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"When you told people… you were a poet, didn't you get your head kicked in?": Precarious Manhood in the Poetry of Don Paterson and Simon Armitage

&

By Twos

A Critical Dissertation and Creative Portfolio

Ali Lewis

Abstract

This thesis comprises a critical dissertation and a collection of poetry, *By Twos*. In the dissertation, I focus on the relationship between poetry and masculinity in the work of Don Paterson and Simon Armitage. Throughout, I rely on Bosson's Precarious Manhood Paradigm (PMP). This theory states that manhood is widely regarded as a fragile status, which is hard-won, easily lost, and requires public proof. In this context, I argue that poetry is viewed as an effeminate art, and that this acts as a "gender threat" to men poets. According to the PMP, men typically respond to gender threats with a "reparative response", which aims to reestablish their masculinity in the eyes of others. This thesis is concerned with men poets', and particularly Paterson's and Armitage's, reparative responses.

To work out what these responses are likely to be, it is necessary to understand how and why poetry – an art which has been dominated by men – has come to be associated with effeminacy. I argue, first, that Romantic changes led to a new feminised conception of the poet; second, that industrialisation gave rise to an 'entrepreneurial manhood', which valorised labour, utility, and rationality, and so clashed with this Romantic ideal; and third, that men poets are "excused by success".

I use these answers as a framework. In chapters three and four, I argue that both poets confound the post-Romantic expectation that a poet's subject matter will be a sensitive exploration of their own emotions. In chapter five, I show that they represent poetry as rational, useful, skilful labour, by casting the poet in the roles of craftsman and industrial worker. Finally, in chapter six, I set out the ways both poets emphasise their professionalism, and draw a line between the feminine *act* of writing poetry and the masculine *role* of being a poet.

"When you told people… you were a poet, didn't you get your head kicked in?": Precarious Manhood in the Poetry of Don Paterson and Simon Armitage

&

By Twos

A Critical Dissertation and Creative Portfolio

Ali Lewis

Doctor of Philosophy by Creative Writing

Department of English Studies

Durham University

2023

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List of Abbreviations

Books by Simon Armitage

A Vertical Art	AVA
Book of Matches	BoM
Sandettie Light Vessel Automatic	SLVA
The Dead Sea Poems	DSP
The Universal Home Doctor	UHD

Books by Don Paterson

God's Gift to Women	GGTW
Landing Light	LL
Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets	RSS
The Fall at Home	The Fall
The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre	The Poem
Toy Fights: A Boyhood	Toy

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Critical Dissertation

Introduction

In this research, I ask two questions. First, how has poetry, an art form which has historically been dominated by men, come to be associated with effeminacy? And second, what do men poets who are bothered by this do about it? Answering the first question takes up the first two chapters. In the next four, I attempt to answer the second question, by focussing on two contemporary men poets renowned for their representations of masculinity, Don Paterson and Simon Armitage.

In this introduction, I first briefly situate this study within the broader context of research on poetry and masculinities. I then set out my reasons for focussing on White men, and particularly Armitage and Paterson, and finally, give a short summary of each chapter.

Situating the Project

In one sense, the confluence of poetry and masculinity has been exhaustively researched – after all, the "library shelves are packed with books that narrate the 'great deeds' of 'great men'" – but in another, it has barely been studied at all.[1] Masculinity, by "being the center, the norm from which all other identities proceed,[…] has remained largely invisible as such".[2] For this reason, there have been endless studies of men poets, but relatively few of men poets *as* men.

Even within this small body of work, however, the majority of research has used poetry as an explanation, rather than as something to be explained. That is to say, many authors have drawn on poems, alongside novels and other media, as *evidence* of a given society's prevalent gender ideologies. Such research raids poems for examples of masculinity. Peter Middleton's classic *The Inward Gaze*, for instance, "looks at men's fantasies and self-images" in Superman comics and poems by Yeats "to discuss the most recent theories of subjectivity, masculinity and emotion."[3] Similarly, Herbert Sussman's

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[1] Pellerin, Pierre-Antoine, "Reading, Writing and the 'Straight White Male': What Masculinity Studies Does to Literary Analysis," *Angles*, 2016. DOIs, stable URLs and access dates are available in the bibliography.

[2] Ibid

[3] Middleton, Peter, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), cover description.

Masculine Identities opens its first chapter, 'Man as Warrior', with a description of Hector's battle with Achilles in the *Iliad,* and we learn that this "paradigmatic episode […] encapsulates vividly in word and action the warrior identity."[4]

In this research, however, I work in a slightly different tradition, which does not ask what poetry can tell us about masculinity, but what masculinity can tell us about poetry. Such research, which looks at the "ways in which masculinity studies has recently renewed the critical approach to certain literary texts",[5] does not consider poetry as the key to understanding a particular masculinity system, but rather, following Butler, treats the writing of poems, in itself, "as a form of gender performance".[6] It asks how a writer *uses* the poem to display or defend his own masculinity. To give just a few examples, this is the approach taken by Ian Gregson in *The Male Image*, Matthew Gartner in his work on Longfellow, and Marlon Ross in *The Contours of Masculine Desire*.[7]

I contribute to this approach by siting it more firmly within contemporary Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and particularly within Vandello and Bosson's Precarious Manhood Paradigm.[8] This perspective views manhood not as a developmental guarantee but as an earned status, which is easily threatened, and requires constant public maintenance through demonstrations of normative masculine behaviour. Viewed in this light, the association of poetry with effeminacy acts for some men poets as a 'gender threat'; writing poems calls into question their manhood, and requires some kind of public reparative response. I argue that poems themselves can be used as reparative responses, and it is such poems I consider in this research.

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[4] Sussman, Herbert L., *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2012), p. 11

[5] Pellerin

[6] Gregson, Ian, *The Male Image: Representations of Masculinity in Postwar Poetry* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 1999), p. 5

[7] Gartner, Matthew, "Becoming Longfellow: Work, Manhood, and Poetry," *American Literature*, 72 (2000), 59–86; Ross, Marlon Bryan, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

[8] Vandello, Joseph A., and Jennifer K. Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood.," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 14 (2013), 101–13

Why Study White Men?

Before I discuss the reasons I chose to study Don Paterson and Simon Armitage in particular, I want briefly to answer a broader question: why study White cis men? Why give more attention to the work of White cis men writers, when they have already been so extensively studied, often to the detriment and neglect of women writers and writers of colour?

This has become a more pressing question of late owing to the confluence of three trends. One is that until relatively recently "nearly all knowledge production not explicitly labeled feminist has implicitly studied men", and, in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) societies, White men. Another is that, at least since the advent of feminism, WEIRD "social science has historically tended to study "down," investigating subordinated and oppressed groups". Feminist sociology especially focused "on the lives and experiences of subordinated groups in the gender hierarchy, [that is] women and transgendered people."[9] Sociologists of race, meanwhile, "primarily centred their investigations on how race had been constructed for blacks and other groups deemed racial minorities".[10] That is to say, research in which gender and race are marked has tended to study oppressed groups and research in which they are unmarked has tended to study privileged groups.

Finally, in the last twenty-five or so years, "[r]esearch on privilege has proliferated, especially in the areas of race and ethnic relations, where a field of 'whiteness studies' has developed, and within women's and gender studies, where there is a growing field of 'masculinity studies'". In short, there has been a (contested) 'return' to the study of men, of White people, and of White men, accompanied by the

[9] Peretz, Tal. "Why study men and masculinities? A theorized research review." *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 12, 3 (2016), 30–43.

[10] Hartman, Andrew, 'The Rise and Fall of Whiteness Studies', *Race & Class*, 46.2: 22–38, p. 24, 2004 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0306396804047723>

argument that this new research explicitly *races* and *genders* its subjects, and so views them *as White men,* not as the presumed "average, normal, universal human".[11]

In this context, feminists have made the legitimate critique that the new trend of "studying men re-centers men's experiences, draws attention and resources away from women, and thereby supports the male supremacist status quo".[12] Similarly, some antiracist scholars have argued that "certain trends and arguments in… the domain of Critical Whiteness Studies" risk "re-inscribing white dominance in the very domains which purport to challenge it."[13] In both cases, the critique is that the study of Whiteness and masculinity is not only unoriginal, but risks contributing to further marginalisation.

In response to this, it is possible to point out that "while whites may have only recently become aware of themselves as 'white', whiteness has long been a source of pain, fear and, lest we forget, humour amongst black people."[14] It has also long been the subject of study. Indeed, "as far back as 1920, Black scholar, W. E. B. Dubois, noted that the workings of racism are not properly understood by focussing solely upon the racially oppressed."[15] More recently, "Black feminist writers such as bell hooks (1992) claim black people may have an intimate and 'special knowledge' of whiteness historically gleaned from their marginalised status and subordinated position to it."[16]

Moreover, as Hübinette points out, the "issues of both whiteness and masculinity become glaringly apparent in geographical places and in racial spaces where whites were/are the minority and where

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[11] Ferber, Abby L., 'Whiteness Studies and the Erasure of Gender', *Sociology Compass*, 1.1: 265–82, 2007 p. 266 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00014.x>

[12] Peretz, p. 31

[13] Howard, Philip S. S. "White Privilege: For or against? A Discussion of Ostensibly Antiracist Discourses in Critical Whiteness Studies." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2004, pp. 63–79

[14] Nayak, Anoop, 'Critical Whiteness Studies', *Sociology Compass*, 1.2: 737–55, 2008 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00045.x>

[15] Howard, p. 66

[16] Nayak, p. 745

white men have historically been far more numerous than white women."[17] That is to say, the belief that Whiteness and masculinity have only recently been the object of study may itself be a consequence of an academy dominated by researchers from the global North and by White men, for whom Whiteness and masculinity are less visible.

However, the fact that Whiteness studies and masculinity studies have longer and more diverse histories than is obvious to some scholars does not in itself meet the critiques of unoriginality and marginalisation above. A broader counterpoint is that the proposition that CWS 're-centres' Whiteness is to overstate the progress that has been made. As Casey argues, work "that names White supremacy as the dominant logic of our global order is not "re-centering" Whiteness, it is examining White supremacy as a totalizing system of domination." For this reason, "[a]rguments about "re-centering… should be redirected: as calls for explicit racialized engagement in and with our present White supremacist social order."[18] Put another way, Whiteness is already in the centre – the problem is that it is invisible. Ignoring it doesn't remove it from the centre. Work therefore needs to be done to make it visible. It is by calling attention to this combination of centrality and invisibility that CWS and CSMM justify their intellectual projects. The object then is to make "white men the objects of study by labelling them as white men, thereby making them visible and, consequently, also arguably vulnerable."[19]

It is this shift from visibility to vulnerability which is the key point. This is "the goal and sometimes almost the *raison d'être* of both masculinity studies and whiteness studies."[20] The argument that visibility leads to vulnerability, however, only has force given that "both "race" and "gender" are identity

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[17] Hübinette, Tobias, 'White Masculinity', in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, ed. by Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, Tamara Shefer and Marinette Grimbeek (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group), (2020) pp. 135–42

[18] Casey, Zachary A., 'Whiteness Has Never Left the Center', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 36.8: 1442–49 (2022) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2025477>

[19] Hübinette, p. 136

[20] Ibid

classifications that geographers [and other researchers] have revealed are "constructed categories of understanding"".

As we shall see later, "race and gender are not ineluctable "things", destinies, or "beings", but "doings" and malleable social productions.""[21] If research is to play its part in dismantling White dominance and male dominance, and thereby meet the normative objection we began with, we "need to be careful… not to construct white masculinity as an apodictic force with no exterior… we need to take care, at the most fundamental level, not to equate an identity, which is the product of cultural activity, with that activity itself".[22] I argue in this research that poetry is part of the cultural activity which creates and reinforces masculinity, and because masculinities are specific, the White Northern English and Scottish Protestant masculinities exemplified in Don Paterson and Simon Armitage's work.

Don Paterson and Simon Armitage

Throughout this research, I focus on two men poets, Don Paterson and Simon Armitage. To a certain extent, I do so because of their cultural centrality. They are among the most celebrated and recognisable poets in the UK, and the ways that they write and, crucially, *represent* poetry are likely to influence the way the art is perceived. More importantly, however, I focus on them because of their many similarities, and the centrality of masculinity to their work.

Both poets are the same age, come from White, working-class, Protestant families, and grew up outside of the culturally-dominant South East of England – Armitage in West Yorkshire, and Paterson in Dundee. They emerged at roughly the same time, winning the Forward Prizes for Best First Collection in 1992 and 1993, and in their early careers, both were aided by the New Generation Poets scheme. This marketing programme promoted them together as "challenging the Oxbridge-London bias of the

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[21] Gillen, Jamie, 'Rethinking Whiteness and Masculinity in Geography: Drinking Alcohol in the Field in Vietnam', *Antipode*, 48.3: 584–602 (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/anti.12202>

[22] DiPiero, Thomas, *White Men Aren't* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 3

literary world with a new burst of regionalism and demotic vigour".[23] As we shall see, this is a grouping and critical interpretation which has stayed with them since. However, as I explore in chapter three, their resemblances go deeper than a shared "'scourge-of-the-middleclasses, hammer-of-the-Oxbridge-hegemony turn'", and they have a broadly similar set of aesthetics.[24]

Neither Armitage nor Paterson has yet been the subject of extensive academic criticism. Ian Gregson's *Simon Armitage* remains the only full-length study of the former, while the first two books on Paterson – Ben Wilkinson's monograph and *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Natalie Pollard – have only recently appeared.[25] Nevertheless, what criticism there is seems strikingly unified in its identification of masculinity as a major theme in both poets.

Gregson, in the chapter 'Armitage: Man and Boy', has given a sustained account of the topic in Armitage's plays and life writing, as well as in his poetry. Of the shorter treatments, Sarah Broom has examined Armitage's "collocation of 'masculine voices'", David Kennedy has explored the presentation of "Masculine subjectivity and other men's bodies", and Vicki Bertram has discussed both poets together in a chapter on 'Men Poets and Masculinity'.[26] In it, she argues that both poets share the "expectation […] of a wholly masculine audience" and a "defensive and conservative" mode of irony.[27] However, out of the six poets she analyses, it is Paterson she identifies as "the most overtly 'laddish'".[28]

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[23] Paterson, Don, and Matthew Sperling, "The Publishing of Poetry," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essay*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 144–52, p. 148

[24] Ibid

[25] Gregson, Ian, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011); Wilkinson, Ben, *Don Paterson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); Pollard, Natalie, ed., *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

[26] Broom, Sarah, "Gender, Sex and Embodiment," in *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 84; Kennedy, David, "'Open Secrets': Masculine Subjectivity and Other Men's Bodies in Some Late Twentieth-Century British Poetry," *Textual Practice*, 25 (2011), 87–107; Bertram, Vicki, *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary Women and Men Poets* (London: Pandora, 2005)

[27] Bertram, pp. 158–159

[28] Bertram, p. 173

And indeed, this is a common characterisation, noted by Christine Patterson, James Wood, and Ben Wilkinson.[29]

However, as Don Chiasson points out, after the 1990s, Paterson's "laddishness, a fad to begin with, was phased out".[30] Similarly, Armitage's collections from *The Dead Sea Poems* onwards are "all much *less* concerned with gender and sexuality – and in particular, with the issues of masculinity and maleness."[31] For this reason, I will be mainly concerned with the poets' early collections – Paterson's *Nil Nil* (1993) and *God's Gift to Women* (1997) and Armitage's *Zoom!* (1989), *Kid* (1992), *Xanadu* (1992) and *Book of Matches* (1993) – though, where relevant, I give examples from other books. Moreover, because I am interested not just in the gender performances within their poems, but in the gendered ways they *present* their poetry, I also draw extensively on Paterson's criticism in *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* and Armitage's lectures in *A Vertical Art*.[32]

Chapter Summary

In chapter one, I ask 'What is masculinity?'. In the first section, I set out the problems of defining such a contentious term, and discuss conceptions of masculinity as an ideology, as a set of characteristics, as an identity, and as a practice. Next, I consider the common pluralisation of masculinity into *masculinities*, a change which acknowledges that there are many different ways of being a man. I then move on to summarise the major contemporary approaches to masculinities research. Finally, I set out a general model of masculinities, which draws on the idea that masculinities are not stable and consistent identities but rather, strategically-negotiated discursive positions, as well as research in the Precarious Manhood Paradigm, which shows 'manhood' is hard won, easily lost, and needs to be publicly proven.

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[29] Patterson, Christina, "Don Paterson: Playing the Beautiful Game," *The Independent*, 2004; Wood, James, "Ever so Comfy · LRB 24 March 1994," *London Review of Books*, 1994; Wilkinson, pp. 29–44

[30] Chiasson, Don, "Forms of Attention," *The New Yorker* (Condé Nast, 2010)

[31] Broom, p. 85

[32] All editions listed in bibliography.

In chapter two, I consider the relationship between poetry and masculinity, and ask how it is that an art which has historically been dominated by men has also come to be associated with effeminacy. To this question, I posit three answers, which can be summed up as follows: poetry has changed, masculinity has changed, and men have always been allowed to do what they want, provided they are sufficiently successful. First, I argue that historical changes to ideas about poetry led to a new 'feminised' and 'Romantic' conception of the poet. Second, the advent of commercial society gave rise to new masculinity ideologies, which clashed with this Romantic ideal because they valorised labour, utility, rationality, activity, and sobriety. And third, men have always been 'excused by success'. A distinction can therefore be drawn between the feminine *act* of writing poetry and the masculine *role* of being a professional poet. In the last section of the chapter, I argue that these answers can be used to categorise men poets' 'reparative responses' to the gender threat of poetry's effeminacy. That is to say, we might expect that men poets will reject the Romantic characterisation of poetry, try to present writing poems as useful rational labour, and attempt to underline the exculpatory power of their own success. And indeed, as I set out in the remaining chapters, this is exactly what we find in Don Paterson's and Simon Armitage's work.

In chapter three, I turn my attention from poetry and masculinity generally, to Armitage and Paterson specifically. In the first section, I outline both poets' aesthetics, which are characterised by opposition to 'expressive' theories and support for a 'pragmatic' view, which posits that a poem should be audience-directed and focus on the reader. As I explore in the second section, such a critical outlook attempts to contradict the reader's presumption that the speaker of a lyric poem *is* the poet – a presumption which is further called into question by both poets' deliberate destabilisation of the lyric 'I'. This combination of anti-expressive aesthetics and the destabilisation of the 'I' can, in itself, be read as a reparative response to the gender threat occasioned by the 'Romantic' changes to ideas about poetry. However, a comprehension of both is also essential to understanding their other discursive strategies, which I set out in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter four, I consider the ways that Paterson and Armitage, in what is perhaps their most obvious reparative strategy, write on traditionally-masculine topics, confounding the post-Romantic expectation that a poet's subject matter will be a sensitive exploration of their own emotions and experiences. I argue that they do this by writing in a consistently 'laddish' voice in their lyric poems and by 'trying on' various masculine styles in their obvious character poems. However, in a final section, I contend that the most interesting effects are found in poems which mix the character and lyric modes and draw the 'I' closer to particularly violent and misogynistic masculine speakers. Entering a debate between Ben Wilkinson and Vicki Bertram on whether such poems are ironic, and whether they are successful in using irony to distance themselves from the speakers, I set out a third position, which is that such poems can be explained by a masculine ethic of brutal honesty, which attempts to present the world negatively, as it 'really is'.

In chapter five, I turn to the second reason I give for the perception of poetry as effeminate, and consider the ways Paterson and Armitage try to accommodate the moral value that post-industrial British – and especially working-class Protestant – communities place on work. I suggest that they do so by presenting the writing of poems not only as labour, but as specific types of labour. First, I argue that both Armitage and Paterson are careful to present poetry as productive labour – work that makes a product – rather than as emotional labour or care work. Second, I look at the ways both poets attempt to navigate a pair of competing ideologies of masculine labour, by representing the poet as both craftsman and industrial worker. And finally, I turn from a focus on labour and production to a focus on utility and the product, and make the case that, despite their surface skepticism, both poets believe in poetry as fundamentally useful and effective, rather than useless and impotent.

Finally, in chapter six, I look at the ways in which both poets try to position their practice as a successful career, marking a hard border between themselves and amateurs by insisting on their long apprenticeships served, their commercial success, their technical mastery, and the place of their art in the public world of work. This, I argue, is made more difficult by two problems. One is that commercial success often requires writing poetry that can be "read as a direct expression of personal

feeling", and the other is that by responding to this market demand, the poet loses his independence.[33] In the last section of this research, I contend that they deal with the first of these problems by using the same dark and blunt subject matter discussed in chapter four to present themselves as honest and plain-speaking, despite their reticence to speak openly about themselves. The second problem, meanwhile, is dealt with by their attempts to turn audience demand into a negotiation, or even a struggle.

[33] Pollard, Natalie, "Address and Lyric Commerce: Don Paterson," in *Speaking to You Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 213–41, p. 222

Chapter One. "Hard to earn, easy to lose": A Model of Masculinity[1]

[1] Bosson, Jennifer K., Pawel Jurek, Joseph A. Vandello, Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka, Michal Olech, Tomasz Besta, and others, "Psychometric Properties and Correlates of Precarious Manhood Beliefs in 62 Nations," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 52 (2021), 231–58

What is Masculinity?

In 1998, Kenneth Clatterbaugh wrote that it "may well be the best kept secret of the literature on masculinities that we have an extremely ill-defined idea of what we are talking about".[2] What he was getting at is this: when people talk about masculinity, it seems as though they're talking about lots of different things, and this goes for both specialists and the general public.[3]

Sometimes it seems that we're talking about *ideas* of what men are or should be — that is, stereotypes, norms and ideologies.[4] At others, we talk about what men are actually like, and what they do — their real 'behaviours, attitudes, and abilities".[5] Sometimes, we talk about masculinity as if it were a "form of collective male practice" — a way of doing things that has a certain purpose or effect (often the continued domination of men over women).[6] And finally, sometimes we are interested in how a person feels or identifies –- in their 'sense of masculinity'.[7] Let us call these areas *masculinity ideologies*, *masculinity characteristics*, *masculinity practices*, and *masculinity identities*.

Masculinity Ideologies

The first approach, that of thinking of masculinity as *ideology*, is interested in societies' cultural standards for men, in the typical roles men are expected to enact, and in the stereotypical and ideal

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[2] Clatterbaugh, Kenneth, "What Is Problematic about Masculinities?," *Men and Masculinities*, 1 (1998), 24–45, p. 27

[3] Reeser, Todd W., "Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies," *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, 2020, 11–38; Hearn, Jeff, "Is Masculinity Dead? A Critique of the Concept of Masculinity/Masculinities," in *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, ed. by Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1996), pp. 204–17; Drummond, Murray, "Masculinities," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 2016, 1–6

[4] Reeser, Todd W., *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2023), pp. 20–29

[5] Clatterbaugh, p. 29

[6] Schrock, Douglas, and Michael Schwalbe, "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35 (2009), 277–95, p. 278

[7] Dahl, Julia, Theresa Vescio, and Kevin Weaver, "How Threats to Masculinity Sequentially Cause Public…" *Social Psychology*, 46 (2015), 242–54. See p. 242 for a description of masculinity as "a pervasive, high status identity".

images of men in the media — what Reeser calls the "images, myths, [and] discourses".[8] Following this train of thought tends to yield something like Clatterbaugh's M3 definition of masculinity: "a set of beliefs, widely shared within a group, about what is masculine and what should be masculine".[9]

However, as Clatterbaugh points out, the obvious problem with this approach is that we are talking about beliefs about men and not about actual men. We know that stereotypes are often inaccurate, and that people are aware of them, endorse them, and conform to them to varying degrees. Moreover, even in the same culture, stereotypes and norms are not "consistent sets", which agree with each other.[10] As Hearn points out men have "been represented as taken-for-granted biologically driven bodies. Yet at the same time, men may be constructed as taken-for-granted disembodied, or least as primarily ('rational') minds."[11]

Masculinity Characteristics

Masculinity can instead be thought of as men's behaviours, traits, attitudes and abilities. In our ordinary usage, we often use the terms masculine and masculinity to describe the real behaviour and characteristics of people, and not just stereotypes and ideals. This does raise the question, however, of what we mean when we say that a person is masculine, or their behaviour is masculine.

One option is to say that masculine behaviour is simply behaviour that men do, masculine traits are those that men have, and so on. This makes masculinity simply a synonym for *men's characteristics*. There are several problems with this approach. One is that, once masculinity is defined as men's characteristics, it can no longer be adduced as a *cause* of those characteristics. Another is that such an undifferentiated concept loses all descriptive power: opposite characteristics, when instantiated by men,

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[8] Reeser, *Masculinities*, p. 21

[9] Clatterbaugh, p. 30

[10] Clatterbaugh, p. 32.

[11] Hearn, Jeff, "Men, Masculinities and the Material(-)Discursive," *NORMA*, 9 (2014), 5–17, p. 11

would be masculinity, and identical characteristics, when instantiated by women, would *not* be masculinity. But most importantly, it doesn't accord with academic, or even ordinary, usage in allowing that women can be masculine and men can be feminine.

One way to get around these problems is to say that masculine characteristics are those which, statistically, men tend to display more on average than women. This gives us something similar to Clatterbaugh's M7 definition:

> A masculine person is one who exemplifies those characteristics that have been shown to differentiate the sexes.[12]

Let us call this concept *men's gender-differentiated characteristics*. This is what is measured in, for example, reviews of gender similarities and differences in research on health and gender.[13] This gives us back some descriptive power, because it allows us to say which characteristics are of interest. Such a concept also allows women to be masculine and men to be feminine: for a woman to be masculine, she would simply have to display those behaviours or traits which are more typical of men.

The definition of masculinity as men's gender-differentiated behaviour does not, however, allow us to solve the problem of incidental characteristics. If it turns out that "a statistical majority of a group of men are more likely to have gray hair or that they are less likely to have a cat", we have no way of setting this aside as 'not masculinity' that does not require us to fall back on ideology – on a norm or a stereotype of what is masculine.[14]

A Mixed Approach: Masculinity as Ideology-Accordant Characteristics

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[12] Clatterbaugh, p. 32; See also Maccoby, Eleanor, *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2003), p. 6

[13] Hyde, Janet Shibley, "Gender Similarities and Differences," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65 (2014), 373–98; Hines, Melissa, "Gendered Development," *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, 2015, 1–46

[14] Clatterbaugh, p. 33

Mixing the two approaches suggests another possible definition of masculinity, which is to think of masculine behaviours and traits as those which align with a stereotype of what men *are* like, or a norm of what men *should* be like. This gives us something like Clatterbaugh's M4 and M5 definitions of masculinities:

> M4: A masculinity is the set of attitudes, behaviours, and abilities of a group of individuals who conform to a stereotype of masculinity.
>
> M5: A masculinity is the set of attitudes, behaviours, and abilities of a group of individuals who conform to a norm of masculinity.[15]

This intersection between ideology (norms and stereotypes) and characteristics (beliefs, attitudes, traits, and abilities) is where the majority of psychological research on masculinity has taken place. Thus, there have been quantitative studies of individuals' and groups' *awareness* of stereotypes and norms, their *behavioural conformity* to stereotypes and norms and so on.[16] Qualitative discursive research, meanwhile asks participants to "talk about and puzzle over" what they think masculinity is, rather than "telling boys and men what traditional masculinity consists of and measuring their adherence to that construct".[17]

Masculinity Practices

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[15] Clatterbaugh, p. 31

[16] Kurtz-Costes, Beth, Kristine E. Copping, Stephanie J. Rowley, and C. Ryan Kinlaw, "Gender and Age Differences in Awareness and Endorsement of Gender Stereotypes about Academic Abilities," *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 29 (2014), 603–18; Heilman, Brian, Gary Barker, and Alexander Harrison, rep., *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico* (Promundo and Unilever, 2017); Wester, Stephen R., David L. Vogel, James M. O'Neil, and Lindsay Danforth, "Development and Evaluation of the Gender Role Conflict Scale Short Form (GRCS-SF).," *PMM*, 13 (2012), 199–210; Witt, Melissa Guerrero, and Wendy Wood, "Self-Regulation of Gendered Behavior in Everyday Life," *Sex Roles*, 62 (2010), 635–46

[17] Wetherell, Margaret, and Nigel Edley, "A Discursive Psychological Framework for Analyzing Men and Masculinities.," *PMM*, 15 (2014), 355–64, pp. 360–361

If normative and stereotypical behaviour is linked to the perception of masculinity, then masculine behaviours and traits might be thought of as those which aim, consciously or unconsciously, to increase this perception. Such *performative masculine behaviour* is the subject of research in the Precarious Manhood Paradigm associated with Vandello and Bosson[18]. For example, following a "gender threat", usually induced by asking men "to perform an ostensibly public, stereotypically feminine task" men have been shown to engage in greater aggression, and make riskier financial decisions, as well as to sexually harass, and sexualise women.[19]

A similar approach, which also conceptualises masculinity in terms of practices, is Schrock and Schwalbe's theory of "manhood acts". As they define them, manhood acts not only "imply a claim to membership in the privileged gender group", but also aim at "claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation."[20] We can see this if we consider that some of the actions in the Precarious Manhood research seem designed not only to bolster masculine image and self-image, but also to subordinate women and other men.

This practice-based approach, like the M4 and M5 approach above, draws together both masculine ideologies, and people's actual behaviours and characteristics. Moreover, it manages to retain this focus on actual characteristics, while avoiding the criticism that it treats masculinity as a static trait, by analysing how its performance varies not just by individual difference, but according to agency, context, and situation. However, definitions which solely treat masculinity as a way to claim privilege, elicit deference or resist exploitation have no good way to explain seemingly less oppressive masculinities, such as the "inclusive masculinity" found in Andersen's research. They must treat such masculinities as

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[18] Vandello, Joseph A., and Jennifer K. Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood.," *PMM,* 14 (2013), 101–13

[19] Vandello and Bosson, p. 105; Bosson, Jennifer K., and others, "Precarious Manhood and Displays of Physical Aggression," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35 (2009), 623–34; Weaver, Jonathan R., Joseph A. Vandello, and Jennifer K. Bosson, "Intrepid, Imprudent, or Impetuous? the Effects of Gender Threats on Men's Financial Decisions.," *PMM*, 14 (2013), 184–91; Mishra, Sonya, Margaret Lee, and Laura J. Kray, "Precarious Manhood Increases Men's Receptivity to Social Sexual Behavior from Attractive Women at Work," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 104 (2023), 104409; Dahl, Vescio and Weaver

[20] Schrock and Schwalbe, pp. 281–284

impossible, as bad-faith adjustments intended to maintain power in the light of societal changes, or as not masculinity at all.

Masculinity Identities

There are two principal ways to think about masculinity in identity terms. One way, often referred to men's *gender identity*, conceptualises masculine identity as the extent to which a person identifies as a man, or feels or knows he is. A second, which I will call their *sense of masculinity*, thinks of masculine identity as the extent to which a person feels *masculine*, rather than the extent to which feel they are a man. These two concepts are both useful, but confused.[21] It takes a group neglected in CSMM – femme trans men – to demonstrate their separability.[22] Such men show that it is perfectly possible to be assigned female at birth, be a man, and not be or feel masculine, and by extension, that there is a difference between 'feeling you *are* a man' and 'feeling you are masculine'. Men can feel like men and not feel they're masculine, and people other than men can feel masculine.

The former concept, men's gender identity, has been the subject of extensive study, with developmental research looking into how boys become aware of their gender identity.[23] The latter concept, sense of masculinity, is easy to operationalise – with studies plainly asking, "To what extent would you consider yourself masculine?" – but its simplicity is both an asset and a drawback. The question allows for "individual differences in what it means to be masculine" – for example, "a man may gain a sense of his masculinity by caring for his children, although such nurturing behavior is typically defined as

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[21] Hoffman, Rose Marie, John A. Hattie, and L. Dianne Borders, "Personal Definitions of Masculinity and Femininity as an Aspect of Gender Self-Concept," *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 44 (2005), 66–83

[22] For a brief discussion, see: Rossiter, Hannah, "She's Always a Woman: Butch Lesbian Trans Women in the Lesbian Community," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 20 (2015), 87–96

[23] Steensma, Thomas D., Baudewijntje P.C. Kreukels, Annelou L.C. de Vries, and Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, "Gender Identity Development in Adolescence," *Hormones and Behavior*, 64 (2013), 288–97

feminine" – but by this same token, it is imprecise as to what people actually mean by 'feeling masculine'.[24]

What are masculinities?

As Schrock and Schwalbe wrote in an influential review, "[c]urrent thinking in the field treats masculinity not as singular but as plural." This means that "there is not just one form of masculinity […], but rather there are multiple masculinities."[25] For most researchers, the term 'masculinities' refers to "historically and geographically rooted"[26] variations in the ways that different groups of people *do* masculinity and/or distinctions between higher status and "lower-status ways that manhood is enacted".[27] For example, in this research I will be considering predominantly White British ideas of masculinity.

The first thing to notice is that, if we follow this logic and start to distinguish, say, separate working class and bourgeois masculinities, there is an ambiguity – again identified early by Clatterbaugh[28] – over whether *masculinities* as a term refers to the *actual* ideologies, characteristics and identities (ICIs) of these groups, or to the types of ICIs *associated with* these groups. Are working class masculinities the ICIs, whatever they are, of working class men, and therefore limited – by definition – to working class men? Or are they a particular set of ICIs associated with working class men, but which anyone can adopt?

We can resolve this confusion if we recognise that sometimes the term masculinities is used to refer to "different men differently situated" – or what we might call *masculinity groups*. Thus, "we get, for

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[24] Wong, Y. Joel, Melissa Burkley, Angela C. Bell, Shu-Yi Wang, and Elyssa M. Klann, "Manly to the Core: Measuring Men's Implicit Masculine Self-Concept via the Semantic Misattribution Procedure," *Personality and Individual Differences*, 104 (2017), 320–25, p. 320.

[25] Schrock and Schwalbe, p. 280

[26] Thompson, Edward H., and Kate M. Bennett, "Measurement of Masculinity Ideologies: A (Critical) Review.," *PMM*, 16 (2015), 115–33, p. 116

[27] Schrock and Schwalbe, p. 280

[28] Clatterbaugh, pp. 39–40

example, bourgeois men or working class men, and these are identified as different masculinities". At other times, it is suggested that "a masculinity can transcend a particular situation" – that is, a working class man can enact bourgeois masculinity. What does this mean? Clatterbaugh suggests it means working class men "can emulate, parody, adapt, [and] share behaviors, attitudes, and abilities common among bourgeois men".[29] For this sense of the word, we can use the term *masculinity systems*. This recognises that there are identifiable patterns not just in individual masculinity concepts, but in constellations of them: a given masculinity system is likely to be characterised by a particular configuration of ideologies, behaviours, traits, and identities. Anderson's concept of 'inclusive masculinity' is a good example.[30] This masculinity system, which is "more welcoming of gay men, men of color, and is accepting of femininity", is not limited to a particular masculinity group; it has been found in student and working class youth communities, as well as in elite footballers.[31]

Masculinity Theories

There is nothing particularly complicated in any of the above; the problem is that we use the same terms – masculinity and masculinities – to describe nearly everything. To deal with this, in all cases, when we talk about masculinity and masculinities, we need to be clear about which masculinity concept(s) we are using, and whether we are talking about individuals, groups or systems.

With the terminological issues cleared up, we can turn now to the contributions of the major theories of masculinity I rely on in this research. These are:

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[29] All quotations from Clatterbaugh, p. 39.

[30] Anderson, Eric, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

[31] Anderson, Eric, "Inclusive Masculinity in a Fraternal Setting," *Men and Masculinities*, 10 (2007), 604–20, p. 617; Roberts, Steven, "Boys Will Be Boys … Won't They? Change and Continuities in Contemporary Young Working-Class Masculinities," *Sociology*, 47 (2012), 671–86; Magrath, Rory, *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football: Men in the Beautiful Game* (London: Routledge, 2017)

- the claim that masculinities are plural, hierarchical and relational, taken from Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity[32]

- the focus of the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) on the trauma and dysfunction caused by gender roles[33]

- the ideas from critical discursive psychology that masculinities are not "stable and consistent" identity positions but rather variable, "multiple, fragmented and inconsistent" discursive positions, which are strategically negotiated[34]

- and finally, the Precarious Manhood (PM) paradigm's finding that 'manhood' is hard won, easily lost, and requires public proof.[35]

Before doing so, however, I describe three ideas, all borrowed from mainstream feminist thought, which make up the consensus of CSMM and underlie nearly all contemporary research on masculinities. These are that masculinity is non-essential, that it is not inherent, and that it is either socially constructed or performatively constituted.

