

**Popular Music and the Myth of Englishness in British Poetry**

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation deconstructs the myth of Englishness through a comparative analysis of intersections between popular music and the poetry of the British Isles. In particular, my project explores intersections where popular music and poetry critics attempt to define Englishness, intersections where poetry and music combine to perform Englishness, and intersections where poetry and music combine to resist Englishness. In the wake of centuries of colonialism, British cultural expressions comprise a hybrid discourse that reflects global influences. I argue that attempts by critics to preserve the myth of Englishness result in the exclusion of a diversity of voices. Such exclusionary tactics potentially promote the alienation of future readers from British poetry. A comparative analysis of intersections between poetry and popular music expands the current critical discourse on British poetry to incorporate the hybridity of British popular music. Although for comparative purposes I consider music as a literature, I do not focus on song lyrics as the exclusive, or primary “text” of popular music. Instead, I am much more interested in the social forces that transform popular music into an expression of Englishness. Often this expression is different from the type of Englishness found in British poetry. However, at other times, British music’s expression of Englishness directly intersects with British poetry. Many of the poets in my discussion, despite their canonical status within British poetry, have ambivalent or outright resistant attitudes towards Englishness. The myth of Englishness is a social construction, and I feel that the deconstruction of that myth may be found at the cultural intersections of British poetry and popular music.

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## Introduction: Englishness, Poet Laureates, and Pop Songs

If identity is conferred in and by discourse and since discourse is by nature differential, dispersed and plural, it would follow that, no matter what national identity claims for itself, it can never be more than one among many. Empirically it seems obviously the case that each of us performs a number of identities. (23)

The fabric of English society has also radically changed. We aspire to be a multi-racial, multi-cultural society, for whom the concept of ‘Englishness’ is at best an empty myth, the invention of an imaginary past; at worst an occasion for prejudice and political reaction. It has become a potential embarrassment, almost a dirty word. (Briggs 190)

Poetry more than any other genres has tended to be discussed in the light of Englishness. English critics are prone to look for candidates for the post of Poet Laureate, whether official or not—and whether to praise or attack him/her. English poets themselves are certainly not always loath to contend for the title. (Ingelbien 7)

### **Part 1: Defining Englishness**

In *Why Poetry Matters*, Jay Parini states that “A common assumption is that poetry reflects the voice of a nation. This is nonsense, as poets rarely speak for anyone but themselves” (117). In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, musician and philanthropist Bob Geldof flatly states that “pop music changes nothing” (Tannenbaum 80). Auden proclaims in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen” (129). At first glance, these statements prove quite challenging for my thesis that numerous British poets tapped into the cultural fondness for popular music to express their national identities. Although some of the poets I discuss are noted for their Englishness, I will argue that each poet had political and aesthetic goals that were at odds with current definitions of Englishness.

What is Englishness? There is no cultural fingerprint of Englishness, no clearly definable identity that has a precise origin or present-day manifestation. Englishness cannot be measured by numbers of double-decker buses, pillar postboxes, British invasion bands, a wall of Cotswold stone or poems composed in iambic pentameter. Although the Englishness of those icons still resonates with some, Englishness is also an exclusionary force to those unfamiliar with the linguistic codes of the tribe.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson presents nationality as a “cultural artifact of a particular kind,” which means that it is produced under the influence of particular historical and social contexts but “capable of being transplanted” into a variety of modern contexts (4). In the following pages, Englishness should be read as the artifact of an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s sense of the term (4). This “artifact” is a series of nostalgic connections to an idealized past that centers on England itself and ignores its role as a subsumed entity of Great Britain and a historical center for colonial expansion. The origins of Englishness as an expression of national identity originate during the late eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The dissertation begins with the poetry of the period that immediately preceded this time; it ends with the period when national identity was emerging as a more hybrid conception (Anderson 4).

In the wake of centuries of colonialism, twentieth-century British cultural expressions comprise a hybrid discourse that contains global influences.<sup>2</sup> During the 1950s, immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean settled in Britain and struggled to

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<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of the word “Englishness” as 1804.

<sup>2</sup> When using the term “hybrid,” I am using both Bhabha’s concept of textual hybridity and Gilroy’s discussion of the hybrid nature of contemporary black music in *The Black Atlantic*. Because the dominant forms of popular music in contemporary Great Britain contain elements of blues and jazz, I see this connection as central to my later discussion of parallel trends in contemporary British poetry and contemporary British rock music.

establish their hybrid identities in resistance to reactionary movements meant to assert a homogenous English identity. In *A Shrinking Island*, Jed Esty suggests that the sheer number of diverse and evolving expressions of Englishness reveals that Englishness is a less unified myth than many critics contend. Therefore, I argue that the myth of Englishness is more contestable for the voices that it excludes than the desire of its proponents for a homogeneous national identity. The result of such exclusionary tactics is the alienation of future readers of British poetry, readers who desire a more inclusive understanding of British literature.

Paul Gilroy's complaint against Englishness is one of several vital counter-arguments to the myth of Englishness:

I have grown gradually more and more weary of having to deal with the effects of striving to analyze culture within neat, homogeneous national units reflecting the 'lived relations' involved; with the invisibility of 'race' within the field and, most importantly, with the forms of nationalism endorsed by a discipline which, in spite of itself, tends towards a morbid celebration of England and Englishness from which blacks are systematically excluded. (Union Jack 12)

Gilroy's awareness of exclusionary tendencies in cultural studies should be applied to recent literary criticism of British poetry that deals with the myth of Englishness.

Although attempts to define Englishness appear prior to the twentieth century, the subject received a boom in critical attention in the mid 1990s. In *The Politics of Englishness*, Arthur Aughey names 1996 as the "*annus mirabilis*" for the contemporary definition of Englishness because of "what happened to English national identity" (1). As

his primary evidence, Aughey argues that the decision to favor the use of St. George's Cross over the use of the Union Jack during England's 1996 bid to win the European football cup marked a defining moment in the contemporary discourse on "Englishness."<sup>3</sup>

Aughey also connects his "*annus mirabilis*" to Philip Larkin's poem of the same title, which focuses on the year 1963. The final stanza of the poem indicates Larkin's emphasis on cultural change:

So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me)—  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles' first LP. (Collected Poems 167)

In addition to his own argument for 1996 as a watershed year for Englishness, Aughey uses Larkin's poem to note that 1963 marked another profound change in British social consciousness. Arguably, despite his references to the Beatles and the lifting of the British ban on D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the speaker in Larkin's poem is less concerned with establishing a national identity than not having participated in the sexual revolution, which was arguably an international movement.<sup>4</sup> However, Aughey omits Larkin's possible adoption of his title from Dryden's poem of the same title, which focuses on the year 1666. If Larkin is intentionally borrowing Dryden's title, then the

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<sup>3</sup> Aughey explores recent changes to the meaning of Englishness in the first chapter of *The Politics of Englishness*.

<sup>4</sup> At least, the sexual revolution can be applied to post 1950s social movements in Great Britain and in the United States.



intertextuality of Larkin's poem connects it to a long-established discourse of the myth of Englishness within British canonical poetry.<sup>5</sup>

Larkin's poem shows his awareness of the cultural change that occurred during Beatlemania. Returning to Aughley's "annus mirabilis" of 1996, the British public's fervor over rock 'n' roll had not diminished since the Beatles. In fact, it was a culturally defining question that year for British youth to ask themselves which rock band they preferred, "Oasis or Blur?" The need to make such a choice in popular music saturated the media in 1995 and 1996, and just as the choice of which flag to fly represents a soccer fan's conception of national identity, so it is my opinion that the need to choose which band best represents British youth culture indicates another expression of the myth of Englishness.

National identity is fluxional, with that identity remaining irreducibly subjective. Still, it may prove useful to separate Englishness into two distinct parts: 1) iconic Englishness, and 2) ideological Englishness. Examples of iconic Englishness include Westminster Cathedral, the George Cross, and *The First Folio*. In general, these artifacts have a long history of symbolic use in England and appear to be a natural part of English life. In contrast, ideological Englishness is far less concrete. Examples of ideological Englishness include the proverbial "stiff upper-lip," "Victorian values," "Thatcherism," "Powellism." Ideological Englishness develops as a response to different historical events, such as war or cultural influence from abroad. I argue that ideological Englishness is much easier to challenge than iconic Englishness because iconic Englishness is more insidious, appearing tacitly separate from ideology. Yet, with

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<sup>5</sup> Dryden's poem commemorates two major events: English naval victories against the Dutch, and the sparing of some parts of London from a fire.

artifacts that straddle ideological and iconic Englishness, it becomes clear that Englishness is a carefully constructed myth. An example of this is the Leavisian canon of English literature, which includes the most iconic English poets like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton, but also contains a carefully constructed ideological justification for why certain poets belong and others do not.

Ideological Englishness is difficult to define because it is rightly identified by Anthony Easthope in *Englishness and National Culture* as a discourse. Easthope contends that “if national identity is understood as an effect of discourse, national identity in a national culture can never achieve the unified homogeneity it wishes for itself” (23). If determining exactly what defines ideological Englishness is a difficult question, then would an easier question be what is England? Officially, England has been the dominant political component of the United Kingdom of Great Britain since the Act of Union with Scotland in 1707.<sup>6</sup> From this time until the present, England’s identity has been circumscribed within the identity of Great Britain.<sup>7</sup> The social borders where one ends and where the other begins have never been clearly defined.

For example, England is a country that does not have a national anthem that is distinct from the one it shares with the rest of the UK. The official national anthem of Great Britain is “God Save the Queen,” which originally appeared in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1745. Shortly after its publication, the anthem was performed in the London theatres with different musical arrangements. For instance, at Drury Lane, Dr. Thomas Arne provided his own arrangement. Although Arne’s arrangement is not the standard

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<sup>6</sup> In 1707, Wales was already considered a part of England without needing a Parliamentary “act.”

<sup>7</sup> Before the Act of Union of 1707, myths of English identity often developed as a means of resistance to or an assimilation of outside cultural influences. For example, during the time of St. George (Roman occupation), King Arthur (Saxon invasions), the Norman Conquest (transfer of aristocratic power), and the Anglican church’s secession from the Roman Catholic church, English identity was profoundly redefined.

arrangement today, his arrangement for another well known British anthem, “Rule, Britannia!,” lives on basically intact. As I will show in the first chapter, the establishment of England’s dual identity as simultaneously English and British began shortly after the Act of Union in 1707.

Although perhaps restating the obvious, Englishness is not to be confused with Britishness, which is a more inclusive term but nonetheless represents a forced political synthesis of distinct Welsh, Scottish, English, and northern Irish cultures. Despite this fact, a 2007 study by the British Institute for Public Policy Research indicates that minorities were more likely to identify themselves as British rather than English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh. The authors of the study argue that ethnic minorities in Britain largely identify with postnational, or a more global consciousness (L. Stone, and Rick Muir 11). A follow-up article in *The Times* indicates that many other minorities prefer to name themselves as dual nationalists, such as Indian-English (Taher). As shown in the epigraph taken from Julia Briggs’s *Reading Virginia Woolf*, a more inclusive understanding of global contributions to British culture is a prominent challenge to the preservation of the myth of Englishness.<sup>8</sup>

Englishness as an ideological discourse is confined to particular parts of British culture such as the arts, politics, and sport. Supporters of Englishness see the preservation of the myth as a vital resistance to the threat of globalization. Those who are resistant to Englishness reject the idea that Englishness can be defined or redefined in ways that incorporate the historically exclusive nature of English culture after the period of colonial expansion. The sometimes heated debate over Englishness includes such

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<sup>8</sup> Part of the epigraph from Briggs’s book is included in the September 2008 draft revision of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

personalities as former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, popular television presenter and newspaper columnist Jeremy Clarkson, and political science professor Sir Bernard Crick.

One of the major promoters of Britishness, a unified national identity that is opposed to separate identities as English or Scottish or Welsh or Irish, was former Prime Minister Gordon Brown. In a January 2006 address to The Fabian Society, Brown, who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer for Great Britain, defined his vision of Britishness:

If we look to the future I want to argue that our success as Great Britain, our ability to meet and master not just the challenges of a global economy, but also the international, demographic, constitutional and social changes ahead, and even the security challenges, requires us to rediscover and build from our history and apply in our time the shared values that bind us together and give us common purpose. (par. 10)

Like many proponents of ideological Englishness, Brown's definition of Britishness relies on a vague-at-best understanding of what constitutes "shared values." Still, his definition contains a more inclusive sense of cultural unity than Englishness, which intentionally excludes the cultural influences of Welsh, Scottish and Irish cultures. Sir Bernard Crick's<sup>9</sup> response to Brown's sense of Britishness was harsh:

Who but ignorant foreigners talk about British rather than English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh novels, poetry, music or folk song? And does any other state in the world field four national football teams? What Brown in fact stresses strongly and well is our common attachment to a civic culture—

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<sup>9</sup> Crick is the author of several books on politics, as well as a biography of George Orwell. He currently holds the position of Professor Emeritus at Birkbeck College, University of London, and is an Honorary Fellow of the Politics Department at the University of Edinburgh (see <http://www.theorwellprize.co.uk/the-award/who.aspx> for more information).

once called representative government, now, somewhat ambitiously, democracy. Britishness is acceptance of the historical institutions of government and their conventions, not a whole common culture. Britishness is a strong but limited concept. It is the civic culture and a pragmatic common interest that holds us together rather than nationalism.

