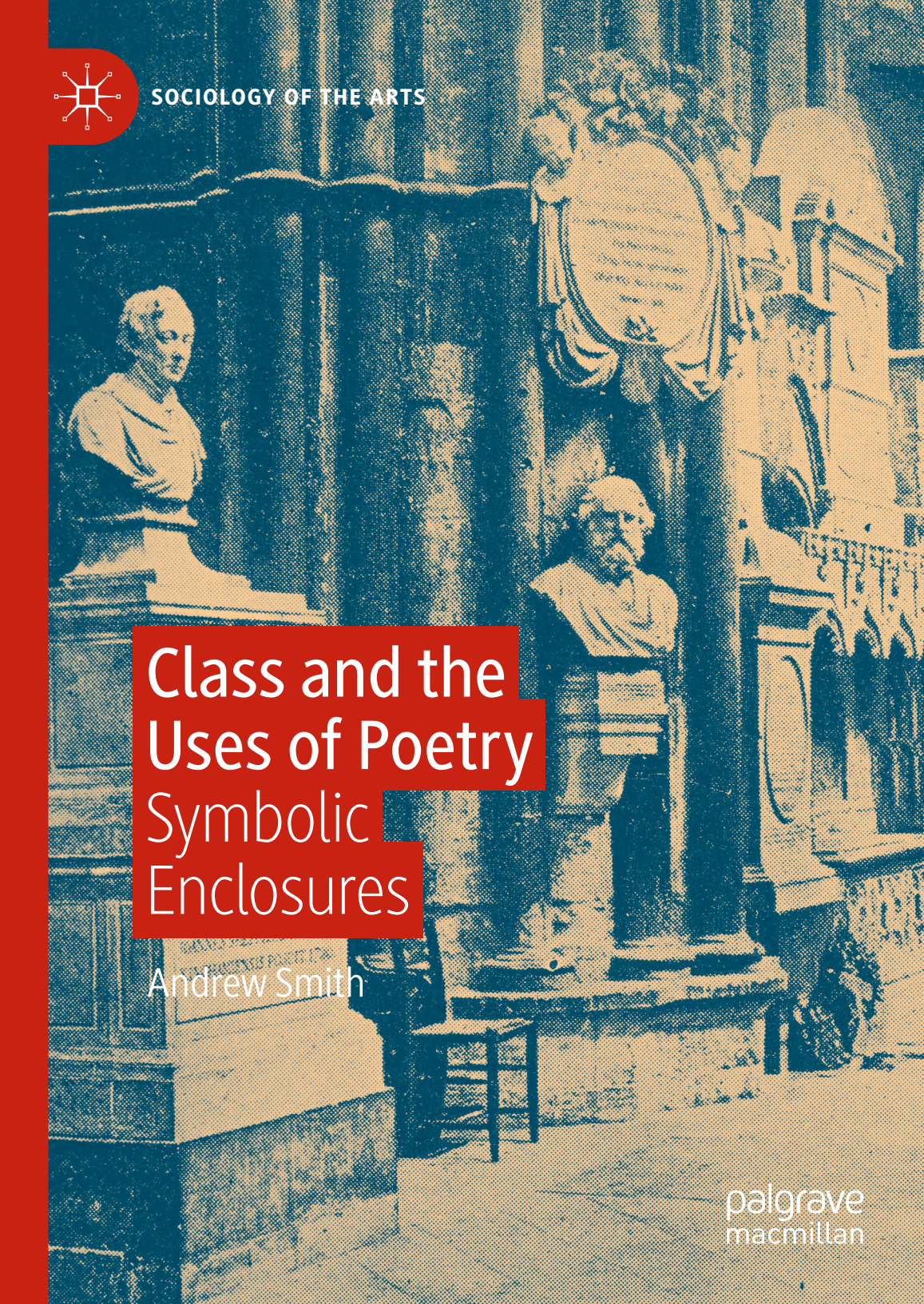
SOCIOLOGY OF THE ARTS
Class and the Uses of Poetry
Symbolic Enclosures
Andrew Smith
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Sociology of the Arts

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Preface

This book has been a shamefully long time coming. I first began to contemplate the possibility of a project exploring the cultural politics of poetry nearly a decade ago and it is a number of years since I completed the last formal interviews and reading groups. A concatenation of different events over that period and since—illness and bereavement in my close family; a four-year stint as Head of Subject; the various impacts of COVID-19—have meant that it's taken me far longer than it ought to have done to properly reflect on those conversations and to find a way of articulating some of the things which they taught me. That there is anything to show at all is thanks to the very many ways in which I have benefitted from the support of others.

In the first place, I am enormously grateful to those who gave up their time in order to take part in this research, as well as to the many people working for local authority, third sector and community organisations, who generously shared details about the project with their networks or who put me in touch with potential participants. Many of those who did end up taking part were enthusiastic at the prospect of reading and discussing poetry. Others were perhaps less so and it was clear that, for some of those involved, the idea of participating was felt to entail a certain kind of symbolic risk—something which I've described below as a trip into occupied terrain. This book simply would not exist were it not for the fact that so many women and men were willing to take that risk. More than that, however, the lines of analysis which I develop in the following

chapters are heavily indebted to the ways in which participants themselves reflected on, and made critical sense of, their encounter with these poems. The same goes for the poets who were also willing to talk to me, and whose accounts gave such a vivid sense of why poetic craft might matter, as well as of the ways in which access to those creative possibilities can be circumscribed along the lines of class.

I am fortunate to be surrounded by colleagues and students who are a seemingly inexhaustible source of insight, advice, encouragement and critical good sense. I owe too much to too many of them to be able to mention everyone by name but I want to acknowledge particular debts to Bridget Fowler—whose work *The Alienated Reader* has been, in many ways, the inspiration for this research, and who offered typically incisive and helpful reflections on the first drafts of my empirical chapters—and to Les Back who, with characteristic intellectual generosity, gifted me a copy of Orwell's essay on the significance of poetry in a world of mass communication. Many other colleagues and students, at the University of Glasgow and beyond, have also given me rich food for thought in the course of conversations, in response to the presentation of early drafts of this work at seminars and conferences or have pointed me towards very useful sources and studies. Together with my colleagues, Lucy Pickering and Giovanni Picker, I had the good fortune to convene a weekly *Sociology Café* for our students through the course of the pandemic, and in that context, I had the particular privilege of moderating an occasional series of sessions entitled 'Bring Your Own Poem', later expanded to 'Bring Your Own Creativity'. Those interactions were, in themselves, a compelling demonstration of how the reading, writing and sharing of poetry—as well as other kinds of creative practice—can create the grounds for sociality and can offer us a particular kind of sustenance when we most need it. Thanks are also due, then, to all those who took part so generously, and so supportively, in those sessions.

I am grateful also to colleagues in the Audio-Visual Service at the University of Glasgow, and to a former doctoral student—now a colleague at the University of Dundee—Michael Morris. The former provided skilled oversight of the process of making recordings of the poems that were used in this research; the latter gave a compelling reading of some of those poems as part of that recording. I benefited, also, from the generous support of my institution—specifically the College of Social Sciences, and the School of Social and Political Sciences—in the form of a number of small awards which helped cover various research costs.

I need also to acknowledge some more personal and long-standing debts. I was very fortunate, in the course of my secondary school education, now the better part of forty years ago, to be taught by two deeply committed English teachers—I knew them as Mrs. Craig and Mrs. Norris—in two different state secondary schools in Scotland, both of whom had a heartfelt love of poetry and who found ways of communicating that love to those in their classes despite the many institutional and other distractions which might easily have prevented them from doing so. More importantly, perhaps, they encouraged us to think of poetry as something valuable in its own right, doing all they could to guard it against the killing instrumentalism of assessment processes. Like many others, I suspect, it was only many years later, in guilty retrospect, that I realised what a precious gift they were holding out to us.

Lastly, none of this and little of anything else would be possible without the love and support of my family, especially my two beautiful sons—Sam and Laurie—and my entirely wonderful partner Emma. I also have the profound good luck to be in a position where I can disagree with Philip Larkin's bleak assessment of what our parents do for us. Accordingly, I want to dedicate this book to my Dad. Although poetry has not mattered quite as much in his cultural life as music, football and art—roughly in that order?—I vividly recall once hearing him read aloud T.S. Eliot's *Journey of Magi*. I still remember something of the sense of that experience, the feeling that one was in the presence, for a moment, of what might be called—to borrow a phrase from Willa Cather—something entire.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

A Late Return to Form: Reflections on Sociology and Poetry

This is a study of some of the ways in which people engage with poetry. More specifically, it explores how readers—for the most part, working-class readers—engaged with and made sense of a selection of contemporary Scottish poems. That engagement was not necessarily a straightforward one and some of those with whom I worked felt that the poems which I had shared with them were written in a way that was restrictive or opaque. To the extent that this was the case, what follows can be understood as an exploration of one kind of cultural exclusion. By the same token, however, it is equally an exploration of how women and men responded to that experience, and of the resourcefulness, the creativity and the critical awareness, which was often evident in those responses. This is also, albeit in a less developed way, a study of the writing of poetry and more particularly of the experiences of a small number of poets, of their relationship to their own poetic labour and of their efforts to secure symbolic recognition in what many found to be a literary field skewed heavily against them. Given this, and as might be expected, much of what follows reflects on how the relationship to a cultural form such as poetry is constitutively entangled with the formation of social relations, how inequalities structuring access to particular kinds of privileged cultural texts and practices continue to both reflect and reproduce the lived reality of class.

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Recent years have seen a certain degree of scepticism in cultural sociology as regards these kinds of questions. As various writers such as Elizabeth Long (2003: 22–23) and Tia DeNora (2004) have argued, focussing only on the ways in which our relationships with different kinds of culture serve to mediate wider social relations leaves unasked important questions about the character of aesthetic experience itself. Questions, for instance, about what draws people to particular creative practices or phenomena in the first place and about the generative possibilities of our relationship with specific kinds of art, music, literature and so forth. Questions, moreover, about the potentialities of the objects of aesthetic interest in their own right. Such objects, as Antoine Hennion argues in an influential essay, have distinctive properties, which are themselves a constitutive part of how taste is made. A painting, a bottle of wine, a piece of music, do things to the person who does things with them. They are not just 'already there, inert', ready to be picked up and played as 'tokens' in the games of culture (Hennion 2007: 105; see also Oclese and Savage 2015).

In many ways, it seems to me, these claims are salutary and important ones. It would indeed be insufficient to treat poetry, for example, as if it were nothing more than the symbolic equivalent of fiat money, something which enriches those who 'own' it and impoverishes those who do not, but which is as practically useless in itself as a paper banknote. As a historically constituted aesthetic practice poetry comes with its own potentialities and its own affordances. It makes things possible and things can be done with it. This being so, any attempt to think sociologically about poetry requires us to reflect seriously on poetry's qualitative distinctiveness as a cultural practice, and to look closely at what happens, at what is made possible, in the reading, sharing and writing of poems.

Unlike some commentators, however, I am not persuaded that attention to the affordances of aesthetic practices or objects requires us to move beyond the account of cultural inequality so powerfully provided by Pierre Bourdieu (see Born 2010). Aside from anything else, Bourdieu's work begins from a stubborn and necessary acknowledgement that cultural practices and objects are not equally available to all. 'Taste', Hennion argues, 'is a making', something which takes shape from the moment in which individuals turn a particular attention to the object at hand, 'on the lookout for what it does to them, attentive to traces of what it does to others' (2007: 104). There is something seductive about this vision of how aesthetic encounters can 'hail' us, and can take shape in our lives. Yet there is also something too easily assuaging about an

account which skips so quickly over the fact that aesthetic experiences are not simply there for the asking. What many of my respondents described, in reflecting on their sustained effort to attend to the poems at hand, was a sense of denial, refusal or rejection. Access to the affordances of distinctive cultural practices remain, in crucial ways, contingent on opportunities and encounters which are not equally distributed. Simone Varriale reminds us of this fact in his helpful attempt to imagine an 'unlikely marriage' between a Bourdieusian framework, on the one hand, and this more recent, more phenomenologically minded cultural sociology, on the other. That former perspective remains necessary, he notes, because even as we might explore the formative quality of aesthetic encounters, we cannot lose sight of the ways in which those encounters are socially situated and are shaped by the positionality of the actors involved. We cannot forgo, in other words, the question of 'who these actors are, that is, their trajectories and degree of engagement (or position) withing existing social fields' (Varriale 2016: 173).

Or, to put it slightly differently: another way of conceiving of that 'unlikely marriage' is to recognise that a concern with the affordances of aesthetic practices has the potential to 'flesh out' a Bourdiuesian account of cultural inequality. It can only help us arrive at a *more* complete reckoning with the nature of that inequality if we ask what creative and experiential possibilities are brought within reach—or are placed beyond reach—in the access to—or exclusion from—particular cultural forms and traditions. Whilst it remains true that taste 'classifies the classifier', cultural dispossession is not just a matter of how a person's relationship to a given kind of cultural practice positions them vis-à-vis others or even how it shapes their own interior sense of their own social position; it is also a question of what historical materialist accounts have long called the use-values of the cultural stuff with which people either do, or do not, get the chance to engage (see, for example, Fowler 1991: 30–48).

* * *

Sociologists, it has to be said, do not appear to have been especially eager to ask any of these questions with regard to poetry. Anyone scouring the contents of the major British sociology journals could be forgiven if they came away with the impression that, for much of its history, the discipline has cast poetry out of mind just as decisively as Plato once cast poets outside the walls of his republic. A systematic search of abstracts within

Sociology, The Sociological Review, The British Journal of Sociology and *Cultural Sociology* reveals a handful of articles in which poetry is addressed as a relevant feature of particular social contexts (for example: Branford 1925; Frannsen 2015; Hunter et al. 2016). It also reveals the occasional article which seeks to use poetry as an innovative means of presenting research findings (Bloor 2013; Edkins 2022). But across these, the most widely read journals in British sociology, there is only one article—of which more, below—which is specifically dedicated to a consideration of poetry *as such*, as a distinctive kind of aesthetic practice. Nor are there obvious equivalents to the book-length studies of the novel as a particular literary form developed by Ian Watt (1957), Lucien Goldmann (1975) or various others.[1] Even in what we might think of as the heyday of the sociology of art and literature in the 1970s and 80s individual poems and poets were present as examples or as case-studies but there was no sustained attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to develop a sociology of poetry in its own right (see, for example: Laurenson and Swingewood 1971; Routh and Wolff 1977; Swingewood 1986).

Why might this be the case? In part, at least, it is due to an understandable wariness in the face of any question taking a form such as: 'what is poetry?' From a sociological perspective, questions framed that way are always likely to appear either tendentious—insofar as they invite an answer in normative rather than historical terms—or simplistic, insofar as they encourage us to think of poetry as some species of cultural butterfly which can be pinned down through a sufficiently exhaustive description of its typological features. But it is also true that there are grounds for treading cautiously, in this respect, when it comes to poetry in particular. In European cultural traditions, at least, it is poetry, certainly more than any other literary practice, which has been clothed in the colours of eternity, which has been conceived of as an aesthetic space outside of history where enduring truths or values continue to shine bright despite the wrackful siege of battering days. Hence, as one example, Ezra Pound's insistence that the greatest poetry endures by its own right, that poetic value inevitably reasserts itself over time without the intervention of secular institutions, and without any relationship to the self-interest of those who recognise it for what it is: 'you don't NEED schools and colleges to keep [great poems] alive […] once in every so often a chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up again, put them in the light again, without asking any favours' (1961: 45). Hence, also,

as Wolf Lepenies shows us in his remarkable historical study, the vehement response of the *Georgekreis*—the artistic movement-cum-cult that cohered about the figure of the German poet Stefan George—to the pretensions of sociology as an emergent discipline in the early twentieth century. For them, as for others before and since, sociology's greatest temerity was to extend its relativising hand towards poetry, to imagine that the significance or meaning of a treasured poem could be historically accounted for. Lepenies quotes the later words of another poet, Friedrich Gundolf, which offer us a powerful example of the assertion that art in general—and poetry in particular—transcends any such contingent or contextualising interpretation: 'A work of art is something self-enclosed and self-sufficient, a centre out of which the paths lead to the historical peripheries and not the reverse' (1988: 325).

Yet, not every poet is allowed to free themselves from the mire of the historical in this way and nor is every poem accorded this condition of self-sufficiency. In fact, the question of whether a given text or author is taken to have universal or 'merely' historical significance runs like a fissure through the body of poetry; it is, itself, a pivotal part of how struggles over poetic value have been articulated and how control over the ascription of such value has been asserted. Take, as one particularly telling example, Robert Southey's *Lives and Works of the Uneducated Poets,* a text which is pertinent here given that it is sometimes described as the first study of British working poets. Southey's essay—published in 1831, at a point when he had held the position of Poet Laureate for the better part of two decades—began life as an introduction to a collection of poems which had been sent to him by John Jones. Jones was employed as a butler and, by his own account, often had to carry his 'little pieces' in his mind for days before he could find the freedom to commit them to paper. Southey offers a reflection on Jones' writing, as well as a critical survey of a number of other 'uneducated' poets—John Taylor, John Fredrick Bryant, James Woodhouse, etc.—all of whom faced similar struggles in finding space for poetic creativity amidst the demands of their working lives. He discusses almost all of these writers in the same tone of paternalistic indulgence, clearly finding something admirable in their commitment to their craft but also quashing any claim on their part to lasting literary significance. Thus, for instance, of the so-called 'milk-maid poet' Ann Yearsley, his conclusion is that she had 'extraordinary talents, strong feelings, and an ardent mind', yet also that 'very few passages can be extracted from her writings which would have any other

value than as indicating powers which the possessor knew not how to employ' (1925: 133). Thus, of Stephen Duck, whose *Thresher's Labour* gives a detailed account of the rigours of rural work, Southey says: 'his talents for poetry were imitative rather than inventive'. He goes on to praise Duck for possessing a humility which prevented him from getting ideas above his aesthetic station and which granted him the good grace to realise that 'he was incapable of imitating what he clearly saw was best' (113).

Southey, to be fair to him, rejects the idea that the writing of poetry should only be encouraged if it is 'of the very best'. To assume so, he says, would reduce poems to a 'luxury' for 'sickly intellectuals' (164). At the same time, however, he dismisses equally the possibility that any of these working poets might join the exalted ranks of 'the very best', a dismissal which is most pointedly articulated in the judgement that their poetry has a strictly historical, rather than enduringly aesthetic, significance: 'There is nothing of John Taylor's which deserves preservation for its intrinsic merits alone, but in the collection of his pieces which I have perused there is a great deal to illustrate the manners of his age' (86).

Wielding that discriminatory power, needless to say, serves as an aggrandising enactment of Southey's own symbolic authority. It is perhaps thus unsurprising that a subsequent edition of the book, published during his lifetime, reversed the order of the text so that Jones' 'Attempts in Verse' became a mere supplement to the Poet Laureate's essay. By the time of the twentieth-century reprint, edited by the American scholar James Saxon Childers, Jones' poems have been evicted altogether. 'To-day', Childers concludes in his introduction, '[Jones'] poems are remembered from no merits of their own but solely because of "the embalming power of Mr. Southey's pen"' (1925: xi). In saying so, perhaps, Childers lets slip a little more than he intends. At the very least, it becomes clear that literary merit does not straightforwardly 'speak for itself', but is rather something which does, or does not, come to be bestowed upon given poems. Whilst his comment is made in the tone of a regretful and retrospective observation it describes, of course, a forgetfulness which he is, himself, in the process of ensuring through his own editorial decision. Moreover, the refusal to 'embalm' Jones' poetry is, at one and the same time, the ascription of that eternalising power to Southey and his pen. The latter's aesthetic transcendence is affirmed in and through the very act that condemns these other poets to languish in the 'historical peripheries'.

* * *

To be clear: neither every poet nor every protagonist of poetry has shared the assumption that poems are works which exist, or should exist, apart from the currents of history. As Raymond Williams (1990 [1958]) reminded us, even at the high-water mark of Romanticism, which has often been taken as enshrining this world-unto-itself conception of poetry, there were many dissenting voices. We might think, for instance, of William Hazlitt's democratising insistence that poetry is 'impatient of all limit', that it acts in harmony with what he took to be a common desire for seeing things in their interrelationship, rather than in a deadening isolation: 'Poetry represents forms chiefly as they suggest other forms or other feelings' (1991: 311). It is an insistence which, in many ways, recalls Antonio Gramsci's assertion that 'everybody is already cultured because everybody […] connects causes and effects' (1985: 25). Nonetheless, I hope the preceding discussion helps make clear why the question of poetry's distinctiveness as an aesthetic practice might be an especially slippery one so far as sociology is concerned. It is slippery, in the first place, because those same questions are so deeply implicated in the constructions by which certain voices have been allowed in, whilst others have been excluded from, the poetic field. Given this, the idea of trying to grasp the qualitative specificity of poetry might well seem like a move that plays into the hands of these processes of symbolic enclosure. As I have argued, I believe that we *do* need to attend to these questions if we wish to think seriously about why the presence or absence of different kinds of culture might matter, substantively, in people's lives. Yet, we cannot forget that these are also questions which themselves constitute—as Bourdieu had it—stakes in the game (1995: 166–173). We cannot overlook the fact, in other words, that categorical statements about what constitutes poetry and about the peculiar potentialities of poetry have been, frequently, part of how the boundaries of poetry itself have come to be 'classed' in the ways that they have.

In the second place, the issue is made trickier still by the fact that the relationship between sociology and poetry, specifically, is fraught to a degree that is not quite the case when it comes to sociology's relationship with—for instance—novels or photography or basketball. There are two sides to any antagonism, of course, and two sides to this relationship, as I will go on to explore. For the moment, suffice it to note

that, at least from the perspective of a particular aesthetic orthodoxy, sociology is in many ways the 'other' of poetry proper, or at least what lies beyond its walls. As we saw with Southey, a sociological or historicising reading is where supposedly 'failed' poetry is sent to die. Auden's advice, from 1946, was not addressed only to aspiring poets, but he surely had them partly in mind when he warned his listeners 'never to commit a social science'. Resistance to the very idea of a 'sociology of poetry' thus involves something more than the usual border skirmishing between disciplines. It entails a heightened sense that 'the thing itself' might be at stake, that any effort to historicise the question of poetic value or the significance of poetic texts constitutes an assault on what poetry is at its core, and thus on what it sustains or makes possible.

How, then, to respond? My view, for what it is worth, is that the best way of avoiding the prospect of being gored on the horns of this dilemma is to approach the whole question in as dialectical a fashion as possible. Hence, on the one hand, I have worked on the assumption that our most practicable sociological guide to the use-values of poetry is likely to be close attention to the ways in which people actually use, or seek to use, or might be prevented from using, poems. In the chapters that follow, as I reflect on the encounters between different readers and poetries, and on the discussions I had with a small number of poets about their work and what that work means to them, I try to keep one eye on what it is that people seek to do with poetic writing; on what specific experiential or epistemological horizons might—or might not—be opened up through engagement with poetry; on what kinds of aesthetic or other resources men and women might find at play in the reading or writing of poems. In short, although I offer some general reflections on poetry in this chapter, across the study as a whole I have tried to approach the question of the creative affordances of poetry in a largely inductive manner, building from the empirical ground up. Apart from anything else, as I hope to show, attending to how people actually grapple with poetry, or seek to engage with poetry, or put poetry to use in the situated reality of their lives, often calls into question the hegemonic ways in which poetry has come to be described, defined or delimited.

On the other hand, however, the flip side of that dialectical question is the recognition that, like all cultural forms, poetry as a practice and individual poetic texts themselves, are determinate. The historically constituted 'shapes' of poetry, if I can put it like that, necessarily shape, in turn, the ways in which poetry can be used or responded to and,

indeed, can often help explain why some readers might find themselves excluded from a meaningful engagement with poetry. Put more plainly: when people pick up a poem they are picking up something which is a particular kind of utterance, which speaks in a particular kind of way, and which is not simply exchangeable for one of the many other ways in which people use language in order to communicate or express themselves. We can and should be sceptical of attempts to impose an absolutist definition of poetry whilst still acknowledging, and reckoning with, the historically established conventions, expectations or traditions, which constitute poetry as a particular aesthetic practice. Or, to put things slightly less plainly and rather more technically: in thinking about forms of creativity such as poetry we might be well advised to avoid the endless squaring off between a full-throttle relativism—for which anything can count as poetry; for which the designation 'poem' is a matter of symbolic struggle seemingly unconstrained by any of the qualitative features of the text or practice in question—and the continuous conservative effort to bring cultural struggles to a dead-halt, to carve the boundaries of 'poetry', and the canon of true poets, once-and-for-all in tablets of imperishable stone. Both of these moves, in their different ways, have the effect of denying poetry its historical existence, the latter by imagining a kind of aesthetic ascension out of history altogether, and the former by imagining that the ways in which poetry has come to be understood, practised and used, are entirely ephemeral or arbitrary.

Poetry, in short, has a social reality. Like all such realities it is open to challenge and contestation, but is also deeply compelling; it is compelling precisely because it emerges out of, and bears upon itself, the imprimatur of historically situated aesthetic struggles and acts of aesthetic labour which cannot be simply wished away or over-ridden. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

> In any culture, there are certain complex sets of criteria as to what counts as good or bad poetry; and although there can be an enormous amount of disagreement over how these criteria are to be applied, or whether they are valid in the first place, their application is far from a subjective affair. People may wrangle over whether a particular patch of colour counts as green, but this does not mean that 'green' is a purely subjective judgement. (2007: 111)

Another way of saying this is simply to acknowledge that anyone who wishes to write or read a poem cannot somehow 'step around' the socially constituted reality of what poetry is understood to be. By the same token, our only path to understanding poetry sociologically—and our only path to grasping its entailment in forms of social inequality—lies through a reckoning with that reality in its own terms.

It is worth adding here, as a final comment, that it also seems important to me to think dialectically about what is revealed, more widely, in these symbolic struggles over the designation or description of 'poetry' as a cultural object. In that sense, I want to do something more than simply critique the kinds of claims that I have briefly mentioned above—e.g. those which invest poetry with an idea of universality, or which construe it as the safehouse for a precious kind of freedom. A critical sociology of culture has always tried to keep open a two-sided awareness, in this regard, has always involved a willingness to bring to light the complicity of cultural practices with relations of social domination whilst *also* recognising that the ways in which those practices are used and understood may articulate longings and demands which are, in themselves, an indictment of a world defined by such relations. I have, so far as I am able, sought to retain that double-edged awareness in thinking about poetry in what follows. In the final chapter of the study, I return to these questions and try to offer some general reflections with respect to them.

* * *

Thus far, these opening reflections have cast a sociological gaze towards poetry. How might things appear the other way about? If, from the perspective of a particular kind of aesthetic orthodoxy, the very idea of sociology of poetry might seem dangerously corrosive, a threat to the 'thing itself', what should we learn from the fact that sociology as a discipline seems to have found poetry strangely hard to handle?

A. H. Halsey, in his history of British sociology, makes a somewhat poignant reference to Charles Madge—co-founder of the Mass Observation Project—as the last sociologist who was also a recognised poet, as if to demonstrate the impossibility of poetry flourishing or reproducing itself in the sociological ecosystem (2004: 15). Halsey, in fact, overlooks a more recent case, that of John Powell Ward. Ward is, as Madge was, a poet of considerable standing—having published numerous collections of

poetry, and having served for some years as the editor of *Poetry Wales*—but is also the author of a number of sociological studies and texts. And it is Ward who gives us that solitary essay, mentioned above, which was published in *Sociology* in 1979 and which took poetry as its focussed concern. What is striking about Ward's argument in that context—an argument which he elaborated more fully in a subsequent monograph—is that, far from making the case for a détente between sociology and poetry, he insists that the two disciplines do indeed exist in a relationship of deep-seated and implacable incompatibility. If Ward might be said to turn a poet's gaze back on sociology, his conclusion from having done so is that poetry, as a practice, stands 'defiant' of the very way in which sociologists habitually approach, understand and write about the world.

The reasons why Ward takes this view are worth elaborating upon. In the first place, he distinguishes poetry from everyday speech, but also from the formalised language of philosophy, on the grounds that it neither addresses an audience nor anticipates an answer. Its existence is rather, he argues, a consequence of our need to find a way of bespeaking those realities—death, nature, love, etc.—which bring us closest to what he calls the 'non-social thing' (1981: 206). It does this by reaching for a form of utterance in which language becomes 'sufficient to itself' (1979: 91). 'Poetry' is thus:

> some event of an order not recapturable into the social order at all; it is untranslatable, permanently itself, an incessant reminder of the empty spaces outside the pattern of merely social interaction and institutions; a hint that the empty spaces may not be so empty after all. (86)

Perhaps we might feel, here, that the baker has slightly overegged the cake. After all, the sensitively contextualised readings that Ward offers of a series of poets in his monograph would seem to suggest that poetry is rather more implicated in the 'social order' than he otherwise allows. Nonetheless, his helpfully provocative argument is that poetry, by calling attention to those aspects of our experiences which are in some sense 'given', by making those things present for us, confronts sociology as a 'black hole' or a 'piece of anti-matter' (1981: 211). Anti-matter, not least, because in so doing poems call into question a founding article of sociological faith: i.e. the view that reality is socially constituted and thus that 'society' is the only necessary point of reference—the only necessary *explanans*—for all that happens to us in our lives.

By the same token Ward argues, sociology and poetry necessarily approach and handle language in fundamentally divergent ways. For the former, he suggests, language is nothing more than the means by which society 'thinks itself aloud':

> It is as though all we have is this one metaphysic of sociality, a blank cheque or a conception like the similarly irreducible 'all', 'thing', 'Being' or 'reality', so simply that it approach nothingness […] [P]recisely because we have therefore no obdurate outside authority such as God, kings or nature to guide us, we must always articulate this thing, 'society', to ourselves as best we can in order to remain close to one another. (209)

Language thus appears to the sociological imagination as the means of this constant self-articulation: the conduit of social relationships; the vehicle of ideology or discourse; a system which serves to mediate social reality. Poetry, by contrast, works to form language precisely in ways that disrupt or impede this relentless nexus of social communication. The poet tries to turn the language around, to point it the other way about, to give us what Hans-Georg Gadamer called the word 'detached from all intending' (1986: 107). Or, as Ward has it: poetry is born in the effort to use 'language, that most social of all phenomena, [to] achieve the expression or quiddity of the non-social' (1979: 101).

It follows, therefore, that poetry is, for Ward, 'defiant' of sociological understanding in one further sense. Whereas sociological analysis typically depends on placing things in explicative connection to other things, disclosing what they reveal about a wider social context whether as cause, consequence, evidence or whatever it happens to be, poetry strives to grant us an apprehension of things in themselves; it strives to find a way of stripping away the pre-packaged quality of what Rainer Maria Rilke called 'this interpreted world'. It does this not by seeking to provide a more accurate account of that world, not by submission to some standard of mimetic precision, but rather by instantiating for us, in and through the kind of aesthetic object that it is, a sense of self-justified presence, an encounter with that which is not beholden to some other, explanatory purpose but whose meaning is itself. Thus, to use Gadamer's words again: 'what appears in the mirror [of poetry] is not the world, nor this thing or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while' (1986: 115). On this account, then, however much they might twist and turn sociology and poetry will always find

themselves standing back to back. The blunt fact, for Ward, is that they look in inescapably opposed ways at—and talk in inescapably opposed ways about—the world and all that it contains.

* * *

Ward's interventions came at the start of the 1980s. By then, new currents in the discipline were already turning—or, perhaps, returning—towards some of those concerns which he suggested were fundamental to poetic practice. Indeed, in revisiting these questions a few years later he acknowledged the emergence of sociological approaches which had, in a general sense, moved closer to poetry's phenomenological sensitivity and which shared some of its fascination with the expressive and evocative qualities of language (1986). Many of those currents have continued to swell in the years since so it is perhaps no surprise to find that recent discussions in sociology have been dotted with calls for the discipline to become *more* poetically minded and even, on occasion, for sociologists to take on some aspects of the poet's vocation.

Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, in a well-known essay on sociological writing sought to contest the rise of blandly technocratic or conformist sociology by emphasising the extent to which the discipline can sustain the equivalent of what literary critics have called *ostranenie:* a liberating disorientation from the taken-for-granted (2000; see also Jacobsen and Marshman 2008). For Bauman poetry and sociology share this profound capacity for 'making strange', for jolting loose a sense of what might be from the grip of what is. Although he is careful not to conflate the writing of poetry with the writing of sociology, he does urge sociologists to think of what they do as being in spiritual alliance with the 'poetic mission', with an effort to vivify the link between subjective experience and the wider world (2000: 79).[2] Moreover, Bauman argues—an argument with which, one assumes, Ward would vehemently disagree—both practices bring us face-to-face with the radical contingency of life, the absence of any grounding absolutes.

By marked contrast, Andrew Abbott's call for a 'lyrical sociology' envisions a discipline that is less invested in explaining why something in social life is as it is and more willing to 'celebrate or investigate or understand it in and of itself', more attentive to the 'dispositional quality of the object of analysis, its position in the social world as it – the object – sees that world' (2007: 88, 92); an argument which, one imagines, Ward would find much

more conducive! Giving central place to this poetic and affective practice of 'human sympathy', Abbott suggests—following in the footsteps of what Zali Gurevitch calls poetry's effort to get 'as near to nearness as possible' (2002: 410)—reminds us of own partiality and mutability. By contrast, a sociology premised on the search for statements of narrative causality leads us to 'quietly reserve to ourselves the privilege of living in the (only) real' (Abbott 2007: 95).

It is worth noting that in a number of ways Abbott's claim echoes—although it takes much further—an earlier proposal from C. Wright Mills. Stimulated by his reading of James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Mills' idea for a 'sociological poetry' was developed only briefly, in a letter to Dwight Macdonald, but what he sketched out there was a way of writing sociology which forsook the dispassionate presentation of social data so as to attend more closely to the human meanings of the lives and experiences of which such data might be comprised (see Mills 2008). Neither Mills nor Abbott make mention of W.E.B. Du Bois in their essays but in this, as in many other instances, Du Bois got there first. At the very least, one would be hard-pressed to think of a more powerful demonstration of what a 'sociological poetry' of this kind might look like than his *Souls of Black Folk* (1995 [1903]). It is also true, as Rita Felski points out (2022), that traditions of feminist writing have long sought to develop a poetics which builds from the resonant details of everyday experience towards an understanding of wider historical contexts and structures. Felski mentions, specifically, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), but we might think, equally, of the writing of bell hooks (e.g. 1991), Gloria Anzaldúa (2021 [1987]), and of some of the most evocative passages in the work of Dorothy E. Smith (e.g. 1988: 155–156; 1990: 17, 35).

Finally, and with a slightly different inflection, Charles Lemert—wary of the possibility that the promise of a 'public sociology' might give sociologists an over-inflated sense of their own importance—urges a sociological practice better attuned to, and more willing to participate within, the ordinary but poetic discourses by which people seek to make sense of their own lives. 'Poetry', in this case, names an orientation which begins by 'turning inward to the only experience that can promote the imagination—that is, the social life near at hand'—even as doing so might help to bring into view the wider forces which determine and shape that life (2002: 382). Thus 'the sociologist might best be herself or himself by becoming more of a poet' (389).

These various proposals may, understandably, be read as signs of a tentative coming together between sociology and poetry, or at least of a renewed interest in the latter on the part of the former. Yet, in many respects, it does not seem as if the tensions of this relationship are quite so easily resolved. For one thing, it is noticeable that each of these interventions mobilises a rather different conception of poetry and its possibilities. The effect of reading their various propositions together is that 'poetry' starts to seem like a kind of 'floating signifier', a placeholder for the particular orientation or epistemological claim that a given writer is articulating. Or, to put it another way, 'poetry' becomes a way of saying something about how we might 'do' sociology but at the cost of looking past what is entailed in 'doing' poetry. In that respect, the distinctive modes of working on and forming language which have been central to the historical constitution of poetry seem to be rendered largely incidental or by-the-by. It might be, therefore, that using 'poetry' as a way of talking about 'sociology' has the unintended consequence of making it harder for us to think sociologically about poetry, harder to properly address the distinctive affordances of poetic writing.

Having said this, I should acknowledge that some of the writers that I have mentioned do offer a considered reflection on the formal properties of sociological writing. Rita Felski, for instance, makes a powerful case for the significance of a rhetorical technique that she calls 'scale-shifting', the skilful 'leavening of theoretical claims with vivid examples' (2022: 657). Yet, in general—as with her concluding call for a sociology that treats the world as 'eminently deserving of a poet's attentive and appreciative eye as well as a theorist's critical gaze' (664)—one has the sense that 'poetry' serves to name a particular kind of sensibility or inclination, a way of looking at or orientating oneself towards the world, rather than a creative practice informed by its own expectations and aesthetic conventions.

Given all of this, might proposals of this kind not seem a little appropriative? Might they not smack a bit of what Janet Wolff once called sociology's 'imperialistic claims' over the territories of art? (1983: 21) At the least, it may be salutary for us to remember that this is how things might appear from the perspective of those who have dedicated their lives to the writing and sharing of poetry. John Burnside, for instance, one of the poets whose work I have drawn on in this project, ends his survey of twentieth-century poetry by decrying the growing tendency to treat poems as sociological documents, to 'set up sociological standards by which to judge art' (2019: 454), and decries also the

emergence of a pedagogical approach in schools which teaches younger audiences to read poetry always 'with some kind of sociological agenda at the back of their minds' (385). Burnside is by no means a defender of art for its own sake, and he has repeatedly insisted on poetry's political importance, its capacity to challenge acts of dehumanisation and to serve as a resource of disruptive energy and hopeful envisioning. But those potentialities, in his view, depend upon poetry that is—so to speak—true to itself, that draws most fully, most knowingly on the specific aesthetic possibilities of poetic speech as a practice in its own right. What sociologists may see as evidence of a rapprochement may well appear, from the standpoint of contemporary poets such as Burnside, to be one part of a wider set of shifts by which poetic practice is being stripped of its own imperatives and bent to what Bourdieu called the 'heteronomous' logic of the wider social field (e.g. 1995: 215–223). So far as I am aware, Ward has not renewed his reflections on the relationship between sociology and poetry but one suspects that, if he were to do so, he would join with Burnside in calling out what the latter clearly sees as a kind of annexation by stealth, a conversion of poetry into sociology by another name.

* * *

In an effort to put my money where my mouth is and with a view to think through in a little more detail this ambivalent relationship between poetry and sociology, here is an attempt to offer some close attention to a specific, if rather idiosyncratically chosen, example of poetic writing. This is a short passage from the opening of the final section of the long poem *Hudibras* by the seventeenth-century satirist Samuel Butler. The three parts of the poem were published, it is relevant to note, between 1663 and 1678, in a period when executions for supposed witchcraft were still taking place in England and elsewhere across Europe, as they would amongst the colonial settlers in New England in the years to come.

> *Who would believe what strange* Bug-bears
> *Mankind creates it self, of* Fears?
> *That spring like Fern, that Insect-weed*
> *Equivocally, without seed;*
> *And have no possible Foundation,*
> *But merely in th'Imagination:*

And yet can do more Dreadful Feats,
Than Hags, *with all their* Imps and Teats:
Make more bewitch and haunt themselves,
Than all their Nurseries of Elves.
For fear do's things so like a Witch,
'Tis hard t'unriddle which is which.[3]

Reading Butler's poem, with its mock-heroic satirising of dogmatic certainty, religious credulity, intellectual self-aggrandisement and political hypocrisy is, in the first place, a reminder that poetry can have an assertively public voice, that it can speak directly to its audience of and about social life. Indeed we might well go further and suggest that there is a sense in which Butler—or, at least, the speaking voice in this passage of his poem—is offering us just the kind of insight that we conventionally expect from social theory. After all, the 'strange bugbears' that are here described, those imaginary villains who come to shoulder the blame for wider social fears, are more than a little reminiscent of Stanley Cohen's 'folk devils' (2002 [1972]). Indeed, many of the dynamics of the 'moral panic' that Cohen famously elaborated are well recognised and pithily described by Butler. Hence, for instance, he emphasises the sudden eruption and spread of these ideas: this is just what 'equivocally' means in this context—ferns were believed, at the time, to be capable of spontaneous reproduction, propagating themselves without dropping seeds. Hence, also, he emphasises the disjunction between the perception of the threat and the object to which that threat is attributed:

And when they neither see nor hear,
Have more than Both supply'd by Fear.
That makes 'em in the dark see Visions,
And hag themselves with Apparitions:
And when their eyes discover least,
Discern the subtlest Objects best.[4]

And hence, most strikingly of all, the poet implies that the wider consequences of such fears are often what serve, in turn, to substantiate or engrain the imagined reality of the 'bugbears' themselves. One could hardly ask for a neater or sharper exemplification of the famous 'Thomas theorem'—that if people define situations as real, they will be real in their consequences—than the closing couplet here: '*For fear does things so like a witch / 'Tis hard t'unriddle which is which*'.

* * *

At least two things are suggested, then, by this example. In the first place, Butler's poem demonstrates that whatever might be taken to distinguish sociological and poetic discourse that distinction is not one that can be sought on the ground of content. It is not, in other words, a matter of what sociology and poetry talk about. Ward, for his part, was shrewd enough to acknowledge that this was the case, and to recognise that there are many poetries which are addressed, explicitly, to social phenomena or social experiences. For him, as we have seen, the distinction resides rather in the fact that, regardless of what a given poem is concerned with, it uses language so as to create an object which is aesthetically set apart. Hence, for example, describing the way in which the poetry of William Carlos Williams cherishes the mundane objects of our daily lives, he says: 'The poetry of the piece, the fact that it is poetry, *is* the way the language renders this apparently social thing pure and self-contained, like water in a sealed bowl' (1981: 156). This is beautifully put, although we might still feel that Ward overstates the extent of that aesthetic self-containment. At the very least, Butler's poetry—explicitly political, explicitly intended as an intervention in the ferment of the period of the English Civil War, and certainly written with one eye on the prospect of patronage or preferment—throws into doubt the suggestion that poetry has no social address and that it anticipates no response.