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[32] Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," *Gender & Society*, 19 (2005), 829–59 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>, p. 846; Messerschmidt, James W., "The Salience of 'Hegemonic Masculinity,'" *Men and Masculinities*, 22 (2019), 85–91

[33] Pleck, Joseph H, "Foreword: A Brief History of the Psychology of Men and Masculinities," in *The Psychology of Men and Masculinities*, ed. by Ronald F Levant and Y. Joel Wong (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2017); Levant, Ronald F., and Wizdom A. Powell, "The Gender Role Strain Paradigm," in *The Psychology of Men and Masculinities*, ed. by Ronald F Levant and Y. Joel Wong (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2017)

[34] Wetherell and Edley, "Negotiating…" , pp. 357–361; Wetherell, Margaret, and Nigel Edley, "Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices," *Feminism & Psychology*, 9 (1999), 335–56

[35] Vandello and Bosson

First, for all these theories, masculinity is neither the outward expression of an "immutable"[36] essence nor the internalisation of an external "objective ideal".[37] This is demonstrated not only by historical and cultural variation in masculinity, but also by the fact that masculinity in its modern Western sense did not even exist in "European culture itself before the eighteenth century".[38] Next, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, "sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with" men.[39] Masculinity is not *necessary* for men nor is it limited to them. Men do not have to be masculine – and it is not pathological if they're not – and people of other genders can be masculine too. This is not so much social science as ordinary usage: "we call some women 'masculine' and some men 'feminine', or some actions or attitudes 'masculine' or 'feminine' regardless of who displays them".[40] And finally, as follows from its being non-essential and non-inherent, whatever masculinity is in a given culture, it is not biologically determined, but "actively produced". It is either socially constructed or instantiated through its own performance in a Butlerian sense.[41]

The combination of these ideas does raise the issue, however, of how masculinity can be defined or even identified if it is non-essential and non-inherent – if it is detached from both an "idea" and a "group"?[42] This question cannot be resolved with the standard move to *masculinities*, as the problem simply follows us there; a plural category "though conceptually signaling heterogeneity nonetheless semantically marks a collectivity".[43] A better answer is perhaps to lay emphasis on Kosofsky Sedgwick's word *sometimes*, so that while masculinity – in most conceptions – can be produced and performed by

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[36] Fuss, Diana, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. xi

[37] Butler, Judith "Performative Acts And Gender Constitution: An Essay In Phenomenology And Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), p. 522

[38] Connell, Raewyn, "The Social Organization of Masculinity," in *Unmasking Masculinities: Men and Society*, ed. by Edward W. Morris and Blume Freeden Oeur (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2017), p. 5

[39] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, "'Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity,'" in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 11

[40] Connell, "The Social Organization of Masculinity," (2017), p. 6

[41] Connell, R. W., "Masculinities and Globalization," *Men & Masculinities*, 1 (1998), 3–23, p. 5; See Carrigan et al for an earlier bringing together of these foundational ideas in masculinity studies. Carrigan, Tim, Raewyn Connell, and John Lee, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), 551–604

[42] Clatterbaugh, p. 36

[43] Fuss, p. 4

men, women and people of other genders, and indeed can travel quite far from from men once 'masculinity' itself becomes a subject of (meta-)discourse, it cannot fully be *detached* from "the group" men, or at least from people perceived as men.[44]

Answering in this way draws attention to the considerable gap between the idea that masculinity is *open* to women and Sedgwick's more extreme position that "it is important to drive a wedge in, […] if possible conclusively, between the two topics, masculinity and men."[45] There is no reason why the "possibility of female masculinity" requires masculinity being "disassociated from the male body altogether", as Reeser seems to suggest.[46] Masculine behaviour, for example, might be thought of as behaviour that a given society or culture thinks men should do, or as behaviour that men do more often than women, but in either case, women can behave in that way, and so on.

Crucially, however, (with the exception of men's gender-differentiated behaviour), anchoring these concepts does not require us or society-in-general to identify a hidden essence of 'men' or even supply a watertight definition of what men are. If, say, masculinity ideology is a discourse surrounding the subject 'men', this does not require that we are able to define 'men'. It requires only that we are able to identify men, and that only roughly. Masculinity ideologies, then, are not centred on all men coherently defined, but on general and contradictory ideas of what some people *perceived* as men do or should do.[47] In terms of both ideological construction and ideological enforcement, it is therefore often ambiguous social or perceived gender, rather than actual gender identity or the sexed body, which is most salient.[48]

Hegemonic Masculinity

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[44] For a discussion of this argument, see Noble, Jean Bobby, "Sons of the Movement: Feminism, Female Masculinity and Female To Male (FTM) Transsexual Men," *Atlantis*, 29 (2004), 21–28

[45] Sedgwick, "'Gosh, Boy George…'", p. 12

[46] Reeser, *Masculinities*, p. 3

[47] See p. 6 of Connell, "Masculinities and…", for a brief overview of the idea of contradiction in masculinity ideologies.

[48] For a discussion, see the introduction to Rubin, Henry, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2009)

Moving on, the two ideas I borrow from Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity – the major sociological theory of masculinity – are that masculinities are plural, and that masculinities are hierarchical and relational.[49] Put into less ambiguous language, plurality means there is not just one group – men – and one system – masculinity – but rather there are multiple masculinity groups and multiple masculinity systems, even within the gender orders of relatively culturally-homogenous countries.[50] These can be exceptionally local, context-bound, and fine-grained – with, for example, Barrett revealing subtle variations "between the different branches of a single military force, the U.S. Navy"– as well as subject to observable change through time.[51]

The second element I rely on is the hierarchy and relation of masculinities, or, as Michael Kimmel puts it, the idea that "all masculinities are not created equal".[52] In our terms, this means that there are masculinity groups and systems of varying statuses, which are defined relationally against each other and against women and femininities. The dominance of certain masculine styles and groups is not usually maintained by force, but rather through "[c]ultural consent, […] institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives".[53] Men – and women – shape, model, and enforce acceptable and unacceptable masculinity ideologies, characteristics, behaviours and identities.

The Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP)

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[49] Messerschmidt, "The Salience…"; Connell and Messerschmidt

[50] Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 835.

[51] Barrett, Frank J., "The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 3 (1996), 129–42, cited in Connell and Messerschmidt; Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 840; Ferguson, H, "Men and Masculinities in Late-Modern Ireland," in *A Man's World? Changing Men's Practices in a Globalized World*, ed. by B Pease and K Pringle (London: Zed Books, 2001), cited in Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 835.

[52] Kimmel, Michael S., and Matthew Mahler, "Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46 (2003), 1439–58, p. 1451

[53] Though see Morse, Stephanie J. and Kevin A. Wright, "Imprisoned Men: Masculinity Variability And Implications For Correctional Programming", *Corrections*, 7.1 (2019), 23-45; Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 846; See, for example, Bird, Sharon R., "Welcome To The Men's Club: Homosociality And The Maintenance Of Hegemonic Masculinity", *Gender & Society*, 10.2 (1996), 120-132. See also, Duckworth, Kiera D., and Mary Nell Trautner, "Gender Goals: Defining Masculinity And Navigating Peer Pressure To Engage In Sexual Activity", *Gender & Society*, 33.5 (2019), 795-817

Turning from sociology to psychology, Pleck's GRSP is "regarded as the major theoretical paradigm in the field of the psychology of men and masculinity".[54] It was formulated in opposition to what Pleck calls the Gender Role Identity Paradigm. The GRIP assumed that "there is a clear masculine "essence" that is historically invariant", that "people have a powerful psychological need to form a gender role identity" that corresponded to this essence, and "that optimal personality development hinged on its formation".[55] The GRSP differs in being non-essentialist, and rejecting the idea that attainment of a 'male role' is healthy. It argues instead that it is these "traditional expectations themselves" that are the problem.[56] Not only are they "inherently contradictory and impossible to uphold", but they are traumatic to be socialised in (trauma strain) and damaging to men and those around them, both if they fail to attain them (discrepancy strain) and if they do (dysfunction strain).[57]

Children who show gender-role discrepancy (GRD) are "significantly more likely to be socially ostracized, ridiculed, or punished by peers and parents" and are more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted.[58] Boys and men "are typically punished more than are girls and women for exhibiting gender-atypical behaviors" and those who are caught "engaging in stereotypically feminine activities – and who are thus presumed to be either currently gay or likely to become gay […] receive punishment in the form of homophobic epithets […], withdrawal of parental attention […], rejection from peers […], and negative evaluations from strangers".[59] It is the threat of such outcomes which likely drives behaviour in the Precarious Manhood Paradigm, discussed below.

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[54] Levant and Powell, p. 16

[55] Ibid

[56] Pleck, p. xiv

[57] Bosson, Jennifer K., Joseph A. Vandello, and T. Andrew Caswel, "Precarious Manhood," in *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Psychology*, ed. by Nyla R. Branscombe and Michelle K. Ryan (Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013), p. 117

[58] Reidy, Dennis E., Joanne P. Smith-Darden, Alana M. Vivolo-Kantor, Carolyn A. Malone, and Poco D. Kernsmith, "Masculine Discrepancy Stress and Psychosocial Maladjustment: Implications for Behavioral and Mental Health of Adolescent Boys," *PMM*, 19 (2018), 560–69

[59] Berdahl, Jennifer L., Marianne Cooper, Peter Glick, Robert W. Livingston, and Joan C. Williams, "Work as a Masculinity Contest," *Journal of Social Issues*, 74 (2018), 422–48; Bosson, Jennifer K., Jennifer L. Prewitt-Freilino, and Jenel N. Taylor, "Role Rigidity: A Problem of Identity Misclassification?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89 (2005), 552–65, p. 553

Masculinities as Practical Ideologies

In setting out their discursive psychological approach to masculinity, Wetherell and Edley have criticised both the hegemonic masculinity and GRSP approaches for treating masculine identities as if they are stable and consistent.[60] They criticise the former by pointing out that men "are not simply locked into one or another" masculinity group or system, but rather "can shift between different modes of masculinity – at one time subordinate, then complicit, then hegemonic too."[61] And they criticise the latter, because its typical methods (scales such as the Masculine Role Norms Inventory) seem to assume that the norms referred to are monolithic and always applicable, and that men's responses to them – their endorsement, conformity etc – are like personality traits: "trans-situational, repetitive, enduring and predictive of other attitudes, actions or personal characteristics".[62] In fact, in the more realistic discursive settings they use, men "represent themselves and their situations variably according to the context or situation" and they do so not by relying on "discrete blocks of consistent, relatively homogenous, knowledge and representations", but by actively drawing on various "modes of accounting and justification" according to context.[63]

This active, agentic use of masculinity ideology is the second tenet of discursive psychology I draw on. Wetherell and Edley emphasise, as above, that men (and women) are not passively 'stuck' within invariant masculinity groups with fixed identities and behaviours, but rather strategically use different masculinities, or aspects of them, "as 'practical ideologies'" or "familiar interpretative resources and methods of self-accounting which are available […] to be worked up as appropriate when faced with various discursive demands".[64] Thus a man may draw on the masculinity ideology of the 'rational businessman' at work, the 'bloke' at the pub, and the 'responsible breadwinner' at home, or a complex

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[60] Wetherell and Edley, "Discursive…"; Wetherell and Edley, "Negotiating…"

[61] Wetherell and Edley, "Negotiating…", p. 357

[62] Wetherell and Edley, "Negotiating…", p. 360

[63] Wetherell and Edley, "Negotiating…" , pp. 360–361

[64] Wetherell and Edley, "Discursive…", p. 339

mix of these. All "are part of a kit-bag of recognizable ways of self-presentation which are available to competent members of society, and which always need to be accomplished in context".[65]

Precarious Manhood

The Precarious Manhood theory has three principles. First, "manhood is widely viewed as an elusive, achieved status, or one that must be earned (in contrast to womanhood, which is an ascribed, or assigned, status)." Second, "once achieved, manhood status is tenuous and impermanent; that is, it can be lost or taken away". And third, "manhood is confirmed primarily by others and thus requires public demonstrations of proof."[66]

We can see the first and third of these beliefs in the "formalized rituals and tests of strength, bravery, and endurance" through which "manhood was and is earned" in preindustrial societies.[67] In postindustrial societies, we can view early gender research's preoccupation with boys developing a proper 'male role' not so much as social science, but as evidence that, in the West too, attaining manhood was not seen as a "developmental certainty" but a "risky, failure-prone process".[68] More recently, Vandello, Bosson and colleagues have demonstrated in a series of studies that manhood is still "widely conceptualized as a social status that is hard to earn, easy to lose, and must be proved repeatedly via action".[69]

This suggests that "men seem to conceive of the male gender role as requiring action" regardless of the type of action actually involved.[70] Later research has shown that "notions of precarious manhood

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[65] Wetherell and Edley, "Discursive…", p. 353

[66] Vandello and Bosson, pp. 1–4

[67] Ibid

[68] Vandello and Bosson

[69] Bosson et al "Psychometric properties…"; See Vandello and Bosson for a review.

[70] Weaver, Jonathan R., Joseph A. Vandello, Jennifer K. Bosson, and Rochelle M. Burnaford, "The Proof Is in the Punch: Gender Differences in Perceptions of Action and Aggression as Components of Manhood," *Sex Roles*, 62 (2009), 241–51

are universally understood, but endorsed to differing degrees across cultures" and that "individual men differ in the degree to which they hold precarious manhood beliefs".[71] Such beliefs have real-world effects and correlates, with research showing "that men higher in precarious manhood beliefs: are less inclined to confront a stranger who displays sexual prejudice […]and show larger cortisol reactivity (a stress response) following feedback that they lack masculinity."[72]

Moreover, they drive actual judgements of masculinity. Men are judged as masculine according to masculinity behaviours, with research suggesting that men need not engage in all masculine behaviours to be considered 'real men', but that "[c]ompetence in traditionally masculine behaviors also provides masculine 'insurance' or 'credit"', which can "be used to allow or compensate for nonmasculine behavior".[73]

The most studied implication of the belief in the precariousness of manhood, however, is that men's sense of masculinity is fragile and easily threatened. Research has shown that men experience threats to their masculinity when they "engage in stereotypically feminine acts" and when they believe they have "demonstrated knowledge typically associated with women", "shown a female personality type", "performed like a woman", "been outperformed by a woman, or "been mistaken as gay".[74] These threats can either be narrowly situational or long-term and endemic, such as working in an occupation considered feminine.[75] There are individual variations in men's "responsiveness to masculinity threats", but contextual factors also impact their sensitivity.[76] Most tellingly, men are more likely to respond to

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[71] Bosson, Jurek et al; O'Connor, Emma C., Thomas E. Ford, and Noely C. Banos, "Restoring Threatened Masculinity: The Appeal of Sexist and Anti-Gay Humor," *Sex Roles*, 77 (2017), 567–80

[72] Bosson, Jurek et al

[73] De Visser, Richard O., Jonathan A. Smith, and Elizabeth J. McDonnell, "'That's Not Masculine,'" *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14 (2009), 1047–58; De Visser, Richard O., and Elizabeth J. McDonnell, "'Man Points': Masculine Capital and Young Men's Health.," *Health Psychology*, 32 (2013), 5–14, p. 6

[74] For the original version of this list and studies using each approach, see Steiner, Troy G., Theresa K. Vescio, and Reginald B. Adams, "The Effect of Gender Identity and Gender Threat on Self-Image," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 101 (2022), 104335

[75] Ibid

[76] O'Connor, Ford and Banos

gender threats when they believe their actions are public, and are "more comfortable and less self-conscious" during feminine behaviour if they are allowed to publicly identify themselves as heterosexual, minimising the chance of (perceived) stigmatising misclassification.[77]

Aside from non-response, men typically react in two ways to masculinity threats: "an affective threat response that stems from concern about others' perception of the self" and "a reparative response that functionally reestablishes one's masculinity in the eyes of others."[78] Affective responses to masculinity threats including feelings of guilt and shame, anger, fear of backlash, and what researchers call 'public discomfort', that is "negative affect and concern about others' perception of the self".[79]

Reparative responses can be roughly divided into three overlapping categories. First, men are "disproportionately likely to enact certain stereotype-consistent" masculinity behaviours, intended to "maintain their gender status" in the eyes of others.[80] So, as mentioned above, gender-threatened men in the WEIRD contexts studied engage in greater aggression, tolerate higher pain thresholds, and make riskier financial decisions. Second, men attempt to separate themselves from stigmatised out-groups, such as women and gay men. For example, they express greater amusement with sexist and anti-gay jokes, are more likely to sexualise, and sexually harass women, and express higher prejudices toward gay people and transgender individuals.[81] Third, and crucially, they attempt to reinforce the same masculine

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[77] Weaver, Vandello and Bosson; Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino and Taylor, p. 559

[78] Stanaland, Adam, Sarah Gaither, and Anna Gassman-Pines, "When Is Masculinity 'Fragile'? an Expectancy-Discrepancy-Threat Model of Masculine Identity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2023, 108886832211411; Dahl, Vescio and Weaver, p. 243

[79] For a review, see Vescio, Theresa K., Nathaniel E.C. Schermerhorn, Jonathan M. Gallegos, and Marlaina L. Laubach, "The Affective Consequences of Threats to Masculinity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 97 (2021), 104195; Dahl, Vescio and Weaver, p. 243

[80] Stanaland, Gaither and Gassman-Pines

[81] O'Connor, Ford and Banos; Dahl, Vescio and Weaver; Maass, Anne, Mara Cadinu, Gaia Guarnieri, and Annalisa Grasselli, "Sexual Harassment under Social Identity Threat: The Computer Harassment Paradigm.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85 (2003), 853–70; Konopka, Karolina, Joanna Rajchert, Monika Dominiak-Kochanek, and Joanna Roszak, "The Role of Masculinity Threat in Homonegativity and Transphobia," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68 (2019), 802–29

norms they perceive themselves as breaching, by discriminating more against those who violate gender norms.[82]

Affective responses appear to mediate reparative responses; men who are more upset or angry about gender threats are more likely to engage in reparative responses.[83] However, reparative responses only sometimes reduce affective responses. Some research indicates that "public display of aggressive readiness reduced men's anxiety-relatced cognitions in the wake of a gender threat", suggesting that "aggressive displays may function to downregulate negative affect when manhood has been threatened."[84] However, other studies suggest that reparative responses "may not be effective in mitigating [men's] experience of gender role discrepancy", despite sometimes coming at great cost.[85]

A General Model of Masculinity

From the above research, we can see that masculinities are inessential, non-inherent, socially-constructed, plural, relational, hierarchical, traumatic, dysfunctional, unattainable, variable, strategic, hard-won, easily-lost and publicly proven. Based on these principles, I use the general model below.

There is no masculine essence, but many cultures have ideas about what men are like and what they should be like. These are *masculinity ideologies*. Men, and sometimes women, may meet these expectations by behaving in the appropriate ways or having the appropriate *masculinity characteristics*, and to the extent they do, they are judged to be masculine. Masculinity ideologies and masculinity characteristics can be thought of as having a reciprocal and contingent relationship: men act in accordance with masculinity ideologies, in part, because of the pressures of these ideologies, and these ideologies are constructed, in part, out of men's endorsement of them and conformity with them. There are many different

[82] Weaver, Kevin S., and Theresa K. Vescio, "The Justification of Social Inequality in Response to Masculinity Threats," *Sex Roles*, 72 (2015), 521–35

[83] Steiner, Vescio and Adams

[84] Bosson et al, p. 623

[85] Berke, Reidy, Miller and Zeichner, p. 67

masculinity ideologies and many different groups of men who endorse, embody, or instantiate these ideologies to different degrees, with some of these groups and ideologies being more prestigious than others. Such *masculinity groups* and *masculinity systems*, usually define themselves against each other, against women, and against femininity ideologies. As these masculinity groups and systems are varied, they must be studied at the specific cultural level, rather than as generalities. For example, in this research, I am interested in certain strands of contemporary White British masculinity.

Men do not always have a comfortable relationship with these ideologies: boys and men are traumatised by being pressured into conforming with them, end up hurting themselves and others when they do conform with them, and feel anxiety when they fail to meet them. Their conformity and non-conformity to these ideologies is not fixed, however. Men's behaviours and characteristics are unstable, variable and context-bound, and men are not passive and naive in their relationship with such ideologies. Rather, men (and sometimes women) will strategically, though not always consciously, invoke different aspects of different masculinity ideologies according to their goals.

When they do so, these can be thought of as *masculinity practices*. Sometimes, they will do so offensively, and use masculinity practices, either alone, or in concert, to maintain power and dominance over women and over other men. And sometimes, they will do so defensively – in order to be thought of as more masculine. One of the reasons men feel anxiety, aside from social censure, is that men view – or act as if – their gender identity is linked to their *sense of masculinity*. This is the extent to which they view themselves as manly, and, more importantly, the extent to which they think others view them as manly. This means that one's status as a man is not a given, but needs to be publicly and repeatedly proven, especially when there is a gender threat – a (perceived) public doubt of a man's masculinity. Doing so often requires a reparative response – a public demonstration of adherence with a culture's masculinity ideologies. This sometimes persuades other people of their masculinity, but it's unclear if it persuades men themselves.

Chapter Two. "Writing Poetry Seemed like Woman's Work, Even Though Only Men were Supposed to Do It": The Relationship Between Poetry and Masculinity[1]

[1] Mermin, Dorothy, "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 64–80, p. 67

Introduction

Throughout this research, I argue that it is possible to apply insights from Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, and particularly the Precarious Manhood Paradigm, to the study of poetry. Below, I argue that, in certain White Western cultures, including the Protestant Northern English and Scottish culture I study, poetry is thought of as a feminine – or at least suspectly masculine – activity, and consequently that this may be seen as a gender threat by certain men poets, prompting both affective and reparative responses.

There is some precedent for this kind of research, although it has not used the Precarious Manhood Paradigm. Marlon Ross and Herbert Sussman have studied Romantic and Victorian men poets' anxieties about, and responses to, the suspicion that poetry is effeminate while David Kennedy and Ian Gregson have done something similar with late 20th century poets.[2] Their research provides guidance on what kind of reparative response we might find in the poets I shall discuss, Simon Armitage and Don Paterson.

But before going on to discuss the reparative responses which I argue Paterson and Armitage deploy, it is worth first attending to the relationship between poetry and masculinity. I do so not only to test the hypothesis that poetry really *is* a gender threat, but also because the specific ways in which it is seen as a threat will help us to work out what men poets' affective and reparative responses are likely to be. It is only by assessing whether and how poetry is seen as a threat to masculinity that we can gain clarity on what men poets are likely to do about it.

Poetry as a Gender Threat

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[2] Ross, *Contours;* Sussman, Herbert L., *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Kennedy, David, "'What Does the Fairy Do?' the Staging of Antithetical Masculine Styles in the Poetry of Tony Harrison and Douglas Dunn," *Textual Practice*, 14 (2000), 115–36; Kennedy, "Open Secrets"; Gregson, *Male Image*; Gregson, *Armitage*

Furman and Dill state that "[p]oetry is often viewed as a feminine art form".[3] But what does this mean? Certainly it seems across WEIRD cultures there is a "common social knowledge that associates poetry with effeminacy, and by extension homosexuality".[4] As multiple studies have shown, boys and young men are aware of "the social and cultural 'truth' that poetry is the business of sissies" and, though many resist reading of any sort, they reserve "a special contempt for poetry."[5] The same is true for boys and young men outside of educational contexts.[6] And this is hardly surprising, because the idea that poetry is inimical to masculinity is part of Western media and culture.[7] Moreover, it is an association that has been noticed by 'both sides'. Within masculinity studies, Susan Alexander writes that "[b]ehaviorally, real men devalue traditional female activities, from child care to poetry".[8] And within literary criticism, Gregory Woods admits that, to many people, poetry is "suited only to eggheads and sissies".[9]

Greig and Hughes attribute this to late 19th and early 20th century sexologists who described a "'taste' for poetry" as evidence of "effemination" and of "sexual inversion"'. But while it is true that the "influence of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis on professional and popular understandings of the relationship between poetry, effeminacy and homosexuality must be viewed as no small matter", the link goes back much further than this.[10] Indeed, as they point out themselves, in the 16th Century, Montaigne wrote that "if they [women] want, out of curiosity, to have a share in book learning, poetry is an amusement

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[3] Furman, Rich, and LeConté Dill, "Poetry Therapy, Men and Masculinities," *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 39 (2012), 102–6, p. 2

[4] Greig, Christopher, and Janette Hughes, "A Boy Who Would Rather Write Poetry than Throw Rocks at Cats Is Also Considered to Be Wanting in Masculinity: Poetry, Masculinity, and Baiting Boys," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30 (2009), 91–105, p. 96

[5] Pike, Mark A., "Boys, Poetry and the Individual Talent," *English in Education*, 34 (2000), 41–55; Greig and Hughes; Benton, Peter, "Unweaving the Rainbow: Poetry Teaching in the Secondary School I," *Oxford Review of Education*, 25 (1999), 521–31; Greig and Hughes, p. 96; Benton, p. 522

[6] Gardner, Joann, "Runaway with Words: Teaching Poetry to at-Risk Teens," *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 6 (1993), 213–27; Furman and Dill

[7] Greig and Hughes, p. 96

[8] Alexander, Susan M., "Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men's Health* Magazine," *Sociological Perspectives*, 46 (2003), 535–54, p. 537

[9] Woods, Gregory, "'Absurd! Ridiculous! Disgusting!,'" *Lesbian and Gay Writing*, 1990, 175–98, p. 176

[10] Greig and Hughes, pp. 94–96

suited to their needs; it is a wanton and subtle art, in fancy dress, wordy, all pleasure, all show, like themselves".[11]

Two things are of note here. One is that poetry is thought of in derogative and stereotypically feminine terms – superficial, vain, fussy, and dramatic. The other is that women may do poetry "out of curiosity", or to have a *share* in book learning. That is to say, even though women might 'have a go', the expectation is that the real poetry will be done by men. This strange double characterisation can be summed up in Dorothy Mermin's phrase, originally applied only to the Victorians but considerably more widely relevant, that "writing poetry seemed like woman's work, even though only men were supposed to do it."[12]

As Michael Ferber puts it, whatever else they are, "[p]oets are also men". Despite the stereotypes and although "their images have varied through the centuries, they are almost always projected as male, and the Romantic glorification of poets did not alter the case".[13] If we move on from Montaigne, the Romantics, and the Victorians and skip to 21st century WEIRD anglophone culture, we can see that perceptions have little changed. The 2006 Poetry in America survey, one of the very few "in-depth survey[s] of people's attitudes toward and experiences with poetry", found that "the image of poets that emerges is fairly stereotypical."[14] But by this they did not mean that poets were seen as women, or even as marginalised men, but rather that people thought "poets are more likely to be old or middle-aged, white men".[15] This is despite the fact that respondents almost universally thought that poetry *readers* were women, and described poets in feminine – or at least non-masculine – stereotypical terms. For example, they were fifteen times more likely to describe a poet as creative than logical.[16]

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[11] Quoted in Greig and Hughes, p. 102. See Montaigne, Michel de, and Donald M. Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 624.

[12] Mermin, "The Damsel…", p. 67

[13] Ferber, Michael, "The Poet," *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry*, 2012, 16–40

[14] Schwartz, Lisa K., Lisbeth Goble, Ned English, and Robert F. Bailey, rep., *Poetry in America: A Summary* (Poetry Foundation, March 2006); Schwartz et al, p. 11

[15] Ibid, p. 11

[16] Ibid, Appendix A, Table 25

Nor is this merely a matter of perception. To put it bluntly, at the time of this study, the respondents were right. Poetry readers are more likely to be women, but poets – at least, published poets – are more likely to be men.[17] Although the situation has improved markedly since Rebecca O'Rourke first decided to bring "an abacus into the hushed house of poetry and count women, and women's poems", men have always published more in books and magazines, have always been reviewed more, won more prizes, and had more 'official' positions as editors and academics, and this is the case in the UK, Ireland, and the USA.[18] But even as we slowly approach, or – in rare years, in rare categories – surpass, the 50% benchmark, it should be clear that this inadequate, "given that more women than men read and write poetry".[19] Even at 50%, men are *over*-represented in the professional world of published poetry. What, then, explains the strange fact that, historically, the "association of poetry and femininity […] excluded women poets" and that it continues to do so?[20]

Rejecting the Assumptions

One way of answering this question would be to dispute these assumptions. For example, work on the poetess tradition has demonstrated that, in the Victorian period, not only did women read more poetry but women poets often sold better than men. As Mermin's research has shown, after devotional poetry, "the next largest market in poetry belonged to women poets".[21] Indeed, "in 1877, thirteen years after

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[17] Iyengar, Sunil, "Taking Note: Poetry Reading Is up-Federal Survey Results," *National Endowment for the Arts*

[18] Coates, Dave, rep., *The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK and Ireland 2011-2018* (Ledbury Poetry Critics, June 2019); O'Rourke, Rebecca, "Mediums, Messages and Noisy Amateurs," *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1 (1990), 275–86, p. 275; Coates (2019); Coates, Dave, rep., *The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism 2020* (Ledbury Poetry Critics, 2020); Keating, Kenneth, and Ailbhe McDaid, rep., *Gender in Poetry Publishing in Ireland 2017* (Measuring Equality in the Arts Sector: Literature in Ireland, December 2018); Shah, Purvi, "The Unbearable (White) Maleness of US Poetry: And How We Can Enable a Structural Response to Literary Yellowface and Gender Inequity in Publishing • Vida: Women in Literary Arts," *VIDA*, 2019

[19] France, Angela, "Gender Disparity in Poetry Publishing: It's about More than the Numbers," *Litro Magazine*, 2014; Cole, Aimee, Christina Clark, Irene Picton, and Lara Riad, rep., *Children and Young People's Engagement with Poetry in 2022* (National Literacy Trust, October 2022); Schwartz et al, p. 19

[20] Mermin, "The Damsel…", p. 68

[21] Scheinberg, Cynthia, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 19. The figures are taken from Mermin, Dorothy, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Indiana University Press, 1993)

her death [Adelaide] Proctor outsold every living writer except Tennyson, and [Jean] Ingelow's works sold over 200,000 copies in America alone".[22] This is a far cry from men's domination, and it is a pattern that has not gone away. As the sales of Rupi Kaur and, before her, Pam Ayres testify, women are routinely the best selling poets.[23] The problem can therefore be unknotted with the realisation that, as Cynthia Scheinberg writes, "the feminization of […] poetics […] may have enabled the rise of women poets rather than hindered it".[24]

This, of course, is an answer that only *increases* the gender threat of poetry to men: poetry is not only feminine, but is a woman's occupation. But the obvious rejoinders to this position are that these poets are exceptions – the statistics above still stand – and that men have not necessarily dominated poetry sales or barred women from it. Rather, they have excluded women's poetry from the canon of great or even proper poetry. In the 'minor' poetess tradition, "gift books contain[ed] poetry that [wa]s "agreeable, curious, or good," as opposed to canonical literature which is sublime, eternal, and great".[25] More recently, the poetry of Rupi Kaur – the most popular woman poet of our time – was described by Armitage as "'facile […] hollow, vacuous,' holding neither life nor language to account".[26] Such poetry may sell well, but it doesn't tend to win awards – and when it does, it inspires strong criticism of the idea "that it deserves to be taken seriously as poetry."[27] Indeed, high sales is often taken to be *indicative* of poor quality: "artless poetry sells".[28]

Another solution might be to object to the other assumption. We could say that poetry is seen not as feminine but *effeminate* – something done by insufficiently manly men, but not by women. Or, what is perhaps a stronger argument, we could draw attention to what Marlon Ross has called "the myriad ways

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[22] Scheinberg, p. 19

[23] Fischer, Molly, "The Instagram Poet Outselling Homer Ten to One," *The Cut*, 2017

[24] Scheinberg, p. 19

[25] Mandell, Laura, "Introduction: The Poetess Tradition," *Romanticism on the Net*, 2003, p. 4

[26] "Leav Rupi Alone," *Jacket2*, 2019

[27] Watts, Rebecca, "The Cult of the Noble Amateur," *PN Review*, 44 (2018)

[28] Ibid

in which the poetic vocation has been sociohistorically defined as distinctively masculine".[29] The most common argument in this regard is that poetry, and particularly the lyric, presents an unchallenged male subject looking at a female object. As Adrienne Rich wrote, "it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them."[30] This "strong, indeed inextricable, association of lyric poetry in particular with masculine subjectivity – 'the great male writing I' – has long been noted by critics, by poets themselves and, since the 1970s, by feminists."[31] The specific problem, as Sarah Maguire set it out, is that the lyric 'I' is a "desiring subject" – "an 'I' that wants, that is in control" – but, women have not "traditionally [been] able to take the place of desiring subjects in a patriarchal society".[32]

This problem is compounded, first, by the "always-irreconcilable roles of woman and poet" with "the former constructed around self-effacement and restraint, [and] the latter dependent on self-confidence and daring", and second, by the reaction of a reading public "resistant to accepting the female voice as representative of anything beyond itself".[33] If we follow John Sutherland's description of (post-Romantic, Western anglophone) poetry as "published privacies", then most contemporary poetry involves "presenting the voice of an individual, yet moving this voice into a public position, one which the lyric tradition invests with authority and […] , ideally, universality".[34] Indeed, this is precisely what Armitage says he is doing: trying to "talk about the universal in terms of the particular".[35] But, as Vicki Bertram points out, "[s]omehow, the transformation accorded the bard is not easily won by a contemporary woman; the voice sounds too thin, too individual" – a point that is evidenced by "the kind of biographical interpretations that have dogged women poets over the centuries."[36]

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[29] Ross, p. 6

[30] Rich, Adrienne, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English*, 34 (1972), 18

[31] Coughlan, Patricia, "'The Whole Strange Growth': Heaney, Orpheus and Women," *The Irish Review (Cork)*, 2007, p. 27

[32] Maguire, Sarah, "Dilemmas and Developments: Eavan Boland Re-Examined," *Feminist Review*, 62 (1999), 58–66, p. 64

[33] Maguire, p. 65; Bertram, p. 83

[34] Quoted in Bertram, p. 57. See "Do I Know You, Ms Plath?," *The Guardian*; Bertram, p. 42

[35] Allardice, Lisa, "Simon Armitage: 'I Always Thought, If Ted Hughes Can Do It Why Can't I?,'" *The Guardian*, 2019

[36] Bertram, p. 83; Bertram, p. 82

The problem with this answer is not, of course, that it is wrong – historically speaking, and in the cultures in which are presently interested, Rich's position is incontestable – but that the existence of these associations does not strike out the existence of the others. Poetry is viewed as both effeminate *and* feminine, because, as many writers have pointed out, "the definition of the masculine can only exist in its difference from its presumed opposite, the feminine", so what is unmanly will *also* tend to be womanly and vice versa.[37] Moreover, the presence of both masculine and feminine associations points not to a resolvable disagreement, but to the fact that poetry "is regarded in our culture in strikingly contradictory ways, and those contradictions are intimately bound up with gender." It is seen "both as a prestigious, elite and esoteric form, and as a private, intimate, intensely subjective one".[38]

If we accept that poetry is at least suspect in its masculinity, if not outrightly feminine, then it still leaves our initial question intact: given men's typical avoidance of all gender threats, why has it historically been dominated by men, and why are poets typically thought of as men? Or, to turn the question around, given that this is the case, why is it viewed as insufficiently masculine? I put forward three arguments: one about historical changes to ideas about poetry, one about historical changes to ideas about masculinity, and one about the exculpatory power of success.

Changes to Ideas about Poetry

The first answer is that men have always dominated poetry, but that ideas about poetry have changed. This meant "that the institution of literature became […] feminized", leaving men poets in a profession which retained at least some of its inherited prestige – and sufficient association with masculinity to act as a barrier to women – but also attracted associations antithetical to masculinity.[39]

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[37] Schilt, Kristen, "Just One of the Guys?," *Gender & Society*, 20 (2006), 465–90, p. 486; Sussman, *Masculine*, p. 154

[38] Bertram, p. 4

[39] Hanley, Keith, "Preface," in *Romantic Masculinities*, ed. by Keith Hanley, Tony Pinkney, and Fred Botting (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 7

The traditional argument in this regard is that it was "during the Romantic period that a number of changes took place relating to ideas about the poet".[40] As Chris Townsend puts it:

> It was once the case that Romanticism was assumed to be a great flash of originality within the history of poetry – a wholesale rejection of the preceding generations of verse, one that replaced reason with passion, formal completeness with fragmentation, human society with nature, beauty with the sublime. There was Enlightenment rationality, then there was Romantic imagination. There was Pope and […] then there was Wordsworth[41]

And, of course, Townsend is right on both counts. On the first, many critics, even up to the mid-twentieth century, did argue that Romanticism was "clearly opposed on every important question to the theory which preceded it".[42] The story that "took shape in the earliest critical accounts of the Romantic movement, which M. H. Abrams enriched rather than amended", posited that there was a "reorientation of literary values signaled by Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756)", and that this reorientation was "strengthened and extended half a century later by the Romantics".[43]

On the second, this flash of originality has been shown to be a myth or, at least, a simplification. The "distinction between 'the romantic period' […] and 'romanticism'" is recognised, as are the period's "many ideological struggles", and the "fundamental differences" between the Romantics even on concepts widely agreed to be important, such as Wellek's triumvirate of imagination, nature and myth.[44] Moreover, Douglas Lane Patey has argued that, if we want to understand "changes in British lyric

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[40] Bertram, p. 7

[41] Townsend, Chris, "Philosophical Connections: Akenside, Neoclassicism, Romanticism," 2022, p. 1

[42] Stone, P. W. K., *The Art of Poetry, 1750-1820* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 126

[43] Duff, David, "Antididacticism as a Contested Principle in Romantic Aesthetics," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 25 (2001), 252–70, p. 252

[44] McGann, Jerome, "Rethinking Romanticism," *ELH*, 59 (1992), 735, pp. 735–737

practice", we need to look not – or not only – to 18th and 19th century Britain, but to 17th century "France, and in particular to the debates over poetry initiated in France by the so-called Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns".[45]

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering three points. First, even if there was not a clean break, there really was a "reorientation of literary values" that, however contestedly, took hold roughly between the 17th and 19th centuries.[46] Although some studies "read canonical nineteenth-century poetry as always already ineffective, elitist, self-involved, as caught up in what Jerome McGann has termed "Romantic ideology", it is also possible to show that "the slow devolvement of poetry into the cliché of inefficacy was a gradual, uneven, and highly contested development in the period."[47] And indeed this is precisely the practice of critics such as Ross and Sussman, who make the argument that feminisation led to a conflict between "the ideal of the poet based on a romantic model" and "the new formation of bourgeois man".[48]

Second, as Jerome McGann famously argued, Romanticism has long-lasting effects as well as deep roots. Scholarship, at least at the time he was writing, was "dominated by a Romantic ideology — by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations", and even if this is no longer the case in academia, it is still holds true for the general public.[49] This is not so much the argument that "the Romantic era produced many of the stereotypes of poets and poetry that exist to this day" or even that "Romantic ideals never died out in poetry, but were largely absorbed into the precepts of many other

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[45] Patey, Douglas Lane, "'Aesthetics' and the Rise of Lyric in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 33 (1993), 587, pp. 587–588

[46] Duff, p. 252

[47] Falluga, Dino Franco, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 2005), p. 1.

