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*Contemporary British Poetry
and the Long 1980s*

The Poetry Promise: Contemporary British Poetry and Its Cultural Capital

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RÉSUMÉ. *Cet essai examine les tendances et les développements apparemment disparates de la nouvelle poésie britannique et tente de montrer que, malgré les différences de contenu et de forme, les textes ont tendance à être motivés par une esthétique commune et une marque très spécifique et très britannique d'utilitarisme lyrique. Les textes abordés comprennent l'anthologie de poésie d'auto-assistance, le poème lyrique traditionnel, le poème sur la nature contemporaine et le poème « canonique » (A. Assmann 2008) traitant de la mémoire culturelle et de l'identité nationale. Un engagement commun en faveur de l'utilité sociale et une poétique de la « familiarisation » (Müller-Zettelmann 2004) garantissent que la nouvelle poésie britannique peut s'imposer dans un environnement de plus en plus compétitif.*

ABSTRACT. This essay analyses seemingly disparate trends and developments in contemporary British poetry and attempts to show that, despite differences in content and form, texts tend to be driven by a shared aesthetic and a very specific, very British brand of lyric utilitarianism. Texts discussed include the self-help poetry anthology, the lyric mainstream poem, the contemporary nature poem and the 'canonical' (A. Assmann 2008) poem concerned with cultural memory and national identity. A shared commitment to social utility and a poetics of 'familiarisation' (Müller-Zettelmann 2004) ensure that contemporary British poetry can hold its own in an increasingly competitive environment.

MOTS CLÉS : *poésie britannique contemporaine, néolibéralisme, mémoire culturelle, identité nationale, conservatisme esthétique*

KEYWORDS: contemporary British poetry, neoliberalism, cultural memory, national identity, aesthetic conservatism

“We guarantee our poems will not contain any words or concepts with which you're not already reasonably familiar” (Fisher 156). In his satirical poem “The Poetry Promise” (2000), Roy Fisher brings the lingo of customer services to bear on the realm of poetry. The text draws its humorous effect from the collision of incompatibles: the world of consumerism with its precise guidelines of customer satisfaction and client safety sits strangely with the unbounded freedom of poetic flights of fancy. For some observers of the contemporary British poetry scene, however, Roy Fisher’s poem points to the very real ways the logic of the marketplace has been encroaching upon the genre (“every poem is designed to represent value for the time you spend reading it”, Fisher 156). At poetry readings in Great Britain today, it is not uncommon for members of the audience to be asked to “fill out questionnaires detailing their customer satisfaction and offering information on their gender and ethnicity” (Wheatley 8). According to Geoffrey Hill, who in his lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry provided nuanced – if scathing – analyses of contemporary British poetry, there is a direct line to be drawn between “our particular phase of oligarchical consumerism” (2011) and poetry’s aesthetic “accessibility” (2010).

This essay discusses seemingly disparate trends and developments in contemporary British poetry. Drawing on poetry’s literary, social, political and economic frameworks, it attempts to show that, despite differences in production, representation and consumption, publications tend to be driven by a shared aesthetic and aim at a very specific, very British brand of lyric usefulness.

Some of the roots for this near-uniformity of craft and purpose may be found in the 1980s: when experimental poets resigned from the Poetry Society after the ‘Battle of Earls Court’ (Barry 26f.), they allowed the remaining majority to form a “new consensus” (Barry 179). Consensual inclusiveness and “deaesthetized forms of writing” (Rowland 21) have since been central to the self-definition of many British poets and their art. Featuring “a defence of ‘Mainstream’ practice” (xxiii) in its introduction, Don Paterson and Charles Simic’s *The New Poetry* (1993) was one of the first major post-poetry-war collections to make accessibility its explicit motto: “these poems, we believe, make a [sic] honest attempt to generate the literal or argumentative context by which they are to be understood.” (xxx).

While the tentative beginnings of creative writing courses reach back to the 1970s (Cox 581), the 1980s were the decade in which academic writing courses and creative writing workshops (such as the residential courses run by the Arvon Foundation established in 1968, Glover 241) developed into a major formative factor in British literary culture. Creative writing as pedagogy poses certain challenges which publications such as John Moat and John Fairfax’s manual *The Way to Write* (1981) or the influential handbook *Writing Poems* (1993) by Peter Sansom sought to address. Generations of aspiring poets have been taught to adhere to maxims such as “bad poems are the same in one essential: they are not true” (Sansom 23), “We are suspicious of adjectives” (Sansom 60), “All bad literature aspires to the condition of literature. All good literature aspires to the condition of life” (Craig Raine qtd. in Sansom 49), or “A dishonest poem is one which expresses, no matter how well,

feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained” (Auden qtd. in Sansom 60). Many writers who graduated from creative writing programmes and subsequently took up posts as lecturers in MA courses of creative writing have been passing on a similar aesthetic orthodoxy in their own teaching (Cox 591).

