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*Contemporary British Poetry
and the Long 1980s*

“Piss so strong/It smells like decent bacon”: The Gross Decencies of Sleaford Mods

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RÉSUMÉ. *Cet article examine comment l'œuvre de Sleaford Mods met en scène une série de contradictions qui contribuent à définir l'impact du néo-libéralisme thatcherien sur l'expérience de la classe ouvrière, en particulier celle des Midlands du Nord-Est, dont le groupe est originaire. Plus qu'une protestation ou qu'une plainte, ils apportent une réponse cohérente, désabusée et dénuée d'illusions aux ravages de leur culture, refusant d'en adoucir les difficultés et les humiliations. Si le nom de Sleaford Mods évoque un sens d'impossibilités issu des mouvements de jeunesse ouvrière des années 1960 et 1980, il exprime également l'ironie sombre nécessaire pour comprendre la mesure de cette perte. Si leur œuvre relève d'une forme de poésie de la protestation, elle peut également être plus subtilement perçue comme étant subversive, en particulier lors et après la pandémie du COVID. Afin de cerner une telle subtilité, l'essai s'appuie sur les observations d'Anahid Nersessian sur la notion de platitude dans la poésie contemporaine — une stratégie « bartlebyenne » de résistance poétique exprimant une chose plus résolue qu'une simple indignation.*

ABSTRACT. This paper looks at how the work of Sleaford Mods enacts a series of contradictions that help to define the impact of Thatcherite neo-liberalism upon working class experience, particularly that of the North-Eastern Midlands, from where they hail. Beyond protest or complaint, they project a coherently unimpressed and non-illusioned response to the depredations of their culture, refusing to soften the impact of its hardships and humiliations. If the name of the Sleaford Mods summons a lost sense of possibility of the working-class youth movements of the 1960s and 1980s, it also communicates the grim comedy necessary to comprehending the weight of that loss. If this is a performance of a kind of poetry of protest, it also needs to be understood as more subtly disruptive than that, especially in the work produced by Sleaford Mods during and after the COVID pandemic. To identify this subtlety, the essay makes use of Anahid Nersessian's observations on flatness in contemporary poetry, a Bartlebyist strategy of poetic resistance that communicates something more determined than mere outrage.

MOTS CLÉS : *Sleaford Mods, Angleterre contemporaine, punk, post-punk, Margaret Thatcher, abjection*

KEYWORDS: *Sleaford Mods, contemporary Britain, punk, post-punk, Margaret Thatcher, abjection*

In 2014, Mark Fisher wrote that the work of the Sleaford Mods had to be understood in the following context:

Factories have closed and trade unions have been subdued. Art schools and the media have been rebourgeoisified. University courses have been opened up, but the real graduate jobs are for the same old suspects. The only time you are likely to hear a working-class accent on television is in a poverty porn documentary. (Fisher 412)

This is not only the “no future” scenario proclaimed by The Sex Pistols in 1977, but practically a non-present. Fisher’s list represents a form of portrait of the long 1980s, the historical grindhouse of neoliberalism that was set in motion by Thatcherism and perpetuated by the New Labour project. This wrought particular devastation on the North-East Midlands of England, where both Fisher and the Sleaford Mods, Jason Williamson and Andrew Fearn, grew up. The work of Sleaford Mods on record or on the page (Williamson’s lyrics were published under the memorable title *Grammar Wanker* in 2019) testifies not only to the transformation of semi-proud industrial Britain to a dilapidated outpost of global capital, but what it feels like to live through that process, its incremental nullification of promise and prevailing sense of deflation. Such a predicament seems apt mainly for some inveterate English miserabilism, yet in Williamson’s writing (and in performance as a Sleaford Mod along with Fearn), it becomes the occasion for a surging and antic counter-sublime, as perversely joyous and grossly comedic as it is excremental and dingy. Over time, their work has also manifested nuances of tone and affect that might be missed in the immediacy of encountering them in performance, and their poetics of gross disillusionment also be understood as an urgent reappearance of English traditions of subcultural discontent.