This point is worth acknowledging, also, because the version of poetry which is frequently put to work in calls for a more poetic sociology, including some of those I have mentioned above, seems very often to be poetry in a restrictively post-Romantic guise. It is poetry, that is to say, as a form of speech which is assumed to be more affective than analytical, which is focussed on the specific rather than the general, and which moves from in to out, being a consequence of the poet's over-flowing need to express their sense of themselves and their experiences. Poetry in these propositions is often, by default, *lyric* poetry, a mode which, as Virginia Jackson points out, has come to stand more widely for poetry *as such,* with the consequence that it becomes a kind of common sense not only that poetic writing must prioritise the 'subjective experience of a speaker' but that in so doing it accepts that any moral, political or 'stipulative functions' are poetically inconceivable (2008: 183). Butler's poetry—or we might equally think, from a very different political perspective, of the

work of radical poets like Edwin Rolfe or Angelina Weld Grimké (see Nelson 2003)—helps us to put that assumption in historical perspective. It helps us to recognise, in other words, that this vision of poetry is only one amongst many and one that came to occupy a hegemonic position, at least in the European fields of poetry, only from the late eighteenth century onwards. One might make the same point, also, about the related assumption that poetry speaks in detachment from that which is held in common, that its signal achievement is to produce for the reader a subjective distancing from things which are a matter of shared experience. Where, on that model of poetic lyricism, is there space for the Northumbrian dialect poetry of Fred Reed (2017), or the writing of Idris Davies (1990), with its loving attention to the speech, the histories, the distinctive moral world of the Rhymney Valley? It is, in short, perfectly possible to explore correspondences between the sociological and poetic imaginations *not* by seeking to remodel sociology on the blueprint of post-Romantic lyricism, but by remembering that poetry itself can sustain a confidently critical, political and even analytical voice. There are long-standing examples of poetic writing which do not reduce poetry to the narrow pursuit of self-expression and which are less concerned with the subjective than with the political, or which emerge from the understanding that the subjective is already political through and through, just as Audre Lorde so powerfully argued (1996).

All of that being said, the second question which might well be asked is: wherein, then, lies the difference? As I noted earlier in this chapter, I want to leave the broad question of poetry's use values at least partly open to what emerges in the course of reflecting on the engagements which I discuss in the chapters which follow. But, nonetheless, as a tentative first suggestion, it seems to me that if there is a demarcation between sociological and poetic discourse it is likely to be one that we should seek, not with reference to content—i.e. not with reference to what sociologists or poets are looking at or what they are speaking about, or even with reference to their broad epistemologies—but by listening to how they speak. In the passage quoted, I have argued, Butler offers us the kind of critical insight into the social politics of scapegoating that would not be out of place in a social theory seminar. Yet, he does so, of course, in a manner that it is dependent upon the distinctive aesthetic discipline in which he is working. Thus, for example, the meaning of Butler's poem cannot be disassociated from the complex games that he is playing, throughout, with language and poetic form. The tone of the poem as

a whole is defined by the overbearing oom-pah-pah beat of his iambic tetrameters—a metre which came to be known, subsequently, as 'Hudibrastics', and which later poets, including Johnathan Swift and Alexander Pope, borrowed for satires of their own. Butler deploys the pomposity of that rhythm as a way of mocking the Puritanical assurance of his eponymous character; it bespeaks the self-regard that he is at pains to puncture, not least as he places it in juxtaposition with all kinds of deflatingly earthy details—the farting of horses and the squeezing of zits and so on—and as he combines it with comically over-wrought rhymes ('*Beside he was a shrewd* Philosopher */ And had read every Text and gloss over*'). In these ways, the sound of the poem is made part of the joke, is inextricable from the poem's satirical address and from what Butler is seeking to impress upon his audience.

We can unpack this at closer quarters in the short passage that I quoted above. Most obvious in this case, perhaps, are the slippery assonances which are threaded through that final couplet. On the one hand, these have the effect of smoothing off some of the bombastic clangour of the poem's established rhythm—a rhythm which Butler 'turns up' or 'turns down' at various moments depending on whether he is reaching for a satirical or, as here, a more reflective tone of voice. On the other hand, of course, those echoes or reverberations are themselves a part of what communicates the meaning of what is being said; they draw our attention, not merely intellectually, but aurally, to the complexity of the riddle that Butler is describing, whereby social fears are commuted into imaginary form, whilst those imaginary forms have real consequences. Thus Butler's decision to punningly rhyme words which are, at least as spoken aloud, all but indistinguishable ('*Witch'/'which'*), is a matter of craft, is a way of giving voice to the difficulty of distinguishing between what a witch might be expected to do, and what the fear of witches does of itself. (See also the way in which the line '*Hag themselves with* Apparitions' startlingly converts noun to verb so as to bring the reader up short before the question of causality, the question of who is responsible for these supposed fears).

Do some of these claims feel as if they are built on an interpretive bridge too far? Quite possibly: formal analysis of this kind always runs the risk of getting carried away with itself! But what can hardly be disputed is that the poet is working on language here in a knowing and wilful way. Butler is using the sounds, echoes and rhythms of words so as to make the form of the poem a part of what the poem says. It becomes

clearer that this is a matter of judgement, not luck, if we contrast that final couplet with another that I quoted: '*And when their eyes discover least / Discern the subtlest Objects best*'. In this case, there is a much balder, more declamatory quality to the rhythm, and the rough-edging of that mismatched rhyme between 'least' and 'best' serves to point up—or, we might better say, to sound out—the disjunction that Butler is describing between the nothing that is empirically known and the everything that superstition claims to know.

* * *

At this point, any sociological readers may well start to feel that they have stumbled into the wrong book. Isn't formal literary analysis of this kind misplaced in a supposedly sociological study? Might not its inclusion, indeed, be an oddly backward step? After all, for sociological accounts of literature, the most persistent 'other'—the perspective against which they have pitted themselves, historically—has been that of formalism. If a reading of a given novel, for instance, pays no attention to the way in which that novel was shaped by the specific context or social relations within which it was written we might well accuse it of being formalist. The term is an accusatory one: it seeks to indict such an account of a fatal narrowness, of being blind to culture's political ramifications. Ditto the critical assessment of a poem which judges it solely on the basis of what it achieves in terms of the expected metrical arrangement of a sonnet, say, or the structure of a villanelle. In this case, the accusation is not just that such a reading overlooks the social content of the poem in question. The accusation is also that it overlooks the historically located nature of its own evaluation and of the criteria on which that evaluation rests. It is for this reason, Cornel West reminded us (1987), that attacks on the canons of literature or art are always scandalous: they call into question not just the canons themselves, but also the authority of those whose cultural authority depends on the endurance of those canons. The point, in any case, is that fixating on the aesthetic forms which are before us is taken to be a sociological mistake precisely because, in so doing, we conceal the extent to which evaluative judgements about 'forms' are socially contingent. Rather like the blithe tourist in the stately home, the formalist is accused of being so engrossed in the aesthetic sights that they forget the history by which those sights are constituted *as* sights, or the brutalities that are concealed by virtue of that very process. It is to be so focussed

on what we have been given historically that we forget the history which gives it to us.

Yet the critique of that kind of myopic formalism, necessary as it surely is, risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As I have argued, a sociological account of literature cannot but be concerned with the distinctive way in which literary texts speak to and of the world. If our irresistible first instinct is, as Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev once put it, the rush to enlist 'in the defence of content' (1978: 67), we end up rushing ourselves past the very thing about which we should be most curious. 'The work of art', they insist, 'is first of all a self-valuable part of reality'. Moreover, and crucially, such a work speaks to and of the world not just 'in and through its content but also directly, as an individual thing, a definite artistic object' (46). Thus, as I hope the example of Butler's poetry has gone some way towards illustrating, we cannot approach the meaning of poems nor, thereby, their social significance, except through attention to poetic texts in their 'full concrete plenitude' (24).

To some extent, the same goes for all cultural practices. One could hardly offer a sociological account of chess, for instance, without paying close attention to the historically constituted rules, conventions, strategies and traditions which govern the playing of the game and which mean that the moving of a particular piece of carved wood to a particular position on a chequered board at a given moment has a particular, intersubjectively recognised significance. There is no route to the sociological meaning of chess that does not begin by learning to read and make sense of the forms of chess. What complicates the situation in relation to literary forms of culture is precisely the fact that they depend upon the use of language, and our everyday experience of language is characterised by a habit of 'looking through' words to what those words signify for us. The pragmatic pressures of daily life require us to latch onto whatever 'content' is relevant to the situation in question such that we have little choice but to treat the forms of language as largely incidental. 'We do not' as Terry Eagleton jokes, 'generally point out to our butcher with a cry of triumph that he has just come up with two alliterations and an anapaest' (2007: 68). In poetry, language is rescued from that invisibility, is forced upon our attention in a way that compels us to appreciate the extent to which linguistic forms are themselves constitutive of meaning. This, of course, is the point that we heard John Powell Ward making previously and he gives us a compelling description of poetry as the effort to punch a hole in the

'everyday social context of say-answer-say' (1979: 93). At the same time, Ward's claim that poetry thus seeks to establish a language 'sufficient to itself' seems, to me, like an overstatement. At the very least that phrasing risks making it sound as if poetry ceases to signify altogether, as if it no longer has anything meaningful to say to the world. Thus, to my mind, Terry Eagleton puts things more helpfully in describing poetry as 'language in which the signified or meaning is *the whole process of signification itself*' (2007: 21; italics in original).

When they made the argument to which I have referred above, and on which I will draw further in later chapters, Bakhtin and his colleagues were taking aim at the kind of pious Marxist criticism that was concerned with keeping score of the political positions articulated in, or attributable to, particular works of literature. Contemporary sociologists of literature, or those working in cultural studies, are not necessarily censorious in that sense and yet in many ways, it seems to me, we continue with that headlong rush to 'enlist on the side of content', continue to respond to literary texts as if what those texts 'say' is something which can be neatly extracted out of the language itself like a gallstone or a cache of gold coins. Even though, as noted, recent years have seen a number of gestures towards a renewed interest in poetry within sociology, such accounts have rarely shown any greater or more careful consideration of the way in which poetic form is constitutive of the meaning of poetic texts. It is as if poetry is to be allowed into sociology on strictly sociological terms, on the condition that we limit our interest to the questions of what poetry talks about or who does that talking. If there is any excuse for hauling the hoary old question of literary form, so long dead and buried, back into the light, it is precisely because we seem as reluctant as ever to attend to the poetic text in its 'full concrete plenitude', even though that reluctance sometimes hides, of late, under cover of a paradoxical claim on poetry's cachet.

* * *

To say these things is not to surrender to formalism or to the idea that poetry really does exist in a state of aesthetic self-enclosure, sealed off from the world. It is, in fact, to make the absolutely opposed claim that it is precisely *in and through* its formal properties that poetry most explicitly bespeaks and reveals its rootedness in our social and human realities. It is important to insist on this because there have been, as we have seen already, powerful critical traditions in respect of European poetries

which have tended towards the 'privatisation' of the question of form. Not even the most diehard adherent of art-for-arts' sake, of course, nor even the most cryptic modernist, denied that poetry belonged to the world in some sense or other. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to acknowledge the weight of a critical orthodoxy, which has construed poetry as the epitome of a 'superior reality', the last bastion of cultural values held apart from society (Williams (1990 [1958]: 32). As Williams persuasively argued, that view had its roots in the artistic response to the disorientating changes that followed from the rise of systems of industrial production, and the unmooring of cultural labour from interpersonal relations of patronage. Yet, what began as an act of symbolic opposition by which art sought to refuse the dehumanising rationality of the market opened the door to something more elitist, more self-aggrandising: a conception in which, tendentially at least, formal technique comes to serve as a means or marker of poetry's aesthetic seclusion.[5] These views still colour, to a significant extent, an enduring sense that poetry is characterised by a peculiar degree of aesthetic 'difficulty', that it is in some distinctive way the antithesis of popular culture. For that reason, it bears repeating that poetic form can be read as precisely the qualitative property wherein we can *most* clearly recognise how fully such texts emerge *from* and speak *of* the social world. There are various ways in which this might be claimed to be the case but suffice it, here, to point towards two main lines of argument.

In the first place, specific poetic forms can be said to be sociologically telling in their own right. That is to say: the particular ways in which particular poets choose to work on and with language are decisions which are, in themselves, necessarily responsive to the worldly contexts in which they were working, and those contexts thereby leave their traces on the poetic text. Reading poems with this in mind is one way of meeting literary formalism on its home ground, so to speak, insisting that poetic form is 'not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it' (Eagleton 2007: 8).

Literary critical studies offer us any number of examples of what we might call this historicity of poetic form but, given the limitations of space, I will refer to just one poignant instance as described by Glyn Maxwell. In the course of his riveting reflection on the craft of poetic writing, Maxwell offers a deeply moving juxtaposition between two poems by Isaac Rosenberg. The first—*The Dead Heroes*—was penned before Rosenberg's arrival at the Western front, and is characterised

by a typically resplendent Edwardian tone: unsullied rhymes; drumbeat rhythms; sweeping patriotic vision—'*Flame out, you glorious skies / Welcome our brave; / Kiss their exultant eyes; / Give what they gave*'. The other—*Break of Day in the Trenches*—was written shortly before his death in 1917. Between the two there lies a tonal shift so dramatic that Maxwell describes it, with complete justification, as a 'quake'. In that second poem, only the last, shattered vestiges of rhyme remain, the rhythms are wholly muted or disjointed, and that imperial vista has shrunk to almost nothing: the description of a passing encounter with 'a queer sardonic rat' and the sight of a dusty poppy: '*Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew / Your cosmopolitan sympathies. / Now you have touched this English hand / You will do the same to a German / Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure / To cross the sleeping green between*'. It is true, Maxwell acknowledges, that Gertrude Stein and other poets were already experimenting with looser poetic forms before the First World War broke out. All the same, in the absolutely vivid contrast between those two works by the same poet, separated by little more than a few months, we can all but hear the sufficiency of conventional poetic forms giving way beneath the weight of historical experience. We can see, as Maxwell says, 'Poetry forming, before our eyes and a rat's, in the face of time' (2012: 66).

Needless to say, perhaps, there is no preordained or neatly predictable relationship between historical contexts and poetic forms. Poets can draw in many unanticipated ways on the manifold resources available to them in poetic traditions, and they may stand in any number of different relationships—from dutiful acceptance to radical apostasy—with such traditions. They may, moreover, strive to use their poetry so as to express all kinds of attitudes to the subjects about which they are writing. These things being so, it is important to acknowledge that a historicising account of poetic form is not a hunt for inevitabilities, but is rather an act of creative interpretation in its own right. It involves, in other words, the recognition that poems are the outcome of a situated creative struggle, an attempt to find the words, tones and resonances that fit in a given context. It asks us to think of poetry as—in Kenneth Burke's words—a form of 'symbolic action', a distinctive kind of creative labour, which acts on the world by naming it. Burke urges us, thus, to conceive of poems as 'answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose' (1973 [1941]: 1). Understood in this way, we can recognise that Rosenberg could, of course, have written *Break of Day in the Trenches* in an almost infinite number of other ways. That the poem has the form that it has is not

the outcome of some superordinate historical determination. But that it has the form that it has is not a matter of unconstrained aesthetic choice either; it is the consequence of his effort to find the words and the sounds that were adequate to the place and moment in which they were being uttered. It reflects, in other words, what Audre Lorde called the poet's 'disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me"' (1996: 96). Poetry, in short, belongs to history and that being so Burke urges us to think of poetic form itself as a 'public matter' or a 'social idiom' (1973 [1941]: 62, 63). The ways in which that might be so are many and are not predeterminable, but the recognition that this *is* so allows us to question the assumption that poetic form constitutes the codebook for some private aesthetic language spoken only by a knowing few amongst themselves.

* * *

There is a second reason why this is true. Poetry works on precisely those qualities of language—rhythm, resonance, rhyme and so forth—which are not intrinsically meaningful in and of themselves. This fact, no doubt, is what led the Russian Futurist poets to seek the essence of poetry in what they called *zaum*: i.e. raw sound, a 'trans-rational' language shorn of any referential meaning at all (see Pike 1979). That effort, in its search for some prelapsarian state of linguistic purity, surely misses the point. Poems work, at least in part, by making the non-referential properties of language meaningful, by turning them to an expressive purpose. Nonetheless, the Futurists and those who followed them do point us towards the crucial recognition that poetry depends upon language's rich materiality, putting to use those qualities of sound which we register in our bodies as much as register them in our minds.

It is all too easy to forget that this is so, not least because the *ars poetica* have been overrun with such a briar-patch of terminology—spondee; dactyl; chiasmus, etc.—that the visceral appeal of poetic language gets lost in the tangle of technicalities. That accretion of terms has been one feature of the 'privatisation' or symbolic enclosure of poetry, and given that context, it can be powerfully liberating for us to be reminded of the extent to which poetry is rooted in our materiality. Here again, in searching for an illustrative example, I turn to Glyn Maxwell who points out that there is a simple reason why the 'pentameter'—the line with five 'beats'—has been such a staple form in English language verse, at least

up until the rise of modernism. That reason, Maxwell suggests, is to be found not in the force of aesthetic precedent, but in poetry's submission to a different kind of precedent altogether: the intrinsic rhythms of the body. Thus, the pentameter is 'the line that takes the time of a breath' (2012: 100); it is the line roughly conformed to the shape of something spoken aloud between the drawing of one breath and the pause for the next. It is for this reason, amongst others, that Maxwell insists: 'A poem isolated from the functions of the body […] is merely the brain at work, lodged in a dusty vault, parched and out of sight, nothing but data' (59).

Poetry, in short, is a practice in which the whole body is involved. This is, no doubt, the reason why so many writers have talked about poetry as the form of literature most tightly bound, most closely attuned, to those aspects of our experience which feel irreducible, which feel fundamental to who we are. The obvious objection to claims of that kind is the fact that the ability to 'hear' the rhythm in a line of poetry is by no means a 'pre-social' phenomenon. As Kenneth Burke helpfully reminds us, that capacity—that 'feel' for rhythm—is learned, even if such learning is often lodged deep in what Eagleton calls the 'folds and textures of the self' (2007: 163). Burke points out that such a 'feel' can be socially nurtured or it can be stifled, and that the likelihood of either tells us something about what a given society does or does not hold dear. '[W]e seem', he writes—addressing mid-twentieth-century America—'to immunize ourselves to the arhythmic quality of both traffic and accountancy by a distrust of the lullaby and the rocking cradle as formative stylistic equipment for our children' (1973 [1941]: 10). Yet, even granting that this is so, even accepting that an ear for rhythm or for any of the other patternings of language is socially acquired, there remains a sense in which those patternings may seem 'given' to us. 'Given' because a quality such as a rhythm has every appearance of being discernible in language itself, something immanent in the materiality of spoken words which cannot be said, in any obvious sense, to be 'socially constructed'. Rhythm does not exist without the subject who hears it, for sure, but nor can the hearer simply choose to impute a given rhythm to any arbitrary collection of sounds. In the same way, the poet may choose to do things with other resonant properties of language—may decide, for instance, to rhyme 'which' with 'witch'—but in so doing they are *making use of* the rhyme rather than making it; they are working on what the language already gives them to work with. That sense of 'givenness' is, moreover, redoubled by the way in which, as Maxwell points out, these potentialities echo and evoke

rhythms which, like breath or pulse, are bound into the very experience of having a human body.

Apart from anything else, acknowledging poetry's materiality serves as a reminder that the historical roots of written poetry lie in part with traditions of oral literature, folk songs and balladry, and communal singing.[6] Such traditions depended—and still depend—on the affordances of rhythm and rhyme so as to form language in ways that allow it to be remembered—to be borne in the body, so to speak—often in the absence of a written record. They are also what mean that, even in contexts where poetic performance was or is a specialised function of particular individuals—bards or griots or skalds—those expressive resources are in some sense a property held in common. In many cases, of course, as with the traditions of work song, emergent poetic forms are wrung directly from the rhythms of labouring bodies, and serve as one way in which 'suffering [can be] shaped and represented, possessed and turned into song, and thus in part triumphed over' (Nelson 2003: 48). Recognising all of this, recognising the ways in which poetic form works with the materiality of language—a materiality that is, in turn, inextricable from our own embodiment—is, itself, a way of repudiating the normative construction of poetry as a rarefied or idealised aesthetic practice. Attending to the materiality of poetic form is a way of claiming poems for earth rather than for heaven. Perhaps this is what Wordsworth meant when he talked about poetry having in its veins 'human blood' and not 'celestial Ichor' (2005: 299).

* * *

Having said these things, I want to add one final and possibly contentious point. As I suggested above, it seems likely that it is poetry's dependence on the materialities of language and of the body which explain why it is the literary form that has, most often, been taken to encapsulate, in a focussed way, things which are fundamental to human experience. What might be contentious is the admission that, to me, this seems like a persuasive view. Persuasive, that is to say, so long as we take the 'human' in that sentence not as a reference to the 'human' subject as they appear in liberal humanism—the sovereign, world-bestriding and self-sufficient bourgeois subject—but rather as the 'human' postulated in the traditions of Marxist humanism, in which we are understood as beings historically situated, dependent on our relations with others, and yet having needs

and potentialities shared in common with those others.[7] It is not for nothing that when the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro sought to put the materialism back into 'historical materialism'—when he sought to insist that there are elements of human life which 'cannot be reduced […] to a production of reality by a subject' (1974: 7)—it was, amongst other things, poetry to which he appealed in support of his argument. It is poetry, Timpanaro argued, which is the literary form that concerns itself most urgently with those things, which are humanly shared in just this sense. In saying so he had in mind experiences such as 'love' and existential facts such as 'the contrast between the smallness and weakness of man [sic] and the infinity of the cosmos' (19). No wonder: these have, indeed, been topics with which poets have been much concerned. Yet, for me, the issue is not so much what poetry is *about* because, after all, poetry can be about all kinds of things including subjects which are idiosyncratically personal. The issue, rather, is the way in which poetry is formed out of, how it speaks from and with, aspects of ourselves which we experience as given, not least the cadences of the languages into which we are born, and the cadences of our own bodies. In that sense poems, I suggest, instantiate for us their own distinctive glimpses of the irrepressible dialectic of human creativity, a creativity which is forever taking that which it has been given and making something new from it. This too, is a way of talking about how poetry belongs to history, it is a way of recognising poetry as creative labour. It is *not* to argue, as per the traditions of idealism, that aesthetic creativity takes place in some transcendence over the world or that aesthetic forms put us within reach of a state of Platonic perfection. It is rather to insist that poems are instantiations of a human capacity for creativity precisely in and through the situated materiality of human lives; is to insist with Marx, that people make poetry, but that they do so in the conditions, and with the resources, amidst which they find themselves.

At the same time, however, these creative acts, at their best, make of what is given a staging ground for something that reaches beyond that givenness. It matters to insist on this creative 'opening' not least because the historicising reading of poetic form, which I discussed previously, can sometimes run the risk of reducing poems to a kind of aesthetic recapitulation of what is there already. In other words, it can sometimes have the effect of treating poems—or, indeed, other forms of culture—as a set of historical symptoms: *this* poetic form as a consequence of these circumstances; *that* way of writing as a refraction of this particular social experience. Hence, for example, the claim by Della Volpe that

every poetic meaning points back to a 'sociological *quid*' (1979: 55). Yet when poems work well, whatever they are ostensibly about, they give us a glimpse of more than just things in their quiddity; they give us, also, a glimpse of possibility, they allow us to remember that that which is given can serve as the basis for that which might yet be. In this further sense we are making a mistake if, in judging the sociological 'meaning' or significance of a particular poem, we respond to it with our eyes fixed rigidly 'on the side of content', if we judge it only in terms of what it 'says' in the most straightforward sense. One can think of poems—to my mind, for instance, this would be true of some of those written by Philip Larkin—which articulate a political vision that is objectionable, which convey a restrictively conservative, diminishing view of the world and of social relations. Yet some of those same poems also make the cadences of language and the strictures of formal arrangements sing in ways that reach beyond the narrowness of that politics. In so doing they give evidence of a human capacity for creativity—a capacity for building a kind of expressive freedom out of the givenness of our materiality and our languages—which belies that diminishment. In what they are they repudiate what they apparently say. Thus, as Adorno puts it: 'The greatness of works of art' is that they 'give voice to what ideology hides. Their very success moves beyond false consciousness, whether intentionally or not' (1991: 39). Or thus, to give the final word to a poet rather than a theorist, it can be in poetry that we sometimes catch a glimpse of 'the future in the present'.[8]

Notes

1. One partial exception here might be Della Volpe's study, published in English in 1979 as *Critique of Taste*.
2. In many ways, Bauman's argument echoes Richard Brown's earlier and more fulsome attempt to delineate a sociological poetics. Not unlike Bauman, Brown emphasised the centrality of metaphorical thinking to the sociological imagination. That is to say that, like Bauman, he placed a central emphasis on that disorientating move which allows us to see the object at hand in a new way by virtue of a kind of transfiguration, by showing it to us *as if* from the viewpoint of something else. Rather than a distinction between 'art' and 'science', therefore, Brown insists only on the difference between forms of knowing that have become stultified and those which allow

us to see phenomena in new ways: the difference, as he puts it, is 'between using metaphors or being their victims'. For Brown, as for Bauman, the most effective sociology thus shares with poetry this commitment to what he calls 'serious lying'. See his *A Poetic for Sociology* (1977: 90, 87).

3. Butler, *Hudibras,* third part, canto III, lines 1–12.
4. Butler, *Hudibras,* third part, canto III, lines 17–22.
5. See also the entry for 'Aesthetic' in Williams' *Keywords* (1983: 31–33).
6. On oral literature generally, see: Lord (1960), Miles Foley (1986), Finnegan (1970), Okpewho (1979). On the relation between folk song and folk poetry, including more contemporary traditions of working-class poetry, see Renwick (1980). On oral and ballad traditions in Scotland, specifically, see: Frank and Smith (2015) and Gilbert (2015).
7. Amongst other discussions of a Marxist humanist position, see: Durkin (2014), Geras (1987), James (1980), Thompson (1978).
8. The phrase is taken from Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' (1972: 65). Shelley is echoing, I assume, Lady Macbeth's rather more ominous glimpse of the 'future in the instant'. The phrase was one that was especially cherished by C.L.R. James and came to be used, indeed, as the title for the first volume of James' selected writings.

CHAPTER 2

Reading Poetry Now: A Short Methodological Overview

The data on which I reflect in the following chapters derives from qualitative research which I conducted in a number of largely working-class areas of Glasgow—Govanhill, Govan and Cardonald—as well as in adjoining towns lying to the west of the city, specifically Clydebank and Dumbarton, under the title 'Reading Poetry Now'. In arranging and carrying out that research, my most immediate concern was to try to understand how it comes about that, in George Orwell's words, 'the divorce between poetry and popular culture is accepted as a sort of law of nature' (2009: 102). Or, to put it more bluntly: I wanted to investigate what—notwithstanding the resurgence of vibrant traditions of performance poetry—strikes me as an act of ongoing theft. That is to say: the effective privatisation of forms of linguistic creativity and expression whose roots lie, to no small degree, in popular and collective traditions. Others such as Tom Leonard (2001) and Cary Nelson (2003) trace out the histories of that theft as they have taken shape in different contexts within the Anglophone world. For my part, I was interested in this as a contemporary question: how does poetry come to be placed out of reach of so many readers; how does that dispossession take shape in people's cultural lives; what are its consequences? It is worth admitting, frankly, that asking those questions in that way implies the rejection of the kind of relativism which—often in the name of challenging cultural hierarchies—turns its back on any evaluative judgement as to 'better' or 'worse' in terms of cultural practices. That view may sound

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liberating, possibly even utopian, but by stripping away any language with which we might try to gauge what is actually lost in acts of cultural enclosure such as this it seems to me to become an alibi to the very inequalities that it seeks to resist.

In order to ask these questions effectively, it was necessary to spend time talking with readers who did not read poetry, either because they were not interested in it, or because they found it unreadable, or because they felt it was uninterested in them. As I discuss in greater detail at the start of the next chapter, there are relatively few existing studies which explore the reading of poetry in any qualitative detail at all, certainly compared with the number of projects which are addressed to the reception of other cultural forms such as novels, music or television programmes. Such studies as I could find were not generally informed by primary research or tended to base their conclusions largely upon the responses of those who were, already, poetry readers. Consequently, much of that work has a tendency to look past those whose experiences are most relevant to understanding how this theft takes place and what it means. It was that perceived gap, that failure to talk with those who already find themselves excluded from poetry, which I wanted to address in the first instance. In thinking about these issues I had in mind Bourdieu's provocative reminder that social research has often unthinkingly incorporated the silences of those who feel disqualified from the right to an opinion about a particular topic (1984: 411–414). The structured silence imposed on particular groups can come to be 'built into' our analyses in ways that serve to normalise or naturalise that condition of silence, not least when such responses are read as nothing more than the outcome of an unconstrained choice or a kind of consumerist preference. It is, no doubt, in just this sense that Pierre Macherey (1978) insisted that our ideological worldviews are constituted as much by what they do not say, as by what they do.

* * *

In seeking prospective participants, therefore, I reached out to as wide a range of existing groups and organisations as I could manage including, wherever possible, groups which were not already focussed on reading as an activity. This meant, for instance, groups of parents meeting in their children's schools, local history or discussion groups meeting in libraries or in other venues, and a range of groups, which had come together in

the context of work being done by third-sector organisations or within extramural education projects. I also advertised the research in a more ad hoc way by producing leaflets and posters which were displayed at the front desks of libraries and community centres. I was sometimes invited to preliminary meetings with prospective participants at which I was asked to outline the project. On other occasions, I spoke with gatekeepers or organisers who then took my invitation back to other group members for their consideration.

Where a particular group of people was interested in taking part, I sent the individual members an A4 booklet which contained a selection of poems by contemporary Scottish poets as well as a 'plain language' description of the project. After the first couple of sessions, I realised that distributing the poems only in this printed form was limiting the way in which people were able to engage with them. With the help of my institution's audio-visual service—and thanks also to the support of a colleague who, unlike me, speaks with a Scottish accent!—I arranged for the poems to be recorded on a CD. Thereafter, copies of those recordings were distributed along with the printed booklet.

In choosing the poems which were the basis for this project I tried to arrive at a selection that would make it possible to reflect on different ways of writing poetry, different topics, and different kinds of poetic voices, whilst also ensuring that I was not asking too much of participants in terms of the length of the selection as a whole. As noted above, the research took place in and around Glasgow and there is, of course, a historical and political specificity to the Scottish context. More than that, there is a significant and distinctive history of poetry writing in Scotland even though that history, like all cultural histories framed by reference to the nation, contains more diversity and a greater degree of hybridity than the neatness of that naming might imply (see Sassi 2015). Nonetheless, for these reasons, and with the intention of ensuring that any potential comparative questions were kept within manageable bounds, I limited the selection to poems by living Scottish poets. On the basis of these various criteria, I chose six pieces: Don Paterson's *The Circle*; two short poems by William Letford—*Taking a headbutt* and *Waking for Work in the Winter*; John Burnside's *History*; Jackie Kay's *Bed*; and Carol Ann Duffy's *Mrs. Midas*.[1] That selection includes poems which are formally structured, poems which are more loosely structured and some which dispense with conventional poetic structure altogether. Similarly, it includes poems which employ an explicit rhyme scheme, as well as others

which use rhyme only for accent or emphasis, or not at all. It includes both shorter and longer poems, as well as poems written in different varieties of English and Scots.

* * *

Once those involved had had the opportunity to read or to listen to these poems, I arranged to meet with the groups in order to talk about what they made of them. Sessions usually began with introductions and some scene-setting on my part, followed by a general discussion about poetry and its salience or otherwise in people's lives. Thereafter, we listened together to the poems, one at a time. After each reading, there was an open, unstructured conversation about what we had just heard. I tried to allow these conversations to develop along their own lines, although I did have some broad questions—comparing rhyming and unrhymed poetry, for instance; or comparing formally structured and unstructured poetry—which I sought to introduce when it seemed appropriate. Sessions lasted between fifty minutes and two hours. Most groups had between five and eight members. On a few occasions, I was contacted by, or put in touch with, individuals who said that they were interested in the project but who were not part of an existing group: in those cases, I generally arranged to meet with them in much the same way, although the discussion then took place one-on-one, rather more in the manner of a semi-structured interview. In total, just under fifty people participated in one form or other.

In most cases, these sessions ran in the venues where the groups in question met already: community centres; local municipal buildings; rooms belonging to third-sector projects and organisations. Where no such venue was available, I arranged to meet in rooms that could be booked in public libraries. The interviews took place in similar locations although on a couple of occasions, I was invited to meet respondents in their homes or at their workplaces. Throughout the course of conducting the research, I took detailed notes both for the sake of my own recollection and in order to try to create space for reflection on the research process itself. I draw on those notes at various points in the chapters which follow.

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The discussions and interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recording device and were then transcribed and anonymised. I undertook most of the transcription myself, although a few recordings were handled by a professional transcription service. Those processes, themselves, raised more than a few pertinent questions about the politics of language. In the first place, it is telling that companies providing transcription services charge a premium for the transcription of recordings which are taken to be especially difficult to follow or to understand. In this case, what that generally meant was nothing other than the fact that those whose voices were recorded were speaking in their own accents, and that those listening to the recordings clearly found those accents unfamiliar or hard to follow. This was the case even though the company that I employed for this work was, itself, based in Scotland. Working-class accents, it became clear, can be quite literally costly, subject to a kind of commercial penalty which is itself one small example of the barriers—not just symbolic, but also material—that often serve to inhibit such voices within academic settings and cultural institutions.

In the second place, I found myself struggling with the question of how best to present the words of those who took part in this project. Amongst the enduring achievements of the great Glaswegian novelist James Kelman has been his demonstration of the ways in which the symbolic power of language is reflected in the formal organisation of fictional texts. Across a series of novels including *The Busconductor Hines, A Chancer, A Disaffection* and *How Late it Was, How Late,* Kelman gradually dismantled the convention by which reported speech in fiction gets presented in 'vernacular' form whereas the all-knowing narrator speaks an inevitably 'standard' English. That arrangement, he notes, reproduces within novels the pervasive hierarchy by which certain kinds of voices are treated as authoritative—telling us what *really* happened—whilst other kinds of voices can only ever articulate the subjective views of the speaker. Thus, Kelman notes, 'the distinction between dialogue and narrative [is] a summation of the political system […] another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities' (2002: 40). That distinction, of course, runs parallel to the disjunction I discussed in the previous chapter between poetries which have a 'claim to permanence'—to quote T. S. Eliot—and those which have a merely topical or historical relevance.[2] I mention Kelman's argument here because it helped bring into focus for me the difficult question of how to present the words of respondents within a text of this kind

and because it served as a standing reminder of the extent to which those same politics of language are implicated in such decisions.

This is, of course, by no means a straightforward issue. On the one hand, it seemed important to me to ensure that the words of those who took part in these conversations were presented in ways that were true to the voices in which they actually spoke. On the other hand, it also became clear—not least through the course of discussing those poems which were written in anything other than 'standard English'—that many of those to whom I spoke, attentive to exactly the hierarchies of language that Kelman describes, felt that the reproduction of words as spoken in the context of something like a published poem or a sociological study, might imply a kind of condescension. Or, perhaps better, that it had the effect of consigning the speakers whose words were thus presented to a kind of linguistic inferiority. Indeed, when I specifically asked interviewees how they would prefer the texts of their interviews to be reproduced it was not uncommon for them to insist that they wanted conventional forms or spellings to be used. In this way, the relationship of language to power creates a kind of double-bind: on the one hand, there is the symbolic violence implicit in any act which, as it were, 'corrects' the words of another speaker; on the other hand, there is the danger of a kind of facile populism which equates 'authenticity' too quickly with resistance and underplays the force of those hierarchies which relegate 'non-standard' ways of speaking to a dominated position (for a relevant discussion, see Bourdieu 1991: 90–102). In the end, my response has been to occupy a—probably rather timid?—half-way house. That is to say: I have tried to reflect significant features of the ways in which participants spoke, especially where those usages were importantly constitutive of what was being said. Or, to put it otherwise, I have tried in the course of transcribing, and in checking the transcriptions provided by others, to reproduce these discussions in ways that capture, as best I can, the politics of language as it was at play in these conversations, including the ways in which people made use of, or departed from, so-called 'standard' English, in order to make themselves heard.

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My analysis of the resulting data involved what gets called, in the parlance of social research, an iterative process of 'manual coding'. Or, more simply, it involved slowly reading, comparing, reflecting on and

re-reading the transcripts, accompanied by detailed note-taking. That 'coding' process was thematically orientated at least insofar as I was interested in identifying significant continuities in the ways in which readers engaged with the poems which I had asked them to read, and in how they articulated their sense of relationship to those poems.

Yet, the notion of 'coding' here feels much too 'thin'. In order to explain why this is so I refer to Elizabeth Long's reflection, at the end of her qualitative study of book clubs in Houston. Long describes a growing suspicion that 'cultural reception is an impoverished term' (2003: 221), one that fails to capture the richness and the creativity that is often evident in readers' engagement with literature. I recognise that feeling: over the course of these discussions themselves and through the process of reading and reflecting on the resulting transcripts I came to feel, similarly, that the idea of studying 'responses' to poetry—which had, indeed, been a part of how I had initially conceived of this project to myself—does little to express the richness of what was actually taking place. It is true, of course, that in some ways reading is a responsive business, at least insofar as texts constrain how they can be plausibly understood and inasmuch as they compel readers to take them as they are, in all of their determinate specificity. But the term risks implying that what happens in the relationship between readers and texts can be reduced to something neatly quantifiable—a matter of liking or disliking, perhaps—or tightly linear, as if the reader themselves does little in this process except to react. What that conception underplays is the extent to which readers are constantly doing things with the texts which they read and doing things, no less, in the face of texts which they find unreadable. Throughout these conversations, and in the course of reading over the resulting transcripts, I was struck by the extent to which, as they engaged with these texts and with each other, readers sought to bring these poems into conversation with aspects of their own lived experiences, or appropriated the language of those poems in unexpected ways, or creatively reworked the poetic texts themselves or found incisive ways of articulating a confrontational sense of exclusion from those texts.

What does that imply for how the researcher might, in turn, best read the transcripts of these engagements? In recognising that such transcripts are a record of things taking place and being done, it increasingly seemed to me that the most appropriate mode of engaging with and reflecting on those records, even for the purpose of sociological analysis, was something adjacent to the practice of literary 'close reading'. Focus group or

interview transcripts are *not* literary texts, of course, and sooner or later one does indeed have to decide which aspects of a body of qualitative data are most compelling or most analytically significant. Nonetheless, I found it helpful here to recall Wolfgang Iser's famous description of how we read texts such as novels. Amongst other things, Iser rejects the idea that novel reading involves a search for some singular 'buried secret' which it is the readers' obligation to unearth and carry away. His account, instead, offers a more phenomenological vision of reading as something which is experienced as 'happening' (1978: 5). In other words, he emphasises the dynamic quality of reading, the degree to which the reader is forced to occupy a 'moving viewpoint' (109) which works to follow the course of something as it takes shape through the text. By the same token, he argues that one hallmark of such readerly engagement is the extent to which it requires of us a willingness to let go 'of what is already ours' (132). I would reiterate that the transcripts of qualitative research projects are not fictional texts. But, nonetheless, a practice akin to the process of reading which Iser describes came to seem to me a more apposite response to texts which offered, after all, not simply a record of attitudes or responses, but rather the trace of things occurring and taking shape. At the very least, that idea suggests an approach which is more processual and more reflexively open than the concept of 'codification' can seem to imply.

* * *

As explained above, my initial intention in undertaking this work was to explore the ways in which poetry has come to be constituted as a restrictively 'high-brow' activity. For that reason, I was especially concerned to try to speak with those who felt that poetry was not meant for them. Given the extent to which studies of cultural reception often engage only with those who are, already, the symbolic owners of the cultural products in question, that approach seems necessary and justifiable. Nonetheless, I soon came to realise that the cultural politics of that decision were more complicated than I had understood. Conceptualising the project with a focus only on the reading of poetry had the inadvertent effect of reproducing a conception of literature as a field in which 'the few produce for the many' (Maguire et al. 1982: 64). As Maguire and his colleagues discuss in the course of their reflections on the various projects which came together under the auspices of the Federation of Worker Writers

and Community Publishers, this is the very way in which the social relations of 'Literature' have been normatively structured. What they call the 'Establishment' of Literature is one that allows working-class women and men into its sanctums only, if at all, in the role of consumers whilst working-class writers—those who would wish to produce, and not merely consume, literature—are regulated to the status of curiosities (60). I became aware of this, at least in part, because of the number of participants who made it clear that they did indeed want to talk about poetry, only with this proviso: that they were interested not only in those poems which they I taken it upon myself to select for them, but also in the poetry of which they were, themselves, the authors.

Given that realisation, I tried, as the project went on, to find ways to meet and speak with poets in the areas where the research was taking place, and to flag up the fact that I was interested in talking with anyone who wrote poetry. As a consequence then, a few of the later sessions which I convened took on a more hybrid character, beginning with a discussion of the poems that I had shared with groups, and then moving to a discussion of the work of members of those groups themselves. When local poets reached out to me directly, I organised interviews in order to talk more specifically about their writing and about the struggles they often faced in trying to find an audience or a measure of symbolic recognition. In some ways that evolution in the research cut across the original intention of the project because most writers of poetry are, necessarily, also interested readers of poetry. Nonetheless, I continued to pursue the research as originally configured as and when I was able.

The working-class reader who feels that poetry is not for them, and the working-class poet who struggles to find an audience or publisher for their poetry are, of course, two sides of one coin. Both experiences reflect, in their different ways, the extent to which poetry has come to be constructed as a space to which only certain kinds of people, and certain kinds of voices, can have easy access. In that sense, although I turned only a rather belated and somewhat ad hoc attention to the labour of local poets, doing so was still important and relevant to understanding the cultural enclosure of poetry. I offer some reflection on the stories and accounts provided by a few of these writers in Chapter five.

* * *

In ending this short reflection on how the research was conducted I want to mention an ethical issue to which I returned more than once whilst the research was ongoing and in the period since. To what extent does the effort to explore forms of cultural exclusion reproduce that exclusion at the level of lived experience? Insofar as this research depended on asking participants what they made of a series of poems, and inasmuch as some of those who took part found some of those poems inaccessible, might not the experience of taking part in the project, itself, be potentially stigmatising for those involved?

As I have argued, it seems unarguable to me that if we want to understand how hierarchies of culture are constructed and sustained it is not enough to measure, in a quantitative sense, who consumes what kinds of cultural product and in what amounts. That work may trace out for us the shape of those inequalities, but it hardly allows us to understand how they become the social reality which they are, how they take shape in peoples' lives and what their consequences might be. It does nothing, in short, to help us understand how people come to find or feel themselves excluded from the meaningful use of particular kinds of cultural texts or practices. At the same time, however, research that reaches towards such an understanding can hardly avoid the possibility of bringing that dispossession to light and in so doing it is always liable to create a situation that some of those taking part might find estranging.

No qualitative research is altogether free of ethical hazard; all we can do is to think carefully about how best to mitigate the risks that are implicit in the work we do. In this specific case, it mattered that the groups who took part in the project were, for the most part, comprised of people who knew each other already and who were often friends. That was not always the case, but recruiting amongst pre-existing community organisations helped to ensure that, broadly speaking, these sessions felt supportive and collaborative. Moreover, in the outline of the project which was provided with the selection of poems, and at the outset of these conversations, I was at pains to emphasise that the purpose of the discussion was not to put anyone on the spot, that any opinion about those poems including rejection or disinterest was as welcome as any other, and that no one should feel under any duress to contribute or to take part. I suspect that comments of that kind, though, are often felt to have a rather pro-forma quality and that they probably do not do all that much to off-set the extent to which qualitative research settings can be experienced as a kind of examination. In that respect, what was probably much more important

was—as I discuss in more detail in chapter four—the sensitive consideration which participants themselves showed in sharing their interpretations or ideas about the poems in question. Those who took part were often, I think, aware of the extent to which these sessions had the potential to involve a kind of symbolic violence, and were often at pains to contribute in ways that served to diminish that risk not just for themselves, but for other members of the group.