[48] Ross, *Contours*; Sussman, *Victorian*; Sussman, *Victorian*, p. 82

[49] McGann, Jerome J., *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1

movements", but that to "some it feels as if poetry *is* Romantic poetry".[50] Romantic ideas *about* poetry are so accepted that, for many non-specialists, they have become definitional *of* poetry.[51]

Third, and relatedly, if we are primarily interested in *perceptions* of poetry and particularly the toolkit of deployable 'ideologies of poetry', the actual history of Romantic changes to poetry is less important than "the familiar story".[52] That is to say, it is not a precise knowledge of the aesthetics of, say, Coleridge or Shelley that affects stereotypes of poetry, or men poets' reactions to them, but rather a vague idea of Romantic-ness. This is perhaps what Eavan Boland meant when she referred to the "Romantic Heresy", which "is not romanticism proper, although it is related to it."[53]

What, then, are the features of this familiar story, this Romantic Heresy? Perhaps the most influential account – and the one which, I will later argue, provides the best insight into the aesthetics of Armitage and Paterson – is that of M.H. Abrams. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, he divided aesthetic theories into four "broad classes" according to the work's orientation – whether the poem was aimed at the universe, the audience, the artist, or towards itself.[54] These he referred to respectively as mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective theories. The mimetic was characteristic of ancient poetry, and the objective of 20th century modernism, but the important transition for our purposes is the change from pragmatic Augustan theories to expressive Romanticism.

According to this schema, Augustan pragmatic theories were audience-focused: poetry was something done *for* and *to* an audience — "to teach, and delight", in Sidney's formulation.[55] The work of art was

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[50] "A Brief Guide to Romanticism," *Poets.org* (Academy of American Poets, 2004); Ferber, Michael, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry*, 2012, 1–15, p. 1

[51] To give an example from an article already quoted, Furman and Dill (2012) argue that "the very act of poetry therapy runs counter to the hegemonic idea", not because of contingent ideas about poetry, but because, definitionally, "[c]reating poetry demands an attention to the subtleties of one's feelings". See p. 103

[52] Duff, p. 253

[53] Boland, Eavan, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 241

[54] Abrams, Meyer H., *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 7

[55] Quoted in Abrams, pp. 14–15

viewed "chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim."[56] Romantic expressive theories, on the other hand, understand art as "essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings."[57] A piece of art is judged on how well it expresses the artist's subjective feeling, as well as the sincerity and authenticity of that feeling, rather than its effect on an audience. Indeed, the audience may not even be considered at all, as in Shelley's conception of the poet as a nightingale singing to itself.

From this sketch, we can draw out a number of ideas key to the 'familiar story', all of which – for reasons of concision, and to emphasise the importance of women to Romanticism – I evidence from the writings of Anna Laetitia Barbauld. First, poetry became an individual, subjective, imaginative, emotional, and, crucially, *expressive* art, not amenable to rules and, hence, irrational. As Eldridge puts it, "Romanticism reconceives the work of art as flowing from imagination, poesis, or genius, in relative freedom from rules."[58] Thus, in her preface to Akenside's *Pleasures of the Imagination*, Barbauld wrote that poetry should not "'confine itself' to 'regular arrangement and clear brevity'. It is a bad poem that makes us 'follow a system step by step.'"[59]

Second, there is the "death-knell of the old ideal of the doctus poeta and of praise of poetry for the useful knowledge it memorializes and imparts".[60] Poetry, so the argument goes, became detached from its usefulness either as a medium for philosophy or history, or a way of memorising knowledge. Thus, in the same preface, Barbauld wrote that "poetry should never 'descend to teach the elements of any

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[56] Abrams, p. 15

[57] Abrams, p. 22

[58] Eldridge, Richard Thomas, "Romanticism: Philosophy and Literature," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. by Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[59] Quoted in Simpson, David, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 150

[60] Patey, p. 599

art or science"'.[61] Didactic poetry, a "genre that […] Thomas Tickell could rank 'second to Epic alone' in the hierarchy of poetic forms, became for the Romantics a byword for mediocrity".[62]

And third, poetry became a sequestered activity, which required not an active involvement with public affairs, but rather a withdrawal from them. We find, as Patey puts it, a "new gesture – from Thomas Warton's "A Farewell to Poetry" (1748) to Coleridge's "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" (1795) – of the lyrist who says he must *give up* poetry in order to rejoin the historical world of social practice."[63] As Barbauld writes in a different preface (this time to Collins), "A real Poet must always appear indolent to the man of the world […] The Poet requires long intervals of ease and leisure; his imagination should be fed with novelty, and his ear soothed by praise."[64] Thus, for Abrams' Romantics, the external world was subordinated to the poet's internal world, such that any poem's description of an object is considered valuable only as "an extended and articulated symbol — for the poet's inner state of mind."[65]

That these characteristics – emotion, irrationality, imagination, retreat, passivity, desire for praise – were to Georgian England stereotypically, almost definitionally, feminine, was noted at the time. This fed into a growing acceptance that "[w]hat the age called 'the poetical character"' seemed "genuinely to fit women -– but [only] because it has been made to exclude erudition and participation in practical affairs."[66] The irony of this, of course, is "the degree to which the male writers and reviewers of the period, especially Hazlitt, by promoting the idea that poetry is the realm of feeling and private

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[61] Quoted in Simpson, *Romanticism*, p. 150

[62] Duff, p. 252

[63] Patey, p. 600

[64] Quoted in Simpson, *Romanticism*, p. 123

[65] Abrams, p. 25

[66] Patey, p. 603

experience, unintentionally but effectively 'authorized women to view themselves as legitimate poeticizers of their own experience"'.[67]

For this reason, women writers were able to "exploit the link between poetry and femininity", even though, as Mellor showed, they were expected to, and did, write differently from men.[68] Despite the difficulties of patronising treatment and lack of formal education, and despite a critical tradition that has overlooked them, "a surprising number of women [in the Romantic era] succeeded in becoming an integral and enduring part of the literary scene".[69] Moreover, they did not do so anonymously: with "few exceptions, women who published poetry books proudly placed their real names on the title page from the very outset of their careers."[70] The more poetry was seen as fit for women, the more women wrote it, and wrote it publicly, and the two were mutually reinforcing. As David Simpson writes, "[b]oth the perception of the feminized character of the literary and the anxiety about it must have been to some degree the result of the dramatically increasing number of women professional writers".[71]

Anxiety about the effeminacy of poetry – the primary focus of this research – is not, then, an anachronistic projection of contemporary ideologies of poetry and masculinity, but rather an issue from the beginning of the aesthetic changes that have subsequently been tidied up into the Romantic movement. "It is in this context," Patey argues, "that we should understand Wordsworth's program in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*: part and parcel of Wordsworth's own understanding of his project to re-create active readers is an effort to remasculinize poetry […] We can hear as much in his account of poetry as the voice of "a man speaking to men," in what he calls the "manliness" of his "style"."[72]

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[67] Mellor, Anne K., "Marlon B. Ross's 'The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry' (Book Review)," *Studies in Romanticism*, 31 (1992), 103, p. 104

[68] Williams, Wendy S., *George Eliot, Poetess* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 16; Mellor, Anne K., "Thoughts on *Romanticism and Gender*," *European Romantic Review*, 23 (2012), 343–48

[69] Feldman, Paula R., *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. xxvi

[70] Feldman, Paula R., "Women Poets and Anonymity in the Romantic Era," *New Literary History*, 33 (2002), 279–89, p. 279

[71] Simpson, *Romanticism* p. 127

[72] Patey, p. 604

Similarly, Marlon Ross, David Simpson, and Herbert Sussman have all emphasised the affective and reparative responses of Romantic and early Victorian men poets to these changes. As an example of an affective response, Ross has drawn attention to Byron's anxieties about the expected passivity of the writer, and especially the poet, which he describes as "a sign of effeminacy, degeneracy, and weakness."

> Who would write, who had any thing better to do? "Action—action—action"—said Demosthenes: "Actions—actions," I say, and not writing,—least of all, rhyme.[73]

Turning to reparative responses, Simpson has emphasised the way Burkean "aesthetics of the sublime seem to have offered male writers a way of having things both ways", allowing them to "celebrate the principle of confusion and a decidedly antirationalist expressive convention" while also "dealing out darkness and terror in the Milton manner".[74] Similarly, Sussman has shown how, for "early Victorian male poets, one historically crucial strategy" was "situating the source of poetry not in the qualities of isolation and emotional intensity associated then as now with the feminine, but rather in the attributes of energetic activity, commercial endeavour and phallic sexuality identified with entrepreneurial manhood."[75]

It is worth drawing out three crucial points from Sussman's work here. First, "[t]his enterprise, continued into the twentieth century" and, I will argue, beyond. As mentioned above, the stereotype of the poet – emotional, irrational, imaginative, rural, passive, and vain – has not much moved on from the one that worried men poets of the Romantic and early Victorian eras, with perhaps only the exception that a poet is now "incomprehensible", as well as "in some way effeminate or strange".[76] This means

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[73] Quoted in Ross, p. 39

[74] Simpson, *Romanticism,* p. 127

[75] Sussman, *Victorian*, p. 82

[76] Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle, and Eileán Ní Chuilleánain, "An Interview with Eileán NÍ Chuilleánain," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 20 (1994), 63

that we may see similar affective and reparative responses, an argument I make in the following chapters.

Second, Browning and other Victorian poets "construct[ed] a distinctively masculine poetic not in opposition to, but from the elements that comprise, the bourgeois formation of manliness". Rather than accepting the Romantic ideal of the poet and and attempting to masculinise it, another reparative response is possible: one can reject the Romantic ideal and posit a different figure of the poet in line with prevalent masculine ideologies. This, I suggest, is what Armitage and Paterson have in mind.

And third, the rise of "entrepreneurial manhood" reminds us that ideas about poetry are not the only moving part; masculinity ideologies also change, and this provides us with a second answer to our central question of how poetry can be both feminised and dominated by men.

Changes to Ideas about Masculinity

In roughly the same period as these changes in poetry's aesthetics – from, say, the 17th to the 19th century – there were also considerable changes in British concepts of masculinity. These took place in the context of an almost all-consuming 18th century debate on 'luxury' as a cause of 'effeminacy', the development of "a virulent strand of antiaristocratic sentiment", which "entered mainstream political discourse by the mid-1750s" and held the aristocracy "responsible for the slide into effeminacy", and, most importantly, the rise of the industrial market economy and "an emergent bourgeoisie struggling for cultural hegemony".[77]

[77] Carter, Philip, "An 'Effeminate' or 'Efficient' Nation? Masculinity and Eighteenth-Century Social Documentary," *Textual Practice*, 11 (1997), 429–43; Berg, Maxine, and Elizabeth Eger, "The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates," *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, 2003, 7–27; Moore, Stephen, "'A Nation of Harlequins'? Politics and Masculinity in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 514–39, pp. 515–516; Shevelow, Kathryn, "*The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Review)," *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 22 (2009), 166–68

Debates over masculinity ideologies in the eighteenth century "took the form, broadly speaking, of a contest between two rival interpretations – one 'classical', the other 'refined'" of normative manliness.[78] With a little necessary simplification, which sets aside the "many points of convergence" and the fact that the masculinities of the time were "more of a synthesis of opinions than a simple contest between authors extolling rival concepts of manly virtue", we can still helpfully draw out two archetypes.[79]

The "most authoritative fantasy of masculinity in early eighteenth-century Britain" was the (neo-)classical and essentially aristocratic "discourse of civic humanism", which emphasised "personal discipline" and moderation as guarantors of that "all-important quality of classical manliness: independence".[80] This "'manly' virtue, or 'virile virtue' as Shaftesbury termed it, was effeminated as much by submission to 'female charms' as by the rage to acquire and spend".[81] Thus "the vocabulary of the civic discourse […] could describe acquisitive and especially commercial activity in the same terms as it described sexual indulgence": the "attractions of both could be termed 'luxury'; their effects on men could both be described as 'effeminacy'".[82]

This was rivalled by a new "refined manliness" associated with David Hume, which "stated that involvement in mixed society led not to effeminacy but to new forms of masculinity whereby manliness was measured, not lost, by men's ability to narrow the gap between the sexes through displays of social refinement."[83] The emphasis on the value of women's society and conversation as a way of softening men and making them fit for the public led to a new ideal figure alongside the older classical republican: the polite man. As Karen Harvey writes,

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[78] Carter, p. 440

[79] Ibid

[80] Barrell, John, "'The Dangerous Goddess': Masculinity, Prestige, and the Aesthetic in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Cultural Critique*, 1989, 101, p. 103; Carter, p. 437

[81] Barrell, pp. 103–4

[82] Ibid

[83] Carter, p. 438

> In contrast (perhaps in reaction) to the libertine, the polite gentleman strove for restraint. In contrast to the fop, the polite gentleman was easy and thoughtful of others. In contrast to earlier models of civility, the polite gentleman came from the middling sort, not the aristocracy; politeness and commerce went hand in hand.[84]

Following this, the "later eighteenth century seems to have brought a revival of older modes of manhood, suggesting that the dominance of politeness was relatively short-lived, sandwiched between early modern and nineteenth-century ideals that had much in common".[85] This nineteenth century ideal was of a type still familiar: "an entrepreneurial, individualistic masculinity, organized around a punishing work ethic, a compensating validation of the home, and a restraint on physical aggression".[86]

Here we can see the continuation from civic humanism of the "core notion of self-discipline and an (often specifically English) roughness that remained while codes of manners waxed and waned" even while the reduction of violence and the repudiation of the culture of honour were held over from refined masculinity.[87] Similarly, in place of the earlier, aristocratic emphasis on public life, and the polite gentleman's emphasis on the public society of women, there was a new "value placed on the domestic sphere": women were esteemed, but "the wife's claim to superiority in "her" sphere" was not allowed to cross the "domestic threshold" into the increasingly male-only world of work.[88]

More radical than this reorientation, however, was the maintenance of the value of 'independence' despite an almost complete reversal in its meaning. Where independence was formerly "aristocratic men's "disinterested reflection" – the moral superiority created by the permanent wealth of a landed estate – [which] was essential to guarantee the moral wellbeing of the nation", by the 19th century it

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[84] Harvey, Karen, "The History of Masculinity, circa 1650–1800," *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 296–311, p. 301

[85] Harvey, p. 311

[86] Tosh, John, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914," *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 330–42, p. 331

[87] Harvey, p. 311

[88] Tosh, "Masculinities…", p. 333

had also come to refer to an absence of reliance on the state, or others, guaranteed by work. Thus, while for the traditional aristocracy *not* working was the measure of independence, the Victorian "labor aristocracy" were "working men proud of their hard-earned skill, their "independence," their domestic habits, and their self-improvement".[89] In this way, the restriction of women to the home and "exclusive male responsibility for the family income led to the characteristically Victorian valorization of work as both moral duty and personal fulfillment".[90]

This version of masculinity in which "aristocratic *otium* is deplored and bourgeois *negotium* celebrated" still exists today, though it competes and interacts with a version of masculinity based on conspicuous capitalist consumption, which would have been anathema to a Victorian manhood that venerated production as masculine at the same time as it denigrated consumption as feminine.[91] Indeed, the ideal of the sober industrialist might be conceived of as the solution to this central problem of the rising bourgeoisie's masculinity: how to reconcile the commercial activity that elevated their class with the traditional denigration of the luxurious goods such activity produced.

Although various attempts were made to solve this problem – for example, Mandeville's contrast between private vices and public benefits, and Diderot's "distinction between good and bad luxury" – the solution that stuck was the capitalist man who creates jobs through the manufacture of goods, but crucially does not spend the money he earns on such luxuries; instead he reinvests the money as capital.[92] Indeed, such is his commitment to reinvestment, the circulation of capital, and the prevention of idleness that he is exceedingly sober, thrifty, and modest in his consumption. As for who actually buys the goods, the obvious answer is the contrast between a female consumer and a male producer.[93]

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[89] Kuchta, David, "2. The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832," *The Sex of Things*, 1996, 54–78, p. 64; Tosh, "Masculinities…", p. 332

[90] Ibid

[91] Saglia, Diego, "The Dangers of over-Refinement: The Language of Luxury in Romantic Poetry by Women, 1793-1811," *Studies in Romanticism*, 38 (1999), 641, p. 659

[92] Jennings, Jeremy, "The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 79–105, p. 87; Jennings, p. 98

[93] Ibid

As David Kuchta puts it, at "the heart of English political culture, constructing women as consumers went hand in hand with masculine renunciation".[94] Indeed, the stereotype that "men make money and women spend it" is still a common refrain of the antifeminist Men's Rights Movement.[95]

If, for the civic humanist, the primary function of the arts was to provide something they were no longer willing to give – guidance for the citizen on how he might "perform acts of public virtue in defense of the political republic" – and, for the polite gentleman, the fine arts were an area in which women were more naturally sensitive (if not more skilled), the specific problems for men poets of this new sober industrialist ideal were more numerous still.[96] And in nearly every case, they were worsened by the new conceptions of poetry that took hold at roughly the same time, or a few generations before. First, the new premium placed on activity, labour and industry could not easily be reconciled with the "Romantic re-valorization of pastoral *otium*" – a version of poetry which had become associated with retreat, passivity, idleness and inspiration, rather than rational labour.[97]

Second, as mentioned above, the "separation of home and workplace, and the increasingly rigorous gendering of that division" meant that "Victorian male poets inhabited an ambiguous cultural space".[98] As poets, they had recently become "expected to express deep feelings and explore private states of consciousness, yet this was identified in domestic ideology as the preserve of the feminine."[99] Thaïs E. Morgan gives the example of Tennyson's early poetry, which Victorian critics found "unacceptably effeminate" because of "the texts about women and their emotions in domestic settings".[100] Morgan

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[94] Kuchta, p. 66

[95] Hodapp, Christa, *Men's Rights, Gender, and Social Media* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), p. 3

[96] Barrell, p. 103; Korsmeyer, Carolyn, "Gendered Concepts and Hume's Standard of Taste," *Reading David Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste'*, 2019, 97–114, p. 107; Jones, Robert W., *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 75

[97] Catanese, Christopher, "Survival Narratives: Georgic Extinction and the Romantic Genre-System," in *Narratives of Romanticism*, ed. by Sandra Heinen and Katharina Rennhak (Trier: WVT, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017)

[98] Adams, James Eli, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 5; Morgan, Thaïs E., "The Poetry of Victorian Masculinities," *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, 2000, 203–27, pp. 204–5

[99] Ibid

[100] Morgan, pp. 204–204

also identifies Matthew Arnold as a poet who "struggles with the relation between poetry and the feminine under domestic ideology throughout his career."[101]

Third, poets had to contend with the "disdain of an increasingly utilitarian society for the literary world as a realm of unprofitable, and thus unmanly, intellectual exchange."[102] A rational and scientific age – one that saw "manliness […] in the technique of productive repression, a practice of energetic action directed to useful social ends" – could find little practical use for poetry.[103] The uselessness of poetry and poets was, of course, not a new accusation – "in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that charge […] becomes notorious" – but the reparative responses against this charge were faltering.[104] Sidney, writing in the 16th century, could insist "on the preponderant utility of what he [the poet] writes", and there were "[v]arious and variously ingenious Romantic efforts to align literature with the practices from which it was coming to be more and more distinct — science and philosophy".[105]

However, these "attempts to hold off the incumbent institutionalization of the "two cultures" mentality and of the gendered dichotomy underlying that mentality: science for men, literature for women" had completely failed by the 19th century, and for several reasons.[106] One is that poets had since the 17th century begun to celebrate rather than deny poetry's essential uselessness. Thus "[b]etween poetry and utility, a gulf is opened, deliberately, and by the poets themselves", meaning that the "old-fashioned man who claims utility for verse is attacked from both sides."[107] Another is that, over the 18th century, the value of poetry as a "form for transmitting scientific and industrial discourse

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[101] Ibid

[102] Adams, p. 28

[103] Sussman, *Victorian*, pp. 27–28

[104] Fraser, Russell, "The Poet as Sciolist," *The Sewanee Review*, 75 (1967), 444–54, p. 446

[105] Ibid; Simpson, *Romanticism*, pp. 139–140. Simpson gives the examples of Coleridge, who posited that poetry has "a logic of its own, as severe as that of science", and Shelley, who argued "for poetry and the imagination as the turbulent originators of reason itself, and thus indirectly of technology (the "mechanical arts")".

[106] Ibid

[107] Fraser, pp. 446–452

became increasingly tenuous as those discourses specialized beyond the capacities of belletristic verse".[108]

A fourth problem is that, if a rational age could find no practical use for poetry, a newly sober age did not appreciate its pleasure value either. This is not just a resurfacing of "Earlier Augustan formulations" which regarded "judgment and wit or fancy as 'man and wife'", and thus saw imagination as effeminate.[109] It is a function of the fact that each of the new Victorian "models of masculine identity: the gentleman, the prophet, the dandy, the priest, and the soldier […] is typically understood as the incarnation of an ascetic regimen, an elaborately articulated program of self-discipline".[110] This "more rigorous inner life […] made itself felt in public life as a renewed 'seriousness'" and a Carlylean "suspicion of theatricality [which] is deeply embedded in Western culture".[111]

For poetry, the issue is that, as James Eli Adams argues, "[u]ltimately, such disdain extends to language itself" and "speech becomes at best a distracting social expedient, at worst sheer inanity", so that the Carlylean hero is taciturn – a hallmark of early Victorian masculinity – but "when he does speak, his words invariably disrupt the regimen of linguistic decorum, whether through a "rude" sincerity bordering on incoherence, or through an economy of speech whose very terseness does violence to polite form."[112] For men poets, dealing with this requires a "momentous point of intersection between the logics of romanticism and anxieties over masculine self-display" in which poetry can only be absolved of theatricality to the extent that it is sincere, authentic and utterly unconscious of audience.[113] Thus, "Mill's lyric poet shares with the Carlylean hero the challenge of affirming integral, autonomous selfhood in modern life; poetry that fails to achieve the requisite authenticity is deprecated

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[108] Catanese, p. 10

[109] Patey, p. 603

[110] Adams, p. 2

[111] Adams, p. 27; Adams, p. 36

[112] Adams, p. 31

[113] Adams, p. 37

as a form of theatricality, mere 'oratory'." For this reason, the "logic of poetic innovation in the nineteenth century […] can be usefully understood as an increasingly emphatic asceticism of style."[114]

Finally, the suspicion of theatricality goes hand-in-hand with the move "from the court and the patronage of gentlemen to the publishing house and the market of the common reader".[115] While there had long been an "aristocratic contempt of the professional writer's lack of independence", the shift from "dependency on an aristocratic class" to writing for a mass market opened up new routes for capitalist publishing success and access to the "strenuous (and more celebrated) psychic economies of the daring yet disciplined warrior-capitalist".[116] At the same time, however, it made the poet dependent on "crowds that applaud and ladies who read".[117] Thus one issue is that the "marketing or commodification of poetry" that capitalist success requires "inevitably results in the vulgarisation and feminisation of literature".[118]

Worse, however, is the suspicion that, as D.G. Rossetti wrote in 1873, "to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned".[119] Indeed, as Sussman writes, "the oft-noted concern of Victorian male writers with the prostitute, with the purchase of sex, functions as a displacement of their own concern with the commodification, the purchase and sale of their own sexualized desire under mercantile patronage and within the art market".[120]

If the flamboyant Byron "never forsakes the image of writing for his own boyish enjoyment, of writing for some self-generating desire for play and mastery", despite writing for "the vulgarized and feminized

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[114] Ibid

[115] Ross, p. 27

[116] Adams, p. 28; Ross, p. 27; Adams, p. 27

[117] Ross, p. 29

[118] Ibid

[119] Quoted in Sussman, *Victorian*, p. 95

[120] Sussman, *Victorian*, p. 95

market", this is an almost impossible move to pull off for the Victorian poet immersed in the new middle-class, domestic, ascetic masculinity.[121] For this reason, the Victorian poet's version of "the paradox noted by Weber, that all asceticism contains an intractable element of theatricality" is that "the Tennysonian poet invariably depends on forms of recognition that he professes to disdain, and is thus implicated in the logic of the dandy".[122]

The suspicion of writing to please or flatter can be denied through roughness, taciturnity, "a "savage" disregard for social decorum and the public gaze" and apparent "fidelity to a unique selfhood, whose integrity was increasingly understood as a radical social autonomy, as in Mill's 'What is Poetry'".[123] However, there is always the risk that "the poet's or prophet's claim to divine inspiration, and the transcendent selfhood that derives from it, would be exposed as a vain, calculated appeal to an earthly audience."[124] Pushed to its logical extreme, "any utterance that finds a receptive audience is suspect, because the audience itself is presumed to be debased."[125]

With few exceptions, these clashes between the new bourgeois masculinity and the Romantic poetic ideal, have like the Romantic ideal itself, not gone away. Contemporary men poets, in the UK and elsewhere, are still wary of the personal and the domestic at the same time as these topics are expected. David Kennedy, in his studies of Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison, has drawn attention to the way that working has remained "inextricable from the performance of conventional masculinity" leading to "anxieties over whether cultural activity generally and poetry specifically is 'real' work for 'real' men."[126] There is still a suspicion of ornamentation, beauty and pleasure. The idea of the poet "as a tunesmith or sciolist, who does not offer knowledge but only entertainment" is still "basic to our modern

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[121] Ross, p. 31

[122] Adams, p. 42; Adams, p. 10

[123] Adams, p. 22; Adams, p. 44

[124] Adams, p. 45

[125] Adams, p. 36

[126] Kennedy, "What does…", p. 115

understanding."[127] And we still find the double-bind of publication, where low sales can be evidence of either a poet's childish amateurism or of their absolute independence, and high sales can be indicative of both masculine capitalist success and unmanly 'selling out'.

Excused by Success

This discussion of sales naturally takes us to our third argument, which is about the exculpatory power of success. This argument pays attention to the structure of poetry as a career, and the twin facts that poets are seen as men, but "the writing of poetry (as distinct from the reading and responding critically to it), has been linked even more so to effeminacy and homosexuality".[128] Or put in blunter terms: writing poetry is for girls, but being a poet is for men. This is what Eavan Boland calls "the distance between writing poetry and being a poet", which is "more impassable" for a woman.[129] If we turn Boland's argument around, so that it is not about why women are not allowed to be poets, but about why men are, we can see that men are, to use a (translated) phrase of Durkheim's, "excused by success".[130]

It would be tempting, here, to add the claim that not only does men's success excuse their involvement in a feminine activity, but that men's poetry is also *read* as more serious, professional, and literary. This is the argument that 'serious writing' excuses men's poetry and men's poetry is read as 'serious writing.' As the novelist Anne Enright put it in the *LRB*:

> If a man writes 'The cat sat on the mat' we admire the economy of his prose; if a woman does, we find it banal. If a man writes 'The cat sat on the mat' we are taken by the simplicity

[127] Fraser, p. 445

[128] Greig and Hughes, p. 96

[129] Boland, p. 246

[130] Durkheim, Emile, "The Division of Labor in Society," in *Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, ed. by David B. Grusky and Katherine R. Weisshaar (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018)

> of his sentence structure, its toughness and precision […]. If, on the other hand, a woman writes 'The cat sat on the mat' her concerns are clearly domestic, and sort of limiting.[131]

This observation is, of course, hard to evidence, but it does seem to be the case for prose. As Sieghart sets out in *The Authority Gap*, men fiction writers are more likely to be published, are sold at higher prices, are taken more seriously by critics, and are read more – at least by men.[132] But the effect Sieghart references for art – of men valuing visual art more highly when it is randomly assigned a man's name rather than a woman's – does not seem to obtain for poetry.

Of the two studies that have followed this methodology, both have found that poems with *women's* names are judged as superior, albeit only marginally. Kaufman et al suggest that this result might be explained by "a tendency for positive bias in the evaluation of women on non-masculine typed performance tasks".[133] This is not only revealing as evidence that Western culture automatically associates poetry with femininity – the study provides no supporting evidence for this association; it is simply a given – but more importantly is borne out in the other study. Lebuda and Karwowski found that scientific work by 'women' was judged as far less creative than identical work by 'men', but the reverse was true for poetry.[134]

What to make of this contrast? It seems likely both that Sieghart's observations *and* the results found by these two studies are, in some ways, correct with regard to poetry – that the expectation that women perform better in feminine-coded tasks co-exists with the generalised "authority gap". But the simplest explanation for this – that the very top of professions is reserved for men, *even* in those areas in which

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131 Enright, Anne, "Anne Enright · Diary: Call Yourself George · Lrb 20 September 2017," *London Review of Books* (London Review of Books, 2019)

132 Sieghart, Mary Ann, *The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously than Men, and What We Can Do about It* (London: Penguin Books, 2022)

133 Kaufman, James C., John Baer, Mark D. Agars, and David Loomis, "Creativity Stereotypes and the Consensual Assessment Technique," *Creativity Research Journal*, 22 (2010), 200–205, p. 203

134 Lebuda, Izabela, and Maciej Karwowski, "Tell Me Your Name and I'll Tell You How Creative Your Work Is," *Creativity Research Journal*, 25 (2013), 137–42

women are thought to be better on average – only makes it more striking that this authority gap does seem to exist in poetry.

The poet Ros Barber characterised this relationship between men, poetry and success in the following terms in an online discussion:

> What you find is that the higher up the "kudos" scale you go, the more the literary scene is dominated by men. Beginners' creative writing classes are often exclusively female […] Further along the career path, in the less intimidating literary magazines such as *Magma*, numbers are about equal. But when it comes to the big prize short lists and the top literary journals: *Granta*, the *LRB* and the *TLS* – you will find women vastly outnumbered by men.[135]

The aptness of this characterisation, at least with regards to magazine publication and up until just a few years ago, is borne out by Coates' *State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism* reports.[136]

And indeed, it bears remarkable similarity to sociological findings about men in so-called "female-concentrated occupations", such as primary school teachers, nurses, librarians, secretaries, and cabin crew members.[137] There, as a reparative response to fears that "their masculinity and heterosexuality would be brought into question", men tend to be "demonstrably careerist".[138] This is a strategy that is aided by "assumptions of enhanced leadership (the assumed authority effect), by being given differential treatment (the special consideration effect) and being associated with a more careerist

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[135] Poleg, Stav, "Are Literary Publications Biased Against Women?," *Magma Poetry*, 2018

[136] Barber's particular point about creative writing courses is difficult to prove statistically as student information is often confidential, but my own experience of working for several years for a poetry education charity bears it out: the vast majority of students were women, and this tapered off the more 'advanced' the courses were advertised as being; Coates (2019); Coates (2020).

[137] Lupton, Ben, "Explaining Men's Entry into Female-Concentrated Occupations: Issues of Masculinity and Social Class," *Gender, Work and Organization*, 13 (2006), 103–28; Lupton, Ben, "Maintaining Masculinity: Men Who Do 'Women's Work,'" *British Journal of Management*, 11 (2000), 33–48; Cross, Simon, and Barbara Bagilhole, "Girls' Jobs for the Boys? Men, Masculinity and Non-Traditional Occupations," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 9 (2002), 204–26; Simpson, Ruth, "Masculinity at Work: The Experiences of Men in Female Dominated Occupations," *Work, Employment and Society*, 18 (2004), 349–68.

[138] Lupton, "Explaining…", p. 112; Lupton, "Explaining…", p. 106

attitude to work (the career effect)."[139] It is not surprising, then, that while "'token' women can be severely disadvantaged", men, although often feeling stigmatised, tend to "benefit from their token status".[140] As Lupton summarises, they "rise to the top of their occupations or professions more quickly", "congregate in particular specialities, usually higher status ones", and "find themselves channelled into administration or management roles […], which tends to accelerate their progress.[141]

All in all, as Linda Nochlin argued over 50 years ago in her landmark article 'Why have there been no great women artists?',

> there are few areas that are really "denied" to men, if the level of operations demanded be transcendent, responsible, or rewarding enough: men who have a need for "feminine" involvement with babies or children gain status as pediatricians or child psychologists, with a nurse (female) to do the more routine work; those who feel the urge for kitchen creativity may gain fame as master chefs; and of course, men who yearn to fulfil themselves through what are often termed "feminine" artistic interests can find themselves as painters or sculptors, rather than as volunteer museum aides or part-time ceramists, as their female counterparts so often end up doing.[142]

Three Threats and Three Responses

Above, I posit three possible, complementary explanations for the curious relationship of poetry to masculinity in Western and particularly British contexts – that is, for the seemingly paradoxical combination of men's historical dominance of poetry and its association with femininity.

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[139] Simpson, Ruth, "Masculinity…", p. 349

[140] Ibid, pp. 350–352

[141] Lupton, "Maintaining…", p. 35

[142] Nochlin, Linda, "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews.com* (ARTnews.com, 2020)

One is that the changes to ideas about poetry that have subsequently been tidied up into the 'Romantic heresy' and taken up as the general public's standard definition have brought it into conflict with traditional ideals of masculinity. Another is that the changes capitalism and industrialisation brought about in masculinity ideologies took masculinity even further away from the Romantic ideal of the poet that had so recently been established. And a third is that men are 'allowed' to be poets to extent that they do it seriously and professionally – in the same way that men are allowed to do other feminine activities as long as they are dominant in them.

It seems at least a good working hypothesis that men poets' reparative responses to the gender threat of poetry will address these dynamics. In short, men poets who experience writing poetry (or the public's perception of writing poetry) as a gender threat will need to find a way to respond to the 'Romantic' ideas about poetry held by many members of the general public; they will need to align their practice with the post-industrial ideals that make labour, rationality and – in some ideologies – renunciation of consumption essential to manhood; and they will need somehow to fashion an image of themselves as serious and successful professionals in an industry and art-form, which, for the most part, is unrecompensed and ignored.

Chapter Three. "The Grim Secrets Only a Practitioner Can Tell You": Simon Armitage's and Don Paterson's Aesthetics[1]

[1] Paterson, Don, *The Fall at Home: Collected Aphorisms*, Kindle Ebook (London: Faber, 2018), loc. 1803

Introduction

In this chapter, I set out Paterson's and Armitage's aesthetics. I do so for two reasons. First, because their aesthetics can, in themselves, be read as reparative responses to the gender threat of 'Romantic' ideas about poetry. And second, because a nuanced understanding of both poets' aesthetics is essential to understanding the other responses and strategies I explore in subsequent chapters.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss Paterson's and Armitage's responses to the gender threat of one aspect of the 'Romantic heresy'. This threat is "the romantic view [… that] the creator as artist is a person of intense sensibility"[2] and the corresponding public expectation that a poem will be a lyric text that represents the "expression of intense inward states".[3] I argue that both poets deal with this demand for sensitivity, emotion, and personal revelation by rejecting the Romantic changes to the ideal of the poet, and falling back on a perceived earlier 'Augustan' ideal. Specifically, I posit that Paterson's and Armitage's attitudes to the *purpose* of poetry are characterised by hostility to *expressive* theories and support for a *pragmatic* view.

In the second section, I move on to a discussion of the ways both poets put their aesthetics into practice, not only by stating their opposition to the identification of the lyric 'I' with the author, but by actively working to undermine it. I argue that they do this in four principal ways. First, by more-or-less openly questioning, within the poem, the identification of the speaker with the author. Second, by simultaneously relying on and undermining what I call 'sincerity effects'. Third, through a thoroughgoing intertextuality that destabilises authorial identity. And finally through extra- or meta-textual comments in, for example, epigraphs and book blurbs, which aim to influence the way the poems are read.

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[2] Sussman, *Masculine*, p. 62

[3] Ibid

In the last section, I turn to the second reason for understanding Paterson and Armitage's respective aesthetics, and set out the ways in which their rejection of expressive theories underpins the strategies and gender performances I shall explore in chapters four, five and six.

The Poets' Aesthetics

As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that the Romantic period changed conceptions of poets and poetry, while broadly true, is also tied up with a standard narrative about British poetry's history, which is perhaps most associated with M.H. Abrams. Although this standard narrative was disrupted in the 1980s by the new wave of Romantic scholars led by Jerome McGann, it was a disruption which not only pointed out the simplifications of the standard story, but, more importantly for our purposes, underlined its continuing influence, and the continuing influence of the ideas it attributes to Romanticism.

For this reason, the general story and the categories of aesthetics established by Abrams still provide a useful framework, because they have, to a certain extent, created the reality they described. That is to say, even if changes in poetry cannot easily be summed up in the historical movement through mimetic, pragmatic, romantic and objective theories, these divisions have gone on to structure the aesthetics of subsequent writers. Certainly, Armitage and particularly Paterson understand their own aesthetics, and those they inveigh against, largely in terms derived from this four-part framework. Both make occasional reference to mimesis and 'objective' ideas such as the intentional and affective fallacies, but more significantly, both poets structure their ideas about poetry around:

1) hostility to *expressive* theories, which are 'self-directed' and maintain that the purpose of art is authentic self-expression, and

2) support for a *pragmatic* view of poetry, which posits that a poem should be 'audience-directed', and have an effect on the reader.

In Paterson and Armitage, these two positions are linked together in a number of ways. First, by a sublimation of expressive (and other theories) to the pragmatic. That is to say, that Paterson at least views self-expression as a legitimate outcome of, and method for, art, but not as its essential purpose. Second, they are linked by both poets' skepticism about the practical possibility of the ideals of an expressive theory; they just do not believe that an unmediated continuum between inward feeling and outward expression is possible. For them, there is no *essential* self, we are always performing characters in some way, and, in any case, poetry is a 'medium of failure' because perfect translation from inner feeling to outward expression is impossible.

