

LOCAL LANGUAGES:
THE FORMS OF SPEECH IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Robert Frost's legendary description of "the sound of sense" to define his poetics has for decades sounded like little more than common sense. His idea is now taken to be fairly straightforward: the inflections of an utterance resulting from the tension between demotic speech and poetic form indicate its purport. However, our accepted notion of Frost's formulation as simply the marriage of form and meaning misconstrues what is potentially revolutionary in it: if everyday speech and verse form generate tension, then Frost has described a method for mediating between reality, represented by speech, and art, represented by verse form. The merger is not passive: the sound of sense occurs when Frost "drag[s] and break[s] the intonation across the metre." And yet Frost places speech and verse form in a working relationship. It is the argument of this dissertation that poets reckon with what is often understood as discord between poetry and reality by putting into correspondence forms of speech and the forms of poetry. The poets I examine—Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, Tony Harrison, and Lucille Clifton—are concerned with their positions in local communities that range from the family unit to ethnic, religious, racial, economic, and sexual groups, and they marshal forms of speech in poetic form to speak from those locales and to counter the *drag* and *break* of those located troubling social and political realities. They utilize what I call their "local languages"—the speech of their

particular communities that situates them geographically in local contexts and politically in social constructs—in various ways: they employ them as raw material; they thematize them; they invent idiosyncratic “local” languages to undermine expectations about the communities that speak those languages; they devise generalized languages out of standard and nonstandard constructions to speak not just to and from specific locations but to speak more broadly about human experience. How, these poets ask, can poetry respond to atrocities, deprivations, divisions, and disturbances without becoming programmatic or propagandistic and without reinforcing false preconceptions about the kinds of language suitable for poetry? They answer that question with the living speech of their immediate worlds.

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To Eric Bo Perry

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CHAPTER I
LOCAL TONGUES

In a letter to John Bartlett in 1913, Robert Frost first explained his notion of “the sound of sense” as the ability of “pure sound” to convey meaning apart from semantics (*CPPP* 665).¹ He famously illustrated his theory with this analogy: “The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words” (664). His sonnet “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” is his poetic rendering of those muffled voices behind the door. In that poem, birds in Eden absorb the sound of Eve’s voice into their song: “the birds there in all the gardens round / From having heard the daylong voice of Eve / Had added to their own an oversound” (308). The mixture of the birds’ “own” song and the “oversound” of Eve’s speech is the sound of sense, her “tone of meaning” that comes through the closed door “but without the words.” The poem’s own soft-spoken, subdued tone of voice echoes the birdsong that is able to convey Eve’s speaking voice not with words but with “pure sound,” “the abstract vitality of our speech” (665). The poem makes clear that a fusion has occurred: “her voice upon their voices crossed.” Eve’s speaking voice “crosses” the bird’s singing just as the narrator’s language is set to the sonnet’s iambic pattern.

Frost defined his concept of the sound of sense, which I will elaborate below, as purely aesthetic. It’s a concept that has been, as Seamus Heaney says, “under-regarded as ‘poetics’” because it is too often perceived as overly simple (“Voices” 31). In a recent review of Frost’s letters from 1886-1921, which were collected and published in 2014, Clive James explains that even as Frost’s reputation has grown over the years, the notion that he is simple still haunts him: “although Frost’s artistic greatness is nowadays more

widely acknowledged, it is still generally thought to be the output of some kind of simpleton.”² For James, Frost’s conception of the sound of sense demonstrates his seriousness as both an artist and a theorist: the sound of sense “was a true idea, not just an easy motto. Implicit in the idea was that the spoken language supplies the poet with a store of rhythms which he can, and indeed must, fit in counterpoint to the set frame of the metre. A hundred years later, very few poets want to face the labour involved in doing this. But those few are the ones we tend to notice.”³ In “Local Languages,” I argue that Frost’s poetic successors cross poetic diction and poetic form to generate the tension that Frost describes in his articulations of the sound of sense, the tension between forms of speech and the forms of poetry, to communicate the experiences of living within and against troubling social and political conditions. Each of the poets examined here—Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, Tony Harrison, and Lucille Clifton—is invested in his or her position in local communities that range from the family unit to ethnic, religious, racial, economic, and sexual groups. They employ the languages of those communities to speak from those locales. This is not to suggest that they merely replicate Frost’s method. Rather, Heaney, Brooks, Harrison, and Clifton invent their own poetic methods and their own poetic languages to locate themselves in various social spheres and to locate the languages of those social spheres in poetic traditions that encompass Irish, English, African American, and American poetry. They utilize what I call their “local languages”—the colloquial speech of their particular communities that situates them geographically in immediate local contexts and politically in prevailing social constructs—to execute what Adrienne Rich calls “a criticism of society” (173). They bring these languages into poems in a number of ways: they employ them as raw material; they

thematize them; they invent idiolects rather than dialects; they innovate them for generalized rather than particularized locales. They all find in poetic form—traditional verse forms and free-verse forms—a resource for conveying and managing the conflicts, endurances, turbulences, divisions, and connections created by social conditions. They enact, deny, resist, survive, and make sense of local disturbances with what Frost calls the vitality of speech.

Frost's idea of the sound of sense seems fairly straightforward: the inflections with which a phrase or sentence is delivered indicate its purport. And yet the sound of sense is not simply a matter of delivery or intonation but results, as I have suggested above, from the tension produced when demotic speech and poetic form coalesce. Such sound of sense occurs across lines of poetry when the rhythms of everyday language and the abstract pattern of meter are placed in what Frost calls "strained relation" (680). To create poetry, the poet "get[s] cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre" (665). The merger is not passive: Frost describes his method as "drag[ing] and break[ing] the intonation across the metre as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle" (680). Scanning lines from Frost's "Home Burial" and "Out, Out—" strictly to their abstract iambic patterns and then weighing that pattern against the inflections of the poems' colloquial speech elucidates what Frost meant by the sound of sense and how his formulation undercuts a stilted, rigid understanding of the operations of poetic meter.

"Home Burial" is a dialogue between a husband and wife whose child has died, a tragedy that poisons their ability to communicate with each other. When at the poem's end the young wife, who has been in her grief and rage drifting emotionally from her

husband, attempts to leave their house, the husband's mounting anger escalates to a threatening outburst:

x / x / x / x / x /
Where do | you mean | to go, | first tell | me that.

(x) / x x / x / x / x /
I'll follow | and bring | you back | by force. | I *will!*— (55-58)

His enraged tone is palpably different from the tone of resignation and desperation in “Out, Out—,” which tells the story of a boy's fatal accident with a chainsaw:

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
He saw | all spoiled. | ‘Don’t let | him cut | my hand off—

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
The doc|tor when | he comes. | Don’t let | him sister!’ (130)

The tones of these two sets of lines differ dramatically even though their metrical patterns are the same. Too, in both sets of lines, many of the unaccented syllables sound as strong as their accented counterparts: “The high possibility of emotional expression all lies in this mingling of sense-sound and word-accent” (665). Although according to Frost there are “virtually but two” meters in English, “strict iambic and loose iambic,” the pattern allows for infinite variety: “The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless” (776). Timothy Steele explains that even though iambic poetry follows the prescribed pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, the weights of different stresses in any given line are varied: “Poets write not only in feet, but also in larger phrases, clauses, and sentences. These feature syllables which do not all fall neatly into the categories of minimal accent and maximal accent, but which rather display an infinite range of stress-shadings. Hence the fluctuation between lighter and heavier syllables is not absolutely regular, but is instead sometimes more emphatic, sometimes less” (125). Steele points out that the “stress-

shadings” of an iambic pentameter line are not as fixed as the metrical grid suggests: “a metrically unstressed syllable at one point in the line may carry more speech emphasis than a metrically stressed syllable at another point.” Colloquial speech patterns would, of course, generate a multiplicity of “stress-shadings.” In the lines scanned above, demotic speech generates these accents:

/ x / x x / / x x /
 Where do | you mean | to go, | first tell | me that.

/ / x x / x / x / / /
 I'll follow | and bring | you back | by force. | I *will!*—.

.....

/ x / / / x x / x / /
 He saw | all spoiled. | ‘Don’t let | him cut | my hand off—

x / x / x / x / x / (x)
 The doc|tor when | he comes. | Don’t let | him sister!’

We might conclude that the iambic metrical environment of the poems promotes, say, “let” and demotes “Don’t” in the third foot of the line from “Out, Out–,” but the sound of sense accentuates “Don’t” as the first word of the boy’s horrific plea. In the next line, the second “Don’t” isn’t as stressed as the first. That line metrically and rhetorically emphasizes “let” as the boy begs his sister to save him. The two feet are made of the same words, but the stress-shadings in those feet are different. Frost is dragging the boy’s urgent speech (“Don’t let him . . . / . . . Don’t let him sister!”) across the meter; that irregularly patterned colloquial language competing with the regular stresses of the poem’s iambic pattern is the sound of sense, the tension produced when forms of speech and poetic form collide.

Frost’s principle describes “tone of voice,” “the power of vocal tone to communicate meaning in addition to or independent of words in their merely definitional

function. It is sound that makes sense purely as sound” (Steele 142). Tone in literature is considered notoriously difficult to analyze objectively because it is thought to be an entirely subjective phenomenon, perceived differently from reader to reader rather than generated distinctly by a text (“Tone” 1442). Terry Eagleton paraphrases the customary critical dismissal of tone: “There is an argument against the close analysis of literary form that goes something like this. . . . [T]alk of tone . . . is purely subjective. What I hear as rancorous you may hear as jubilant. You read as garrulous what strikes me as eloquent. Tone in a poem is not a matter of F major or B minor. Ironically, only a few features of form—metre and rhyme, for example—can actually be formalized” (102). Eagleton disagrees with the line of thinking he typifies here. Although he acknowledges that “we can misinterpret . . . the tone of a poem” (114), he believes that tone is not “purely subjective” but a debatable “matter of interpretation” that can be evidenced with textual features (105). Likewise, for Susan Stewart, tone derives from fixing the sound of speech in poetic forms that can be “reported in an approximation”:

The trajectories of speech and song are both opposed and complementary in such forms. The sounds of speech rhythmically proceed forward in time according to conventions of articulation and interval. The sounds of song are organized both melodically and harmonically, that is in both linear and recursive fashion, and use fixed repetitive patterns of stress, tone, and duration. Speech disappears into the function of its situation; it can be repeated as fixed text or reported in an approximation. Song, by virtue of its measure, is fixed and repeatable, although it is, like all utterances, subject to transformation. It is the tension between the

unfolding semantic pressure of speech and the asemantic pulse of measure that defines the possibilities of lyric art. (36-37)

Stewart considers tone analyzable despite its subjective quality precisely because it is the result of what Eagleton refers to as a formalization. If we define form generally, like Caroline Levine does, as “patterning, shapes, and arrangements” (13), then poetic form is the patterning, shaping, and arranging of diction in received and free-verse structures that produce the sounds that create tone.

For both Frost and Stewart, tone results from the tension between speech and measure. In Frost’s formulation, that speech is everyday speech; it is “gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books” (675). When Frost says that “poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech” (701), he means that colloquial diction provides the “raw material of poetry” and that meter provides “the posture proper to the sentence” (665).⁴ Colloquial language, in other words, can provide a poet with “pure sound,” but the speech by itself does not constitute poetry, nor does mechanical adherence to a metrical grid: “Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is not that” (664-65). For Frost, poetry results from the rhythms of demotic speech and the abstract pattern of meter interacting. Steele explains that part of Frost’s accomplishment as a poet is his ability to get the sound of sense and iambic pentameter into strained relation while managing to hide the tension, to conceal the “breaking” and “dragging” of speech across meter: “Frost is a poet’s poet. His art conceals art. It is easy to overlook his dexterities because he appears to achieve them effortlessly” (123). His art, as we have seen, is not

just a matter of everyday speech playing against the metrical pattern; that pattern can also punctuate the emotionality in everyday speech.

And yet despite the apparent effortless in Frost's poetic renderings of the sound of sense, his concept is notably elusive. One reason for this is that, as Steele explains, he varies his terminology in the letters in which he first discussed his ideas about speech and meter: "[Frost] keeps fiddling with his terminology in a way that suggests he cannot focus his meaning to his own satisfaction. What begins, in the first letter to Bartlett, as 'the sound of sense,' becomes, in the second letter to Bartlett 'sentence sounds'" (146). Eight months after he revealed to Bartlett his theory of "the sound of sense," Frost described "sentence sounds" as the fixed, predetermined tones of voice that sentences capture: "The sentence sounds are very definite entities. . . . I think no writer invents them. The most original writer only catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously" (675). But Steele also explains that Frost essentially means the same thing regardless of nomenclature: "we may well feel that these phrases indicate somewhat different things—pure tone in the first case, sentence as tone in the second—even though Frost indicates . . . that the terms are synonymous" (146). In the second letter to Bartlett, Frost doesn't devise a discrete theory separate from the sound of sense but emphasizes the relation between specific aural effects and the rhythm of line and syntax: "a sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. . . . You may string words together without a sentence-sound to string them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees—but it is bad for the clothes" (675). For Frost, the sentence itself strung across lines provides the best context for local aural effects.

Frost perceives words as sounds, but he is not primarily concerned with sound effects like assonance and consonance. In fact, he disavows these sonic elements in the poetry of his predecessors: “the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it” (664). And yet, as Tyler Hoffman points out, Frost’s poetry consistently and skillfully generates the very sound effects he derides: “It would be easy enough to show that Frost’s poetry features alliteration and assonance, as nearly all poetry does, but the fact that they achieve figurative force in poetry written throughout his career is remarkable in light of his theory of ‘the sound of sense,’ which so thoroughly deemphasizes that function of language” (68). Indeed, local sound effects in Frost’s poems collaborate with colloquial speech and meter to create the sound of sense. Consider the prevailing consonantal and assonantal sounds in these lines from Frost’s sonnet about Eve’s voice in Eden:

Admittedly an eloquence so soft
Could only have had an influence on birds
When call or laughter carried it aloft.
Be that as may be, she was in their song.
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds’ song be the same.
And to do that to birds was why she came.

The expressions “Admittedly,” “Be that as may be,” and “probably” are colloquial while a complex of sound effects underscores the poem’s placid, reflective tone: the soft *s* in “eloquence,” “so,” “soft,” “influence,” “birds,” “voice,” “voices,” “crossed,” “persisted,” “woods,” “lost,” “song,” and “same”; the dulcet *l* in “Admittedly,” “eloquence,” “only,” “influence,” “call,” “laughter,” “aloft,” “long,” “probably,” “lost”; and the airy vowels of “soft,” “aloft,” “crossed,” “long,” and “lost” and “same” and “came” that constitute most of the poem’s rhyming end-stops. The sounds strung along these sentences come as much from the harmonization of consonants and vowels as from the sound of iambically patterned colloquial diction.

To give another example of a poem discussed earlier, in “Out, Out–,” where a buzz saw severs fatally a young boy’s hand, sound effects work with colloquial language and meter to create in blank verse the sound of the poem’s sense. The raw material of “Out, Out–” is what Heaney calls the “vocal authenticity” of a quotidian workday (“Voices” 31). The “posture” provided by the iambic pentameter is the stoicism of a rural community that must accept tragedy as suddenly as it strikes. The images of the serene countryside and the sounds of everyday work suddenly give way to the boy’s pleading and the community’s taciturn reaction to his death:

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
.....
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
.....

His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—

.....

Then the boy saw all—

Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. ‘Don’t let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!’
So. But the hand was gone already.

.....

No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

The poem conveys the community’s rapid acceptance of tragedy through the interruption of the sounds of everyday work by the silent reaction to the accident. The snarling buzz saw’s clattering “rattle” and the regular rhythm of the iambic pentameter line suggest an unthreatening familiarity while alliteration in the opening lines connects the “saw” to the “sweetness” of country work in the soft *s* sound of “stove,” “sticks,” and “Sweet-scented stuff.” The speaker describes the boy after the accident with gentle idiomatic language: “the boy saw all– / Since he was old enough to know, big boy / Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart–.” The speaker, sister, and doctor observe the boy’s death with fright and disbelief but also with an understanding that when an accident intervenes in

everyday life all anyone can do is move on reluctantly because work has to continue. Death is a shock, the poem demonstrates, that requires acceptance. The inhabitants of the poem's rural world do not have the luxury of accommodating displays of grief, a fact that is part of the poem's tragedy. The single-syllable sentence "So" creates a sound effect that communicates both the situational and emotional shift from the country workday to tragedy: the long-*o* assonance of "Don't" "Don't" in the boy's imploration to his sister to rescue his hand builds to the word "So," which temporarily halts the rolling blank verse thereby rendering an abruptness as the community perceives the necessity of immediate response unimpeded by emotion.

Frost devised his notion of "the sound of sense" to define his own poetic: "I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory of versification." (664).⁵ However, his conception of everyday speech and traditional poetic form generating tension does not just characterize his particular aesthetic strategy but describes a method for mediating between reality (represented in Frost's principle by colloquial language) and art (traditional poetic form). James Longenbach describes an artist's "medium" as facilitating an exchange between artistic and realistic realms that has the potential to become itself a tradition: "The artistic medium enables a transaction between the artist and the world, and, over time, the history of those transactions . . . become[s] inextricable from the medium as such, an inherited set of conventions" ("Medium"). According to Longenbach, diction is for poets the "most fundamental" medium. Similarly, Seamus Heaney construes the relationship between poetry and reality as an opposed one that poets must inevitably reckon with: "Both Art and Life have had a hand in the formation of any poet, both are to be loved, . . . Yet both are often perceived to be

in conflict and that conflict is constantly and sympathetically suffered by the poet” (*Government* xii). It is the argument of this dissertation that poets reckon with this apparent discord between poetry and reality by putting into correspondence forms of speech and the forms of poetry and that such an interaction has social and political ramifications. I examine how Heaney, Brooks, Harrison, and Clifton all employ the language of their particular locales in vastly different ways to locate poetic languages adequate for conveying life within those locales that are subject to political violence, hierarchies, and inequalities. How, these poets ask at pivotal points in their careers, can poetry respond to atrocities, deprivations, divisions, and disturbances without becoming programmatic or propagandistic and without reinforcing false preconceptions about the kinds of language suitable for poetry? They answer that question with the living speech of their immediate worlds, and they make poetry out of local language to undermine assumptions about the communities that speak those languages.

This study is not, however, concerned with “everyday speech” per se. For to isolate such speech in modern and contemporary poetry would be to encompass most of that poetry: “Diction means the kind of vocabulary conventionally considered suitable for poetry; and the point about modern poetry is that there isn’t one. Most modern poetry uses what we might roughly call everyday speech” (Eagleton 144). David Perkins long ago established that in England, Ireland, and America at the beginning of the twentieth century colloquial diction was becoming a predominant linguistic register in poetry: “Aside from Pound and Eliot, the major poets of the opening twenty-five years of the century were Hardy, Yeats, and Frost. In these poets and in many ancillary figures we recognize a prevailing mode of the period. It may be provisionally characterized as a

quietly reflective, colloquial poetry of actual life” (*1890s to the High Modernist Mode* 136).⁶ Further, everyday speech was an alternative to conventionally poetic diction for early twentieth-century poets who wanted to modernize:

The Modernist movement involved, in part, an acceptance in poetry of a naturalistic view of reality which had long been present in novels. In this transition the more obviously conventional was replaced by the less obviously so. Thus meter, rhyme, stanza, archaic or otherwise ‘poetic’ diction, ‘beauty’ of sound and imagery, formal closure, and the figure of the poet as apart from ordinary life gave way to free verse, colloquial diction, images of everyday experience, open form, and, in one famous example, the figure of the poet as New Jersey doctor. (Perkins, *Modernism and After* 336)

That New Jersey doctor, William Carlos Williams, identified in American idiomatic speech the potential for a distinctly American verse form: “Trying to conceive a new prosody, [Williams] urged that there must be a ‘measure’ (a term he first used in 1928), ‘some sort of discipline *to free* from the vagaries of mere chance.’ The measure must be ‘new’ and ‘intrinsic’ to actual American speech. ‘Speech is the fountain of the line,’ and ‘it is in the newness of a live speech that the new line exists’” (qtd. in Perkins 269). Williams believed that American poetry should be “based on ordinary and local speech” to distinguish it sharply from English poetry. But poetry in England was at the time becoming more colloquial, too. Within a decade of Williams’ prescription for an American prosody made from American speech, England’s poetry was adapting its own conversational tone even as it sought to remain connected to its past: “English poetry [in the 1930s] returned for inspiration to its native traditions. Not that these poets, or most of

them, could be thought traditional in the sense of ‘like the past.’ They were too colloquial, elliptical, rhythmically irregular and seriously parodic for that” (128-29).⁷ Perkins points to W. H. Auden’s “Spain, 1937” as an early instance of a predominant style in England, which he calls “intellectual talk”: “the mode of address could range from the oratorical to the intimate, but for the most part this poetry of intellectual speech was conversational. More exactly, it was a poetic imitation of conversation, more heightened, metaphoric, and formally patterned than ordinary conversation, but more like talk than was common in English poetry” (127). The poetry in England naturally clung more tightly to its inherited verse traditions, but it also innovated that tradition with demotic registers because the colloquial represented progression and modernity.

And yet for African American poets, poetry that enlists the diction and rhythms of speech could represent regression, too—literary black dialect in the early part of the twentieth century was expected by readers as an inevitability in black poetry. For example, Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first African American poet with a broad readership, felt forced to compose in black dialect “in order to gain a hearing from white readers, expecting that they would then be interested in his nondialect poetry,” which they weren’t (Ford, “African American Poetry” 373). A couple of decades after Dunbar’s death in 1906, James Weldon Johnson observed that African American poets were “trying to break away from, not Negro dialect itself, but the limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention” (41). That long convention of literary black dialect derived from racist minstrel and plantation traditions, and Johnson thus urged African American poets “to find a form that will express the racial spirit” and communicate the complexity of modern black experience other than that mode: “Negro

dialect is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is it capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology. This is no indictment against the dialect as dialect, but against the mould of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set” (42). So while Williams rendered speech in poetry to distinguish American poetry and other modernists saw colloquial language as a means for progression, African American poets understood the “quaint and musical folk-speech” of literary black dialect as racist and simplistic, “an instrument with but two full-stops, humor and pathos” (40, 41). Johnson wanted a form for African American poetry that expressed “the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought” of black individuals that was “freer and larger than dialect” (41). If “live speech” and formal expertise and innovation, then, are the salient characteristics of a distinctly American poetry, African American poetry epitomizes American poetry: it has a history of employing local language as its raw material in a way that rejects “the mould of convention” that was literary black dialect, and it has “from the start,” as Karen Jackson Ford explains, “both mastered and altered the dominant Anglo-European literary tradition it encountered in the United States” (373). Brooks and Clifton, we shall see, continue in the tradition that Johnson called for: they invent their own poetic languages that strategically hint at black speech to debunk not “dialect itself” but the conventional employment of literary black dialect in black poetry and correlative prejudices about the appropriate diction for black poetry.

Colloquial language, of course, appeared in poetry long before the advent of modernism or the creation of modern African American poetry. In his classic preface to his and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802, Wordsworth famously explained that

collection's linguistic mode as "the language really spoken by men" (452). He describes the diction of *Lyrical Ballads* as rigorously devised to "look steadily at my subject" and to avoid "falsehood of description": "There will . . . be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done . . . to bring my language near to the language of men; and further, because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry" (450). Jon Cook points out that idiomatic speech was in use as an aesthetic method in poetry over a century before the Romantics: "John Donne wanted to roughen up the smooth textures of Petrarchan love poetry with vernacular idioms and rhythms" (1). For Tom Paulin, the latter part of the nineteenth century is when everyday speech comes to full fruition in poetry. He places Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, Walt Whitman, Robert Burns, William Barnett, and Christina Rossetti in a "common family of vernacular writers" who are "linked by the way in which they employ language as speech process in their poems, not necessarily by their use of dialect words or regional accents" (though Burns and Barnett wrote explicitly in Scots and Dorset dialect) but for what he calls their "savage vernacular energies" (xi-xii) and their poetic renderings of "spoken sound" (xiv).⁸ For Paulin, though, John Clare best represents vernacular poetry because he gains political force from his use of regional speech: "With their lack of punctuation, freedom from standard spelling and charged demotic ripples, [Clare's poems] become a form of Nation Language that rejects the polished urbanity of Official Standard. They are communal speech—the speech of the Northamptonshire peasantry—vulnerable before the all-powerful language of aristocratic

politicians and the printed language of parliamentary statutes” (xix). We will see that like Clare, Harrison “dramatizes his experience of the [British] class system,” not just by rejecting standard spelling, punctuation, or polish but by stacking his Leeds vernacular against a variety of other forms of speech to create fields of verbal turbulence that enact the divisions that classism creates.

The terms “everyday speech” or “ordinary language,” then, are too capacious for the purposes of this study; they risk conflating the demotic language of one person or community with that of another. Everyday speech, for instance, on Heaney’s Northern Irish childhood farm is nothing like that on Brooks’s street in Bronzeville, her South Side Chicago neighborhood. Nor is the working-class Leeds dialect of Harrison’s family anything like Clifton’s family’s black vernacular in working-class Upstate New York. Brooks and Clifton sometimes produce similar local speech, but they also both invent their own languages that only suggest black vernacular and that are entirely different from each other: the language Brooks creates for her local characters is elaborate, polysyllabic, and highly adorned while Clifton’s is pared down, minimalist, and highly nuanced. The speech of the poets studied here is more precisely called local language, a language they create from their particular geographical locales and communities that is unusual and extraordinary as often as it is usual and ordinary. The poets I study here employ their local tongues to speak from their social spheres, setting their languages in a host of traditional and free-verse forms not to make something happen—to vary Auden’s much-quoted phrase, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” from his famous elegy to Yeats—but to be “A way of happening, a mouth” that can speak with vocal authenticity about local social realities (88).⁹ The “two roads” of these poets’ tongues, to borrow the figure

Clifton devises to describe the language she invents for immaterial realms, “converge into a single / certitude” (*CP* 469). We can perceive these “two roads” as artistic and historical reality or geographical and social location or politics and prosody or sound and sense all converging in the single certitude of poetry that bridges artistic and social realms by situating the poet in both spaces at once.

The geographical settings of these poets place them in prevailing social structures, what Adrienne Rich calls “the location of the poet” (167). Like Frost, Rich emphasizes the primacy of sound in poetry. Rhythm, she remembers, was the element that first drew her to poetry: “I had grown up hearing and reading poems from a very young age, first as sounds repeated, musical, rhythmically satisfying in themselves” (“Blood” 169). Sound remained central for Rich even during her maturation and radicalization, when poetry became for her not just “music and images” but a way “toward a criticism of society”: “I was easily entranced by pure sound and still am, no matter what it is saying, and any poet who mixes the poetry of the actual world with the poetry of sound interests and excites me more than I am able to say” (173). Yet the young Rich initially mistook the sounds and rhythms she heard in poems as coming from “some transcendent authority” (170). She first believed “that the capacity to hook syllables together in a way that heated the blood was the sign of a universal vision” (170). The best poets, Rich thought, expanded their personal views into “higher world views” that eclipsed social conditions (170). Rich’s political progressiveness begins with her realization that the universal is a fiction and that her “personal world view” is shaped not just by poetry but by the “social and political forces of time and place” (171).

A poet's awareness of her location—her position in a social construct predicated on such determinants as geography, race, religion, gender, sexuality, and class (183)—influences her work, from context and subject matter to poetic form. For example, Rich's location disrupted her relationship to traditional form. Her first two volumes are composed of poems written in inherited forms like sonnets and blank verse, but starting in 1963 with the publication of her third book, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich began writing in free verse to accommodate a feminist consciousness that was beginning to assert personal experience as political: "As a poet, I had learned much about both the value and the constraints of convention: the reassurances of traditional structures and the necessity to break from them in recognition of new experience" (181).

However, Rich's break with inherited form did not constitute an unequivocal repudiation of it. Long after her transformation from traditional poet to political free-verse poet, she continued to consider traditional verse form as a resource that enabled her early development even as it prevented direct engagement with her subject matter: "formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded" ("When We Dead" 22). In fact, Rich finds in traditional form potential for resistance and experimentation: when poetic imagination "make[s] the form evolve, become responsive, or works almost in resistance to the form" a "struggle" occurs "not [to] let the form take over, lapse into format, assimilate the poetry; and that very struggle can produce a movement, a music, of its own" ("Format and Form" 1). When traditional form doesn't "lapse into format," it can achieve the same effects that Rich finds in free verse: "I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing

itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (“Blood” 181). And yet this “dialogue with others,” the dialogue in which a political poetry locates itself, is, in part, a conversation with poetic tradition: “This kind of art . . . is not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future” (187). Rich’s ideas are similar to T. S. Eliot’s famous conception of tradition. They both view a poet’s relation to tradition as a mark of individuality. Eliot saw poetry at its “most individual” when it engages “most vigorously” with the past (“Tradition” 4). He also perceives the interaction between the poet and tradition as transformative: “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities” (5). We will see that tradition for the poets studied here covers enormous cultural terrain: Heaney, for instance, alludes in his poems that ruminate on the sounds of both Irish-language and Anglicized Irish place names to the Gaelic *dindshenchas* verse tradition, an ancient body of verse in Ireland dating back to at least the eleventh century that demonstrated a writer’s “knowledge of the meaning of place” along with revealing “a major preoccupation in Irish literary culture: a deep-rooted concern with origins” (Welch 9-10). The tradition links local language to the concept of origins, and Heaney brings it into his contemporary Northern Irish poetry to make the same connection.

Of course, Frost and Rich had vastly different notions of the poet’s responsibility to tradition. Rich’s sense of location directed her away from conventional form, so she could more precisely examine gendered social constructs. In contrast, Frost flippantly dismissed free verse as facile when he compared writing free verse to playing tennis without the net. But both poets share a responsibility to local concerns. Frost brings the

local into poetry when colloquial speech interacts with meter, and Rich grounds poetics in “the artist’s relation to bread and blood” (178). She is critical of those who believe art to be “supernaturally” inspired and “universal,” those who are hampered by “falsely mystical” notions and dismiss the “merely temporary and local disturbances” that political poetry is concerned with (178). Rich is not referring to colloquial language, but her emphasis on poetry’s relation to “bread and blood,” her distrust of the “mystical,” and her concern that the fallacy of the “universal” discredits “local disturbances” as unsuitable for art’s “transcendent plane” bear comparison with Frost’s interest in placing everyday speech rhythms in strained relation with meter. Rich rejects the idea that “political poetry is . . . by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth” despite its “immense subversive power” (179). Rather, she learned from Yeats that poetry “can, may have to, account for itself politically, [and] consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language” (174). There is something of Frost in such a lesson as well, for the fusion of colloquial language and poetic form locates the poet inexorably within both poetic tradition and local territories, territories that are also situated politically within structures of social organization.

Rich distrusts poetry criticism that ignores culture, politics, and history. To underscore the point that poetry is inextricably tied to social concerns, she refers to Edward Said’s characterization of a poem not as a “quasi-religious wonder” but a “human sign to be understood in secular and social terms” (qtd. in Rich, “Blood” 170-71). Today it has become a commonplace of poetry studies to construe poetry as both an experience and an aesthetic object. Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill situate rhythms of poetry in bodily experience: “Rhythm is everywhere in our lives and has been

since we first learnt to breathe or walk, or even perhaps from the first time we felt a heartbeat. While poetic rhythm may seem contrived compared with these natural bodily functions, it engages us with a similar intimacy as something we do not objectively observe but subjectively experience” (19). Because they understand poetic form as experiential, Hurley and O’Neill “seek to recommend a critical mode that integrates formal observations into thematic critical narratives” (2). They recognize, as Rich and Said did two decades earlier, that “[f]orms bring with them historical associations that the poet can activate, ironise or re-invent” (10). Hurley and O’Neill’s endorsement of a formalist criticism that incorporates politics and history reminds us that the New Formalist poets of the late 1980s and early 90s wrote traditional verse as an alternative to the “short free verse autobiographical lyric” (Feirstein vii) that had become standard and that they wrote such verse not to narrow the audience of poetry but expand it (Gwynn 12).¹⁰

Although Marjorie Levinson’s recent survey of formalist poetry criticism since 2000 still identifies a “perception of the embattled situation of formalist interests in today’s critical arena” (PDF 2), she also perceives in formalist criticism a new tendency to examine “the conception, role, and importance of form in new historicism . . . cultural studies; contextual critique; ideology critique; Foucauldian analysis; political, intersectional, and special-interest criticism; suspicion hermeneutics, and theory” (559). Alice James offers a similar assessment of the state of formalist criticism. She argues that “[i]n present-day debates we still encounter the same old polarizations: formalist versus realist literature, art for art’s sake versus social commitment” (1). But James also explains that “[t]here have been calls for new kinds of formalism that incorporate historical

understanding or political commitment” (2). Caroline Levine most recently has made such a call. She outlines a new formalist method that does not separate aesthetic or literary form from sociopolitical experience but that doesn’t just “read literary form in relation to social structures” either, a now “commonplace practice in literary studies”: “We have typically treated aesthetic and political arrangements as separate, and we have not generally used the language of form for both, but we have routinely drawn on social scientific accounts of ‘structure’; we have certainly paid attention to national boundaries and hierarchies of race and gender” (3). Levine argues that “politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping” just as poetry does and that formalism should “bring together the field’s dispersed insights into social and aesthetic form” to advance a “new theory of form,” one that comprehends political and social reality as, like art, forms themselves that are “containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated” (3). She thus refuses to dissociate art from historical reality: “We can understand forms as abstract and portable organizing principles, then, but we also need to attend to the specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide” (7-8). I argue that we can perceive the relationship between aesthetic form and sociopolitical experience in the overlap and collision between forms of speech and poetic form.

However, my dissertation is not concerned with theories of form per se but with local language as a poetic that imbues poetry with social and political potency. I utilize Heaney’s formulation of poetry’s ability to redress deleterious social conditions with harmony and rhythm, Robert Pinsky’s ideas about the poet’s responsibility to answer and transform reality into art, and Wallace Stevens’s concept of poetry as the imagination

pressing back against reality, along with particular scholarship on the poets I examine, to apprehend poetry's relation to the social world and to communicate how local language operates in poetry and how it mediates between artistic and social realms. I also turn repeatedly to Heaney's, Brooks's, Harrison's, and Clifton's articulations of poetry's aesthetic, political, and social faculties in essays, lectures, and interviews. The primary critical method here, though, is to scrutinize closely the interaction that occurs between diction and poetic form in the poems themselves.

These scrutinies begin with Seamus Heaney. Of the poets I study in "Local Languages," only he has discussed Frost's concept of the sound of sense as a particular influence. In "Voices Behind a Door," for instance, he explains that "Out, Out—" affected him on several levels when he first encountered it as a university student: "what attracted me then was the familiarity of the world that Frost was writing about. Yard work, farm people, the hard rattling action of a buzz saw" (31).¹¹ Heaney was impressed by "Out, Out—" not simply because he recognized in the poem images and sounds similar to his own childhood in rural Northern Ireland but because the poem set those images and sounds in traditional verse form: "Frost corroborated a part of me that needed to know that the world of a County Derry farm could be given a look-in in English blank verse" (31). The familiar subject matter lured Heaney into Frost's poem, but the sound of that world reverberating in the sound of poetry kept him there: the "documentary aspect of his work was only one part of the attraction, because you read Frost as much for his melody as for his subject matter" (31). The melody of "Out, Out—" revealed for Heaney the emotional resilience of the poem's rural characters: "Coming as I did from a world of farmyard stories about men crushed in quarry machinery or pulled into the drums of

threshing mills, I recognized the note of grim accuracy I was immediately susceptible to its documentary weight and did not mistake the wintry report of what happened at the end for the poet's own callousness" ("Brim" 86).¹² That note of grim accuracy is one of the notes Heaney sounds in his poems as well.

It is not callousness that Heaney hears in "Out, Out—" but the suddenness of tragedy and a community's swift and reserved response to that tragedy. He hears, in other words, the sound of the poem's sense, and he adapts Frost's concept for his own poems about rural life.¹³ In "The Early Purges," for instance, the speaker recalls the fright and sadness he felt at first witnessing kittens being drowned and the understanding he eventually developed that "on well-run farms pests have to be kept down" (*Death of a Naturalist* 11). Both "Out, Out—" and "The Early Purges" manifest acceptance in similarly rural worlds through colloquial language set in pentameter lines. Heaney's poem is a parable of farm life in which the speaker casts the naturalness of death in the light tones of childhood memory and the matter-of-factness of axiomatic lines like "Still, living displaces false sentiments." The poem argues against false sentiments with the idiomatic, humorous description of the kittens that the speaker and his friend must drown: "the scraggy wee shits." A few lines later, the friend tries to convince himself and the speaker that the death of the kittens is for the best: "Sure isn't it better for them now." Like the speaker's mild tone in "Out, Out—," the tone of regional expressions like "wee" and "Sure" conveys not indifference but a combination of reluctance and acceptance as the boys learn the hard lesson that, on a farm, death is a necessary part of the work.

In the second chapter, "Seamus Heaney Holding His Tongue," I begin by examining Heaney's employment of regional speech and traditional verse forms to give a

look-in to his rural world. I then turn to his poems that merge the various linguistic strands of Northern Irish speech: Gaelic, Ulster-Scots, and Anglo-Saxon. Heaney devises a poetic language that integrates these representative elements of the conflicting sides of Northern Irish history as a corollary for the political unification of his stricken homeland. Beginning in the late 1960s, and continuing throughout Heaney's life, Northern Ireland was ravaged by sectarian violence between paramilitary groups representing the British-identifying Protestant community and the native Irish Catholic population. On both sides, horrific guerilla tactics resulted in the loss of thousands of lives.¹⁴ Heaney struggled alongside his Northern Irish contemporaries throughout his career to respond adequately to what he refers to as the "Ulster predicament" (and what we have come to know as "The Troubles"): "Among poets of my generation in the 1960s there was a general feeling of being socially called upon which grew as the polarization grew and the pressure mounted upon the writers not only to render images of the Ulster predicament, but also perhaps to show solidarity with one or other side in the quarrel" (*Redress* 193).¹⁵ Indeed, Heaney struggled to find ways to write about political conditions without sacrificing "creative freedom" for "social obligation" (194). He wanted to create poetry that was, above all, art, regardless of its political context—poetry that was not "intended as a contribution to better community relations" and that "was not presuming to be anything more than a momentary stay against confusion."¹⁶ In *North* (1975), his seminal book on the region and the conflict, and later in *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1985), Heaney experiments with different strategies for writing politically and preserving his artistic integrity, methods that include relating prehistoric cadavers to victims of sectarian violence in his famous bog poems and making poetry out of local Northern Irish speech.

In an infamous critique of Heaney's poetry and poetics, David Lloyd castigates what he sees as Heaney's "poetics of identity" and "aesthetic politics," which stem from a stagnant Irish nationalism that merely reproduces the bourgeois "imperial ideology" it purports to reject (37). Lloyd charges Heaney with an inability to offer sufficient political resolution and claims that Heaney instead superficially reduces "history to myth, furnishing an aesthetic resolution to conflicts constituted in quite specific historical junctures by rendering disparate events as symbolic moments expressive of an underlying continuity of identity" (27). Lloyd argues that Heaney aestheticizes violence caused by insidious socioeconomic forces "in the name of a freedom expressed in terms of national or racial integration" rather than a freedom expressed in terms of difference (30-31). Lloyd is deeply suspicious of "integration" as a political resolution because to him integration doesn't promote unification but dissolves the individual in a "national consciousness" that mimics the social system it seeks to dissociate from, a system that, Lloyd claims, eradicates difference (15).

In *North*, *Field Work*, and *Station Island*, Heaney worries about some of Lloyd's eventual attacks, particularly that his poems are guilty of aestheticizing political realities and social atrocity and of "confus[ing] evasion and artistic tact" (*Station Island* 82). For instance, in *North*, he asks if he can "get" the people of the region "true" when portraying them in a sonnet ironically as "anonymities" (xi); he wonders if his poetic lines are comparable to a prehistoric Celtic relic's "interlacings elaborate / as the netted routes / of ancestry and trade" or if they're merely "dithering, blathering" (13-16); and he fears he's eluded social and political efficacy by moving to the Republic to write poetry instead of participating actively in the sectarian war: "Taking protective colouring / From bole and

bark . . . // . . . blowing up these sparks / For their meager heat” results in him having “missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet’s pulsing rose” (68). For Lloyd, these dilemmas ring false because they simply return to a British Romantic poetics of identity, never assessing the oppressive colonial ideologies that created and sustained the volatile situation in Northern Ireland in the first place. For example, Heaney often presents himself as what Lloyd calls “the stable center” of his “tableau of identifications” (28) in the bog poems rather than centralizing the prehistoric corpses the poems describe: “I first saw his twisted face in a photograph” (*North* 28); “I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck” (30-31).¹⁷ This “I,” Lloyd claims, is an essentially British Romantic construction that represents “the continuity of an Irish spirit” that “Irish nationalist thinking in the nineteenth century” onwards co-opted (15). Even when Heaney speculates about his poetic methods he keeps himself at the forefront: “I am the artful voyeur” (31); “I sit weighing and weighing / My responsible *tristia*. / For what?” (67). According to Lloyd, Heaney’s poems don’t rigorously critique the problem they present about art’s relation to politics but are instead preoccupied with “self-production,” relating “an ‘Irish identity’ to the English literary–and political– establishment [that] provides not only the language, but the very terms within which the question of identity is posed and resolved” (23). Lloyd contends that Heaney’s debate with himself is expressed uncritically; it goes “unexamined,” “never subjected to a scrutiny which would imperil the quasi-syllogistic structures” of his poems (32). Rather, the “distance” between the “self-produced” speaker and objects like the bog bodies “rapidly contracts” into “an imaginary immediate relation to the corpse” that “facilitates the elimination of human

agency” (the “I” merely represents the colonialist notion of the “Irish spirit”) and “the subordination of human agency to aesthetic form” (28).

Through the opprobrium he heaps on Heaney, Lloyd rigorously examines the problem with replicating and integrating colonial concepts of subjectivity and identity. What he doesn’t consider in his assessment of Heaney’s “self-production,” though, is the function of local language in Heaney’s poems and its relation to human agency. The closest Lloyd gets to considering local language in Heaney is a brief, acute analysis of regionalism at the end of his essay:

Just as rhetoric about enterprise and the free market exploits the image of individualism while masking the actual diffusion of power through larger heterogeneous structures, so the celebration of regionalism dulls perception of the institutional and homogenizing culture which has sustained its apparent efflorescence at the very moment when the concept of locality, enclosed and self-nurturing, has become effectively archaic, and indeed, functions as such. (37)¹⁸

But Heaney’s use of regional speech doesn’t necessarily celebrate regionalism, nor does he render the local archaic with that register. Rather, he utilizes regional language to write poetry about political polarization that isn’t itself polarized or polarizing. In “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” for instance, from *North*, he employs local language to depict the stifling of human agency that sectarianism causes. The speaker contemplates life in an environment where one must hold his tongue even when speaking (or writing poetry). And yet the poem counters that stifling by making poetry out of the eroded language it considers, setting to the patterns and rhythms of rhyming pentameter quatrains the rote phrasing of journalists when reporting on the Troubles and the empty

colloquialisms used by civilians to hide allegiances. The poem arranges hollow cant and loaded idioms in cadenced lines both to portray the effects on everyday language when that language becomes a tool for evasion, concealment, and self-protection and also to “sing” “Of the ‘wee six’” counties that comprise Northern Ireland.

For Heaney, local speech and poetic form distinguish Northern Irish poetry from the tradition in England rather than “rehears[ing]” that tradition (Lloyd 32): for the young Heaney, the “literary language, the civilized utterance from the classic canon of English poetry, was a kind of force-feeding. It did not delight us by reflecting our experience; it did not re-echo our own speech in formal and surprising arrangements” (*Preoccupations* 26). In “The Ministry of Fear,” from *North*, the sounds of regional speech in poetry “innovate” rather than replicate English tradition:

I tried to write about the sycamores
And innovated a South Derry rhyme
With *hushed* and *lulled* full chimes for *pushed* and *pulled*.
Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain
Were walking, by God, all over the fine
Lawns of elocution. (58)

Heaney’s novice self here is the stable center of this autobiographical poem. But the poem doesn’t subordinate human agency to form; rather, it locates human agency in the form of the Northern Irish rhymes it originates, rhymes that distinguish Northern Irish poetry as its own English-language tradition. Later, in *Field Work* and *Station Island*, Heaney will employ the living speech of the victims of sectarian violence precisely to restore to those victims the agency they were denied.

Heaney articulates his ideas about poetry's integrative capacities in *The Redress of Poetry*. I turn repeatedly to his explanations of his concept throughout this dissertation to construe the relationship between poetry and social reality. Poetic harmony, Heaney believes, can redress social discord by suggesting "possibilities of political harmony" (203). He sees poetry as way to bridge actuality and the imagination: "within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; . . . each form of knowledge redresses the other and . . . the frontier between them is there for the crossing" (203). Heaney argues that poetry counters reality by weighing it against a counter-reality "which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation" (3-4). That counter-reality sets "projections and inventions" that "match . . . complex reality" to "the felicity of a cadence, the chain reaction of a rhyme, the pleasuring of an etymology" (5). Poetry that redresses reality is made both from "co-ordinates . . . [that] correspond to the world we live in and endure" and "its own language rather than . . . the language of the world that provokes it" (8, 199). That language, as Robert Pinsky remarks, "answer[s] the received cultural imagination of the subject with something utterly different" (423); it is a language marked by its connection to the actual world it re-envisioned and by its originality.

Because poetry has this redressing ability, Heaney claims, it is "being appealed to constantly" for political purposes. He is thus adamant that poetry must not be confused with activism: "Poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things

in the world And while this may seem something of a truism it is nevertheless worth repeating in a late-twentieth-century context of politically approved themes, post-colonial backlash and ‘silence-breaking’ writing of all kinds” (*Redress* 5). It is also a truism that poetry can be political without surrendering its inventiveness, linguistic processes, and originality. Such is the kind of poetry that, for instance, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote: her poems transform reality with “utterly different” language rather than “the language of the world that provokes” her, and they correspond to her social world in the ways Heaney and Pinsky describe (as do, we will see, Harrison’s and Clifton’s). Brooks has discussed her poetry as rendering the African American Chicago neighborhood she lives in and endures: “I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street. I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner, and I could look first on one side and then on the other. There was my material” (*Report Part One* 133-34). Brooks makes politically conscious poetry out of the raw material outside her window with what she calls her “Gwendolynian” idiolect rather than in the language imposed on or expected of her.

In my third chapter, “The Gwendolynian Tongue,” I examine the process of language in Brooks’s poems, how she idiosyncratically represents the things in her world. She sometimes sets local language in traditional verse forms to respond directly to the deleterious social conditions that racism manifests. For instance, her sequence “Hattie Scott” opens with poems that suggest sonnets in the making, but by the third section the colloquial language pulls away from that high cultural form toward the folksier rhythms of a ballad. The second poem in the sequence, “the date,” is an octave comprised of Hattie’s idiomatic responses to a demeaning boss. Her retorts, though, aren’t vocalized; she thinks them to herself but doesn’t say them aloud because she has to keep her job. At

the same time, the poem implies the condescending orders of Hattie's boss without actually presenting the boss's speech. We might say the boss's words constitute the "missing" sestet if "the date" were a sonnet. The poem utilizes literary tradition to bring Hattie's local language forward while silencing her white boss—a reversal of Hattie's reality where the boss barks orders that Hattie must silently suffer. In another poem, local language and the formal effects of poetry demonstrate that a tenement apartment is the raw material for poetry. The sound of a "dream" language in "kitchenette building" is set against the "strong," everyday language of "rent," "feeding a wife," and "satisfying a man" (*Blacks* 20). The second stanza fuses both kinds of language as the description of a "white and violet" onion "fight[s] with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening down the hall" (20). The assonance of these lines, the sound of their sense, insists that day-to-day tenement life is material for poetry.

And yet Brooks does not usually compose poems about local characters in local speech. Even the speakers in her ballads, a populist form typically in colloquial diction, often deliver lines that are not at all demotic. For example, in "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," which tells the tragic story of a black family moving into a white neighborhood, Rudolph's quoted language is emphatically not everyday speech:

"I am not hungry for berries.

I am not hungry for bread.

But hungry hungry for a house

Where at night a man in bed

"May never hear the plaster

Stir as if in pain.

May never hear the roaches

Falling like fat rain.

“Where never wife and children need

Go blinking though the gloom.

Where every room of many rooms

Will be full of room. (*Blacks* 376)

Rudolph’s speech is unusual and elaborate rather than everyday: he speaks in a declarative rhetorical register marked by annunciatory repetitions (“I am not hungry, “I am not hungry,” “hungry,” “hungry”), inverted syntactical constructions (“Where never wife and children need / Go blinking though the room”), puns (“every room” is “full of room”), and in highly rhythmical alternating beats and rhymes. His language is contrasted to the plainer language of his white adversaries: “*Why, you black old, tough old hell of a man, / Move your family in!*” the malicious agent tells Rudolph knowing full well how the Reeds will be received in the white neighborhood. When Rudolph is killed defending his wife and children, the collective language of his new neighbors is debased and pernicious: “His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse. ‘Nigger—’ his neighbors said” (378).

The crude racist slur is the language of the angry whites—alliteration connects “neighbors and “Nigger”—and it opposes the evocative, nuanced term the narrator invents to describe Rudolph and his family:

Rudolph Reed was oaken.

His wife was oaken too.

And his two good girls and his good little man

Oakened as they grew.

“Oaken,” an uncommon locution that denotes strong wood, accrues meanings as the poem proceeds. In the quatrain above, which opens the poem, oaken refers to brownness. A few stanzas later, it indicates Rudolph’s brave determination to “fight for” the right house: because he is “oakener / than others in the nation,” he isn’t deterred from buying that house when he finds it even though it’s “in a street of bitter white.” When rocks break through the windows of the Reeds’ new home as soon as they move in, “oaken” describes Rudolph’s physical strength and his forbearance: “Though oaken as man could be,” Rudolph doesn’t react the first or second night he and his family are accosted. By the third night, however, Rudolph’s daughter is wounded, and Rudolph is murdered when he confronts his family’s assailants. Meanwhile, other terms for the Reeds have been circulating in the poem all along: the realtor refers to Rudolph as “black,” the narrator describes Reed’s wife and children after they’ve moved onto the block not as “oaken” anymore but as “dark,” and finally, the white neighbors kick Rudolph’s lifeless body and call him “Nigger.” The tragedy of the poem is not only Rudolph’s murder by racist neighbors but the contrast between the family’s “oakenness” at the beginning of the poem and their “oakenness” at the end: the last image is Reed’s “oak-eyed” wife doing “no thing” but changing her daughter’s bandage. The ballad demonstrates linguistically the insidious capacity of racism to transform the “oaken” (brownness, strength, durability) into the “oak-eyed” (stunned, numbed, devastated, and forced to endure). The word’s shifting meanings correspond to the degenerating events the poem depicts.

Brooks consistently defies preconceptions about what the raw material for poetry should be and debunks expectations about the diction for African American poetry. For instance, two of her major poems, “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” and “The Anniad,” portray ordinary characters in impoverished social contexts with extraordinary, lavish, and ostentatious languages. Satin-Legs Smith is a poor black man who dons zoot suits on Sundays to compensate for workweek deprivations. The poem’s extravagant diction and stately blank verse match Smith’s luxurious style. In “The Anniad,” the heroine, Annie Allen, is a young black girl whose worsening reality relentlessly threatens to negate her romantic ideals. The poem’s recondite lexicon pits Annie’s tenacious, elaborate imagination against that bleak reality in intricate variations of rhyme royal stanzas. In such poems, Brooks invents for her local characters an idiolect rather than an expected dialect to challenge the status granted to different kinds of speech as well as assumptions about what constitutes poetic language. Her Gwendolynian language in traditional verse forms contends with the deleterious forces of inequality and oppression.

Across the Atlantic and several decades later, Tony Harrison would also approach traditional verse as a form for contention. In “On Not Being Milton,” the first poem in a sequence that delivers working-class local language in rhymed iambic pentameter, Harrison declares, “Articulation is the tongue-tied’s fighting” (*SP* 112). My fourth chapter, “Tony Harrison’s Tongue-Tied Fighting,” argues that his poems cast the “glottal” stresses of his local Leeds dialect in meter and rhyme to challenge social hierarchies: “Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress / clangs a forged music on the frames of Art, / the looms of owned language smashed apart.” Harrison’s poems juxtapose disparate forms of speech as allegories of division rather than, in Heaney’s case, allegories of

integration. For example, in “Them and [uz],” a poem from the same sequence as “On Not Being Milton,” speech registers are bluntly set against each other to create a turbulent linguistic environment. There, the speaker recalls being ridiculed by his grammar school teachers for reading Keats and Shakespeare in his Leeds accent; as a boy, he pronounced the word “us,” represented phonetically in Daniel Jones’s 1917 *English Pronouncing Dictionary* by the symbol [AS], as “uz.” The poem brings together several forms of speech in rhyming iambic pentameter:

α ί α ι̇, ay, ay! . . . stutterer Demosthenes

gob full of pebbles outshouting seas –

4 words only of *mi ’art aches* and . . . “Mine’s broken,

you barbarian, T.W.!” He was nicely spoken.

‘Can’t have our glorious heritage done to death!’

I played the drunken porter in *Macbeth*. (SP 122)

These lines include Greek words from a tragic chorus (α ί α ι̇), that same utterance refashioned as “ay, ay” (a “catchphrase” of Northern English comedians who are important figures for Harrison [Rutter 125]), an arcane reference to an ancient Greek orator with a speech impediment (“Demosthenes”), colloquial English terms and phrases (“gob,” “done to death”), the digit 4 as opposed to “four,” a phrase from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” rewritten phonetically to sound out the Leeds accent, and a combination of an English teacher’s quoted speech directed at the speaker and the speaker’s internal responses to his teacher’s belittling statements. The poem presents, in other words, a

welter of linguistic registers, “a series of switchback contradictions whose dividing line (as between warring factions) won’t stay put” (Rutter 124). The assortment is disorienting. Harrison depicts such divisions as disruptive, debilitating realities that occur at the level of language.

Such poetry is not just defiant; it also makes a new music by bringing Leeds vernacular into verse form. In fact, even as Harrison’s poems enact division, they are not in themselves divisive. For he employs poetic tradition not to establish a paradigm for social demarcation in “low” vernacular and “high” verse forms but to manage the verbal turbulence his poems depict. The patterns and arrangements that create iambic pentameter, rhyme schemes, and stanza breaks simultaneously serve linguistic disruptions and lend order and coherence to that disruption. Traditional verse is for Harrison a form for fighting and also for putting oppositional elements into working relationships.

It is also a form for locating his working-class community squarely in poetic tradition. “On Not Being Milton” and “Them and [uz]” are both from *The School of Eloquence*, Harrison’s book-length sequence of poems that all adapt the sixteen-line “sonnet” structure that George Meredith originated in his 1862 sequence *Modern Love*. Stephen Burt points out that “in most of Harrison’s sonnets, the combination of fluent meter with anti-elitist sentiment seems to defend the pentameter itself: iambic pentameter (Harrison’s verse seems to prove) is not an imposition of foreign artifice, but a more emphasized, more ordered version of the pattern inherent in English speech” (335). Burt perceives the defensiveness in Harrison’s poems and the ordering capabilities of their poetic forms, but he also misleadingly describes them as “appropriating aspects of the

sonnet tradition” for a “dispossessed people” who have been left “out of the sonnet tradition” (335). According to Burt, when Harrison “appropriates” “[t]he verse forms closest to English history and tradition [they] become fully accessible, fully appropriate vehicles for his anger on behalf of the dispossessed, the working classes” (335). For Burt, this process of appropriation occurs in Harrison’s poems when “form” and “anti-elitist sentiment” merge (335).

But this suggests that traditional form must be confiscated or at least made “appropriate” for the masses. Alternatively, for Levine, forms in general—social, political, aesthetic—“do not belong to certain times and places” (12). We can add sonnets to the list of traditional literary forms that she says scholars are now beginning to comprehend as “portable” (6), travelling across cultural, national, and temporal locations: “a range of recent literary theorists, including Wai-Chee Dimock, Frances Ferguson, and Franco Moretti, have noted that certain literary forms—epic, free indirect discourse, rhythm, plot—can survive across cultures and time periods, sometimes enduring through vast distances of time and space” (4-5). Indeed, I argue that Harrison’s poems do not set colloquial language in inherited form to appropriate tradition but to locate his working-class community in its rightful traditions. For example, Antony Rowland explains that the Cornish-language line in Harrison’s “National Trust” is taken from an *englyn*, an early Welsh poetic form that dates back at least to the twelfth century (274). In that poem, a local convict is lowered by “stout upholders of law and order” into a pit to measure its depth; the experience leaves the convict “flayed, grey, mad, dumb” (*SP* 121). The speaker connects this “hush-hush” act to the killing of the Cornish language by the “gentlemen” who exploited the tin mines at “Towanroath / now National Trust, a place

where they got tin, / those gentlemen who silenced the men's oath / and killed the language that they swore it in." The poem's end ponders a history of disappearances and unaccountability in Britain:

The dumb go down in history and disappear *A*

and not one gentleman's been brought to book: *B*

Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr *A*

(Cornish) –

'the tongueless man gets his land took.' *B*

These concluding lines link Leeds speech (the speaker signifies that he's speaking in dialect with "'s") to the extinguished Cornish language and to traditional verse form by rhyming the speaker's local language and a line from the original *englyn* that it translates at the end. Modern and ancient vernaculars in the sonnet-like structure here point back to a deep poetic inheritance and declaim the rebellious, liberating power of that inheritance. Form is not inaccessible to the masses but is a way for them to resist those forces that would appropriate their territory. The inherited forms of poetry—sonnets (English, Petrarchan, Meredithian) and *englyns*—were always appropriate forms for local tongues and didn't require appropriation.

In his poem "Heredity," Harrison attributes his poetry to a personal inheritance from his "uncles, Joe and Harry." Harrison's inheritance is traditional, too; the poem is a rhyming iambic quatrain:

How you became a poet's a mystery.

Wherever did you get your talent from?

I say: *I had two uncles, Joe and Harry—
one was a stammerer, the other dumb.* (111)

Harrison stacks divergent forms of speech in traditional verse forms to create and manage linguistic division and to give voice to silent family members. Like Harrison's, Lucille Clifton's poems speak for family members whose expressivity has been hindered. In a very early poem, for instance, she tells her mother that the poems she will write "are the poems / you never wrote" (CP 18). Almost thirty years later, she would portray her mother burning her own poems because they displeased her husband: "her hand is crying. / her hand is clutching / a sheaf of papers. / poems. / she gives them up. / they burn" (446). Indeed, many of Clifton's poems carry out her mother's directive to "turn the blood that clots on your tongue / into poems" (296). For example, free verse's characteristic white space and enjambment give way to a uniform arrangement of lines in "shapeshifter poems," building a kind of fortification for their speaker against a sexual predator with the sound of an owl's song:

who is there to protect her
from the hands of the father
.....
not the woman
she will become with her
scarred tongue who who who the owl
laments into the evening who
will protect her. (316)

The poem asks, “who is there to protect her?” The answer to that question is that “who [the song] / will protect her,” the owl’s song—a metaphor here for poetry. In later poems, Clifton continues to equate sexual danger with a lyrical “wakening” that is disciplined and formal, “cultivated” and “trained”: “she will cultivate night vision. / she will train her tongue / to lie still in her mouth and listen,” says the speaker of “night vision,” recalling herself as a young girl anticipating dreadfully the intrusion in her room at night by her father (444-45). The girl “will remember / to build something human with” the frightening experience of sexual abuse; the poem is the “something human” she creates out of such danger.

For Clifton, it is the female members of her family who bequeath to her a poetic inheritance. Her “aunt timmie,” who “smoothed the sheets the master poet slept on,” teaches her about “form and line / and discipline and order and / america” as much as poetic tradition or social history does (557). In “grandma, we are poets,” she compares her own poetic gifts to her grandmother’s autism, much as Harrison did with his stammering and mute uncles. The genetic condition of having twelve fingers, a trait passed on to Clifton from her mother, is for her a symbol of the artist’s extra powers. Her mother’s, aunt’s, and grandmother’s charge is not to “give up” her poems but rather to use her extra powers to write about her most painful and troubling experiences. She must create a poetics from not just the location of an African American in the US in the twentieth century but from the location of the women in her family.

And yet Clifton locates herself in many spheres that extend well beyond the African American community and her own family: they include Americans, Native Americans, Africans, mythic and religious characters, abuse and illness survivors, victims

of political and social oppression, poets, pop culture figures, and a host of others. Her location is plural, and she develops a poetic language to render that plurality. For instance, the speaker's declaration at the beginning of "defending my tongue"—"what i be talking about / can be said in this language only"—suggests that her language is "only" black vernacular: "this tongue / be the one that understands / what i be talking about" (344). The next stanza, however, is composed in a less situated colloquial diction. The poet addresses herself conversationally:

you are you talking about
the landscape that would break me
if it could the trees
my grandfolk swung from the dirt
they planted in and ate.

The speaker concludes that one language is not enough to express what she "be talking about": "the words / be hard be bumping out too much / to be contained in one thin tongue." Clifton would need more than "one thin tongue" to speak for and from her multiple locales.

Indeed, Clifton doesn't speak with "one thin tongue" but with a multivalent tongue that encompasses a broad range of human experience. Unlike Harrison, she connects divergent or oppositional elements rather than separating them or arranging them hierarchically. Her linguistic modes shift almost unnoticeably across her lines. My fifth chapter, "Lucille Clifton's Mortal Tongue," examines how she fuses speech registers with subtle blends of nonstandard and standard grammatical structures in distinctive free-verse forms to speak at times from her particular local communities and to speak at other

times more broadly of human experience from less specific and even otherworldly locations. In some instances, she employs black speech to critique racism: her early sequence of “tyrone” and “willie b” poems, for example, sets the idiomatic language of young black boys in the perilous context of a race riot. In “admonitions,” a black mother speaks in local language that is at once colloquial and oracular: she addresses her specific children and all African American children about the menaces of racism and sexual threat. The mother speaks, in other words, in a local vernacular imbued with transcendent oracular authority.

Still, as Clifton’s poetry developed, black vernacular began to recede from her work even as she maintained a tone of voice that was almost always colloquial. Her first biblical poems—the “some jesus” sequence that ends her second book—employed black speech to portray biblical characters as humans. But her biblical and spiritual poems after that series are comprised of expressly nonstandard diction and phrases that indicate not necessarily black speech but humans speaking during disturbing encounters with otherworldly entities. Thus, she devises a local language, for instance, for the Garden of Eden, in which she envisions the creation of language. In “tree of life” and in “brothers,” the language she invents for Eden’s Lucifer, a corollary for herself as a poet (“Lucifer” and “Lucille” both mean “light bringer”), is at once lofty, prophetic, archaic, and demotic. Lucifer—“less snake than angel / less angel than man”—speaks directly to God on behalf of humans with a vernacular for the oracular (467).

Despite her oracular authority and the remarkable consistency in her immense body of work, in “the message from The Ones,” the final section of the late volume *Mercy* (2004), Clifton appears to question her poetic languages. Here, she relinquishes

her poems to “The Ones,” otherworldly voices she began to hear in the late 70s but would not acknowledge until much later. The “message” poems follow a classic Clifton sequence about the World Trade Center tragedy, “september song,” as if her own local language and poetic form can no longer, after September 11, perform the work of turning blood clots into poems. Yet her language for their extra-human voices is Cliftonian all the same, a fact they acknowledge: “we will call you / one eye / field of feeling / singing ear / quick hand // we will make use / of these” (CP 614). Clifton’s “tongue / is useful / not unique,” and The Ones insist that they “come / to languages / not lives” (613). But this “general[ity]” (615) is in tension with their admission that she is unique precisely because she is a poet: they will call her “singing ear” and “will make use / of” her particular capacities (614). Indeed, their language is hers. “The Ones” come to Clifton, we will see, because they are “tongueless,” and they need her mortal tongue and the local language she has devised for their messages.

Clifton found the kind of natural, unadorned voice that Brooks was searching for when she began to write free verse. Brooks has explained her free-verse ambitions as a way to address her audience: “My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully ‘call’ . . . all black people, black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones” (*Report Part One* 183). In other words, Brooks wanted to locate her poems in her community, from the “gutters” to the “thrones” of black Chicago. Clifton was likewise concerned with her poetry’s address as much as its capacity for redress: “What I hope is to write poetry that my Aunt Timmie can understand on one level; the cab driver can understand on another;

and the Ph.D. can understand on yet another” (qtd. in Witmyer 27). Harrison, too, wants to create poetry that speaks to people from a cross-section of readers: he aims “to remind” his readers “of the privilege of their literacy” by jarring them with “disconcerting” idiomatic language and also, as he exclaims in his poem “The Rhubarbarians,” “to be the poet my father reads!” (Interview with Haffenden 231; Harrison *SP* 114). Heaney, who doesn’t discuss explicitly the address of his poetry but focuses instead on its redressing properties, conceived of local language as a way to write an “answering poetry” and thus a “responsible poetry”: poems in the poet’s “own language,” he says, can produce “an adequate response to conditions in the word” (*Redress* 191). He recalls in the sonnet sequence “Clearances” pitching his language to his uneducated mother as a way to remain connected to her: “I governed my tongue / In front of her” he says, because “the wrong / Grammar kept us allied and at bay” (*Haw Lantern*, 28). In “Local Languages,” I examine the ways poets govern their tongues by combining different manifestations of colloquial language with both traditional and free-verse forms to respond to social and political conditions. Their local languages position them in distinct social territories and locate the languages of those territories in a vast poetic tradition of English-language poetry that spans Ireland, England, and America. Each of these poets demonstrates that local language is a poetic for investigating social and political realities, occurrences, and disturbances, a poetic for mediating between aesthetic and social realms.

Notes

¹ Quotations from Frost’s poems and prose are from The Library of America edition of his *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays (CPPP)*. I indicate the page number the first time a poem is mentioned and then quote without citations.

² Reena Sastri has recently acknowledged the complexity of the sound of sense and the ways one of Frost's poetic descendents employs speech patterns experimentally rather than programmatically or conventionally: in an article published in the March 2014 edition of *PMLA*, Sastri argues that in Louise Glück's poems, "the textures of conversation, what Robert Frost called the 'sentence-sounds' of everyday speech" depict "a constructionism of voice," "the coming into being of a poetic speaker or lyric" (190).

³ In *Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry*, Tyler Hoffman claims that Frost devised his theory on sound to contrast with modernism's focus on the image and to belie the notion that his art was simplistic: he "need[ed] to lay claim to an aesthetic under the watchful eyes of the London avant-garde" (14-15). Hoffman's overarching argument is that the sound of sense expresses Frost's political inclinations, that is, "a leftist worldview [that] draws attention to the individual and cuts across class lines in its recovery of the commonness of speech" (6). Frost's poetry does not, Hoffman claims, represent "a valorous resistance to flabby free verse, but a complexly coded articulation of political and cultural identity in the modern world." Hoffman briefly discusses Heaney's poetry in relation to the sound of sense: Frost's formulation, according to Hoffman, creates for Heaney (and Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott) "a space in which to articulate native identities—a space, that is, in which the subaltern speaks—with meter analogized as the dominant cultural tradition" (11). I will argue precisely the opposite about meter and traditional poetic form: they don't represent domination but are resources for responding artistically to dominating social forces.

⁴ Two classic studies of diction in poetry are Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction* (1928) and Donald Davie's *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952). A recent analysis of diction in English-language poetry is Rob Jackaman's *Broken English/Breaking English* (2003).

⁵ In his letter, Frost includes a superscript asterisk after the word "theory" and a corresponding footnote that reads "Principle I had better say" (664). This suggests just how certain Frost was that his idea embodied the way poetry works: he was not advancing a proposition to be tested but his personal belief about the operations of poetry.

⁶ To exemplify his point, Perkins names particular poems: Hardy's "Afterwards," Frost's "After Apple-Picking," and Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole."

⁷ The poets of the 1930s that Perkins is referring to include, along with Auden, Dylan Thomas, William Empson, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis. This generation is commonly referred to as "the thirties poets" or "the Auden group." They're not all English: MacNeice was born and raised in Northern Ireland, and his parents were from the west of Ireland.

⁸ Paulin edited *The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse* (1990), the only general anthology of poems composed in dialect and, more generally, in colloquial language. The poets represented are mostly British and, to a lesser extent, Irish. Paulin does include a

poem by Heaney (“Broagh,” which I discuss in Chapter Two) and Harrison (“v.,” which I discuss at length in Chapter Four). Brooks and Clifton are not represented. In fact, few American poets are included (Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop are) and no African Americans (except the blues singer Lucille Bogan, not known as a poet in any conventional sense, who recorded under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson). Only a handful of nonwhite poets appear in the book at all: Louise Bennett from Jamaica, Derek Walcott from Trinidad, the Indian poets Eunice de Souza and Nissim Ezekiel. The absence of poets of color in an anthology of poems that employ regional speech is a serious omission: local language is often a crucial element in the work of nonwhite poets as they examine rigorously assumptions about race, class, gender, literary language, dialect, and tradition.

⁹ The relationship between poetry and politics is a longstanding subject of debate. When James Merrill was asked in 1968 about poetry and “political realities,” he responded, “Oh dear, these immensely real concerns do not produce *poetry*” (38). In discussions about poetry’s political efficacy, critics often refer to Auden’s line “poetry makes nothing happen” from his famous elegy to Yeats to corroborate the social futility of poems (89). However, Auden’s poem says much more than “poetry makes nothing happening”; it says, “poetry makes nothing happen” because it is itself “A way of happening, a mouth” that “survives” (89). And yet as recently as 2007, Dowdy, in his book on twentieth and twenty-first century political poetry, acknowledges Auden’s subtle claim that poetry is a happening rather than a catalyst but still concludes that Auden ultimately implies that “a poem is . . . an ineffective social act” (2).

¹⁰ New Formalism was “a late-twentieth century development in American poetry that sought to draw fresh attention to traditional forms of verse in terms of meter, rhyme, and stanzaic symmetry” (“Brief Guide to New Formalism”). New Formalist poets include Brad Leithauser, Molly Peacock, Marilyn Hacker, Mark Jarman, Dana Gioia, Gjertrud Schnackenburg, Elizabeth Alexander, Julia Alvarez, Rafael Campo, and others.

¹¹ Heaney also discusses, for instance, Frost’s sonnet about song and speech in Eden in “Above the Rim.” He hears the “oversound” of the poem as the result of its rhythmic and sonic variations, its “mixture of the rejoicing notes and the weeping notes” (78).

¹² Heaney rejects readings of the poem that make this mistake. Its “callousness” was first suggested to him by the English professor who introduced him to the poem (“One” 10). More recently, Craig Raines has claimed that in “Out, Out–,” “Frost intends to show us that life must go on. . . . But what he succeeds in showing us is that people are implausibly callous” (265).

¹³ Frost’s use of the word “So” in “Out, Out–,” for example, was precisely the kind of colloquialism that held considerable resonance for Heaney. In a discussion of his translation of *Beowulf* (2001), Heaney explains his choice to translate the Anglo-Saxon poem’s first word, “Hwæt,” as the idiomatic “So.” “Hwæt” would normally be translated

as the literary “Lo” or “Hark,” but Heaney wanted a more connotative word to capture the natural cadence of its narrator, what he calls “the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon”: “the particle ‘so’ came naturally to the rescue, because in that idiom ‘so’ operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention. So, ‘so’ it was” (*Beowulf* xxvii). “So” is also an Irish colloquialism to indicate yes or to reinforce what has just been said or what is about to be said (“so”).

¹⁴ The partition of Ireland occurred after the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1922 when twenty-six counties of the island gained independence from Britain as the Irish Free State (eventually becoming what we know today as the Republic of Ireland), and the six remaining counties in the north of the island remained under British rule (creating a separate political entity, “Northern Ireland”). The partition caused a year-long civil war in Ireland between those who supported the Treaty that led to the creation of Northern Ireland as a discrete nation and those who did not. The majority of citizens in the six counties were Protestants who identified as British and wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, but almost as many people in the region were Catholics who identified as Irish and wanted to see Ireland unified and freed from British control. Northern Ireland thus became a deeply divided and dangerously contentious place. One of the effects of such division was institutionalized discrimination in employment and housing against Irish Catholics by the unionist majority. What we know today as “the Troubles” began in the late 1960s when student-led demonstrations demanding civil rights for Northern Irish Catholics were met with violence by loyalists and, eventually, the British army that was originally called in to protect the Catholic community. Heaney succinctly relates the sectarian crisis that began a few years after the publication of his first book (*Death of a Naturalist* in 1966) to the 1922 partition: “partition created crisis. It kept the Protestant majority out of Ireland’s Ireland every bit as effectively as it kept the Catholic minority within Britain’s” (*Redress* 198). The Troubles have lasted for over thirty years, with the worst violence occurring in the 70s and 80s. In 1998, the “Good Friday Agreement . . . put in place wide-ranging strategies of accommodation between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and between Ireland and Britain. In 1999 a devolved assembly was formed in Stormont, only to be revoked in 2000 when agreement could not be reached on the decommissioning of weapons. In 2007 a new devolved assembly was established involving power-sharing between Sinn Fein and Dr Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party” (“Northern Ireland”).

¹⁵ The group of writers in Heaney’s generation in Northern Ireland make up what has been called the “Northern Irish Renaissance.” They include poets from both sides of the divide: Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian. In *The Ulster Renaissance*, Heather Clark argues that when taken together the individual work of these poets amounts to a vision for a cohesive Northern Irish community in the midst of social chaos.

¹⁶ The phrase “a momentary stay against confusion” is how Frost described poetry in his famous essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” (777).

¹⁷ Lloyd is discussing “The Tollund Man” here, the first of the bog poems that actually appears in *Wintering Out* (1972), the book before *North*. Heaney ends “The Tollund Man” with himself: “I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home” (37). This element of “self-production” that Lloyd is critiquing is also found in *North*’s bog poems.

¹⁸ Critics have taken Lloyd to task for his attack on Heaney: for example, Elmer Andrews remarks that Lloyd is “perversely resistant to the pervasive note of critical self-reflection which complicates Heaney’s expression of the standard sentiments of Romantic nationalism” (*Writing Home* 5). He points out that the line from Heaney’s “Hercules and Antaeus” that Lloyd takes for his title—“pap for the dispossessed”—indicates Heaney’s awareness “of the possibly illusory nature of his concept of home.” For Brendan O’Donoghue, Lloyd’s “brilliant essay on Heaney’s relation to the defects of the Irish Revival is curiously spoiled by suddenly turning at the end into an *ad hominem* rant against the poet” (*Cambridge Companion* 120n9). Too, Lloyd concludes his essay by railing against Heaney’s reputation, not just his poetics: “The seeming coherence between . . . the elevation of a minor Irish poet to a touchstone of contemporary taste and a discourse whose most canonical proponent argued for the Celtic literature as a means to the integration of Ireland with Anglo-Saxon industrial civilization is appropriate and pre-programmed” (37). And yet the categories “minor” and “major” seem to be the kind of hierarchical binaries that Lloyd writes against. Edna Longely also criticizes Heaney’s *North* for being overly stylized and distancing (“Inner Emigré”). Another less known and less rigorous denunciation of Heaney is Desmond Fennell’s chapbook *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1*.