The ethics of care which was evident in how members of these groups talked and worked together is itself a reminder of the extent to which people are capable of critical reflexivity with regard to the social relationships of which they are part. There is, perhaps, a danger that in emphasising the potential risks of participation in research projects—in foregrounding the question of 'vulnerability'—we undervalue that critical and analytical agency. Thus, in the case of this project, the questions which were most obviously at stake concerned the meanings of the poems at hand and how best to make sense of those texts. It was indeed the case that some of those who took part felt that they did not have the language or, perhaps, the entitlement to tackle those questions. Yet, as I discuss further in the subsequent chapters, it was also the case that participants often stepped back, as it were, to think through what was revealed in that experience itself. Inasmuch as the project sometimes brought to light a kind of cultural dispossession, it also created a context in which that dispossession was critically reflected upon.

Given that, I want to reiterate in conclusion that the analysis that I develop in what follows is heavily indebted to the questions, the reflexive considerations, and the moments of incisive insight which my respondents themselves articulated, and which they often pursued collaboratively through the course of their discussions. In the subsequent chapters, I have tried to act in accordance with the recognition that critical social understanding, and the capacity to analyse social relations, are never the exclusive property of social researchers. In the course of analysing the records of these engagements, and in deciding how best to organise and present the analytical findings of the study, I have sought to listen to and learn from the analytical work that my participants themselves frequently embarked upon.

Notes

1. Burnside's poem was, to the best of my knowledge, first published under the heading 'St. Andrews. West Sands; September 2001' in *The Guardian* in September 2001. Because it was under this title that I first encountered it, this was how it appeared in the booklet of poems that I shared with participants. I refer to it here, however, as 'History', using the title under which it was published in his 2002 collection *The Light Trap* and, subsequently, in his *Selected Poems* from 2006. Those later versions are very slighted amended from that which appeared in *The Guardian*—the word 'spindrift' is replaced by 'driftwork', for instance. In those later versions, the earlier title—'St. Andrews. West Sands; September 2001'—is retained as an epigram.
2. The quote from Eliot comes from a reflection on the poetry of Idris Davies, published in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* in 1958; see Eliot (2019: 281).

CHAPTER 3

Where Are We Going With This?: Poetry and Symbolic Exclusion

How is the encounter between poetry and working-class readers imagined? What is that encounter expected to look like and what are its consequences assumed to be? Here, to get started, is one example of how this moment has been envisaged from the perspective of those who are culturally dominant. This comes to us from a work of fiction, albeit from a work with the very obvious ambition of standing as a 'novel of our times', Ian McEwan's much-feted, prize-winning *Saturday*.

The most dramatic scene in *Saturday* involves that archetypal middle-class nightmare: the home invasion. The home in question—a townhouse in Fitzrovia—belongs to Henry Perwone and his wife Rosalind, neurosurgeon and lawyer respectively. The invaders are Baxter and Nige', both of whom have been involved in an earlier confrontation with Henry following a car accident from which Henry extricates himself when he diagnoses the early signs of Huntington's disease in Baxter's 'vaguely ape-like features' (McEwan 2006: 97). Later on, Baxter and his accomplice, knife in hand, follow Rosalind into the house as she arrives back from work, and just as the February 2003 anti-war march breaks up outside. It is clear immediately that Baxter, with his 'agitated physical reality', 'sour nicotine tang' and 'monkeyish air' is set on extracting a violent revenge on Henry and his family (207). Having broken the nose of Henry's father-in-law—a poet named Grammaticus—he forces his daughter Daisy—also a poet—to strip naked. But, just at this moment, when some act of awful

A. Smith, *Class and the Uses of Poetry*, Sociology of the Arts,
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humiliation seems imminent, Baxter pauses, unsettled by the discovery that Daisy is pregnant. Instead, his attention turns to a volume of her poems lying close at hand: 'Read one. Read out your best poem. Come on. Let's have a poem' (219). So, it comes about that Daisy recites, from memory, not one of her own verses but rather Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. McEwan describes the effect on Baxter in visceral terms, subtly echoing the language of the poem in the process: 'his grip on the knife looks slacker, and his posture, the peculiar yielding angle of his spine, suggests a possible ebbing of intent. Could it happen, is it within the bounds of the real, that a mere poem of Daisy's could precipitate a mood swing?' (221). Indeed it could: Baxter, who doesn't recognise the source of the poem, becomes rapturous—'You wrote that. You wrote that […] It's beautiful. You know that, don't you. It's beautiful. And you wrote it'—changing in the course of a few moments into an 'amazed admirer', an 'excited child' (222). He grabs up the volume of Daisy's poetry—'I'm taking this. OK?'—and then, tricked by Perwone's promise of access to a fictitious trial of new medication, follows him upstairs to his office where he is, in the end, overpowered (223).

Whilst it has all the trappings of a thriller, there is also something of the fairytale about the way in which McEwan constructs this scene. His use of a free indirect style makes it just about possible to pass off the derogatory descriptions of Baxter as an intimation of Perwone's own prejudices. But the responsibility for what happens next, for the imagining of the quasi-magical metamorphosis which takes place, belongs to the author. When Perwone realises that he cannot, in that moment, call upon the support of the institutions of the state, when he realises that 'These two are real fighters' and that he cannot hope to overpower them physically, he casts around in desperation, wondering: 'What else then' (218)? And the 'what else' which intervenes at the critical juncture is culture. Culture and, above all, poetry as the epitomising instance of that culture. The fact that Baxter has Huntington's disease offers a kind of narrative alibi for his abrupt transformation but nonetheless the moral lesson of the scene is explicit: the mere speaking aloud of the poetic word is enough to tame the unruly working-class subject, to open their eyes to beauty, to rid them of their angry resentments. It is poetry which steps in, at the point of extremity, to shore up the social order. The scene ends with Baxter being thrown down the townhouse's elegant stairwell, but that physical fate is only a kind of objective expression of what has already been done to him in cultural terms.

* * *

In other words, the relationship between the working-class reader and canonical poetry is imagined here as a relationship of domination. Of course, this is not at all how the scene feels in the telling; indeed, in that context, it is Baxter and his sidekick who are introduced as the bearers of threat, of chaotic disorder, such that the ending of the scene is clearly meant to leave the reader with a sense of reassurance or relief at the restoration of a proper state of affairs. But in imagining this last ditch triumph of culture over the 'ignorant armies' that surround it, McEwan is necessarily required to unveil, to put on display, something of how cultural authority is sustained, what the normative assumptions undergirding that authority might be. In other words, although the story presents Baxter as the agent of violence, McEwan cannot give us the resolution he does without showing us, at the same time, the operation of a different form of violence, of what Pierre Bourdieu famously called 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling' (2001: 1–2).

For Bourdieu, as this quote indicates, symbolic violence names a mode of domination which is differentiated from real violence by the fact that it takes place with the tacit agreement of those involved. In his view, we can only hope to explain the otherwise bewildering reproduction of a social world characterised by gross inequality if we recognise how domination is converted into symbolic forms and practices which allow that domination to appear legitimate, even just. That process rests on a double move, both parts of which are necessarily reproduced in this scene from *Saturday*. On the one hand, the 'games of culture', as Bourdieu calls them, operate under the assumption that the products of those games—novels, art, poetry and so forth—are, in principle, equally accessible to all members of that culture (1984: 224–5). The claim of culture is therefore presumed to be an entirely open and uninhibited one. The poem merely needs to be heard in order to be understood. Indeed, there is a sense in which the pacifying force of culture, like the peace of God, bypasses understanding altogether: Arnold's poem acts on Baxter more like a spell or an incantation than a form of communication. It astonishes, convicts and changes him by its own intrinsic power.

On the other hand, and in reality, the ability to appreciate poetry, to take pleasure in it and to be able to relate to it in ways that are deemed appropriate—the ability to take symbolic ownership of it—depends upon a long process of acculturation. To *be* 'cultured', in this sense, is always a matter of having *been* 'cultured', of slowly inculcated dispositions, which reflect the extent of one's access to a plethora of unequally distributed resources: having a famous poet as a grandfather, for instance; having had the opportunity to learn 'Dover Beach' by heart. But, the consequences of these structured inequalities are lodged so deeply that they quickly cease to be considered social phenomena at all, appearing rather as innate qualities of the person, attributes 'pitched not so much beyond words as below them, in gestures and movements of the body' (1984: 80). The corollary is that those without these attributes are condemned by their bearing, by their very selves, by their 'agitated physical realities'. Set next to the cultured, the uncultured must appear gauche at best (an 'excited child'), brutish at worst (a monkey, an ape, a potential rapist).

For this reason, then, symbolic violence is construed—as is the case, indeed, in this scene—not as a mode of domination at all but as the necessary and morally warranted shape of social relations between those who are, or are not, properly civilised and as mediated by their respective relationships with the most consecrated cultural objects. Baxter is compelled by the beauty of the poem, a beauty before which he can do nothing other than profess: 'It's beautiful'. But, what he is compelled *into*, thereby, is submission to a set of unequal social relations, as expressed in his sudden, self-abasing, gushing obeisance: '"How could you have thought of that? I mean, you just wrote it." And then he says it again, several times over: "You wrote it!"' (McEwan 2006: 223). In this context, his misattribution of Daisy's authorship is perfectly fitting. It bespeaks his acknowledgement of her symbolic authority, of the fact that she can lay claim to those words in a way that he never will. Thus, domination is rendered invisible precisely because it is enacted through culture, through a poem by Matthew Arnold, no less, under cover of the exonerating promise that poetry bears in its hands nothing more forceful, nothing more violent, than sweetness and light.

* * *

This scene from McEwan's story depends, of course, on the engineering of an encounter between a canonical piece of poetry and an unanticipated

listener, an encounter which has the effect of putting that listener safely in their place. This meeting needs to occur in order to facilitate the ideological resolution of the novel. But it is important to be clear that this is not the situation which, generally speaking, Bourdieu has in mind when he talks about symbolic violence being 'invisible even to its victims'. What he means, in that respect, is that such violence is more usually and most compellingly expressed in the avoidance of such encounters altogether. For all of us, Bourdieu argues in a well-known passage, our embodied sense of our place within the social world tends to act as a 'generator of practices adjusted to the regularities inherent in a condition […] a virtue made of necessity which continuously transforms necessity into virtue by inducing "choices" which correspond to the condition of which it is the product' (1984: 175). More simply: we learn to like the things we have to like and to avoid, or find distasteful, those things which are out of our reach. This does not mean that Bourdieu thinks that the experience of dispossession goes unchallenged. He insists, indeed, that 'agents always find some defences, individual or collective, momentary or durable […] such as irony, humour […] "stubborn obstinacy", and so many other forms of misunderstood resistance' (2000: 223). Nonetheless, as a whole, his analysis is characterised by a blunt, hard-headed realism about the lived consequences of social domination, a realism intended to disabuse us of the soothing reassurances of the 'populist mystique': 'Having adapted to the demands of the world which has made them what they are [those who are dispossessed] take for granted the greater part of their existence' (231). Symbolic violence thus operates most insidiously in the form of a correspondence between our internalised sense of possibility, indeed our sense of what might be pleasurable or desirable, and the limitations already imposed by our social trajectory. For the most part, therefore, in his account, those whose educational or economic circumstances have denied them access to the most valued forms of culture, such as poetry, will tend to respond by 'refusing what they are refused […] reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them' (1984: 471).

The contrasting view—a brave or naïve defence of the populist mystique, depending on one's perspective—is perhaps best represented by someone like Michel de Certeau, whose writings on everyday life place a much more concerted emphasis on the fugitive manoeuvres by which ordinary people subvert the structures of social authority. In a famous chapter, de Certeau extends this argument to the practices of reading

specifically. Although heavily commercialised forms of production have had the effect of hollowing out the promise of culture as a civilising force, he argues, they continue to reproduce the assumption that the ordinary reader does little more than dumbly ingest the texts that they are given. In place of the idealised citizen, pedagogically moulded in the image of the liberal arts, we have the idealised consumer, recipient of ever more narrow and instrumentally directed reading matter. What remains constant, however, across these constructions, is the assumption that 'to read is to receive [a text] from someone else without putting one's mark on it, without remaking it' (1980: 169). To this extent, de Certeau, like Bourdieu, certainly sees the question of what and how we are able to read as one which is implicated in the wider question of social inequality: 'Reading is as it were overprinted by a relationship of forces […] whose instrument it becomes' (171). One explicit expression of this fact is the way in which the most treasured cultural texts come to exist as a kind of 'private hunting reserve', a terrain to which only a handful of privileged critics own the 'passport' granting the status of 'official interpreter'.

Where de Certeau differs markedly from Bourdieu, however, is in his assertion that these reserves are also the site of an unlicensed but ineradicable process of 'poaching'. Ordinary readers, he insists, always do more than simply settle for what they are given. Reading is a 'doing', a process of appropriation, of sceptical commentary and creative application; in short, a constant making of meaning in ways that refuse to be wholly governed, either by the content of the text itself or by the expository fiat of intellectuals. All of this is evidence, de Certeau claims, of a '*common* poetics', routinely disregarded and denied institutional authority, but forever breaking through the placid surface of elite reading practices (172, italics in original). Indeed de Certeau goes so far as to take the image of poetic creativity, more generally, as a metaphor for understanding the creative responses of ordinary people within the confining structures of social life. To those agents, he insists, such structures are equivalent to 'the rules of meter and rhyme for poets of earlier times: a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules within which improvisation plays' (xxii).

Bourdieu and de Certeau thus offer two exemplary but very differently orientated ways of conceptualising the relationship between working-class readers and canonical forms of culture such as poetry. For the latter, the crucial question is what people *do* in the moment of cultural reception, as the page is turned, when the programme is switched on. It is the tactical

creativity at play in how people make use of the stuff of cultural life that de Certeau is concerned to emphasise; ordinary readers are involved in a *practice* when they read and there is an always-potentially-subversive quality to those practices in his account. From the Bourdieusian perspective, this optimism is, to a significant extent, premature. De Certeau's metaphor of the ordinary reader poaching on the game reserves of high culture ignores the degree to which our response to culture is incorporated in a more-or-less intuitive sense of what one likes, or does not like, to read; of what kinds and styles of texts one might find enjoyable. These questions of taste, moreover, are already structured by a range of objective factors: whether one can read at all, for example, or whether one can afford to read. In short, for Bourdieu, one cannot 'poach' from a terrain that one does not see: 'The *sense* of limits implies *forgetting* the limits' (1984: 471, italics in original). On this view, the fences around the game reserves of high culture may not be experienced as external to the reader at all—not barriers over or under which we might decide to clamber—but rather as a landscape formed within ourselves, reflecting the exclusions of lived experience, and shaping our subjective sense of what is possible, pleasurable or worth the investment of time and energy.

* * *

One of the very first examples which de Certeau introduces in order to illustrate the possibility of a practice of reception that unsettles, rather than accedes to, the authority of the text is that of Indigenous communities in the Spanish empire. These communities, he suggests:

> often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of 'consumption.' To a lesser degree, a similar ambiguity creeps into our societies through the use made by the 'common people' of the culture disseminated and imposed by the 'elites' producing the language. (1980: xiii)

A little later on, he specifically criticises Bourdieu for not arriving at a similar conclusion. The latter, he argues, acknowledges much more readily the subversive ways in which official culture might be received and refashioned when he writes about Algeria than he does when he writes about metropolitan France. It is, de Certeau says, 'as though a different space were required in which to make visible and elucidate the tactics marginalized by the Western form of rationality' (50).

De Certeau is neither the first, nor the only, writer to draw this analytical connection. Decades earlier, at the end of the 1940s, C.L.R. James had drafted a study which emphasised the extent to which the audiences of American mass culture found in that culture a sense of charged contradiction, a 'derisive symbol of the contrast between ideals and reality' (1993: 127). There is no question that James' argument, in this regard, was informed directly by his recognition of the ways in which those living in colonised societies had appropriated the canonical texts of European culture, finding in them all kinds of dissident meaning including an awareness of the even more highly charged contradiction between Europe's professed ideals and the realities of colonial rule.[1] In a more general sense, it is unquestionably the case that writers reflecting on the politics of reading in the contexts of empire, or in the experience of racialised communities in America and elsewhere, have been some of those who—both in their own practice, and in their conceptual writing—have demonstrated most compellingly the critical resilience of ordinary readers. Think, for example, of the fiercely independent exposition of Christian scripture by the late eighteenth century radical and abolitionist Robert Wedderburn, his repudiation of any 'doctrine, however plausible, but what he perceived in his own judgement' and his corresponding injunction to his audience that they, likewise, should 'pay no attention to any man, but search for yourselves' (1991: 67, 69). Think of Anna Julia Cooper's deft, critical reading of the politics of representation in the canons of American literature (1998). Or think of the extent to which, by his own account, Chinua Achebe's epoch-making fiction was catalysed by a 'landmark rebellion' over the reading of Joyce Cary's *Mr Johnson:* 'Here was a whole class of young Nigerian students […] united in their view of a book of English fiction in complete opposition to their English teacher, who was moreover backed by the authority of metropolitan critical judgement' (2000: 23). Achebe's characteristic concern with the power of stories was, in this sense, always also a concern with the critical awareness of the reader, of their ability—as in that moment in the classroom

in Ibadan—to repudiate the ways in which literary texts might serve to shape theirs sense of the world and of their place within it.

To a significant extent, then, it is work in these traditions which has borne witness to the interpretive autonomy of ordinary readers even when other traditions—such as those of the Frankfurt School—have come close to losing sight of that autonomy.[2] All the same, there is something too simplistic in de Certeau's claim that practices of reading in the contexts of empire offer us, straightforwardly, an example of how 'common people', as such, respond to the texts of official culture. It is too simple because it disregards the extent to which culture is itself a racialised, and racialising, category. Readers in the colonial context were placed in a radically different position in relation to the texts of European culture precisely because that culture was a fundamental part of how the difference between 'coloniser' and 'colonised' was established. Hence, Frantz Fanon's angry insistence that:

> when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife—or at least he makes sure it is within reach. The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him. (1963: 33)

There is, of course, a corollary to this point: even non-elite White readers in metropolitan societies are situated in a particular relationship to those same texts. That relationship may well be one characterised by symbolic domination, but it is nonetheless one framed by the normative assumption that they are, at least in some partial or provisional sense, insiders to the racialised category of 'Western culture'.

These same questions need to be raised, as various writers have argued, with respect to Bourdieu's analysis as well (for example: Yosso 2005; Wallace 2018). As we have seen, Bourdieu's account of symbolic violence presents submission to cultural authority as a submission *into* something: symbolic violence entails the embodied sense of occupying a position within a particular social field—albeit a subordinate position—and the acknowledgement of a set of common understandings about the value of the symbolic currencies which are at stake within that field—even if one comes to understand oneself, thereby, as a 'loser'. What Bourdieu did

not emphasise to any great extent was the fact that processes of historical racialisation are a formidable and distinctive part of these dynamics of symbolic domination. Thus, to reiterate, one way in which that domination has become forceful within European societies is precisely via the assumption that even those who are dominated domestically are, at some level, heirs to a shared cultural patrimony. It is not so much, we might say, a question of their 'owning' this culture as of that culture 'owning' them. Conversely, though, for those who are constructed as racially different this cultural boundary has been a deeply exclusionary one, positioning them not as submissive insiders but as antipathetic others, as figures of an exterior against which that culture defines itself. As so often, James Baldwin, reflecting here on his life in the small Swiss village of Leukerbad, articulates this distinction with great clarity:

> the culture of these people controls me but they can scarcely be held responsible for European culture […] Yet they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in the village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have – however unconsciously – inherited. For this village, even were it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted […] The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me. (2017 [1958]: 169)

I make this excursus, then, because any attempt to map the processes of symbolic domination as they play out in the relationship between readers and cultural texts, requires us to remember that class and 'race' are imbricated categories. Overwhelmingly, the people attending the groups with which I met were white. Most were white Scottish although some came from Irish-Catholic families—a community which has itself been subject to a specific history of racialisation (see, for example, Ignatiev 2009 [1995])— or from other European migrant backgrounds. As we will see, the responses of these readers to the poems we read together demonstrated a great deal about culture as the conduit of symbolic violence and about the tactical and critical resources with which these largely working-class readers responded to that violence. All the same, it is important to recognise that the enduring effect of the racialised construction of culture was always potentially there, in the background as it were, rarely

explicit and breaking the surface only occasionally, when—for instance—the poetry we were discussing was contrasted with rap. Or, occasionally, in inflections of the patriotic language with which some older readers recalled the canonical war poems that they had learned at school. Those moments were a reminder that it is always possible—possible, but by no means inevitable—for the relationship to 'legitimate' culture to mediate a sense of racialised belonging for white British readers, even in situations where its texts are encountered as the weaponry of symbolic subjugation.

* * *

I have been able to find very few recent accounts that set out to investigate, in qualitative detail, what takes place in the encounter between working-class readers and canonical poetry in the exemplary way that, for instance, Bridget Fowler (1991) investigated the reading of popular romances. There are, of course, influential debates about how far Bourdieu's description of the relationship between class and culture remains accurate (for example: Peterson and Kern 1996; Warde et al. 2007). There are, also, general explorations of the changing shape of reading habits in different national settings (for example: Griswold, McDonnell and Wright 2005). For the most part, this work, based on survey data, is concerned with describing the broad social patterns of people's engagement with culture, rather than with understanding how that engagement does, or does not, occur. When poetry is addressed in more qualitatively orientated research, it is often in the context of studies which explore locally rooted poetries, work produced and shared within particular communities as a resource of self-expression, dialogue, solidarity and resistance (for example: Hunter et al. 2016; Plys 2020). These accounts are certainly crucial. Moving in the tradition of earlier studies such as those by Hall and Whannel (1964), or Maguire et al. (1982), their attention to specific cultures of poetry helps to shed light on the vast hinterland of popular creativity which lies beyond the 'game reserves' of canonical culture.

My interest in this chapter, however, is precisely with what happens at the fences of those reserves, how those fences are erected, how they take effect, the extent to which they might be internalised and how readers respond to them. That means, crucially, attending to the experiences of those who do *not* generally read poetry—certainly not consecrated, published poetry—or who have not done so to any significant extent since they were at school. It means exploring what happens in the encounter

between those readers and those kinds of poetry, encounters which might sometimes be discomforting, even antagonistic. As I argued, briefly, in the previous chapter, the reason why we need to attend to this uneasy relationship is that in the absence of that attention, we risk drawing analytical conclusions on the basis of a sample which is comprised of those who *do* read and use poetry in their lives; a sample, in other words, which is already formed in the image of the exclusions we should be investigating.

Take, for instance, Joan Shelley Rubin's often remarkable *Songs of Ourselves*, a study from 2007, which describes the everyday engagements with poetry in America from around 1880 through to the period following the Second World War. Rubin's investigation, which makes ingenious use of a tremendous array of textual sources— diaries, anthologies, autobiographies, scrapbooks and non-scientific surveys—is one of very few (see also Chasar 2012), which really does seek to describe, close-up, the diverse ways in which poetry has been read and understood by what she calls 'ordinary people'. That work is illuminating and it allows Rubin, amongst other things, to draw out the complexities at play in the quotidian uses of poetry, not least the extent to which those uses show scant regard for the demarcations over which literary critics and cultural sociologists have spilt a great deal of ink (commercial vs. highbrow; traditional vs. modernist, etc.). Yet, silent within Rubin's study, by definition, are all of those for whom poetry has no meaningful reality or conceivable value in their lives, those who don't or can't read it. And it is precisely this silence—a constitutive silence, in Pierre Macherey's sense—which allows Rubin to offer a largely unqualified celebration of the autonomy of ordinary readers of poetry, their ability to establish 'provisional meanings through the ways they understand and use print', including 'for ends its creators might not have anticipated' (2007: 7). It is this silence, moreover, which allows Rubin to insist that class (as well as race and gender) cannot be treated as 'explanations of reading differences but as categories to be reckoned with in charting the many factors that shape the dissemination and reception of a text' (10). Even on repeated reading, it is not easy to understand quite what it means to distinguish between class as an 'explanation' of reading practices, on the one hand, and class as a 'category to be reckoned with' which might 'shape' the 'reception of a text', on the other. The intention is clearly to avoid any whiff of determinism, anything that threatens to impugn the 'interpretive prerogative' (403) of the ordinary reader, their ability to read in unexpectedly catholic ways across genres, styles and traditions. This brightly

encouraging view is possible because, of course, all of the evidence that Rubin has comes from those who are already to be found within the game reserves of poetry. Mostly, from what we might think of as licensed visitors at that—she acknowledges that 'the readers I discuss are by and large middle-class' (10)—although some are rather more in the vein of de Certeau's illicit poachers. In any case, it's no wonder that the resulting analysis is one that places its accent so strongly on the side of readerly agency, and so strongly against the suggestion that such agency might be shaped or delimited by forms of exclusion. Bourdieu's point about the 'forgetting of limits' applies to those who are privileged as well as to those who are not: if everything we see lies inside the reserve already then it's all too easy to forget that the fences are there.

* * *

The extent to which the fences *are* there became apparent to me very quickly, from the moments in which I first sought to reach out to people who might be willing to take part in this project. At a local library, for instance, the woman working behind the desk was happy to display some leaflets I had made up, and kindly promised to mention them to the groups which made use of a meeting room at the back of the building. But when I asked her whether the library hosted any reading clubs that I could approach directly, she said: '*we do have a reading group but, to be honest, they don't do much reading and this wouldn't be for them*'. According to my field notes from the time, she made a 'fly away' motion with her hands and added: '*it would go over them*'. At a nearby community centre, meanwhile, the attendant in the porter's box was no less generous in showing me around, and in trying to put me in touch with some of the organisations which met regularly in the building. Yet when I had first sought, rather falteringly, to explain what the project was about, his immediate response had been to say: '*to be honest I couldnae help you with anything about poetry*'. He waved his hands as he spoke in a gesture which I took be an indication of refusal, although it might equally have been read as a warding off of something unwanted. And when, a little later, I attended a meeting of a group of older people at an arts project to ask whether they might be interested in being involved, it was clear from the moment that I began to speak that simply posing that question—or more accurately, my posing of that question—was felt to be intrusive, ill-mannered. Having listened patiently to what I had to say, a woman acting

as the de facto spokesperson for the group explained that they were too busy with an ongoing project to participate and then noted that it just '*wasnae for them*'. At this point she became a little more heated, adding that she had always hated poems, even at school. '*You want to go up to the West End*', she said—referring to one of the city's wealthiest districts and site of the university by which I am employed —'*they think they're better educated than us*'.

On a different occasion, I had gone along to another community group to introduce the project and was sitting afterwards having some food with others who were there. I got talking to the man next to me and he said, pointedly: '*you couldn't have done something useful [with your life], like be a brickie or an engineer?*' When I asked him whether he thought that poetry might not also be useful in some ways he was sharply dismissive, describing it as hopelessly pretentious and self-important. Like a number of other people that I spoke with during the course of the research, he contrasted written poetry to blues; a reminder, qualifying what I noted above, that the traditions of popular culture, and the ways in which people consume those traditions, can cut across racialised boundaries. Unlike poets, he said, the great blues artists understood that less is more, that you can take the most ordinary or ephemeral of experiences—'*a moon rising over a roof*'—and turn them into a song. When I asked him whether, all the same, he might want to take part in the project, he looked at me with incredulity: '*you're asking me! After what I've just fucking told you?*' Sometime later in the evening, catching me smiling at something the person sitting next to me had said, he turned and asked: '*what are you laughing at? Have you just thought of a line for a new poem?*'.

It was not, of course, that I did not anticipate the hesitation with which an invitation to read and talk about poetry might be greeted. I did expect that for many prospective readers that proposition might be met with some combination of reluctance, hesitancy or uncertainty. But, what I had not really appreciated was just how condemnatory it might feel to those who had little familiarity with that kind of poetry. Those responses certainly bore witness to the reality of symbolic violence. It is a relevant description because of the extent to which assumptions about who was authorised to talk about poetry were not only imposed upon prospective readers by others (it's not for them) but were also, often, self-imposed (it's not for us). Yet this was clearly not the whole story. Encounters like these last two mentioned made me feel that Bourdieu places too concerted an emphasis on the *imperceptibility* of symbolic violence to

those who experience it. Witness, for instance, his claim that 'the awareness of [cultural] deprivation decreases in proportion as the deprivation increases, individuals who are most completely dispossessed of the means of appropriation of works of art being the most completely dispossessed of the awareness of this dispossession' (1993: 227). What came across in these moments, by contrast, was the degree to which that violence *is* often recognised as such, and can be responded to as such. Thus the man's question to me—'*what are you laughing at*'—was, tacitly, a way of asking another question: '*who* are you laughing at?' It was a question deliberately intended to drag into view the potential violence of that encounter, the extent to which 'laughing at poetry' might also be laughter at those who are deemed unpoetic. Given this, the refusal to engage with formal or published poetry cannot be assumed to reflect, necessarily, an internalisation of the limits of cultural authority. There may also be a much more 'tactical' quality to those responses, a knowing avoidance of what is foreseen to be a situation characterised by domination, a situation which might inscribe that domination into lived experience. Beyond that again, and as in the case of the last speaker cited here, is the possibility of something further. That is to say, a calling out of legitimate cultural authority; an insistence, in defiance of that authority, that canonical poetry itself be subjugated to a relativising or disenchanting contrast with the clarity, the uncluttered precision, of popular aesthetic traditions.

* * *

To read a poem is, self-evidently, to encounter something which is *meant*. Meant, but not in the indifferent sense in which the text of a receipt, or a bill, or an advert—or, indeed, in most cases, a text message—means something (although see Manghani 2017 for a defense on the poetics of texting!). Rather, and as discussed in the first chapter, poetry can be understood as emerging in the effort to redeem language from its submission to mundane utilitarian purpose, from its desiccating entailment in the framing of instructions, the sharing of information and all of the instrumentalisation of language that takes place in course of just getting things done. This is perhaps why Henri Lefebvre talked about poetry offering a 'protest against the functional' (2014: 497); it also, no doubt, why Auden believed that poetry created a place 'where executives / would never want to tamper'. It is certainly what Hans-Georg Gadamer had in mind when he described poetry as 'the word that stands', as a practice, which uses the

'structuring of sound, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, assonance, and so on' in order to 'haul back and bring to a standstill the fleeting word which points beyond itself' (1986a: 134).

Claims of this kind are common enough in critical writing on poetry but they were also echoed in the views and reported practices of those with whom I spoke, including many of those who did not consider themselves to be readers of poetry at all. Take, for instance, this reflection from Sandra, a middle-aged woman who I met, and talked to, together with her friend Maeve[3]:

> *I've got to say that I haven't read poetry since basically I was at school, unless it's been in a card or something where there's been a poem in it. I've got say that if I ever buy a card that's what I look for. Hopefully it will say what I'm trying to say.*

A little later on, in the course of a discussion about whether or not it was preferable for poems to rhyme, she returned to this point:

> *If I have to buy a card for somebody I like it to have nice words, so that the person that I'm sending it to knows what I'm thinking when I send it to them, you know, this is the wishes that I'm sending, this is what I'm hoping for the future. These are all the nice things that I'm sending to you, I couldn't write it as nice as that. I couldn't probably put into the words they've written, but I've read it and I thought, it's really nice, I think they'll understand what I mean by this […] You go to write that in a card yourself, you've written it and you think, it's no really what I meant to say.*

Other readers made similar comments, talking about the fact that they might reach for poetry, if at all, in those occasional moments outside of daily routine—when someone dies; when you fall in love—when it was felt to be most necessary to find what another participant called the '*proper words*', the words that would establish that what was being said really was '*what you meant to say*'. Or, to put it slightly differently, when it mattered that the words used had a heft, a crafted quality, which salvaged them from the relentless 'using up' of language in everyday speech.

Sometimes, indeed, in the course of these conversations, it was possible to catch a poignant glimpse of just how far poetry can successfully establish a 'word that stands', a work on language that endures even when, as in this case, the material record of that work is itself long lost:

Kate: *My mother wrote poetry, and unfortunately her notebook got lost. My sister and I used to make fun of her […] I only remember the first two lines, and she wrote: 'I sit and gaze at the Conval hills / and I think of the times that are gone'. I can't remember the rest, and the notebook was lost.*

Angie: *That's heart-breaking.*

Kate: *Absolutely. Now, we used to make fun of her. She didn't have time for sitting gazing at any Conval hills, she had 6 children to bring up. But she must have written her thoughts in this little notebook. We may find it, I keep hoping we'll discover it again.*

In the same way, Alan, a retired former engineer, remembered a man he had known who had died in an accident at the Stephen and Sons shipyard after he fell from the gantry where he was stationed. '*Five year in submarines, they couldnae get him*,' Alan recalled, '*the yard got him in one day*'. In the course of telling me this story, he began to recite, spontaneously, a poem that another acquaintance had written at the time. It was not, as I understood it, written specifically about this event, but it was clearly bound into that memory for Alan, the words becoming a way of ensuring that the death was not just swept away and lost in the passage of time: '*His mother came to him last night / said come to me, my child / when they laid him in the ground at dawn / they wondered that he smiled*'.

The poem, then, means something. It is this quality of being deliberately meant which is precisely what distinguishes it from everyday speech, not just in the musings of philosophers, but in the uses made of poetry by ordinary readers. Yet, it is also precisely this prospect, the poem's promise of meaningfulness, which turns the reading of poetry into a kind of ambush in situations where readers find the poem with which they are confronted opaque, elusive or impossible to grasp. Such a situation entails a particularly perplexing and infuriating contradiction, the simultaneous promise and denial of meaning. Indeed, more than this, the denial of meaning by the very cultural object which is constituted by the quality of being meant. It was, understandably then, this contradiction and the need to navigate it, which was pivotal to some of the responses of the readers with whom I talked.

* * *

Start, for instance, at the level of the words themselves. To the reader who comes to poetry bearing the relevant kinds of cultural capital much of the sincerely felt pleasure of reading emerges in those moments of recognition when it seems as if 'this word' fits absolutely in 'this place'. Witness, for example, the claim by the influential literary critic I. A. Richards that whilst a single word may, in and of itself, be interpreted in many ways, 'let it occur in such an intricate whole as a poem and the responses of competent readers may have a similarity which only its occurrence in such a whole can secure' (2001 [1924]: 6). For Richards, this possibility exists because the poem is the product of the poet's striving for precisely this 'sense of its rightness' (24), the struggle to craft, in Coleridge's reported phrase, 'the best words in the best order'. Insofar as this is achieved, the poem attains an integrity or an organic unity characterised by just this feeling that each part is meaningfully dependent on each other part. This 'wrought composure', Richards argues, calls out to us, granting to the receptive reader the experience of a species of grace, a balanced clarity which allows them for a moment 'to see things as they really are […] freed from the bewilderment which our own maladjustment brings with it' (236). Thus poetry, as the careful forming of language, also acts in formative ways on its audience with effects which, he insists, are less a matter of 'our perceiving a pattern in something outside of us' than of 'our becoming patterned ourselves' (127).

This argument could almost be the theoretical mandate for the scene from Ian McEwan's novel with which we started the chapter: the poem as a transparently accessible, morally transformative object. Here, then, the same objections apply because, of course, an ability to acclaim the wrought composure of the poem, the vivid sense that each word fits in its place—what Appleyard called the 'actual immanence of all in each' (1971: 142)—depends absolutely on an ability to 'perceive the pattern'. That ability is not a natural one, is not an endowment with which we enter the world. It is, rather, contingent on the reader having already in mind some awareness of the antecedents or traditions to which that creative effort is addressed and in the context of which the relationships between parts of the poem might feel serendipitously apt, jarringly off-key, fresh-minted or hackneyed, or whatever the case may be. In this sense Richards wants to eat his cake whilst still having it, claiming for the poem an ability to create readers in the image of its own composure, yet surreptitiously requiring of those readers that they know, already, whereof they read.

Hence the telling but unelaborated qualifications which hedge his argument, limiting its relevance to what he terms, variously, the 'competent' reader, the 'sensitive' reader, the 'right kind' of reader or the 'suitable reader'. All of these are, of course, ways of admitting that what he truly has in mind are readers who know what 'words in the best order' look like when they see them and readers who know, more fundamentally still, what those words mean. As Wolfgang Iser wryly puts it in his discussion of the 'oft quoted ideal reader': 'It is difficult to pinpoint precisely where he is drawn from, though there is a good deal to be said for the claim that he tends to emerge from the brain of the philologist or critic himself' (1978: 28).

So, what of the reader who falls outside of these critical demarcations? What of the reader who, for instance, does not recognise or misunderstands a particular word? This is the concluding stanza of Don Paterson's poem 'The Circle': '*look at the little avatar / of your muddy water-jar / filling with the perfect ring / singing under everything*'. Many of those who took part in these sessions found Paterson's poem deeply moving and drew from it a lesson about a willingness to accept the world in all of its flawed, imperfect reality. It is a poem which teaches us, as Sandy put it, to recognise and take solace in a sense of '*continuity*', to understand that even when '*things go badly wrong […] things still move on*'. Nonetheless, these concluding lines in particular, and those which precede them in Paterson's poem, were also the subject of protracted discussion in a number of the reading groups, a discussion which was sometimes characterised by a sense of frustration at what was felt to be their opacity. Here, for instance, is the response from Alan, the former engineer quoted above:

> *I couldnae get any reaction to it, you know [reads silently for a moment]. No, I simply couldn't connect to this […] I don't, I cannae get this, I can see some sense in the first lines—'even when you rage and moan / and bring your fist down like a stone / on your spoiled work and useless kit'… someone on the verge of despair. But I can't get this: 'you just can't help but broadcast it / look at the little avatar'. What's an avatar?*

To respond to the poem as an 'intricate whole', as something in which each word is constitutively related to those around it, presumes before anything else that one understands those words. If a word like 'avatar' is not one that is familiar then that 'intricate whole' necessarily presents a

very different face to its reader, becoming instead an impenetrable object, a closed fist, as was evident from these further responses:

> ***William:*** *Does anyone know what avatar means, is it blue planet or whatever? I meant to look it up in some dictionary, to see whether it was an actual word […]*
>
> ***Ben:*** *I don't know what's going on in the poem. It didn't tie in for me, it was trying to make … cause the first verse when you read it out, I kind of thought, is it gonnae start making more sense?*
>
> ***AS:*** *Yes.*
>
> ***Ben:*** *And I ended up like that towards the end being … because I've read it three times, and I didn't particularly understand it. So I tried just to listen to it, to see if that helped. But I was just, I couldn't get there.*

It is, in short, precisely the tightly interwoven quality of the poetic text which can become exclusionary to the reader who does not recognise a given word or a specific technical device. That reader finds themselves exiled from the poem's meaningfulness, as it were, faced by a text which constantly withholds the very thing which it ought to hold out; its words and phrases appearing, not as the intertwined components of a meaningful whole, but rather as disconnected things that will not '*tie in*', which refuse to come together in a fashion which '*starts making more sense*'.

This does not mean, at all, that readers who felt this way about *The Circle* thought that it was meaning*less*. Quite the opposite: as will be evident already, what was articulated in these responses was an experience of the poem as the bearer of private meaning, a meaning which it kept to itself, locked in some place beyond the reader's reach, somewhere they '*couldn't get to*'. Nor, as this last quote makes clear, was that frustrated sense of exclusion due to any lack of readerly diligence. Indeed, it was felt all the more strongly precisely because of the extent of that diligence. Overwhelmingly, those who took part in the groups talked about the time they had spent reflecting on these poems, reading and re-reading them or listening to the recordings. Quite often, in the course of the discussion, participants would pause in order to read aloud passages that they felt were tricky or recalcitrant, trying, as one participant put it, '*to make them catch*'. Moreover, these efforts involved considerable analytical

resourcefulness. Thus, to stick with the present example, a number of readers assumed, understandably, that 'avatar' was a reference to James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film *Avatar*, in which the word describes a technology allowing a person's consciousness to be downloaded into a surrogate body. With this as the explanatory key, they proceeded to develop specific accounts of what was taking place in the poem:

Thomas: *'The Circle's' quite interesting.*
AS: *Yeah? The first one?*
Thomas: *[…] If you take the first 4 parts intae it, you read the first couple of parts and you don't understand it, and you get to the bottom five, you get to the last two, and you pick up on the whole story, what he's talking about.*
AS: *What's happened at the end? Cause I find it, I find it a little hard to understand what's going on right at the end.*
Thomas: *Well, if you read it at the end, even, it was a wee boy that was always drawing but when he tried to write it up he couldnae finish it off, and he just constantly scribbled up all his pages, and threw them away, because […] his brush was getting wrapped round like a snake, and then out came the avatar, and the avatar is, if you've seen the film you'll know what that was all about […] you go back up – 'the shake's as old as he is, all / thank god, his body can recall / of that hour when one inch from home / we couldn't get the air into him'. Then he goes out in the avatar, it's them bringing him back in as a young boy.*
AS: *Right.*
Thomas: *You know, when you look as his muddy water jar, filling the perfect ring, singing under everything….*
AS: *Yes?*
Thomas: *So, he's achieved his goal.*

This example makes clear what was made equally clear in many other instances. Where readers reported being unable to '*get*' a particular poem, that experience was in no way due to any lack of imagination or interpretive creativity or sheer determination. As Thomas said to me, a little later: '*Some [of these poems] you can analyse dead quick, by just looking at them and then thinking about it by start, by middle and end. And others you've*

got look at it and go … this is just wild'. When I asked him which kind of poem he preferred, he said: '*the one that I like to work out […] Getting them straight away is dead boring [….] You've just got to put your thinking cap on with some of them I'd say: right – let's try and analyse it*'. De Certeau is absolutely right, in this respect, to emphasise the ingenuity of ordinary readers, and to caution us against underplaying the hermeneutical creativity which readers routinely bring to their engagements with unfamiliar cultural texts.