And finally, both are doubtful that even poets who espouse an expressive theory of art can genuinely ignore the demands of the reader, even if that is what they claim to be doing. This is compounded by a suspicion that what the market itself wants is (the appearance of) disinterested self-expression. Hence, it is impossible in practice to distinguish between a poet writing 'authentically' for self-expression and a poet writing for the market. Both poets tend to think that all poets are at the same game – trying to please a reader and gain a readership – but they themselves are open about it and others are not. As Armitage puts it, "here's the key question: who are you writing for? If the answer is 'myself', you're fibbing. And fibbing to yourself, which is the most deceitful of all deceptions. You write because you want to be read. Let's get that out in the open."[4]

The Nuances of their Positions

Don Paterson sets out the nuances of his aesthetics quite explicitly in his book, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*. He writes:

> Poetry, I'd like to think, proceeds from a generous instinct, not a selfish one. Whatever private torments might have been assuaged in our writing, we want to give these damn things away in

[4] Armitage, Simon, *A Vertical Art: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 2021), p. 221

> the end. To have someone else want your poem for themselves, it must be desirable; to be desirable, it must be beautiful, or interesting, or both; and for a reader to find it so, it must exhibit some of the symmetry of form and organisation we find in the natural world. This last statement might sound a bit of a reactionary leap, and of course it's as old-school as it comes: it's been a cliché since Plato and Aristotle to say that the reason we find a piece of art satisfying is because it is 'imitative of nature'. However, I persist in thinking of the poem as kind of a human-made natural object, our 'best effort' that we quietly slip back into the world.[5]

In this, we find a surprising – to the modern reader – and idiosyncratic emphasis on mimesis and the "iconicity" of language. For Paterson, "*words sound like the things they mean*".[6] However, we should not mistake its novelty for prominence; although a poem in this theory should "exhibit some of the symmetry of the natural world", this is not an end in its own right, but part of the ultimate aim of making the poem desirable to a reader.[7]

We also find a simultaneous wariness of, and admission to, the expressive function of poetry. Paterson acknowledges that writing poetry may 'assuage' and purge emotion – and, as he argues elsewhere, this helps in writing the poem – but to do it for this purpose *only* is "selfish". Expression then, like mimesis, is artistically useful only to the extent that it aids the creation of a poem the reader finds "beautiful, or interesting". Paterson has a similar attitude to 20th-century objective theories, writing that the "poem is *not* primarily a disinterested and ahistorical artefact" although he admits "reading it that way can often be extremely useful."[8]

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[5] Paterson, Don, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber, 2018), p. 59

[6] Ibid, p. 53

[7] Ibid, p. 59

[8] Ibid, p. 113

Simon Armitage has not set out his own aesthetics quite so fully, but we find a number of notable similarities (including a shared rejection of the intentional and affective fallacies) and only one major dissimilarity, which is that Armitage does not share Paterson's unusual mimetic approach.[9]

First, both Paterson and Armitage focus on the reader, and see publication as "a sacred duty and the aim of the poem."[10] Indeed, Armitage's stance on this is so strong that he maintains "if you don't have readers, you don't have a poem."[11] This, of course, is some distance from Shelley's nightingale or Mill's statement that "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy."[12] Although Paterson does not follow Armitage in saying an unread poem is not a poem at all, he would perhaps think it was *incomplete* as, to him, the reader is an "equal collaborator in the creation of the poem".[13] Without that reader, a poem "will never leave their house, never grow up, never speak to another soul, because it never wanted to."[14]

Second, both poets emphasise, to varying extents, that if a poem is to have the desired effect on a reader, it should aim, in the Horatian formulation, to "profit or to please, or to blend in one the delightful and the useful."[15] The 'please' half of the formulation – the obligation, as Paterson has it, to "'entertain', in the widest sense"[16] – is not really in question for either poet; if it is not often explicitly brought out, this is because it is too obvious to need serious rehearsal. As Armitage says in *A Vertical Art*, "No one sets out on a poetic adventure in search of the featureless and the insipid."[17]

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[9] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 224

[10] Paterson, Don, "The Dark Art of Poetry," *T.S. Eliot Lecture* (unpublished lecture, London: South Bank Centre, 2004). This lecture is available in abridged form here: https://www.theguardian.com/books/poetry/features/0,12887,1344654,00.html. The full lecture was previously hosted on the website of the South Bank Centre. It has now been removed; I rely on a locally saved copy of that full version.

[11] Roensch, Rob, and Quinn Carpenter Weedon, "'Swimming through Bricks': A Conversation with Simon Armitage," *World Literature Today*, 2017

[12] Mill, John Stuart, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," *The Crayon*, 7 (1860), 93

[13] Paterson, Don, intro., *New British Poetry*, ed. by Don Paterson and Charles Simic, 1st edn (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2004), pp. xxiii-xxxv, p. xxix

[14] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[15] Quoted in Abrams, p. 16

[16] Paterson, intro. *New British*, p. xxvi

[17] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 198

The idea that a poem should have either moral or didactic designs on the reader is, however, more controversial, and, once again, Paterson is more of a neo-classical throwback than Armitage. He is quite plain in saying both that "poetry should be a moral project", and that poetry, as well as asking questions, should also posit "some kind of possible solution".[18] Armitage is less forthright than Paterson about both. In 'Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres', he is disparaging about the use of the poem as a place for reasoned discussion and the passing on of information, criticising "the emphasis of erudition over articulation" in the poetry of "learned scholars".[19] However, he goes on in the same essay to argue that well-written poems may be highly persuasive (and badly-written poems create an antipathy to the poets' cause), suggesting only that he believes a poem's other instrumental uses should not supersede what he regards as the fundamental aim of the poem, which is the pleasure of the reader.

Turning from reasoning to morality, Armitage has said, on the one hand, that in "terms of their morality, I don't write poems to tell people how to lead their lives".[20] But on the other, he has said, sometimes "I am inspired by an event and then feel a moral duty to write about it."[21] This is perhaps the "duty" he said he felt to write about Covid-19 in his poem 'Lockdown'.[22] Ethics also clearly forms part of Armitage's criticism. For example, he censures Elizabeth Bishop's "occasionally dubious portrayals of the foreign and the strange".[23] This is similar to Paterson's belief that "[m]any poems which hold contrary views to our own can still be enjoyed […] and their worth can be more-or-less

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[18] Patterson, Christina, "Don Paterson: Playing the Beautiful Game," *The Independent*, 2004

[19] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 151

[20] Jones, Simon Joseph, "In-Depth Interview with Simon Armitage," *High Profiles*, 2005

[21] Hewitt, Emma, "Interview: Simon Armitage," *Cherwell*, 2016

[22] Agency, PA News, "Simon Armitage: Why I Had to Pen a Poem about the Lockdown," *East London and West Essex Guardian Series* (East London and West Essex Guardian Series, 2020)

[23] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 137

neutrally assessed. But certain opinions can cross a line which makes such disinterested judgement impossible".[24]

Finally, Armitage has a similar attitude to Paterson with regard to poetry as self-expression. This has several strands to it. First, neither believes a poet has an obligation to 'tell the truth' about their life, or about anything else. For Paterson, a "poet need be no more reliable than any other literary narrator".[25] Similarly, Armitage quotes Lorrie Moore's advice to a writer: "[f]irst, try to be something, anything, else". He claims that what "she's saying" is that "[y]ou yourself are not literature." Carrying on this thought, he suggests that we don't appreciate even "the most candid confessional poets – the Lowell of *Life Studies,* the Plath of *Ariel* – […] because their soul-searching was so thorough, but because their illusions were so accomplished, their portrayals so convincing, their puppetry so lifelike."[26] The implication is that 'truthful' writing is not only unnecessary, but an impossibility, or an act of deception (an "illusion"), either of the reader or of the self.

Second, both think it is a "fatal error" to believe "that feeling and practice form a continuum."[27] Just as a poem need not come from the biographical facts of the poet's life, it need not come from strong, authentic feeling either. Rather, "[d]read and rapture are inimical to the composition of poetry, even if the naïf thinks them the ideal states…. The temperament of the act and of the inspiration must somehow be oppositionally arranged".[28] Or in Armitage's words (which are a fairly succinct summary of his own *ars poetica*):

> at the moment of writing I have to go very cold, become quite detached, quite dispassionate, just because at that moment in time I feel as if I'm trying to make something – a work of art, hopefully, that's going to create a response. And to construct that thing I need all my wits

[24] Paterson, Don, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary* (London: Faber, 2012), p. 432

[25] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 181

[26] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 231

[27] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[28] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 1161

> about me. So it's no good if I'm a molten piece of jelly because I'm not going to be able to do my work properly.[29]

Third, besides documentary truth and strength of feeling being no guarantee of a good poem, they are also no guarantee of sincerity, authenticity or truthfulness. Rather, as Paterson argues, "with so much at stake (in their own minds, at least) on the *reception* of their verses, love poets are the least trustworthy", despite their typically autobiographical and strongly felt content.[30] We can see this distrust in Armitage's discussion of Bob Dylan, in which he argues that the "songs themselves were written and performed to *give the suggestion* of spontaneity, improvisation even, but they were too memorable to be anything less than crafted and composed [emphasis added]".[31]

As well as this imputation of hypocrisy, there are in both writers the standard moral judgements that have been aimed at confessional or expressive poetry: that if it is not cynical, it is adolescent, self-indulgent, lazy, and somehow improper – an airing of dirty laundry. Paterson laments that anyone "armed with a beer-mat, a pencil, and a recent mildly traumatic experience [feels] they are entitled to send 100pp of handwritten drivel into Faber or Cape".[32] Consider also the implication of expressive poetry's inherent narcissism in this remark of Armitage's defending Thom Gunn, and indeed the need to defend him at all:

> it's probably important, on Gunn's behalf, to make a distinction between *confessional* poetry – the kind that performs open heart surgery in front of the mirror – and *personal* poetry, poetry provoked, inspired or inflected by life events, the type that no poet can avoid.[33]

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[29] "Simon Armitage Interview: 'The Events of This Year Are All I Can See and Think about'," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, 2020)

[30] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 181

[31] "Why I Took the Slow Train to Become a Fan of Bob Dylan," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, 2016)

[32] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[33] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 114

Armitage's statement here that "no poet can avoid" writing personal poems is instructive, not only in its presentation of the idea in such a negative light, but also because it contextualises his statement above about needing to be "detached". It is not that real emotion and real-life experience can't be used, but that they must be processed first, and this involves some necessary estrangement from the material so that it may be considered from the perspective of a reader. On this point, Armitage quotes Gunn approvingly: "'The danger of biography, and equally of autobiography, is that it can muddy poetry by confusing it with its sources.'"[34] This is an almost identical formulation to Paterson's simultaneous belief that the temperament and the act must be 'oppositionally arranged' and that "the presence of strong, undiluted and direct feeling is the best argument for writing – sometimes, at least – from experience rather than imagination: maybe it's the only one".[35]

To sum up, Paterson espouses aesthetics which combine elements of mimetic and expressive theories with a pragmatism to which they are subsumed, whereas Armitage is purer in his pragmatism, understanding poetry neither as reflecting the universe, nor as an expression of his inner self. Indeed, though he believes some element of the personal is 'unavoidable', he cannot "think of a single instance when [he's] told something straight."[36] For both, then, the continuity between real life, 'real emotion' and the poem is not linear, although they both recognise the *expectation* that it is. How they use that mismatch is the subject of the next section.

Levels of Sincerity

Despite their positions on its relevance, Paterson and Armitage are both aware that their poetry will inevitably be judged by some readers on its perceived sincerity and authenticity – that is, the extent to which the speaking voice is 'really' that of the poet, and the extent to which that speaking voice 'tells

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[34] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 114

[35] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 103

[36] Greenhalgh, Chris, "Simon Armitage: An Interview with Chris Greenhalgh ," *Bete Noire*, 1992, 271, quoted in Gregson, Ian, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), p. 31.

the truth' of their experience. The paradox of having pragmatic aesthetics – writing what the reader wants instead of what you want – in a post-Romantic reading culture is that *what the reader wants* is often the (seemingly) sincere expression of the poet. And, as Paterson has admitted, even for poets whose intellectual position on sincerity is that it is aesthetically irrelevant, "the idea that poetry involves a fidelity to one's own experience and emotions is much more deeply engrained than you suspect – it operates almost as a moral imperative."[37]

Despite its neglect as a critical term, Deborah Forbes argues "'Sincerity' is obviously a meaningful category for readers" – an observation that "is easily demonstrated by a casual perusal of the jacket copy of poetry books published in the 1980s and 1990s", and, I might add, the 2000s, 10s and 20s.[38] But always alongside the expectation that a poem be sincere, there has been a corresponding, and justified, suspicion that it is not. As Forbes puts it, the "pervasive distrust that accompanied the rise of literature as a profession elicited both a desire for the author as a guarantor of the honesty of the text and a deep skepticism of this figure".[39]

As such, much of the effort of post-Romantic lyric writing has been taken up with reassuring readers that the poem really is as authentic and natural as they expect and want it to be. To this end, writers, wittingly or unwittingly, use what Rosenbaum calls the "rhetoric of sincerity": "the range of expressive conventions used to mark the voice, figure, and experience of the first-person speaker as that of the author, including claims to originality, spontaneity, authenticity, artlessness, and immediacy."[40] These are, to revert to Forbes's terms, "the forms of sincerity invented by self-expressive poetry, in which sincerity is strictly unverifiable but still at stake."[41] As Donald Davie wrote, an accounting of sincerity

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[37] Paterson, Don and Raymond Friel, "Don Paterson: Interviewed By Raymond Friel", in *Talking Verse: Interviews With Poets* (St Andrews: Verse, 1995), p. 194.

[38] Forbes, Deborah, *Sincerity's Shadow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 197.

[39] Forbes, p. 17

[40] Rosenbaum, Susan B, *Professing Sincerity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 2

[41] Forbes, p. 3.

does not mean we are "required to dismantle the whole body of our recent assumptions. In part at least, the measure of a poet's sincerity is, it must be, *inside his poem.*"[42]

Being aware of reader demands and suspicions, and the sincerity effects that combat them, and being unmoored from their intellectual and ethical attachments to the truthfulness of the lyric 'I', Armitage and Paterson deliberately trouble these waters, constantly "conjuring a credible identity only to unravel it".[43]

Destabilising the 'I'

I argue that they achieve this destabilisation of the 'I' in four broad and interlinked ways. First, by more-or-less openly undermining the identification of the speaker with the author, and the truthfulness of what they say, particularly through references to literary theory. Second, by simultaneously undermining and relying for effect on the conventions and rhetoric of sincerity. Third, through both poets' announced and unannounced intertextuality, which makes it unclear where the boundaries of the speaker and author are — when they are speaking in their 'own voice' and when they are using somebody else's. And finally, meta-textually, through extra-poetic statements and gestures, such as comments in interviews, works of criticism, and authors' notes, which work to deny the 'truthfulness' of their speakers' voices, while at the same leaving a door open for ambiguity. To give just one example, the jacket copy of the 2005 edition of Paterson's *God's Gift to Women* claims that "straight autobiography mixes with invention, [and] exaggeration", deliberately raising the possibility of 'truth' while refusing to reveal its whereabouts.[44]

With regard to the first of these interlinked methods of destabilising the 'I', Alexis Harley, in her essay about Armitage and "reader-author relations" draws attention to the many poems

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[42] Davie, Donald, *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, ed. by Barry Alpert (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1977), p. 146.

[43] Wilkinson, *Don Paterson,* p. 33.

[44] Paterson, Don, *God's Gift To Women* (London: Faber, 2005).

> in which the author talks of his dying (thus engaging with ideas of the death of the Author), or of looking at himself or his twin (developing tropes for self-reflexivity), or of the dissection of the authorial body (suggesting the work of the critical reader on the text's anatomy, and thereby on its producer's).[45]

Discussing the untitled poem from *Book of Matches* beginning 'I thought I'd write my own obituary…', she writes that the "central ambiguity here, as in much of Armitage's work, is whether the deliberate highlighting of radical literary theory (in this case, 'The Death of the Author' thesis) is calculated to endorse it, or whether the poem's narrative – a tale of the author triumphing over death – works at its surface level as a riposte to the post-structuralist assassination of the writing identity."[46] A very similar move is enacted in Paterson's 'A Talking Book':

> To the academy's swift and unannounced inspection:
> this page knows nothing of its self-reflexion,
> its author-death or its *mise-en-abîme.*
> Relax! Things are exactly as they seem.
> The charge of being clever, coy or cute
> I will not even bother to refute,
> there being no I to speak of.[47]

Here, not only does the rejection of both the I-as-speaker *and* the death-of-the-author openly trouble authenticity, but so does the play with sincerity conventions, the second method enumerated above.

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[45] Harley, Alexis, "Necessary Wobbles: Simon Armitage And Reader-Author Relations", *Simon Armitage*, 2001, paragraph 5. The essay is, unusually, hosted on Simon Armitage's own website.

[46] Harley, para. 8

[47] Paterson, Don, *Landing Light*, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 2004), p. 26.

In the poem, there is an almost unsettling disconnect between the informality of the address – "Relax!" – and the performative full rhymes and theoretical references, that is to say, between its seeming 'naturalness' and its emphasised artificiality. This juxtaposition is perhaps most obvious in a couplet which, as well as speaking of misplaced identification with a fake double, mixes a conversational bagginess with the fussiness of a rhyme broken across a line:

> Okay: now let's
> say you're in the bath, lathering your pits
> with – your Pears impractically thin –
> a horrible red lump of glycerine
> in which a tiny plastic replica
> of Gromit is embedded, his snout and paw
> freed on the humanitarian whim
> of a girl you know who just can't help but sym-
> pathise with everything[48]

Harley points out that Armitage, in a similar way, frequently "deploys trenchant rhyme schemes, heavily articulated metrical patterns and exaggerated rhetorical devices in order to draw attention to the poemliness of the poems" while at the same time including "robustly colloquial elements, demotic idioms and popular images, which anchor the texts with a familiarity that works against the estranging impact of rarefied (or parodic and exaggeratedly contrived) poetic forms."[49]

As well as the simultaneously estranging and authenticating effects of Armitage's mix of sincerity conventions, Harley also discusses the destabilising effects of the third method mentioned above: intertextuality. She gives the example of his poem 'I've made out my will; I'm leaving myself' from *Book*

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[48] Paterson, *LL*, p. 27.

[49] Harley, para. 4

of Matches.[50] Here, the allusions and quotations are "not just the detritus from Auden, Shakespeare and St. Luke, but from whoever calls the heart 'the ticker"'. The poem is "composed of elements, some of which are taken straight from the readers', the public's, own mouths."[51] Thus, while the conventional quotation and allusion borrows authority from the quoted sources and cedes authorship, the use of cliché, considered as a kind of demotic intertextuality, gives Armitage's speaker an 'everyman' authenticity at the same time as it dissolves him into that unpindownable everyman.

Paterson's very different intertextuality is one of the most striking aspects of an oeuvre that has included from the outset translations and 'versions' – Paterson makes a distinction between the two – both genuine and invented, as well as both open and disguised allusion and quotation.[52] Some of the first poems in his first collection, *Nil Nil*, establish the shifting boundaries between authors and texts: 'Morning Prayer' re-sets Rimbaud's 'Oraison Du Soir' from evening to morning and into a recognisably Scottish idiom of "pish" and "pints"; 'Curtains' is represented as an excerpt '*from* Exeunt', a sequence we never see the whole of, which may not exist; 'Sunset, Visingsö' appears to be a 'translation' of an invented poet, Jørn-Erik Berglund; and 'An Elliptical Stylus' includes an alternative poem-within-a-poem. [53]

In his full-collection version of Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, Paterson adds titles to Rilke's untitled sonnets, re-orders them, and presents them without facing-page originals, thereby encouraging the reader, in Jones and Segnini's words, "to consider the poem as an independent, autonomous work", separate from both Rilke and Paterson.[54] Paterson's version of Machado, *The Eyes*, is also re-ordered, alphabetically this time, and there are also "a couple of poems in the book that Machado didn't write,

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[50] Armitage, Simon, *Book of Matches*, Kindle Ebook (London: Faber, 2001), loc. 268

[51] Harley, para 27

[52] See Afterword to Paterson, Don *Orpheus: A Version Of Rainer Maria Rilke* (London: Faber, 2007).

[53] Paterson, Don, *Nil Nil* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 2 - 20

[54] Segnini, Elisa and Elizabeth Jones, "'I Was Back In A Dark Wood': Don Paterson's 'The Forest Of The Suicides"', *Connotations: A Journal For Critical Debate*, 24.1 (2014), p. 161

ones that I just threw in because that voice was coming through at the time".[55] All of this can be considered a way of emphasising that for Paterson, "the poem annihilates the poet".[56]

Jones and Segnini demonstrate the sheer complexity of Paterson's intertextuality and referentiality in their analysis of 'The Forest of the Suicides', a reworking of Canto 13 of Dante's *Inferno*.[57] In both texts, a pilgrim, hearing strange noises and encouraged by his guide, Virgil, breaks off a twig from a bush and is shocked to hear screams of pain, followed by a voice. The voice explains that it had once been human, but had committed suicide, and its punishment was to be a plant continually attacked by harpies. This damned soul in Dante is "the thirteenth-century Pier della Vigna" but, Jones and Segnini argue, Paterson replaces him with "the 20th century poet Sylvia Plath", reproducing "the plot line and subject matter of Dante's text", while imitating "Plath's voice not only in [her] monologue, but throughout the poem".[58] In this conversation between Paterson-Plath-Dante-Pier della Vigna, Paterson-Dante-Pilgrim and Paterson-Dante-Virgil, who really can we say is the author or the speaker at any one time?[59]

Turning finally to the extra- or meta-textual, Armitage was once asked in an interview whether "the 'I' of your poems is a fictional character?", and answered that there is "a kind of fictional Simon Armitage that pops up in a lot of poems, even those that seem overtly autobiographical". He mentions "a dialect poem which I dedicate to Simon Armitage… a poem to a person I didn't really recognise."[60] And yet, despite this 'non-recognition', he also has a habit of revealing in interviews and memoirs the 'real story' behind poems, as he does with 'The Tyre' in *All Points North,* and 'The Shout' and 'The Winner' in

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[55] Paterson, Don, *The Eyes: A Version of Antonio Machado* (London: Faber, 1999); From an interview in Dósa, Attila, *Beyond Identity: New Horizons In Modern Scottish Poetry* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 147-166.

[56] Paterson, Don, "The Dilemma Of The Peot", in *How Poets Work* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 155.

[57] Paterson, *LL*, p. 9

[58] Segnini and Jones, p. 143–144; Segnini and Jones, p. 158.

[59] See discussion in Segnini and Jones, p. 157.

[60] Armitage, Poetry Archive interview

Gig.[61] In the interview and the dedication to 'Simon Armitage', and in many other places, Armitage works to estrange the I figure in his anecdotal poems, but in his memoirs, despite the distancing second-person in *All Points North*, he does the opposite and works to ground the poems in autobiography.

Paterson tends not to reveal much of his private life in interviews. In his new memoir *Toy Fights*, he does talk about the 'real events' associated with 'Amnesia' and 'An Elliptical Stylus', but for the most part, he seems to have opted out of Armitage's strategy of referring back and forth between the two worlds – the possibly-fictional 'in-poem' and the probably-real 'out-of-poem'.[62] Instead, within the covers of his books (and indeed between his books, which he has described as "one big book that you publish in instalments), he refuses to honour the distinction.[63] The notes to *God's Gift to Women*, for example, which we might expect to be part of the factual extra-poetic content, contain a fabricated quotation from the *Journals* of Paterson's invented continental philosopher Francois Aussemain. Similarly, one of the collection's two epigraphs is taken from St Augustine's *City of God*, but with an extra sentence added: "The gloom is lightened by an atrocious pun."[64] As a whole, the quotation may well be a reference to Michael Donaghy's poem 'City of God', a poem about the memory palace technique referenced in Paterson's 'The Alexandrian Library, Part II', itself dedicated to "M.D. / the bigger fibber" — a pun, perhaps even an atrocious one, on Eliot's dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, "*il miglior fabbro*"[65]. The point, or at least one point, is that just as much as the person in the poem who looks like Paterson might not be Paterson, the reassuring person *outside* the poem who does not look like Paterson might actually be him.

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[61] Armitage, Simon, *All Points North* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 47-55; Armitage, *Gig*, p. 104; Armitage, *Gig*, pp. 106-108.

[62] Paterson, Don, *Toy Fights: A Boyhood*, Kindle ebook (London: Faber, 2023), loc. 2103; Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 2609

[63] Don Paterson, *The Verb*, radio interview, BBC Radio 3, 18 September 2009. Quoted in George, p. 98.

[64] Paterson, *GGTW*, epigraph.

[65] See Paterson, Don, *Smith: A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Michael Donaghy* (London: Picador, 2014), loc: 865, for a discussion of the poem, first published in Michael Donaghy, *Shibboleth* (Oxford: OUP, 1988); Paterson, *GGTW* p. 42.

This game of investment and denial is played in an often almost gleeful way, and occasionally in a more adversarial mood, in which the poet is determined to get one over the reader. It is, of course, also an exercise that relies on both the expectation and the skepticism of the reader, so they can never be too final in either their avowals or disavowals. The reader's desire that a poem be 'real' creates an expectation to be thwarted, and their skepticism – egged on by the poets' own intra-, inter- and extra-textual statements – makes it an even more worthy victory. The reader has been tricked into reading a poem as if it were real *despite the poets telling them repeatedly that it isn't.* This is, to use Alan Gillis's phrase, "the seemingly-denying-what-it-asserts vision of Paterson's verse".[66] In 'Two Trees', for example, the "the pathetic fallacy he has so involved us in" throughout the majority of the poem is "flatly denied" at its conclusion:[67]

> And no, they did not die from solitude;
> nor did their branches bear a sterile fruit;
> nor did their unhealed flanks weep every spring
> for those four yards that lost them everything,
> as each strained on its shackled root to face
> the other's empty, intricate embrace.
> They were trees, and trees don't weep or ache or shout.
> And trees are all this poem is about.[68]

Here, as A.E. Stallings writes, the "denial rings both true and false – and hints at more pain than would a glib exploitation of trees as metaphor. Though he has invoked the human comparison only to reject it, the comparison remains invoked, like an unresolved dissonance throbbing in the air."[69] There is something of the magician in this; they tell the audience that what they're seeing isn't real at the same as

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[66] Gillis, Alan, "Don Paterson", in *The Edinburgh Companion To Contemporary Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 183.

[67] Stallings, A.E., "Poetry For Grown-Ups. Marie Ponsot's Easy And Don Paterson's Rain", *Poetry Foundation*, 2010

[68] Paterson, Don, *Rain*, Kindle ebook (London: Faber, 2009), loc. 50

[69] Stallings

performing so miraculously and convincingly that it's hard to believe it's not. For Paterson, especially, this is part of a broader pattern. As Don Chiasson writes, "Cancelling the symbols he courts, refusing the meanings he makes plain, keeping boisterously mum: these habits have been part of Paterson's work from the start."[70]

Aesthetics and Masculinity Performances

Having set out Paterson's and Armitage's theoretical and practical responses to the idea that the poem should be personally expressive, the obvious next question is how this aesthetic stance impacts their performances of masculinity.

First, opposition to the idea of self-expression as the purpose of art legitimises the use of different levels of sincerity. Freedom from the demand that a poem expresses a subjective deeply-felt truth allows character poems and an unstable, non-author lyric 'I'. This in turn is what allows the poets the freedom to explore differing masculinity ideologies without the automatic identification of the poet with the masculine character depicted. I explore this in the next chapter.

Second, if we turn to the active embrace of pragmatic theories, we can see that a focus on where the poem is *directed* (the reader) rather than where it has come from (the poet's self or subconscious) moves discussion of poetics, as well as the poems themselves, away from the internal, the private, the emotional, and the undisprovable onto the rational, 'objective', empirical, external world. Criticism is not located in answering the impossible and intuitive question of where a poem comes from and how we can tell if it is authentic, but by asking the empirically-verifiable question of what readers like and how poets can give it to them. Hence, as Abrams noted, pragmatic theories tend quickly to resolve into rhetoric and the Horatian tradition. This, in turn, is what allows the creation of a poem to be seen as a craft and as skilled labour. I explore this in chapter five.

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[70] Chiasson, Don, "Forms Of Attention", *The New Yorker*, 2010

Third, another effect of this focus on the audience is that it positions the poem as an instrument, as a tool with which you might legitimately affect and influence not only an audience but the world-outside-the-poem more generally. Moreover, treating the poem in this way, as an instrument that may be used to serve ends outside the poem, justifies the commercialisation and professionalisation of writing poems. Seen in the light of pragmatic aesthetics, book sales become not only a justifiable route to success, but also a proxy for quality, such that artistic and commercial aims are aligned rather than antagonistic. I discuss this in chapter six.

Finally, the unstable 'I' discussed in this chapter allows for the poet to act publicly without the public revelation of personal details. Hostility to expressive theories lends itself to what might be termed a 'masculine epistemology' – it focusses poems' subject matter away from the self, the internal, the personal, and the emotional, and onto the external world, the universal, and the rational. The poet can therefore be successful in publication without the fear of the final revelation of his emotional state, or of the details of his private and domestic life. Such details may be included for effect, but they are always liable to be destabilised or denied as 'character'. Again, I discuss this in chapter six.

Chapter Four. "Massively Detained by Sex and Football": Masculinity in Voice and Subject Matter[1]

[1] Patterson, Christina, "Don Paterson: Playing The Beautiful Game", *The Independent*, 2004

Introduction

In the last chapter, I considered the ways in which Armitage and Paterson reject the demand that the poem be an authentic expression of the poet's own subjectivity. However, this does not on its own solve the problem of the post-Romantic expectation that a poet's subject matter will be a sensitive exploration of their own emotions, experiences and relationships.

In this regard, much has been made of the way Armitage and Paterson – in what is perhaps their most obvious reparative response to the gender threat of poetry – write on themes that are "determinedly blokeish", as though each poet's "real concern is with proving the manliness of the genre and thus relieving his own anxieties about the effeminacy of his chosen profession."[2] Similarly, both poets have written character pieces in which they use the freedom of the destabilised 'I' to explore and sometimes parody different, and more extreme, masculinities than are expressed in their ordinary lyric poems. But what are perhaps more interesting and controversial than these are the poems in which both poets mix the lyric and character modes in ways that bring the lyric 'I' closer to the violent or misogynistic masculinities that are a feature of their character pieces.

In a debate which is best exemplified by the differing interpretations Ben Wilkinson and Vicki Bertram have put forward of Paterson's '*from* 1001 Nights: The Early Years', such poems have been both defended as ironic performances intended to subvert traditional masculinity (Wilkinson), and criticised as thinly-veiled endorsements of the masculinity they unconvincingly distance themselves from (Bertram).[3] Against these, I put forward a third interpretation which posits that such poems are neither successful nor unsuccessful ironic performances, but rather should be read 'straight' as sincere poems grounded in a masculine ethic of brutal and unflinching honesty.

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[2] Bertram, p. 188

[3] Bertram, pp. 188–193; Wilkinson, pp. 36–40

This reading, as should be clear, is not a departure from the blokeish masculinity performances of their ordinary lyrics, but rather acts as an even more effective reparative response. Where, in the 'irony defence', such poems are intended as critiques of a harsh masculinity they themselves do not possess, and in Bertram's interpretation they are examples of a masculinity they do possess but dare not openly admit, reading them straight allows them both to critique and, crucially, to own harsh masculinities, and – in the Byronic fashion – admit to vice.

Below, I briefly consider the masculine subject matter of Paterson and Armitage's ordinary lyric poems, then touch on the character pieces in which they explore a variety of more extreme masculinities, before finally considering the 'mixed mode' pieces and engaging in the debate on irony.

Masculinity in Voice and Subject Matter

Throughout his early career, Don Paterson was, like "Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, among others […] notable for doing things in [his] poems that weren't at all effete or tubercular, like drinking Murphy's, smoking and watching soccer."[4] That is to say, for writing on subject matter that is specifically masculine to a British or Irish audience. The first three poems of *Nil, Nil*, the opening salvo of his career, are a good example. They find the speaker playing pool in a pub, then hungover after having drunk "oh, fifteen, twenty pints", then "pish[ing] gloriously" "in a glittering arc" the "jug of Murphys I threw back."[5] Admittedly, they are also, respectively, a postmodern exploration of death and the self, a version of Rimbaud, and a delicate rhymed lyric, but this is precisely the point Paterson is trying to make: that you can write of such intellectual concerns and "you don't need to have been to Oxbridge" to do so.[6]

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[4] Chiasson

[5] Paterson, *Nil Nil*, pp. 1–5

[6] Ellison, Mike, "Birth of the Muse: Rock-Style Stardom Beckons As a New Generation of Poets Quits the Attic for the Limelight," *The Guardian*, 6 January 1994, p. 22

Noting this double emphasis, Christina Patterson detected a "shade of Borges, that prophet of postmodernism", but also wrote that it is "perhaps, no coincidence that the quoted accolades [on *Nil Nil*] are all from men. The title said it all. Here was a poet who loved football, drink, sex and trains. Here, in fact, was a lad."[7] Indeed, this is a characterisation that Paterson himself has accepted, remarking in an interview that "[t]hese were the things I was thinking about at the time […] I was massively detained by sex and football […] There's no point in saying I didn't invite it".

As well as his laddish subject matter, Paterson is also notably masculine in voice. His demotic style is characterised by slang, swearing, dialect, a conversational looseness, and – albeit to a much lesser extent than Armitage – idiom and cliché. His "steely eyed, insistent, and even threatening"[8] address, at least in the early books, swings unnervingly between the triangulated and the direct. Paterson often breaks the fourth wall, as in 'Prologue' and 'Nil Nil', and he has a "buttonholing manner" that, even more than Armitage, hovers between joke and threat.[9] As William Scammell wrote, "the rough-beast diction is deliberately unsettling, like some autodidact offering to sort you out in a Glasgow bar."[10] The best-known example of this diction is probably the ending of 'An Elliptical Stylus', which I discuss below, but we can also see it in 'The Alexandrian Library'. For example, in 'Part III', we find the following:

> Despite your impressive portfolio of shortcomings
> you are not a bad lad, you have come to accept,
> on balance, more blessing than blight; though if pressed
> you could give the addresses of ten or twelve folk
> inclined to feel otherwise, deeply.
> Some call you an angel. Some call you a cunt.
> They are both on the money[11]

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[7] Patterson, "The beautiful game…"

[8] Wilkinson, p. 65

[9] Scammell, William, "I'll See You in Church, Jimmy," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, 1997)

[10] Ibid

[11] Paterson*, LL*, p. 51

If Paterson's overt masculine subject matter has been obvious from the start, Armitage's initially slipped somewhat under the radar. When he was applauded, and occasionally denigrated, it was for the way he opened up poetry to a new class, region, and age demographic, while the gendering, with a few exceptions, was largely ignored or subsumed as part-and-parcel of the other 'identities'. Peter Reading's description of *Zoom!* as characterised by "slangy, youthful, up-to-the-minute jargon and the vernacular of his native northern England", for example, was typical of the positive press, and the negative reviews used similar terms.[12] Carol Ann Duffy, however, picked up on the visible masculinity on display, labelling Armitage "the captain of the Northern Males" in her *Guardian* review of *Kid*, and James Wood went as far as to lament his bad influence, writing that Don Paterson "needs to avoid the blokeish bluntness of Simon Armitage".[13]

Critical attention, however, has caught up and Armitage's masculine subject matter has now been well discussed. Vicki Bertram, writing in 2005, noted that Armitage's 'Snow Joke' is "both about, and for, men" with women functioning "as trophies, cited briefly as the man's appendage".[14] Similarly, Sarah Broom, in 2006, identified the way that "Armitage's male speakers […] make specific references to 'masculine' activities and sexuality".[15] She gives the example of 'All Beer and Skittles' with its mentions of "the overflow dripping / like a barmaid's apron / and the putty as dry as a Wesleyan wedding".[16] Both David Kennedy (2012) and Ian Gregson (2011), meanwhile, have put forward sympathetic accounts. The former discusses Armitage's "embarrassed blokishness" and interrogation of "male bodies and what they produce", while the latter emphasises fatherhood, and the "Male violence [which] is a recurrent theme in Armitage's work".[17] To this list, we might add football, television, drinking,

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[12] Reading, Peter, "The Muse Of The World", *The Sunday Times*, 1989, p. 14

[13] Duffy, Carol Ann, "Books: Kid", *The Guardian*, 27 Oct 1992, p. 11; Wood, James, "James Wood · Ever so Comfy · LRB 24 March 1994," *London Review of Books*

[14] Bertram, p. 53

[15] Broom, Sarah, "Gender, Sex and Embodiment," in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 79

[16] Armitage, Simon, *Zoom!* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 16

[17] Kennedy, David, "'Open Secrets'", pp. 102–104; Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 59

pubs, and sex.[18] Thus, in poems like 'Hop In, Dennis' from 2010's *Seeing Stars* or 'Goalkeeper with a Cigarette' (*The Dead Sea Poems*), it is obvious we are in a man's world, and specifically a working-class British man's world.

> that's not breath coming off my bloke, it's smoke.
> Not him either goading the terraces,
> baring his arse to the visitors' end
> and dodging the sharpened ten-pence pieces,
> playing up, picking a fight, but that's him
> cadging a light from the ambulance men

If we turn, as we did with Paterson, from themes to voice, we can see a similar demotic address, which singles out the speaker as not only a man, but not the kind of man you'd find in a poem. Just as with Paterson, there is slang, swearing, and regional dialect, rather than the rarified, standard English one might expect. But, as Broom identifies, "one of the key markers of competent [masculine] 'performance' of cultural scripts is the confident use of idiom".[19] If we return to 'All Beer and Skittles', we find that the "speech world of the poem […] is both rough and colourful: […] 'He had a hair up his arse / at the best of times', […] 'This job, he assured me, / was a piece of piss'". All of these "expressions evoke a world that is traditionally masculine in its outlook".[20]

'The Two of Us' may not seem the most obvious choice for demonstrating these elements of Armitage's style, being a near translation of Samuel Laycock's 'Thee an' Me'.[21] However, with the 'plot' and images provided by the original, it lets us see Armitage's voice not only isolated, but exaggerated to

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[18] 'An Accommodation' (*Paper Aeroplane,* loc: 1690), first published in *Seeing Stars* (Faber, 2010); 'All for One' in Armitage, Simon, *The Universal Home Doctor*, Kindle ebook (London: Faber, 2010), loc. 127; 'Snow Joke' in *Zoom!*, p. 5; 'The Strid', in *UHD*, loc. 222.