(14)

Crick's comments point to many prevalent complaints about the impossibility of Britishness as a distinct identity because it is a political product. Like many, Crick uses sport as an analogy to explain when national identity becomes important for people. When England's national team takes the field today, English flags come out, not Union Jacks. This national passion is reflected in popular television presenter Jeremy Clarkson's comments in *The Sunday Times*:

As the nation settled down on Wednesday night to watch England play Croatia, I sensed an air of optimism in the land. A feeling that all would be well. I mean hey, England were holding their own against Brazil when Croatia didn't even exist as a nation state. (4)

In the rest of the article, entitled "We've Been Robbed of Our Englishness," Clarkson equates the loss of the game with the loss of national pride that has come in the wake of political correctness, where,

Our soldiers were murderers. Our empire builders were thieves. Our class system was ridiculous and our industrial revolution set in motion a chain of events that, eventually, will kill every polar bear in the Arctic.

(4)

Although Clarkson's views possibly are more reactionary than the average Briton's, he does raise the question as to whether or not English people have enough acceptable outlets for pride in their country.

What it means to be English, not British, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh, is even a hot topic on the internet. On the website *Icons: A Portrait of England*, viewers nominate their own versions of iconic Englishness. A sample includes the pub, Morris Dancing, Big Ben, the Lake District, and *The Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>10</sup> The site is a product of the British government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which also oversees the planning for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. *Icons* presents England as a collection of passive images, which seem rather harmless until one considers what is missing. Again, it must be stressed that iconic Englishness contains a tacit ideology of exclusion. As *Icons* demonstrates the British government's presentation of English culture to interested web surfers, the 2012 Olympic Games create an opportunity for British solidarity, at least in terms of sport. However, they also reveal another reality for the English sports fan: when the national soccer team plays one is English, when the Olympics are on, one is British.

Despite one's stance on Englishness, England's role in colonialism cannot be ignored. Paul Gilroy attacks the veil over iconic Englishness:

we are all, no doubt, fond of things which appear unique to our national culture—queuing perhaps, or the sound of leather on willow. What must be sacrificed is the language of British nationalism which is stained with the memory of imperial greatness. What must be challenged is the way

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<sup>10</sup> see <http://www.icons.org.uk>.

that these apparently unique customs and practices are understood as expressions of a pure and homogeneous nationality.

(Union Jack 69)

Simon Gikandi also contends that England's past must be reconciled with the present in a discourse that includes both the perpetrators of and the victims of the colonial enterprise:

Living in the shadow of Englishness, even in our postcolonial moment, demands that one begin to come to terms with not only the legacy of empire but also the 'presentness' of the culture of colonialism even in the discourses and political practices that negate it. It also demands that we recognize the mutual imbrication of both the colonizer and the colonized in the making of modern social and cultural formations. (20)

## **Part 2: Poets Laureate**

To what extent does Englishness, as a part of "the culture of colonialism," constitute hegemony? Gikandi contends that it is to a larger extent than most people are aware of. Among the divergent elements of the "culture of colonialism" that defines Englishness, one of the most prominent is the position of Poet Laureate. According to Thomas Osborne the appointment of the Poet Laureate reflects royal sovereignty. Osborne argues that "Englishness is, so to speak, 'housed' very prominently in its poetry," and that "there are also quite tangible links between poetry and sovereignty, specifically in the designation of the position of poet laureate" (63). Osborne's conflation of Englishness, poetry, and sovereignty shows that there is much at stake in choosing a Poet Laureate. Although the monarch does not directly select the Poet Laureate and there

are no defined duties, the position of Poet Laureate is supposed to celebrate the work of an eminent living poet from the UK.<sup>11</sup>

According to Osborne, “the modern laureate addresses the sovereign in the context of a public,” which means that it is not so much his or her job to promote sovereignty through direct praise of the monarch, but through the laureate’s ability to speak, officially, to the people through the favor granted by the monarch (63). In Osborne’s view, this places poetry in a position of power: its Englishness is partly determined by its association with royal sovereignty, which gives the English Poet Laureate a special authority.

The Poet Laureate is figurehead for British poetry and, to a lesser extent, for the cultural relevance of the monarchy. Although former laureate Andrew Motion was seldom considered among the first rank of British poets, he nonetheless made a vital impact on the preservation of poetry as a valid relevant cultural expression.<sup>12</sup> In an online *London Times* article, Motion comments on his role in creating an online archive of poets reading their poems:

It seems very true that poetry in performance has more resonance than poetry on a page. Our intention was to use the internet to prove that the sound of a poem is as essential to its meaning as the words on the page. And we wanted that sound to be made by the authors themselves because we felt as we still feel: that poets have unique rights on and insights into

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<sup>11</sup> The Poet Laureate is selected by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)—the same ministry responsible for the *Icons* website and for regulating the national lottery, among many other functions. After the DCMS makes its selection, the reigning monarch approves the appointment.

<sup>12</sup> Motion is the first poet to resign his position after a term limit of ten years, not upon the Laureate’s death, which had been the previous means of transfer. Motion is by no means the first poet laureate to be considered below the first rank of canonical poets. The canonicity of Cibber, Bridges, Day-Lewis, and Betjeman, and of other laureates has been questioned since the appointment became official in 1668.



their own work. Their accents, pacing, inflection, emphasis and tone all tell us vital truths about intended meaning, indicating the ways in which a work of art is and is not dependent on its creator's self, and achieving a matchless blend of intimacy and address. ("The Sound Is as Important as the Words" 9)

Motion's contributions to the Poetry Archive are significant because the site is not limited to English, or even British poets. Instead, the archive includes a wide diversity of Anglophone poets, and new poets are still being added.

When Carol Ann Duffy took over the job of Poet Laureate of Great Britain in May 2009, she made history on at least three fronts: she is a woman, she is openly gay, and she is the first Scottish born person to hold the position. As a relief to many, she is also a more widely esteemed poet than her predecessor. Despite these groundbreaking changes, the appointment of a poet laureate remains an act of cultural hegemony. According to Antonio Gramsci, "every government has a cultural policy that it can defend from its own point of view, demonstrating that it has raised the country's cultural standard. It all depends on how this standard is measured. A government might improve the organization of high culture and downgrade popular culture" (126). Thus, in Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Duffy's appointment is the British government's way of showing that it has updated its cultural policy to include Duffy's divergence from the male line of poets laureate.

Gramsci's concept of a shifting cultural policy is reminiscent of Motion's comments. When asked about potential successors in 2008, the latter commented that "my hunch is, and my support would go to, the choice of someone who is able to move

fairly fluently between the high ground and more populist things” (A. Flood). Duffy, who has published poetry for both children and adults, would seem to fit this role perfectly.

### **Part 3: Pop Songs**

For Gramsci, the bourgeoisie’s control of popular culture is one apparatus of hegemony: “the effort to get closer to the people signals a revival of bourgeois thought, which does not want to lose its hegemony over the popular classes, and in order to exercise this hegemony better, it embraces a part of proletarian ideology” (126). Gramsci uses the example of French novels about workers and peasants that are directed “toward the people” to show how “the French intellectual set” adapts literature to control the emergent social power of the masses (126). The goal of the bourgeoisie’s efforts is a seemingly natural integration of proletarian ideology with its own ideology. For this “education of the people” to remain “indirect,” bourgeoisie intellectuals must strike a fine balance between popular culture and high culture. Using Gramsci’s conception of the cultural balancing act between high culture (in particular, canonical British poetry used to affirm or resist Englishness) and popular culture (in particular, popular music), the dissertation explores how this balancing act plays out in comparative moments in the history of British poetry and popular music.

Iain Chambers claims that

the willingness finally to acknowledge a native popular culture, previously excluded from the realms of good taste, was largely forced upon British intellectuals by the increasing and apparently irresistible presence in contemporary British life of a mass, urban culture, much of it apparently American derived. (Border Dialogues 37)

Chambers is describing the emergence of theorists like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart—theorists who cast a wider net over culture than their predecessors. Starting with the jazz age, the mass culture of which they write also found its way into British poetry. Although poetry has traditionally been viewed as high culture, poets have referenced popular music, and these references may be read as two distinct texts within the same work.

Primarily, I see a comparative approach to poetry and references to popular music as an attempt to expand the current critical discourse on British poetry to include the recent critical understanding of the hybridity of British music. To define my particular use of the term “discourse,” I adopt Anthony Easthope’s contention that the act of rereading poetry throughout history establishes a living and dynamic discourse that is not established by the publication of a poet’s introduction to a volume of his or her work or established by an important work of outside criticism. In the conclusion to *Poetry as Discourse*, Easthope states, “there seem good grounds to suppose that poetic discourse will live on, especially if it is reunited with music” (162). He goes on to suggest that linking poetry and music will lead to the type of spontaneous discourse created by the experience of a public performance of music, not the authoritative “bourgeois poetic discourse” that has tainted the experience of poetry (161).

For comparative purposes I consider music as a literature, but I do not focus on song lyrics as the exclusive, or primary “text” of music.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I am interested in presenting popular musical styles or genres as texts. As with British poetry, musical texts

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<sup>13</sup> In his essay, “Poetry and Motion: Madonna and Public Enemy,” Andrew Ross claims that “the point of such [comparative] readings [...] is to analyse the continuity, and discontinuity, between different levels of cultural and social experience, rather than to hermeneutically plumb the meaning of a written text with the aid of a masterable critical method” (96). For a similar view, see Iain Chambers’ *Urban Rhythms*.

are subject to hegemonic forces that transform popular music into an expression of Englishness. However, this expression is different from the type of Englishness associated with poetry because it seemingly emerges from the masses, not from an intellectual elite. Samples include the proliferation of the Union Jack on album covers and the incessant presentation of the Beatles as being ordinary “lads” from Liverpool. My analysis of expressions of Englishness in music primarily relies on the work of musical anthropologists and cultural studies scholars such as Dick Hebdige, Andy Bennett, Iain Chambers, and Wendy Fonarow.<sup>14</sup>

Music is often tied to Englishness: the singing of patriotic songs at an international sporting event is an example. Musicians also desire to create or preserve a uniquely English sound to their music. Referencing traditional folk music was once the primary way musicians promoted Englishness. After music halls became the unofficial preservation societies for British traditional music, contemporary musicians began to employ music hall style in their performances. Similarly, British poets referenced traditional folk music and music hall style in their poetry. After the long decline of the music hall industry, poets began to reference popular music recordings. These references attempted to connect to a British public that was more familiar with popular music than with poetic allusion. British poets have created this synthesis of poetry and music for a multitude of aesthetic and ideological purposes. Generally speaking, the particular components for this synthesis are: 1) a response to a specific British socio-political context; 2) the celebration of music—either as accompaniment to poetry or a trope within poetry that reaches out to a wider audience; 3) a response to a crisis in the

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<sup>14</sup> In particular, Hebdige’s *Cut ‘N’ Mix: Culture, Identity and Carribbean Music*; Bennett and Patterson’s *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*; Chambers’s *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*; and Fonarow’s *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*.

representational abilities of art, especially poetry; and 4) a presentation of British (or English) iconography.

The use of popular music in British poetry challenges Englishness because popular forms of art are generally less regulated than mainstream art that relies on patronage or financial assistance from the government. Yet the poet's use of contemporary popular music as an act of resistance is mitigated by popular music's domination by commercial interests. Still, the use of popular musical intertexts provides poets with another language that partly escapes standard poetic interpretation. This is an idea that attracts Paul Gilroy, who addresses the role of music in shaping identity in several of his works: "Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers" (Union Jack 102). For instance, live, sometimes improvised, performances are musical "rituals" that may provide a metaphor for poets to assert their own identities. Thus, when Stevie Smith sang her poems at poetry readings, she identified the unique internal music that she used to compose her verse beyond the bookish definitions of iambic tetrameter.

In *After the Heavenly Tune*, Marc Berley suggests that the intersections between music and poetry generally occur in two forms: formal and aesthetic approaches to combining music and poetry, and attempts at recreating popular music forms like ballads or songs. An example of the former is the use of music in the composition of "songs" by John Donne, and an example of the latter is the artistic application of the movements of a Beethoven string quartet in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Where Berley is most relevant to this

dissertation is in his suggestion that poets desire music as an inspiration for their poetic compositions. As Gilroy suggests, music provides an extradiscursive way of communicating beyond the words in a poem. Because of this quality, music and poetry in the following discussion are considered as two distinct, but intentionally intertwined texts within particular poems.