Recognising that this so matters, not least because it underscores the fact that insofar as readers are excluded from poetry, that exclusion takes place not from the inside out but from the outside in. They are excluded not by the absence of any inherent capacity within themselves—not in accordance with some pre-social distinction between 'right' kinds and wrong kinds of readers, in Richards' terms—but by the long-run ramifications of educational and economic inequalities which mean that the interpretive resources necessary to experience the poem as an intricately wrought whole are unevenly distributed. None of this, moreover, was inscrutable to those with whom I worked. Thomas, who worked as a taxi driver, went on to put it like this:

> *I think that somebody that reads poetry maybe seven days a week would understand them [the poems in the collection], very simple, whereas people like werselves, and this is no disrespect to anybody here, who don't read poetry often, don't pick it up often enough [or if] you pick it up its just because we've been doing this group today, you go … load a shite man. […] [T]hey don't understand it, and they don't want to analyse it and they just want to have a quick read and go, 'nat, that's no for me'.*

This last comment certainly speaks to Bourdieu's point about the ways in which cultural dispossession can be converted into a matter of taste, an internalised judgement about what does or doesn't belong to '*people like werselves*', symbolically speaking. Yet it felt to me, in the moment, that there was a much more reflexive and more critical edge to Thomas' statement as well. What was being indicted with that dismissive '*load a shite man*' was not just poetry as a particular cultural form but the wider structure of social relations in which it is possible for some people to read and take pleasure in poems '*seven days a week*' whilst for others it is something unfamiliar, an obstructive and sometimes perplexing presence.

* * *

In many respects, what I have argued in the preceding section is true also of the role played by allusion in poetry. A great deal of the response of what we might call the 'credentialed' reader depends on their ability to recognise the resonances of a given poem in relation to other poems and other cultural antecedents, to understand the literary nods and winks worked into choices of syntax, turns of phrase and semantic arrangement. It was in this sense that the formalist critic Jurji Tynyanov—pre-empting later, structuralist positions—argued that the literary work cannot be appreciated as an isolated object, that its meaningfulness is always in part a function of its relationship to other works within what he called 'the system of literature' (1971; see, more generally, Pomorska 1971). As with the claims of I. A. Richards that I considered above, this theory of literature comes with an unspoken, normative image of the reader in train. If the meaningfulness of a poem is dependent on its relationship to other poems, then it can only be fully accessible—it can only truly 'belong'—to those readers who are able to appreciate this web of intertextual relations, who have an awareness of how the work at hand is differentiated from, and indebted to, all of those other works which precede and surround it. For such readers, of course, that understanding sustains genuine forms of pleasure, deepening and extending their sense of the ways in which the work is meant. But these are also self-regarding pleasures. The ability to intuit and enjoy referential richness depends necessarily on the reader's own embodied appropriation of those riches. Reading, from the perspective of such readers, is thus always in part a performance of their own entitlement. Conversely, of course, for readers who do not recognise some or all of these allusions, the experience can be very different. Such references may face them not as a penumbra of widening resonance and implication—not as a doorway that opens onto the panorama of the 'system of literature'—but rather as a compounding layer of opacity, one more suit of armour beneath which the poem keeps its innermost meanings to itself.

A striking example here concerns the way in which different readers responded to Carol Ann Duffy's *Mrs Midas*. Taken from her collection *The World's Wife*, in this poem, Duffy retells the Midas story from the perspective of Midas' imagined partner. In doing so, she shifts the setting to a recognisable and contemporary world of middle-class domesticity whilst at the same time refusing to disenchant the myth or strip it of its magical elements. Hence in Duffy's version the hapless Midas really does make a 'burnished throne' of his armchair, really does turn the plumbing

golden, really does end up having to spit out his sweetcorn as it transforms into '*the teeth of the rich*' in his mouth. As this last example makes clear, throughout much of the poem, the poet is playing a kind of doubled game, refusing on the one hand to take the easy route by treating these alchemical changes as metaphorical, whilst relishing, on the other hand, the possibility of summoning up an array of striking metaphors to describe those changes in their materiality. A plucked pear becomes a lit bulb in Midas' perilous grip, the tongue of his imagined child becomes a '*precious latch*' and so on.

How one responds to all of this, of course, pivots on whether or not one 'gets' the reference. Readerly engagement with Duffy's poem demonstrates, powerfully, the exclusionary force of poetic allusion because, in a direct sense, the very legibility of the poem depends on whether or not the reader understands what is signalled in the poem's title. For the reader who does so, a vista of interpretive possibility opens up, a set of questions about how Duffy plays with the myth and what she 'does with' it. But for the reader who does not, the poem is likely to seem befuddling, a series of inexplicable and mysterious transformations, an experience which Doug described with eloquent clarity:

> *I don't get it. Right. This is one of those occasions I would like, I would like to be, I would like someone to say, right, I'm in a chat show and Carol Ann Duffy comes through that door. Right. I would like her to explain it to me. […] I'm in bed and I can read a book […] There's been a murder, somebody's, someone's run away. Fine. But I'm finding with poetry, I struggle. There's something I'm missing. And I'm finding this is coming up all the time. I'm missing something and I don't know what it is. And now, because I don't know what it is I'm guessing.*

Like other readers, faced with similar conundrums, he began to work through parts of the poem aloud:

> *'The twig in his hand was gold'! Eh? No! You're following it and… then it's broken for me [….] I'm annoyed that I don't know what's going on, I want to find out what it is I'm missing. […] 'But now I feared his honeyed embrace / the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art'. I can only… maybe this is the way that I'm going to be with poetry, I like sections of it. Look, that's clever. But I'm still going: 'there's something going on here that I'm missing'. And I want somebody to explain it to me.*

At the risk of repeating myself, it seems important to underscore the genuine reflexivity that is apparent in how Doug articulated his engagement with the poem. His response was not at all one which dismissed the poem as gibberish or which assumed that there was nothing there worth the candle. What he described was a frustration rooted precisely in the sense that there *was* something there—'*I know I'm missing something*'—only something from which he found himself kept. In that respect, what his comments offered was not so much a critical reading of the poem itself, treated as a self-contained object, but a critical reading *of the relationship* in which he found himself vis-à-vis that poem. In saying that something was 'broken' or 'missing', he was not making a literary judgement about the text—pointing out a missing word, say, or a broken rhyme—but, rather, a quasi-sociological judgement about the situation in which that poem confronted him as a kind of private or restricted code.

I have, it should be said, no way of precisely quantifying the proportion of readers who did, or did not, 'get' the reference in Duffy's poem, not least because one significant expression of exclusion in this context is the likelihood of silence. The reading groups were, as I have suggested above, generally supportive settings. Because participants often knew each other already they were often willing to speak quite openly about their frustrations and uncertainties with respect to what they were reading. Nonetheless, it is a reasonable assumption that there will have been other readers who did not feel comfortable about articulating the sense that they were 'missing' something. The hesitant question asked by a young man in one group—'*Is Midas a famous story or something?*'—may well have spoken aloud a puzzlement which other readers also felt but did not want to acknowledge openly.

* * *

As already noted, and as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, none of this meant that the readers that I spoke with did not 'make sense' of these poems, nor that they were uninterested in construing, or unable to construe, meaning from them. Self-evidently, poems are concerned with something. Thus, for readers who did not immediately 'get' the overarching reference in *Mrs Midas*, the interpretive challenge lay in trying to determine what that 'something' was, what the poem was fundamentally 'about'. For instance, many participants decided—as did these three

women, all of whom were in paid or unpaid care work—that the poem offered a kind of parable about the tribulations of long-term relationships:

Shona: *The one where he's, they're talking about the gold and him pulling the branch…*
Morag: *Was that about her husband? Is that her husband?*
Isobel: *I think it's supposed to be her husband. Yeah.*
Morag: *And what, they, I don't know, were they….*
Shona: *They ended up separating? Or….*
Morag: *…together for years and it was just like a normal marriage…*
Shona: *What's one of them! [laughter]*
Morag: *Didnae speak to each other… separate beds.*
Shona: *Lack of communication.*
Morag: *Aye.*

For others, the disorientating events described in the poem were taken as an indication that what was at issue was the experience of mental illness:

Alan: *Is this a couple, they were [but] he's flipped? […] that's how some of these guys behave, that's suffering from, what do you call it, 'post-traumatic stress'? I think that somebody's slipped into that state, there's an unwritten story behind it. I mean, she locks the door: 'put a chair against my door / near petrified'. Aye. It's quite deep isn't it?*
Roisin: *I think this man's had some sort of breakdown, and he's deciding that he is made of gold and I think, you know, there's been a bit of psychosis going on here, she's watched him for a long while, she's pretending that nothing's going on and when he's got stranger and stranger and stranger, then […] he believes his own delusions, and she leaves him to it.*

And for others, again, the references to Midas' self-isolation towards the end of the poem suggested that it was perhaps concerned with a physical illness, as Isla—who worked as a nurse—suggested:

I don't know. At first I thought it was going to be about domestic abuse, to be honest, at the start, you know like when she was talking about being nervous and stuff, but there were things that I couldnae get like why the fruit was

turning to gold and all this thing about the fairylights, and then I thought it was like he had HIV or AIDS because she didnae want to touch him and she reckoned she'd like get something from him, kind of thing. And then when he moved away and stuff, I thought what, what is like a hospice or what was it, you know, I just couldn't get it, couldn't get my head round it at all.

To be clear: none of these readings are, in any simple sense, 'wrong'. It is entirely plausible to take Duffy's poem as a reflection on some or all of these kinds of experiences. Nonetheless, I want to reject the relativism which responds to a situation like this with the cosseting claim that all readings of a poem are equally apt. However well-intentioned, however much that assertion is meant to honour the agency of readers, it has the troubling effect of obscuring the deeply uneven social terrain on which these readings take place. In other words, it conceals the extent to which these are *disadvantaged* readings, readings put together in the shadow of, and against, the awareness that something was 'missing'; they were readings established as a means of allowing the reader to get some interpretive purchase on a poem whose referential framing rendered it stubbornly recalcitrant to the reader's search for meaning: difficult to '*crack*', hard to '*get into*' or to bring within '*reach*'.

It was, of course, the case that many readers, especially older readers, *did* recognise the reference to the Midas myth in Duffy's poem, and for those readers, the discussion quickly opened out to other kinds of question: about the poem's humour, for example, or about the politics of gender. And sometimes, participants who understood the reference wove a careful explanation into the wider conversation. The nurse whose response I've just cited, for example, having talked about not being able to '*get her head around*' the poem, went on to say the following:

Isla: *I was sitting talking to my husband last night, because he read [the poems] as well, and he's saying 'it's just the story of Midas,' but I don't know the story of Midas.*

Morag: *Aye. No, I'm the same.*

Isla: *He was saying to me, to him, it was just, it was just a modern day version of the story of King Midas.*

Morag: *And what was she [Mrs. Midas] screaming for?*

Isla: *If he, if he, because he was her husband and if, if everything he touched turned to gold, she would turn to gold and die.*

Morag: *Ah! Right. Okay.*

This tactful sharing of interpretive resource was by far the most characteristic way in which these exchanges developed within the groups, marked as they were by a noticeable awareness of the potential for domination at play in practices of reading, of the tacitly stigmatising effects of misreading, and by a corresponding sensitivity as to the articulation of any claim which might have the effect of calling into question someone else's carefully established understanding of the text at hand. Hence, when readers did share information which helped make fresh sense of a poem they often did so in the same cautious way as the participant above, crediting that information to some external third party—a partner, a website, a documentary—rather than claiming it for themselves, as if to ensure that its introduction did not have the effect of establishing a relationship of symbolic inequality between members of the group. Moreover, where references were explicated, this was often done in such a way as to avoid any ostentatious appearance of knowledge. On at least two occasions, for instance, as in this group, the Midas story was explained, not by reference to its classical source, but rather by recalling a recent advert for Skittles:

Mhairi: *You know… you get all the imagery but it never at any point grabs you. It's just one question after another. What the hell does she mean by this? What? And it gets a wee bit too much. It gets [whispering] boring.*

Jack: *'It was then that I started to scream'. What does that… I don't seem to…*

Iain: *I think that's the point at which she realises that anything that he does … you know, she's lost her husband. Anything that he does now is going to turn to gold. So she realises just at that point that they can't live together anymore and that living with him is going to be torture, because everything he touches … you know that advert where that… where the guy's sitting…*

Mhairi: *And they all turn to Skittles!*

Iain: *…and everything turns to Skittles! It's exactly that. She realises that's what is going to happen from that point on.*

Fiona: *Is there a man who everything he touches turns to Skittles? Give me his number!*

On the few occasions when explanatory claims of this kind were made in a more assertive way, it was within those groups which had, in class terms, a more mixed composition. Very occasionally, in those settings, those with a greater degree of formal education took it upon themselves to act in the role of interpretive spokesperson for others. In the group below, for example, there had already been an extended discussion about Duffy's poem between a couple of participants for whom its contextualising reference was clearly very familiar. When there was a pause in the conversation I turned to ask others what they thought about the poem, and one older woman began to reply, rather cautiously: '*I found it a bit mixed*', she said, '*but when you [were all] talking about it, it made more sense somehow*'. At that point, another member of the group, a retired professional, interjected: '*Well, it made sense, I mean we've all read the King Midas story […] His little daughter, turned to gold. A golden statue. I mean the Greeks did all the good stories anyway. It was okay. A bit contrived. Good for a laugh*'. At this, the first speaker stopped short, saying nothing more except to suggest that she had found the poem as a whole '*A bit sad*'.

This exchange, it seemed to me afterwards, offered a glimpse of how profoundly a kind of authority can be enacted in and through processes of cultural reception, in and through inequality which means that what appears richly allusive to one reader may appear deeply elusive to another. The claim that '*we've all read*' a given text cannot but have the effect of erecting a symbolic border wall between the 'us' who are licensed to speak about the cultural object at hand, and the 'them' who are thereby excommunicated from that discussion. Moreover, the difference between these two responses makes clear the compounded advantage which the possessor of legitimate cultural capital has over other readers. It is not just that the second speaker here 'got' the reference, and was thus able to respond to the poem with the confidence which came from understanding, in the most straightforward sense, what was 'going on' within it. It is also that, by dint of getting that reference, the reader in question was able to respond to the poem as *a text amongst other texts*, to raise the stakes of the interpretive game to the intertextual level, so to speak. It's not for nothing that Bourdieu noted that the hallmark of legitimacy in respect of culture is precisely this capacity to treat the games of culture *as* games (1984: 142–154). For the former reader, however—and certainly for those other readers I cited above, for whom the poem was taken to be concerned with mental illness or marriage problems—the

absence of that reference meant that not only was it hard to be confident what the poem was about, but it would have made no sense at all to treat its meaning as somehow dependent on its relationship to other poems. Rather, and as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, those readers focussed on seeking to make sense of the moral or interpersonal story that the poem tells in itself. Thus the same poem was read in two entirely different ways; in ways that are, as Bourdieu famously described (1984: 267–283), in confrontation with each other. For the symbolically dominant reader, precisely because *Mrs Midas* could be analysed in terms of a playful juxtaposition between two texts—a Greek source and its contemporary revision—it could be taken as a kind of literary game, '*good for a laugh*' if '*a bit contrived*'. From the standpoint of the dominated reader, by contrast, the meaning of the poem was necessarily rooted in its human content, from which perspective it did not appear like a game at all, but rather a '*sad*' account of a broken relationship or a troubled mind.

* * *

In many ways, I think, this distinction was also at play in the most frequent and pithiest critical judgement made about the poems which were discussed: i.e. the suggestion that a given text was '*too much*'. This view was one which was offered in varying ways about various poems, although it was made most often about John Burnside's *History*. Burnside's poem split opinion. Many readers were much taken with its vivid evocation of a sense of place and its cherishing of the minutiae of daily life. As Mary put it, it is a poem which teaches us to recognise that '*we're always looking for the next thing, what's the next thing I've to do. We don't live in the here and now*'. Other readers, however, found the poem excessive, feeling that it didn't know '*when to stop*', that it contained '*too many words*', that '*there was too much to it*' so that it began to seem '*mind-boggling*'.

This was, certainly, the longest piece which participants were asked to read, but what was at issue here was something more than a simple judgement about length. In the first place, that seemingly quantitative assessment—'*too much*'—necessarily sheds light on the qualitative social conditions which structure the possibilities of reading. Needless to say, perhaps, the question of the length of a literary text is integrally related

to the question of time; of the time required to undertake the work necessary to understand and assimilate it. And access to such time is, of course, unequally distributed along lines of both class and gender. As Shona said:

> *See when it comes to poems, I like, I like when things are direct … aye, and maybe three or four lines to each part; see when it comes to maybe six, seven lines, I just have to keep reading it over again, to concentrate […] you need to read it and read it to try and get it.*

This comment led to other members of the group intervening in agreement and volunteering some of the situations which they found inimical to that need to *'read it and read it': 'Cause say you've got a young family as well, there'll be no time to sit and read, either, like cause you're just looking after all the kids'*. Burnside himself has offered a deeply-felt defence of poetry as an anti-elitist and implicitly critical resource, a practice which he describes as sustaining a 'science of belonging', standing in opposition to 'a world of infinite subdivision, a lifetime of shift-work and comfort breaks' (2019: 8). These responses to his poem, however, read that opposition from the other direction, as it were, giving a sense of just how far the conditions of everyday life for many prospective readers, particularly the conditions of paid and unpaid labour which they faced, made the concentrated time required for the reading of poetry feel like an exorbitant luxury.

Secondly, and moreover, at least some of these responses suggested that what was felt to be dissuasively '*too much*' about Burnside's poem was not so much its length as the way in which the poem was put together, particularly its avoidance of any formal structure or predictable organisation. Roisin, who I interviewed in the hospice where she worked, and who was talking here more generally about what she liked and disliked in poetry, made the point thus: '*I like the kinda short stuff, as I say, I kinda get stuck at 4 lines I think [laughs]*'. When I asked her why, she said: '*I do find when I read some of the stuff that just goes on and on and on, you're thinking: where are we going with this?*' It was this feeling of prospective endlessness engendered by open-form poetry, the difficulty of envisioning just where it was '*going*', which she found alienating. She much preferred, she said, poems that '*put that pattern down*' in a way that made it clear '*that's that little bit said and on to the next bit*'. In exactly the same way, Doug explained that what he found most frustrating about Burnside's poem was the impossibility of grasping it *as a whole*, an experience which,

he insisted—as if pre-empting the derogatory reply which might accuse him of interpretive laziness—has '*nothing to do with my concentration*':

> *I'm afraid this is another puzzle. I liked it right down to where we've got 'and the muffled dread of what may come / I knelt down in the sand with Lucas / gathering shells and pebbles / finding evidence of life in all this'. And, again, I'm no poet, I never will be, [but] I'd a finished it right there. It's went on and on and on. It's almost as though it's been spun out, and very clever it was too […] I liked [some of the phrases], but now it seems as though I'm only liking chunks of poetry, parts. And it's nothing to do with my concentration. I'm following here and then I lose it.*

In the conclusion to this study, I reflect in more detail on the potential sociological importance of the question of aesthetic wholeness. Suffice it to point here to a disconcerting irony. I assume that the formal openness of Burnside's poem is deliberate, that it articulates an ethic of openness towards the world. His poetry expresses its loving attention to that world, in all its brightly interwoven detail, by refusing to impose a neat or angular poetic order upon it. All of that is very much in keeping with his moving account of poetry's political possibility. Yet, for some of his readers, it needs to be recorded that the rejection of the structuring possibilities of poetic form meant that the poem felt more overwhelming than open; that it replicated, more than it repudiated, the experiential character of a 'world of infinite subdivision', of lives broken into '*chunks*' and '*parts*'.

It is, finally, worth underscoring again the way in which Doug's critical response to the poem in question broadened out, becoming a reflection on the social relationship instantiated in the encounter with that poem. As his imaginary editorial intervention—'*I'd a finished it right there*'—makes clear, he felt, like other readers, that in going '*on and on and on*' the poem had become an act of symbolic display, an expression of the cultural 'richness'— and, indeed, of the temporal richness – which made its existence possible. That possibility, moreover, was understood to be, in a profound way, antipathetic to its audience, an aggrandisement of the private virtuosity of the poet at the reader's expense:

> *I liked 'the long insomnia of ornamental carps in public parks' – that's brilliant, I liked that! That's clever. But I'm afraid it was just, I don't know, I'm not… I'm even ashamed that I'm even talking about poetry, I'm talking about something I don't know anything all about but to me he's*

> *spinning it out because he can, he's spinning it out and using words and rhyming because he can. And I think that's maybe what poets do.*

* * *

In *Poetries and Sciences* (1970 [1926]), a text published shortly after *Principles of Literary Criticism*, I. A. Richards reiterated the argument made in that more famous work, but in stronger form yet, insisting again that the poem, as a distinctive literary object, is constituted by the force of its own creative premises, by the fact that the relationships between the words and phrases of which it is composed establish a set of 'entailments' to which even the poet is required to submit if the work is to achieve the state of finality towards which it aspires. This argument has a classical precedent: it was the Roman poet Horace who suggested that the poem is defined, not by any principle of mimetic accuracy but by its intrinsic coherence, the demand that it be 'single and unified'. That demand, Horace argued, placed a pleasurable imperative before the poet, such that they 'will at any moment be saying exactly what [their] poem requires' (Murray 2000: 98–99). For Richards, likewise, this demand for poetic integrity ends up granting the poem its own form of agency:

> The poem ceases to be a record [of the poet's experience] and appears instead as a coming into itself of a being with a role of its own to play. It starts off as a problem: *what to be;* and it ends by finding in itself, when successful, what it was seeking. It becomes self-entailed. (1970 [1926]: 98)

It would be easy enough, as Richards himself recognised, to dismiss this claim as an example of the pathetic fallacy. Yet, in many respects, it does accurately reflect the way in which the readers I have cited in this chapter talked about their encounters with the poems they were reading. I was struck by just how often that encounter was described in terms which made it seem as if it took place, not so much with a text as with something embodied and volitional. A telling example came early on in the project, when I was talking about the research with a man I had met at a breakfast club at a local community organisation. I mentioned to him that I had been surprised by the length of time it had taken to get ethical approval for the research given that it was, after all, concerned only with the reading of poetry. He told me that he had a CD of recorded poems to which he sometimes listened and which he had found helpful in the past.

He also gently corrected me, pointing out that the ethics committee's caution was entirely justified. Sometimes, he said, a poem can '*get you like that*', and he held up a clenched fist in a fierce gesture, as if throttling the life from something. '*Then*', he said, '*you're left going "whoa!"… now I've got to deal with that*'. Many other readers talked about the poems at hand in a very similar way, describing them as if they were possessed of their own capricious agency and visceral presence, a reminder that—as Karin Littau (2006) insists—reading is an embodied and affective business. Phrases of this kind were commonplace when those I spoke with came to express their reactions to what they had read: *'It didn't really touch me very much'; 'It just didn't grab'; 'I like poems to hit you hard'*. One reader, in articulating his struggle to read canonical poetry at school, put his head in his hands, shook it, and gave a brief howl, as if revisiting a literal experience of bodily imprisonment or physical pain.

For many of those with whom I spoke, in short, there was indeed a sense that the poem was a 'being' of its own, but with this profound difference: where Horace or Richards see the poem as a benevolent, creative interlocutor for the poet, for at least some of these readers, it was felt to be a deeply ambivalent presence, offering meaning yet denying it, leaving them to ask *'when is it gonnae start making sense'?* In contrast to a still-powerful ideology of cultural redemption, there was little in these discussions which suggested that coming 'face-to-face' with poetry was inevitably liberating or transformative. Readers did not, like McEwan's home invader, become suddenly effusive or take up the chorus: 'It's beautiful … it's beautiful'. Rather, these poems—at least some of the poems, for some of the readers—were experienced as accusatory, as presences whose effect was to pass an admonishing judgement on the reader:

> *I went into page two and I thought, I don't understand this, is this just me? […] Then I read the third one and I thought, I don't understand this one either. Then I think it was either the fourth or the fifth one I thought, this person is writing about somebody very close, but as I say it was like … just me, must be I'm thick.*

> *As it went on I felt as though I was getting tricked […] I just think it's clever, but I'm not clever enough to understand it. It's clever, it's clever uses of words, but no, it's clearly over the top of my head.*

> *I don't think I understood that one either … I'm not very good.*

As discussed above, participants often described the suspicion that they were 'missing something' in respect of a given poem, that there was some interpretive key in the absence of which it remained—to borrow a metaphor from Derrida—like a hedgehog curled upon itself, spines outward. And as these last quotes make clear, this feeling was sometimes transmuted into *self*-criticism, into a sense that it must be the speaker themselves who was 'missing something', who was in some way to blame.

This reported experience, the feeling of being condemned by the encounter with the poem, does indeed speak to Bourdieu's account of symbolic violence, to his assessment of the way in which cultural consumption becomes a context wherein the enduring effects of structured dispossessions—of time, of opportunity, of access—rebound as a judgement, or a self-judgement, upon those involved: '*It's clever… but I'm not*', in the words of one of the readers quoted above. Yet, as I've sought to emphasise in the foregoing discussion, this was *never* the sum total of what was evident in these responses. At least as often such comments turned outwards, outwards towards a critique of the poet responsible for what was taken to be their self-absorption, their disregard of the obligation to communicate: '*maybe that's what poets do*'. Or further outwards yet, towards the unequal social relationships which, it was felt, the encounter with the poem disclosed. Thus Doug, whose response to Burnside's poem I cited above, talked jokingly about how reading these poems made him feel as if he were, in his phrase, '*a dumpling*'. But he did not, by any means, passively accept the status of symbolic dumpling-hood, and nor did the social relations which structured this encounter between poet, poem and reader disappear without comment into the taken-for-granted state of things. As he went on to say, elaborating on the point implicit in the quote I've already given:

> *[the poem] spun and spun and I went 'you're doing it because you can'. I dare say, Mr. Burnside, I would apologize to you right away, he'd probably be quite upset about that, but that's just my interpretation. And I'm no a poet, and I'm no a very clever person either, so Mr. Burnside'll be saying: 'well obviously you don't know that much about poetry because you don't understand it'. I don't!*

'*You're doing it because you can*': as succinct a 'meta' reading as you could hope to find of the poem as a manifestation of symbolic privilege, and

one which implies a more general critique of a world characterised by deep-seated inequalities..

* * *

In the course of this chapter, I have made reference to two well-established assumptions about the nature of poetry. In the first place, there is the idea that the meaningfulness of a poem can be treated and understood as something which is to be found, in a self-contained way, within the poem in itself, the result of what it is, intrinsically, as a closed aesthetic object. In the second place, the idea—supplementing the first—that the meaningfulness of a poem can be treated and understood as something further defined by its relationship to other literary texts. One might summarise this position as entailing the twofold claim that what poems mean depends upon what they say to themselves and upon what they say to other poems.

Both of these ideas are deeply rooted in the history of literary criticism but perhaps their most cogent elaboration comes to us from the Russian Formalist critics of the early twentieth century, for whom it was a foundational claim that any systematic study of literature could proceed only by recognising the distinctive quality of *literariness*, the particular characteristics which give the literary text its self-identity and which, they argued, were susceptible of study as independent phenomena on their own terms. Thus, for instance, when later Formalist writers moved towards an interest in questions of literary history, those questions were construed as involving an investigation into the dynamic evolution of literary forms in and of themselves, explicable without recourse to external or historical factors: 'the study of literature as a self-formed social phenomenon', in the words of the group's chief theorist, Boris Eichenbaum (1965: 136).

The writers of the so-called Bakhtin School who provided the first sustained sociological response to these claims never sought to deny the specific qualities of poetry or of other kinds of literature. Indeed, as I mentioned briefly in the first chapter, they heaped scorn on the 'sorry tendency' of a particular kind of Marxist poetics which sought to 'declare war on anything "immanently" literary in the explanation of literary phenomena […] as if art only becomes a social factor if it is interpreted as nonart' (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978: 31). By contrast, they insisted, the poem is social precisely in and through its poetic qualities. The poet

doesn't put together work by choosing immaculate words from a timeless dictionary, as if those words are merely bits of sonic kit, ways of making raw sound; 'empty, thingless names', in Edward Thomas' lovely phrase. Rather, artistic and aesthetic choices are always 'tactful'. That is to say: they are always historically and contextually situated and imply some orientation to that situation. The poet necessarily responds to the specific expectations that govern the poem as a 'specific construction', but they do so in their here-and-now, such that their response to those expectations cannot but be 'socially evaluative'. Their work is inevitably *about* something, it articulates a perspective towards something, it is uttered in the world. For this reason, then, treating poetic meaning as something enclosed within the privacy of the poetic text would be—as Valentin Voloshinov put it, in relation to language more generally—like trying 'to turn on a light bulb after having switched off the current' (1973: 103). Poetry is lit from within by the surging current of social life, by the fact that it emerges in and as part of a wider, continuous struggle to make sense and meaning of that life.

In this way, then, this group of writers rejected the claim—which had characterised, in contrasting ways, *both* the Formalist position and that of their cruder Marxist detractors—that one could draw a simple analytical distinction between form and content, the first envisioned as a purely aesthetic dimension and the latter as the proper vehicle of political or ideological meaning. To think as much, Voloshinov wrote in an essay on poetic discourse, was akin to believing that a carefully carved statue represented nothing more than the 'form of marble'. What such a view misses is the fact that it is exactly in its formal qualities, the very manner in which the work is 'unfolded', that a poem bespeaks its relation to the world: 'form applauds, bewails or derides' (1983: 20).[4] In short, the poem—in common with all art—is an 'immanently sociological' (7) object, an object which is socially meaningful precisely by virtue of those things which most make it a poem.

I risk this brief reprise of what is, by now, a widely considered debate, for a particular reason. In this chapter, I have sought to describe some of the ways in which some working-class readers found themselves kept from poetry and I have tried to pay careful attention to how those readers articulated that experience. My immediate concern has been to look close-up at how cultural dispossession takes place or takes shape in the encounter between the reader and the poem. As I argued at the

start, doing this is crucial not least because of the temptation to extrapolate general and generally optimistic conclusions about readerly agency on the basis of research conducted with readers who are already familiar with, and able to access, whatever texts are in question. What strikes me powerfully about the responses which I have considered here is the extent to which, because they involved engagements with poems which were experienced as unyielding and obstructive; because they involved engagements with poems which would not surrender their meaning even to the diligent, hard-working reader; *precisely* for these reasons, it became all-but-impossible for those readers to handle these texts as exclusively literary objects. Treating a poem in that normatively assured way, responding to it as something which can be read for its intrinsic poetic qualities, or in terms of its richly embroidered relations with other literary works, depends upon an ability to 'get' the poem, to recognise those references, and those abilities depend in turn on access to resources which are not equally a feature of every social experience. The reader who finds themselves symbolically excluded from a poem is, necessarily, excluded from the possibility of treating it as a pristinely literary object—something to be decoded in terms of technique, allusion and so forth. Yet, as with other forms of social exclusion, this experience—like the crack in Auden's tea-cup—opens a possible path to something broader and more consequential. The more the reader is denied the prospect of treating the poem as a literary puzzle, the greater the likelihood there is of it appearing as a kind of sociological puzzle, something which instantiates or brings into view a troubling social relationship.

It is not my intention to overstate this argument. The women and men that I have cited above were not driven by their readerly frustrations to develop fully blown sociological accounts of the politics of knowledge. Experiences of exclusion are not self-explaining in any case; to make sense of them it is not enough to have lived them. Yet, nonetheless, there was an incipient critical potential in the fact that these readers could not take the act of reading poetry for granted. Privileged readers will frequently disagree about the meaning of poetry, of course, but that question is, for them, one which can be asked of the poetic text in and of itself. It is, as it were, a question that can be safely reduced to the size of the poem. By contrast, for the readers that I have discussed in this chapter, the question of poetic meaning could not be so easily or safely contained. Grappling with the experience of exclusion from the meaning of the poetic text meant that other questions were always potentially in

play: questions about the meaning of the *encounter* with the poem as this obdurate, obstructive presence; questions about why the poet had written in the way they had; questions about the conditions which might allow some people to 'possess' poetry in ways that others could not. In short: questions not only about what a given poem might mean but about what its *lack of meaning might mean*, and about how that exclusion from the poem's meaningfulness came about. And so, the consequence is that for many of the readers I have discussed here the argument famously made by the Bakhtin School critics—i.e. the recognition that the poem is a socially situated object and that it embodies within itself a set of social relationships—would have seemed neither contentious nor surprising; less contentious and less surprising to them, perhaps, than to some widely anthologised literary critics. They might not have used this theoretical language, perhaps, but these readers understood implicitly the gist of what Bakhtin and Medvedev are telling us when they say that the meaning of a literary 'work cannot be understood, nor can even one of its functions be studied outside of the organized interrelationships of the people between whom the work is situated as the ideological body of the intercourse' (1978: 153).

* * *

This leads me to a final reflection on the idea of symbolic violence. It is certainly true that many of the readers who took part in this research would not have read the poems in question had it not been for the fact that they had been asked to do so for the purposes of that research. I can report this with some confidence because participants often made a point of saying as much at the end of the discussions: '*Had I never been handed this [holding up the booklet of poems] I would never have read any of them. I would never have sought them out, or thought about them*'. Sometimes, I felt, comments of this kind were made as a courtesy to me, as a way of reassuring me that the speaker didn't feel that the discussions had been a waste of time. Sometimes, it was clear, they implied just the opposite. Either way, it was apparent that for many of those with whom I spoke this kind of poetry was not a commonplace or sought-after part of their cultural lives. To that extent, the research discussed here does offer support to Bourdieu's suggestion that culture is implicated in the reproduction of social inequality through the self-governing work of taste, the way in which prospective readers are taught by their lived experience

to assume that certain kinds of culture are simply not for the likes of them. At the same time, I temper this conclusion by recognising that, as I intimated at the outset of the chapter, for at least some readers the repudiation of poetry had a much more tactical quality; they turned their back quite knowingly on a form of culture which they saw as riddled with privilege, as irrelevant to their daily lives, and in such a way as to seek to call into question the wider cultural hierarchy which accords greater symbolic status to these poetic traditions than to other kinds of expressive and aesthetic practice.

It is also true, as I have argued, that these discussions sometimes gave evidence of the extent to which the encounter with a literary form like poetry can serve to articulate cultural authority, and that it can do so in ways that have the effect of lodging that authority within the subject's sense of themselves. As will be evident from examples given above it was sometimes the case that a reader who felt defeated by a given poem might take that defeat as evidence of a lack of sensitivity, discrimination or knowledge on their own part, in such a way as to reinforce the assumption that cultural hierarchies are the outcome of personal, rather than structural, inequalities. To that extent, it is important to remember that poetry can appear not as the conduit of beauty or of truth, of personal solace or spiritual uplift, but as the conduit of domination; as the instantiation, indeed, of a kind of violence. Yet, as I have suggested throughout the course of the discussion, the evidence from these conversations leads me to want to qualify Bourdieu's emphasis on the imperceptibility of that violence. The readers with whom I worked were acutely aware of the fact that poems are things which are meant. Few, I think, would have disputed John Carey's definition of poetry as 'language made special, so that it will be remembered and valued' (2020: 1). Thus, on those occasions when they found themselves excluded from the meaning of the lines and verses before them they understandably articulated that experience as an experience of *denial;* they recognised very well that they were being *excluded from* something and from something potentially valuable. In that sense, the reading of poetry which took place in these groups was rarely the reading of poetry as it appears in the cultural imagination: an act of deep, inner communion between reader and text. It was something much more confrontational, more frictional and discomforting. It involved wrestling and tussling with texts which were sometimes felt to have broken their promise to the reader, hiding the very meaning which they should have been giving away. Bourdieu suggests that 'one of the effects of symbolic

violence is the transfiguration of relations of domination and submission into affective relations, the transformation of power into […] the charm suited to evoke affective enchantment' (1998: 102). In general, it seemed to me, there was very little evidence of this transfigurative process at play in these discussions. The affect generated in the engagement with these poems was much more often anger or frustration than 'charm'. So, yes, these encounters could entail symbolic violence but to the extent that this was so they also *felt* symbolically violent. That violence often seemed close to the surface as readers talked about their responses to these texts. At least for some of those readers some of these poems had the appearance of antagonists and, understandably, they responded antagonistically. In doing so, as with all moments of social antagonism, a reflexive possibility was opened up. A kind of domination was made more palpable, more name-able, and was brought within closer critical reach. To put it otherwise, a form of domination was made more evident, rather than less, precisely *because* it was experienced in symbolic form, in a form which put the question of 'meaning' so explicitly at issue.

Notes

1. This is a point that, famously, James discusses in his study of the Haitian revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1980 [1938]).
2. More recently Jacqueline Bobo's groundbreaking study of Black women viewers of the original film version of *The Color Purple* arrives at a similar argument. Foregrounding the critical and interpretive autonomy evident in responses of the viewers with whom she worked, Bobo emphasises the extent to which 'Black women's responses [to the film] confront and challenge a prevalent method of media analysis that insists that viewers of mainstream works have no control or influence over a cultural product' (2004: 181).
3. The names given here, and throughout, are pseudonyms. Occasionally I have also changed other specific details in order to protect the anonymity of participants.
4. As with a number of essays and other texts arising out of the work of the Bakhtin school, there is some dispute as to the authorship of this essay, and in some published versions, it is attributed to Bakhtin himself. I have referred to the authorship as attributed in the edition which I consulted.

CHAPTER 4

Not Within Us, But Between Us: Making Sense of Poetry

I began the last chapter by considering an example of how the encounter between working-class readers and poetry has been imagined in contemporary literature. Here is another, this time from Edna O'Brien's powerful and often deeply unsettling novel *The Little Red Chairs*. In the scene in question, we are presented with a book club, taking place in the fictional town of Cloonoila and overseen by the novel's protagonist, Fidelma McBride. The text that is being discussed by members of the club is a passage on Dido from *The Aeneid,* its introduction serving to put in place one of the foundational stories with which O'Brien's novel is in implicit dialogue. Amongst those attending the session are a local family, nicknamed 'the Naublers':

> There was the father, who was blind, with his Alsatian, his stroppy wife, several young daughters and hobo sons. They hated books. They detested books and came only to make a disturbance. They always brought refreshments, chips, miniatures of gin or vodka, with cans of tonic water and a generous bag of ice. The Alsatian was thrown cubes of ice, which he gnawed at, until it melted into Flossie's carpet. (2015: 79)

The meeting opens with the text being read aloud by a cultured older woman in a wheelchair who accords it 'all the ceremony and poise that it deserved'. But this gracious reading elicits a less than gracious response: '"Feck" was the first word, followed by a slew of fecks and it set the tone

A. Smith, *Class and the Uses of Poetry*, Sociology of the Arts,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66448-9_4

for the invective that was to follow' (80). Various members of the group chime in, deriding the poem's lack of relevance, its antiquated story and Dido's submissiveness:

> the most brazen of the Naubler sisters, in her short skirt and fishnets, stood on the stool to mimic Dido, rising from her saffron bed, sprinkling herself with river water, pouring wine between the horns of a white heifer, and speaking into the open vitals of a slaughtered sheep, to find an answer for her tormented love. 'She's pathetic' was her verdict. (80)

When other members of the group speak up in defense of love, they are castigated—'"Oh, Granny's on a trip … she's a wanker"' before, eventually, this all-too-obviously 'problem family' give up on the business of reading poetry altogether:

> It was too much for the Naublers, who rose en masse and trooped out, the dog straining as if there was something in the room he still needed to sniff. The bickering girl was yelling into her phone – 'We're out of this 1900 BC shithole … See ya'. (81)

Nothing in O'Brien's writing is quite as simple as it first appears. In one sense, at least, the 'Naublers' can be read as an ad hoc chorus—one of a number of such choruses that the author introduces—their judgement on the passage from *The Aeneid* full of double meaning, speaking as much to the events unfolding in the novel itself as to the text in question. On this basis, their angry dismissal of Dido's story holds out a warning about the dangerous vulnerabilities that might come with need or desire. Or, perhaps, it could be taken as articulating the reader's own increasingly uneasy sense of those vulnerabilities and where all of this might lead Fidelma as she embarks on a relationship with the man who will later offer a defense of Dido, the sex therapist Dr. Vlad (a character based, closely but not exactly, on Radovan Karadžić).

Yet, even accepting that this might be so, one would be hard-pressed to overlook the extent to which O'Brien leans into the most well-worn and disparaging depictions of working-class men and women (see Lawler 2005). Here, as so often, such men and women appear not as named, characterful individuals but only as an obstreperous mass, defined by a shared lack of aesthetic taste—short skirts and fishnets—, an absence of social decorum—ice cubes on the carpet—, and a handful of stock

props—chips and alcohol, the menacing dog and the mobile phone. Above all, of course, this is a representation in which the working-class are characterised by their mocking derision of literary culture, by their inability to respond to poetry with anything other than the determination to make a spoiling 'disturbance'. It is a depiction which feels all the more disquieting coming, as it does, from the author of *The Country Girls*.

The way in which the relationship between working-class readers and poetry is imagined can thus be thought of as an ideological coin with two faces. On one side, there is what remains of a once confident vision of cultural hegemony, encapsulated by the scene from McEwan's novel with which I began the preceding chapter, in which the working-class subject is enraptured by the merest encounter with poetry, subdued by the symbolic authority of the poetic text. On the other side, however, there is the pessimistic, neoliberal counter-vision, in which those same readers are condemned by their own supposed thick-headedness, by their violent rejection of the cultural riches laid out before them. In the former imagining, the working-class subject is rescued by the benevolent hand of high culture and all it costs them is their prostration before the majesty of that culture. In the latter view, they bring their abjection upon themselves, cast into the symbolic outer darkness by their own hand, as it were, by the fact that they choose, 'en masse', to walk out on what poetry might otherwise offer them.

* * *

In what follows I seek to explore in closer detail how readers in the groups with which I worked grappled with the poems they read, or to which they listened, and how they responded to the sense—described in the preceding chapter—of symbolic exclusion from the meaningfulness of some of those poems. I start with O'Brien's representation, therefore, because it expresses so starkly one engrained idea about what the nature of that response is likely to be. That is to say, the assumption that, when faced with something which is culturally difficult or unfamiliar working-class readers will simply turn their backs, or that if they engage at all, that response will take the form of symbolic vandalism, a vituperative effort to tear down whatever their own alleged ignorance prevents them from having. The assumption, in short, that the only recourse of the ordinary reader, in the face of literary culture, is towards repudiation. By absolute contrast, what I try to describe in this chapter is the determined

interpretive creativity which readers frequently brought to their reading of poetry. More than that, I want to explore what this evidence suggests about the different ways in which poems might be read, how meaning can be wrought from them and how poems can be made to speak to the lives of their readers. As I discussed in the previous chapter, participants in the research were sometimes critical about the poetry which they were asked to read and they were sometimes also critical about what that poetry was taken to reveal about the wider politics of culture. Yet, that criticism reflected an experience of being refused by these texts, rather than a refusal of them. It expressed a sense, in Édouard Louis' succinct phrase, that 'it wasn't that we'd rejected literature, but that it had rejected us' (2019: n.p.). To that sense, readers replied, very often, with a concerted and collective effort to make something out of those texts, to return them to the ground of lived experience, as it were. That effort shows the stereotypes of derisory working-class readers for the acts of symbolic violence which they certainly are. Moreover, at the same time, it asks us to think afresh about how the reading of poetry might place, what it might look like, and what its consequences can be.