In sensory terms, Williamson renders the familiarly repulsive into matters of high curiosity, as in “Tied up in Notts” from the 2014 album *Divide and Exit*:

The smell of piss is so strong
it smells like decent bacon
Kevin's gettin footloose on the overspill
under the piss station (Williamson 2019, 141)

The ammoniac nastiness of the smell is not exactly ameliorated or worsened by the simile, but made thoroughly strange through associative play. How can urine smell like bacon, and “decent” bacon at that? More curiously again, what is “decent” about it? Is it simply a statement of appreciation, or the decency of respectability? Is it bacon that you find delicious, or bacon as a form of social capital? Williamson then riffs from “bacon” to “Kevin’s getting footloose”, presumably alluding to Kevin Bacon’s *Footloose*, a 1984 film where teenagers are famously forbidden to dance by a repressive local clergyman. An upbeat reading of this appears to confirm resistance to “decency” as a form of social administration, yet a downbeat one says it is just wordplay for its own sake. Similarly, the Kevin being referred to might just be another Kevin, not the film star. “Overspill” both signifies effluvium and the

excretive language used to refer to the populations of housing estates on the fringes of large conurbations, even as it might carry a trace of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow". If this is thoroughly playful, it is also unforgivably direful. Waste fuels the up-down rhythms of Williamson's wit. To then demystify and dispel the exploratory associations that he has generated, Williamson restores the smell of piss as the originating subject of his rifting. The verse culminates with a couplet that expresses the fundamental tonal and temperamental tension in Sleaford Mods: "I got an armful of decent tunes mate/ but it's all so fucking boring" (Williamson 2019, 141). If "I got an armful of decent tunes" can be read as a traditional statement of poet's *braggadocio*, the totalizing dismissal of that "decency" and everything else as "all so fucking boring" provides an irresistible antithesis. Sleaford Mods enact all sorts of dialectical tensions, between play and disengagement, possibility and inability, expressive rampancy and recessionary depression. As such, they present compelling problems of reception and transmission for their audience, who are left with the task of doing something with the tensions and questions that Williamson and Fearn manifest.

In the same way, I argue that Sleaford Mods express all sorts of problems of definition. They are not a conventional group, even if their name, combining the name of the dynamic 1960s youth movement with the name of a small town on the border of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, might suggest otherwise. The most apt descriptive term for them, "a musical duo", might also be the most aptly bathetic, the kind of term that might adequately capture the karaoke act in the back room of the pub as much as it might signify Simon and Garfunkel. It might be better to define them negatively: Fearn is not exactly a DJ, but a contentedly non-vocal provider of backbeats, just as Williamson is not exactly a singer or a rapper, to the degree that he might demand reconsideration of what might be understood as a vocalist.

They are two people, but many kinds of mod. In one sense of the term, they bear the name of the youth movement from the 1960s (then revived briefly as a form of leftist radicalism in the immediately post-punk early 1980s by Paul Weller's The Style Council) that brought sharp style and working-class urgency together. Yet "Sleaford signifies a more parochial kind of identification. Rather than part of a mass movement, then, the Sleaford Mods might be seen as remnants of that movement and the possibility it prompted. They might be the only mods to have ever lived in Sleaford. If "mod" might summon an image of the young Phil Daniels in The Who's mod epic *Quadrophenia* (1979), an icon of well-dressed vigour, the sight of Williamson and Fearn provides yet another comic disillusionment, as these mods are two unshaven middle-aged men in nondescript sportswear, more Tesco than Armani. Fisher phrases this adroitly: "On the face of it, they couldn't be any less mod" (Fisher 412).

More immediately, "mods" now has an entirely different resonance, referencing the supervisory presence implicit in all online discourse, the invisible moderators of social media with the power to admonish or banish. Williamson is a forthright contributor to online discourse, enjoying its immediacy and license. His piss-and-

bacon lyrical riffs mock conventions of tolerability and permission, even as they do no real harm. In this way, ideas of content moderation and immoderation pervade all of his work, and this also finds expression in how he fashions his superficially inchoate material. The other modernism of Sleaford Mods is therefore a subtle matter of making shapes and tones, generated by the brittle and angular polyvocality of Williamson's writing, but also the way in which it has its foundation in the dance-based aesthetic of Fearn. If the verbal direction of Williamson is towards anhedonia, where pleasure seems inexpressible and impossible, Fearn's rhythm offers a way out to the bodily hedonic, where movement is irresistible.