In the 1980s, Great Britain’s political, social and financial system underwent a massive neoliberal transformation. Driven by the quest to cut state expenditures, Margaret Thatcher’s public management turned to market-based practices and assessed the public sector strictly in relation to costs and measurable results. During this period, the arts sector saw a shift away from public subsidy to corporate sponsorship and a transformation of the Arts Council from an independent agency to an instrument of government (Billington). Margaret Thatcher famously pointed to composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and his creative output as representing the type of internationally successful art her government wished Britain’s creative industries to produce. That the musical should have been chosen as a model for 1980s art should not come as a surprise: it “represented Thatcherism in action: what it celebrated was the triumph of individualism and profitability” (Billington).¹ As critics such as Welsch and others have shown, the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s introduced a neoliberal logic to the British poetry scene which it has been grappling with ever since.

“All poems will be written in guidelines” (Fisher 156): the Self-Help Poetry Anthology

The self-help poetry anthology first made its appearance at the turn of the millennium. Daisy Goodwin’s *101 Poems that Could Save Your Life: An Anthology of Emotional First Aid* edited in 1999 was the first in a hitherto unbroken series of similar publications.² Compiled by poets, poetry publishers and media celebrities, the self-help anthology typically combines time-honoured favourites with lesser-known contemporary poems, with texts having been selected less for their aesthetic merit than for their therapeutic value. Arranged according to ailment, featured poems tend to be accompanied by uplifting words which help to establish a link between the problem at hand (unhappy love, loss of motivation, feeling blue etc.) and its lyric cure.

In the introduction to her collection *You’ll Never Walk Alone: Poems for Life’s Ups and Downs* (2022), Rachel Kelly highlights the health-related benefits of reading: “book reading provides a survival advantage among the elderly of twenty-three months. The more people read, the more likely they [are] to live longer” (21). Stevie Smith’s text “Not Waving But Drowning” published in 1957 is one of the poems showcased in the volume (26f.). It features in a section entitled “Winter: Time for

¹ In 1987, Margaret Thatcher’s arts minister, Richard Luce, announced that “the only test of our ability to succeed is whether we can attract enough customers” (qtd. in Billington).

² See, for example, Neil Astley’s *Staying Alive. Real Poems for Unreal Times* (2002) and *Soul-Food: Nourishing Poems for Starved Minds* (2007), William Sieghart’s *The Poetry Pharmacy. Tried-and-True Prescriptions for the Heart, Mind and Soul* (2017) or Julia Copus’ *Life Support. 100 Poems to Reach for on Dark Nights* (2019), to name but a few.

Sadness” (23-50) and is followed by the editor’s mini-exegesis: “This poem [i.e., “Not Waving But Drowning”] encourages me to be more emotionally honest and open about my real feelings when I feel ‘much further out’ than others may realise. It’s an invitation for you to share your true feelings too” (27).

Self-help poetry collections present poems which (are made to) relate to one particular problem, one specific, narrowly defined, usually unpleasant situation of everyday life. To achieve the disambiguation of a text which by its very nature is designed to be an *opera aperta* (Eco), i.e., an aesthetic object which is both polysemic and suggestive, the self-help poetry anthology has to exert strong editorial guidance (e.g., via the type of section commentary or mini-exegesis used in Rachel Kelly’s volume). Paratextual devices narrow down, fix and stabilise a text’s hermeneutic openness. The poem is ascribed a streamlined meaning and assigned a clear-cut teleology. In the logic of the self-help anthology, the poem is to life’s predicaments what aspirin is to a headache or a wrench to engine failure. It is turned into a performative tool within a mechanistic binary of ailment and cure. The self-help poetry anthology confers to poetry a new ontology and a new purpose. Through processes of selection and contextualisation, poetry is made to enter the world of utility and converted into a consumer commodity.³

Such conspicuous practices of market orientation appear to be the radical attributes of a niche phenomenon and a far cry from ‘regular’ poetry publications. The following section will probe this assumption, looking at prominent examples of contemporary British ‘mainstream’ poems, ascertaining their predominant textual strategies, underlying aesthetic precepts and intended effects.