CHAPTER II

SEAMUS HEANEY HOLDING HIS TONGUE

In “The Prerequisites,” the 1954 preface to a limited edition collection of his poetry, Robert Frost explained that a “poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A” (*CPPP* 815). Similarly, Seamus Heaney has described his reading of other poets as “nourishment” and “imaginative protein” (*Preoccupations* 136). One crucial imaginative protein for Heaney has been “the sound of sense.” Heaney describes Frost’s legendary idea as “probably under-regarded as ‘poetics’ because of its huge simplicity, but . . . deeply relevant to that historically important shift in English language poetry in this century which saw (and heard) the entry of specific local intonations . . . into the central English line” (“Voices” 31). What Heaney finds most impressive in Frost’s poetry is how natural and spontaneous his poetic speakers sound even in rhyme and meter: “what made Frost’s approach . . . compelling was the way he insisted that what you might call the poet’s vocal authenticity could coexist with a commitment to the inherited forms” (31). In Frost, regional speech was closer to reality than conventionally poetic diction, and yet it was conventional verse form that revealed the music of such speech.

During his early development, Heaney set local language in inherited forms in order to convey the historical reality of his rural world while maintaining the artistic reality of poetic form.¹ His instinct not to oppose regional speech and verse form would also inform his mature understanding of aesthetics in which art and life are mutually productive. For Heaney, poets must reckon with a division between art and life, a conflict

inevitably “suffered by the poet” who then “begins to feel that a choice between the two, a once-and-for-all option, would simplify things” (*Government* xii). But the poet knows that “no such simple solution or dissolution is possible.” For poetry, Heaney would explain later in *The Redress of Poetry*, “add[s] a complication where the general desire is for a simplification” (3). What Heaney is describing here is the difference between poetry that is, simply, “harnessed to movements” and poetry that matches the “complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated” (2, 8). When sectarian violence and political turmoil erupt in his homeland, Heaney asks himself how suffering, rage, and social atrocity can find adequate expression in poetry with complication rather than simplification. He answers this question by putting Shakespeare into dialogue with Yeats: “The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’” (*Preoccupations* 57).² For Heaney, local language in Northern Ireland was a befitting emblem of adversity for reconciling the conflict between art and social reality because it unified the linguistic strains that represent the multifarious, conflicting sides of Irish, and especially Northern Irish, history: Gaelic, Ulster-Scots, and Anglo-Saxon. As the Northern Irish Troubles escalated, Heaney employed local language and traditional and free-verse forms in his poetry in order to respond adequately to that social calamity and to locate himself not on one side of the sectarian divide but among his Northern Irish compatriots, both Catholic and Protestant.

In his early poetry, Heaney set the local speech of his Northern Irish community to traditional verse forms to convey his rural world with vocal authenticity. As we saw in the previous chapter, such vocal authenticity was precisely what Heaney heard in Frost’s

“Out, Out–,”: “I knew from my own experience of such accidents that all you can do the morning after the funeral is what you have always done, keep going and get on with it. Regretfully perhaps, perhaps stoically, but with a broken rather than a hardened heart” (“One” 10).³ His poem “Mid-Term Break” is his depiction of that “getting on with it” (15). There, the speaker is an older sibling whose younger brother has been killed in an accident.⁴ The poem sets the child’s death against domestic tones and sounds typically associated with domestic routine to communicate the pressure of suppressed emotion and the assimilation of extraordinary tragedy into the ordinary.

Like “Out, Out–,” “Mid-Term Break” begins in a setting where a familiar sound is grimly ominous and employs colloquial language to articulate a community’s reticence in the face of tragedy. School bells announce the end of class while evoking funeral bells as the discomfited speaker waits to be driven home to his young brother’s wake: “I sat all morning in the college sick bay / Counting bells knelling classes to a close. / At two o’clock our neighbours drove me home” (*Death of a Naturalist* 15).⁵ The poem unfolds through the speaker’s perspective as he recalls arriving home to his family and fellow townspeople:

In the porch I met my father crying –
He had always taken funerals in his stride –
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The idiomatic “in his stride” and “it was a hard blow” combine empathy and resignation. Heaney’s homespun phrases lend a subdued quality to the poem’s sorrowful tone. Further, the colloquial expressions create tonal shifts that coincide with shifts in circumstance. The conversational tone in the stanza above contrasts with the more formal sounding tone

in the lines before it, a solemn tone established by foreboding diction (“sick,” “bells knelling,” “close”) and an elaborate pattern of *c*, *l*, *n*, *s*, *cl*, and *ls* sounds: “I sat all morning in the college sick bay / Counting bells knelling classes to a close.” This sonic movement from heavy alliteration and consonance in the first stanza to the subtler, more muted music of the next stanza’s local parlance, which doesn’t alliterate as resoundingly, corresponds to the poem’s movement from college campus to domestic porch.

Heaney describes and creates sound to render a rural community’s emotional temperament. “Mid-Term Break”’s tranquil domestic sounds contrast to the poem’s tragic circumstances, emphasizing the absorption of tragedy into the everyday as the speaker picks up among the background noise of whispers and awkward salutations the sound of an infant who “cooed and laughed and rocked the pram.” The speaker is both highly perceptive of what’s going on around him and awkwardly self-conscious. He feels “embarrassed / By old men standing up to shake my hand // And tell[ing] me they were ‘sorry for my trouble.’” The colloquial responses to tragedy—the crying father who normally takes “funerals in his stride,” the loss summarized as “a hard blow,” the old men “sorry for [his] trouble”—encapsulate the emotional reticence of the community, their inclination to share sorrow in clipped, local expressions. Contrasted with the descriptions of background noises, they also convey the sense of going through the motions: the speaker awkwardly shakes hands with adults who address him with these formulaic phrases, but he fixates on the cooing, laughter, and rocking that he hears beyond their words. When he finds himself holding the hand of his mother who “coughed out angry tearless sighs,” grief and suppression collide in what Helen Vendler describes as “the

conflict between ‘angry’ and ‘sighs’, and the violently suppressed tears stifled under ‘tearless’” (Heaney 31).

The sounds themselves produced by “Mid-Term Break” also correspond to the tragic context. For example, loose iambic rhythms give way to the strict iambic pentameter of the last two lines where the steady rhythm and the exact rhyme of “clear” and “year” mirror the directness and clarity of the speaker’s frank confrontation with and acceptance of his brother’s death. The next morning, the speaker goes to his little brother’s room to confront the death on his own terms. The images for what he sees there are both mournful and consoling: “Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops / And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him / For the first time in six weeks.” The poem in tercets closes in a rhyming couplet whose second line is separated by white space:

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Rhyme seals the poem, emphasizing the finality and necessary acceptance of death in rural cultures where reticence is essential.⁶

Heaney thematizes sound, employs colloquial language, and creates sound effects in “Mid-Term Break” to convey the painful reality of loss. He doesn’t, however, always equate hard reality with adversity: “Death and darkness are there, I have to admit, in the titles [of his first two books, *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*], but I still want to object [to suggestions that I] chose to emphasize them as negative factors

And why's that? Probably because I thought of 'the dark' in the second title as a conventionally positive element" (*Stepping Stones* 95). In "The Outlaw," from that second volume, local language communicates the apprehension of moving into precarious realms while revealing the positive elements of those realms. In the opening three couplets, the speaker renders in everyday speech his walk to a covert, out-of-the-way place:

Kelly's kept an unlicensed bull, well away

From the road: you risked a fine but had to pay

The normal fee if cows were serviced there.

Once I dragged a nervous Friesian on a tether

Down a lane of alder, shaggy with catkin,

Down to the shed the bull was kept in.

I gave Old Kelly the clammy silver, though why

I could not guess. He grunted a curt 'Go by.' (*Door into the Dark* 4)

The speaker recalls here in colloquial diction taking his cow to be bred by an unregistered stud bull owned by "Old Kelly." Heaney's readers tend to hear in the poem unsettling tentativeness: "The nervousness of the first part of the poem is suddenly dissipated by a brutal, consonantal hammering" (Andrews, *Seamus Heaney* 30); "the poem allows us to glimpse the darker impulses lying just beyond the threshold of the human world" (Tobin 41). True, the cow is nervous and the boy's sweating palms that make the silver coins

clammy suggest that he is, too. But the tone here is casual, composed, and easy-going: the bull's "kept . . . well away / from the road," the "risk" is just having "to pay / the normal fee," and grunting "Old Kelly" isn't frightening but just a bit brusque. The boy's not even entirely sure why he's giving Kelly money. The language itself isn't nervous, brutal, or dark but straightforward and plainspoken, demotic speech set in the rhythms of loose iambic pentameter with a mixture of exact and slant end-rhymes. The poem's regularly patterned local speech situates it not beyond the human world but directly in that world.

In his study of Heaney's use of the pastoral as a form for resistance, Sidney Burris sees "The Outlaw" as an example of "a language of confrontation and deception [that] pervades even the simplest rural vignettes" (20). In his view, "the mannerly concision of the couplets is constantly undercut by the foreboding sense of illegality that issues from the diction of the poem" (20). And yet instead of undercutting the "mannerly" couplets with a lexicon of illicitness, the poem tempers the speaker's nervousness with colloquial language and "unfussy" diction. Kelly's instruction to "Go by. // Get up on that gate" is "curt" but has the nonthreatening familiarity of local speech; "go by" is a Northern Irish idiom meaning "get out the way" ("go by"). The speaker gets up on that gate to a safe "lofty station" where he watches not a "foreboding" illegal act but "a business-like conception." The poem anticipates a grand entrance for the bull: "The door, unbolted, whacked back against the wall," the speaker declares just before the bull's arrival. His appearance, however, isn't dreadful or thrilling. Conversely, he is "Unhurried as an old steam-engine shunting." The speaker recalls that as the bull "circled, snored and nosed," he did so with

No hectic panting,

Just the unfussy ease of a good tradesman.

Then an awkward, unexpected jump, and,

His knobbled forelegs straddling her flank,

He slammed life home, impassive as a tank,

Dropping off like a tipped up load of sand.

Even the bull's "unexpected" mounting of the cow is rendered inelegantly in the slant rhyme of "tradesman" and "and." This "illegal sire" is not magisterial but "impassive," just as the taciturn Kelly's only other words are casually aloof: "'She'll do,' said Kelly and tapped his ash-plant // Across her hindquarters. 'If not, bring her back.'" The modulating sounds and rhythms of the business-like diction, local idioms, and colloquial tones emphasize the event's matter-of-factness, the sound of its sense.

And yet instead of aligning Heaney's work with the sound of sense, Jeffrey Bilbro associates the aural qualities of Heaney's poetry with T. S. Eliot's concept of the "auditory imagination" in which "syllable and rhythm" link subconscious, "primitive and forgotten" "levels of thought and feeling" to "the trite, the current, the new and surprising" (Eliot 33; Bilbro 118). Bilbro recognizes that Heaney often instills his poems with "natural pitches of speech," but he distinguishes the colloquial poems from those poems in which "echoing, instinctual properties . . . derive more from Eliot's influence than Frost's" (336n28).⁷ Indeed, Heaney himself refers to Eliot's concept as "[o]ne of the most

precise and suggestive of [Eliot's] critical formulations" (*Preoccupations* 150). Eliot elucidated for Heaney "the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments" (150).

However, Heaney's own assessment of Eliot's poetry suggests that Eliot was less an influence on him than Bilbro claims.⁸ In "Learning from Eliot," for instance, Heaney is careful to keep the elder poet's effect on him in check: "If Eliot did not help me to write, he did help me to learn what it means to read" (*Finders Keepers* 40). He learned from Eliot not how to write but how to read Eliot, learned that he could get past his anxiety about not being able to understand the semantic content in Eliot's poems by turning his ear to the rhythms of those poems:

In the 'Death by Water' section of *The Waste Land*, for example, I began to construe from its undulant cadences and dissolvings and reinings-in a mimetic principle which matched or perhaps even overwhelmed any possible meaning that might be derived from the story of Phlebas's fate. . . . I began to stop worrying about Phlebas's relation to the Drowned Man and the effigy of Osiris cast into the water; all that was important as a structural principle, but the breath of life was in the body of sound. (37)

True, Heaney explains here that Eliot helped him to hear rhythm and sound as meaning. But for his own poetry, Heaney wanted more than rhythm and sound: "much as I was learning from Eliot about the right way to listen, he could not be the stimulator of poetry for me. He was more of a literary superego than a generator of the poetic libido, and in order for the libidinous lyric voice to get on with its business, it had to escape from his

overseeing presence” (39). Heaney claims that it wasn’t Eliot but Frost, Yeats, and Hardy who taught him to write with a “corroborative relation between a landscape and a sensibility” (40). They showed Heaney that the “words on the page can function in a way that is supplementary to their primary artistic function: they can have a window effect and open the blinds of language on to subjects and places before or behind the words. But this kind of mutual help does not exist—and is not intended to exist—between the words of Eliot’s poetry and the world that gave rise to them” (40-41). Sound and semantics in Eliot’s poems aren’t always linked but often placed in disparate relation. To put it another way, Eliot’s sounds and rhythms are often dislocated from their allusions, images, and semantic content. For example, Heaney explains that he could make nothing of the “leopards,” “bones,” or “Lady . . . withdrawn / In a white gown” in Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday” (*SP* 85). Even though the “rare music” of Eliot’s lines sounded “lovely,” “the poem never quite became a gestalt,” and Heaney was perplexed by “a vision as arbitrary and disjunct from the usual as the vision of the leopards and lady” (*Finders Keepers* 31-33). Heaney was only able to come to terms with the poem when he stopped trying to join its sound and semantics:

Those qualities which created resistance in the first place now seem to me the valuable things about this work. The sense that the poem stood like a geometry in an absence was what caused my original bewilderment. . . . Nowadays, however, what gratifies me most is the very feeling of being privy to an atmosphere so chastely invented, so boldly and unpredictably written. Things like bones and leopards—which pop into the scene without preparation or explanation and which

therefore discombobulated me at first—these things I now accept not as the poet’s mystifying whim but as his gift and visitation. (33)

In contrast, Heaney made use of the “mutual help” of connecting sound and sense to locate himself in his community and to locate the language of that community in poetic tradition.

Bilbro argues that “the auditory imagination,” not the sound of sense, “exemplifies Heaney’s search for . . . harmonic inspiration, his delicate feel for the aural qualities of language, and the healing delights that come from language’s sonic qualities” (322). He listens to Heaney’s “The Guttural Muse” for sounds that relay the psychological transformation of healing. When that poem’s lonely speaker watches from a hotel window a group of young people leaving a nightclub, the sound of their voices impels him to ponder the mythic power of the tench fish whose slick skin was thought to be healing. Bilbro hears in the poem a common Heaney movement: “As in many of his poems, Heaney sets up a sound pattern in the beginning of the poem that he then weaves through it” (322). The “sound pattern” here begins with the word “midnight” in the poem’s opening lines: “Late summer, and at midnight / I smelt the heat of the day” (*Field Work* 28). For Bilbro, the “tense, short *i* in *mid-* contrasts with the falling, long *i* in *-night*” (322). These two sounds then “weave through the poem, sonically mirroring the shifting emotions of the speaker as they alternately build and release tension” (322). The repeated sounds aurally convey the “release” that the speaker undergoes as they shift from stanza to stanza: “The tight ‘window’ in the third line is balanced by the relaxing ‘night’ of the fourth line. The short *i* sounds in ‘discotheque’ and ‘thick’ are almost onomatopoeically released in the long *o* and voiced *i* sounds of ‘comforting.’ The repeated ‘fish’ . . .

release into ‘slimy’ and ‘slime’” (322). In Bilbro’s estimation, the predominance of “long, open-mouthed *i* sounds” in the third and final stanza indicates that the speaker has been healed of his abjection: the sound of “‘white’, ‘like’, and ‘p/ike’, broken only by the short *i* in ‘swim’. . . resolves in the poem’s final word – ‘life’” (322).

“The Guttural Muse,” then, is a meditation on sound. The poem demonstrates how sound itself can convey meaning as much as semantics can. Bilbro recognizes that the poem “embeds the soothing effect of . . . sounds” rather than “didactically explicat[es]” them (322). But his analysis rests entirely on a cryptic perception of assonance. Presumably, he relates subtle shifts in vowel sounds to Eliot’s concept because Eliot defined the auditory imagination by its “feeling for syllable and rhythm.” Assonance is certainly important in “The Guttural Muse,” but it is only one element among several that work together to communicate the poem’s meaning. Alliteration, consonance, slant rhyme, and repetition across the poem’s rhythmically varied lines create the very sounds that the poet ruminates on. The three five-line stanzas that compose “The Guttural Muse” are each a single sentence with rhythmical variations across lines and syntax. It opens with short lines that blend senses and rhythms: “Late summer, and at midnight / I smelt the heat of the day: / At my window over the hotel car park.” The speaker smells the “heat of the day” as he looks out upon a banal parking lot in lines that will sound prosy against the mellifluous iambic rhythms of the next lines: “I breathed the muddied night airs off the lake / And watched the young crowd leave the discotheque.” As “the young crowd” and the “night airs off the lake” enter, the shorter, flatter opening lines give way to longer, ascending rhythms.

For Heaney, the sound of sense is an animated, visceral quality that is essential to poetry: Regarding Frost’s “Never Again Would Birds Song Be the Same,” Heaney says, “[i]n Frost’s trope, the song of the birds is tuned to the note of Eve’s voice in Eden, in much the same way as poetry is tuned to the sound of sense, and to those tones of voice that live in the original cave of the mouth” (78). Heaney’s lines, then, correspond with his notion of Frost’s “emotional occurrences” rather than his sense of Eliot’s “etymological occurrences.” For Heaney, Frost’s “emotional occurrences” are generated from rhythm: “I call [Frost’s effect] an emotional occurrence, yet it is preeminently a rhythmic one, an animation via the ear of the whole nervous apparatus: what Borges called ‘an almost physical emotion’” (“Above the Rim” 66). The tactile lines in the middle stanza of “The Guttural Muse” create their own “almost physical emotion.” The rhythm at the end of the first stanza is enhanced in the next stanza as the speaker hears the young people below:

x / x / x / x / x /
 Their voi|ces rose | up thick | and com|forting

 x / x / x x / x / x /
 As oi|ly bubb|les the feed|ing tENCH | sent up

 x / x / x / x / x /
 That ev|ening | at dusk—|the sli|my tENCH

 x / x / x / x / x /
 Once called | the ‘doc|tor fish’ | because | his slime

 x / x / x / x / x / x
 Was said | to heal | the wounds | of fish | that touched it.

The predominantly ascending iambic rhythm conveys the upward movement of the crowd’s voices as they drift up to the speaker’s window. Likewise, the internal slant rhymes of “up” and “dusk” and “fish” with “it” as well as the enjambment across the stanza’s last two lines create a fluid, continuous movement. The stanza releases a series

of *d* and *t* sounds that correspond to the tench's release of "oily bubbles": "feeding," "dusk," "called," "doctor," "said," "wounds," "touched"; "tench," "sent," "at," "tench" again, "to," "touched," and "it."

The poem's aural effects and loose iambic rhythms convey the sound of "soft-mouthed life" that the poet yearns for. In the final stanza, the first line shifts back to a shorter, prosier rhythm. But it just as swiftly resumes a longer rhythm and more regular pattern in the next enjambed line, which it sustains for the rest of the poem:

x / x x / /
A girl | in a | white dress

x / x / x / x / x /
Was be|ing court|ed out|among | the cars

x x / / x / x / x /
As her |voice swarmed |and pudd|led in|to laughs

x / x / x / x / x /
I felt | like some | old pike | all badged | with sores,

/ x x / x / x / x /
Wanting | to swim | in touch | with soft-|mouthed life.

The sounds strung along this sentence include the consonance of "courted," "cars," "like" and "pike" as well as "swarmed," "Wanting," and "swim"; the slant rhyme of "cars" and "sores"; the assonance of "laughs" and "badged"; and the onomatopoeic "puddling" of the girl's laughter. That "swarming," "puddling" laughter is the muse of the title, and it recalls the sound of Eve's voice that the birds in Frost's poem adapt for their song:

"Admittedly an eloquence so soft / Could only have had an influence on birds / When call or laughter carried it aloft." The sounds in "The Guttural Muse" make their own "eloquence so soft" to convey the "soft-mouthed life" of night airs, comforting voices, healing bubbles, and puddling laughter.

In fact, “The Guttural Muse” demonstrates the capacity of sound to locate the speaker in the restorative realm of his local community: he’s a visitor now in his own home, and although the poem separates the speaker from the sights, smells, and sounds of that locale by a hotel window, he is not alienated from his former world. On the contrary, he is consoled by it. “Guttural” in the title refers to the specific sound of Heaney’s own dialect. The word “guttural” itself denotes “any mode of pronunciation which is harsh or grating in effect” (“guttural”). For Heaney, the “guttural” sound of his Northern Irish dialect is a source of relief precisely because it’s a source of location: “the point about dialect or hearth language is its complete propriety to the speaker and his or her voice and place. What justifies it and gives it original juice and joy is intimacy and inevitability” (*Stepping Stones* 129). The poem sets down its sounds to communicate the “original juice and joy” of Heaney’s local dialect. It compares the familiar voices of the young crowd to the viscous, mucky, “oily bubbles” of a “feeding,” “slimy tench,” a fish whose “slime” rubs up against the “wounds” of other fish. “Muddied” air, “smelt” heat, and “slimy tench” are likely equivalences for a way of speaking that is “harsh” and “grating.” But the poem compares these voices to these images in ascending iambic rhythms and in an intricate pattern of consonantal sounds. Heaney is employing the aural effects of English poetry to mitigate the “guttural” sound of an Irish way of speaking that is not, to the speaker, harsh and grating but thick and comforting. He is, to use his own terms, “crossing” his “Irish pieties” and his “English literary awarenesses” (*Preoccupations* 37).

That these sounds signify what many would consider to be repulsive–throaty voices, oppressive heat, murky lakes filled with slimy, secreting fish–underscores the restorative quality of the local. Familiarity makes these guttural voices not harsh but

soothing. Qualities that would displease most may actually be rejuvenating when they are tied to community and memory. Heaney describes the poem as connecting sensation, locale, memory, remedy, language, and origins: “It was like a vision of the kind of life I had in the fifties, going to dances and so on, and I felt the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self” (58). The poem conflates the illiterate (sound and memory) and the literate (metaphor and paradox) to locate its speaker in a communal sphere where local speech is an antidote to affliction.

Heaney had considered the precarious location of that guttural muse within the English literary tradition in his earlier poem, “Traditions”:

Our guttural muse
was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition,
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten
like the coccyx
or a Brigid’s Cross
yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that ‘most
sovereign mistress’,
beds us down into
the British isles. (*Wintering Out* 21-22)

Critics have tended to reduce “Traditions” to an Irish-English colonial dichotomy. For example, Corcoran regards the poem as Heaney’s “major enunciation of [a] linguistic theme” that regards the English language as “the imposition of the colonial oppressor, dispossessing the native Irish of their own first ‘tongue’” (38). In his estimation, the “first section imagines Elizabethan English as that ‘alliterative tradition’ (‘alliterative’, because the earliest metres of English poetry, in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, were alliterative in form) which, following the Elizabethan Plantation of Ireland, has ‘bullied’–raped, masculinely forced its will upon–the ‘guttural muse’ of the native Irish language, that virtually disappeared tongue” (38). Blake Morrison similarly perceives the poem’s theme to be linguistic dispossession; for him, English is the guttural language that displaces Gaelic: “The hard, masculine, consonantal language of England has invaded and displaced the soft, fluid, feminine language of the Gaelic vowel. . . . Heaney’s tone here is elegiac, seemingly resigned to English sovereignty” (41). Although Daniel Tobin observes that the poem demonstrates “the active mastery of the conqueror’s language by the colonized,” he still regards it as “a meditation upon the fate of the Irish language,” which has been “[b]ullied or raped by the alliterative tradition of English verse” (72). In Tobin’s estimation, English poetry has desolated the “guttural muse,” “the Irish language [that] grows as vestigial as the uvula Heaney metaphorically attributes to her.” (72). Corcoran, Morrison, and Tobin each assume, in other words, that the “guttural muse” is Gaelic. And yet in this English-language poem by an English-language poet who has been concerned with conveying Irish usages of English since his first book, the “guttural muse” is not the Irish language per se but an Irish way of speaking English. The deterioration of the Irish language at the hands of the British certainly provides a crucial

historical context for “Traditions,” but the poem isn’t about the colonial decimation of that language. Instead, “Traditions” advocates an Irish literary tradition that is written in English and that has emerged from a confluence of Irish and English sources.

“Traditions,” then, does not capitulate to a dominating colonial force, nor does it voice the resentment and anger that so many scholars want to hear in it.⁹ Heaney isn’t contending with the English tradition; if anything, he’s appealing to his own community, which has allowed the “custom” of the “alliterative tradition” to usurp their “guttural muse.” The root of this conflict is, of course, colonial, but the poem makes an argument about poetics: an Irish English-language tradition that fuses its own distinct “guttural” elements with English poetic conventions such as alliteration could convey the rhythms and sounds of the various forms of English speech heard not on “the British isles” but on the island of Ireland.¹⁰ In fact, alliteration in the first section connects the “coccyx” and the “Cross” to the “custom” that relegates the “vestigial” muse to the “outhouse.” That Heaney chooses not to capitalize the *i* in “isles” stresses the political fundamentals of form: the lower-case “isles” asserts that the term “British Isles” is not merely a geographical description, as it is generally regarded, but a political formulation. Heaney subtly draws attention to this troubled designation while arguing for an Irish English-language poetics that would locate Irish poets not on the British Isles but on the “isle” of Ireland.

The first section may seem to speak with a collective Irish voice that directly addresses the dominant English tradition, but the second and third stanzas more clearly address the poet’s own community. The “guttural muse” has been endangered by colonial forces but also neglected by the Irish themselves, and that neglect has caused the metaphorical uvula, the flap of tissue in the throat that produces guttural sounds, to “grow

// vestigial.”¹¹ The enjambment there across an entire stanza break places special emphasis on “grow”: the muse’s uvula hasn’t disappeared or been cut out but has atrophied into a state of literary desuetude because it continues to grow but without exercise; it has become a mere remnant of a former structure just as “the coccyx” bone at the end of the spine is thought to represent a vestigial tail. The muse and her uvula have been “forgotten” by her own community just like a “Brigid’s Cross,” a popular Irish symbol made from rushes or straw, that has been moved not by colonists but by the Irish themselves from a prominent position in the main house to “some outhouse” where it is “yellowing.”

The opening of the second section of “Traditions” confirms that a commanding Irish voice is addressing his community:

We are to be proud
of our Elizabethan English:
‘varsity’, for example,
is grass-roots stuff with us;

we ‘deem’ or we ‘allow’
when we suppose
and some cherished archaisms
are correct Shakespearean.

Richard Russell detects a disdainful attitude in this section’s first line: “The phrase ‘We are to be proud’ sounds ironically contemptuous of this English linguistic heritage (the difference is the ‘to be’; ‘We are proud’ would be a straightforward affirmation of this

heritage)” (*Poetry* 208). Likewise, John Wilson Foster implies that the poet is scornful of the influence of the English language in his homeland: “Is he bridling at the pride of Ulster Protestants in the Elizabethan case of Ulster dialect? So it seems” (16). But “to be” in this line need not be caustic. It may distinguish the utterance as an imploration rather than a declaration. The speaker’s employment of Hamlet’s famous locution of indecision (“to be or not to be”) underscores the definitiveness with which he esteems his community’s use of English: “be proud,” the speaker beseeches rather than posing a “to be or not to be” question, of “our Elizabethan English” and the “correct Shakespearean” of our “cherished archaisms.”¹²

Because local Northern Irish speech is the guttural muse, the last stanza in the section asserts the importance of accent and word choice. After the previous stanza’s consideration of the Elizabethan elements of Ulster diction, the focus here shifts to the influence of Lowland Scots on Northern Irish dialect. The opening colloquialism suggests an aside:

Not to speak of the furled
consonants of lowlanders
shuttling obstinately
between bawn and mossland.

But this is not a digression; the stanza “speaks of” the poem’s local, communal, and personal concerns as Irish, Scottish, and English linguistic influences merge in the “furled / consonants of lowlanders.” “Lowlanders” with a lowercase ‘l’ can refer to any dweller in a low or level land, rural inhabitants literally close to the earth, but the term more specifically points to the variety of English used by both Scottish Lowlanders and the

Northern Irish descendants of Scottish planters. The terrain between “bawn” and “mossland” across which the lowlander “consonants” travel back and forth is not a colonial battlefield but a range where historical, linguistic, and personal forces come together, however “obstinately.”

For Heaney, the political implications of local language are personal: “the language I spoke while growing up in mid-Ulster . . . [was] a language where trace elements of Elizabethan English and Lowland Scots are still to be heard and to be reckoned with as a matter of pronunciation and even, indeed, politics” (*Finders Keepers* 379). He can locate those politics and that linguistic history in his own autobiography. “Mossbawn” was the name of Heaney’s childhood farm. The very word became to him a metaphor for the conflicting cultures of Northern Ireland: “Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter’s house on the bog” (*Preoccupations* 35). To this Scottish and English hybridization Heaney adds a third, Irish strain that subordinates the semantic meaning of *bawn* to how the word sounds when spoken by Heaney and his family and neighbors: “we pronounced it Moss bann, and *bán* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster” (35). The poet situates himself not in the moss or the bawn but “in between the marks of English influence and the lure of the native experience” (35). In other words, he locates himself among the varied inhabitants of the island of Ireland: from his Catholic family members on his childhood farm to the Protestant descendants of the Ulster Scots. For Heaney, language unifies by joining strands of identity—whether

they be national, political, or historical—that colonialism and sectarianism threaten to divide.

In “Traditions,” then, linguistic influences are not cordoned off from each other but are understood as constituents that form the diverse ways of speaking English in the North. In fact, Heaney prizes the concept of diversity even when he wants to distance himself from what he regards as that word’s political correctness: “I have a dread of pious words like ‘diversity’, but I believe in what they stand for” (*Finders Keepers* 411). And yet even in its support of diversity and multifariousness, “Traditions” doesn’t resist or object to nationalist identification. In fact, “Traditions” stakes its own nationalist claim as Heaney “finds sanctuary” in the poem by thinking of his literary tradition as one that is written in English but is uniquely Irish. The poem’s third and final section emphasizes the fact that Shakespeare’s Captain MacMorris in *Henry V* is one of the first examples of the stage Irishman:

MacMorris, gallivanting
round the Globe, whinged
to courtier and groundling
who had heard tell of us

as going very bare
of learning, as wild hares,
as anatomies of death:
‘What ish my nation?’

Heaney puts the stage Irishman in conversation with another authoritative Elizabethan voice. The “anatomies of death” that anger MacMorris in “Traditions” come from Spenser’s description of the wretched state of starving Irish people during the Elizabethan English conquest: “Out of every corner of the woods and glynnnes, they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legges could not beare them. They looked like anatomies of death; they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eate the dead carrions, happy where they could finde them; . . . and, if they found a plot of water-cresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time” (“Present State of Ireland” 101-02). But Spenser’s tract is not humane; it recommends famine as a corrective measure against the “degenerate,” “wild” natures of the Irish and their “evil customs” (67, 75). One of those “evil customs” is the Irish language that English and Scottish settlers were picking up: “I have to finde fault with the abuse of language, that is, for the speaking of Irish among the English, which as it is unnaturall that any people should love anothers language more then their own, so it is very inconvenient and the cause of many other evils” (70). Spenser considers genocide to eradicate Irish culture and to prevent the adoption of the language by the English and Scottish. “Traditions,” on the other hand, creates poetry from a fusion of diverse and sometimes conflicting cultural elements.

Stereotypical representations are some of those conflicting elements that Heaney examines in “Traditions.” But he does not limit his view only to stereotypes of the Irish. The announcement at the poem’s beginning that “Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago / by the alliterative tradition” connotes the John Bull stereotype of England. The very notion that English is an imposed language that should be cast out and that Irish is an original and therefore purer language that should be reinstated is the kind of simplistic

dichotomy that generates stereotypes. The very fact of Irish literature in English may replace stereotypical representation with a more nuanced representation. In the closing stanza of “Traditions,” Heaney responds to the “gallivanting” MacMorris through another “wandering” literary figure, Joyce’s Leopold Bloom:

And sensibly, though so much
later, the wandering Bloom
replied, ‘Ireland,’ said Bloom,
‘I was born here. Ireland.’

Heaney suggests the stereotype of the wandering Jew to underscore Bloom’s Jewish identity against his declaration of national identity, the long-*o* sound of Jew and “Bloom” aurally emphasizing that connection. Bloom makes his pronouncement in *Ulysses* when the Citizen, a narrow-minded and bullying jingoist, challenges Bloom’s nationality. By answering MacMorris’ question with Bloom’s modern response, “Traditions” asserts the “sensibleness” that being born on the island of Ireland makes one Irish but also that national identity and nationalism are varied, complex, and diverse.¹³ The poem locates the poet in a tradition that isn’t confined to a singular idea of national identity, such as an Ireland that only speaks its original language, but in one where complex national identity supersedes stereotype and the confines of colonial oppression.

Heaney’s literary tradition isn’t confined to a singular idea of nationality, such as Gaelic-only Ireland, but represents a complex national identity. He “beds” himself in a modern Irish literature written in English that would “make Irish poetry in English get out from under the twilight shades of the specifically English traditions” (*Government* 32). For Heaney, the Irish Literary Revival evoked in “twilight” provided a way for Irish

writers who wrote in English to get out from under the shadow of England's literature because it was "a conscious counter-culture act against the rationalism and materialism of late Victorian England" (*Preoccupations* 101). The Revival offers this alternative to an English tradition because of its local concerns: "Although it has long been fashionable to smile indulgently at the Celtic Twilight, it has to be remembered that the movement was the beginning of a discovery of confidence in our own ground, in our place, in our speech, English and Irish" (135).¹⁴ He views Yeats's Revival as grounded in communal identification: "he sought a badge of identity for his own culture, something that would mark it off from the rest of the English-speaking world." Yeats also aimed to locate that culture in an historical place, for a project that renewed Irish folklore could "bind the people of the Irish place to the body of their world." Heaney recognizes that for Yeats speech was as crucial a binding element as legend and folk belief: "his other purpose was to supplement this restored sense of historical place with a new set of associations that would accrue when a modern Irish literature, rooted in its own region and using its own speech, would enter the imagination of his countrymen." Heaney's "guttural muse" brings the diverse sounds of English as it is spoken in Northern Ireland, with all its assorted influences, into poetry just as Yeats "brought the moods of the Irish weather into English poetry and changed the atmosphere of that poetry" (*Preoccupations* 136).

Heaney admires Yeats's work during the Revival because it stemmed from an interest in the local and because Yeats recognized that "the successful awakening of the people's imagination" could "allow them to repossess their territory with a new conviction" (*Preoccupations* 104). And yet Yeats was not unequivocally nationalist: the older Yeats was, as Heaney notes, "an Anglo-Irish Protestant deeply at odds with the

mind of Irish Catholic society” (106).¹⁵ Still, Heaney reveres early Yeats because of his commitment to community during the Revival: “It is easy to admire this young Yeats: his artistic ambitions, his national fervour, his great desire to attach himself to a tradition and corpus of belief that was communal” (106). It is less easy for Heaney to admire later Yeats, whose “style had evolved a tone for detaching rather than attaching himself, for saying ‘I’ rather than ‘we’” (106). And yet Heaney still regards the later Yeats as “a mythologizer of aristocratic ceremony and grace” who “donned the mantle . . . of the aristocrat so that he might express a vision of communal and personal life that was ample, generous, harmonious, fulfilled and enhancing” (108) even as his “reactionary politics” led him to view “the redistribution of the Coole Park estate among its tenants” as a “step back” and to reprimand what he saw as “middle-class piety and philistinism” (106).¹⁶

The fact that Heaney distinguishes the younger, “easy-to-admire” Yeats so sharply from the “less sympathetic” later Yeats suggests that Heaney has more difficulty reconciling Yeats’s public outlook and his later poetry than he acknowledges (106). When Heaney tries to do just this, he attempts to connect the man and his poetry, at once dismissing the arrogant public persona and vindicating the magniloquent poems for their “sumptuousness” (108). But Heaney ultimately implies that Yeats’s late poems are as contrived as his public image. Referring to a lecture in Dublin at which Yeats paraded ostentatiously in a fur coat while berating his audience for not showing enough support for the acquisition of Hugh Lane’s art collection by Dublin’s Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Heaney remarks, “The silliness of the behaviour is continuous with the sumptuousness of the poetry of the middle period. Yeats’s attack upon his own middle class really springs out of disappointment: why aren’t they taking the lead culturally now

that they are in the lead economically?" (108).¹⁷ Heaney thus perceives Yeats's late poems "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Among School Children" as "deliberately orchestrated" (111) and "Under Ben Bulbin" as "too male and assertive," suggesting that the affected tone that Heaney hears in that latter poem is less paternal than patriarchal (113). Alternatively, in less-known poems such as "What Then?," "Man and the Echo," and "Cuchulain Comforted," Heaney finds the "tenderness towards life and its uncompletedness [that] is at odds with and tending to gain sway over the consolations of the artificial work" (111). Here, "the great fur coat of attitude is laid aside" (112).

What Heaney can't quite bring himself to say is that Yeats's influence on him is limited when the diction and tone of his poems have a "vitreous finish" and move with a "high-stepping tread" (99-100). He admires Yeats when his language is communal, introspective, and "dependent upon 'the foul rag-and bone shop of the heart'" (111). He explains that he would have ended Yeats's *Collected Poems* not with "Under Ben Bulbin" but with "Cuchulain Comforted" because the latter is "kinder" (113). In that poem, the fallen mythological Irish hero encounters a "linen carrier" in the underworld who implores Cuchulain to relinquish his solitariness and join the other "Shrouds" in their sewing:

Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still.
And thereupon that linen-carrier said
'Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

‘Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;

Mainly because of what we only know

The rattle of those arms makes us afraid. (*CP* 332)

That “rattle of those arms” is the sound of Cuchulain’s warring for independence, which has marked him, the beginning of the poem tells us, with “six mortal wounds,” one for each of the six counties of Northern Ireland that were partitioned from the rest of Ireland in 1921. The shrouds fear Cuchulain’s rattle of arms because they believe that the aggressive pursuit of autonomy can erode to fanaticism and isolationism and will inevitably lead to violence among those separated or to exile and displacement. The quiet act of threading counters that dreaded sound with an image of communal life: “We thread the needles’ eyes and all we do / All must together do.” When the threading gives way to collective singing—“Now we shall sing and sing the best we can”—the voices of the shrouds transform into those of birds:

They sang, but had nor human notes nor words,

Though all was done in common as before,

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

The ending here recalls Frost’s “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same.” As we have seen, that poem expresses Frost’s notion of the sound of sense as “voices behind a door that cuts off the words” by rendering a birdsong that conveys Eve’s individual tone of voice “but without the words.” Similarly, in “Cuchulain Comforted,” when the Shrouds sing in concert, they do so with neither “human notes nor words.” It is the collective birdsong that ultimately “comforts” Cuchulain, just as the sound of local voices

in “The Guttural Muse” comforts the dejected speaker and allows him “to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life.”

“Cuchulain Comforted” is exemplary for Heaney because of its endorsement of communal life and assertion that collective song heals. He would conclude Yeats’s work with the poem because, even though it is about the afterlife, it esteems the real world: “the language of the poem hallows the things of this world—eyes, branches, linen, shrouds, arms, needles, trees, all are strangely chaste in the context” (*Preoccupations* 113). Part of that context is the poem’s *terza rima*, which formally establishes “interconnectedness” with its interlocking rhymes that “provide a reassuring structure of woven continuity” (“Terza Rima” 1423). Heaney remarks that Dante’s form is “proper” for a poet who is “preparing his own death by imagining Cuchulain’s descent among the shades” (*Preoccupations* 113).¹⁸ Heaney singles “Cuchulain Comforted” out because it is the only poem Yeats wrote in Dante’s form and because Dante is particularly important to Heaney as a poet of local concerns:

the relationship between a literature and a locale with its common language [is not] a particularly Irish phenomenon. It is true, indeed, that we have talked much more about it in this country because of the peculiar fractures in our history, north and south, and because of the way that possession of the land and possession of different languages have rendered the question particularly urgent. But I like to remember that Dante was very much a man of a particular place, that his great poem is full of intimate placings and place-names, and that as he moves round the murky circles of hell, often heard rather than seen by his damned friends and enemies, he is recognized by his local speech or so recognizes them. (136-37)¹⁹

Heaney aligns himself with Yeats when Yeats works in a poetic tradition that employs the language of a particular place and articulates the abstract vitality of speech.

Heaney suggests that Yeats belongs to a long tradition of located language when he reminds us that Dante, like Yeats, wrote about place and that the *Divine Comedy* is rife with place names. It is a tradition that goes back well before Dante and is, in fact, specifically Irish. Medieval Irish poets practiced a genre called *dinnseanchas* between the ninth and twelfth centuries. In these poems, “[p]lace-names are explained by reference to legends which are linked to them by means of pseudo-etymological techniques, where sometimes fictitious stories are adduced to explain the existing names” (“Dinnshenchas”).²⁰ For Heaney, a *dinnseanchas* poem locates the poet in the ways I’ve been discussing because it “marries the legendary and the local” (*Preoccupations* 131). But it isn’t necessarily an accessible form since it assumes that its auditor has some previous knowledge of a place name’s etymology “to retrieve the underlay of Gaelic legend in order to read the full meaning of the name and to flesh out the topographical record with its human accretions” (132). Heaney’s own *dinnseanchas* poems represent his attempt to make the legendary and the local more readily available.

Heaney has written many poems during his career that are concerned with specific Irish locales, but his series of place-name poems from the first part of *Wintering Out* situates him explicitly in the *dinnseanchas* tradition with poems that examine etymology. Rachel Buxton and Andrew Murphy have claimed that this tradition presents particular problems for Heaney because the esoteric names and their derivations exclude readers while his aims are to communicate beyond his locale. They each cite his poem “Broagh” to exhibit their concerns. Buxton contends that “Heaney has at times been unsure about

exactly what language he should be using. He is torn between, on the one hand, the desire to be faithful to his origins, and, on the other, the recognition that he must communicate effectively to a wider audience who may find his use of Irishisms—such as *deibidhe* rhyme, the *dinnseanchas* genre, and local duality—a barrier to comprehension, as he highlights in . . . ‘Broagh’” (49).²¹ Similarly, Murphy implies that the “linguistic and cultural map” that the *dinnseanchas* tradition supplies is futile to anyone unfamiliar with the locales represented: “in ‘Broagh’, a common language of place, intelligible to planter and native alike, [is] unavailable to outsiders, ‘Broagh’ itself being a kind of signifier shared only by the locals, because of ‘that last / *gh* the strangers found / difficult to manage’” (143). Indeed, the place-name poems follow the *dinnseanchas* tradition in that they utilize etymology, but they just as equally scrutinize the very sounds of those place names as they are spoken in Northern Ireland. In fact, Heaney has explained that a series of lectures he attended as a college student on Ulster dialect held as much sway over him as the *dinnseanchas* poems:

Those few classes were seminal. In fact, one poem in [*Wintering Out*], ‘A Backward Look’, derives from the inaugural lecture given by my former language teacher John Braidwood, when he was promoted to the rank of professor. His text was printed as ‘The Ulster Dialect Lexicon’ and many of the transliterations from the Irish that appear in the poem are lifted straight from the pamphlet.

Dinnseanchas was a corroborating tradition, let’s say, rather than an immediate influence. (*Stepping Stones* 129)

Heaney also indicates that more formidable influences than either Braidwood’s dialect lectures or *dinnseanchas* were Joyce and Frost. When Dennis O’Driscoll asks Heaney

about possible models for his poems that employ “the very notion of the phonetic as subject matter” and thus demonstrate “the idea that the sound of words . . . could be matter as well as means for poetry,” Heaney responds that he had “[n]o precedent consciously in mind, but Joyce must have been at work downstairs. The first paragraph of ‘The Sisters’, maybe, where there’s this dreamy caress of words like ‘gnomon’ and ‘simony’, or the little deliquescent hymn to the word ‘suck’ early on in *A Portrait of the Artist*” (*Stepping Stones* 124).²² Heaney here emphasizes the sound of Joyce’s words. He values sound over the political implications inevitable in his own poems that scrutinize transliterated Irish place names: “their energy [is] phonetic rather than political” (125). Moreover, he describes the process of composing the place-name poems not in terms of etymological analysis or polemics but by conjuring Frost’s famous notion of “the figure a poem makes,” a figure that, according to Frost, must progress from beginning to end as naturally as ice melts (*CPPP* 776-78): “What happened in them was a kind of melting down of memory-stuff and Ulster myths of belonging. There was nothing civic about them, it was the ultimate Frostian sensation of the poem coming to itself like a piece of ice on a hot stove” (*Stepping Stones* 125). Indeed, it would seem that in *Wintering Out* Heaney relied on Frost’s poetics, especially the sound of sense: “I was trying to prepare anybody who had ears to hear for the *Wintering Out* poems,” he says, because he has always believed that the “secret” of poetry “lies in the summoning and meshing of the subconscious and semantic energies of words” (128).

Heaney’s place-name poems do not, as Buxton and Murphy argue, risk excluding those unfamiliar with Irish locales. True, “Broagh” ruminates upon the pronunciation of a place name that is especially difficult to all but the local community, and Heaney himself

has described the poem in terms of exclusiveness: “I felt that I had made Broagh exclusive, made the English language work to tell my story” (“Among” 10). However, Heaney here doesn’t mean that the poem was intended to be restrictive; rather, he means that the poem emphasizes the word’s local particularity while elucidating its difficult pronunciation for those unfamiliar with it. The poem, then, is inclusive, too: it clarifies a place-name’s obscurity for those who aren’t able to pronounce the word; in other words, it includes the “strangers” referred to at the end of the poem who have difficulty making the Irish “gh” sound.

“Broagh” presents the name of the local Irish village as distinctively Northern Irish by providing that word’s derivation in the manner of the *dinnseanchas* tradition of etymological exploration:

Riverbank, the long rigs
ending in broad docken
and a canopied pad
down to the ford. (*Wintering Out* 17)

“Broagh” is the name of a village that part of Heaney’s Mossbawn farm crossed into. It is also an Anglicization of the Irish word *Bruach*, which means the bank of the river and gives the poem its first word (Hart 65). The stanza proceeds with terms that, as in “Traditions,” merge Irish, English, and Ulster Scots: “the Broagh riverbank was covered with docken, and docken was an old English plural And our riverbank field was called ‘the long rigs’, and *rigs* is a Scottish word, probably brought over by the planters in the seventeenth century” (“Among” 9). Further, “pad” is a Northern Irish colloquialism that signifies a path (“pad”). The first stanza, then, charts a linguistic history as it

progresses from the name of the village to the riverbank that the name derives from and then on to wild dock plants and a tree-covered path that leads to the ford at the end of the riverbank.

The poem mobilizes various linguistic strands in the place name “Broagh” and then provides an image that construes the word’s difficult pronunciation. After the first stanza brings us through a “rig” that includes a host of diverse linguistic influences from the “Riverbank” to the “ford,” we cross the white space between the first two stanzas and arrive on ground that will elucidate what is apparently incomprehensible to “strangers”:

The garden mould
bruised easily, the shower
gathering in your heelmark
was the black *O*

in *Broagh*,
its low tattoo
among the windy boortrees
and rhubarb-blades

ended almost
suddenly, like that last
gh the strangers found
difficult to manage.

Here, the local terms of the first stanza give way to more general language in order to convey a sphere that is at once singular and accessible. In the second stanza, “mould” would be familiar to locals as a Northern Irish idiom for “organically-rich soil” (“mould”). That the soil is in a “garden” imbues the lines with general familiarity, too. Further, the terrain is not described as shut-off to outsiders but is characterized in a diction that has a gentle, vulnerable aspect, making this “garden” feel common and shared: its ground “bruise[s] easily” and the rain that soaks it is a soft “shower.” When the ground becomes wet, the “heelmark” that forms from walking upon it isn’t necessarily a local’s or, for that matter, the poet’s, but is “your heelmark.” This mixture of local and generalized language makes the discrete region available to outsiders.

These three stanzas constitute one rhythmic sentence that makes use of assonance, consonance, and alliteration in order to counter the blunt sound of the last two lines. Russell points out the prevalence of assonantal *o* sounds, both long and short, throughout the poem: we hear “broad,” “ford,” “mould,” “*O*,” “*Broagh*,” “boortrees,” and “tattoo,” as well as “docken,” “canopied,” “down,” “shower” and “found” (205). These instances of assonance occur amid the alliteration and consonance of “docken” and “down,” “canopied” and “pad,” and “black,” “*Broagh*,” “boortrees” and “rhubarb-blades.” But Russell also hears the poem rendering the uncommon *gh* sound in the wind that “ended almost suddenly”: “the ‘low tattoo’ of the uttered ‘*Broagh*’ that sings in the ‘boortrees’ in stanza 3 abruptly stops in stanza 4” (205). For him, that sonorous, sudden stopping of wind gives way to the last line’s “fricative ‘difficult’ and the harsh ‘a’ sounds of ‘manage’” (205).” This leads Russell to conclude that the poem replicates the difficulty that strangers experience when trying to say the word “*Broagh*”: “The effect on the reader

is jarring, and he is forced to literally reshape the sounds issuing from his mouth, echoing the difficulty of the ‘strangers’ (presumably English) in uttering ‘Broagh’” (205). But “Broagh” does not reenact the difficulty that “strangers” have with a local word. Instead, it articulates the sound of that word, which would be unpronounceable to those who haven’t been brought up hearing and saying it. Contrary to what Russell hears, it is not the wind that ends “almost suddenly” but the impression of a heel on garden soil that has collected rainwater: “your heel” creates a “low tattoo” in the ground and fills up suddenly with rain; “almost” as suddenly the water is then absorbed into the ground, and the impression disappears. The *gh* sound in the word “Broagh,” Heaney imagines, would sound like the “almost” sudden absorption of water into the ground and the fading of the heelmark if such an action were audible. “Broagh,” then, is about mitigating, not enacting, difficulty; it extols a locale’s linguistic distinction while clarifying the qualities that make that language distinct.

This is not to allege that “Broagh” is without political context or that its aural properties somehow evade or transcend politics. Heaney himself contradicts his declaration that the place-name poems “are phonetic rather than political” when he explains that, with “Broagh,” he “was trying to coax a few lyric shoots out of the political compost heap of Northern Ireland” (*Finders Keepers* 382). In fact, the poem’s phonetic concerns are political: “its purpose was to bring . . . Irish, Elizabethan English and Ulster Scots . . . into some kind of creative intercourse and alignment and thereby to intimate the possibility of some new intercourse and alignment among the cultural and political heritages which these three languages represent in Northern Ireland” (382). The poem doesn’t merely separate those who can comprehend the word “Broagh” from those who

can't but works to join the diverse linguistic inheritances of a language while simultaneously underscoring the singularity of that language. Other poets may "broach the dictionary hoard, and get great energy and exhibition from doing so," but for Heaney it is local language that provides that energy: "I've always confined myself to words I myself could have heard spoken, words I'd be able to use with familiarity in certain companies" (*Stepping Stones* 129). That local language, represented by the word "Broagh," is a distinct, exclusive, difficult language that unifies a diverse array of identifications.

Like "Traditions," "Broagh" utilizes its multifarious linguistic inheritances to assert a nationalistic disposition that is not narrow but expansive and inclusive: "the poem, although very short, tried to do justice to all the elements of heritage in my natural speech, although it could not have come into being without the excited, vindicated right of the Irish to have its equal say" ("Among" 9). These diverse elements allow Heaney to "fuse" what he describes as "the resentful nationalism of [his] Catholic minority experience" and "a concept of identity that was enlarging and releasing and would eventually help me to relate my literary education with the heritage of the home ground" (9). And yet for Russell, the conflation of these varied strains of linguistic influence and the nationalistic stance in "Broagh" make a paradox: "Heaney's recognition of his various dialectical heritages in the poem paradoxically enabled him to claim his Irishness and convey that part of his identity through the English language, a perfect illustration of how he draws upon and unifies seemingly opposed spheres of influence" (205). Russell perceives that in "Broagh" and "Traditions" spheres set at odds by sectarianism are unified in language. But Heaney's apprehension of his own multilayered speech

traditions and his use of the English language to “claim his Irishness” are not, as Russell argues, paradoxical. Rather, his understanding of his varied inheritances is comprehensive, and his employment of English is natural.

Indeed, English is not only the language Heaney was brought up and educated in but is the very medium he has mastered as an English-language poet. An Irish English dialect is not, as Russell implies, an oxymoron but a fundamental development of colonization. Braidwood’s lecture, which made such a strong impression on Heaney, explains dialect formation not as the debased outcome of subjugation but as an act of historical conservation: “Dialects are conservative and dialect speakers preserve not only older ways of speech but older traditions and ways of life; they are a link with the past” (22-23). Referring to Albert H. Marckwardt’s theory of the “colonial lag,” Braidwood emphasizes the special evolution of dialect in a colonized region. Marckwardt theorized that “transplanted” languages develop differently from indigenous languages because they must adapt to a new “people, their language, and their culture” (qtd. in Braidwood 23). In other words, colonialism doesn’t create an ironic relationship between oppressed people and the language imposed upon them; instead, the imposed language merges with the existing culture and develops especially gradually because that language must adapt to its new environment, rather than the other way around. The dialect that emerges maintains contact with its speakers’ pre-colonial origins. This doesn’t insinuate that colonial culture is derivative or backward: “The colonial lag is but one aspect of colonial culture: it is generally offset by innovation” (23). Indeed, to regard Heaney’s Irish English as ironical is to overlook his innovations: his poems unify various strains of language to manage the complexities of Irish history. The notion that this is paradoxical

is the same kind of misreading that insists on hearing the “guttural muse” as Gaelic and that regards “Broagh” as marking “off boundaries dividing an imagined linguistic community of Catholic and Protestant locals from presumably English or foreign ‘strangers’” (Russell 205).

“The Backward Look” demonstrates that, for Heaney, language can preserve history without being backward-looking. The poem compares a snipe’s flight to language:

A stagger in air
as if a language
failed, a sleight
of wing.

Critics tend to read the poem as an elegy for the Gaelic language, “that virtually disappeared tongue,” as Corcoran calls it, “commemorated in the poignant, glancing, allegorical elegy, ‘The Backward Look’” (38). Like Corcoran, Hart sees the poem as elegizing Gaelic and envisaging its decline: “Encoded in Heaney’s digression on the poetic origins of language is the history of a specific language’s decline. With characteristic economy and skill, he writes an elegy for Gaelic, pointing to the battle of the Boyne as a turning point in its fate, and modern sectarian violence as one of the consequences of its suppression” (59). For Tobin, the sense of cultural annihilation is unmistakable because of the poem’s abrupt opening: “What so impresses at the outset of the poem is the suddenness of linguistic and cultural extinction as reflected in the snipe’s initial disappearance” (72). The poem takes a “backward look” at Gaelic with an

especially fraught gaze because of colonialism's brutal role in the recession of that language.

And yet the poem is more a rumination on linguistic transformation than a reverie for a dying language. It is, in other words, an affirmation of what survives as much as it is a lament for what vanishes. In the opening stanza, the snipe's beating wings make "A stagger in air" that only seems "as if a language / failed." "Stagger" here denotes more than tottering; in Northern Ireland, it also means to "make an attempt at (something)" as well as "stammer" or "stutter" ("stagger" 331). The snipe appears to be failing, but it also may be stammering, attempting to formulate an expression. Its "stagger," in fact, is described as an act of cunning, "a sleight / of wing," indicating that a strategy is underway. The poem also executes a strategy, one designed not to depict the death of a language but to render the transformation of one language into another: "if there is one thing constant in language," Braidwood remarks in his lecture, "it is change" (23).

Thus, "The Backward Look" is not about death but change, for the snipe doesn't die but instead turns into a new kind of language:

A snipe's bleat is fleeing

its nesting ground

into dialect,

into variants,

transliterations whirr

on the nature reserves –

little goat of the air,

of the evening,

little goat of the frost.

Tobin argues that at the opening of the second stanza and throughout the rest of the poem, the snipe's flight reenacts the disappearance of Gaelic: "From this point onward, instead of a revery of origins, the snipe's flight records the passage from 'the nesting ground' of the native Irish language with its dialects and variants, with its rich literary and cultural reserves, into a ghostly absence" (72). But if we comprehend the "nesting ground" as the Irish language, as Tobin does, then the "dialects" and "variants" can't also be those of the Irish language. The snipe doesn't "flee" from dialects and variants but from "its nesting ground" and then "into dialects" and "into variants" and finally into "transliterations" that "whirr" in their protective "nature reserves." The transliterations in the next lines come directly from Braidwood's lecture, where he presents them not as substitutions for a "ghostly absence" but as innovations: "Some of the most imaginative bird names are translation loans from Irish—*Little Goat of the Evening* [gabhairín oidhche] or *Air Goat* [mionnán aeir] for the snipe, from its plaintive call (in Munster it is called *goureen-roe* [gabhairín reo, little goat of the frost])" (26). Heaney arranges these "loans" also to underscore their imaginativeness: the repetitions of "little goat" and "of the air," "of the evening," and "of the frost" generate a songlike rhythm. These folk expressions are borrowed from the Irish language and preserved in lines of English-language poetry.²³ "The Backward Look," then, doesn't depict the decline of Gaelic but the transformation and conservation that occurs when languages merge.

And so if the poem is elegiac, it is because the snipe laments those victimized by Ireland's political conditions:

It is his tail-feathers
drumming elegies
in the slipstream

of wild goose
and yellow bittern
as he corkscrews away.

As Hart explains, the snipe's elegies are not just to the Irish language but to those who have vanished over the course of Ireland's history: "The bird's plaintive cry elegizes the 'wild geese,' the term for those Irish patriots who, when defeated by William III at the Battle of the Boyne and given the choice of taking an oath of allegiance to the king, joining the English army or sailing to France where James had exiled himself, decided to flee to Europe" (60). Gaelic is also one of colonialism's many victims, and the language is linked directly to Irish independence, from the Battle of the Boyne to the establishment of the Gaelic League and up through the sectarian strife in Northern Ireland that was well underway when "The Backward Look" was written: "Two centuries [after the fleeing of the 'wild geese,'] the Gaelic League (founded in 1893) would attempt to resurrect the language, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, forefathers of the IRA, would add military muscle (ultimately in the form of the Easter Rising of 1916) to their program" (60).

Indeed, the snipe's flight over this broad historical landscape reaches the dangerous territory of Northern Ireland during the Troubles: the snipe, whose bleating has transformed into English kennings of Gaelic words for "snipe," cuts
through the sniper's eyrie,
over twilit earthworks
and wall-steads.

The sniper could be from either side of the Northern Irish conflict, an IRA-fighter or a Loyalist paramilitarist. In fact, sides are deferred in this process of linguistic transformation and assertion of the preservative capacities of poetry. Heaney's point is not that "[t]he failure of the Irish language through historical dispossession has led to a situation in which the abrogation of dependency on colonial rule can lead to violence, . . . [and] as well to the empowerment of the poet's imagination" (Tobin 72). Rather, the point of "The Backward Look" is that history records not just decimation but also renewal; in turn, "the poet's imagination" is inclined to connect these processes. The Gaelic bleating of the snipe "flees" to a new language, Irish English. What is more, this Irish English-language poem becomes itself a "natural reserve" for Irish origins just as a "fieldworker's archive" would preserve "earthworks / and wall-steads": the kennings are now preserved in the poem.

But Heaney also knows that Northern Irish poetry cannot be only a site for conservation and linguistic unification, for it must reckon with the deplorable violence of its homeland. The poet's language in the North, represented by the snipe, navigates directly "through the sniper's eyrie" before it "disappears among / gleanings and leavings / in the combs / of a fieldworker's archive." The contemporary Troubles began in 1969

when a student-led civil rights campaign protesting housing and employment discrimination against Catholics escalated into violent rioting and clashes between Catholic and Protestant civilians in Belfast and Derry. The subsequent environment of murders, bombings, reprisals, and fear inevitably informed and changed the shape of Heaney's poetry: "From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (*Preoccupations* 56). Heaney would find compelling images and symbols in the remains of prehistoric, tribal murder victims buried in the bogs of Northern Europe, figures he gave voice to briefly in *Wintering Out* and then more lengthily in the famous sequence of bog poems in *North*. The poems originated mostly from images of preserved corpses of ancient Scandinavian and Germanic victims of ritualistic sacrifice that he came across in P. V. Glob's 1965 book *The Bog People*: "Some of these emblems I found in a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started, in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People*. It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times" (57). Heaney connected the photographs in that book to the situation in Northern Ireland not just because of the timing of its English-language publication or the fact that the corpses were exhumed from bogs but because he identified a correspondence between the tribal violence in prehistoric Jutland, Irish history, and contemporary Northern Ireland: "the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles" (58).²⁴

And yet a shift that occurs across the two sections of *North* indicates that Heaney's search for symbols and images "adequate to our predicament" would not end with the bog poems. The evolution of the poems across these sections implies that if Heaney found adequate emblems in the bog, he also found that the bog's resources were finite. The bog poems are pared down, comprised mostly of quatrains with two- and three-beat lines, their long, narrow shapes suggesting a downward movement as if into the ground. They rely mostly on visceral description that connects the physical images of the bog cadavers to contemporary images of Northern Ireland and to the poet's personal, conflicted disposition toward the atrocious violence in his homeland. For example, in "Punishment," the poet observes the corpse of a young woman probably executed for adultery in blazon-like detail; he "can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck, the wind / on her naked front" as well as "see her drowned / body in the bog, / the weighing stone, / the floating rods and bough" and "her shaved head / like a stubble of black corn" (*North* 30-31). He envisions what the woman looked like when she was alive, addressing her as if she were his beloved: "Little adulteress, / before they punished you / you were flaxen-haired, / undernourished, and your / tar-black face was beautiful." But the poem is not just descriptive. It ponders the ethical responsibility of a poem that can render brutality in writing while the poet can't outwardly respond to such savagery in life. The poet's fear of complicity links the strangled prehistoric "adulteress" and contemporary young Catholic women who are tarred and feathered when accused of indiscretions with British soldiers:

I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

The poet's observations are "artful," but he is also "dumb": the volatile political situation requires him to strategize about how and when to speak. He exaggerates his outrage in public while privately accepting the "tribal" comeuppance he pretends to repudiate.

Because the symbols and images are not entirely adequate to reconcile the conflict between artful voyeurism and standing dumb, Heaney required other ways to make sense of the Troubles. Located language would become part of his strategy. The last poem of the first section, "Hercules and Antaeus," foregrounds the book's shift from below ground to above. It is a sequel to "Antaeus," the section's first poem, in which Heaney

adopts the persona of the mythological giant, who declares the indomitable strength he acquires from the ground during conflict:

In fights I arrange a fall on the ring
To rub myself with sand

That is operative

As an elixir. I cannot be weaned

Off the earth's long contour, her river veins. (*North* 3)

A challenger would be hard-pressed to defeat Antaeus because each time Antaeus falls, the earth empowers him:

Let each new hero come
Seeking the golden apples and Atlas.
He must wrestle with me before he pass
Into that realm of fame

Among sky-born and royal:

He may well throw me and renew my birth
But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,
My elevation, my fall.

In *North*, Heaney touches ground and opens it. The poems in the first section discover “word-hoard[s]” (“North” 10-11) in ancient “stone-age fields” and tombs (“Belderg”); in the burial ground at Newgrange and the cemeteries in the hills of coastal towns (“Funeral Rites” 6-9); in a “White bone found / on the grazing” that speaks to the poet with “the

rough, porous / language of touch” (“Bone Dreams” 19-23). As we have seen, the book’s most famous poems bring preserved bog people out of the peat and into poetry: “The Grauballe Man” looks “As if he had been poured / in tar” as “he lies / on a pillow of turf / and seems to weep // the black river of himself” (28-29); the exhumed “Bog Queen” describes her long burial “waiting / between turf-face and demesne wall, / between heathery levels / and glass-toothed stone,” her vulnerable carcass “Braille to the creeping influences” underground (25-27).²⁵ These poems manifest Ireland’s history and the sectarianism in the North as corporeal: they return to physical origins in the land and far below its surface. A fundamental element of corporeality is mortality, and in the bog poems especially, the prehistoric dead become paradigms of the fatal violence in Northern Ireland.

For Heaney, digging was always a central metaphor for poetry. “Digging,” the famous first poem in his first book, compares the poet’s pen to his father’s and his grandfather’s spades: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests, / I’ll dig with it” (*DN* 2). As we have seen in “Punishment,” Heaney begins in *North* to question his “megalithic” method: “are you emblems of the truth,” he asks in “The Digging Skeleton,” his version of Baudelaire’s poem in which a book of “anatomical plates” affects the French poet similarly to the way Glob’s book moved Heaney (17-18). The poem before it, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,” weighs prehistoric archeological discoveries against the poet’s “longhand” as he observes a linear marking on an ancient Viking relic that takes on a life of its own, “eluding the hand / that fed it” (12-16). The intricate engraving is held up as a work of art by virtue of its naturalness: it moves like “a bill in flight” and “a swimming nostril.” However, the phrase “Trial Pieces” indicates that

Heaney is not just impressed by a remnant of Viking art but also tentative about his own archeological approach: “Trial Pieces” refers to the etched specimen that is “magnified on display” at a museum exhibition, but it suggests, too, that the poem itself is a “trial piece” to be tested against the carving on the fossil. Will the poem’s lines be like “the line that amazes itself” on the Viking artifact, “improvis[ing] on bone” “the craft’s mystery”? Or is the poet less like the heroic Viking creators of “buoyant, migrant line[s]” and more like another kind of Norseman, the cultivated but overanxious and indecisive figure of

Hamlet the Dane,
skull handler, parablist,
smeller of rot

in the state, infused
with its poisons,
pinioned by ghosts
and affections,

murders and pieties,
coming to consciousness
by jumping in graves,
dithering, blathering.

The poet here is uncertain about his art’s social obligations and capacities. The “affections” he wants to convey by giving “ghosts” voices may not, in the context of sectarian “murders,” condemn “rot // in the state” but merely reiterate local “pieties.” In

The Redress of Poetry, written over a decade after the publication of *North*, Heaney would continue to contemplate poetry's social responsibility. There, he explains that a poem "holds up" and "answers" the social conditions that provoked it into existence when "[t]here is a sensation both of arrival and of prospect, so that one does indeed seem to 'recover a past' and 'prefigure a future', and thereby to complete the circle of one's being" (9).²⁶ In the first section of *North*, Heaney asks if the poems, in their quest to "recover a past" by delving into the ground, are also able to "prefigure a future." Does the main procedure of the first part of *North*—to "enter / the megalithic doorway"—result in anything more than "jumping in graves," and, perhaps even worse for a poet, "dithering" and "blathering"? The poet is as uncertain about poetry's social commitments and efficacy as Hamlet is about "murders and pieties."

Heaney frames the first section of *North* with the Antaeus myth. In the last poem of that section, the earth-empowered wrestler is defeated by Hercules, who gains his power not from the ground but from his "intelligence // . . . a spur of light, / a blue prong," which gives him the idea to overcome Antaeus by raising him above his head:

Hercules lifts his arms
in a remorseless V,
his triumphs unassailed
by the powers he has shaken,

and lifts and banks Antaeus
high as a profiled ridge,
a sleeping giant,

pap for the dispossessed. (46-47)

Heaney has regarded “Hercules and Antaeus” as a metaphor for the balance between real-world chaos and poetry’s composure and stability: “There is a poem in *North* which is a metaphorical consideration of this [balance]. I think it is a dangerous poem to have written—a poem called ‘Hercules and Antaeus’. Hercules represents the balanced rational light while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity. Overall, I think that in the case of almost every Northern poet, the rational wins out too strong. This poem drifts towards an assent to Hercules, though there was a sort of nostalgia for Antaeus” (“Unhappy” 68). Heaney may regard “the rational” as “win[ning] out too strong,” and he treats Antaeus somewhat benignly as Hercules “banks” the “sleeping giant” rather than crushing and killing him. But if the poem doesn’t exactly repudiate Heaney’s Antaeian methods, it does seek out an alternative to them:

the cradling dark,
the river-veins, the secret gullies
of his strength,
the hatching grounds

of cave and souterrain,
he has bequeathed it all
to elegists.

He is bequeathing to elegists, in other words, his Antaeian poetic methods.

Heaney finds potential for alternative methods in the figure of the intellectual Hercules, and the poem implies that local speech will be part of this new course. Here, he

foregoes the imperious pronouncements of the earlier “Antaeus”—“I rise flushed as a rose in the morning”; “I am cradled in the dark that wombed me”—for a subtler diction. The later poem employs compound phrases that sound like contemporary kennings to describe Hercules: “snake-choker, dung-heaver.” Hercules is “Sky-born and royal,” but he is not grand or inflated; conversely, “his mind” is simply “big with golden apples.” Even his confidence that he is well equipped to trounce Antaeus is conveyed with demotic reserve: “Hercules has the measure / of resistance and black powers / feeding off the territory.” Further, the formerly self-proclaiming but now vanquished Antaeus is an insufficient provider for “the dispossessed” since he is finally relegated to mere infant’s food, or “pap,” an archaic term for a human nipple (*OED*) and a current Ulster colloquialism for an animal’s teat (*Concise Ulster Dictionary*). Heaney has suggested that his use of “plain speech” in the poem was part of an effort to veer away from a prevailing manner: “A new direction is being followed already in *North*, in poems like ‘Hercules and Antaeus’ and ‘Exposure’ [the last poem in *North*]. The Hercules poem, for all its mythic content, is more like what [Czeslaw] Milosz would call ‘plain speech in the mother tongue’” (*Stepping Stones* 162).

This is not to suggest that the colloquial would offer an easy solution for Heaney’s problem of reconciling poetry with political and civic atrocity. Vernacular has been a major element in Heaney’s poems since the very beginning of his career, and the movement across the two sections of *North* does not simply represent a return to an abandoned poetic. Instead, in the second section, Heaney emerges from the ground because he senses that even though the poems he made out of it were poetically fruitful, they have also exacerbated the dilemma between poetry’s social and aesthetic

commitments, and he is compelled to scrutinize that conflict. He is not interested in finding more “images and symbols adequate to our predicament” but with examining what that predicament has done above the ground, or, more specifically, what it has done to a local language as richly varied as that described in “Traditions.” Moreover, Heaney moves on from the prehistoric bog people, who had not only served as paradigms of tribal violence but also provoked this aesthetic crisis. Instead of describing images of the dead as emblematic of his homeland’s strife, he will make use of living speech to give the victims of the Troubles their say.

That the opening poem of *North*’s second section, “The Unacknowledged Legislator’s Dream,” is a prose poem that alludes to Shelley’s famous designation for poets signals a formal shift to coincide with the book’s movement from below ground to above it. In this new section, even the verse poems take on, for the most part, more expansive shapes as the lines become less compressed, usually extending to five beats. Instead of narrow stanzas moving downward, the lines stretch across the page. It is as if the poet has come out of the ground and entered the wide world. It is not an uncomplicated arrival. “The Unacknowledged Legislator’s Dream” occurs neither in the ground nor the world but in the disorienting realm of a dream where the poet grapples explicitly with his anxieties about balancing his dual commitments to his people and his art. He envisions himself first as a liberator with Archimedean power: “I sink my crowbar in a chink I know under the masonry of state and statute” (51). But he is also a cartoonish amalgamation of Tarzan, who “shook the world when he jumped down out of a tree,” and French insurgent: “I swing on a creeper of secrets into the Bastille.” Prose as opposed to verse lines befits a poem in which the speaker dreams of himself as a French

revolutionary poet: French symbolists like Baudelaire wrote prose poems to tap the “prickings of the unconscious” and to rebel against the rigid conventions of eighteenth-century neoclassicism (“Prose Poem” 1112). But Heaney also questions the sincerity of his rebelliousness: the desire of this “Unacknowledged Legislator” for acknowledgement by “his wronged people” who “cheer from their cages” preempts his desire to write poems. His obsession with being recognized as a certain kind of poet restricts him and threatens the very possibility for poetry: “I am blindfolded with my hands above my head until I seem to be swinging from a strappado.” The need for acknowledgement restrains and incapacitates the poet.

For Heaney, the prose poem is a form for material that he has been eager to write about but that over time has increasingly resisted wrought arrangement in lines: “[Prose] is a way to pounce on material that has been in my memory for so long it has almost become aware of me and has begun to be wary of being chosen for verse” (*Stepping Stones* 180). Prose gives Heaney a way to write a poem even when he is unable to eschew the self-consciousness that could make verse seem overly mannered or pretentious: “Each [prose poem] is a making over into words that are more self-conscious than the usual prose record and yet not justified as verse” (180). Prose is, then, a way to justify self-conscious content, to legitimize material that may come across as preachy or programmatic in poetry and quite literally to align it with the margins of the page rather than to organize it in lines. It is, in other words, a form well suited for a poem about a poet’s capacity to write political poetry when political concerns threaten to impede poetics. The “Unacknowledged Legislator” is actually imprisoned in the poem’s “verse-free” prose paragraphs just as he is imprisoned in his dream of veneration: “In the cell, I

wedge myself with outstretched arms in the corner and heave, I jump on the concrete flats to test them. Were those your eyes just now at the hatch?" The poem illumines something of the subtlety in Shelley's reference to poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the World" ("Defence" 535). Shelley's phrase has been famously misread: when the emphasis is placed on "legislators," the adjective "unacknowledged" is often mistaken as unofficial or as unrecognized, and therefore unappreciated. But Shelley was emphasizing not so much legislating as the condition of being "unacknowledged." Acknowledgement can preclude artistic inspiration, and it is only when poets don't acknowledge themselves as political authorities that they can then be legislators in his sense. Shelley believed that when poets write with an agenda and attempt to "teach certain doctrines" or "moral truths,"—when they are, in other words, too self-righteous—poetry ceases. Doctrines and truths can be expressed at will but poetry, according to Shelley, cannot: "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (520). Poets, then, must not be concerned with how others perceive them because writing poems for acknowledgement, either by pandering to political expectations or soliciting revolutionary glory as a political poet, may result in no poetry at all.

If political demands can have such a decimating effect on poetry, what effect do the conditions that engender those politics have on local language? When our "Unacknowledged

Legislator” emerges from his dream, he asks this very question. In “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” the poet is fully awake in the real world of contemporary Northern Ireland where sectarianism has reduced language to journalistic cant and cagey colloquialisms. For Heaney, traditional verse is the form to examine this erosion of language: the patterns and rhythms of rhymed pentameter quatrains contrast starkly with the rote phrasing of journalists when reporting on the Troubles and the calculated idioms used by civilians to hide allegiances (52-55). In other words, verse form provides the poet with a way to depict a voice trying to “sing” in an environment of empty political rhetoric and sensationalizing journalists

Who proved upon their pulses ‘escalate’,
‘Backlash’ and ‘crack down’, ‘the provisional wing’,
‘Polarization’ and ‘long-standing hate’.

Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing.

Those sound bites of opportunistic journalism reduce Northern Ireland’s conflict to stock phrases, but the quatrain concludes with the poet’s insistence on his poetic language—“Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing”—an assertion that generates a new tone in the next stanza. The poet’s song is

Expertly civil-tongued with civil neighbours
On the high wires of first wireless reports,
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts.

The iambic rhythms and the rhymes are as expertly managed as the old, idiomatic “retorts” and the banal “reports” of journalists, but whereas the retorts and reports are designed to

evade and sensationalize, the poem tries to create harmony out of those contrived languages. The rhythm, assonance, consonance, and alliteration of “high wires of first wireless reports” and “Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours” make a dulcet music out of a palpable bitterness. And yet when the language of the poet’s “civil neighbors” quickly shifts back to a litany of “sanctioned” demotic responses, the musicality recedes: “‘Oh, it’s disgraceful, surely, I agree.’ / ‘Where’s it going to end?’ ‘It’s getting worse’” (53). Such phrases cause the poet’s “voice of sanity” to become “hoarse” (53).

Indeed, Heaney’s hoarseness leaves him unconvinced that traditional form is enough to contravene the restrictive dialectal conditions in his

land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,

Of open minds as open as a trap,

Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames like wicks,

Where half of us, as in a wooden horse,

Were cabin’d and confined like wily Greeks,

Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.

How can verse form unlock this “confined” linguistic “cabin” when the only allowable language is a “whispering morse”? The poem’s metered quatrains are comprised largely of cryptic jargon, but rhyme and rhythm do not just emphasize the underhandedness of such vernacular; Heaney also defends the purposeful ambiguity and evasion in the speech of his Catholic compatriots (and, by implication, his Protestant adversaries as well): they are a “flock suspect // in their deepest heart of hearts” who must conform to their tribe lest they be cast as “heretic[s]” who have “come at last to heel and to the stake.” Heaney

employs idioms here not to critique his community's speech as he did the journalist's sensationalizing jargon but to speak their evasive, "fork-tongued" language:

We tremble near the flames but want no truck

With the actual firing. We're on the make

As ever. Long sucking the hind tit,

Cold as a witch's and as hard to swallow,

Still leaves us fork-tongued on the border bit:

The liberal papist note sounds hollow

When amplified and mixed in with the bangs

That shake all hearts and windows day and night.

The "liberal papist note" of moderation and tolerance deteriorates into superficialities in the context of civil war. Heaney even holds his own poet's tongue when he turns his attention to the

composition of the poem itself in a parenthetical aside that questions poetry's ability to offer anything like a solution and to scorn its "open-minded" proclivity to refrain from taking sides:

(It's tempting here to rhyme on 'labour pangs'

And diagnose a rebirth in our plight

But that would be to ignore other symptoms.

Last night you didn't need a stethoscope

To hear the eructation of Orange drums

Allergic equally to Pearse and Pope.)²⁷

Heaney worries that the beating of his pentameter lines is about as audible as a heartbeat next to the sound of actual detonations. Can poetry “draw the line through bigotry and shame” in an environment “Where to be saved you only must save face / And whatever you say, you say nothing”? The poet despairs that he cannot write about a place where “hold[ing] your tongue” is at once a weapon against your enemies and a strategy both to align yourself with and protect yourself against your own community: “for all this art and sedentary trade / I am incapable.” And yet the poet is capable, for even as he appears to capitulate to the conditions that stultify language in the “wee six” counties of the North, his impulse to sing persists: “Of the ‘wee six’ I sing.” Heaney eventually finds an adequate expression in an unlikely form: he brings a line of graffiti into the poem’s last stanza that equates living in a world of such violent local disturbances to not living at all:

Is there a life before death? That’s chalked up

In Ballymurphy. Competence with pain,

Coherent miseries, a bite and sup:

We hug our little destiny again.

That terse question—“Is there a life before death?”—voices the “Competence with pain” that the poem has been searching for. In “Whatever You Say Say Nothing,” Heaney may not be able to “diagnose a rebirth” in the “miseries” of the Troubles, but he makes them “Coherent” by breaking local language, whether journalistic cant or “Northern reticence, the tight gag of place” or a defacement on a public wall, across the back of his song’s meter.

“Whatever You Say Say Nothing” asks how poetry can exist when the general order of the day is to “say nothing”? And yet Heaney makes poetry out of this very dilemma by setting restricted, “coiled” local language in the patterns and rhythms of rhyming pentameter quatrains. The poem arranges the hollow cant and loaded colloquialisms it examines in cadenced lines to “say something” quite specific: that a life in which everyday language becomes a means of evasion, concealment, and self-protection is no life at all. In this poem and in the other poems in the second section of *North*, Heaney no longer mines the buried past for “befitting emblems of adversity”: the bog poems exhausted that “word-hoard,” and Heaney is compelled instead to inspect the contemporaneous world.

As we have seen, the first section of *North* probes the earth but then gives way to a second section that is concerned with what’s happening above ground. The bog poems may have demonstrated that “description is revelation,” a lesson Heaney explains learning in “Fosterage,” the fifth section of the *Singing School* sequence in *North* (66), but he also speculates that such description makes him an “artful voyeur” of deplorable violence. In other words, the bog poems forced Heaney into a long debate with himself about the adequacy of poetic language to respond to violence and about his two-fold responsibility to his community and his art. To reconcile his conflicting loyalties to art and community, he would come out of the bog and encounter more directly the actualities of the conflict, trying out different methods to avoid the voyeurism that description might encourage.

Two discrete methods from each section of *North* that Heaney merges in order to make sense of the Troubles are giving voice to the dead (section one) and utilizing local

speech (section two). In “The Strand at Lough Beg” from his next book, *Field Work* (1975), Heaney shifts his focus from prehistoric bog corpses and the manipulative language of sectarianism to a real victim of sectarian violence, one who is connected personally to the poet. Heaney has emphasized the importance of the poem’s personal element: “It was another of those instances where the intertwining of the ‘creative’ and the ‘responsible’ is, as they say, interrogated. I had not at that stage heard Joseph Brodsky’s dictum that ‘if art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private’. But that’s what’s being said in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’” (*Stepping Stones* 221). It is as if moving from the distanced, symbolic figures of the past and the linguistic constraints of the present to more immediate, personal figures might offer Heaney a way to bear witness without being voyeuristic.

“The Strand at Lough Beg” strikes a balance between a brutal murder and a ritualistic burial that is meant to provide alleviation: “In the opening stanza, there’s probably enough hard information about the context of the killing to offset the healing landscape passage at the end” (221). The poem commemorates Colum McCartney, a cousin of Heaney who was murdered by paramilitaries. Heaney envisions the moments leading up to his cousin’s death; he had been, presumably, pulled over by a loyalist gang while travelling through the Irish countryside:

Leaving the white glow of filling stations
And a few lonely streetlamps among fields
You climbed the hills towards Newtownhamilton
Past the Fews Forest, out beneath the stars. (17-18)

A hazardous presence contrasts the serene landscape as the poet imagines his cousin's entrapment by sectarian assassins:

What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down
Where you weren't known and far from what you knew:
The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg,
Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew.

The quiet setting and the violent act are not the only disparate elements in the poem. The measured pace of blank verse counters the suddenness of the ambush while the poem's random rhymes both reflect and offset the arbitrariness of sectarian vengeance: the violence is unexpected and yet anxiously anticipated just as the rhymes occur sporadically but distinctly; they accumulate in some parts and then disappear in others. In fact, "The Strand at Lough Beg" tends to describe landscape in rhymed lines, but the poem either stops rhyming or employs slant rhymes when its attention shifts to the violent act that occurs on the land:

Across that strand of yours the cattle graze
Up to their bellies in an early mist
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in Dew. Like a dull blade with its edge

Honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze.

I turn because the sweeping of your feet

Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees

With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes.

The series of exact rhymes—“graze,” “gaze,” and “haze,”; “sedge,” and “edge”—communicates the unified composition of the tranquil dawn landscape: the cattle, the two men, and the lake are all immersed in the same dewy haze. But that composure subsides as the rhymed lines quickly give way to unrhymed and slant-rhymed lines (“feet,” “knees,” “eyes”). Heaney gets blank verse and rhyme into “strained relation.”

Heaney identifies a central poetic in the relationship between historical reality and the aesthetic reality of poetic form. He believes that when poetry creates what he will call equilibrium between real life and poetic form, it is then able to “redress” social conditions without having to become “an applied art, harnessed to movements which attempt to alleviate those conditions by direct action” (*Redress 2*). Poetry amends “whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions” by “the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress—tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium” (1-3). In other words, it integrates “harmony” into “a context of division and contradiction” (*Redress 190*). This is not to suggest that poetry’s ability to redress can be imposed upon a poem at will simply by writing in inherited forms. On the contrary, poetic redress must occur naturally: the poet is not self-consciously “haunted by the big question of poetics. All these accumulated pressures and issues are felt as an abiding anxiety but they do not enter as guiding factors within the writing process itself. The movement is from delight to wisdom and not vice versa. The

felicity of a cadence, the chain reaction of a rhyme, the pleasuring of an etymology, such things can proceed happily and as it were autistically, in an area of mental operations cordoned off by and from the critical sense” (5). Poetry that redresses, then, does not do so programmatically because it is art not politics. He likens his concept to Wallace Stevens’s famous description of poetry as “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” to clarify this important distinction between poetry and politics: “governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers’ sense of what is possible or desirable, or, indeed, imaginable” (1). In other words, politics involve the imagination attempting to make reality, whereas poetry results from the imagination “pressing back against” that reality.

Heaney’s principle of redress builds on Stevens’s idea about poetry pressing back, but it is Frost’s poem “Directive” that Heaney turns to in order to illustrate “the redress of poetry.” That poem directs its reader through an overgrown forest before arriving at an abandoned playhouse where children once pretended to be the adults in the real house nearby (*CPPP* 341-42). Heaney reads “Directive” as “an allegorical defense of poetry” (xiv). According to him, the poem compares poetry to “the playhouse of the children” in that poetry imagines alternative realities just as the children in the playhouse imitate life in the adult house: “the games of make-believe which the children played in the playhouse were a kind of freely invented answer to everything experienced in the ‘house in earnest’ where (the tone makes this clear) life was lived in sorrow and in anger” (xv). The activity in the playhouse doesn’t simply replicate the goings-on in the adult house; instead, it commemorates that reality and matches it in play:

Frost suggests, in fact, that the life endured by the occupants of the actual house finds its best memorial and expression in the “house of make-believe.” He convinces us that the playhouse has the measure of the other house, that the entranced focus of the activity that took place as make-believe on one side of the yard was fit to match the meaning of what happened in earnest on the other side, and in doing so Frost further suggests that the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it.

(xv)

“Directive,” then, is a poem of redress: it does “not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated” (8). In other words, because “Directive” matches reality, it is in position to redress reality.

Heaney is not so sure that “The Strand at Lough Beg” matches complex reality. When he claims that the “hard information” at the beginning of the poem balances the “healing landscape passage at the end” (*Stepping Stones* 221), he implies that his vision of preparing his cousin’s body for burial risks contrivance and sentimentality:

[I] kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Heaney assumes that the hard details at the beginning that juxtapose the landscape and the ambush temper the potential bathos in the last lines. But the counterpoise of the first and last parts of the poem and between the actual events and the blank verse in which those events are envisioned is apparently not enough to keep him from redressing the poem itself.

Indeed, Heaney later criticizes the poetic methods of “The Strand at Lough Beg.” He worries that the poem doesn’t correlate its “projections and inventions” and “complex reality” (8). In order for a poem to be “instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world, . . . an intended intervention into the goings-on of society” (192), it must include raw material from that world: “As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way” (8). “Lough Beg” presents the real-world images of sectarian violence and contrasts them with images of the countryside: road blocks, guns, and blood are set against trees along the lake, cattle, and marigolds. The poem’s final scene, however, doesn’t contrast images but depicts the speaker ceremoniously washing his cousin’s corpse: its last note, in other words, does not convey a complex realistic scene but a Dantesque vision. It alludes to the first Canto of the *Purgatorio* where Cato the Younger, who committed suicide in ancient Utica rather than capitulate to Julius Caesar’s tyranny, instructs Virgil on how to prepare Dante’s body to enter Purgatory. When the poem shifts from realism to the imagined burial rites, it risks sliding into melodrama.

In *Station Island*, Heaney will examine explicitly poetry's capacity to respond to reality as well as its susceptibility to sentimentalizing it. What's more, he will identify a stay against this risk in local language. In the seventh and eighth sections of *Station Island*, Heaney finds a correspondence to the actual world in local language. He notes that obsolete but relevant uses of the term "redress" are "to set (a person or thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position" and "to bring back to the proper course" (15). In the *Station Island* poems, instead of inventing a language for symbolic figures of the preliterate past or describing a sectarian assassination and burial alongside a rural landscape, he sets the contemporary dead upright and has them speak in their own speech, first a murdered shopkeeper ("VII") and then McCartney himself ("VIII"). Presenting the personal, local language of actual victims might allow him to respond adequately to the Troubles.

In *Station Island*, the ghost of the elegized subject of "The Strand at Lough Beg" rebukes Heaney for not attending his cousin's wake and for the methods of the elegy itself. Heaney tries to explain to McCartney that he emphasized the horror of the murder in "Lough Beg" against the landscape because he connected the gloominess of the beach there to his own sense of desolation upon hearing the news:

I pleaded with my second cousin.

'I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg

and the strand empty at daybreak.

I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake.' (*Station Island* 81-83)

But McCartney's ghost will have none of it. He charges Heaney with mistaking political strategies for aesthetic circumventions. Heaney redresses himself by "redressing"

McCartney's corpse in the obsolete sense of that word: "to set (a person or thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position." Heaney supplies McCartney with a voice to admonish the kind of voyeurism that he had worried about in "Punishment" and to investigate not just the adequacy but the culpability of poetic language in the face of social atrocity:

You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact.

You confused evasion and artistic tact.

The Protestant who shot me through the head

I accuse directly, but indirectly, you

who now atone perhaps upon this bed

for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew

the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*

and saccharined my death with morning dew.

The poetic elements of rhyme and meter in "Lough Beg" cannot be what is causing Heaney to worry about "evasion," nor do they "whitewash" or "saccharine" death; for McCarthy speaks here in lines formally similar to the randomly rhymed blank verse of that earlier poem. What McCartney's ghost objects to is the saccharine ending of "Lough Beg." The "cold handfuls of the dew" that Heaney gathers to "wash you, cousin" in the earlier poem are repudiated in the later poem because instead of washing the corpse, they only "whitewashed ugliness." It is precisely the kind of descriptive language that characterizes the excerpt from Dante's *Purgatorio* that Heaney uses as the epigraph for "Lough Beg": "All round this little island, on the strand / Far down below there, where the breakers strive, / Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand." Dante's striving breakers,

tall rushes, and oozy sand are “lovely blinds” indeed, but in the volatile context of civil war would they also be examples of evasive, tactful language that can have the effect of sugarcoating the hard facts?

And yet Dante is even a more central source for *Station Island* than he was for “The Strand at Lough Beg.” The latter doesn’t just quote from the first canto of the *Purgatorio* for its epigraph; as we have seen, it also alludes to the scene in that canto where Cato tells Virgil how to prepare Dante for Purgatory. But, as Corcoran explains, *Station Island* is Dantesque in an even larger sense than “The Strand at Lough Beg”; the whole poem is modeled on the Italian poet’s *terza rima* epic with five of its twelve sections composed of tercets: “in ‘Station Island,’ the imaginary pilgrimage to the island becomes a series of meetings with ghosts of the type Dante meets in the *Purgatorio*: friendly, sad, self-defining, exemplary, admonitory, rebuking” (115-16). Heaney is able to redress “the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*” in a poem that is modeled on the *Purgatorio* because much of *Station Island*, and especially the section immediately preceding “VIII,” employs another kind of Dantesque diction that allows him to exercise “artistic tact” without evading facts: local language.

Although Heaney begins the seventh section of *Station Island* with the poet gazing into “water / soothed by just looking, idling over it / as if it were a clear barometer // or a mirror” (77-80), his “looking” and “idling” never become narcissism. The poet is not as he imagined himself in the final image of his first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966): “big-eyed Narcissus” peering and shouting into wells to “see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (“Personal Helicon” 44). From as early as his second book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), he had been learning that the situation in Northern Ireland would mean

that he “must move from *I* to *we*—open it up somehow” (*Conversation 19*). Thus, he now lets the next ghost he encounters speak, that of a shopkeeper whom Heaney knew when they were both young men and who was executed by sectarian vigilantes after being called down from his apartment in the early morning hours. The poet is “reluctant” not just “to meet his face” but to let the old acquaintance speak in his poem. Yet after describing the ghost—“His brow / was blown open above the eye and blood / had dried on his neck and cheek”—Heaney allows the shopkeeper to tell his own story, not coincidentally, in colloquial language:

What time it was
when I was wakened up I still don't know

but I heard this knocking, knocking, and it
scared me, like the phone in the small hours,
so I had the sense not to put on the light

but looked out from behind the curtain.
I saw two customers on the doorstep
and an old landrover with the doors open

parked on the street so I let the curtain drop,
but they must have been waiting for it to move
for they shouted to come down into the shop.

Instead of setting sectarian violence against a moody landscape, enacting a ritualistic preparation of a victim's body, or describing a prehistoric corpse with metaphorical language in compressed lines, the poet now imagines a victim speaking to him in his own living language. The local speech prevents the *terza rima* poem from sounding contrived or "tactful." Further, the realistic dialogue between the shopkeeper and his wife communicates the private tragedy of sectarian violence; it portrays the couple apprehending the terrible fact that one of them is about to be taken from the other:

She started to cry then and roll round the bed,
lamenting and lamenting to herself,
not even asking who it was. "Is your head

astray, or what's come over you?" I roared, more
to bring myself to my senses
than out of any real anger at her.

Her fear, his admonishment of her protestations, and his struggle to keep his senses culminate in a single gesture that doesn't "saccharine" or "whitewash" violence; instead, the poem reports the gesture as a matter of fact:

She was quiet herself now,
lying dead still, whispering to watch out.

At the bedroom door I switched on the light.

'It's odd they didn't look for a chemist.

Who are they anyway at this time of the night?

she asked me, with the eyes standing in her head.

‘I know them to see,’ I said, but something
made me reach and squeeze her hand across the bed

before I went downstairs into the aisle
of the shop.

That squeeze of the hand is not sentimentalized. It is itself a hard fact of the narrative, the last time the man will touch his wife, and it is relayed as such in realistic, straightforward colloquial speech.

Though he lets the shopkeeper have his say, the poet doesn’t disappear from the poem because he is not relinquishing responsibility as a poet but assessing the adequacy of local language to address the Troubles: “My conscious concern was the killings in the North and the adequacy or inadequacy of my response to them in the poetry I was writing” (*Conversation 25*). After the poet hears the shopkeeper’s tale, he talks directly to the murdered man, single quotes indicating that the conversation occurs in the present between the poet and the ghost rather than within the ghost’s narrative about his murder:

‘Did they say nothing?’ ‘Nothing. What would they say?’

‘Were they in uniform? Not masked in any way?’

‘They were barefaced as they would be in the day,

shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all.’

The diction itself here is also not masked in any way but “barefaced as [it] would be in the day,” matching the blunt reality of sectarian assassination; the local vernacular corresponds to the world it responds to. When the poet resumes speaking, he retains the shopkeeper’s plainspoken manner:

except for the ravaged

forehead and the blood, he was still that same

rangy midfielder in a blue jersey

and starched pants, the one stylist on the team,

the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim.

The poem’s own “clean” style individualizes its unthinkable victim, one of thousands of innocent people killed during the Troubles. The shopkeeper is representative of these victims, but the poem’s idiomatic diction also renders him a particular man in a particular place: he gets annoyed with his wife; he struggles to keep his senses when he’s afraid; he feigns impatience with his assassins (“Could you quieten the racket // or I’ll not come down at all”). He even needles the poet with wily humor: “You’ve put on weight / since you did your courting in that big Austin / you got the loan of on a Sunday night.” Finally, when the poet asks the shopkeeper to “Forgive the way I have lived indifferent– / forgive my timid circumspect involvement,” the shopkeeper refuses such headiness and won’t gainsay his forthright, idiomatic manner: “‘Forgive / my eye,’ he said, ‘all that’s above my head.’”

One thing we don't know in "VII" is who's on which side. Although Heaney has explained elsewhere that the poem is based on the murder of a personal acquaintance named William Strathearne, "an easy Catholic target living in a Protestant village," nowhere in the poem does he identify the couple's religion or the political affiliations of the gunmen (*Conversation* 26). As in "The Backward Look," he strategically leaves these details out: "One thing I worried about in writing that section of 'Station Island' was whether to make the killers in the poem members of the RUC [the Royal Ulster Constabulary, a thoroughly Protestant institution]—since it had been rogue members of the police force who had committed the actual murder" (26). He decided that the poem should avoid any partisan implication: "I felt that if I blazoned that into the poem, it would constitute an inflammatory, propagandist, almost pro-IRA gesture" (26). His point, after all, is that the fateful "reach and squeeze" of "her hand" has occurred many times on both sides of the sectarian divide. A Northern Irish Catholic or Protestant could be telling the same story in the same Northern Irish English.

Heaney has connected *Station Island* to Dante not only by its otherworldly encounters with famous figures but also its colloquial element. When Karl Miller asks Heaney if he is "right in thinking that your involvement with Dante . . . led you . . . to a sparer, more colloquial poetry," the poet replies, "That *is* fair to say, yes: I was exhilarated to read Dante in translation in the Seventies, because I recognized some of the conditions of Medieval Florence—the intensities, the factions, the personalities—as analogous to the Belfast situation" (*Conversation* 34). For Heaney, Dante's dream-vision motif was especially suited for *Station Island*: "The good thing was that my experience of the Lough Derg pilgrimage was far enough in the past for my memory of it to possess a

certain dreamlike quality already” (34). But Dante’s straightforward style also held sway over Heaney: his combination of “the desiderata of high art” and “realist narrative” offered Heaney “a way to be true to what was going on inside myself and outside myself” (34). O’Donoghue argues that the connection between the two poets at the level of language is even stronger than Heaney allows. He holds up “VII” as an example of Dante emboldening Heaney to write in vernacular (after all, the Italian poet wrote in his Florentine Italian instead of Latin): “What Heaney is doing again is to suggest that the language of the exchange is not rhetorically recast in the poem, but occurs unprocessed. The interlocutory ghost here, William Strathearne, goes on to reject more elevated language, about forgiveness and circumspection, by saying: ‘All that’s above my head.’ . . . The characters in *Inferno* act with passion, but they speak without it; in accordance with God’s will, they answer Dante’s requests for information in a clear, informative narrative. Heaney abides by a similar convention” (*Language of Poetry* 93-94). Heaney, like the ghosts in his poems, rejects “whitewashed” language because it has potential to evade the hard facts of sectarianism.

Heaney’s own realist narrative also ensured that *Station Island* would not be just another version of the *Commedia*: “I was worried, of course, by the pastiche element, writing a poem so obviously an echo of *The Divine Comedy*, so one antidote to that was to make it very plain in its diction, and entirely matter-of-fact in its narrative” (*Conversation* 34-35). He has attributed the success of the seventh section of *Station Island* to its combination of local speech and traditional form: “It’s one that holds up. It’s almost twenty years since I wrote it, but I still occasionally include it at poetry readings. I suppose it comes across because it’s a story, and because of the colloquial aspect. What I

enjoy is the muted rhyming, the slightly Dantesque formality of the verse, being combined with the speech rhythms of South Derry” (25). Indeed, that local language became for him a device for correlating artistic tact and complex social reality. His remarks about Patrick Kavanagh’s “Lough Derg” could be said about his own Lough Derg poem, *Station Island*, and about many of the poems across his career: “there’s a lot of old blather in it but at least you’re in the company of flesh and blood” (*Stepping Stones* 238). The interaction between that “old blather” and traditional form was what supplied Heaney with a method to locate the “frontier of writing,” a nonsectarian space in a violently divided country, while allowing him to remain loyal to his own local community and to his artistic commitments (*Redress* 186).

In the guise of Colum McCartney’s ghost, Heaney had chastised himself for remaining at a poetry event instead of attending his cousin’s wake: “You were with the poets when you got the word / and stayed there with them, while your own flesh and blood / was carted to Bellaghy from the Fews.”²⁸ The “blather” that Heaney hears in Kavanagh, the colloquial language of his homeland, allows Heaney to align himself both “with the poets” and with the people of Mossbawn and Castledawson and Broagh and Bellaghy and Belfast, all of them his “flesh and blood.”

Notes

¹ Critics have not fully explored the Frost-Heaney connection at the level of poetics. They have typically focused on Heaney’s more obvious connections to other poets and dismissed Frost’s influence, as Neil Corcoran does when he characterizes it as “relatively unabsorbed” (4). Rachel Buxton devotes much of her study on Frost and contemporary Northern Irish poetry to his influence on Heaney and acknowledges that “it is Frost’s use of language which has made the more long-lasting impression on Heaney’s poetry,” not the “‘farmer poet’ aspect” (48). Still, her book stresses thematic elements such as subject matter and political agenda over poetics. She suggests that early in his

career, the Irish-Catholic Heaney sought non-English models and found in Frost a poet who used vernacular in resistance to what she refers to as “Standard English” (51). According to Buxton, an anti-colonial element inheres in Frost’s poetry: “The American poet is, in some respects, in a position similar to that of the Irish poet in terms of his or her relationship with England” (50). She identifies this anti-colonial element in the colloquial speech of Frost’s poems, implying that Frost’s example “opened up for [Heaney] the space in which he could find his own poetic voice—he writes that when he was reading Frost he ‘was being persuaded all the time of the trustworthiness of the undersound of my own non-standard speech’” (51). Buxton concludes that Heaney’s interest in Frost was at least partly political: “the fact that Frost was not English, and more specifically not writing in Standard English, was a part of his attraction” (51). However, we must not mistake Heaney’s phrase “non-standard speech” for “non-Standard English.” Both poets, in fact, write in Standard English: but that register is modulated by colloquial expressions and local rhythms. For other considerations of Frost’s influence on Heaney see Stephen James; Kennedy-Andrews, “Bringing It All Back Home”; Longley, *Poetry and Posterity*; Mason; and Wilcox.

² The quoted question about rage and beauty is from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65 and the phrase “befitting emblems of adversity” is from Yeats’s “Meditations in a Time of Civil War.”

³ Heaney has also discussed Frost’s influence on him in his essay “Above the Brim,” which appears in the commemorative book *Homage to Robert Frost*. The book includes essays by Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott as well.

⁴ Heaney explicitly connects his autobiographical poem to Frost’s poem: “The accident that happened in my own family was less terrible, but still grievous. One of my young brothers was killed in a road accident. I believe, however, that ‘Out, Out–’ and other Frost poems like it prepared me for the poem I would write” (“One” 15).

⁵ Quotations from Heaney’s poems are from his individual volumes. I indicate the volume and inclusive page numbers the first time a poem is quoted and then quote without page citations.

⁶ The effect is similar to that at the end of “Out, Out–,” where the colloquial rhythm is tightened by the internal rhymes of “there,” “their,” and “affairs”: “No more to build on there. And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs” (CPPP 131).

⁷ In another recent examination of Heaney’s connection to Eliot, Cuda argues that the two poets shared “tactics for artistic rejuvenation” (161). According to him, Eliot taught Heaney that “memory” can be a “generative principle of love and self-renewal” (153), a lesson Heaney applied to the poems of the first part of *North*, poems that seek renewal by way of prehistoric artifacts and people. Cuda bases his argument largely on the fact that Heaney originally included a section of “Little Gidding” as an epigraph to

North. The epigraph was eventually cut, and Heaney doesn't remember including it, much less why he did so.

⁸ The inclination to connect Heaney to Eliot rather than to Frost may be partly because Heaney has written more on Eliot than on Frost, and those writings have been published in his collections of criticism. Heaney's reflections on Frost, on the other hand, are scattered in various interviews and uncollected lectures. In fact, the only sustained consideration of Frost by Heaney doesn't appear in Heaney's critical volumes but alongside essays by Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott in the commemorative book *Homage to Robert Frost* (1996). But, too, Eliot's "auditory imagination" seems less circumscribed than Frost's sound of sense. Eliot doesn't weigh his concept on one aspect of sound the way Frost may appear to. Still, we should not mistake Frost's concept of "the sound of sense" with his particular method for attaining it. Frost explains the sound of sense by emphasizing his own preferences: it pleases him to achieve the sound of sense by putting colloquial speech and blank verse "into strained relation"; he "like[s] to drag and break the intonation across the metre" (*CPPP* 680). But Frost didn't believe that the sound of sense could only be rendered by a single form—the form that he prefers—that would make all poems sound the same.

⁹ Corcoran, Morrison, and Tobin aren't the only critics who hear contention in "Traditions." Jay Parini says the speaker "complains" (108), Karen Marguerite Moloney regards the poem as "wry comment on the fate of this culture throttled" (97), and John Wilson Foster considers the speaker "resentful" (16). In his *New York Times* review of Heaney's *Beowulf*, James Shapiro describes the poem as "angry."

¹⁰ Heaney makes the point that even political readings of poems have to come to terms first and foremost with the poetry: "any account of the Irish poet and Britain must get past politics and into poetry itself" (*Finders Keepers* 405).

¹¹ The coccyx and uvula are thought to be vestigial, "remaining or surviving in a degenerate, atrophied, or imperfect condition or form" ("vestigial," *OED*).

¹² Heaney recorded all of his work up through *District and Circle* for a special CD box set produced by Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), the Irish national broadcasting corporation. His reading of "Traditions" there corroborates my argument that his tone is not disdainful when he says, "We are to be proud / of our Elizabethan English." Heaney stresses the words "are" and "proud" rather than "to be" in his delivery of these lines.

¹³ In *James Joyce and Nationalism*, Emer Nolan argues against the notion that Joycean modernism is antithetical to Irish nationalism. In fact, Nolan claims that for Joyce the experimental novel was a form to bear out the complexities of these "analogous discourses" (xii). She explains that, like modernism, "nationalisms vary, and are internally divided and disputatious" (xiii).

¹⁴ The Revival was an “Irish movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to revive and promote an indigenous Celtic cultural, literary, and artistic tradition to counter centuries of imperial English domination” (“Celtic Revival”). The movement’s most famous writers were Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge, and it circulated around the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Joyce mocked the movement as the “cultic twalette” (*Finnegans Wake* 344). He alleged that the Revival’s populism is detrimental to the individual artist: “If an artist courts the favour of the multitude he cannot escape the contagion of its fetichism and deliberate self-deception, and if he joins in a popular movement he does so at his own risk” (“Rabblement” 71). Beckett similarly assessed the state of Irish literature in his classic 1934 essay “Recent Irish Poetry.” There, he divided Irish literature into two distinct camps: the “antiquarians,” those poets who wrote conventionally within the Irish Literary Revival and under the auspices of Yeats, and the “others,” a trio of Irish modernist poets (Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, and Thomas MacGreevy) whom Beckett praises for their unconventional aesthetics of self-awareness and their focus on “the actual” (70-71).

¹⁵ Yeats had an ambivalent and often contradictory relationship with Irish nationalism. For instance, in “Poetry and Tradition,” he ascribes to poetry a nationalist objective: “to remember certain ardent ideas and high attitudes of mind which were the nation itself, to our belief, so far as a nation can be summarized in the intellect” (248). Yet in “A General Introduction for My Work,” he ambiguously claims, “I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons” (526). In “From Democracy to Authority,” those reasons apparently lead not to nationalism but authoritarianism: he imagines Ireland as “a nation controlled by highly trained intellects” because “the modern State is so complex that it must find some kind of expert government—a government firm enough, tyrannical enough, if you will, to spend years in carrying out its plans” (435).

¹⁶ Coole Park was Lady Gregory’s estate in the west of Ireland. It was an important gathering place for Irish writers and artists, and it is where Yeats, Gregory, and Edward Martin first discussed the establishment of a national theatre in Dublin, which would eventually lead to the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Literary Revival (Maxwell 8-9). Coole Park was also a landed estate or “big house,” and Yeats did not support redistributing that land to its tenants when Gregory sold it back to the government. Yeats would regard such a project as deriving from the “sentimentality,” “insincere rhetoric,” and “mob emotion” of Irish nationalism (“Ireland 1921-1931” 486). His three poems about Coole Park are “The Wild Swans at Coole,” “Coole Park, 1929,” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.”

¹⁷ Hugh Lane was the founder of the Municipal Gallery of Art in Dublin and Lady Gregory’s nephew. In 1908, he lent a group of French Impressionist paintings to the Gallery, but they were rejected by a disapproving City Council. Lane’s response was to move them to London though he had stipulated in his will that they should be returned to Dublin if a proper home could be established for them there. Yeats ardently supported Lane’s bequest and regarded the Dublin government’s inability to find a place for the paintings as yet another sign of Ireland’s middle-class philistinism. In 1929, a permanent

place was found in Dublin for the Municipal Gallery where the paintings could be displayed (“Sir Hugh Lane”).

¹⁸ This underworld might very well be a Christian heaven, too: the three line stanzas indicate the Holy Trinity, reinforcing the implication that the Shroud who speaks in the poem has “authority” among the other Shrouds because he is Christ.

¹⁹ For a close examination of the relation between Dante and Seamus Heaney (and Derek Walcott) see Fumagali.

²⁰ Heaney spells the form “dinnseanchas”; the *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, whose definition I cite, anglicizes the term. In Chapter One, I used Welch’s spelling—*dindshenchus*—in his recent study of Irish literary history, *The Cold of May Day Monday* (2014).

²¹ *Deibidhe* is an Irish-language poetic “form which rhymes monosyllables with the unstressed syllable of a two-syllabled word” (O’Donoghue, *Language* 18). Rob Jackaman explains that it is an especially difficult form to bring into English because its seven-syllable structures “are generally unfamiliar in English prosody” (162). Heaney uses the form, for example, in the sixth section of *Sweeney Astray*, his version of the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* (McCarthy 20).

²² The narrator of the opening story of *Dubliners* considers the sound of “gnomon” and “simony” as he ruminates on the sound of the word “paralysis.” (Joyce 1). Social and psychological paralysis is the central theme of Joyce’s book. These words sound to the narrator as foreboding as their meanings. In his notes to *Dubliners*, Terence Brown defines “gnomon” as “[t]he remainder of a parallelogram after removal of a similar parallelogram containing one of its corners” (238n1). It could also refer to a part of a sundial or “a rule, canon of belief or action” (238-39). “In Roman Catholic Church,” Brown tells us, “simony” is “the selling or giving in exchange of a temporal thing for a spiritual thing” (239n3). Similarly, in *Portrait*, when Stephen ruminates on a pandering classmate being labeled a “suck,” he connects the idiom’s pejorative meaning to the “ugly” sucking sound of water clearing a drain (7-8).

²³ The title “The Backward Look” alludes to Irish literary history: it is also the title of Frank O’Connor’s 1967 survey of Irish Literature which spans “Early Ireland” to Yeats and Joyce.

²⁴ Not all of the bog poems come from Glob’s images. For instance, “Bog Queen” is not based on a photo, nor was this “Queen” a Scandinavian or Germanic victim of tribal violence: “There’s no photo of the ‘bog queen’, only a quotation about a body being found on Lord Moira’s estate in the late eighteenth century (*Stepping Stones* 158). The speaker is, however, a victim of violent natural processes—“the seeps of winter / digested me”—and daily life in rural Ireland: “I was barbered / and stripped / by a turf-cutter’s spade.” In his famous early poem “Digging,” the spade is Heaney’s metaphor

for his pen. In her essay “Bog Queens,” Patricia Coughlan argues that Heaney is unable to construct autonomous, empowered feminine figures; they are always subordinated to his male ego, or rather, to his spade/pen: “such representations of feminine power ultimately arise from a masculine psychological difficulty in acknowledging woman’s subjectivity as a force in itself, and not merely as a relation to man’s” (186).

²⁵ Vendler has pointed out that “Bog Queen” is indebted both to English and Irish traditions: the poem is a blazon, but it is also a “renovation of the aisling poem (a poem envisaging the nation as a maiden appearing to the poet)” (*Heaney* 46-47).

²⁶ Heaney borrows his terms here from Jorge Luis Borges.

²⁷ These lines in which Heaney employs the very colloquialisms he critiques and in which he ponders rhyming “pangs” and “bangs” are from the poem’s second section. Though “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” is one of his most famous poems, Heaney apparently felt compelled to hold his tongue while making editorial decisions for *Opened Ground*, his large selected poems. The second section is not included in that book, nor is it included in his earlier *Selected Poems*. Perhaps Heaney omitted the section because it situated him too firmly on a sectarian side.

²⁸ Heaney’s professional obligations as a poet caused him to miss his cousin’s wake. He was attending Kilkenny Arts Week at Jerpoint Abbey to introduce Robert Lowell when the murder happened. Because he did not know his cousin well (McCartney was a son of Heaney’s father’s cousin, so he would have been a rather distant relative), and because he would have been represented by family who were in Bellaghy, Heaney didn’t feel compelled to abandon his duties in order to attend the funeral. Still, he felt considerable compunction about that decision: “the circumstances of his death were so brutal you couldn’t not feel that your presence was called for, in protest as much as in sympathy” (*Stepping Stones* 220).

CHAPTER III

THE GWENDOLYNIAN TONGUE

Seamus Heaney does not explicitly assign elements of sound such as assonance and consonance to his concept of poetic redress, which describes, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the capacity of a certain kind of “fully realized poem” (*Redress* 10) to act as an “agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices” (5). But he does imply that a poem’s aural qualities are crucial for achieving the redress of poetry. Sound effects in poems that respond to disharmonious social conditions can, of course, match or expose those conditions; but they can also supply rhythms that counter disharmony. Heaney insists that poetry’s response to reality is predicated on the innovative arrangements of what Frost would call “sentence sounds” (*CPPP* 146): “I have been intent upon treating poetry as an answer [to social conditions] given in terms of metre and syntax, of tone and musical trueness; an answer given also by the unpredictability of its inventions and its need to go emotionally and artistically ‘above the brim’, beyond the conventional bounds” (*Redress* 192). Heaney’s notion of redress implies that a poem’s sound doesn’t always convey its sense by matching tone to semantics: when a poem is concerned with discordant social conditions, it may instead lend harmony and rhythm to those conditions thereby “tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium” (3). Such a poem in such a context, Heaney would argue, has social utility because it is “instrumental in adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world” (192).

Heaney describes the formulation of the real world in poetry as a reimagining of the “labyrinth” of experience through which the poet acts as guide: “if our given experience is a labyrinth, its impassability can still be countered by the poet’s imagining

some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it” (2). The poet’s reimagining of “impassible” labyrinths as passable is an act of redress because it posits an “alternative” version of reality in which prevailing social conditions are resisted or reconceived: “the redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances” (4). In order for poetry to allow this “glimpse” of an “imagined reality” (187), it must “be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated” (8). In other words, a poem that would redress the social world must be composed of images, sounds, and speech from that world: “As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way” (8). In his poetry, Heaney merges various forms of specialized diction—archeological terms, Gaelic and Elizabethan English, local place names—with the real-world coordinate of local language in order to write poems that respond adequately to his social conditions, poems that support “that idea of poetry as an answer, and the idea of an answering poetry as a responsible poetry, and the idea of poetry’s answer, its responsibility, being given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it” (191).

One way poets integrate elements from the actual world they respond to is with diction. As we have seen in the previous chapter, diction was precisely what caused Heaney to worry that his poem “The Strand at Lough Beg” was not just an inadequate response to the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland but that it “confused evasion and artistic tact” (*Station* 83). In the eighth section of *Station Island*, Heaney stages a

conversation between himself and the ghost of his murdered cousin, whom he had previously elegized in “Lough Beg.” In “VIII,” his cousin’s ghost redresses Heaney for the “whitewashed” and “saccharined” diction of that earlier poem (83). Such diction, apparently, was not able to effect the redress of Northern Irish violence but only sugarcoated it. In the previous section of *Station Island*, Heaney had already corrected himself by employing everyday speech to recount another instance of political violence. Because the diction of the seventh section conveys living speech—the incident is relayed in the colloquial language of the victim—it corresponds to reality and thus avoids evading the fact of sectarian assassination.

This is not to suggest that only poems written in colloquial language are able to respond adequately to complex social conditions. Nor am I arguing that the employment of colloquial language is an obvious or unmistakable move for a poet compelled to critique society. That would imply that only one rhetorical method is guaranteed to make sense of complexity. Rather, colloquial language provides one kind of diction among many kinds that poets utilize in order to locate themselves in social reality and to put their poetry to the task of responding to and reconceptualizing that reality. In fact, poets do not typically work in a single register. They more often set various and sometimes conflicting forms of speech against each other in order to draw out the resulting tensions. Such a move corresponds to Frost “skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre” (*CPPP* 665). For Frost, the collision alone of the “raw material of poetry” (natural speech) and “the posture proper to the sentence” (meter) can produce enough pressure to generate poetry (680). Frost would elsewhere describe the effect of dragging and breaking the irregular accents across the

regular beats in social terms: the “strained relation” results in “a clarification of life,” “a momentary stay against confusion” (777).

Like Frost and Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks makes use of the tension between different registers of language in order to respond to complex social conditions. In fact, her poems execute the redress of poetry but also extend that concept. For instance, Heaney believes that the kind of poetry capable of redress “represent[s] a principle of integration within . . . a context of division and contradiction” (190). Poetry could, for example, unify the linguistic registers of the conflicting communities in Northern Ireland with metre, syntax, tone, and “musical trueness” (192). But how does integration work as a poetic for a twentieth-century African American poet who responds to a racist world that violently resists the integration of her community? In such conditions local language is especially fraught because racism strives to segregate and, in the most extreme instances, annihilate the very community speaking the local language. At times, Brooks employs vernacular in order to locate herself squarely in her community and to respond directly to threatening social forces. And yet her poems are more often comprised of a notoriously idiosyncratic diction that debunks expectations about her community’s local language. She devises a language for her local world that is ornate and enigmatic to question assumptions about the proper language for African American poetry and to create an African American idiolect that defies circumstance and proclaims her community’s distinction.

Poetic style for Brooks is not a strategy for integration but a method for assertion and resistance. But, too, she often redresses circumstances precisely in the way that Heaney describes. For example, her famous poem “kitchenette building,” part of the

twenty-poem “A Street in Bronzeville” sequence, reads like a paradigm of Heaney’s requirements that a poem should be both “a process of language” and “a representation of things in the world” (5). The poem is set within the walls of a tenement building so suffocating it threatens to devitalize its residents: “We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in, and gray” (*Blacks* 20).¹ In this circumscribed world, people are reduced to “things” and subjected to the monotony (“dry hours”), coerciveness (“involuntary plan”), confinement (“Grayed in”), and drabness (“gray”) of urban poverty. Indeed, critics tend to read the poem as a presentation and condemnation of the debilitating effects of claustrophobic ghetto life. Hannah Brooks-Motl, for instance, describes the poem as asking “us to think about what happens to people when social forces squeeze them into smaller spaces and closer proximity.” According to her, the poem conveys the inability of dreams to survive in such crowded impoverishment.²

But if the poem is concerned with life in close quarters, it is also thinking about the function of language in those quarters. In fact, it quickly turns its attention away from the social “plan” that creates degrading living conditions and begins ruminating on sound and local language: “‘Dream’ makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like ‘rent,’ ‘feeding a wife,’ ‘satisfying a man.’” Here, the sounds of two kinds of language—one “giddy,” one “strong”—are juxtaposed, suggesting that the poem might contrast them and perhaps make a case for one over the other. However, the next stanza fuses these two registers of language:

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,

Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms.

The poem answers the question it poses—can a dream in a kitchenette building “send up,” “fight,” “Flutter,” or “sing”?—by bringing the inanimate “things” of the tenement—“onion fumes,” “fried potatoes,” “garbage,” “rooms”—into concert through a series of overlapping sound effects that include internal and end rhymes (“fumes” and “rooms,” “white” and “fight”), assonance (“white,” “violet,” “fight,” “fried,” “ripening”), alliteration (“fight,” “fried,” “Flutter”), and consonance (“fried,” “garbage,” “ripening”).³ These “sentence sounds” strung along the mostly five-beat lines affirm that a dream in a kitchenette building can send up its fighting song. For the second stanza already set the “things” of tenement life to song by melding the “giddy” dream sounds and the “strong” facts of tenement life. The “dream” is described as the same color as a purple onion (“white and violet”), and although the first stanza seemed to contrast the dream’s “giddy sound” with “strong” colloquial phrases about rent, wives, and men, the second stanza suggests that the “dream” sound may be “strong,” too—strong enough to “fight.” Further, the long *i* sound of the second and third lines—“white,” “violet,” “fight,” “fried,” “ripening”—rises up with the strong odors of frying potatoes and yesterday’s garbage. The “ripening” garbage might not be pleasing, but the language used to describe it is. Here, a “representation of things in the world” is arranged into a “process of language” in order to perform the very singing the poem wonders about. Apparently, the giddy sounds of tenement life can quite strenuously “sing an aria down these rooms.”

In my reading, the formal effects of “kitchenette building” sound out an unexpected sense in ghetto life: self-consciously poetic sound effects insist that the everyday is poetic. Yet for most readers, like Stephen Burt, for example, the poem draws

out a less favorable sense of such day-to-day experience: this “sonnet,” Burt argues, “emphasizes the everyday inconveniences of low-income domestic life, as if to say that such hassles, hour by hour and day by day, do more to damage the souls of Chicagoans than any single dramatic event” (311). Similarly, Eavan Boland considers the poem’s depiction of daily life against what she also sees as its sonnet form: “It is a cropped sonnet, a thirteen-line word-portrait of claustrophobia and resignation, with a sharp moment of resistance” (214). For her, “kitchenette building” acquiesces to the crowded conditions of tenement life: “The poem begins accepting the limitations of cramped space” (214). According to Boland, the poem ultimately conveys the reality of “cooking scents” and “the sounds of the day ending” in order to underscore the contradictions of “longing for another reality” and the “the fall-to-earth practicality” of its final stanza (215):

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!

Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,

We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Boland regards the poem as conceding to closed quarters not just at the beginning but with the “practicality” of its ending as well.

Burt and Boland don’t explain exactly how the sonnet form functions here. But each implies that Brooks varies the sonnet, with its prescribed patterns and divisions, in order to depict the resilient vitality of the imagination in especially strapped circumstances.⁴ And yet for both Burt and Boland, that vitality is only momentary. The poem doesn’t manage a sustained redress of its debasing social context and is, presumably, shorter than a traditional sonnet because of it. Waiting for the “lukewarm water” in the bathroom isn’t just an inconvenient “hassle” but actually “damage[s]” the

residents who have to bathe in it (Burt 311). And tepid bathwater represents a return to the harsh reality of the first stanza's "dry hours" (Boland 215). Boland suggests that the poem divides its thoughts along a series of sonnet-like turns, moving from acknowledgement of the tenement's monotony to a bursting forth of linguistic exuberance and back again, yielding to that original monotony.

And yet the last stanza of "kitchenette building" continues to employ its opening sonic effects to counter the "dry hours" that begin the poem. The lyrical "wondering" that occurs in the second stanza helps pass the long "hours" of tenement life. By the final stanza, the residents have to move quickly because, as another fusion of "giddy" and "strong" language asserts, "Number Five is out of the bathroom now, / We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it." "Number Five" and "out of the bathroom" correspond to the "strong" colloquial phrases in the first stanza. Along with "lukewarm water," they are also images taken directly from the kitchenette building. Yet simultaneously, the consonance of "We," "lukewarm," "water"; "think" "lukewarm"; and "water," "to," "get," and "it," as well as the double rhyme of "minute" and "in it," sound like the "white and violet" "dream" of the second stanza. In other words, the last stanza continues to sing against "the involuntary plan." Indeed, the poem's ending anticipates that the "hope" to get in the bathwater, however lukewarm, will be fulfilled, the "dry hours" literally—and perhaps figuratively—countered.

To call "kitchenette building" a sonnet simply because the poem is a line shy of fourteen is to risk misconstruing the relation of its formal structure to its sense. Where are the elements unique to the sonnet form? It is not fourteen lines long, nor is it divided by an octave and sestet or by three quatrains and a couplet. What happens if we take its

structural form at face value? We have three envelope tercets with an envelope quatrain separating the first tercet from the last two: *aba cdec fgf hih*. The quatrain stands among the tercets as an instance of the very singing the poem wonders about: its length subtly resists confinements of context. Burt and Boland imply that the poem's sonnet form sets the "things" of a "kitchenette building" to song while drawing out the tensions between that high cultural form and the raw material of the tenement, but the implication that such a form is required along with the poem's aural effects to raise those "things" to the level of music goes against the very point of the poem: after all, "kitchenette building" demonstrates that the "strong" sounds of tenement life themselves can achieve the giddiness the residents dream about.

When Brooks does write sonnets to respond to complex social conditions, we know it. For example, "the soft man," also in the "A Street in Bronzeville" sequence, is a variation of a Petrarchan sonnet that employs that form's two-part structure in order to weigh a language for talking against a language for thinking. Like "kitchenette building," "the soft man" ends with a bath that offers respite from the bustling city (*Blacks* 25). Also like that earlier poem, "the soft man" is concerned with the function of local language in an urban, African American milieu. But in "the soft man," the sounds of the everyday world do not rise up like scents to redress oppressive conditions. Instead, they erupt in a surge of flashy colloquialisms and names of local nightclubs:

Disgusting, isn't it, dealing out the damns
To every comer? Hits the heart like pain.
And calling women (Marys) chicks and broads,
Men hep, and cats, or corny to the jive.

Being seen Everywhere (keeping Alive),
Rhumboogie (and the joint is jumpin', Joe),
Brass Rail, Keyhole, De Lisa, Cabin Inn.
And all the other garbage cans. (25)

This isn't just a fast-paced dialectal collage of urban nightlife. There is also another kind of language operating here. In the lucid, subdued tone of a rhetorical question, the poem announces its revulsion of the swagger required in this night world: "Disgusting, isn't it, dealing out the damns / To every comer?" The speaker's identity is ambiguous: we are not sure if the voice is the narrator speaking to the soft man, the narrator speaking to the reader, or the soft man talking to himself. However, we can be sure that the poem quickly merges a refined voice with the elaborate colloquialisms of a man who is discomfited by those very colloquialisms. The snappy phrases ("dealing out the damns," "corny to the jive," "the joint is jumpin', Joe"), the slangy epithets ("chicks," "broad," "cats," perhaps "Joe"), and the inventive place names ("Rhumboogie," "Brass Rail," "Keyhole," "De Lisa," "Cabin Inn") contrast with the opening line's "Disgusting, isn't it" to communicate the soft man's exhaustion and anxiety with "Being seen Everywhere (keeping Alive)."

Indeed, the reserved language in the sestet opposes the demanding vernacular of the jazz clubs. There, Brooks brings the "clean unanxious" voice hinted at in the poem's first line to the forefront in order to clear a place for reprieve:

But grin.
Because there is a clean unanxious place
To which you creep on Sundays. And you cool
In lovely sadness.

No one giggles where

You bathe your sweet vulgarity in prayer.

Here, Brooks varies the Petrarchan sestet with compression. The octave's mostly five-beat lines had approximated the iambic pentameter we expect in a sonnet, but the sestet evades those expectations by modulating between short lines—"But grin," "In lovely sadness," "No one giggles where"—and pentameter lines. And yet the sestet is more conventional than the octave in both its subtler diction and its more regular iambic rhythm. Re-arranging the lines (and eliminating the stanza break between the octave to the sestet) reveals the sestet's deeply conventional pattern:

/ / / / x / x / x /
Brass Rail, | Keyhole, | De Lisa, | Cabin Inn. *A*

x / x / x / x / x /
And all | the oth|er gar|bage cans. | But grin. *A*

x / x / x / x / x /
Because | there is | a clean | unanx|ious place *x*

x / x / x / x / x /
To which | you creep | on Sun|days. And | you cool *x*

x / x / x / x / x /
In love|ly sad|ness. No | one gigg|les where *B*

x / x / x / x / x /
You bathe | your sweet | vulgar|ity | in prayer. *B*

Of course, this arrangement would have resulted in a twelve-line poem, not a sonnet at all, and Brooks innovates that form's sestet with short lines in order to convey an audible shift that occurs across the sonnet's volta as the octave gives way to the sestet. The sestet's first line, "But grin," is a concise imperative that halts the busier rhythm of the preceding stanza; the white space above it and after it evokes the quietness the soft man

years for. Brooks employs the sonnet form to juxtapose different registers of language: the sestet's short lines and white space create dramatic pauses that contrast to the rolling rhythm of the octave.

Indeed, in the quieter space of the sestet, there is no ostentatious laughter ("No one giggles") but instead the grinning contentment of serious contemplation. The mere thought of his Sunday sanctuary makes the soft man smile because his "sadness" there is cooling, "lovely," and restorative. D. H. Melhem reads "prayer" in the last line literally and regards the "Sunday" place as church: "'the soft man' . . . seeks to escape the crudities and spiritual poverty of his days by weekly church attendance" (25). Church is certainly suggested by "Sundays" and "prayer," perhaps even by "bathe," "Mary," and "Joe." But given Brooks's different figuring of "Sunday" in other poems in the book, we need not assume that the soft man's redemption is religious. For instance, in "when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story," Sunday is sexual: on that day, the poem's lovers "finally undressed and whipped out the light and flowed into bed" (36-37); in "obituary for a living lady," the speaker corrects herself when she refers to Sunday as the church-going day, suggesting that the word carries multiple and perhaps conflicting connotations: "Sunday—I beg your pardon—Sabbath nights" (34-35); "Satin-Legs Smith" uses his "Sundays" to throw off the deprivations of day-to-day life by putting on elaborate suits and escorting flamboyantly dressed women on dates. In fact, the soft man's "creeping" to his Sunday place connotes a deflated and perhaps stealthy gait and also suggests covert sexuality: "creep" is an African American colloquialism for "a clandestine mission usually referring to a romantic meeting" ("creep" 42). The soft man

finds reprieve in his Sunday place not because it offers religious reconciliation but because he can relax and be himself there, alone or perhaps with a lover.

The sestet in “the soft man” does not resolve a problem laid out in the octave, the traditional procedure of the Petrarchan form. The speech of the jazz clubs exhausts the soft man, and he anticipates a break from it in the quieter language of the sestet, but that sparser, plainer language is not a corrective to the colloquial diction before it. Instead, the poem differentiates between these two registers in order to examine their distinct responses to social conditions: the octave’s idiomatic language conveys a particularly clamorous social world while the non-colloquial language in the sestet portrays the soft man thinking about his own “unanxious place.” Both forms of speech respond to a social realm that is vital and dynamic but also demanding and overwhelming; one courses through that world, and the other provides recourse from it. What’s more, the poem’s Petrarchan structure doesn’t just juxtapose these languages but facilitates a tonal shift: across the sonnet’s two divisions, the one register (loud, fast, elaborate) gives way to the other (slower and quieter). The sound of the poem’s sense is the sudden change in tone that occurs as the poem moves from its strategic talking voice in the first part to its restorative thinking voice in the second.

“The soft man,” then, doesn’t celebrate or condemn colloquial language. Rather, the soft man utilizes ornate vernacular to talk his way through the jazz nightclubs. That nonstandard language gives way to standard phrasing in the sestet that responds to the same social demands, this time by providing relief from those demands. Still, readers tend to regard the conflict between the soft man and his social conditions as moralistic: for instance, Melhem hears the “pious” soft man denouncing urban nightlife (25).

Similarly, Margot Harper Banks perceives the soft man as hypocritically judging the men and women he meets at night while eluding judgment of himself: “The character has a moral standard that he applies to those he encounters, even though he is engaging in the same activities they are. Women are either ‘Marys [moral women] or chicks and broads [immoral women]’. The men are ‘hep, and cats’ [cool], or corny to the jive [un-cool]’ and he likens the places they frequent as ‘garbage cans.’ He is casting a negative, judgmental light on them. At the same time he is affirmed at church where he is not judged” (130). Even Brooks herself suggests that the poem draws a moral divide between nightclubs and church: “that was about a young artist I knew, a painter who later became quite famous and hated that poem. . . . [H]e was very religious. He found his salvation in religion. That was true in life, and I hope in the poem. . . . But he didn’t want anybody to know. He kept that private” (*Conversations* 145-46). Brooks hopes that the soft man’s “salvation” comes across as religious like her friend’s, but the sonnet’s octave and sestet don’t separate social from religious life. Rather, they separate forms of speech: each division responds to the same social circumstances with different diction.

In fact, Brooks seems to be writing about her friend’s inclination for privacy, not his religious beliefs. For the poem downplays religion and communicates instead introversion through diction and lineation. The soft-spoken sestet describes the Sunday place in lines whose variations in length create both white space and marked pauses that evoke the solitude of the soft man’s personal haven. He doesn’t grin at the thought of church on Sunday, another realm of social busyness, but at the thought of privacy. The poem, after all, demonstrates how public and private forms of speech can be brought together to respond to social conditions: the sestet matches reality, which the octave then

redresses. To take Heaney's terms further, "the scales of reality" in the nightclubs have been "tilted" by the sestet's private language "towards some transcendent equilibrium" (*Redress 3*).

In her most famous poem, "We Real Cool," Brooks would also employ colloquial language to examine a social domain similar to the nightclubs in "the soft man" (*Blacks* 331). The pool hall in "We Real Cool" is not, however, merely draining but destructive. The poem summarizes the lives of seven adolescents in four monosyllabic couplets that transform vernacular language into an intricate series of coinciding sounds:

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

As in "the soft man," critics detect an admonishing voice here. For example, while Barbara B. Simms finds the sonority of the poem's language connotative of a "certain pride" in its speakers, she ultimately hears the poem's speakers as sadly delusional: "the tone changes dramatically when the reader learns the street people 'Die soon.' At once

their defiant and complacent attitudes seem quite pathetic, and the reader wonders whom the cool people are trying to kid about the desirability of their disordered lives” (58). Similarly, Helen Vendler dismisses the poem based on her sense of its “prudishness,” referring to it as a “judgmental monologue, which though it is ostensibly spoken by adolescents, barely conceals its adult reproach of their behavior” (384). Alternatively, Hortense J. Spillers argues that the poem does not evaluate the choices of its young speakers but presents their own thoughts about themselves in their own language: “Deliberately subverting the romance of sociological pathos, Brooks presents the pool players—‘seven [at] the golden shovel’—in their own words and time. They make no excuse for themselves and apparently invite no one else to do so. The poem is their situation as *they* see it. In eight (could be nonstop) lines, here is their total destiny. Perhaps comic geniuses, they could well drink to this poem, making it a drinking/revelry song” (120).

For Simms and Vendler, the poem’s bluntly ominous final declaration, “We / Die soon,” indicates that the poet has taken the monologue back from its speakers to reprimand their decision to leave school for late nights, pool, sin, gin, and jazz. On the other hand, Spillers recognizes that the poem never once veers from its rhetorical methods to signal that the pool players have stopped speaking. The poem for her is consistently told from the speakers’ collective perspective, “in their own words and time.” Indeed, it is comprised entirely of first-person plural declarations that are syntactically and syllabically uniform: each of the poem’s eight sentences is comprised of three syllables. The poem, then, isn’t “disordered” or “ostensibly” delivered but scrupulously ordered. Further, the aural effects in these short lines emphasize the pool players’

rhythmic, lilting speech rather than the poet's disposition toward her speakers. The complex of sound effects here is particularly intricate, especially for a poem that employs the same number of lines Williams famously did to describe his wheelbarrow: it includes the repetition of "We" throughout the poem, internal rhyme ("cool"/"school," "late"/"straight," the triple "sin"/"Thin"/"gin," "June"/"soon"), alliteration ("Left," "Lurk," "late"; "Strike," "straight," "Sing," "sin," "soon"; "gin," "Jazz," "June"), and consonance (the *l* sound in "real," "cool," "Left," "school," "Lurk," and "late"; the *k* sound in "cool," "school," "Lurk," and "Strike"; the *r* in "lurk," "Strike," and "Straight"; and the *n* of "sin," "Thin," "gin," "June," and "soon").

In fact, all but one of the poem's twenty-four words—"Die" in the last line—connect to other words in the poem through sound. True, "Die" doesn't relate to any other words in the poem by way of rhyme, alliteration, or consonance, and therefore bluntly contrasts to the correspondence of sounds in the other declarations. And while all of the other verbs in the poem are linked to their modifying adverbs either by consonance ("Left school"), alliteration ("Lurk late," "Strike straight," "Sing sin"), or rhyme ("Sing"/"sin," "Thin"/"gin"), "Die" doesn't associate sonically with "soon." But this doesn't indicate that the poet has been admonishing her speakers because of their decisions. Rather, the dissonance here in language that is syntactically consistent with the rest of the poem contrasts with the harmony of the previous lines and thereby emphasizes its declarative tone. The speakers realize that their certain (declarative), natural (colloquial), and enjoyable (lyrical) striking, singing, drinking, and jazzing may be fatal, and they pronounce that realization. The sound stands out because the speakers mean it. These straight shooters are not delusional but entirely self-aware.

When George Stavros asked Brooks in 1969 if the poem's form "was determined by the colloquial rhythm [she was] trying to catch," Brooks minimized the poem's colloquial element: "No," she replied, "determined by my feeling about these boys, these young men" (*Conversations* 44). Earlier in their discussion, Brooks describes the pronoun "We" throughout the poem as underscoring the speakers' tentativeness: "The 'We'—you're supposed to stop after the 'We' and think about their validity, and of course there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course." She is suggesting here that the placement of "We" at the end of all but the last line is the poem's most crucial formal aspect rather than the sound effects of the colloquialisms. And yet her later comments about the poem contradict this connection between the poem's formal features and its speakers' self-doubts. For example, by 1988 she comes to hear the "We" as a much louder assertion of the speakers' identity against a society that overlooks them:

when I first wrote the poem, oh, so many years ago, I said, 'We real cool / we left school / we learned late.' But then it occurred to me that these are youngsters, that's why I wrote the poem really. These are youngsters who don't have much attention. They would like some attention. They'd like to be looked at with some respect and affection by their society. So I decided to put the 'we' at the end so that you would have to pause just a split second and give them just a split second's worth of attention. (134)

Two years before this, she was even more insistent about the young pool players' self-determination, singling out the phrase "Jazz June" as an example of the poem's linguistic response to threatening social forces:

I wrote it because I was passing by a pool hall in my neighborhood in Chicago one afternoon and I saw, well as I said in the poem, seven boys shooting pool and I wondered how they felt about themselves. And I decided that they felt they were not quite valid and that they certainly were insecure. They were not quite cherished by the society. Therefore they would feel that they should spit in the face of the establishment. I use the month of June as an establishment symbol. Whereas the rest of us love and respect June and wait for it to come so we can enjoy it, they *jazz June* as I said before, derange in it and scratch it and do anything that would annoy the establishment. (130)

Over the years, "We Real Cool" came to demonstrate for Brooks the capacity of language to assert individuality against social conditions that would eradicate it.

"The soft man" juxtaposes two forms of speech and elucidates their distinct relations to a common locale. The sonnet's octave is comprised of nonstandard idioms while the sestet's diction is comprised of standard constructions. The divisions of this Petrarchan sonnet distinguish talking from introversion: the soft man speaks aloud in the octave but thinks quietly to himself in the sestet. "We Real Cool" also examines the relationship of language to society. But rather than explicitly differentiating forms of speech, it elevates vernacular with alliteration, consonance, and rhyme. The poem presents itself in its title and first line—"We real cool"—as a monologue in dialect that becomes increasingly musical as the poem proceeds: "real cool" and "Left school" give

way to “Lurk late,” “Strike straight,” “Sing sin,” “Thin gin,” and “Jazz June” before the poem’s final blunt proclamation, “We / Die soon.” The interlocking sounds and forceful rhythms here—each three-syllable line has two successive beats—“send up” the pool players’ declarations against their social conditions, just as assonance brings the “things” in Brooks’s “kitchenette building” into song. The poem combines colloquial language, layered sound effects, a robust rhythm, and imaginative metonymic phrases (“Sing sin,” “Thin gin,” “Jazz June”) to assert its speakers’ collective identity against threatening social forces.

“Kitchenette building,” “the soft man,” and “We Real Cool” employ colloquial language to effect poetic redress. But each poem strikes other notes as well: the “dream” sounds in “kitchenette building” contrast to “strong” colloquial phrases; the reserved language in “the soft man”’s sestet is literally softer than the octave’s ornate vernacular; and the explicitly colloquial “We real cool” in Brooks’s most famous poem establishes a pattern that is repeated throughout: “We real cool. We / Left school. We / Lurk late. We / Strike straight. We,” and so on. And yet the assertions after “We real cool” are not idiomatic in themselves; rather, their distinctive sound effects and metonyms set them apart from colloquial speech. In other words, the poem mobilizes two registers of speech at once: a highly individualized language—an idiolect—emerging from a collective, idiomatic voice.

Indeed, Brooks rarely composes in colloquial language alone: “Hattie Scott” is her only poem entirely cast in that register (*Blacks* 51-55). The speaker in this five-poem sequence both thinks and talks in local speech to oppose the oppressive domestic locales she occupies. For example, Brooks makes use of everyday speech to express Hattie’s

defiance of the tyrannical woman she keeps house for. The sequence's second poem, "the date," is a litany of unspoken reactions to a boss who is callously indifferent to Hattie's time and personal life (52). Hattie can't respond aloud because she has to protect her livelihood, but if she can't say her replies, she can think them:

If she don't hurry up and let me out of here.
Keeps pilin' up stuff for me to do.
I ain't goin' to finish that ironin'.
She got another think comin'. Hey, you.
Watcha mean talkin' about cleanin' silver?
It's eight o'clock now, you fool.
I'm leavin'. Got somethin' interestin' on my mind.
Don't mean night school.

The colloquial language here is straightforward, but the individual sentences sound somewhat disjointed, too, especially when Hattie says "Hey, you" at the end of the fourth line and switches from "talkin' about" ironing to polishing in the next one. According to Bill V. Mullen, the rhyme of "you" with the second line's "do" sounds especially precipitous because the phrase "Hey, you" also represents a shift in the poem's diction: "Here, the vernacular is the source and symbol of an unabashed working-class talk-back encapsulated in the abrupt rhyme of the shouted 'Hey, you.' The break in poetic diction, its interruptive quality, liberates Brooks's/Hattie's torrential voice of resistance" (169). Mullen hears in this poem the "self-speaking and coherent" vernacular of "black . . . female proletarianization" redressing the menial work conditions created by capitalism's race, class, and gender stratifications (167-68).

“the date” does sound like “talk-back” even though Hattie doesn’t actually verbalize her retorts. But the poem is half of a script for two characters rather than just a collage of plainspoken answers. Hattie is not literally talking back to her boss but thinking back to her in lines that imply spoken orders that go unheard in the poem. In other words, Hattie is responding in her head (or perhaps under her breath) to something like “if you think you’re leaving without finishing that ironing and polishing the silver, you’ve got another thing coming” and “Hey, I’m talking to you” (as if the boss has mistaken Hattie’s silence for inattentiveness). Hattie’s present-tense replies indicate the boss’s “lines,” and she repels those condescending directives by defiantly repeating them while placing rhetorical stress on “ain’t goin’,” “She,” “think,” and “you”: “I ain’t goin’ to finish that ironin’. / She got another think comin’. Hey, you.” This is another “think” indeed. Hattie resists day-to-day reality by thinking in what sounds like a language for speaking, an effective method for poetic redress since the poem shuts out the boss’s imposing speaking voice just as Hattie would be well used to shutting out that voice as she works. “the date” counters the reality of Hattie’s onerous and demeaning workplace, for although only the boss speaks aloud in the actual scene, we hear just Hattie. An imbalance, then, has been corrected: the poem voices Hattie’s thoughts, and relegates her boss’s talking to the background. Brooks employs colloquial language here to demonstrate one’s capacity for defiance even when that defiance cannot be articulated out loud.

The last poem of the sequence, “the battle,” also confronts deleterious social conditions with idiomatic speech (*Blacks* 55). This time, the domestic sphere is located in

Hattie's own community, a close-knit neighborhood where news travels rapidly by word of mouth:

Moe Belle Jackson's husband
Whipped her good last night.
Her landlady told my ma they had
A knock-down-drag-out fight.

This opening stanza doesn't focus on the incident itself but rather presents gossip travelling from person to person: Hattie's mother tells Hattie a story about Moe Belle Jackson that she's heard from Moe Belle's landlady. Hattie relays Moe Belle's story in the same colloquial language that Hattie's mother and Moe Belle's landlady would presumably have used: Moe Belle's husband "Whipped her good"; the couple had "A knock-down-drag-out fight." In the poem's third and last stanza, we can hear the mixture of rumor, speculation, and judgment that characterizes gossip. Any sympathy Hattie might feel for Moe Belle is peppered with disdain for her complacency:

But if I know Moe Belle,
Most like, she shed a tear,
And this mornin' it was probably,
"More grits, dear?"

Hattie sarcastically concludes that Moe Belle perpetuates the abuse she endures since she capitulates to it: Moe Belle cries only "a tear" and "probably" even serves breakfast to her "dear" husband in the morning. Rhyme connects Moe Belle's "tear" to the speculation that she addresses her husband as "dear" the next morning and accentuates Hattie's sardonic, gossipy tone.

Brooks used gossip as a metaphor to explain to young writers that poetry should be convincing and realistic and that formal techniques could help the “wordage” of poems achieve that: “You must make your reader believe that what you say could be true. Think of your efforts to be convincing *and* entertaining when you are gossiping. You use gesture, touch, tone-variation, facial expression. Try persuading your wordage—SOMEHOW!—to do all the things your body does when forwarding a piece of gossip” (*Capsule 11*). In the middle stanza of “the battle,” that persuasive gesture is enjambment. The first line breaks unexpectedly:

I like to think
Of how I'd of took a knife
And slashed all of the quickenin'
Out of his lowly life.

If that break had been prompted by the poem's meter as the other line breaks are, the stanza would have been presented this way:

I like to think of how
I'd of took a knife
And slashed all of the quickening
Out of his lowly life.

Enjambment causes a subtle shift in rhythm as Hattie relays what her response to domestic violence would be (as opposed to what happened to Moe Belle last night and what she probably did this morning). The tone changes a bit as Hattie turns her attention away from Moe Belle and relays what she would do to Moe Belle's husband. In other words, the “wordage” is arranged to sound slightly fiercer than the stanzas that surround

it as Hattie imagines herself executing revenge. Further, the repetition of “of” four times in four lines is prosy and matter-of-fact while the glottal *k* in “like,” “think,” “took,” and “quickenin” sounds cutting by contrast. Hattie may be mildly disapproving of Moe’s acquiescence, but she severely condemns Moe’s husband. The battle of Moe Belle Jackson, then, is also the battle of Hattie Scott as Hattie envisions a violent alternative to Moe Belle’s resignation. Hattie, after all, “like[s] to think” of what she would do to Mr. Jackson. Brooks sets local language in the ballad form not just to forward a piece of gossip but to go to battle for Moe Belle.

Colloquial speech in “Hattie Scott” is a form for conceiving retribution at other levels, too. In the sequence’s third poem, “at the hairdresser’s,” Hattie instructs “Minnie” to fashion her hair in a new style that will show up the more glamorous women in her neighborhood:

Gimme an upsweep, Minnie,
With humpteen baby curls.
'Bout time I got some glamour.
I'll show them girls.

Think they so fly a-struttin'
With they wool a blowin' 'round.
Wait'll they see my upsweep.
That'll jop 'em back on the ground.

Got Madam C. J. Walker's first.

Got Poro Grower next.

Ain't not one of 'em worked with me, Min.

But I ain't vexed. (53)

Hattie isn't "vexed" that hair-straightening products won't work on her because she is resourceful enough to find alternatives. In fact, if she can't straighten her hair enough for it to blow in the wind, she'll do the opposite to it and "tie it up high with curls." Her diction is both conversational and elaborate: the "humpteen baby curls" of her "upsweep" will "jop" "them girls" "who think they so fly" and provide Hattie with recourse against the "angels" she depicts in the next poem as "waitin'" at her funeral to nab her "one lone little short man / Dressed all shabbily." The "high with curls" "upsweep" in this colloquial poem is itself a figure for elaboration. In fact, stylistic embellishment is a central poetic in Brooks. She often writes in diction that is emphatically non-colloquial, even when context or theme might lead us to expect that register.

Hattie Scott resists burdensome aspects of her social sphere in the colloquial language that she thinks to herself in and voices aloud. She rebuffs her employer's patronizing orders and fantasizes about avenging a victim of domestic violence. Her local language provides recourse from these oppressive circumstances. But her speech does more than this, too: it characterizes Hattie. Not only is she defiant and defensive; she is also observant ("It's usually from the insides of the door / That I takes my peak at the sun"), efficient ("No lollin' around the old work-place / But off, spite of somethin' to see"), sarcastic ("Don't mean night school"), disdainful ("Think they so fly a-struttin'"), friendly ("Ain't not one of 'em worked with me, Min"), self-deprecating ("'Bout time I got some glamour"), and mournfully ruminative ("No lodge with banners flappin' / Will

follow after me”). Her straightforward speech portrays her complex identity and asserts that identity against social conditions that would thwart her.

However, such use of vernacular for both portraiture and defiance is not at all typical of Brooks. In fact, few of her characters speak colloquially. For instance, the diction in two of her major poems, “The Anniad” and “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” is emphatically not colloquial (*Blacks* 99-109; 42-47). Unlike the resilient, down-to-earth Hattie Scott, “The Anniad”’s Annie Allen doesn’t rebuke outright those social forces that threaten her romantic illusions. Rather than responding to social circumstances with the directness of colloquial language, Annie—to borrow Stevens’s famous conception—“presses back” against her increasingly bleak reality with a magniloquent, excessive, and dexterous imagination (“Noble Rider” 1-36). Likewise, Satin-Legs Smith’s “shabby days” are also bleak. He finds reprieve on Sundays, just as “the soft man” does, but he doesn’t seek diversion from the hustling world of jazz clubs. Instead, Smith dons jazzy zoot suits temporarily to cast off impoverishment. The poem is not simply a portrait of ostentation in the face of deprivation, though. As Karen Jackson Ford indicates, it is “something of an *ars poetica*,” too, for throughout it questions poetic language while depicting the flamboyant, “meticulous,” and “serious” Smith (“Sonnets” 348). The poem’s speaker ruminates on the appropriate diction with which “to proceed” and “inspect” Smith’s Sunday endeavors. And yet we never hear Smith talk: it is as if the poem strategically resists Smith’s speech in its consideration of the available forms of poetic language.