If anything, this has become even more apparent in the past decade as Sleaford Mods have adapted and subtly transformed their modes of performance, but it is visible even in their most famous early performance, that of the song "Jobseeker" on Jools Holland's BBC in 2007 ("Jobseeker" is still Sleaford Mods most requested song, which they play at the end of their typically long sets, and the BBC performance is their most watched version of the song on Youtube).¹ Lyrically, "Jobseeker" expresses the routine bafflements of trying to work with any dignity in a metrics-based economy. Against this menu of neoliberal harassments, Williamson's speaker affirms only the abidingly temporary solutions of drugs or booze or masturbation against psychological disintegration and forty years of asset stripping: "I've got drugs to take, and a mind to break" (Williamson, 2019, 118). In the BBC performance, his exuberantly aggravated gestures and physical tics are queried by the determinedly chilled-out Fearn. One acts as if on amphetamine, the other sips a lager and smiles mildly, even dopily. Taken together, whatever the drug, they represent a 21st century politics of paradoxically aggravated but resolute refusal, the only option left for the intelligently outraged.

The lyric for "Jobseeker" begins and ends with counting. At its conclusion, this appears as a simple enough roll call, a tolling of unnamed and unemployed individuals, jobseekers one to eight, that might also represent an invitation to the dance. The term "Jobseeker" has a specific historical provenance. It emerged out of the Tory government's 1995 rebranding and restructuring of those that had previously been either described as the unemployed or people in receipt of supplementary benefits. The jobseeker was provided with "an allowance" by the state if they could prove that they were actively seeking work. This was assessed through regular interviews with employees at government job centres. In effect, the jobseeker had to work at pretending to seek work, even if it was work they could not or did not want to do. Otherwise their benefits were suspended or removed. As Fisher put it, the unemployed were now asked to (over)invest in themselves as potential commodities:

Now, there is no time away from work, and work is not opposed to subjectivity...
All time is entrepreneurial time because we are the commodities, so that any time

¹ This 2016 posting of the video by Ian Walker had received 2.5 million views as of January 25 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEYY1i0AU>.

not spent selling ourselves is wasted time.... The unemployed do not escape this condition – the simulation tasks that they are now induced to perform in order to qualify for benefit are more than preparations for the futility of paid work, they are already work (for what is so much “real” work if not an act of simulation? You don’t just have to work, you have to be seen working, even when there’s no “work” to do...) (Fisher 2013, 536)

As there can be no time away from work, capital exists in a compact with your own subjectivity, demanding you keep alive the spectre of your own busy-ness. The self has always to be at work, even when it is not working. In this way, the listing of “Jobseeker One/ Jobseeker Two/ Jobseeker Three/ Jobseeker Four” at the end of Williamson’s performance can be a tally or a death toll, or simply the counting of the time that Capital insists belongs to it, not you.² This interpellative arrogance is what Williamson’s lyric primarily rejects, insisting upon the right of the individual to destroy themselves rather than have something else do it for them. In this way, “Jobseeker” might be seen as a straightforward song of thorough protest, and undoubtedly much of its popularity resides in this.

Yet this dramatization of a fundamental opposition between the individual and the state is only the most obvious dialectic at work here, and more insidious subtleties are also in play. “Jobseeker” begins with another form of more apparently esoteric numbering:

19.4- top
18.6- middle, Rob?
19.2- top
18.4- mate, middle³

The tyranny of numbers takes multiple forms. Bifo Berardi argues that neoliberalism “submits production and social life to the most ferocious regulation, the financialization of language” (Berardi 31). As numbers are more than ever the principal means of establishing how and where you exist, they also carry with them a contrary power of rendering you null and void. Only inhabiting the right metric, or being able to code or decode the right sort of numbers, represents the record of your success:

Mathematics becomes ferocious when it is forcibly inscribed into the living organism of society, and this ferocious mathematization of the living body of society is preparing the worst evolution of Europe. (Berardi 33)

On the other hand, numbers are where you might find yourself lost or marooned, feeling less than zero. At first, the numbers in Williamson’s lyric produce that recognizable alienation: what can they possibly signify, what terror might they hold?

² This counting of Jobseekers does not appear in the print version of the poem in *Grammar Wanker*.

³ The printed version in *Grammar Wanker* leaves out the name “Rob”.

The answer to that question comes through Jason Williamson's explanation in a tweet that the numbers referred to when a job in an industrial kitchen required him to "stick thermometers into the pallets of cold chicken delivered by lorries. If it was over 22 it got sent back".⁴ Thereby decoded, the numbers take on a kind of metaphorical jokelife, the confirmation of working time on the rotisserie and its routinized incinerations, work which generates the real fear that the worker making the McNugget is themselves becoming a McNugget.