In his important monograph *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* (2022), Antony Rowland upholds the distinction between the ‘mainstream’ and ‘innovative poetry’. While being wary of simple oppositions, Rowland notes the endurance and critical efficacy of the two terms. Like Edwards before him, Rowland describes the two corpora in predominantly aesthetic terms: mainstream writing is interested in clarity of expression, coherent narratives and a single point of view, whereas the innovative tradition, which his study is primarily focussed on, tends to foreground non-normative language use, multiple voices and open form. Drawing on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (118-135), Rowland uses the concept of ‘enigmatical poetics’ (Rowland 24-41), i.e., the notion of a *discours*-oriented (Genette 159), formally self-reflective, linguistically and epistemologically experimental aesthetic, to define and recalibrate the opposition between mainstream and innovative poetry. Choosing a related focus, my essay looks at those contemporary British poems which espouse an aesthetic of accessibility, prize clarity of language and thought and engage in “the hard labour entailed in achieving lucidity” (Enright xxviii). Adorno’s dialectical conception of ‘committed’ vs. ‘autonomous’ literature (1962) maps onto a form-focussed reading of the mainstream-vs.-innovative-poetry divide: Whereas Paterson, editor of the mainstream anthology *New British Poetry* (2004), declares his distrust

³ For an article in defence of the self-help poetry anthology see Neil Astley’s StAnza [sic] Lecture 2005. The text responds in depth to a number of reviews denouncing the genre.

against ambiguity and an antipathy towards that which is not strictly definable, Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* endorses both (115f.). My essay follows Rowland in its classificatory concentration on epistemology and poetics and, like him, steers clear of a concatenation of poetry's features of textual composition with extrinsic factors such as class, gender or ethnicity.⁴ Within a *discours*-oriented framework, poems such as Abigail Parry's "Arterial", Sarah Howe's "Night in Arizona", Daljit Nagra's "8", Lemn Sissay's "Moving Target", Mona Arshi's "The Lilies", Jason Allen-Paisant's "The Last Time" or Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo's "Investigation of Past Shoes", despite differences in their authors' respective ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, regional affiliation or political outlook, are revealed to ascribe to a similar aesthetic and epistemology.

"Poetry You Can Count On" (Fisher 156): Poetry and Truth

In twenty-first-century Britain, poetry is prized for being relatable. The type of poem published by mainstream publishers and shortlisted for the major national poetry prizes (T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, Forward Poetry Prize, Costa Poetry Award) tends to be comparatively simple in its formal make-up, places marked emphasis on subjective experience and emotional intensity and aims primarily at an affective reader response. The various situations the poems' *personae* find themselves in are taken from everyday British life: the speaker wakes up next to a beloved person (Kathryn Simmonds, "Elegy for the Living"), pulls weeds (Simon Armitage, "Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass") or guts a freshly caught fish (Jen Hadfield, "Song of Parts").

From a familiar, everyday situation a 'revelatory anecdote' unfolds, a short incident to which the poem attaches a deeper meaning. Mainstream poems tend to show a high degree of narrativity; lyrical mini-narratives turned philosophical vignettes ponder the deeper implications of a closely defined mundane situation. The punchline that comes at the end of so many a contemporary British poem delivers a comic twist or offers a startlingly laconic analysis or snappy conclusion. Humour, surprise and a strong affective potential provide entertainment and make for an emotionally engaging and stimulating reading experience.

A salient feature of contemporary British poetry is its use of strategies geared at producing the illusion of authenticity ("Every one of our poems is authenticated as being drawn directly from the writer's personal experience or thoughts", Fisher 156). The boundary between fiction and reality, between real-life experience and a fictional story world projected by an aesthetic verbal construct, is deliberately eroded by texts depicting emphatically realistic and detailed descriptions of highly private scenes. Often, speaker-related information is particularised and individualised (and also coincides with the biographical data of the author) to such a degree that it can become a veritable feat *not* to read these texts as authentic diary entries presented in a moderately lyricised form.

⁴ For an earlier essay of mine adopting a similar framework see Müller-Zettelmann.

The language of contemporary mainstream poems resembles everyday language use; traditional lyric devices tend to be used sparingly and unobtrusively.⁵ They aestheticize a text discreetly so as not to obscure what is perceived to be its actual core: its central “emotionally intelligent insight” (Middleton).

Jo Shapcott’s *Of Mutability* (2010) may serve as an example. *Of Mutability* won the Costa Prize for Poetry, the Costa Book of the Year Award and the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry. The collection was written after Shapcott’s treatment for breast cancer; its poems retrace the development of the disease and the various stages of its treatment. The poem “Era” is the second in the collection and describes the day the speaker makes her way to the clinic in order to have her first operation. Taking on the form of a pathetic fallacy, the London scenery appears anomalous and out of kilter, and the speaker focusses on the pathological nature of the things around her:

The twenty-second day of March two thousand and three
I left home shortly after eight thirty
on foot towards the City: I said goodbye
to the outside of my body: I was going in.
The magpies were squabbling in the park.
The little fountain splashed chemical bubbles
over its lip. Traffic swarmed and swam
round Vauxhall Cross, like crazy fish, with teeth.