One further point deserves to be underscored. O'Brien's representation reveals another stubborn presumption about the nature of the relationship between working-class readers and canonical culture. It does so insofar as it presents that relationship as one in which the former is a threat to the latter; insofar as it gives the impression of consecrated culture as something frail and under siege. Thus, we are given, as the image of that culture, a classical poem being read aloud by an elderly woman in a wheelchair, surrounded on all sides by the baying disdain of the popular audience. If there is power at play in this moment, it appears to lie entirely on the side of that audience, against whose disruptive barrage of 'fecks' and snide remarks poetry can summon up, it seems, no adequate retort. The roots of this ideological imagining are deeply set. Raymond Williams reminds us (1989: Chapter 3) that the politics of the avant-garde could lead towards radicalism as well as towards retreat. But it is the latter inclination, the conservative and self-pitying vision of culture which emerged in the wake of modernism's loss of faith which is in evidence here. In that envisioning the custodians of culture have given up on any kind of popular address and on the prospect of any popular appetite for serious poetry, a perspective which—as Cary Nelson (1995) has demonstrated in the American context, and Tom Leonard (2001) in the Scottish—relies on the wilful forgetting of traditions of popular and radical poetry which

were contemporaneous with poetic modernism but often disregarded by it. What remains in consequence, in any case, is a crepuscular vision of poetry as one of a handful of precious cultural artefacts passed around between the few still in the know; some prized aesthetic fragments shored up against the ruinous, book-hating barbarians who lie in wait on every side with their dogs in tow.

As with other species of conservative pessimism, what is most telling about this picture is the way in which it inverts the lines of force which are actually at play in the relationship to culture. It is true that there was, indeed, a degree of vulnerability apparent in the reading groups and interviews which I ran, but it was a vulnerability which lay, by and large, on the side of the readers. It was those readers who often felt under symbolic fire in their engagement with these poems. One telling expression of that sensibility was the fact that those taking part often construed the study itself as a form of examination. Thus, in the course of these discussions, participants would sometimes pause to ask me, or to ask each other '*is that it*' or '*have I got it?*' Thus, towards the end of one meeting, as the conversation was winding down, one of the women involved leaned over and said to me, under her breath: '*Have you been to other groups … Are we sort of the average?*' It is true, of course, that all qualitative research settings place participants in an uneasy position to some degree, given that they ask those participants to bring to explicit attention experiences and views which are not normally subject to such attention in the run-of-the-mill course of our lives. These particular responses, however, need to be read in the context of what we saw in the preceding chapter, which is the extent to which the encounter with a consecrated form of culture such as published poetry can feel condemnatory to some readers. In short, and in absolute contrast to the representation in O'Brien's novel, it was ordinary readers who frequently felt as if they were threatened by the encounter with canonical poetry, rather than the other way around.

It was also, it seemed to me, that same sensibility which explained why readers sometimes chose to preface their responses with a kind of disclaimer, an insistence that what they were saying about a given poem needed to be treated as the expression of a merely subjective opinion:

> *remember you asked my opinions […] you asked me to analyse it, and remember that it's my analysis. This is what I see.*

> *That's the way I interpret that […] that's how I interpret it […] it's not a quiz, there's no right or wrong answers, you know, everybody's … it's open to interpretation with everybody.*

Appeals to interpretive relativism of this kind clearly served as a way of puncturing the vulnerability that some readers felt. They did so, on the one hand, because they appended a kind of qualifying detachment to what those readers had to say: remember—this is only what I see. And they did so, on the other hand, by undercutting any assumption that there might be such a thing as an authoritative reading of a given poem against which other readings could be found wanting: remember—there's no right or wrong answers.

It is worth adding that, for older readers in particular, the need to make that qualification and the sense, more generally, that poetry reading constituted a kind of test was clearly related to the way in which they had been taught to think about these things at school. Very often in their classrooms, it seemed, the prevailing paradigm had been one informed by the assumptions of the so-called 'new criticism', associated in Britain with I. A. Richards, and in the U.S. with writers such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Characteristic of that critical school was a tendency to approach poems as complicated symbolic puzzles, the proper appreciation of which requires that the ordinary reader be placed under the guiding hand of the critic. Sandra described with particular clarity the experience of being taught poetry in line with presumptions of that kind:

> *I used to like poetry especially because I can remember a wee bit about the golden hosts, golden daffodils with Wordsworth. I always remember that bit, because it was drummed into us at school, but then again we got poetry at school. I used to find it quite difficult then, because I'd said to the teacher 'but I don't understand, because what you think of a poem and what I think of a poem is two entirely different things'. No, no, no; everybody was supposed to have the same mind-set as the teacher and when you sat the exam, if you didn't know what she meant you failed. I thought, well, if I'm going to fail it will be in poetry, because that's not what I see. To me what he was talking about in that field of daffodils was like, everything else was kind of grey and then he came across this field of daffodils and put some colour back into his life, kind of thing; that's what I took from it. It wasn't what the teacher took from it. So, I think, the whole class failed.*

As might be imagined, I began each of these discussions by insisting that the sessions were not tests—that there was no question of 'failing'—and by seeking to reassure those who were taking part that all responses, including negative ones, were equally welcome. Yet there is a sense in which my reassurances were disingenuous. Those involved were right to feel, as O'Brien's representation makes starkly apparent, that responses to culture can be used to pass judgement upon readers. They were right to feel that there was something at stake in their responses. They were right to feel, moreover, that those stakes might be particularly high in the case of the most symbolically valued cultural forms such as poetry. As one younger women astutely put it, when it comes to poetry: '*you're very much exposing yourself, you're exposing yourself*'.

Finally, I might add that this sense of readerly vulnerability was not related only to the question of whether participants did, or did not, feel entitled to express a view about the poems which lay before them. It was also a question of whether they felt as if they had the appropriate language with which to express those views. '*I don't really have a lot of words*', as one respondent put it, '*to describe how, what this poetry means*'. In O'Brien's scene canonical poetry is overwhelmed by the invective-strewn fluency of the working-class audience, drowned out by it. But, in these reading groups and interviews, it was the readers who sometimes felt symbolically outgunned, who felt that they lacked a necessary, technical terminology. It was readers who sometimes felt, indeed, that their own articulacy was being called into question. Thus, for example, at the end of most of the groups, I asked whether anyone would like to read one of the poems aloud, and it was often the case that someone was willing to do this. But it was also true that participants sometimes shook their heads and said, like this woman: '*No … because I'll end up getting my words muddled up*'.

* * *

I have sought to reiterate at the outset of this chapter the sense of vulnerability which some participants, in different ways, expressed in the course of this research. I have done so because of the need to debunk the stereotype of the discordant working-class anti-reader. At the same time, however, it would be a significant mistake to overstate this point, or to fall into an opposing stereotype by which such readers appear cowed or deferential or come to be described only in terms of some perceived 'deficit'.

None of this was how things appeared in the course of these discussions, characterised as they often were by a great deal of humour and mutual encouragement, and by a rapid-fire sharing of views and ideas such that it was often difficult for me to follow the course of the exchanges, especially in larger groups where two or three sets of readers might end up pursuing their own debates over particular phrases or passages independently. Many of the transcripts were full of cross-cutting conversations of this kind.

All of this points to an important aspect of the way in which readers went about their reading of these poems, and about how feelings of symbolic exclusion could be contested. That is to say: the practice of reading is necessarily shaped and facilitated by the contexts and the relationships within which that reading occurs. See, for instance, this exchange which took place amongst a group of readers who knew each other well, who had been gathering regularly for some time, and who were engaged in ongoing creative projects together. The passage begins as members of the group are talking about one of the poems considered in the previous chapter: John Burnside's *History*.

Sean: *I found it difficult to get a theme. I was looking for a theme, and to ma mind there's just too many words I think. But that's no taking away from the poet, that's his style. I'd prefer a shorter, less obscure kind of statement, right, in a way, the words just, aye, they don't appeal to me, they don't hit me and then at the end: 'but still, through everything / attentive to the irredeemable'. That's upsetting. I wondered what's he getting at? You know – the 'irredeemable'?*

Ann: *Yes, what's it mean?*

Sean: *Cause I'm a great, my favourite novels are like Crime and Punishment, right? It's about redemption. Seriously! About redemption and I'm a great believer in it, I look for redemption.*

Doug: *How do we get it? How do I get redemption? [laughs]*

Sean: *Well, that's another… you know like meditation, and you can do it through drink and drugs…*

Doug: *I tried that. It doesnae work.*

Sean: *…Yoga? Or philosophy! Find your own philosophy. And sticking by it and be, and be content, be happy with it. That's*

what I think, although it wouldnae need to be a harmful philosophy like a Nazism … which is abhorrent.

Carolyn: *I think I'll go back to the beach! [laughter]*

Sean: *Or you could be a Marxist, if you like.*

Doug: *Right, I'll try! [laughter and some cross-talk here]*

This interchange is typical of the way in which discussions went in this particular group and in many of the other groups as well. Debates about the meaning of the poem at hand were constantly interwoven with reflections about life, politics or personal experience and they often became the occasion for the sharing of jokes and witty asides. I should confess that my first analytical impulse in response to this was to think of these passages of dialogue as extraneous, a kind of discursive wrapping paper to be torn away and disposed of in order to get at what 'really' mattered: i.e. what these readers had to say about the poem or poems in question. That impulse, that instinctive concern only for what 'this' reader made of 'this' poem, is, of course, a telling reflection of how 'legitimate' poetry reading is presumed to take place and a demonstration of how far those narrow presumptions lie engrained in me. In that view, the reading of poetry, perhaps more than any other form of cultural consumption, is conceived of as an essentially private or inward-facing activity: the solitary reader curled up in a sunlit nook or walking the hills with a book in hand. What I came to appreciate, of course, was that there was in fact no neat analytical line to be drawn between those moments in which participants were addressing themselves to a particular poem and all of those other moments—the interjections, the by-play, the reminiscence and banter—in which they were addressing themselves. I say this not only because the interpretive discussion was so closely threaded through the interpersonal discussion but because the latter was part of what made the former possible. Those exchanges were crucial to how these readers responded to these poems because they were constitutive of the social relations within which those responses took shape and which—in this particular case—allowed the readers in question to express their views with critical self-assurance even on those occasions when what they were describing was a sense of puzzlement or frustration with respect to the poem at hand. Thus, the reader's ability to express what they think or feel about a given poem is not solely a matter of what they, in themselves, bring to that poem; it is not exclusively a question of their subjective resources, of

their cultural capital. To some degree, at least, critical articulacy is a situated and social achievement, sustained by the presence—or, as the case may be, made more difficult by the absence—of interlocuters who attend and respond to what is being said and who act as collaborators in the process of making sense of what is before them. In this respect, then, I think that Wendy Griswold is absolutely right to assert, as she does in her pioneering study of novel reading in Nigeria, that 'all culture is local culture' (2000: 20); that the stuff of culture is always made and made meaningful in the context of specific settings and in the midst of specific relationships.

It is important to add, perhaps, that this point ought not to be taken as referring only to the immediate, here-and-now settings in which people read or interpret literary texts. Cultural consumption is 'situated' in a deeper sense as well. It can be informed, in other words, by longer histories and traditions of cultural practice and by the expressive possibilities which those practices sustain. It was telling, in this respect, how strongly members of this particular group emphasised the significance, in their own lives, of a local cultural world with which they had grown up, one which emphasised and prized verbal dexterity, and which they still clearly considered an empowering resource:

> ***Sean:*** *Even, even in the 50s when I was growing up, it wasn't so much poetry [that mattered to people], it was more talk and jokes, and people just talked; storytellers, a guy could tell you a story and you'd be like: 'oh, he's good at this', but just an ordinary subject. Even talking about a fight or anything… and joke-tellers, oh, joke-tellers. There was a guy in [our neighbourhood] was famous for joke-telling, he was famous. He never failed…*

So, whilst this was not something that I set out to research, it certainly was the case that in some of these groups—and particularly in the conversations of older participants—there was an acknowledgement of the enduring salience of a confident, locally rooted working-class world of cultural expression, even though that world was sometimes described, as in this case, as having one foot in the past. As the references to political philosophy and Dostoevsky make clear, part of what was being referred to here were the legacies of those practices of autodidactic scholarship described by Richard Hoggart (1984 [1957]) and more recently

by Jonathan Rose (2001). But something less formal and less textually focussed was being indicated as well: a celebration of linguistic and narrative fluency, the skilful and witty use of words and storytelling techniques, and the presence of a local cultural field which accorded symbolic prestige to those capacities (a presence to which Seán Damer (1989) has also attested in his ethnography of the erstwhile Moorepark housing scheme, between Govan and Ibrox).

These creative potentialities were evident not only when participants reflected, as in this case, on the significance of such traditions in their own lives. They were also evident in the profoundly creative uses of language which punctuated these conversations, not least the deft turning of metaphors and similes. Thus one older man suggested to me that he would never get another job because he had '*a face like a robber's mask*'. Thus Alan talked about the way in which waves of economic recession had led to shipyard workers being discarded from their jobs as if the bosses were '*throwing away a used rivet*'. Thus, again, Carrie, a middle-aged woman who had worked to secure herself a place at university, said—as a way of describing her sense of dislocation when she initially arrived on campus—'*that first year, I was just chewing the railings*'. All of this is a reminder, if one is needed, that it is only by virtue of a process of what can legitimately be called 'symbolic enclosure' that the designation 'poetry' has come to be reserved for certain kinds of texts, for certain kinds of speech and for certain kinds of speakers. As Bakhtin and Medvedev noted (1978: Chapter 5), the Formalist attempt to treat poetic language as sui generis is guilty of overlooking precisely this continuity between poetic and everyday practices of linguistic invention. As these examples suggest, popular cultures have, in their own right, cherished and burnished the resources of creative expression, including the use of language so as to make vivid what might otherwise be taken for granted. I cite these particular examples because they make clear how far that capacity can be wielded with tacit political intent, serving as a means of stripping away the veiling mundanity of forms of structural violence, allowing the oppressive quality of specific social relations to be apprehended with fresh intensity. It is, of all people, Theodor Adorno who reminds us that there is a 'collective undercurrent' of popular articulacy, a creative expressivity which reaches for the 'sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded' (1991: 45) and which is, itself, one part of what nourishes and sustains formalised literary traditions such as those of lyric poetry.

* * *

The claim that reading is a socially situated activity has a converse implication, of course. It certainly was the case that in some other groups, particularly those in which participants did not know each other quite so well, the discussion proved to be more disjointed or more hesitant, at least initially. Or perhaps, a better phrase would be 'more guarded'; it was as if the readers in question found themselves standing alone against the text, thrown back on their own interpretive resources and uncertain about how their responses might be received by those around them. Even in those cases, however, the general tendency was for the process of making sense of the poems to become, very quickly, a matter of shared discursive effort. Over time, in almost all of the groups, what emerged was a form of reading which I came to think of as 'interpretive riffing'. That is to say: a way of reading in which understanding emerges as the outcome of collective, rather than individual, labour. Here, for example, are sections from the conversations which took place in two of these sessions. Under discussion in the first case is Don Paterson's *The Circle* and, in particular, that evocative concluding passage which was considered in the previous chapter. In the second case, the discussion takes off, as it were, from a question about the reference to the RAF airbase at Leuchars in John Burnside's *History*.

Sandy: *Well, that water ring is not perfect, but it's part of everything else that's happening, and it's all … it's too clever for its ain good!*

Ben: *Yeah, it is.*

Sandy: *It's that clever, nobody can understand it. But no, it's like the ring of, you, the nature of life, and things breathing. And it's all happening, even though that's not perfect, it's part of everything. You know, everything's imperfect, kind of thing. Does anybody else thing that?*

Mary: *I actually thought that that meant that the water jar could make a perfect ring, and his wee boy couldn't.*

Sandy: *I think that perfect ring is maybe the noise, you know, rather than the physical thing.*

Mary: *Oh! Right.*

Sandy: *That's what I was thinking, you know, the perfect tune, the perfect pitch of everything.*

Aileen: *And Leuchars … I mean, I know in September in Leuchars, you have the….*
Iain: *That they're all scrambled, yeah. They're all scrambled.*
Aileen: *… you have every year, every year you have the air show.*
Mhairi: *Air show?*
Iain: *Yeah. But Leuchars is also … is Leuchars not a US …*
Aileen: *No, it's the UK air…*
Mhairi: *Airbase. Is that right?*
Iain: *Yeah. But sometimes the US base their planes there.*
Mhairi: *Yes. They could do. Yes.*
Blair: *The Tornadoes were based there.*
Iain: *Tornadoes, in fact, yeah. And everything was scrambled I think, at that time in 2001.*
Blair: *But that mentioning of Leuchars and the war. To me, you know, means destruction and all the other things he's talking about is nature and it really is … is destruction going to happen, you know, and destroy all the natural [world] […]*
Mhairi: *You see, you think Leuchars was a war symbol. I see it as something different, because it's basically a big base for defence. I've got friends that live in St. Andrews, well I used to have friends that lived in St. Andrews and one of their sons, he didn't fly planes, he was a civilian worker that worked in Leuchars and he used to go there, up and down. […]*
Jack: *But there's a part of a line there that says 'and the muffled dread of what may come'. That implies that this is something… that something dreadful such as war or Armageddon or whatever…*
Aileen: *And a muffled … when you say 'muffle', you think the muffling of the drum and the marching on of…*
Jack: *Again, muffling could mean gunfire which is so far away that you only get the residue of it…*

These are just brief examples, snapshots of more protracted discussions, but in both cases it is possible to see how different responses to a

particular poetic phrase or passage were picked up and passed around between readers, tried on for size, wrangled over and finessed. There was a deeply generative quality to these interactions as different readers took on, debated and refined the interpretive suggestions made by others: is the 'perfect ring' a sound or a shape? Does 'muffling' evoke drums or gunfire? And very often, a kind of symbolic handhold was gained on the poem, as I discuss in more detail below, by referring it back to the lives of readers, by relating it to things which were already, experientially, 'their own'. Thus, for instance, the interpretation of Burnside's textual reference to Leuchars is interwoven with a critical discussion of the thing in its extratextual reality. In a very direct sense, then, this was a way of staking a symbolic claim to the poem by laying hands upon it, rejecting any conception of it as an elevated or 'self-standing' aesthetic object. This riffing interpretation dragged the poem out of its pristine textual isolation and into the back-and-forth of ordinary discourse, such that interpretive possibilities were constantly held out and measured against the responses of other readers. Bakhtin and Medvedev remind us, in a lovely phrase, that meaning is something which emerges 'not within us, but between us' (1978: 8). In many ways, it seemed to me, it was just such an assumption which was expressed in and through this readerly practice; an assumption that the meaning of the poem is not to be found, like a pearl, whole and complete 'within' the carapace of the poem itself but, rather, in what readers, 'between' themselves, make of it and make out of it.

Lest it be assumed that what this implies was a kind of interpretive free-for-all, it is worth emphasising just how far in both of these cases, and more generally, the discussions were orientated towards a search for the reading which worked best, which made the most persuasive, most compelling, sense of the poem or passage at hand. Hence the numerous occasions on which readers referred back to the text itself: '*But there's a part of a line there that says…*'. This readerly recourse to the text was rarely deferential; it was certainly not the case that poems were treated as if they possessed some kind of scriptural authority. It was, rather, a way of reading which was genuinely akin to the practice of 'riffing', with phrases drawn out, reprised, reordered and interwoven with a wider discussion. This example, focussed on William Letford's short poem 'Taking a headbutt', is indicative:

Mary: *It took me a few reads to get that.*

Sandy: *You've obviously never tasted your own blood when you've been butted by someone. You know: it tastes of brass.*

Mary: *Does it?*

Sandy: *Oh aye. It's as if you're sooking a brass honnel.*[1]

Mary: *Yeah, well I didn't understand that. It took me a few, but then I thought, oh, he's been hit by somebody.*

Alex: *Aye: 'the bell was rung', you know?*

Mary: *I didn't get: 'made the mistake of leaning forward, and that was that'. What was that?*

William: *'Your pal ruffled ma hat'.*

Mary: *Aye.*

William: *'Made the mistake…' […] 'The bell was rung', as if it's the end of a fight, you know?*

Mary: *Aye. But it's strange. Well, it took me a couple of reads to get it.*

Alex: *I think it's cause everybody is capable of doing things like that, you know, reacting like that. A lot of people wouldn't, you know. But there's a lot of people I know, myself, that would do things like that, off the cuff, kind of thing … just to react […].*

Mary: *Once I got it, after the second or third read, I thought that nobody who behaved like that would use the word 'ruffled'. I mean, you're not going to say 'your pal ruffled ma hat'.*

Sandy: *It's like suggesting that only bad boys get into fights, which is a load of shite, you know! Because people who are [posh voice] 'professors' get into fights as well, you know!*

Mary: *But it's not like somebody getting angry – 'your pal ruffled ma hat'.*

Ben: *You wouldn't say 'ruffled ma hat'. You wouldn't say anything, would you?*

Sandy: *Maybe if he spells it with 'lt', instead of 'ed', and he spelt it in the Scots way: 'rufflt'.*

Mary: *Aye.*

Sandy: *That might be better: 'rufflt'.*

Alex: *Or 'don't touch my hat'.*

Sandy: *'Your pal rufflt my hat'. That sounds brilliant, doesn't it? […]*

Mary: *A 'ruffle' is quite gentle, is it not?*

Ben: *It's like… patronising.*

Mary: *Oh, right.*
Alex: *'Ruffled' your heid.*
Mary: *I would have thought: 'knocked my hat off' would have been better.*
Alex: *Rough. Ruffian. It could mean anything.*
Sandy: *I quite like the sound though. Kept it a bit shorter: 'yer pal rufflt my hat'.*
Mary: *And instead of going 'what', you'd be like, 'ruffled!?'*
Alex: *That's maybe what happened!*

What I mean to emphasise by this long quotation is the way in which the poetic text becomes meaningful as it is constantly spoken into or spoken through. Thus, for instance, it is reclaimed or returned to the rich expressivity of ordinary speech: '*It's as if you're sooking a brass honnel*'. Thus it is tested against, held up to the light of, lived experience: '*You wouldn't say ruffled ma hat*'. And thus, indeed, it comes to be creatively and strikingly re-written: '*"Your pal rufflt my hat". That sounds brilliant, doesn't it?*'.

In short: this was a process which treated poetic meaning as an emergent outcome of shared discursive effort. By proceeding in this way these engagements had the effect of establishing what we might think of as a space of interpretive openness and of challenging thereby any sense of exclusion which readers might initially have felt: '*It took me a few reads to get that*'. Nor, I should make clear, is this my optimistic inference; it was something to which those taking part attested explicitly. As the discussion about Paterson's poem wound down—in the first example cited above—Ben, one of the readers who had been most reluctant to contribute, spoke up:

> *Poems like this, I tend to avoid, just because I find them hard. But maybe the good thing is to sit with poems like this, and by discussing it, I understand it a lot better now, just getting a wee bit of perspective. So maybe that's why it's good to read stuff like this, rather than just ignoring it.*

Much the same point was made elsewhere, including towards the end of the discussion with the group whose responses I discussed previously. Here again, Doug, one of the participants who had talked most incisively about his sense of frustration at some of the poems we were considering, reflected at the end of the conversation as follows:

> *I can understand this a lot more now because I'm sitting listening to other people […] Reading this on ma own, not in a group, not discussing it, it means nothing to me. But now it does. I can agree with you […] I can understand more in a group, I can understand more of it. I can, if somebody else has got an opinion then I can accept that. I, well, I didn't see that. I can say 'I didn't see that', rather than look at you blankly and go 'what are you talking about'?*

In relation to all of this, a historical comparison seems relevant. Cary Nelson argues persuasively, in his revelatory discussion of the radical American poetries of the early decades of the twentieth century, that what those poetries demonstrate for us is the prospect of an entirely different conception of what poetry might be and of how it can come to matter in the world. What is disclosed, Nelson argues, by the ways in which political poems were circulated, reprised and revised in socialist magazines and radical reading groups, passed from hand to hand and by word of mouth, is a vision of 'poetry as a collaborative, dialogic enterprise' (2003: 154), undertaken on the assumption that 'no poem live[s] exclusively within its own boundaries' (178). The reading groups which I am discussing here took place, of course, in a very different political moment from the one which gave energy to those popular poetic cultures. It is also the case that these groups were 'artificial' social settings. Participants were not, generally, in the habit of meeting in order to read poetry and, in some cases, were not in the habit of meeting at all. In that sense, the dynamic which I am describing has to be recognised as being, to some extent, an artefact of the research process itself. Yet, nonetheless, what that dynamic brought into view was a *possibility*. Nelson's studies, in common with other histories of working-class literary cultures—such as those provided by Jonathan Rose (2001) or Mike Chasar (2012)—reveal a largely forgotten history of popular reading practices that face stubbornly outwards not inwards and which approach literature as a shared resource rather than an arena for private conquest.[2] And it was precisely those assumptions which seemed to me to be evident in the course of these discussions, as poems were picked up, debated and understandings worked out or refined: a way of reading which approaches meaning as something born in the reciprocity of social relationships, as the product of an always 'collaborative, dialogic enterprise'.

* * *

As I have already briefly intimated, one telling aspect of this reading practice was the extent to which readers responded to these poems by tethering the texts in question to their own experiences. Thus, in one of the earlier examples which I cited above, an uncertainty about the word 'irredeemable' in Burnside's poem was taken up and served to ignite a wider discussion about the idea of redemption, not as an abstract question, but as a possibility which that reader had fought to embody in their own life. In a very similar way, and as suggested in the previous chapter, the fact that readers did not always recognise the overarching reference in Carol Ann Duffy's *Mrs. Midas* did not prevent them from developing responses to the poem which used it to reflect on the vicissitudes of relationships or on the challenges of living with someone who, for instance, might have problems of addiction. It was in just this sense that Maeve interpreted *Mrs. Midas*' repeated references to gold as an indication that what the poem was describing was life with someone who was especially close-fisted or controlling. This was an interpretation which she expressed by drawing the poem into conversation, as it were, with things which she had lived through:

Maeve: *This woman has no got a voice. It's like, as if they've no got any self-esteem or respect for their self. You only accept things in life what you allow. So, she's allowing that […] It's like… because I'm no going in too deep, but when I was with my ex and he had greed, greed, greed for money, but he didn't care how he treated you, so like a person should be more … you should be respecting the person you're with, rather than, you know, the greed for money. But actually, what he taught me, he was trying to teach me 'emotional intelligence', he said, but actually I turned it around and read up on psychology and I actually found out so much that I actually walked away.*

Sandra: *It was more that he was trying to control [you]?*

Maeve: *He actually taught me something […] I actually read things and saw right through him. I could write a book about it.*

This finding is not a new one. In her thoughtful account of book clubs in Houston, Long pointed out that reading practices are always shaped by the 'weight of the lives readers being to their encounters with books' (2003: 29). What is also worth underscoring, however, is the way in

which that situated practice of reading can rebound on our sense of the text itself, enriching or radically reframing it. In this case, for instance, relating Duffy's poem to her own experience empowered Maeve to speak about it, to assert her 'voice' in response to it. More than that, however, she also made the poem *itself* newly vivid. As discussed previously, much of the wittiness of *Mrs Midas* is a consequence of its magical realism, its summoning up of a world in which the most banal objects really are turned to gold. By placing the poem in the light of what she had lived through, Maeve stripped away that somewhat playful quality, making it something more urgently or fiercely concerned with the realities of gendered power. By bringing her life to the poem, we might say, she brought the poem to a new kind of life.

Reading in this way, of course, implies an upending of the expectations of conventional literary analysis. Rather than asking only what a poem 'says'—as if the literary text is a voice speaking aloud to a silent and passively receptive world—it asks what the world says back to the poem. And in so asking it makes possible a critical response, only one which is offered as much on moral as on aesthetic ground. Thus, a different kind of analytical question is initiated. It is no longer just a matter of deciding how the poem could or should have been written, but of reflecting on how the poem's protagonist could or should have responded to the situation which the poem describes (as in Maeve's suggestion that Mrs. Midas needs to learn, as she herself had learned, to '*walk away*'). And those kinds of question continued to be what was at issue as the conversation developed and as she and Sandra went on to ponder what might have happened in Mrs. Midas' imagined future:

Sandra: *Maybe it's just as well she didn't have a child with him.*
Maeve: *What was it you were saying about the heart of gold?*
Sandra: *Well, people that are kind and thoughtful, you would say they have got a heart of gold.*
Maeve: *Aye, that's right.*
Sandra: *But when you're reading that, as you say with a 'heart of gold', you know, you can't live with a heart of gold. It's not that he's got a heart of gold, how can he live, because it's like metal, it's, you know: a brick.*
Maeve: *But it's just showing no matter how much, I mean 'do you know about gold, it feeds no one', no matter how much you've got in life, it's not to do with money or whatever…*

Sandra: *No.*
Maeve: *…it's to do with the person, isn't it?*
Sandra: *[…] See when it comes to the crunch, can't live with a heart of gold.*
Maeve: *But, as I say, I make out she's glad that she's not had a child because she dreams that she does. But, there's no mention…*
Sandra: *Probably she wanted one, but no with him.*
Maeve: *Aye.*

From the perspective of 'legitimate' literary analysis, of course, this kind of speculation is anathema. The last thing that the 'credentialed' reader is supposed to do is to treat the characters appearing in literary texts as if they were actual people. Yet, what is expressed here is not some naïve assumption that the poem is straightforwardly 'real' nor a search for trite 'lessons'. What is expressed, rather, is a powerful normative expectation that poetry is, in a significant way, continuous with real experience. It is, we might say, a way of making poems meaningful by holding them accountable to life.

We can see that same expectation evident in a further example. In this case, the members of the group in question were talking about William Letford's short poem 'Waking for Work in the Winter', a piece with which readers in many of the groups particularly identified:

Sean: *Total, total identification because, when I was working in construction, say I was living in Partick at the time, or Springburn at the time, and I called, I was out laying bricks in weather, really horrible, cold, in fact weather we shouldnae have been, werenae really allowed to, because the mortar freezes – but we did it anyway, bits and pieces.. the thought, the thought of getting up. What I think back, I say: how did I do that? Do you know what I mean? Lying in bed with the wife, it's nice and warm but you know what I mean?*
Doug: *So you find that one quite relatable?*
Sean: *I mean it's hard, aye, I mean I had nay car, I had to get public transport away out to Govanhill or Paisley.*
Doug: *You went miles!*
Sean: *I know, by public transport. It'll take you nearly an hour and a half to get there.*

AS: *What time were you starting?*
Sean: *8 o'clock. And sometimes it was dark […] Oh man. It was hardship. I mean it's hardship. I'm talking about a particular job I remember in Possil Park. Usually your fingers kinda thaw out by dinner time, but it was that cold, still like that at 1.00 o'clock, couldnae get my fingers, cause I was laying brick, and we had to heat the bricks to let them thaw out. On an old brazier.*
Doug: *See, I admire you and people of your kind, cause I haven't….*
Sean: *But once you were in it, you had to do it….*

Here again, it is easy to imagine how, from the perspective of 'legitimate' literary criticism, a response of this kind might be written off as guilty of taking poetry as reportage, or of placing a concern with 'relevance' ahead of a concern with literary quality. On the one hand, of course, that dismissive rejection of the question of relevance bespeaks the profound privilege from which it originates. The culturally entitled reader rarely has to worry about whether or not published poetry conforms to their experience precisely because it almost always does. Even if they do not own a pear orchard or know all that much about horticulture they are unlikely to be disconcerted when the speaker in *Mrs Midas* tells us that 'we grew Fondante d'Automne' since the phrase summons up a world to which they comfortably belong. It is, in short, a response which looks down on other readers for asking of poetry the very thing which the privileged reader takes for granted: the literary text's experiential legibility, the confidence that it speaks to them of their lives.

On the other hand, that criticism also overlooks what this reading *does* in and through its engagement with the poem, it misses what this way of reading makes creatively possible as a practice. What was articulated in this response was a willingness to take the poem seriously as the instigator of moral or political reflection. Hence it was that the discussion in the group quickly segued from the 'hardship' of working life, as expressed by the poem, to a discussion of the wider structural violence which makes work under those conditions something that must be both hated and desired at once, wished away but longed for at the same time:

Doug: *Do you think you would have had to have […] worked like you to understand that?*
Sean: *Oh, aye, it would be helpful if you…*

Doug: *…had needed to get up?*

Sean: *…had had a taste of it. And then you've got the insecurity of bricklaying or stone. I was a stonemason. You've got the insecurity and it was taken for granted, you'll be paid off. You will be paid off at the end of this job, know what I mean? See that for years? Wears you out.*

Doug: *I was only unemployed for 18 months of my whole life [but] it devastated me. I lost my home, I had to come back fae [where I lived], new town, new life, new wife. I was married at 19, lost everything simply through redundancy. And coming back and staying with my mother-in-law for ages. There's a book in there, I'll tell you that. Getting up? Getting up to try and get jobs, that just arenae there!*

Sean: *What you were talking about earlier, what you were talking about your son's predicament, you know? Aye, but hold on, that just, to me, if you're in any way political with all they things happening, your son, my brother, my unemployment, my brother's unemployment, hundreds of thousands, you cannae help but investigate the politics of why, why you're messed about like that. […] I resent the policies of governments, I resent cause they cause suffering, see what I mean? […] I feel deeply and I cannae help it, why should I change?*

Far from trying to close down the interpretive response to the poem by an insistence on measuring it against those things which were well-known from the readers' own experiences, what this reading did was to use the poem's articulation of and with those lived experiences to create critical possibility, to 'open up' the prospect of an enlarged moral or sociological horizon. And here again, the understanding which was won by so doing rebounds on and enriches, in turn, our understanding of the poem itself. The brutal demand to 'get up' for work in the cold and dark of winter which Letford encapsulates becomes all the more intense, its imperative character falls into starker relief, as it is contextualised by the comment which makes clear the alternative: '*Getting up? Getting up to try and get jobs, that just arenae there*'. If, by literary criticism, we mean a reading whose effect is to deepen our appreciation of the literary texts which we read, then this surely deserves to be treated, in its own right, as a profound critical statement.

It strikes me as significant and poignant, given all of this, that readers in both of these examples made a point of suggesting that the experiences which they were describing had furnished them with the resources to write a book of their own (*'I could write a book of my own'; 'There's a book in there, I'll tell you that'*). It is a claim which, on the one hand, tacitly acknowledges the extent to which certain kinds of lives are accorded significance by virtue of their incorporation in the novels, stories and poems of canonical literature. Yet it is also a claim which insists on granting to the reader's own experience an authority equal to that of the texts with which they are engaging, which insists that such experience is a sufficient warrant for their interpretive labour, according them the right to make sense of these poems. That empowering assumption was central to the way in which reading was enacted in most of these groups. This was not, self-evidently, reading as disinterested aesthetic analysis. But nor, for that matter, was it reading characterised by naïve realism or motivated by a search for narrowly didactic learning. Rather, it seemed to me, it was a way of reading which, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's helpful term, allowed the literary text to 'reverberate' (1986b: 21) with life, which assumed that the process by which we might reckon with and make sense of poetry can be taken as part of the wider discursive and situated processes through which we reckon with, and seek to make sense of, our experiences. Nor—as I elaborate in more detail below—does 'making sense' imply a passive settlement with things as they are. In both of the cases cited above, and in others considered elsewhere in this account, the reading of these poems became a context which created space for critical reflection on the experience of injustice more broadly, opening out towards a set of normative reflections about how the world ought to be.

* * *

At the risk of belabouring the point, one further example of this reading practice is worth considering. The poem which most readers found most engaging was Jackie Kay's *Bed*. In one sense, at least, this was a reflection of what was felt to be the poem's accessibility, thanks in part to its conventional four-line stanzas and its use of spoken Scots. Many of the readers with whom I worked made a point of emphasising the fact that they did not feel linguistically or formally excluded by Kay's poem as they did by some of the other poems under discussion. As one man put it: '*I followed it from the beginning to the end. No surprises, there was no codes,*

there was nothing to unlock'. A comment of that kind should not be taken as implying, however, that what this reader or other readers wanted was a poetry that was facile or self-explanatory. What drew these readers to this poem, rather, was what they described as its immediacy, the sharp sense of human presence which it established: '*she's describing so vividly the feelings of the mother*', as one reader put it, '*you could be absorbed by it, you could almost feel as though you're sitting next to that old lady*'. Many other readers said as much, often commending the vividness of the scene which they found in the poem by recapitulating it in their own no-less-vivid terms: '*I could see her sitting there at the living room window in a single end, looking down at the street, and watching things. The furniture round about in the dark room*'.

Here again, I feel the shadow of that literary objection falling across the page, the objection which condemns 'reading for realism', which condemns an investment in poetic characters as if they were actual people. One can almost hear the orotund declamation: 'a poem is not a soap opera'. No one, of course, condemned the Imagists when, in seeking to break with the curlicued conventions of Victorian poetry they urged the pursuit of just that sense of concrete presence which these readers found in Kay's poem. But there is a difference, of course. For the Imagists, such immediacy was to be bought at the cost of looking *past* the characterful specificity and moral complexity of people in their interrelations, as if the presence of the poem can only be attained by making humans, as social beings, somehow less present, by placing them at the service of the poem's act of experiential apprehension. Thus, they become mere aesthetic touches in a wider scene: the petals on Pound's black bough or the damp-souled housemaids who add a blue note of despondency to the view that T.S. Eliot surveys from his window. By striking contrast, for many of the readers in these groups what gave Kay's poem its sense of urgency and 'thereness' was precisely its *refusal* to look past concrete human presence. What made it compelling was its summoning up of a recognisable person in their socially situated personhood, in the midst of the messy relations of which they are part. For many readers, of course, that sense of immediacy was related to the fact that the poem described a situation which recalled things they had experienced at firsthand or which, indeed, they were living through at the time. A number of those who took part, particularly women, shared experiences like those described by this participant:

I know how that feels because my mother took no well, and I would go over, everyday I went over, but it didn't matter what I did, it was never good enough. So, it could be a wee bit of that as well. You know, like no matter what her daughter is doing or her son, and it could be her son. But I take it frae that bit that she's a daughter, but no matter what she's trying to do it's just never going to be good enough. She's telling her what's happening, she can't take it, because obviously […] she's bedridden. My mother ended bedridden, but as I say, you tried to tell her what was happening, but half the time she wasn't interested anyway. So there's that as well going on […] But it is degrading for them, I've got to say, and I could see that from my mother's point of view. But, she never ever did see it from my point of view. That I had a house and a family to see to as well, and I was giving up all my time, no that I had to, I did it because she was my mother and I would go over and if she would even say have said 'thanks', then, that would have been enough. But, I had brothers you see, and not one of them came near for years and then they appeared at the door one day and it was the red carpet went out and it was 'go, make your brother a cup of tea'. I'm the disabled one here, you know, like could he no go and make me a cup of tea? You know? I've been trying to do this, that and the next thing for you all morning. Now you want me to go and make tea? I don't think so.

The conventions of literary criticism generally place accessibility and depth in opposition to each other. The poem which is formally straightforward is the poem about which, it is supposed, little can be said or about which little is worth saying. And, yes, there were indeed some readers who did feel this way about Kay's poem, who shared the view of this man: *'To me, it seems more self-explanatory, when you listen to it. I don't really have much to say about it, 'cause I think it says it all. It's all out there, really, isn't it*?' Yet, for most readers, it was exactly the 'thereness' of the poem, its presentation of a recognisable social relationship which was what made it so rich and which meant that, more than any other piece we read, it provoked deep and sustained discussion.

What was evident in these enthusiastic responses, in other words, was just that arresting sense of 'recognition'—the feeling that the poem confronts the reader with its own undeniable presence or voice—which Gadamer describes as the archetypical feature of our response to art. Yet 'recognition' is not an experience which is guaranteed or sustained solely by the work of art's intrinsic qualities; it is not just a question of how the literary text 'stands forth' in itself. It describes a relational phenomenon, something which happens—or does not happen— at the meeting place

between the text and those who read it. As such its conditions of possibility are necessarily structured by all that is presumed of the reader by the poem, by all that it takes for granted: the knowledge, the experiences, the histories which are inscribed within it. As we saw in the previous chapter, the consequence of all of that—of the many tacit ways in which poetry is socially determinate—was that the experience of some readers in the face of some of these texts was an experience of estrangement, a sense that they stood unrecognised in the presence of the poem. There was often a striking contrast, therefore, in the energy with which those same readers responded to Kay's piece, and in the sense of symbolic ownership which was apparent in those responses, not least in moments when participants responded to my unthinking 'correction' of the text into 'standard' English by politely—but definitely—reasserting the original:

Sandra: *There's that bit where she says there's no a lot of talking between them.*
AS: *Yes, we don't talk anymore…*
Maeve: *We dinnae talk any mair.*

This sense of symbolic ownership was expressed, moreover, in participants' close analytical reading of the poem's language, the careful effort to unpack the precise implications of particular uses of dialectic and syntax, and in ensuing debates over whether the protagonist's voice was convincingly expressed:

Sean: *Sometimes you see, with dialect like that, Scots, you can distinguish what area. Cause we don't say 'dochter' about this area, you know what I mean? Maybe Ayrshire they say it? I think she's fae Ayrshire?*
Alan: *I think it's convincing. Because that generation, probably their parents had either come from the Highlands or had come from Ayrshire, come from way out, way, way out. Coming for work, work at that time I imagine, and there'd be traces of the parents', you know: 'I dinnae ken'… I've heard that among that generation.*

Alan, who on other occasions had felt that he had little to say about the poems that were being discussed—or as if his views, in those cases, lacked

any legitimacy—here asserted his expertise with an air of determined interpretive authority: '*if it [the speaker's voice] had sounded […] artificial it would have struck me right away*'. Later on, he reflected further on why he preferred this poem to some of the others we had read:

> *I think maybe it sounds a bit selfish but the background, it's familiar to me. And I feel at ease with the language. Whereas, with the others … I don't know, sometimes I wonder if writers and poets use words, even make up words, I don't know if it's a genuine attempt to describe either a person or a place or a situation, or whether it's, especially among authors, is it a show to the lower legions that 'I'm so knowledgeable, here's a word that you'll probably need to go and look up a dictionary'? And it's usually a word that a simple, straightforward word could take its place.*

Having said this he paused, before adding a further comment out of a concern—or so it seemed to me at the time—that I might take what he had said as an appeal for simplicity, a refusal to be challenged. It wasn't, he insisted, the straightforwardness of Kay's poem that he relished, but just the opposite:

> *You can imagine her, that wee word 'tut' […] even her 'tut', that's, even when she's tut-tutting or complaining or whining, I mean […] I can, I can, what's the word? Empathise. I can feel right with the description of a child, her being the child. Whining. The child whines, moans, sobs, that's … forced on her. It's thrust on her. It's not a choice.*

In other words, he insisted, what he found compelling about the poem was the way in which it concealed '*a whole wealth of detail between the lines*'. What I took him to be telling me, in saying all of this, was that 'feeling at ease' should not be mistaken for something being 'easy'. Rather, it is precisely when the reader's life is recognised in what they read—when they are granted that sense of immediacy, of '*feeling right*' with what is read—that it becomes possible to attend to the poem in its fullness, attuned to all of the interpretive possibility which thus opens up '*between the lines*'.