I contend that despite their canonical association with British poetry the poets in my discussion have ambivalent or outright resistant attitudes towards Englishness, a stance which is confirmed by their references to popular music. As Jay Parini suggests, poets mostly speak for themselves, although their readers may feel that their poetry “reflects the voice of a nation.” Most who select the Poet Laureate would certainly want to believe this. However, Andrew Motion’s Poetry Archive, which preserves the voices of over a hundred different poets from diverse backgrounds, and the selection of Carol Ann Duffy as Poet Laureate show that the public presentation of British poetry is caught between a more inclusive sense of national identity and the retention of the icons of traditional Englishness.

Although Bob Geldof argues that popular music “changes nothing,” popular music itself constantly changes because it is subject to the demands of consumers. Today’s pop star will be replaced as soon as the public’s taste shifts. Only a select few musical figures achieve lasting renown and popularity. Poetry, on the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu notes maintains a unique cultural prestige that lies largely outside of commercial forces (50-51).<sup>15</sup> The combining of poetry and popular music creates a unique cultural force that simultaneously affirms the traditions of verse and the vitality of popular culture. The poets in this dissertation explore this combination by choosing

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<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu terms this status “charismatic legitimation.”

popular music that expresses their national identities, none of which prove congruent with the myth of Englishness.

In the first chapter, I argue that, in addition to its exclusionary tendencies, the performance of Englishness is an attempt at cultural self-preservation. In some cases, a performance of Englishness will link British traditions in music with British traditions in poetry. The first chapter provides historical background for such links with two literary examples from the eighteenth century: the song “Rule, Britannia!” (1740) and John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728). Although originally a small part of a much longer work that contained James Thomson’s political and artistic opinions, “Rule, Britannia!” became one of the most popular and recognizable expressions of British patriotism.<sup>16</sup>

*The Beggar’s Opera* is a work of poetry, exemplified by Gay’s use of aria, or what he terms “airs,” which are set to popular tunes, and Gay’s aesthetic pronouncements. Gay’s efforts link directly with the contemporary prevalence of broadside ballads, as well as with the transcription of popular ballads by Thomas D’Urfey and others. Although critics view Gay’s decision to write an English language “opera” primarily as a reaction to the prevalence of Italian opera in London’s theatres, Gay had several divergent political and artistic goals. Because of the tremendous popularity of *The Beggar’s Opera* and “Rule, Britannia!,” Gay and Thomson’s political and artistic goals were replaced with the nationalistic agendas of outside figures.

In chapter two, I present Yeats’s desire at the beginning and end of his career to reach a broad Irish audience through the composition of folk ballads. On one hand, Yeats’s ballads demonstrate his political and aesthetic hopes for Ireland’s future; on the

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<sup>16</sup> “Rule, Britannia!” is a part of the masque *Alfred*, which Thomson co-wrote with David Mallet. The song was set to music by Thomas Arne.

other hand, the use of British ballads in English demonstrates that Yeats had a specifically Anglo-Irish vision for Ireland's future. Rob Doggett contends that Yeats "writes from an interstitial position, a space between imperial center and colonial periphery" (3). I argue that Yeats's ballads are an attempt to bridge the traditional British canon with a distinctly Irish literature, which foresaw future "interstitial" poets such as Derek Walcott.<sup>17</sup>

In chapter three, I focus on the use of popular music as a vital part of the aesthetic identities of Dame Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith. In particular, both poets were concerned with combining music with public performances of their poetry and with using musical styles in their verse.<sup>18</sup> Sitwell and Smith used popular music to liberate their female subjects from traditional roles assigned to British women and to redefine the traditional role assigned to female British poets. Furthermore, both poets pose a challenge to the Englishness because they subvert the authority of canonical English literature.

In chapter four, I analyze the work of two poets who figure prominently in contemporary critical discussions of Englishness—Philip Larkin and Sir John Betjeman. As with other poets in the dissertation, I explore how these poets use music in their poetry as an expression of a national cultural identity. In particular, Larkin's critical writings on jazz contrast with his poetry, which is relatively jazz-free. When one explores Larkin's opinions of what makes good jazz, one will likely recognize his aesthetic

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<sup>17</sup> Because Yeats is simultaneously included in anthologies of British poetry, Irish poetry, and postcolonial literature, fixing his role in a national literature is difficult.

<sup>18</sup> In *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (1997), Laura Severin devotes an entire chapter to Stevie Smith's "sung poems." Instead of reading her poems to her audience, Smith often sang them. Sitwell's collaborations with English composers include Sir William Walton's score for *Façade* and Benjamin Britten's composition *Canticle III* (Op.55), which employs Sitwell's poem "Still Falls the Rain."



preference for technique, order, and balance, qualities which critics often use to link his poetry to Englishness.<sup>19</sup>

For Betjeman, the use of music in his poetry is one small but essential detail in the creation of an elaborate English tapestry. Betjeman is known for his obsessive attempts to preserve examples of English architecture, and I submit that he also views traditional English music as a cultural necessity for future generations. In particular, Betjeman often references English sacred music in his poetry as an additional attempt to preserve the resonances of Englishness.

The concluding chapter focuses on the poetry of Derek Walcott and Grace Nichols. What separates Nichols from Walcott is the intensity of Walcott's personal tension between employing traditional forms of British poetry (especially its language) and establishing a unique voice that transcends an implicit artistic connection with the British empire.<sup>20</sup> Nichols, on the other hand, seems more concerned with voicing the unique perspectives of a multitude of speakers and subjects. Ultimately, although Nichols and Walcott present a keen awareness of the irony of preserving Englishness in the time of a crumbling empire, they have a much more ambivalent attitude towards their relationship with traditional British poetry. In the concluding chapter, I explore the vital

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Larkin was particularly critical of the jazz form known as "bop," or "bebop," which had a less regulated rhythmic and melodic structure. Larkin was especially critical of bebop pioneer Thelonious Monk, whose popularity baffled Larkin; Larkin goes so far to question Monk's competence as a piano player. Larkin's critical writings on jazz appear in the collection *All What Jazz? A critical discussion of Larkin's interest in jazz* appears in B. J. Leggett's *Larkin's Blues*.

<sup>20</sup> In "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott concludes with:

how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?

relationship between reggae and the hybrid cultural identity of Caribbean immigrants in both Walcott and Nichols's poetry.

## Chapter One: The Ballads of an Expanding Empire

For all the interest in music in the England of the Restoration and eighteenth century, and despite the various efforts at tying poetry back in with music, or composing poems as if they could resemble musical genres, the most enduringly interesting poems from that period remain those that distanced themselves from actual music. Ballads and songs were mostly comic or satirical—or, if serious, petrified and pedantic. (Kirby-Smith 193)

[Arguments about the role of foreign opera between 1675 and 1728] range from whether foreign conventions should be imitated by the British—and if so, how and to what degree—to why foreign (particularly Italian) musical dramas themselves should or should not be tolerated on the British stage. The criteria invoked are by turns aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and nationalistic. (Gilman 541-542)

### **Part 1: Poetry, Popular Music, and National Identity (1728-1740)**

*The Beggar's Opera* (1728) and the masque *Alfred* (1740), which contains the anthem “Rule, Britannia!,” define a period when national identity, politics, music, and poetry coalesced into a discourse that would establish the myths of Britishness and Englishness. For their first public performances, both works were collaborative efforts by figures from the world of culture and politics.<sup>21</sup> Both works made an impact on the national consciousness of the first half of the eighteenth century and quickly slipped out of the authors’ grasps to be transformed into parts of the political apparatus of an expanding empire.

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<sup>21</sup> Although John Gay is usually credited as the sole author of *The Beggar's Opera*, it is arguable that Johann Cristoph Pepusch’s arrangement for the opera was a vital part of the play’s success on the London stage. In the case of *Alfred*, although James Thomson is generally credited as the author of the song “Rule, Britannia!,” the masque (and possibly the song as well) was co-authored by Thomson and David Mallet, with Thomas Arne providing the masque’s musical arrangement. As will be discussed below, both productions required further collaborations with several others from the world of British politics and the London theatre.

John Gay and James Thomson lost control of the meaning of their works because the works became too popular. They were even beyond the reach of powerful cultural arbiters like Robert Walpole and the Tories who opposed him. Gay's and Thomson's work became pawns in a struggle for political power in Britain, while the authors' personal statements about the role of art in Britain were overlooked. What was at stake was the identity of the newly unified Great Britain.

England's national identity was transformed dramatically in 1707 by the Act of Union, officially creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain.<sup>22</sup> In *Devolving British Literature*, Robert Crawford asserts that after the Act of Union, many English literary figures felt that England's national identity simply absorbed Scotland's: London became the *de facto* hub of government and culture for both countries (51). According to Crawford, a further effect of "the ease with which 'Britain' and 'Britannia' could come to mean simply 'England'" was "the temptation for the Scottish writer to submerge his national identity under a purely Anglocentric notion of Britishness" (51). Thomson resisted this temptation. According to Crawford and Mary Jane Scott, Thomson's work, taken as a whole, shows his desire to defend Scotland as a politically integral, yet culturally distinct part of Great Britain. While Thomson celebrates the power of the new union, his attention to the Scottish landscape and people stands as an act of resistance to complete cultural hegemony (Crawford 51, Scott xi).

Another crisis of national identity was the accession of a German monarch after the death of Queen Anne in 1714. Because the Act of Settlement (1701) decreed that England would no longer be ruled by Catholic monarchs, Anne's closest living Protestant

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<sup>22</sup> England incorporated Wales through the Laws in Wales Acts (1535-1542), which created the compound nation of England and Wales. In addition to her title as Queen of The United Kingdom of Great Britain, Queen Anne held the separate crown of Queen of Ireland.

relative was crowned George I at the age of 54. George I, who had served as Elector of Hanover since 1708, spoke little English and continued Queen Anne's tradition of trusting a large portion of the administration of the government to cabinet ministers. Within this system, Charles Townshend and Robert Walpole emerged as cabinet leaders.

Walpole's political influence was so profound during the period between 1721, when he reassumed his post as first lord of the treasury, and 1742, when he was given the title First Earl of Orford and "retired" to House of Lords, that he is often credited as being Britain's first prime minister. Walpole, who succeeded to his father's seat in the House of Commons in 1701, was known in his early years for his patronage of the arts, especially poetry. James Sambrook reports that, between 1725 and 1726, Walpole gave monetary rewards to Alexander Pope and James Thomson. He also awarded a pension of £200 a year from the Treasury to Edward Young, for "the encouragement of poetry" (Sambrook 138-139).

Despite his early good will to a handful of poets, Walpole increasingly became the enemy of London's literati. Walpole's rise to power within the government seemed to have been due to his knack for bribing the right people, his ability to evade implications of involvement in the failed South Sea Bubble investment scheme of 1720, his convincing arguments to rival political figures that they retire and leave him in charge, and his anti-Jacobite rhetoric that solidified his fellow Whigs against the rival Tories. The latter were accused of supporting the "Old Pretender," James Stuart. Walpole also forged a fortunate alliance with Queen Caroline, who saved his cabinet position when George II acceded to the throne.

Walpole was often the victim of fierce satire. According to historian Rebecca Fraser, Walpole was “hated by many for his greed, his cynicism and his astonishingly widespread system of bribery and corruption” (414). Popular histories of Britain, including Fraser’s *The Story of Britain* (2006) and *The Oxford History of Britain* (2001), often credit John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* with presenting the most hostile attack on Walpole. Perhaps stung by the criticism, Walpole prohibited *Polly*, the sequel to *The Beggar’s Opera*, from being performed in 1729. Ultimately, though, Gay had the last laugh—sales of the prohibited, yet newly printed play netted Gay a tidy profit.<sup>23</sup> Historians often suggest that Gay’s satire of Walpole’s government led to the extreme censorship of the theatre by the Licensing Act of 1737. This act, which required pre-approval by the Lord Chamberlain for all staged productions, greatly reduced the number of new productions in the years following its passage.

After the passage of the Licensing Act, the anti-Walpole camp was centered around Henry St. John, later First Viscount Bolingbroke, whose essay *On the Idea of a Patriot King* (1737) expounds the virtues of moral leadership and is said to have influenced Thomson’s later literary productions, especially *Alfred*.<sup>24</sup> Bolingbroke was also friends with Swift and Pope, who were both friends of John Gay. Increasingly, as Walpole’s power grew and the public knowledge of his corruption mounted, Bolingbroke and others looked to Frederick, Prince of Wales, to end the corruption of Walpole’s administration. Unfortunately for the hopes of Walpole’s foes, Prince Frederick, Bolingbroke, Gay, and Thomson all predeceased George II, leaving the first British-born

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks reports that “within a year 10,500 copies had been sold of two large quarto editions,” and that Gay could have made between £1,000 and £3,000 (Spacks 56).

<sup>24</sup> See Sambrook, page 146.