[19] Broom, p. 79

[20] Ibid

[21] Armitage, *DSP*, loc. 591

show more clearly the difference between him and Laycock, the other poet from Armitage's home village of Marsden:

> […]on the day they dig us out
> they'll know that you were something really fucking fine
> and I was nowt.
> Keep that in mind,
> because the worm won't know your make of bone from mine.

Masculinity in Character Poems

I have argued above that the typical lyric "speaker in Paterson's early work tends to be 'an alienated and asocial bachelor: the solitary drinker, greeting the dawn by pissing from his window, recollecting shags from his past"'.[22] Similarly, as Broom points out, the "trademark Armitage voice…is for the most part decisively masculine."[23] In both, although the identification of the 'I' with the poet is calculatedly undermined, there is a "dependable characterisation of the speaker": a laddish persona, whose status is maintained by voice and subject matter.[24]

Here I argue that more extreme and more varied masculine styles are contained in poems presented as obvious character pieces. Armitage's *Zoom!*, for example, "contains a babble of different versions of masculinity." Sometimes "the speaker is the person successfully performing a given cultural script, [and at] other times he is failing to perform it, or subverting the available roles and discourses."[25] We can see these different versions in two different poems about mechanics. In one, 'Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid', it is the speaker who is the mechanic, giving "superbly patronising" advice to a female

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[22] Wilkinson, p. 29, quoting Bertram, p. 193

[23] Broom, p. 77

[24] Wilkinson, p. 29

[25] Broom, p. 78

customer: "If you want / us again we're in the book. Tell your husband."[26] In the other, 'All We Can Do', it is the speaker who has broken down and has to watch the mechanic's "competent […]version of masculinity" while he is towed "in the car behind".[27] In both, the point is a gentle mockery of men and "an amused fascination with gender games" and, in both, this is pulled off through the destabilisation of the 'I' discussed in the previous chapter.[28] The use of the lyric 'I' brings the poems close enough to be read as "self-satire", but we are always aware of the distance, in part because the characters are varied, but mainly because they are so exaggerated.[29]

We can also see this distancing through exaggeration in somewhat darker pieces, where the critique of masculinity is more serious. A good example is Armitage's 'Brassneck', a set-piece poem in which a swaggering, swearing, pickpocket targets the gormless and effete middle-classes at football games.[30] Here there is an extremity and vulgarity of language which seems to go beyond the merely barroom banter that characterises his lyric pieces. When the speaker tells his (literal) partner-in-crime to keep "his cunt-hooks out of my wallet", the contrast is stark, and clearly signals that the speaker is not to be identified with the poet himself. The use of obviously non-naturalistic language is also dialled up. The polysyllabically rhymed dactyls of lines like "Down in the crowds at the grounds where the bread is: / the gold, the plastic, / the cheque-books, the readies" are about as different as is possible from the lightly patterned and unrhymed lyric lines of, say, 'Poem', but are very like those of his most obvious character poem, 'Kid', which also uses polysyllabic rhymes and an exaggerated, comic metre.[31]

As Broom identifies, the "implied ironic stance is signalled partly (as is often the case in Armitage's poetry) by the humorous effect of the contrast between content […], on the one hand, and poetic

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[26] Armitage, *Zoom*, p. 30; Broom, p. 80

[27] Armitage, *Zoom*, p. 11; Broom, p. 78

[28] Broom, p. 79

[29] Ibid

[30] Armitage, Simon, *Kid* (London: FF Classics, Kindle Edition, 2010), loc: 88.

[31] Armitage, *Zoom*, p. 33; Armitage, *Kid*, loc: 531.

form […] on the other".[32] Also notable are the sheer number and variety of idioms, which move far beyond the clichés of ordinary speech, and stray from Armitage's normal Northern English idiolect to the almost-Cockney of "readies" and the lines:

> and not that I mind,
> he thinks I'm a touch on the gingery side:
> my voice a little too tongued and grooved,
> my locks a little
> too washed and groomed.[33]

In that word "gingery" – from 'ginger-beer', meaning 'queer' – we see the association of homosexuality with eloquence and the writing of poetry, and the threat of violence that comes with it. The innuendo of the "[b]ent" policemen who "took [him] into the toilets" is also probably intended. This prickly and defensive anxiety ("not that I mind") about the suspect sexuality of eloquence seems to do something curious; through its very unacceptability, it distances the character of the speaker from the character of the poet himself. As Deborah Forbes argues:

> When faced with a poem spoken in an "I" voice that may or may not be separate from the voice of the poet, one way for the reader to determine the genre of the poem is to measure the distance of the speaker's implied values from what can be assumed about the poet's values.[34]

We can see this moral distancing in Armitage's 'Gooseberry Season'.[35] This is the story of a man who has lost his job, and appears at the speaker's house one day "asking for water", then moves in, and

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[32] Broom, p. 81

[33] Armitage, *Kid*, loc: 88.

[34] Forbes, p. 108

[35] Armitage, *Kid*, loc. 40

makes a nuisance of himself – not paying rent, "sizing up" the speaker's daughter – before the speaker kills him and disposes of the body. The interloper's sins are a litany of traditionally-masculine failures: he has lost his job and run away from his responsibility to his family; not done "a stroke of work" since moving in; he is dependent, not paying a "farthing of rent"; his only contribution is a luxury indulgence, a recipe for "smooth, seedless gooseberry sorbet"; and worst of all, he has made sexual advances on both of the women that 'belong' to the speaker: "sucking up to my wife and on his last night / sizing up my daughter."

These concerns about masculinity, and the punishment meted out for them, are obviously played up, but it's noteworthy how much they line up with the speaker's concerns in the much more lyric 'Wintering Out', in which he seems to admonish himself for "board[ing] six months / at your mother's place, pay[ing] / precious little rent / and not lift[ing] a finger".[36] The performative callousness of the ending is perhaps useful, then, in holding such opinions at arm's length: the speaker, having killed the visitor, says that he sometimes scoops out an extra portion of gooseberry sorbet for the murdered man "for the hell of it", and then seems to threaten the reader: "I mention this for a good reason." This, as Gregson points out, creates an "implicit textual distance between an affectless murderer and the implied author", which is all the more necessary because, unlike in 'Brassneck', the "mundaneness […] adds plausibility to the representation of the speaker's voice".[37]

Don Paterson's '*from* 1001 Nights: the Early Years' is, to my mind, a quite 'distanced' character piece: it is in the voice of a named character, and it is clearly set up with overtones of critique, as is obvious from its epigraph: "*The male muse is paid in silences. Shahrāzād could not have been bought for less than [a] minor Auschwitz.*"[38] Nevertheless, I engage with the debate over it below. In the piece, Paterson voices the character of Sharyar, the prince of the titular story, who, having been betrayed by his first wife, marries, "beds", and then kills a new bride each day:

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[36] Armitage, *Kid*, loc. 157.

[37] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 36

[38] Paterson, *GGTW,* p. 8.

Heaven to bed the same new wife each night!
And I try; but morning always brings her back
changed, although I recognise the room:
my puddled suit, her dog-eared Kerouac,
the snot-stream of a knotted Fetherlite
draped on the wineglass. I killed the alarm,

then took her head off with the kitchen knife
and no more malice than I might a rose
for my daily buttonhole. One hand, like a leaf,
still flutters in half-hearted valediction.
I am presently facing the wall, nose-to-nose
with Keanu Reeves. It is a sad reflection.

Although it obviously uses the first person, and is somewhat modernised – and so brought closer to its author – through its references to Fetherlite condoms and Keanu Reeves, the hyper-masculine gestures of extreme sexual violence are at all times held at a distance, in the protective gloves of character, and, crucially, are in part held at that distance specifically *by* the extremity of the actions. Perhaps for this reason, Paterson's early collections, which may be read as critiques of traditional masculinity, as they are, for example, by Wilkinson, are at the same time full of traditionally-masculine, sometimes violent, men. "Images of female decapitation recur", as Robert Crawford somewhat drily puts it.[39] Bertram is more direct, writing that "Paterson's poems display an enjoyment of killing women".[40]

It is certainly worth picking up on the treatment of women, as it is the subject through which all of Paterson's speakers, both lyric and character, most obviously display their masculinity. The Madonna-

[39] Crawford, Robert, "Robert Crawford · Deep down in the Trash · LRB 21 August 1997," *London Review of Books*, 1997

[40] Betram, p. 187

whore complex is rather literally expressed in 'Amnesia', which features both "blind Annie Spall, the dead evangelist" and the daughter "who ran the brothel from the upstairs flat."[41] More generally, in Armitage's early poems, both the division of the women featured into those suitable as sexual partners and those not, and the admixture of sex and violence, are stark. Of the twenty-two women referred to in *Nil Nil*, thirteen are actual or fantasised sexual partners; five are described as unsuitable for sex (three are ugly, one a 'maiden' relative, one both ugly and secretly a boy); two have left a man and either died or been threatened with violence because of it; one is the unmentioned other half of 'we'; and one is a young woman cleaning the floor. We are "presumably intended to take such scenarios ironically", Bertram writes.[42] This is the question I take up in the next section.

Mixing the Lyric and Character Modes

Above, I looked first at poems in which, despite the destabilisation of the 'I' discussed in chapter three, there is a relatively consistent masculine lyric persona, and then at poems in which extreme masculinity is explored, but which is held at a distance through character. Below, I consider poems in a more mixed style, where the lyric persona is brought closer to extreme masculinity.

The title poem of Don Paterson's *God's Gift to Women* is a good example. Like '*from* 1001 Nights', it contains overtones of critique which are hard to ignore, from the bitter irony of the title to the epigraph from an invented G.K. Chesterton story, 'Gabriel Gale and the Pearl Necklace':

> Cradling the enormous, rancid bunch of stock he had brought her, Mary reflected that the Holy Father could no more be depended upon to make an appropriate donation than any other representative of His sex.[43]

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[41] Paterson, *Nil Nil*, p. 22

[42] Bertram, p. 187

[43] Paterson, *GGTW*, p. 25.

In the poem proper, we find Paterson, half-in and half-out of the character of a philandering, Dundonian Cain, half-boasting and half-lamenting that "a single blow was all it took; / the fucker died inside a week".[44] The "Pearl Necklace" of the title, and the name Gabriel, seem to reference the "string of blisters' on the chest of the female character, which look "as if some angel'd shot his come / as bright as lit magnesium / across your body as you slept".[45] The terrible, generationally-renewed 'gifts' of sex and violence men inflict upon women seem encapsulated in the scalding 'come', and in the male speaker's callous infidelity, which pushes his wife to cut her wrists "with the edge of a Bic Ladyshave".[46] But here it is possible to ask whether the cloak of character can keep the violence, the misogyny of, say, "Titless, doll-eyed, party-frocked",[47] away from the lyric person, especially when, as here, the characters seem so thin and variable – Cain; Christ; Hansel; Oedipus – and when all the characters sound the same.

This is an observation that holds across much of Paterson's early work. Whether he is being Simonides joyfully taking money from a corpse in 'The Reading', or Mars, father of Romulus and Remus, giving his sons sex advice in 'Letter to the Twins' ("make that shape that boys, alas, / you will know already as the sign for *gun* / yet slide it with a woman's gentleness / till you meet that other muzzle coming down"), or any of his nameless personae in, say, 'Imperial' or 'Buggery', his voice is always Paterson.[48] As Wilkinson says,

> Paterson's early poems often concern themselves with the fluid and malleable nature of the self […] However, they do so almost entirely from the perspective of a broadly consistent persona.[49]

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[44] Ibid, p. 27.

[45] Ibid, p. 30.

[46] Ibid, p. 29.

[47] Ibid, p. 31.

[48] Paterson, *LL*, p. 23; Paterson, *LL*, p. 20; Paterson, *GGTW*, p. 37; Paterson, *GGTW*, p. 24.

[49] Wilkinson, p. 29.

In this way, Paterson mixes the conventions of the character and lyric modes, and increases the believability of the character. 'An Elliptical Stylus', a poem we will keep returning to, is a good example.[50] The poem is a "'sad little story about the speaker's Scottish working-class father being mocked by a salesman"'.[51] Throughout, Paterson uses a first-person lyric I, in his 'own' Scots-English voice, and matches closely the speaker's life to his own: both are men, working class, Scottish, and poets, and, as is clear from Paterson's memoir *Toy Fights*, the events really happened. However, he also gives emphasis to the artful and artificial stylistic elements of the story, referencing the fact the poem is a poem (and a "story" and a "fable"), and even supplying an alternative poem-within-a-poem, 'Fidelities', written as if he were the salesman's son instead. And, crucially, he admits to the violent impulse, which he invites the reader to judge as if it were a character poem, while at the same time working as hard as he can to make it seem a *real* utterance, directly addressing the reader.

> But if you still insist on resonance,
> I'd swing for him, and every other cunt
> happy to let my father know his station,
> which probably includes yourself. To be blunt.

It is, as Wilkinson argues "a disorientating mix of apparent confessionalism and ludic flamboyance" in which the audience is forced to sit in the discomfort of not knowing whether their poet-speaker really is a hypermasculine violent aggressor or not – and what the consequences would be if he were.[52]

'You May Turn Over and Begin…' by Armitage is another example, which is, typically, less confrontational and takes a different masculine tack.[53] It is an anecdotal poem in which the speaker, a sixth form boy – jealous of the "older guys" with motorcycles for whom the girls let out their "buns

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[50] Paterson, *Nil Nil*, p. 20.

[51] Quoted in Wilkinson, p. 19.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Armitage, *Kid*, loc. 286.

and pigtails" – dreams of "milk-white breasts and nakedness". He finds "consolation" in an incident in which one such girl, riding pillion, puts her feet down at a traffic light and is left behind "like a wishbone". After this, the rider, not noticing her absence, crashes. Written in a loose, first-person anecdotal style, and using a set of circumstances which are not 'verifiable' extra-poetically as some of Armitage's anecdote poems are, but which are nevertheless plausible as a 'real' event, it is nevertheless stylised with bravura half-rhyme couplets, and ends with a callousness that invites its reading as a character piece, not least because it is almost identical to the gesture – a performatively nonchalant shrug at violence – which ends 'Gooseberry Season'.

Aside from its general ambivalent attitude to education and intellectualism, and its emphasised heterosexual desire, the poem as a whole portrays a 'nice guy' masculine style, which emphasises its distance from traditional masculinity while replacing it with something equally sinister. The speaker displays a simultaneous jealousy and derision of 'alpha' masculinity. The girls' "buns and pigtails / [are] only let out for older guys with studded jackets", but the older guy is also presented as unable to satisfy the girl, who is left, "high and dry" with "her legs wide open". He is also depicted as being uncaring, not noticing her absence "till he came round in the ambulance." The extent to which the girl would be better off with the obviously more sensitive and intelligent speaker is questioned, however, with the performed callousness of the closing gesture, in which the speaker turns from the description of the accident and remembers the bit of trivia he couldn't put his finger on at the start of the poem: 'Which of these films was Dirk Bogarde / not in":

> rumour has it he didn't notice
> till he came round in the ambulance
>
> having underbalanced on a tight left-hander.
> *A Taste of Honey*. Now I remember.

The Irony Defence

It is obvious that in all three modes the poets perform a tough masculinity, which rejects the perceived post-Romantic expectation that the poet will be "effete or tubercular".[54] The interesting question is how to interpret the more extreme, violent and misogynistic masculinities on display, especially when their status as character poems seems deliberately to be questioned by the poets themselves.

We can see what appears to be a version of this debate playing out in the competing interpretations Ben Wilkinson and Vicki Bertram put forward of Paterson's poems in *God's Gift to Women*, particularly '*from* 1001 Nights: The Early Years'. The problem, as Wilkinson sets it out, is that Paterson's attempt "to interrogate issues of gender and sexuality by means of ironically perpetuating traditional modes of representation" runs the risk of "merely replicating and endorsing, rather than parodying and so subverting these representations".[55] Wilkinson places himself in the ironically 'parodying and subverting' camp and Bertram in the 'replicating and endorsing' camp – a contrast which may, in some ways, reflect the differing responses of male and female readers to such violent subject matter.

Of course, this issue is not finally resolvable. For one thing, meaning is at least co-created by the reader, as Paterson himself would admit, but mainly because both sides actually, and counterintuitively, rely on the *same* position on the relation of character to author – which is that it is contingent. Indeed, I argue that Wilkinson mischaracterises both sides of the debate; he claims that Bertram sees Paterson's masculine poems as plain self-revelation, when she does not, and he defends Paterson with the irony defence, when it is reasonably clear that Paterson himself does not wish to be defended in these terms.

Regarding the first of these arguments, I posit that Bertram's view that Paterson is being dishonest in his intentions is not underpinned by a straightforward belief in unavoidable self-revelation, but by the very same belief in character's inherent slipperiness that underpins the irony defence Wilkinson relies

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[55] Wilkinson, p. 37

on. Thus, this is not a debate between a critic who believes in the separability of character and author, and one who does not, but between different views of the aesthetics and ethics of character performances. Bertram's position, in her own words, is that "lies and savage irony provide perfect cover for a fully postmodern display of masculinity".[56] Wilkinson states that Bertram reads Paterson's poem in a "rather straightforwardly blinkered fashion, ignoring their dramatised speeches and scenarios in favour of viewing such poems as evidence of the barely-veiled misogynistic intent of the poet 'behind' them".[57] Later, he paraphrases: "In other words, *God's Gift to Women* apparently finds a macho poet indulging in chauvinism and chest-thumping, with the parody and irony of the poems a smokescreen."[58]

The question is: which is it? Wilkinson accuses Bertram of simultaneously "ignoring" the parody and irony, and reading them as a "smokescreen". Is she reading the poems in a straightforward manner, or believing in subterfuge? The difficulty comes in because it is notoriously hard to tell the difference between honesty and a double-bluff. Thus, we see Paterson's defenders accusing his critics of treating his work as honest and straightforward communication – not bluffing at all – when actually they think he is *double*-bluffing: not openly admitting to a hegemonic masculinity, but hiding behind an exaggerated performance of hegemonic masculinity that is so outlandish that readers think it cannot be indicative of his 'real' opinion, when, in fact, so they argue, it is, or nearly is. This much becomes clear if we look at Bertram's actual words: Paterson's is specifically a *postmodern,* not an open, display of masculinity, and it is achieved, not through 'barely' veiling his position, but outright "lies" and "savage irony".

Both positions, then, in fact read the poems as ironic; their disagreement is over the purpose of the irony. This, of course, is just as well, because the argument Wilkinson attributes to Bertram is impossible to defend. It is, of course, the ordinary working of criticism to say that characters simply do

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[56] Bertram, p. 188

[57] Wilkinson, p. 38

[58] Ibid

not, and do not simply, represent the 'true' feelings, beliefs or lives of their authors. Moreover, Armitage and Paterson have a number of undisprovable arguments making this case. I give just three.

First, both Paterson and Armitage would argue there is no such thing as an essential 'true self', which it is possible to represent. As Paterson writes in *Smith*, "Being or pretending to be just one person is a trick; most of us host a whole bunch of folk".[59] A similar idea animates Armitage's poem 'All for One' in which two versions of the self, the 'I' and the mind, literally argue and wrestle.[60] Second, that argument notwithstanding, the poet's 'individual voice' neither *is* the 'self', nor is it a reliable representation of it. As Paterson writes in the Afterword to *Orpheus*: "The voice isn't you, and never was".[61] And third, it is impossible for a person fully to know themselves in any case, as there is always a blind spot in self-perception. Armitage literalises this unreachable area, and also gestures at its opposite problem – not failing to see yourself as the world sees you, but rather seeing yourself when you look at the world – in the poem beginning 'A safe rule in life is: trust nobody…', which continues

> That's the first, and secondly,
> the man with 20/20 vision who achieves the peak
> of Everest (forgetting for now the curve
> of the Earth), looks east and west and gets
> a perfect view of the back of his head.
>
> Third, there will always be
> that square half-inch or so of unscratchable skin
> between the shoulder blades, unreachable
> from over the top or underneath[62]

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[59] Paterson, *Smith*, loc. 1019

[60] Armitage, *UHD*, loc. 128

[61] Paterson, *Orpheus*, p. 84

[62] Armitage, *BoM*, loc. 182

Taking now Wilkinson's position that '1001 Nights' is an attempt to represent extreme masculinity ironically in order to parody and subvert it, I argue that Paterson's own position on irony is germane, because the irony defence is specifically grounded on intention, and while we should not definitively trust a statement that a poem *is* meant ironically, we should at least take seriously a statement that it is not. On this point, in his collected aphorisms, Paterson is scathing about the use of irony specifically to defend the presentation of violence against women:

> the liberal middle classes like to forget that, a mere twenty-five years ago, they found the sight of a woman being stabbed in the face with a fork just about the funniest thing they had ever seen, provided they could reassure themselves that the context was sufficiently ironised.[63]

Armitage seems to have a similar position, although his comments on the matter are somewhat ambiguous. Asked by Jane Stabler about the "exploration of violence" in his poetry, Armitage, referring to Lowell's 'Half a Century Gone' from the *Notebook, 1967-8*, says "I always think that the most important thing is to avoid the 'collusive grin"'.[64]

This on its own is by no means terminal to Wilkinson's argument, or the irony defence in general – after all, it is clear from the title of *God's Gift to Women* that Paterson does use irony, and Armitage uses it plentifully – but we should at least bear in mind an alternative or complementary explanation for the inclusion of such violent and misogynistic masculinities.

Masculinity as Brutal Honesty

My own argument, in short, is that Paterson in '1001 Nights' and similar poems is neither displaying violent and misogynist men to critique them through irony nor helplessly expressing his own

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[63] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 220

[64] Stabler, p. 24

undisguised misogyny, nor even using them as a kind of post-modern wish fulfilment, but rather simply trying to tell the truth – which is that some men are violent – and that this is a better explanation for most of Paterson's and some of Armitage's mixed-mode pieces.

To see the case for this, it is useful to return to Armitage and Paterson's aesthetics and specifically their (almost mimetic) commitments to reflect the world, and crucially, to tell the truth about the world as it actually is. Indeed, for Paterson this is a poet's first commitment. Asked, "Does a poet have any particular responsibilities?", he answers "Not to lie. To themselves first".[65] For both, poetry's "very purpose is to stop us articulating false statements about the world".[66] The question is how to reconcile this with the pragmatic anti-expressive positions explored in the previous chapter. The answer can be found in Peter Hühn's argument that "a text can be called "factual" under two conditions – if the author is speaking as him- or herself, or if what is being referred to is really "the case" in the world, the story told has really happened".[67]

If we consider Paterson's and Armitage's commitments to be honest as attempts to say what is "really "the case" in the world", then combined with the refusal to treat the poem as a form of expression, we get an explanation for a strange double emphasis in both poets, in which they both claim to give the truth, but not the facts. Paterson, for example, has stated that the "facts in poems are only there in the service of what you perceive to be the truth. And the facts often have to change to honour that truth."[68] Similarly, Armitage advises writers to apply the "Lie Detector Test": "Poems don't have to tell the truth, but they have to be true to themselves, even if they're telling a lie. Give the poem a thump – does it ring true?".[69] Indeed, Paterson goes further than this, making lying not irrelevant to truth, but rather a route to it. As he explains, "if you're a known liar, it actually gives you the freedom to tell the

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[65] "Don Paterson - Interview," *The Harlequin*, 2013

[66] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 10

[67] Hühn, p. 157

[68] Miller, Phil, "How Does a Poet Write a Poem? An Expanded Chat with Don Paterson," *HeraldScotland* (HeraldScotland, 2016)

[69] "How to Write Poetry: Poet Simon Armitage Has a Few Things for You to Think About," *The Guardian*, 2008

truth, since no-one will ever believe you."[70] Naturally, these truths, in their worldviews, which are either realist or pessimist depending on your opinion, include men's misogyny, their violence, and their unreconstructed masculinity. Indeed, when it comes to violence, Armitage believes it is wrong "to refer to violence […] through exclusion or refraction".[71]

With this in mind, we can see that Armitage's and Paterson's simultaneous belief in telling the truth and avoiding the 'facts', especially about themselves, leaves the persona or character poem as the best way to be honest about the world without self-revelation. The 'I / not I' allows them to represent unpleasant men characters, not necessarily to ironise them – though this is a possible reading – but to suggest they really exist. In this interpretation, the mixing of styles and the consequent plausibility of the 'I' is best explained not as an attempt to push an 'ironic' character as close to the edge of acceptability as possible, nor as the winking revelation of a masculinity they actually endorse, but a way of being brutally honest and including themselves in the harsh picture they draw of the world. In this we can see elements of the division Donald Davie makes between "the Wordsworthian poets who confess to virtue [… and] the Byronic poets who confess to vice".[72] This latter type of confession grounds its ethics not in virtue but in a frank, unflinching honesty.

The problem, of course, is how to give the impression of frank, unflinching honesty when you are so committed to undermining the sincerity of the lyric 'I'. I argue that the solution lies in the psychological effect known as "negativity bias": the fact that "negative information is deemed more true".[73] This means that the blunt, the shocking, the risky, the explicit, and the 'unpopular' come to be indicative of sincerity. Within art, the elision from the negative – the unpleasant, violent, or pessimistic – to the honest can be seen in movements like the 'dirty realism' of Bukowski, Raymond Carver and Tobias

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[70] Friel, p. 194

[71] Stabler, p. 24

[72] Davie, p. 143

[73] Hilbig, Benjamin E., "Sad, Thus True: Negativity Bias in Judgments of Truth," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45 (2009), 983–86

Wolff, which "reeks of authenticity".[74] It can also be seen in Victorian "Manly speech", which warded off the suspicion of insincerity through a directness which "might well cross the boundary of propriety and appear brusque or even rude."[75]

As the phrase 'Manly Speech' suggests, there is not only an elision from unpleasantness to honesty but from unpleasant honesty to manliness. Michael Davitt Bell, for example, has shown that, in the American tradition, a novelist's claim "to be a realist or a naturalist was a way to provide assurance that one was a "real" man rather than an "effeminate" artist."[76] Even now, as Pellerin suggests, writing in a bleak and pessimistic way is "a badge of honor, as if 'real men' wrote about 'real life' in 'real prose.'" This, I argue, is what the shocking, violent, and misogynistic depictions are doing in Paterson and Armitage's writing.

They are both poets' way of underlining the truth of what they are saying without having to write about themselves. The mixing of styles, on the other hand, reminds us that it could be. That is to say, where the irony defence implies that the poets are above the critiques they are making of other men, and thus excludes them from the masculinity they portray, and Bertram's argument would deny that their representations of men are critiques at all, suggesting a kind of self-sparing dishonesty, reading the poems straight claims the masculine character for the lyric persona, but does not celebrate it.

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[74] "Granta 8: Dirty Realism," *Granta*, Summer 1983; Newman, Gracie, "Dirty Realism: Authenticity in the 20th Century," *The Stanford Daily*, 2018

[75] Tosh, John, "Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity in Victorian England," *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 2017, 91–110, p. 460

[76] Bell, Michael Davitt, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), cover description

Chapter Five. "There's the Craft and the Graft, sure, but there's a Whole Lot More Besides": The Poet as Craftsman and Labourer[1]

[1] Paterson, "Dilemma…", p. 157

Introduction

In this chapter, I consider Paterson and Armitage's reparative responses to the second gender threat I set out in chapter two. This threat was that post-industrial changes in British culture led to a new emphasis on both rational utility and labour, not only as moral virtues, but as essential components of masculinity. This put pressure on seemingly-unproductive intellectual pursuits generally and on men poets in particular. As Herbert Sussman argued, the new "[e]ntrepreneurial manhood with its emphasis on engagement in the male sphere of work, [and] its valuing of strength and energy […]generated particularly acute anxiety for the early Victorian male poet".[2] This is not an anxiety that has gone away; the figure of the poet in the public imagination is still an ideal based on the Romantic heresy, and both work and what we might call potency – the ability to effect changes in the world – are still essential components of most masculinity ideologies.

On the issue of poetry and labour, there are a number of reparative responses available. Men poets might, for example, demonstrate "[c]ompetence in [other] traditionally masculine behaviors" to provide "masculine 'insurance' or 'credit', which can be used to "compensate for nonmasculine behavior".[3] Indeed, as the critic Slopen points out, this can take the form of other jobs:

> male authors, especially poets, are terribly fond of listing their assorted occupations on their book jackets. Jobs like logger, truck driver, cop, fisherman, are especially cherished. These are appropriately macho, two-fisted occupations proving that the guy is no sissy.[4]

But the reparative response I am interested in, and which I argue Paterson and Armitage use, is to present the writing of poetry *itself* as labour.

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[2] Sussman, *Victorian*, p. 82

[3] De Visser, "'Man Points'", p. 6

[4] Quoted in Greig and Hughes, p. 97. The original has been removed.

This is not a new idea. In 'Becoming Longfellow: Work, Manhood, and Poetry', Matthew Gartner argues that Longfellow strove to "legitimize poetry as an occupation fit for a man" by emphasising "artisanal ideals of hard work and pride of craft" and by achieving "commercial success" – two of the same strategies I argue Paterson and Armitage use.[5] Similarly, in a context closer to Paterson, David Kennedy has demonstrated the way in which Douglas Dunn presents the writing of poetry as a kind of masculine, industrial labour and "the poet as a socialist worker":[6]

> My poems should be Clyde-built, crude and sure
> […]
> Clydesiders of slant steel and angled cranes;
> A poetry of nuts and bolts, born, bred,
> Embattled by the Clyde, tight and impure.[7]

Below, I first explore Armitage's and Paterson's comments on the idea of poetry as work, arguing that both their presentation of poetry as work, and their guilt and defensiveness when it is not, are two sides of the same coin. Second, I argue that when they do present poetry as work, they are careful to characterise it as productive labour – work that makes a product – rather than as emotional labour or care work. They are not, as they are keen to emphasise, therapists.

Next, I look at the ways both poets attempt to navigate a pair of competing ideologies of masculine labour: an older tradition which views *episodic* craft labour based on the apprenticeship system as quintessentially masculine, and a newer tradition which views as masculine the hard, *continuous* labour of the factory system. Responding to the first of these, I attend to the ways both poets describe the writing of poems as skilled craft labour. Then, in a further section, I study the ways both emphasise the long and hard hours it is necessary to put in. The combination of these two practical ideologies – the

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[5] Gartner, pp. 61–62

[6] Kennedy, "What does…", p. 130

[7] Dunn, Douglas, *New and Selected Poems, 1966-1988* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989), p. 55

poet as artisan and the poet as labourer – results in a characteristic 'drudge then flourish' depiction of the writing process.

Finally, I turn from a focus on labour and production to a focus on utility and the product. As Arthur Danto brings out in 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', poetry has long been seen as a "as a causally or politically neutered activity" – one that, in Auden's famous formulation "makes nothing happen."[8] This political and philosophical impotence is an obvious gender threat, because it seems to make poetry an indulgence or vanity, and poets an irrelevance. It is for this reason, I argue, that both poets present poetry as having some use value, or purpose in society, even if they are skeptical of "big P political poetry".[9]

Not a Job, but Work

As Kennedy wrote of Harrison and Dunn, "anxieties over what might be termed class performativity are inextricable from anxieties over gender performativity", so the question is "whether cultural activity generally and poetry specifically is 'real' work for 'real men'".[10] Paterson's attitude to this is probably best summed up in the idea that "poetry isn't a job", but it is work.[11] The first half of this seems to be tied up with two specific ways in which poetry falls short. One is that, unlike an ordinary job, and even "unlike a 'novelist' or 'composer', you can't do it all the time".[12] He says, "I have […] friends who hit the studio or desk or piano at nine and knock off at five. I know of no poet who does this."[13] And the other is that the financial rewards are so low: poetry "isn't a calling, and even less a living".[14] He writes,

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[8] Danto, Arthur C., "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art," *Grand Street*, 4 (1985), 171

[9] Allardice, "I always thought…"

[10] Kennedy, "What does…", p. 115

[11] *Harlequin,* "An Interview with Don Paterson"

[12] *Harlequin,* "An Interview with Don Paterson"

[13] Paterson, *Toy Fights*, loc. 136

[14] Ibid

"There's no profession. What they call 'the poetry profession' is a Ponzi scheme. With similar financial rewards".[15]

While the impecunity of the poet is, naturally, a problem for poets, and a gender threat for all men, it is a particular threat for working-class writers, who do not have the resources to indulge in unpaid work. Paterson draws together these class and gender anxieties in his comment that, "for those of us from poorer or working-class backgrounds, the news that you were going to dedicate your life to writing serious verse was received by the community with the same panic as might be your departure for […] a transexual circus."[16]

The lack of a proper work schedule, meanwhile, is perhaps tied up not only with "the importance of working to conventional male identity generally and to working class male identity specifically", but also with Calvinism.[17] In *Toy Fights*, Paterson writes that the Mearns – where his father's family were from – "fetishised the Protestant work ethic to the point of death cult", and, although "the Patersons were relatively easy-going" by those standards, he is clear those expectations still affect him.[18] In an aphorism which invites a personal reading, he says:

> My work is the deferral of work, which exhausts me; the actual work I barely notice. As a result I never really feel like I'm working, a happy enough state of affairs for all but the Calvinists, for whom it is *an exact torment.*[19]

Beyond these specific complaints, there seems to be a general feeling that to call yourself a poet is both embarrassing and pretentious, expressing the strange double characterisation of the poet as both effeminate failure and visionary. Reflecting the first, he said in a 2004 interview, "I'm still embarrassed

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[15] *Harlequin,* "An Interview with Don Paterson"

[16] Paterson, introduction to *NBP*, p. xxv

[17] Kennedy, "What does…", p. 116

[18] Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 204

[19] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 1552

to say I'm a poet… I say I'm a writer and sometimes I say I work for the Inland Revenue, which kills the conversation. To say you're a poet is even worse."[20] Regarding the second, he writes to "call yourself 'poet' strikes me as either a mistake, a tasteless vaunt or the confession of a mental illness" while to "be called one is either a mistake, a compliment or a diagnosis".[21]

Simon Armitage, for his part, is somewhat more ambivalent – or at least inconsistent – in his characterisations. In a 2015 interview with the *Guardian*, he said "I definitely don't think of it as a job", but in 2021's *AVA*, he recalls being asked to type his "job title into the search box" and "typ[ing] in the word 'poet'".[22] Nevertheless, if we take his ambivalence to be doubt about poetry's status as a proper job, he sets out the same two reasons as Paterson, and, like him, links them to his working-class background. First, he states that you "can't make a living as a poet just by writing poems".[23] And second, he says that "I completely understand that idea of coming from a working-class background and wanting to get on with something."[24]

In terms of reparative responses, both Paterson and Armitage, to a certain extent, use the strategy Slopen identifies, emphasising that while poetry itself isn't a job, they do *have* jobs. At the beginning of *Toy Fights*, Paterson writes, "I sometimes 'do' poetry" but "[i]n exchange for money, I lecture, and for years also worked in publishing".[25] Indeed, he argues that this is generally true; unlike novelists who "are all, to a man and women, convinced they work like dogs", poets "all have *jobs*".[26] Armitage, a former probation officer, did have one of those "macho, two-fisted occupations" and this identity structures his second collection, *Xanadu*, which is set on the Ashfield Valley Estate — "his first posting

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[20] Patterson, "Playing the beautiful game"

[21] Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 146

[22] Edemariam, Aida, "Simon Armitage: Making Poetry Pay | Aida Edemariam," *The Guardian*, 2021; Armitage, *AVA*, p. 243

[23] "Armitage Arms Poems With Power: Arts: The Harvard Crimson," *Arts | The Harvard Crimson*

[24] Edemariam, "Making poetry pay"

[25] Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 100

[26] Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 198

as a raw recruit".[27] However, both poets' far more frequent strategy is to represent poetry not as a job, but as *work*.

At its most basic level, the idea that writing a poem is work rests on the idea that it is an active not a passive process. This might seem a low bar, were it not for the post-Romantic belief that poets are merely the passive recipients of poetry, whose true source might be either internal (the subconscious) or external (the muses), but is certainly not the active, conscious creation of the poet. Paterson, in particular, is scathing about the "certain breed of older scholar who continues to regard the poet as a bewildered naïf through which the work is channelled".[28] Armitage, for his part, complains about the essential passivity of other poets in 'Re-Writing the Good Book': "how much more exciting it would have been if poetry had been commandeered by people who did more than sit at home with their thumbs up their arses."[29]

Beyond this, Paterson emphasises a second basic component of poetry-as-labour: that it requires time and effort. The poem does not arise instantly, nor is it a spontaneous effusion of native talent. In *The Fall At Home,* he writes, "what looks like talent is just the dumb patience to sit two hours longer than everyone else" and in his poem 'Why do you stay up so late', a sort of *ars poetica* as apology to his son, we get an indication of the necessity of patience and long hours.[30] The speaker, first collects 'the dull things of the day' and then has to

> […]look at them and look at them until
> one thing makes a mirror in my eyes
> then I paint it with the tear to make it bright.

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[27] Armitage, *Xanadu*, cover description

[28] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 343.

[29] Armitage, Simon, "Re-Writing The Good Book", in *Strong Words: Modern Poets On Modern Poetry* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 254.

[30] Paterson, *The Fall,* loc. 74.