And anything could be real in a country
where Red Kites were spreading east and now
we had February swallows. Planes for Heathrow
roared not far enough overhead, shedding
jet trails which pointed over there: those other
places where all the frontiers end with a question. (Shapcott 4)

Like the rest of the volume, “Era” projects a strong sense of authenticity; it names date, time of day and geographical landmarks in meticulous detail. The language with its short simple syntax and its short simple words is unobtrusive, casual, and close to everyday speech. With its fourteen lines, the poem pays passing tribute to the sonnet, but apart from its line count there are not many conspicuous lyric devices that would stand in the way of easy comprehension (“Each individual poem will be completely coterminous. It will not contain either too few words to join up its meaning adequately or so many as to make it appear to be up to something else”, Fisher 156). The text’s central semantic figure placed in the poem’s concluding lines supplies sufficient information to hint at the metaphor’s tenor, and the fact that the author is known to be a cancer survivor strengthens the effect of authenticity. As in so many poems of the contemporary corpus, “Era” with its revelation of highly

⁵ “Rhetoric is felt to block empirical knowledge. There is an unconscious idea of reaching absolute truth by reducing language to one dimension, the strength of one cognitive faculty, something quite literal. [...] The poetry is notably plain and similar to prose. An alternative means for the expression of emotion and emphasis has not been found” (Duncan 24).

private information, its (supposedly) faithful rendering of detail, its emphasis on the speaker's interiority, its highly individualised and touchingly emotional account, invites readers to equate the text's fictional *persona* with the biographical author, who here seems to be allowing her readers to share some of her most intimately private moments. The collection contains a poem entitled "Piss Flower" which revels in the pleasure of urinating ("I can shoot down a jet stream / so intense my body rises / a full forty feet", 54) and another poem which rejoices in the sensual pleasures of drinking tea:

This tea, this cup of tea, made of leaves,
made of the leaves of herbs and absolute

almond blossom, this tea, is the interpreter
of almond, liquid touchstone which lets us
scent its true taste at last and with a bump,

in my case, takes me back to the yellow time
of trouble with blood tests, and cellular
madness, and my presence required

on the slab for the surgery, and all that mess
I don't want to comb through here because
it seems, honestly, a trifle now that steam

and scent and strength and steep and infusion
say thank you thank you thank you for the then, and now (Shapcott 53)

This is a deeply moving text, and the speaker's relief and gratitude at being able to savour the here and now are very relatable. The polysemy of the title ("Procedure") encapsulates the poem's transition from the speaker's bleak pathological past to her taking intense pleasure in the sensual experience of preparing, smelling and tasting an aromatic brew. The choice of beverage is no coincidence, however, as tea is here used to textualise the sense of a markedly British brand of wellbeing. This was also noted by Carol Ann Duffy, former poet laureate, who at the awarding ceremony for the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2011 praised the "calm but sparkling Englishness" of Shapcott's poetry, which "manages to combine accessibility" with an "engagement with all the facets of being human" (The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry). The medal awarded to Shapcott on the occasion shows the crowned effigy of the monarch on one side, and on the reverse an image of Truth personified, holding the flame of inspiration. This seems a fitting image of what lies at the heart of the genre conception of contemporary British poetry.

Truth to many a contemporary British poem does not appear to be an overly problem-ridden notion; it might be hard to come by, but it is out there, and what is more, it can be grasped via lyric language. To the mainstream poem, language is "at least as much an ally as an enemy" (Enright xxix). Relying on a poetics which is

strikingly similar to the aesthetic underpinnings of the self-help poetry anthology, the mainstream poem is concerned with “the startling reincarnation of the old truths in the culture of the age” (Paterson xxxi). The text is appreciated not so much for its aesthetic otherness than for its ability to present hard-won nuggets of truth in an appealing and accessible form.