* * *

As this last example already suggests, the '*wealth of detail*' which most readers found in Kay's poem concerned the actions, choices and perceived

responsibilities of the mother and daughter that the poem describes. Those issues occasioned more protracted and more contentious debate than any other aspect of any other poem. The following engagement is indicative. It started almost as soon as the reading of the poem had finished:

Iain: *I love the language that's being used. I love Scots. And I think, you know, you get a real clear image of this crabbit old bitch sitting in her bed and lamenting her life gone by […]*
Fiona: *She didn't come across to me as a crabbit old bitch.*
Iain: *Didn't she? Yeah, well…*
Fiona: *No. Lamenting her circumstances, yes, but not a bitch.*

In what followed, these divergent interpretations constantly resurfaced, and were taken up by other members of the group, in an ongoing debate over the moral implications of the relationship which the poem imagines, and over how to take the things which the mother says in the course of her monologue.

Mhairi: *[M]y mother went into a nursing home and … they told me she'd only be about three months to go and I couldn't cope any more. And she went three and a half years in a nursing home. But most of them [residents in the home] didn't have any visitors. […] They were all different, but you could see there was a … they were well looked after, but underneath that there was a kind of bitterness, this is what my life has come to. This woman appreciates everything her daughter has done for her, but she's still bitter that this is her life.*
Iain: *You see, I don't think she does really appreciate what her daughter…*
Mhairi: *I think she does actually, because … she does.*
Iain: *Yeah, I don't think she does.*
Mhairi: *Because they could be extremely nasty when they don't. I think she's not [nasty].*
Iain: *Yeah. But I think she is… I think she is extremely nasty. She is being, in a very simple way.*

Mhairi: *She's accepting of it, but you're just having the thoughts [overlapping talk]. I don't think she's nasty to her daughter at all, because she's thinking about it.*

Aileen: *There's an old West of Scotland way where older women … it was encouraged to be, kind of … you know, they felt their place was to be like that, and people want to do things for them. They weren't always really grateful and we knew a couple of families where the eldest daughter hadn't either got married or she was married and the mum was with her and maybe, you know, you would hear them shouting and their stick and…*

Iain: *And there's no … it's, like, you know, there's hints that she's not at all satisfied with her daughter and things like…*

Aileen: *'Crabbit tut'.*

Iain: *'An simmer doon fray this same windae – that's no seen a lick o' paint fir donkeys'. Is that a criticism of her daughter for not making [overlapping talk]?*

Mhairi: *No, I think it's just …. I think probably just a very old Glasgow tenement.*

Iain: *Yeah. No, but I think it could be an implicit criticism about the daughter as well. I think a lot of it is.*

When, quite some time later, one of the group sought to move the focus of the conversation towards a more generalised consideration of the poem's thematic concerns other readers quickly stepped in to return the debate back, once more, towards the question of its central relationship: '*She does it very well. I mean, you are left with this: is she nasty? Is the daughter nasty to her? I mean, it's beautifully done to make you think*'.

Much as the protagonists in this debate objected to the opposing interpretation of the poem they were, in one sense, on the same side. They were on the same side insofar as it was clear that they felt that these questions were a crucial part of what the poem was fundamentally about. Or, to put it another way: they were on the same side in enacting a reading practice which assumed that the questions we might ask of poems are continuous with the questions we ask all the time as we try to understand the social world and the relationships which shape that world for us: questions of motive, responsibility, intention and relationality. And this, of course, hints at an underlying normative expectation—an expectation that the poem's first obligation is to a human, not a literary, imperative. When

readers expressed, as they sometimes did, a frustration with the circuitousness of symbolic or other forms of analysis they did so not because they wanted a poetry that was superficial or comfortably familiar, not because they wanted a quiet life, critically speaking. They did so because they wanted poetry which placed the intricacy and richness of social relationships ahead of literary intricacy, which chose not to subordinate human to aesthetic meaning.

* * *

It is perhaps worth reiterating the fact that when readers sought to make critical sense of the relationship represented in the poem—when they asked, for example, '*is she nasty? Is the daughter nasty to her?*'—they were not making the mistake of imagining, as the charge of naïve realism so deprecatingly implies, that these were flesh-and-blood individuals. They were, of course, perfectly capable of differentiating between a poem and a person. What art offers us, Gadamer suggested, is something different from scientific knowledge. The poem, precisely in its immediacy, makes a claim upon us, it presents itself to us as something that requires understanding. It is in that respect, in and through the specificity of its presence, that it serves to make possible thinking towards how things are, or could be, in human experience. And it was, indeed, in something like this sense that these readerly debates over the relationship made manifest in Kay's poem had the effect of creating space for a series of reflections about the meanings of human action and about how things might be arranged in social life. Those questions were not raised to a level of conceptual abstraction but they were there, nonetheless, expressed in the effort to establish a critical understanding of what the poem brought, for many readers, into vivid focus. In reflecting on the rights and wrongs of the relationship which Kay's poem makes present, they brought into question what constitutes right and wrong in relationships as such. This effort thus involved, in a very real sense, a form of 'close reading', only a close reading focussed not on the poem's aesthetic qualities but on understanding the nuanced and situated meanings of the interactions which it describes: whether, for instance, a passing comment about a long unpainted window frame—'*this same windae / that's no seen a lick o' paint fir donkeys*'—might conceal a barbed admonishment. In this way, as the reader quoted above put it, the poem serves to '*make you think*', not by means of philosophical proposition or theoretical generalisation, but in

and through its concrete immediacy, in and through the way in which it focusses attention on the texture of social actions and interrelations. It was in grappling with this recognisable 'presence' which the poem established that a form of critical reflexivity was made possible. All of this, it seems to me, is what Gadamer means when he says that the ambiguity of the poem—the challenge which it places before our understanding—'answers to the ambiguity of human life as a whole' (1986c: 71).[3] In this way, he argues elsewhere, our response to art is continuous with a 'universal characteristic of human existence—the never-ending process of building a world' (1986d: 104).

This last claim is a deeply attractive one, especially in its repudiation of the assumption that poetry is radically detached from life or that a proper response to art requires the reader to enact such a detachment on their own behalf. It was just such a repudiation which, as I've argued, these readers put into practice through the ways in which they engaged with these poems. Yet, doesn't Gadamer settle rather too abruptly, rather too eagerly, for the comfort of the 'universal'? Putting things that way risks losing sight of the criticality that was also evident in these engagements. In many cases, as we have seen, the reading of specific poems, as they were taken up and debated in conversations within the groups, as readers brought those poems into a relationship with their own lived experiences, resolved itself less in the generalised 'process of building a world', and more in a situated questioning of the world at hand. It is, as Jacques Rancière famously argued, the stereotype of the lumpen labouring body that serves to hide from view the creative agency of working people, the extent to which, in their writing and reading, they are often 'at work on the construction of a *different* social world' (2012: xi, italics added). It was a critical effort of just that kind that was frequently evident in the responses of these readers, as their readings opened out towards questions or reflections of a profoundly normative character, questions intended to provoke attention to the political causes of everyday suffering—'*why [are] you messed about like that?*'—or reflections culminating in a refusal of the gendered arrangement of the labour of care: '*Now you want me to go and make tea? I don't think so*'. The ways in which readers make sense of poetry may conform to the ways in which they make sense of the world but that does not imply, inevitably, conformity *to* that world. Indeed it is possible that in the discursive struggle to gain a critical purchase on the poetic text, readers in their collaborations can find their way to a critical purchase on the world of which that text is one refracted expression.

Perhaps, we might call this—in contrast with the more usual benchmark of 'critical distance'—a form of reading characterised by 'critical closeness', a way of responding to poetry which works by hauling the text nearer, bringing it into conversation with what the reader knows and bears already.

* * *

It rarely felt, in the course of discussion within these sessions, as if participants were jockeying for advantage against each other. I say this not because those discussions were characterised by unanimity or flat consensus—as will be evident, there were disagreements aplenty—but because they seemed to take place according to the presupposition that understanding is something which is secured between us rather than a victor's trophy to be borne away. Viewed as a whole, I came out of the research reminded that engagements in the fields of culture can take place just as well in accordance with an ethic of reciprocity as in accordance with the logic of symbolic domination. Nonetheless, there *were* moments in the research when a specific kind of tension became apparent. Two examples may serve to illustrate what I am talking about. Firstly, there is this comment, from Isla:

> *[W]e talked about analyzing poetry. Sometimes you read and think: maybe they did just mean that her hair looked like gold. You know? Maybe there, there wasnae any other meaning, maybe he just looked at her that day and thought: her hair looks like gold. End of story. And, you know, don't try to over-analyze.*

This was said at the very end of the session in question and—at least to judge by the immediate nods and murmurs of assent which it elicited—it seemed to put into words something which many other members of the group also felt. Poems are easily spoiled, someone suggested shortly afterwards, '*by trying to read too much into [them]*', just as a member of one of the other groups said that they had had their love of poetry ruined by the way in which they were '*analyzed to death*' in school; ruined by an approach which could only treat poetry as '*something to be dissected*', rather than '*a thing in itself*'.

Secondly, there was this moment, which occurred when the group in question was discussing *The Circle*:

Mhairi: *It just didn't grab. You know how sometimes poems just …. There was one or two people it was very meaningful to, but … it's okay.*

Iain: *It is horses for courses, though, isn't it? I mean, you might like one poem and then, you know, totally dislike another. I mean, there were things I didn't like about it. I didn't…*

Mhairi: *I don't totally dislike it, but it just…*

Aileen: *Didn't speak to you?*

Iain: *There were things I didn't like. I didn't like the run on lines because I wasn't … where, you know 'they run in one great heavenly design'. And there are several instances of that where they'd … an attempt had been made to carry on, to run on … because there's a clear stanza break […] And I wondered why this particular framework had been chosen. I also thought the rhyme scheme where the rhyme is literally one line rhymes with the next, the next rhymes with the next, so A, A, B, B, C, C and so on. That was a bit of a … a bit prosaic rather than having … and perhaps that's because he's dealing with something very matter of fact, the difficulties that this boy has. I found it less satisfactory. I like the content, but I found the frame a bit difficult.*

Immediately following this last comment there was a brief pause to which I responded—over-anxiously, I suspect—by interjecting a more general question about whether people preferred poems which did, or did not, rhyme. Shortly afterwards, when other readers returned to Paterson's poem, it was noticeable that they chose, for the most part, to avoid the critical terrain to which this preceding comment—and, indeed, my question—had been addressed, and sought to relate the poem again to lived experience, and to broader questions about social relations:

Mhairi: *I did get emotionally … it didn't engage me emotionally, though I could understand the difficulties the wee chap has and how the father is not happy about his son not being perfect.*

Iain: *And yet that very question about perfect: who is, you know? What is?*

Mhairi: *Well all parents think their child is … if they won't admit it, they secretly think their child is. […]*

> ***Jack:*** *I think that's perfectly true what you are saying. People judge one other people from the results of a … for example, if you have an offspring and that offspring has something different, doesn't matter whether that person is different in a normal way. It's just different. And people see that and they don't relate always kindly to that because they're clustered in their own … well, this is how we are. This is how we behave. This is how society should behave.*

What I have tried to describe in this chapter is the way in which those who took part in these sessions sought to make sense of the poems I had asked them to consider, how they worked to render them meaningful. Central to that effort was a practice of reading poetry by the light of lived experience and on the tacit assumption that the very process of doing so can be understood, without discordance, as part of the ongoing struggle to make sense of social life. That way of responding required sustained engagement with the poems at hand. Readers often discussed specific passages, phrases or descriptions at length and in sometimes meticulous detail. There was no demurral here from the hard work of interpretative analysis, nor from close textual attention. Occasionally, however, as in these two telling moments, what broke the surface was an acknowledgement that reading in this particular way might lack the legitimacy of a critical engagement which concentrates its focus on questions of literary precedent, symbolic reference or formal composition; a tacit awareness, in other words, of the unequal relationship between the 'popular' and 'pure' aesthetics which Bourdieu famously described (for example, 1984: 24–26). That certainly seemed to me to be what was evident in the moment of slightly disconcerted silence which greeted the comment about rhyme schemes and stanza breaks. At the time, it felt as if the introduction of that perspective had had the unintentional effect of calling into question the terms of the preceding discussion. And this tacit awareness also seemed to be what was expressed in the comment about the risks of 'over-analysis'. From the perspective of that speaker and many others in the group, the prospect of searching poetry for some 'other', literary meaning seemed preposterous. Preposterous, that is to say, in the full, original sense of that word: it was felt to give priority to what ought to have been, at best, a secondary concern. That kind of analysis was felt to have the effect of 'spoiling' the poem precisely because it meant treating poetry's substantive content as something subsidiary, reducing it to nothing

more than the circumstantial occasion for aesthetic performance. When the readers in that second group redirected the discussion back towards the ways in which the poem spoke to their lives they were, thus, doing nothing more than putting first things first. Yet both that moment of silence and that critique of 'over-analysis' made clear that the readers in question were aware of the fact that there *are* other modalities by which the reading of poetry might take place, that there are reading practices aimed towards 'other meanings', and that those ways of reading might be accorded greater cachet in the wider fields of culture. So here, as on a number of other occasions, there was a lingering sense that even whilst readers found a way to assert their critical voices, even as they laid claim to the poems at hand, they were doing so on what they knew to be occupied territory, on ground already skewed by an unfavourable symbolic hierarchy.

That overhanging sense of relations within the fields of culture was evident in other ways as well. It was evident, for instance, in the care which was often shown by those readers who *were* interested in the formal or symbolic qualities of a particular poem. Those kinds of analytical questions were not introduced very often into the course of these discussions, notwithstanding the example above. When they were, the readers who voiced them were often noticeably cautious about how their suggestions might end up positioning others. They were, in other words, attentive to the risk that what they said might have the effect of making the responses or interpretations of other readers seem less sophisticated. When Sean, for instance, who also wrote poetry himself, sought to raise the possibility of responding to poems in a non-literal, more symbolic fashion, he gave that suggestion a deliberately provisional and even self-deprecating quality by framing it as a series of tentative questions rather than assertions:

> *I think it's because [….] in poetry you're no always accurate – literally accurate. The words are a kind of analogy to a certain thing, so it builds up a wee picture, you know what I mean? […] You have to forget about literal language when you're reading poetry, don't you?*

In this case, and in other examples considered above, it was clear that readers recognised that practices of cultural consumption are haunted by the possibility of symbolic violence. And it was clear, moreover, that they appreciated the fact that this symbolic violence might be articulated not just in relation to readerly understanding—whether, for example, a

reader recognises a particular reference—but also in and through the very manner in which things are read. There was an unspoken understanding, in other words, that the kind of reading practice which tended to characterise these discussions was in some ways vulnerable, that it was prospectively subordinate to a high-brow 'critical' reading characterised by what was seen—from the perspective of many of these readers—as a topsy-turvy insistence on interpreting the poem, first and foremost, as a literary construction.

* * *

How to respond to all of this in conclusion? In one sense, of course, it is tempting to end up picking a side. In the politics of cultural consumption as a whole, it certainly is the case that the appearance of disinterest is privileged over the engaged response, that the aesthetic interpretation trumps the subjective one. It is for precisely this reason that it seems to me so important to insist on the dignity of these latter ways of making sense of poetry, to refuse the account which dismisses such readings as naïve or superficial and to recognise how much they might bespeak a concern for the richness and complexity of human life. It is crucial, moreover, to acknowledge the critical possibilities which they also sustain. Not the least of these is the extent to which they enact, at the level of practice, a critique of the very assumption that taking poetry seriously requires us to hold it at an arm's length from society, to approach it as something self-contained and worthy of contemplation only insofar as it remains in this imagined isolation, sealed off from any question of historical context or human relevance. It is exactly because these two ways of reading face each other in a relationship of structured inequality that it is all the more necessary to think about how privileged forms of cultural consumption appear *from the perspective of those practices which are less privileged*; to allow the latter to pass their critical judgement upon the former, as it were. The ways of reading that I have sought to describe in this chapter have the profound effect of throwing into relief the bloodless, impoverished quality—what Bourdieu called the 'calculated coldness' (1984: 34)—of those ways of consuming culture which honour detachment or which presume that disinterestedness is the condition of legitimate understanding.

Yet, this relativising move, it seems to me, only gets us so far. As I argued, briefly, in chapter one, the insistence on interpreting all of this in terms of the vis-à-vis dynamic of cultural politics, of focussing only

on how different ways of reading might have the effect of positioning one cohort of readers *in relation to another* within the field of culture, risks leaving unasked a whole a series of substantive questions; questions about what different ways of reading might make possible, about their pleasures and potentialities. It is not just a question of how different ways of reading might act as means of 'position-taking' within a given field, but also of what they actually allow readers to 'take' from what they read. And in that respect, we need to acknowledge that the reluctance of many readers to reflect on, or to be moved by, the formal qualities of poetry does entail and express a certain kind of dispossession. Most participants in this research, it was clear, had not been encouraged in the course of their education to think about poems as crafted language, nor had they been given ways of recognising how that crafting might have taken place. Many of those who had come to think about poems in such a way had won that recognition for themselves, by dint of their own dogged and studious labour of reading and reflection. There is a form of symbolic dispossession at play in this situation, *not* because it prevents prospective readers from responding to poetry 'in the proper way'—i.e. with appropriate analytical distance—but *precisely because it robs those readers of an important means of challenging* the ideological assumption that this is how poetry must be properly read.

Perhaps one final example will help make this point clearer. This comes from a discussion with Claire, who I interviewed separately, who was herself a poet and who was therefore deeply interested in how poems are constructed and put together. In this case, she was talking about her response to William Letford's 'Taking a headbutt':

> *Okay, it wasn't until afterwards when I thought about it, that I realised the impact it had made. Because, I think, it's actually, it's actually very brilliant, almost accidentally brilliant. You know, it's almost like he didn't mean to be brilliant, but he's been brilliant. Because, when I read it, I read it through and I got back to those last two lines—'I know I went somewhere because I had to come back'. And in this small, small piece of writing, he has captured altered states of consciousness, you know, and he's done it to me as well. Because what I didn't realise until I thought about it afterwards was, in reading the poem, the poem actually puts me in a different state, an altered state of consciousness. And that realisation that 'I had to come back', I had to come back too, because I had been so deeply engrossed in this poem, that I had to come back as well. And also, I thought afterwards, how*

> *amazingly clever is that. Because in a way, the poem* is *a headbutt. In as much as it, do you know what I mean, it's short, sharp and hard.*

This is, in many ways, an epitome of just the kind of response which is enjoined on readers by the formalist traditions of Western literary criticism. It articulates, beautifully, the skill with which—to borrow Alexander Pope's famous admonition—Letford has made the sound seem 'an echo to the sense'. It is, of course, very possible to imagine how such an interpretive approach might end up making a fetish of poetic form. After all, in principle the same shock of aesthetic recognition could be called forth by a poem about *anything*, to the extent that the subject of the poem becomes merely incidental, something which exists only in service of what the poem sets out to do, aesthetically speaking. Indeed, taken to the point of extremity this way of reading can lead us to the circular absurdity in which, as Robert Pinksy puts it, all we can do is recognise how 'form keeps droning that X = X' (1996: 298) so that poetry becomes a kind of game of aesthetic solitaire. This is just what the readers quoted above sought to reject as a killing 'over-analysis'.

Yet, none of this was what was intended in Claire's response to Letford's poem. What she was drawing attention to was *not* poetic form as something attenuated from life, but precisely the opposite: form as a part of the visceral way in which poetry works upon us, how it is able to speak to us through the body as much as the intellect. She was drawing out what she called, elsewhere in the interview, poetry's capacity to provoke in us a '*feeling response*'. Form, in other words, not as a box of inward-facing mirrors, but as that by which poetry reaches out and grabs us. Saying as much, she admitted, being willing to attend to both the crafted quality of the poetic text but also to its relevance to life, placed her in a space of uncomfortable symbolic contradiction, what she called '*a grey ground between kind of, the academic approach to poetry, and the public side of poetry, if you like*'. In seeking to reconcile these competing claims she was, in many ways, trying to suture the halves of a torn cultural whole.

Taking a lesson from Claire's sustained critical effort, I end this chapter by risking a normative claim. Attending to poetic form matters, I would argue, because it helps us recognise poems for what they are: the product of deliberate, skilful human creativity. It is the absence of that recognition which feeds and sustains an engrained romantic ideology—or, at least, an ideology projected retrospectively onto Romanticism—for which poetry is seen as only belonging to, or only accessible by, those possessed of some

ineffable or unbiddable talent (see Williams 1990 [1958]; and, canonically, Abrams 1953). This is precisely the view which inclines readers to think of poems as the consequence of giftedness, not of labour; it makes it harder for them to attend to the 'made-ness' of the poem, the fact that it is the product of an intentional working upon language. The consequence is that poetry is pushed further out of critical reach for many readers. Or, to put it another way: it seems to me that what we need to overcome is the fact that questions of form have been critically construed as ways of holding poetry at a distance from life, that they have been allowed to become the accomplice of aesthetic alienation. There is, after all, a compelling argument that the converse ought to be true. It is, as I have argued in chapter one, precisely in its formal properties that poetry most eloquently demonstrates its rootedness in our materiality. No one, to my mind, has articulated this claim more elegantly than Glyn Maxwell. 'Any form in poetry', he argues,

> be it meter, rhyme, line-break, is a metaphor for creaturely life. It looks to me as if the most durable are those most closely fused to what we are most deeply: organisms that *breathe* and *move* and *have,* who one day horribly learn they can't breathe or move or have forever […] The sound of form in poetry, descended from song, moulded by breath, is the sound that creature yearning to leave a mark. (2012: 120; see also Littau 2006: chapter 7)

If there is a problem, therefore, it lies not with attention to poetic form as such, but with the critical dominance of a way of reading which seeks to abstract form from its materiality, to strip it 'free' of its human presence, to make it a matter of abstract aesthetic parametres or technicalities, and to detach all of this from questions of social and subjective context. Facing that privileged response—symbolically subordinated to it but still defiant in its own terms—there is the response that I've sought to recognise in this chapter, the response which insistently reaches for the human presence in poetry. The contradiction—we might even say: the tragedy—lies in the fact that so many readers whose reaction to poetry moves in this latter direction, who set out to find the human presence in poetry, are denied one of the most powerful means of doing so precisely because of the extent to which 'form' has been made synonymous with abstraction. We have been taught to think of formal questions as pointing somehow inwards, into the poem's own aesthetic heart, when in fact they point

outwards, back to ourselves, back to the pulse and breath and sound which are characteristics of our shared human experience, back to those real bodies in real times and places, labouring to leave their mark.

Notes

1. I.e. Sucking a brass handle.
2. Jonathan Rose, for instance, describes the overlooked history of working-class reading practices in Britain, as instantiated in traditions of reading rooms, travelling libraries, and the intellectual resources made available by miner's institutes and other worker-led community spaces, all of which were a significant part of working-class life through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and for which, importantly, 'books were treated as public property' (2001: 86). In a similar way, Mike Chasar's account of early twentieth-century traditions of popular scrapbooking in the U.S., and of the audiences for popular poetry radio shows, shows the endurance—even amidst the rise of technologies of mass communication—of an assumption that poetry is not a private resource but, rather, a kind of 'cultural commons' (2012: 53).
3. In this further respect, then, my findings are not dissimilar to those described by Elizabeth Long, who likewise emphasised the extent to which the novel readers with whom she met responded to the novels at hand by relating those texts to their own lived experiences, and by using them as a means of opening up normative reflection (see, for example, 2003: 108).

CHAPTER 5

We've All Got an Inner Being: Poetic Labour in an Unequal Field

In April 1919, the British Raj proclaimed martial law across a number of districts in the Punjab. The proclamation came in response to protests against the deeply repressive Rowlatt Act, which was itself an expression of intensifying British fear about increasing—and increasingly coordinated—anticolonial resistance, and about how that resistance might be informed by the example of Bolshevism. The most notorious work of British brutality in that historical moment was the gunning down of hundreds of unarmed civilians, on the orders of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer, in Jallianwala Bagh on April 13th, but the weeks preceding and following the declaration—which was backdated with the specific intention of providing legal cover for earlier actions—saw summary executions and deportations, the shooting of protestors and widespread public flogging. British military commanders in local areas used the suspension of already flimsy protections to impose punishments intended to humiliate those who were suspected of involvement, making a demoralising example of their bodies. In the city of Kasur, Captain A.C. Doveton invented a whole range of so-called 'fancy punishments' including ritualised whitewashing, forced skipping and shaming acts of public prostration. On one occasion, according to a subsequent government report: 'An accused who was of a poetical disposition was set the task of composing a poem […] which he read in the market place' (Disorders Inquiry Committee 1920: 140). The subject of that poem is disputed. The original commissioners

A. Smith, *Class and the Uses of Poetry*, Sociology of the Arts,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66448-9_5

describe it as being 'in praise of martial law', whereas a rival commission established by the Indian National Congress, of which M.K. Gandhi was a member, suggested that Doveton had a more personal panegyric in mind: 'Capt. Doveton got from the people an address for himself, and actually, by way of punishment, required a Mohemmaden to compose verses in his praise' (Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress 1920: 100). Whether these verses were meant to be a celebration of British authority in general, or of its embodiment in a particular individual, hardly matters. In either case, Doveton's intention was clearly to use the writing and reciting of poetry as a means of enacting that authority and as a way of staging the racist assumption which underwrote such authority; i.e. his stated belief that the colonised were no more than 'willing slaves' (for more detailed discussion see Elkins 2022; Sayer 1991).[1]

Many decades before these events Karl Marx, reflecting on an earlier season of British brutality in India, had noted that anyone wanting to see 'bourgeois civilization' unveiled, stripped of the 'respectable forms' in which it swaddled itself domestically, should turn their attention to the colonial world where its 'naked' reality was immediately recognisable (Marx 1974: 86). So, indeed, it is with the idea of writing poetry. The general conception of a poetic vocation that we have inherited—the 'respectable form' in which it comes cloaked to us—construes it as something inherently antithetical to the operation of power. For Matthew Arnold, to cite an example as influential as it is obvious, the 'dominant idea' instantiated in and through a commitment to poetry is that of 'beauty and of a human nature perfected on all its sides' (1994 [1869]: 37). That ideal, Arnold insists, is defined precisely by a rejection of the blindly partisan and the narrowly instrumental. He thus positions the vocational commitment to culture generally, and to poetry specifically, as standing in opposition to those who choose to 'work for machinery […] for hatred […] for confusion' (47).[2]

That imagining of the poet's social role has proved to be extremely sticky and hard to question. Cary Nelson points out, for example, that whilst poetic modernism is understood as breaking with the Victorian traditions which preceded it, the literary critical construction of modernist poetry frequently recapitulated 'the ideological status that genteel poetry occupied' (1995: 239). Hence, readings of a writer like Ezra Pound have worked insistently to decouple his antisemitic politics from his poetic craft in a way that exemplifies the enduring assumption that poetry as such is 'a form of discourse generically guaranteed luminous transcendence' (243);

that the act of writing poetry, by definition, stands serene and apart from acts of social domination or oppression.

In saying this, I do not intend to mock the longing invested in this vision of poetic creation. As Theodor Adorno argued in a radio lecture from 1957, such longings are historically expressive: 'the demand that the lyric word be virginal,' Adorno notes, 'is itself social in nature' (1991: 39). Adorno's point is that this demand is, in its own way, a repudiation of a life felt to be constantly hostile, splintered and beridden with violence. It is, he says, this experience which is 'imprinted in reverse on the poetic work' (39), and is given voice in the commitment to such work. Nonetheless, we cannot begin to think sociologically about the writing of poetry without being willing to disclose the bloodstains on this most well-laundered of cultural practices. It is precisely because the literary critical construction of poetry has so insistently accorded to it a quality of pristine otherworldliness, because the idea of the poetic craft persisting, clean-handed, above the grubby historical reality of social inequality is so stubborn that we need to acknowledge how far that craft may be enmired in that reality.

The experiences of the writers that I discuss in this chapter are very distant from those described in my opening example, of course, and what they reveal is a different inflection of the politics of culture. All the same, attending to this example seems like a relevant place to begin precisely because it requires us to confront an instance of poetic writing stripped of its respectable, ideological framing, conscripted into service of the very structures of oppressive authority by which bourgeois civilisation has been sustained and by virtue of which it knows itself. It is salutary to remember that unnamed man of 'poetical constitution' standing in the marketplace, reading aloud a poem he had been forced to write, to a purpose not of his choosing. Far from allowing him to transcend the acts of domination occurring all around him, the writing of poetry becomes, in that moment, an integral component of that domination, a part of how it is made socially real. The writers I discuss below did not face violence of that kind, but for many of them, certainly, writing poetry meant struggling against the symbolic and actual structures organising the production of literature; structures premised, in many respects, on the assumption that a working-class poet is, already, a contradiction in terms.

* * *

It was not my intention to dwell on the writing of poetry in this research. Originally, I had thought of the project as a study of cultural reception, concerned with exploring the ways in which readers responded to, and made sense of, different kinds of published poetry. Yet, almost from the first moment, as I was attending community groups and trying to recruit participants, I met people who wanted to tell me about an acquaintance who wrote poetry, or about someone who lived locally who was known for doing so, or about the fact that they were themselves poets. Sometimes, people would share some of this work with me spontaneously: '*Ma wee dug's deid, ma wee dug's deid / he fell oot the windae and onto his heid*', one man quoted from a poem written by a friend of his. '*You can follow it from there all the way to the funeral*', he explained. Elsewhere, just as the discussions were beginning to wind down in one session Margaret reached into her bag and brought out a small volume which she handed to me to consider: '*These are poems that people have written*', she said. '*[They] have written their own small stories or poems into it, and sent it … it's a book made up of people, you know, who are just ordinary people who've written a small poem and sent it in. And it's been published*'. In my fieldnotes from the time I noted the sense of urgency with which she shared this, as if she were wanting me to acknowledge that the writing of poetry need not be reserved for those who are construed as being, in some sense, exceptional or unique. As we talked further, I discovered that one of the poems in the volume had been written by her son. On first reading, I had taken it to be a love poem but it was, in fact, an elegy on the death of the legendary Scottish racing driver Jim Clark.

As is explained in earlier chapters, my initial decision to explore the responses of those who were not, already, readers of poetry was motivated by a sense that the views and experiences of such readers are, all too often, discounted in qualitative studies of cultural reception. To that extent, it is perhaps understandable that I did not set out to speak with those who were poets in their own right. Yet, these two encounters, amongst others, brought me to a gradual and guilty realisation. That is to say: a realisation of the extent to which that original conception of the research had the effect of reproducing a belittling stereotype by which working-class men and women are reduced to gleaners in the cultural field, picking over the stuff which others have left behind. It was, no doubt, an awareness of that which also explained the occasional sense of frustration which emerged in the course of these conversations. Those who wrote poetry themselves were sometimes and understandably keen to move beyond a discussion of

those poems which I had taken it upon myself to choose—'*so, have I got them all, is that them all*?'—in order to consider their own writing. To say so is only to say that these participants resisted my reduction of them to mere consumers and sought, instead, to be acknowledged for what they were: skilful and creative poets in their own right albeit, in most cases, poets whose work was as yet unpublished or was self-published.

As I spent more time talking to these women and men about their work, I began to understand how persistently that work was shaped by versions of just this struggle; a struggle against the constant disregard of their creativity and for some measure of symbolic recognition. A struggle, in other words, against a kind of silencing to which they often found themselves condemned and which my research was, itself, in the course of rehearsing once more. It is for that reason, then, that I try in this chapter to give some measure of attention to the creative labour of these writers and to their accounts of what is entailed in that labour. I should acknowledge that in doing so I am drawing on what were often quite ad hoc conversations and reflections, sometimes taking place after discussion of the poems addressed in the preceding chapters, sometimes woven through those discussions, and sometimes in interviews organised separately as well as, occasionally, in subsequent correspondence.

* * *

Simply enlisting in the struggle for creative recognition means putting something of oneself on the line; it requires a significant degree of bravery and commitment. As I tried to show in chapter three, participants in the reading groups were understandably aware of the charged significance of our responses to consecrated forms of culture and were therefore sometimes guarded in how they articulated their views. Yet, the symbolic risks attendant on cultural consumption are pitched lower than the risks attendant on seeking to claim for oneself the identity 'poet'. No doubt this is true, to some extent, for anyone, because staking that claim implies a willingness to render one's writing subject to the judgements and responses of others. It is, however, particularly the case for working-class men and women given the ways in which that identity has come to be, as it were, classed against them. No one, perhaps, has dismantled the exclusions written into the construction of Literature with a capital 'L' with such trenchant eloquence as Tom Leonard:

> Let a writer have the authority to be nobody else but themselves, if they so wish: to make direct reference to specific particulars of their own life, as lived, names and all. But the code of governance of the 'canon' specifically *excludes* any person from being 'nobody else but themselves'. This is the heart of the mystery: it is the 'unwritten constitution' of what is taught as British Literature. […] why should a code of governance exclude anyone from being nobody else but themselves? What could be the point of this? The answer, it seems to me, is that a code of Literature could not be thought desirable in which anyone might imagine that by being nobody else but themselves, they were the equal of anyone else. It would not be thought desirable, that is, to a government expressly founded on the principle that not everyone is equal to anyone else at all, but that there is a 'natural' inequality which people have to be taught. (2001: xxvi–xxvii)

Given this, it is hardly surprising that when participants talked about their own writing of poetry it was sometimes in the past tense, referred to as something at which they had once tried their hand but in which they had lost confidence, or which had not survived the rigours of working life or the absence of creative interlocuters. Often, indeed, someone with whom I was speaking would reveal only diffidently or in passing the fact that they had written poetry at all. Thus, Alan asked me at the very tail-end of a long conversation whether I knew about an old lodging house in Govan, which had been recently demolished. It was only then that he added:

> *I wrote a wee poem about that. And eh, they got [a well-known Scottish radio presenter] along to do the voice-over and apparently he told the woman in charge that he thought the wee poem was quite good. I thought: 'well, he knows what he's talking about!' But I enjoyed doing it, you know? Cause I'd known the building when I was a youngster, it was originally a seaman's hostel, so I wrote a wee bit about the background of the building and the tragedies that happened in it, you know, down the years.*

In a similar way, Roisin told me off-handedly: *'I suppose I wrote some silly wee poems when I was younger'*. When I asked her a bit more about it, she explained that she had gotten into doing so because of the influence of her family:

> *ma grandpa, I was told, was a bit of a writer and a bit of a philosopher. And my father was a great thinker, and we used to just sit and think together … and, I suppose like everything else you put your thoughts to paper at some point and it came out in a sort of, not rhyming but in blocks of four sentences*

> *at a time. I tried to copy what you were taught at school and fit, fit everything into this, you know? This pattern that would appear on the page.*

She said all of this with a certain amount of self-deprecation, yet as she went on it was clear that those '*patterns that would appear on the page*' as a result of her creative effort, and which had shaped the flux of thought into something durable, still meant something to her:

> *And so, aye, so I suppose just putting your thoughts down at the time of how you, how you sort of felt, as I say. I think the first one, if ma memory serves me, was about … I mean, where I lived and about the house that we lived in, and looking out of the window and what I saw and what I thought and felt about it.*

One of her pieces of writing, she explained, ended up being '*published in a sort of teenage magazine kind of thing*'. Lest this story start to sound a little too mawkish, a little too much like Thomas Gray, I should be clear that there was absolutely nothing self-pitying in the way in which she shared these experiences. All the same, it seemed to me that there was a poignancy about what she told me because it was clearly not just that teenage poem which she recalled, but a sense of the expressive possibility which it represented. Gray's elegy has all his inglorious Miltons lying mute and in the ground, of course, leaving it to the authoritative voice of the canonised Poet to take the measure of what has been forfeit. No one I spoke to would have welcomed that condescension, but in any case, it misses the point. That relationship with creative potential—that 'might have been'—is not just a matter of the past, but is rather something which leaves its traces in the subjective here-and-now as something never completely surrendered, a road that might yet be travelled. Thus, when I asked Roisin, later, whether she still wrote, although she initially said '*no, no*', she went on to admit otherwise: '*Back and forth I've jotted down … you kinda wake up in the morning with a great inspirational quote in your head sort of thing and, maybe an opening sentence from what I hope would be a great book someday*'. Indeed, when we moved on to discuss the poems I had asked participants to read, she showed me that she had composed her responses in the form of what she called '*wee four lines*'. She described her response to Carol Ann Duffy's poem, for instance, as '*great, strange, scary, confused*'. She paused for a moment, having read this out, before

reflecting: '*I think it's always interesting how I write things as well […] That's a wee poem of its own, isn't it: "great, strange, scary, confused"*'.

* * *

One still influential conception of the poet imagines them as a figure defined by their isolation from social life—aloof from the world, like the wanderer in Caspar David Friedrich's famous image, or adrift in the disreputable margins of the city, in the vein of a Baudelaire or a Hart Crane. As mentioned already, Raymond Williams related the emergence of this idea of the 'creative writer [as] autonomous genius' (1990 [1958]: 32) to a series of wider historical changes, including the mechanisation of production and the rise of the first forms of mass communication. It was in that context, he argued, that art came to be reimagined as a privileged sanctuary for threatened cultural values. That claim, as Williams consistently reminded us, had both a conservative and a critical edge. The former tendency, however, led towards the assumption that in the last resort, poetry finds its truest audience amongst the cadres of the 'cultured few'. We might think, for example, of Coleridge's determination that aesthetic education be placed in the hands of a *clerisy*, their discriminating authority an antidote to a world in which 'all men being supposed able to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous Public, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism' (2009: 55). Yet, the resulting embrace of aesthetic detachment was not, as Bourdieu would demonstrate, quite the act of disinterested renunciation which it appeared. The disregard of a mass audience and of a bourgeois standard of success, the pursuit of ever more restricted modes of poetry was—within the upside-down economy of the cultural field—always convertible to a form of symbolic prestige, a marker of commitment or spiritual seriousness. Those whose cultural and material resources allowed them to sustain that commitment over time, to pursue aesthetic innovation with the least concession to commercial pressures, to adhere most assiduously to the principle of art for its own sake, were also those who, in the long run, were most likely to secure the prize of symbolic consecration, to end up on the reading lists of future courses in Literature and to find their place within the ranks of the national canon. Hence, Bourdieu writes:

> the Christ-like mystique of the *artiste maudit,* sacrificed in this world and consecrated in the next, is nothing other than the retranslation of the logic of a new mode of production into ideal and ideology [...] the partisans of art for art's sake, compelled to produce their own market, are destined to deferred economic gratification [...] We are indeed in the economic world reversed, a game in which the loser wins: the artist can triumph on the symbolic terrain only to the extent that he loses on the economic one, and vice versa. (1993a: 169)

These developments are, of course, only one part of the story of modern poetry and, as Bourdieu himself acknowledged, the fact that avant-garde writers themselves occupied a dominant position within the wider field of social power meant that there was always a flickering affinity between their standpoint and those characteristic of other socially dominated groups (for example 1995: 251). Nonetheless, it is worth reprising the terms of that ideological conception of poetry here because of the extent to which it both echoes, and yet inverts, the experiences of some of the poets with whom I talked. A number of those poets did indeed articulate their sense that harbouring an ambition to write poetry had the effect of setting them apart. Yet the alienation which they described, was not the consequence of a wilful aesthetic choice. It related, rather, to their repeated encounter with a wider assumption that poetry, as a creative practice, was incompatible with working-class subjectivity. Writing poetry, as Dylan put it to me, '*is regarded as something which is out of your class*'. It is worth adding that, for those who identified as male, that sense of incompatibility was often felt to be ratcheted up a further notch. Poetry, he continued, is not seen as '*an entirely a manly thing to do*'; thus he had found that choosing to identify himself as a poet had sometimes meant having to deal with stigmatising insinuations of '*weakness*'. Many of these poets, in other words, found themselves excommunicated by the very history adumbrated by Bourdieu and Williams. The act of symbolic enclosure which bequeaths true poetry to the cultured few, which places it in opposition to a 'multitudinous Public', meant that simply trying to write poetry as 'nobody else but themselves' entailed a sense of self-contradiction, it meant laying claim to a practice already predicated—just as Leonard describes—on their absence.

In saying as much, it is easy to slip into an account which implies that all that is at issue is a certain 'construction' of poetry; a 'narrative', as is all too often said, or 'a story' about what poetry is and who it belongs

to. As the quote above suggests, the poets with whom I talked certainly did feel the force of that exclusionary construction. Yet, we would do well to remember Williams' point here: the ideological conception of cultural practice corresponds to actual changes in the structures and institutions of cultural life. In this case, the assumption that poetry is '*out of your class*' is one which refracts broader political and economic processes which have had the effect, at least in the British context, of significantly diminishing the spaces available to autonomous working-class artistry and self-expression. That history is a more complicated and entangled one than I can rehearse in any detail here but it includes a series of policy decisions which have produced a degree of instrumentalisation in state schooling, especially in relation to the teaching of literature. It includes, moreover, the closing down—although never the complete loss—of many of those spaces of independent learning sustained by, *inter alia,* local councils, organised labour, dissenting religious traditions, movements for mutual improvement or community education, as well as the corresponding loss of many less formalised arenas of cultural activity.[3] I am reminded, in this respect, of a man to whom I talked at the very start of the project who recalled the days when '*you couldn't go into any fucking boozer around here*'—he meant the areas around the erstwhile heart of the city's shipbuilding industry—without stumbling across some aspiring poet reading their work aloud. There was no sense of rosy nostalgia in his recollection of those experiences, and he talked about the extent to which such poets might be met with dismissive and sometimes homophobic abuse. But he remembered also the stubborn margin of possibility which remained open in those spaces: '*I used to like that about it*', he said, referring to the poet's bloody-minded claiming of their right to speak: '*you will hear my fucking poems*'. To a significant extent, he blamed the loss of those possibilities on what poetry had itself become, on its retreat into an esoteric, modernist language. Some of the writers with whom I spoke said something similar. Dylan, for example, talked about the extent to which culturally valued poetry often appears to be '*deliberately opaque*'. It is as if, he said, it has been written on the assumption that '*there are only going to be a small amount of people who are going to be able to understand this poem—probably just me [i.e. the poet] and my friends, if the truth be known*'. That assumption, of course, has a converse implication, as he went on to note: that '*working-class people can never understand poetry*'; that it is a practice in which they are necessarily '*out of their depth*'.

In the view of the previous speaker, however, there were also other factors involved, including the wider marketisation and homogenisation of cultural life. This was something he saw playing out in the way in which institutions like the local pub—insofar as it might manage to survive at all—did so at the cost of conformity to the forces of commodification, with piped music and ubiquitous sports coverage reducing it to a site of largely passive consumption, stifling many of the ways in which it might otherwise have been claimed for creative endeavour. All of that has meant that at least since the mid-twentieth century, and most especially in the era of neoliberalism, the lived experience of many working-class men and women has often been such as to make the pursuit of intellectual or artistic ambitions seem forlorn if not self-defeating. This was something that a number of my respondents, such as Sean, had known first-hand: '*I get bitter and resentful because I tried to get away from it [manual labour]. I went, you know, and got three Highers and they were useless. Even applying for library assistant or museum assistant, you know, jobs that we call "cushy numbers", couldnae get anywhere*'.