This is why I sit up through the night.[31]

Armitage describes this idea of time and effort viscerally in an interview with *World Literature Today*, saying "there are '[l]ots of agonies for me to go through to get the poems to their finished drafts […it's like] swimming through bricks".[32] Indeed, it is a standard part of his media image that he "works furiously hard" and is not to be confused with the "poets sitting for days in a trance, contacting the evasive muse, writing two lines every other month".[33] This raises the obvious question of what kind of work they are doing.

Poetry as Productive Labour

Having identified as a baseline that, while 'poet' is not a job, writing poetry might be conceived of as work, I want to use a distinction of David Graeber's to argue that poem-making is idealised as a particular kind of labour: productive labour, as opposed to *re*productive labour.[34] (The distinction, as productive and *un*productive labour, goes back to Marx). The former makes something, while the latter maintains something already there. The former might be mining, manufacture, or even baking if the product is sold and profit made, and tends to be technical, while the latter might be "housework or education".[35] That is to say, reproductive labour is often caring or emotional labour – something both poets are keen to emphasise poetry is not.

It will be obvious, of course, that these distinctions are gendered, but it is perhaps less obvious that most work "can't be said to "create" anything. Most of it is a matter of maintaining and rearranging things", and, more to the point, that the same basic task can be presented in either light according to its

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[31] Paterson, *Rain*, loc. 114

[32] Roensch and Carpenter Weedon

[33] "As a Probation Officer Simon Armitage Met His Share of Villains…," *Herald Scotland*, 2006

[34] Graeber, David, *Bullshit Jobs* (London: Penguin, 2018), Kindle ebook, p. 202

[35] Graeber, p. 202.

prevalent gendering in a given society.[36] Consider how traditionally men have cooked high-status meals, such as Christmas dinners – often badly, and with a great deal of fuss, and expectation of high praise – while their wives got on with the job of cooking every other day of the year. The former creates a product, while the latter is just maintenance. The point, then, is not to ascertain what kind of labour writing poetry really is, but how it is presented by the poets.

I start with the negative, and explore both poets' attitudes to poetry as reproductive, emotional labour. The first thing to say in this regard is that positioning the poet as carer and writing poetry as therapeutic is not unusual. Indeed, it is the framing of many of the bestselling recent anthologies. Here, for example, is the blurb for *Poetry Pharmacy*: "Whether you are suffering from loneliness, lack of courage, heartbreak, hopelessness, or even from an excess of ego, there is something here to ease your pain."[37]

Paterson's attitude towards this is complicated and striated, dividing practitioners into poets proper and amateurs, and practitioners from readers. "Poetry" he says, "is a wonderfully therapeutic thing to do at amateur level" but "the serious practice of poetry, is the worst form of self-help you could possibly devise. There is a reason why poets enjoy the highest statistical incidence of mental illness among all the professions."[38] In short, writing poetry is not pampering or self-care; it is, in fact, dangerous, and therefore manly.

With regard to the division between poet and reader, on the one hand he insists on the "intrinsic cultural value" of poetry – that it is "of absolutely no use other than for its simple *reading*" – and inveighs against the "insistence on poetry's auxiliary usefulness – for example […] as a form of therapy" which has "eroded its real power". But on the other, he identifies this real power as the

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[36] Graeber, p. 221.

[37] Sieghart, William, *Poetry Pharmacy*, (London: Penguin, 2017).

[38] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

"power to actually inspire readers to think or live differently."[39] There is a very similar argument made in his preface to *New British Poetry* in which he first argues that poetry is "lousy decoration, a lousy way of carrying information, mostly a lousy collaborative partner, and is good for very little but itself" and then goes to says "[m]ercifully it seems that the urge to be assuaged or comforted or inspired or galvanised into action by a poem [is] hardwired in the human brain."[40] It seems, then, that for Paterson, poetry *can* be caring or therapeutic labour as long as it does not take that name.

We find a similar but softer division in Armitage, who admits that for readers, "it can have its therapeutic use".[41] However, his enthusiasm is limited to say the least. Commenting on an IPSOS MORI poll, he writes: "only 11 per cent of respondents had read any poetry — roughly the same number who had read a self-help book. Some nights, I lie awake worrying they're the same people."[42]

He is similarly ambivalent about its use as therapy by writers. In an article for the *Guardian*, he admits:

> A great many of those experiences [in the probation service] found their way into the early poems, and even though I denied it at the time (and still deny the idea of poetry as some kind of therapy), it's probably true that they operated as a release valve, a way of depressurising during weekends and bank holidays.[43]

On the other hand, in an earlier interview with *Varsity*, he said, "I don't think poetry is just for one thing […] It certainly can be a way of self-examination and exploration, and I think on that basis can be very therapeutic for some people."[44] That phrase, "for some people", alongside the comment above, suggests that he is not one of those people. Whether the difference is that he is a professional poet and

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[39] All ibid.

[40] Paterson, Intro to *New British Poetry*, xxvii - xxviii

[41] "As A Probation Officer…"

[42] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 229.

[43] "'Writing Was Just For Fun Then': Simon Armitage On Writing Zoom!", *The Guardian*, 2020

[44] Taylor, Joanna, "Simon Armitage: Poetry "Engenders A Sense Of Empathy", *Varsity Online*, 2016

the other people are amateurs can only be inferred, but what is certain is that, like Paterson, he does not conceive of his own practice as care, therapy, or maintenance either for the self or for anyone else, regardless of what other people do.

If we turn from what poetry is not, to what it *is*, Armitage explicitly underlines his desire for *product* over and above the unrewarding and endless drudgery of emotional maintenance in his former job: "One of the problems with working in probation was that there was no product. You could put endless amounts of effort into a client, and genuinely, after five or six years, conclude that you'd made no difference whatsoever in that person's life."[45]

Paterson draws together many of these threads in an aphorism comparing musical to poetic composition. In it, he bemoans that poetry cannot be produced at will through simple labour and technical calculation, expresses distaste for the necessity of emotional labour, and explicitly links the act of *pure* production, untainted by care, to godhood:

> As a compositional practice, music is easily superior to poetry in that it can be exercised at will. The composer is often detained in nothing more than the business of making a single large and subtle calculation – the emotion consequently registered in the heart of the listener having at no point in the process necessarily been felt in his own. This is unthinkable in poetry, yet more often than not – whatever the agonies or raptures of the poet – the reader is left dry-eyed and perfectly indifferent. But to have felt *nothing* and *still devastate an audience,* that sensation is probably as close to divinity as we will get.[46]

Of course, it is true that, in this, emotional labour is regarded as necessary for the creation of a poem, but crucially it is seen as a negative.

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[45] Roensch and Carpenter Weedon

[46] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 2297.

Episodic Versus Continuous Labour

Masculine productive labour of the kind Paterson and Armitage idealise also tends to be *episodic,* particularly outside of modern capitalism. It has a defined build-up and end point, which is the creation of a product. It it also prestigious, exciting, risky, and technical in character. Feminine reproductive tasks, on the other hand, tend to be *continuous*, monotonous, time-consuming, and uncelebrated. As Graeber argues:

> Hunting animals is more demanding than gathering vegetables […]; building houses better lends itself to heroic efforts than cleaning them. As these examples imply, in most human societies, men tend to try, and usually succeed, to monopolize the most exciting, dramatic kinds of work.[47]

The reason I emphasise that productive labour is episodic specifically *outside of modern capitalism* is that the industrial revolution, and the factory, essentially forced men into what was then considered a feminine type of labour. In fact, it was women and children who were the first to be put in factories, as they were the ones most expected to do repetitive, other-directed work. It was only after it became clear that women were becoming bigger breadwinners than men that the switch was effected.[48]

Sussman identifies this switch from masculine-coded episodic labour based on the apprenticeship system to feminine-coded continuous labour in the industrial revolution as one reason for the valorisation of work as an end in-and-of-itself, and the subsequent masculinisation of factory labour.[49] Hence we have two masculine ideologies that seem to pull in opposite directions: episodic, productive labour as epitomised in the figure of the master craftsman, and hard, continuous labour as epitomised in the figure of the industrial worker.

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[47] Graeber, p. 86

[48] Graeber, p. 243; Paterson is well aware of this historical change. See *Toy*, loc. 3069

[49] Sussman, *Masculine*, pp. 82–88

As Sussman characterises it, the "craftsman as a form of masculine identity" is "a man whose primary self-definition […] depends upon his skillful practice of making something well." He "must prove his manhood by exhibiting the product of his skilled labor for his peers".[50] On the other hand, for "both the owners of the factories and their workers, manliness was performed through working hard, [and] making money."[51] For the industrial worker, "a man become[s] a man through the performance of hard work", not through skill.[52]

Below, I first explore Armitage's and Paterson's representation of poetry as craft labour, then consider their emphasis on hard, continuous work, before assessing the ways in which the two figures of craftsman and labourer are brought together.

The Poet as Craftsman

In this section, I argue that Paterson and Armitage present the poet as a skilled craftsman in three principal ways. First, and most obviously, they depict the writing of a poem as if it were a skilled manual craft, rather than an intellectual or an emotional one. If "romanticism deskilled the process of making what we now call 'art'", Armitage and Paterson seek to reverse this process.[53] Second, they represent writing poems as a skill, which, even if it is not *always* teachable, is nevertheless governed by rationally explicable rules of process. As Sussman writes, in "all times, the craftsman achieves his expertise not through sudden inspiration, but through a long period of training" during which "he absorbs the rules and techniques of his craft."[54] And finally, both poets represent the poet's career as following this typical training pathway, from apprentice, to journeyman, to master.

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[50] Sussman, *Masculine*, pp. 59-60

[51] Ibid, p. 81

[52] Ibid, p. 85

[53] Ibid, p. 62

[54] Sussman, *Masculine*, p. 59

Turning to the first of these, Armitage, in the introduction to *Sandettie Light Vessel Automatic*, wrote that commissions allowed him to view poetry as "a *craft*, with its implication of form and function".[55] He is fond of characterising writing as a hands-on, practical, if not always rugged, activity, "like building up a papier-mâché or matchstick model, layer by careful layer, piece by precarious piece".[56] This also comes across strongly in his criticism:

> Hardy's symmetrical and right-angled stanzas are the solid oak drawers in a bureau or dresser, and his rhymes are the dovetails and wooden dowels and mitred corners by which the structures interlock[57]

Indeed, he presents this idea of mastery over a material as foundational to the art:

> [You can] control a poem. You [can] manipulate, shape, and fashion it, then have something finished, something to show. At some level I've always wanted to be a maker, but I'm no good at drawing, or making pots, or anything like that, so what I've ended up doing is making things with language. That's the root of the word "poetry," anyway: "to make." I really missed that when I was working for the probation service.[58]

Paterson prefers to present the making of a poem as something mechanical. He has written on numerous occasions that a poem is "a little machine for remembering itself", and has continued the metaphor when talking about editing, which he says is like "dredging up bits of machinery that normally sit below the waterline of conscious operation, then taking them to bits, pointing and poking at them".[59] Like Armitage, his appreciation for skill and craft also comes across in his criticism – in

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[55] Armitage, *SLVA*, p. 10

[56] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 276

[57] Paterson, *AVA*, p. 155

[58] Roensch and Carpenter Weedon

[59] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 22; Paterson and Sperling, p. 147.

Smith, he praises Donaghy's poems as "exquisitely crafted things, beautifully tooled, self-winding mechanisms" – but it is also evident in a more subtle way in his poems.[60] Edward Larrissy, for example, finds in Paterson's work a "dual emphasis on, and suspicion of, artistic technique", which combines a scepticism of final meaning or 'truth' in the deep sense with spotlit and emphasised bravura craftsmanship.[61] His poems contain moments where "the satisfaction to be gained from the technical mastery of art seems to outweigh the emptiness of meaning's absence."[62]

Moving on to my second point, a corollary of the idea that poetry is a skilled craft is that the tools for making a poem are, if not obvious, then at least in theory rationally explicable, replicable, and teachable, just as they are in any other artisanal activity. In *The Poem*, Paterson writes "[Everywhere but in 'linguistically innovative' or 'avant-garde' poetry] the rules of the word-game are sufficiently well understood to be shared: this means that a line or a stanza can be found wanting in the poem's own terms, and is capable of being effectively revised […] by an editor."[63] He is open to the idea that these techniques and processes, though they are objectively observable, in actual composition may be intuited. Indeed, he believes it may actually be better if they are so. "[A]s far as poets are concerned," he writes, "all techniques should be learned with a view to forgetting them."[64] However, this does not mean that the rules don't exist: "employing 'intuition' as a proper explanation is just a logical fallacy, and elides what I believe to be a consistent process."[65]

Armitage's basic agreement with Paterson about the importance of knowable techniques over free and formless spontaneity can be fairly inferred from an offhand comment that "[t]o me, jazz is the very

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[60] Paterson, *Smith*, location: 149

[61] Larrissy, Edward, "No-Score Drawing: Postmodern Games in Don Paterson," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 49–60, p. 53.

[62] Larrissy, p. 49.

[63] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 335.

[64] Ibid, p. 165.

[65] Ibid, p. 225.

opposite of poetry".[66] To that, we can add an extra element, which is that, not only are his poems rationally crafted, they are *planned*: "I know other poets who work on poems as exploration, but I've usually got a destination in mind."[67]

Armitage's comment about the way "other poets" write is an important caveat. Both poets recognise that there are times when a poem, even one of their own, doesn't seem to fulfil these craft criteria of being skilled (and in Armitage's case, willed) labour – when a poem seems to arrive passively through inspiration. Paterson's poem 'The Rat' concerns just such an anxiety. In it, a naïve poet, who refuses the technical help of the speaker, writes "with his green arrogance / […] and his one lucky strike" a perfect poem ("the best poem ever written about a rat"), which seems to say to the speaker "*For all the craft and clever-clever / you did not write me, fool. Nor will you ever.*"[68]

However, there are two mitigating points here. First, the naïve poet's success is represented as a *frustration,* not as triumphant evidence that a poem truly is a product of momentary inspiration. And second, luck, native talent, and intuition as 'sources' of poetry as can be subsumed under the category of skill. In 'The Rat', the poet has just accidentally hit on the correct technique. This does not mean the technique does not exist, any more than a film character cutting by chance the correct wire proves bomb disposal an unskilled job. Indeed, this combination of luck, native talent and intuition is the *ordinary* and perhaps better way of composition: "one makes a poem or a child, by accident *and* design."[69] As Paterson writes in *The Poem,* "All this is work best completed by the instinct […]but the instinct can be consciously trained into making better and more consistent decisions".[70]

I turn now to a final observation on the poet as craftsman, which is that both poets draw an equivalence between the poet's career and the traditional artisanal journey. Paterson is consistent in

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[66] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 200

[67] Edemariam, "Making poetry pay"

[68] Paterson, *LL*, p. 32

[69] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 963

[70] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 81.

saying that "[s]erious poets […] don't start off amateurs, but apprentices – just like any other vocation" and that "of all the arts, poetry traditionally has the longest apprenticeship".[71] Indeed, it is striking how closely his fable of the "four lives" of the poet tracks the traditional learning path of the craftsman, in a which naive is taken in, taught the craft, becomes a journeyman, and then finally settles in one place as a master craftsman. The first life, "lyric innocence", is followed by the poet leaving the "tiny house of the poem" to inspect its "architectural mysteries", then by the "alyric wilderness", the wandering time when the poet has seen too much of the way the poem works, until at least he reaches the "'fourth stage, and regains his lyric muse – but never forgets that this innocence must be conscientiously, even cynically defended."[72]

Armitage also occasionally uses this figure. For example, he described his career before being appointed poet laureate as "a 30-year apprenticeship to this moment".[73] If we return to his characterisation of Hardy's technique, we can see that he also stresses another facet of the craftsman's life-journey, which is that, rather than "privileging romantic individualism, craft emphasizes bringing the personal touch to objects produced within traditional means." So, "paradoxically, [it is] only by mastering the tradition" that he can "inform his making with traces of his own personality." For Armitage, it is "the rhythmical subtlety within [Hardy's] poems that represent his individuality and stop him becoming the automaton apprentice to some great master."

The Poet as Labourer

After the industrial revolution, "[c]onsistent effort became the sign of true manliness", so, alongside their depiction of poetry as skilled episodic labour, there is in both poets a concomitant valorisation of *continuous* labour. That is to say, they are both keen to emphasise that they are working hard as well as working skilfully. We can see this in what we have already discussed – the guilt, anxiety and frustration

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[71] Paterson, "Dark Art…"; "Don Paterson: *The Essay,* Letters to a Young Poet" (BBC Radio 3, September, 2014)

[72] Paterson, *The Fall At Home*, location: 1842.

[73] Allardice, "I always thought…"

that poetry will not behave like a day job – but it is also present in their belief that poems are improved not just by skill, but by ongoing, long-term effort.

Paterson has said "I don't want to read anything that hasn't half killed somebody, so the least I can do is expect the same of myself."[74] A great poet needs "demonic patience, that ability to ruthlessly reapply oneself to the material over and over again – which will ultimately win it harmonic depth as well as melody, argument as well as flow".[75] This is part of his belief that poetic effort is cumulative – poems which are worked on get better and poets who work harder get better. As Paterson puts it, "You just do it, [and] get better by doing it more".[76]

Despite this belief in the value of patience, many of Paterson's aphorisms express frustration at poems *not* being a direct result of work. This, for example, is from *The Blind Eye*: "What kills the writer, in the end, is the absence of a direct relationship between effort and accomplishment. Thus it is rarely true *work*, in any way our bodies can understand."[77] This apparent contradiction can be resolved, however, by presenting inspiration not as the opposite of work, but as *part of* the process of work – the natural endpoint of it. In explaining how little he achieved "pencils sharpened and 'notebook' open, before a window framing perfect scenery" compared with how much he achieved "typing with one thumb" on a "shitty commuter train", he writes that "Inspiration is our occasional and incidental *reward* for good work".[78] We should not be misled: "Our rare 'bursts of inspiration' have given spontaneity an undeservedly good name".[79]

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[74] Carruthers, Stephen, "On Poetry and Writing: An Interview with Don Paterson," *Dura-Dundee.org.uk* (Dundee University Review of the Arts, n.d.)

[75] Paterson, Don, "Enthusiasms: Hartley Coleridge," *Poetry*, 187 (2006), 490–92

[76] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 648.

[77] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 849

[78] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 354

[79] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 368

Armitage too insists on the extremity of his efforts: "I work hard, I do. I work harder than I did when I was a probation officer".[80] However, just as with Paterson, we can get a fuller picture of the *source* of this insistence if we consider it in the negative. When writing does not conform to the idea of hard work, Armitage represents this as something to feel guilty about. We can see this in the self-deprecation of the speaker in Armitage's poem 'To the Women of the Merrie England Coffee Houses, Huddersfield' which combines many key themes: the poets are not doing proper work, they are poor because of it, and to make matters worse, the people doing the real, hard work are women. The men, meanwhile, excluded from the world of real work, are 'boys':

> O women of the Merrie England Coffee Houses, Huddersfield,
> when I break sweat just thinking about hard work, I think about you.
> Nowhere to hide behind that counter, nowhere to shirk…
>
> O women, the soles of your feet on fire in your sensible shoes,
> your fingers aflame, spitting and hissing under the grill.
> You, madam, by the cauldron of soup – you didn't hassle us,
>
> just wiped the crumbs from under our genius poems,
> me and the boy Smith, one toasted teacake between us[81]

Combining the Archetypes

The effect of combining the figures of poet-as-artisan and poet-as-labourer is that, in both poets there is a double valorisation of poetry as men's work: it is something poets work hard at, or at least feel they should do, but poetry is also characterised by dramatic, skilful creation. This may partially explain the 'drudge then flourish' attitude just alluded to in Paterson's aphorisms. The 'drudge' provides a defence

[80] Feay, Suzi, "Literary Life: Simon Armitage on the Art of Dissent," *Ft.com* (Financial Times, 2017)

[81] Armitage, Simon, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus the Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 21

against the accusation that poets are sighing, work-shy romantic fops and the 'flourish' a defence against the idea that that bookish, continuous secretarial work is all there is to it. This combination of hard work and seemingly effortless mastery might also go some way towards explaining the 90s masculine vogue for hidden form, which Jack Underwood in an article for *Poetry Review* identifies as a defining characteristic of Paterson's work and of the era in general.[82] The work must be both displayed and hidden, as in Paterson's comment that, "I don't want anyone to know how much work I've put in. It's a disgrace how much work I've put in".[83]

As for Armitage, Gregson, in his chapter 'Armitage: Man and Boy' contrasts these two masculine styles in two poems, 'The Winner' and 'Goalkeeper with a Cigarette'.[84] The former, in Armitage's description, depicts a speaker "whose bodily malfunctions have reached ludicrous proportions, but despite losing almost every limb and function […]manages to take the life-saving test at his local swimming baths and complete the Lyke Wake Walk."[85]

> When the feeling went in the lower half of my right arm
> they fitted a power-tool into the elbow joint
> […]
> After the pins and needles in my right leg
> they grafted a shooting stick onto the stump.
> […]
> This Easter I'm taking the Life-saving Test – oh Pa,
> […]
> picture your son in his goggles and vest, with a heart
> like a water-pump under a battleship chest.[86]

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[82] Underwood, Jack, "Mirror-Within-Mirror:", *The Poetry Review*, 105.1 (2015), 127 - 132, p. 130.

[83] Paterson, "Dilemma", p. 162

[84] Gregson, *Armitage*

[85] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 54. Quoted from *Gig*, p. 108.

[86] Armitage, Simon, *Cloudcuckooland* (London: Faber, Kindle Edition, 2010), loc. 161

'Goalkeeper with a Cigarette', meanwhile, tells the story of its protagonist's "thoroughly relaxed brilliance".[87] In contrast to "those other clowns, / performing acrobatics on the bar, or press-ups / in the box […] / with hands as stunted as a bunch of thumbs", our man makes "the save of the year with his legs" in one breath and "takes a deep drag on the goal-line / in the next".[88]

For Gregson, 'The Winner' shows the speaker – identified closely with Armitage through the first person narration – overcoming adversity, and replacing the soft flesh of his nerves and body parts with "steel" and machinery. It demonstrates "an aspiration towards a supercharged and entirely secure masculinity characterised by iron hardness and unwavering unstoppable activity."[89] Through this, he embodies two of David T. Evan's idealised masculine characteristics, "the big wheel" and "the sturdy oak", which refer respectively to "the acquisition of success, status and bread-winning competence" and "strength, confidence and independence."[90]

'Goalkeeper with a Cigarette', on the other hand, "clearly represents for [Armitage] the ideal style, the one to aim for when the struggle in 'The Winner' has been won […] a level of talent which transcends the need to struggle."[91] Referencing Lynn Segal, Gregson writes "the goalkeeper personifies phallic power, the repeated 'That's him', and the dwelling on the word 'man' […]. all emphasise his 'total inner coherence' and his 'unbroken and unbreakable' masculinity"'.[92]

I would add to these characterisations only the division in labour types I have previously adumbrated (and which Gregson, in any case, implies). The former poem shows masculine hard work and the latter

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[87] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 56.

[88] Armitage, Simon, *The Dead Sea Poems*, Kindle ebook (London: Faber, 2010), loc. 302

[89] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 55.

[90] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 53. Quoted from David T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: the Material Construction of Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 48.

[91] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 56.

[92] Ibid.

masculine mastery. The chronology Gregson identifies, with the brilliance following the struggle, is also important, as it demonstrates how these two contrasting ideologies can be brought together coherently. Just as in Paterson's aphorism, the effortless mastery refers back to previous hard work, and the hard work refers forward to the effortless mastery. The two are brought together in a third masculine fantasy, 'Great Sporting Moments: The Treble' from *Kid*, in which the speaker wins a tennis match against a rich competitor – one of those "chaps from the coast with all their own gear" – through mastery, honed through honest, working-class, labour: "five choice strokes / perfected on West Yorkshire's threadbare courts".[93]

Use Value

As mentioned above, Paterson opines that poets should have:

> the confidence to insist on the poem as possessing an intrinsic cultural value, of absolutely no use other than for its simple *reading*. Perversely, it has been the insistence on poetry's auxiliary usefulness – for example, in raising issues of cultural identity, as a form of therapy, or generating academic papers – that has encouraged it to think far less of itself, and so eroded its real power to actually inspire readers to think or live differently.[94]

On first reading, this seems a fairly open-and-shut agreement with the standard position that poetry should not be used as a way of achieving anything else – that it is impotent and pointless, except for its ornamental value. Certainly this is the implication of his opposition to poetry as "big sweary outburst[s] about how dreadful the war in Iraq is".[95]

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[93] Armitage, *Selected Poems*, loc. 685. First published in *Kid* (1992).

[94] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[95] Ibid

However, this would be an unusual position for Paterson to take, given that he presents poetry as a craft, and we "tend to see craft as the making of a functional or useful object in distinction to art as the making of an object valuable for its own sake and without utility". With this in mind, we can see that the term "auxiliary usefulness" sticks out, because it implies the presence of an opposite 'primary' usefulness, which is proper to poetry. And indeed, Paterson does have a view of the intrinsic usefulness of poetry. It is not, then, that poetry has *no* uses, but rather that it has uses it should be put to and uses it shouldn't. If this is the case, what are these proper uses?

One is its mnemonic function, which for Paterson is foundational: poetry "was a 'magical' discipline — one that could conjure from thin air the location of waterholes, hunting grounds and food stores […] Long before the book, poetry was the brain's first 'external storage', our first 'mnemotechnology.'"[96] And this is a function which comes close to being definitional: "I've said this so many times it's beginning to sound a bit self-satisfied – but a poem is just a little machine for remembering itself […]. A poem makes a fetish of its memorability. It does this, because the one unique thing about our art is that it can be carried in your head in its original state, intact and perfect."[97]

Beyond this, there are the uses he spells out in 'The Dark Art': to make "readers feel genuinely uncomfortable, excited, open to suggestion, vulnerable to *reprogramming*, complicit in the creative business of their self-transformation".[98] Making readers feel excited is unlikely to be too controversial, but the idea that poetry should make readers open "to suggestion [and] vulnerable to *reprogamming*" suggests poetry has a legitimate use in persuasion, or something even more forceful.[99] This is the real reason he objects to "sweary" anti-war poetry: "it tries to provoke an emotion of which its target readers are already in high possession, [so] it will change no-one's mind about anything".[100]

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[96] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 15

[97] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[98] Ibid

[99] Ibid

[100] Ibid

The reference to "suggestion" also implies that the poem has a use in being a place for public reasoning, despite the fact that poems are "now rarely treated as a direct and trustworthy form of human discourse."[101] On this note, he laments that, while it was once "standard practice to locate the poem largely in the realm of reasoned discussion, and dive into the world of concrete description only to plunder it for illustrative exampla", the "idea that Poetry and Reason are inimical" seems to have calcified.[102] This idea, Paterson observes, "seems to have been put about solely by Poetry."[103]

Paterson more fully sets out his position on the usefulness of poetry as a discursive and reasoning art in the notes to his versions of Rilke's *Orpheus*:

> The Sonnets, for all their occasional obscurity, also make a great deal of plain sense. This sense has to be placed at the heart of any discussion if the poems are actually to be *useful* to us, and perhaps at the heart of all discussion of poetry if we are to both legitimise and encourage its original thinking as well as its original speech — and attend to some of the very considerable thinking that poetry has been doing over the last century.[104]

Failure to account for poetry as a way of thinking, "leaves us with poetry that can only be talked around and about, but not *with*."[105] This 'use' of poetry, then, turns out to be absolutely central: the purpose of poetry is not just to express, nor even to argue, but to be complicit in "the creative business of [… the] reader's self-transformation".[106]

Outside of this relatively broad conception of instrumental uses that are *intrinsic* to poetry, and despite his opposition to "auxiliary usefulness", he takes a rather relaxed and 'realist' view of extrinsic

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[101] Paterson, *Orpheus*, Afterword, p. 64

[102] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 105

[103] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 722

[104] Paterson, *Orpheus*, p. 65

[105] Ibid

[106] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

instrumentality, and identifies a number of ulterior motives for writing a poem which, whether we like them or not, exist in the real world. Paterson's poem 'Candlebird',[107] for example, both describes and enacts a poem's use for seduction, while the speaker in 'A Fraud' delights in having stolen the "little clear tongue" of verse, which he keeps alongside his own, so that

> Now two strangers shiver
> under one roof
> the one who delivers
> the promise and proof
>
> and the one I deploy
> for the poem or the kiss.[108]

Even in his guide to Shakespeare's sonnets, Paterson identifies Sonnet 145 as a possible "sop to the missus", and believes there's a "very good chance" Sonnet 122 is an apology for Shakespeare's having lost a notebook the Fair Youth has given him.[109]

To sum up, then, Paterson vehemently rejects the emasculating belief that poetry is irrelevant, and counters it with two reparative strategies. First, he presents poetry as a place not only for thinking, but for actively *reprogamming* people. Far from impotence, it is a medium that offers the 'dark art' of control over the reader, as can be seen in his aphorisms:

> Quickly, before you reach the end of this paragraph – look at the secret message on the spine of this book. Now consider: either you did or did not respond to that command. Did your

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[107] Paterson, *GGTW*, p. 55

[108] Paterson, *LL*, p. 21

[109] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 445; Paterson, *RSS*, p. 359.

> accession feel like weakness, or your refusal of such a stupid request feel like the assertion of your independence? Either way the text directed it.[110]

Second, through his 'realist' view of poetry's being used for extrinsic purposes – seduction, commissions, threats, instructions – he seems to present the idea of poetry as pure expression as precious and naive.

Armitage, like Paterson, identifies the origin of poetry in an instrumental 'mnemotechnology' use. Poetry, he says, "can make incredible things happen in somebody else's head, in complete silence, across hundreds of miles, across thousands of years."[111] He also, like Paterson, has an idea of the purposes of poetry which is much broader than pure expression. Taking a range of example from the notes to several commissions, he has used poetry variously "to summarise the sentiments of all the returning combatants" ('The Not Dead'), "to celebrate" (Branwell Brontë in 'Mansions in the Sky'), and "for exploring ideas, and paying respect"('The Great War – An Elegy').[112]

He is perhaps most explicit in his assessment of the purposes of poetry in his Oxford lectures:

> Poetry is not one thing but many, and long may that be the case – but the elusive golden standard remains an intensified version of language that offers the best opportunity for reflection and scrutiny while being ingeniously clear, effortlessly fluent, powerfully communicative, successful in its intentions, aware of its causes and effects, wide in entreaty and glorious in consequence.[113]

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[110] Paterson, Don, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 91

[111] Roensch and Carpenter Weedon

[112] Armitage, Simon, *Sandettie Light Vessel Automatic* (London: Faber, 2019), p. 155; Armitage, *SLVA*, p. 174; Armitage, *SLVA*, p. 166.

[113] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 200.

Some of the aspects of this 'golden standard' are merely indications of expressive quality (intense, fluent) but others, particularly those at the end of the list, are more interesting. The claim that poetry offers the *best* opportunity for reflection and scrutiny aligns him with Paterson on the value of reasoning in poetry. Moreover, his emphasis on consequence suggests he also believes in poetry's ability to *do things*. If a poem should be 'glorious in consequence', what consequences should a poet seek? What are their duties? I set out three, all of which can perhaps be summed up in Armitage's comment that "maybe I've continued to practice as a social worker but through film and poetry."[114]

The first is that the poet should speak out on contemporary 'issues' and write in a way that furthers his values (though this shouldn't go so far that one is "a shop-steward for contemporary values first and a poet second").[115] Second, Armitage sees his poems as ways to lend a voice to "'people from the margins not properly able to articulate for themselves, or voices that have been lost or taken away', such as the residents of a Rochdale housing estate in *Xanadu* (1992) or the murdered teenager Sophie Lancaster in *Black Roses (2012).*"[116] And third, he believes that poets should "get out from behind the keyboard and the dusty tomes, come down from the ivory tower […] and be prepared to go into the schools, prisons, communities and hospices".[117] This is part of what Lisa Allardice calls his "sense of artistic responsibility to engage with the world".[118] As she points out, he "has been unafraid of taking on "moments of national or collective consciousness", such as the millennium, the 9/11 attacks and most recently Brexit, in his poem 'The Brink'".[119]

Armitage's reparative strategy, then, is similar to Paterson's in rejecting the perception of poetry's perceived uselessness and exclusion from reason, but where Paterson combines a belief in poetry's

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[114] Roensch and Carpenter Weedon

[115] Ibid

[116] Armitage, Simon, *Xanadu* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1992); Armitage, Simon, *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (Hebden Bridge: Pomona, 2012); Allardice, "I always thought".

[117] Simon Armitage, "Poet Laureate: The Highest Office In Poetry | Simon Armitage", *The Guardian*, 2018

[118] Allardice, "I always thought"

[119] Ibid

power with a weary cynicism about its probable uses, Armitage is far more positive about the instrumental uses poetry can be put to. Indeed, he regards it is part of a poet's duty that he abandons the quiet effeminacy of private academic life, and get involved in the real world.

Chapter Six. "A Pound is a Pound": Success and Poetry as a Profession[1]

[1] Armitage, Simon, *Walking Away* (London: Faber, 2016), p. 61

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which both Don Paterson and Simon Armitage manage competing ideologies of masculine labour through their figuring of the poet as artisan and as labourer. In this chapter, I want to consider a further representation: the poet as successful capitalist. In his work on Longfellow, Gartner argues that "commercial success served, among other things, to help legitimize poetry as an occupation fit for a man" because "manhood for the swelling ranks of the middle class was increasingly bound up with success in business".[2] Although time and context obviously differ, this emphasis on capitalist success is a reparative strategy which Paterson and Armitage also use. It is the attempt, as I termed it in chapter two, to be excused by success.

In this chapter, I first compare poetry as a career with other jobs that have feminine associations, and note that men in such professions differentiate themselves through three interlinked strategies, all of which both poets use. These consist of placing emphasis on professionalisation and commercial success, of underlining the mastery which differentiates professionals from amateurs, and of stressing the importance of acting in the public world of work, rather than in the private, domestic sphere.

In the next section, I consider two problems with this emphasis on commercial success. One is that success in the contemporary market often requires writing poetry that can be "read as a direct expression of personal feeling", and the other is that in responding to this market demand, the poet loses his independence.[3] He can be seen as writing what *they* want rather than what he wants.

I argue that the first of these problems can be solved in two ways. First, through an outward-facing perspective – a partial rejection of the market's demands that poets write about their private lives. And

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[2] Gartner, p. 62

[3] Pollard, Natalie, "Address and Lyric Commerce: Don Paterson," in *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 213–41, p. 222

second, through the blurring of the I / not I distinction discussed in chapter three. This allows the poets to use the form of the confessional poem without the need to actually confess.

However, this use of the confessional form without self-revelation only makes the second problem worse. There is a risk that, in being so insincere in pursuit of sales, the poets may be seen as theatrical – failing to speak honestly and openly, like men. Their responses to this make up the final part of this chapter.

Excused by Success

In chapter two, I drew attention to the similarities between a career in poetry and involvement in other feminine-associated careers, such as primary school teaching and nursing, as well as to the affective and reparative responses men have to such a gender threat. Of all these jobs, however, the most productive comparison is probably between being a poet and being a chef. This is because, while the majority of nurses and primary school teachers are women, with only the top echelons being disproportionately dominated by men, poetry and cheffing are (especially historically, but still currently) jobs predominantly done by men.[4] The *professions* are masculine despite the *activity* being feminine. Both stereotypically and in raw numbers, cooking and writing poems are 'for' women, but being a chef and being a poet are 'for' men. Charlotte Druckman, in an article based on Linda Nochlin's, summed this up in "the following equation: *woman*: *man* as *cook*: *chef*."[5]

If this is the case, what – aside from the fact that most professional kitchens "are testosterone-fueled, aggressive, male-dominated spaces", the equivalent of the blokeish subject matter discussed in chapter four – are the key differences here?[6] First, the chef is successful – he is fêted and financially

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[4] Lupton, "Explaining…", p. 105; Harris, Deborah A., and Patti Giuffre, "'The Price You Pay': How Female Professional Chefs Negotiate Work and Family," *Gender Issues*, 27 (2010), 27–52.

[5] Druckman, Charlotte, "Why Are There No Great Women Chefs?," *Gastronomica*, 5 Feb 2010

[6] Ibid

recompensed – whereas the cook is not. The latter term is both neutral and "generic, referring to anyone who prepares food", regardless of how well they do it, or if they get paid.[7] Second, he is a master – he is technical, exacting, and proficient – rather than a dilettante. He is "a professional who goes through proper training and rises in the ranks of a military system [… whereas the] cook is self-taught, home-schooled, working by instinct".[8] And third, the chef is public – he acts in the world of work – whereas the cook is limited to the private, domestic sphere. As Druckman points out, when women chefs are on shown on television, they all "have a home kitchen as their backdrop" while men have gleaming professional kitchens.[9] All of these – capitalist success, mastery, the public sphere – are essential for most traditional masculinity ideologies, and indeed we can see all of these differences emphasised as points of concern in Paterson and Armitage.

Capitalist Success

Despite the extremely prevalent notion that to write for money is somehow to remove the essence of poetry, and the expectation that poetry not only tends to be, but *should* be its "own exceeding great reward", both poets are exceptionally sensitive to the opposite idea: that the "Writer and Poet is excusable only if he is Successful. Makes Money".[10] They both recognise the making of money as a practical necessity for the poet – as something that ought to be manfully acknowledged, rather than shuffled off stage – and they both accept capitalist success as a motivation for artists.

Armitage is frank about the importance of money in poetry. Poets, at least in part, write poems for money, and his books *Walking Home* and *Walking Away* present the relationship between producer and consumer at its most basic. On the journeys he writes about, the poet sings "for his supper with poetry

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[7] Druckman, "Why are there…?"