The fact that Brooks doesn’t present Smith’s speech seems expressly strategic when the poem subtly gestures toward colloquiality. “The Sundays” portrays an urban black man who fends off the constraints of poverty by dressing in flashy suits, going to

the movies, and taking different women out on dates. It is mostly in blank verse with random rhymes, its stanza lengths ranging from a couplet to a twenty-line verse paragraph. The diction is also varied: it is comprised of lofty and peculiar vocabulary, sardonic narrative asides, romantic imagery, and plainspoken language that sounds especially intimate. But whereas the poem presents these forms of speech explicitly, it only hints at idiomatic language. For instance, the poem's opening suggests the phrase "fat cat" but that colloquialism is not employed to indicate that Smith acts like "an impressive, wealthy person"—the vernacular term's denotation ("fat cat" 52). Instead, the second stanza describes him as waking like "a cat" and as "fat / And fine this morning" (*Blacks* 42). Brooks suggests the speech register readers might expect of Smith; we might imagine him describing himself or one of his Bronzeville acquaintances as a "fat cat." But she breaks that nonstandard expression apart and reverses its order, separating its constituent parts—"fat" and "cat"—to put them to non-demotic use: Smith is compared to a cat stretching after waking and then described as physically large. The phrase, in other words, is carefully stylized to match Smith's primping. She dismantles the colloquialism and, in turn, dismantles expectations about Smith's speech.

In fact, the poem's first few stanzas are entirely comprised of especially ornamental diction that matches the ceremonial grandness of his Sunday ritual. The language that represents Smith is decidedly non-colloquial:

Inamoratas, with an approbation,
Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination.

He wakes, unwinds, elaborately: a cat

Tawny, reluctant, royal. He is fat
And fine this morning. Definite. Reimbursed.

He waits a moment, he designs his reign,
That no performance may be plain or vain.
Then rises in a clear delirium.

He sheds, with his pajamas, shabby days.
And his desertedness, his intricate fear, the
Postponed resentments and the prim precautions. (42)

The language “unwinds, elaborately” as it recounts the advent of Smith’s sobriquet, “Satin-Legs,” with eccentric words: Smith’s lovers are “Inamoratas” who have “bestowed” upon him the “title” Satin-Legs Smith in “approbation” of his stylistic “inclination.” It is, in other words, not at all plain or shabby, like Smith’s weekdays, but lavish. Smith himself is described in similarly idiosyncratic diction: he is “Tawny,” “reluctant,” and, finally, “royal,” “Definite,” and “Reimbursed.” Indeed, he plans his Sunday “reign” with the patience and meticulousness of a king. His regal grandness is not “plain or vain,” for his performance and the language used to describe it “Reimburse” him by offsetting the “desertedness,” “fear,” “resentments,” and “precautions” of his laborious daily life: the diction is exuberant not deserted, audacious instead of fearful, and innovative rather than cautious. As he approaches his bath, Smith—“fat / And fine”—seems not just to have delayed his resentments but eradicated them. Rhythm is as elaborate here as the words themselves: a single-syllable rhyme (“cat”/“fat”) follows a

four-syllable one (“approbation”/“inclination”) while consonance and alliteration produce an intricate aural pattern. The words form a web of *b*, *w*, *t*, *r*, and *f* sounds: “approbation,” “Bestowed,” “Blessed,” “elaborately,” “Reimbursed”; “wakes,” “unwinds”; “cat,” “Tawny,” “reluctant,” “fat,” “Definite”; “reluctant,” “royal,” “Reimbursed”; “fat,” “fine,” “Definite.” The implied colloquialisms (“fat cat,” “Satin-Legs”) and embellished, polysyllabic diction (“Inamoratas,” “approbation,” “Reimbursed,” “delirium”) combine to make an extravagant music that correlates to Smith’s exuberant style and presses back against the reality of his dreary weekdays.

Brooks suggests colloquialisms here, but she doesn’t explicitly utilize colloquial speech to characterize Smith the way she does to characterize Hattie Scott. Hattie’s vernacular locates her squarely in her community, and she employs that language to imagine direct responses to troublesome elements of her social domain. “The Sundays,” on the other hand, is not concerned with the capacity of colloquial language for direct redress; rather, the poem employs language that corresponds to Smith’s outlandish dress in order to examine the capacity of artifice and embellishment to resist dismal social conditions. Hattie manages the burdens of her world—a demeaning job, loneliness, an unfaithful partner, violence in the home—with an “upsweep” of idiomatic speech set in the folksy rhythms of a ballad. The poetry that describes Smith, on the other hand, is not folksy but set in ornate, randomly rhymed blank verse. For instance, his closet

is a vault

Whose glory is not diamonds, not pearls,

Not silver plate with just enough dull shine.

But wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,

Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt.

All drapes. With shoulder padding that is wide

And cocky and determined as his pride;

Ballooning pants that taper off to ends

Scheduled to choke precisely. (43)

The iambic pentameter, perfect rhymes (“shine”/“wine,” “wide”/“pride”), and alliteration (“wonder,” “wine,” “With,” “wide”; “pearls,” “plate,” “padding,” “pride,” “pants,” “precisely”) are as “precisely” “Scheduled” as Smith’s “Ballooning pants that taper off to ends.” The description of his “wonder-suits” as “Sarcastic green” emphasizes their unusual brightness and, like “cat” and “fat,” connects his flamboyant style to speech.

That the two instances of enjambment here occur when the poem describes the end of Smith’s shoulder line (the shoulder pads are “wide / And cocky”) and the ends of his pant legs (they “taper off to ends / Scheduled to choke”) stresses the correspondence between Smith’s extravagant dress and the poem’s rhetorical extravagance: the written lines are as tailored as his suit. Thus, elaboration is not just a theme but a central poetic in “Sundays.”

The poem matches Smith’s elaborate style—an “architectural” style marked by “neat curve[s],” “angularity,” and “technique.” Further, it adapts that style to render the details of Smith’s teeming neighborhood that “smear” and “are blurred”:

He hears and does not hear

The alarm clock meddling in somebody’s sleep;

Children’s governed Sunday happiness;

The dry tone of a plane; a woman’s oath;

Consumption’s spiritless expectoration;

An indignant robin's resolute donation
pinching a track through apathy and din;
Restaurant vendors weeping; and the L
That comes on like a slightly horrible thought. (45)

The language is as intricate as that used to describe Smith's suits: the rolling blank verse is comprised of distinctive diction—an alarm clock is “meddling,” overheard talk declares an “oath,” coughing produces the onomatopoeic “spiritless expectoration,” an “indignant,” “resolute” “robin” is “pinching a track through apathy and din.” The “L” refers to Chicago's elevated rapid transit system; the *l* sound of that colloquialism itself “comes on” in its repetition across the stanza's last line. The elaborateness here is not just a counterpart to Smith's showy style: it renders precisely the local world that Smith himself only barely registers. Brooks describes those aspects of the neighborhood that Smith “sees and does not see” and “hears and does not hear” with the same kind of uncommon diction that she employed to describe his waking, his bath, and his suits. From the beginning of her career, that local world was integral to Brooks's poetry because it was the raw material for her poems: “I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner [of 63rd Street in the “Bronzeville” neighborhood of Chicago's South Side], and I could look first on one side and then on the other. There was my material” (*Conversations* 15). In “The Sundays,” she devises a language to correspond to Smith's zoot-suit style and to depict that style's capacity to “Reimburse” Smith's “shabby days.” But that same language also serves a secondary purpose: she utilizes it to distinguish aural and visual details of the street—her raw material—that Smith overlooks.

The details that Smith doesn't perceive reveal the deprivation of his surroundings. He doesn't entirely hear and see these aspects, but Brooks devises a Satin-Legs-like poetic language both to relay those particulars and to pit elaborateness against deprivation. She observes

the broken windows

Hiding their shame with newsprint; little girl
With ribbons decking wornness, little boy
Wearing the trousers with the decentest patch,
To honor Sunday; women on their way
From "service," temperate holiness arranged
Able on asking faces; men estranged
From music and from wonder and from joy
But far familiar with the guiding awe
Of foodlessness. (45)

The dressed-up language opposes the deprivation it describes. Like the girl's "ribbons" and the boy's "patch," the stanza's alliterations ("windows," "with," "wornness," "wearing," "women," "way," "wonder"; "Sunday" and "service"; "from," "far," "familiar," "foodlessness"), exact and slant rhymes ("arranged"/"estranged"; "joy"/"awe"), and repetitions ("*From music and from wonder and from joy*") adorn the wornness of urban blight. The broken windows may be "Hiding their shame" with newsprint, but the little girl's frayed appearance is decked with ribbons, the little boy's patch mends a hole on his trousers, the women wear expressions of "temperate holiness," and hunger produces in the "estranged" men a "guiding awe." The people of Smith's

local world are dignified and reverent: the girl doesn't hide but decorates her dress; the boy finds trousers with "the decentest patch, / To honor Sunday"; the women skillfully moderate their anxieties (their faces are "asking") with calm, devout countenances; and the men contend in subdued consternation with the overwhelming forces of indigence. The stately blank verse communicates their dignity while the proliferation of enjambment adroitly tempers that stateliness: the lines flow conversationally without the dramatic pauses of end-stops.

That Brooks, on the one hand, employs Smith's style to render his local world and, on the other hand, portrays him as not entirely perceiving that world points up the poem's ambivalence about him. For example, the destitute men in Smith's community contrast with his extravagance, making him seem self-indulgent. The "estranged" men's "foodlessness" puts them far "From music and from wonder and from joy" while Smith wears wonder-suits, goes to the movies, and takes his date to "Joe's Eats" where he can enjoy "fish or chicken on meat platters. / With coleslaw, macaroni, candied sweets, / Coffee and apple pie" (45, 47). Brooks's readers don't always register this ambivalence and often view the poem as casting Smith in an entirely negative or entirely positive light. For example, Danielle Chapman argues that Brooks, "in her pure delight in Satin[-]Legs, . . . enables the character to come alive and exist independently of her own interests, her pathos, herself" (57). In contrast, for Joanne V. Gabbin, Smith is "in perverse oblivion of his oppression, . . . merely the walking dead" (255).⁵ Brooks's own comments about the poem affirm its ambiguity. When Claudia Tate asked her in 1983 about a perceived lack of "political awareness" in her earlier work, Brooks referred Tate back to "Sundays" but also revealed her own conflicted sense of the poem's political implications:

I try to picture in “The Sunday’s of Satin-Legs Smith” a young man who didn’t even know he was a tool for the establishment, who didn’t know his life was being run for him from birth straight to death, and even before birth. As I say in that poem: “Here are hats / Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties / Like narrow banners for some gathering war.” Now this book was published in ’45 and even then I could sense, although not brilliantly, not in great detail, that what was happening to us was going to make us erupt at some later time. (*Conversations* 106)

Here, Brooks regards Smith’s “hysterical ties” as a figure for political resistance, but she also insinuates that his penchant for baths, lotion, lavender, zoot suits, and women in equally ostentatious dress reveals him to be a mere “tool for the establishment.”⁶ Over a decade before her discussion with Tate, she had asserted less equivocally that elaborate style could provide a shield against racist social forces:

I called it hats “like bright umbrellas,” which implies that he is protecting himself under that fancy wideness [T]he zoot-suiters . . . were not only black men but Puerto Ricans, too, who would wear these suits with the wide shoulders, and the pants did balloon out and then come down to tapering ends, and they wore chains—perhaps you’ve seen them in the movies every once in a while. That’s the kind of person I was writing about in “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith.”

(*Conversations* 43)

If Smith is a “tool for the establishment,” he nevertheless understands that bright, wide, ballooning style could serve as armor against that same establishment.

Still, Smith's hat may be protective from the eruptions of others, but he never quite erupts himself. He "hears and does not hear" and, "as usual," "sees and does not see." He also, as I have been arguing, speaks and does not speak: he expresses himself with his embellished style of dress but we never hear his particular speech. His silence underscores his obstructed relationship to both the social world he doesn't fully see or hear and his own history:

The pasts of his ancestors lean against
Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.
Hundreds of hungers mingle with his own,
Hundreds of voices advise so dexterously
He quite considers his reactions his,
Judges he walks most powerfully alone,
That everything is—simply what it is. (46)

Smith assumes that his stylistic "inclination" sets him apart from his community, that his "reactions" are entirely individualistic, that "he walks most powerfully alone" even though he actually shares his "hungers" with "Hundreds." Idiomatic language is once again hinted at: "everything is—simply what it is" sounds like the oversimplifying colloquial phrase "it is what it is." By modifying it with the word "simply," Brooks emphasizes the phrase's propensity to evade complexity. The poem, however, doesn't simplify but adapts Smith's ostentatious style to convey the complex reality (it's smeared and blurred) that Smith can't entirely hear or see. He would like to regard himself as an island, but the twelve alliterating *h* sounds across the stanza's seven lines communicate the connectedness to his local world that he himself doesn't register; each refers either to

Smith or to his community: “his,” “Him,” “him,” “his,” “Hundreds,” “hungers,” “his,” “Hundreds,” “He,” “his,” “his,” “he.” Whether Smith senses it or not, everything is not simply what it is: alliteration depicts his identity mingling with his past, his ancestors, and his community.

The poem’s ornamental, magniloquent “Sunday” language depicts and matches Smith’s distinctiveness, and yet the fact that he himself never speaks in the poem renders that distinctiveness tentative. Even though the “ancestors” of the past “advise so dexterously,” Smith’s perspective on that past, and the social world around him that he doesn’t completely see or hear, is, tepidly, just that it is what it is. When he does come closest to speaking, Smith merely utters sounds rather than articulates verbal responses: his “yelp” on the front steps of the hotel he’s staying at is “secret,” and his reaction to the prohibitive images of white movie stars when he goes to the cinema is coarse: “movie-time” for him means, in the darkness of the theater, “time to boo / The hero’s kiss, and boo the heroine / Whose ivory and yellow it is sin / For his eye to eat of” (46). Yelping and booing seem rather indistinct utterances for such a “meticulous” man. Similarly, the embellished dress of the different women he “Squires” tends to “Fog out” their individuality:

His lady alters as to leg and eye,
Thickness and height, such minor points at these,
From Sunday to Sunday. (46)

The elaborately made-up women Smith “Squires” are indistinguishable from each other. And yet, in their “Queen-lace stockings,” they are as “positively” royal as Smith is:

But no matter what

Her name or body positively she's
In Queen Lace stockings with ambitious heels
That strain to kiss the calves, and vivid shoes
Frontless and backless, Chinese fingernails,
Earrings, three layers of lipstick, intense hat
Dripping with the most voluble of veils.
Her affable extremes are like sweet bombs
About him, whom no middle grace or good
Could gratify. (46-47)

Each woman looks like the next, even as each opposes “middle” ordinariness on her Sunday date with ambition, vividness, intensity, and extremity. That Smith's date's hat is “Dripping with the most voluble of veils” once again associates clothing with verbal expression and emphasizes the fact that we never hear her actual volubility either.

“The Sundays” implies that Smith perceives himself as standing apart from his community and his ancestry. But because it also utilizes Smith's very style to describe that community and his relation to his ancestry, it doesn't exactly admonish him for this. In fact, it more strictly reprimands the “you” that enters the poem in the fifth stanza. The direct address here is typically understood as Brooks addressing her white readers and calling out their judgmental expectations.⁷ The poem shifts to the second person as the speaker asks her auditor to consider the language employed to describe Smith:

Now, at his bath, would you deny him lavender
Or take away the power of his pine?
What smelly substitute, heady as wine,

Would you provide? life must be aromatic.

There must be scent, somehow there must be some.

Would you have flowers in his life? suggest

Asters? a Really Good geranium? (42)

The speaker is suspicious of her auditor's preconceptions. Why, we might ask, would "lavender" and "pine" require "substitutes"? Convention, the poem surmises, demands "headier" images, not a poor man's inexpensive oils and colognes. The poem disavows parallel assumptions about the appropriate language for poetry. Smith's "wonder-suits" are, in fact, "in yellow and in wine," not because "wine" is heady but because "wine" renders precisely the color of some of his zoot suits. Brooks slyly rebukes the "you" she addresses because her auditor's inclination to devise substitutes would "deny" and "take away" Smith's "power." When she asks what kind of flowers would be appropriate to envision in Smith's room, the conversational "Really Good" that modifies "geranium" is sarcastic, the capitalization of that descriptor emphasizing its vacuity and the vacuity of including an image simply because it is a flower—the g sounds in "Good" and "geranium" don't even alliterate. The speaker asserts that poetry and life must correspond—"There must be scent, somehow there must be some," she insists—and that correspondence must be attained with images from the life that the poem depicts. If "life must be aromatic," poems must be as well, but they must include the aromas of the world they respond to; therefore, "you might as well / Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil" because those are the actual materials of Smith's world.

Brooks's argument here that the poem should include the content of Smith's bathroom and closet correlates to Heaney's notion that a redressing poem "should not

simplify . . . [but] be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated” (*Redress* 8). She not only includes images from Smith’s world but places them in opposition to more conventionally poetic images, which she flatly refuses: at the thought of including a geranium, carnation, poinsettia, or rose, she exclaims,

No! He has not a flower to his name.
Except a feather one, for his lapel.
Apart from that, if he should think of flowers
It is in terms of dandelions or death.
Ah, there is little hope. You might as well—
Unless you care to set the world a-boil
And do a lot of equalizing things,
Remove a little ermine, say, from kings,
Shake hands with paupers and appoint them men,
For instance—certainly you might as well
Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil. (43)

There may be “little hope,” but there is hope nonetheless. Indeed, the poem itself does “a lot of equalizing things”: it refuses to substitute Smith’s “lotion, lavender, and oil,” his “feather” flower (unlike “Good” and “geranium,” “feather” and “flowers” alliterates), his “heritage of cabbage and pigtailed,” his “intimacy with alleys, garbage pails” with more decorous images and instead employs those realistic figures to compose intricately patterned blank verse. In other words, the poem presents Smith’s Sunday style as an alternative to bleak reality in poetic language that renders Smith’s dress and past as alternatives themselves to vapid poetic conventions. Another way of saying this is that

Brooks adds “a little ermine” to Smith by matching his extravagant style with an equally extravagant poetic language, a language that obtains its extravagance from the real images of Smith’s world—after all, the poem opens by comparing Smith to a king. As we have seen, Heaney similarly describes his concept of poetic redress in terms of envisioning alternatives: poems that redress provide a “glimpsed alternative,” “a revelation of potential” that, though “constantly threatened by circumstances, . . . remains as a standard for the poet, so that he or she must then submit to the strain of bearing witness in his or her own life to the plane of consciousness established in the poem” (4). The “plane of consciousness” in “The Sundays” is what Ford calls Smith’s “zoot-suit aesthetic” (“Sonnets” 149). Brooks bears witness to her local world from that plane, envisioning an alternative that could “set the [larger] world a-boil” by “appointing” Bronzeville as the raw material for an especially opulent poetry.

In “The Sundays,” then, Brooks explicitly defies conventional expectations about poetic language. She also more subtly refuses assumptions about black poetry when she implies Smith’s vernacular in the title (“Satin-Legs”) and in various instances throughout the poem: “cat” and “fat,” “Sarcastic green,” “everything is—simply what it is.” As I have been arguing, the poem implies colloquial language while the diction throughout is emphatically non-colloquial. And yet the diction isn’t particularly formal or standard, either. In what context would words and phrases like “inamoratas,” “clear delirium,” “blithest,” “gold impulse,” “expectoration,” “pinching a track,” “estranged from music,” “piquant,” “sweet bombs,” “intrepid” (and a host of others) be considered standard? Brooks strategically suggests vernacular in an exaggeratedly uncommon lexical environment to subvert the expectation that a poem about a black man in an urban ghetto

would inevitably employ that vernacular. Instead, she invents an intricate poetic language in unordinary diction—her own “baroque, / Rococo” style—in order to distinguish Smith’s Sundays from his everyday life and to depict the complex reality of his local world (44). That Brooks wrote the poem in response to Richard Wright’s suggestion that she include in *A Street in Bronzeville* “one really long fine poem around which shorter ones are added or grouped” that would strike “a personal note and carr[y] a good burden of personal feeling” suggests that the poem epitomized for Brooks her own personal poetic: Wright seemed to be looking for something of an *ars poetica*, and “The Sundays” was Brooks’s response to his request (qtd. in Kent 63). Part of her poetic was to resist expectations.

Even when the poem names the titles of blues songs—“The Lonesome Blues, the Long-lost Blues, I Want A / Big Fat Mama”—it does so not only to contrast those colloquial titles with the names of European classical composers but to evoke the blues itself as a form for resistance. Despite the “piquant” elusiveness of Grieg, the “wayward eloquence” of Tchaikovsky, and “the shapely tender drift of Brahms,” theirs is not fitting music for the “sore avenues” of Smith’s ghetto (45-46). Instead, blues is more appropriate because it would more accurately convey Smith’s childhood experiences, his “forgotten hate,” his father’s lost dream, the memory of his sister turning to prostitution, and the general malaise and monotony of daily deprivation. The blues is a suitable figure for black vernacular and black aesthetic expression here precisely because it depicts black individuals contending with oppressive social conditions: “The music is distinguished thematically and philosophically by its posture of direct confrontation with the melancholy psychological state also called blues that is produced by unfortunate circumstances of lost love or unjust circumstances of racism and poverty” (“Blues” 151).

Further, the blues extends individual psychology out to the community, just as “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” moves from portraying Smith’s elaborateness to portraying his local world and the children, women, and men who live there: “the blues fosters the creation of a distinctive [African American] communal culture as a bulwark against social oppression and existential angst” (151). These fortifying aspects of the blues are like Brooks’s own description of Smith’s “protective” hat.

The poem’s juxtaposition of references to European classical composers and references to the folksy titles of blues songs also corresponds to Henry Louis Gates’s notion of “black difference” and his sense that black writers “signify” black vernacular in order to stand apart from the Western tradition:

black writers, both explicitly and implicitly, turn to the vernacular in various formal ways to inform their creation of written fictions. To do so . . . is to ground one’s literary practice outside the Western tradition. Whereas black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so “authentically,” with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular. (xxii)

But just as black vernacular indicates black difference from Western tradition, it also locates black writers in that tradition:

Black writers . . . learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts. These black texts employ many of the conventions of litera[r]y form that comprise the Western tradition. Black literature shares much with, far more than it differs from, the Western textual tradition, primarily as registered in English,

Spanish, Portuguese, and French. But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source—and the reflection—of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition. (xxii-xxiii)

In “The Sundays,” Brooks’s “specific language use” is her elaborate diction that matches Smith’s style and his speech. She doesn’t simply present Smith’s colloquial voice but, once again to borrow Heaney’s terms, “adds a complication where the general desire is for a simplification” (3). Part of that complication is the elaborately uncommon diction sustained throughout the poem.

That “The Sundays” suggests black vernacular in emphatically non-colloquial language is not, as we have seen, its only complication. Brooks defies conventions and expectations about poetic language, but she is also characteristically ambivalent about the poem’s relationship to traditional form. “The Sundays” is composed of an expertly calibrated blank verse, just one of the many traditional forms that Brooks mastered and innovated throughout her career. And yet when the poet sardonically asks her auditor (“you muse,” she needles) if “A bit of gentle garden in the best / Of taste and straight tradition” will provide “his happiest / Alternative,” she answers her own question equivocally: “Maybe so” (43). Indeed, Brooks’s entire career is marked by such equivocation. Although the legend of her 1967 radicalization misleadingly invites us to demarcate her pre- and post-67 work as traditional before that year and freed from tradition after it, the poetry tells a different story. In 1967, Brooks did in fact attend the Second Fisk Writers’ Conference where she encountered a new political black poetry that was written in a direct, urgent free verse. At Fisk, she began a profound political

“transformation” that would be “felt in all aspects of her life—personal, public, and poetic—as she made new friendships and professional alliances, began publishing with black presses, and worked indefatigably to encourage and support young black writers” (Ford, “Sonnets” 346). Brooks herself perpetuates the notion that her work can be sharply divided by its formal differences before and after Fisk when she explains that Black Arts poets taught her that traditional forms were white forms that she should do away with: “The word went down: we must chase out Western measures, rules, models” (*Capsule* 5). But she just as often contradicts these eschewals of literary tradition in her poetry and in interviews. For instance, in 1969 she told George Stavros that “there are things colloquial and contemporary that can be done with the sonnet form,” and as late as 1977 she regarded the ballad form as appropriate for a new, immediate, and accessible poetry that she was still trying to write and define (*Conversations* 45, 88). Ford helps us understand that Brooks’s poetry is not traditional before 1967 and revolutionarily free after that year. Instead, her poetry is consistently engaged with questions about poetic form and its relationship to political and social reality, a unifying rather than divisive aspect of her work: “what unites rather than divides Brooks’s poetic career is precisely . . . an anxiety about form, a persistent question about the appropriateness of art in political and social struggle, and consequently, a suspicion of elaborate artifice. And yet this anxiety and suspicion continually run up against her equally tenacious confidence in (and inclination toward) a highly wrought and self-conscious style” (348). “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” is Brooks’s poetic depiction of this anxiety and suspicion running up against her own “highly wrought” style. It is a style marked, in part, by especially unordinary diction,

a complex style that Brooks devised her own elaborate term for: “Gwendolynian” (*Conversations* 68).

Many of the poems in Brooks’s second book, *Annie Allen* (1950), are considerably more “highly wrought” than “The Sundays.”⁸ For instance, “The Anniad”’s reverberating tetrameter septets portray its hero in even more uncommon diction than Satin-Legs Smith’s zoot-suit language. “The Anniad” dramatizes the dissolution of a young girl’s romantic ideals as she grows up and confronts both her own dreams and deleterious social forces that make them illusions. Annie’s unordinary speech in the “Childhood and Girlhood” poems leading up to “The Anniad” characterizes her as a flighty and precocious child: “How pinchy is my room!,” she complains, “how can I breathe! / I am not anything and I have got / Not anything, or anything to do!” (*Blacks* 83). For all her naïve hauteur, she is a sophisticated thinker. She senses larger meanings in everyday life and discerns the limitations of convention even if she can’t yet articulate them: “Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother / There was somewhat of something other / And whether it was veils and God / And whistling ghosts to go unshod / . . . She did not know; but tried to tell” (84). In “do not be afraid of no,” she examines abstractly the implications of resistance and capitulation: Annie is uncomfortable with saying “no” but also senses that “To say yes is to die / A lot or a little” (92-93). And yet the poem does not condone or endorse either refusal or acquiescence. Instead, it suggests something of Keats’s “negative capability,” his famous idea that literary achievement is attainable when the writer “is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (261). Young Annie, it would seem, shares Keats’s instincts about the value of uncertainty for a daring imagination: “It is brave to be

involved, / To be not fearful to be unresolved. // Her new wish was to smile / When answers took no airships, walked awhile.” Annie does not confront social conditions in the same way that Hattie Scott does. Rather than responding to her circumstances in a straightforward idiom, she presses back against her worsening reality with her ornate, enigmatic imagination. That imagination is conveyed in an oblique and grandiloquent idiolect.

Language in *Annie Allen* is at its most idiosyncratic in “The Anniad,” the middle section of the book that separates the eleven “Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood” poems and the fifteen poems that comprise “The Womanhood.” In forty-three tetrameter septets, each with three variously patterned, mostly exact rhymes, “The Anniad” intricately depicts Annie’s idealizing, romantic imagination as it encounters the constraining realities of sexism, war, racism, betrayal, sickness, death, parenthood, and solitude. As Melhem has observed, the stanzas of “The Anniad” are set in a variation of rhyme royal, traditionally seven pentameter lines rhyming *ababbcc* (63). Brooks alters that form with shorter, four-syllable lines, a looser rhyme scheme, and a mostly trochaic pattern with each line ending with a stressed syllable:

/ x / x / x /
Think of | sweet and | choco|late *A*

/ x / x / x /
Left to | folly | or to | fate, *B*

/ x / x / x /
Whom the | higher | gods for|got, *A*

/ x / x / x /
Whom the | lower | gods be|rate; *B*

/ x / x / x /
Physi|cal and | under| fed *C*

/ x / x / x /
 Fanc|ying | on the | feather| bed C

/ x / x / x /
 What is | never | and is | not. (99) A

The short lines framed by heavy stresses generate an insistent rhythm while the rhyming end-stops create a resounding, persistent pattern.

Despite this overarching lyric structure, scholars invariably ask if the poem, whose title alludes to Homer's *The Iliad* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*, can be considered an epic.⁹ True, the poem narrates the story of a single person from beginning to end and—since “The Anniad” constitutes the middle section of *Annie Allen*—evokes the epic convention *in medias res*. But the poem is only loosely linked to epic: it is composed of uniform stanzas, moves in a linear fashion, and produces a repeating, incantatory melody (“Epic” 440-42; “Oral Poetry” 978). Thus, most scholars conclude that “The Anniad” alludes to Homer and Virgil not because Brooks set out to write a proper epic but for satirical purposes, and thus the poem is, such assessments deduce, a mock epic.¹⁰ For example, Claudia Tate argues that “The Anniad” “relies on mock-heroic conventions in order to underscore the gravity of [Brooks’s] criticism of Annie’s adult life” and that the poems in *Annie Allen* in general adapt conventional verse forms in order to communicate Brooks’s disdain for Annie: “we frequently find that Brooks seems to be ridiculing aspects of Annie’s life” with “conventional, formal, [mock-heroic] satirical techniques for expressing her attitude toward her subject” (142). Brooks, Tate assumes, is reluctant to criticize Annie or the other characters in her life outright, so she employs traditional verse forms to advance that criticism implicitly. Thus, Tate locates a conflict in the *Annie Allen* poems between what she calls “satirical format” and “content” about a poor African American girl in a society that discounts her (142). Tate reads “Maxie Allen” (*Blacks* 84-

| | |
|--|----------|
| x / x / x / x / (x) For ear to hear the hav en't any, | <i>D</i> |
| x / x / x / x / For arm to toss, for leg to chance, | <i>E</i> |
| x / x / x / x / For heart to hank er for romance. | <i>E</i> |

The shift in the third line to an iambic pattern signals that a rote lesson has begun: the rhythm established after “stipendiary little daughter” sounds more mechanical than the first two lines. This is not light verse condemning Maxie but a “Gwendolynian” combination of uncommon diction (“Stipendiary”) and images from Maxie and Annie’s real world (“Quaker Oats,” “Cream-of-Wheat,” a “penny”). The arrangement of this diction and these images in swift, rhyming lines replete with alliteration (“Lord,” “lucky,” “let”; “Quaker,” “Cream”; “tongue,” “tantrum”; “hear,” “haven’t,” “heart,” “hanker”) creates intricate sound effects and a routine rhythm that conveys both Annie’s distinctiveness (“Stipendiary” is no ordinary adjective) and the Allen’s commonplace world where stipends are spent frugally on oatmeal and a child’s request for a penny has to be declined.

“Maxie Allen,” then, doesn’t depict a conflict between content and form to indicate the speaker’s contempt but employs traditional form to set Annie’s unordinary, fanciful, “Stipendiary” imagination against her ordinary, “Quaker Oats and Cream-of-Wheat” home. The conflict the poem depicts is between mother and daughter rather than between speaker and subject. Its first stanza presents Maxie’s motherly instructions about being grateful in the rhythms of a nursery rhyme, a form for an adult to address a child. Brooks utilizes the nursery rhyme form to draw out the tension between Annie’s elaborate but naïve imagination and her mother’s seasoned practicality. In the second

stanza, the child assumes the adult role of instructor as Annie “trie[s] to teach her mother / There was somewhat of something other” than gratitude for life’s meanest necessities, even though she can’t quite describe that “somewhat of something other.” Maxie is well aware of Annie’s lack of experience and her pompous obliviousness:

Her mother thought at her full well,

In inner voice not like a bell

(Which though not social has a ring

Akin to wrought bedevilling)

But like an oceanic thing:

What do you guess I am?

You’ve lots of jacks and strawberry jam.

And you don’t have to go to bed, I remark,

With two dill pickles in the dark,

Nor prop what hardly calls you honey

And gives you only a little money.

The diction here—Maxie’s diction—is as peculiar as that used to describe Annie: Maxie’s “inner voice” is “Akin to wrought bedevelling” and “oceanic.” She asserts her experience against Annie’s youthful ignorance. The iambic rhythm temporarily halts when Maxie “thinks” at Annie in the shortest line of the poem: “What do you guess I am?” Not only does Maxie take back the role of teacher from Annie here, but she takes over the poem as well. The stanza’s indented lines indicate Maxie’s thoughts, and yet when the poem flushes left again, Maxie is still thinking: “And you don’t have to go to bed, I remark” (the poem’s longest line). The poem is not disdainful toward Maxie; on the contrary,

these last lines bring her inner voice forward to contrast her wealth of hard-earned experience and Annie's inexperience. Not doggerel at all, "Maxie Allen" imparts commonplace lessons, asserts resistance, and promotes individuality.

Brooks is not disdainful of Maxie or Annie, nor is "The Anniad" a mock epic in which "commonplace characters and events have been elevated in a ceremonious manner by using lofty diction and complicated techniques" (Tate 149). Rather, like Annie does at a relative's wake in the fifth "Notes" poem (88), Brooks sticks out her "Gwendolynian" tongue to portray Annie's magniloquent and dexterous imagination as it persists against an increasingly desolate reality.¹¹ Despite her poor surroundings, Annie dreams of romance and mitigates feelings of anger by applying make-up and styling her hair:

Watching for the paladin
Which no woman ever had,
Paradisaical and sad
With a dimple in his chin
And the mountains in the mind;
Ruralist and rather bad,
Cosmopolitan and kind.

Think of thaumaturgic lass
Looking in her looking-glass
At the unembroidered brown;
Printing bastard roses there;
Then emotionally aware

Of the black and boisterous hair,

Taming all that anger down. (99-100)

Annie's imagination is "thaumaturgic." Not only is the term polysyllabic and highly unusual, it denotes that which "works, or has the power of working, miracles or marvels; wonder-working" ("thaumaturgic"). This uncommon word, elaborate in both sound and sense, correlates more to Satin-Legs Smith's extravagant "wonder-suits" and the corresponding language that Brooks devises in that poem to match Smith's style than to Annie's "flat" deference and silence (Tate 147).¹² Further, the poem doesn't, as Tate claims, contrast Annie and the suitor she imagines. Rather, the diction that describes the "unembroidered" Annie is as embroidered and "boisterous" as that used to describe Annie's dream mate: she imagines, after all, a "paladin" who is "Paradisiacal," "Ruralist," and "Cosmopolitan" while she is described as "Physical and underfed" but also "Fancying" about "Western clouds and quarter-stars, / Fairy-sweet of old guitars" with "All her harvest buttoned in / All her ornaments untried," "Printing bastard roses" on her cheeks. Rather than contrasting the imagined paladin's expansive emotional and intellectual capacities with Annie's inert passivity (Tate 147), "The Anniad" presents Annie and her imagination as indivisible: the language that describes her and the language that describes her imaginings are of the same register.

"The Anniad" doesn't contrast Annie and her imagined suitor but fuses "What is never" and "What is ever." "What is never and is not" is the idealized "paladin": he is, after all, a lover "Which no woman ever had." "What is ever and is not" is Annie's abundant, romantic imagination that is capable of dreaming up a heroic figure even as "the higher gods" have forgotten her and "the lower gods berate" her. Annie is an African

American girl discounted by an intensely racist society; her own local community reproaches her inclination to unproductive, impractical dreaming. And yet her thaumaturgy produces a dynamic figure who can be at once “Paradisiacal and sad,” who has a childlike “dimple in his chin” and yet “mountains” in his mind, who is “Ruralist” on the one hand and urbane on the other; and who is both alluringly “bad” and “kind.” The figure Annie thinks up is not real, and yet the imagination that conceives that figure is real.

This formulation of the imagination as a version or aspect of reality calls up, as I have been suggesting, Stevens’ relation of imagination and reality to the very nature of poetry: “It [the nature of poetry] is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals” (27). Stevens complicates his idea about this interdependence by merging these concepts with each other and with “society”: “Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality, that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable” (28). The context here is Stevens’ argument that a poet does not have intrinsic social obligations. The implication, however, is that poetry’s combination of imagination and reality, and its enactment of the imagination resisting “the pressure of reality,” inevitably relates poetry to society: for Stevens, the imagination and society are, after all, “inseparable.” Heaney’s notion of poetic redress amounts to a similar estimation about poetry’s relation to society, though in less abstract terms: he differentiates between a poetry that is “an applied art, harnessed to movements which attempt to alleviate those conditions by direct action” and a poetry of “metaphysical force” that represents “an imagined response to conditions in the world” and that ultimately provides “a glimpsed alternative” (2-4). The former risks becoming “programmatically” while the latter promises

“vivid experience” (2). Brooks herself links the individual poetic imagination directly to society even when that imagination is operating at a distinctively private level: “The poet, first and foremost an individual with *a* personal vision, is also a member of society. What affects society affects a poet. So I, starting out, *usually* in the grip of a high and private suffusion, may find by the time I have arrived at a last line that there is quite some public clamor in my product” (*Conversations* 19). “The Anniad” does not position Annie’s inertness against a superior ideal but sets a “Gwendolynian” language against reality. Brooks’s idiosyncratic, elaborate diction in highly controlled septets conveys Annie’s flourishing, illusionary, skillful, precocious, individualistic imagination and enacts her “emotionally aware” capacity to glimpse an alternative to deprivation.

Scholars who have perceived “The Anniad” as an epic rather than a mock epic obtain a clearer view of the poem’s depiction of Annie because they do not view the poem as ridiculing or satirizing her. Evie Shockley explains that critics mistake the unordinary diction of “The Anniad” as satirical because they view the poem through a Black Arts lens even though that movement would not coalesce for many years.¹³ The Black Arts Movement prescribed free verse and black vernacular as essential qualities of black poetry, so a poem like “The Anniad,” Shockley concludes, would sound by BAM standards like it was ironically mocking Annie or, as Don Lee put it in 1972, like it was “written for whites” because it “requires unusual concentrated study” (*Report* 17). Shockley defends “The Anniad” as a black poem by emphasizing that it is not a Black Arts poem: “Brooks, when she wove her soaring, sparkling lexicon into ‘The Anniad,’ was not writing within the BAM or post-BAM context and, by extension, was not flouting a consensus or even a widely circulating opinion that the African American poet

should write her work specifically to—and, thus, in the common discourse of—the vast majority of African American people” (39). Shockley argues that in order to understand the black aesthetic at work in “The Anniad” the poem must be read as a “legitimate epic” because its black aesthetic is its very adaptation of that grand genre to tell a narrative about an everyday, working-class African American girl. She locates the poem’s black aesthetic in the fact that it portrays a poor black girl’s plight as a heroic quest a decade before the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1960s. Shockley here is defining Brooks’s pre-Black Arts “black aesthetic” as an innovative combination of traditional form and elaborate diction to tell the stories of poor African Americans and therefore question assumptions about the appropriate subjects for traditional poetic forms.¹⁴ But she also appears to be disallowing the notion that Brooks, before the Black Arts Movement, could also be writing against the misconception that local language in black poetry is necessarily black vernacular.

True, reading the poem as an epic rather than a mock epic deters us from reading it as satirizing or ridiculing Annie. But while “The Anniad” certainly invokes epic conventions (in its title, its references to gods, its incantatory lines), it just as readily utilizes mock epic elements, too: its setting is domestic, it presents a narrative of everyday life in a grandiose fashion, and its hero is humble. Moreover, the poem employs traditional forms other than epic or mock epic. For instance, it has features of a ballad: its form is rhythmic and memorable, its stanzas repeated, and its characters representative (“thaumaturgic lass,” “tan man,” “Doomer,” “bacchanalian lass.”).¹⁵ In fact, “The Anniad” is not an epic, a mock epic, or a ballad but a lyric narrative poem in a variation of rhyme royal that alludes to these poetic traditions in a language that corresponds to its hero’s

distinctive imagination.¹⁶ To read the poem as either an epic or a mock epic is to risk misconstruing how its language operates: “The Anniad” doesn’t employ its curious diction to mock Annie or to match grand epic objectives. Rather, it fashions an idiolect to depict a formidable imagination as it presses back against the pressure of reality.

When scholars consider “The Anniad”’s diction, they often do so by classifying it as especially formal rather than simple or, by implication, colloquial: it is “erudite” (Tate 149), “archaic” (Goodman 166), “exalted” (Jimoh 178). Such diction is then deemed either to be ironic (the words are lofty and grand, yet they describe poor black people during a time of institutionalized racial segregation) or to be amplifying Annie’s futile romantic illusions (the words are, like Annie’s ideals, detached from day-to-day reality). Lee, as we have seen, implied that the language of “The Anniad” was “white” because of this formality (*Report* 17). Shockley points out that readers tend to hear irony in an African American poem when they don’t hear “ordinary speech”: this is “manifest in readings of the poem as a mock-epic that explicitly or implicitly turn on the claim that Brooks’s language is *too* ‘deliberately distanced from [the] ordinary speech’ of most African Americans to be anything but satirical as a vehicle for an ‘ordinary’ young African American woman’s story” (39).¹⁷ So ingrained is this expectation for ordinary speech in African American poetry that some scholars do hear black vernacular in “The Anniad.” For instance, Houston A. Baker considers the poem a Frostian mixture of colloquial speech patterns and psychology: “while Brooks employs polysyllabics and forces words into striking combinations, she preserves colloquial rhythms. Repeatedly one is confronted by a realistic voice—not unlike that in Robert Frost’s poetry—that carries one along the dim corridors of the human psyche or down the rancid halls of a decaying

tenement. Brooks's colloquial narrative voice, however, is more prone to complex juxtapositions than Frost's" (25-26). Hortense J. Spillers reads the phrase "bad honey" that describes tan man's mistresses as an example of the poem's specific use of colloquial language. For Spillers, the other non-colloquial terms that also describe tan man's girlfriends emphasize that colloquialism by contrast: "'Bad' honey is the best kind in colloquial parlance, 'bad' having appropriated its antonym, and in the midst of 'vinaigrettes' and 'bacchanalian lasses,' it is a sharp surprise" (124).

And yet "The Anniad"'s diction is not colloquial, nor is it adequately described as "erudite," "archaic," or "exalted." Rather than erudite, it is recondite—an uncommon, embellished, eccentric, innovative combination of polysyllabic words that would be unusual in any context ("paladin," "Paradisiacal," "thaumaturgic," "theopathy," "Doomer," "hecatombs," "bijouterie," "Appoggiatura," "Hyacinthine"), equally idiosyncratic made-up words and constructions ("rompabout," "demi-gloom," "Oilily," "children-dear," "magics," "ribbonize," "satinly"), everyday words in unusual syntax that refer to Annie's commonplace world ("Now she folds his rust and cough / in the pity old and staunch"; "Telephone hoists her stomach to the air"; "Who is starch or who is stone / Washes coffee-cups and hair/ Sweeps, determines what to wear"), and peculiar phrasing that renders ordinary actions extraordinary (Annie "Printing bastard roses" is Annie applying blush; "Hieroglyphics of her eyes" conveys Annie's anxiety for her conscripted husband; "a green / Moist sweet breath for mezzanine" indicates that tan man is in the hospital with a respiratory infection; the "Meteors" that "encircle her" are Annie's potential lovers). Even the instance of archaic language ("Take such rubies as ye list") and the references to literature (Shakespearean "Pucks and cupids," a catalog of classical

figures from Plato to Dionysius) communicate not the pursuit of formal learning but a romantic mind looking to English and Greek classics for “solace” and for “kisses pressed in books.” This is not standard, formal, or white diction employed to mock Annie, nor is it diction that flamboyantly accentuates the absurdity of Annie’s romantic illusions. Rather, this is a complex idiolect in intricate septets that matches Annie’s romantic, precocious imagination and her capacity to deploy that imagination to resist a worsening reality.

If the elaborate diction of “The Anniad” is meant to convey Annie’s romantic imagination as it is defeated by an increasingly bleak social reality, couldn’t we expect some change in that diction as her imminent defeat nears? Further, if the diction represents Annie’s romantic impulses and the destruction of those impulses by tan man, war, tan man’s mistresses, death, and loneliness, might we not also anticipate that the language meant to convey Annie’s romantic conceptions and that used to refer to those deleterious forces would be set at different, perhaps even oppositional registers? “The Anniad” presents a wholly consistent poetic language to describe Annie, her early fantasies, her speech, tan man, the war, tan man’s girlfriends, and Annie’s crisis and endurance. The language of the poem is all of a piece—in diction, meter, tone, stanza length, number of rhymes per stanza—throughout its 301 lines, regardless of what those lines are describing. That this includes Annie’s early imaginings (which the poem is thought to be so critical of) and her quoted speech signifies that even though the poem is a third-person narrative, the language throughout represents Annie’s mind.

Annie's quoted speech is as idiosyncratic as the words used by the narrator to tell Annie's story. For example, when tan man is drafted, just as she has become comfortable in their new apartment, Annie responds to his loss in the poem's characteristic language:

Vaunting hands are now devoid.

Hieroglyphics of her eyes

Blink upon a paradise

Paralyzed and paranoid.

But idea and body too

Clamor "Skirmishes can do.

Then he will come back to you." (102)

Annie is "devoid," "Paralyzed," and made "paranoid" by the anxiety of seeing her husband off to war. And yet the language is not devoid or paralyzed but rather as elaborate and enlivened as the rest of the poem. The consonance of "Vaunting" and "devoid," the three first-syllable rhymes of the alliterating "paradise / Paralyzed and paranoid," and the stanza's three perfect rhymes ("devoid"/"paranoid," "eyes"/"paradise," "too"/"do"/"you") convey Annie's "Vaunting" imaginative capacities, which are intact here and remain so throughout the poem. What's more, Annie's eyes are figured as "Hieroglyphics" because of the shapes they make as she stares and blinks, but the metaphor also suggests that they signify, like a written mark, more than just their physical characteristics. Annie is, in fact, like a hieroglyphic, a bit hard to read: she is worried about tan man, but she also envisions "a paradise" that they may return to when he eventually comes home. She thinks to herself in language that is set off from the narrator's language by quotation marks, but her description of war is just as idiosyncratic

as the narrator's description of, say, Annie's desire for her husband as "a hot theopathy." Annie conceives of the war as "Skirmishes" that will end soon and not necessarily tragically. Marshalling eccentric language to minimize the war, she counters her paralysis and ruminates upon what life will be like when he returns. Her imaginative ability to reduce the war is a way to bear it.

Downplaying the war as "Skirmishes" that "can do" before tan man returns is not Annie's only method of survival. For example, she idealistically puts tan man in a "heaven," describing the cap of his military uniform as a "godhead" that "glitters now / Cavalierly on his brow." When tan man moves Annie into an apartment that is even shabbier than the "dusted demi-gloom" of her parent's home, her imagination is not hampered by disappointment but persists against it. She adjusts her perception of their new home:

Which she makes a chapel of.
Where she genuflects to love.
All the prayerbooks in her eyes
Open soft as sacrifice
Or the dolour of a dove.
Tender candles ray by ray
Warm and gratify the gray. (101)

Tan man's "pocket chooses" a "lowly room" because it is all he can afford, but this description counters that lowliness: Annie has turned the room into a chapel. The couple may lack dollars, but Annie offsets their grim financial situation with the spiritual "dolour of a dove," a traditional Christian figure for the Holy Spirit. Annie's elaborate

imagination turns a gray, bleak kitchenette into an austere, solemn, candlelit sanctum just as she filled her head with “Western clouds and quarter-stars” and the “Fairy-sweet of old guitars” as she lay on the featherbed of her “underfed” childhood.

Annie denies impoverishment by imagining a tenement apartment as a chapel where sex is as sacred as genuflection. Her abundant imagination decorates her new “lowly room” with stately opulence:

Silver flowers fill the eves
Of the metamorphosis.
And her set excess believes
Incorruptibly that no
Silver has to gape or go,
Deviate to underglow,
Sicken off to hit-or-miss.

When Annie and tan man marry, Annie’s imagination transforms their dreary apartment into a warm and gratifying one. Her “Silver flowers” are more permanent than actual silver, which would eventually tarnish and which she’d wind up having to sell anyway. Her imaginative silver, on the other hand, is not subject to “go” or “underglow” but is “set.” Indeed, she consistently employs her “set excess” of incorruptible imaginative capacities throughout “The Anniad” to envision alternatives to reality: she can, after all, turn a soldier’s cap into a godhead, a tenement into a sanctuary, sex into an act of spiritual devotion. Annie pits her imagination directly against the pressure of reality by, to use terms from the poem, gilding that reality (Annie’s shyness is a “gilt humility”),

bejeweling it (tan man's cap is a "bejeweled diadem"), warming it (the candles she lights in her new apartment "Warm and gratify the gray").

That Annie considers an event as monumentally cataclysmic as World War II to be a mere skirmish contradicts Shockley's understanding that "the coming of war—the gold standard of excesses—manages to tear down her defenses" (46). In fact, if we understand the poem's language as a counterpart to Annie's excessive imagination encountering that "gold standard of excesses," her defenses seem especially strong. For even though the war threatens to destroy Annie's world and her imaginative impulses, it doesn't disrupt the language that corresponds to those impulses. In fact, the war is introduced as the villain in the poem's balladic tale in language that is altogether consistent with the rest of the poem:

Doomer, though, crescendo-comes

Prophesying hecatombs.

Surrealist and cynical.

Garrulous and guttural.

Spits upon the silver leaves.

Denigrates the dainty eyes

Dear dexterity achieves.

Names him. Tames him. Takes him off,

Throws to columns row on row.

Where he makes the rifles cough,

Stutter. Where the reveille

Is staccato majesty.

Then to marches. Then to know

The hunched hells across the sea. (101-02)

War is the worst doom (“Doomer”) that arrives in a powerful “crescendo”; its destructive might is mysterious (“prophesying”), sacrificial (“hecatombs”), and bizarre (“Surrealist”). But war is also figured here as having a form of speech that is noisy, ineloquent, nasty, and spiteful. Along with conveying Annie’s thaumaturgic imagination (her “gilt humility,” “hot theopathy,” “dusted demi-gloom”), “The Anniad”’s Gwendolynian tongue voices Annie’s sense of the crudity of war: war “spits” upon the “dainty eyes” of Annie’s dexterous imagination. In other words, Annie, on the one hand, comprehends the disturbing force of war as a “crescendo . . . Prophesying hecatombs,” a “great public sacrifice (properly a hundred oxen) among the Greeks and Romans” (“hecatomb”); but, on the other hand, she recognizes war as a brutal language itself that is “Garrulous and Guttural,” a “cough,” a “stutter.” Even the “majesty” of war’s “reveille” is a “staccato,” repetitive drone. War denigrates everything Annie strives to create—the “silver leaves” that “Dear dexterity achieves”—and yet, in turn, Annie articulates war as cacophonous and inarticulate. The poem juxtaposes the war’s spitting, coughing, and stuttering with the language used to convey Annie’s sophistication: she communicates in “crimson ruses,” her eyes contain “prayerbooks,” she “believes / Incorruptibly.” Doomer may name and “tame” tan man, but Annie’s “Dear dexterity,” rendered in the poem’s Gwendolynian language, names and tames the War.

In “The Anniad,” then, we are not witnessing Annie’s complete demise but her persistence. However, this is not to say that the poem depicts Annie as immutable. In fact,

social reality changes Annie and nearly extinguishes her imaginative capabilities. By the time tan man returns from the war's "eerie stutter" to seek "recompense" in extramarital affairs, Annie is all but stripped of her romantic illusions:

Think of sweet and chocolate
Minus passing-magistrate,
Minus passing-lofty light,
Minus passing-stars for night,
Sirocco wafts and tra la la,
Minus symbol, cinema
Mirages, all things suave and bright. (104)

Annie's fantasies about magistrates, lofty light, stars, exotic places, music, and movies—"all things suave and bright"—have been subtracted from her imagination. The first line of this stanza—"Think of sweet and chocolate"—repeats the first line of the poem, asking us to consider just how much experience has changed her. Even though Annie spends an entire year seeking, and at least temporarily finding, "solaces" in the seasons—the crunching of snow "Chills her nicely," the spring air produces "a fine / Fume of fondness and sunshine," the "hypnotist intent" of summer picnics distracts her from her dismal home life (105)—we must not take Annie's resilience as evidence that her experiences haven't affected her negatively. Not only is Annie "Minus" her "suave and bright" illusions, but when we are asked yet again to "Think of" Annie after her year of searching, the terms of the poem's first line are repeated but with the order reversed, indicating that Annie has changed; the reality of being an African American adult bearing dismal circumstances in a racist society has outstripped her naïve youthfulness: "Think of

chocolate and sweet / Wanting richly not to care / That summer hoots at solitaire” (105). Annie, still equipped with elaborative imaginative capacities, has come to find that even though she may want “not to care,” her imagination can no longer evade reality.¹⁸ She is too familiar now with heartbreak and loneliness to be wholly and permanently comforted by snow, sunshine, and picnics. She knows that in “her true town” everything is “falling falling down” (105).

Indeed, Annie’s experiences threaten to destroy her: after looking to nature, community service (“I am bedecked with love!” Annie proclaims, “I am philanthropist!”), art and literature, and eventually a love affair of her own (she “Tests forbidden taffeta”), Annie appears to have surrendered, for the “culprit magics” have faded and

no music plays at all

In the inner, hasty hall

Which compulsion cut from shade.—

Frees her lover. Drops her hands.

Shorn and taciturn she stands. (107)

And yet Annie refuses to be “taciturn,” a word that denotes Annie’s near speechlessness but is, too, an elaborate Gwendolynian term that corresponds to Annie’s imagination. In the next stanza, she announces, in quotations, her recourse to another potentially compensatory realm, motherhood:

Petals at her breast and knee. . . .

“Then incline to children-dear!

Pull the halt magnificence near,

Sniff the perfumes, ribbonize

Gay bouquet most satinly;
Hoard it, for a planned surprise
When the desert terrifies.”

Once again, Annie’s quoted speech is entirely Gwendolynian. Just as the young girl’s ribbons adorned urban blight in “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” Annie’s elaborate imagination, however “shorn and taciturn,” is still able to “ribbonize” “most satinly” her difficult reality. She reminds herself that her capacity to imagine alternatives to reality can make the unbearable bearable and that she can put this ability to use time and again: “Hoard it, for a planned surprise / When the desert terrifies.”

When that terror eventually comes in the form of tan man’s death, we are asked a final time to survey the damage done to Annie: “Think of tweaked and twenty-four”; “Think of almost thoroughly / Derelict and dim and done.” Against the nearly obliterating odds, Annie is, however “faint” and “old,” surviving:

Stroking swallows from the sweat.
Fingering faint violet.
Hugging old and Sunday sun.
Kissing in her kitchenette
The minuets of memory. (109)

The swallows here recall those in a poem from the first section of *Annie Allen* where they portrayed the faded marriage of Annie’s parents. In “the parents: people like our marriage,” Maxie and Andrew have settled complacently into a resigned life, any trace of romance in their relationship all but dissolved: “There are no swans and swallows any more.” In “The Anniad,” Annie continues “Stroking swallows from” her “sweat” even

after tan man's repeated betrayals, his constant rejection of her, and his ultimate death. From the poem's first line to its last, Annie endures despite being "almost" destroyed by one tragedy after the next. Just short of destroyed, she is still "Stroking," "Fingering," "Hugging" and "Kissing." No longer genuflecting to immature romantic illusions, Annie kisses "minuets" of memories that, however terrifying they may be, are not illusions.

Brooks was characteristically ambivalent about "The Anniad." In a conversation with Stavros, she assesses the poem in 1967 as "not a wild success; some of it just doesn't come off" (*Conversations* 47). In another interview ten years later, she dismisses it as "rather artificial poetry" and as "just an exercise, just an exercise" with a one-dimensional purpose, "to *prove* that I could write well" (96). And yet although Brooks suggests that "The Anniad" has "nothing for anyone to treasure or be nourished by" because its technical features render it artificial, she nevertheless equates nourishment for herself with her most highly wrought, intricate poems: "I like that word 'nourish.' There are some poems in [*Annie Allen*] that I do like, that I enjoyed writing" (96). In fact, in that 1967 interview with Stavros, Brooks associates diction and form in "The Anniad" not with artificiality but with mystery, magic, pleasure, and enjoyment: "I was fascinated by what words might do there in ["The Anniad"]. You can tell that it's labored, a poem that's very interested in the mysteries and magic of technique" (46). She exclaims in that same interview, "What a pleasure it was to write that poem!" and relates its meticulous diction to beauty, coherence, and potency: "I was just very conscious of every word; I wanted every phrase to be beautiful, and yet to contribute sanely to the whole, to the whole effect" (46-47).

Brooks may have had a sense that “The Anniad” was not “a wild success” and that “some of it just [didn’t] come off,” but these negative impressions must be balanced against her equally positive associations of the poem’s formal features with labor, revision, and carefulness: “every [stanza] was worked on and revised, tenderly cared for. More so than anything else I’ve written” (47). In 1961, Brooks equates “real poetry” precisely with technique and diction: “By the time I began to write *Annie Allen*, I was very much impressed with the effectiveness of technique, and I wanted to write poetry that was honed to the last degree that it could be. And I wanted chiseled [l]ines, everything just right, real poetry I wanted to write, and that’s the mood I was in when I began writing *Annie Allen*” (6-7).¹⁹ As early as the age of thirteen, when she was first realizing her artistic inclination, Brooks comprehended her desire to write poetry as a hunger for the “right word”—and a capacity for discerning the wrong ones: she recalls thinking during that time in her life, “Why, there were *oodles* of *other* writers! They, too, suffered, and had suffered. They, too, ached for the want of the right word—reckoned with mean nouns, virtueless adjectives” (*Report One* 56). Similarly, she responds to descriptions of her novel *Maud Martha* as “poetic” by suggesting that the very term “poetic” is itself a euphemism for word choice: “about [*Maud Martha*] being poetic in parts, I suppose that could hardly be avoided, if it is a thing to be avoided, because even in writing prose I find myself weighing the possibilities of every word just as I do in a poem” (162). Whether in her poetry or prose, the word itself held particular import for her.

Brooks never stopped “weighing the possibilities of every word” because diction was always a crucial element of her aesthetic, which was always expressly a black

aesthetic. As late as 1983, Brooks was still debunking the notion that her poems were less political before her 1967 attendance at Fisk: when Tate asked Brooks about “the black aesthetic” in 1983, Brooks responded impatiently, “But we have been talking about this all along. An announcement that we are going to deal with ‘the black aesthetic’ seems to me to be a waste of time. I’ve been talking about blackness and black people all along” (108). In that same interview, when Tate suggests that *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen* “don’t seem to focus directly on heightened political awareness,” Brooks replies, “Well, let me just run down the table of contents of *A Street in Bronzeville* ‘of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery,’ ‘The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith’ Many of the poems, in my new and old books, are ‘politically aware’: I suggest you reread them” (106). Brooks is defensive about whether her early poems are political and testy with questions about a post-BAM black aesthetic because she ultimately considers all of her work to be socially minded black poetry.²⁰

Although Shockley argues that Brooks’s aesthetic before 1967 was a black aesthetic, she also perpetuates something of Tate’s notion that Brooks’s early work didn’t focusing “directly” on “heightened political awareness” by suggesting that the political nature of her work before and after her experience at Fisk differs even if only in degree. For Shockley, critics have failed to understand Brooks’s pre-1967 aesthetic as a black aesthetic because they’ve tended to perceive that early work against BAM standards that had not yet been established when “The Anniad” was written. Such a view, Shockley explains, has the effect of making “The Anniad”’s diction seem ironic; for BAM prescribed black vernacular as a key element of black poetry, and yet “The Anniad” is largely composed of diction that is emphatically not colloquial: “Ultimately it requires an

ahistorical imposition of BAM ideology in a 1940s context to argue that Brooks's decision to employ a high, Latinate diction in 'The Annid' can only have been intended to mock the life and longings of her dreamy and disempowered young black heroine" (39). Shockley helps us understand here that the diction of "The Annid" is not ironic, but she also implies that, after BAM, Brooks moved toward vernacular and away from the "thaumaturgic" diction of "The Annid" and that such diction expresses a black aesthetic only in that it puts an African American poet's linguistic skills on display years before BAM's aesthetic program.

However, Brooks did not move toward vernacular and away from her Gwendolynian diction after 1967, even though she was intimately involved with and influenced by the Black Arts Movement. Rather, after 1967, she attempted to write a mostly free verse poetry that would be more immediately and aurally accessible to her black community than her earlier work but without imitating other BAM poets and without sacrificing what she calls her "G. B. voice" (*Report One* 183):

I am in transition. I want to reach all manner of black people. That's my urgent compulsion, to write a kind of poetry that will not be an imitation of younger blacks, although I admire their work so much, but will be a—some special kind of Gwendolynian poem that will not have the close-textured quality of some of the sonnets I've written, perhaps, or a poem like "A Light and Diplomatic Bird" which I used to like so much because of its embroideries, or certain parts of *The Annid*. It will be a simple-looking poem but there will be subtleties easily reached, I hope, by those who are interested in reaching them—immediately enjoyable by black people who spend a great deal of their time in taverns or the

streets, blacks who, perhaps, have dropped out of high school. I want to reach and appeal to such blacks. (*Conversations* 68-69)

True, Brooks found that “certain parts” of “The Anniad” ran counter to her objective here, and she does remark in the same interview that she’ll “have to find some other words” to achieve the accessibility she’s after, but after 1967 she didn’t replace her Gwendolynian diction with black vernacular or, for that matter, any other register sanctioned by her Black Arts peers (69). Instead, what she wrote post-Fisk was a poetry that would retain her complex, intricate style and that would also communicate immediately to an audience when delivered orally. It is an exacting poetic undertaking—to make poetry that deals with complex issues promptly available in an oral format, to write a “simple-looking poem” that’s not simple—and she struggled to achieve it: “I have not yet achieved the changes I want,” she said in 1973 (74); “I am still struggling. I haven’t written *anything* yet that seems to be just the kind of thing I want to achieve,” she told Gloria T. Hull and Posey Gallagher in 1977 (85). Brooks struggled because her challenge was not to write accessible poetry per se but to achieve that accessibility without sacrificing her complex style: “Some of the ordinariness of the language is also suitable to my new idea, my new compulsion,” she acknowledges, but she also adds, “I happen to think, however, that the valid poem that I want to write (because it will probably have valid itemata) can be significant for the unique word and still be accessible to all manner of life” (86). That Brooks here uses a Gwendolynian term—“itemata”—when describing her impulse to bring the ordinary and the extraordinary together emphasizes how important that impulse was to her aesthetic.

Even though Brooks judged *Beckonings* (1975) to be “the great failure among all of [her] books,” she also considered it to be representative of her new ambition to write an orally accessible poetry: “Some of the poems in [*Beckonings*] are an attempt at the new style” (*Conversations* 79). She may have felt that *Beckonings* failed to meet her standards, but she also valued that book because it was the first time she came close to reconciling her new “dual impulses”: when she lamented about not having “written *anything yet*” that achieved her goal of a new style, she also said about *Beckonings*, “I don’t feel unhappy about having brought it out. . . . I’m not scared to bring out things that just might be far less than my standards. . . . [T]hat is a book which shows dual impulses struggling” (87). The “dual impulses” struggling in *Beckonings* are precisely her Gwendolynian style and her desire for immediate accessibility. For what *Beckonings* offers is not “the ordinariness of language” but a variety of linguistic registers set against each other—the colloquial, the archaic, the highly unusual, the recondite, the uncommon instead of the standard. In other words, *Beckonings* is replete with Gwendolynian diction. For example, an elegy for Brooks’s brother commemorates his “jewelling use” (3), another poem with the peculiarly long, colloquial title “Five Men Against the Theme ‘My Name is Red Hot. Yo Name Ain Doodley Squat’” refers in its first line to “the time of the crit, the creeple, and the makeiteer” (6); an homage to African American novelist John Oliver Killens describes him as an “eye-tenderizer, a heart-honeyer” and implores him to “See our / tatter-time” (7); in another elaborately titled poem, “Sammy Chester Leaves ‘Godspell.’ And Visits *Upward Bound* On a Lake Forest Lawn, Bringing West Afrika,” Sammy is “leantall” and the lake is “lumplush.”²¹ Finally, in the volume’s last poem, “Boys. Black,” classified in Brooksian fashion as “*a preachment*,” Africa is called “the

long leap languid land,” and the understanding of the relationship between black American identity and African identity as a simple relationship is itself complex: “our tiny union / is the dwarf magnificent. / Is the busy simple thing” (15-16). Indeed, Brooks yet again presents her “itemata” in an eccentric combination of common and uncommon terms: God is a “Thorough,” a “There,” a “spent pulse,” a “yet-to-come,” a “mad child, / playing / with a floorful of toys, / mashing / what when he will,”; youthful intellectuals are “clocks that strike the new time of day”; antiquated language refers to streets, mouths, and television shows when the speaker warns her listener that

It is too easy to cry “ATTICA”
and shock thy street,
and purse thy mouth,
and go home to thy “Gunsmoke.”²²

It is too easy, the poem argues, for the language of protest to degrade into the old programmatic tones, too easy for political poetry to slide into familiar rhetoric: “Thy” suggests an ancient authority and an outmoded pattern.

And it is none too easy to write a poetry that makes complexity immediately accessible, but this is precisely what Brooks aimed for in her post-1967 poems: to devise a “newish voice” that would “not be an imitation of the contemporary young black voice, which I so admire, but an extending adaptation of today’s G. B. voice” that would speak about and to her local black community with urgent coherence (*Report Part One* 183). Brooks is at pains to retain her G.B. voice precisely because the Gwendolynian tongue is her black aesthetic; it voices a distinctive African American idiolect.²³ The language she invented for her local speakers responds to the dismal, mundane, and impoverished social

conditions that racism creates with lavish and entirely uncommon diction set in a variety of traditional and free-verse forms. Her idiosyncratic language, located squarely in the African American community, challenges assumptions about both the local language of that community and the appropriate language for African American poetry. Her employment of form and diction, then, is not ironic—to apprehend it as such is to overlook the collaboration of different forms of speech in her poems that counter deprivation and depict black people as individuals rather than curios: “It is my privilege to state ‘Negroes’ not as curios but as people,” she told Paul Angle in 1967. She uses that word again over two decades later in a conversation with Haki Madhubuti: “our people have been looked upon as curios, something to look at and be amazed by—something other than ordinarily human. And of course I can’t accept that. I happen to know myself and I know that inside myself I am not a curio” (qtd. in Joyce 247). Her poems effect redress not by, as Heaney has it, the “integration” of harmony into “a context of division and contradiction” but by prominence in the face of division (*Redress* 190). The irony of Brooks’s poetry is that it repudiates the notion of African Americans as curios and affirms her community’s “ordinary humanness” with an extraordinary, located language that is elaborate, intricate, and remarkably unusual.

Notes

¹ Quotations from Brooks’s poems are all from either *Blacks*, which collects her first four books as well as additional selected poems, or from *Beckonings*. I indicate the book and page number the first time a poem is mentioned or quoted and then proceed to quote without citations. For the longer poems (“Hattie Scott,” “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” and “The Anniad”), I indicate the inclusive page numbers the first time the poem is mentioned and then indicate the specific page number after particular quotes.

² Melhem claims that the tenement's conditions in the poem defeat art: "The speaker doubts that art, 'an aria' sung by the dream, can survive its physical habitation" (23). For Shaw, "the environment" of the tenement building "precludes the survival of any dreams"; the poem's theme, he argues, is "spiritual death" (62-63). Brooks-Motl's perceives the poem as more ambivalent than these earlier readings. Her overall view of the poem is that "agency and self-determination in the kitchenette are problematic at best," but she does acknowledge that "its aural effects work effortlessly." Although for her the poem ultimately communicates that dreaming could never be fully possible in a tenement, the fact that it can be partly possible suggests at least a little hope:

the poem itself is testament to the urge to dream, to fantasize, to project and plan. Even if a whole minute can't be spared to wonder, the seed of wondering has been planted. There are other moments that make the ending seem less pessimistic than it might first appear. The final clause—"get in it"—reaches back across the previous stanza to revise "let it in," and small reversals happen throughout the poem: after all, the poem starts "dry" and ends "wet."

And yet wouldn't an urge without the option to act on that urge be an especially frustrating constraint? I argue that rather than testifying to "the urge to dream," the poem enacts the very dreaming it ponders.

³ Brooks-Motl reads the second stanza of "kitchenette building" as particularly expressive of the building's deterioration. According to her, parts of speech are arranged here to convey the repugnant and detrimental assault on the senses that occurs in these tenement halls:

Cooking onions become menacing when they produce "fumes"; the smell of fried potatoes is so ubiquitous that the dream must "fight" with them; and, most tellingly, the sanitary conditions of the building mean that garbage stays in the hall, "ripening" and mingling with the other common smells. Against such olfactory concreteness, the "dream" is barely allowed substance. It remains a stopped-short series of adjectives ("Its white and violet") and a series of verbs that correspond to contradictory subjects (people "sing" while things "flutter").

Ultimately, she believes the poem responds to its question about whether or not dreams can survive in a kitchenette building with "a definitive answer: not really."

⁴ Burt's and Boland's discussions of "kitchenette building" appear in essays that are chiefly concerned with other poems. I cite them to argue that imposing a form on a poem because the poem merely suggests that form or because the poem comes close to that form rather than taking the poem's formal features for what they are risks misreading. This is a point that I'll return to later in my discussion of "The Anniad."

⁵ See Ford for an overview of various critical perceptions of *Satin-Legs* and perceptions of the speaker's disposition toward him ("Sonnets" 350n8; 351n9). She explains that critics tend to read the poem's last stanza—an italicized sestet written in plainspoken, simple diction that contrasts with the poem's prevailing style—as an indication that the poem is critical of Smith's flamboyance because "underneath all his artifice he's a natural man and . . . he succeeds when he accepts this about himself"

(351n9). However, Ford points out that this last stanza is not necessarily the poem's definitive ending; for "The Sundays" presents two other registers in the stanzas just before it: a "zoot-suit" language that catalogues the offerings at "Joe's Eats" (and which has been the poem's register throughout), and a tetrameter, eye-rhyming couplet that sounds especially lofty and romantic ("And even and intrepid come / The tender boots of night to home") (350-51). Ford argues that this presentation of three endings "challenges certainty," and thus "the poem refuses either to indict or exonerate Satin-Legs; rather . . . this poem is more interested in how to represent ambiguity than in how to resolve it" (349; 351n9).

⁶ For Mullen, too, Smith is a tool for the establishment. He argues that Smith's penchant for "flashiness" is "an ironic metaphor for both the traumatic markings of black social class formation and the dismal potentiality of protest ideologies" in a commodity culture (163). In Mullen's Marxist reading, "The Sundays" depicts "the 'choice' of race rebellion" as it is undermined by "consumer preference" (164). In other words, rather than rebelling, Smith is consuming products and advertising them.

⁷ Mullen suggest that the "you" is not necessarily the liberal white poetry reader but middle-class black bourgeoisie who paradoxically "desire for participation in and resistance to American democratic capitalism" (151). Byrant argues that the "you" includes white liberals and black middle-class readers (like those who would have subscribed to *Ebony* magazine); the poem for her critiques the expectations of both demographics: "Brooks interrogates both her middle-class black readers' notions of respectability and her liberal white readers' fascination with black urban life, resisting their respective tendencies to view Smith as either a bad example of a representative figure" (117).

⁸ Although Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1949, reviews were more mixed than reviews of *A Street in Bronzeville*. Reviewers took issue with the book's myriad technical features: "While reviews of her previous book . . . had uniformly praised her poetic technique, many critics—even those who wrote the most encouraging response to *Annie Allen*—were put off by the very self-conscious display of formal expertise, elevated diction, and linguistic whimsy that Brooks lavished upon the new volume" (Shockley 30). These reviews seem especially patronizing: Kunitz connects what he finds to be the volume's "awkward locution" to an "uncertainty in taste and direction" (although he does hail the Gwendolynian word "pinchy" as "a little masterpiece all by itself") (11-12); Rolfe Humphries finds in the book "boldness, invention, a daring to experiment, a naturalness that does not scorn literature but absorbs it," and yet he also believes that its "weakness lies in . . . awkwardness, naiveté, when [Brooks] seems to be carried away by the big word or the spectacular rhyme" (8). Such assessments seem to regard Brooks's expertise as praiseworthy but only when she has the wherewithal to stay in her place.

⁹ Melhem explains the significance of the *-ad* suffix and connects it to what she hears as its celebratory (though tentatively so) tone: "the suffix *-ad* is a Greek form,

denoting a descent from a period of time (in Annie's case, an updated Medieval); a group (the poems); an epic in celebration. Here Brooks continues to celebrate the common life with its potential grandeur, in a way both critical and compassionate" (61-62). Spillers calls the title a "pun on *The Aeniad* or *The Iliad*" that "prepares us for a mock-heroic journey of a particular female soul as she attempts to gain self-knowledge against an unresponsive social backdrop" (121). Melhem's view and the fact that Spillers finds the poem to be "funny . . . a comedy [that] proceeds from self-recognition" demonstrates that even readers who view Annie in a positive light tend to perceive the relationship between the poem's subject matter and its formal structure as ironic.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive summary of scholarship that grapples with the question of whether or not "The Anniad" should be regarded as an epic or a mock-epic, see Shockley's endnote to her chapter on Brooks's poem (206n18). Shockley charts conflicting critical opinions regarding the matter that spans twenty years: Tate (1987), Melhem (1987), Spillers (1987), Stanford (1995), Jimoh (1998), Walters (2001), and Leonard (2006). Shockley (2011) weighs in on this conversation with a forceful argument that writing an epic allowed Brooks to appeal to two impulses: it legitimized her technical skill to a white literary establishment, and it granted her a "polyvocality" with which to advance a "black aesthetic highly attuned to the interplay between race, gender, and class" (28-29).

¹¹ Tate argues that Annie suppresses "anger, resentment, and guilt" (144) and is only able to express gratitude, essentially following her mother's advice to be deferential in the first stanza of "Maxie Allen." According to Tate, when Annie does rebel in the fifth "note" of *Annie Allen*'s first section, she does so only at the wake of an "old relative" where "no one can witness her transgression": "She went in there to muse on being rid / Of relative beneath the coffin lid. / No one was by. She stuck her tongue out; slid" (88). That Annie only furtively sticks out her tongue here suggests to Tate that Annie is incapable of responding adequately to her social circumstances.

¹² Scholars sometimes perceive the ostentatious diction of "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" as ironic in the same way that "The Anniad"'s diction has been perceived. For instance, Mullen refers to the former poem's opening diction as "mock chivalric jargon" that operates as a kind of "fronting" strategy that "separates the 'respectable' and 'riffraff' in Bronzeville" (162). Similarly, Henry Taylor comprehends the "elegant language" he hears as "mock-heroic" because Satin-Legs is too ordinary for heightened words such as "Inamoratas," "approbation," "bestowed": "The ironic contrasts begin with the title; the protagonist's name yokes the exotic and the ordinary. The polysyllabic opening introduces a narrator whose self-consciously elegant language is mock-heroic" (257). I argue that Brooks's diction is not ironic but is instead a key element of her Gwendolynian black aesthetic, and I hope to demonstrate that this is nowhere truer than in "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" and "The Anniad."

¹³ Shockley reads the poem as a "legitimate epic" that Brooks wrote in part to showcase her technical abilities before a dismissive white literary establishment and to

advance “a black aesthetic highly attuned to the interplay between race, gender, and class” (31).¹³ Shockley associates this black aesthetic with what she calls the poem’s “polyvocality,” its combination and innovation of traditional genre, stanzaic form, and poetic diction to address at once a cross-section of potential readers—white and black literary critics, middle-class and wealthy white readers, working-class and middle-class African Americans, feminists—thereby questioning assumptions about race and gender that cause these groups to hear the poem differently (30-31).