As such, the actively-seeking-work interview emerges from a troubling smog of comfort food. Prior to the 1980s this setting would have been called either a dole office or unemployment exchange, and it just meant queuing up and signing a form. Available to students outside of term-time until the mid-1980s, the dole was the state benefit that fed the extraordinary productivity of the British music scene between the 1960s and 1980s. No dole, no punk.

Punk reverberated through the 1980s in complex and contradictory ways. On the one hand, it promoted a D-I-Y model of cultural production, and that access to basic technologies represented the freedom to publish (a felt tip pen and a photocopier could make you a publisher). A lack of money or technical proficiency necessarily could not necessarily stop you. But in contrast to this democratization of cultural production, another mode of punk was being practised by Margaret Thatcher (Jeffries 57). Her proclamation that "there is no such thing" as society could have been a situationist slogan cast up from a Sex Pistols song.⁵ Yet there are as many ways of being punk as there are of being anti-social; the choice to separate yourself from society is not necessarily the same as actively seeking its erasure.

Williamson's punkish stress on the sovereignty of his own self is not socially disinterested, therefore, but is shown as taking place within a context where such sovereignty is forbidden, even as a more weakly-constructed and mediated selfhood is insisted upon. His refusal to give up on intersubjectivity as a condition for the flourishing of the self then manifests in the polytonality and polyvocality of his writing. Broken into different voices, both internal and external, at times cordial and yet profoundly anti-social, "Jobseeker" represents these tensions and realizes many of their implications. In one register, its apparent use of the rant mode appears to be exemplary of a certain kind of "Broken Britain" rhetoric of resentment that would become a familiar element of the Brexit noise, and yet it really directs us to a different destination altogether. I do not argue that this is simply redemptive, but instead something more satisfyingly unillusioned, as Williamson and Fearn establish a rhythmic relation between the bodily and the social, a way of expressing forms of subjective rage and social alienation without succumbing to sullen monotony and nihilism. Ultimately, the question of this lyric's remarkable popularity, confirmed by its performance usually either as an encore or set-closer by the group, confirms its power for audiences to recognize their own experience in that of another. "Jobseeker" is over fifteen years old now: its joyful abjections have discovered a

⁴ <https://twitter.com/sleafordmods/status/427359014029381632>. Posted 8.35AM. Jan 26, 2014

⁵ <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

remarkable commonality, giving voice and form to that which Thatcher's social de-revolution sought to eradicate.

Williamson's experience of inquisition recalls how Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant" imagined entry into 1960s bourgeois institutions of marriage and work in terms of an interview, thereby demonstrating how civil society turns the idea of "a woman's work" into a job for life, ultimately harrying the subject into silence: "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it" (Plath 222). Williamson's interrogator demands the persistent pretence of work or intent-to-work for all, even as the body of the jobseeker proclaims all it will and can do to obliterate the thought of it. As with Plath, the jobseeker's alternative to seeking work is to accept the alternative diagnosis that you are mentally ill: "Can of Strongbow, I'm a mess/ Desperately clutching onto a leaflet on depression/ Supplied to me by the NHS" (Williamson 2019, 116). This offers a diagnosis, but no prospect of a cure, and indicates the prevalent disinterest in care. Whatever remains of the welfare state is the contempt for welfare, the holes in the safety net are what now define it. This complex failing of care informs the complex texture of Williamson's lyric, as is particularly apparent in its print form in *Grammar Wanker*. The voice of the interviewer is recorded in prose on the page, presenting the generic question that commenced all Jobseeker interviews: "So Mr Williamson, what have you done in order to find gainful employment since your last signing on day?" (Williamson 2019, 117).⁶ The immediate response of "Fuck All!" is presented as part of the same dialogue on the page, yet it is not entirely clear whether the Jobseeker has actually said it, or is fantasizing about saying it. One of the problems inherent in the Jobseeker's interview process was that your benefits could be suspended if your answers were deemed to be unsatisfactory.

Subsequent verses, including the one citing the chicken temperatures, are presented in part-rhymed quatrains, until the prose mode intervenes again for another dialogue. The final repetitions of the term "Jobseeker" are presented in a mantric stanza of their own (the print version omits Williamson's counting-off of "Jobseeker One, Jobseeker Two" from the BBC performance). These various framings reflect the struggle that the long 1980s enacted over imaginative space. If the neoliberal state seeks to extend into your fantasies, whether that is to make you go through a fantasy of applying for social benefits as if it is a job interview, or engineering your psyche to feel unworthy and unwell because you are not at work, then that becomes the necessary terrain for fantastic resistance. Williamson's dialogues with the interviewer are therefore necessarily fantastic places where the Jobseeker enjoys a liberty of speech otherwise denied to them. In response to the generic question about efforts to find work, he offers "Fuck All. I sat around the house wanking" (Williamson 2019, 117). The modernist quatrains also encapsulate the same tensions and oppositions as the dialogues but offer the concentrated