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Coleridge, S. T., "Preface to the Second Edition," in *Poems of S.T. Coleridge*, Second (London: J. Cottle and Messrs. Robinsons, 1797), pp. xvii-xx. The allusion is to Genesis 15:1 in the KJV; Plath, Sylvia, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), p. 438,

readings" and, at every stop, he "mentions the exact amount of money he earned through his readings".[11] This open and jocular attitude is summed up in his description of a particular opportunity as "not only irresistible but tax deductible".[12]

However, also telling are his frequent anxious and self-deprecating jokes about the *lack* of money you make as a poet, which are the other side of the same coin. In *Gig*, for example, he writes: "I'm invited by the chairperson to elaborate on the essential difference between poets and novelists. I reply that in terms of travelling, the main distinction, as far as I can tell, is economy and business class."[13] Similarly, in 'To Poverty' he exhorts the anthropomorphised Poverty to go "find a novelist".[14] Such jokes would not be self-deprecating – indeed, would not work – unless to make money from the art was his legitimate aim. This much is acknowledged, albeit lightly mocked, in *The Dead Sea Poems*:

> I found poems written in my own hand.
> Being greatly in need of food and clothing,
>
> and out of pockets, I let the lot go
> for twelve times nothing, but saw them again
> this spring, on public display, out of reach
>
> under infra-red and ultra-sonic,
> apparently worth an absolute packet.
> Knowing now the price of my early art

[11] Armitage, Simon, *Walking Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), cover description; Hélie, Claire, "Crossing the Pennines in Simon Armitage's Walking Home (2012)," *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 2015.

[12] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 189

[13] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 136.

[14] Armitage, *Selected Poems*, location: 1000. First published in *Book of Matches* (2001).

I have gone some way towards taking it all

to heart[15]

Armitage is aware of his reputation as "arguably the consummate poet-professional" (the interview this is quoted from is called 'Making Poetry Pay') and "has come round to making a virtue of that, even a kind of manifesto": "I used to have a purist view of poetry, that the page was all there was," he said at the Oxford Union. "I don't think that any more. A poet is the entire package."[16] This attitude has both a practical and an aesthetic justification, which are often combined.

Practically, he tends to portray opposition to the idea of poetry's making money as naive and out-of-step with reality. Here he is, for example, defending his decision to write poetry for the television: "In those days, I probably held the lofty, moral position that poetry and television were complete opposites, and that verse could only be devalued by the small screen. I've changed my tune since then."[17] Aesthetically, he says in a discussion about a commission for the the night mail "that any situation or scene can be expressed as poetry".[18] This casual comment is actually quite philosophically revealing as it demonstrates a belief in the separability of poetry from the truth or from inspiration. That is to say, he considers poetry a matter of first doing "blockwork" and then adding "ornamentation" – a position that makes sense when we remember his earlier comments about planning his poems.[19] This idea, that poetry can 'dress' the world, is an ancient one, but one which has been almost completely eroded by the linking of poetry to truth, subjectively felt, rather than with sophistry. To Armitage, the idea that an unfelt or uninspired poem was not a *real* poem would presumably just be a no-true-Scotsman fallacy. It it this viewpoint which explains – or, if you prefer, justifies – the enormous number of his commissions, which fill the 216-page *SLVA*.

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[15] Armitage, *DSP*, loc. 44

[16] All from Edemariam, "Making poetry pay…"

[17] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 51

[18] Armitage, *Gig*, p. 41

[19] Armitage, Simon, "Simon Armitage: 'Language Is My Enemy – I Spend My Life Battling with It'," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, 25 Mar 2017)

In Paterson, we see a similar frankness about the importance of money to poets, and an emphasis on facing up to this fact. Natalie Pollard has drawn attention to the way that, in Paterson, the reader is "not permitted to turn a blind eye to their part in the negotiative economies of poetic production." His "interlocutions make clear the humblingly culpable dealings of *poetic speakers*."[20] That is to say, neither Paterson nor his speakers shy away from or denounce the importance of money – or other recompense. In poems like 'Candlebird', 'The Reading', and 'A Talking Book', the reader is constantly reminded "that the successful artwork must somehow find a way to get itself passed between numberless receiving hands, ears, and speaking tongues".[21]

This recognition of the importance of a paying readership naturally goes hand-in-hand with a frank acknowledgement of the motivational value of success, defined in capitalist terms. Although this is a position he himself has long since repudiated, the early Paterson wrote: "I strongly suspect that for a lot of men, and probably the same number of women, sex, money and fame – which is just the promise of sex and money – are among the primary motivations for writing poetry."

Furthermore, just like Armitage, who is a lecturer, teacher, and editor, Paterson occupies something of a Renaissance man position in the poetry industry. He has acted as writer, editor, publisher, theorist, and teacher. However, unlike Armitage, who is happy to yoke the artistic and financial, he tends to draw a sharper distinction between them, openly admitting that these positions are mainly done for financial, or least non-artistic, reasons. Of teaching he writes, "Anyone whose students 'teach him as much as he teaches them' should lose half his salary."[22] "Editing," he writes in Andy Brown's *Binary Myths* "doesn't help my writing one bit."[23]

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[20] Pollard, "Address…", p. 237

[21] Pollard, "Address…", p. 232

[22] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 475.

[23] Brown, Andy, *Binary Myths 1 & 2* (Exeter: Stride publications, 2004), p. 161.

Although he doesn't undertake them on the scale of Armitage, Paterson also writes the occasional commission – 'Phantom', for example, was written to accompany an Alison Watt exhibition[24] – but he seems to have a more ambivalent attitude towards them. In *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, he says, there's "only one thing likely to produce a dodgier result than a commissioned poem: it's a poem you commission from yourself."[25] However, in *Smith*, he describes the idea of the paid commission as "frankly great", and says that "a ripping yarn" is told of their invention."[26]

On balance, this yarn, related in his poem 'The Reading', takes the more jaundiced view. At a feast, the poet Simonides reads a commissioned praise piece, which is "not a good poem [… but] As good as the fee". He is aggrieved, but secretly knows it is "just", when the king only pays him "one-half the struck price". Insulted, he memorises "each man's face in [his] mind, / each man at his rank at the table", then leaves. Once outside, he calls down a curse, and watches as the king's hall is destroyed by a "great thunderbolt", which collapses the roof. Seeing the men's wives trying in vain to identify their husbands, he uses his poetic skill of memory to show them to the bodies of their "tenderised menfolk". Finally, he kneels by the corpse of his patron and carefully counts "the rest of my fee from his purse."[27]

Here, the commission is presented as a begrudging necessity performed for a despised elite, rather than as either a perfectly respectable way into a poem, or as an anathema – and this, in a way, valorises it even more. It's not just work; it's *unpleasant* work, which in some definitions is what separates it from play".[28] The implication seems to be that if commissions were artistically fulfilling, they would not, properly speaking, be work at all.

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[24] National Gallery, Sunley Room, *Alison Watt: Phantom*, Mar – Jun 2008

[25] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 183

[26] Paterson, *Smith*, loc. 889.

[27] All quotations from Paterson, *LL*, pp. 23–26

[28] Graeber, p. 220.

More important than his attitude to commissions, however, is Paterson's unusual insistence on judging poetry's quality "by adducing something as tawdry and irrelevant as, say, actual book sales".[29] This he deploys as a constant barb against the avant-garde – a group he specifies in distinction to a mainstream, which is itself defined as "those poets who still sell books to a general – i.e., non-practising and non-academic – readership".[30] His contempt for such poets' perceived disdain of the audience – and therefore of sales – ranges from anger ("There is nothing democratic about the business of making intelligent men and women feel stupid, decade after decade."[31]) to happily pointing out the hypocrisy of the many "major players in the UK avant-garde" who have discreetly contacted him seeking publication at Picador.[32] However, it always comes back to mockery over sales: "In hell, the Postmoderns are awarded a huge, sensitive and critically informed general readership. I wish them sales; I wish them the *book group*".[33]

Armitage, in his more gentle way, seems to define himself against the same perceived enemy: "I'm an old-fashioned poet. I'm a communicator. I've said many times that if you don't have readers, you don't have a poem. Not everybody seems to believe that — or you might come to that conclusion by looking at their work."[34] And in his criticism, we find an identical move to Paterson's, in which the sales of "recherché" poetry are held up as evidence of their poor artistry. After listing a series of questions – "Is intrigue the aim? Are we being educated here? Do opaque allusions operate as a form of entry qualification […]?" – he says that he is not "calling for dumbing-down in poetry", but simply asking such questions "on behalf of an art form seen by many as 'difficult', whose USP – its unique selling point – is very often its unique lack of sales".[35]

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[29] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 680

[30] Paterson, introduction to *NBP*, p. xxv

[31] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 681.

[32] Paterson and Sperling, p. 150

[33] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 759

[34] Keel, Toby, "In Focus — Poet Laureate Simon Armitage: 'Someone Once Told Me I Have a Child's Eye, Probably as an Insult, but I Took It as an Enormous Compliment' - Country Life," *Country Life*, 26 Jun 2020

[35] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 192

Naturally, this argument – that quality can be judged by commercial success – is one that Paterson finds difficult to reconcile with his position on his other rivals, "the populists, who […] infantilise our art" with "chicken-soup anthologies full of lousy poems".[36] One seeming way out of this bind – emphasising the importance of popular appeal while denigrating populists – is to take the long-view and rely on posterity to even out the 'mistakes' of the market. As he says in *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, "nearly all perennially popular poems are also great, apart from the 10 per cent that are awful".[37] For Armitage, however, this strategy is an attempt to escape from the proper aesthetic judgement of the market: "Blake is a handy reference point for those students of mine who claim future readers will recognise their talents even if I don't – though in truth this is usually a hedge position they've taken up after a profit warning on their current business model."[38]

A better strategy, which both poets use, is to emphasise the second key difference – that the poet, like the chef, is "a professional who goes through proper training". For this reason, 'amateur' is probably Paterson's most frequent term of criticism, and he is often at pains to distinguish between amateurs and poets proper:

> Poetry is a wonderfully therapeutic thing to do at amateur level; but amateur artists and musicians don't think they should exhibit at the Tate, or play at the Wigmore. (Serious poets, I should say, don't start off amateurs, but apprentices – just like any other vocation.)[39]

As Jo George points out, his "concession that poetry can be a 'wonderfully therapeutic' amateur pastime is a way of making a clear distinction between himself and these 'courteous' poetic dabblers.

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[36] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[37] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 340

[38] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 223

[39] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

Marking himself out as a serious, professional poet, Paterson insists that writing is a 'vocation', with a proper 'apprenticeship', in which the poet must painstakingly learn his craft."[40] On top of this requirement for proper training, which we discussed in the last chapter, there is also a requirement for "native talent".[41] This is important because, without it, anyone could go through the necessary training and end up a proper poet, which, for Paterson, is clearly not the case: all creative writing classes end up doing is "encouraging a lot of unrealistic and inappropriate ambitions."[42]

Armitage does not share Paterson's disdain for creative writing classes – it "is not some sort of frivolous endeavour but a robust subject with high values and [it] produces high calibre work" – but still, he is keen to emphasise a sharp distinction, rather than admit the continuity between writing poetry and being a poet.[43] In his *Ninety-Five Theses*, he writes, "We're all film directors as far as YouTube is concerned, and all journalists according to the *Huffington Post*. The list goes on. But we're definitely not all poets."[44] This is a point he drives home in the opening lecture of *AVA,* 'The Parable of the Solicitor and the Poet', in which, having been given by his solicitor a box of "cliché-ridden and sentimental" poems, he finds himself "chastised" and comes to regret "the affirming statements he has made over the years – about poetry as the ultimate democratic art form, requiring little more than pen and paper and a working knowledge of the alphabet".[45] In this way, both poets protect one flank against the 'avant-garde' – coded as elitist and ineffectual – through an emphasis on capitalist success, and another flank against popular and populist poetry – coded as sentimental and amateurish – through an appeal to technical mastery.

The Public Sphere

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[40] George, Jo, "On Spirituality and Transcendence," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 98–113, p. 102

[41] Paterson and Sperling, p. 147

[42] Ibid

[43] "Armitage: 'Creative Writing Is Not a Frivolous Endeavour'," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, 2011)

[44] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 244

[45] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 9

Finally, for both poets, it is important that they are outward-facing and involved in the public sphere, rather than writing privately for themselves, or for a domestic audience. They emphasise this in three ways. First, as alluded to in chapter three, both poets see poetry not as one-way act of expression, but as a two-way act of communication between poet and reader. Second, they underline this through poems which stage attempts to break the fourth wall and to communicate directly with the reader. And third, both poets, but especially Armitage, try to view their poems, not as separate from, but rather continuous with, public life and public engagement.

In their criticism, both poets put huge value on publication, which is, for Paterson, "a sacred duty and the aim of the poem".[46] However, this emphasis is not only about sales. Rather, both view poetry as an "act of communication".[47] This term underscores the active two-way relationship between poet and reader, which is visibly or invisibly defined against what they consider the Romantic idea of mere passive *expression.* As Armitage puts it, "I've been writing in a public way for three decades, trying to see poetry as an act of communication that isn't merely a restricted code."[48] The reason this communication is important, and indeed the reason it is two-way, is that, for both, the reader is the *cocreator* of poetic meaning. Poetic meaning is created when "artist and audience collude":[49]

> It is through this quiet pursuit of the half-said thing that the reader enters into a state of co-authorship—and what makes poetry a more interactive art form than just about every other[50]

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[46] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

[47] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 343; Keel, "In Focus".

[48] Ibid

[49] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 16

[50] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 150

Turning to the active *staging* of communication in the poems, Paterson's poetry is characterised by an almost neurotic *over*-consideration of the reader.[51] As Peter Howarth has observed, "[y]ou are never allowed just to overhear a Paterson lyric; nods must be exchanged and glances returned."[52] In the poem called 'Prologue' at the beginning of *GGTW*, Paterson gives his readers a pep talk and instructions: "A poem is a little church, remember, / you, its congregation, I, its cantor; / so please, no flash, no necking in the pew". But attention is not just paid to the relationship between poet and audience, but to that between different audience members too. Nothing escapes his notice, and the poem continues, "… or snorting just to let your neighbour know / you get the clever stuff."[53] The poems are full of broken fourth walls, anticipated reactions, and appropriate rebuttals. In 'A Talking Book', for example, all the different types of readers are welcomed and subjected to Paterson's wit: the academy, the "undecided shades in Waterstones", and the critics on their "one-day travel-pass" — but of course, "this song is just for you".[54]

In Armitage's poem 'I say I say I say', we see similar direct address and anticipation, but instead of the cantor, he takes on role of the comedian doing crowd-work:

> Anyone here had a go at themselves
> for a laugh? Anyone opened their wrists
> with a blade in the bath? Those in the dark
> at the back, listen hard.[55]

Indeed, this pattern – the poet as comedian, asking for a response – is present from from the first lines of his first collection: "Heard the one about the guy from Heaton Mersey? / Wife at home, lover in

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[51] Robinson, Peter, "Punching Yourself in the Face: Don Paterson and His Readers," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 131–44

[52] Howarth, Peter, "Degree of Famousness Etc: Don Paterson · LRB 21 March 2013," *London Review of Books*, 2013

[53] Paterson, *GGTW*, pp. 1–2

[54] Paterson, *LL*, pp. 26–31

[55] Armitage, *DSP*, loc. 169

Hyde".[56] From the beginning, the gaze is outward, the audience rather than the unmarked self is acknowledged as paramount, and we are out in an identifiable real world, not at home – which is where the "Wife" is.

Finally, I turn to the idea of poetry as public engagement. For Armitage at least, the work of poetry is made public by its continuity with other areas of life – it "need not be an autonomous or hermetically sealed activity, as its long-established relationship with theatre and drama makes clear" – and by the idea that he is writing over shared public concerns, rather than writing *of* himself *for* himself.[57] This, of course, is epitomised by his roles as poet laureate and, before that, 'The Poet of the Millennium'. However, as Armitage himself has pointed out, this is "not a huge leap from the type of work" he had been doing before: he has long "engag[ed] with topical subjects and everyday concerns" , and found "innovative ways to engage a wider community."[58]

Paterson, in most moods, can sound pretty dismissive of this: "I can think of no activity more self-deluded and 'bourgeois' – and more dependent on tenure and trustfund for its indulgence – than the belief that 'linguistically innovative' poetry can be a force for popular political change."[59] However, as we saw in the previous chapter, he has high hopes for poetry's instrumentality: it is a philosophical, persuasive and, crucially, "a moral project".[60] His objection, then, is that such public interjection is done badly. Compare Tony Harrison with '100 Poets Against the War':

> [W]hen Tony Harrison […] writes an anti-war poem condemning UK and US foreign policy, it appears the next day on the front page of one of the UK's biggest dailies [… but we] must set against this the somehow terribly millennial spectacle of '100 Poets Against the War' […] whose strategy, in the end, was to suggest we flood the intrays of our politicians with

[56] Armitage, *Zoom!*, loc. 87

[57] Armitage, *SLVA*, p. 9

[58] Huddleston, Yvette, "Simon Armitage on Being Poet Laureate, Climate Change and Raising the ...," *Yorkshire Post*, 2019

[59] Paterson and Sperling, p. 149

[60] Patterson, "Playing the beautiful game…"

> thousands of unread e-books […] reinforcing the idea that poetry could be of no *use*, but its sufficient bulk might be employed as a kind of electronic gunge.[61]

The Problems of Commercial Success

Through these strategies, both poets mark a hard border between the 'feminine' activity of writing poetry, and the celebrated, technically-demanding and public job of being a poet. There is, however, a problem with this strategy. By emphasising commercial success and particularly sales, a poet is put into the same awkward position by the market that Byron complained of centuries before: namely, that he has to make what the audience likes rather than being independent. This causes difficulties, first, because the contemporary market seems to demand the apparently personal – precisely the domestic and the emotional that is denigrated – and second, because this puts the poet in a dependent relationship with their readership. To make money, the poet must provide what readers want, but, distressingly, what they seem to want is the baring of the soul.

In her discussion of "Address and Lyric Commerce" in Paterson's work, Natalie Pollard remarks upon "the contemporary marketability of lyric address's 'directness' and accessibility", noting that a "poet today that allows his work to be read as a direct expression of personal feeling (whether or not it is) is likely to get on well with *you*." As "readers' blogs […] show, those poems which invite audiences to witness their honesty and private feeling are most often lauded by readerships today."[62]

This is a fact that both poets are aware of. Armitage has written that "[p]oets are always complaining that when they use the word 'I' in a poem, readers are very quick to assume that […] these are confessional in some way, and it's not always the case. But at the same time, I think poets are aware that that 'I' word is a useful little barb in a poem to catch hold of a reader's attention."[63] Similarly, Paterson

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[61] Paterson, introduction to *NBP*, p. xxviii

[62] Pollard, "Address…", p. 222

[63] Poetry Archive interview

has remarked that he has started "writing more directly, as I belatedly realised most people quite like that sort of thing".[64]

The obvious issue with this is that "at the heart of the crisis in masculinity is a problem with the reconciliation of the private and the public, the intimate and the impersonal".[65] Or put another way, "[t]he personal has always been linked with the feminine term and thereby devalued".[66] Paterson certainly seems to have a dislike of personal revelation. In the work of others, he views it as narcissism. His scattered remarks on the subject include that "the confessional mode came with a subject line which read For Your Too Much Information", that one "might make an exception for Rilke, but the rest of y'all can quit whining", and that "poetry gives us no special dispensation for our […] solipsism and recreational hypochondria".[67] Armitage similarly comments on the "sensationalism and narcissistic connoisseurism of the self in the likes of Lowell, Sexton and, of course, Plath".[68] This is the familiar refrain against washing your dirty laundry in public, and – again – it is used to reinforce the border: "[o]ften when people suffer a bereavement they write a poem – these are people who are not poets. They believe in it as a place to put their emotions."[69]

If we turn to their views on their own work, Paterson rejects the idea that he'll spill his guts to a stranger. Indeed, despite the fact that he has now written a memoir, it begins with an epigraph from the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez: "I am not me".[70] This he regards as a sensible, and indeed general, strategy: "when it comes to that most delicately fraught of subjects – themselves – many poets are either legendarily reticent or evasive".[71] Armitage too has a complicated relationship with

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[64] "Don Paterson Lingers in the Rain," *HeraldScotland*, 2009

[65] Clare, Anthony W., *On Men* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p. 212

[66] Farish, Helen, "'Faking It up with the Truth': The Complexities of the Apparently Autobiographical 'I,'" *Life Writing*, 6 (2009), 143–47

[67] Paterson, *Smith*, loc. 559; Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 3266; Ibid

[68] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 114

[69] Jones, *High Profile*s

[70] Paterson, *Toy*, loc. 13.

[71] Brown, Clare, and Don Paterson, *Don't Ask Me What I Mean,* (London: Picador, 2004), p. xi.

autobiography. His poem 'I am Simon Armitage', for example, begins "I am *Simon Armitage*. I am / *Aiming Maestro, / Airiest Gammon*". It then runs through another twenty anagrams of Armitage's name before ending "*Against Memoir* I am".[72]

As for the second problem, of caving to the demands of the market rather than being properly independent, Armitage opines that to "write only in the way that others want to read is to sell out. But to write only in the way you want to write is to disengage."[73] Pollard comments on a similar balance in Paterson's poetry, which "cheekily ushers an audience in" but "resists sycophantically conforming to their expectations."[74] Discussing the "brusque dismissal" of the ending to 'An Elliptical Stylus', Pollard notes that "the reader is told in no uncertain terms to disembark from Paterson's poetic craft ('*you get off*'), in a phrase that addresses *you* directly, even as it punningly allies *your* appetite for continued poetic enjoyment with (denied) sexual gratification."[75] In this way, his "lyric speech is alert to the knowledge that it cannot afford either to be entirely unmindful of, or too subservient to, the demands of the marketing, publishing, anthologizing industries that are part and parcel of writing".[76]

Solving the Problem of Self-Revelation

I argue that the first of these problems, of self-revelation, is solved in two ways. First, by a partial rejection of the demand through a focus on the outward rather than the inward. And second, through the same blurring of the I / not I distinction discussed above, with the poets following the *form* of the confessional poem without abiding by its requirement to actually confess. The former is more a technique of Armitage and the latter of Paterson.

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[72] Armitage, Simon, "'I Am Simon Armitage,'" *The New Yorker* (The New Yorker, 2022)

[73] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 221

[74] Pollard, "Address…", p. 222

[75] Ibid

[76] Ibid

On the first point, reviewers of Armitage have long noticed that there "are distancing devices everywhere in the work: the emphasis on stories and concrete things can push the focus outward rather than inward".[77] And indeed, it is probably telling that one such review, which uses almost identical phrasing – "Armitage looks outwards not inwards" – is quoted on the cover of *AVA*.[78] Despite Kennedy's comment that Armitage's is a "a poetry that has yet to move very far from its Northern roots and, indeed, displays no wish to do so", it is clear that he has always started *from* the intensely local and looked outwards, as can be seen in his early calling card, 'Zoom':[79]

> It begins as a house, an end terrace
> in this case
> but it will not stop there…
>
> On it goes, oblivious to the Planning Acts,
> the green belts,
> and before we know it is out out of our hands:
> city, nation,
> hemisphere, universe, hammering out in all directions.[80]

Even in *Magnetic Field*, the 2020 collection that gathers all the poems he has written about his home village of Marsden, the (literal) framing device is the boyhood "bedroom window" he used to look out of, not into.

Paterson, similarly, has written that "there are no good subjects". Even though "your affair […] is a painful and heartbreaking subject, […] you have to learn to leave those poetic objects and events you

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[77] Edemariam, "Making poetry pay…"

[78] Mooney, Bel, "Poetry ," *Daily Mail Online*, 12 Dec 2019

[79] Kennedy, David, "On the Phone: Simon Armitage, Kid," *PN Review*, 3 July 1992

[80] Armitage, *Zoom!*, loc. 1227

correctly identify in your life and in the world exactly where you found them, which is the only place they had any poetry."[81] Nevertheless, his relationship with the demand for self-revelation is much more complex than mere rejection, as is perhaps most convincingly demonstrated in his little-studied collaboration with Alison Watt, *Hiding in Full View*.[82]

In this sequence of fourteen one-line poems, accompanied by Watt's photographs, Paterson writes, "What we show when we disclose, undresses both the promise and its emptiness" and "*The lens is no one looking*. Sure, no doubt; but yesterday I stared the bastard out." Here, "[f]earing the reader-spectator's appropriative wishes for complete self-'disclosure', he seeks a 'place to hide', rehearsing concerns that certain kinds of looking distortingly 'catch' and fix poetic persons" but at the same time, his "lines know, but also need to keep reminding themselves, that the 'full' view of a human subject is unachievable".[83]

Aside from "Paterson's way of hiding amongst the numerous recognisable personas his work tries out", another way that his "self-presentation promises disclosure but conducts ongoing variance and staging" is through his open appropriation of the *techniques* of confessional poetry.[84] As he puts it in an interview with *Poetry Review,* "I like the confessional tone. I don't like that within the confessional tone you're obliged to confess."[85] In *The Poem*, he explains that "there are, to be cold about it, some good technical reasons why 'the confessional mode' might sometimes make for a superior poem."[86]

By this he means that "writing *with* your genuine feeling but otherwise just 'making it all up' might often be the poet's best strategy". In this way, one can hold on to the "different musical and rhythmic quality"

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[81] Paterson, "Letters to…"

[82] Watt, Alison, and Don Paterson, *Hiding in Full View* (Edinburgh: Ingleby Gallery, 2011)

[83] Pollard, Natalie, "Hiding in Full View: Dark Material and Light Writing," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 114–30, p. 120

[84] Pollard, "Hiding…", p. 117

[85] The Poetry Society Podcast, "Don Paterson Talks to Colette Bryce," *SoundCloud* (Poetry Society), Winter 2019

[86] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 167

which distinguishes emotional from non-emotional speech in a "quantifiable, characterisable" way, without the poem itself being "blighted by the tear-blinded distortions that accompany great emotions".[87] Through this, Paterson stays true to what he calls "Frost's law of reciprocity, 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader", which is the "fundamental rule of emotionally effective writing", but manages – for technical reasons – to avoid actual self-revelation.[88]

Armitage, for all that he believes in distancing and emotionlessness as necessary to good poetry, describes a quite similar technique in his interview with Christopher Greenhalgh:

> I can't linger on the truth long enough to write about it, because eventually there will be another word or another phrase that comes to mind, and that's the one that I will want to use in the poem. I don't feel as if it's cheating, because it often helps to describe the sensation I'm talking about, rather than saying 'That must be right, because that's what happened'.[89]

As Pollard points out, Paterson's efforts to be read *as* confessional have been successful. If "honesty and private feeling are most often lauded by readerships today", then readers "often comment on both qualities in Paterson, and especially in *Landing Light* and *Rain*."[90] Similarly, despite the fact that "the focus on authenticity and "honesty" in Armitage's work is a simplification", it is nevertheless a focus he has managed to inculcate in his audience.[91]

Theatricality and Independence

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[87] Ibid

[88] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 248

[89] Greenhalgh, Chris, "Simon Armitage: An Interview with Chris Greenhalgh ," *Bete Noire*, 1992, 271

[90] Pollard, "Adress…", pp. 222–223

[91] Gregson, *Armitage*, p. 30

Unfortunately, Armitage and Paterson's solution to the gender threat of the expectation of personal revelation – using the form of the confessional at the same time as signalling its unreliability – makes the second problem worse. This kind of play and subterfuge is associated with an alternative feminine stereotype – that of theatricality. The insistence on being a *professional* writer, and on manipulating the audience to those ends, brings to mind three other feminine-coded meanings of the term 'professional': the actress, the prostitute, and the man who has to work for a living, rather than having an 'independent' income. That is to say, the way in which they have pursued capitalist independence puts them at risk of losing independence understood in the older, aristocratic sense.

If it was true that in the eighteenth century, "[b]etraying the anxieties that riddle its usage, the word "profession" allude[d] euphemistically not only to prostitution but also to the theater", making it "no surprise that Mary Darby Robinson, poet, actress, and mistress-courtesan, came to embody the late-eighteenth-century public's ambivalence about professional writing", such attitudes are still with us today.[92] Confessional poetry – and especially women's poetry, which is *read as* confessional poetry – is simultaneously and paradoxically chastised for exposing dirty laundry in public *and* for its theatrical fakeness. As Caolan Madden argues:

> When a woman writes as an "I," the assumption is that either the feelings she writes about are her own, and therefore a violation of the privacy and modesty expected of women, or those emotions were manufactured for the market, in which case the woman poet is not only a seller of herself, but a broker of lies.[93]

When it is a man who writes as an 'I' in the confessional or apparently confessional mode, this bizarre and contradictory combination of criticisms is linked with a charge of effeminacy and childishness, as can be seen in this well-known William Logan review of Franz Wright:

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[92] Rosenbaum, pp. 13–14

[93] Madden, Caolan, "Performing Poetesses," Doctoral dissertation, 2017, Rutgers University

> When Wright offers the crude, unprocessed sewage of suffering, it's nasty stuff […]. He was cruelly affected by the divorce of his parents, though perhaps after forty years there should be a statute of limitations […] Just when I decide to dislike him for his truculent theatrics, his prima-donna moroseness (when have we had a poet more devoted to Our Lady of the Eternal Victim?), he'll write something so ruefully funny it's hard not to forgive him.[94]

It can also be seen in Simon Armitage's comments defending Thom Gunn against the charge of indulging in "*confessional* poetry – the kind that performs open heart surgery in front of the mirror".[95] Here again, the accusation is that what is produced is somehow both embarrassingly unprocessed and narcissistically performed for the audience.

Against the charge of theatricality, one common school of masculine reparative response is the 'manly speech' discussed in the previous chapter. This manly speech comes "from the heart, unbridled by fear of reprisal or ridicule" and locates its masculinity not in a slippery refusal to reveal the self, but through an open and steadfast plain-speaking sincerity, which says what needs to be said and no more.[96] Thus, we can draw a line from Victorian manly speech through Yeats' exploration of the way in which "sincerity, tending to conversational hostility, could serve as a substitute for the corporeal manliness that the man of letters otherwise lacked" to the American 'raw' tradition that sees 'cooked' poetry as a "downright 'castration of the pure masculine urge to freely sing"'.[97]

It is worth pausing here to explain the particular double-bind of men writing poetry in a post-Romantic market. For one tradition, writing personal poetry *as* the self is effeminated because it is read as domestic, personal, emotional, narcissistic, and uncontrolled – a spilling of the guts and public washing of dirty laundry. This can be avoided by writing *as* someone else – a 'not you'. This kind of poetry

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[94] Logan, William, "Stouthearted Men," *The New Criterion*, 2004

[95] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 114

[96] Tosh, "Gentlemanly…", p. 460

[97] Bland Botham, Peter, "'I Am a Victorian!': W. B. Yeats, Modern Manliness and the Problems of Work," *The Review of English Studies*, 71 (2019), 745–67, p. 763; Pellerin

becomes rational, outward-looking, audience-focused, controlled, unselfish, and commercially minded. But for another tradition, which views the commercial as essentially effeminate, writing *as* someone else in this way is a form of dependence. It is theatrical and insincere – the behaviour of an actress, a courtesan, or a flatterer, who is afraid to speak as himself. For this tradition, speaking *as* the self is associated with the masculine ideals of being plain-speaking and plain-dealing, honest, unadorned and uncorrupted.

For Paterson and Armitage, the basic equation is this: poetry is effeminate because, since the Romantic period, it has demanded the expressive, emotional, passive and, most importantly, the personal. It can only be forgiven by capitalist success. Success, in our reading culture, however, requires precisely this revelation of the personal. This can be avoided by writing in the confessional *mode*, but undermining the identification of the 'I' with the poet. This, however, walks straight into the trap of being cowardly by failing to speak simply, say what you really think, identify who you are, and stand by your words.

Paterson and Armitage are not unaware of this other demand of masculinity – for sincerity, honesty, and taciturnity – as can be seen in Paterson's praise of Michael Hoffman's "powerful, Lowellian indifference to the consequences of honest speech – including saying no more when one is done talking". Channeling this 'other tradition', Paterson writes that Hofmann seems to "have little interest in either convincing or impressing anyone via the usual Flash-Harry tricks, epiphanies, look-at-me zingers or wise conclusions".[98] Indeed, Paterson's frequent comments on the scarcity of his output – "eight to ten poems a year, all of which come very slowly" – and his wariness of over-publication might be read as an endorsement of this view:[99]

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[98] Paterson, *The Poem*, pp. 424–425

[99] O'Malley, J. P., "An Interview with Don Paterson," *An Interview with Don Paterson - The Bottle Imp*, 2012

> overpublication is a terrible thing in a poet, and only arouses suspicion. It looks like its coming way too easily, meaning either its not costing you enough, or you're insincere, or you're probably repeating yourself.[100]

While taciturnity and concern for over-publication is not necessarily something you could accuse Armitage of, he does have the same regard for honesty, as discussed at the end of the last chapter.

Rudeness as Honesty

The question, then, is how to deal with this. I argue that one solution is precisely that posited earlier. Both poets combine an emphasis on honesty with a rejection of the necessity of *facts* to truth. But more importantly, both demonstrate this plain-speaking honesty through an abrasive and "in-your-face" style, which is read as independent, honest and open, manly communication *even though there is no necessary connection between honesty and unpleasantness*, and even if this 'social realist' unpleasantness is precisely what people want to hear.[101] In this regard, it is hard not to think of the figure of the controversial stand-up comedian who seems both to give people what they want and yet also somehow say what you're not allowed to say.

On the first point, for Armitage, as we have already seen, "[p]oems don't have to tell the truth, but they have to be true to themselves, even if they're telling a lie."[102] And, for Paterson, poetry is "another trick, a brilliant, useless, one-off performance; but it's through such performances that poetry nonetheless allows us to glimpse those truths we might otherwise find impossible to apprehend."[103] For this reason,

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[100] Paterson, *RSS*, p. 293

[101] Robinson, p. 133. See full article for discussion of Paterson's abrasive style.

[102] Armitage, "How to Write Poetry: Poet Simon Armitage Has a Few Things for You to Think About," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, 2008)

[103] Paterson, *The Poem*, pp. 275–276

it "is both trustworthy *and* untrustworthy: it is a truth-telling, but it often gets at the truth at the expensive of the facts, facts being something most poets tend to regard as an inconvenience."[104]

Regarding the second point, that of abrasiveness of tone and subject matter being read as honest, disinterested, necessary communication, one need only read the reviews to see this elision. Peter Sansom, in the back cover quotation for *Zoom!,* describes Armitage's language as "robust, no-nonsense and (above all) honest".[105] Ben Wilkinson, reviewing *Paper Aeroplane*, wrote that he inhabits "a poetic persona – street-smart, self-deprecating, no-nonsense – so fully and at times lazily that he has come to parody himself".[106] And Claire Hélie notes that this authenticity is "supplemented by a few traits that are stereotypically attributed to 'the resilient Northerners, hard-working and humorous in the face of adversity, blunt-speaking and straight forward'".[107] But, for the early Armitage, whose poetic voice has from the beginning been more bluff than actually aggressive, unflinching honesty is represented more by bleak 'social realist' subject matter than by tone.

To give just one example, the photographs which illustrate the book version of the film-poem *Xanadu* depict he Ashfield estate through a broken window, a dog defaecating, an abandoned mattress in an alleyway, and the poet in a graffiti-filled room. These are accompanied by poems, which demonstrate the distance between poetry's normal effete subject matter and his:

> Remember […]
>
> how we once wrote poetry:
> about the distance

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[104] Ibid

[105] Armitage, *Zoom!*

[106] Wilkinson, Ben, "Paper Aeroplane: Selected Poems 1989–2014 by Simon Armitage Review – 'What Surprises Is How Urgent and Contemporary His Early Poems Still Read'," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, 2014)

[107] Hélie, Claire, "'It's My Voice; That's How I Speak': The Rhythms of Northern English in the Poetry of Simon Armitage," *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 2010, 157–70

between stars, and how for some
small things

the skin on a surface of water
is bearable, impregnable.

And then at last
the long lost flat,

out of bounds
on health and safety grounds,

burgled and broken
once too often

then sealed for ages
under the staircase.

Blow its cover
like Howard Carter

and enter the tomb
of the small front room.[108]

Paterson, as we have explored, is not averse to dark and violent subject matter, but the necessity, independence, and honesty of his speech has always been more associated with tone and address. On

[108] Armitage, *Xanadu*, pp. 26–27

this note, Peter Robinson has drawn attention to Paterson's "Janus-like" relationship with his readers.[109] On the one hand, he criticises "what he calls 'the Postmoderns' for adopting […] a 'no-need' relationship to readers" – an attitude we can see in the following aphorism:[110]

> We meet the novelists a little way, the poets at least halfway, the translated poets three-quarters of the way; the Postmoderns we pick up at the station in their wheelchairs[111]

On the other he often "dramatises authorial need by staging its apparent absence", through his "knockabout plain speaking", his frequent threats to the reader, and professions of disgust for their taste.[112] "'Of course you don't like all the aphorisms,' he writes in *The Book of Shadows*, adding then, 'I don't like all of *you*'".[113] Indeed, this sometimes goes so far as having a "grudging respect" for the integrity of "the Postmoderns": they are "paid a backhanded compliment in his excursions into aphorism – that supposed 'elite form nonpareil'", which Paterson describes as making "no pretence to engage the reader in any sort of dialogue".[114] Rather, "to judge by its [the aphorism's] tone of relentless asseveration, it has no opinion of them […]. What the reader feels is a kind of ultimate contempt".[115] As Robinson writes, the combination of contempt and apparent concern for the audience reads "as if the writer were perpetually having to be rude to readers' faces as the one way of retaining their attention".[116] The poet thinks "he knows the effect his literary personality will have on a reader while, simultaneously, deploying that personality as an index of integrity in his apparent indifference to those effects".[117]

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[109] Robinson, p. 141

[110] Robinson, pp. 137–138

[111] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 1517

[112] Robinson, pp. 138–139

[113] Robinson, p. 135 quoting *The Fall*, loc. 2479

[114] Robinson, pp. 138–139; Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 2461

[115] Ibid

[116] Robinson, p. 138

[117] Robinson, p. 135

Meeting the Reader on Your Own Terms

Paterson's phrase "I don't like all of you" brings us onto a second solution to the double-bind of both needing and resenting readers. I argue that both Paterson and Armitage attempt to show their superiority to – and independence from – their audience by occasionally rejecting its taste, by criticising poetry that panders to it, by insisting on a balance between audience demands and poetic autonomy, and, in Paterson's case, arguing that a poet needs to "create the taste by which he is to be relished".[118] That is to say, the masculine poet does not just create what the audience tells him to, but rather creates what he wants to create.