¹⁴ Shockley describes Brook’s use of epic to portray Annie as audacious: “To cast a poor, urban, African American woman’s struggle, fought largely on the home front, as an epic was a remarkably gutsy move on Brooks’s part in 1949, years prior to the time when the second wave of the women’s movement would force American society to rethink its assumptions about where history is made and who makes it” (32). She asserts that because Brooks refused to accept that certain forms were inappropriate for African Americans and for women, she writes about a young black woman in an especially elevated literary genre traditionally utilized to represent an entire people’s history, nation, or culture: “there is no basis for assuming that Brooks herself would understand the epic genre, the ‘grandeur and formality’ it calls for, to have an automatically antithetical relationship to content critical of a working-class black woman’s particular experience of oppression—even if she was well aware that some members of her audience might” (40). In Shockley’s estimation, Brooks establishes authority for those audience members incapable of correlating a young African American girl’s constrained life and the grand ambitions of epic poetry by writing her epic in an expertly orchestrated, exceptionally intricate variation of rhyme royal:

Casting Annie as the central character of an epic, Brooks pushes readers who might not see the young woman as capable of representing the “tribe” (whether constituted as black women, women, black people, or working-class people) to reconsider the extent to which her quest speaks to the “community’s heritage and values” And by taking a stanza that innovatively signifies upon the venerable rhyme royal stanza and *wizarding* it across 301 lines of poetry, Brooks (also potentially a curiosity in some eyes) demands that her audiences see *her* as a poet powerful enough to project a “narrative voice” capable of supporting the necessary “cultural, historical, or mythic heritage.” (44)

Shockley is quoting here from Lynn Keller’s *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (1997). Keller doesn’t take up “The Anniad,” but Shockley refers to her study for its succinct descriptions of the uses of epic. Shockley also explains in an endnote that she borrows the word “wizarding” from the last line of *Annie Allen* (208n35). This Gwendolynian term conveys Brooks’s sense of how African Americans might effectively maneuver in a racist society: “We are lost, must / Wizard a track through our own screaming weed” (*Blacks* 140). It is precisely Brooks’s black aesthetic, Shockley claims, that prompts her to tell this legitimate, and legitimizing, epic about a young black girl “Whom the higher gods forgot” in especially layered stanzas: “Brooks’s provocative poetics constitute a defiant refusal to allow the poem to be ignored. Her formal choices challenge the racist and sexist inclination some might have to look upon Annie as a

curiosity or a nobody” (44). Annie, in other words, can speak for her “tribe” like any other epic hero.

¹⁵ Other critics have suggested that “The Anniad” is ballad-like: Melhem points out that “the singular form of this forty-three-stanza poem, whose septets have been classified as a version of rhyme royal, bears a resemblance to the tetrameter of the long-meter hymn stanza” (62); Harold Bloom calls the poem “a problematic but poetically interesting ballad” (vii).

¹⁶ Ford explains that the ballad form was important to Brooks because it “had a distinguished lineage in African American culture” and because it proved “useful for writing about ordinary black folk” (“Ballads” 373-74). Furthermore, Ford helps us to understand that Brooks didn’t necessarily write explicitly in a form when she wanted to utilize that form to examine the relationship between art and life:

[P]oems she titled ballads that are not formally ballads (“the sonnet-ballad” [1949] and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” [1960]), nonballad poems that thematize ballads (“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” [1960] and “In The Mecca” [1968]), and poems that experiment with ballad conventions (“The Bean Eaters” [1960], “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat” [1960], and “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed [1960])—all reveal an ongoing investigation of the possibilities of the ballad for radical black poetry. (374)

Ford demonstrates how, for example, “A Bronzeville Mother” thematizes the ballad form, rather than presents itself as a traditional ballad, in order to put “the very inadequacy of those generic conventions” to the work of “representing the complexities of racial violence” (377). Similarly, the last poem of “Appendix to the Anniad,” the curiously titled “the sonnet-ballad,” is clearly a sonnet, but its ballad features are not so easily discernable. Ford identifies those features and argues that the two forms work together to draw out the transformation of Annie’s “romantic illusions” as they “give way to recognition of adult responsibilities” (376). That this last poem ends the book’s middle section, which is titled *The Anniad*, corroborates my argument that Brooks was alluding to and thematizing a number of different traditions in that section’s title poem rather than writing in any one tradition.

¹⁷ Shockley identifies certain problems in conventional “epic” speech for an African American poet working out of a black aesthetic. As Tracy Walters tells us, epic poetry is traditionally written in “a style which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject” (354). Shockley surmises that this grand style coupled with epic’s communal objectives presented a distinct challenge for Brooks as an African American poet: “While these two expectations for the epic [that the diction should be far from ordinary speech and that it should voice a community’s heritage] are not inherently in conflict, they might be seen as incompatible—as creating a problem of language, in other words—for an African American poet, if ‘the voice of [her] community’s heritage’ is understood to be, by definition, a black vernacular voice” (38). In other words, if epic expresses a “community’s heritage”

and also utilizes a diction far removed from living speech, how can an African American poet effectively put that genre to communal work when the assumption in 1949 was that the language of the black community was black vernacular? Shockley attempts to answer this question not by analyzing the diction of “The Anniad” but by considering the time period (the late 1940s) and the critical context of the poem. She explains that Brooks would have been writing under the auspices of the New Negro Renaissance, which presented black poets as capable of the highest level of literary achievement—capable, in other words, of writing epics and rhyme royal stanzas in lofty, erudite language.

¹⁸ Shockley reads the “Minuses” as especially positive: “Though cast in terms of lack, this letting-go represents progress on her journey” (48).

¹⁹ Brooks says right after this, “I no longer feel that this is the proper attitude to have when you sit down to write poetry, but that’s how I felt then” (7). The interview was conducted in 1961. Brooks goes on to say that she wanted her next poems to be more like those in *A Street in Bronzeville* rather than *Annie Allen* because the “rougher” *Bronzeville* poems prized “humanity” over technique (7). This is evidence that Brooks was always reexamining her style—years before 1967—to identify ways to move her work forward, which could sometimes mean going back to earlier methods.

²⁰ In 1994, when Sheldon Hackney brought up to Brooks the “notion that [her] poetry before 1967 is descriptive of the black experience but not alert to the injustice, whereas afterwards it is committed, more activist,” Brooks replies, “that is absolutely not true” (*Conversations* 162). She continues, “Many of the poems that I’m reading on stages now come from my very first book, and are considered ‘social’” (162). I hope to demonstrate in this chapter just how politically “alert” Brooks’s pre-1967 poems were.

²¹ Brooks’s titles are sometimes as elaborate as her diction, and they constitute another Gwendolynian element of her poetry. Here are just a few titles from her first books: “the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men” (*A Street in Bronzeville* [in *Blacks*] 70); “pygmies are pygmies still, though perch on Alps” (*Annie Allen* 94); “For Clarice It Is Terrible Because with This He Takes Away All the Popular Songs and the Moonlights and Still Night Hushes and the Movies with Star-eyed Girls and Simpering Males” (*The Bean Eaters* 364). Similarly elaborate is the structure of *Annie Allen* as a book. For example, “The Womanhood,” the book’s third and final section, is comprised of fifteen poems. The first of these is a sequence of five numbered sonnets titled “the children of the poor”; the seventh is a sequence of three separately titled poems under the title “XII: beauty shoppe,” and the thirteenth section, “XIII: intermission,” is a numbered three-poem sequence.

²² Brooks omitted and revised some of the *Beckonings* poems when she republished that book as well as two others (*Riot* [1969] and *Family Pictures* [1970]) and some new poems (under the subtitle *To the Diaspora*) in *to disembark* (1981): she combined “Five Men Against the Theme” and “To John Oliver Killens in 1975” and

reworked “Boys. Black” into “Another Preachment to Blacks.” Kent tells us that Brooks felt that “Boys. Black” in its first version was “too preachy” (253).

²³ In his effort to identify the characteristics of the poetry that emerged from the Black Arts Movement, Henderson includes elaborate diction in his list of qualities and argues against the notion that black poetry must be written in black vernacular. Ironically, the example he chooses to elucidate diction as a black aesthetic is Don Lee, the poet who took issue with the recondite language of “The Anniad” and heard that language as white: “Don Lee, for example, can use the word “neoteric” without batting an eye and send us scurrying to our dictionaries. The word is not ‘Black’ but the casual, virtuoso way that he drops it on us—like “Deal with that”—is an *elegant Black linguistic gesture*” (33). In fact, Lee’s gesture with the word “neoteric” is a Gwendolynian move.

CHAPTER IV

TONY HARRISON'S TONGUE-TIED FIGHTING

In *The Redress of Poetry*, Seamus Heaney distinguishes between poetry that imagines alternatives to social conditions and poetry that is “harnessed to movements,” that presents itself as calls to action (*Redress* 2). He endorses poetry whose primary responsibility is to envision a “glimpsed alternative” to social reality rather than poetry that is more directly concerned with advancing social agendas (4). The former, he implies, is how poets make art out of their relation to their social circumstances while the latter erodes to didacticism. Poets who conceive realities that counter historical reality, Heaney argues, rely on their abilities to innovate language; they “answer” social conditions in poetic languages they invent, not in the language imposed upon them: their answer, he says, is “given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it” (191). As we have seen, Heaney himself devises a poetic language to convey the conflicting national identities of Northern Ireland, strands that are brought together in the local language of his poems’ speakers, regardless of what side of the peace wall they speak on. This integrated language is a corollary for political and national unification. Gwendolyn Brooks also executes poetic redress by creating poetic languages, but rather than integrating forms of speech in an historical context of racial discrimination, her language defies the society that subjugates her with an aesthetics of elaboration. In “The Anniad,” for instance, a poor African American girl living in an urban ghetto during an age of American segregation and world war faces an increasingly bleak adulthood. The language Brooks invents for that poem’s main character is the opposite of real world, everyday language; the diction is highly uncommon and recondite, and the verse form is

markedly intricate. Poetry for Brooks provides a way to resist and stand out from the constraints—poverty, isolation, self-destruction—that racism creates.

When Heaney argues for poetry as an imagined alternative to inhibiting conditions rather than a moral condemnation of those conditions, he pits Wallace Stevens against Tony Harrison to illustrate these supposedly conflicting inclinations:

Stevens, as he reaches the conclusion in his essay ‘The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words’, is anxious to insist that his own words are intended to be more than merely sonorous, and his anxiety is understandable. It is as if he were imagining and responding to the outcry of some disaffected heckler in the crowd of those whom Tony Harrison calls ‘the rhubarbarians’, one crying out against the mystification of art and its appropriation by the grandees of aesthetics. (1)

In Harrison’s poem, “The Rhubarbarians,” that “disaffected heckler” is Harrison himself, and Heaney assumes Harrison would “have little sympathy with Wallace Stevens” because Stevens’ aesthetic is based on the creation of “supreme fictions” and not on direct action (2). In his poem, Harrison expressly aligns himself with his north England working-class community—the “rhubarbarians” of the title—and its history of resistance and capitulation to industrial and class exploitation. He then connects that relation to his role as a poet and translator of classical literature. Heaney at first seems to esteem Harrison’s distrust of mystery and grandness, and he proceeds to regard with apparent admiration Harrison’s conviction that poetry can provide alternatives and then some: Heaney says Harrison “want[s] poetry to be more than an imagined response to conditions in the word” (2). And yet what initially sounds like praise for Harrison’s social and political integrity is actually a critique of the lack of “artistic integrity” in the kind of

poetry that Heaney thinks Harrison writes (6). Such poems, Heaney claims, are an “applied art”; they “will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of *their* point of view”; they do not “add a complication where the general desire is for a simplification” (2-3). This kind of poetry, in other words, is moralizing, didactic, pandering, and simplistic.

Harrison’s poetry does often take a firm, frequently unyielding moral stance against political and social situations and institutions. His poems have lambasted the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the first Gulf War (“A Cold Coming”), imagined the abdication of the British monarchy (“A Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III”), and rejected the very notion of his own national laureateship (“Laureate’s Block”). Often, he writes in the formal tradition of the rhyming, pentameter couplet, evoking the didactic verse of neoclassical poets like Pope and Swift. But his work belies the notion that outright political conviction and even political didacticism are necessarily devoid of aesthetic force and complication. In fact, Harrison, like Heaney and Brooks, devises his own labyrinthine, complex poetic language for responding to social conditions. And yet rather than dreaming of alternative worlds, Harrison depicts the disorder that social divisions create, utilizing local language to examine the disruptions that occur at the most personal levels of experience when people are divided from each other by various forms of social stratification, experiential realms as fundamental as physical health, sexuality, and speech. His poems enact the disruptions they are concerned with by stacking various forms of speech against one another, provoking unsettling shifts in point of view, time, and address, and by employing puns, foreign languages, incomprehensible utterances, arcane historical references, neologisms, and typographical variances such as digits,

symbols, and different fonts to bear that disorder out. For example, “The Ballad of Babelabour” imagines the building of the biblical Tower of Babel, by comparing its laborers to contemporary construction workers and by considering the supposed impropriety of their dialects (and the appropriateness of those dialects for poetry):

 Their snaptins kept among their turds
 they labour eat and shit
 with only grunts not proper words
 raw material for t’poet. (112-13)¹

That “raw material” is the speech of the laborers and the speech of “t’poet.” That speech, though, is not represented just by colloquial language but in a maelstrom of dissonant components that include different languages, fonts, neologisms, and idioms: “What ur- **Sprache** did the labor speak?” the poem’s first line asks, separating “ur” and “sprache,” or proto-language, with a hyphen and black letter typeface, the ornate script used throughout medieval Western Europe and in Germany until 1941 (“ursprache”; “black letter” *OED*). The visual presentation of “ur- **Sprache**” contrasts the primitive utterances of sound that constitute spoken language (“ur” is the German prefix for original or primitive) and the elaborate, ornamental quality of written (and therefore sanctioned) language. This “ur-**Sprache**” is then depicted in an iteration of grunts, fonts, cartoonish neologisms, and misspellings designed to appear illiterate yet intelligible:

 ur ur ur ur ur ur urs
 sharpened into **Sprache**
 revurlooshunairy vurse
 uprising nacker starkers.

The repeated “urs” of the first line “sharpen” into sounds that create the words “revurlooshinairy” and “vurse”; they are written phonetically in this subversive poetry to sound out the glottal accents of Northern English vernacular. In the next stanza, that syllable “ur” comes to signify the verb “to hear” just at the moment the story of Babel, thought to explain the diversity of languages, becomes cataclysmic:

by the time the bards have urd
and urd and urd and **Sprache**red
the world’s all been turned into *merde*
& Nimrod’s Noah’sarkered.

The “bards” have “Sprachered” for the king but also for the “ur crappers.” They were paid by “Nimrod’s nabobs” “to laude the state’s achievements” but transformed, too, the “urs” of the “uprising nacker starkers,” the laborers who built the Tower. When Nimrod’s tower is destroyed by God, and the result is a world “turned into *merde*,” French for shit, Nimrod and his minions flee, leaving both “Bards & labor . . . for dead.”

Sandie Byrne explains that disjuncture and contention are precisely what readers first observe in Harrison’s work: “Most reviews . . . begin by saying that it is concerned with division, or that it is dialectical” (*H. v. & O* 1). She catalogues the diverse modes of language and textual layouts in many of the poems: “Widely spaced lines, broken lines, a mixture of typographical styles (italic, bold Gothic, small caps, large caps, the phonetic alphabet . . .) and languages (English, French, German, Latin, Greek . . .), acronyms, abbreviation, parentheses, asterixes, footnotes” (14). And yet for Byrne, Harrison’s textual divergences are not so much disruptive as they are both methods for reproducing “the pained and laboured articulation which is its subject” and strategies for avoiding

uniformity: the variances, she claims, “ensure that the poems are never homogenized, pre-digested verse puree” (14). She believes that the difficulty of comprehending so many perplexing, intermixed linguistic modes purposely “retards smooth and easy reading,” thus preventing the poems from being glossed over: “These never slip down so easily that their message is missed, or their production taken for granted” (14-15). In other words, the poems’ heterogeneous registers insist on attentiveness rather than enact division. Those readers Byrne refers to who immediately identify turbulence in Harrison’s poems tend to perceive discrepancies not between different forms of speech but between speech and traditional poetic form. For example, the discordance Neil Roberts hears in Harrison’s poetry is generated by the interaction of meter and the poems’ linguistic and textual varieties: “The tendency of the iambic pentameter to smooth the surface of language, the unique balance that it holds between the rhythms of song and speech, is constantly disrupted by typography, quoted speech, abbreviations and so on” (218). Harrison, Roberts implies, “manipulates” and “disrupts” iambic pentameter subversively to undermine that high cultural form.² In Roberts’s reading, Harrison breaks the meter across speech—to reverse Frost’s famous phrasing—rather than the other way around.

I think, however, that a better way to understand the operation of traditional form in Harrison’s poetry is to perceive how poetic tradition lends order to the disturbances the poems convey. Harrison doesn’t depict disarray to instigate close reading or to pit diverse elements against inherited verse forms. After all, the rhymes and rhythms of the ballad form hold the incongruous elements of “Babelabour” together. The stability of conventional verse forms allows Harrison to manage the social disturbances he references

in measured lines and to lend articulation to the supposedly inarticulate working-class. This never means for Harrison elevating or translating regional speech; it means, in some instances, presenting different forms of speech as allegories of class division and in other instances arranging what is thought to be nonstandard English to make poetry. Harrison doesn't appropriate traditional forms in order to raise colloquial language to a higher cultural level. Rather, he arranges that language to generate the patterns and rhymes that are the foundation of poetic tradition in order to put that tradition to his own uses. Regional speech, in other words, is the raw material for inherited verse forms as much as any other form of speech is, and Harrison employs the traditional patterns that his local language creates in order to sound out and visualize the disturbances caused by class separation. For example, his ongoing "sonnet" sequence, *The School of Eloquence* (1978), which includes "The Rhubarbarians," threads local language through a cryptic, erudite language and often merges obscure historical events and autobiography, organizing this amalgamation into conventional quatrains with end-stopped rhyming couplets or alternating rhymes and quatrains with white space around the lines, making a four-line stanza sometimes look and sound interrupted or fractured (or not like a quatrain at all). Other poems in the sequence play with sonnet elements such as octaves, sestets, and couplets, breaking stanzas at unexpected times to move jarringly across historical time periods and to facilitate shifts in address thereby presenting what Harrison calls a "broken narrative" (228).³

"The Rhubarbarians," for instance, is a two-part poem that begins by addressing a royal debt collector during an early nineteenth-century workers' uprising in north England and ends with the poet imploring his father to watch him conduct an opera on a

Lincoln Center stage in contemporary New York (123-24). The poem is set in quatrains except for its last four lines, which are separated by white space that suggest a tentative emotional state as the speaker's rumination about language becomes an homage to his father. By the end, the rhymes and line and stanza breaks have guided us through the poem's tumultuous movements, a turbulence that is tempered by the mellifluous effects of assonance and alliteration. It may seem on the surface that the language that Harrison invents does the opposite of Heaney's unifying poetic language: Harrison's poems depict division by their jarring, cacophonous, and abstruse elements. And yet they are also orderly, direct, and rhythmic. The poems ultimately make music but with disjointed, discordant notes. His varied, obscure lexicon creates moments of disorientation, but the overarching structures ultimately provide, to borrow another of Frost's phrases, "a momentary stay against confusion" (*CPPP* 777).

According to Heaney, Frost manages his "stay against confusion" with "sentence sounds," "natural speech cadences" that "re-establish a connection with the original springs of our human being" ("Above" 72). Those cadences, Heaney believes, imbue poetry with distinct social utility: "And so it follows that a poetry which gives access to origin by thus embodying the lineaments of pristine speech will fulfill, at a level below theme and intention, a definite social function" (72). Heaney also turns to Robert Pinsky to explain his conception of poetry that is social without explicitly intending to be. Pinsky asks in an essay about the social function of the poet, "what, if anything, can a poet be said to owe other people in general, considered as a community? For what is the poet answerable?" (421). Pinsky is especially careful about the terminology he uses to investigate the poet's social commitments and finds a surrogate vocabulary to replace the

contested designation “political poetry”: “This [the question of what poetry is answerable for] is a more immediate—though more limited—way of putting the question than such familiar terms as ‘political poetry’” (421). It is instructive to ask what is so off-putting about the phrase “political poetry” that compels Pinsky to devise a “more limited” method of examining poetry’s public responsibilities? The phrase troubles Pinsky for the same reason that it troubles Heaney: it implies that poets write for causes rather than out of purely aesthetic impulses, that poetry’s aims are essayistic rather than artistic.⁴ But Pinsky, like Heaney, also has a strong sense of poetry’s intrinsic connection to social life, and he preserves his understanding of poetry as a social art by separating poetry that “answers, that promises to respond” and poetry that seeks a specific audience for direct address. Pinsky’s distinction here helps Heaney conceive of poetry that is able to redress society without sacrificing artistic integrity, and Heaney quotes the following Pinsky passage twice in his book on redress: an artist requires “not so much an audience as a need to answer, a promise to respond. The response may be a contradiction, it may be unwanted, it may go unheeded, it may be embraced but twisted . . . but it is owed, and the sense that it is owed is a basic requirement for the poet’s good feeling about the art. This need to answer, as firm as a borrowed object or a case debt, is the ground where the centaur walks” (Pinsky 423; qtd. in Heaney xiv, 191). In other words, the artist is not obliged to anyone in particular, no community, no one person; instead, the artist is only obliged to the artist. Committing oneself to an audience, Pinsky (and Heaney) suggests, risks resulting in “the interesting phenomenon of bad work by good artists” (423). To put it another way, a poetic answer can’t recognize itself as an answer; a poem’s speaker should never be aware that he or she is being heard. Once the need to speak to an

audience exceeds the need just to speak, poetry begins to disappear and some other mode of communication—what they might call politics—takes over.

For Brooks and Harrison, poetry and politics need not be separable categories. Each is fundamentally concerned with the same questions that Heaney and Pinsky ask about the poet's social role: in fact, Heaney, Pinsky, Brooks, and Harrison are all committed to poetry's social function. But whereas Heaney and Pinsky are tentative about uniting poetry and political concerns because they want to ensure that aesthetics won't take a backseat to activism, Brooks and Harrison do not worry so much about the vulnerability of art when responding to political circumstances. Further, they are both particularly alert to and preoccupied by their poetry's respective audiences; they are as concerned with poetic address as with poetic redress. Thus, Gloria Wade Gayles's observation that Brooks "has no interest in writing 'political' poems—how she hates the word" (*Conversations* xiv) and Brooks's own apparent resistance to that word have to be weighed against Brooks's qualifications of it: after all, when Brooks says, "I don't call anything I write political," she immediately follows that up with "but I'm moved by what is happening in the world just as anybody else would be" (124). Although we find her selecting, as Pinsky did, an alternative word for political—"Many of the poems that I'm reading on stages now come from my very first book, and are considered 'social.' I dread saying political" (162)—we should also recognize that she is not revealing discomfort with the word itself, nor is she questioning political content per se; instead, she is taking issue with the way both the word and such content have been perceived by, as Heaney calls them, "the grandees of aesthetics": "I think that word [political] has been abused," she says in another instance, "and often it is used to scold someone. You might be told that

you are a political poet as a kind of castigation. It's an accusation" (124). Brooks dreads the word not because of any particular problem with the idea of a poetry that takes up political concerns—much of her poetry does exactly that—but because she knows that the predominant line of thinking about political poetry is similar to that of Pinsky's and Heaney's: that to be overtly political is to imperil poetics. Brooks, in fact, saw poetry as a vehicle for action; for example, regarding divisions between black men and women that were occurring as the civil rights and feminist movements overlapped, Brooks remarks, "At no time must we allow whites, males or females, to convince us that we should split. I know there's a lot of splitting going on now. And I hope it's going to stop. I don't know what's going to stop it. Maybe some poets writing some good poems can help!" (110). Poetry, Brooks believed, holds the potential to ward off politically imposed divisiveness.

In many other discussions about poetry and politics throughout her career, Brooks describes her own lyrical impulses as having implicit and explicit political origins. A word she doesn't dread is "inspiration," a revered concept that aestheticians from Plato to Heaney have used to signify the mysterious or spiritual aspect of poetic agency, but she also explains that "agitation" (as opposed to Romantic "tranquility") is at least as necessary to her composition process as more serene forms of inspiration: "I make notes on the scene at the moment of 'inspiration'—and I'm really not afraid of that word. But 'emotion recollected in tranquility'? It seems to me that there has to be some kind of agitation within you in order to produce any kind of poem. So while I'm writing, I'm agitated, and I like to be" (68). A year later, she appears to take issue with the notion that black poetry is necessarily political: "Isn't that interesting that to be Black is to be political. That word doesn't bother me either. I don't sit down and say, well today I'm

going to write a political poem and it will scare all the whites. I don't have that in my mind at all. I really believe what the young said—that Black poetry is written by Blacks, about Blacks, to Blacks—and that is really all that I have in my mind” (84). The designation itself does not trouble her as an artist; what troubles her is a racist culture that marginalizes black people thereby making “black” an inevitably political category. She is pointing up the prevailing assumption that anything a black artist creates must be related to racism. Apparently, Brooks is one poet who needed not just “an answer, a promise to respond,” as Pinsky has it, but an audience comprised of her own community to share that answer with.

In fact, Brooks had always been attuned to that audience that her poetry addressed and its political and poetic implications. In 1983, when Gloria Hull suggested that her earlier work was not politically focused, Brooks once again questioned the unwieldy capaciousness of that term as well as the suggestion that her earlier, more formally traditional work wasn't radical: “You know, when you say ‘political,’ you really have to be exhaustive” (106). She refers Hull to her early famous poem, “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” which, as we have seen in the last chapter, not only portrays a black man who fends off the day-to-day deprivations of racism with garish flare but also speaks directly to her ostensibly white and decorous readers. While Heaney claims that poetry can counter real-world circumstances quite naturally by including equivalences of that world, Brooks troubles that notion by bringing into her poem the materials of a poor African American man's bathroom and closet and, at the same time, pressing her reader to examine the very poetic conventions that dictate what the appropriate raw materials for poetry are: “Now, at his bath, would you deny him lavender / Or take away the power of

his pine? / What smelly substitute, heady as wine, / Would you provide?" (*Blacks* 42). What's more, although her famous radicalization after the 1967 Second Fisk Writers' Conference has been passed down through literary history as a crisis of form in which Brooks had to throw off the poetic traditions she had mastered because they were Anglo-European, we have now come to understand her shift in consciousness not so much as a repudiation of "white" formal conventions (she never entirely relinquished traditional forms, and she regarded all of her poetry—traditional and free verse—as political black poetry throughout her career) but as both a deepened awareness that her audience is her community and an accelerated drive toward accessibility and immediacy.⁵ She would always maintain that poetry was "for anybody who wanted to consult it"; after 1967 she wanted to write not just "about blacks" (which she had always done) but also "to blacks" and in a style "that will appeal immediately but still might be understood on several levels" (120).

Harrison is also concerned with the audience of his poems. In "The Rhubarbarians," he exclaims in parentheses, "(I'd like to be the poet my father reads!)" (114). But he also recognizes that his audience is not necessarily going to include the readers he envisions; after all, he'd "like" his father to be one of his readers but says so in an aside because he knows that in reality his uneducated, working-class father doesn't read poetry. Instead, Harrison has an educated readership that comes to his work with its own expectations about poetry that Harrison wants to unsettle: "where the poems seem to become most satisfying in a 'literary way' to the readers of poetry, it is at precisely those moments that I want to remind them that there is a vast group of people who don't read poetry, and to remind them of the privilege of their literacy" (Harrison, Interview by

Haffenden 231). One way to remind his readers of this vast unprivileged group is through its combination of colloquial registers and arcane allusions: when Richard Haffenden asks Harrison if the “disconcerting idioms and references” in his poems are meant as “a subversive strategy” by which his readers would feel “arrested and even assaulted,” Harrison’s reply indicates that Haffenden has honed in on one of Harrison’s chief poetic methods, “Yes, very good” (231). Indeed, Harrison, like Brooks, is inclined not only to question but to make poetry out of his readers’ preconceptions:

when I’m conscious of satisfying the literate cultured reader of poetry . . . , I know that my next temptation is to take away his satisfaction by evoking the ghosts of the inarticulate, and by quoting them in the scale against poetry. I work to give the reader of poetry maximum gratification, but he has to pay for it: that literary frisson—*‘hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère’*—will cost you so much in social awareness, in the consciousness of social gaps and divisions. (232)

As Heaney does in his formulation of poetic redress, Harrison here configures poetry as a scale. But whereas Heaney seeks a balance between imagined and historical realities, Harrison aims to weigh language that has been deemed inarticulate against language that has been sanctioned for poetry. When the scales are weighed in this way—and Harrison is not so much concerned with achieving equilibrium, as Heaney is, but with tipping the scales—the reader is jolted (a “literary frisson,” Harrison says) into recognizing the ways even his or her own thinking is marked by “social gaps and divisions” in the form of prescriptions about the kinds of language that can generate poetry.

Heaney refers to Harrison and Pinsky when laying out his argument about poetry that can both engage with social conditions and maintain the transcendent or mystifying

properties of aesthetics. And yet although Heaney positions the two poets on opposite sides of his claim, Pinsky's ideas about poetry and social responsibility align with Harrison's work. Pinsky believes that artists need to feel an obligation simply to answer rather than an obligation to identify a certain audience or community. Poets can't, in other words, will their responses to groups or causes but must feel indeterminately compelled to respond to external conditions. Still, this spontaneous urge to respond is not enough by itself to make art: "before an artist can see a subject . . . the artist must transform it: answer the received cultural imagination of the subject with something utterly different. This need to answer by transforming is primary; it comes before everything else" (423). What Pinsky is saying is that inspiration and originality, not agendas, must be the driving force behind political poetry and that inspiration must be coupled with the poet's capacity to transform experience (what Heaney would call the ability to glimpse an alternative to reality) when that mystifying, unknowable urge to create strikes. And yet there is something intentional about Pinsky's description of poetic agency, too: he believes that poets can achieve the kind of transformation that he describes when they make material that is supposedly "unpoetic" their "task," material that is, say, "contaminated with particular political implications" (425). Pinsky regards this poetic task as his own: "Whatever important experience seems least poetic to me is likely to be my job" (425). The political, then, is material for poetry precisely because it appears so often to oppose the poetic.

Transforming the "least poetic" into poetry is Harrison's job as well. "The Rhubarbarians," for example, enacts the artistic metamorphosis that Pinsky describes, and with the ostensibly least poetic materials. The poem is the second in the ongoing

School of Eloquence series, a three-section sequence of over seventy sixteen-line “sonnets” that Harrison began before 1978 and which he was still adding to as recently as 2007, when his *Collected Poems* was published.⁶ “The Rhubarbarians” has two parts, each with four rhyming quatrains. The first part pits a mob of workers against a clothing mill owner and his minions; in the second part, the poet ruminates on his work as a translator and his relationship with his father. The second part’s final four lines vary the poem’s overarching quatrain structure by employing white space that makes the first two lines appear as single-line stanzas and the last two as a closing couplet. The poem’s rhymes are mostly alternating throughout, with some variance: the last stanza of the first section is composed of two couplets. That stanza considers (like Pinsky does) whether the material in the stanzas before it—namely, the apparently indecipherable language of the mob—is appropriate for poetry. Here are the first four stanzas:

Those glottals glugged like poured pop, each
rebarbative syllable, remembrancer, raise
‘mob’ *rhubarb-rhubarb* to a tribune’s speech
crossing the crackle as the hayricks blaze.

The gaffers’ blackleg Boswells at their side.
Horsfall of Ottiwells, if the bugger could,
’d’ve like to (exact words recorded) *ride*
up to my saddle-firths in Luddite blood.

What t’mob said to the cannons on the mills,

shouted to soldier, scab and sentinel
's silence, parries and hush on whistling hills,
shadows in moonlight playing knurr and spell.

It wasn't poetry though. Nay, wiseowl Leeds
pro rege et lege schools, nobody needs
your drills and chanting to parrot right
the *tusky-tusky* of the pikes that night.

The last stanza here reveals the lesson taught in school: that the material in the earlier stanzas cannot, in fact, make poetry. Initially, the "Nay" in the opening line may sound like this negative interjection is affirming the negative assertion just before it, as if the line were saying, "It wasn't poetry. No, wise official schools, it wasn't." And yet we are not hearing a "disaffected heckler crying out against the mystification of art" but a poet who, like Pinsky, is crying out against precepts for art. According to Pinsky, the poet's response to artistic decrees that warrant only certain kinds of material as poetic is a social response:

there is a dialectic between the poet and his culture: the culture presents us with poetry, and with implicit definitions of what materials and means are poetic. The answer we must promise to give is "no." Real works revise the received idea of what poetry is; by mysterious cultural means the revisions are assimilated and then presented as the next definition to be resisted, violated and renewed. What poets must answer for is the unpoetic. (426)

Indeed, Harrison answers his culture with a resounding “Nay,” and he does so in the name of the unpoetic. His “Nay” does not signify compliance with the sentiment in the sentence just before it but rather negates that sentence. “It wasn’t poetry though” is what the speaker has been taught by “wiseowl Leeds *pro rege et lege* schools.” Leeds, in northern England, is Harrison’s hometown city; *pro rege et lege* is the Latin motto of its coat of arms (which includes three owls) meaning “For King and Law.” The “Nay,” instead of concurring with or deferring to the previous claim about poetry, directly addresses the very entity—the Leeds school system—that imparts such dubious lessons in poetic suitability. Further, the poet doesn’t just contradict or correct this official line of thinking about poetry but repudiates it: No, wiseowl Leeds schools, it (the material in the previous stanzas) is poetry, and, further, “nobody needs / your drills and chanting” to make poetry.

In fact, the rote “wiseowl” ways of teaching poetry (methods made up of “drills and chanting”) encourage only memorization rather than substantive learning and understanding. What’s more, the sanctioned conventions of poems presumably taught during “drills and chanting”—how they should sound, the subject matter they should contain, the words they should employ—can themselves be insufficient to render adequately the histories of those who have been maligned, dispossessed, disenfranchised: people, in other words, who have been pushed to the edges of society, people like the rhubarbarians. What can adequately convey such marginalized histories is the very language of the marginalized, the diction they use, operating in either the traditional or free forms of poetry. In the case of “The Rhubarbarians,” the appropriate poetic word to “parrot right” is “tusky”—a north England colloquialism for rhubarb, a plant that

proliferates in northern English working-class regions like Leeds and is distributed from those regions to the rest of the United Kingdom.⁷ That repeated colloquialism itself is also distributed from Leeds via the poem. The word is able both to “parrot” the sound of steel pikes clashing against each other (or being sharpened) during the workers’ uprising that the poem depicts and to signify the regional speech of the embattled mob. The “*tusky-tusky* of the pikes that night,” the first part concludes, is poetry because it sounds out the battle, brings living language into the poem, and connects that language explicitly to the poem’s positioning of workers against business owners. To do all this in a pentameter stanza that employs the poetic conventions of alliteration (“Nay,” “nobody,” “needs,” “night”), enjambment (“Leeds // *pro rege et lege* schools,” “nobody needs // your drills”), and perfect rhymes (“Leeds” and “needs,” “right” and “night”) indicates that it is not formal methods the poem questions, for it relies on those methods, but prescriptions about the diction expected to constitute those forms. In other words, “tusky,” a regional word for a crop that flourishes in a working-class region, is transformed into a poetic word with the capacity to communicate a region’s history. The regional language of the rhubarbarians, then, is especially articulate and emphatically not barbaric, nor is it opposed to poetry. Instead, the language is “rhubarbaric”; it proliferates poetry out of the supposedly “unpoetic.”

In fact, the three previous stanzas flat out discount the notion that “It wasn’t poetry though” even before the poet directly addresses, and explicitly argues against, the Leeds education system. The argument has already been made. The poem opens with rhyming, highly rhythmic quatrains that impart the obscure history of a calamitous, early nineteenth-century working-class resistance by workers known as Luddites who violently

protested against the use of new industrial machinery that would replace people in jobs. The language of the poem is likewise calamitous, and not immediately semantically accessible. The stanzas are dense and disorienting with their glugging and popping utterances, blazing fires, obscure regional vocabulary and figures (“gaffers’ blackleg Boswells,” “Horsfall of Ottiwells”), and a mob—“t’ mob,” in the poet’s Leeds accent—that shouts “silence.” This occurs without any clear sense of context apart from the previous poem, the first in the *School of Eloquence* sequence, which compares the regional Leeds accent to a Luddite destroying a stocking frame: “Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress / clangs a forged music on the frames of Art, / the looms of owned language smashed apart!” (122). Language in “The Rhubarbarians” seems itself “smashed apart” in that meaning appears to have been subordinated to pure sound. As Carol Rutter explains, the semantic inaccessibility of the verse is part of the point: the “Rhubarbarian” poems “are difficult, and they mean to be, for their topic is struggle, and language is hard. The images are clotted. The scenes shift kaleidoscopically, and time slippages drop the reader into different centuries without warning” (145). The fact that Harrison provides a note defining “Tusky” but none to explain the poem’s other perplexing words corroborates Rutter’s claim that the confounding obscurity is the point: his local language requires additional information that he provides, and yet he doesn’t explain “gaffer’s blackleg Boswell’s” or “Horsfall of Ottiwells.” The entirely local expression “tusky” renders onomatopoeically the sound of the clashing pikes; the note makes its semantic meaning in Leeds vernacular explicit to elucidate the connection between the word’s sound and its local sense.

Difficulty is central to Harrison's work, and critics have perceived it in very different ways. For example, Blake Morrison suggests that Harrison generates tension between meter and syntax in order to demonstrate that his poems require arduous labor: "If the metre and syntax sometimes seem strained, this is precisely the point: his poems let us know that they have come up the hard way; they are written with labour, and out of the labouring classes, and on behalf of Labour Party aspirations" (57). And yet Harrison's meter is almost always exceptionally regular; in fact, if the syntax is strained, it is not because of the meter but because of the various kinds of diction at play; the meter actually lends pattern and regularity to the contortions caused by contrasting lexicons. Morrison also overstates Harrison's "Labour Party aspirations": a poem like "The Rhubarbarians" isn't difficult in order to manifest labor but because it enacts the difficulties caused by human division. Anthony Rowland also disagrees with Morrison's point about difficulty and labor. He claims that Harrison is not writing for the working classes but to reconcile his "simultaneously primitive and sophisticated self," establishing a "culture/barbarism dialectic" that "produces the awkward nature of Harrison's poetry" (265). For Rowland, local language is barbaric, and traditional form is cultivated; when the two come together in Harrison's poetry, they conflict: "In 'The Rhubarbarians,' the ghost of the classical sonnet clashes with the 'unpolished' Luddites' speech to produce linguistic awkwardness. By challenging the aesthetics of the Petrarchan, Shakespearian and [Meredithian] sixteen-line sonnets, Harrison mirrors the original linguistic struggle between the mill owners and the Luddites" (271). Yet Rowland mistakes semantic difficulty for awkwardness. The poem's texture at the purely sonic level, created by its meter, rhymes, and aural effects, all traditional poetic elements, is smooth and

mellifluous (consider, for instance, the alliterative *r* sound in the first stanza or the repeating *s* and *sh* sounds in the third). Further, Harrison doesn't "challenge" the sonnet form; rather, he puts the form to use:

I decided on the sixteen-line sonnet because not only can you make it do what the traditional octet-sestet fourteen-liner can do but also because you can use it, for example, as two octets—so that the dialectic can be stronger. It also has strong narrative possibilities when you use it in the form of four quatrains: I can use that narrative impulse to leave an up-beat which will carry on into the next poem. It is a very malleable form, with all the narrative possibilities of Meredith as well as all the single, one-off strengths of the traditional sonnet. (232)

Harrison uses traditional forms not to dispute tradition but because of its possibilities and its malleability: he employs the sixteen-line structure to put oppositional forms of speech into working relationships.

What we hear in "The Rhubarbarians" isn't merely awkwardness but a disruption of sound and sense. This disruption occurs because different forms of language are operating at the same time. He arranges those forms of speech in ways that unsettle our customary relation between sound and sense. The relation, though, is there. The poem is comprised of an onomatopoeic combination of words that indicate the sound of speech ("glottals glugged like poured pop" refers to the mob's voluble but incomprehensible utterances; the alliterative *cr* in "crossing the crackle as the hayricks blaze" mimics the crackling of fire; the sibilance in "What t' mob . . . / shouted to soldier, scab and sentinel / 's silence, parries and hush on whistling hills" renders the quietness that makes wind audible); metaphors that connect regionalisms to nature (shifting shadows and moonlight

play “knurr and spell,” an old English game); and, finally, colloquial registers that align the poet’s language with the language of the people in the poem (“if the bugger could / ’d’ve liked to”; “what t’ mob said . . . / ’s silence”). The turbulence generated from the combination of these different registers replicates the discombobulation caused by the divisiveness, violence, and barbarism of class division. The poem itself is a field of tumultuous linguistic activity.

But other structures order the tumult these structures release. Traditional verse form in “The Rhubarbarians”—quatrains, pentameter lines, rhymes and half-rhymes—generates steady rhythms and supplies an organizing scaffold: the first quatrain presents the mob’s speech, the second gives us Horsfall’s quoted language, the third pits both against each other, resulting in “silence, parries and hush on whistling hills.” The rhymes in this stanza where the confrontation occurs—“mills”/ “hills,” “sentinel”/“spell”—are conventional alternating rhymes (ABAB), but the half-rhymes between the two sets create an even more unified sound (AAAA). Moreover, the poem is framed by compound locutions coined by doubling colloquial terms: “*rhubarb-rhubarb*” and “*tusky-tusky*.” As we have seen, “tusky” is a regional referent for a Leeds plant, and rhubarb is the proper name of that plant. But “rhubarb,” like “tusky,” has other important functions in the poem. Harrison explains that “rhubarb” is the word used in the theater by extras when they want to simulate background conversations. The double connection of that word to Leeds and to theater (Harrison is a prolific playwright and translator of classical literature, as well as a filmmaker, though he has remarked on several occasions that all of the material he writes is poetry and indeed it is all written in verse form) suggested to him that his working-class experiences could be transformed into poetry:

I'd always thought that my life couldn't be written about. I remember the day I began to change. It's in the poem I called 'Rhubarbarians'. I used to go walking with my father near East Ardsley where the rhubarb fields were; *tusky*, as we called it. He told me that 98% of British rhubarb came from Leeds. And my Dad said, 'Oh I was in a play once, I was; I held a spear in *Julius Caesar* at school.' He said they taught him, as they do in the theatre, to make indescribable crowd noises by saying '*rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb*'. So I always had that sense that saying '*rhubarb*' was what my life was about, whereas the central literary life was somewhere else. ("In Conversation" 39)

The word "rhubarb" indicates the social class of the mob (they are merely extras) and the lack of value placed on their language (their speech makes sound but without sense). It also locates the poet squarely in his community and links him directly to his father (poet and father, who will appear in the second section, both speak in local idioms). And yet the poem employs the word not just to signify "indescribable crowd noises." Instead, each "rebarbative syllable" of the "mob *rhubarb-rhubarb*" is raised "to a tribune's speech" in resistance to the poem's two oppressive individuals: a "remembrancer," or royal debt collector, and Horsfall of Ottiwells. In fact, the poem pits the "mob *rhubarb-rhubarb*" and "*tusky-tusky*"—signifying the "indescribable crowd noises" of the rhubarbarians, their clashing pikes, and the Leeds plant—against the only quoted speech in the poem: Horsfall of Ottiwells' boast "that he wished to 'ride up to his saddle girths' in Luddite blood" (Thompson 560).⁸ It is Horsfall's language in the second stanza, not the mob's, that is barbaric.

As we have seen, critics commonly hear a discrepancy between Harrison's demotic registers and his poem's traditional forms and therefore perceive those elements to be in conflict. This perception typically involves equating form with bourgeois cultivation and constraint and regional speech with the oppressed, inarticulate working classes. Douglas Dunn, for instance, apprehends the relationship between Harrison's subject matter and what he believes to be the basest verse forms as ironic; their "sub-classical," "hurtfully lucid narrative outlines" emphasize the alleged lowness of their raw material: Harrison's "ironies are drawn from pentametric metricality and full rhymes—the philistine standard of verse—to subjects that otherwise subvert or denounce the mistaken political, social and literary expectations that those who uphold that standard tend to invest in it" ("Formal Strategies" 130). Harrison's "metre," Dunn claims, "is vigorous in playing off its classicism against a demotic Leeds background" ("Lyricism" 255). And yet Harrison utilizes verse forms to put different kinds of speech into working relationships that enact the disruption that class division creates. Traditional forms do not generate the disruption audible in his poems but help Harrison manage it.

Indeed, Harrison himself has explained the tension in his poems not as a result of poetic form conflicting with colloquial language but in terms borrowed from Basil Bernstein's theory of restricted and elaborated speech codes: "I'm building . . . potential division into the actual writing, conscious as I am of what are called the 'restricted' and the 'elaborate' codes. I play one form of articulation off against the other" (Interview by Haffenden 232). According to Bernstein, these codes are socially determined: the "two codes . . . are generated by particular forms of social relationships. They do not necessarily develop as a result of the speaker's innate intelligence. The level at which a

speaker operates a particular code may well be a function of his native ability, but the *orientation* is entirely a matter of the sociological constraints acting upon the speaker” (58). In Bernstein’s formulation, “restrictive codes” apply to tight-knit, circumscribed, relegated communities: because the language code in those spheres is closely shared, it is at once more predictable and less redundant than “elaborated codes”; fewer words and fewer syntactic variations are needed because the listener shares the code and is able to fill out meaning on his or her own. On the other hand, “elaborated codes” require “the speaker to elaborate verbally and to make explicit his discrete intent” because the code is “*person* rather than status oriented” (63). In other words, “elaborated codes” imply a higher social status in that the speaker’s individual intent directs communication rather than his or her location in the social structure. “Restricted codes,” in contrast, indicate lower social status: the speaker’s individual intent is limited as he or she communicates in a language that “shares . . . general social characteristics” (62). Harrison understands his own work as generating tension between these speech codes to draw out the divisions caused by classism. When Dunn locates this tension instead between poetic form and local language, he doesn’t account for the elaborated codes in Harrison’s poems (they are never all idiomatic) and assumes at the same time that poetic form is “elaborated” in nature and only has an ironical relationship to restricted forms of articulation. For Harrison, local language and poetry are foundational rather than conflicting elements: the “restricted” forms of speech, what he calls “the mother tongue, the early speech,” represent for him “the most formative linguistic part of your life” (232). Likewise, verse form is a “life-support system,” “associated with the heart beat, with the sexual instinct,

with all those physical rhythms which go on despite the moments when you feel suicidal” (236). Poetic form and regional speech in Harrison are intrinsically, not ironically, related.

Similarly to Dunne, Luke Spencer is inclined to pit the formal structure of “The Rhubarbarians” against its colloquial elements:

Demotic abbreviations, strongly emphasized at the fractured beginnings of two widely separated lines (‘d’ve liked’ and ‘s silence’), show the class struggle being waged between the grammar of proletarian radicalism and the law and order of bourgeois prosodic form: they insist upon the integrity of the cropper’s experience (and its continuity with the rest of working-class history) as something that wrenches at and threatens to pull apart the constraints of the text’s very traditional structure. (69)

Yet the elided phrase “d’ve liked” is not spoken by the workers but by the boss they’re revolting against: what Horsfall would have “liked” is to massacre the Luddites. Spencer proceeds to suggest, at least initially, that regional Leeds vernacular—what Pinsky would call the “unpoetic”—is at risk of buckling under what he considers “very traditional” formal constraints: “The same battle goes on in terms of rhythm and rhyme: the four or five stresses per line are constantly jostled around and interspersed with varying numbers of unstressed syllables; the rhyme-scheme at last gives way under pressure as the final stanza resolves itself into a pair of rhyming couplets that enact the Luddites’ hard-won solidarity” (69). In other words, the poem’s turbulence is, for Spencer, a result of its formal arrangements.

And yet structurally the poem is exceptionally uniform: the lines are almost all end-stopped, the rhymes are exact except for “could” and “blood” (although in different

accents they very well could rhyme fully), the stanzas are quatrains, and the meter is pentameter. In fact, rhyme for Harrison is “not a restrictive thing, it’s actually an instrument of discovery”: “strong forms and rhymes . . . keep the subject alive and still raw till the last, until the true form has been discovered” (44-45). In “The Rhubarbarians,” local language doesn’t contend with poetic tradition as a representation of constraining bourgeois culture; rather, that language is, like the poem’s other linguistic registers, placed in formal patterns to generate rhythm, to create aural connections, and to provide structural coherence. If in Spencer’s formulation, the poem’s traditional conventions stand for oppressive social forces (“bourgeois prosodic form,” he calls it) then wouldn’t the fact that the alternating rhyme scheme “gives way” to rhyming couplets (a prosodic form that isn’t “philistine,” as Dunn says, but that is itself an especially substantial literary tradition) indicate that form has overcome the “grammar of proletarian radicalism” in this supposed battle? Spencer’s deduction that the transformation from alternating rhymes to couplets “enact[s] the Luddite’s hard-won solidarity” does not actually corroborate a conflict between working-class grammar and poetic form. Instead, if the couplets convey Luddite solidarity, then their speech and the poem’s form are in solidarity. The poem’s collaboration of traditional poetic form and colloquial language has been disallowing all along the grammar school dictum that working-class language and history “wasn’t poetry.”

Still, it’s not entirely surprising that poetic form in *The School of Eloquence* series could be construed as representative of oppressive culture. As mentioned earlier, the poem that opens the sequence and immediately precedes “The Rhubarbarians,” “On Not

Being Milton,” seems to suggest as much. Linguistic activity there is as unsettling as it is in the first few stanzas of “The Rhubarbarians”:

The stutter of the scold out of the branks
of condescension, class and counter-class
thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass
of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks.
Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress
clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
the looms of owned language smashed apart! (112)

In this stanza, the utterance of a “scold,” which denotes “a person (esp. a woman) of ribald speech” but also connotes “skald,” an archaic Scandinavian word for poet, is released from the “branks” (“an iron framework” used to muzzle scolds as punishment) of upper class “condescension” in a “lumpen” huddle of “glottals” and “morphemes” (“lumpen” suggests lumpy but is also an abbreviation of “lumpenproletariat,” a term to deride the working classes as “boorish, stupid, [and] unenlightened”). The syllables of regional speech are compared to an iron hammer pounding on “the frames of Art, the looms of owned language.” This sixteen-line “sonnet,” Spencer suggests, is itself a frame of art, a machine to be destroyed just as the Luddites destroyed the stocking frames meant to replace them: “the central tension throughout is that between the ‘Ludding’ impulse to smash the ‘frames of Art’ and the fact—so blatantly foregrounded—that the ‘looms of . . . language’ are now ‘owned’ as much by Harrison himself as by the ruling class” (68). What blatantly foregrounds this “fact,” Spencer implies, is the poem’s form. According to him, Harrison’s dexterity with language, his “dizzying display of ingenuity,” collides

with the smashing of “Art” the poem envisions because the poet is making “Art” out of traditional form. He’s making, in other words, the very kind of machine the poem wants to dismantle.

And yet the poem doesn’t depict working-class dialect dissembling the poem’s structure, nor does it equate form with the “looms of owned language.” Form is also not, as Cécile Marshall (Nantes) claims, Harrison’s “way of proving that a poet from working-class origins can excel as much as anybody else in an art form that was presented as the exclusive ‘speech of kings’ when he was at the elitist Leeds Grammar School” (131).⁹ On the contrary, Harrison employs traditional verse form to demonstrate that working-class speech makes its own music when that speech is arranged poetically and that such music is like a hammer smashing apart the frames of “Art” with a capital A, art that has been sanctioned as Art by “the grandees of aesthetics.” Harrison doesn’t write in traditional verse forms to prove himself but to repudiate the systems that operate against his community. He masters meter so that, as he says, “people would have to pay attention” (Haffended 236). “On Not Being Milton” thus doesn’t dispute its own sonnet-like form; it utilizes that form to argue that dictates about the proper diction for poetry are exclusionary. It’s titled as such not because Harrison correlates Milton and the English poetic tradition with oppression or because, as Marshall argues, “the poets he discovered avidly at school gave him models of eloquence, [but] . . . were inadequate to come to terms with linguistic blocks” (127). Rather, Harrison calls his poem “On Not Being Milton” to conjure the “mute inglorious Milton”—a talented poet without the opportunities that Milton had—that Thomas Gray imagines in his famous “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (671). “Three cheers,” Harrison’s poem exclaims, raising the proverbial

plebian pint glass, “for mute ingloriousness!” Indeed, the poem doesn’t destroy the sixteen-line “sonnet”—it is a sixteen-line “sonnet” despite the fact that it opens by suggesting its own destruction: the first quatrain proclaims that “these sixteen lines” have been “Read and committed to the flames.” And yet, as Byrne notes, the poem “believes” this “claim to have read and committed to the flames the poem’s sixteen lines” by its very existence (*H, v. & O* 56). “On Not Being Milton” is not “self-defeating” (Spencer 68). Instead, it employs traditional poetic form to compare vernacular accents in poetry to the impact of a “cast iron Enoch” (a “sledgehammer used by the Luddites,” Harrison’s note tells us) during a working-class revolt in order to question the very concept of “owned language” (and owned poetic form) and to draw out the linguistic divisions inherent in classist ideas about ownership and art.

In the second part of “The Rhubarbarians,” Harrison continues to refute standard notions about “owned language,” mobilizing the meanings of “rhubarb” that signified speech in the first section as background noises, nonsense, and heated argument. In the second section, local language is used for more refined purposes; it takes us from the Luddite revolt and Harrison’s grammar school to—as the poem’s parenthetical subtitle, “On translating Smetana’s *Prodaná Nevesta* for the Metropolitan Opera, New York,” indicates—his career as a professional librettist. The speaker despairs that the difficult work of retaining clarity when translating languages has the effect of making his production as incomprehensible as the “*rhubarb-rhubarb*” that extras mutter during performances:

Finale of ACT II. Though I resist
blurring the clarity of *hanba* (shame)

not wanting the least nuance to be missed

syllables run to rhubarb just the same . . . (114)

In other words, all language has the capacity to elude clarity: local speech, standard English, translations for operas; it can all “run to rhubarb.” The poet’s job is to “resist / blurring the clarity,” to save “the least nuance” from being “missed.” The nuance that Harrison stumbles on here is the Czech word for shame. The ellipsis preempts his reflections on linguistic opacity as the poet-speaker worries that the preceding stanza’s obscure references to opera, the foreign word, perhaps even the use of “rhubarb” to represent jumbled speech would in fact “blur the clarity” for an uneducated, working-class reader like his father:

Sorry, dad, you won’t get that quatrain

(I’d like to be the poet my father reads!)

It’s all from you once saying on the train

how most of England’s rhubarb came from Leeds.

In a sense, “The Rhubarbarians,” and *The School of Eloquence* sequence as a whole, is “all from” Harrison’s father. For his father’s remarks on the train about rhubarb and Leeds do more to activate his poetic imagination than the “drills and chanting” he learned at Leeds *pro rege et lege* schools. In fact, the *Eloquence* series charts the development of the poet from a young student learning his place in British society to the adult, erudite poet who sets his home speech in traditional verse forms in part to reconcile his relationship with his father. That relationship requires resolution because it has been fractured by class distinctions: the son’s education and his artistic vocation and successes

threaten to divide father and son because they lift the son out of their formerly shared social sphere.

And setting local speech to traditional verse forms does not bring the son back into that strata but enacts the disarray that social division creates and ultimately to imply the erasure of such social divides. The stanza above apostrophizes his father because he wants to honor him for elucidating the connection between his communal origins and poetry. It is not incidental that the task of translating the word *hanba* into English facilitates this address. The poet-speaker acknowledges not just that his father is a source for his poetry but that it is precisely issues of clarity that prevent his father from reading his poetry: he “won’t get” quatrains like the one before it. Clarity is what the poet struggles to achieve; he doesn’t want to lose any subtleties in his translation but perceives his English words losing their original linguistic sense. The central anxiety in “The Rhubarbarians,” then, is not between poetic form and language but how to make art distinct enough to enact the disturbances caused by hierarchical social organization and honor one’s community when that community is relegated to the lowest rungs of class structure. Harrison wants a poetry that will challenge oppressive systems of stratification and address those located at the bottom of those hierarchies.

The word “rhubarb” in the poem’s second section furnishes the poet with an instrument both to illustrate the disruptions of economic disparity and ennoble his disparaged community. Again, the transformed word in the poem’s first section was “tusky,” the colloquialism for the Leeds vegetable. Its repetition “parrot[s]” a local history that the poet has been taught is improper material for poetry. In other words, the poem makes poetry out of supposedly unpoetic events by putting local language to

rhythm, rhyme, and meter. Similarly, the second part of “The Rhubarbarians” transforms the word “rhubarb” by infusing it with a multitude of complex semantic and sonic functions (consider, for instance, the alliteration in “each / rebarbative syllable, remembrancer, raise / ‘mob’ *rhubarb-rhubarb* / to a tribune’s speech”). The word at once denotes the vegetable and communicates by way of its theatrical use to mime background conversations that all language risks evading its own subtleties: all language “runs to rhubarb.” The poet believes it is his job to preserve the nuances of language in the face of obfuscation, and the word “rhubarb” is a tool for upholding the nuanced connection between location and poetry.

Indeed, the word for the local vegetable that also indicates the collective speech of the “rhubarbarians,” the poet’s local community, becomes an adjective to modify the various elements of an opera that he has translated and conducted:

Crotchets and quavers, rhubarb silhouettes,
dark-shy sea-horse heads through waves of dung!
Rhubarb arias, duets, quartets
soar to precision from our common tongue.

To use Harrison’s terms, one “form of articulation” here is musical art and its technical language: “crotchets and quavers” refer to the varying lengths of notes that comprise the songs—the “arias, duets, quartets”—of opera. Another “form of articulation” in the stanza is local language: the word “rhubarb” designates the poet’s Leeds background by denoting its main crop and connoting the language of his working-class community, the “mob *rhubarb-rhubarb*” of the first section that crossed “the crackle as the hayricks blaze[d]” in revolt. The word “Rhubarb” has gone from indicating the incomprehensible

sounds of a mob's outcries during a workers' revolution to conveying the sonic and visual activity that occurs on an opera stage during a performance: the "silhouettes" are "rhubarb silhouettes"; the "arias, duets, and quartets" are "Rhubarb arias, duets, and quartets." Rhubarb, with its large leaves and long stalks that grow in dense fields, renders the shadows of performers on a dimly lit stage, the shapely aural contours of the music, and even the rows of audience members in the darkened theater ("dark-shy sea-horse heads through waves of dung!" the poet exclaims as if surprised by his own comparison of the crowded auditorium to a ground of manure). While "Rhubarb" and "barbarian" combine to create the term "rhubarbarian," thus equating the local vegetable with the primitive in the first section, the second section's play on that Harrisonian term, "Rhubarb arias," equates the local not with the uncivilized but, on the contrary, with art that is soaring, precise, and generated from a "common tongue."

Harrison puts the word for the common vegetable to uncommon use to play what Bernstein calls the restrictive and elaborated codes of language against each other. If restrictive codes are the linguistic outcome of social constraints, as Bernstein tells us they are, then the poet releases that code from its shackles by utilizing what would be categorized as elements of a restrictive language in a particularly unrestrictive fashion: the particular meaning of "tusky" is restricted to Leeds, but the repetition of *t* and *k* that sounds out the clashing pikes in a battle creates an effect available to any ear. Likewise, that vegetable's standard referent "rhubarb" is both employed to mimic indecipherable guttural chatter and to describe an opera. According to Bernstein, syntax, not vocabulary, determines whether or not a code is restricted or elaborated:

These speech systems or linguistic codes are not defined in terms of vocabulary. If it is difficult to predict the syntactic options or alternatives a speaker uses to organize his meanings over a representative range of speech, this system of speech will be called an elaborated code. In the case of an elaborated code, the speaker will select from a wide range of syntactic alternatives and so it will not be easy to make an accurate assessment of the organizing elements he uses at any one time. However, with a restricted code, the range of alternatives, syntactic alternatives, is considerably reduced and so it is much more likely that prediction is possible. In the case of restricted code, the vocabulary will be drawn from a narrow range but this in itself is no indication that the code is a restricted code.

(57)

Words by themselves, then, do not govern which category classifies a particular form of speech. That depends on how the words are used in sentences. “Tusky” is an idiomatic alternative for “rhubarb” used by Harrison’s working-class community: in the context of their speech, it would be a syntactical element of a restricted code (in fact, it’s so “restricted” that Harrison includes a note explaining what it means in Leeds). In the poem, however, the word is used syntactically “to parrot right . . . the pikes that night.” It is employed, in other words, unpredictably and “elaborately” to sound out the battle between the workers and their employers even though restricted codes are meant to be “more predictable and less redundant” than elaborated codes. Similar to this elaborated use of “tusky” is the use of the word “rhubarb” in the poem’s second section. At the beginning of the poem’s first section, the word signifies the speech of a mob—a speech that would fall into Bernstein’s restricted code because it is not immediately available to

those outside of the social group that speaks it. And yet by the end of the poem, the word for the vegetable pertains to an opera. Its use in the poem's last stanzas is entirely unpredictable—"rhubarb" conveys notes, movements on a stage, songs, and a crowd's applause—and the word is repeated (again, not a facet of a restricted code because restricted codes are not "redundant," Bernstein says) seven times throughout the poem.

Harrison makes these uses of "tusky" and "rhubarb," as Bernstein has it, "*person* rather than status-oriented" (63). "Rhubarb" connects not just the poet to his father but to the poet's working-class upbringing to poetry: the son's poems come "all from [his father] once saying . . . how . . . rhubarb came from Leeds." Little wonder, then, that the poet's baton in the concluding stanza metamorphoses into a rhubarb stalk:

The uke in the attic manhole once was yours!

Watch me on the rostrum wave my arms—

mi little stick of Leeds grown *tusky* draws
galas of rhubarb from the MET-set palms.

The uke and "mi little stick" refer back to the second section's epigraph, lyrics from a George Formby song, a popular comic singer-songwriter in England who entertained viewers and listeners with snappy rhymes set to ukulele music and who epitomizes the kind of "poet" Harrison's father would have paid attention to.¹⁰ But the figure of Formby doesn't stand between the poet and his father; rather, the poet utilizes Formby's ditty to connect himself to his father. The epigraph tells of how a "*Band conductor*" "*lost his baton*" and how Formby "*jumped in his place and conducted the band / With mi little*

stick of Blackpool Rock.” Blackpool is a seaside town frequented by the working-class residents of northern England. Harrison associates Formby’s ukulele, his “little stick of Blackpool rock,” with his father’s own ukulele and then connects it to himself: the “uke” in the attic that “once” belonged to his father, the poem implies, has been inherited by Harrison. Further, just as Formby’s “little stick” was made from local material, so is Harrison’s: “mi little stick of Leeds grown *tusky*,” he calls his instrument.

That the last four lines are presented as two isolated lines followed by a couplet rather than as a quatrain increases the emotional heft of the poem’s ending. Within the poem’s overall quatrain structure, the lines still sound like a quatrain but, with white space surrounding the second line, they no longer look like a quatrain. That space creates a dramatic pause directly after the revelation that the uke binds the poet and his father, suggesting that when in the next line after the white space the poet implores his father to “Watch me on the rostrum wave my arms,” he may be addressing the dead. Instilled in Harrison’s conducting of the opera (and his conducting of the poem) are his own local influences, anxieties, and attachments, and he wishes his father could hear the “mob” sound of “rhubarb” in the applause of the affluent audience at the Metropolitan opera house. The clapping of their “palms” correlates figuratively to the poet’s “little stick”: they join their literal “palms,” but the word “palm” also suggests something of a “tusky,” earthen quality. The poem not only employs local language to enact the disarray of social divisions and to twist restricted and elaborated linguistic codes but to depict the “MET-set” honoring a “Loiner,” a term for residents of Leeds (“Loiner” *OED*).¹¹ In this moment, familial relations have been reconciled, and class divisions have been dissolved.

“Loiner” is another important word for Harrison. He used it to title his first book-length collection of poems, *The Loiners* (1970).¹² The word refers to people from Harrison’s hometown and signifies, according to him, not just “citizens of Leeds, [but] *citizens* who bear their loins through the terrors of life, ‘loners’” (“Dr. Agrippa” 34). The book portrays its various “Loiners” as people suffering the damaging effects of a constricting society, damage inflicted on the most basic of human conditions and instincts: physical health and sexuality. For instance, the opening poem elegizes Thomas Campey, an impoverished bookseller afflicted with *tabes dorsalis*, a degenerative spinal condition caused by untreated syphilis that is exacerbated by Campey lugging heavy books around Leeds to sell:

Thomas Campey, who, in each demolished home,
Cherished a Gibbon with a gilt-worked spine,
Spengler and Mommsen, and a huge, black tome
With Latin titles for his own decline:

Tabes dorsalis; veins like flex, like fused
And knotted flex, with a cart on the cobbled road,
He drags for life old clothing, used
Lectern bibles and cracked Copeland Spode. (13-14)

The poem connects Campey’s deterioration not to the activity that would have led to the contraction of a sexually transmitted disease but to a life in which “huge, black tome[s]” are both a source of survival and deprivation. These large books, “every pound of [their] dead weight” cause pain to Campey because they place additional strain on his already

compromised “back, / Squeezed lungs and damaged heart.” But they are not just physically debilitating; they represent the formal education to which a Loiner like Campey hasn’t had sufficient access. Further, as Rutter explains, they indicate societal collapse: “The books on his handcart are histories of civilisation’s terminal decline [Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Mommsen’s *The History of Rome*, and Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*]. Their gilt spines are straight, but they’re breaking Campey’s spine: he too is in terminal decline” (126). The spines of the books may or may not be “straight,” but they are gilded and cherished by Campey, and as such they stand in contrast to the dilapidated houses of Leeds and Campey’s ratty clothing, secondhand bibles, and damaged pottery. And yet even as Campey reveres his books, there is a tacit indifference about them: that they Latinize the name of the disorder they contribute to implies a certain impersonal disconnection between the content of the volumes and Campey. The poem suggests that what eventually kills Campey is not simply the poor bookseller’s physical condition but the tomes he sells to make a living and the restricted opportunities they represent in a world of demolished homes, old clothing, used bibles, and cracked Copeland Spode.¹³

Other poems in *The Loiners* more explicitly equate social conditions and restrained sexuality. In “Ginger’s Friday,” “Allotments,” and “The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe,” for example, sexual repression results in, respectively, child abuse, self-disgust, and fatal confinement.¹⁴ The adolescent John “Ginger” Kelly is savagely beaten by both his Catholic father and his neighbor, Mr. Daley, for peering in on Daley and his wife having sex. Ginger prays the Hail Mary in Latin and gets stuck at the word *peccata*, Latin for “sin,” on his way toward a particularly brutal punishment that leaves him

“blubbing” and inhaling the repulsive “burning rubber and burnt bacon smell” of the leather belts he is beaten with. “Allotments” also associates pubescent sexuality with guilt and violence. In that poem, a pair of teenagers are caught in secret sexual liaison outside a putrid slaughterhouse by a “Pole” employed there who, the poem’s speaker surmises, “had smelt / far worse at Auschwitz and Buchenwald” (18-19). The speaker goes to bed that night conflating his youthful lust with what he imagines to be the rancid odor of concentration camps: “I smelt / Lust on myself, then smoke,” he says in a bout of sleeplessness, “[. . .] and I cried.”

It is easy to imagine such harsh castigation turning these young characters into an adult like Peanuts Joe, the unstable character in the poem between “Ginger’s Friday” and “Allotments” who is singled out by his community for his illicit sexual compulsions. Peanuts Joe is an obsessive masturbator and exhibitionist—“the *-nuts* bit [in Peanuts] really *-nis* [for penis]”—and his name becomes, after his death, a term for all public defacements: “his sad name / Was bandied as a dirty backstreet Hess, /A masturbator they made bear the blame / For all daubed swastikas, all filthy scrawl / In Gents *and* Ladies, YANK GO HOME” (16-17). The poem equates Joe’s penis and his proclivity for exposing himself and masturbating in parks with war imagery just as Joe’s fellow Loiners assumed he had shellshock even though he was never in the army:

He fired and loaded in his handkerchief.

Some said that it was shell-shock. They were wrong.

.....

In allotment dugouts, nervous of attack,

Ambushing love-shadows in the park,

His wishes shrapnel, Joe's ack-ack *ejac-*
ulatio shot through the dark

Strewn, churned up trenches in his head.

Joe is not particularly dangerous (the poem implies his harmlessness by referring to him as "the gormless one," a British idiom for lacking sense). He has a troubled, "nervous" relationship to his own sexuality that sends him to "allotment dugouts" of his own making where he ambushes only "love-shadows," his "shrapnel" is merely his anomalous "wishes," and his unwell, compulsive mind creates "trenches" in which to hide.

That the poem communicates Joe's covert activities in the park with metaphors of war reveals its sympathy for Joe and its repudiation of his condemnatory society. Joe's masturbating in shadows is described in the language of war while war and its absurdities (swastika souvenirs, for instance) are precisely what is lauded at a local veteran's day ceremony:

'VD Day' jellies, trestle tables, cheers

For Ruskis, Yanks and Desert Rats with guns

And braces dangling, drunk; heaped souvenirs:

Swastikas, Jap tin hats and Rising Suns.

The Victory bonfire settled as white ash.

The accordion stopped Tipperarying.

The music stops when Joe exposes himself at the ceremony. He is subsequently incarcerated and ultimately found "guttled like a fish / On army issue blades." The "VD Day" exposing of "poor Penis" Joe (no longer "Peanuts Joe") becomes not just the act of a mentally unhealthy person but expresses the poem's own defiance against a system that

violently suppresses sexuality and then aggressively disciplines behavior that may derive from such suppression. The “VD Day” crowd censures Joe’s metaphorical war with his own sexuality while celebrating real-world war with “cheers,” “souvenirs,” a “bonfire,” and the jovial, light-hearted “Tipperarying” of an “accordion.”

In “*The Loiners*,” Harrison did not yet bring his own life fully into his poetry. As we have seen, he first envisioned a way to do that with *The School of Eloquence* poems, beginning with “The Rhubarbarians.” The genesis for that poem was Harrison’s father telling Harrison that rhubarb came from Leeds and that his father had once been instructed to repeat the word “rhubarb” when playing an extra in a school play. This connection between Leeds and speech would eventually reveal to Harrison that his local language could be a way to bring his autobiography into poems that also examine divisive social structures. What Harrison eventually learned from his father’s explanation of the word “rhubarb” is that the presentation of different forms of speech in poetry could allegorize the relationships between different classes. The epigraph to *The School of Eloquence* reveals that Harrison took his title from a phrase in fellow Loiner E. P. Thompson’s study *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1966): Thompson explains that a ticket for entrance into a covert meeting of the London Corresponding Society, a group seeking to reform Parliament in the eighteenth century, read “*Admit for the Season to the School of Eloquence*” (174). Thompson famously argued in his book that class is a relationship rather than an abstract concept: “By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is an *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a ‘structure’, nor even as a ‘category’, but

as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” (9). Harrison’s poems often read like poetic renderings of Thompson’s notion that class signifies unequal relations rather than categories. In “The Rhubarbarians,” for instance, we hear, explicitly and implicitly, disparate forms of speech: Harrison’s communal “*rhubarb-rhubarb*,” Horsfall’s violent threats, decrees about poetry by Leeds *pro rege et lege* schools, the sound of pikes clashing in the repetition of the colloquialism “tusky,” George Formby’s demotic ukulele lyrics, the Czech word for “shame” in an opera’s second act, Harrison’s father’s factoid about England’s rhubarb, the poet’s imploration that his father watch him as he conducts an opera, and the applause of an upscale audience. We also hear, as I have been arguing, the disturbance these registers create when they are placed in relation to each other.

And yet traditional verse form provides coherence: the poem conveys the turbulence of those linguistic relationships in measured, highly organized rhyming pentameter quatrains. Colin Nicholson’s estimation of Harrison’s traditional forms, like Dunn’s and Spencer’s, points up the propensity of critics to insist that poetic tradition perpetuates social hierarchies. He implies that Harrison’s employment of those verse forms amounts to an appropriation of high culture in order to raise low cultural material into that elevated domain: “Nothing if not an interventionist in the economies of literary form, Harrison who has habitually pitted himself ‘against the most traditional verse forms’, incorporates previously possessed models of eloquence into his own terms, redistributing their energies by bringing into coexistence the languages of poetry and of demotic speech ‘in a way new to English poetry’” (60). But Nicholson misquotes Harrison here: Harrison doesn’t say he sets himself “against the most traditional verse

forms” but “against the most difficult traditional verse forms” (“Dr. Agrippa” 33). To set oneself against difficulty is quite a different thing from setting oneself against tradition. Harrison explains that he writes in difficult traditional forms because “[i]t had to be hard work, and it was, and it still is” (33). The difficulty of the verse forms matches the difficulty of the content: he not only employs those verse forms to relate incongruous materials but to amplify the disorder of those relations while undergirding them with regularity, rhythm, and a cohesive structure. He does not, then, position himself against traditional verse form but works within those forms to control the turbulence his poems create.

The Loiners is not as expressly concerned with forms of speech as Harrison’s subsequent poetry is, nor is it, for the most part, autobiographical apart from the fact that the bulk of the poems portray characters from the same city where Harrison grew up.¹⁵ Still, his earlier preoccupations with corporeality do connect to his later concerns with local language in that speech is, like sexuality and bodily health, an elemental, visceral factor of human experience. Indeed, Harrison was always probing the effects of social division on the most fundamental levels of personhood: *The School of Eloquence* adds speech to Harrison’s earlier method of analogizing the effects of societal stratification on the individual with varied images of physicality. In fact, in *The Loiners*’ longest poem, “The White Queen,” local language was already emerging for Harrison as a strategy for depicting the consequences of social division on his characters.

Although a Loiner is a person from Leeds, “The White Queen” is not set in England.¹⁶ Rather, the sequence’s characters are expats from northern England who reside in colonial Africa at the moment Britain is releasing its imperial grip there.¹⁷

Harrison, who moved to Nigeria in 1962 to be a lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University, has spoken about how living in Africa allowed him to gain an especially clear view of class inequalities back home and, more specifically, to focus in on those disparities as they unfolded within the British education system: “What Africa did for me was literally to put in perspective my own education: it’s one of the reasons why *The School of Eloquence* begins with a poem to Africans. I found the drama of my own education dramatically posed in black and white: people coming from illiterate backgrounds and reading about Wordsworth’s daffodils because it was set in their exam papers, when they didn’t know what a fucking daffodil was” (Interview with Haffenden 236). Harrison here isn’t objecting to Wordsworth’s daffodils per se but to assumptions that daffodils are universal images that everyone would be familiar with. His time in Africa revealed to him the inadequacy of such assumptions: racism and colonialism had the effect of making discrepancies that might be inconspicuous within the borders of England and across communities of the same race particularly salient. In other words, Loiners might be more familiar with daffodils than Africans would be, but rhubarb and tusky would more aptly convey the experience of a Loiner than daffodils would just as Nigeria would have its own poetic corollaries for its people.