“[O]ur poems will not contain any words or concepts with which you are not already reasonably familiar” (Fisher 156): Familiarising Poetry

Poetry has often been described as the most autonomous, the most ‘literary’ of literary genres. It is no coincidence that in their attempt to capture the essence of the literary, both Jakobson and Shklovsky had recourse to the poetic mode. Poetry is reputed to be furthest removed from the pragmatics of the mundane, from mechanistic relations of cause and effect and the capitalist logic of production for profit. That this should be so is largely due to the two related principles of deviation and defamiliarisation. Deviation from established modes of thought is the trait which led Adorno to believe in poetry’s utopian potential, and defamiliarisation is the term coined by Shklovsky for poetry’s ability to break the automatism of perception and “recover the sensation of life” (Shklovsky 12). According to Shklovsky, poetry’s main target is an epistemological one: it aims to disrupt standardised cognitive frames and their clichéd linguistic manifestations with the purpose of laying bare their tendency to abridge and simplify. Through defamiliarisation, poetry exposes the schematic and commonplace and opts instead for the unnamed, the uncategorised, the difficult, the cognitively fresh and the ideologically excluded. For Theodor Adorno, ‘pure’ poetry includes the notion of a rift, of antagonism and resistance: “our conception of lyric poetry has a moment of discontinuity in it” (Adorno 1951, 66). The poem is political through its radical idiosyncrasy, its distance from the mechanised and mercenary, through addressing the unnamed, the ideologically non-existent, the uncategorised and thus undefined:

immersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. [...] The lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation. (64)

For Adorno, poetry’s linguistic otherness acts as a social counter-discourse. The lyric is a visionary form which, through its uncompromisingly idiosyncratic language, offers resistance to a world dominated by the uniform laws of the marketplace. By disregarding, violating, or laying bare clichéd templates of meaning, poetry opens up zones of social possibility and reaches beyond common epistemological strictures.

What appears to apply to the covert poetics informing both the self-help poetry anthology and specimens of the British poetry mainstream, then, is that poetry’s epistemological potential has been – not abandoned exactly – but made to take a back seat and take on a subordinate role. In other words, what these lyric phenomena share is that they adhere to what I would like to call the principle of ‘familiarisation’

(Müller-Zettelmann). Familiarisation can be seen as the aesthetic counter principle to what Rowland describes as the ‘enigmaticalness’ of innovative poetry, i.e. its opacity, elusiveness and recalcitrance. Rather than striving to shatter preconceived notions and automatised habits of perception, rather than breaking up the sterile and formulaic and thus to ‘recover the sensation of life’, familiarising forms of poetry seek to reconcile their readers with the given. The ludic side of poetry, its aesthetic, self-referential, anti-pragmatic, explorative and experimental character is reined in; meaning and purpose of the lyric text are levelled and disambiguated, and readers are presented with a unidirectional path of streamlined semiosis and pragmatic application.

On a compositional level, familiarising aesthetics translate into a range of devices which, taken together, produce effects of lisibility,⁶ accessibility and verisimilitude. Familiarising techniques include the use of a transparent discourse, focusing on a poem’s *histoire* rather than its *discours*, facilitating empathy and identification through setting up a palpable, overt speaker, creating embodiment and the illusion of authenticity via *autodiegesis*, constructing a frame-affirming situation through typical *qualia* and presenting the speaker’s emotional take on the issue at hand.

Outcome-Oriented Poetics: British Poetry and the Creative Industries

In his 2020 monograph *The Selling and Self-Regulation of Contemporary Poetry*, J. T. Welsch studies poetry’s precarious position within Britain’s ‘creative industries’ and elucidates how British poetry has been edging ever closer to the ideological core of a neoliberal system that imposes its principles of competition and profit onto all spheres of social life. Not unlike recent trends in pedagogy, an outcome-oriented logic has come to rein in poetry’s potentially destabilising forces in favour of predictable and risk-free results. Welsch explains how the notion of artistic autonomy – both as lived experience and nostalgic performance, as self-exploitative reality and sentimental myth – has become poetry’s USP (Unique Selling Point) within a relentlessly capitalist environment. Paradoxically, poetry’s claim to autonomy, i.e., its purported independence from the logic of the marketplace, is precisely what makes it valuable: “Rather than treating art and commerce as separate spheres, creative works take on a ‘two-faced reality’ as both ‘a commodity and a symbolic object’” (Welsch 9, citing Bourdieu 1993, 113).

Welsch goes on to show how changes in the public perception of creativity and a drastic reduction in public subsidies, together with a general climate of recession and crisis have prompted participants in the British poetry scene to develop a range of strategies to address the new socio-political objectives. In addition to the aesthetic choices outlined above, performative strategies of self-definition and self-presentation, self-regulating practices of communication, collaboration and evaluation as well as a variety of strategies geared at enhancing poetry’s

⁶ The term derives from Roland Barthes’s coinage ‘*lisible*’ (vs. ‘*scriptible*’), which he uses to describe traditional literary works and their reliance upon conventions shared by author and reader (Barthes 4f.)

institutionalisation and professionalisation have evolved to help British poetry assert itself within an increasingly competitive environment.