On the first point, Paterson is clear that, although a poem is nothing without an audience, the audience is sometimes wrong: "intelligent people also have to accept that they might occasionally feel stupid because the argument or idea that the poem incarnates is intrinsically difficult, and its nuance is indistinguishable from its value".[119] This is not a criticism that you would find openly in Armitage, but the idea you shouldn't always trust the audience's taste is implicit in his description of the "cheap gags, the vacuous 'life-affirming' statements, the soliciting of an instant response and the over-emoted serving of already over-egged puddings" of some performance poets.[120] There is something similar too in Paterson's warnings that "[w]riters often end up humourists if they read in public too often" and that anything "that elicits an *immediate* nod of recognition has only reconfirmed a prejudice".[121] The point is that too much exposure to – and instant response from – an audience makes one play up to that audience. Even if we "have correctly perceived a bored and dwindling audience", we should not debase

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[118] Paterson, "Dark Art…". The allusion is to Wordsworth.

[119] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 682

[120] Armitage, *AVA*, p. 20

[121] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 1544; Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 2280

ourselves – or them – through "a manic and cheap attempt to keep them awake with the brain-candies of image, anecdote and metaphor".[122]

For both poets, the easiest way to resolve this tension is that the audience "should meet poets at least halfway".[123] As Armitage explains, "you can extend what you do towards as wide an audience as possible until you start feeling that you might be losing your integrity."[124] Another – more macho – answer, however, is the the idea, as expressed by Paterson in 2004 (if later repudiated in *The Poem*[125]), that:

> Wordsworth was not necessarily wrong when he said that every great and original writer must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; but he should have strengthened that statement. The poet must achieve that alone, with no other apologist or champion but that of her or his own work.[126]

[122] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 105

[123] Paterson, *The Fall*, loc. 1517

[124] Mansfield, Susan, "Simon Armitage: From Probation Officer to Poet | the Scotsman," *The Scotsman*, 2019

[125] Paterson, *The Poem*, p. 294

[126] Paterson, "Dark Art…"

Conclusion. "How Fine, I Thought, This Waking Amongst Men!"[1]: Directions for Future Research

[1] Paterson, 'Waking with Russell', *LL*, p. 5

Over the last six chapters, I have considered the ways in which the feminisation of poetry in some White anglophone cultures has acted as a gender threat for two men poets, and explored several reparative responses they have used to deal with this threat. The most obvious route for further research would be to expand the application of this framework – the precarious manhood model – to other poets, and to cultures and masculinity systems other than the contemporary, predominantly White, working-class, Northern English and Scottish manhood I have discussed.

In some cultures, we may find similar results. For example, Geng Song has traced comparable processes in China, asking why "the audience in the past accepted the *caizi* [the 'fragile scholar' interested in poetry] as an ideal male lover while today's audience considers it effeminate?".[2] In other cultures, poems, or at least certain kinds of poems, do not have the same associations of effeminacy, and so may be used as straightforward gender performances, rather than reparative responses. Ul Haq and Rashid, for example, have explored gender performances in post-9/11 Afghan war poetry[3]. N.S. Turner, and Lukamika, Chebet and Wanjala, meanwhile, have studied the performance of masculinity in Zulu and Isukha oral praise poetries respectively.[4]

A slightly different emphasis for research would be to foreground the co-construction of race and masculinity (or the intersection of race, class and masculinity) as I have foregrounded the co-construction of class and masculinity here. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's study of T.S. Eliot's use of "Africa as a trope" and his conjuring of a racialised Other as a way of constructing Whiteness is a good example. Such "racialized materials" she argues "are fraught with complex identifications, fascinations,

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[2] Song, Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. viii

[3] Haq, Inam Ul, and Uzma Rashid, 'Masculinities: Tracing the Trajectories of Gender Performance in Afghanistan War Poetry', *Masculinities & Social Change*, 7.2: 110, 2018 <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/mcs.2018.3122>

[4] Turner, N. S., 'Representations of Masculinity in the Contemporary Oral Praise Poetry of Zulu Men', *South African Journal of African Languages*, 19.3: 196–203, 1999 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02572117.1999.10587397> ; Lukamika, Kibigo Mary, Choge Susan Chebet, and Simiyu Fred Wanjala, 'Masculinity in the Language Used in Praise Poetry in the Performance of the Ritual of Shilembe and Indigenous Sport of Mayo among the Isukha Community in Kenya', *International Journal of Information Research and Review*, 6.7: 6386–93, 2019 <https://www.ijirr.com/masculinity-language-used-praise-poetry-performance-ritual-shilembe-and-indigenous-sport-mayo-among>

and anxieties that amount to a cycle of warding off, haunting, appropriation and incorporation."[5] Eric Keenaghan's reading of Wallace Stevens is similar, with "Hispanic males function[ing] as North Americans' off-white brothers who can be invited into the national community and so prove that the boundaries defining 'white masculinity' are somewhat malleable" even as his "texts exhibit adverse reactions to African American presences".[6]

Another way forward would be to study those men poets for whom the association of poetry with effeminacy is not a problem. We may find that, as gender roles become less restrictive, and especially as traditionally-feminine concepts, such as emotion, care, and sensitivity, become more celebrated, men poets are, for example, happy to write in the confessional mode without presenting it either as no-holds-barred straight talking or as a tricksy dramatic monologue getting one over the reader.[7]

A more radical direction, however, would be to study those men poets who go further than not being bothered by the feminine associations of poetry, but actively use poetry as a way to *reshape* rather than reinforce traditional masculinity ideologies.[8] As research by Lupton and others has shown, when there is a tension between professional and gender identities, men tend to reconcile it through two broad strategies: "either by a reconstruction or rationalization of the nature of their occupations, or by renegotiation of their own conception of what it means to be a man."[9] As we have seen, men predominantly use the first of these strategies and "give primacy to the preservation of masculine

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[5] DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, "'Hoo, Hoo, Hoo": Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern Whiteness', *American Literature*, 67.4: 667, 1995 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2927891>

[6] Keenaghan, Eric, 'A Virile Poet in the Borderlands: Wallace Stevens's Reimagining of Race and Masculinity', *Modernism/Modernity*, 9.3: 439–62, 2002 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0054>

[7] For a discussion, see Christofidou, Andria, "Men and Masculinities: A Continuing Debate on Change," *NORMA*, 16 (2021), 81–97

[8] Darling, Kristina Marie, "So Many Side-Eyes: Experiments of Resistance in Kenji C. Liu's Monsters I Have Been," *Tupelo Quarterly*, 2019

[9] Lupton, "Maintaining…"

identity". However, it is also possible that men poets will accommodate the tension between poetry and masculinity by changing what it means to them to be a man.[10]

[10] Khakpour, Porochista, "Toward a New Masculinity: Five Poets and the Politics of the Male Body," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 93 (2017)

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Creative Portfolio

By Twos

Ali Lewis

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Arts and Crafts

Art

Thunder clears its throat.
The cloud is almost black

and the shape of England,
like its own weather map.

The rain dribbles shorthand
on the window and blurs

the crotchets of the birds
on the stave of the fence

who don't sing the notes
they faithfully represent.

Leisure on a Red Background

After Fernand Léger

Everything's so insistently next to everything else.
The man in the orange suit abuts the man in the blue.
There's no gap at all between the bicycle wheel
and the leg of the woman behind. Only an angle
we don't have access to could separate them out.
And even then, the red sky or the yellow beach
would intercede, and we'd never get to see the space.
I wish we could look faster than the world could paint.

Representation

the way a drawing of a tree looks like a brain
but a tree doesn't look like a brain
the way a drawing of a brain looks like a cloud but a brain doesn't
though the brain is cloud-grey and a drawing of a brain is pink
the way the drawing of the rain exaggerates the droplets
and makes them rain-sized
not to scale with the cloud
though a cloud can be as small as the cloud on the page
like the leaves on a drawing of a tree are implied or the size of leaves
and few and front-facing like Vitruvian Men
how the droplets are drawn like we're level with them all
as if we're everywhere and in the perfect place
like sunlight on a drawing of a cloud
from behind which the sun is also peeking out
and the part that isn't shown isn't there but in your brain
like a rainbow isn't there when you get to it
it's only where it is because of where you're not
like God is only God because of where you are
and a drawing of a cloud looks like God
and a cloud looks like God because of where you are
the way a drawing of a God when its not a cloud
looks like a man
with his arms and legs in a cross
and leads the mind to death
how death looks like a drawing of a man but a man doesn't look like death
depending who you are
and where you are
and what you've been through
the way you've been through a cloud and either noticed it or not
depending on the picture of a cloud in your brain

The Deposition

At the Uffizi Gallery

While maids with heads in cuckoo clocks pose in front of cypress trees
and boys with dresses stiff with jewels lay hands on books with gilded edges
while lapdogs snooze symbolically on satin beds
and the Dutch congregate in the shadows pulling teeth

while our mother's mother hides her shame behind a levitating fig-leaf
and demure and aimless winds press virgins' hair against their breasts
while Joseph's missing with the statue arms and the backs of people's heads
and a Cerberus of cherubs sings a saint to ecstasy

while Mercury inspects an orange and a cloud with his staff
and a Grace dances close to him in a toga made of ghosts
while a chiselled centaur carries Cupid, dancing to his lyre

and a Virtue gestures proplessly, representing Hope
while the others ham it prudently with mirrors and an asp
and the nice one feeds a newborn while her other hand's on fire

while milk-faced heirs display ancestral gewgaws and devices
and an heiress with an ermine looks disgusted at a vase
while people wander hills like the tracks of windscreen wipers
and a codpiece bulges like Hamlet's dagger through the arras

while a couple at a banquet fuss feet beneath the table
and a waiter-Bacchus bares his nipple and a basketful of fruit
while a holy thicket warm themselves about a glowing cradle
and a steward wears a look that says: *I'm about to play this lute*

while the bowler-hatted shepherds are enamoured of their hands
and Peter guards the door with his maître d's veneer
while a boy sympathises with the plight of a ram
and the angels look away like you've asked for volunteers

while every baby has a pomegranate and a mob accountant's scowl
a thin man with a crown of thorns is put up and taken down.

The Orange Vendor

After Natalia Goncharova

Oranges on her head and oranges in her hand,
flowers on a yellow poncho.
She's so much smaller than her clothes.

I don't know why I bought the print.
Is it her one free hand, or the way
she stacks so many things
the wrong shape for balancing?

Or how she shifts her weight to cope
when she makes a sale, and an orange,
or many oranges, are taken away?

Two Miracles

My father taught me I could magic worms
up by rubbing palms with him after work,
and might pray them up myself if I played
outside. Clean hands are like a lack of rain
to worms. Those grey cigars of sweat and oily
dust, explained, he said, how God had made
the world: himself, out of nothing, and of toil.

So with a Stanley blade, on my hands and
knees, I scraped the stubborn labels, the sealant
soaked in spirit from the hull of the old
still-good washing machine you wanted sold
and then, just out the way. As a favour,
the landlord took it, in the end. And lo!
From labour's dirty hands — nothing came.

The Diamond Cutter

Going home one afternoon, the diamond cutter
saw his absent lover's hand grafted to the wrist
of a stranger in the market. It was not crudely done:
even he, trained from youth to see epiphyses

in faultless rocks could not discern the join, or say
for certain where she stopped and the miscreant began,
but the fingertips, he knew, were hers, the elbow's
crease, he knew, was not, and that freckled wrist…

that freckled wrist he'd study every night for twenty
years, through a microscope balanced on their marriage
bed, until, one sweat dawn, chisel to hand, he'd find
the hidden octahedral plane and bring his mallet down.

The Chick Sexer

The chick sexer separates the hens (for eggs)
from the cocks (which, commercially, are useless).

The hens are retained and moved either to free-
range poultry farms (high end) or battery

cages (budget). The males are gassed (UK)
or macerated (in the US). This usually takes place

at five days to a week. At this stage, the layers
(hens) may be differentiated by squeezing faeces

from the stomach, which opens up the anal
vent, or cloaca. A raised 'bump' indicates male,

though in certain breeds, identification can be made
on the basis of wing-feather size and shape:

male feathers are shorter, rounder, and lighter
in colour. Experienced sexers can do this by eye.

Recent industry reports claim that genetic testing
will soon be both scaleable and cheap, obviating

the current need for live sexing. This will reduce
waste and savings can be passed on to the consumer.

Some companies have promised sexers made
redundant will be comprehensively retrained.

The Knife Sharpener

He says that whetstones must be soaked, like reeds,
until the bubbles stop, and while his bathes,
he tells us how the handle's weight – the scales
and butt and pins – compensate the lighter
tang, and balance it against the blade;
how the bevel is a devil's trade
between incision and longevity.
Then he breathes, lays out a cloth, and only now
lifts the rock from its bath and settles it,
dripping, in a wooden block to flatten out
its concave dishing with a level-stone.
He scrubs the slurry up – the diamond grit
of mud and metal sludge you need to hone
fine work – peers along the rifle sight

of the spine, then at last begins to slide
the edge against the grain. Right hand
on the handle, thumb on bolster, left
fingers laid like a pianist's, or like
a diner with a finger-bowl of light,
across the flat, left thumb acting as a guide.
He presses tip to heel twice, swaps lead
hands and tames the pile-side point to haft,
then flips the whetstone for the finer sand.
And the way he bears the sharpened knife,
the muck he grinds through for the shine,
the angle that he holds against the stone,
do not tell me every thing I need
to know about him, his life, or my own.

The Comedian

Did I tell you I found a body once?

I was always scared of farmers' guns.

No: I just pretended that I was.

Even in the countryside, they're not going to kill a child.

I knew that then; I know it now.

This body that I found was in the toilets.

I thought when I was playing I'd fall between the bales of hay. I'd trap my leg, like the arm in that climbing film which hadn't yet come out.

You ever put a knife to your skin like he does?

Tests for STIs I've sat an hour at home with the push syringe against my finger.

I exaggerate my fear of blood, you know the way that happens.

Your friends encourage a trait they can know you by so you help them to it.

There wasn't any blood, this guy, but there was a needle.

Did I make that up, or is it true, or both?

He could've had a needle in his leg, like a leg stuck in a bale of hay, and I forgot and made it up again and it was true.

You can't keep anything in mind.

You've got to just chant the numbers till you make it to a pen.

That thing I said?

With the leg in the bale of hay.

That was cheap.

Callbacks are easy and people love them for some reason.

Why?

Because they're easy and people love them.

That's not quite a pull-back-and-reveal.

Which is what I did with the toilet door to find the dead guy.

The guy I found was in the toilets at the bus station.

He was crumpled and unshaven, like a picture of a dead guy.

You ever held a razor to your skin?

I've not, but I've shoved my hand into a wash-bag and slashed my finger.

That drop of blood I could've done with for the tests.

That drop of blood could've dripped into the pot as if from a ham, hanging raw from the ceiling.

I wrote a piece about the ham once, comparing it to books.

It won an award (second place).

I also wrote a poem RE: the dead guy.

I don't eat meat anymore.

Perhaps I should not consume the dead.

Perhaps he didn't see his death like this. As material.

Perhaps he didn't see his death at all.

Those kids I knew did: saw their own and did it on their own.

I won't make the comparison: another way of making it.

Another used a knife.

The world when you're in love is dangerous.

It's dangerous when you're not.

Another rule of comedy is repetition works once you're through the wall.

Another rule of comedy is repetition works once you're through the wall.

It only get more funny with its awkwardness.

Another rule is change it on the third.

Awkwardness – the word feels autological, like *word*; or *noun*; *pen-ta-syll-a-bic*:

I found a body; or *my friends died too young; they're different people.*

Autological means 'describes itself', like the dead guy can't.

Like my friends.

I do, or did. I loved them.

The sad bit at the end is how you win awards.

Notice how the dead guy's been obscured.

Notice how I've used the passive voice to obscure my obscuring.

The dead guy's just part of the journey that gets me to my friends, who died.

Then back to me, who didn't, except on stage.

In comedy, you're judged if what you say didn't happen.

But another rule is this: you write the show yourself.

Pairings

Pressure

The road clear, the day once-in-a-summer
hot, the car so light with just the two of us,
shirts slung around our necks, seatbelts off,
singing to *Rubber Soul* on cassette and flying
eighty, eighty-five downhill when we hit
the pheasant so clean and hard it pops.

I watch feathers disappear one by one
in the rearview mirror, pull into
the nearest petrol station, pressure
wash blood from the bonnet of my car,
from the headlights, from underneath
the wheel arches while you keep watch,
tell me shaking I would do this with you.
I would do this with you if we'd killed a man.

Repair Is a Failing Trade

A dropped paring knife, a tray of potatoes
in hot fat slipping from the work-surface edge.
A dough overworked. A haircut, one side
then the other, then the first again. So much
I've tried to save it would be better to let go.
A finger opened to the white for a dint
avoided in the lino. A sopping burn
to save a mess. The losing exchange
of potential for completion. Beauty chased
till it got away. So many stories
end with *and all for*. As in, he swerved
and broke his neck, and all for a pheasant.
I asked him once if he wished he'd gone on
straight, and squashed the bastard flat,
but words are cheap, and he said he'd do the same.

Buridan's Ass

After Al-Ghazali

Since I've been reckoning with grief,
I've not been anything as dramatic
as suicidal. I've been cavalier

with doses. I've taken
less care crossing the street.

I've hoped, perhaps, to trigger
the flinch as a car slams past,

to make terror or habit
answer the question — make for me
my first decision in weeks.

And why not? It's routine that carries
the ungospelled body over the sand.

And fear? That's just the body's
honest accounting of all we already have.

Lethe

After The Myth of Er

Since I've been reckoning with grief,
I've been remembering my previous.
Two friends, one close, both dead.

I've been comparing the way they left
with this, which I wished for them,
or myself, or thought I did:

this bereavement with a view
that parting is. Wrong, twice,

to believe myself selfless enough
to choose to see the gone going,

selfish enough to cheer their forgetfulness
forgiving me. After all, they didn't mean to leave,

or so I pretend to know. I only
want to want to watch your moving on.

Untrue

After Wednesday Martin

Since I've been reckoning with grief,
I've been taking time

to consider the misogyny
of my cuckold hurt,

and what a privilege it's been
to be able to defer
the thought of what I do

and do not face, to contemplate
how much the pain is worse
than any other breach of terms,

or winnowing of faith, and why,
if not because I talked you

into monogamy —
because I thought of you as mine.

Just World

After Abigail L. Harris

Since I've been reckoning with grief,
I've been learning what it is to cheat

and be cheated on. Desperately reading
up on polyamory, as if I really believed

kicking away the reason
for my hurt would banish it. Cherishing
the thought that, feeling wrong,

I must've done wrong. I don't want to be
the kind of academic man who clothes
his shittiness in appropriated theory,

who hears the term and thinks it means a claim
to endless fucks and no responsibility,

who finds it convenient to blame his being left
on the impossible inhumanness of lifelong sex.

Eggplant

> *"I was today years old when I learned that they're called eggplants because BABY EGGPLANTS LOOK LIKE EGGS"* [image omitted] —@wmginsberg

It's so suggestive in the way it flows
from ovum to phallus, trying, being both.
In its fade from grout to midnight lacquer.
How its egg fruit grows but doesn't crack
in the dream of change without injury.
I adore its florafaun hybridity,
natural as a cock coming from a seed.
How in the plant's green hand the egg is grasped
like an opal set in prongs of copper-gold.
And the questions of salience it seems to pose
as the fruit matures into its ordinary
flesh. Of if we should be known and named
by our most distinctive or prevailing traits
~~as all who've tasted shame or fleeting grace~~
as all of us who've made mistakes have asked.

Aubergine

> *"I gotta be THAT GUY but these are [a] special variety… normal eggplants still kinda look like eggs when they're small, but they are also still very purple."* — @sachasayan

Two weird linguistic tricks placed side by side.
One: the tracing of a word, like 'aubergine',
to its origin to find it's from the Sanskrit
'vātigagama' — meaning 'aubergine'.
Not 'bitter apple' or 'fruit that cures the wind'.
'Rope', from the Old English 'rāp' meaning 'rope'.
No dead metaphors. Just a noise for a thing.
And two: the real-ing of a metaphor
as when you go out on a tourist dhow
and see a sailor really *show someone the ropes*,
feel the wind in their sails, or watch an anchor
reach its *bitter end*, that is, the boat-end of the line,
where the strands are spliced and tied to the bitt,
~~only seen in a *port in a storm* when it's all payed out~~
and nothing to do with sweetness and time.

Free Will

i)

With or without the sun,
which it can't see
or feel through the soil
a seed
like *Humulus lupulus*
or Common Hop
will always shoot
directly up.

Suspended, inverted
in a bell-shaped pot
with a light underneath
it will still swim
up through the green dark
to insist, panicking,
at the sealed top.

ii)

But if it breaches,
breathes
above damp loam,
Humulus lupulus
or Common Hop
may be sealed,
collared, in a dark box
and there trained

with a torch
and tape to fix
and vary the position
of the false light source,
to twist itself
in dying nests,
to tie itself in knots.

Control and Release

Making Love to the Knife Thrower

Of course he had the spinning 60s bed.
He told me, the trick is, there is no trick.

Of course he pulled the straps too tight.
Though that itself may have been a trick.

He kissed the sheet next to my neck.
He said, the hardest part is keeping still.

He placed an obelus by my every inch.
He said, the skill's to *almost* always miss.

He kissed the bed between my thighs.
He said, to live, pretend that you have died.

He promised me that we would never switch.
He's afraid to die and I'm afraid to kill.

A glamorous assistant lives many lives.
That's why we look so different every night.

Hotel

She hated the way he repeated himself
along long corridors like a bad hotel carpet,
and how, like a bad hotel carpet, he'd wait,
impatient, at the bathroom door
so he could start up again when she emerged.

She hated the way he positioned himself
to force her to cross him when she wanted
to leave, and how, like a bad hotel carpet,
he'd always know first about people's affairs
and boast how he kept them all quiet.

She hated the way, like a bad hotel carpet,
he caught the door whenever she slammed it,
and the way he would lead her straight
from that door through the hall to the bedroom,
as if he couldn't imagine going anywhere else.

She hated the way she could see him
in a Rotary Club or Masons' Grand Lodge,
and how he was, like a bad hotel carpet,
the same in the bedroom as he was in the bar,
as he was in the bedrooms of all of the others.

She hated the way he'd wait at the doorstep
if she stayed out too late, or roll, bright red,
out into the street, and how, like a bad hotel
carpet, his patterns were chosen to mask
all the dirt, his surface to muffle her steps.

Fractal Date

When he snapped at her in the restaurant,
she said that a tree branch looks like a tree,
and that a twig also looks like a tree.

When he questioned how long she thought it would last,
she answered that coastlines get longer
the more closely you measure them;
that attention to detail is a form of infinity;
and that scholars know more and more about less and less.
The trick is to catch them somewhere in the middle.

When he pressed her to tell him if he was 'the one'
and asked, if he *was*, why she would leave him,
she replied: there are two notable facts about snowflakes:
that they're all so famously different,
and that they display what's known as self-symmetry:
the edge of a snowflake
looks like the magnified edge of a snowflake.
She apologised for being obscure.

When he asked if this was it, *over*,
she said you can't tell a stream from a river
when you don't know the scale of the map,
and that the same goes for arteries and capillaries,
of which there were many in her heart,
though, of course, many more of the latter.

Test Scenario

Subject A wanted the Object.

So did Subject B.

A wanted the Object more than B, but not as much as A wanted to avoid upsetting B.

B wanted the Object not so much for B's Self but for Subject C.

C didn't want the Object at all, but wanted to see B stand up to A for once.

A knew that C didn't really want the Object and neither did B.

A didn't want to give the object to B; A wanted B to stop indulging C's games.

A knew that if A kept the Object for A's Self, C would be angry at B for being a coward (which A didn't want), and at A for being Selfish (which A thought was unfair).

A was certain that if A gave the Object directly to C, C would hate A for knowing C's heart, and hate B for once again failing to stand up to A, and would hate the Object anyway, it being a symbol of B's cowardice and A's charity.

B, for B's part, knew that if B took the Object, A wouldn't mind, but A would pity B and B's relationship with C.

B knew what would happen if B didn't take it.

C, for C's part, thought that if C didn't take the Object for C's Self, B certainly wouldn't, and A would get A's own way once again.

C thought that if C *did* take the Object, B would be humiliated and A disdainful.

C didn't know if C wanted that or not.

Sonnet

Leaving our bed
in the quiet dark
and walking
to the light switch
in the hall

we have to just
step out and trust
there'll be a floor
beneath us

as bellringers
pull their ropes hard
before they've heard

the note before
the note before

The Best Thing About Falling

is that the body's
centre finally
asserts itself
so no matter how you drop

you'll soon be flying
pelvis-first and arms
and legs last
in a kind of bowl shape

as if you are being crushed
beneath a vast
invisible boulder
which is what

you've been trying
to tell people all along

The Long-Distance Hangman

parades his empty thought-balloon above our heads
thinks a barrel then a bull-calf
he is the Charmer of the Snake and Basket
he is the Muscles that Close the Eyes
he has the weather on a pull-string

Poseidon of the Damp and Flaccid Trident
the whirlpool that brings him ships and goods
the tent of hurricane whose eye he stands in
that puts down people three towns over
the Jailor with Cuffs in Every Size

Cursive Author of a Story Out of Nothing
he describes a well he's at the bottom of
whose frayed meniscus wobbles like a lip
the Windpipe and the Mouth that Never Closes
who makes the shapes of words but not the sounds

The Great Disappointment

After a painting by a probably imaginary painter

Since I've been reckoning with grief
I've been looking for a painting I remember
of a peasant, miserable on a hillside,

seconds after his rapture hasn't come,
his plough already sold to a neighbour

for a song as a show of faith and a joke
to crack in paradise. But the closest

I can find is a *Simpsons* scene, a poem
by Donaghy, and a *Puck* cartoon of Millerites
on their roofs in ascension robes just before

the climbdown and the false dawn
the Lord designed to expose the doubters

with their stores of grain, while the faithful,
tested, thinned, get ready for the real date.

To the State

all seams all joins are weak
all interfaces watersmeet all confluence
all parts with impurities adulterations are weak
any part with gaps leaks crevices
a part with fractures
parts with perforations openings are weak
all protuberances roughnesses extremities
all edges anything that comes to a point
any part that cuts across or against the grain
all moving parts are weak are liable to heat
a hot part warps
parts that heat and cool are weak
any part subject to repetitious movement
to continuous movement becomes weak
any part not maintained is weak
any part fixed any part made good
a part used for the first time may be weak
any part put to unintended use
a multipurpose part is weak
all parts whose use is changed
all custom all adjustable
a part sawn off modified tuned
a part with failsafes circuit breaks may fail
any part reliant on external systems is weak
any part beyond the mechanical
anything you have to mend or feed or clean

The State of It

i)

the way it matters
if the what can be wielded
or flows or is an atmosphere
or if it's what appears
around a flame a streetlight a plasma TV

can it be
stood on or breathed or drowned in?
or is it seen only as a novelty in an orb
fleetingly in its fourth state?

ii)

estate
and status and standing
are the roots of the state

which says I have so I am so I can
or I can so I have so I am

iii)

if the state states the state is neutral
if it can be of disrepair of origin of the union
if it exists at one remove

then the state just describes and defines
and as a definition must bound and exclude

iv)

but to state is to say unequivocally
that is
without equal voice

v)

is it neutral to say
you *are* a state
you are *in* a state

you live in a state
and so does everybody else

to live in a state is to live in a mess
a mess is where soldiers eat and relax

vi)

a failed state is a mess gone wrong
a mess that has been ordered

Flora and Fauna

The Wood Pigeon

breaking cover —

its fluster of browns
and greys
like the unpainted sides
of piano keys
you only see
when they're played.

The Carpet

of green grass
rolled down
the middle
of a country road
can't understand,

has to ask
why the tired,
rutted tracks
that shoulder it,

that travelled
the same hidden lane
to the same
end, complain
like that.

Snow

Hiking, we think it's starting to snow
and it may be. But often we walk
into the snow which is already falling,
already there. We step into the globe
and don't even notice. There is no sound.
It's not just starting. We're arriving now.

Like Words

When I was taught each drop
is flattened underneath by the air's resistance
to its falling, as if what looked like nothing

cared, I began to picture the rain,
wrongly, it transpires, as bullets in reverse,
retracing their paths to the muzzle,

but imagine if it did all come back to you
like that, and you got soaked. How much
you'd rejoice. How much it would hurt.

The Touch

I left a bucket outside overnight on the patio.
I'd had a party, and this was the leftover
ice, later tepid water, into which my friends' hands
had dipped to fish
out the bubbing cans. This morning,
it was warm, imprecise. I've seen
headlights confetti-cannon gold dust
for a lonely driver's night parade
and the bucket's surface was a slice of that beam.

Tomorrow, it'll be a filthy monocle.
In two weeks, fluttering with eyelashes
come alive. Diminutive glass rods.
Vaguenesses that, microscoped, would resolve
to grubby bears with pushed-up sleeves.

It was the same with the unambitious pond
I rushed to dig, and didn't stock,
then washed my hands in. There, now,
the water seems little more than a lubricant
to ease the crowd of frogs. Each snail
an ice-cream dropped. I didn't put them there.
You can see why people believe in God
and His life-giving touch.

The Body Politic

Seeing in the British Library the frontispiece
of Hobbes' *Leviathan* – an etching of a king,
artfully restored, whose body is made up

of dozens of his subjects, like one of those
celebrity posters made of smaller photos somehow
collaged – I'm reminded of what I know

but don't often think about: that I am a host
as well as a host, that even within
me, there is no necessary unity between

the parasites, the fungi, the cells splitting
like sects, the bacteria on my finger that touches
the glass above the book, which tells me,

now I am not all together at peace with myself,
that *myself* is a piece of legal fiction
and it's amazing we agree on anything at all.

Pastoral

Three weeks alone and all I can read
are those backwoods American poets
with their figs and windfall peaches
and their one good chair of four legs
from which they observe

the changing yaw of the up-early light
as it climbs and then brims the horse trough,
or the rich patterning on an earthenware
jug filled with slow syrup their father tapped
himself and sealed, his old
clay fingerprints held still on its lip —

and attend to what such heirlooms
might want teach us, if we can learn to listen
so deeply we hear their thoughts as our own.

The Dead Branch

Genesis: 9: 20-25

When it fell like a fan from a servant's
servant's hand, it must've only glanced,
the wound was that shallow. A tent of skin
the shape and colour of the leaves
he used to skim from the stagnant ooze.

And looking up, his mind was as woozy
as a flooded town with only crowed spires
and high hills above the waterline.

He saw the blue opening in the tree's
old crown, and the new air rushing blindly
in where the branch was plucked. He felt
the cold in his own head's broken thatch.

Then he saw the black branch as a river
flowering to a sea after being dammed.

Hunger

The only time I used the knife, it was a beggar,
a man I didn't know, who the morning found
sack-dropped, with an alms bowl in his coat
and beneath it, a stomach emptied
then swollen like a spoon turned onto its back.

I swapped his tongue with the blade's
then drew the red line of his blood
up the fuller: a thermometer in the mouth
of a feverish child. There were no questions.
Nobody saw or said anything strange.

I filled his pockets with heels of bread,
wound him in bedsheets and rowed him out
to the lake's still centre; made him a target –
the water like stacking cups seen from above.

After that, the hungry came thickly, in knots
tied to our mealtimes, vulgar and public,
beseeching, in filths, with gleaming bowls.

Day-in, day-out, we slopped ladles
from stove to bench, unsmiling but held
together by the soup-pot's scrapings,
which we didn't like. Couldn't stomach.

I wasted. My wife slimmed to taut then slight
then dug-out, her gut a ground-hollow,
a dog's nest in the woods, snarlingly empty.

In our bed, the five of us dawned bundled
like kindling, while the line at our door
reached to the lane-end, almost to town.
The kid wouldn't suck; Alice's breast folded
like a page to return to. I crossed my threshold,

took the last of my salt and strength
and gorged the lake, sang to it, spent the night
awake on its back. And seeing that wasn't enough,
remade the man's hurt to go with his hunger,
and threw myself in as a fish not worth the eating.

The Raising of Lazarus

After Duccio

Since I've been reckoning with grief,
I've been thinking about Lazarus.
I've been noticing trees:

the absent way they slip
their leaves, as if falling into sleep.

I envy the deciduous,
how they become statuary,
how they take up the same space,

remaining as someone's way-marker
without causing any pain.

Is there hope in their temporary
death? Is it just what's next is worse?

No, Lazarus never smiled again
but he crawled out of the earth.

Couplings

Holiday

I can sense my clothes I am so sun-glowed.
I feel like an olive in every single way.

You trail the proboscis of the DEET
along the inside of your wrist.

My every golden arm-hair's a leaping fish's
water-trail arrested by the light.

You have a bas-relief of mozzie bites.
My whole body's warm, like it's holding an egg.

So tonight, let's lie not touching on a bed
which is two beds united by a sheet.

And this week, let's share a soap,
and be familied by smelling both the same.

We'll have peaches to eat above the sink.
Our tiny coffee cups will all have pennies in.

Love Poem to Your Self-Sufficiency

Stand in a field long enough and the sounds
start up again,

as they do when
at times I sit quiet in another room
and you forget me
eventually

and start to hum,
talk to yourself,
cajoling, motivating, praising.

And knowing
that to call attention to a thing
is as often to kill
as to save it,

I say nothing – enjoy
the sound of you, without me,
happy.

Is it, our relationship, even a thing?

Or do we put it
in the category of clouds,
forests, beaches etc. –

that which
doesn't really exist,
being single raindrops,
individual trees,
grains of sand?

And if we do,
does that mean
that there is no 'us',

or that there is an 'us'
but it only exists
in those moments
we're doing things together?

And if that is the case
should we not perhaps
be kinder to each other
and do more things?

I only ask
because I'm watching
this documentary,
Saving the Rainforest,

and they've spent
the whole time
tending
individual trees.

Putting the World Away

seagulls caught mid-flap & stacked
like white plastic lawn chairs chameleons'
tails wound up moths closed & replaced
on the shelf pine forests folded in half
& velcroed together millipedes zippered
stingrays riffled in boxes coastlines hitched
straight hills flipped then settled in valleys
petals packed like parachutes back into buds
food chains nested neatly as diagrams krill
inside squid inside elephant seal crabs
hermited clouds skimmed off towers
dropped into wells greased like pistons
starfish geared the two of us bedded down
tessellated Pangaea eased back together

Expanding Universe

on date night a bowling ball squeezes
between pins the ice-cubes in my glass
won't chatter the train home is late then
cancelled derailed our journeys take longer
these days I've noticed tonight on the news
it says something about lakes having stretched
& widened & thinned but I don't understand
it all seems so difficult we wake
on opposite sides of the bed having not made
love outside the birds are evenly-spaced
directionless I want to ask you how can
everything move further from everything else?
but you're very small now and as close
to other people as you are to me

Dance Lessons

It bothered me
that we couldn't move
gracefully together,

our bodies tuned
to different frequencies:
you at double speed,
me with my shy feet.

I thought it said
something public
about the way we felt.

Perhaps it did;
you wouldn't take lessons,
though desperately
I wanted to:

if I couldn't dance
with you, I couldn't
dance with you.

Compact

We are walking on the compact sand,
trudging that narrow aisle of compromise
where the water meets the beach,
when I realise you're not holding my hand
but stopped ten paces and years ago
to look at what I wouldn't see. The islands
loaned simplicity by distance. The trees
branching like decisions. The boats
sailing italically away. How many times
have I been talking with you and turned
to find you gone? Wandered off, or paused
to observe some private wonder. A thought
that needed still to crystallise. The lichen
continents. The waves curled up like ferns.

Wild Fig

Sometimes I feel I grew you, tended you,
in the same way I've raised seeds,

kidding myself I made it all happen,
when I have seen laden fig trees
grow out of the red dust on boulders,

when all you ever needed
was light and space and the earth,

that I was not responsible for,
that was simply near me, lying around,

and you could have got from anyone
who left you right kind of alone.

Alone, I think there must have been
a last time I sat you at our table

and fed you. Tender sapling, tall fig.
No one ever waters a tree.

Last Meal

> *He feeds upon her face by day and night,*
> *And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,…*
> *Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.*
>
> — Christina Rossetti, *from* 'In An Artist's Studio'

Full English, demob food, and no real
conversation beyond vague logistics.
We'd said everything else the night before,
or what I thought was everything, until
you phoned a week later to tell me of the affair.
But then, in that cafe, there was only us,
our silence, our methodical consumption
– we still needed to eat – until, already,
somehow, the remnants of egg and wet
toast were all that were left, all that
separated us from the end of ten years of love.
And then, at the last, I let my body give way
to attentiveness, allowed myself to savour
the meal, the time, I had always scoffed,
treated as mere fuel, until it was almost gone.
Now I held each subdivided morsel, each
sip, in my mouth like the rarest wine.
I looked at your face, that light-brown mole
between your brows, the few faint lines,
the capillaries around your nose, the flake
of soft bread caught in the crease of your lips,
and felt a sort of crazed satisfaction.
It had been rich. I had loved my companion.