The *School of Eloquence* poem for Africans that Harrison refers to above is “On Not Being Milton”; its epigraph explains that it is “for Sergio Vieira & Armando Guebuza,” poets and leaders of FRELIMO, the Marxist party in Mozambique where Harrison lived for four months in 1971 (Rylance 120). The poem’s first stanza announces the poetic objective of the entire sequence as a return to origins:

Read and committed to the flames, I call

these sixteen lines that go back to my roots
my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,
my growing black enough to fit my boots.

These lines allude to another political figure from a colonized land, Martinican poet, activist, and parliamentarian Aimé Césaire. The French phrase in the third line is the title of Césaire's landmark 1939 book-length poem, which translates to *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. In that poem, Césaire put forth his famous concept of Negritude, which evolved into a formidable Marxist-influenced literary movement of black, French-speaking writers who rejected European colonialism and sought to reconnect with Africa.¹⁸ Rick Rylance explains that what attracted Harrison to Césaire were the similarities in the troubled relationships that existed between both poets' formal educations and their local spheres:

There is plenty . . . to appeal to Harrison in Césaire. *Cahier* was written, in 1938, on the eve of Césaire's return to Martinique after seven years of education abroad. Like much of Harrison's work, it is preoccupied with the social context of language, and dual feelings of sympathy with, and separation from, a native culture. 'On Not Being Milton', therefore, describes 'growing black enough' to return to his roots—a phrase with a distinctively black resonance after Alex Haley's *Roots* of 1976. (123)

For Rylance, the word “black” equates Harrison's own experiences with the experience of enslaved Africans. He also hears hinted at in that last line the colloquialism “too big for your boots.” The idiom indicates to Rylance that Harrison is actually questioning his

correlation of African history and his own situation growing up in working-class England; Harrison, Rylance believes, employs

his verbal dexterity to gain a distance on the idea even as it is advanced. For behind the identification with (even appropriation of) this black experience, lurks a northern phrase . . . : growing too big for your boots—becoming conceited, having grand ideas. The poet sees himself through the eyes of his family (he now has cultural pretensions), but he also implies he is too assuming in aligning himself with Césaire’s black predicament. The uniting idea is found in the blackness of coal. Harrison’s family worked in the mining industry which forms so much of Yorkshire working-class culture. . . . One meaning for the initially-puzzling opening . . . is therefore: I have read (been educated) and committed this older culture, like coal, to the flames, but am now returning. (123)

The speaker throughout *The School of Eloquence* is self-conscious about the fact that his education separates him from his family: that disposition drives many of the poems. But he doesn’t criticize himself for assuming grand ideas and pretensions; rather, he criticizes assumptions that certain classes of people (say, working-class coal miners in northern England, native Africans in colonial Nigeria, French-speaking black writers in Martinique, nineteenth-century Luddite revolutionaries, his baker father in Leeds) are incapable of communicating grandly without pretense. In fact, the tone of “On Not Being Milton” is not tentative but confident and assertive: the poet doesn’t commit an older culture to the flames but declares himself “Read and committed to the flames” of the Luddite-like linguistic battle in the next stanza where his local accent—“Each . . . Leeds stress” —makes a new poetic music to counter prescriptions that dictate what “Art” should

sound like. He doesn't doubt himself but acclaims the "mute" voices of the uneducated and the low-paid: "Three cheers for mute ingloriousness! // Articulation is the tongue-tide's fighting." He announces defiantly that he has become metaphorically "black" enough in the sense of Negritude—self-identified with his coal-mining community, connected to his working-class ancestry—to fit his boots before proceeding to smash "the frames of Art / the looms of owned language."¹⁹ Harrison doesn't appropriate black experience; rather, he perceives in racism and colonialism a magnification of other forms of oppression. He is inspired by Negritude, particularly its conviction that origins and heritage can resist oppressive forces: when he aligns himself with the Luddites, he is also reaching back to his historical roots to fight the organizational structures that demean his community.

"Articulation" of the supposedly inarticulate is Harrison's weapon in this fight; it means to him "the power over words," and its "supreme form . . . , the highest eloquence" is "poetry" ("Facing Up" 437). He makes a point of identifying with Gray's imagined "mute inglorious Milton" rather than with the real Milton because he wants to join a literary tradition that speaks on behalf of the tongue-tied. This mute Milton turns local language into poetry, an aesthetic transformation with political ramifications: to make poetry out of the speech of the marginalized is to question structures ("frames of art"; "looms of owned language") that rank forms of speech just as they rank people. And yet Harrison understands this transformation to be Miltonic, too, in that it upholds as inextricable the same connection between public and private life that he finds in Milton's poems: "Milton's sonnets range from the directly outward to the tenderly inward, and . . . the public address of the one makes a clearing for the sacred privacy of the other"

(Preface 9). Harrison casts himself as a poet who speaks for those who don't have the opportunities to write poetry, but Milton also reinforces Harrison's sense that occurrences in the social world recur in private, individual contexts. "The Rhubarbarians," we have seen, ranges from the outward to the inward: it begins with an historical battle over a century before the speaker's birth and ends with the speaker seeking his father's approval.

Harrison, then, relates not just to the mute Miltons of the world but to Milton, too. This is part of his point: they're all poets, and constricting, hierarchical classifications obliterate the bridge between public and private experiences that poetry builds. Harrison also sees a corollary in the experience of black writers in colonized countries and his own experience because they, like him, have felt keenly the divisions caused by social organization in their personal lives. Harrison and Césaire are educated, articulate writers who come from communities that have been subjugated by oppressive systems and relegated to second-class citizenship in their own homelands. Thus, the colonial situation in Africa provoked Harrison to examine his own literary education against the deprecation of his community:

There was an almost surrealistic perversity about 'O' Level questions, which were set by a board in England for African students. That kind of dichotomy [in Africa] made me think about my own education and dramatise it, and find some of the polarities through that dramatization. [Twentieth-Century British writer] Harold Acton talked about external and internal colonialism, and I found in the history of colonial Africa a very broad, dramatic portrayal of some of the things that had happened to me. (Interview with Haffenden 236)

In other words, Harrison observed in colonial Africa a paradigm of social inequality that revealed similar kinds of inequalities back in England that he had been personally subjected to. It comes as no surprise, then, that in *The Loiners*, the British colonies serve as the ground upon which to demonstrate the distortions on internal experience that constraining external structures cause.

The ground for “The White Queen” is not the “internal colony” of Leeds but an “external colony” in Africa. It is less, as Pinsky has it, “the ground where the centaur walks” and more the ground where the satyr walks. Pinsky borrows from Pound here to communicate the “bodily and conceptual” qualities of poems (422). Pound compared poetry to a centaur in order to illustrate its engagement with both mental and physical instincts: “Poetry is a centaur. The thinking word-arranging, clarifying faculty must move and leap with the energizing, sentient, musical faculties” (52).²⁰ The satyr figure is, like the centaur, a composite of human and animal. But whereas the centaur suggests a stark division between reason and instinct (the figure is split in half: man from the waste up, horse from the waste down), the satyr is a conflation of wildness and refinement (a human body with horse- or goat-like ears, tail, and, often, phallus): it is, as Marianne McDonald explains, “a type of mediating figure between the citizen and one who lives outside the city’s limits, man and monster” (472). Harrison himself mediates between what he calls “a metaphorical dumbness” and “the highest eloquence, poetry”: he turns the speech of the supposedly inarticulate into poetry, “that supreme form of articulation” (“Facing Up” 437).

In ancient Greek festivals, satyr plays would send up the sweeping tragedies that were staged just before them with bawdy, drunken characters. But the satyr play is more

than just a raucous parody; it “also provides psychological relief after the high anguish of tragedy” (472). In 1986, Harrison wrote *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, which translated and modernized the surviving fragment of Sophocles’ satyr play, *Icheneutae*.²¹ Harrison was, Rosemary Burton tells us, exposed to satyr plays long before then; as a boy, he read Euripides’s *Cyclops* in school and was “[a]lways fascinated” by satyrs, which would come to represent for him “cultural outcasts deprived of opportunities to rise from the lowly situation to which others had condemned them” (25). In fact, long before *The Trackers*, Harrison presented his own versions of satyrs in “The White Queen.”²² Its first part, entitled “Satyrae,” is a sequence of five rhyming iambic pentameter poems in verse paragraphs of varying lengths. The first three poems are dramatic monologues spoken by the White Queen, a middle-aged, British gay man living in colonial Africa who drinks too much and spends much of his time soliciting young African males for sex, while the last two poems portray other troubled expatriates in the third person. The relocation of these Loiners from Leeds to Africa has the effect of transforming them into “Satyrae,” distorted versions of themselves. They adapt and act on a kind of paradoxical power that their status as white Britons affords them. In the external colony, non-normative sexual impulses that are suppressed in the internal colony may seem freer for exploration than they are at home, but they are also especially damaging, isolating, and dangerous.²³ For instance, punishment for homosexuality in England, the White Queen explains, is to be “locked away or trussed / Like a squealing piglet”; in contrast, when decolonization begins in Africa, a loudspeaker announces a “proclamation: murder, looting, rape, / *Homosexuality*, all in the same breath, / And the same punishment for each—death, *death!*” (24). And yet even as Harrison’s “Satyrae” are exaggeratedly infatuated with sex and

drink excessively in this centrifugal environment that at once invites and condemns deviation from societal norms, they are not only bestial, grotesque caricatures: they have characteristics we might deem animalistic because they mostly incline toward instinct and appetite, but they are entirely human. In other words, he emphasizes their ambiguity. In fact, subtle colloquial registers present these satyr-like characters sympathetically, as Loiners displaced in the colonies where the effects of social conditions on the individual are enlarged. Those registers suggest that the “Satyrae”’s animalistic traits are precisely what makes them psychologically complex human characters vulnerable to the mandates of social constructs.

“The White Queen” opens with a declamatory tone that introduces its speaker as a somewhat unlikely satyr. He is, he exclaims in the opening line, a “Professor! Poet! Provincial Dadaist!” These are not exactly the “culturally outcast” identifications we would expect from a satyr, but in the rest of the first stanza the portrait becomes more routinely satyr-like; he is also

Pathic, pathetic, half-blind and half-pissed
Most of these tours in Africa. A Corydon
Past fifty, fat, those suave looks gone,
That sallow cheek, that young Novello sheen
Gone matt and puffed. A radiant white queen
In sub-Saharan scrub, I hold my court
On expat pay, my courtiers all bought. (21)

For Romana Huk, the White Queen is a caricature, at once stripped and overblown, of colonial British domination: “Queen Victoria . . . is undressed and exposed as the White

Queen, whose figurative demonstrations of imperialistic hunger are as horrific as only cartoon can stand” (“Leeds Renaissance” 82). If this English “queen” in colonial Africa suggests the colonizing Queen of England’s “court” and “courtiers,” it is a debased royalty. And yet to perceive the White Queen only as a horrific representation of English colonialism is to overlook the poem’s presentation of him as a conflicted, anxious individual. He is a professor and poet, both distinguished vocations, but he is also “pathetic” and “Pathic.” Not only horrific and cartoonish, he is a complex person who views himself with a mixture of lofty allusions, exasperated acknowledgement that his best years are behind him, and self-disgust.

That the White Queen labels himself “Pathic,” the “passive partner in homosexual anal intercourse,” and describes his usual state of mind as “half-pissed” indicate that he has internalized society’s classification of homosexuality as a pathology and that he seeks anesthetization from this crippling view of himself in the oblivion of alcohol. But he also describes himself with cultivated terms, and often with a dash of sardonic self-deprecation. He is a Corydon, the shepherd in Virgil’s *Eclogues* who is in love with a young slave boy; he used to resemble Ivor Novello, the Welsh composer and actor popular for his handsomeness; and he refers to himself as “a radiant white queen” not so much because he associates himself with the monarchy but because he regards himself with mordant disdain (his radiance does not come from his beauty but his ruddy complexion; he holds court drunkenly in gay bars). Indeed, this hideous Corydon is “Past fifty” and “fat”; his former “Novello” face is bloated from excessive drinking; and he dons an undignified “sub-Saharan scrub” in his court of barrooms where he compensates “courtiers” for sex. This is a psychological portrait of a literate, once-ambitious man

whose distortions (a Corydon, but fat and old; a puffed Novello; a radiant queen in a scrub) reveal not “imperialistic hunger” but a shattered self-perception resulting from social conventions that categorize homosexuality as a committable mental illness if not a capital offense. He fends off this sanctioned assault on his personhood with prostitution, booze, erudition, and wit.

Indeed, rather than simply a grotesque, pathetic caricature, the White Queen is a complex, ambiguous character. Social norms about sexuality do render him as damaged and disfigured, “half-blind” and “matt and puffed,” but he is also vigorously defiant. In fact, he is initially unapologetic about his sexual desires even as they have warped into a racially charged fetishism for the young African males he pays to have sex with. He appears to be not at all disturbed by what that fetish might reveal about the racism he’s absorbed from society along with his internalized homophobia:

I am alone,

And early all year round I go to town

And grub about for love. I sometimes cruise

For boys the blackness of a two-day bruise,

.....

and go my rounds

Of downtown dance and bar. Where once they used

To castrate eunuchs to be shipped off East,

I hang about *The Moonshine* and *West End*,

Begging for pure sex, one unembarrassed friend

To share my boredom and my bed – *One masta want*

One boy – one boy for bed . . . (21)

This “queen” may be lonely (“I am alone”) and desperate (he grubs about for love and begs for sex), but he is also unabashed in his penchant for playing out racial power roles in bed, even with “castration” looming as a consequence of non-normative sexuality. His requests are advanced directly—“*One masta want / One boy*”—and pitched in a simplified English that his African conquests who aren’t fluent in the language would understand. He wants “unembarrassed” sex partners who will be equally uninhibited in enacting his fantasy in which he will assume the role of the older white “masta” sexually dominating a younger “boy” whose blackness he compares to “a two-day bruise.” Still, that unembarrassed boldness deteriorates during the inevitably awkward, pathetic drunken encounters with his partners:

like an elephant

That bungles with its trunk about its cage,
I make my half-sloshed entrances and rage
Like any normal lover when I come
Before I’ve managed it. Then his thin bum
That did seem beautiful will seem obscene;
I’m conscious of the void, the *Vaseline*,
Pour shillings in his hands and send him back
With the driver, ugly, frightened, black,
Black, black. (21-22)

The scene he is describing is not an isolated incident but a pattern of behavior: he makes not one but many “half-sloshed entrances,” and he speaks in the future tense because

habitual experience allows him to anticipate the consequences of his behavior. But his obsession prohibits him from putting an end to the satyric sexual performances in which his phallus is an encaged elephant's trunk he "bungles" with, his orgasms are unduly forced because of his drunkenness, and the whole sexual exchange is reduced to "the void," "*Vaseline*," and "shillings."

Indeed, the White Queen's behavior is both a monstrous display of drunkenness and the result of psychological conflict. After sex, he is repulsed by what he so assertively sought: the male body seems to him "beautiful" before the act but is "obscene" after it; when his young partners leave, they are no longer "unembarrassed" but "ugly" and "frightened." Finally, when he acknowledges his fixation on race, the line break emphasizes his compulsiveness: "black, / Black, black," he says, the repetition of that adjective across lines accentuating his preoccupation not just with sex but with the race of those he wants to have sex with.

The White Queen understands that his "natural" desires are misshaped by an ensnaring social structure in which power is distributed discriminately:

What's the use? I can't escape

Our foul conditioning that makes a rape

Seem natural, if wrong, and love unclean

Between some ill-fed blackboy and fat queen. (22)

He has social power over the black boys he solicits (he is "fat"; they are "ill-fed"), but it is a power enervated by society's denunciation of his homosexuality; his response is to project it in its diminished form onto sexual relationships with the black boys who are below him in the racist hierarchy of the colony. He reduces himself to "some fat queen"

and can't separate the young males he's attracted to from their race: "some . . . blackboy," he labels his conquests, rather than "black boy." But he also understands the social system's operations and is aware of his location within that system. He acknowledges that he is caught in a structure that acculturates monstrous acts of domination like rape as "natural," even when they are legally "wrong," while homosexuality is perpetually maligned as "unclean," and especially so when it is between an "ill-fed blackboy and fat [white] queen." In other words, his is a world in which racism and sexual violence are condoned while love between same-sex partners is condemned. That contradictory amalgamation of social approval and social condemnation, exacerbated in the external colony, draws out the individual contradictions in the pathetic, pathetic poet-professor.

These contradictions constitute the White Queen's satyric features, but they don't make him an exaggerated satire of himself. Indeed, certain aspects of him are presented as satyr-like—his sexual obsessions, his immoderate drinking, his campy references to himself and his homosexuality. But for all of these satyric qualities, he is depicted realistically: an expat Loiner who finds refuge in the colonies from the more delimited and patrolled sexual conventions back in England and who is observing, increasingly, the imminent threat of new, alarming social injunctions as the colony approaches independence. Along with reprieve from constraining sexual mores, he also gleans racist social power as a white Englishman in an African colony and then transposes that power onto homosexual relations that he has been conditioned to abhor. He is, in other words, a layered, multifarious, troubled character—at once pretentious ("Provincial Dadaist!"), self-deprecating (a "matt and puffed" "radiant white queen"), confident (he sits "Bolt upright" when cruising for sex), bold ("I flush with defiant lust," he says when he relays the death

proclamation to his friends at the bar), and repulsed by himself (even though he knows it's "foul," he can't "escape" the "conditioning" that tells him he's "unclean"). Harrison does not create an embellished diction to match the exaggerations of a satyr but mobilizes a combination of linguistic registers to depict the White Queen's ambiguity and psychological complexity: the poem is, as we have seen, demonstrative, sardonic, erudite, and defiant, all while portraying a vulnerable, disturbed psyche. And yet the tone throughout is conversational, the diction particularly demotic at certain instances, marking a counterpoint to the White Queen's more affected moments. In fact, it is when he speaks colloquially that he communicates most clearly his internal anguish, anguish caused by society's brutal proscriptions on an instinct as personal and natural as sexuality. The poem demonstrates how public conceptions distort individual experience. But it also depicts the individual pressing back against those conceptions: if society makes of this human a satyr, the satyr's colloquial language makes him human.

And yet scholars tend to hone in on the professorial rather than the colloquial qualities of the White Queen's language. For instance, Spencer and Byrne each focus on the allusion to Sir Thomas Wyatt's famous poem "They flee from me." Directly after the White Queen ponders his typically humiliating sexual episodes, he remembers "at least" one encounter that was not marred by drunkenness and remorse:

Things can be so much better. Once at least
A million per cent. Policeman! Priest!
You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love,
And to him it was. It *was*. O he could move
Like an oiled (slow-motion) racehorse at its peak,

Outrageous, and not gentle, tame, or meek. (22)

Wyatt's poem also relays clandestine sexual exploits in rhyming iambic pentameter:

I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change. (599)

The poems are similar in several ways: both recall dalliances that occur in a context of danger, both speakers objectify the people they are sexually interested in (the White Queen's boy is a "racehorse"; Wyatt's women are ranging deer), and both distinguish one of their sexual partners from the rest. Wyatt's speaker, like the White Queen, fixates on a particular person whom he finds especially alluring:

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array, after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small,
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, "Dear Heart, how like you this?"

The speaker is incredulous at the woman's sexual frankness and, even more, at how taken he is with her: "It was no dream," he begins the next stanza, "I lay broad waking." When she moves on to other lovers, he is left with a wounded ego and the sense that he has been duped by a woman whom he believes he treated with special kindness: "But since that I

so kindly am served, / I fain would know what she hath deserved,” the poem concludes.

For both Spencer and Byrne, Harrison’s references to “They flee from me” anchor the poem. Spencer claims that Harrison’s poem draws emotional energy from Wyatt’s and that Wyatt’s poem lends fortitude to Harrison’s speaker: “Here the carefully deployed echoes of [. . .] ‘They flee from me . . .’ help to give the Queen’s self-advocacy considerable emotional weight. This is language that above all insists on mitigating nothing and apologizing for nothing. From bungled buggery to the highbrow chatter of a literary party [that takes place in the second poem of ‘Satyrae’], the Queen tells it all with lethal precision” (29). Likewise, Byrne claims that the Wyatt allusion does more than evoke the connotative associations of a typical literary allusion: “The technique used here is neither straightforward imitation nor adaptation. The narrative voices of the canonical poem of conventional heterosexual courtly love and of the modern (and at the time) little-known poem of homosexual rented sex in one sense could hardly be more different, but their tones—salivating reminiscence, bitter protest, and self-pity—are the same, as their relationship to the beloved is the same” (*H. v. & O* 11). Byrne apprehends the poems as different in that she considers Wyatt’s to be conventional and Harrison’s unconventional, but she hears a similar tone in each: “Harrison handles our sympathies as skilfully as Wyatt. When the Queen shouts, ‘And to him it was. It *was*’ he protests too much—almost—just as when Wyatt’s narrator insists: ‘It was no dream. I lay broad waking’, though he is clearly convincing himself: we do believe him, or at least believe that he believes it” (*Loiner* 21). The allusion, Byrne argues, underpins the poem’s portraiture of the White Queen because Harrison heard in the Renaissance poem how tone could communicate complex psychology.

And yet it is not so much the specific allusion that supplies emotional weight to Harrison's poem but the colloquial language in that stanza. True, the White Queen's language there is certainly as precise, literate, and witty as anywhere in the poem. He begins his homage to the one prostitute he falls in love with by playing on Wyatt's avowal that for all the betrayals he has suffered, "once in special" was "Twenty times better." For the White Queen, "Things" have also been "so much better" despite the prevailing patterns; in fact, "once" it was "a million" times better for every "cent" spent on his prostitute-lover. He then addresses his adversaries in the same oratorical style with which he announced himself at the poem's opening: "Policeman! Priest!" he exclaims, the alliterating *p* resonating with the poem's first lines ("Professor! Poet! Provincial Dadaist! / Pathic, pathetic, . . . half-pissed").

However, the allusive, declamatory language here quickly gives way to informal, less mannered diction as the White Queen explains that what is being classified as "filthy" is "love": "You'll call it filthy, but to me it's love, / And to him it was. It *was*." The tone here—direct, sincere, colloquial—does not communicate that the White Queen protests too much, as Byrne argues, but communicates through repetition, plainspoken diction, and italicization the White Queen's earnestness. He emphasizes the simplicity and straightforwardness of the natural feelings that have developed between another man and him. He identifies in his lover's appearance and gait the qualities he is captivated by:

O magnificently shameless in his gear,
He sauntered the flunkied restaurant, queer
As a clockwork orange and not scared.
God, I was grateful for the nights we shared. (22)

Those qualities are his shamelessness and his physical grace: he saunters magnificently, wearing the denigration “queer / As a clockwork orange,” a cockney phrase indicating an unnatural bizarreness, with pride (Burgess). The lines move with similar agility, reflecting the young man’s alluring nimbleness: exact rhymes punctuate end-stops while the repetition of hard *g* and *c* sounds and sibilant *s* and *sh* sounds create a varied, intricate rhythm: “magnificently,” “gear,” “God,” “grateful”; “flunkied,” “queer,” clockwork,” “scared”; “magnificently,” “shameless,” “sauntered,” “restaurant,” “scared,” “nights,” “shared.” This elaborate music builds to the blunt admission, “God, I was grateful for the nights we shared”; the line’s colloquial directness is emphasized by its contrast to the grander lines before it. The same effect closes the stanza:

My boredom melted like small cubes of ice
 In warm sundowner whiskies. Call it vice;
 Call it obscenity; it’s love; so there;
 Call it what you want. *I just don’t care.* (22)

The younger man’s self-assurance is an antidote to the White Queen’s afflictions: observing his confidence dissipates the monotony of life in the colony and the closet and dilutes the alcohol he medicates himself with. In fact, the White Queen acquires something of his magnificent saunterer’s tenacity. But rather than flying in the face of homophobic conditioning with “Outrageous,” “shameless,” “oiled” sauntering, the White Queen defies societal constraints on his sexuality with repetition, colloquial language, and rhyme: “Call it,” he repeats three times as if issuing a challenge, all of the demeaning names typically used to degrade homosexuality. He then repudiates those classifications by defining homosexuality as love—not filth, vice, or obscenity. And yet his rebuke is not,

as we might expect from the disdainful, defiant, educated, self-deprecating white queen, particularly denunciatory. It is instead pitched in the demotic: “so there,” he rebuffs his castigators, linking by rhyme the next line’s final colloquial declaration: *I just don’t care*. The poem acquires strength less from its allusions to poetic tradition and more from its arrangement of living speech in that tradition’s verse forms.

Harrison’s most famous poem, “v.,” also sets living speech in traditional poetic form and employs allusions to situate that language in literary tradition (236-49). Comprised of 202 iambic pentameter quatrains with alternating rhymes, the poem depicts a middle-aged man visiting the cemetery in Leeds where his parents are buried and where he will be as well. It’s a setting similar to the churchyard where Thomas Gray introduced his “mute inglorious Milton.”²⁴ In Harrison’s poem, the speaker also associates poetry with the dead when he finds himself standing between graves marked Byron and Wordsworth: “With Byron three graves on I’ll not go short / of company, and Wordsworth’s opposite” (236). But these are not the graves of the Romantic poets. Rather, they are the graves of Loiners with those names who held modest occupations; Wordsworth here “built church organs,” and this Byron didn’t write *Don Juan* but “tanned / luggage cowhide in the age of steam.” The speaker relates himself to the graves not just because they signify famous poets but because they bear those “distinguished” names while belonging to the unattested “rabblement” of the working class:

That’s two peers already, of a sort,
and we’ll all be thrown together if the pit,

whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,

causes the distinguished dead to drop
into the rabblement of bone and rot,
shored slack, crushed shale, smashed prop. (236)

This “pit” beneath the graveyard, an old, blasted coal mine the cemetery is slowly subsiding into, is a tumultuous abyss—it’s “shored,” “crushed,” “smashed”—of bodily remains, coal, rock, and the destroyed beams of the former mine. It is a realm of disarray and obscurity that represents the fate of the disenfranchised, and it terrifies the poet more than death: “I’ve never feared the grave,” he remarks toward the poem’s end, “but what I fear’s / that great worked-out black hollow under mine” (245). The poet links himself (mine) to the blasted out coal mine that the working-class dead disappear into. He fears sinking into the “black hollow” of anonymity, being forgotten by history. But he isn’t necessarily afraid for just himself, at least not anymore, for as a professional poet and dramatist, he’s already seen “HARRISON . . . on books” and “in Broadway lights,” and he holds out hope that his successes will save him from obscurity (240). He dreads the “great worked-out black hollow” under the graveyard because he knows it is the destiny of his local community. He wants to create poetry to counter the societal conception that working-class people are irrelevant to history; his strategy to accomplish this is to make poetry out of working-class speech, even defiling and nihilistic forms of that speech.

The ground above the “worked-out pit” is also turbulent, not with the corroding and demolished materials of bone, slack, shale, and prop, but with written language:

The language of the graveyard ranges from
a bit of Latin for a former Mayor
or those who laid their lives down at the Somme,

the hymnal fragments and the gilded prayer,

how people ‘fell asleep in the Good Lord’,

brief chisellable bits from the good book

and rhymes whatever length they could afford,

to CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK! (237)

The headstones bear the typical epitaphs, earnest sentiments, and biblical quotations of a cemetery. They are polite, refined, and banal: a “bit of Latin” for someone who gave his life in war, “fragments” of hymns and prayers, hackneyed phrases that compare death to sleep, “bits” selected because they are “chisellable,” rhymes short enough to purchase. These descriptions of the engraved language on the stones contrast starkly to the capitalized presentation of the actual profanities spray-painted on the graves by “some peeved supporter who was pissed,” a drunken skinhead, the poet imagines, returning from a Leeds United football match, agitated and dismayed by yet another loss.²⁵ The obscenities are emphasized not just by capitalization and an exclamation point but also by the fact that while the “chisellable” “rhymes” etched on the stone are not quoted, the words “FUCK!” and “book” are not only quoted but arranged to rhyme. Scrawling, it would seem, is not only more affordable than engraving but can still create the kinds of aural patterns in conventional epitaphs.

That the profanities are cited explicitly while the epitaphs are merely described as fragments and bits suggests that the poet prizes the skinhead’s jarring graffiti over the vapid language of tombstone commemoration. But the speaker is not actually extolling the profanities. True, the skinhead’s provocative locutions (“they’re there to shock the

living” [240]) are not insipid like the epitaphs, but the speaker identifies an insidious quality in the spray-painted words:

there’s LEEDS v.

the opponent of last week, this week, or next,
and a repertoire of blunt four-letter curses
on the team or race that makes the sprayer vexed. (237)

It is not the word “FUCK!” the most prevalent expletive, that beguiles the speaker but the letter “v” that “fills every space” “sprayed on the run at such a lick” that the left side of the letter is shorter than the right creating what looks like the “red tick” check “they never marked his work much with at school.” The graffiti doesn’t just assert the forcefulness of epithets against the triteness of epitaphs, but discloses the graffitist’s ignorant, repellent social views. This skinhead “sprayer” has little formal education, defaces monuments for the dead, and expresses his rage not just in a lexicon of “blunt four-letter curses” but with racist epithets, too: “This pitman’s of last century daubed PAKI GIT, / this grocer Broadbent’s aerosolled with NIGGER” (240). The engraved epitaphs may be banal but they are merely conventional bits and fragments that working-class families could afford. The skinhead’s “aerosol vocab,” on the other hand, is hateful speech released in a paroxysm of obscenities and racist derogations.

And yet even though the speaker is appalled by the defacements—he asks, “why . . . inscribe *graves*?” and “how can these kids / . . . believe that the ‘Pakis,’ ‘Niggers,’ even ‘Yids’ / . . . should bear the blame?”—his disposition toward the skinhead is ambiguous. He explains that, as a child, he himself helped a skinhead “whitewash a V on a brick wall” to celebrate victory after World War II, and he regards the “V” as a symbol of social

division in general:

These Vs are all the versuses of life
from LEEDS v. DERBY, Black/White
and (as I've know to my cost) man v. wife,
Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

class v. class as bitter as before,
the unending violence of US and THEM,
personified in 1984
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind,
East/West, male/female, and the ground
these fixtures are fought out on 's Man, resigned
to hope from his future what his past never found. (237-38)

The letter “v” indicates for the speaker more than sports rivalries: it stands for opposition itself, ranging from categories of race, gender, politics, and religion to philosophical abstractions like the soul and body and the heart and mind. Yet the division that the poet is most specific about is one created by class distinctions, which he saw manifested in a particularly violent, year-long coal miner strike in Northern England in 1984: “Coal Board [Ian] MacGregor” was the head of the National Coal Board responsible for a series of pit closures that the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) protested by striking.²⁶ The speaker’s consideration of “v” as an emblem of antinomy is not his way of

apologizing or making excuses for the skinhead's vandalism. Rather, it provides an historical context for the vandal's rage and locates its source.

This identification of the origins of the skinhead's anger reveals the speaker's sympathy toward him, but it also causes the speaker to risk idealizing the skinhead. While ruminating on "What . . . these crude words are revealing" and "What . . . this aggro act implies" after finding that "UNITED" has been spray-painted on his own parent's grave, he imagines that the offending skinhead vandalizes to "Giv[e] the dead [his] xenophobic feeling" and speculates about whether the graffiti can be considered a depraved "*cri-de-coeur* because man dies" (241). These elevated rationalizations of the vandalism, though, are swiftly interrupted by the vandal himself. In the next stanza, the imagined skinhead speaks, berating the poet in an especially harsh tongue for what he hears as the poet's contrived, pretentious language:

*So what's a cri-de-coeur, cunt? Can't you speak
the language that yer mam spoke. Think of 'er!
Can yer only get yer tongue round fucking Greek?
Go and fuck yerself with cri-de-coeur! (241)*

The poet's language, the skinhead believes, is not just grandiose and pompous but treacherous: it is foreign and thus unintelligible to the community that the poet comes from ("crie-de-coeur," "*fucking Greek*"), and it betrays the poet's background ("*Think of 'er*," the skinhead demands, referring not just to the poet's mother but to his mother tongue). The skinhead is admonishing the poet not only for writing in French and Greek but for writing in a version of English that doesn't correlate to his working-class upbringing—an English that Harrison would call in *The School of Eloquence* "Received"

English (“Them & [uz]” 122-23).

This exchange begins a contentious dialogue between the poet and the skinhead, the latter refusing the lofty justifications that the former keeps appealing to in order to locate a higher meaning in the skinhead’s lowly behavior:

‘The only reason why I write this poem at all
on yobs like you who do the dirt on death
’s to give some higher meaning to your scrawl.’

Don’t fucking bother, cunt! Don’t waste your breath! (242)

The argument, though, is not just between the educated and the uneducated but between the poet and himself: “If you’re so proud . . . then sign your name,” the speaker cajoles the vandal. The skinhead duly responds:

He took the can, contemptuous, unhurried
and cleared the nozzle and prepared to sign
the UNITED sprayed where mam and dad were buried.

He aerosolled his name. And it was mine. (244)

The poet, here, has not just been arguing with a member of his community who resents his education; he has been arguing with himself about the language he employs to compose his poems. In other words, he worries that so-called elevated language in his poems acts as an unintended repudiation of “*the language that [his] mam spoke.*”

Harrison had expressed this anxiety about the language he gleans from learning and the language he learned at home in *The School of Eloquence* as well. In “Wordlists,” for example, he presents a litany of dictionaries from various languages, “other tongues [he’s] slaved to speak or read,” as well as the names of different lexicographers before

turning his attention to his mother's speech:

L & S dead Latin, L & S dead Greek,
one the now dead lexicographer gave me,
Ivan Poldauf, his English-Czech *slovník*;
Harraps' French 2 vols, a Swahili,
Cabrera's Afro-Cuban *Anagó*,
Haus, Yoruba, both R. C. Abraham's—

but not the tongue that once I used to know

but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's. (118)

The poet can read a Czech dictionary ("*slovník*"), a vocabulary book of Afro-Cuban dialect ("*Anagó*"), and Lewis and Short's ("L & S") Latin and Greek dictionaries. But these acquisitions, he fears, come at the expense of his original language, the dialect he spoke at home. He learns "dead" languages and a host of foreign tongues in spite of "the tongue" he "used to know / but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's"—literally, his mother tongue (118). The poet senses that his interest in reviving classical languages not only pulls him away from the very language his mother taught him but prevents him from preserving that language.

That the poet and skinhead merge doesn't just indicate that the skinhead is the kind of destructive angry young man the poet may have become if he hadn't the opportunities of formal education. Regardless of social advantage, their particularly rough brand of local language is the same. By the time he realizes that he himself is the skinhead, the speaker has already demonstrated his own inclination for invective:

‘You piss-artist skinhead cunt, you wouldn’t know
and it doesn’t fucking matter if you do,
the skin and poet united fucking Rimbaud
but the *autre* and *je est* is fucking you.’ (242)

The speaker acknowledges that the skinhead, a facet of himself, is a kind of artist, a “piss-artist” who doesn’t express, to borrow Harrison’s own terms, “inwardness and tenderness” but who is instead “angry and vituperative” (Harrison, “Beats”). The two are linked, then, by both their shared working-class location in society and by their impulse to lash back at their adversaries with hostile language. The poet, Rimbaud demonstrated, creates rebellious art by bringing even the most repulsive aspects of self into poetry. The “*autre*” in “*je est*”—Rimbaud’s famous conception of the self as an “other” joined to the “I” that society constructs—is both the skinhead and the artist who are thought to stand apart from each other (“skin and poet united”). Throughout the poem, the speaker casts the skinhead’s language, which he is at turns suspicious of, repelled by, and fluent in, as a rejoinder to social constraints: when Leeds United lose their matches, the vandals “lose their sense of self esteem” and so spray “words on tombstones” in order to “reassert the glory of their team” (236). Likewise, the destruction of local billboards and city signs is described as the only way for Leeds “kids” to redress a system that situates them on the lowest economic rung:

kids use aerosols, use giant signs
to let the people know who’s forged their fetters
like PRI CE O WALES above West Yorkshire mines
(no prizes for who nicked the missing letters!) (240)

The defacement of property with aerosol and the desecration of a “PRINCE OF WALES” sign are forms of expression the “kids use” to assert themselves against their disenfranchisement.²⁷ Even though the skinhead remarks bitterly, “it’s not poetry we need in this class war,” he also perceives his scrawled words as weapons of resistance. His graffiti may not make the kind of literary art that wins “prizes,” but he nonetheless considers it his “work” and contrasts it to the more elevated writing that does win prizes:

Who needs

yer fucking poufy words. Ah write mi own.

Ah’ve got mi work on show all over Leeds

like this UNITED ’ere on some sod’s stone. (244)

Here, vernacular Leeds speech is the raw material that creates rhymed iambic pentameter poetry. More specifically, that speech makes poetry not from “poufy words” that are meaningless to the skinhead but from the very language that the skinhead speaks and that he utilizes to fray society’s fetters.

Still, even as Harrison presents vandalism as social redress, he prevaricates about the “work” the skinhead creates. True, the speaker endorses the obstinacy of the unemployed and the low-paid against the neon signs of capitalism that “dwarf the lads / who spray a few odd FUCKS when they’re depressed”; those neon signs represent another kind of graffiti—an insidious, “clandestine, genteel aggro”—the sanctioned, public language of advertising that sells “booze” and “tobacco” and promotes “the royal crest” and the “the British ruling class” (240). However, although the poet believes that the “few odd FUCKS” can express the frustrations of the jobless, he knows that local language can be invidious, too: the obscenities are defacements that express xenophobia

and racism, precluding the potential for such illicit “work” to become art:

The prospects for the present aren't too grand
when a swastika with NF (National Front) 's
sprayed on a grave, to which another hand
has added, in a reddish colour, CUNTS. (238)

Larger divisions create smaller divisions that, in turn, make their own divisions. Local language can redress deleterious social organization, but it can also communicate its own repugnant views.

Local language in “v.” both confronts social stratification and depicts the linguistic degradations that such stratification causes. It also discloses the underlying causes of those divisions. When the poet presses the skinhead to explain the proliferation of “v.,” what makes him go “against! against! against!” on other people’s property with his spray-paint, the skinhead replies,

*Ah'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke.
It's reading on their graves the jobs they did—
butcher, publican and baker. Me, I'll croak
doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid. (241)*

The skinhead’s future is dismal because he has no opportunities for employment. The locus of his rage, then, even when it’s at its most deplorably antagonistic and racist, is not in opposing football teams or the non-white immigrants arriving in his city in increasing numbers but in his position in an economic system that aggressively markets booze, tobacco, and British royalty while eliminating jobs like “butcher, publican and baker.” His world is not progressing but declining. He doesn’t have the employment

opportunities that earlier working-class generations had, and it makes him not just hateful of others but hateful of himself:

*If mi mam's up there, don't want to meet 'er
listening to me list mi dirty deeds,
and 'ave to pipe up to St fucking Peter
ah've been on t'dole all mi life in fucking Leeds! (242).*

Here, the skinhead halts his verbal assault and reveals in his own speech his lack of self-worth. He expresses in local language at once coarse and delicate a shame so severe it would prevent the speaker from uniting with his dead mother. His blatant, ignorant racism is tempered by his connection to the non-white people he disparages. He knows that they, too, are victims of rampant unemployment in a social context of “clandestine, genteel” capitalism and royalism:

*When dole-wallahs fuck off to the void
what'll t'mason carve up for the jobs?
The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed?*

*This lot worked at one job all life through.
Byron, 'Tanner', 'Lieth 'ere interred'
They'll chisel fucking poet when they do you
and that, yer cunt, 's a crude four-letter word. (242)*

“Cunt” for the skinhead and his working-class Pakistani compatriots connects the marginalized, even as the skinhead denigrates his fellow working-class Loiners as “dole-wallahs”: they, like him, won’t have job titles on their graves, and the skinhead imagines

all their tombstones engraved instead with “*The cunts who lieth ’ere wor unemployed.*” In a paradoxical world of neon capitalism and degrading unemployment, the notion of crudity is reversed: for the skinhead, a word like “poet” is just as crude as a world like “cunt” because it represents aspirations he has no access to; “Cunts,” on the other hand, encompasses all the jobless while also indicating their wretched position in a classist society. Even the poet himself consistently refers to the skinhead as “cunt”: “Listen, cunt!” he exclaims when first addressing the skinhead, “the reason why I want this in a book / ’s to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing” (242). The poet seeks to understand the skinhead’s actions and to communicate his motivations, but he is also crudely condescending to him: he groups the unemployed under the denigration “ungrateful cunts.”

The poet is not just ambivalent about the skinhead but ambivalent about his own motivations, too. Although he wants to assign “higher” meanings to the word “UNITED” spray-painted on his mother and father’s grave, he also speculates that his purported desire to do so is a “sham” (240). “UNITED” scrawled on his parent’s tombstone suggests for him designations other than the Leeds football club:

it’s hard *not* to make

a sort of furtive prayer from this skin’s scrawl,
his UNITED mean ‘in Heaven’ for their sake,

an accident of meaning to redeem

an act intended as mere desecration

and make the thoughtless spraying of his team

apply to higher things, and to the nation. (240)

The speaker is apprehensive about the desecration: “UNITED” invokes for him the idea of his parents reuniting after death despite the fact that he does “not believe in afterlife at all.” And yet he wants to grant them their belief in immortality. He entertains an “accident of meaning” he doesn’t believe in because it’s consoling: even though he “know[s] the [actual] world’s so torn,” he “want[s] no other” for himself, but he would concede the idea of an “other” world for his “dad who hoped from ‘the beyond’ / a better life than this one, *with* my mother.” In a cemetery riddled with spray-painted Vs, the speaker can’t resist the irony (“it’s hard *not*” to perceive it) that marked on his parent’s grave (and the grave his corpse will, he presumes, one day occupy) is an antonym for opposition that he can inject with “deep aspirations” (241). And yet he is diffident about the “prayer” he makes of the word “UNITED”; it is “furtive” rather than forthright because he instills in the word “higher” ideals that don’t even exist for him.

In fact, the poet is skeptical about the very notion of raising language to supposedly superior purposes. In a parenthetical aside directly before he reconsiders the meaning of “UNITED,” he questions his reasons for reassessing the graffiti:

(Though honesty demands that I say *if*
I’d wanted to take the necessary pains
to scrub the skin’s inscription off
I only had an hour between trains.

So the feeling that I had as I stood gazing
and the significance I saw could be a sham,

mere excuses for not patiently erasing
the word sprayed on the grave of dad and mam). (239)

The poet worries that applying the skin's vandalism to "higher things" like his parent's death, the class-divided nation itself, and even "all the nations / made in the name of love for peace's sake" (241) is merely a pretense, an idealized concoction to justify his detachment. After all, he visits the cemetery only intermittently: "Since my parents' death I've spent 2 hours / made up of odd 10 minutes such as these" (238-39). But he is not just analyzing his own predisposition; he is questioning the very notion that certain forms of language require elevation "to higher things" in order to have "significance"—in other words, prescripts that language must be imbued with "deep aspirations" in order to be poetry (240). It is an aspiration the skinhead rejects outright:

*Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole
'ave got about as much scope to aspire
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal
aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire. (241)*

The skinhead redresses the poet's conception about language, higher meanings, and deep aspirations, and he does so by speaking in his own coarse speech and speaking for his community, "*Folk on t'fucking dole.*" Wrestling loftier meanings from forms of speech, the poem argues, risks distorting that speech—say, sentimentalizing or misconstruing it—rather than locating grand meanings in it. The poem demonstrates that a "mere desecration" on a grave referring to a sports team and not "higher things" can itself make poetry. In fact, the poem does not elevate the word "UNITED" but rather makes poetry

out of a speaker's ruminations and debates with himself about the very act of elevating language and about the forms of language supposedly suitable for art.

Indeed, the poet himself has always been suspicious of "higher" meanings, and like his skinhead counterpart, his reaction to what he distrusts can be ravaging. "I've done my bits of mindless aggro too," he tells the skinhead before relaying an incident from his youth in which he turned a fire hose on the "wobbly soprano warbling" at an operetta (243). He describes the act as an enraged response to what he perceived to be a disjuncture between art and politics:

It wasn't just the singing angered me.

At the same time half a crowd was jeering
as the smooth Hugh Gaitskell, our MP,
made promises the other half were cheering.

What I hated in those high soprano ranges
was uplift beyond all reason and control
and in a world where you say nothing changes
it seemed a sort of prick-tease of the soul.

I tell you when I heard high notes that rose
above Hugh Gaitskell's cool electioneering
straight from the warbling throat right up my nose
I had all your aggro in *my* jeering. (243)

The combination of political division—equal parts “jeering” and “cheering” at a political meeting—and a soprano’s voice exasperates the young Harrison because “those high soprano ranges” sound to him exhilarating and yet the jeering and cheering remind him that the “uplift” is disconnected from his social reality. The opera singer’s voice is alluring but ultimately empty, a “prick-tease of the soul,” because it lifts up “beyond all reason and control,” beyond the real-life experiences of the people it’s addressing. Further, the contrast between the “high notes” and Labour Party MP Hugh Gaitskell’s “electioneering” (his “smooth,” “cool” “promises” are as alluring and as empty as the soprano’s “uplift”) is jolting and infuriating, their clashing sounds go “right up [his] nose,” and the speaker’s recourse is to become a “damned vandal” with a rage similar to the skinhead’s.

The speaker and the skinhead, then, are both inclined to respond to conditions that oppress and anger them; they each represent aspects of the artist whose individual concerns are social concerns. Harrison himself has described the relation of the poem’s poet-speaker and the skinhead in terms of social circumstances and self-expression: the skinhead is “the sort of person I probably would have ended up being had I not had the opportunities I had . . . going to Leeds Grammar School and so on,” he tells John Tusa, explaining that he would likely have become an unemployed vandal not just because of lack of opportunity but because of the constraints in an environment where “I couldn’t express myself.” What Harrison is communicating here and in “v.” is that aesthetic deprivation is part of the larger social impoverishments that debilitate disenfranchised communities. Graffiti in the poem is desecrating and offensive, designed “to shock the living” (240); it is also the skinhead’s only form of expression. The poem doesn’t identify

so-called higher meanings in the skin's brand of repugnant, shocking, illegal speech but presents that language to convey the estrangement, shame, self-hatred, alcoholism, joblessness, racism, and misogyny caused by debilitating social conditions, disturbances that include. In other words, he puts art and vandalism, expression and desecration into what he calls in "v." a "working marriage" (244). Harrison has described his inclination to join these supposedly opposing categories as instinctive: in "v.," he explains to *The Guardian*, he wanted to "take on my own instinct to vandalise my own art. There's always that voice—'what's the point, who the hell wants a poem?' I have to outstrip that dark, negative force to write anything" (Harrison, "Beats"). Local language is for Harrison a method for outstripping negative forces, a poetic for making poetry personally and politically significant.

As we have seen, Harrison's poetry depicts the disturbances that social divisions cause by juxtaposing different registers of language. In *The Loiners* and "v.," those differences in register are subtler than they are in *The School of Eloquence*. His Loiners share a local language that foregrounds their complexity and ambiguity against the distorted caricatures that society would make of them. Their colloquial language is presented amid the more conventionally poetic language of the poems' narrative voices. Likewise, the speaker and skinhead in "v." speak to each other in a crude Leeds dialect; the educated speaker's style is more refined than the skinhead's, but his diction often erodes into the same vulgar locutions of his uneducated alter ego. In the *Eloquence* series, a broader variety of speech forms are stacked against each other to create a jarring, tumultuous linguistic environment.

Harrison has described his work as an effort to mend severed elements: "I had a

very loving upbringing,” he says, “Education and poetry came in to disrupt that loving group, and I’ve been trying to create new wholes out of that disruption ever since” (Interview with Haffenden 246).²⁸ Iambic pentameter, rhyme schemes, and stanza breaks convey linguistic disruptions while lending coherence to that disruption; the poems make “new wholes” by uniting vernacular (the language of his “loving upbringing”) and the traditional language of “Education and poetry.” In other words, traditional verse allows Harrison to put oppositional elements into working relationships. Despite the fact that at the end of “v.” the poet leaves it up to the reader, the “poetry supporter,” to decide whether or not “UNITED” can “stay,” the poem has already made the argument that all forms of language are appropriate for poetry and that poetry has the capacity to draw out the tensions between different forms of speech. In fact, the “affront[ed]” reader might be inclined to remove the “more offensive FUCK and CUNT,” but to do so is to belie the fact that poems “grow from . . . SHIT,” from “the beef, the beer, the bread,” from working-class locales like Leeds, and from the local language of those locales (249).

Harrison views literary tradition as far back as Greek tragedy and, in the English tradition, Shakespeare, as a site for linguistic diversity:

The idea that [Greek tragedy] . . . uses uniformly high language [is] . . . one I find totally unacceptable. It’s another reason why I try to use Northern actors, or I use a word like “clart” in *The Oresteia*. There’s very little evidence about the linguistic levels in Greek tragedy, and we have no touchstones in the colloquial. The lexicography of the nineteenth-century Victorians has Victorian class-assumptions—the assumption, for example, that something is either “poetic” or

“vulgar.” Poetic language, as we know from Shakespeare, can take in the crude and the holy almost in the same line (Interview with Haffenden 242-43).

In other words, literary tradition has not generated class assumptions; rather, class assumptions have been imposed upon that tradition. What’s more, verse forms are for Harrison democratic forms for contending with unequal social organization. Their rhythms echo the heartbeat, the persistence of life against the adverse conditions of social reality: “language [is] able to express *everything*, grapple with *all* the worst things that we can imagine . . . [.] Language which is rhythmical and spellbinding can draw people’s imagination further into horror and take them on that journey, make them see everything but not make them feel that it’s impossible to survive what they’ve witnessed” (qtd. in Astley 12). Harrison has always equated traditional poetic form with survival: writing in rhyme and meter, he tells Haffenden, is akin to “plugging in to the life support system of metrical verse and all those who have practiced it in the past” (235); in another interview, he claims, “metre itself is like the pulse,” a “rhythm to carry me to the other side” of painful experiences (43). Indeed, the young student ridiculed by his teacher in *The School of Eloquence* as not refined enough for poetry (“you’re one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!” the teacher in “Them and [uz]” tells the boy [122]) survives, and thrives, by poetry. In the second section, the speaker has become a professional poet who has learned the poetic tradition in order to “occupy” his teacher’s “lousy leasehold Poetry” with “the language that I spoke at home,” spitting “the bones [of Littererchewer] / into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones.” Poetry is not available for ownership; it has been merely leased by “the Receivers” like Jones and the boy’s English teachers; Harrison makes poetry out of local language to “tell the Receivers where to go.”

Harrison himself, the working-class Leeds scholarship boy, has also survived and thrived on poetry. In 1987, he was featured reading “v.” on a national television program broadcast by the BBC, an opportunity the poet found especially satisfying: he tells Clive Wilmer, “I was very glad that it was on television. That’s the kind of audience I feel poetry should have” (30). The television was an ideal platform for a poet who, like Brooks, wants “to speak directly to the people I’m writing about” (45), a poet whose aesthetic aim is for “poetry that people like my parents might respond to” (Harrison, “Beats”). He’s driven, in other words, to create art that does not tease the soul like the soprano he attacked in his youth but that communicates directly to his own community with immediacy, connects individual experience and social reality, and enacts the disruptions that occur when society stratifies individuals and their communities into hierarchical divisions. Local language is a poetic method for him to accomplish this: “I certainly didn’t put in four-letter words in order to make a scandal—they were an essential part of the poem; it’s a poem which ranges from the graveyard’s use of Latin for epitaphs down to the ‘fuck’ and the ‘shit’ that are inscribed on the graves. And these are examples of modes of language—both of which have their own kinds of power and the poem really is about power and the power over language” (Interview with Wilmer 30). And yet that language also yielded scandal: his televised performance was met with a fury of condemnation for its unflinching use of profanity.²⁹ It was as if rather than hearing what the “crude words” in the poem “were revealing,” Harrison’s critics heard only vulgarity itself. Or perhaps, as Harrison himself has claimed, it was the poem’s audacious debunking of aesthetic categories that so offended them: “bringing the skinheads into high art was what caused the offence. It was like I’d done the graffiti on the classical

form” (Harrison, “Beats”). Regardless of what specifically provoked them, the incensed reactions against the poem attest to the potency of poetry that addresses itself to the masses with local words.

Notes

¹ Quotations from Harrison’s poems are from the second edition of his *Selected Poems* (1987). For short poems, I indicate the inclusive page numbers the first time a poem is quoted and then quote without citations. For long poems, I cite the inclusive page numbers initially and continue to provide page numbers as I quote. I cite from the *Selected Poems* because it is the most widely available of Harrison’s poetry books: his *Collected Poems*, which includes all of his work up until 2005, is currently out of print, as are his individual volumes and chapbooks. There are some slight differences in the ordering and groupings of poems in the individual books versus their presentation in the *Selected* and *Collected* volumes, which present the poems in the same way. I indicate these differences in the endnotes when relevant.

² Even when critics acknowledge Harrison’s many comments about his innate inclination to traditional poetic forms, they ultimately insist that those forms must be in conflict with local language. For example, Roberts points out that Harrison conceives of meter and rhyme as instinctive, but he also claims that Harrison believes at least in part that “iambic pentameter is not neutral in terms of class and ideology” (218). Roberts quotes Antony Easthope’s classification of iambic pentameter as a “hegemonic form” separate from “improperly” poetic forms such as the “accentual meter found in nursery rhymes, industrial folksongs and football chants” (qtd. in 218). Similarly, Barker recognizes that Harrison employs traditional verse forms to set different linguistic registers at odds: “Harrison in his formal mastery claims back the hijacked language of poetry to use its forms as an expressive weapon against ‘Received Pronunciation’ and to accommodate in verse the oral world of his origins” (51). And yet Barker perceives the poems as distinguishing the “languages of ‘Poetry’ and of demotic speech” from each other and as employing traditional forms “conscious[ly] and deliberate[ly]” to draw out an ironic, contentious relationship between inherited poetic form and colloquial language: “There is perhaps an irony in the fact that he chooses the highly artificial extended sonnet form . . . to outmaneuver the enemy” (51). For Marshall (Nantes), Harrison’s poems ask whether or not “poetry can escape its elitist status” (118). She recognizes, on the one hand, that traditional form for Harrison is a tool “to contain the powerful emotions that would otherwise overflow,” but, on the other hand, she regards traditional verse form as opposing the charged speech of social protest: “Harrison relishes the contrast between traditional poetic forms and the language of indignation and sometimes outrage that his poetry can convey” (131). In contrast to these views, I argue that for Harrison traditional

poetic form is neutral: he does not pit inherited verse forms against forms of speech; rather, he utilizes those poetic forms to pit different forms of speech against each other. The formal arrangements of his poems elicit rhythmic, tonal, and aural effects regardless of the cultural implications of different types of diction while locating a range of linguistic registers, including Leeds vernacular, squarely in poetic tradition.

³ Harrison modeled the structure of his “sonnets” on George Meredith’s *Modern Love* (1862), a sequence of sixteen-line poems. As we will see, he explains to John Haffenden that he found in Meredith’s form “narrative possibilities” and that he was drawn to that particular length because he could, for instance, divide sixteen lines into two octaves rather than employing the traditional, Petrarchan octave-sestet structure (232). Douglas Dunn argues that the poems are “not Meredithian sonnets” but “really four quatrains subjected to variations” (130-31). Indeed, the connection between *Modern Love*, a sequence about a failed marriage, and *The School of Eloquence* is rather thin. Further, quatrains and variations of quatrains proliferate in *The School of Eloquence*.

⁴ Marshall (Nantes) explains that although Harrison appears to be an overtly political poet, he has expressed in interviews his worries about poetry’s political futility because, according to her, he is “deeply aware that, in the words of W. H. Auden, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’” (131). Harrison is indeed preoccupied by poetry’s social function: he often frets about its ostensible futility, but he ultimately considers the “whole fatuity of the belief that writing poetry will do anything” to be what “negates poetry” (Burton 14).

⁵ As indicated in the previous chapter, Karen Jackson Ford helps us better understand the effect of Brooks’s radicalization on her poetry. See Ford’s two essays on, respectively, Brooks’s use of the ballad and the sonnet.

⁶ *The School of Eloquence* was first published as seventeen sixteen-line poems in 1978. The first part is comprised of poems that link Harrison’s education to the history of his working-class community; the second portrays life with his parents; and the final is concerned with “the place of art in a class-bound culture” (Rylance 120). Harrison published a second version of the sequence containing thirty-three more poems in *Continuous: 50 Sonnets from The School of Eloquence* (1981). In his *Selected Poems* (1987) and *Collected Poems* (2007), Harrison added still more poems to the series (hence, his sense of the sequence as “Continuous”).

⁷ The *OED* defines “rhubarb” as “an exotic plant producing the medicinal rootstock known as rhubarb, rhabarbarum, or rhapontic” and also as “murmurous background noise, an indistinct conversation, *esp.* the repetition of the word ‘rhubarb’ by actors to represent such a conversation or the noise of a crowd” and as “Nonsense; worthless stuff.” “Tusky,” according to the *OED*, is an adjective to describe something “Characterized by tusks; tusked: chiefly as a poetic epithet of the wild boar.” It is also, Harrison tells us, a Leeds colloquialism for rhubarb (“In Conversation” 39).

⁸ Harrison gets his history of the Luddites and the title of his sequence from Thomas's famous *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966). Thomas was a professor at the University of Leeds where Harrison pursued undergraduate and graduate studies in classics. Harrison's sequence begins with an epigraph taken from Thomas's book that includes the phrase "*Admit for the Season to the School of Eloquence*" (109). Thomas quotes "William Horsfall, of Ottiwells," a stocking-frame owner, announcing "that he wished to 'ride up to his saddle-girths' in Luddite blood, and his hatred was . . . obsessional" (560).

⁹ True, Harrison explains his earliest attempts to master traditional verse form as an effort to prove himself: "Originally I was drawn to metrical verse because I wanted to 'occupy' literature, as I said in 'Them and [uz]'. . . . I've occupied it in the sense that I can do it—I learned it as skillfully as I could in order that people would have to pay attention" (Interview with Haffenden 236). In another interview, he claims that mastering inherited forms was his way "to show off to *them*" (*Talking Verse* 84). However, Harrison was inclined to flaunt his skills less because he was a working-class poet and more because he was a young poet: "I did that when I was very young." In fact, the output of his early exercises in received poetic forms yielded work of "imitation and translation, none of which [he] cared to publish" (84). Further, Harrison may have brandished his dexterity with rhyme and meter to affirm himself as a poet, but those forms always came naturally to him. In those same interviews, he explains that he "instinctively" "associated" meter with "the heartbeat" (Interview with Haffenden 236) and that he "was always drawn to metre" (*Talking Verse* 84). The very fact that almost all of Harrison's poetry rhymes and scans suggests that poetic tradition wasn't simply a way for him to gain respect as a working-class poet but that he is predisposed to inherited verse forms as a poet, working-class or not.

¹⁰ Huk explains that the comedian is an important figure for Harrison: "One of the more unconventional literary influences on Harrison's poetry . . . was the method, patter, timing and delivery of the English stand-up comedian: this was a tradition he grew up with, experienced both from the music halls of Leeds and the comedy shows on the wireless" (77). Harrison tells Haffenden that "the stand-up comedian . . . knows how to relate to his audience" (243) and that his *School of Eloquence* sonnets were influenced by "the technique of the stand-up comedian[s]" he saw at music halls: "I went to the music-hall at the time when I was a kid, and always admired that technique of setting something up and then taking it away, structuring the lines and being almost aggressively aware of line-ending and the rhythmical entity of each line" (237).

¹¹ The BBC says there are three competing theories as to how Loiner came to mean a person from Leeds: "Loiner could derive from the name Loidis (in use by the eighth century for the district around modern-day Leeds)"; "[a]nother explanation says that in the 19th century there were many yards and closes around Briggate whose back entrances were known as Low Ins or Loins, hence Loiner"; and "[y]et a third theory is that there were a number of lanes in the Briggate area pronounced loins in the local accent. People who gathered in these loins to gossip were therefore called Loiners.

¹² Harrison's first publication is the chapbook *Earthworks* published in 1964. It includes nine poems in traditional verse forms.

¹³ Thomas Campey is an especially important figure for Harrison: "The first poem in *The Loiners* is about a man named Thomas Campey, who—without partaking of this culture—dragged books to market with his bad back, and enabled me to equip myself with a 'gentleman's' library. In all my books I now have a bookplate with a drawing of this man" (Interview with Haffenden 233).

¹⁴ Rowland argues that these three poems are emblematic of the "Cold War," "post-Holocaust" concerns that Harrison took up in *The Loiners*:

In a letter to Alan Ross (5 April 1968), Harrison explains that 'A "Loiner" [. . .] is a citizen of Leeds. They are also poems about loins in a general sense.' The White Queen's homosexuality and neo-colonialism, Thomas Campey's syphilis and the brooding figure of Queen Victoria, the promiscuous anti-Soviet wandering around Prague; all these characters and qualities in *The Loiners* add up to the collection's overall examination of dialectics between the personal and political in the Cold War period. (51)

For Rowland, the poems link personal sexual repression and social atrocity: "'Ginger's Friday' forms a prime example of how post-H/holocaust poems such as 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' and 'Allotments' open out into wider examinations of sexuality in *The Loiners* as a whole" (51). Rowland argues that the poems protract local oppression to larger systems of tyrannical social organization, even pointing to a stanza in "Ginger's Friday" that Harrison eventually dropped that emphasizes Ginger's background as an Irish-Catholic: "Catholics silencing teenagers' burgeoning interest in their sexuality, the Nazis' systematic murder of the Jews, the meat industry's exploitation of cattle; all these victim/non-victim binaries are subsumed into more abstract (perhaps too abstract) dialectics of power in *The Loiners* as a whole" (52).

¹⁵ The only explicitly autobiographical poem in *The Loiners* is the book's last poem, "Ghosts: Some Words Before Breakfast." That poem is a harrowing recount of Harrison waiting for his young daughter to regain consciousness after an accident in which she "had both legs crushed under a 10 ton lorry on the Great North Road" (qtd. in Rowland n30, 129).

¹⁶ Harrison's poems are presented in slightly different fashions across his publications. For example, the same poems from *The Loiners* are presented in the *Selected* and *Collected Poems* but not grouped in sections as they are in the five-part individual collection. Further, several poems from the initial book do not appear in the *Collected Poems* at all: "A Proper Caution," the second and third parts of the "Travesties" section of *The White Queen*, "The Chopin Express," "The Excursion," "Sentences," and the five *Curtain Sonnets*. A poem entitled "Doodlebugs" is presented with the *Loiners* poems in the *Selected* and *Collected Poems* but is not in the first book.

Harrison explained how he was grouping his early poems in an unpublished letter to a *London Magazine* editor a few years before *The Loiners* was published: “In a letter to Alan Ross (28 January 1967), Harrison writes that ‘The White Queen’ ‘is one of a group of 10-12 poems about Europeans in Africa called *A Place in the Sun*, and Thomas Campey belongs to another group under the general title of *The Leeds Quatrains*” (qtd. in Rowland n49, 84). Only four of the poems set in Africa made it into the book: *The White Queen*, “The Heart of Darkness,” “The Songs of the PWD Man,” and “The Death of the PWD Man.” The “PWD” poems are dramatic monologues in Leeds dialect set to the rhythms of a ballad. Like *The White Queen*, the PWD man’s neocolonial racism is manifest in his sexual compulsions for Africans. Also like *The White Queen*, his local language presents him as a repulsive but also sympathetic character. He expresses repugnant views about African women but also vulnerability, loneliness, and an awareness of his destructive behavior:

I want a voice with that soft tone,
Disembodied Yorkshire like my mother’s on the phone,
As the cook puts down some flowers and the smallboy scrapes the spade,
To speak as my epitaph: *Look at the hole he’s made.* (44)

¹⁷ All of Nigeria officially became a British colony in 1900: “British missionaries arrived in Nigeria in the 1840s and in 1853 Lagos [the capitol of Nigeria] was annexed as a British colony as part of the campaign to halt the West African slave trade. When the activities of legitimate British traders in the Niger delta region were threatened by French rivals, the British government took responsibility for the conquest of the interior in 1900.” Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960 (“Nigeria”).

¹⁸ Negritude had “both a cultural and a political dimension” (“Negritude,” *PPP*). It was influenced by Harlem Renaissance writers like James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, who sought to reinvigorate African American culture, and was “mixed with an undercurrent of Marxist ideals” (“Brief Guide to Negritude”). Negritude writers “took a militant stand against black cultural assimilation by actively seeking to explore the singularity of the black cultural experience” (“Negritude” *PPP*).

¹⁹ Madden also reads the fourth line of “On Not Being Milton”—“my growing black enough to fit my boots” (112)—as connecting Harrison’s coal-mining working-class community and Negritude: there, Madden argues, “Harrison links race and class, rethinking working-class culture through the cultural politics of negritude and the history of coal mining, and suggesting that he is ‘growing black enough’ through coal-dust or recovered history ‘to fit my boots’” (136).

²⁰ Pound employs the figure also to compare the poet’s skill with a prose writer’s: “It is precisely the difficulty of this amphibious existence that keeps down the census record of good poets. The accomplished prose author will tell you that he ‘can only write poetry when he has a bellyache’ and thence he will argue that poetry just isn’t an art. I dare say there are very good marksmen who just can’t shoot from a horse” (52). But Pound castigates the centaur in *The Cantos*: the “Pull down thy vanity” passage of “Canto

LXXXI” begins, “The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world,” an insect in a “casque” of “vanity” that believes it creates out of “man / Made courage, or made order, or made grace” rather than from “a live tradition / or from a fine old eye” (384).

²¹ See McDonald for a discussion of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* and its relation to the classical tradition of satyr plays.

²² *The White Queen* is a five-part poem in a variety of traditional and free verse forms. The first two parts are comprised of a series of dramatic monologues in heroic couplets; the third is a prophetic *terza rima* poem inspired by Italian Renaissance poet and physician Hieronymi Fracastorii’s 1530 epic *Syphilis*; the fourth presents three iambic monologues (ranging from trimeter to pentameter) with alternating rhymes; and the fifth is a sequence of concise, free-verse “postcard” notes from the White Queen to his young lover. The *Collected Poems* omits two poems that were originally in the third section: one is composed of two envelope quatrains and a sestet rhyming ABAABA (“The Ancestor”), the other is comprised of three ballad-like quatrains with alternating rhymes (“Rumba”).

²³ Aldrich explains that “[c]ertain colonies gained fame as sites of homosexual licence”: “[t]he colonies provided many possibilities of homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality—a variety of perspectives and experiences by which men expressed attraction to other men (or male youths)” (1-3). Aldrich also points up the racism inherent in those sexual relations:

Almost all [colonial] men . . . to much varying degrees, accepted ideas current in the colonial age about ‘natives.’ Racialist and racist stereotypes abounded. Romanticisation and idealization of foreign cultures—or, conversely, denigration of them—were common, along with wild fantasies about the luxuriance of the hammam, Africans’ generous genital endowments, Asians’ passivity and the beauty and virility of half-naked ‘savages.’ (9)

In fact, white homosexual colonialists were typically indifferent to the racist subjugation that their non-white sexual and romantic partners suffered under British imperialism: “few made real attempts to understand the cultures of men they bedded; some remained blithely unconcerned about the political disenfranchisement, economic exploitation and cultural alienation to which colonialism had reduced subject populations” (9). The white queen expresses such insensitivity not just in his racist objectification of young black males but toward the very man he has fallen in love with. The poem closes with a final postcard note to his imprisoned lover: “*Mon égal!* / Let me be the Gambia / in your Senegal” (37). That the poem ends with the White Queen joking to a black prisoner about the phallic shape of Gambia suggests that he doesn’t in fact regard his lover as “*Mon égal*” (my equal) but merely as a sexual object.

²⁴ For a recent discussion of “v.” as an elegy in the tradition of Gray, see Kennedy. For him, the poem not only “mourn[s] and commemorate[s] the decline of the working class” but elegizes also “the decline of class as a social and political conception” and “the possibility of dissent” (165). In other words, the poem condemns class division but also

extols the community created by that division and its resistances to that division. Other critics have also examined the elegiac aspects of “v.” See Byrne in *H, v. and O*, Haberkamm, Madden, Rowland, and Spencer.

²⁵ Harrison had earlier portrayed unemployed, drunken skinheads in “Divisions” from *The School of Eloquence* (SP 173-74). In that poem, like in “v.,” the speaker is at pains to separate himself from vandalizing skinheads. And yet the poem makes clear that the speaker and the skinheads he observes speak a similar language.

²⁶ The epigraph to “v.” is a quote taken from the January 10, 1982 issue of the *Sunday Times* by Arthur Scargill, a member of the Labour Party and the president of the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984-85 miner’s strike that the poem refers to: the epigraph states, “My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words” (Harrison, SP 235). Scargill led the charge against Margaret Thatcher’s pit closures and anti-union legislation. One of the strike’s main failures is that it split the Labour Party and the NUM.

Eagelton sees the miner’s strike as a minor element of “v.”: “The actual Miners’ Strike impinges on [the poem] hardly at all, other than in a moving epigraph taken from Arthur Scargill, which might have been spoken with Tony Harrison specially in mind” (350). Madden, on the other hand, argues that “the attribution of the quotation . . . foregrounds the historical context central to the poem” (127). For Madden, “the strikes provide a significant political context within which to stage the poet’s desire for political alliance with the working class, and the skinhead’s consistent destabilization of any such alliance—an alliance formulated as poetic transcendence of the political and resisted through a polemic and crude emphasis on the materiality of the social, an alliance further indicated and indicted in a number of key puns, such as ‘gob,’ ‘flying visits,’ and ‘enemies within’” (127-28). Madden explains the double meanings of these terms: “gob” in Leeds vernacular refers to the mouth (“shut yer gob a while,” the speaker in “v.” says to the skinhead) and to worked-out coal mines (128); the “flying visits” the speaker takes to his parents’ graves evokes Scargill’s “flying pickets,” which forced the closure of the Saltley coal depot, “the final showdown of the strike” (131); and the “enemies within” that the poem’s speaker ruminates on—the conflicting aspects of himself—alludes to “Margaret Thatcher’s characterization of the striking miners as ‘the enemies within’ Great Britain, thus inextricably linking the skinhead . . . to the striking miners as a figure of social division and class resentment” (129). Madden helps us understand that the poem’s diction positions “v.” squarely in the context of Harrison’s local history, a history of working-class resistance that took on national proportions.

²⁷ Madden connects the missing “N” and “F” from “PRINCE OF WALES” to the “National Front” graffiti that the poem’s speaker observes earlier in the poem: “When skinheads steal the ‘N’ and ‘F’ from a sign over Yorkshire mines, “PRINCE OF WALES” suddenly becomes “PRI CE O WALES . . . The “price” of Wales (its mines or its language) is linked through an act of vandalism (against the Empire?) to the racist politics of the National Front (NF)” (141). Indeed, in the infamous film that Harrison made with

Richard Eyre of himself reading the poem, an image of the spray-painted letters “NF” flashes on the screen as Harrison reads the lines about the defaced sign.

²⁸ Although Byrne’s view of division in Harrison’s poetry is different from mine in that she locates it in the poems’ speakers, in “oppositional voices [that] do not exceed a discrete and encompassing single voice, of the narrative I” (4), she also perceives the “wholes” in poetry that Harrison creates out of the holes of his experiences in working-class Leeds. For her, the poems provide “meaningful utterance” and “ligature and organization” (1).

²⁹ Most discussions of “v.” focus on the poem’s infamous BBC broadcast. In fact, Kennedy points out that the controversy has sometimes overshadowed the poem itself: critics of *v.* have tended to elide the poem with the historical and political circumstances surrounding the moment of its writing, first publication, and subsequent controversial television version broadcast by Channel 4 on 4 November 1987. . . . it is interesting to note here that the *Bloodaxe* second edition [of the poem] follows the poem’s twenty-seven pages with a further forty-six detailing political and media reactions to the broadcast. It is almost as if *v.* exists more as its reception than as a poem. (164)

In his acceptance speech for the 2009 PEN/Pinter Prize, Harrison recounted the controversy and read out a litany of responses to the film by conservative politicians: “a cascade of obscenities” (Teddy Taylor, MP); “another probably Bolshie poet seeking to impose his frustration on the rest of us” (Gerald Howarth, MP); “the riff-raff takes over” (Sir Gilbert Longden, MP) (qtd in Harrison, “Inky Digit” 80). The British news sensationalized the event before the airing even occurred as “The Four-Letter TV Poem Fury” (quoted in Harrison, *V.* 40), and a debate ensued about whether the film should be allowed to air. A number of writers spoke out in support of the film and the poem, including Peter Levi, Harold Pinter, and Melvin Bragg. After it aired, the Independent Broadcasting Authority found that “the level of public response to the transmission of *v.* was relatively low. The flood of public protest expected was not realized” (quoted in *V.* 73).

CHAPTER V

LUCILLE CLIFTON'S MORTAL TONGUE

To Tony Harrison, poetry is both a form of social defiance and a personal inheritance. He opens *The School of Eloquence*, an ongoing sequence of poems largely about class differences, by crediting his “uncles, Joe and Harry— / one . . . a stammerer / the other dumb” for his poetic abilities (*SP* 111). As we have seen in the previous chapter, the *Eloquence* poems are often themselves fields of verbal disturbance, disorienting and turbulent. And yet even as they manifest linguistic disruption as corollaries of the social disruptions they examine, the poems are entirely cohesive. Their traditional verse forms—iambic pentameter; quatrains, octaves, sestets, and couplets that underscore sonnet-like turns; various rhyme schemes—establish and maintain order. The poems’ conventional structures engender patterns, sound effects, and visual and tonal shifts out of varying linguistic strands, from the poet’s highly literate disclosures to the debilitating, “shocking stammer” of his Uncle Joe (*SP* 168).

Harrison’s uncles are important figures for him not so much because he wants to speak for those who can’t but because he understands their constrained determination for articulacy as a metaphor for political poetry. In fact, his uncles do not need their nephew to speak for them because they’ve discovered their own methods to circumvent their speech barriers. For example, Uncle Harry in “Wordlists” uses his “*Funk & Wagnalls*” dictionary “to confute” “Tory errors” (*SP* 118). Harry, “most eloquent deaf-mute,” compensates for his inability to communicate vocally by pointing to words in a dictionary to express his dissatisfaction with reactionary politics. Likewise, in “Study,” the speaker compares his Uncle Joe’s strained speech to a powerful artistry:

His gaping jaws

once plugged in to the power of his stammer

patterned the stuck plosive without pause

like a d-d-damascener's hammer. (115)

His uncle's persistence in speaking results in a "patterned" sound similar to the speaker's description of the stammer: the *p* of "plugged," "power," "patterned," "plosive," and "pause" alliterates just as his uncle's stutter does when he struggles to say the word "damascener." Further, rhyme links Joe's stammer to "hammer," suggesting that what obstructs Joe is precisely what impels him both to shape his words with great effort (to "damascene" is to adorn metal) and to batter back against incapacitating forces. Later, in "Self-Justification," we learn that Joe has dedicated his life's work to remedying his speech problem:

Impediment spurred him,

the worst stammerer I've known, to be a printer.

He handset type much faster than he spoke.