Hanoverian monarch, the Prince of Wales's son George, who was crowned George III in 1760.

Bolingbroke's concept of the patriot king grounded the identity of Britain's leadership as British, not Hanoverian, and it was a part of the emergence of European nationalism in the eighteenth century. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson identifies the eighteenth century as

not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious moods of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rational secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. (11)

According to Anderson, the machinery for this transformation was “a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity” (42-43). As I will show, this “explosive” mixture of capitalism, printed media, and the promotion of vernacular English art form the contexts surrounding Gay's and Thomson's work as expressions of national identity.

Anderson's argument that nationalism partially replaces religious belief implies that a society's secular cultural expressions undergo a similar "transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning." Anderson contends that "lexicographers, philologists, grammarians, folklorists, publicists, and composers" take vital roles in these "revolutionary activities" (75). For example, collecting folk songs has a long history in Britain. Ethnomusicologist Helen Myers reports that

The history of folk-song study in Great Britain properly begins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the collection of popular broadside ballads, often composed by professional song writers, and so named because they were printed on folio-sized unfolded sheets. The first collection, a sequence of Robin Hood ballads, was printed by Wynkyn de Worde (c1495), only two decades after the introduction of printing to England. (130)

By the eighteenth century, collections of broadside ballads contained contemporary popular songs and traditional folk songs that covered two centuries. Myers reports that "during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, broadsides were the primary medium for sensational news among the urban working classes" and the Company of Stationers registered the publication of over 3,000 broadsides (130).

The popularity of broadsides was such an important artistic expression of national identity that, according to musicologist Paul Lang, "popular music" is "now recognized as the only vital and true native aspect of English eighteenth-century music" (683). If by "popular music," one thinks of philistinism, then one is essentially negating the cultural and literary *zeitgeist* in Restoration and early eighteenth-century London. The sheer number of songbooks published during this time, including several editions of



Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy*, William Thomson's *Orpheus Caledonius*, and John Playford's *The Dancing Master*, indicates a tremendous thirst for such popular songs. Their tunes were sung by the clientele of London coffee houses, and often reworded to capture the frustrations of political events like the South Sea Bubble and events surrounding Walpole's dominance of British politics. Such popular music could be adapted quickly to the rapidly changing political landscape of the period, as was the case with the tunes used for *The Beggar's Opera*, and it was not long before state-sponsored patriotic and nationalistic songs began to tap into the popularity of politically subversive ballads. By 1745, London Theatre audiences had heard the first musical arrangements of both "God Save the King," and "Rule, Britannia!" Furthermore, they had been encouraged to sing along, thus solidifying an English national identity for the recently unified Great Britain.

To create the sense of "continuity" of which Anderson speaks, Gay employs the tunes of the most ubiquitous and ancient broadside ballads and rewrites the lyrics to reflect his attitudes towards capitalism's corruption of politics, marriage, justice, and a score of other social ills. As in Anderson's model, Gay provided national continuity between ancient ballad tunes and eighteenth-century opera. The effort proved to critics that English, not Italian, should be the language of performance arts. Furthermore, using ballads tapped into the capitalist enterprise of printing broadsides; prints and reprints of *The Beggar's Opera*, related memorabilia, and its songs became a commercial enterprise.

In contrast to Gay, with *Alfred*, James Thomson attempted to achieve continuity between the nation's past and present by tapping into the story of the ancient English king Alfred. Towards the conclusion of the play, a hermit prophesizes that a great king,

meaning Thomson's patron, Prince Frederick, will rule. "Rule Britannia" appears in this forward-looking portion of the play, declaiming that "Britons never will be slaves." Although the continuity Thomson provides is artificial, he codifies the qualities that the leader of Great Britain should possess by "rediscovering" them from ancient British history.

Gay and Thomson arrive at their respective visions of Britain in different ways: Gay shows what Britain has become through the influence of capitalism. Thomson professes his hopes for Great Britain's future by linking past and present. What both works share is a combination of native popular music and English poetry. Gay and Thomson's use of native British music was significant because the music performed in London between the death of Henry Purcell (1695) and the first production of *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) was, according to music historian James Winn, "essentially imported" (241). In the eighteenth edition of *The Spectator*, published on March 17, 1711, Joseph Addison shows his concern over the influence of foreign music on English audiences:

At present, our Notions of Musick are so very uncertain, that we do not know what it is we like; only, in general, we are transported with anything that is not *English*: So it be of a foreign Growth, let it be *Italian, French,* or *High-Dutch*, it is the same thing. In short, our *English* Musick is quite rooted out, and nothing yet planted in its stead. (82)

In the same edition of *The Spectator*, Addison refines his concern about the music of "foreign Growth":

Musick is certainly a very agreeable Entertainment, but if it would take the entire Possession of our Ears, if it would make us incapable of hearing Sense, if it would exclude Arts that have a much greater Tendency to the Refinement of Humane Nature: I must confess I would allow it no better Quarter than *Plato* has done, who banishes it out of Commonwealth. (81-82)

As Gay would do a decade later in a letter to Swift, Addison suggests that the popularity of foreign music has had an adverse effect on other arts. For Addison, the purely aural “delight” of music is not enough, it must “instruct” as well.<sup>25</sup>

Addison’s statements come less than a month after the February 24 premier of *Rinaldo*, which was Georg Friedrich Handel’s first opera composed especially for the London stage. Handel, who served as George I’s *Kapellmeister* at the royal court in Hanover before following him to England, would become the dominant figure in English music for several decades. According to musicologist Richard Platt, *The Spectator*, in several editions, printed “the only unfavourable reaction” to *Rinaldo*. Platt suggests that this could have been due to Addison and Steele’s personal interests in promoting English-language opera in the London theatres (111). Despite their efforts, London audiences preferred the music and the spectacle of Handel’s and other composers’ Italian-language operas to English-language operas until Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* premiered in 1728.

Although Handel would later become a British citizen and compose some of the most revered English music, including *The Messiah* (1742), Handel’s early role as a composer for British audiences was clearly defined before he arrived in the country. Musicologist Paul Henry Lang notes that “it is perfectly true that Handel was called to

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<sup>25</sup> Gay’s letter to Swift is discussed in the next section.

England to supply the upper classes with operas in the Italian style—this circle of English society not being interested in English music—and that this great musician turned to the English oratorio only after his repeated failures and bankruptcies in the operatic field” (519). Some of the reasons that Handel’s operas experienced financial difficulties were the tendency for the productions to contain lavish and expensive scenery and the to employ highly paid Italian singers. Despite its dominance of English music, Roger Fiske notes in *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* that “there was never in England a widespread enthusiasm for Italian opera. As in more recent years, it affected only a coterie of society of people and intellectuals; the middle and lower class theatergoer inevitably preferred the playhouses where he could understand the words” (66).

Although Addison’s criticism of music of “foreign Growth” certainly applies to *Rinaldo*, which is an Italian language opera with a score composed by a German and starring Italian singers, including two castrati, there were few native English composers to challenge the dominance of Italian opera. One exception was Thomas Augustine Arne, who predominantly composed music for the London theatre. Arne is perhaps best known for his musical arrangements of literary works by English poets Shakespeare and Milton. Arne’s most enduring contribution to British musical history was arrangement for the anthem, “Rule, Britannia!” Despite this accomplishment, and like other English composers of his time, he was not nearly as renowned or prolific as Handel.

Music historian James Winn contends that British composers were slow to adopt the musical advancements that were taking place on the Continent, primarily the shift from vocal music to orchestral music:

in England, whose musical culture after the death of Purcell was essentially imported, the idea of imitation remained powerful, and literary men remained suspicious of music. The opera, where some kind of collaboration was necessary, was the most obvious battleground for a struggle between composers and poets. (241)

Whether it was the ballad opera, which Gay mastered in *The Beggar's Opera*, or a masque like *Alfred*, the most popular musical forms of the period were not purely orchestral. As the use of masques, ballad operas, and Italian operas waned after Gay and Thomson's time, English composers continued to work almost exclusively with vocal music. For example, in the second half of the eighteenth century, many English composers followed Handel, who turned from Italian opera to the English oratorio. In *A History of Music in England*, Ernest Walker notes the prevalence of vocal music throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century: "we may safely say that no instrumental work of even second-rate merit was produced by any resident English-born composer during the whole period" (Walker 287).

Given the prevalence of vocal music in the eighteenth century, it follows that writers like Addison would be suspicious of musical forms that did not use the English language. On its most basic level, Italian opera does not contain English poetry, and because the vast majority of the English audience were likely not fluent in Italian, the result was meaningless sound and spectacle, which, according to Addison, has no ability to promote the "Refinement of Human Nature."

As if to add insult to injury, Italian opera did not follow the conventions and traditions of English drama, many of which had their origins in Aristotelian and Horatian

poetics. For instance, the final scene of Italian operas during the period often contained a miraculous and inexplicable reprieve of a male lead. In Handel's *Alessandro*, loosely based on Alexander the Great's Asian campaigns, Clitus, a former captain in Alexander's army, conspires with others to conquer Alexander and his army. When faced by Alexander's superior nobility, Clitus backs down and asks him for forgiveness. After he receives Alexander's pardon, Clitus joins the celebration at a temple. The characters in Italian opera were often loosely based on characters from antiquity—historical accuracy was not a priority. The assumption is that London audiences, because of the language barrier, could only follow the plot in a rudimentary way and would not really know what was happening. Audiences were undoubtedly also attracted to the exotic Italian opera stars, including feuding female leads and the too-proud castrati.<sup>26</sup> Roger Fiske notes that “even if they could make nothing of the music, there was the fascination of watching those only-just-mentionable creatures, the castrati, strutting about in their monstrous pride” (66).

Although such spectacle must have appealed to some, many writers feared that such entertainment was a potential threat to the integrity of English theatre. In her essay “*The Beggar's Opera* in Its Own Time,” Yvonne Noble points to the problem: “such ruthless subordination of every other aspect of the drama—sense, motivation, even bare intelligibility—seemed to literary men truly decadent—as hideous a perversion of the drama's moral purpose as the *castrato's* physical disfiguration was of the body's” (8).

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<sup>26</sup> Just before *The Beggar's Opera* premiered, London newspapers were following the rivalry between the two main female leads in Italian operas, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. Most of the critical work on *The Beggar's Opera* suggests that Gay references the feud by pitting Polly and Lucy against each other in his play and in the Beggar's opening comments.

The critical discourse throughout the eighteenth century on Italian opera's threat to native British music and taste often contains concerns about the negative effects on British art.

Because they are often focused on the political contexts of *The Beggar's Opera* and *Alfred*, critics often ignore Gay's and Thomson's personal poetics, which arose out of the same neo-Platonic (and arguably neo-Aristotelian and neo-Horatian) ideals that Addison professes. However, their poetics strongly informed the works that they are most known for today. The decisions they made, especially in their use of native musical forms, show their attention to the importance of moral instruction and the autonomy of poetry, and place them within a discourse that runs throughout English poetry, namely the battle between poetry and music for cultural supremacy.

Despite all of the attention given to Italian opera here, the relationship between poetry and the other arts existed in England long before Gay and Thomson's work appears. For instance, the feud between Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson over the poetic-musical form of the court masque reveals poetic resistance to a loss of poetry's autonomy. Inigo Jones, who provided set designs, costume designs and scenic effects for several court masques written by poet and playwright Ben Jonson, continually pushed the boundaries of what kinds of visual spectacle it was possible to present to audiences. For example, Jones is frequently credited with inventing moving set pieces. The working relationship between Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson reportedly suffered because of disagreements about the primary artistic role of the masque. In *The Court Masque*, Enid Welsford firmly contends that "at bottom the quarrel was an aesthetic not personal one" and that for Jonson,

his composition was to be at one and the same time a poetic libretto suitable to the occasion and a dramatic poem independent of its accompaniments of dancing and scenery, and capable of surviving the Court performance for which it was primarily intended. The other arts in fact were the mortal body of the masque, but poetry was its immortal soul. (251)

Welsford argues that as a result of Jonson's convictions about the genre

in England the poets tried to turn masques into literary masterpieces which would stand the test of time, but for the accomplishment of their purpose they had to achieve some kind of harmony between the arts, they had to find some way of making the music and scenery and dancing expressive of the poetic idea of the performance. (250)

Roy Strong notes that after Jones and Jonson parted ways, Jones, "with the assistance of various tame poets," transformed the masque into "a decadent form in which what had been essentially a poetic means of expression became overloaded with pointless visual spectacle" (215).

After Inigo Jones subverted the roles of both music and poetry in the masque, it was Milton who shifted the artistic balance of masque to the side of poetry with his two masques from 1634: *Arcades* and *Comus*. Instead of designing elaborate sets and scenic effects, Milton let his poetry establish the scene. In his analysis of the masque *Comus*, Milton scholar C. L. Barber contends that "Milton and posterity benefited from the fact that at Ludlow physical scenery was necessarily minimal; this was to be a masque where poetry, rather than Inigo Jones, would present the descents from above and open out the



vistas” (91). Despite Milton’s efforts on behalf of poetry, Inigo Jones was still engineering his own brand of court masques as late as 1640.<sup>27</sup> The masque would continue to be a battleground for the artistic struggle of autonomy between poetry and visual spectacle for more than century.