At this point I would like to return to the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry, the prized trophy which can be read as an emblem symbolising British poetry's public character and social function. The image of Truth holding the flame of inspiration implies a *poeta vates* concept: the poet is conceptualised as sooth-sayer in whose hands poetry transforms into a genre capable of granting access to the essence of things – or to put it in the words of poetry editor and publisher Neil Astley: “poems offer people spiritual wisdom in a spiritually bankrupt age” (Astley 2005). On the medal's obverse, the effigy of the monarch hints at what can be considered an even stronger asset in poetry's portfolio of symbolic assets, more potent even than its aesthetics of familiarisation or Welsch's ‘artistic autonomy’: poetry's privileged role as a medium of cultural memory, as a genre entrusted with the construction of Englishness and national identity.

“Englands of the Mind” (Heaney): Cultural Memory

In an acclaimed essay of the same title (1980), Seamus Heaney, Northern Irish poet and 1995 Nobel Laureate, spoke of “Englands of the Mind”. Attempting to pinpoint the driving force and *raison d'être* of British poetry, Heaney identified the creation of idealising versions of the fatherland as the core pursuit of some of his English contemporaries. Their efforts to act as “hoarders and shorers of what they take to be the real England” (150) make them key contributors to the project of cultural memory.

Cultural memory is a collective's way of dealing with its own past.⁷ Like religious or ideological models, cultural memory is a “way of worldmaking” (Goodman), arising out of the human desire for identity, order, stability and the construction of meaning. In contrast to the academic discipline of historiography and its endeavour to present past events in an unbiased and scientifically exact way, cultural memory is characterised by a markedly partisan, ideological and pragmatic way of dealing with the past. Its main objective is to construct a group-specific version of a community's past which is relevant to its present-day survival. Aiming to create a robust and uniform version of collective identity, cultural memory provides a collective with normative answers to the question “Who are we as a nation?”

Collective memory can never be encountered in its entirety, nor does it ever occur in a ‘pure’, unmediated form. The non-material components of cultural memory, i.e., its constitutive ideas, precepts, narratives and value judgments, are dependent on concrete material manifestations – in effigy, painting, memorial, poem or song. It is through their repeated consumption, through the recitation of a culture- and epoch-specific corpus of canonised texts that a society will stabilise and mediate its collective self-image. For its preservation and circulation, cultural memory relies on

⁷ This section an adapted version of Müller-Zettelmann 398-399. For studies on poetry and cultural memory see Gorp, Zettelmann.

social structures. It depends on the mechanisms and institutions of cultural transmission to ensure its enduring relevance. A collective's specific construction of its own past needs to be constantly repeated, rehearsed, recited and re-enacted: "As the performative aspect of the term 'remembrance' suggests, collective memory is constantly 'in the works', and, like a swimmer, has to keep moving even just to stay afloat" (Rigney 345).

Cultural memory does not lay emphasis on temporal distance, historical otherness and the inherent historicity of cultural phenomena but instead stresses their timeless, universal character. Within the framework of cultural memory, literary texts feature both as objects and media of *memoria*, as tokens and vessels of communal remembrance. Whatever their function, however, memory texts are not perceived as 'of their time', not as testimonies of the remoteness of past experience or the specific conditioning factors of the present day, but as a superior corpus of cultural heritage expressive of what we acknowledge as our own. Such texts are exempt from the eroding forces of cultural evolution; in their role as providers of absolute meaning, they are situated in a realm of the ever-valid and the nationally distinctive. With documents of the so-called 'canonical' (A. Assmann) kind, their age and circumstances of origin are of no importance – located in an eternal present, their concern is with history, truth and collective identity.

In Britain, poetry is the preferred genre called upon when there is occasion for evoking national unity through emotional means: "Emotional identification, catharsis and above all, emotionally intelligent insight, as well as some recognition of national identity, are what adult readers learn to seek in poetry" (Middleton). To fulfil its role as a medium of collective memory, contemporary British poetry often draws on established iconographic patterns and makes use of an arsenal of tried-and-tested symbols and collective narratives. Texts with a strong mnemonic current are often found to refer to one of two areas of experience: the British countryside and the Great War.