Those cruel consonants, *ms*, *ps*, and *bs*

on which his jaws and spirit almost broke

flicked into order with sadistic ease. (172)

At his job, Joe counters vengefully his broken speech by typesetting "with sadistic ease" the letters that represent the most difficult sounds for him to make. That Joe's nephew makes his first attempts at poetry in a writing pad given to him by Joe and describes those attempts as stammering links his uncle's stutter to his own artistic efforts: "Uncle Joe . . .

/ . . . supplied those scribble pads / on which I stammered my first poetry.” Writing poetry is as onerous an undertaking for the speaker as speaking is for his uncle because theirs is a working-class speech thought uncondusive to poetic eloquence. Making poetry out of the local language of the disenfranchised is akin to articulating through a stammer.

And yet the poem argues that such difficulty enhances rather than impedes eloquence: “aggression, struggle, loss, blank printer’s ems” are, the speaker tells us, the interferences in life “by which all eloquence gets justified,” the extra white space visually comparing Joe’s work as a typesetter (“justifying” type is a printer’s term) to the poet’s work arranging diction, and perhaps to the silence that printer and poet speak through. In other words, eloquence here proceeds from countervailing oppositional forces. The speaker and his uncles have all found resources for eloquence in spite of conditions that would silence them: Joe has his type, Harry his lexis, and Harrison his traditional verse forms.

In a 2009 lecture, “The Inky Digit of Defiance,” Harrison reiterated the connection between his uncles’ burdens with speech and their expressivity: even though his Uncle Joe’s “jaws would stick on a consonant for so long that the baulked energy would go through his whole body and make him stamp his feet, . . . as a compositor he was astonishingly fluent” (80-81). Likewise, his Uncle Harry “wielded a thick Funk and Wagnalls’ dictionary in one hand, pointing to the word he wanted with the other,” making of the volume itself a prosthetic for communication: “He licked his fingers frequently so as to be able to flick through the pages fast and a little of the ink of the lexicon darkened his defiant digit” (80-81). That defiant, inky digit represents for Harrison unity between personal experience, political reality, and poetry:

I heard a phrase on a late BBC World Service program about the recent election in Afghanistan. The reporter spoke of women coming from the polling booth proudly displaying fingers marked with indelible ink to show they had voted. “The inky digit of defiance,” the reporter called it. I thought that also described my Uncle Harry’s finger darkened by his manic lexical need. These early experiences of family inarticulacy were what drove me, I see now in retrospect, into a passion for language and languages, and for what is still for me the supreme articulacy and eloquence of poetry. (81)

Making poetry out of a loved one’s inability to speak or out of forms of speech thought improbable for “supreme articulacy and eloquence” is Harrison’s “own form of defiance.”

Like Harrison, Lucille Clifton thinks of poetry as a family inheritance. As Harrison associates his artistic inclination primarily with his uncles and father, Clifton tends to connect her poetic capabilities to the female members of her family: her aunts, mother, grandmothers, daughters. Also like Harrison, Clifton uncovers political realities in her family history. But whereas the Leeds dialect that Harrison’s family speaks operates alongside disparate versions of speech in order to allegorize ruptures created by unequal social organization, Clifton’s poems make sudden movements across linguistic registers that are nevertheless smooth and continuous. These disparate registers relate individual experience in domestic settings to common experience in broader social contexts rather than create disruption.

In “study the masters,” for instance, “aunt timmie” represents a collective of unacknowledged “masters” whom the speaker advises us to contemplate:

it was her iron,

or one like hers,
that smoothed the sheets
the master poet slept on.
home or hotel, what matters is
he lay himself down on her handiwork
and dreamed. she dreamed too, words. (557)¹

The poem does more than pay homage to Aunt Timmie's domestic "handiwork." By stating simply "or one like hers" and "home or hotel," Clifton renders her aunt's experience as illustrative of working women of color: it is not Aunt Timmie's "iron" alone but "one like hers, / that smoothed" the master poet's sheets. Whether that ironing occurs in Timmie's home or in a hotel by an anonymous housekeeper, the alliterating *h* of "home" and "hotel" emphasizes the shared experiences of those locales and connects the "handiwork" to both "he . . . himself" and "her." The poem states that "what matters" is not so much where but that "he" rests on "her" work, a connection we hear not just in that repetition of *h* sounds but in the *d*, *r*, and *w* of "down," "handiwork," "dreamed," and "words" as well. And yet even as the poem claims that his laying down on her work is "what matters," the white space proceeding "dreamed" suggests that the poem is doubling back on that estimation: during the pause, it shifts its focus from the master poet back to Aunt Timmie. What matters along with the fact that "he lay himself down on her handiwork" is that Timmie's words emanate despite that fact. The poem puts into action art's equalizing power. It twines the two masters with sound and names the woman who irons the sheets of the "master poet" a "master" herself.

Harrison's uncles have their typesetting letters and dictionary to express themselves against silencing forces, and Clifton's Aunt Timmie has her chanting. We might think of Aunt Timmie as Clifton's version of Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" with whom Harrison identifies. For Timmie's dream, like that of any "master poet," is a dream of "words," in her case, "some cherokee, some masai and some / huge and particular as hope." Again, Clifton employs white space to make subtly an unexpected movement: in the slight pause between "dreamed, too" and "words," the poem imagines that Timmie could also have been a poet—not only does she, like the master poet, dream "too," but her dreams are made of words like any poet's dream would be. Hers is a dream in language that derives from specific, nonwhite identifications (that the "master" poet is a "master" suggests his whiteness)—the dream of an American woman with "cherokee" and "masai" lineages. It is also the dream of a common tongue, a language with a diction as "huge and particular" as the word "hope." The poem refers generally to "some cherokee" and "some masai" words to emphasize that the "master" being studied here is nonwhite and to make the point that some American inglorious Miltons would have non-European ancestral ties. It portrays Timmie as a "particular" person in one line ("it was her iron") and then connects her in the next line to a "huge" community of women ("or one like hers"). What we would learn if we were to "study . . . masters" like Aunt Timmie is that individual expression is unified in broader contexts.

Indeed, even though the poem suggests that Aunt Timmie's voice has gone unheard ("if you had heard her," it says), it relays her lesson nonetheless. For just as Uncle Joe and Uncle Harry have their nephew to honor them in poetry, Aunt Timmie has her niece. The speaker's description of her aunt's mastery recovers a crucial voice of

American existence that social hierarchies have attempted to ignore: listening to Aunt Timmie's chanting as she irons elucidates for the speaker the link between "form and line / and discipline and order / and," as the poem's one-word final line tells us, "america." Likewise, listening to the niece's depiction of that chanting is a lesson not just in craftsmanship but in how a formalized, lineated, disciplined, ordered black female local language is as much the language of "america" as any "master" poet's language.

Not only does Clifton locate the source of her poetry in her lineage, she also, like Harrison, figures her poetic impulse as something of an "inky digit": "an exceptional fact about Lucille's birth is that she was born with twelve fingers, six on one hand and six on the other, as were her mother and one of her daughters"; Clifton "associates this congenital difference with European witchcraft and with Egyptian royalty" (Lupton 10). However, this shared trait is also figured in the poems as a sign of her poetic inheritance. In fact, the extra digits are symbols for Clifton's artistic power just as the "inky digit" of Uncle Harry represents for Harrison an aggressive fluency: "We poets acquire our inky digits . . . through our own form of defiance," he remarks, comparing the inky digit of poetry to "the 'Fuck you!' single middle digit" (81). Clifton's inky digit is not so strident: the first of many "twelve-finger" poems represents her extra digits as "wonders" that were "cut off" by "somebody" who "was afraid we would learn to cast spells" (196). In characteristic Cliftonian fashion, that singular but nondescript "somebody" becomes a larger "they" who "didn't understand / the powerful memories of ghosts" before cutting off the speaker's and her female relatives' additional fingers. The attempt by "somebody" and "they" to dispose of the speaker's mysterious power is futile though, for the speaker declares that "we" can put those "now / . . . invisible fingers" to work in poetry that casts

spells by turning to ancestry and memory in order to “take what we want” and to connect the dead and the living. Clifton’s digits are not Harrison’s blunt instruments but the more mysterious powers (her extra digits are “wonders,” her gloves “strange”) of remembrance and connection with those alive and with those who have died.

Despite the capacity for Clifton’s “terrible, shadowy” hands to take what “we” want and to proclaim black female lineage (Clifton foregrounds blackness along with femaleness when she describes the extra fingers she shares with her female family members as “strange black gloves”), her understanding of the connection between her extra fingers and her poetic gift is, subsequent poems reveal, considerably fraught. For example, in “speaking of loss,” which is grouped with “*i was born with twelve fingers*” in a section titled “homage to mine” in her book *two-headed woman* (1980), the bereft speaker counts her extra fingers among “everything” she has lost: “i began with everything; / parents, two extra fingers / a brother to ruin” (204).² “Everything” the speaker had has been filched, incarcerated, and amputated by an unspecified entity: “someone has stolen / my parents and hidden my brother. / my extra fingers are cut away.” The speaker finds herself labeled with an unfamiliar name in an unfamiliar location: “how did i come / to sit in this house / wearing a name i never heard / until i was a woman?” But she is not entirely emptied, either; rather, she is “left with plain hands and / nothing to give . . . but poems.” Similarly, in the last section of *two-headed woman*, the speaker worries that the exasperating voices she has been hearing are evidence that she is losing her mind, and she associates them with her extra fingers, invoking her dead mother, whom she suspects is at least one of them: “mother i am mad. / we should have guessed / a twelve-fingered flower / might break. my knowing / flutters to the ground” (245). Her

unusual trait both symbolizes her poetic gift and renders her vulnerable in a society hostile to difference. And yet by the end of the poem, the speaker revels in her “otherness”: one of the troubling voices is “someone calling itself Light” who “has opened my inside,” and the speaker (Clifton herself, we can assume, since Lucille means light and the section is entitled “the light that came to lucille clifton”) is “flooded with brilliance.”

Each of these poems concludes by relating the extra fingers to artistic creation. However, the association between the extra fingers of a black woman and her poetry is a complicated one: her genetic trait represents by turns dismemberment, loss, madness, self-accusation, and rage as well as the impulse to create poetry from memory and ancestry when all else is lost. Over ten years later, in “it was a dream” from *The Book of Light* (1992), Clifton would again figure the extra finger as a symbol of the artist’s extra power. This time, it belongs to the speaker’s “greater self” who appears to her in a dream. The apparitional visitor is violently denunciatory, “accusing me of my life / with her extra finger / whirling in a gyre of rage” (431). When the speaker pleads with the writhing chimera who “twisted her wild hair / and sparked her wild eyes” to explain what she “could . . . have done,” that greater self “screamed as long as / i could hear her / This. This. This.” Her repeated, capitalized imperative “This,” it turns out, is not a condemnation but a directive to poetry; the greater self commands the speaker to write poetry about the harsh and hidden details of the speaker’s life. “This” points to what is right there in front of her, including the poems that are in front of us.

To observe Clifton’s optimistic taking “what we want” and affirmative proclaiming of black female legacy is not to ignore the troubling circumstances that make

such taking necessary. For example, the untitled poem directly preceding “it was a dream” that ends “lightning bolt,” *The Book of Light*’s first section, is not unambiguously triumphant. There, a speaker invites her auditor to “celebrate” the “kind of life” she has “shaped” on “this bridge between / starshine and clay,” alluding both to Whitman’s “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” and Hughes’s “I, too, sing America” (427).³ Clifton situates her poem with those classic poems of American identity, but she also distinguishes herself from the looming male figures who wrote them:

i had no model.

born in babylon

both nonwhite and woman

what did i see to be except myself?

Clifton sings here as Whitman and Hughes did before her, but, as a black American female, she also perceives herself as having “no model.” She has to invent her own language (“I made it up,” she says) because black women haven’t been represented adequately in the national literature. It is a deficiency that Clifton nevertheless makes productive use of:

In this culture females have not even had permission to be poets until fairly recently. As an African American person I’m fortunate in being outside those boundaries of definition, so I could be whatever. I mean, no one thought I was going to be a poet anyway. As a rule in this culture those boundaries about what one is supposed to be as a visible human being didn’t include people of African descent, so I ignored them.

I've said many times that one of the blessings of being born an African American woman on this continent is that I learned early not to buy other people's definitions, and primarily about who I was. That refusal led me to wonder about *every* definition, so I was then able to try to define the world for myself.

("Interview with Bill Moyers" 84)

To compensate for having no model, the speaker of "*won't you celebrate with me*" becomes the model herself: "i had no model" and so, she reasons, "what did i see to be except myself?"

The language Clifton devises to be her own model expresses her individuality and her connection to others; it extends personal experience to encompass larger, collective spheres. A particular "nonwhite" female "i" insists on being herself despite a self-eradicating social context while referring to that context in emblematic terms: "babylon" signifies a racist and sexist mainstream society that marginalizes nonwhite women; "starshine" indicates the otherworldly or the spiritual, "Lucifer" and "Lucille," which both mean "light"; "clay" symbolizes earthly life and Adam; and "this bridge between starshine and clay" is the poetry written to correlate the endurances of a specific black female speaker to larger human ordeals and forbearance. Rhythm reinforces the poem's unifying capacities: the *b* and *w* sounds in "born," "babylon," "both," "be," "nonwhite," "woman," "white," and "what" and the rhymes of "white" and "life" and "see" and "be" create a cohesive music. The poem welcomes its listener to celebrate a black female poetry born out of black, female independence (she stands alone and resolute, "my one hand holding tight / my other hand") and survival ("everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed"), a poetry that, with its straightforward,

general diction and minimalist forms, claims the authority to uphold specific black female experience as paradigmatic of human experience.

On the whole, we don't typically find in Clifton's work uncomplicated celebrations of human experience but ambivalent accounts of family life, historical events, spiritual occurrences, and perseverance. For example, the poems leading up to "*won't you celebrate with me*" present the difficulties that her family has faced: "oh stars / and stripes forever / what did you do to my father?" the speaker asks in "sam" (416); "she would sit, shy as a wren / humming alone and lonely / amid broken promises," she says of her mother in "thel" (418). Similarly, in "it was a dream," which comes directly after the celebration poem and begins the book's next section, the "kind of life" the speaker wants to celebrate is firmly indicted by a twelve-fingered, wild-haired, wild-eyed, screaming "greater self" for "what my days had come to." We find in Clifton less an inclination to praise and more an impulse to commend what she has "shaped" and "made . . . up" despite constant threat. The tone established in the celebration poem's first line, "won't you celebrate with me," is not, as Robin Ekiss argues, "timid and apologetic" but determined and resolved: she requests not permission to celebrate—she's going to celebrate with or without us—but the company of others as she pays homage to her own black female poetry, the "This. This. This" her greater self directs her to, a poetry that answers back the accusatory, accounts for its days, bridges material and immaterial realms, and prevails in a social context that would annihilate it.

In her foreword to Clifton's *Collected Poems* (2012), Toni Morrison observes that critics narrowly and condescendingly idealize Clifton instead of focusing on the artistry of the poems: "Accolades from fellow poets and critics refer to her universal

human heart; they describe her as a fierce caring female. They compliment her courage, vision, joy–unadorned (meaning ‘simple’), mystical, poignant, humorous, intuitive, harsh and loving” (xxx-xxx). These are not qualities that Morrison takes exception to in and of themselves; rather, she decries the absence of scholarly investigations into the ways Clifton’s language manifests those qualities:

I do not disagree with these judgments. Yet I am startled by the silence in these interpretations of her work. There are no references to her intellect, imagination, scholarship or her risk-taking manipulation of language. To me she is not the big mama/big sister of racial reassurance and self-empowerment. I read her skill as that emanating from an astute, profound intellect—characteristics mostly absent from her reviews. The personal courage of the woman cannot be gainsaid, but it should not function as a substitute for piercing insight and bracing intelligence.

My general impression of the best of her work: seductive with the simplicity of an atom, which is to say highly complex, explosive underneath an apparent quietude.

(xxx)

Morrison identifies the tendency of Clifton’s readers to engage only superficially with the poetry: they hear, and applaud, Clifton’s simple diction and enduring tones without apprehending the complex procedures of that diction and how such a tone is achieved.

Critics who have focused on the diction of Clifton’s poems seem to struggle with how to characterize it, or they misconstrue its operations. For example, Helen Vendler hedges in her assessment, classifying Clifton’s generalized diction as, on the one hand, “ineffectual” and, on the other hand, “undeniable” and between admiring Clifton’s ability to repel embellishment with the “spare and the plain” and castigating what she regards as

the poems' hostility to that embellishment (4-5). In another instance, Justin Quinn excoriates Clifton for supposedly adapting vapid poetic conventions he deems characteristic of a certain brand of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century poetry: the typical theme of such poems, he argues, "is how wonderful one's relations or lovers are, and how vulnerable is this beauty in an inimical world. The conclusion is a slight sigh of despair and foreknowledge." Quinn describes Clifton's simple diction as a "seamless stylistic assimilation into the verbiage of the ubiquitous second rate" (*CPR*). While he critiques what he perceives to be her mannered, late-twentieth-century trendiness, he also categorizes her as a Black Arts poet, a movement with an aesthetic rooted not in the late 1990s but the 1960s (and a movement Clifton was not actively involved in): "Succeeding generations of African-American poets are disassociating themselves from the Black Arts movement as it fostered a careless attitude to the craft: reading Clifton, one feels that such distancing is justified. African-American poetry has never, even to the present day, enjoyed the same attention as has the music and the novels, and this is perhaps because the poets themselves have not been able to situate themselves satisfactorily either within or without the Anglophone tradition."⁴ Alternatively, Rachel Elizabeth Harding contends that Clifton's voice authoritatively situates itself in literary tradition. But she doesn't locate Clifton's authority in her arrangement of language but in her "womanist" familial, historical, and spiritual knowledge (36).⁵ Clifton's poems, Harding argues, blends the "pragmatic and poetic, the practical and the spiritual" (42-43). For Harding, these are the essential components of Clifton's work: she is "a writer of profound illumination and plain-speaking."

However, to divide the plain or colloquial language from the mystical or illuminated language—the practical from the poetic—in Clifton posits too stark a separation between those modes and a merely programmatic use of them. True, much of Clifton’s poetry, especially in the first decade of her career, employs black vernacular both to effect social redress in the ways I’ve been describing; and many of the poems across her oeuvre depict speakers enduring troubling spiritual experiences in language that is not idiomatic. But even when the diction in her poems changes, the tone across her four-decade career is remarkably consistent: whether generated from idioms, from locutions that evoke the otherworldly, or from plainspoken language more standard than vernacular, Clifton’s poems produce a consistently authoritative tone of voice. This authority derives from a multivalent local language she creates out of a simple, often general lexicon arranged in especially compressed, stylistically spare free-verse forms. Her visually small poems convey the vicissitudes of domestic life and pose large questions about race, spirituality, mythology, mortality, and poetry. They address entities as intimate as herself and her family and as immense as God, white America, dead ancestors, Joan of Arc, the earth, and slavery. And they inhabit personas that span everyday speakers like “tyrone,” “willie,” “aunt agnes,” and her mother and father; mythic figures such as Adam and Eve, Kali, Leda, Mary and Joseph, Lucifer, and King David; pop culture characters like Clark Kent; and historical people like James Byrd.⁶ This extensive range of variable concerns, voices, and listeners is counterbalanced by the visual and tonal constancy of the poems.

And yet despite this consistency and her authoritative tone of voice, we find Clifton, as with the other poets examined here, writing at different points about her search for a language adequate to her subjects. She wants a poetry that will embody human

experience but that will nevertheless depict her specific communities. Such a shared language is at once “huge and particular,” local and general. Her attempt to unify these oppositional qualities complicates her relationship to local language: as she becomes increasingly committed to an all-encompassing language that links her singular ordeals and occurrences to common human experience, she enters realms that extend beyond human localities, and the distinctly located language of black vernacular recedes from her work while less situated manifestations of speech take hold. Most notably, the poems spoken by the immaterial voices she eventually called “The Ones” sound dislocated rather than located. And yet they maintain both a colloquial element and Clifton’s characteristic tone: we hear the distinctive Cliftonian voice even when her speakers address us from outside our world and tell us her “tongue” isn’t “unique” (“the message from The Ones” 613). In this simultaneously discorporate and demotic register, Clifton questions the very notion of location, speaking authoritatively for her communities and for “more than” her communities (“perhaps” 246).⁷

As I’ve suggested, the communities that Clifton identifies with are especially varied: they include African Americans and her own family comprised mostly of women, and they encompass a host of others, too.⁸ For instance, she locates herself at different times among poets, Americans, Native Americans, Africans, inheritors of Western cultural traditions, victims of political violence, survivors of sexual abuse and cancer, Christians, Buddhists, the aging, animals, “live things everywhere” (“cutting greens” 173). Indeed, Clifton’s is an aesthetic of wholeness, of, as the speaker of “for the mute” says, “many languages” not just “one mortal tongue” (237). Her many languages, issuing from an African American, female, wife, mother, poet in the United States, in the

twentieth century, deny the social constructs that attempt to situate her and her communities within restrictive structures. She devises a comprehensive local language that speaks with human authority, a mortal tongue even for voices that are not mortal, a tongue for, as Heaney has it, “adjusting and correcting imbalances in the world” (*Redress* 192).

One of Clifton’s languages is black vernacular. It indicates that Clifton’s speakers are African American and confers upon them the authority to speak to and from that community. Her expressly unadorned earlier poems often present black speech in a manner that acquires potency not from linguistic elaboration or complication but from plainspoken forthrightness. Such speakers assert themselves with commanding, succinct directness. For example, “*those boys that ran together*,” an early poem reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks’s famous “We Real Cool,” sets the misfortunes of local black men against their former “fineness” in spare, colloquial diction that produces a matter-of-fact tone. Brooks also distinguished youthful vibrancy from a dismal future, but she did so in her characteristically extravagant poetic style: her speakers’ everyday speech (“We real cool. We / Left school”) transforms into a succession of alliterating, ornate phrases that are expressly non-colloquial (“Lurk late,” “Sing sin,” “Jazz June”). The persistent, mechanistic pattern of intricate sounds in four scrupulously ordered, rhetorically consistent couplets both convey the boys’ self-awareness and their march toward impending self-destruction.

Clifton’s poem—a brief, free-verse composite of a five-line stanza, a couplet, and two isolated lines—also weighs vitality against demise but in colloquial language so

unassuming it sounds like the opposite of the lavish idiolect Brooks devised to depict determined self-awareness in its precursor poem:

those boys that ran together
at tillman's
and the poolroom
everybody see them now
think it's a shame. (48)

This monologue is delivered not by the boys themselves but by a speaker whose demotic language identifies her as a member of a local community who has been observing, along with “everybody” else in the neighborhood, the boys “at tillman’s / and the poolroom” over the years. She tells the story of the boy’s fate in unaffected diction that generates a subdued, deadpan tone unlike the exuberance that embellished speech produces in “We Real Cool.”

We might surmise that “*those boys that ran together*” sounds the way “We Real Cool” would have sounded if it had continued in black vernacular: not an elaborate mounting of coinciding sounds but a direct and steadfast assertion in the face of detrimental social forces. Unlike “We Real Cool,” “*those boys*” never shifts verbal pitch but rather maintains a steady colloquial register to articulate the uncertain prospects of young black males with both disarming bluntness and the intimate earnestness of everyday conversation. That blunt, intimate language is arranged to create white space that suggests nuanced emotional pauses:

everybody see them now
remember they was fine boys

we have some fine black boys

don't it make you want to cry? (48)

The speaker repeats the phrase “everybody see them now” from the first stanza and explains that witnessing the boys as they become young men doesn't just provoke regret (and perhaps a bit of judgment) about the dispiriting situations they've grown into (“everybody see them now / think it's a shame”) but also jogs the neighborhood's memory of their former, unforgettable impressiveness: “everybody see them now / remember they was fine boys.” The speaker recognizes that seeing the young men triggers thoughts of better times. The poem presents her unambiguous local speech to communicate clearly the speaker's realization that such vitality still exists in the “fine black boys” that “we have” now and the tragic recognition that history threatens to repeat itself. The community's current boys are as “fine” as the boys that used to run together, but they are also as vulnerable to conditions that would destroy them, a fact that causes the speaker to ask tersely, “don't it make you want to cry?” The clear-cut, everyday language here locates the speaker in the community she comments on and depicts her complex thought process as she comes to view the past not as “a shame” but as a cautionary tale.

When Clifton does create a series of dramatic monologues for two black boys named Tyrone and Willie B, she employs black speech to locate her subjects in their local community and to articulate in their own language their varying senses of identity in relation to that community. The sequence is comprised of eight free-verse poems that

range in length from seven to fifteen lines, all except one—"willie b. (2)"—containing no line breaks. The poems alternate; Tyrone speaks followed by Willie, the successive pairs numbered from "1" to "4." In each brief poem, Tyrone and Willie recount occurrences during a local riot. That they are minors—Willie, we are told, is twelve, and Tyrone's adolescent zeal indicates he is just a bit older than that—suggests that the boys are merely playing war, imitating the violent circumstances they witness around them like the children in Frost's "Directive" who make of their playhouse a pretend version of a troubled adult house. But rather than portraying "disaffected black youths playing at the battles adults fight in earnest" or "spirited children at play" (Holladay 17; Lupton 29), the sequence depicts its speakers in the throes of an actual riot. In fact, the alternating monologues relay a specific historical event that occurred in Clifton's childhood hometown: the Buffalo, New York riots of 1967 in which teenage boys set fires, overturned cars, and looted stores in response to unjust housing conditions and employment opportunities ("1967 Riots"). The boys' language is emphatically not playful but in earnest: Tyrone and Willie disclose in black vernacular their divergent self-perceptions as well as their dispositions toward and impulses to communal action.

Communal action was a crucial imperative of African American poetry during the civil rights struggles, and black vernacular was often the language of that poetry. That Clifton's "tyrone" and "willie b" sequence was published in 1969 and describes a local African American insurgence against disempowering, systemic racism in black speech connects it in some ways to the Black Arts Movement, a group of African American artists in the 1960s and 70s who advanced an aesthetic of collective militancy to bolster black nationalism.⁹ Black Arts poetry was designed to "expose the enemy, praise the

people, and support the revolution” (Karenga 33-34) in a radical poetic style that reflected the revolutionary political goals of the Black Power Movement and repudiated Anglo-European literary conventions that earlier African American poets made use of: “Black Arts excesses—obscenity, thematic and formal violence, repetition, unorthodox spelling and syntax, typographical tricks, nonverbal noise, signifying, cacophony, and polyrhythms—registered a complete rejection of white American culture and of previous ‘Negro writing’ that had been submissive to Anglo-European literary values” (Ford, *Excess* 174-75). Not surprisingly, the verse form BAM poets utilized to reject poetic tradition was free verse composed of aggressive, colloquial diction that conveyed the ferocity of its black speakers. Amiri Baraka’s definitive 1966 “Black Art” illustrated the aesthetic and called on African American poets to attune their own work to it:

we want “poems that kill.”

Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
rrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh
. . . rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . Setting fire and death to
whities ass. Look at the Liberal
Spokesman for the jews clutch his throat
& puke himself into eternity . . . rrrrrrr. (31-32)

Black poems, Baraka decreed, should employ combative linguistic, sonic, and visual innovations as the necessary poetic corollary to a consolidating, intensifying black nationalist consciousness that refused the prevailing, violently racist social structures of white America.

To be sure, Clifton's work fulfilled certain criteria of Black Arts poetry even though she was never integrally involved in the movement. Haki Madhubuti, a central BAM figure, acknowledged her work's black aesthetic when he borrowed the terms that Stephen Henderson had used to delineate attributes of Black Arts poetry in the landmark study and anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973). Madhubuti related his own perception of Clifton's aesthetic "wholeness," which he described as her merging of self-exploration and black unity, to Henderson's concept of "saturation": "One way toward [Clifton's] wholeness is what Stephen Henderson calls 'saturation,' the giving and defining of Blackness through proclaiming such experiences as legitimate and necessary, whereas the Black poetic experience used often enough becomes natural and expected. Clifton 'saturates' us in a way that forces us to look at ourselves in a different and more profound way" (153). According to Henderson's influential description, black poetry has three essential components: themes relaying aspects of black history, inventive structures designed from black speech and black music, and, finally, a general "saturation" of "Blackness" through "tone" and "perspective" (10).¹⁰ Indeed, Clifton's enigmatic "tyrone" and "willie b" series presents the different perspectives of two African American boys in black speech during an historic riot provoked by institutionalized racism in the late 1960s. The poems are in free verse, they identify the white man as the enemy, and they include

expletive (vulgarity was common in BAM poems) and a gesture toward the anti-Semitism that some Black Arts poems notoriously expressed.¹¹

And yet Clifton's employment of black vernacular in the "tyrone" and "willie b" poems demonstrates her independence from the Black Arts Movement in equal measure.¹² The poems don't embrace a "militantly engaged political stance" (Thomas 144), nor do they "assault white culture and bring down its oppressive authority" (Ford, "African American Poetry" 389). In fact, Clifton is not included in the anthology section of Henderson's volume even though by the time his book came out she had published two collections of poetry, one of which, *Good Times*, includes the "tyrone" and "willie b" series.¹³ Clifton confirmed her early separation from the Black Arts Movement in a 2002 conversation with Sonia Sanchez, a poet who did write the kind of "assassin poems" that Baraka called for (among many other kinds of poems across her long and productive career): "Now I must say this to you. I must say this. People, I think, sometimes are surprised that Sonia and I are such good friends because we don't write alike. Particularly when I was first writing, African-American writers . . . didn't validate what I did because it did not seem to be political, forgetting what Gwendolyn Brooks said—that when she walked out of her door, it was a political decision"¹⁴ Indeed, Brooks and Clifton occupied similar positions in relation to the Black Arts Movement: both were influenced by the movement but questioned precepts about what constitutes political black poetry. For example, the younger BAM poets that Brooks took under her wing prompted her to seek alternatives to the traditional forms she had mastered and innovated because they were thought incompatible with the revolution. But Brooks declared that any of her new, free-verse attempts would be extensions of her own "G. B. voice" rather than "an

imitation of the contemporary young black voice,” and she maintained throughout her career that all of her work, traditional and free verse, was politically aware black poetry (*Report One* 183). Likewise, Clifton’s “tyrone” and “willie b” poems were “contemporary young black” poems but not categorically Black Arts poems: they are not, for instance, rhetorical and typographical eruptions of black vernacular. Rather, they present the composed, measured idiomatic speech of a community’s “fine black boys” who view a local disturbance as an opportunity to assert their individuality.

Clifton’s depiction of a civil rights riot doesn’t set linguistic rage against the brutal tyranny of racism but portrays two individual boys in their own language as they struggle for recognition in a volatile context. In the sequence, Tyrone’s vernacular descriptions of a germinating riot reveal a youthful, enthusiastic personality reveling in resistance:

the spirit of the buffalo soldiers
is beautiful
how we fight on down to main street
laughing and shouting
we happy together oh
we turning each other on
in this damn war. (60)

Tyrone is emboldened by the invigorating energy of activism: the rioter’s vitality is “beautiful”; they are “laughing and shouting,” “happy,” and “turning each other on” in a “war” that is empowering, the modifier “damn” indicating colloquially the speaker’s excitement. Marching with his fellow “buffalo soldiers” instills in Tyrone a sense of

defiance and strength in numbers. He refers to himself not as “I” but “we,” the name “buffalo soldiers” connecting the demonstrators to each other, to the city of Buffalo, and to previous armies of African American men, namely the black regiments referred to as “buffalo soldiers” by Native Americans during the Indian Wars and by white Union soldiers during the Civil War. These affirmative declarations expressing the exhilarations of group dissent during the beginning of a riot counter historical characterizations of the young agitators as downtrodden and despondent. When the leaders of a local education center in Buffalo interviewed the youths involved in the 1967 riots “to determine why they were engaged in violence and looting,” they found that the boys had a “general negative attitude” towards the police and “society in general, which they felt kept them from getting ahead educationally, vocationally or socially” (20). The boys felt betrayed by ineffective welfare programs and demeaned by hopeless employment prospects that resulted in, at best, “menial” jobs that lead to “dead end[s].” In Clifton’s poem, the prospect of rioting has the opposite effect on Tyrone: uniting with other black boys to defy aggressively the social systems that inhibit him elicits brio and elation.

And yet despite this positive rendering of the “fight on down to main street,” the “tyrone” and “willie b” poems, when taken together, register ambivalence about rioting. We hear something of this in Tyrone’s delivery of the group’s proclamation, the first poem in the series:

on this day
the buffalo soldiers
have taken up position
corner of jefferson and sycamore

we will sack the city
will sink the city
seek the city. (59)

This sounds like a straightforward declaration of a set of aims. However, their presentation suggests ambiguity, too. The first claim is “we will sack the city,” a stately announcement that may allude to the sacking of Troy. But in the next two lines, Tyrone adds “sink” and “seek” to his list of declarations indicating that no singular objective for the insurrection has been established. That the words “we” and “we will” drop off in the next two lines make it sound as if Tyrone is playing with words to formulate his sense of the riot’s purpose. The intentions proliferate: “sack” leads to “sink” which becomes “seek,” that final verb emphasizing Tyrone’s optimism. It is as if the first syllable of “sycamore” in the fourth line generates the column of alliterating, one-syllable intentions in the next three lines (“sack,” “sink,” “seek”) rather than any definitive idea of what the riot should accomplish. In other words, these young “buffalo soldiers” are still trying to work out the purpose of their protest up to the very last minute, and their language itself seems generative for this working out. Ending on the phrase “seek the city” suggests that they are not just out to cause destruction but that they are searching for something more.

Tyrone’s pronouncement of the boys’ goals is both definitive and undetermined. He announces their geographic location and their aims in annunciatory language evocative of a battle cry: “on this day / we have taken up position.” But the fact that he experiments with different expressions to describe their mission suggests that these “buffalo soldiers” aren’t entirely sure about what they want to achieve. The sequence’s other speaker, Willie, is surer than Tyrone in that he identifies precisely what he wants to

get out of rioting, and yet for all his certainty, Willie's local language is not that of a determined political militant but a child: "i aint but twelve," he says, explaining that his mother has told him he has "no business out here / in the army" not only because of his age but because his father was a white man. This last fact troubles Willie; we hear him reflecting bitterly his mother's sentiments about his father when he refers to him as "the mother fucker." And yet despite his mother's discouragement and his conflicted feelings toward his father, Willie is especially precise about his involvement in the riot:

why i would bring a wagon into battle

is

a wagon is a help to a soldier

with his bricks

and when he want to rest

also

today is mama's birthday

and i'm gone get her that tv

out of old steinhart's store.

Willie here is answering a question that goes unheard in the poem: why would you bring a wagon into battle? His response amplifies the fact that Willie is just a boy in this incendiary setting. The poem's meticulous arrangement of his speech renders a child assembling a reply: the first line repeats the question; the second is just "is" by itself to communicate the boy's slow and careful effort to respond distinctly or perhaps his hesitation as he thinks up an answer; the next few lines lay out clearly the pragmatic uses of a wagon in a battle, and the sixth is another one-word line—"also"—indicating that

Willie is about to reveal his real reason for having a wagon. What we are hearing, of course, is the sincerity, naiveté, eagerness, and reluctance audible in a child's voice: it doesn't occur to Willie that a child's wagon is a rather out-of-place piece of equipment for a riot. In Willie's young mind, a wagon is a perfectly suitable resource because it can carry heavy bricks and can cart "a soldier" and his loot around when he's tired or hurt. It is childlike practicality, rather than inspiring solidarity, that motivates Willie: the riot could make getting his mother a birthday gift possible. Tyrone seeks affinity with the other rioters while Willie seeks to provide his mother with an item she wants (it's "that tv" at "steinhart's store") but can't afford. By arranging Willie's local language to point up his age and guilelessness, the poem addresses why children are rioting.

Indeed, each boy discloses what he seeks from participating in a local disturbance. Tyrone expresses desire for connection to his peers with a teenager's exuberance and uncertainty. Willie, younger than Tyrone, hasn't developed that adolescent admixture of idealism and unsureness: he refers to himself, his mama, his white father, and his involvement in the riot in language that conveys an innocent certainty. And yet despite their differences, we come to find by the end of the series that Tyrone and Willie both perceive in the riot an opportunity for self-assertion and recognition. In the last of Tyrone's poems, he continues to speak optimistically even as he anticipates violence:

we made it through the swamps
and we'll make it through the dogs
leaving our white man's names
and white man's traditions
and making some history

and they see the tear gas
burn my buffalo soldiers eyes
they got to say
Look yonder
Tyrone
Is. (64)

Adrienne McCormick explains that Tyrone's concluding poem reveals in the end that his "understanding of himself relies upon how others perceive him" (76). This self-understanding, McCormick argues, is only available to him through his relationship to his community: "'Tyrone' and 'Is' are both capitalized in a rare showing of typographical authority, yet the name is always lower case in the poem titles. This sense of self comes from the speaker's perception that others ('they got to say') must recognize his bravery and survival" (76). For McCormick, this endorsement of communalism discredits individualism, and the poem's structure bears out this demotion: even though, she argues, the line breaks emphasize Tyrone's identity by isolating "Tyrone" and "Is," the poem "tapers to a point, in a manner that undercuts the surety of the statement. Tyrone needs his community to validate his sense of himself; Clifton creates for him a presence, and its authority (if we can call it that) is not individual but communal. His being is contingent upon community recognition and support" (76). According to McCormick, the sequence exemplifies Clifton's characteristic prioritizing of "constructed, contingent" communality over authoritative, coherent individualism.¹⁵

And yet individualism in Clifton doesn't preclude communality but constitutes it. Nor does community in her poems eradicate individualism—it preserves and protects

individuals. She presents Tyrone's speech to portray an adolescent boy's desire for connection, mutuality, and solidarity in the face of racist social forces that deny and obstruct his individuality. In other words, black vernacular depicts Tyrone as a particular boy from a particular place who participates in a local riot with zeal and perseverance. He identifies in the riot not just coherent, uplifting coalition but the potential to proclaim his individuality by standing up to the incoherence of racism, to, for instance, tear gas that will "burn my buffalo soldiers eyes." The poem's ending,

Look yonder

Tyrone

Is,

doesn't "taper off" at the end, but arrives at an accentuating point that acclaims Tyrone's identity, capitalizing the first letter of his name in the penultimate line and emphasizing in the last his existence with the present-tense form of "to be." That the final "Is" also echoes back to Tyrone's burning, tear-gassed "eyes" critiques racist social conditions that provoke communal rioting and turn violence into the only resource for young boys to express themselves.

Willie also finds in the riot a platform for assertion, but his situation is even more delicate than Tyrone's. He begins clearly enough, admitting conclusively his responsibility for setting fire to a local bar in a tone that implies he is again answering an interrogation we don't explicitly hear: "i'm the one / what burned down the dew drop inn," he boldly confesses (65). In this final monologue, however, Willie is not as articulate as he was when he discussed his wagon, even though again one-word lines and blunt end-

stops render his drive to make himself clear. Directly after divulging his crime in the lines above, Willie says,

yes
the jew do exploit us in his bar
but also
my mama
one time in the dew drop inn
tried for a white man
and if he on a newspaper
or something
look I am the one what burned down the dew drop inn
everybody say I'm a big boy for my age
me
willie b
son.

McCormick reads Willie's last poem similarly to the way she reads Tyrone's, as promoting community over individuality: "We have another capital I, and an assertion of self that is again dependent upon community recognition. 'Look' and 'everybody say' project a sense of authority, but also reveal its absence. The lines repeat the first two lines of the poem, which feature the lower case 'i'. . . . The need for repetition also reveals his lack of an authoritative voice" (77). Willie's and Tyrone's identities are indeed similarly wrapped up in how the community perceives them: Willie's words in his final poem,

“everybody say” and “look,” echo words in Tyrone’s final poem, “they got to say / Look yonder.” Both are fundamentally concerned with how they look to others.

And yet although Tyrone and Willie have both identified in the act of rioting potential for individual recognition by others, their motivations and methods are entirely different. Tyrone, as we have seen, finds himself by exhibiting bravely his support for the revolution: he’ll suffer tear gas to “make some history” for his people who have made it through the “swamps” and “dogs” of slavery and segregation. The younger Willie is not, in the end, as clear about his actions as he was about hauling his wagon to the riot. He implies that he burned down the bar because its Jewish owner was exploitative, but the lines “yes / the jew do exploit us in his bar” sound more like Willie repeating some older person’s sentiment and putting lilting sounds together (“jew” and “do”) rather than him positing his own thought-out reason. In fact, we hear traces of his real incentive when he refers again to his mother and “a white man.” He stutters a bit as he can’t quite articulate the connection between them and his actions: “but also / my mamma / . . . tried for a white man / and if he on a newspaper / or something / look I am the one” The lower-case “i” becomes a capital “I” here, indicating momentarily that Willie has realized an identity in the act of arson. Still, what we hear in the end is not a self-realized individual but a child, the personal pronouns and proper names reverted back to the lower case: “everybody say i’m a big boy for my age / me / willie b / son.” The poem doesn’t uphold communality over individuality (or, for that matter, the reverse). Rather, it portrays tragically the susceptibility of an angry, confused child to lashing out against circumstances invariably positioned against him.

Clifton's poems are always more invested in relating or connecting ideas or concepts that are thought to be divergent or oppositional than separating them or arranging them hierarchically. Indeed, she melds linguistic registers. As I have been arguing, her poems don't stack different forms of speech against each other to induce ensuing tensions but move seamlessly along subtly shifting rhetorical modes. We find this when Tyrone's colloquial announcement in his first poem takes the form of three consonantal announcements, the phrase "we will" diminishing with each line and stressing that standard construction (as opposed to the vernacular "we happy together" and "we turning each other on" in Tyrone's next poem). In other words, Clifton unifies rather than separates forms of speech just as she unifies concepts like communality and individuality and public and private. For example, "admonitions," the last poem of her first book, *Good Times* (1969), sustains, like the first "tyrone" poem, an overall colloquial tone even when the speaker delivers a pair of hortatory declarations to the publicly condemned young men of her community and instructs her fellow black women about responding to recurrent racial and sexual menace. The poem is comprised of three free-verse stanzas which address, respectively, the speaker's "boys," "girls," and "children," each stanza a line or two shorter than the one before it and each line containing one to three beats. Typical of Clifton's poetry, there is no punctuation, not a single word is capitalized, and the poem's speaker is figured as the poet herself. The poem looks almost like a list, perhaps a note or memo jotted down quickly, as in the final stanza where the speaker addresses both her boys and girls:

children

when they ask you

why is your mama so funny
say
she is a poet
she don't have no sense. (71)

Readers point to “admonitions” and this stanza in particular as an example of Clifton’s inclination to be “humorous” and “funny . . . in dark circumstances” (Lupton 32, Alexander). Others hone in on the subversive elements of the poem’s lighthearted language. Hilary Holladay, for example, hears its final idiom subtly affirming in an offhanded fashion the speaker’s ability to make sense, thereby fortifying her identity as a poet (not having “no sense,” Holladay deduces, would mean having sense): “As ‘admonitions’ makes perfectly clear, Clifton will not deny who she is, nor will she try to control what other people think of her. The double negative in the last line . . . captures black vernacular speech but also asserts that the speaker does in fact have ‘sense’—the intuitive sense of a poet who knows how to use language to suit her own ends” (*Wild Blessings* 18-19). For Alicia Ostriker also, the colloquial tone of “admonitions” is defiant: the speaker’s “insouciance,” “charm,” and “unpretentiousness” amount to an obstinate “lack of conventional dignity” (15-16). Clifton, Ostriker argues, debunks the societal norm that “the mother’s role is a domestic not a public one” by connecting “maternity to poetry, and both to play, with a casual impropriety that suggests a contest already won” between, presumably, the stanza’s “they” and the speaker. Holladay and Ostriker both uncover in Clifton’s demotic diction and laidback humor a composed, sturdy imperviousness to dictates about social roles.

Indeed, “admonitions” is not just humorous in the face of danger but authoritative about managing that danger. When the mother tells her children how to answer effectively their inquisitors, the emphasis is not on whether poets make or don’t make conventional sense but on what the children should “say,” the stanza’s only one-word line. The speaker directs them to utilize language for circumvention and self-protection: they are to “say” the word “poet” when their mother’s competence and credibility are doubted because poetry is thought to be confounding and inscrutable. It is thought, in other words, to make no sense. The poem itself is a nuanced linguistic strategy: it presents the colloquial language of an individual speaker simultaneously addressing her children in a domestic setting and speaking collectively to and for an entire community.

This memo to an African American mother’s “boys,” “girls,” and “children” skirts the line between personal communiqué and public pronouncement. The first stanza considers the “private” and “public” dichotomy:

boys
i don’t promise you nothing
but this
what you pawn
i will redeem
what you steal
i will conceal
my private silence to
your public guilt
is all i got. (71)

The stanza claims to pit the speaker's "private silence" against her boys' "public guilt," but rather than separating private and public experience, it fuses them. On the one hand, the vernacular expressions "i don't promise you nothing / but this" and "is all i got" signify that a particular African American female speaker is talking to her sons. On the other hand, this individual speaker's private commitment to her boys when they are judged publicly is delivered as a pronouncement: between the stanza's explicitly idiomatic lines, the speaker announces "what you pawn / i will redeem / what you steal / i will conceal." The oratorical repetitions and standard syntax and the contraction and double negative of "don't promise you nothing" along with the colloquial "is all i got" produce at once two different tones: colloquial and oracular. The vernacular expressions (and multiple references to "i") are those of an individual speaking to her sons while the proclamations convey that this specific, lower-case "i" is speaking for and to a larger public. She is both mother advising her children and oracle advising all African American children.

The poem's language is at once private and public, the language of a domestic speaker in a particular place amplified as the voice of all the women from that place speaking to all the sons of that place. Clifton's speaker both upholds her individuality and connects herself to her community, expressing what McCormick calls "the communal nature of identity in Clifton's imagining" (76). The speaker vows to deploy the little she has—she can promise "nothing but this" because it's "all i got"—to protect her sons from a society that disenfranchises them, while the promises she makes—redemption, concealment, silence—are not next to nothing but vastly substantial, issued not just to individuals but to a whole population. Clifton has described this confluence of individual

and communal address as an aesthetic rooted in African values, what she calls a “both/and” sensibility that communicates inclusiveness and relatedness rather than an exclusive “either/or” standpoint: “either/or is not an African tradition. Both/and is tradition. I don’t believe in either/or. I believe in both/and. So my ‘I’ tends to be both me Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me, and the me that is also human” (“An Interview” 59). The mother’s voice in “admonitions” is at once individual and representative, dispersing admonitions or “authoritative advice” concurrently to her children and her community (“admonition,” *OED*). She gains the authority to render private consultation as public admonition by setting vernacular to the cadences of a formal declaration, weaving those registers across the stanza with sound: boys and but; promise and pawn; redeem, steal, and conceal; private and public; guilt and got. The stanza conveys individual and communal connection: the speaker is linked to her sons and to other African American mothers and their sons.

“admonitions” locates itself in the community it addresses, speaking publicly and privately in black vernacular for African American mothers and to African American children. However, the poem does not just unify the individual and the communal; it also differentiates the speaker’s community from the dominant society that indicts and judges its boys and threatens its girls. The second stanza particularizes that oppressive society as white and male when the speaker turns to her girls to offer counsel for fending off the racial and sexual threat that white men impose:

girls
first time a white man
opens his fly

like a good thing
we'll just laugh
laugh real loud my
black women.

The tone here is even more thoroughly conversational than the first stanza's as the speaker adds laughter—a considerably lighter method for recalcitrance than redemption, concealment, and silence—to her arsenal. In this single-sentence stanza, there is no drift across idiomatic phrases toward non-colloquial inflections as there is in the previous stanza. Rather, the linguistic register here is fixed, the admonition articulated with terse, straightforward certitude. And yet despite the concise, direct, and casual delivery, the situation referred to is decidedly perilous. That the speaker addresses her girls about a white man opening his fly the “first time” implies both the inevitability of that intrusion and an inevitable next time (and perhaps many times after). Further, that the white man believes his advances are “a good thing” communicates precisely the opposite; his come-on is not a good thing but deceptively “like” a good thing, a sexual offensive presented as an inducement. The laconic, intimate elocution of the stanza opposes its precarious, distressing context.

The tone of “admonitions” conveys the unflappability of its African American female speaker in the face of racist and sexual danger. In colloquial, succinct language, she proclaims solidarity with younger generations of African Americans while admonishing the mainstream racist and sexist society that imperils them. Her singular voice—she is a particular “i” addressing her daughters and sons in black vernacular—is also communal. The first stanza addresses both the speaker's individual boys and all black

boys in language that is simultaneously private and public. Likewise, the second stanza begins with the mother directing her daughters to safeguard themselves against the unbidden, treacherous sexual gestures of white men. By the stanza's end, the speaker and her daughters are subsumed in a larger whole: the first person "i" becomes "we," and the "girls" become all black females. The instruction is straightforward and abrupt: when the white man advances, "we'll just laugh / laugh real loud my / black women." The repetition of the word "laugh," its reverberating volume (we'll laugh loud), the proliferating consonantal "l" sounds, and the enjambment across "my" and "black women" create a fluid, continuous movement as the stanza sharply concludes. The stanza delivers one of the hard lessons that transforms young black girls into black women, upholding not humor per se as a retort to racist sexual violence but a frank, steadfast collectiveness that is blunt and, more than amusing, bemusing.

These poems employ black vernacular to execute a criticism of society. Local language in the "tyrone" and "willie b" series expresses the adolescent ebullience and boyish innocence of young participants in a riot. As the boys relate the events of a violent uprising, their speech characterizes them: Tyrone is a spirited, impressionable teenager eager to display his bravery and loyalty, and Willie is a naïve, vulnerable young boy who talks mostly about his mother even when explaining his involvement in an act of arson. In other words, Clifton presents idiomatic language here to foreground specific children against a perilous social context. Racism, these poems argue, turns childhood into a hazardous stage of life. Likewise, local language in "admonitions" conveys a particular voice speaking about treacherous social conditions. The poem's speaker is a black mother addressing her children about the risk those forces present. The poem, though, extends

beyond the speaker's domestic sphere: noncolloquial grammatical structures in oratorical patterns project her colloquial voice to all African Americans. Her amplified, pithy language conveys a cool imperturbability that counters the dangers she warns of. The mother's oracular admonitions to her boys and girls admonish a racist society that condemns and jeopardizes black people.

This oracular tone, produced in "admonitions" and the first of the "tyrone" monologues by inflecting colloquial speech with noncolloquial elements, is Clifton's predominant register. She generates it in different ways at different times, but it is consistent across the span of her career, whether her poems concern family members, historical events, superheroes, sensationalist news stories, pop culture, or classical myths. What's more, oracularity in Clifton is not just a matter of timbre but a thematic component: a significant portion of her work describes unsettling encounters with prophetic voices. All of her books, from her second, *good news about the earth* (1972), to her last, *Voices* (2008), include poems that depict speakers, usually biblical characters or the poet herself, undergoing potent spiritual experiences. These poems occupy crucial positions in her books: they are typically arranged in sequences, and seven of her eleven poetry collections conclude with whole sections about esoteric encounters. The poems are surrounded by or follow poems about family, social and historical realities, and contemporary American life.¹⁶

Indeed, Clifton's books often group earthly and spiritual realms in separate parts. For instance, the first biblical sequence she published, "some jesus," is the last section of *good news about the earth*, a collection overtly attuned to the racial and sexual politics of its time, to American history in general, and to Clifton's autobiography. There are poems

about Kent State, abortion, the Black Power Movement, women's liberation, and slavery, as well as poems for her father, sisters, and husband. The concluding "some jesus" section departs strikingly from the real world: it is comprised of sixteen brief free-verse poems spoken by various figures from the Old and New Testaments. Adam and Eve, Cain, Moses, Solomon, Job, Daniel, Jonah, John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, an apostle, and Jesus all relay occurrences in taut lines usually comprised of both nonstandard and standard English. The speakers sound, by turns, astonished, forlorn, apprehensive, celebratory, enigmatic, self-assured, cautionary, deferential, ecstatic, bewildered, and hopeful. In other words, they sound like real people. Holladay draws a distinct line between these biblical monologues and the book's earlier poems about race:

The volume's first two sections, "about the earth" and "heroes," contain race-centered poems, whereas the last part, "some jesus," is a series of biblical portraits. This progression places topical poems such as "after kent state," "Malcolm," and "apology (to the panthers)" in a continuum with "adam and eve," "the calling of the disciples," and "good friday." The juxtaposition enables Clifton to create her own typology, in which contemporary matters and biblical stories inform and illuminate one another. (23)

To instantiate this connection between the book's contemporary concerns and its biblical figures, Holladay compares the depiction of Moses in the "some jesus" section and the earlier tributes to black leaders in the "heroes" section: "Clifton's Moses clearly provides a model for twentieth-century black leaders," Holladay argues, because "[I]ike Moses and the nineteenth-century slaves who found inspiration in him, modern-day black leaders have faced significant obstacles in their pursuit of a collective spiritual freedom" (26).

Like Holladay, Akasha (Gloria) Hull regards the “some jesus” poems as political black poetry. She distinguishes black vernacular as the sequence’s preeminent political feature: “perhaps the most heterodox (for some readers) of Clifton’s stratagems is that she further ‘levels’ these biblical figures by making them racially black. This is apparent throughout their language, for they speak an African American folk dialect of ‘be’s,’ third-person subject-verb ‘disagreements,’ and colorful metaphor” (280). For Hull, Clifton’s biblical poems in general challenge prevailing hierarchies by revealing “the ordinary in the extraordinary,” bringing “heaven ‘down’ to earth” and making “‘men’ of gods” (279). In other words, situating black vernacular in archetypal settings is inherently political because it implies the dismantling of established orders: “it must be said that transforming biblical figures into plain black folks is a move that simultaneously levels and elevates. It brings the Bible’s inhabitants down to earth, while it imparts to black people some of the status of universal heroes and heroines” (281). In Hull’s estimation, then, local language brings lofty characters down while symbolic or mythic contexts raise people up.

And yet colloquial language in “some jesus” doesn’t level or elevate its speakers. The biblical characters aren’t ordinary, and their speech isn’t plain. Rather, Clifton presents biblical characters speaking in black vernacular to imagine those quintessential Judeo-Christian figures as real humans rather than as representations of spiritual dilemmas or concepts and to correlate the bible’s symbolic narratives and the experiences of black people. Clifton herself has described her biblical poems as attempts to envision mythical stories as human stories: in 1999 she told Charles Rowell, “My take. . . on Biblical people—because I write about that a lot—my take on them is that they were human.

Not myth, not mythological creatures, but human beings. What they wondered is what all humans wonder. They had all of the insecurities and uncertainties that humans have” (63). In a later discussion with Hull, she explains that she read the entire bible but not “as a literal book” (qtd. in Hull 277). In fact, although Clifton wrote poems about religious figures across her career, she always maintained—“in almost all of her interviews,” Lupton tells us—that she isn’t religious (88). Her concerns even in poems where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus speak are not with Christianity, nor does the fact that those characters speak like black people simultaneously “level” and “elevate” them. Rather, black speech humanizes them. By making characters like Moses, Mary, and Jesus human, Clifton constructs, to borrow the terms she used to describe her poetry decades later in the famous “*won’t you celebrate with me*” poem, a “bridge between / starshine and clay.”

The “some jesus” sequence utilizes colloquial language to portray biblical characters as human beings. That most of the poems include elements of African American speech indicates that these are black humans. What the poems do not suggest, however, is that these speakers are plain folks. For example, “moses” is a manumitted slave who portends in the poem’s final idiomatic line a nearing encounter with God:

i walk on bones
snakes twisting
in my hand
locusts breaking my mouth
an old man
leaving slavery
home is burning in me

like a bush

God got his eye on. (113)

Moses is portrayed here as a prescient black man, not necessarily as a model for black leaders and certainly not an ordinary person raised to the lofty level of religious symbolism. He is the extraordinary biblical figure who releases his people from bondage and who will receive the Ten Commandments from God. Rather than revealing the extraordinary in the ordinary, the poem's depiction of Moses as a black person communicates that black history is as extraordinary as biblical tales are: it is a history, after all, of annihilated ancestors (the bones Moses walks on), resistance to oppression (the snakes twisting in his hand), and epidemic suppression (the plague of locusts). The fact that Moses speaks in black vernacular despite the locusts "breaking" his mouth upholds black experience as a paragon of human endurance. It is not, however, an uncomplicated or unequivocally triumphant perseverance: Moses conflates his "burning" desire to go home after being freed and his uneasy anticipation of God's plans for him. The idea of his own home after captivity thrills him, but he also anxiously prefigures the burning bush that God will speak to him through. That "God got his eye on" him unnerves this weathered, liberated old black man. The poem presents the speech of Moses as black speech because to do so is to present him as a human and to make of black experience a paradigm of humanness.

Clifton's depictions of biblical figures as African Americans speaking in black vernacular are revolutionizing: her scriptural revisions transform "the Bible from a patriarchal to an Afrocentric, feminist, sexual, and broadly mystical text" (Hull 293). These linguistic portraits conceive biblical tales as chronicles of black experience.

Clifton's "cain," for instance, is as much a portrait of a grief-stricken black man exiled from the world as an allegory of murderous jealousy:

the land of nod
is a desert
on my head i
plant tears
every morning
my brother
don't rise up. (112)

The set-apart "i" here visually depicts Cain's banishment and loneliness. He "plants tears / every morning" not just because of his solitary expulsion in "the land of nod" but because each day is a reminder that his "brother / don't rise up." His language conveys his individuality: he's a particular black man who has killed his brother and who lives in isolation and anguish because of it. Cain's predicament—his desertedness, his dead brother, his guilt—is contrasted later in the sequence to those of two other condemned black men, John the Baptist and Jesus. These men, are wrongfully criminalized and so have none of Cain's desolation. John anticipates avidly and reverentially the arrival of a "brother" whose afro is not like a desert on his head but like the bush God speaks to Moses through:

somebody coming in blackness
like a star
and the world be a great bush
on his head

and his eyes be fire
in the city
and his mouth be true as time

he be calling the people brother
even in the prison
even in the jail. (118)

John is talking about Jesus, a fellow black preacher who impresses John with his capacity to call people “brother” even when imprisoned and who, we learn in the sequence’s later “easter sunday” poem, has come down from the heavens “like a great dipper of stars” in order “to lift men up” (125).¹⁷ Jesus is a messianic black man whose lower-case “i” in that poem becomes a capital I the instant he recognizes the unjust racial orders of the world that will incite him to lift men up: “while i was in the middle of the night / I saw red stars and black stars / pushed out of the sky by white ones.” Presented as a man speaking in an ordinary tongue, Jesus in these poems is an inspiring human force against racism who promises that, even in a world where white pushes out red and black, “the future is possible” (“spring song” 126). Clifton’s use of black speech to portray Cain, John, and Jesus as real men depicts the degradation black people face and the racism they must resist as human and spiritual catastrophes that will be overcome.

In the “some jesus” sequence, Clifton equates black vernacular with humanness and employs that mode to imagine biblical stories as stories of black experience. We also begin to hear in these early poems Clifton’s rendering of spiritual experiences as linguistic experiences. For example, Joseph speaks in his “some jesus” poem of the

bemusing effect his remarkable son has on his speech: “something about this boy / has spelled my tongue” (120). Even when his “fingers tremble / on mary” his “mouth cries only / Jesus Jesus Jesus.” The spell is both constraining (“Jesus” is the only word his “spelled” tongue can say) and releasing (Joseph repeats the word during sex with his wife). Language, here, is the outcome of a bewildering ecstasy that is at once spiritual (the word he repeats is “Jesus”) and physical (Jesus is a human boy; Joseph is touching Mary when he exclaims the words). Similarly, when the first humans speak in the very first “some jesus” poem, their utterances suggest a link between linguistic creation and procreation. Adam produces words—“the names / of the things / bloom in my mouth”—and Eve gives birth—“my body opens / into brothers” (111). For Clifton, to be human is to be generative.

We have already seen in “*i was born with twelve fingers*” that Clifton figures poetry as a spell: despite the fact that her extra fingers were cut off precisely because they might “cast spells,” they represent her ability to write poetry that is itself a kind of magic capable of bridging material and immaterial realms. In another autobiographical poem, she envisions her own birth—the birth of a poet—as a mysterious, surreal emanation of language, once again linking reproduction with the production of words: “light / on my mother’s tongue / breaks through her soft / extravagant hip / into life. / lucille / she calls the light” (172). Adam, too, is typically depicted by Clifton as generating language in something of a spellbound state. In “the birth of language,” for instance, a poem published almost two decades after the “some jesus” series, Clifton portrays Adam as realizing with trepidation his own speechlessness as he takes his first steps in Eden:

and adam rose

fearful in the garden
without words
for the grass
his fingers plucked
without a tongue
to name the taste
shimmering in his mouth. (348)

For Adam, speaking is impossible because language doesn't yet exist. Rather than acquiring it, he must invent it. Being "without words" makes him "fearful" because he can't name the world he's discovering and charged by God with naming, and so can't begin to make sense of it. Adding to these complications, the questions the poem ends with suggest that when Adam does make an utterance, what stimulates him to do so is bodily pain:

did they draw blood
the blades did it become
his early lunge
toward language.

And yet the poem also relates the invention of language to thrilling occurrences:

did his astonishment
surround him
did he shudder
did he whisper
eve.

Adam says, finally, “eve,”—the companion, of course, who will help him engender language and humanity. His attraction to her is overwhelming: it astonishes him, surrounds him, and makes him shudder. It is, in other words, an arresting physical and emotional reaction, and it results in him whispering his first word. In a later poem from the same book, we find that Eve inspires the creation of language and is a maker of language herself: she grows impatient with Adam’s “slow” “searching for language to // call me” and so announces, “tonight as he sleeps / i will whisper into his mouth / our names” (400). She convenes with him to produce language, an act as human as sex, bleeding, tasting, and birth.

Searching for language becomes an increasingly predominant theme in Clifton’s poetry. This is especially true when biblical characters and otherworldly voices speak in her poems. In fact, Adam is one of Clifton’s figures for the poet, and she associates writing poetry with his agonizing struggle to devise language: her poems relate his challenges to her own challenges as a poet. For example, in “the birth of language,” the speaker surmises that Adam begins to make language when the “blades” “draw blood,” suggesting that human duress entails linguistic creation; similarly, Clifton’s dead mother in another poem advises her living daughter to “turn the blood that clots your tongue / into poems.” (296). In other words, poetry is a language made from difficult experiences and disturbing conditions.

And yet Clifton also contemplates poetry’s adequacy to construe those experiences. In “the making of poems,” for instance, she goes so far as to call the results of her poetic work “failures,” comparing her “job” as a poet to Adam’s strained attempts at naming and to being a mother:

the reason why i do it
though i fail and fail
in the giving of true names
is i am adam and his mother
and these failures are my job. (216)

The poet here isn't reprimanding herself because her abilities are limited; to identify oneself as "adam and his mother" is hardly a rebuke—Adam's "mother," after all, would be God.¹⁸ Rather, she is describing an artist's persistence (she makes poems again and again) to undertake the exacting task of giving "true names." Her poems are "failures" because the raw material for poetry is language and language may only get so close to "giving . . . true names" when circumstances and emotions seem ineffable. Clifton elaborates her sense of the complex relationship between language and experience in a conversation with Hull: "Language is translation of that which is beyond language. Language is a trying to express that which probably is not really expressible" (qtd. in Hull 295). The point Clifton underscores here is not so much that language can't express the inexpressible but that it is "a trying," that it keeps attempting to do so. For Clifton, the poet's job is to try continuously to bring "that which is beyond language" into language.

As I have been arguing, Clifton found that local language could be transformed into poetic language. More specifically, black vernacular was for her a poetic to set individuality against perilous social contexts and to uphold black experience as a paradigm of human experience. Black speech, in other words, illuminates in Clifton's poems the individual humanness that hierarchical social systems attempt to obscure. And yet as Clifton's investment in inscrutable spiritual situations deepens over her career, and

as she searches for language commensurate to those enigmas, black vernacular begins to recede from her work. For example, her sequence about the Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, is arranged in language that at times suggests black speech but mostly mixes standard English and nonstandard registers that are colloquial but not determinately African American like the demotic speech in “some jesus” is. For example, the “astrologer” who “predicts at mary’s birth” delivers the first of these poems in nonstandard English that sounds only somewhat like black speech:

this one lie down on grass.
this one old men will follow
calling mother mother.
she womb will blossom then die.
this one she hide from evening.
at a certain time when she hear something
it will burn her ear.
at a certain place when she see something
it will break her eye. (226)

The phrases “she hear something” and “she see something” evoke black vernacular, but that they follow a string of idioms that are decidedly nonstandard without being definitively African American—“this one lie down on grass,” “she womb will blossom then die” “this one she hide from evening,” “at a certain time,” “at a certain place”—emphasizes the extraordinariness of the astrologer’s diction and syntax rather than his specific race. We hear a colloquial speech we can’t quite locate. After all, the poem is a

prediction about a young girl who will be told by an angel that she'll give birth even though she's a virgin, a girl whose ear will burn and whose eye will break. The oracle who predicts Mary's troubled future speaks in unusual speech that is idiomatic but not situated.

Likewise, in the next poem, Mary's mother, Anna, speaks in standard and nonstandard structures, indicating again a human speaking oracularly: "we rise up early and / we work," she says, before referring to her own unsettling dreams about her daughter: "that dream / i am having again; / she washed in light / . . . she on a hill looking up / . . . shall i give her up / . . . we scrubbing" (227). The poem's mixture of standard English ("work is the medicine for dreams," "that dream / i am having again" "shall i give her up / to dreaming then") and nonstandard English ("she washed in light," "she on a hill," "we scrubbing") conveys Anna's prognostications colloquially. Hers is a tongue not unlike Joseph's in the "some jesus" poems. Also like Anna and Joseph, Mary herself speaks in unusual grammatical formulations, producing a tone that sounds both conversational and spellbound: "winged woman was saying 'full of grace' and like," "joseph, i afraid of stars," "i hands keep moving toward i breasts," "i watching my mother," "could i have fought these thing" (198-202). For Hull, the form of speech in these poems is not African American but North American nevertheless: "Mary, Anna, and the astrologer all speak a form of Caribbean dialect. He says 'she womb will blossom,' a grammatical usage that is still current in Jamaica among other places" (285). The Jamaican dialect Hull hears in the poems points up for her the characters' marginalized social status: "Clifton implies a comparison between the early Christians and present-day Rastafarians," two "sects," with a history of battling adversity.¹⁹ But the

poems depict humans in the midst of extraordinary spiritual occurrences rather than in the midst of historical adversity. Their uncommon, human language correlates to the strange, nonhuman phenomena they communicate. The poems translate experiences that are beyond human into human language by blending standard and nonstandard expressions. To portray humans undergoing disorienting, disturbing spiritual ordeals in language, Clifton invents a vernacular for the oracular.

Clifton creates an oracular tone in her Annunciation poems by devising speech that manages to be both everyday and exceptional. Anna, for instance, sounds like an ordinary black woman speaking idiomatically about her and Mary's daily work. Her demotic tongue, however, is as unusual as the prophetic dreams she relays: she speaks about her daughter's unsettling future in expressly standard grammatical structures ("shall i give her up"), nonstandard phrases ("all day we scrubbing"), and unusual formulations that are colloquial but not determinately located ("she washed in light"). The Annunciation poems suggest that the astrologer, Anna, and Mary are black people, but their vernacular is not overtly African American as is Cain's, Moses', and John's in the "some jesus" sequence. There, Clifton employs black speech to foreground humanness in biblical contexts while referring to afros, slavery, "black / skin" ("solomon" 114), the Middle Passage ("jonah" 117), Africa ("the raising of lazarus" 122), African American food ("palm sunday" 123), and Jesus's "coming in blackness." In the Annunciation sequence, Clifton also evokes black speech at different times, but she doesn't reference black culture or history explicitly, and the poems present the utterances of humans in the midst of prophetic, otherworldly encounters in a host of linguistic registers that include especially formal standard phrases and nonstandard syntax that is

not always necessarily indicative of black speech. The poems accentuate unsettling astonishment in the astrologer's, Anna's, and Mary's prophesying demotic language rather than a specific human history or culture.

These early Annunciation poems mark the beginning of a change in Clifton's poetry in general and especially in her spiritual poetry: distinctly located black speech starts to recede from her work as Clifton devises less situated forms of speech for her speakers. True, the Annunciation poems contain black-vernacular constructions; however, they also contain nonstandard and colloquial phrases that do not necessarily signify black speech ("she womb will blossom"; "could i have walk away" [232]). Rather than employing black vernacular to portray humanness, Clifton presents in these poems various speech registers (including black vernacular) to depict humans speaking oracularly. It is as if she is experimenting here with different syntactical formulations to produce an idiom for everyday speakers who confront strange, intangible phenomena. To use Clifton's own words from a later poem, "grandma, we are poets," in which she equates symptoms of her grandmother's autism to poetry ("*a state of mind / characterized by daydreaming,*" by "*hallucinations,*" and by "*excessive rocking and spinning*"), Clifton's eccentric vernacular in the Annunciation poems amounts to a "*failure to use language normally*" (374). Her "failures," as she calls her poems in "the making of poems," require uncommon speech to translate uncommon experiences.

In the spiritual poems published after the Annunciation poems, black vernacular is no longer distinctly audible but only intimated. And yet, too, all of Clifton's spiritual poems are concerned, at various levels, with speech and language. This is especially true in her poems about Lucifer. For example, the "tree of life" sequence that ends *quilting*

(1991) is comprised of ten poems that link procreation and linguistic creation: Lucifer encourages Adam and Eve to have sex and to produce language.²⁰ In “brothers,” the final sequence of eight poems in *The Book of Light* (1992), Lucifer speaks directly to God in part to admonish God’s silence during the turmoil and suffering of human history. In both sets of poems, Lucifer is cast as a generator of language and, like Adam and Eve, a figure for the poet whose speech is at once colloquial, unusual, standard, and nonstandard. Indeed, Lucifer the “light-bringer” is a figure for, not just a poet, but Clifton herself: the names “Lucifer” and “Lucille” are derivations of the word “light”—and light is one of Clifton’s most prominent symbols. To identify just a few instances of this prevailing figure in her poems, light on her mother’s tongue signifies the poet’s own birth (172); “the light that came to lucille clifton,” the title of the concluding section of her 1980 book *two-headed woman*, represents the mysterious voices Clifton began to hear in the late 1970s and that she later called “The Ones” (239); and *The Book of Light*, her seventh book of poems, opens with a *Roget’s Thesaurus* list of synonyms for the word that reads like a concordance to her work and concludes with a sequence of poems spoken by Lucifer (409). Lucifer, meaning light-bringer, represents, then, Lucille, meaning light, just as Clifton’s extra fingers represent her extra artistic powers—the angels, after all, call the fallen angel “lucifer six-finger” in the third “tree of life” poem (395).²¹

Clifton’s readers tend to focus on the sexual dimension in the first Eden sequence rather than its language. For example, Holladay warns against reducing the “tree of life” series to the conventional good versus evil dichotomy of the Eden trope and stresses instead Lucifer’s endorsement in the poems of sex and procreation. Even though Clifton herself suggests in a discussion with Holladay that her version of Lucifer represents the

evil in humanity—"I believe," she says, "that if we face up to our responsibility and the possibility of evil in us, we then will understand that we have to be vigilant about the good" ("Lucille Talks" 188)—Holladay clarifies that such comments do not actually indicate that Clifton employs Lucifer as a traditional symbol of human fallibility (120). Indeed, in the same interview, Clifton explains that her conception of Lucifer is the same as her conception of other biblical characters: "It's too easy to see Lucifer as all bad. Suppose he were merely being human. That's why the Bible people—it's too easy to think of them all as mythological saintly folk. It is much more interesting to me that these were humans—caught up in a divine plan, but human. That seems to me the miracle" ("Lucille Talks" 188). Holladay points out that Clifton's Lucifer is not only human-like but presses Adam and Eve into sex as a way toward human knowledge—the knowledge, presumably, that sex is not just pleasurable but results in procreation:

her poems about Lucifer and the Creation story are not about evil. Rather, they look at man and woman in their allegedly 'fallen' state as sexually aware adults who have Lucifer to thank for their newly raised consciousness. Unlike Milton's Satan, whose evil emerges as a powerful, infectious force, the Lucifer of *Quilting* is primarily the herald of human sexuality. He introduces Adam and Eve to sex, and Clifton—never one to shy away from sensual delights—cheers him on. (120)

For Hull, too, the "tree of life" poems are chiefly about sexuality: "Sexual passion is certainly the splendid and agitated center of Clifton's 'tree of life' poems" (289).

According to her, Lucifer's fall to Eden in Clifton is precipitated by an obsession with human sexual desire: "it is the love of sex, or sexual love—with all of its origins and generations—which has motivated (perhaps unconsciously) the mighty upheaval in heaven"

that results in Lucifer's excommunication (290). Unlike Holladay, Hull does equate sex in Clifton's Eden with knowledge of good and evil: "Clifton seems to be saying that sexuality is life," she claims, and the poems connect "knowledge and life" via "the belief that without consciousness of 'good and evil' (that is, struggle and morality), there can be no life. These are the real stakes that Clifton's human-centered poems highlight—not the old tale of obedience and transgression" (292-3). Regardless of their different ideas about good and evil in "tree of life," both Holladay and Hull perceive human sexuality in the poems as, to borrow Holladay's terms, "a form of illumination," (120), a form, in other words, of knowledge that results in Lucifer's fall and Adam and Eve's fall, while also resulting in the creation of humanity.

And yet in the "tree of life" poems, Lucifer encourages the creation of language as much as the procreative act of heterosexual sex. As we saw earlier, Clifton equates procreation and linguistic creation. Lucifer in "eve's version," the third poem in the sequence, is not exactly an "affirming and affectionate" character promoting sex (Holladay 119) but a wily, whispering "smooth talker" who

slides into [Eve's] dreams
and fills them with apple
apple snug as my breast
in the palm of my hand
apple sleek apple sweet
and bright in my mouth. (396)

Eve is encouraged here to make language. Lucifer drops into her "dreams" the image of an "apple." The nonstandard grammatical structures create the impression that the words

she speaks are in the process of forming as she utters them: “fills them with apple” rather than apples; “apple sleek apple sweet.” Indeed, Eve assigns to the image of the forbidden fruit of knowledge the word “apple” and then devises other words to describe the image, creating, in effect, poetry: she invents a simile to convey the way the apple feels in her palm, “apple snug as my breast,” and produces a string of alliterating adjectives for “apple”: it is first “snug” then “sleek” and “sweet,” echoing perhaps Lucifer’s whispery, serpentine sibilance; its shape is similar to her breast and the words are “bright” in her mouth. Lucifer tempts Eve into making language because the fallen angel has detected in speech the power that God has prohibited. Sexuality, then, is not the only “forbidden something which Eve and Adam discovered when they opened their eyes with apple-knowledge” (Hull 289); language is a “forbidden something” as well. In fact, in the next poem, sex is presented as a kind of “holy work”—holy in that it is, like God, a creative force—that the angels in heaven are deprived of because they aren’t human: “if the angels / hear of this // there will be no peace / in heaven” (397). Lucifer tempts Adam and Eve to have sex and to make language because for Clifton the impulse to create is a human impulse.