After Italian opera arrived in the early eighteenth century, several composers and poets attempted to create English language operas to compete with the foreign creations. For the most part, these operas were not as successful as their Italian counterparts. Richard Platt reports in *The Blackwell History on Music in Britain* that “after the failure [...] to compete with Italian opera, English composers turned again to the traditional form of the masque” (115). In 1715, Colley Cibber, who was the manager of Drury Lane theatre and later became Poet Laureate, wrote the libretto for two of these new masques. Cibber employed the German composer Johann Cristoph Pepusch, who would later provide the accompaniment and an overture for John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, to compose the music. Unfortunately for Cibber and the other poets and composers who attempted to revive the masque at this time, Platt reports that they were only “moderately successful, but their influence resulted in one incomparable masterpiece, Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*,” whose libretto was written by none other than John Gay (117). Although it seems that *Acis and Galatea* was not staged until 1732, the original collaboration between Handel and Gay is dated from 1718. Gay’s early working association with Handel casts serious doubt on his desire to resist Handel’s Italian operas with *The Beggar’s Opera*. That Gay would choose to work with the traditional English masque also shows that he still saw artistic value in the form.

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<sup>27</sup> Biographer J. Alfred Gotch considers *Salmacida Spolia* (1640-1) to be Inigo Jones’s final court masque (Gotch 211).

In the wake of such a long tradition of the masque in England, Arne, Thomson, and Mallet's *Alfred* would be staged in a similar way as Milton's *Comus*—in front of noble personages, with a natural landscape as the primary backdrop—but unlike Milton's work, the vast majority of the poetry in *Alfred* was eventually forgotten, and attempts to rework the masque for London theatre audiences resulted in only a few moderately successful runs in 1745, 1751 and 1773. However, by this time, the work had been significantly “alter'd” by David Mallet and ceased to resemble the original masque as it was performed at Cliveden in 1740 (Stone, Jr. 238).

The enduring part of *Alfred* was, of course, the resounding anthem “Rule, Britannia!” Perhaps because of the popularity of the anthem, David Mallet attempted to claim authorship of it after Thomson's death in 1748. Over the years, scholars have offered several arguments claiming that Thomson was the sole author of the anthem, but regardless of authorship, the song's popularity caused it to become one of a handful of British patriotic songs that have defined the United Kingdom's identity for more than two centuries. Yet, it must not be forgotten that it was originally just an afterpiece to a masque designed to present the most desirable qualities for the past and future monarchs of Great Britain to possess.

*The Beggar's Opera* and “Rule, Britannia!” were products of a political climate where resistance to Robert Walpole's government was acted out onstage. Their use of native musical forms to accompany their own versions of national identity has its origins in ballad and masque forms, providing the “continuity” between the past and future English art forms. Given these associations, it should be no surprise that many others would attempt to control the message of these works and claim them as works of

consummate Englishness. However, with Gay and Thomson, as with other poets in this dissertation, their personal choices show that they are more concerned with their own artistic vision than promoting a particular brand of national identity.

### **Part 2: *The Beggar's Opera***

As *The Beggar's Opera* became a popular phenomenon, it increasingly became a platform for everything from its apparent encouragement of lawlessness in London, to its reassertion of English-language theatre music over the dominant Italian *opera seria* of its day, to its widely recognized satire of Robert Walpole's corruption. What often gets lost in attempts to claim the play for these various English platforms is the simple fact that the novelty of the work is its use of tunes from popular music, especially ballads, which Gay took from several different countries, including Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, France, and Italy. The critical tendency to ignore Gay's choice of international source material for the tunes for his "airs" in *The Beggar's Opera* shows how generations of English critics consider the work to be a specifically English resistance to Italian opera.

If Gay's primary intentions in *The Beggar's Opera* were to resist the popularity of Italian opera or lampoon Walpole's government, as several critics assert, Gay fails on both counts. For example, Walpole is never mentioned by name in the play. His implication in the social crimes Gay details is provided by outside sources, including members of Gay's intellectual circle, the Scriblerians. As for its resistance to Italian opera, the play is built using some of its most popular conventions.

So, what is *The Beggar's Opera* really about? The play is part Gay's unabated attack on human folly and vice, part Gay's unabashed celebration of folk music, and part Gay's vision of the possibilities of British drama, poetry, and music. In many ways

the play is revolutionary, and its lasting popularity and influence are testaments to the efforts its creators took to bring it to London audiences.

Gay's attack on human folly and vice in *The Beggar's Opera* essentially equates members of the highest social classes with the members of the very lowest social classes. In order for this to work, Gay must remove two very important authorities from the equation: religion and the monarchy. In the essay "John Gay, Bertolt Brecht, and Postcolonial Antinationalisms," Aparna Dhardwadker claims that *The Beggar's Opera* is "the first major English play to represent politics as a secularized sphere of action, devoid equally of the charisma of kingship and the sanctity of religion" (9). Dhardwadker's claims are highlighted in the fifth scene of the third act of *The Beggar's Opera* where two prominent members of Gay's fictional London underworld, Peachum and Lockit, peruse an account book that contains a list of items stolen from the 1727 coronation of George II:

LOCKIT: The Coronation account, brother Peachum, is of so intricate a nature, that I believe it will never be settled.

PEACHUM: It consists, indeed, of a great variety of articles. It was worth to our people, in fees of different kinds, above ten installments. This is the part of the account, brother, that lies open before us. (102-103)

Such a scene lends itself to the common critical contention that Gay is attacking both moral and government corruption in *The Beggar's Opera*. Lockit and Peachum's familiarity in this scene—referring to each other as "brother"—has often been cited as a reference to Walpole and his brother-in-law and political cohort Lord Townshend. The

scene's degeneration into violence also parallels Walpole's confrontations with Townshend.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the play, Gay cautiously spreads moral corruption around to several characters. In the scene above, both Lockit and Peachum are implicated in what is a very subversive look at the exchange of the crown between members of the new Hanoverian royal family. For Lockit and Peachum, the exchange is ultimately nothing more than a series of entries in an account book. There is no cause for celebration of a continued political stability in the shadow of a Jacobite rebellion. The only cause for concern is that the accounts may never be settled.

According to *The Oxford History of Britain*, "whether the opera was actually intended as a political satire is uncertain, but it is significant of the contemporary climate of opinion that it was instantly accepted as such" (417). Peachum and Lockit are not the only characters in the play that are associated with Walpole and other political figures of the day. Another popular history of Britain by Rebecca Fraser states that "George II's court was clearly the thieves' kitchen in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, with Walpole as its chief character Macheath, the swaggering highwayman" (425). Some critics support the idea that Macheath represents Walpole with the evidence that Macheath's outlaw status is equivalent to Walpole's and that Macheath's rival lovers in the play, Polly and Lucy, represent Walpole's wife and mistress, but there are few concrete suggestions to conclusively connect the characters.

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<sup>28</sup> At least one critic argues that Walpole and Townshend's physical confrontations occurred after the *Beggar's Opera* premiered. See Loughrey, Brian and T. O. Treadwell, page 27, for a summary of the rivalry between Walpole and Townshend and Kern's disputation that the events were contemporaneous to the premier of the play.

Still other critics see the various aliases of a man at the conclusion of Peachum's roll call of the accused men who are about to appear in criminal court as another reference to Walpole: "'Robin of Bagshot, alias Bluff Bob, alias Carbuncle, alias Bob Booty!—'" (46-47).<sup>29</sup> To reconcile the tendency to view Walpole as a particular character, one of Gay's biographers, David Nokes offers the following argument: "Gay was careful not to narrow his attack to a simple *ad hominem* lampoon. His satire is directed not at individuals, but at a wider political culture, though he was powerless to prevent audiences and reviewers from interpreting it in strictly partisan terms" (436).

A popular legend surrounding the premiere of *The Beggar's Opera* holds that Walpole was in attendance, and when the final line in Air XXX repeated, Walpole good-naturedly joined in:

Air XXX

When you censure the Age,  
Be cautious and sage  
Lest the Courtiers offended should be:  
If you mention Vice or Bribe,  
'Tis so pat to all the Tribe;  
Each cries—That was levell'd at me. (85-86)

If true, the coincidence would be all too perfect, especially since the words to this particular song are attributed to Swift (W. H. G. Flood 150). Despite the prevalence of this story, Nokes is careful to note that there exists "no reliable evidence to confirm this anecdote" (435).

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<sup>29</sup> Loughrey and Treadwell argue that the collection of these nicknames "was immediately understood to refer to Walpole," and that "the name 'Bob Booty' was to stick to him for the rest of his career" (Loughrey and Treadwell 27).

In addition to its apparent, but limited criticism of politics, Gay addresses the prevailing concerns about Italian opera in *The Beggar's Opera*. First of all, in terms of “sense,” Gay opens the play with the one character that seems to be aware of the need to maintain a sense of artistic control over the work, namely the Beggar, who speaks the first words of the play:

BEGGAR: If poverty be a title to poetry, I am sure nobody can dispute mine. I own myself of the company of beggars, and I make one at their weekly festivals at St. Giles. I have a small yearly salary for my catches and am welcome at dinner there whenever I please, which is more than most poets can say. (41)

Although it is not a novel convention for poets to cite their poverty, Gay's failure to receive royal patronage in 1727 may have inspired these words. Such a modest opening statement both establishes the work as poetry but immediately subordinates it to the need to adapt the poetry to what is “in vogue.” The Beggar also cites poverty to differentiate his work from Italian opera, which often relied on elaborate and costly physical spectacle to entertain audiences.

After his introduction, the Beggar goes on to explain his overall design for the play, which is loosely modeled on the conventions of Italian operas. For example, he includes “the similes that are in your celebrated operas: the Swallow, the Moth, the Bee, the Ship, the Flower, etc.”(41). The similes appear in the ballads, not in the dialogue. According to Loughrey and Treadwell, “the ‘Simile Aria’ was a characteristic feature of heroic opera in the Italian style,” which shows that the Beggar keeps this convention relatively intact (11). The ballads function in *The Beggar's Opera* as opera arias do,

breaking the course of dialogue up with song. Despite following the aria tradition, the Beggar acknowledges that there is no recitative, which he terms “unnatural”(41-42). This is another place where it may be argued that Gay bends genre to suit his own, more English tastes.

It would stand to reason that Gay, if intentionally critiquing Italian opera, would not incorporate so many of its conventions. Instead, the Beggar’s opening words justify his alterations of the Italian conventions by explaining that the changes are appropriate for his original audience, which was a company of beggars, and that the opera is appropriate for the original reason for its composition, to celebrate “the marriage of James Chanter and Moll Lay, two most excellent ballad-singers” (41). This would seem to indicate that the Beggar does not mean to condemn Italian opera altogether, but simply to explain the differences between the opera he composed and what audiences outside of the “company of beggars” were used to. Thus, he is left to walk a fine line between the culturally known conventions of Italian opera, and the less artistic popular ballads (the music shared by beggars and the nobility) that he must use to compose his work. Gay’s masterstroke here is that the trendy form of Italian opera that appeals to the culturally elite is combined with the popular songs from the street and coffeehouses—there is something in the play for everyone.

To address Italian opera’s corruption of dramatic conventions, the Beggar returns before the last scene ends to answer the question posed to him by The Player:

PLAYER: But, honest friend, I hope you don’t intend that Macheath shall  
be really executed.



BEGGAR: Most certainly, sir. To make the piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical justice. Macheath is to be hanged; and for the other personages of the drama, the audience must have supposed they were all either hanged or transported

PLAYER: Why then, friend, this is a downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily. (120-121)

To “comply with the taste of the town,” to use the Player’s words, the Beggar rewrites the play with a reconciliation scene where Macheath is spared a trip to the gallows and the play ends with a dance. As in the opening scene, the Beggar feels no remorse in altering the genre that he is working with to suit his, or the audience’s pleasure. According to Steve Newman,

The Beggar’s moral stupidity indicates Gay’s search for an alternative beyond capitulating to the Town’s taste for operatic comedy *or* the Beggar’s preference for the scaffold. Both of these spectacles offer a flawed relationship between art and politics: The scaffold subordinates art entirely to the power of an unjust state; conversely, opera absurdly divides art from justice, even as its powerful supporters profit from social inequities. (17)

Another Italian opera convention *The Beggar’s Opera* alters is the use of castrati as the male lead. Gay’s play does not mention castrati directly, but Macheath’s extreme masculinity, confirmed by his role as the father of several children and the leader of a band of highwaymen implies that his role would not play well in a high voice. Yvonne Noble argues that Gay presents Macheath as an anti-operatic, quintessentially English

hero: “In sum, in Macheath—vigorous, English, generous, and manly—*The Beggar’s Opera* implicitly appeals to its audiences to affirm their allegiance to what is native, natural, life-giving, and good—in short, to the values that in literature we generally call comic” (14). Swift relished the popular attention that *The Beggar’s Opera* received, especially for its apparent stance against Italian opera: *The Beggar’s Opera* “likewise exposeth with Great Justice that unnatural Taste for Italian music among us, which is wholly unsuitable to our northern climate, and the Genius of the People, whereby we are overrun with Italian Effeminacy, and Italian Nonsense” (quoted in McIntosh 425).