We are familiar with the redemptive faith which is invested in cultural practice. It is a faith-given objective expression, amongst other things, in the remarkable number of arts-based projects which can now be found in working-class neighbourhoods of cities like Glasgow. Many of those projects do powerful work and, indeed, some of the groups with which I met had first come together in these kinds of settings. The dedication sustaining those interventions, the desire to use collaborative processes of creative production as a way of responding to the mundane violence of poverty, shows that the longing which Adorno discerned on the flip side of the image of art remains potent and compelling. Yet that longing is, of course, not self-substantiating. The prospect of making a living from cultural creativity—or, less ambitiously, simply having one's creative labourers treated with respect—depends upon resources to which only very few have confident or reliable access. Given that, to be swept up by the promise of aesthetic creativity—to say, as Claire did, that '*Poetry is […] the love of my life*'—was not necessarily experienced as an unequivocal good. It was sometimes, indeed, felt to be more a curse than a blessing. A curse, that is to say, insofar as that love might give rise to a sense of possibilities which proved, over time, to have been foreclosed; which proved, over time, to be a series of already broken promises.

Thus, for instance, Finlay described his life as having been a species of warfare, a constant battle aimed at establishing his reputation as a writer

and an artist in the face of repeated setbacks and denials. He had, in the end, made something of a name for himself, and in telling me his story he occasionally referred to himself as a demonstration of the liberatory potential of that aesthetic commitment: '*I'm the perfect example of how it can change, how things can change*'. But in other moments, something else was evident: a sense of disillusionment or an awareness of continued precarity which led him to conclude '*my life's not worked out as I thought*'. He noted, moreover, that he knew many others who were veterans of that same conflict, not all of whom had survived. Most tragically of all, he remembered a friend of his who, having tried everything to secure for himself a foothold of recognition in the field of cultural production without success—writing numerous scripts, collections of poetry and novels—had, ultimately, taken his own life.

So here again, I find myself wondering whether Bourdieu is not guilty of overplaying the idea that symbolic violence is imperceptible to those who experience it. Is it not the case that many prospective working-class poets or writers may end up turning their back on those creative aspirations precisely *because* they come to think of them as a trap, a *trompe-l'oeil* horizon painted on a brick wall? The declaration that a given form of culture is 'not for the likes of us' can be read as an internalised judgement about where one belongs and about the befitting limits of one's ambitions. But it might equally reflect a much more discerning, more penetrating reading of the social terrain, a clear-eyed understanding of a world which constantly enacts that exclusion not just in the stigmatising dismissal of working-class voices, but through economic and political processes which build cultural disenfranchisement into lived reality at the level of local communities.

* * *

I should be clear that not all of those with whom I spoke wanted their work to be more widely read or hoped to establish themselves as full-time writers. But some did, and in those cases the most direct expression of the history of dispossession which I describe above was often a sense of alienation from prospective audience, a lack of interlocuters who would treat their writing with the kind of seriousness and attentiveness which would correspond to the time and effort which they had invested in it. What those authors faced was not a surfeit of readers from whose clamorous views true poetry somehow needed to be protected—as per

Coleridge's discomforted account—but rather an emptiness which they longed to fill. For instance, when I asked Sean, who had generously shared some of his beautifully judged and deeply moving poetry with me, what it was that motivated him to write, he said explicitly: '*It's a desire to express myself, and let others know, you know what I mean? It's to share, I get pleasure out of sharing it, reading it and sharing*'. This was something which he had found himself much better able to do since joining the community group of which he was part:

> *it's a good feeling. And if you think you've done quite well it's great to read, read, read over it. I dae that often. I go: oh, that's no bad, eh? I don't think it's ego, you just feel … accomplished, you've accomplished something. It's an action, poetry, as well. It's quite an action.*

For a long time, however, there had been very few people in his life with whom he had been able to talk, in this way, about the products of his creative labour. He recalled moments when, as he put it, he was overtaken by a sudden '*consciousness that […] I shouldnae be here*', that there was no one around him who shared his love of writing and of books. Thus he had lived for some years—this was said with a laugh, but clearly in earnest—'*in purgatory*'. The word was, evidently, not chosen lightly and was intended to express a kind of suspended animation, a sense of being unable to share those things that were in him to share; what Anna Julia Cooper described, albeit in a different context, as 'a thumping from within unanswered by any beckoning from without' (1998a: 86).

> *See when you're full of the spirit, you're full of the muse, right, and you sit writing, you could read poetry to people that arenae really responsive, know what I mean? And it can make you feel bad. And you're like 'do you no like it?'. But they're not that way inclined.*

For others, such as Dylan, the search for a way out of that purgatory had led to a kind of symbolic impasse. He had, in the past, joined some locally-based writing groups and although he found encouragement and support in those settings, he was sometimes dispirited because he felt that other members of those groups did not always share his deep-seated knowledge of, and interest in, poetic histories and traditions. With little formal educational encouragement, Dylan had invested his life in reading poetry, such that he often produced—as well as his own beautifully observed nature

poems—skilful parodies of texts by a wide range of canonical poets. When I met him he shared with me a long portfolio of poetry which moved, deftly but creatively, in the styles of Edwin Morgan, Norman MacCaig, Wendy Cope and many others: a whole constellation of famous poets with whom he made himself an interlocutor. Sometimes, he told me, when he had first started to work seriously on his writing, the traits and tones of these famous poetic predecessors would occupy his own poetry unbidden, inhabiting it from the inside, as it were.

None of that effort counts for much, he noted, if those listening to or reading the resulting poems do not recognise the resonances at play within them. '*Most people do not understand them*', he told me about these parodies, '*they can only read them as poems*'. Parodies, he reminded me, are not photocopies or passive reproductions. Rather they require—like the best cover versions—a capacity to make some new and meaningful from an original, working from the inside out. Yet that creative labour is, in a sense, foregone if the audience does not share, in its 'mind's ear', the point of departure. '*In order for a parody to work*', he said, '*the person that is reading it has to see what you are trying to do and who the original writer was*'. Otherwise, '*people are going to say: "Who is Philip Larkin? Who is T.S. Eliot?"*'.

Given this, then, he had taken the decision to try to reach a rather different readership, choosing to attend a writers' group which met in one of the city's grander public buildings and which attracted—as he described it—a somewhat genteel audience. This is how he recalled what happened:

> *Mistakenly sitting at the front – a mistake at any venue! – I was asked without warning to read first. Obviously no one wants to be the first to read. 'You're here to read, aren't you?', I was prompted. 'Ask someone else', I said, 'I will read later'. Yet despite my protestations there I was in front of a large room of so-called poetry lovers, virtually unprepared. I was offering them a choice of sedate poems or decidedly un-sedate poems, when I heard an impatient voice call out: 'Just get on with it, for goodness sake!'*

So it was that he found himself caught in an impossible double-bind. He was faced, in one context, with a prospective readership which, in his view, did not always recognise what he was trying to achieve. Yet, elsewhere, he was treated in a way that made him feel exhibited or out-of-place amongst those who, he had hoped, might have better understood his work. In the latter case, angered by the sense that he was being put on the spot, he

sought to turn his poetry into a means of symbolic revenge, aimed at obliterating the relationships of bad faith in which he felt he had been trapped:

> *With that I angrily decided that they were going to get the type of poem that they would definitely not forget. I thought: this could be suicide for my poetry aspirations. I can still see their faces in my mind. More shocked than awed if the truth be known. I had offered them a sparkler on an atom bomb. I think some of them might still be feeling the aftershock and the fallout to this day. They asked me to go first – what they ended up with was a pre-emptive strike. [laughing]*

Much of Dylan's account of his struggle to live out his sense of calling as a poet involved grappling with similar kinds of experiences of estrangement. Only this was not, as per the romantic myth, an estrangement which was chosen as a means of securing a kind of 'mystique', nor a situation which could be somehow 'cashed in' for long-term symbolic success. It was, much more bluntly, the absence of the readership and recognition for which he longed—an aporia whereby one potential audience did not treat his poetry as seriously as he hoped, whilst another potential audience refused to take him seriously as a poet.

Leonard argues that any collection of poetry, which fails to adequately reflect the reality of social conflict is a lie (2001: xvii). The same applies, surely, to any account of poetic practice. As the stories above demonstrate, the commitment to that practice, far from placing its practitioners at a safe aesthetic remove often led them to forms of confrontation—'*they might still be feeling the aftershock*'—or placed them at cross-purposes with their prospective audience: '*do you no like it?*'. To strive to write poetry, and to get that poetry heard, required them to wrestle, repeatedly, with a doubled-edged exclusion: on one side, the long-run consequences of processes of cultural dispossession inflicted on working-class communities; on the other side, the stigmatising fences of the game-reserves of consecrated culture. Like others with whom I spoke, Dylan described his engagement with poetry using the language of love—'*for me*', he said '*it's a love affair*'. Yet his lived experience as a poet was such that, at least in this case, he felt that he had no choice but to make an avenging weapon, an '*atomic bomb*', of the products of that love.

* * *

Having said these things, it is important to add a qualification. Bridget Fowler suggested at the start of the 1990s that deeply rooted autodidactic traditions, the acquisition of cultural capital through 'an arduous process of self-education' (1991: 170), may have helped to sustain a marginally more open or accessible cultural scene in Scotland than in, for instance, the French context described by Bourdieu. How far that remains the case can be debated, although it is telling that none of the poets whose writing I have used in this project come from especially elite backgrounds. Moreover, it certainly is true that there is a proud record of Glaswegian working-class writing, and many of those with whom I spoke clearly looked to prominent figures in that tradition—James Kelman, Jeff Torrington, Liz Lochhead—as well as to other working-class writers such as John Cooper Clarke—as exemplars. Dylan talked in this vein about Tom Leonard as someone who had genuinely '*attempted to introduce poetry to people who never think about poetry*'. Leonard mattered to him, it was clear, not so much by virtue of the form of poetry that he wrote—a form of poetry which, in practice, he broadly rejected: '*I actually feel that vernacular poetry dumbs down […] it assumes that the reader can only understand a vernacular language rather than a formal language*'—but because of what he represented as a figure of possibility, as a demonstration that one could start off as a postman and find entrance into the high fields of cultural production. Leonard's example helped make it possible for him to conceive of a future marked not by financial success—he specifically insisted that he had '*no interest in money*'—but by symbolic recognition: '*Poetry to me is a passion, and the thought of rubbing shoulders with poets I admired, men and women, as a participant, and as a fellow writer, would be a realisation of years of writing, reading and dreaming*'.

It is true, moreover, that resilient spaces of cultural creativity continue to exist in the city, and some of my participants had certainly found a deeply supportive home in one or other version of those spaces. Claire, for instance, explained that she had first discovered poetry when she was a teenager:

> *I was given, second hand, by a cousin, an old diary made by Miss Selfridge. And it was full of beautiful pictures and little quotes, here and there, of just words. And I didn't know where they were from, and I was so moved by one of them, that I actually ended up writing about it in a piece of creative writing. And my English teacher spotted it, and recognised it for what it was, and gave me an anthology of that poet. And it was the first poetry book*

> *I'd ever read and I was just … I fell in love, you know, fell in love […] it was wonderful to have found a way of expressing myself.*

Initially, she had harboured ambitions to become, as she put it, '*a literary poet*' but over time she grew disillusioned, choosing instead to channel her energies into her prospective career: '*poetry was still there to a miniscule amount, but when … I ended up getting in employment […] I was a workaholic, and I only worked and did my shopping at Asda and that was my entire life which was not healthy at all*'. Even in that context, however, she had continued to write for herself and later on, when she found herself needing to '*reconstruct a life*', she had returned to poetry with a new fervour:

> *oh gosh, it's been a saviour in many ways. Because it has taken me into a community of people who share the love of poetry, the act of poetry. And simultaneously, I began reading more poetry. So now I read poetry most days. When I get up in the morning I write three pages of prose, just free writing, and then I read, most days, I read poetry and most days I write. I give myself the opportunity to write every day. I now have a huge body of work.*

That daily labour had not yet translated into formalised recognition in the sense of publication. She, like others, recounted stories which gave a glimpse of just how hard it is to break into the field of literature and of the sheer determination which is required to keep writing and working in that context:

> *I nearly, nearly got a book published last year, along with a friend of mine […] we even had a book launch, and on the night of the book launch the publisher didn't turn up with the books, and the books have never materialised […] It was heart-breaking. But I'm currently working on another collection, hopefully, which hopefully will be coming out next year.*

But it was clear also that part of what enabled her to keep going, in that respect, was the fact that she had become a member of two groups where writers from around the city meet, on a monthly basis, to share and discuss their work. What she found amongst those communities was an audience willing to take her writing seriously and able to offer her '*excellent criticism*'. This, in turn, had helped her to develop a sense of poetry, not as a private pursuit, but as something done with and for others:

> *it's quite difficult when you first start, when I first started showing poetry at writers' groups, I would be like that [fluttering her hands]. My hands would shake. But now I have absolutely no qualms about sharing my poetry. In fact, I even want to, you know? I want to share it now.*

It might be remembered here that Sean—who was a member of a group which regularly read their writing aloud together—said something very similar, relating his sense of poetry as '*an accomplishment*' to his ability to share it with others in that setting. These thoughtful comments strikes me as richly provocative: they remind us that, in crucial ways, designations such as 'poet' are sustained by the recognition or acclamation of others. What Sean and Claire found in the groups of which they were part were relationships which allowed them to create poetry not only in a practical sense, but through the collective and symbolic affirmation of their writing *as* poetry. Nor, indeed, did that affirmation imply a merely subservient acceptance of the 'code of Literature' that Leonard describes. In centring and celebrating their own creativity, members of the group of which Sean was part sometimes brought a powerfully counter-hegemonic scepticism to bear on the authority of that code. Perhaps the most telling expression of this fact came towards the end of my discussion with the group, when Sean had just finished reading a poem of his own. There was, at first, a long, drawn-out and reflective pause. Eventually, another participant looked up, nodded towards me, and then said with a smile: '*Now you see that … that's proper, that's proper poetry*'. The implicit comparison was, of course, with the examples of published poetry which I had asked the group to discuss beforehand.

* * *

In a well-known and somewhat contentious passage from *Distinction*, Bourdieu describes the unequal relationship which exists between those who are cultural 'autodidacts' and those who are culturally entitled (1984: 328–331). One indicative expression of that inequality, he argues, is to be found in the earnestness of the commitment to the accumulation of cultural knowledge which often characterises those who are largely or wholly self-taught. Those who inherit consecrated culture through the course of their upbringing and education, he argues, are able to treat such culture with an off-hand assurance which acts, in itself, as a token of their 'legitimacy' because it bespeaks that 'certainty of having which

is grounded in the certainty of always having had' (329–330). Those who are self-taught, by contrast, he argues, are often betrayed by the fact that 'they take culture too seriously', by a tendency to make culture 'a matter of life and death' (330–331). What Bourdieu is suggesting, in other words, is that those who are culturally 'rich' are frequently able to dominate the struggles of culture by virtue of their ability to conceal their investment in those struggles; they are able to 'win' those games by appearing not to care all that much about them, by their ability to display in style and approach their 'freedom from the insecurity which haunts [the] self-made' (330). Those who *are* self-made tend, conversely, to be sneered at for trying too hard, for an over-anxious acquisition of cultural knowledge which is then held up against them as evidence of tacit self-interestedness, as proof of a relationship to culture which is 'narrowly subordinated to practical goals' (330).

I thought frequently about this passage from Bourdieu in the course of these discussions, and particularly when I was speaking with those writers who were invested in the search for readership and recognition. I thought about those words, for example, as I spoke with Dylan, whose encounters with different reading groups I discussed earlier. He provided me with a long and moving description of how he had come to poetry and what the writing of poetry meant to him:

> *Writing poetry has been a lifelong passion. Having failed to accomplish myself in the formal education system, I accidentally fell into the world of poetry having watched, of all things, a television documentary about Sylvia Plath. A window was opened in the loft of my mind, previously having equated poetry with the hated and totally unrelatable school syllabus variety. Having discovered poetry, through the library system, I now could see that there was a world of contemporary poetry. Through the library I had the opportunity for a second chance, and could not be excluded from this treasure by a lack of formal education.*

That chance encounter with Sylvia Plath had been the first step on a creative journey to which he had dedicated himself with a profound and unstinting commitment:

> *When I started to write poetry it was very raw and instinctive, until I developed skill through practice and endless reading of other poets, eventually learning what works and what doesn't work. Practice and constant editing.*

There was, indeed, a deep seriousness about Dylan's relationship to poetry. It is true that some aspects of that relationship bore the hallmarks of the 'self-made' artist as Bourdieu describes them: an avid accumulation of knowledge, an understandable eagerness to make up for lost time and careful consideration of how best to secure an audience. Hence, for example, his decisions to work in a particular style or on particular topics were sometimes guided, as he frankly acknowledged, by a strategic consideration as to what kinds of work might be most likely to secure the attention of a prospective publisher, a prospective agent, a future audience. It was not, as he explained, commercial success that he sought through publication, but symbolic recognition of the creative labour to which he had dedicated so much time and energy.

> *It seems that, to make the claim of being a poet requires a body of proof and to make such a claim, this should be substantiated by publication. Therefore, the poet's right to refer to themself as a poet has to be validated by publication or his claim has no validity. Therefore, not being published not only invalidates the poet's claim to be a poet, but is the only form of evidence accepted.*

In short: although the poetry that Dylan wrote was sometimes lively, light-hearted and engaging, there was nothing playful about his commitment to that poetic labour. He approached it with great earnestness; 'a matter of life and death' would not be an exaggerated description of what it meant to him. This, he said to me, '*is my dream. It keeps me alive*'.

This is also where I find myself feeling that there is, indeed, something meagre and ungenerous about Bourdieu's account of those who are culturally self-taught. For one thing, that account throws its analytical accent overwhelmingly on the question of what such figures might *not* have or might *not* know. It is indicative, for instance, that he suggests that those who are self-taught are often exposed by the fact that 'they are ignorant of the right to be ignorant' (1984: 329). That framing of the question seems to me to wholly miss the chance to consider more closely exactly what culturally excluded writers and artists may be *more* likely to see. It misses the chance to ask about what those who hold marginalised positions within the fields of cultural production might critically recognise and understand about those fields and the ways in which they work; what they might recognise, perhaps, more surely and clear-sightedly than those who are comfortably ensconced within those fields. Against the grain of Bourdieu's account, it seems important to me to wonder—as, say,

Rancière encourages us to wonder—what critical perspectives and possibilities are evident in, and accompany, this as yet un-consecrated cultural labour?

In the case which I have been discussing, for instance, it is certainly true that Dylan aspired to critical success. To that extent, he necessarily accepted the judgements of the cultural field as legitimate and legitimating. He wanted, he told me, to '*be a writer's writer*'; he wanted '*the validation of the sort of people that I hero worship*'. One can treat that, if one wishes, as evidence of the way in which the institutions of canonised culture are able to 'induce misrecognition' (Bourdieu 1984: 328); one can read that cultural aspiration as evidence of a love which is, at the same time, a surrender. Yet, to do so, to emphasise only the force of the *illusio* of the cultural field, would mean ignoring the extent to which—as I have tried to show—this man's creative life was also characterised by struggle and contestation. It was clear that for him those experiences had often been deeply *dis*illusioning and that they had led him towards an often disenchanted assessment of the ways in which the fields of culture operate. Thus, for instance, he had repeatedly reached out to recognised poets—writing to them or sending them samples of his work—in the hope of soliciting their support. '*I find [established] poets very ungenerous*', he told me, '*with the exception of the late Edwin Morgan*'. Later, he added: '*I liken their lack of generosity—not being prepared to help and encourage new and unpublished poets—to a form of nepotism, in which entry and access to agents and publishers can often depend upon being personally associated and familiar with established poets, which being acquainted with could potentially bypass years of fruitless effort to open doors otherwise closed to the outsider*'.

To put it otherwise, there was anger as well as love in Dylan's relationship to poetry; an anger aimed not towards the act of writing poetry itself, but towards the structures which, in his experience, governed and accorded success in respect of such labour. From his time at school onwards culture had been frequently wielded against him. As a writer searching for an audience, he had been met sometimes with a kind of misunderstanding, sometimes with a kind of exclusion. For exactly these reasons it was, of course, true that his relationship to poetry was not characterised by the sense of comfortable entitlement typical of those who are 'born into' legitimate culture. But, by the same token, just because that relationship was so uneasy—because it had frequently brought him face-to-face with the reality of cultural dispossession or exclusion—it was

also characterised by an incisive critical awareness. His reading of the dynamics of the world of culture expressed nothing like the 'naivety, innocence, humility' (1984: 330) which Bourdieu describes as the self-exposing marks of the cultural outsider. In many ways, in fact, he read that world more or less *as* Bourdieu urges us to read it: i.e. a site of contestation and manoeuvre rife with its own forms of politely euphemised violence.

In short, I find it impossible to interpret the seriousness of this poet's commitment to his craft as evidence of some meek submission before the symbolic violence of the cultural field; a fond or naïve buying into the game. Everything about his 'life-long' struggle as a writer had led him to a much more fraught, more oppositional, relationship to that game. Or, to put it otherwise, everything about his creative experiences had inclined him to see poetry for the symbolic weapon that it certainly is: '*these poems have to be asbestos coated*', he told me, about a collection that he had recently completed, '*in order not to be shot down in flames*'. All of this was true not simply in respect of his struggle for critical recognition, but also in a wider sense. That is to say: he understood very well what, at a deeper level, lies at stake in such struggles. His commitment to his poetry was sincere but it was also inextricable from his determination to undo some of the deeply dehumanising quality of his early experiences of formal education, of asserting himself as a full and creative person in the world. Dylan understood, in other words, exactly what Bourdieu means when he says, at the very end of *Distinction*: 'What is at stake in aesthetic discourse is nothing less than the monopoly of humanity. Art is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non-humans' (1984: 491). As he put it, no less pithily, poetry offers '*a way of validating myself as a human being*'.

* * *

Yet, how, after all, should we interpret this claim? On the one hand, as I have just suggested, those who are marginalised in the field of poetry are, for understandable reasons, always likely to find their poetic labour shadowed by strategic rationality, by a need to consider the most effective way in which to contest that marginalisation. And, yes, we might well read the comments just quoted in just that sense, as a declaration of war, an example of poetry put to use within a wider social struggle. Poetry,

in short, as a means of contesting the dehumanising quality of symbolic violence.

That reading is not wrong. But nor, it seems to me, is it wholly sufficient. If Dylan meant something along those lines—as I think he surely did—it is not *all* that he meant. Because he, like others with whom I spoke, clearly found in the writing of poetry something richer and more nourishing than mere strategy. That is to say that the poets with whom I spoke all described finding in their craft joys and possibilities intrinsic to that craft itself. Poetry offered them things which—to borrow a phrase from W.H. Auden—were uncovered in the valley of its making. That included, inter alia, the possibility of a focussed kind of articulacy. Reflecting back on why she had fallen in love with writing poetry when she was younger, Claire concluded that she had given herself over to that work—'*it's been a constant in my life, when everything else has been so shifting, I've always had poetry*'—because it was a practice by which '*part of me could get out*', because it served—to borrow Auden again—as a 'mouth'. For others, similarly, the writing of poetry made possible just what consumer capitalism so frequently stymies: creative agency. Thus, both mundanely but tellingly, Sean explained that he often turned to his writing out of a refusal to spend his time '*watching tv*'. Poetry allowed him to be more than just a recipient, it gave him a means by which '*to express something*'. And for Dylan, whose words I have drawn on most extensively in this chapter, poetry promised, before anything else, an aesthetic excitement or pleasure which was deeply precious to him in its own right. It was the anticipatory promise of those joys which, after all, had first beckoned to him in the life-changing jolt he felt when, so unexpectedly, he had stumbled across what he called Plath's *'alien'* words. These were, he said, as much affective experiences as intellectual ones, something felt in the body as much as in the mind: '*And I remember particularly going to the library, and a new book was coming in. I would be shaking with excitement to get back when a new Edwin Morgan came out, or a new Iain Crichton Smith, or – particularly – a new Norman MacCaig came out*'. Some of that same joy, that same sense of expansive possibility, continued to reverberate in the way in which he described his response to his own writing: '*To tell you the truth there is an element of wonder when I read my own poems, because I think, where did I get that from*?' The dedication with which this writer struggled for poetic recognition cannot be gainsaid. But what strikes me about his reflection here is the fact that the '*element of wonder*' which his work provoked

for him was not simply dependent on securing such recognition, any more than it mattered to Claire whether others shared her sense that writing poetry was '*wonderful*'. These affordances were ends as much as means; gifts that these writers *gave themselves* in and through their own aesthetic labour. It is an emaciating analysis which, in the face of this, can think only to ask how poetry serves to mediate an individual's position within a wider symbolic economy. Perhaps, indeed, one might put it more strongly: an analysis narrowly fixated on that question feels much too well-conformed to a world dominated by exchange value, a world in which things and practices are constantly shorn of their own specific, phenomenal and experiential qualities, are forever reduced to means.

In recent years, as noted already, the sociology of culture has been more inclined than it was to attend to the specific potentialities of different forms of creativity and to consider the ways in which aesthetic practices may be socially productive in their own right (see, for example: Born 2010; Oclese and Savage 2011; Martin 2015). For my part, in thinking about these questions, I find myself drawn back, as so often before, to the much earlier work of that eccentric Marxist C.L.R. James. It is James who gives us, after all, in *Beyond a Boundary* (2013 [1963]), one of our most incisive critical analyses of the way in which a form of popular culture is implicated in the articulation of social power and in the reproduction of social inequality. It is James who gives us, in that same study, a pathbreaking account of how popular culture can become a site of social struggle, the symbolic channel for insurgent resistance to such power and to such inequalities. And yet is also James who insists, still within that same study, on the inclusion of a chapter entitled 'What is Art?' in which he offers a radical, humanist assessment of why creative practices matter *as such* and of what it is that draws people to them (see Smith 2018). For him, it is clear, these different lines of analysis are not in contradiction, but rather depend upon and sustain each other. In asking how culture comes to be claimed and used within social struggles of different kinds we ask only half the question because we need to be concerned, no less, with what is actually at stake in the struggle over access to, or enclosure of, cultural forms and practices themselves. What creative possibilities—what elements of wonder, what distinctive ways of making—do they hold out in their own right? James, in other words, helps direct our attention back towards what we might call the 'use-values' of culture, back towards the question of the ways in which cultural practices, as practices, may make possible things which human beings need in their lives.

Elsewhere, as the discussion was winding down in one of the other groups, a man who had taken part shared a story with us. Doug was also a writer although, in his case, mostly of fiction rather than poetry. In this particular case, however, he talked about a different act of aesthetic creativity. He remembered an occasion when he had been on holiday with his family, and a peaceful day which they had spent on the beach together: '*the only thing I thought about was the crystal blue sky, and there was a guy like on a kite, looked as though it was a hang-glider, and I remember thinking, the view fae up there must be magnificent*'. Eventually, he said, the evening started to draw in, and he thought about the passing of time:

> *I'll never be coming back [to the place in question], no with my wife, no with my family, and I took the sand from underneath the imprint of my feet […] I got a plastic bag with the imprint of my foot and went out at night and got wee acorns and bits of stuff that came off the tree and made art out of them. I've still got them. It's very meaningful to me. I stood in that sand, I found that acorn, the whole thing came from [that place] […] When we came back from holiday I made them into art, brought frames, and framed the whole lot. And I thought that was quite … I couldnae tell anybody about it, they'd have thought it was mad. 'Imagine doing that!' [Another group member: You're no mad!]. And I've still got three of them: one in the living room, one in the hall, one in the toilet. And every time I look at them I've great memories. Cause it was a great holiday and a sad holiday all rolled into one […] And I thought that's the first time I realized… maybe there is a bit of the 'artiste' – would you agree? – there's a bit of the 'artiste' in me?*

This, it seems to me, is a powerful example of something which Wilhelm Dilthey once described: art's capacity, whatever else it might offer, to transfigure the fleeting stuff of lived experience into something which outlasts the ephemerality of that experience, granting to it a newly vivid or conspicuous quality: 'a kind of constructive social power [which] can produce a figure that could not be given to [us] in any experience, and through which the experiences of daily life become more comprehensible and meaningful to the heart' (Dilthey 1985: 96). The self-deprecating and gently ironic way in which this man chose to describe himself—'*a bit of the artiste*'—speaks to the exclusions with which such designations are ring-fenced. Yet this man's story also reiterates the fact that the creative potential of aesthetic practice is not, in itself, reliant on wider recognition—'*I couldnae tell anybody about it*'—and nor is it necessarily subsidiary to some other purpose. To say so is not to surrender to

idealism. Poetry is not, as Dilthey insisted, an unearthly gift, but a proper 'social power', taking place and intervening in the world. Or, as Sean put it: poetry is '*an action*'. In reaching for poetry, or for other forms of aesthetic creativity, women and men not only challenge the ways in which art or culture have been enclosed, they enact a form of humanly created, humanly valued possibility. Against every attempt to monopolise the term, they enact their own humanity. It seemed to me to be deeply telling, in that respect, that no sooner had this man finished his story than Sean spoke up in affirmation of that claim: '*Aye, absolutely aye. The spirit, the soul, whatever you want to call it. We've all got an inner being, even if you're no religious […] Otherwise how would you feel inspired to write poetry or create great art or great music? Do you know what I mean?*'

Notes

1. The punitive or intimidatory use of poetry in the practices of imperial domination is, apparently, an ongoing tradition. At least according to reporting by *'The New York Times' 'Serial'* podcast, a member of an interrogation team at Guantanamo—code-named 'Mr. X'—was identified for involvement in the so-called 'special projects team', charged with enacting 'enhanced' forms of interrogation—i.e. torture—precisely because of the peculiar 'creativity' that he had shown in previous and more 'conventional' interrogations. That includes, apparently, the fact that he had written a poem, entitled 'You Have Lost', which a detainee was forced to look at for 8 hours whilst the American national anthem played on a loop (Koenig and Chivvis 2024).
2. It should be added that, as poems such as 'The Scholar-Gipsy' suggest, Arnold was not blind to the fact that this ideal was not necessarily reflected in reality. He recognised, at least, that 'pregnant parts and quick inventive brain' were not always sufficient to guarantee poetic reputation or success (see also Williams 1990 [1958]: 110–129).
3. Rose's remarkable historical account recovers the history of many of these largely self-organised traditions (2001: especially chapters one, two, seven and eight).

CHAPTER 6

A Long Conclusion: On the Uses of Poetry

Class, E. P. Thompson famously insisted, is neither a structure nor a category but is 'something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' (1991 [1963]: 8). In saying so, Thompson was turning his back on the idea that we can treat the dynamic, historical reality of class in abstraction from social experience, as if it were a stratigraphic feature of the social order that can be traced out and analysed without reference to real lives. It is an ethical as much as an analytical reminder, a call to remember that class is something which happens *to* people, which becomes real in and through relations of social domination, in and through the lived consequences of those relations, and in and through the conflicts which they provoke. Class is thus *not*, as Thompson put it elsewhere, 'this or that part of the machine', but rather '*the way the machine works* once it is set in motion—not this interest and that interest, but the *friction* of interests—the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise' (1978a: 85, italics in original). One part of the reason why poetry mattered so much to Thompson, as Nick Stevenson points out, was precisely the fact that, in attending to moral and cultural complexity, it served to resist the tendency to reduce ordinary lives 'to the abstractions loved by authoritarians, Leninists and economists' (2017: 17; see also Thompson's own reflections in his essay 'Commitment and Poetry' (1994)).

A. Smith, *Class and the Uses of Poetry*, Sociology of the Arts,
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Yet, poetry, itself, does not stand entirely apart from the heat and noise of social conflict. In a society in which poems are a presence and pleasure in the cultural lives of a few but a widespread absence in the lives of many others, poetry cannot but be implicated in those relationships of domination. In saying this I am referring less to the question of what a particular poem might happen to be about—what kind of vision it offers of the world—than to the Bourdieusian recognition that the production and use of different forms of culture play their own constitutive role in the shaping and naturalising of class relations. The points can scarcely be teased apart in any case because the very histories which have tended to make poetry a privileged cultural terrain are often reflected in the kinds of poetries that tend to be published or symbolically honoured, and in the kinds of lives of which that poetry speaks. Beyond this lies the broader question of how poetry is ideologically constructed *as such*, of the sort of cultural object that it is understood to be. If poetry is a part of how class 'happens', it plays that part all the more insidiously the more that it is subject to the exonerating ideology which makes it an impertinence—a breach of aesthetic etiquette—to suggest that the reading or writing of a poem has anything to do with all of that 'thundering noise' in the first place. If nothing else, I hope this study is guilty of that impertinence.

What I have sought to do in the preceding chapters is to explore, in the kind of close-up detail which qualitative research allows for, some aspects of how 'class happens' in and through the relationship between working-class readers and contemporary poetry. Taking Thompson's injunction seriously, I have tried to consider how forms of cultural dispossession were at play in the encounter between those readers and these symbolically valued literary texts. Broad surveys of cultural reception can be powerfully revealing, of course, but they offer in themselves no way of making critical sense of the patterns which they describe. Indeed viewed in the abstract those patterns might be read as reflecting nothing more than the aggregate choices of freely acting cultural 'consumers'. We can understand the extent to which our relationships with cultural practices and texts are not just freely chosen—we can understand cultural exclusion *as exclusion*—only if we are willing to consider why and how readers find themselves obstructed from a meaningful engagement with particular kinds of culture; only if we are willing to pay attention to what it is that actually 'happens' in that encounter. That implies, moreover, giving at least some consideration to how broader social histories and trajectories help shape that confrontational moment—a moment of 'friction' in just

Thompson's sense—in which a given text comes to feel like an ambivalent or recalcitrant presence in the hands of a given reader.

Nor, it should be added, is qualitative research in and of itself the answer here because, as I argued at the outset of chapter three, qualitative studies of cultural and literary reception have sometimes tended to focus too fixedly on the responses and motivations of readers who are engaged, already, with the cultural forms in question. That they should do so is not problematic in itself. What strikes me as misleading, however, is when studies which effectively disregard the experiences of those who are excluded from consecrated forms of literary culture go on to reproduce an image of more or less unconstrained readerly agency. Neither the ability to make meaningful sense of a book of poems, nor any other form of cultural and aesthetic agency, is simply 'given'. Those abilities, rather, are always to some extent contingent on access to opportunities and experiences which are not equitably distributed. Unlike the earth's stratigraphy, of course, those differentiations are the product of something much less arbitrary than the unfolding of natural processes. They are, rather, the consequence of things which can 'be shown to have happened'; they are outcomes of practices and policies which have, amongst other things, diminished the publicly accessible spaces in which the reading and writing of literature might thrive and have instrumentalised the teaching of literature in state schools, not least through the outsourcing of the design of curricula materials to the private sector. In this project my focus has been, for the most part, on what takes place in the moment of encounter between readers and poems. For that reason, I have not explored this wider history of cultural dispossession in extensive detail, although I have tried to be attentive to its traces as and when they became evident in the accounts of those with whom I spoke. Nonetheless, it bears repeating that insofar as my participants described a sense of exclusion in response to the poems which we discussed, that experience was *not* a reflection of any readerly 'failing' or deficit on their part. That sense, rather, was a reflection of what can reasonably be described as a history of theft, a history by which one part of the cultural commons has come to be subject to a form of enclosure.

That enclosure shapes the question of who gets to make use of poetry in their cultural life. It shapes the question, also, of who has the opportunity to make the stuff in the first place. In my final empirical chapter, I explored a different but related expression of these cultural relations through consideration of the experiences of a small number of poets. Not

all of those poets were seeking publication or literary recognition. But none of them wanted their writing to remain a purely private endeavour; overwhelmingly they thought of poetry as something to be shared. For many of those writers, it had taken great determination to reach the point at which they could envisage themselves as the authors of something worth sharing. The process of claiming the identity 'poet' often required them to battle against the whispered insinuation of their lived experiences—especially their experiences in formal educational settings—wherein poetry was construed as a cultural practice lying out of reach or in the hands of others. And even for those who had fought past the consequences of that symbolic violence the prospect of making a living from writing poetry often seemed vanishingly remote. Many, indeed, would have recognised the complaint of John Taylor, one time London boatman and self-published poet, who described the experience of 'emptying his veins' in order to produce a collection of poems which—given away in the hope of securing patronage—left him with all but nothing to show: 'That all the profit a mans paines hath gat / Will not suffice one meale to feed a Cat'.[1] These contemporary writers face, of course, a very different world and a very different political economy of publishing, yet perhaps not quite as different as we might assume. After all, aspiring poets who end up turning to self-publishing platforms such as Kindle Direct Publishing are put in a position which is not altogether unlike that which Taylor describes given the extent to which success on such platforms tends to depend, in the first instance, on the mobilisation of inter-personal relations and connections. In any case, the upshot is much the same. Dylan, reflecting on his experience of self-publishing a collection of poetry in that way, told me that he had ended up bringing down the price of his volume of poems to the point where it cost less than '*a bag of chips*'. He thus found himself in a situation which he compared to that of a bakery. No baker, he pointed out, would carry on baking, day after day, if no one was buying their produce. In that sense, he said, the baker's validation occurs when the customer buys his cakes and, in the same way, the writer's validation lies in the publication and appreciation of their work. That metaphor summed up, pithily, how the field of poetry had come to appear to him and to some of the others with whom I talked. It appeared, in other words, as a space which was not only symbolically hostile, but which seemed accessible only for those whose material resources allowed them to produce something for nothing and to go on doing so time after time. It was not that these writers were not drawn to the writing of poetry

for its own sake—their aesthetic love for the practice was as 'pure', so to speak, as that of any anthologised poet—but that love could not, in and of itself, sustain them if they were seeking a wider audience. As Bourdieu quite rightly insisted, it is only those who are rich already who can long afford to think of aesthetic creativity as its own reward (1995: 149).

* * *

No act of enclosure, however, goes unresisted. In describing class as the outcome of a 'friction of interests' Thompson is insisting on just that dialectical fact, is reminding us that the social reality of class emerges in contestation as much as domination. Tracing some of the ways in which poetry is implicated in how class 'happens' does not mean denying, therefore, that readers have critical agency. It implies only the need to properly acknowledge the structural and historical relations in the context of which, and against which, that agency is enacted. As I have tried to show in chapter four, even when faced with texts which felt, to some of those who took part, as if they were written in a kind of private language, the readers with whom I talked responded, repeatedly, with interpretive ingenuity and critical insight. The character of those engagements throws its own relativising light on the way in which the reading of poetry has generally been conceived in the European cultural imaginary. In that imaginary, as Karin Littau notes, poetry reading generally appears as a serene activity and to which is attributed a quasi-mystical, recuperative power all its own: 'Since the world is anarchic, and poetry is not, poetry can save us from disorder by transferring to the reader a state of order' (2006: 95). As so often with the envisioning of cultural practices, that proposition bespeaks the classed specificity of the lives from which it originates. The process of 'making sense' of poetry which was evident in these groups, by contrast, felt much more obviously frictional so far as the relationship to the poems themselves was concerned. It felt as if what was taking place was a struggle, not in search of but *against* a certain kind of order, an effort to break down the fences and reclaim part of an occupied cultural terrain.

By the same token, however, insofar as that struggle was one which brought readers together it had the effect of creating a horizon of symbolic collaboration. Very few of the interactions within these groups seemed to accord with Bourdieu's general emphasis on the restless pursuit of self-interest within the fields of culture. Nor, for that matter, did they

much resemble the picture of the ideal–typical bourgeois reader, locked in their solitary and private communion with the text. Rather, as I discussed in more detail in chapter four, reading took the form of a shared interpretive labour, rooted in dialogue and characterised by a constant passing of the poem from hand to hand. In that way, readers worked together so as to contest any sense of exclusion, and so as to make something meaningful of the poems they were reading. It is true that, to some extent at least, engagements of that kind were an artefact of the research process itself which, after all, brought participants together in order to participate in an activity that was, for many of those involved, not a usual part of their cultural lives. Nonetheless, those engagements took the shape they did and not some other. They had little in common with the symbolic one-upmanship of, say, a late-night arts review or a university seminar. They thus offer us a glimpse of the possibility of different modalities of reading and using literature. Or, to put it otherwise, they are a reminder of long-standing popular practices of cultural reception which reject the privatisation of cultural wealth, which work according to the assumption that stories, songs, poems and so forth are a species of the public good. This too is a part of how class can come to 'happen': not just through experiences of exclusion, but through the ways of doing and working together which arise in the course of challenging such exclusion.

If these readerly engagements can thus be described as entailing a kind of struggle, something of that same struggle was also evident in the ways in which the poets to whom I spoke described their writing. We are familiar with the idea of aesthetic production as something effortful, of novels and scripts emerging from long hours spent wrestling with the muses. Yet subtending that aesthetic effort for many of these writers was a struggle of a much more overtly social kind, which is to say, all that was required of them in order to assert their right to write and their right to be heard. I was reminded often, in the course of those conversations of the working poet that one of my interlocuters had described seeing in his younger days, reading his verses aloud to a largely unresponsive or antipathetic audience. '*You will hear my fucking poems*', was how he had epitomised that attitude of dauntless creativity. Much of that oppositional or disorderly spirit, that refusal to be silenced, was apparent in the labour of the writers with whom I spoke as they contested the symbolic and material barriers which constrain access to the literary field.

One implication of all of this, as I've argued in various places in the preceding chapters, is that through the course of this research, I

found myself increasingly hesitant about the idea that forms of 'symbolic violence'—the ways in which power is mediated by cultural and symbolic practices—have the effect of rendering social domination invisible, euphemising it to the point where it comes to seem unremarkable or inevitable. It is true that, in some cases, readers who found it hard to make sense of a particular poem blamed themselves for that experience. There was, in that respect, evidence in these discussions of how cultural hegemony takes hold, of how structures of social inequality can be legitimated or internalised in and through our relations with literary texts. But it is also true that those encounters very often provoked an effort to make critical sense, not simply of those texts, but of the antagonistic character *of that encounter*. The reader for whom, by dint of education or family background, poetry is a familiar pleasure has every reason to take their access to those pleasures for granted. For the reader who, by contrast, finds themselves excluded from those same forms of culture, that experience of exclusion can bring critical questions within reach. Readers for whom poetry appears as a problematic or troublesome cultural object are necessarily prevented from handling poems as 'self-standing' aesthetic objects and they are, therefore, more likely to reflect on the ways in which access to poetry is a mark of class advantage. In much the same way, those poets with whom I spoke who were struggling to find an audience or to secure some measure of symbolic recognition had long since been driven to question the idea that the 'games of culture' are fair games, that the literary field operates according to impeccable meritocratic principles. Their own lived experience of symbolic struggle, their awareness of what it had taken to gain a handhold on the terrain of poetry, meant that they could hardly fail to recognise the uneven ways in which that terrain was constituted, could hardly fail to understand the extent to which it was rife with a kind of violence. In sum: if the hallmark of symbolic violence is its imperceptibility then we would do well to recognise that it is those who are the beneficiaries of that violence, rather than those who are subject to it, who have least cause to recognise it *as* violence and most reason to take the old ideology of aesthetic detachment at face value.