⁶ Williamson's delivery of the phrase "Mr. Williamson" carries an echo, however conscious or unconscious, of the British comedian Norman Wisdom, whose persona centred upon a hapless employee who repeatedly and noisily appealed to his boss "Mr. Grimsdale", for assistance. Mr. Williamson's hyper resistance is in absolute contrast to the pathetic deference of Wisdom.

resilience and resolution of the lyric mode: "I suck on a roll-up, pull your jeans up/ Fuck off! I'm going home" (117). Therefore the Jobseeker performs both monologues and dialogues, and the voice of the interviewer struggles to be heard beyond a real or imagined command to "pull your jeans up". Yet there are also moments of total reversal in tone, when Williamson's protagonist adopts the voice of an affronted customer to review those who presume to be in power: "And I want to know why you don't serve coffee here. My signin' on time is supposed to be ten past eleven. It's now twelve o'clock" (118). In pretending to hold the Government agency to the same standards of efficiency and service that it purports to demand from everybody else, Williamson suggests that accountability is a routinized fantasy. In the only substantial difference between page-version and performance-version, this leads to the only expression of outwardly-directed fantastic violence. In *Grammar Wanker*, the Jobseeker says "and some of you strange bastards need executin'" (118), enacting a fantasy of retribution in which the employees of the state are lined up against the wall in a form of revolutionary fantasy. In the BBC performance, Williamson exclaims that "some of these smelly bastards want exterminatin'", which might be read as an even more disturbing piece of sociopathology, given that it is an apparent comment on his fellow applicants. That said, it also works as a comment on the pitiable state that the fellow applicants have been reduced to by the dead zone they are made to inhabit.

This is Bartleby on amphetamines, hyper-steadfast in his refusal to allow the culture of work the domination that it seeks in his psyche, a resistance that is expressed through violence that is both directed internally or externally. Yet this violence is a manifestation of the administrative desire of the state to define and delimit the citizen-in-need. When his job history as a manager with "reputable companies" is cited by the interviewer as a basis for seeking opportunities, Williamson's Jobseeker offers up the warning that he would take the opportunity to steal from the company, rather than steal for them, recalling Brecht's line about the robbing of a bank being nothing to the opening of a new one. The disinterest in work, the disgust in work, is informed by the experience of work. Williamson's Jobseeker refuses to cede imaginative rights over his own possibilities, and again implies to the inquisitor that it would be in nobody's interests for him to be thus employed. The system is incompatible with what he knows himself to be. The logic is apparently irrefutable, and it is evidence of yet another tonality in this lyric, which is matter-of-factness. If there is much that is raging or antic here, there is also self-possession and reason, even delight. As remarked above, this is manifest in the BBC performance, with Williamson spasming as if his body was not entirely under his control, while Fearn composedly nods, looking pleasantly out of it. His beat provides a cool metric against which Williamson agitates. The two men might be two parts of

the same psyche, one acting out all sorts of repressed material, the other keeping a lid on, smoking, chilling and watching.⁷

In the orderly/disorderly spirit of Williamson's book title, *Grammar Wanker*, we might take these interrelated images of contentment and aggravation, then place them within an analysis of Williamson's use of swearing, which he declares to not be merely performative but an existential fact: "It's how I speak...it's not just fucking swearing" (Harrison, online). We can therefore hear the rebarbative expression of "Fuck Off!" at the opening of "Jobseeker" as much as an inward directive to the self as an expression of resistance to the opening question of the interview, and then the proclamation of "Fuck All!" as a more total disinterestedness. In claiming his swearing as intrinsically idiolectic, Williamson both establishes the redoubt of his own selfhood, but also situates that idea of selfhood within the familiar English context of class, and a refusal to speak "proper" English. McEnery and Xiao have attested to the remarkable frequency and adaptability of "fuck" in English, but they also point to the radical difference between its spoken usage and its written usage:

Fuck occurs 12 times more frequently in speech than in writing. The greatest contrast is found for fucking, which was used nearly 20 times as frequently in the spoken as in the written section of the corpus. While it is not clear why people use fuck considerably more in speech than in writing, our speculation is that fuck occurs more frequently in informal rather than formal contexts, though the censorship of published written texts is another possible explanation for the relatively lower frequency of fuck in writing. (McEnery and Xiao 236)

One can only imagine what Williamson might make of the citation of such a "grammar-wanky" resource as this, but it does reinforce his point that swearing is a constitutive part of speech and communication rather than a blot upon it. At the same time, it must be identified that even as fuck is a fundamental part of speech, for Williamson it is also a key part of his writing, as familiar and flexible a stylistic gesture for him as the dash is for Emily Dickinson.