As Noble suggests, Macheath could be read as the antidote to the kind of concerns that Swift, Addison and others shared about Italian opera, but it is less certain what Gay’s true feelings were about Italian opera. In a letter sent to Jonathan Swift before *The Beggar’s Opera* premiers, Gay writes,

As for the reigning Amusement of the town, tis entirely Musick. real fiddles, Bass Viols and Hautboys not poetical Harps, Lyres, and reeds. Theres nobody allow’d to say I sing but an Eunuch or an Italian Woman Every body is grown now as great a judge of Musick as they were in your time of Poetry. and folks that could not distinguish one tune from another now daily dispute about the two different styles of Hendel, Bononcini, and Atillio. People have now forgot Homer, and Virgil & Caesar, or at least they have lost their ranks. ("Gay to Swift 3 February 1722/3" 43)

In his letter, Gay mentions the three most prominent opera composers working with the Royal Academy of Music from 1719 to 1728. Although Handel was the most prominent, Giovanni Bononcini and Attilio Ariosti were both established Italian opera composers

before they were invited to compose for the Royal Academy's opera productions. Gay's primary concern seems to lie in the fact that Italian opera was creating an audience that was now turning away from poetry. Also, Italian opera's popularity appeared to prevent attempts at writing English language opera. For Gay, who obviously enjoyed the folk ballads that he would use in his *Beggar's Opera* airs, the preference for foreign composers was especially troubling—not only did they employ Italian-language librettos to the detriment of English poetry, but the popularity of foreign music was also a threat to English music.

Despite Gay's concerns in his letter to Swift regarding the popularity of Italian opera, it must be remembered that Gay wrote the libretto for Handel's masque *Acis and Galatea* in 1718, five years before the letter. Such a collaboration would make it unlikely that Gay was opposed to all foreign composers. Additionally, the text of *The Beggar's Opera* notes that Gay set Air XX to the march from Handel's opera *Rinaldo*. Again, it seems unlikely that Gay would use such a source, not to mention other French and Italian tunes, if his intention was to reassert native English music over imported music.<sup>30</sup>

Another consideration for Gay's apparent attack against opera in his letter to Swift is that he, like Swift, struggled against pretentiousness. The fight against pretentiousness was one of main projects of the Scriblerus club, which in addition to Swift and Gay, included Alexander Pope, Dr. John Arbuthnot, Henry St John (1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Bolingbroke), and Thomas Parnell. Despite their individual accomplishments, The Scriblerus club authored works under the pseudonym of Martinus Scriblerus, a talentless writer that was incurably pretentious. Of the Scriblerians, Patricia Carr Brückmann writes,

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<sup>30</sup> For a list of sources of Gay's tunes in *The Beggar's Opera*, see Kidson and W. H. Grattan Flood.

Although it would be foolish to argue that one cannot read one of these authors without the others, it is true that they saw themselves as a group. Those works for which they are most recalled by the common reader—*Travels into Several remote Nations of the World*, *The Dunciad*, and *The Beggar's Opera*—are works that come from the group, fragments of their grand design, the hilarious and almost totally neglected *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*. (8)

The overall design of *Memoirs* was to become, in Brückmann's words, "the memoirs of a universal pedant, corrupted by mechanical education and dedicated to curiosity rather than to wisdom" (4). Viewed through a Scriblerian lens, Gay's letter to Swift is less a rant and more an amusing comment on the kind of pretentious Italian-opera followers that one might expect Martinus Scriblerius to be.

The Scriblerus club also had political interests. Bolingbroke and Arbuthnot were politically active Tories. Thus, Gay's membership as a Scriblerian implies his opposition to Walpole, who was the leader of the Whigs. For his part, Swift was quick to assign credit to *The Beggar's Opera* for supporting his own Tory agenda. In a letter to Gay, Swift expresses his hopes that Walpole saw *The Beggar's Opera* as an "affront" on him: "Pray God he may, for he has held the longest hand at hazard that ever fell to any sharper's share" (quoted in Nokes 434).

Although Gay was a Scriblerian, the nature of his satire was not always congruent with that of the other members. Diane Dugaw claims that "in contrast to his Scriblerian colleagues Swift and Pope, his satiric renderings, however skeptical their warnings, nevertheless remain ambivalent and bemused" (166). When applied to *The Beggar's*

*Opera*, Dugaw's comment may explain why Swift was so quick to suggest Gay's intentions when it appears that Gay himself may not have had such a clear agenda. For example, in the Beggar's conversation with the Player at the end of *The Beggar's Opera*, the Beggar seems concerned with the moral of his opera:

Through the whole piece you may observe such a similitude of manners in high and low life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable vices) the fine gentlemen imitate the gentlemen of the road, or the gentlemen of the road the fine gentlemen. Had the play remained, as I first intended, it would have carried a most excellent moral. 'Twould have shown that the lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich: and that they are punished for them. (121)

Just as in Italian opera, the villains, even if they were meant to represent real people like Walpole, are granted reprieves. In the introduction to *Polly*, the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, the "Poet" returns to say: "my strokes are at vice in general: but if any men particularly vicious are hurt, I make no apology, but leave them to the cure of their flatterers" ("*Polly*" 72). Despite the political controversy surrounding *The Beggar's Opera* and the banning of its sequel, Gay never openly participated in ad hominem satire or openly attacked anything but "vice in general."

Another critic who sets Gay apart from his fellow Scriblerians is Samuel Johnson: "Gay was the general favorite of the whole association of wits; but they regarded him as a play-fellow rather than a partner, and treated him with more fondness than respect" ("*Life of Gay*" 268). Considering that Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is so widely regarded now as

a masterpiece of eighteenth-century satire, Johnson was probably too quick to dismiss its brilliance. Johnson writes that “the play, like many others, was plainly written only to divert, without any moral purpose, and is therefore not likely to do good; nor can it be conceived, without more speculation than life requires or admits, to be productive of much evil” (“Life of Gay” 278). Again, Gay did little to suggest other than what Johnson claims.

Because Gay was not as renowned as Scriblerians Pope and Swift, there have been suggestions that Gay did not write *The Beggar’s Opera*. On the question of Gay’s authorship, biographer David Nokes concludes,

The very originality of the opera’s hybrid form, about which Pope was so skeptical, is eloquent testimony that it was, in both conception and detail, Gay’s own work. He alone among the Scriblerians had the proven facility for writing popular song lyrics and, [416] according to legend at least, was proficient on the flute. (415-416)

Although Gay could likely play some of the tunes used in the opera on his flute, it is very likely that Pepusch also had a hand in adding tunes, especially since it was Pepusch who composed the overture and had the burden of directing musicians to accompany the singers.

For several critics, Gay’s use of music in *The Beggar’s Opera* provides the best evidence that he had much more in mind than pure entertainment. Both Diane Dugaw in ‘*Deep Play*,’ and Daniel Albright in *Untwisting the Serpent* argue that a large part of the play’s lasting influence comes from the mixing of musical elements from high culture (as in Handel’s march from *Rinaldo*) and low culture, as in Air LIII, which is derived from

“a very coarse song” (Kidson 77). In particular, Dugaw points out that the songs in Gay’s ballad operas “increasingly functioned as implicating intertexts which draw into the play other texts, authors, and contexts,” and that “Gay’s metaleptic method, exemplified richly in a song like ‘Over the Hills,’ creates in his works polyvalent figures of allusions” (169, 184). These allusions include both the tune’s use in ballads with different lyrics and the words of Gay’s Air XVI. The air begins with Macheath and Polly’s pledges to remain faithful even if they are forced to leave England:

MACHEATH: Were I laid on Greenland’s Coast,  
And in my arms embraced my lass;  
Warm amidst eternal frost,  
Too soon the half year’s night would pass.  
POLLY: Were I sold on Indian soil,  
Soon as the burning day was closed,  
I could mock the sultry toil,  
When on my charmer’s breast reposed. (66)

Although Greenland was not a British colony, it had a profitable trade relationship with Great Britain prior to 1692 (Knight 28). Macheath likely imagines Greenland as a possible landing point after stowing away on a departing ship. “Indian soil” in 1728 was likely an allusion to British colonies in the Americas. Furthermore, to be “sold” implies that Polly is being sent to a penal colony like Georgia or into indentured servitude. Thus, Gay references the colonial expansion and profitable trade of the seafaring British empire.

The tune of Gay's Air XVI, set to different words, had previously been used by other playwrights. It appeared as "Jockey's Lamentation" in Thomas D'Urfey's *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1709), and George Farquhar used the tune in *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). In *The Recruiting Officer*, it is military marching song, whereas "Jockey's Lamentation" is a lighter love song. In *The Recruiting Officer*, the song contains the lines "Over the hills, and o'er the main, / To Flanders, Portugal, or Spain, / The Queen commands and we'll obey" (Farquhar 92); "Jockey's Lamentation" begins "Jocky met with Jenny fair, / Aft by the dawning of the day; / But Jocky now is fu' of care, / Since Jenny staw his heart away" (Swaen 164). Both versions predate *The Beggar's Opera*, which means the presence of the tune in *The Beggar's Opera* alludes to the words of the other versions of the song. For audiences during Gay's time, these allusions would have been clear.

When the music of *The Beggar's Opera* is viewed as an important intertext, it is evident that Gay considered the work to be something more than a play. Viewed in relation to the rest of Gay's literary work, *The Beggar's Opera's* blend of music and poetry confirms Gay's habit of playing with genre conventions, as in his poem *Trivia* (1716). David Nokes explains:

Like all the best of Gay's writings, *Trivia* defiantly resists generic classification. This is not because its literary models and antecedents are in any way obscure. On the contrary, Gay not only parades literary sources from Virgil and Juvenal to Ned Ward and Swift, but makes clear his basic structure is borrowed, once again, from Virgil's *Georgics*. In formal terms, then, the poem is a town georgic; what is exclusive is its tone. (206)



In *The Shepherd's Calendar*, another early poem, Gay uses common speech, which means that it contained much less artifice than pastoral poems of the time that followed Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* in 1697. Gay follows *The Shepherd's Calendar* with *The What d'ye Call It: a Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce*, a play whose name alone indicates difficulty with its genre classification. The title recalibrates theatrical genres. In his preface to the 1715 edition of the play Gay defines his genre-bending:

We have often had tragic-comedies upon the English theatre with Success: but in that sort of composition the tragedy and comedy are in distinct scenes, and may be easily separated from each other. But the whole art of the tragic-comi-pastoral farce lies in interweaving the several kinds of the drama with each other, so that they cannot be distinguished or separated.

(What D'ye Call It 1)

Gay goes on in his preface to defend against critics who object to the play as a tragedy, using Aristotelian considerations. Specifically, he mentions "plot," [*mythos*]; "Characters" [*ethos*]; "Moral" [*dianoia*]; and "Number and rhyme" [*melos*] in his justification for his choice of such a twisted genre. Gay also mentions "Sentiments," which may imply a verbal control or diction (*lexis*) and "Catastrophe," which implies a spectacle of some sort (*opsis*). Ultimately, Gay argues that his play blends these concepts perfectly.

Gay's knowledge of Aristotelian poetics in the introduction to *The What d'ye Call It* seems to draw upon *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), John Dryden's influential work on the reestablishment of English drama during the Restoration. In the essay, Dryden establishes a definition of a play: "A just and lively image of human nature,

representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind” (17). Dryden takes a decidedly nationalist tone in a prefatory address to the reader that “the drift of the ensuing discourse was chiefly to vindicate the honour of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them” (7). Thus Dryden establishes the definition of what an English play, as opposed to a foreign one, should promote. In his introduction to *The What d’ye Call It*, Gay affirms that he is trying to improve “English theatre” by showing how to blend different dramatic genres properly, but he also bends the rules by arguing that tragedy and comedy should be in the same play, an assertion that would seem at odds with Dryden’s 1668 argument that tragedy should be composed in heroic couplets and comedy in blank verse. However, by 1677, with the play *All for Love*, Dryden himself was composing tragedy in blank verse. Thus, by 1715, the rules of English drama had evolved to allow Gay’s genre blending.