* * *

In trying to think through these questions then—in reflecting on how class happens in and through our relationship with certain kinds of privileged literary text—I have been aware of pitfalls on both sides of the

path. On one hand, there is the lure of a complacent populism which, in its eagerness to find and celebrate cultural resistance, ends up disregarding those structured inequalities which circumscribe access to the making and use of particular forms of culture. On the other hand, however, there is the danger of framing working-class readers only in terms of cultural dispossession. To do so means not only overlooking the resourcefulness at play in ordinary ways of reading and using literature, but also the generative and critical potentiality of those practices. So far as this latter point is concerned, I have found it helpful to hold onto Bourdieu's description of the 'popular aesthetic' as *the refusal of a refusal*.[2] To reiterate: it matters to put things that way because, otherwise, it becomes too easy to talk about those ways of reading, such as were often evident in the discussions considered here, only in terms of how they 'fall short' relative to more 'literary' practices of critical analysis and so forth. As is discussed in more detail in chapter four, the readers in these groups often responded to the poems in question by relating them to their own lived experience or by making them the occasion for a wider consideration of the ethics of human relations. Bourdieu's double negative is a reminder that these are not merely compensatory or 'second-best' interpretations. Rather, they involve a specific rejection of what the so-called 'pure aesthetic' has itself already rejected: i.e. the very possibility that art belongs to social life, that it should be humanly useful, that it speaks in and of the world. It bears repeating—with that first pitfall in mind—that these discussions were often shadowed by a tacit recognition of the fact that these might not be the kinds of responses that readers are expected to offer when they are handed a book of poems. In that sense, it remains true that the 'popular aesthetic' is symbolically subordinated to the 'pure aesthetic'. But the ways of reading poetry which were evident in many of these conversations also 'speak back' as it were, they make their own normative claim, a claim that is asserted as they haul into view everything which more valourised ways of readings of poetry, with their mise-en-abyme focus on technical or symbolic properties, allow to fall out of reach. If, to quote Thompson once more, 'Meaning can only be given to history in the quarrel between "ought" and "is"' (1978: 28), and if, as he further argued, poetry offers us one of the cultural settings wherein that quarrel is joined, that sense of poetry's human uses was often more evident, it seemed to me, in these discussions than it has sometimes been in canonical works of literary criticism and aesthetic theory.

To this point, I have sought to add, however, one further and qualifying argument. For Bourdieu, a concentration on the formal properties of art is what most precisely characterises that 'pure' or 'intellectualist' aesthetic. It is a focus which, as he argues in the widely read 'Introduction' to the first edition of *Distinction,* in turning its back on any question about the worldly relevance of art bespeaks the 'life of ease' from which it emerges, a life which need not be troubled by such crassly practical concerns. He goes on:

> Although art obviously offers the greatest scope to the aesthetic disposition, there is no area of practice in which the aim of purifying, refining and sublimating primary needs and impulses cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life, that is, the primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter, does not produce the same effects. (1984: 5)

At least so far as poetry is concerned, however, it seems to me that we might well question the assumption that form is to function as manner is to matter. As I have suggested at various points in the preceding chapters, many of the formal properties of poetry, many of those properties which are what most clearly differentiate poetic expression from our daily speech—the wilful use of assonance, rhyme, metre and so forth—depend upon and tend to make explicit language's materiality. They do so, moreover, in ways that often call attention to, and depend for their resonance upon, our *own* materiality. Indeed, one might argue that there is a sense in which poetic form reasserts the immediacy of 'needs and impulses' which come with our corporeality, all of those ineluctable rhythms of our bodies: heartbeat and footfall and the insistent patterning of our breath. Perhaps this point is unfair to Bourdieu who, after all, has in mind precisely the ways in which aesthetic traditions have tended to reify 'form' and to celebrate formal experiment as a merely aesthetic exercise undertaken for its own sake. Yet, to my mind, the equation he proposes here does not quite work in the case of poetry. It is, instead, those poetries which draw most concertedly upon the historically constituted possibilities of poetic form, which make a crafted use of those materialities of language, which lie closest to the pole of the 'popular aesthetic' and which retain most from popular traditions of creative expression. Conversely, there was at least some tentative evidence in this research that 'open form' poetry can feel, paradoxically, rather less open—rather more restrictive—to many readers.

A limited qualitative study of this kind offers, of course, no real basis from which to draw generalisable conclusions. Such a study is probably not a sufficient ground for making normative propositions either. All the same, if I were to risk one such suggestion it would be to emphasise the value of teaching poetry in a way that seeks to demystify poetic form. Such an approach, it seems to me, would require us to find ways of allowing readers to experience poetry as the product of a kind of craftwork, a labour on language, a specific creative practice. It might mean showing how poetry makes use of the affinities of language, allowing readers to approach poems with their bodies, hearing as much reading, attentive to cadence as much as to content. It would, in short, try to return poetry to earth, to the materialities from which it derives. Doing so might allow more readers a way of laying claim to poetry, not least by demonstrating how far poems are rooted in things which already belong to us, removing some of the inhibiting symbolic barriers around the practice without buying into the well-meaning but—in my view, misguided—assumption that poetry is identical with self-expression, that poetry can best be measured according to some standard of subjective 'authenticity', or that a poem is simply what happens when we articulate, as Glyn Maxwell puts it, 'your next thought, your latest feeling' (2012: 88).[3]

* * *

Having said the various things which are said above, having tried to make explicit some of the ways in which relationships to poetry are both shaped by, and in turn serve to inscribe, deep-seated social inequalities, it seems a reasonable question to ask: why bother? Why care if poetry has little place or little significance in the lives of so many people? Might it not be the case, indeed, that construing this situation as a matter of 'dispossession' involves its own genuflection to cultural hierarchy, to the assumption that consecrated forms of literature such as poetry matter more than other cultural practices or traditions?

To such arguments there are, it seems to me, two possible responses. On the one hand, writing poetry off as a hopelessly 'elitist' pursuit surrenders to what I've described as a history of theft, to those processes—both material and ideological—which have served to establish a deeply restrictive conception of what poetry is and who it belongs to. In the face of the experiences of those readers that I discussed in chapter three—readers who, on occasion, felt themselves to be disbarred from a meaningful

engagement with poetry—one could, indeed, shrug one's shoulders and point out that there are plenty of other fish in the cultural sea: let them eat *Is It Cake!* But in doing so one would allow those acts of appropriation to disappear from view, to become the literary equivalent of the bucolic pastoral landscapes left behind by the historical enclosure of common land. To describe those experiences as instances of dispossession is to insist that they should be situated within that longer history. It presumes, moreover, the possibility of contending with that dispossession and, in that sense, is meant to stand in symbolic solidarity with the many individuals and organisations that continue to claim the writing, reading and sharing of poetries as popular activities in their own right.

The second argument that I would make here is one which brings this study, finally, full circle. It is reasonable to use a term like dispossession in this context because poetry, in common with all cultural practices, has its uses. The question of who gets to make and read poetry matters because something significant is at stake in those possibilities over and above the cultural capital which accrues to those who can claim 'possession' of such activities within the symbolic economies of culture. Thus, I return here, at the end, to the question to which I gestured at the outset concerning poetry's particular use values. For many advocates of poetry, I imagine, the phrase 'use-values' will set alarm bells ringing. And for good reason: there is, indeed, a risk that it makes it sound as if poetry might be useful in the same way as a tool or a pamphlet of instructions is useful—i.e. as a means of performing a narrowly defined function or getting a specific task done. It was precisely against that kind of view, of course, that Auden staked his provocative disclaimer that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (for a helpful discussion see Burnside 2019: 15–33). It was against that view that Kenneth Burke, in a brilliant discussion, suggested that the distinctiveness of poetry lies in the fact that it has nothing 'promissory' to offer (1973a [1941]: 148). And it was, as we saw in chapter one, along these general lines that John Powell Ward distinguished between sociological and poetic ways of approaching the world.

To be clear, then, in using the term 'use-value' here I have no intention of reducing poems to narrowly utilitarian objects. 'Use-value' is meant, rather, in something like Marx's sense, as a way of delineating a viewpoint or a perspective which stands in contrast to the instrumentalism of 'exchange-value'. Which stands in contrast, that is to say, to a view of the world for which things—and, indeed, people—are emptied of any intrinsic value at all, rendered insignificant except insofar as they serve to facilitate

the circuits of economic exchange.[4] It was thus that Marx drew a distinction between what we might think of as two different kinds of orientation. The first, which he describes with the rather unpoetic formula C-M-C, describes a world in which the characteristic economic relationship entails the sale of something in order to purchase something else—a coat sold in order to buy a Bible is his famous example. The phenomenological orientation of such a world begins and ends with the tangible human usefulness of those things in themselves. From the perspective of that second orientation, however, for a world made in the image of exchange-value, money is invested only in order to secure a return, in order to make 'money out of money', a relationship that he describes with the formula M-C-M'. And in that world things are necessarily denuded of their particularity, the qualitive usefulness which belongs to them in themselves: 'value suddenly presents itself as a self-moving substance which passes through a process of its own, and for which commodities and money are both mere forms' (Marx 1976: 256). In raising the question of poetry's 'use-values' then, it is not my intention to reduce poetry to an instrument, but rather to reflect on the extent to which poetry might offer one way of *resisting* the colonisation of our lives by just that kind of instrumentalism. I am interested in asking, like Burke, how poetry might serve as an 'equipment for living' (1973b [1941]), a sustaining resource which may matter all the more given the extent to which the rationality of exchange-value has encroached into many of the interior recesses of our lives. There are, no doubt, very many different ways in which it might be said that poetry is useful in this sense, but I settle here for three brief and concluding suggestions as to these affordances of poetry as, it seemed to me, I glimpsed then in the course of this research.

* * *

In the first place: *language*.

Every one of these discussions was studded with moments of reclamation, moments in which those taking part stopped to call attention to particular descriptions or metaphors or passages from the poems in question. This was the case regardless of whether a particular reader found a particular poem, as a whole, to be indecipherable, to be '*that clever nobody can understand it*', as one participant put it. Most people who took part in these conversations paused in this way, at one point or another, in order to read aloud a line or a turn of phrase which struck them, often leading

others in the group to go back to the poem in order to re-read those words for themselves.

> *I liked the line: 'A've seen hale generations graw up / an simmer doon fray this same windae'.*
>
> *'Now the garden was long and the visibility poor / the way the dark…'. That's, I like that, it's really, really good.*
>
> *I liked the idea of a kite being … you know, as a plug… 'plugged into the sky'. I thought that was a beautiful image.*
>
> *And I love the description 'some skinny chicken, ma skin aw bubbles and dots and spots'. I mean, that's wonderful imagery, isn't it?*
>
> *'The long insomnia of ornamental carp in public parks / captive and bright'. No, I just really, really liked that. [Sounds of agreement and a pause whilst others look for these lines].*

Sometimes, readers added their own interpretive gloss to the passages they had highlighted in this way:

> *And then the last line: 'I miss most, even now, his warm hands, on my skin, his touch'. I really liked that. It's about be careful what you wish for.*
>
> *'The selfish moon'. As if it's out there having a good time to itself at night, you know, and I'm stuck in, and it's staring down at me, you know, kind of thing. It sounds very beautiful that.*

Sometimes, though, they added nothing to them, simply allowing a particular phrase—'*blood metal darkness*' or '*ma great tent o' nappy*' or '*quail-grey in the distance*'—to hang in the air, as it were, placing it before others to be appreciated for its own sake. As Roisin put it, describing her practice of reading: '*I would read quietly at first, and to myself first, but the likes of there, when get a nice phrase likes of that, I read that [aloud]: "the comets, planets, moon and sun". Aye, so if something attracts me I would read it out*'.

In one sense, there is nothing especially remarkable about this. Indeed that repeated 'reading out' of specific phrases and descriptions was such a commonplace part of these conversations that, in the moment, I scarcely

noticed how often it was taking place. It was only later, reading and re-reading the transcripts, that I began to understand that each occasion on which this happened was its own demonstration of the way in which poetry can return language to us afresh, redeeming it from the condition of instant disposability to which it is consigned in political sloganeering, advertising jingles and the ever-swelling tides of corporate-speak. Each pause, each moment spent cherishing a poetic phrase in its own right, each sharing of that phrase with others, was a testament to the fact that poetry asks us to attend to 'words as material events, rather than gazing right through them' (Eagleton 2007: 47).

Nor does it seem too much to me to suggest that this sharpened awareness of language may extend laterally, as it were, to our sense of the things so described. That is to say, that such moments sustain the possibility of what Wilhelm Dilthey, in his *Poetics,* called 'apperception', a vivifying of some aspect of lived experience so as to allow us to 'see' anew the fish in its pond, the kite in the sky, the heft of the incontinence pad, or to feel in a freshly honed way the emptiness of loss or the pangs of resentment (see Dilthey 1985; see also 1985a). Poems, of course, come with no ideological guarantee so far as their content is concerned. They can just as easily be used to say that which is disgusting or regressive as to say that which is uplifting or redemptive. Yet Eagleton is surely right when he says that this particular 'use-value' of poetry, its capacity to rehabilitate language, to recover words which have been shrivelled into the circuitry of power or commerce, is one which 'stands askew to a civilization obsessed with business' (2007: 58). Moreover, in sustaining also those moments of apperceptive clarity, of a renewed sense of things in their own intensity, it stands also askew to—it offers us one experiential bulwark against—the narrowly reductive logic of exchange-value and the way in which it tends to drain the life from the stuff of our daily lives.

* * *

In the second place: *inspiration*.

Plato, we might remember, thought poetic creation a risky enterprise precisely because it required the poet to be overcome by 'enthusiasm', to be 'filled with God'. Thus he has Socrates describe inspiration as evicting the poet from a state of self-knowledge, forcing him 'out of his [sic] mind' such that 'reason is no longer in him' (2000: 5–6; see also Gadamer 1980). Sociologists have not generally followed Plato's account of the

experience of poetic creativity in itself but at least since Raymond Williams the discipline has approached the idea of inspiration with a scepticism of its own.[5] That concept, after all, tends to endorse the image of the poet as an exceptionally gifted or receptive figure. It tends towards the implication that literary creativity is mysterious, unbiddable, even otherworldly. What gets hidden by such ideas is the extent to which the status of the 'poet', the possibility of writing poetry, and the chances of finding an audience for that poetry, are all heavily contingent on economic and social factors which are very much a matter of 'this world' and which are distributed in unequal ways. More than that, the attribution of a capacity for 'inspiration' itself has often been part of how those inequalities have been reproduced. James Saxon Childers' judgement that the poems of the butler John Jones lack even the 'uncultivated germs of that *mens divinior*' (1925: xiv) is characteristic. Childers' aesthetic indictment of what is missing from these poems is really, of course, an indictment of Jones himself, of the supposed absence of that divine spark in him.

Yet, as will be evident from the accounts considered in chapter five, some of the poets with whom I spoke, in describing their relationship to their own creativity and in describing how that creativity felt to them, did indeed use the language of inspiration. Thus, for example, Dylan—whose experiences I recount in more detail in that earlier chapter—reflected on some of the specific challenges of writing poetry:

> *The thing with poetry is, that you have to say a lot with few words. You have to be economical with words as you have a lot to communicate but don't have the luxury of a whole novel worth of words to do it with - you have a relatively short poem and very few words with which to try and get that across.*

At this point, he paused for a moment, mulling over the best way in which to put things.

> *To tell the truth Andy, sometimes I don't know where some of these poems come from, as when I would read them back I would genuinely wonder where they had come from. I have even thought to myself that an external source had inspired me, almost like a dead poet had been working through me.*

He went on to elaborate in more detail on that experience:

> *You think that you are in control of these poems and there is an element where you are, but as you are constructing and putting order and form to the words there is also an element of inspiration, an almost magical quality to this process. For example, when you are confining a poem to a rhyming format one line dictates the next, in that sense it is structured and ordered and not as free flowing as non-rhyming poems where inspiration definitely does drive the poem.*

This is the same poet, it is worth remembering, who described how he had seeded the ground of his own writing by reading and reading and reading; by '*reading everybody*'; by slowly coming to understand, from the inside as it were, '*how a poem is constructed […] what works and what doesn't work*'.

Here indeed are many of the tropes associated with ideas of aesthetic inspiration. The feeling that, for example, creativity comes from 'without' as much as from within: '*where has that come from?*'. Or the feeling that the poet is somehow 'beside themselves' in the course of their work, that they are as much conduit as creator: '*you think that you are in control*'. Yet, it does not seem helpful to me to respond to this by simply reiterating what such tropes might occlude. Rather, I want to take this description, aspects of which were echoed in reflections from other interviewees, seriously. These carefully chosen words help us to consider the nature of poetic labour and to think more sociologically about what is taking place as the writer gets caught up in that labour.

Here it may be worth remembering Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that all art constitutes a 'bringing forth', that 'it has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it' (2005: 107). Gadamer—following, in this respect, in the footsteps of Schiller—goes on to draw a striking analogy between our experience of art and our experience of play.[6] 'Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself', he notes. Thus, the experience of playing a game is, simultaneously, the experience of 'being-played':

> The attraction of a game, the fascination that it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players […] The real subject of the game […] is not the player but the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself. (2005: 111)

There is, at this point, no space to get embroiled in a wider reflection on the rich intricacies of Gadamer's argument in *Truth and Method*. Nonetheless, this aspect of his account is helpfully suggestive as to the way in which we might make sense of the reported experience of 'inspiration'. In particular, the analogy with what happens when we are 'held in the spell' of a game reminds us that the frameworks and precedents of cultural and literary traditions act upon agents in ways that are generative and restrictive at one and the same time. Like the arbitrary rules of every kind of game, they both impose themselves upon those who would seek to take part in the game but are also what sustain the creativity and innovation which mean that no two 'games' are mere replicas of each other. Thus, we can attend to poetic creativity without reducing the poet to a puppet of social and historical circumstances but also without requiring them to be the possessor of some uniquely potent inner power. The possibility of crafting the specific cultural object that we call a poem depends on everything that serves to constitute poems as distinctive kinds of utterance, all of the long histories of symbolic contestation and innovation which grant significance to particular ways of working on and with language. It is hardly surprising that this poet should describe the writing of a poem as giving rise to a sense of 'un-selfing', then, because creative agency is not something that the poet draws wholesale from inside of themselves, is rather more like a potentiality of which they become part. It is, as Gadamer puts it elsewhere, a 'givenness' to 'which we are opened' (2005: xxiii). In describing that process as akin to possession—in talking, half-jokingly, about the sense that someone else was 'working through' him—Dylan offered a powerful, experiential account of aesthetic creativity as a socially and historically constituted possibility.

In the course of crafting a particular phrase or reaching for the right word that possibility may well manifest as a sense of constraint, of course, because the ways of 'making meaning' which are relevant to particular forms of writing are determinate, and because they are dependent, moreover, on properties of language which cannot be wished away and which mean that—for instance—'singe' rhymes with 'hinge', whilst 'gearstick' does not. Thus, in the particular instance which Dylan described, in searching for a rhyme which would fit at a given moment in a given poem, the poet is precisely *not* able to say just any old thing. They trade in the possibility of saying everything, as it were, in order to be able to say the something that 'works'. It is at least partly for this reason that poetry stands apart from everyday language use. Yet that experience of

constraint—that coming face-to-face with 'givenness'—remains, at one and the same time, a kind of 'opening' or potentiality; it is what grounds the poet's aesthetic agency. If the poet speaks in ways that others have made it possible for them to speak they do so, nonetheless, with words which they have to discover for themselves.

To acknowledge this is not to recant on the critique that I have tried to offer through the course of this study; it is not to suddenly forget that the reading and writing of poetry are a part of how class happens. This last point is one which, it seems to me, Gadamer—in common with some of the more recent, phenomenologically orientated accounts in cultural sociology—fails to address with sufficient seriousness. At the end of his famous essay on 'The Relevance of the Beautiful', he argues that we can only become interlocutors in aesthetic traditions if we are willing to 'construe the work [of art] by learning to understand the language of form and content so that communication really occurs' (1986: 52). Tellingly, that claim places all of the onus for cultural engagement on the reader or viewer themselves, on their willingness to 'learn to understand', as if the decision as to whether or not to do so were a simple matter of choice and as if those who fail to do so are guilty of a self-condemning lack of effort. As the evidence from earlier chapters demonstrates, this presumption of the inherent 'openness' of cultural traditions—what Bourdieu famously called the ideology of 'cultural communism' (1984: 224)—is deeply misleading. Whatever works of art might 'bring forth' is never simply there for the asking in the seemingly straightforward and unconstrained way that Gadamer suggests.

Nonetheless, I agree with what Neil Lazarus, channelling and critiquing Theodor Adorno, once argued. The only way 'to hate tradition properly is […] to mobilize its own protocols, procedures, and interior logic against it—to demonstrate that it is only on the basis of a project that exceeds its own horizons […] that tradition can possibly be imagined redeeming its own pledges' (1999: 7). The poets with whom I spoke did not, generally, talk about their work as something undertaken with an explicitly political intent. Yet, simply by virtue of writing poetry for and as themselves, by laying claim to the identity of the poet, they were calling into question the 'code of governance' of 'Literature' which—as we have heard Tom Leonard put it—'specifically *excludes* any person from being "nobody else but themselves"' (2001: xxvii). Thus, their poetic labour was an act of immanent critique in just the sense that Lazarus describes, one that sought to break open from within the 'horizons' of

symbolic ownership surrounding poetry as a cultural practice. What that critique did *not* involve however, what none of the poets to whom I spoke appealed to, was the kind of free-for-all relativism which, in the face of those exclusions, gives up on poetic traditions, proposing instead that every kind of utterance has an equal claim to be considered poetry and which repudiates any kind of evaluative judgement as to what does, or does not, 'work' effectively as a poem. That these poets did not appeal to that view, it seems to me, was due—on the one hand—to the fact that they had such a deep-seated sense of the generative potential of those traditions, of the ways in which, despite everything, it was possible to speak through them, even as called out the exclusions in which those traditions come wrapped. On the other hand, it was clear that—at least in some cases—these writers were also wary of where relativism's temptingly broad path might lead. They recognised, in other words, that a poetry which exists without recourse to any conception of specifically poetic value, a poetry which has surrendered any idea of itself as an activity mediated by aesthetic understandings in common—by some intersubjectively shared idea of what constitutes a meaningful poem—is left with nowhere to go but exchange-value. Hence, Dylan looked at the rise of self-publishing platforms with a deep-seated ambivalence. He recognised that such platforms, in bypassing the gatekeepers of symbolic consecration, offered one possible means of opening out the horizons of poetry as a cultural practice. Yet despite that recognition he called such platforms '*a disaster for poetry*', because he understood that what was forfeit, in giving poetry over to the indiscriminate judgement of the market, was any meaningful measure of poetry *as* poetry: '*All you do is just upload it—and that's it*'. The consequence, he said, was that '*it means nothing*'.

* * *

In the third place and appropriately enough as a way of ending: *finitude*.

The transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions upon which social researchers rely in the course of their analyses are much more effective at capturing what *is* said than what is not. By their nature, they record language, they draw attention to the words that people use. As a result, some of the most striking moments in the conversations which formed the basis for this research are not easily discernible in the resulting transcripts. In a real sense, one had to be present in order to recognise them at all. What I am talking about are moments comprised of a particular

kind of silence. I say 'particular kind', because these were not the familiar pauses which punctuate any conversation as interlocutors take a breath or consider their responses. These moments, by contrast, had an intensity, a charged quality, that was distinctively their own. They were, in short, instances of the silence which seems to follow, more or less inevitably, on the reading aloud of a poem.

Each time that a member of a group read one of the poems under discussion, each time that we listened to a recording of one of those poems being read and—most markedly of all—whenever participants shared a poem of their own, the seconds which followed that reading were filled with a silence which felt heightened in this way. These were silences which seemed, moreover, to be deeply compelling in that nobody was eager to let them go, to give them up, to be the first to turn on again the torrent of everyday discourse, the incessancy of 'say-answer-say' (Ward 1979: 93). If one wanted a sociological field-guide to spotting poetry, I remember thinking, one might well find it in that focussed, resonant silence which poems seem to gather around themselves.

One way of making sense of such moments would be to hark back to long-standing claims about poetry's 'self-sufficiency', to the idea of poetry as the epitomising instance of what Hegel called art's capacity to 'give licence to the object to have its end in itself' (1993: 64). What is perilous about such claims, as I have argued already, is that they have all too often led down a slippery slope which ends up ejecting poetry from history altogether. The conception of the poem as whole and complete has oftentimes been the warrant for an idealism for which poetry—and Art more generally—becomes the 'pledge' of a 'Truth' rescued from 'human arbitrariness', as Schiller puts it (1967: 56). Yet, such descriptions do seem to me to be on to something, phenomenologically speaking. Those silences were a consistent and marked feature of these engagements, after all; they surely betokened a reckoning with something consequential. Moreover and more generally, it was extremely common, as I've discussed in chapter three, for participants in this project to talk about the poems they were reading as if they were indeed things-in-themselves, to accord them a presence—even a kind of agency—of their own. This was so even when those poems were experienced as hopelessly closed off, or when that agency was felt to be an obstructive or a belittling one so far as the reader was concerned. That these were, so often, the terms of the responses to poetry in this context is, itself, a powerful reminder of the

fact that we cannot define the meaning or nature of poetry in some once-and-for-all idealist sense. All we have is the question of how poetry is encountered and understood in such and such a moment, what it means to these particular readers, how it might be significant in this specific historical context. It therefore seems much more fruitful to me to end by reflecting on what those silences might suggest about the ways in which poetry might matter—how it might be humanly useful—for readers here and now, in the particular conjuncture in which we find ourselves.

When, in the middle of the nineteen eighties, Fredric Jameson sought to epitomise the cultural logic of late capitalism, he famously took as his illustrative example the experience of trying to navigate the befuddling spaces of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. Jameson described a building completely at odds with the stately formality of the grand bourgeois hotel, a space within which all 'perception of perspective or volume' was lost and where the wandering subject began to feel that 'the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself' (1984: 85) had been overthrown. The result, as Jameson described it, was a kind of bewilderment only a bewilderment which had about it something of the heart-racing quality of the sublime. Thus, it encapsulated a wider structure of feeling which Jameson took as characteristic of late capitalism: a vertiginous sense of our inability 'to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught' (86).

In many ways, we continue to live in a world which feels as if we have lost the exit. But with this difference, it seems to me: gone is that ambivalent but very definite sense of exhilaration which Jameson describes; an exhilaration which, in all probability, was only true for a tiny fraction of the global population even when Jameson described it. Increasingly, the loss of formal coordinates seems to be expressed in something much more deeply banal: that is to say, a pervasive suspicion that the world is inimical to ending. As Henri Lefebvre so presciently predicted, with the rise of information technologies the social order comes to have the appearance of a kind of relentless machine memory, one in which many of the erstwhile rhythms of everyday life are eroded, in which social phenomena often seem to be in a state of constant replay and constant reboot; a world of endlessly circulating information 'without gaps' (2014: 822). And it is that absence of 'gaps' which, to me, most telling captures a specificity of our historical experience: the apparent loss of many of those activities which might otherwise have granted us a sense of meaningful completion.

Thus, for example, in the context of work, we witness the spread of the unbound temporalities of the gig economy. Even in those workplaces that are still, at least nominally, organised around the conventional pattern of the working day, familiar forms of fragmentation have been given an additional twist by the extent to which the labour process as a whole has come to be superintended by neoliberal processes of—frequently automated—performance management in whose hands the very idea of completable tasks suffers a kind of evaporation. In whose hands, indeed, specific tasks come to seem as if they exist only for the purpose of the endless renewal, endless reimposition of such targets. In many ways, those changing rhythms might be thought of as the counterpart, the reverberation in the bodies and experiences of ordinary workers, of the temporalities characteristic of the world of deregulated and computerised financial trading which emerged from the 1970s with the collapse of the Bretton-Woods economic order. It is in this sense that Carolyn Hardin (2014), herself borrowing from E.P. Thompson, describes a shift in our everyday 'time-sense', a kind of compression by which the very idea of a differentiated 'future'—lying somewhere beyond a conceivable and definite end-point of a current state of affairs—is collapsed back into the present. Hence, Hardin points out, for those workers sufficiently fortunate as to have this possibility at all, the prospect of a pension is increasingly understood—courtesy of the enforced shift from so-called 'defined benefit' to 'defined contribution' schemes—not as a process of saving today in anticipation of some distant period that lies at the 'end' of working life, but rather as a set of investments which the worker is expected to constantly monitor, map and visualise in the here-and-now. Indicatively, she argues: 'Once an aspect of the distant future, when retirement becomes present in the substitute horizon of online [pension investment] calculators, its futureness, its thenness, disappears' (2014: 111). Hardin's account is just one example of the ways in which the wider temporalities of the late capitalist system are insinuated more widely into social experience, reconfiguring not just the world of work but also, as Pryke and Allen noted in their no-less prescient reflections on the rise of high-frequency derivative trading, 'everyday understandings and experiences of time and space' (2000: 269).

Or think, likewise, about the passage from 'conversation' to 'texting'; how, for the latter, even the circumstantial brackets which our located-ness in time and space might otherwise have placed around the logic of 'say-answer-say', are kicked away. Both kinds of interaction create possibilities, of course. Yet, it begins to appear that the most perilous enemies

of conversation are not, as Theodor Zeldin once argued, 'rhetoric, disputation, jargon and private language' (1994: 41), but rather the ways in which mobile communication technologies dissolve the 'discontinuities' of the former into a diffuse openness in which communication becomes literally interminable.[7] Even sleep, as various studies have shown, no longer seems to offer, for growing numbers of people, a reliable punctuation, a clear line-break in the structure of the day, and becomes instead something fragmentary, sporadic and inconstant. As Jonathan Crary argues, in his coruscating critique, the dissolution of erstwhile patterns of sleep—he reports that the average North American now sleeps around six and a half hours a night, down from nearly ten hours at the start of the twentieth century—finds its apotheosis in the 'machine-based designation of "sleep mode" […] a state of low-power readiness [which] remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operationality and access' (2014: 13). That shift, he argues, typifies the broader and relentless process by which late capitalism has waged war on any of those rhythms of culture, season or body which might act as a barrier to accumulation and consumption, creating a world in which any 'off/on logic' is superseded, such that 'nothing is ever fundamentally "off" and there is never an actual state of rest' (13). None of these changes, of course, should be understood as imposing themselves uniformly across all social contexts. Rather, they take shape in ways that are *both* deeply uneven yet constitutively interlinked, as geographically disparate sites are integrated within the wider structures of the networked economy. Thus, for instance, Crary reads the colonised night-times of rural communities in Afghanistan—their sleep constantly interrupted by the ever-present threat of American drones—and the harried, incomplete sleep of white-collar workers in the so-called developed world, as counterpart symptoms of the same, broad tendential shift towards the 'generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks' (8). Or hence, as Matthew Wolf-Meyer shows, call-centre workers in South-East Asia endure a systematic disorganisation of their sleep as their working lives are forced into conformity with the rhythms of the US and European economies in an act of what he calls 'spatiotemporal imperialism' (2011: 885).

If, like Jameson, we wanted to find a cultural synecdoche for all of this, we might well look to the fact that the 'self-standing' artistic work, that hallmark of bourgeois aesthetics, has been undermined—*not* by the mesmerising spectacle of some kind of hyperspace—but by the much

more mundane subsumption of the individual work within the logic of the franchise. Witness, for example, how each commercially successful film—in common, indeed, with many commercially successful novels—becomes, in effect, an advert for its own sequel. And then, in due course, the sequel settles nothing beyond signposting the audience's way to the 'three-quel'. And so on, until the sequence ends, not with any culminating aesthetic bang but with a feeble commercial whimper as diminishing box-office returns consign the whole series to streaming services, to that world of never-ending replays with such films are already so well conformed. Nothing, indeed, seems to encapsulate this wider cultural logic with such banal clarity as the way in which, on these platforms, the next show begins, unbidden and unwanted, even whilst the credit sequence for the previous programme is still rolling. This is, perhaps, what a world made in the image of exchange-value feels like: everything a means and nothing an end. Everything a means and nothing an ending. If one were to risk a name for this condition, one might call it the *society of the segue*—a word which, it is worth remembering, was largely obscure in the English-speaking world until the 1980s but which has since undergone a precipitous increase in use.

Against that backdrop, what does the silence which follows the reading of a poem matter? What might it betoken? Thinking about all this at the time and thinking about it since in the context of listening again to those recordings, it seems to me that these silences were reflections of a shared recognition, or a kind of cherishing, of the fact that the speaker—and the poet—had granted the audience an experience of something completed. We, the listeners, fell silent not just because we were thinking about the words, nor because we had been lulled into a kind of reverie, as the romantics might have had it. We fell silent because we did not want to begin again, not straight away. Poems create these brief but often intense experiences of what it is to be, for a moment, ended. It may well have been that, for an earlier generation of cultural critics, and certainly for those at the vanguard of modernism, the idea of the poem as a 'finished' object appeared too closely aligned with a sense of bourgeois propriety; too in keeping with the supposedly coherent and self-sufficient subjectivity of bourgeois individualism. As Eagleton notes, one could thus take such appeals to closure as a form of 'deathliness' (2007: 20).[8] Or, one might simply feel that a concern with poetic form is unbearably prissy, a petty concern for 'tidiness' when much more urgent historical matters are pressing. Yet, these questions may not look, now, as they once did to the

shock troops of modernism. It is precisely in the shadow of our present historical conjuncture that the specific affordances of poetry and poetic form seem to take on a new urgency, start to feel as if they are revealing unexpected qualities of resistance. In short: it may be that now, more than ever, in a social context where all too often it feels that nothing is finishable, nothing is ever over or truly done-and-dusted, that we most keenly need access to a cultural practice which has, amongst its use-values, the fact that it can grant us—or, at least strives to grant us—an encounter with finitude. If that is true, then all the more reason to fight to reclaim that culture, and those possibilities, from the enclosures in which they have been penned.

Notes

1. Taylor, 'A Few Lines', lines 55–56.
2. For example: 'In contrast to the detachment and disinterestedness which aesthetic theory regards as the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is, i.e. autonomous, *selbständig*, the "popular aesthetic" ignores or refuses the refusal of "facile" involvement and "vulgar" enjoyment, a refusal which is the basis of the taste for formal experiment' (1984: 4).
3. Maxwell adds, slightly waspishly: 'That's an impulse which waited ninety years to find its true literary form. It's called a blog'.
4. Discussions of these questions are, to say the least, extensive. Marx's most famous formulation of that distinction comes in Part One of the first volume of *Capital*. For a very helpful reflection, see Stallybrass (1998).
5. See, for example, Williams' account of the positioning of this term within a wider constellation of ideas in the Romantic period in *Culture & Society* (1990 [1958]: 44).
6. Schiller, in his famous *Letters Upon Aesthetic Education* also takes the 'play drive' as central to an understanding the quality of aesthetic experience (1967: 101–109).
7. The term 'discontinuities' is drawn from Sugarman and Thrift's helpful essay on 'Neoliberalism and the Psychology of Time' (2020: 813).
8. One thinks, for example, of how Thomas Buddenbrook, in Mann's great novel, or the Makioka family, in Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters*, are so held in thrall by the demands of 'proper' form that they end up failing to live their own lives.

Appendix: Poems

Reproduced on the pages below, with permission from the relevant copyright holders, are the six poems which were discussed in the reading groups that formed the basis of this project. They are reproduced here in the same order in which they appeared in the booklet, and in the accompanying audio recording.

A. Smith, *Class and the Uses of Poetry*, Sociology of the Arts,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66448-9

The Circle

for Jamie

My boy is painting outer space,
and steadies his brush-tip to trace
the comets, planets, moon and sun
and all the circuitry they run

in one great heavenly design.
But when he tries to close the line.
he draws around his upturned cup,
his hand shakes, and he screws it up.

The shake's as old as he is, all.
(thank god) his body can recall.
of that hour when, one inch from home,
we couldn't get the air to him;

and though today he's all the earth.
and sky for breathing-space and breath.
the whole damn troposphere can't cure.
the flutter in his signature.

But Jamie, nothing's what we meant.
The dream is taxed. We all resent.
the quarter bled off by the dark.
between the bowstring and the mark.

and trust to Krishna or to fate
to keep our arrows halfway straight.
But the target also draws our aim –
our will and nature's are the same;

we are its living word, and not
a book it wrote and then forgot,
it's fourteen-billion-year-old song

inscribed in both our right and wrong –

so even when you rage and moan
and bring your fist down like a stone
on your spoiled work and useless kit,
you just can't help but broadcast it:

look at the little avatar
of your muddy water-jar
filling with the perfect ring
singing under everything.

Don Paterson
From *Rain* (2009)

Taking a headbutt

your pal ruffled ma hat
i said, what? made the mistake of leaning forward
and that was that

blood-metal darkness and the taste of brass
the bell was rung
i know i went somewhere
because i had to come back

William Letford.

Waking for Work in the Winter

Even when frost hasn't left the hard ground rutted by the wheels of tractors
Even though tail lights clog the motorway
Even though the moon still stands blind and cold in the morning sky
Even though the sheets are clean and the covers are warm
And the person beside you breathes the rise and fall of somewhere deep
Get up
Like the dog that hears a sound in the dark
Get up

William Letford
From *Bevel* (Carcanet, 2012) by permission of the publisher.

History

St Andrews: West Sands; September 2001

Today
as we flew the kites
- the sand spinning off in ribbons along the beach
and that gasoline smell from Leuchars gusting across
the golf links;
the tide far out
and quail-grey in the distance;
people
jogging, or stopping to watch
as the war planes cambered and turned
in the morning light –

today
– with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread
of what may come –

I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas
gathering shells
and pebbles
finding evidence of life in all this
driftwork:
snail shells; shreds of razorfish;
smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone.

At times I think what makes us who we are
is neither kinship nor our given states
but something lost between the world we own
and what we dream about behind the names
on days like this
our lines raised in the wind
our bodies fixed and anchored to the shore

and though we are confined by property
what tethers us to gravity and light

has most to do with distance and the shapes
we find in water
reading from the book
of silt and tides
the rose or petrol blue
of jellyfish and sea anemone
combining with a child's
first nakedness.

Sometimes I am dizzy with the fear
of losing everything – the sea, the sky,
all living creatures, forests, estuaries:
we trade so much to know the virtual
we scarcely register the drift and tug
of other bodies
scarcely apprehend
the moment as it happens: shifts of light.
and weather
and the quiet, local forms
of history: the fish lodged in the tide
beyond the sands;
the long insomnia
of ornamental carp in public parks
captive and bright
and hung in their own
slow-burning
transitive gold;
jamjars of spawn
and sticklebacks
or goldfish carried home
from fairgrounds
to the hum of radio

but this is the problem: how to be alive
in all this gazed-upon and cherished world
and do no harm

a toddler on a beach
sifting wood and dried weed from the sand
and puzzled by the pattern on a shell

his parents on the dune slacks with a kite
plugged into the sky
all nerve and line

patient; afraid; but still, through everything
attentive to the irredeemable.

John Burnside.

Bed

She is that guid tae me so she is
an Am a burden tae her, I know Am ur.
Stuck here in this big blastit bed
year in, year oot, ony saint wuid complain.

There's things she has tae dae fir me
A' wish she didnae huv tae dae.
Am her wean noo, wey ma great tent o' nappy,
an champed egg in a cup, an mashed tattie.

Aw the treats A' used tae gie her,
she's gieing me. A' dinny ken whit happened.
We dinny talk any mair. Whether it's jist
the blethers ha been plucked oot o' us

an Am here like some skinny chicken,
ma skin aw bubbles and dots and spots,
loose flap noo (an yet as a yung wuman
A' took pride in ma guid smooth skin.)

Aw A' dae is sit an look oot this windae.
A've seen hale generations graw up
an simmer doon fray this same windae –
that's no seen a lick o' paint fir donkeys.

The Kerrs have disappeared, but the last
Campbells ur still here so Am telt –
tho ' hauf the time A' dinny believe her:
A've no see ony Campbell in a lang time.

My dochter says 'Awright mother?'
haunds me a thin broth or puried neep
an A say 'Aye fine,' an canny help
the great heaving sigh that comes oot

mu auld loose lips, nor ma crabbit tut,
nor ma froon when A' pu' ma cardie tight
aroon ma shooders fir the night drawin in.
Am jist biding time so am ur.

Time is whit A' hauld between
the soft bits o' ma thumbs,
the skeleton underneath ma night goon;
aw the while the glaring selfish moon

lights up this drab wee prison.
A'll be gone and how wull she feel?
No that Am saying A' want her guilty.
No that Am saying Am no grateful.

Jackie Kay.

From *Darling: New & Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2007) by permission of the publisher.

Mrs Midas

It was late September. I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun
to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. The kitchen
filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath
gently blanching the windows. So I opened one,
then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like brow.
He was standing under the pear tree snapping a twig.

Now the garden was long and the visibility poor, the way
the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky,
but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked
a pear from a branch – we grew Fondante d'Automne –
and it sat in his palm like a light bulb. On.
I thought to myself, Is he putting fairy lights in the tree?

He came into the house. The doorknobs gleamed.
He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of
the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.
He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.
The look on his face was strange, wild, vain. I said,
What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.

I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob.
Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.
He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the
forks.
He asked where was the wine. I poured with a shaking hand,
a fragrant, bone-dry white from Italy, then watched
as he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.
It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees.
After we'd both calmed down, I finished the wine
on my own, hearing him out. I made him sit
on the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.
I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.
The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears:

how he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted.
But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold?

It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes
no thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,
as the blue flame played on it luteous stem. At least,
I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.

Separate beds. In fact, I put a chair against the door,
near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room
into the tomb of Tutankhamun. You see, we were passionate
then,
in those halcyon days; unwrapping each other, rapidly,
like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed
embrace,
the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.

And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live
with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue
like a precious latch, its amber eyes
holding their pupils like flies. My dream-milk
burned in my breasts. I woke to the streaming sun.
So he had to move out. We'd a caravan
in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up
under cover of dark. He sat in the back.
And then I came home, the woman who married the fool
who wished for gold. At first I visited, odd times,
parking the car a good way off, then walking.

You knew you were getting close. Golden trout
on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch,
a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints,
glistening next to the river's path. He was thin,
delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan
from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold
the contents of the house and came down here.
I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,
and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead. I miss most,

even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.

Carol Ann Duffy
From *The World's Wife* (1999)

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