If "Fuck" signals resistance to interpellation by the late capitalist state in "Jobseeker", this is only one of many manifestations of animus here. "Fuck" is also a way of shifting emphasis and tone in the lyric, a means of terminating one type of discourse then moving to another. Nowhere in Williamson is there a rallying cry, a plea for solidarity and collective action, as if such a thing was unimaginable, but swearing might just represent the last redoubt of a common language in uncommonly awful Britain. By contrast, Philip Larkin's proclamation that "They fuck you up, your mum and dad" in "This be the Verse" (Larkin 1971, 30) carried a sense of possibility in its cultural moment (even if it was not necessarily that radical or optimistic). It was potentially thrilling to encounter "They fuck you up, your mum

⁷ It should be admitted that Fearn's chilled immobility on the BBC stage might have been caused by the constraints of the studio space. In concert, he is a gleefully bouncing figure who moves incessantly around stage, albeit with a certain serenity of expression.

and dad” because it was still so unfamiliar on the page, and suggested new liberties on the horizon, however wanted or unwanted. In the 21st century, and not least because of pornocratic digital culture, “fuck” is ever more prevalent in both what people say and people read. More than ever, the challenge is to give the word meaning, and not be “just swearing”. Perversely, however, Williamson claims responsibility in his swearing and for his swearing, it is how he speaks. His use of profanity might appear to be gross, but it also calls out indecency, rather than merely giving voice to it.

All of this is placed in performative relief by the “Fuck yeah” demeanour of the smiling and silent Fearn, which suggests that there is more equipoise at work than might be immediately assumed in the total impact of Sleaford Mods. “Jobseeker” is not mere complaint, but active and thoughtful rejection; Fearn and Williamson project a new environmental rhythm which implies that a kind of liveability exists outside of the rotisserie. Mods in the 1960s dressed and acted as if they were inhabiting a near-future which had been promised them, one based on full employment, disposable income and consequent access to style. Sleaford Mods in one sense represent the absolute collapse of that sense of possibility, something authored by the 1980s’ restructuring of society into a mechanism for generating stupefying wealth for a few (enormous numbers), while ensuring that this could only happen if everyone else ended up paying for it. Yet if Williamson only appears to retain a kind of mod haircut fit for a scooter run to Brighton and nothing else, the importance of Sleaford Mods is that they express the demolition of all that possibility. They look out on an entirely different landscape, shorn of industry and energy, a consumer culture where even consumption is a diminished thing, as “Tied Up in Nottz” suggests:

Crab eyes, another lonely little DJ with no fuckin’ life
Weetabix, England, fuckin’ shredded wheat, Kelloggs cunts (Williamson 2019,141)

This is clearly not just a transposition of speech from mouth to page, but presents a crafted litany of devastation in which the nation state jostles with breakfast cereals. If it appears to be merciless, that is not self-generated by Williamson, but a manifestation of how the world keeps communicating to him.

In another sense, Williamson and Fearn in the Jobseeker’s Centre and elsewhere in 21st century England is like Milton’s Adam and the Archangel Michael visiting the Lazar House in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*:

Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark,
A lazar-house it seemed, wherein were laid
Numbers of all diseased, all maladies
Of ghastly spasm, or racking torture, qualms
Of heart-sick agony, all feverous kinds,
Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs,
Intestine stone and ulcer, colic pangs,
Dæmoniac frenzy, moping melancholy

And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,
 Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,
 Dropsies and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.
 Dire was the tossing, deep the groans (Milton *Paradise Lost* XI: 478-489)

As in Milton's sensitively relentless accumulation of these miseries that humanity must endure because humanity brought them into the world, there is remarkable compassion of observation at work in Williamson, even as it is also fired with shame and rage. This tendency has persisted throughout the work of Sleaford Mods, even as circumstances shift. Williamson and Fearn's work during the COVID lockdown pursued a Miltonic logic of learning from pain, and that such stringencies at least offer an opportunity for understanding the dimensions of your predicament, however hellish it might be. In "Out There", from 2021's *Spare Ribs*, Williamson's speaker stalks his deserted townscape, inwardly reminding the locals that kneejerk xenophobia and paranoia is an idle diagnosis of what really ails modern England:

Out there
 I run my fingers through my hair
 I wanna tell the bloke that's drinking near the shop
 That it ain't the foreigners and it ain't the fuckin Cov
 But he don't care (Williamson 2021)

If the world only offers a totality of suffering and pedestrian prejudices, then it is exactly right to reject it. This is a thorough expression of a kind of Puritan wisdom that has emerged out of the eastern Midlands since the 1700s, flourishing in the area between Nottingham and Boston in Lincolnshire, precisely where Sleaford is situated. Williamson in the Job Centre and the Lincolnshire-born Anne Bradstreet in the ruins of her burning house in colonial Massachusetts might seem unlikely confederates, yet they share a boisterous contempt for the constraint of worldly things, and its "dunghill mists", as she put in "Verses upon the Burning of our House, 10th July 1666" (Bradstreet 319). Neither simply envision an apocalypse as such, but nevertheless indicate that there might well be something to survive the imminent disaster. For Bradstreet, it is the afterlife, but with Sleaford Mods it is more of an attachment to the idea that a space exists outside of the badness of things. It is not exactly Utopian, but at least an alternative place where you can speak freely about the awfulness of what you witness. Williamson's scatology acts like Bradstreet's, in that it is not so much directed satirically at individuals but rather at the very normal condition of the world. The last announcement of Jobseeker, the termination of its tolling, is the blowing of a perfect raspberry in the face of that normality.

This might signal the song to be a send-up, acting out how the world will end on an appropriately flatulent note. At the same time, its rubbishing of reality can be seen as necessary deflation. Berardi argues that "if we start by dismantling the very possibility of a future, we are obliged to go beyond the dogmatic reassertion of neoliberalism" (Berardi 39). If this is what society is, in the ever-reducing terms that

the past fifty years have offered, then there should be no society. Not this one, anyway. That was where the project of Thatcherism began, a vision of dedicatedly anti-social devastation which materially realized with remarkable velocity.

Williamson was born in the Lincolnshire market town of Grantham in 1970, the same town in which Margaret Thatcher was born forty-five years earlier. It might be claimed that it is also significant that Isaac Newton was schooled in the same town, and that Tom Paine worked there, all of which is interesting or possibly a matter of mere chance. Yet coincidence might matter in this case. "Jobseeker" arguably manifests a Thatcherite contempt for modes of state intervention, with its expressions of disgust for fellow claimants, yet the jobseeker's "interview" that Williamson recounts is a phenomenon of the neoliberal shrinking of the welfare state, as symptom of the political impulse to destroy as much of the welfare state's version of care as possible. The objection of Williamson's jobseeker is not so much to the existence of the social safety net, but its withering, and the wretchedness that has been conferred upon those in receipt of benefits, treated as if they have no rights when in fact they do. Stuart Jeffries argued that Thatcher's Conservative party was one of three punk movements that emerged at the end of the 1970s (the others being The Sex Pistols and the thought of Jean-Francois Lyotard). Her version of punk had a hard streak of Lincolnshire Puritanism: "Thatcher's brand of neoliberalism was from the outset a kind of sado-masochistic shriving where renewed virtue came from suffering" (Jeffries 89). Her version of anti-establishmentarianism was simultaneously one of reform, not destruction: "Thatcher's punk rebellion involved not the transfer of power to the people but the shifting of income and wealth from poor to rich" (Jeffries 57). If Williamson and Thatcher are both punk in their vision, they are fundamentally opposite in what they see: she watches wealth rising upwards, while he pays attention to destitution going in the other direction.

This further relates to the ease with which all of this can be mis-constructed. Sleaford Mods might appear to express a form of rage that might seem to be the same kind of thing that led to the Brexit vote, and yet their denunciations are peculiarly free of racism or terror of the other. They might appear as avatars of toxic masculinity, even though many of their most productive collaborations have been with female performers (Amy Taylor, Tor Maries) and left-wing thinkers like the historian Sara McKenzie. If rage is seen as informing everything they do, then a struggle lies in trying to distinguish their version of rage from everything else that persists in the outraged "out there".