Early works like *The What d’ye Call It* show Gay’s interest in manipulating genre conventions, or creating “hybrid forms” of drama, but they are nothing like *The Beggar’s Opera*, which incorporates music. According to William A. McIntosh, prior to *The Beggar’s Opera*, there had been three plays produced in London that could be described as “ballad operas” (420). Of these, Gay’s work shares the most similarities with Thomas D’Urfey’s *Wonders in the Sun* (1706).<sup>31</sup> Before *The Beggar’s Opera*, ballad operas were the exception rather than the norm. None had the sustained popularity that enjoyed by Gay’s opera.

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<sup>31</sup> D’Urfey’s *Wonders in the Sun* borrowed heavily from the collection of ballads he edited, entitled *Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy*. Several scholars, including Flood and Kidson, link many of the tunes used in Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* to D’Urfey’s collection.

Another predecessor to *The Beggar's Opera* is Gay's ballad "Newgate's Garland." Although the poem is not as much a hybrid in terms of genre, it contains the moral leveling of social classes that is a hallmark of *The Beggar's Opera*. The poem tells the tale of how Jonathan Wild's throat was cut by a highwayman known as Blueskin Blake, whom Wild had "peached" on, meaning to betray to the authorities for economic gain or clemency. Wild's tendency to equivocate between harboring criminals and informing against them is reminiscent of Peachum's character in *The Beggar's Opera*.

Gay would repeat the moral leveling technique of "Newgate's Garland" in the ballads in his opera. He would take a tune from a popular ballad and tell a sensational tale that mixed highwaymen, courtiers, peers, "parliament-men," physicians, lawyers and "Churchwardens" into the same greedy category ("Newgate's Garland" 184-186).

Calhoun Winton notes that the ballad shares a primary theme with the opera: "money and betrayal" (81). The ballad mentions the "forty pounds" paid for information leading to an arrest, which is the sum Peachum mentions in act I, scene 4 of *The Beggar's Opera*. As many critics suggest, audiences felt that *The Beggar's Opera* features many references to the news of Gay's day. For instance, "Newgate's Garland" mistakenly claims that Blueskin Blake's "sharp penknife" inflicts a mortal wound on Jonathan Wild. It did not. Jonathan Wild was convicted of the possession of stolen goods and hanged seven months after the Blueskin Blake incident. The poetic license that Gay takes in killing Wild is necessary to the poem's sarcasm. The speaker claims that Wild's death has set thieves of all social levels "at ease" and that each "may rob if he please." "Newgate's Garland" shows that Gay took events from London's criminal culture and manipulated their facts to morally level the classes. It is an important lesson to learn before one reads *The*

*Beggar's Opera*. Gay was less concerned about historical accuracy than he was about condemning the unified society of “rogues.” The 1724 publication of the “Newgate’s Garland” is evidence that Gay was considering the moral leveling of social classes before his hopes for royal patronage were dashed in October 1727, when he was insultingly offered the post of gentleman usher to two-year-old Princess Louisa, George II’s youngest child (Loughrey 24). Critics often cite Gay’s failure to receive patronage as a motivation for moral leveling, but Gay was working with this theme at least three years prior to the premiere of *The Beggar’s Opera*.

Because Gay was not a prolific playwright, it is unknown how confident he was that *The Beggar’s Opera* would be a success. Others were decidedly doubtful that the play would attract audiences. Despite Colley Cibber’s earlier attempts to reassert the English masque in the face of Italian opera, as the manager of Drury Lane, he turned Gay’s play down. Winton reports that as Gay took the play to John Rich at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, he had to promise Rich that the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry would either partially or completely bear the cost of the play’s production (95-96). When the play was passed amongst Gay’s literary friends, Congreve was reported to have remarked to Pope, “it would either take greatly, or be damned confoundedly” (Winton 91).

Thomas D’Urfey’s *Wonders in the Sun*, a ballad opera predecessor to *The Beggar’s Opera*, which ran for only five nights, might have served as a fairly accurate predictor for the success of Gay’s play. Fortunately for Gay, it did not—*The Beggar’s Opera* ran for 62 consecutive nights and was produced at least once every year for the remainder of the eighteenth century. The unprecedented popularity of *The Beggar’s Opera* created instant celebrities out of its performers. In “Three Stories of Celebrity: *The*

*Beggar's Opera* 'Biographies,' Cheryl Wanko argues that three largely fictional biographies of the actors who played Polly Peachum, Captain Macheath, and Matt of the Mint, "are responding to some of the first appearances of new cultural heroes and the transgressions associated with figures who succeed in nontraditional ways: celebrities" (482). According to the biographers, the "transgressions" are the images of lawlessness (in the case of the actors who played Macheath and Matt) and the immorality (in the case of all three performers) that are said to be harmful to the massive audiences that were flooding into theatres to see them, harmful to those buying fans or screens with images of the characters or scenes from the play printed on them, and harmful to those buying the music from the opera to sing at home.

Beyond expanding the personal fame of the actors, Wanko notes, "the play helped create a new consumer market for theatrical information and memorabilia, a market that had existed in potential for quite a while, but had not been exploited" (494). In a way, this "commodification and commercialization" was the result of enterprising individuals who wanted to cash in on the economic success of the production. It was also the result of the explosion of economic capital that was originating from Britain's colonial enterprise, which provided theatergoers with disposable income to purchase fan objects associated with the play (Wanko 494). At the heart of Wanko's analysis of the biographies is the conclusion that "Gay's slippery satire, as critics have found, is often ambiguous in its intentions, but the biographies that followed clearly tried to control its seductive force" (495). Such blatant attempts to "control" the message of the play can also be found in Swift's insinuations that the play was railing against opera, or against Walpole. In the case of *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* (1728), Wanko

notes that the book is not a biography of the actor who plays the part, but “continues the play’s attack on Robert Walpole and moralizes against political rapacity” (489). Because it was so abundant and so much more clearly defined than the play itself, the material published in the wake of the success of *The Beggar’s Opera* may have been at least partly responsible for the critical impression that Gay himself intended the play to point fingers at Walpole and eliminate Italian opera as a threat to native English music.<sup>32</sup> Despite the efforts of those outside of the production of the opera to interpret its meaning, Steve Newman argues that the opera held its edge as social commentary. According to Newman, because the opera is based on the ballad, a form “so thoroughly common and commodified,” it “provides an experience of song that cannot be used by the audience to separate itself definitively from the ‘Rabble’” (18). According to Newman, “this allows *The Beggar’s Opera* to survive the devouring force of ‘commercial culture,’ preserving its democratizing energy while negating its inequitable luxuries” (18).

For Yvonne Noble, *The Beggar’s Opera* has a nationalistic role: “In an important sense, Gay’s opera [...] is [...] a playwright’s opera with a vigorous English subject, performed in English by a native cast, and sung to native music. Here lies the strongest rejoinder to the ‘outlandish’ art form and to all those who preferred it to the neglect of art of native growth” (11). Noble is correct in noting the significance of Gay’s choice to set his opera in London instead of in ancient Rome or Greece (like many Italian operas of his time) and the significance of having English cast members, but “native” music is slightly misleading. As Albright suggests, when it comes to his selection of tunes, “Gay was as much a thief as Captain Macheath,” taking his tunes from any convenient source, whether

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<sup>32</sup> Calhoun Winton also asserts that “it is worth reiterating that the re-education campaign of the opposition, the program of finding and pointing out specific political propaganda, did not begin until *The Beggar’s Opera* was securely established as a hit” (99).

it was from England or beyond (125). Whether Gay wanted the tunes to tap into the shared cultural knowledge of his audiences, or to save time and money by not having to collaborate with a composer on sixty-nine separate tunes, it seems unlikely that he wanted the music in his work to be quintessentially English, even if the words to the songs are.

Calhoun Winton is another critic who points to the national identity of the play: “as if to emphasize the Englishness of this opera, Gay lavishes English music on Macheath’s prison scene” (125). The scene in question is towards the end of the play when Macheath has been condemned to be hanged and awaits his execution, Macheath sings a line or two to several well known tunes, including “Chevy Chase” and “Green Sleeves”; in total, the scene uses ten separate airs. Air LXV (the eighth of the ten used in the scene), is not of English origin, but is “Old Irish” (W. H. G. Flood 150-155). Thus, as Gilman suggests, the play is better categorized as a “British opera,” not an English one (545). Another prominent feature of the scene actually subverts the mostly English song selection. Macheath takes a strong swig of liquor after he sings part of each song, turning some of the most loved and ancient tunes of his native land into drinking songs. In Daniel Albright’s words, this seems to characterize Gay’s work as a whole: “Gay enjoyed the *frisson* of hearing a pop song such as the Lillibullero one moment and a lofty melody by Handel the next, because the opera works to undo any distinction between the high and the low” (125).

As Noble suggests, the *The Beggar’s Opera’s* setting and characters are English, but an important part of the play’s influence on non-English writers that chose to adapt it derives from its seemingly universal approach to human nature and emotions. Discussing

the play as a source of inspiration for postcolonial writers, Aparna Dhardwadker notes how:

The representation of social exploitation, institutionalized crime, bureaucratic corruption, and coarsened femininity in this aggregation of characters forms a culturally transportable theatrical complex which accommodates the social and political failures of the postcolonial Third World particularly well. The permanent contribution of Gay's play to its various cultural translations is to show that the failures of social and political institutions can be brilliantly represented through the resources of comic, rather than tragic, irony. (19-20)

The attraction for the writers in Dhardwadker's essay is not to cut out Walpole and paste in another political figure, but to use laughter to lessen the sting of corruption and exploitation. In this sense, *The Beggar's Opera* is potentially subversive because it requires audiences to get the following joke—what is being presented on stage is funny because gamblers, prostitutes, pickpockets, highwaymen, corrupt prison wardens, and fencers of stolen goods are being linked through both popular tunes and eloquent English speech with courtiers, attorneys, and the kind of noble personages that are usually portrayed in Italian operas. According to Steve Newman, “Gay uses the lyric doubleness of the ballad—individual speech and communal song—to undermine the ruling classes' presumptuous monopoly on subjectivity” (18). Newman suggests that Gay creates an inversion of rich and poor, a mirror image of society that is precise but upside down.

If taken literally, the play would suggest that a prime minister is no more noble than a thief. One can simultaneously be moral and of low social class: the inverse being



equally true. In his defense of his original ending, the Beggar appears to have a concern for the moral purpose of public performance, but the Player, who represents the “taste of the town,” convinces the Beggar to rewrite the ending. Thus, the audience’s last view is of a lively dance, not a hanging. Although this alludes to endings in Italian opera, in practicality, it leads to what Toni-Lynn O’Shaughnessy terms “multiple, unresolved questions” (216). At the end of the play, it seems that Macheath’s only punishment for a life of crime is to be confronted by his many wives for his infidelity.

In spite of the seemingly ambiguous moral resolution at the end of the play, William A. McIntosh asserts that “the dominant force in *The Beggar’s Opera* is its professional and social satire, and [...] its function is essentially didactic” (433). For McIntosh, the audience must consider the world to be full of criminals: those who are punishing Macheath for his crimes are as corrupt, if not more corrupt, than the highwayman himself. Therefore, the individual audience member must consciously isolate herself or himself from this inherent criminality to rise above it (McIntosh 433).

What McIntosh seems to forget is that many of the members of Gay’s audiences may have missed or ignored the didactic message and focused simply on the “delight” it brought them. For instance, as the play’s popularity grew, so did the near cult following of one of its main characters, Polly. Audiences from all social positions partook in Polly worship. The simple fact that Polly refuses to give up on Macheath reaffirms the work’s underlying theme that, despite the corrupt world, sincere human emotion triumphs.

According to Dewey W. Hall, Fenton actually attracted the attention of two noble suitors: Sir Robert Fagg and Charles Paulet, the Third Duke of Bolton (343). Hall also remarks on Hogarth’s famous painting that shows these two men in competition for Ms. Fenton’s

affections: “Hogarth’s portraiture blurs the line between actors and audience, who become part of the staged scene too” (344).

In addition to the satirical airs that highlight social corruption, there are sweeter airs that display the sincere emotions of love and the pains of poverty, and almost all of Polly’s songs promote these emotions. Polly is simply an island of sincerity in the sea of satire and cynicism that characterizes Peachum, Macheath, and Lockit. However, what challenges this intentional sincerity is that the tunes that were selected to accompany Polly’s emotional professions were not always originally sweet ballads of love. Daniel Albright comments on this use of irony, which he feels, “everywhere saturates the music”:

the closest thing to a sentimental love song, *Pretty Polly say*—in which Macheath and Polly pledge to be true to one another—is sung to an exceptionally coarse, perky tune, *Pretty Parrot, say*; but a noble, glorious melody, Purcell’s ‘If love’s a sweet passion,’ billows forth to accompany Lucy’s explanation of how her father taught her to kiss ‘the parson, the squire, and the sot,’ until she learned the art of social kissing so well that she became pregnant out of wedlock. The low tune undercuts the highfalutin words and vice versa. (125)

Wilfrid Mellers builds on Albright’s suggestion by arguing that “the piquancy of the situation came from the fact that the new words were often a satiric gloss on the implications of the familiar melody” (270). When taken together, Albright’s and Mellers’ arguments suggest that no character can be considered sincere. There is always a layer of irony.