"A new sense of the shires" (Heaney 169): the British Nature Poem

At least since the days of Romanticism, British poetry has been cultivating close ties with nature in its untouched, unspoilt state. While for William Wordsworth the epiphanic experience of nature offered an encounter with the divine, contemporary British nature poetry is often concerned with making the nation's uniqueness tangible through lyric evocations of the English countryside. Britain's sites of natural beauty are attributed properties which, in metonymic extension, are meant to be understood as essential features of the national character. This can be seen in Carol Ann Duffy's "White Cliffs" (2012), for instance, a text which offers an anthropomorphised vision of the cliffs of Dover, conferring on them attributes of protectiveness, strength and battle-readiness: "Worth their salt, England's white cliffs; / a glittering breastplate [...] / something fair and strong implied in chalk" (Duffy).

In a related technique, texts link the description of a region to its local history, constructing a magical, mythical past. Alice Oswald's book-length poem *Dart* (2002) describes the river Dart through its "repertoire of murmurs" (n.p.), letting those who live and work close to the waterway act as the river's many voices. Based on recordings of conversations with "people who know the river" (n.p.), Oswald's poem, which won the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry (2002) and was funded by the Arts Council's 'Arts for Everyone' scheme, offers a soundscape which combines statements by fishermen, foresters, millers, dairy workers, stonewallers, boatbuilders, oyster gatherers and ferrymen with the mutterings of mystical creatures from myth and local folklore (Jan Coe, 4; a waternymph, 11; the King of the Oakwoods, 13). Here as elsewhere, places of nature feature as sites of symbolic depth; they hint at common roots and hidden origins and promise identity, belonging, and national self-esteem.

As part of the Cultural Olympiad in 2012, Simon Armitage was commissioned by the Ilkley literature festival to write six nature poems (*Stanza Stones Trail*). Armitage wrote his texts on different manifestations of water ("Snow", "Rain", "Mist", "Dew", "Puddle", "Beck") and had them carved into 'stanza stones' along a 40-mile trail in the south Pennines. "Snow, snow, snow/ is how the snow speaks, / is how its clean page reads. / Then it wakes, and thaws, / and weeps" (Armitage 221): the heavy anthropomorphism of Armitage's *Stanza Stones*, the way the poems collapse ontological boundaries by inscribing their words into the very material they speak of, the fact that verse lines are exposed to the elements, left to be overgrown by moss and lichen, all this seems a fitting image for twenty-first century English poetry and its construction of a would-be organic relation to the referent in general and the English countryside in particular. Contemporary English poetry often construes nature as a locus which "keep[s] open the imagination's supply lines to the past" (Heaney 151), presenting the English countryside as a realm of fullness, beauty and the true source of Englishness.

"We are the dead" (McCrae 3): British Poetry and Memory Culture

This, then, is poetry's unique 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) – many poems in Britain today are devoted to the construction, propagation and performative enactment of national identity. Apart from their actual semantic content, i.e., their actual patriotic message (which can be quite vague and impressionistic in character), what is essential is that the propagation of a collective national identity is seen to be the genre's very own domain. In the face of an imminent erosion of time-honoured British auto-stereotypes brought on by a multitude of crises, the 'canonical' corpus at the core of the British mainstream sees itself as a mediator of binding social values and timeless truths about what it means to be English. In other words: The sheer use of the genre of poetry ennobles, elevates, exalts.

In the United Kingdom, official rites of remembrance often feature specimens of poetry in both song and recitation. The Royal British Legion's annual Festival of Remembrance is a particularly high-profile event, taking place at the Royal Albert

Hall on the Saturday before Armistice Day (Royal British Legion, Festival of Remembrance). Attended by the monarch, members of the royal family and senior members of the British government, this televised 90-minute event “remember[s] the service and sacrifice of the Armed Forces community from Britain and the Commonwealth” (Royal British Legion, Remembrance). The Festival of Remembrance is a stunning spectacle which has the logic, the precision and indeed the personnel of a military operation. In fact, it is hard to think of another occasion where the workings of cultural memory, its methods, main players and political aims, are revealed quite so plainly to the naked eye.⁸ Its dramaturgy follows a tried sequence of set pieces leading up to a core piece of remembrance ritual, the so-called ‘Act of Remembrance’. As its culminating verbal act, followed by the sounding of ‘The Last Post’ and a two-minute silence,⁹ the president of the Royal British Legion recites the fourth stanza of Robert Laurence Binyon’s “For the Fallen” (1914). Written a few weeks after the outbreak of the First World War, “For the Fallen” has long since been “sanctified” (Assmann A. 100) and entered into the cultural memory canon. The poem’s repeated public recitation is not only intended to make British audiences remember a particular historical occurrence of national significance. More importantly, the ‘canonical’ poem is meant as a collective bodily re-enactment, an ‘incorporation’ of national identity. In this way, “For the Fallen” is less *about* an ‘imagined community’, it *is* community, its public performance and communal enactment.¹⁰