To merely express a complaint and to demand that it be heard is also to demonstrate that you require permission to be heard. The complaint is contained by the very structures it professes to indict. So, to perceive "Jobseeker" as a text of righteous protest, and to trumpet its performance on the BBC's Jools Holland show as a transgressive moment, is also to raise the spectre of its opposite, an expression of collapsed agency. If your lyric has become a Lego video online, as happened with

“Jobseeker”, that might simply represent your disappearance into the image-stream.⁸ The theatricality and sheer brio of “Jobseeker” has made it very popular, but it is something of an outlier in the work of Sleaford Mods, in particular that of the past decade, where they have moved into more insidious rhythms and the recessive tonalities that Anahid Nersessian has identified in much contemporary poetry as a means of cutting through mere complaint and outrage into a more implicating politics of language.

Protest customarily is understood as finding expression in loud demonstrativeness, but Nersessian argues that poetic flatness can “make dissent and defiance manifest as a relational style, not just a matter of opinion” (69). This flatness is “an entirely differential style that cordons off the critical, often insurgent voice from lyric conventions of expressivity and relation, from the drama of the subject who grows larger and larger in situations of conflict or crisis” (69). So 2023’s “UK Grim” by Sleaford Mods replaces the bass-heavy punk back beat of “Jobseeker” with a sparse but insistent electrobeat, a partial echoing of Dr Dre’s “The Next Episode”, and Williamson’s delivery of the chorus refuses any stressing of syllables: “This is UK GRIM, keep that desk area tidy/ Put in the bin, this is UK GRIM” (Williamson 2023) emulating the AI tonalities which now pervade an entirely corporatized culture. Zombification that extends to everything, including (to a degree) Williamson’s speaker. Nersessian argues that “[F]latness is the exemplary effect of a white-collar abyss of corridors and hallways” (Nersessian 73). As Nersessian has identified, one of the most difficult but vital things that poetry manifests is tone, and how “the atmosphere of the age appears to vibrate through [it]” (Nersessian 55). Her particular interest is in “recessive” affects and how they manifest as tonal flatness, apparently at “odds with the intensities and political content” (56). In the face of such affective deadening, “the commonplace linkage of high-octane self-presentation to a sense of serious occasion or crisis comes undone” (57). Even though “Jobseeker” exemplifies such “high-octane self-presentation”, Williamson’s work is even more adept at showing more humdrum forms of British dying-on-the-inside: “Because in England nobody can hear you scream” (Williamson, “UK Grim”). The devastations wrought by such a culture have to be felt through the dumb chill of its conformity as much as the anger it might inspire. Williamson confirms this impact, and in his wanderings throughout his Britain, the only traces of intersubjective potential that can be found are in his own words, and the sense that they might have an audience.

Out of this state of “subjective destitution”, we can begin to play with new forms of likeness and unlikeness, nonsensical similes and correspondences. If Williamson explores again and again what it feels like to have lived through Britain since the great settling-of-scores in the 1980s, which flattened out social life under the sign of consumerism, this also incorporates an exploration of what it is to feel nothing. Whatever exuberances might be discovered in Sleaford Mods, the pleasure that can

⁸“Lego – Sleaford Mods- Jobseeker”, posted itsnotbennings, 8 Mar 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnZPHiSOP_0

be found in their comedy and the bodily charge of their rhythms, it is all set against the flatline context of an entirely plateaued England, waiting for the end: "But when it's gone, leave the trails in the mindset/ But when they come, like a dawn raid smashed the mindset" (Williamson 2023).

Ultimately, the flattest of all things in the Sleaford Mods is Jason Williamson's East Midlands accent, described (complimentarily) by Mark Fisher as "lacking urban glamour, lilting lyricism or rustic romanticism" (Fisher 2019, 411). Fisher argues that Williamson's "insistence on retaining a regional accent is therefore a challenge to the machineries of class subordination – a refusal to accept being marked as inferior" (Fisher 2019, 411). It is also the perfect medium for expressing how fundamentally unimpressive contemporary British life can be. The piss-and-bacon jouissance of "Tied Up in Nottz" offers a gleefully bathetic rendering of the end times: "No amount of whatever is gonna chirp the chip up/ It's the Final Countdown by fuckin' Journey" (Williamson 2019, 143). In this domain of the abject, errors can happily proliferate. Contrary to Williamson's proclamation, "The Final Countdown" was a hit record for the German poodle rock band Europe, not "fuckin' Journey" (143). It does not matter. Rather than the negation of possibility, this is where something might begin, in the righteous loathings and counter-epiphanies of the roundheaded Sleaford Mods.

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