Lucifer encourages linguistic creation because language is knowledge and knowledge is forbidden. In “the garden of delight,” the sixth poem of the series, the narrator describes Eden as a composite of the four basic terrestrial elements with different meanings for different beings: “for some / it is stone,” “for some / it is . . . / water,” “for some / it is fire,” and “for some air” (398). But, too,

for some

certain only of the syllables

it is the element they search their lives for

eden

for them

it is a test. (398)

The repeated “some” here echoes the repeated “some” in “remembering the birth of Lucifer,” the sequence’s second poem (394). The pronoun in that poem refers to Lucifer’s fellow angels who “began / to wait and to watch” when God brought Lucifer into existence. In “the garden of delight,” we might assume that the “some” who perceive the four elements in Eden refers to those witnessing angels; however, the poem’s final “some,” those “certain only of the” fact that they can arrange syllables into language, are not angels but humans. Eden “for them / . . . is a test” because knowledge is “the element they search their lives for.” They have the ability to invent language and thus attain knowledge, and yet knowledge is precisely what is denied them. In the next few poems, we find that Adam and Eve do achieve language. Adam has difficulty making words—“some need is in me / struggling to roar through my / mouth into a name” (399)—and Eve, impatient with the lack of progress by “the clay two-foot,” “whisper[s] into his mouth / our names” as he sleeps, just as Lucifer filled her dreams with “apple” (400). Eve gives Adam the language he struggles to create, once again implying a connection between procreation and language. It is Eve, the whisperer of names, who leads Adam and Lucifer out of Eden after their banishment: “clay and morning star” follow “her bright back” past “the fiery swords” and “the winged gate” (401). The world they enter is not yet a world

of chaos but one where “everywhere seemed light // seemed glorious / seemed very eden.” “Eden” becomes in these colloquial lines an adjective to describe the new world as Adam and Eve leave Eden with a vernacular. They will be able to make sense of their new world with language—by, for example, making comparisons to their former world.

That “lucifer speaks in his own voice” in the sequence’s final poem suggests he is only now compelled to speak for himself, religion and the Bible having always spoken for him. How might we characterize this voice, and how is it distinct from those in the other “tree of life” poems? Lucifer’s speech is remarkably similar to that of the other “tree of life” speakers. To be sure, each speaker in the series is distinct: Lucifer is sly, the angels are mournful, Eve is self-assured and impatient with Adam’s delay, and Adam is anxious and diffident. But, too, they all employ standard and nonstandard constructions in comparable ways. Even the third-person narrator who describes the angels “remembering the birth of lucifer,” for instance, does so in lofty, ominous language set in both standard structures and nonstandard syntax redolent of a manner of speaking:

some will remember
the flash of light
as he broke
from the littlest finger
of God some will
recall the bright shimmer
and then
flush in the tremble of air
so much shine. (394)

The narrator revises the biblical creation myth, linking the creation of the world (“Let there be light” [*King James Bible*, Genesis 1.3]) to Lucifer’s birth.²² According to Mandolin Brassaw, Clifton connects Lucifer’s birth (and subsequent fall) to the advent of humanity to challenge the traditional good/evil binary of the Eden trope: “Clifton offers another version of the story of Creation and the Fall, one that recasts Lucifer in a creative, rather than destructive role” (49). The poem’s linguistic style also connects its authoritative, myth-reversing narrator to the sequence’s other speakers: the nonstandard expression “so much shine” sounds similar to, say, Eve’s description of Lucifer filling her dreams with “apple,” “apple sleek apple sweet,” or to the angel’s neologism, “ashard,” when that speaker ponders Lucifer’s disconcerting absence from heaven in “whispered to lucifer”: “was it to curl your belly / around her / that you fell laughing / your grace all ashard” (395). What’s more, the diction of the “tree of life” series threads the poems together; they employ a lexicon of, for example, luminosity—“Lucifer,” “light,” “shadow,” “flash,” “bright,” “shimmer,” “flush,” “shine,” “lightning,” “radiant,” “fire,” “star,” “fiery,” “glorious,” “light-bringer,” “illuminate”—or, in another example, a lexicon of vocality: “sing,” “remember,” “recall,” “say,” “laughing,” “talker,” “mouth,” “whispers,” “hear,” “syllables,” “roar,” “name,” “language,” “call,” “called.” In other words, the speakers of the “tree of life” poems share a form of speech. Clifton has invented for these biblical poems a vernacular, a prelapsarian “local” language for heaven and the Garden of Eden.

When Lucifer finally does speak in his own voice, he also employs this Edenic local language. His speech, like that in the previous poems, is marked by a confluence of standard and nonstandard English:

sure as i am
of the seraphim
folding wing
so am i certain of a
graceful bed

.....

it was
to be
i who was called son
if only of the morning
saw that some must
walk or all will crawl
so slithered into earth

.....

i became
the lord of snake. (402)

Lucifer presents his fall from “son of the morning” to “lord of snake” as a kind of promotion—he goes from son to lord (if also from angel to snake)—and as a strategy to ensure humanity’s distinction—he’ll crawl, so Adam and Eve can walk; he’ll drop “apple” into Eve’s dreams, so she can speak and, in turn, whisper names into Adam’s mouth. Brassaw identifies in Lucifer’s intentions redemptive creativity: “That Lucifer saw that ‘some must walk or all will crawl’ indicates a particular insight on his part: he understands the need to instruct Adam and Eve, lest they remain ignorant about the

nature of God. This knowledge, though it means expulsion from the Garden, is what makes Adam and Eve human—set apart from the animals that merely ‘crawl’” (50). For Brassaw, Lucifer is cast as “a savior of humanity” because he arouses in them their desire for knowledge, an innate desire that makes them human.

What also sets humans apart from the animals that crawl is their ability to speak. That Lucifer’s language is similar to Adam and Eve’s indicates that he is instructing them toward language and also that he himself has adopted the vernacular of Eden to speak like a human. He announces his declarative certainty in a subtly demotic register (“sure as i am,” the poem opens) that is also nonstandard (“of the seraphim / folding wing”). Line breaks emphasize his hortatory annunciations—“it was / to be / i who was called son / if only of the morning / saw that . . .”—while nonstandard syntax gives the impression of colloquiality. Indeed, the linguistic mode in the “tree of life” poems is all of a piece; their diction and grammatical variations are as consistent as their free-verse forms, minimal punctuation, and lack of capitalized letters. When “lucifer speaks in his own voice,” he does so in the same demonstrative, oracular, and demotic language as all the “tree of life” poems:

i the only lucifer
light-bringer
created out of fire
illuminate i could
and so illuminate i did. (80)

Lucifer proclaims himself the only “light-bringer” in declamatory language comprised of words that denote luminescence and in syntactical constructions that are oratorical and

that border on the idiomatic: “illuminate,” or speak, “i could” and “so illuminate i did,” Lucifer boldly announces. Brassaw points out that the last two lines here allude to the answer Moses gets when he asks God’s name: “I am that I am,” God replies (51; *King James Bible*, Exodus 3.14). We also hear in Lucifer’s concluding rhetorical flourish a colloquial voice echoing that biblical passage.

The very word “illuminate” at the end of “tree of life” refers to Lucifer’s instruction in Eden and relates his role to Clifton’s role as a poet: “In her use of illuminate, Clifton links Lucifer’s creative action to poetry, calling attention to the relationship between them, and in particular to their mutual role in poetic illumination. In doing so, she rewrites his actions in the Garden of Eden as creative and redemptive and puts herself in a position to critique God’s action (and inaction) through her own poetic creations” (Brassaw 51). Clifton devises a language for Lucifer to illuminate (or instruct) Adam and Eve and to execute a critique of God. That critique occurs in Clifton’s next Lucifer series, “brothers,” the sequence spoken entirely by Lucifer that rounds out *The Book of Light*. In those eight poems, Lucifer converses with a silent God in the same form of speech as the “tree of life” poems. Throughout this “conversation,” Lucifer invites God to rest with him and to reflect on the now-expunged world (section 1), attempts to explain God to God (2), claims to possess a “serpent’s understanding” that God seems to lack (3), defends his own actions in Eden (4), and questions God about why he “watched the excommunication of / that world and . . . said nothing” (6). His speech is not, however, an unambiguous denunciation: he also recognizes God’s “mercy” and “grace” in the penultimate poem before he admits in the last poem that he has “said too much” and concedes somewhat to “the silence.” That penultimate poem provides a description

of Lucifer's speech in the image of a forked "tongue": "the two roads / of this tongue / converge into a single certitude" (469). We might conceive of those two converging "roads" as the standard and nonstandard expressions in the local language "Lucille" invents for Lucifer (and the other Eden speakers) that produce a singular oracular tone.

Clifton scholars have paid less attention to the linguistic procedures of "brothers" and focused more on its socioreligious qualities just as they have more rigorously examined sexuality in "tree of life" than language.²³ For instance, Holladay regards "brothers" as a "theodicy—a defense of God's enigmatic silence" (127), while Brassaw perceives Clifton's equalizing of Lucifer and God as a deconstruction of "the myth of the omniscient patriarch of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (52). When they do consider the poem's language, Clifton's readers tend to focus on its relation to black speech. Lupton denies any implication of black culture in "brothers," and Holladay mines the sequence for veiled references to that culture. Holladay hears African American connotations in Lucifer's reminiscence of Adam's and Eve's emergence, the "sweet fume of the man's rib / as it rose up and began to walk" (466): for her "there is . . . the zesty aroma of barbecue in" that "fume," thus making "room for soul food in [Clifton's] Creation story" (132). The title alone suggests to Holladay black vernacular: "We may also recognize colloquial African American speech in the sequence's title, which raises the intriguing possibility that God and Lucifer are true soul brothers."²⁴ Lupton, on the other hand, disputes Holladay's detections of black culture, recognizing a "noticeable absence of black grammatical structures" in "brothers" and "tree of life" and contending that when "Holladay suggests that the title 'brothers' might indicate the 'possibility that God and Lucifer are true soul brothers,' she seems to overlook both the formality of Lucifer's

speech patterns and his echoing of the Protestant hymnals The epithet ‘soul brother,’ with its roots in black music, jazz, and black culture, pertains to younger, hipper, funkier men than the two worn-out apocalyptic antagonists of *The Book of Light*” (90). What Lupton implies, however, is that Lucifer’s speech in “brothers” is comprised entirely of decidedly standard grammatical structures to convey a kind of religious formality and that such “formality” necessarily precludes the possibility that Lucifer could be a black speaker.

True, Lucifer “do[es] not speak in dialect” and is “not racialized in specific ways” like some of Clifton’s other biblical characters (Brassaw 48).²⁵ But in what sense are his speech patterns only standard? In fact, his speech is a convergence of standard and unusual rhetorical constructions. He employs, in other words, the language that Clifton invents for Eden, what I have been calling a vernacular for the oracular. As Lupton points out, Lucifer does often speak in a lofty manner that imparts a certain authoritative formality. For example, the poem’s opening invitation sounds ceremonious rather than one brother casually asking another to chat: “come coil with me / here in creation’s bed / among the twigs and ribbons / of the past. i have grown old / remembering this garden” (466). In another instance, as Lucifer contemplates his own existence, his inverted syntax and declamatory phrases reveal an archaic rhetorical style: “how come i to this / serpent’s understanding?” he asks before declaring that “from / a hood of leaves / i have foreseen the evening / of the world” (467). His language renders, fittingly, a commanding composure but also tenseness: he is, after all, interrogating God.

However, the emphatically standard constructions in “brothers” that connote Lucifer’s self-possession, represent only one part of his forked tongue. The rigidly

standard formulations are coupled with looser grammatical structures that convey a colloquial strain. For instance, when Lucifer attempts to explain God to God in the sequence's second poem, he begins, "listen, You are beyond / even Your own understanding" before explaining to God that God shares attributes with the very humans he has created: their "pride," "dominion," "ambition," Lucifer says to God, "is You, all You, all You" (466-67). That directive to "listen" and the repetitions of the nearly idiomatic "all You" render a conversational speaking voice. Indeed, standard grammatical structures in the poem are often counterbalanced with phrases and colloquialisms that are not particularly standard. For example, when Lucifer contemplates the human world that Adam and Eve are sent to, his language is at once standard and nonstandard, ordinary and unordinary. He describes that world's "delights" and then declares his right to ponder God's silence:

the tinny newborn cry of calf
and cormorant and humankind.
and pain, of course,
always there was some bleeding,
but forbid me not
my meditation on the outer world
before the rest of it, before
the bruising of his heel, my head,
and so forth. (468)

Lucifer here speaks in especially sonorous language, the consonantal *k* sounds in "cry of calf, / and cormorant, and humankind" creating a mellifluous continuity across the lines.

His is a poetic language comprised of unusual constructions that create rhythm and express both formality and informality. For instance, “cry of calf” is not a grammatically standard phrase, and “forbid me not” is another inverted archaism that evokes prayer (“Lead me not into temptation”). They are nonstandard phrases that communicate, along with consonance, Lucifer’s stately eloquence. However, at the same time, the poem’s other lines are more prosaic than stately: “and pain, of course, always there was some bleeding,” Lucifer says flatly about the difficulties outside of Eden. Likewise, Lucifer brusquely glosses over his conflict with the archangel Michael in a register that has a formulaic quality: “the bruising of his heel, my head, and so forth.” “So forth” is Lucifer’s indication that we’ve all heard the story before. His language is at once exalted and down-to-earth. We hear, as Lucifer says of himself in “as for myself,” the third poem of the series, “less snake than angel” but also “less angel than man.”

This subtle blend of standard and unusual English constructions comes to be, as I have been arguing, Clifton’s predominant linguistic register. In “brothers,” her formulations are intricately woven to create a language that is both formal and informal, standard and nonstandard. For instance, when Lucifer capitulates to God’s “mercy” and “grace,” he asks, “how otherwise / could i have come to this marble“; “how otherwise / could the two roads / of this tongue / converge”; and

how otherwise
could i, a sleek old
traveler,
curl one day safe and still
beside You

at Your feet, perhaps,
but, amen, Yours. (469)

This series of questions delivered in standard syntax sounds—with, for example, its grand self-reference (“i / a sleek old / traveler”)—especially composed and formal before the poem’s concluding string of self-interrupting words: “at Your feet, perhaps, but, amen, yours.” Likewise, the one-word, one-sentence line “so” that begins the last poem announces oratorically that Lucifer’s speech is concluding, but it has a conversational feel as well. That last poem ends with two lines that illustrate the “two roads” of Lucifer’s coherent tongue: “You kiss my brother mouth / the rest is silence.” (470). The nonstandard phrase—“brother mouth”—and the quotation of Hamlet’s last words and, perhaps, Christ’s (“It is finished” [*King James Bible*, John 19.28-30]) represent the informal and formal roads that converge in Lucifer’s language.

The characters in Clifton’s Eden speak in a multivalent language rather than in the distinctly located language of black vernacular or the unlocated language of standard English. She devises for Eden a local language not indicative of any one group but that speaks generally about existence. True, black vernacular represents in Clifton’s poems humanness: in her early biblical poems, black speech depicted biblical characters as real humans rather than representations of spiritual dilemmas and equated black history and biblical narratives. But Clifton’s artistic aspirations look farther afield over time, a development that is especially evident in her spiritual poetry. She still aimed to present biblical characters as human, as she explained in 1999 to Michael Glaser during a discussion of “brothers”: “they are meant to be human and it’s much more interesting that way, much more interesting if sacredness can be part of what it means to be human. What

a concept! You know? What a concept that Lucifer was beautiful. I try to remember there was light in Lucifer” (325). She also continued to employ black vernacular, however sparingly, in poems throughout her career.²⁶ And yet in that same interview with Glaser, Clifton clarified that she wanted to locate a language not just for specific communities but for all or, as she puts it, “any human” (327). Over fifteen years after Madhubuti identified what he called her presentation of a “wholeness” in black experience (153), Clifton evinced to Glaser that her parameters for wholeness had expanded: “One wants to write out of wholeness, out of the wholeness of ‘What is Lucille?’ And that allows, I hope, something about what *any* human is” (“Stranger” 327).²⁷ After all, she described her “I” as threefold to Rowell: it’s “me Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me, and the me that is also human” (“An Interview” 59). Lucifer is one of Clifton’s epitomical speakers because he represents light, the world beyond humans, and the “me Lucille” “that is . . . human.”

Clifton creates a language for Lucifer that is, to borrow her terms, “both/and” rather than “either/or,” a language that is standard and nonstandard, formal and colloquial, archaic and contemporary to portray him speaking like a human and for humans in general. His mortal tongue is also specific; he speaks in a range of linguistic registers that produce Clifton’s singular authoritative tone. Indeed, Lucifer speaks like a human, and yet he also speaks oracularly from a timeless location identified only as “long after” (466). He is, of course, an angel, a particularly authoritative one who takes it upon himself to explain God’s unfathomableness to God (“You are beyond / . . . Your own understanding. / that rib and rain and clay . . . / is not what You believed / You were, / but it is what You are” [466-67]) and to grill his “brother” relentlessly:

tell me, tell us why
in the confusion of a mountain
of babies stacked like cordwood,
of limbs walking away from each other,
of tongues bitten through
by the language of assault,
tell me, tell us why
You neither raised Your hand
nor turned away, tell us why
You watched the excommunication of
that world and You said nothing. (469)

In this climactic poem, Lucifer speaks on behalf of himself (“me”) and on behalf of humanity (“us”). That the refrain—“tell me, tell us”—becomes “tell us” in its final iteration rather than “tell me, tell us” again or just “tell me” stresses his concern with collecting all human beings in that pronoun. Indeed, Lucifer doesn’t particularize human atrocities when he demands that God account for his silence during the horrific course of human history but embodies all human suffering in a vivid, complex, apocalyptic image: an immense pile of stacked babies, severed limbs, and lacerated tongues. His language is specific—it is Lucifer speaking in his particular arrangement of standard and nonstandard constructions—and extensive, he asks God to explain his silence to all of “us” and generalizes human catastrophe with that comprehensive image. Lucifer employs a mortal, oracular tongue to speak for and about humanity in general and to criticize God long after humanity has passed away.

And yet Lucifer's criticism of God's silence in such a representative voice is not unequivocal but highly ambiguous. We learn by the end of the sequence that a more accurate conception of God is that God is silence itself rather than an indifferent being who "said nothing" during the calamity that was human history: "before the word / You were," Lucifer says, a variation of New Testament logos, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the word was God" (*King James Bible*, John 1.1). In fact, the title of the poem in which Lucifer asks God to "tell us" why he said nothing is "*the silence of God is God.*"²⁸ The title of the last poem then repeats a modified version of that phrase, visualizing with white space and ellipses "*the silence of God*" that confounds Lucifer: now Clifton writes only ".....*is God.*" Lucifer comes to an understanding in "brothers" that he can't assail God's silence because God is silence; in fact, it is Lucifer and "us" who have been given by God the capacity to speak. Because God had "no need to speak," and because language is necessary for coexistence, he created other entities to perform that task: he "sent" his "tongue / splintered into angels," and he created Adam and Eve, beings set apart from animals by their ability to devise language (470). Lucifer, speaking in "brothers" to God on behalf of all of us, is one of the splintered parts of God's silent tongue, the one who, in "tree of life," encourages Eve to produce the language that she eventually gives to Adam. That Lucifer's last line in the last poem, "the rest is silence," reiterates Hamlet's last words, perhaps the most famous literary characterization of human error and ambivalence in English, suggests that Lucifer has realized something about human limits rather than about God's disregard for humanity. After all, Lucifer, like "us," has the ability to speak but not necessarily the ability to comprehend the immortal or the immaterial. Less than a critique of God, "brothers" is an

examination of the relationship between language and that which is beyond words, a language that perhaps says “too much” when it tries categorically to explain God: “even i / with my little piece of it,” Lucifer says of his own tongue in the last poem, “have said too much.”

“brothers” contemplates the efficacy of language to explain the inexplicable. The sequence hints at these linguistic hindrances in its second poem when Lucifer refers to the traditional conception that God made humans in his own image as merely what “some / lexicographer supposed” (467). In the end, the series portrays its speaker realizing that God cannot be delineated: he recognizes in the final poem that to ask God to explain is to “deny You” because doing so denies God’s fundamental essence: silence. For Clifton, language has always been more than mere words, words that might risk saying “too much.” In an earlier poem, “grandma, we are poets,” she describes words as restricting rather than illuminating experience: “i imagined myself / in the place before / language imprisoned itself / in words” (374). Indeed, Clifton’s sense of the inadequacy of words is not confined only to immortal realms, for she ponders their ability to render the human world, too, a world just as inconceivable as immortality. After all, Lucifer implies that God didn’t call Adam and Eve back to Eden just because he “is silence” but because their human “names” are “ineffable”: “only You,” Lucifer says to God, “could have called / their ineffable names, / only in their fever / could they have failed to hear” (468). In “Grief,” published eight years after “brothers,” Clifton worries even more explicitly about the effectiveness of poetic language. There, she directs us first to consider Adam and Eve’s “original bleeding,” “moaning,” and “the lamentation of grass” that “bore the weight” of the first humans before “pausing” in grief for “the myth of america” and then

for the girl
with twelve fingers
who never learned to cry enough
for anything that mattered,

not enough for the fear,
not enough for the loss,
not enough for the history,
not enough
for the disregarded planet,
not enough for the grass. (562-63)

While twelve-fingered Lucifer has said, with his “little piece” of God’s splintered tongue, “too much” by ordering God to explain himself, twelve-fingered “Lucille” worries that she has not said enough.

And yet in her last sequence of poems about her own inexplicable, disconcerting spiritual experiences, “the message from The Ones,” the final section of her 2004 book *Mercy*, Clifton doesn’t depict a poet’s search for language to render inconceivable experiences but rather gives her poems over to the nonhuman voices that she hears. In “The Ones,” it is those nonhuman voices that search for language—for, more specifically, a poet’s mortal tongue. Clifton had first written about these voices in the poem “the light that came to lucille clifton” and the sequence of nine poems with the same title that follows that poem and concludes *two-headed woman*.²⁹ In that 1980 sequence about disembodied voices, Clifton testifies to hearing them, describes them as “strangers /

peopling this light,” frets that she has gone mad, detects her dead mother’s presence in the voices, searches for ways to render them accurately, defends their existence against friends who question them, imagines the visions of Joan of Arc as voices, confides in her dead father that she is “not equal to the faith required” by them and that she wants to run from them, and, finally, deduces that they are ancestral (243-51). The series doesn’t reveal what the voices actually say other than, in the second poem, “lucille / we are / the Light” (244). Rather, the poems convey “lucille’s” anxiety about hearing them at all. In 2004, however, “the message from The Ones,” which documents this same auditory experience from the late 1970s but wasn’t published until over twenty years after *two-headed woman*, is presented as a transcription of the voices themselves. The speaker of all twenty-three poems is “The Ones.”

And yet the language is Clifton’s language arranged in her characteristically minimal free-verse forms. It is as if The Ones answer a request that Clifton posed to angels in an earlier poem: “i . . . ask the seraphim / to speak to me in my own words” in order “to lean on understanding. not my own. theirs” (517). The Ones are not angels just as they are not Clifton’s mother—they speak of angels in the third person rather than in the second-person plural that they employ to refer to themselves. They are never entirely clear about their own origin: in one poem, they insist that they are not spirits/souls—“we are not ones / who have rolled / selves into bone and flesh,” and yet in another they imply that they were once human, “flesh is the coat we unfasten / and throw off” even as they maintain that they don’t “wander bone yards” as ghosts (614; 617). What is certain is that The Ones speak to Clifton in her own words. The sequence is, like “brothers,” a one-sided conversation, this time not a tongued being speaking to silence

itself but a collective of “tongueless” entities speaking to a human in that human’s voice (624). To hear them is to hear Clifton:

in the saying of
you
we will sometime
be general
and sometime
particular. (615)

The Ones refer to their own ways of “saying” in terms that describe Clifton’s poetry: general and particular. Further, they speak in Clifton’s standard and nonstandard constructions: they say “we will” and not the less formal “we’ll” while also utilizing unusual phrasing, “we will sometime / be” rather than “we will sometimes be.” Indeed, throughout the sequence, the language of The Ones is a pared-down Cliftonian language, comprised of both general and particular diction, punctuated by standard and nonstandard phrases that render human speech in an oracular context. For example, when they explain that they are not Clifton’s mother, they announce “we are not she” rather than the colloquial “we are not her” (611); their invitation to Clifton to meet them every day at her table is “come to here / each morning” rather than “come here” (612); they describe their own existence as “in the saying of we / we are we” (615); and they explain that paying attention to “what sits inside” oneself and “watches” is a way to “sometime discover / which when / which which” (619). Their language is unadorned and minimal and yet deeply enigmatic; it is oracular and riddling but has the ease and naturalness of everyday

speech. Their language emphasizes their uncomplicatedness in a demotic tone: “we are just here / where you are.” And their exchange with Clifton is decidedly conversational:

meet us here

each morning yes

why you

why not. (612)

Implied but unheard in these lines is Clifton asking, why me? The answer is straightforward and almost idiomatic: “why not.” The Ones employ, in other words, what sounds like a local language.

Indeed, The Ones come to “lucille” because they seek the local language that she has created both to speak to and for her communities and to speak to and for “more than” her communities. They suggest in the third poem that Clifton is “not chosen” because she is special—“any stone / can sing” and her “tongue is [just] useful” rather than “unique.” But they disclose in the very next poem that they “will make use” of her particular “one eye / field of feeling / singing ear / quick hand” (614).³⁰ They have in fact chosen her precisely because her ability to “sing” makes her “unique.” The Ones recognize her “unique” way of seeing and speaking; they recognize that she has been “blessed / or cursed / to see beyond” herself because she is a poet.

The Ones select Clifton because they want her mortal tongue. They come to her for the same kind of trade-off that she had earlier described asking the “seraphim” for: understanding in exchange for language. The Ones explain,

you who feel yourself

drowning in the bodys need

what can you know clearly

of fleshlessness

.....

you who lie awake

holding your mouth open

receive us as best you can

and we enter you

as we must

tongueless

as best we can. (624)

The poet, The Ones sense, desires a clear knowledge of the inexplicable, the world beyond the human world, “fleshlessness.” They have witnessed her lying awake and holding her mouth open for it, and yet they can supply that knowledge only if they have her mortal tongue. Despite their claim that “lucille” isn’t “chosen,” they do want her particular language, a language that doesn’t just “speak of / black and white” (625).³¹ The Ones are in touch with Clifton because she, like them, “remembers” that “every human comes / to every color.” Further, hers is a voice that knows that “god” is beyond language, that “god” can’t be defined by words like “love” and “light” and so can’t be given a name:

place here

the name

you give
to god
is love
is light
is
here the name
you give
to

yes. (622)

God is silence, the white space after “to” conveys. The Ones want the mortal tongue of a poet who knows this—and who knows also that God is “yes,” an affirmation.

The Ones speak through Clifton’s mortal tongue because it speaks a local language, a human language, and a poetic language, and they require all these to issue their admonitions. They claim that they don’t seek Clifton’s tongue to offer “the same old / almanac” of traditional New Testament axioms as common as the months of the year: “january / love one another / february / whatever you sow / you will reap” (620). Their message does evoke the Christian message about loving your neighbors and reaping what you sow. However, their charge is not to be your brother’s keeper but to recognize that you are your brother:

you are not
your brothers keeper
you are your

brother

.....

the king is you

the kike is you

the honky is you

the nigger is you

the bitch is you

the beauty is you

the friend is you

the enemy oh. (626)

The Ones want to convey to humans in the crudest and plainest of human words that, just like god is silence, human beings are each other, “each is required to be” the brother as The Ones say in the next poem, rather than required to “keep” or help him (627). They speak through Clifton to warn humans that unless they understand this wholeness, unless they realize “that balance is the law // balance or be balanced / whether in body / or out of body / we don’t know” (629), their world will continue to be “in grave danger” (628). A “final chance” that humans have is to be “nursed toward [this] wholeness”; otherwise, we will continue the cycle of poisoning waters and polluting air (630), eroding “the patience / of the universe” until “might it / slowly / turn its back” on us (631). What the Ones require to issue their exhortation is a poetic language for effecting “balance” so that humans will not “be balanced” by another force, a language for “correcting and adjusting imbalances in the word” (Heaney, *Redress* 192).

Clifton's language manages to be at once local and general, individual and communal, standard and nonstandard—balanced, in other words, by unifying these supposed oppositions. That Clifton only published “the message from The Ones” two decades after they spoke to her, and in a style that suggests transcription, indicates that she wasn't quite sure how or when to deliver their prophecy.³² When she did publish it, she placed it directly after “september song,” a sequence of seven poems about 9/11. For Clifton, 9/11 was especially harrowing because it so violently dispelled “the myth of america” that she took “pause” for in her earlier poem “Grief.” In the first “september song,” she compares the unprecedented violence on American soil that day to the bloodshed that occurs all the time in “otherwheres,” in, for example “israel ireland palestine” (601). The poem presents 9/11 as an abominable version of “the message of The Ones”: “God has blessed America / to learn that no one is exempt / the world is one all fear // is one all life all death / all one” (601). But 9/11 is also what The Ones warn against, for it is a horrid instantiation of “the law [of] / balance / or be balanced” (601). To heed “the message of the Ones”—that everything is required to exist and that everything is not just connected to everything else but is everything else—is to remake a world of suffering and conflict. In her prose memoir, Clifton expressed her belief in the cohesion of existence by alluding to Yeats's notion, in “The Second Coming,” that “Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold” (*CP* 187). Clifton refutes Yeats's cataclysmic view: “Things don't fall apart. Things hold. Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept” (*Generations* 275). Clifton's “Ones” also allude to Yeats's poem in their last “message.” Whereas

Yeats prophesizes a “rough beast” who “slouches toward Bethlehem to be born,” The Ones leave more room for hope in Clifton’s characteristic language:

there is a star
more distant
than eden
something there
is even now
preparing.

The Ones have been saying all along that it is up to us whether the “something there” is preparing to make or unmake our world. Clifton provides the means for conveying their admonitions because she wields a local language that speaks to and for specific humans and communities and speaks to and for humans in general, a local language that could collect us all in “the single love / of the many tongued God” (602).

Notes

¹ All of Clifton’s poetry is gathered in *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010* (2012). I cite from that book, providing the page number the first time a poem is mentioned and then proceeding without citations for short poems and with citations for sequences.

² Many of Clifton’s poems are untitled. I refer to untitled poems by their first lines set in quotes and italicized.

³ Cheryl Wall also connects Clifton to Whitman and Hughes: about “study the masters,” Wall says, “As she posits a democratic ideal that revises our understanding of the heroic and the beautiful, Clifton pays homage to past masters of American vernacular poetry, such as Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes” (541). Lupton says that Clifton sent poems to Hughes before her first book was published and that at “St. Mary’s College she taught a creative writing class called *I Too Sing, America*, based on Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” and Langston Hughes’s [“I, Too,” which begins,] “I, too, sing America” (27; 63). Ostriker adds Dickinson to the comparison: “Walt Whitman’s

transcendental expansiveness and Emily Dickinson's verbal compression feel uniquely wedded in Clifton. Epigraphs from Whitman mark the sections of [Clifton's prose memoir] *Generations*, and the elliptical Emily might well consider the intensely playful Lucille one of her daughters" (82). In an obituary for Clifton in *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Alexander also links Clifton to Dickinson: "Of great poets whose poems are kin to Clifton's, I think of Emily Dickinson; to Dickinson's intense compression Clifton adds explicit historical consciousness." Comparisons to these seminal figures of American poetry underscore Clifton's own identification as a distinctly American poet, "I am not an either/or person. I'm not either American or black. I am an American poet" (Holladay 200).

⁴ Clifton was not actively involved in the Black Arts Movement, but, as Cheryl Clarke notes, "play[ed] at the margins" of that "circle" (82). According to Clarke, Clifton's "miss rosie," in which Clifton describes one of her grandmothers as a "wet brown bag of a woman" (39), "is not the typical icon of black womanhood embraced by the devotees of black nationalism in the Movement. Clifton's heroine is not moving in 'blk / queenly / ways,' as in [Black Arts poet] Sonia Sanchez's poem, 'black / woouooooomen chant'" (82). Ford identifies an incompatibility between Clifton's "experiences and values" and BAM militancy: "Though . . . Clifton published her first volume of poetry in 1969 at the height of the Black Arts Movement, her native independence, family-centered experiences and values, and religious optimism inclined her away from participation in a militant movement" (215-16). Indeed, Clifton tells Rowell that her poetry "did not reflect" the Movement: "At the time I didn't even know what it was" (66).

⁵ Harding borrows Alice Walker's idea of "womanism." Harding explains that "Walker did not 'invent' womanism" but was "one of the first artists/scholars to create a label for an essentially female-centered, indigenous mode of being in the world that holds the welfare of all community members as a key value and recognizes the ludic-prophetic power of women's culture" (55n1). To preface her book of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker provides a definition of "womanist": "a black feminist or feminist of color," "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually"; a woman who "Loves music . . . dance . . . the moon . . . the Spirit . . . love and food and roundness . . . struggle . . . the Folk . . . herself. *Regardless.*"

⁶ James Byrd was a black man brutally murdered by white supremacists in 1998 and who speaks in Clifton's "jasper texas 1998" after his death in a manner that is colloquial, resolute, stately, subdued, and enraged all at once.

⁷ "More than" is an important concept for Clifton. Many of her poems use the phrase. For example, "the thirty eighth year" repeats at the beginning and end of the poem "i had expected to be more than this" (182-83); Clifton refers to her daughters in another poem as "my more than me" (148); in "leanna's poem," the speaker claims, "one / is never enough" and so "i wish for you / what i wish for myself— / more than one / more than one / more than one" (137). In an interview with Rowell, Clifton uses the

phrase to describe poetry: “Poetry is about more than logic,” she says, it’s “a way of not just accepting the taught, passed-on information, but trying to get more than that” (61, 64).

⁸ Harding describes Clifton’s identification with varied communities as a way for her to connect personally to history: “Clifton understands and approaches history with intimacy. The history about which she writes *belongs* to her, whether family stories of Dahomey women and slavery, the Biblical accounts of prophets and holy women, or unnamed African and Native American predecessors whose presence remains palpable in the late twentieth-century landscapes where Clifton lived. As a citizen of the Americas, as a daughter of the diaspora, as an African American woman, Clifton claims all of these stories” (45).

⁹ For a concise overview of the Black Arts Movement, see Ford’s chapter “The Black Arts Movement.” Ford relays that “the movement took shape in response to the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965” (168). Baraka moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem a few days after the murder. Ford connects the Movement’s overarching goal, which Baraka summarized in his *Autobiography* as “to help raise the race” (202), to the goals of the Harlem Renaissance. She also notes that “Larry Neal dates the origin of the movement a year earlier,” to the previous spring when LeRoi Jones, Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Johnny Moore, and others started the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School (248n1).

¹⁰ During a November 2000 panel entitled “What’s African American about African American Poetry,” transcribed for *Fence* magazine, Harryette Mullen provided a succinct overview of Henderson’s conception of “saturation” in black poetry: it is “(a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and (b) a sense of fidelity to the absurd and intuitive truth of the Black experience.’ [Henderson] also demonstrates saturation with what he calls ‘mascon’ words, meaning terms or images embodying a mass concentration of historical and cultural significance. Such words—like ‘blue,’ ‘cool,’ ‘funk,’ or ‘soul’—are frequently used to evoke collective black experience and historical consciousness.”

¹¹ Ford connects the anti-Semitism (and the homophobia and misogyny) in some Black Arts poetry to its “dependence on the trope of masculinity. Black Arts poems tended to present an exclusively masculine persona who thematized homophobia, anti-Semitism, and misogyny. The ideal black revolutionary, and therefore the quintessential black revolutionary poet, was defined in contrast to homosexual men, Jewish men, and women—that is, in contrast to people whose ‘masculinity’ was viewed by the persona as inadequate” (176).

¹² Holladay also identifies salient BAM elements in Clifton’s work. According to her, Clifton “epitomizes several of the ideals that the movement symbolized” (26). Some of the attributes that Holladay locates in Clifton that she believes aligns her with the Black Arts poets are accessibility, topicality, and “the clarity of her vocabulary,

symbolism, and themes.” I argue that Clifton’s relation to BAM poetry is more complex than that: she employed some of its stylistic elements and wrote about black experience and culture, but her emphasis on humanness rather than militancy set her apart from her Black Arts peers.

¹³ Clifton’s second book, *good news about the earth*, also had poems about black nationalism: in “the way it was,” Clifton laments a “nice girl . . . trying to be white” (79); in a poem to “the panthers,” she apologizes for her “whiteful ways” (82); the “heroes” section contains poems about Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seal (100-02). Indeed, it is not surprising that such poems would lead Holladay to conclude that the book “illustrates her affinity with the Black Arts Movement” (23). In its first poem, “after kent state,” the speaker implores, “oh / people / white ways are / the way of death / come into the / black / and live” (77). And yet in typical Cliftonian fashion, and in opposition to Black Arts tenets, Clifton doesn’t invite only black people into the black to live but all or any “people.”

¹⁴ Sonia Sanchez was a central BAM figure, but, Ford tells us, she had an uneasy relationship with the Movement: she eventually “rejected” its “masculinist vision” (208). Even though she replaced it with “another masculinist vision: the teachings of the Nation of Islam,” Sanchez’s love poems and haikus from that period indicate “that she sought order, control, and an opportunity for reflection after the disorder, anarchy, and impetuosity of the Black Arts Movement” (208).

¹⁵ McCormick argues that Clifton’s “i” represents a “multidirectional communal mode of articulation rooted in the both/and thinking that typifies feminist and African American ways of knowing” (69). For McCormick, Clifton’s “i” is “multilayered and communal,” both “feminist” and “rooted in her African American articulations.” McCormick does not, however, allow that Clifton’s poetry is both communal and individual: “What Clifton produces throughout her career is a multilayered communal ‘i,’ rather than an authoritative, individual ‘I,’ and a complex vision of lyric subjectivity as constructed, contingent, and communal rather than essential, consistent, or coherent” (68). Both McCormick and Thyreen-Mizingou claim that Clifton’s communal “I” “questions[s] the limitations of American individualism at the turn of the 21st century” (McCormick 71). McCormick locates that questioning in Clifton’s multiple selves while Thyreen-Mizingou detects it in what she perceives to be Clifton’s Christian “responsibility for the other, as opposed to typical American individualization” (68). I claim instead that Clifton speaks broadly to her specific communities and to “more than” her communities while also conveying individualism.

¹⁶ The sequences of spiritual poems that end Clifton’s books are “some jesus” in *good news about the earth*, “the light that came to lucille clifton” in *two-headed woman*, “tree of life” in *quilting*, “splendor” (which ends with “brothers”) in *The Book of Light*, “From the Book of David” in *The Terrible Stories* (1996), “the message from The Ones” in *Mercy*, and “ten oxherding pictures” in *Voices*. Her books that don’t end with spiritual or biblical sections also contain sequences of spiritual poems: *an ordinary woman* (1974)

includes a series of poems about Kali, the powerful Hindu goddess associated with death (“Kali,” *OED*); *Next* (1987) includes several “message” poems in which Clifton’s dead mother, husband, and friend speak; the “new poems” section of *Blessing the Boats* (2000), her selected poems, includes a sequence of three poems about Lazarus as well as a poem in the voice of Lucifer, and her late poems published after her death in 2010 include poems about angels, Lucifer, God, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Armageddon.

¹⁷ Holladay concludes that in “john,” the “somebody coming” is Christ and Martin Luther King, Jr.: “That savior may be either Jesus Christ or Martin Luther King, Jr. Once we begin thinking about King, the persona’s witty description of himself as ‘a baptist preacher’ alludes to King’s own religious denomination, and ‘blackness’ in the first and last lines signifies King’s race, not just nighttime or the spiritual void that the savior is entering” (106). Holladay reminds us that Clifton’s earlier poem, “the meeting after the savior gone” (51), also linked King and Christ.

¹⁸ For Ostriker, to evoke Adam’s “mother” is to suggest a number of possibilities: “The mother could be Eve, or a nameless pre-monotheistic goddess, or just any mother doing her homely work—and that conflation of myth and modernity is part of the joke. Making the poet double gendered is another part” (81).

¹⁹ Other readers also hear Caribbean dialect in the Annunciation poems: Andrea Benton Rushing remarks, “Clifton uses a lower-class Caribbean accent rather than the African-American idiom in which she usually writes” (220), and Ostriker comments that the “dialect” in the Annunciation poems “thickens toward Caribbean, [and] implies a braiding of Christianity and Rastafarianism” (89). Hull implies that Clifton corroborates these detections of Caribbean speech by quoting Clifton as calling both Rastafarians and Christians “small, somewhat despised” sects with “who knows what promise.” (qtd. in Hull 285).

²⁰ The titles of the sections of *quilting* refer to traditional quilt designs: “log cabin,” catalpa flower,” “eight-pointed star,” and “tree of life” (Holladay 48). Hull explains that there are two “tree of life” quilt patterns, one “is made up solely of trees” and the other “has a serpent coiled around the tree” (294). Holladay draws attention to Harryette Mullen’s essay, “African Signs and Spirit Writing,” in which Mullen discusses quilt making as one of the means by which illiterate African American artists created a substantial body of black folk art (623-42).

²¹ For a helpful summary of what light and Lucifer means to Clifton and for Lucifer’s traditional denotations and connotations see Hull 287-89. Holladay argues that Clifton associates herself with Lucifer to dismantle racializing dichotomies about darkness and light: “Clifton asserts herself as a black poet sharing her epiphanies with the world. Known as both the Prince of Darkness and the Light Bearer, Lucifer embodies the same polar opposites as does Clifton. A dark-skinned poet whose first name means ‘light,’ she knows something of the paradox the light-bearing Lucifer experiences as the so-called Prince of Darkness” (121). For Holladay, the Eden characters provide a way for

Clifton to connect herself to broader contexts: “Writing about Adam and Eve and Lucifer ultimately becomes a way for Clifton to write about herself and humanity” (122). Holladay, like Hull, perceives Lucifer as “a proxy for Clifton and her own questions about God” (131).

²² Brassaw and Hull also connect Clifton’s Lucifer poems to “God’s famous command” in Genesis (Brassaw 50; Hull 289). Hull also notes that in Luke’s gospel in the New Testament (10:18), Jesus says, “I beheld Satan as lightening fall from heaven” (289).

²³ According to Holladay, “brothers” examines “the theological problem of God’s silence in the face of human suffering” (131). She concludes that the sequence presents a spiritual resolution in which religious faith is restored: “Through the figure of Lucifer, Clifton gradually comes to terms with this silence and affirms her faith in a higher power and the redemptive grace of poetry” (131). That Lucifer speaks at all, Holladay claims, is proof that God exists because “God’s silence calls human speech into being” (138). Like Holladay, Brassaw believes that Clifton “casts Lucifer in a humanizing light,” but for her the poems don’t affirm religious faith but dismantle traditional structures: the fact that Lucifer and God are “brothers” and the “ease with which Lucifer addresses God” obliterates the traditional hierarchy (52). I argue that Clifton’s Lucifer poems, and all of her biblical poems, are about language more than theology.

²⁴ For Holladay, the phrase “the hum of the great cats / moving into language” in the first “brothers” poem also signifies black culture: “In those great purring cats, Clifton once again invokes African American history: maybe the lions and tigers of Eden were the original hep cats, African animals swaying to the beat and humming the prelapsarian blues” (132).

²⁵ Brassaw argues that Clifton’s Eden characters don’t speak in black vernacular because she wants to implicate all people in the project of the American civil utopia and, as becomes evident in the poems, in oppression in general. In these poems, the conflict, and most of the communication, is largely between Lucifer and God. A snake in form, but not a beast in the traditional sense, Lucifer is cast in the text as neither white nor black, as he is also neither explicitly male nor female. In Clifton’s version, it is Lucifer, rather than Adam or Eve, who is foregrounded and reclaimed from the tradition that figures him as a (black) beast and a threat to the purity of white America. In a surprising move, Clifton casts Lucifer in a humanizing light as an illuminator of the unclear. (48)

Rather than implicating all people, Clifton is, I contend, speaking for all people.

²⁶ Some of Clifton’s later poems that include black vernacular are “defending my tongue” (344), “note, passed to superman,” (449), “old man river” (506), “out of body” (570), the sixth “september song” (606), and “my grandfather’s lullaby” (650).

²⁷ Clifton made many comments over the years about her desire to speak both for and beyond her specific communities. For example, in a 1985 essay, Clifton describes passing down to her own daughters the stories of “mama and aunts and the old mothers of the church” as preserving American history: “It was, it is, the way we have continued in this country, passing on our own and the wider history and culture of America. Not just of Black America, of all of it, so that we know what life was like among Black people as well as white ones during slavery time because we heard and overheard the tales of Ole Miz and what happened when (“Grapevine” 129). Over a decade later, she tells Glaser that she hopes she’ll be remembered as an African American woman whose work emphasized humanness: “I would like to be seen as a woman whose roots go back to Africa, who tried to honor being human. And who tried to do the best she could most of the time. My inclination is to try to help” (328). In an interview with Rowell that same year, she explains that her story as a black American female is the story of humanity: “I hope [my story] can be read as part of The Story, of what it means to be human in this place at this time. I am a black human being, and that is part of The Story” (58). For Clifton, the human element in poetry transcends the hierarchical categories that society devises to exert control: “Poetry is a human art. It is about being human, whatever gender or color or class” (67).

²⁸ The title is a quote from Carolyn Forché’s poem, “The Angel of History.” Forché borrowed the phrase from Elie Wiesel (Brassaw 68n7).

²⁹ Hull summarizes the origins of Clifton’s supernatural experiences: in 1975, Clifton and two of her daughters were playing with a Quija board when it spelled out “THELMA,” Clifton’s mother’s first name (“Channeling” 330). This marked the beginning of a number of phenomenal occurrences in which Clifton heard voices, and so “incorporated the nonvisible into [her] scheme for what is real” (qtd. in Hull, “Channeling” 340). Clifton eventually began writing down the “automatic messages” she received. She has a number of poems about these experiences, most notably the sequence “the light that came to Lucille Clifton” and “the message from The Ones.” There are significant differences between these two sequences: “the light” poems suggest that the voices include Clifton’s mother, entities that were once people, and ancestral beings; “The Ones,” on the other hand, insist that they are none of those, although they are ambivalent about whether or not they were ever human. Another difference is that the earlier sequence focuses on Clifton’s anxieties about hearing voices while “The Ones” depicts the voices delivering their prophetic message. They employ, I argue, Clifton’s oracular, colloquial language to transmit that message.

³⁰ Along with regarding her extra fingers as symbols of her “unique” artistic power, Clifton perceived her poor eyesight in a similar vein: “Another congenital distinction that Clifton addresses throughout her poetry is her one bad eye; she had poor vision in her left eye from birth. Over the years her right eye has compensated for the left eye’s weakness” (Lupton 10). In Clifton’s poem “lucy one-eye,” that congenital “weakness” results in a “crooked look” that actually gives her insight and perseverance: “lucy one-eye / she see the world sideways. / word foolish / she say what she don’t want /

to say, she don't say / what she want to. // lucy one-eye / she won't walk away / from it" (169). The vernacular Clifton invents, her standard and unusual constructions, expresses her way of seeing "the world sideways" and her commitment to saying what she doesn't want to—even saying what she doesn't want to instead of what she does want to—when it is imperative to do so.

³¹ The Ones want a language that doesn't just speak of black and white in a world that seems only willing "to hear of / black and white."

³² Clifton told Lupton about "The Ones," "Those were poems that came to me in the '70s,—there isn't another way to say it—that came to me in the '70s, and I did not call them; they came and I wrote them down. It was like taking dictations" (94). For a brief discussion about Clifton's place in a tradition of automatic writing in poetry see Brassaw 58.

CHAPTER VI

LIVING TONGUES

In the poems Lucille Clifton was writing in the years before her death in 2010, she continued to speak with her “mortal tongue” from immaterial realms. In a sequence of twenty-three poems titled “Book of Days,” composed in 2006 but not published in Clifton’s lifetime, linguistic location shifts from “godspeak” to “lucifer” to “man-kind” to “angelspeak” to “mother-tongue”: the poems seem to be searching for a common vernacular for these different entities. In the series, figures other than god, Lucifer, man, and mother also speak: we hear a personified rainbow, a narrator revising Old Testament tales, and the prodigal son of the Christian bible skeptically contemplating the concept of “free will”—an “illusion,” he calls it, God’s “prettiest trick” (689-711). The poems ponder not just “the difficult light” of human experience but both “mortal and immortal worlds” (693). Kevin Young, one of the editors of Clifton’s massive *Collected Poems* (2012) that includes “Book of Days,” explains that this “start of a manuscript” was found with other papers that Clifton had thrown out: “The typescript . . . was among . . . discards, complete it seems, without any editorial markings or even her name” (746). It is not clear whether Clifton considered these pieces to be finished poems before disposing of them. What is clear is that she continued devising “local languages” in minimalist free-verse forms for spiritual spheres in a style at once conversational and authoritative. In the “Book of Days” poems, “godspeak,” “angelspeak,” the language of Lucifer and “man-kind,” and a “mother-tongue” are all composed in the same parlance, the vernacular that Clifton had invented for speakers in otherworldly locations.

The language in “Book of Days” is similar to the language in, say, “the message from The Ones,” which, though published in 2004, was written many years before the “Book of Days” series. As in “the message” poems, Clifton is still trying in “Book of Days” to craft a local language that is “more than a common occurrence,” a personal language for “more than a woman in her ordinary skin” (701). She wanted, in other words, a language for her last poems that speaks on behalf of humanity and to humanity in general, a language for connecting material and immaterial locations, for constructing that bridge between “starshine” and “clay” she had imagined in “*won’t you celebrate with me.*” That “bridge” is Clifton’s poetry written in a language, as she says in “the rainbow bears witness,” the tenth “Book of Days” poem, “hung between earth and heaven” that is “unwilling to relinquish one for the other” (698).

And yet the language in these last poems also differs from the language she creates to deliver the messages from The Ones or, in other instances, to portray Mary’s troubling encounter with the angel Gabriel or to depict Eve whispering words into Adam’s ear in Eden or to stage a dialectic between Lucifer and God long after humanity has ended. Those earlier poems formulated local languages by a confluence of standard and nonstandard grammatical structures to suggest human speech generally rather than situating that speech within particular communities. Those poems tend also to connote the otherworldly or the spiritual with lexicons evoking luminescence and the celestial sphere. In contrast, the “Book of Days” poems are not inflected with nonstandard grammatical structures to imply human speech, nor do they contain much heavenly imagery or diction. Rather, the grammatical structures in “Book of Days” are consistently standard, and their diction is corporeal more often than ethereal. For example, the

“mother-tongue” poems speak about “hay,” “flowers,” “corn,” “rain,” and the human “heart”; they address infants; they describe Jesus as a woman in a “blue housecoat,” the loaves he transformed turned “back to stones.” The measured, direct “mother-tongue” is standard colloquial English:

true, this isn't paradise
but we come at last to love it (“land of nod” 694)
.....
tell me this one thing, god:
in which room of the heart
is the fortress,
is the inside wall that saves you? (“after the child’s death” 696)
.....
lord, in between
the solitudes of birth and death
the solitudes of life
will almost do us in (“after the flood,” 697)
.....
no failure in us
that we can be hurt like this,
that we can be torn. (“we are dying” 703)

The language is immediate, sparse, and commanding: the speaker addresses “god” and “lord” matter-of-factly, in the second instance to gain an explanation for how she was supposed to bear her children’s death and in the third address to explain “the solitudes of

life” that her “lord” doesn’t seem to be aware of. The mother-tongue is demotic, too: “true,” she begins as if in dialogue; “tell me this one thing,” she asks God; “life / will almost do us in” she says idiomatically to the “lord”; “no failure in us,” she begins colloquially as she imagines death as just “a small stone.” The “mother-tongue” is the local mortal tongue of “a woman in her ordinary skin,” who, in her oracular authority, is “more than a common occurrence.”

The “Book of Days” poems emphasize not just who is speaking but speech itself: the titles are “godspeak” rather than “god,” “angelspeak” not “angel,” “mother-tongue” instead of “mother.” That speech in all of these poems is concise, assertive, and plainspoken. In fact, the language for these mortal and immortal worlds is the same: the speech in “Book of Days”—god’s, angel’s, man’s, mother’s—is, like the speech Clifton invented for Adam, Eve, Lucifer, and the angels in Eden, all of a piece: compressed, colloquial, and commanding. For example, the linguistic register of “godspeak,” below, is the same as that of “mother-tongue”:

little ones,
small and treacherous,
why would you believe that *I* punish you
who punish each other relentlessly
and with such enthusiasm? (702)

This language is conversational and uncomplicated in its address to all humans. In the sequence’s last poem, “godspeak” is immediate and straightforward even as it considers all of existence:

you, with your point-blank fury,

what if i told you
this is all there ever was:
this earth, this garden, this woman,
this one precious, perishable kingdom. (711)

What we find in these final poems is that Clifton's local oracular language was becoming more forthright and more "ordinary" than ever before.

Clifton, I suggested in Chapter One, found something like the kind of language Gwendolyn Brooks seemed to be searching for when Brooks began to write free verse. Brooks wanted to create poetry that preserved her elaborate, recondite aesthetic while communicating immediately to black people in the taverns and on the streets. From time to time, her poetry employed the specifically located language of black speech, but Brooks more often devised for her local speakers an idiosyncratic, polysyllabic language that one wouldn't hear in taverns or on streets. After her 1967 radicalization, she was less concerned with defying expectations about the suitable diction and forms for African American poetry than with "reach[ing] all manner of black people" (*Conversations* 68). She wanted, in other words, to write poetry that was more readily available than "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" or "The Anniad," poems that would be, as she said in 1973, "simple-looking" but not simple (69).

This change to the "simple-looking" would not come easily to Brooks. By the late 1970s and into the 80s, she was still struggling to fulfill her own charge to write a poem "accessible to all manner of life" but also "significant for the unique word" (86). In 1983, she told Claudia Tate, "This is what I'm fighting for now in my work, for an *expression* relevant to all manner of blacks" (107). Indeed, "unique words" and expressions were

always integral components of Brooks's aesthetic: her post-1967 free-verse poems were as replete with them as her early verse. Further, the later poems were neither simple-looking nor simple. Even when her local characters speak aloud in the later free-verse poems, they tend to do so not with the "ordinariness of . . . language" that she was eventually after but with extraordinary diction similar to that in "The Sundays" and "The Anniad" (86). For example, the characters of "In the Mecca," Brooks's long poem published in 1968 about the inhabitants of a large tenement apartment building in which a young girl has gone missing, don't speak throughout most of the poem in everyday language. The poem's central question is presented as quoted black speech: "WHERE PEPITA BE?" asks Mrs. Sallie when she notices her daughter's absence. The answers she gets from her neighbors are summed up in a repetition of black vernacular:

Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er

Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er. (Blacks 416)

But the rest of the quotations in the poem are mostly in Brooks's idiolect. "Great-great Gram," for instance, speaks in a language that sounds as idiolectic as it does idiomatic:

"I ain seen no Pepita. But

I remember our cabin. The floor was dirt.

And something crawled in it. That is the thought

stays in my mind. I do not recollect

what 'twas. But something. Something creebled in that dirt

for we wee ones to pop." (417)

Gram is too preoccupied with the roaches of her childhood to help Mrs. Sallie locate Pepita. Her speech is local ("ain seen") but not entirely colloquial: "'twas," "creebled,"

the alliterating “we wee ones.” In another instance, “old St. Julia Jones” reveals in Gwendolynian language a religious fervor that borders on fanaticism:

“Isn’t He wonderfulwonderful!” cries St. Julia.

“Isn’t our Lord the greatest to the brim?

The light of my life. And I lie late

past the still pastures. And meadows. He’s the comfort

and wine and piccalilli for my soul.

He hunts me up the coffee for my cup.

Oh how I love the lord.” (407-08)

St. Julia’s language is not at all everyday but embellished and unusual:

“wonderfulwonderful,” “I lie late / past the still pastures,” “picacalillis for my soul,”

“hunts me up the coffee for my cup.” The speech Brooks devises for her is not local

speech like “WHERE PEPITA BE?” and “I ain seen er” but enigmatic and self-

consciously poetic language (“light of my life. And I lie late / past the still pastures”); the

internal exact rhyme of “up” and “cup”). The language she invents for her characters in

free verse after 1967 is as idiosyncratic as the language she set in blank verse and rhyme

royal before that transforming year.

Indeed, in her first free-verse poems, Brooks threads colloquialisms through her Gwendolynian language just as she only intimated local speech in “The Sundays” and “The Anniad.” In “Riot” (1969), for instance, a three-part poem about uprisings that occurred after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the characters speak in decidedly uncommon registers: in the first section, a white man expresses his racist repugnance in French (“Que tu es grossier!”), in satirically absurd exclamations (“Don’t

let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!), and finally in a bigoted biblical allusion (“Lord! Forgive these niggahs that know not what they do”). In contrast, the language of the black rioters is composed and refined: “You are a desperate man, / and the desperate die expensively today” (*Blacks* 470-71). In the poem’s second section, the male members of a local gang are depicted speaking colloquially even though most of the poem’s diction is expressly noncolloquial:

“We’ll do an us!” yells Yancey, a twittering twelve.

“Instead of your deathintheafternoon,

kill ’em, bull!

kill ’em, bull!”

.....

A Poem to Peanut.

“Cooooool!” purrs Peanut. Peanut is

Richard – a Ranger and a gentleman.

A Signature. A Herald. And a Span.

.....

The Disciples stir

and thousandfold confer

with ranging Rangermen;

mutual in their “Yeah!–

this AIN’T all upinheah!” (476-77)

The diction, whether the narrator’s or the characters’ quoted speech, is indeed “unique”: “an us,” “deathintheafternoon,” “Cooooool!” “A Signature, A Herald. And a Span,”

“thousandfold confer,” “upinheah!” If Brooks was looking for a poetic language to communicate to people in taverns and on streets immediately, this recondite, esoteric idiolect would not serve.

Some of Brooks’s late poems were written in “ordinary speech, loose rhythms and accessibility” (*Conversations* 87). These poems, as Gloria Hull observes, “turn out like ballads.” “The Boy Died in My Alley” from *Beckonings* (1975), for instance, begins by setting local speech to ballad rhythms. That poem tells the tragic story of a young black boy killed in an alley:

The Boy died in my alley
without my Having Known.
Policeman said, next morning,
“Apparently died Alone.” (*Beckonings* 5)

It proceeds with similarly colloquial diction typical of ballads, although by the end, the ballad rhythms have unfolded into free verse:

He cried not only “Father!”
but “Mother!
Sister!
Brother.”
The cry climbed up the alley.
It went up to the wind.
It hung upon the heaven
for a long
stretch-strain of Moment. (6)

The poem seems to do precisely what Brooks says she wanted her new poems to do: when Hull asks her about “diction and language, richness of imagery, and imaginativeness of comparison” in her new work, Brooks replies, “I believe all those elements can be included in a ballad that people who feel they despise poetry will not have to struggle over. I believe unique expressions can be used in a quotes, ‘simple poem.’ You just need a couple of unique expressions to distinguish a simple poem, to lift it up” (*Conversations* 88). The Gwendolynian diction here is not as pronounced as it is in “In the Mecca” or “Riot.” The locutions, for instance, in the penultimate stanza quoted above are a bit less elaborate than those in the earlier poems: “the heaven,” “stretch-strain,” and “Moment.” And yet even with this simpler Gwendolynian lexicon, Brooks still suggests in the very same conversation with Hull that such a poem did not accomplish what she wanted to do: she refers to “The Boy Died in My Alley” (and “Steam Song,” a more conventional ballad also in *Beckonings*) as “over-simple.” In fact, while Brooks thought *Beckonings* representative of the style she was trying to locate, she also considered it to be “the great failure among all of my books” (87).

The poems Brooks wrote in the 80s and 90s do not corroborate that she found the immediacy she was looking for. For example, “Winnie” is a long free-verse portrait of Winnie Mandela, the anti-apartheid South African activist and politician (and wife of Nelson Mandela) whom Brooks describes in the poem as “the She of our vision, the Code, / the articulate rehearsal, the founding mother” (*Winnie* 7). In “Song of Winnie,” Winnie calls not for simple-looking poems but “Big Poems, / roaring up out of sleaze, / poems from ice, from vomit, and from tainted blood. / This is the time for stiff *or* viscous poems” (15). In another poem set in South Africa, “The Near-Johannesburg Boy,” the young

speaker's speech is anything but the language a young boy would speak in the street: he describes walking with his playmates "in the dark that is our dark, there, a pulse across earth that is our earth, there, there exulting, there Exactly, there redeeming, there Roaring Up / (oh my Father) / we shall forge with the Fist-and-the Fury: / we shall flail in the Hot Time: / we shall" (*Near-Johannesburg* 12). The poem was written in response to images of apartheid that Brooks saw on television. But it was the speech of young children in that stricken country that moved her most: "what specifically inspired the poem is what I heard the children were saying to each other: 'Have you been detained yet?'" (*Conversations* 123). The direct speech of local South African children compelled her to provide a poetic language for them, and to do so with her characteristic Gwendolynian tongue: "exulting," "there Exactly, there redeeming," "Roaring Up," "the Fist-and-the-Fury," "the Hot Time."

In her last book of all new poems, *Children Coming Home* (1991), Brooks gives voices to American children in an accessible style that retained her Gwendolynian aesthetic. In that collection, she distills the impressions of children through her unusual diction. For example, "Gladys" learns in school of the Persian Gulf War:

Teacher told us today of those people in the Persian Gulf.

The people

bent over babies.

The people

worked with wheelbarrow and word-processor;

went into mines.

The people made love,
twisting into comical curlicues.
They birthdayed, prayed,
said,
marketed,
watched rich men and robbers,
ate okra and rice, ate bread.

.....

They talked of their here, their hereafter.
They talked of their hometime killers, in symbols or softly.

Then the Other Killers came. (9)

The poem communicates immediately and directly the daily lives of Iraqi civilians. And yet we hear, too, Brooks's distinctive vocabulary: "comical curlicues," "birthdayed," "said, / marketed," "here" and "hereafter," "hometime killers," "symbols or softly," "the Other Killers." It is as if sifting her language through a child's perspective afforded Brooks something of the immediacy she struggled to achieve for so long.

These late poems about South Africa and Iraq exemplify Brooks's ongoing concerns with world events. Indeed, she refers to herself in a late interview as "a reporter" (*Conversations* 153). In 1971, she was commissioned by *Ebony* magazine to visit Montgomery, Alabama with the photographer Moneta Sleet Jr. to write poetry based on the images he captured there (*In Montgomery* ix). She refers to that long poem, her biographer tells us, as "verse journalism, claiming the category as her original

contribution to genres” (Kent 241). Some of Tony Harrison’s poetry could be called verse journalism, too. Like “v.,” his poems “Initial Illumination” and “A Cold Coming” were first published together in a popular newspaper, London’s *The Guardian*, rather than in a literary journal or book.¹ According to Sandy Byrne, the poems are “‘journalistic’ poetry in reaction to current affairs,” namely the miner’s strike (“v.”) and the Gulf War (“Initial Illumination” and “A Cold Coming”) (*Loiner* 15). Alan Rusbridger, the Features Editor at *The Guardian* who commissioned Harrison to write poems about events like the Persian Gulf war and the Bosnian war, explains that he called on Harrison for pieces about the Gulf because he wanted to present “new things to say about this war, or ways of saying them,” a war he describes as “long-drawn-out, distant, anaesthetized” (134). Harrison’s poetry provided for Rusbridger those “new ways of saying,” particularly “A Cold Coming”: “it managed to say more than scores of conventional commentaries, whether by Jew, Arab, strategic observer, or armchair wing commander. It cut through all the phoney euphemisms and cold, strange unreality of this war-by-video, and forced the reader starkly face-to-incinerated face with the unsmiling soldiers of Saddam who were at the receiving end of the most awesome array of military hardware the world has ever seen” (135).² Harrison demonstrated for Rusbridger that poetry was capable of not just pressing back against reality but cutting through it.

The incinerated face that Rusbridger refers to in his assessment of “A Cold Coming” is that of an Iraqi soldier who was photographed after being burned to death when his jeep was struck by American bombs. The photograph is infamous. Rusbridger says it’s “one of the most shocking images of war I have ever seen” (134). At the time, only one

newspaper in England, *The Observer*, would publish the photo, and all American media outlets refused to run it.³ In a 2014 article about the photograph in *The Atlantic*, Torie Rose DeGhett details its origins:

On February 28, 1991, Kenneth Jarecke stood in front of the charred man, parked amid the carbonized bodies of his fellow soldiers, and photographed him. At one point, before he died this dramatic mid-retreat death, the soldier had had a name. He'd fought in Saddam Hussein's army and had a rank and an assignment and a unit. He might have been devoted to the dictator who sent him to occupy Kuwait and fight the Americans. Or he might have been an unlucky young man with no prospects, recruited off the streets of Baghdad.

DeGhett quotes her colleague to clarify that it was not “military obstruction but editorial choices” that kept the photograph from the general public: “It’s hard to calculate the consequences of a photograph’s absence. But sanitized images of warfare, *The Atlantic*’s Conor Friedersdorf argues, make it ‘easier ... to accept bloodless language’ such as 1991 references to ‘surgical strikes’ or modern-day terminology like ‘kinetic warfare.’” Harrison, in “A Cold Coming,” invents for that soldier the opposite of a “sanitized,” “bloodless language.” Poetry allowed Harrison to counter bloodlessness because for him writing it is “like plugging myself into a life-support system, especially when I’m looking at subjects that seem too terrible to talk about. The heart beats iambically; the form keeps the connection to the heartbeat” (Harrison, “Beats”). Harrison perceives traditional verse form similarly to the way Adrienne Rich famously described it: like “asbestos gloves” that equip him to handle incendiary material.

“A Cold Coming” comes after “Initial Illumination” in *The Guardian* and in the chapbook of the two poems that was published in 1991. In “Initial Illumination,” the poet is not initially sure if the illuminated language of poetry can respond adequately to war; he is “doubtful, in these dark days, what poems can do” (311).⁴ As he takes a train through the English countryside, he contemplates in elevated, erudite diction the cormorants he sees flying above Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of Northumberland famous for illuminated manuscripts that were created in a monastery there in the eighth century. The poet connects the birds he sees from the train to the images of cormorants that “Eadfrith the Saxon scribe/illuminator / incorporated . . . / into the *In principio*’s initial I.” The poem also compares Viking raiders who stole one of the lavishly bound books (bound by an “anchorite” named “Billfrith”) to British and American imperial forces in Iraq and relates televised images and rhetoric of war to illuminated script in language that is itself baroque and labyrinthine: “that sort of soldiery that’s still recruited / to do today’s dictators’ dirty work”; “The word of God so beautifully scripted by Eadfrith and Billfrith the anchorite / Pentagon conners have once again conscripted / to gloss the cross on the precision sight”; “Eadfrith had to beautify / the word of God much bandied by George Bush / whose word illuminated midnight sky / and confused the Baghdad cock who was betrayed / by bombs into believing day was dawning.” The poem’s language seems “scripted” like ancient religious manuscripts, or like sound bites on television news programs. If the contrived language of politicians and media outlets anaesthetizes the war, does ornate poetic diction, the poem asks, merely aestheticize it? The poet is doubtful if such dense, intricate language can have any effect at all if it doesn’t convey the scent of “dunghill at” the “claws” of the tyrants who start wars.

In “A Cold Coming,” Harrison doesn’t worry about the adequacy of poetic language to respond to war but invents for the charred Iraqi soldier in the photograph referred to above a living speech: a “local language” that is demotic, sarcastic, humorous, coarse, tender, and angry. Harrison has described metrical form as a way to generate articulateness when circumstances appear to render eloquence impossible: “my metre starts ticking in the presence of dumbness and inarticulacy. Coming from a very inarticulate family made me try to speak for those who can’t express themselves, and created a need for articulation at its most ceremonial—poetry.” Indeed, the poem imagines the soldier as a poet himself: the windscreen wiper on his jeep is “a pen / ready to write down thoughts for men / his windscreen wiper like a quill” (313). The poem depicts the dead soldier speaking: he tells the narrator that he’s picked him to speak to because the “poet’s task” is “to find words for this frightening mask” and because he wants “to reach / the warring nations with my speech.” This speech for the frightening masks of war doesn’t describe the physical suffering of war but refers to “a small item [Harrison] read in the news about American soldiers freezing their sperm before they left for the Gulf” (“Rear Window”). The soldier asks about his enemies:

Did No. 1 say: God be thanked

I’ve got my precious semen banked.

And No. 2: O praise the Lord

my last best shot is safely stored.

And No. 3: Praise be to God

I left my wife my frozen wad? (314)

The tragedy communicated here is not just that the man has been burned alive but that he was a real man from a real place who won't see his wife again and won't have children:

Though all Hell began to drop

I never wanted life to stop.

I was filled with such a yearning

to stay in life as I was burning,

such a longing to be beside

my wife in bed before I died,

and, most, to have engendered there

a child untouched by war's despair. (316)

The language is direct and colloquial rather than illuminated script. The soldier speaks with unsettling demotic forthrightness, a language that refuses to "Lie" with sentimentalities about the Iraqi soldier wanting "my foe to be my friend." When the soldier envisions the Marines back home with their families, he imagines them convincing themselves that casualties are simply one of war's necessities, and he dismisses those justifications:

Lie and pretend that I excuse

my bombing by B52s,

pretend I pardon and forgive

that they still do and I don't live. (318)

The soldier's speech is candid and sardonic, not contrived. The poem ends with the narrator playing the "recording" of the soldier's monologue back, "I pressed REWIND and PLAY / and I heard the charred man say: " (320). In the final line, the colon gives way not to words but white space, the cold fact of the dead man's silence.

For Harrison, the birds in "Initial Illumination" are symbols of beauty, "the catches in their beaks / shower[ing] fishscale confetti on the shining sea." But these "local cormorants" remind Harrison, too, that contemporary life is "darker" than the medieval ages we "keep calling 'Dark,'" an age when images of cormorants were used to bedeck illuminated manuscripts. To Harrison, the "scripted" rhetoric and contrived images of the Gulf War sanitize social atrocity, and the poet worries that his own "scripted" poetic diction might have a similar effect by aestheticizing such events. The local language he creates for the dead soldier in "A Cold Coming" checks his anxiety about poetry's efficacy. It's a dilemma and a solution for Seamus Heaney, too: in the eighth section of "Station Island," Heaney's dead cousin accuses Heaney of evading the hard reality of political violence: "you whitewashed ugliness" and "saccharined my death with morning dew," his cousin says about an earlier elegy to him, "The Strand at Lough Beg." And yet in the seventh "Station Island" poem, the poet has already located a poetic language that is not evasive, contrived, or sentimental: the local language of Northern Ireland.

Like Harrison, in his late poem "The Blackbird of Glanmore," the final poem in *District and Circle* (2006), Heaney contemplates birds. In Heaney's poem, the blackbird

doesn't represent "beautification" but the memory of painful loss. The poem harkens back to "Mid-Term Break." That early poem, written over forty years before "The Blackbird of Glanmore," tells the story of Heaney's return home from college to attend the wake of his four-year old brother who was killed in a car crash. This dissertation began with "Mid-Term Break" to demonstrate how the tension between poetic diction and poetic form communicates the painful reality of loss and the hard fact that "all you can do the morning after the funeral is . . . keep going and get on with it." ("One" 10). The poem thematizes sound, employs colloquial language, and creates sound effects in iambic pentameter to render with vocal authenticity a rural community's emotional disposition. In later poems, Heaney would also employ local language to respond to his homeland's violent sectarianism.

It seems fitting to end, then, with "The Blackbird of Glanmore" because that poem contemplates the same circumstances that generated the earlier one. It also shows Heaney merging his local and spiritual concerns much as Clifton tried to do. In his poems after 1990, Heaney writes about what Helen Vendler calls "non-phenomenal" realms, worlds beyond human life and after death (*Heaney* 136). In "Squarings," for instance, a sequence of forty-eight twelve-line poems each with five beats (they form the shapes of squares), the speaker contemplates spiritual spheres, "Shifting brilliancies" (*Seeing Things* 55), "squint[ing]" through "the skylight of the world" (57), a mysterious ship that appears to monks (62), a world without "Fathomableness / ultimate / Stony up-againstness" (64). In "The Blackbird," the world beyond life and after death is made fathomable. In that poem, the speaker arrives at his adult home—his "house of life"—and

spots a blackbird in the grass, “Filling the stillness with life” (77). The blackbird reminds the speaker of lines he once translated,

I want away
To the house of death, to my father

Under the low clay roof. (77)

Those lines of poetry about “the house of death” and “my father” then bring to mind another family member he has lost:

A little stillness dancer—
Haunter-son, lost brother—
Cavorting through the yard,
So glad to see me home,

My homesick first term over.

The bird reminds Heaney of poetry, and poetry reminds Heaney of loved ones who have died because he spent so much of his career elegizing them.

The bird also reminds Heaney of local language. After he ruminates on his young brother dancing in the yard to welcome him home, he recalls a neighbor’s ominous words, “Long after the accident” described in “Mid-Term Break”:

Yon bird on the shed roof,
Up on the ridge for weeks—
I said nothing at the time
But I never liked yon bird.

The neighbor doesn't like "yon bird" because for her it was an omen; she implies she knew because of its presence that something terrible was going to happen on Heaney's childhood farm. And yet despite its terrible news, Heaney doesn't feel the same way about the bird. In fact, he feels the opposite: "It's you, blackbird, I love," he says,

I am absolute

For you, your ready talkback,

Your each stand-offish comeback,

Your picky, nervy goldbeak—

On the grass when I arrive,

In the ivy when I leave.

Heaney loves the blackbird because it symbolizes poetry: its "ready talkback," "stand-offish comeback," its pickiness and nerviness. It endures, too: poetry is there "when I arrive" and there "when I leave." And Heaney loves as well his neighbor's language, the local language that communicates to him the horrific portent of the bird, the living tongue that provides the bird with, as Frost would say, an "oversound." It is that sound the poets examined here make by crossing diction and verse form to harmonize, defy, resist, celebrate, and critique their own local realities.

Notes

¹ "v." was published in the March 5, 1991 issue of *The Guardian* and "Initial Illumination" and "A Cold Coming" were both published in the March 18, 1991 issue (Byrne, *Loiner* 208n87).

² Rusbridger explains that the editorial staff at *The Guardian* wanted Harrison's poems presented as news: "We carried the poems on the main editorial page since it seemed to us important that they be seen as a commentary upon current events and not as a piece of contemporary Eng. Lit., which would undoubtedly have been the case had they been consigned to the arts or features pages" (Rusbridger 134).

³ DeGhett explains what initially became of the photo: "The image was not entirely lost. The *Observer* in the United Kingdom and *Libération* in France both published it after the American media refused. Many months later, the photo also appeared in *American Photo* where it stoked some controversy, but came too late to have a significant impact."

⁴ In Chapter Four, I quoted Harrison's poems from *Selected Poems* because it is the most widely available volume. "Initial Illumination" and "A Cold Coming" are not in that book but are in Harrison's *Collected Poems* (2007), which is out of print in America. I quote these poems from that volume.

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