At the 2022 Festival of Remembrance, performance poet Jaspreet Kaur recited her poem “The Moment” (2018). Kaur’s text is an anaphorically structured praise of selflessness and philanthropy (“the moment that you see joy in another being’s eyes, because of your own selfless actions, life starts to make a lot more sense”, Kaur), which at the 2022 Festival of Remembrance was spoken to sombre orchestral accompaniment. Following upon a sermon delivered by the Bishop of London and spoken only minutes before the ‘Exhortation’ (Royal British Legion: The Programme), i.e., the solemn recitation of Binyon’s “For the Fallen”, Kaur’s text is embedded in a semiotically complex system. Its main semiotic technique is one of

⁸ Harrison gives a personal account of the manipulative potency of the event: “What [...] alarmed me was that the words, and the whole theatre of Remembrance Day ceremonies, stirred me. I was repulsed in equal measure, not least by the realization that I too could be stirred. I too found my mind and emotions manipulated by the rituals, imagery, words and music” (15).

⁹ See Brown for a critical evaluation of communal silence: “public silence effectively disposes of those it is supposed to commemorate and makes of silence a spectacle where participants are absorbed in their own enactment of empathy and sorrow. [It] tends not to open the past up for interpretation” (234).

¹⁰ J. Assmann draws attention to the proto-religious nature of ‘memory festivals’ and their embodied, participatory character: “[C]ultural memory is imbued with an element of the sacred [...], and commemoration often takes the form of a festival. This [...] serves to keep the foundational past alive in the present, and this connection to the past provides a basis for the identity of the remembering group. By recalling its history and reenacting its special events, the group constantly affirms its own image; but this is not an everyday identity. The collective identity needs ceremony – something to take it out of the daily routine. To a degree, it is larger than life. The ceremony as a means of communication is itself a forming influence, as it shapes memory by means of texts, dances, images, rituals, and so on.” (24)

linkage, of ‘articulation’ (in Stuart Hall’s terminology),¹¹ where linguistic and performative proximity lead to a transfer of value. Within this system of ‘semantic cross-pollination’, Britain’s ‘fight for justice and freedom’ during the two world wars is associated with a list of core Christian values, army, church, government and crown are aligned as core British institutions on which responsibilities of government are laid, and the First World War features less as a complex assemblage of historical data than as a site of emotional intensity and focal point of bitter-sweet patriotic sentiment. Within this semiotic framework, duty, service, loyalty, endurance, courage and self-sacrifice turn into uniquely British virtues, and Kaur’s lyric praise of selflessness recited with the fervour of a religious incantation attains subtly patriotic undertones.

“All our poems are at the very least relevant” (Fisher 156): Contemporary British Poetry’s Cultural Capital

Critics have remarked upon the relative isolation of British poetry on the world stage (Tuma, Duncan, Wheatley).¹² This could be put down to the aesthetic “failure of conservatism in modern British poetry”.¹³ As this study hopes to have shown, the reasons for contemporary British poetry’s preferred aesthetics of familiarisation might partly lie elsewhere. In a neoliberal climate of fierce social and economic pressures, British poetry has chosen to focus on its pragmatic potential. In the case of the more overtly commercial self-help anthology, poems (are made to) deliver concrete apposite advice. Many a mainstream poem follows a similar imperative, aiming to provide aid and solace for life’s many grievances. In the special case of poems concerned with cultural memory, British poetry has managed to carve out for itself a role of the utmost national importance. The ability to speak credibly of values that bind Britain as a nation, to present the collective’s identity not as a contested site but as an array of meanings, practices and beliefs based on consensus and shared experience, is the prerogative of a special corpus at the heart of the poetry mainstream and British poetry’s most potent cultural capital. ‘Canonical’ poems confer upon the entire genre pragmatic relevance and an elevated status. The social efficacy of ‘canonical’ poems depends on an aesthetic which treats language as a stable and reliable medium of knowledge, foreclosing all impulses which would call the solidity of the signifier’s hold on reality into question. Britain has invested its poetry with the power to provide the community with unifying visions of

¹¹ “By the term ‘articulation’, I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices does not mean that they become identical or that one is dissolved into the other. Each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence. However, once an articulation is made, the two practices can function together” (Hall 113-114, footnote 2).

¹² “In the United States, British poetry is dead” (Tuma 1).

¹³ Cf. Duncan’s monograph of the same title.

nationhood, and it is easy to see that in the face of an asset of such inestimable societal and market-related value, the sacrifice of free aesthetic play is an easy one to bear.

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