Polly is usually considered by both critics and audiences as a sincere character. If the presentation of Polly's innocent heart is rejected as ironic because the tunes that she sings are often bawdy and she is known as a prostitute, then it would stand to reason that she would not have been as beloved by audiences as a sincere romantic. There are two arguments that support the audience's belief in Polly's sincerity. First of all, in performance, the actress Lavinia Fenton set the standard for performing Polly as a sincere romantic. Thus, Fenton's artistic choice as a performer may have manipulated the audience's interpretation of the character, despite the apparent irony of tune selection. Secondly, according to Toni-Lynn O'Shaughnessy, although historical evidence reports that Fenton must have played the role without irony, "[Polly's] language is reasonably read without reference to irony" (215).<sup>33</sup> It seems likely that the play's widespread success was partly the result of the audience's positive response to a sincere character like Polly that won over the less jaded audience members.

Just as in the more than two and a half centuries of critical comment on the play, Fenton's performance adds yet another dimension to what the play ultimately means, with the final conclusion being that the play is essentially what one makes of it, and that part of its continuing appeal lies in its moral ambiguity. In other words, it is a work that can be performed to highlight any one of a number of themes, but in the end, close readings often lead to more questions than answers.

Because the play's popularity has never been in doubt, the attempts to interpret its success (both in Gay's time and in the present day) as an expression of national identity conceals many of Gay's artistic goals. For many critics, both historical and

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<sup>33</sup> To reinforce her argument, O'Shaughnessy cites a 1736 debate about which actress would be better suited to play Polly (O'Shaughnessy 216).

contemporary, the play is nationalistically English because it resisted foreign culture, resisted the tyranny of Walpole, and established a native form of art, namely the English ballad opera. As an example, consider Paul Henry Lang's explanation of its popularity: "the public's joy and very real amusement in listening to an evening of familiar, and much-loved music, to a witty and intelligible text in their own tongue, explains the popularity of the ballad operas and their adverse effect on the imported Italian species" (521-522).

According to Lang, *The Beggar's Opera* makes a significant contribution to English musical history, but for other critics, the play crosses the line between art and pop culture. One needs only to go back as far as 1965 to find a challenge like the following one from Wilfrid Mellers:

In so far as it guys the conventions of aristocratic art and patronizes the tunes of the folk while understanding neither, it marks the beginning of British philistinism: of the belief that if art has any justification it is not because it helps us to deal more adequately with life's difficulties but because it makes us forget, momentarily, that such difficulties exist. (270-271)

Mellers's comment returns full circle to Samuel Johnson, who claims that the play is nothing more than a diversion. In such a way, the play's use of popular forms is artistically disadvantageous, which conflicts with Diane Dugaw's statement that "the vibrancy and mettle of Gay's satire derives from its use of popular materials. These forms served the private lives and pastimes of ordinary citizens that increasingly constituted the power base of the new order" (185). Somewhere in between Mellers and Dugaw's

disconnect lies a summary of *The Beggar's Opera's* role in the discourse on poetry, music, politics, and national identity between 1728 and 1740—on one hand, it reasserts the dominance of words over music in theatrical productions; on the other hand, it unites English ballads with ballads from the rest of the British Isles.

### **Part 3: “Rule, Britannia!”**

James Thomson's words to one of the most iconic anthems of Britishness came from his vision of Great Britain as a unified country beyond political lines:

#### An Ode

1.

When *Britain* first, at heaven's command,  
Arose from out the azure main;  
*This* was the charter of the land,  
And guardian angels sung *this* strain:  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;  
*Britons* never will be slaves.”

2.

The nations, not so blest as thee,  
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall:  
While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
The dread and envy of them all.  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;  
*Britons* never will be slaves.”

3.

Still more majestic shalt thou rise,  
More dreadful, from each foreign stroke:  
As the loud blast that tears the skies,  
Serves but to root thy native oak.  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;  
*Britons* never will be slaves.”

4.

Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame:  
All their attempts to bend the down,  
Will but arouse thy generous flame;  
But work their woe, and thy renown.  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;

*Britons never will be slaves.”*

5.

To thee belongs the rural reign;  
Thy cities shall with commerce shine:  
All thine shall be the subject main,  
And every shore it circles thine.  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;  
*Britons never will be slaves.”*

6.

The Muses, still with freedom found,  
Shall to thy happy coast repair:  
Blest isle! with matchless beauty crown'd,  
And manly hearts to guard the fair.  
“Rule, *Britannia*, rule the waves;  
*Britons never will be slaves.”*

(McKillop "Introduction: 'Rule, Britannia'" 176)

Originally a part of the masque *Alfred* (1740), the song’s fame quickly eclipsed its origin, and like the meaning of *The Beggar’s Opera*, the song’s meaning has been carefully constructed and reconstructed to serve the political goals of the expanding British Empire. The masque was originally commissioned by Frederick, Prince of Wales, for a private performance in honor of his daughter Augusta’s birthday. The masque was first performed at the prince’s home in Cliveden, on the river Thames. Known as “Poor Fred,” the Prince of Wales followed the family tradition of feuding with his father about politics. While living in London at Leicester House, Frederick and his court often spoke in opposition to his father’s policies. After his 1727 coronation, George II kept Walpole in power, and the literati flocked to anyone who provided resistance to the regime, especially to Frederick, who had the money to support them.

The Prince of Wales was known as an “idealistic young man with intellectual tastes,” including poetry, music, and the plastic arts (Fraser 427). In addition to his

patronage of the arts, another part of Frederick's appeal to the literati was his association with the ex-Jacobite Bolingbroke. It was Bolingbroke's essay *On the Idea of a Patriot King* (1737) that defined the period's artistic resistance to Walpole. According to James Sambrook,

*Alfred*, as a contemporary remarked, was 'written under influence of, and by the encouragement of Lord Bolingbroke, nor do the political maxims insisted upon it differ from those laid down in his idea of the patriot king' (Davies 2:69). The role of patriot king, which his supporters fondly thought Frederick would take up one day, was to rescue politics and society from present corruptions by moral example. (146)

Sambrook notes that Bolingbroke's theme of a patriot king influenced not only Thomson's *Alfred*, but all of his theatrical works, including *Agamemnon* (1737) and *Edward and Eleanora* (1739) (146). Even before he became familiar with Bolingbroke's polemic, Thomson had gradually transformed his artistic identity from being a poet known for composing verse on the glories of nature in *The Seasons* (1730), to a poet and playwright who extolled patriotic themes in *Britannia* (1729) and *Liberty* (1734).<sup>34</sup> Although *Britannia* was not dedicated to the Prince of Wales, it nonetheless praises Frederick "as a future benefactor of his country" (Sambrook 143). As Sambrook suggests, Thomson might simply have been looking for patronage in 1729, but as time went on, the Prince of Wales increasingly became the center of Thomson's political writing. In 1737, the Prince awarded Thomson a pension of £100 a year.

In 1737, the King expelled the Prince of Wales from his court, Parliament passed Walpole's Licensing Act, Bolingbroke's essay *On the Idea of the Patriot King* was

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<sup>34</sup> The first part of *The Seasons*, "Winter," was published in 1726.

published, and Thomson's *Agamemnon* was produced in London. Because of the Licensing Act, *Agamemnon* was one of only two new plays produced in the 1737-1738 theatrical season. It enjoyed a moderately successful run of nine nights, with the Prince of Wales commanding two of the performances. Perhaps because of the Prince of Wales's kindness in the form of command performances and Thomson's pension, Thomson dedicated the publication of the play to him.

Arguably, it took all of these events of 1737 to make the production of *Alfred* possible in 1740. The span of time between the publication of Bolingbroke's essay and the performance of *Alfred* gave Thomson time to absorb the concept of the patriot king, which is the central theme of the work. When the Prince of Wales was exiled from his father's court, he left Leicester House in London and moved to the estate at Cliveden and was settled there by 1739. Had *Alfred* been staged in a London theatre it might have been banned under the conditions of the Licensing Act. Although the play does not satirize Walpole, it gives unabashed praise of the Prince of Wales, who was the Tories' hope to become king and replace Walpole.

For the August 1, 1740, performance of *Alfred*, an elite group of actors, musicians, and perhaps most notably, theatre impresario John Rich, traveled from their respective London theatres to Cliveden to perform in front of the Prince of Wales and his guests. Rich, who had produced the *Beggar's Opera* in 1728 and built Covent Garden Theatre with the profits, was hired to stage *Alfred* and a few other stage performances in the garden of the manor home (Cummings 112). Rich was an interesting choice to manage the performances at Cliveden because his theatre at Covent Garden had housed Handel's opera company during the 1733-1734 season. Handel's company went to Rich's



theatre because a rival company, known as the “Opera of the Nobility,” led by none other than the Prince of Wales himself, had split from Handel’s company, seemingly because of a failure to “convert Handel to English opera” (Sadie and Hogwood 289). Evidently, the fact that Rich’s Covent Garden theatre had housed Handel’s opera company during his feud with The Prince of Wales’ rival opera company did not preclude Rich from staging the production of *Alfred*.

Despite his association with Rich’s theatre, Handel did not compose the music for that evening’s productions—that distinction belonged to Thomas Augustine Arne, who, in addition to composing the music for *Alfred*, also composed the music for what the *London Daily-Post* called “a Musical Masque call’d *The Contending Deities*,” which was also performed that evening (Grant 193). Paul Lang notes Arne’s special qualifications for composing the music for the performances:

The best known and appreciated among native English musicians of the period was Thomas Augustine Arne (1710-1778). He was a prolific composer for the stage, but his musical talents were lyric rather than dramatic. Many of his songs are of a simple moving beauty. ‘Rule Britannia’ became a famous patriotic song, and his Shakespearean settings do not suffer from the association with the great poet—a praise that cannot be bestowed on many musicians more favorably known than Arne.

(519)

Thus, as Lang points out, despite not being as prominent as Handel, Arne was clearly the best choice to compose the music because he was known for setting English poetry to

music. Additionally, it probably did not hurt that, unlike Handel, Arne had not been resistant to the Prince of Wales' musical politics.

In addition to setting music for Shakespeare's poetry, Arne had also set the music to *Comus* (1738), an opera with a libretto by John Dalton that was based on Milton's original masque *Comus*. The production was a success, establishing Arne alongside Pepusch as one of the most prominent composers for the London theatre (Cummings 12-13). In 1734, Arne had also set the music for another masque, *Dido and Aeneas*.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Arne was uniquely suited to set *Alfred*, an English masque in the spirit of Milton's *Comus*, to music. Unlike Handel, whose refusal to compose his earlier works with English librettos led to Cibber and Pepusch's eighteenth-century masques, Arne shared with the Prince of Wales the view that operatic music and English poetry should not be strangers.

Rich and Arne were both English, but the authors of *Alfred*, David Mallet and James Thomson, were born in Scotland and attended the University of Edinburgh together. Although it was more than two decades since the Act of Union, Scottish intellectuals were viewed in London as outsiders. Robert Crawford describes Thomson's arrival in London in 1726:

Thomson immediately contacted his fellow Edinburgh alumnus, the literary opportunist David Mallet, who was a tutor in the Duke of Montrose's household. After moving south early in the 1720's, Mallet had changed his surname from the distinctively Scottish 'Malloch'—apparently after the English critic John Dennis had called him 'Moloch'—

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<sup>35</sup> Arne's composition is not to be confused with Purcell's opera of the same name from 1689.

though Mallet told a Scottish friend that the English mispronounced his name. (48)

As Crawford notes, the mistaken pronunciation of “Malloch” was representative of the Scottish people’s struggle to integrate into London society. They were suspect because of their Scottish accents and Scottish dialects, and there was the suspicion that anyone from Scotland was a Jacobite, or at least sympathized with the “Old Pretender.” Despite being excluded from the English throne by the Act of Settlement, James was still considered to be the “King” of Scotland until the Act of Union officially united the kingdoms in 1707. According to Thomson scholars, especially Crawford and Mary Jane Scott, Thomson was very careful to assert his identity as British, not Scottish.

Crawford calls Mallet a “literary opportunist,” and considering Mallet’s reputation for proclaiming himself as the author of literary works that he did not write, the label seems to fit. One of the most heated debates surrounding the authorship of “Rule, Britannia!” (the authorship of *Alfred* is generally considered to be a seamless collaboration between Mallet and Thomson) concerns Mallet’s claim that “Rule, Britannia!” is his. Unfortunately for Mallet, he attempted to claim the song only after Thomson’s death.

The question of the authorship of “Rule, Britannia!” is answered by the song’s glorification of Britishness. According to Margaret Anne Doody, “Thomson [...] was one of the most enthusiastic exponents [...], of the commercial globe and maps, of the measurable world, and he also has a steady poetic topic in the relation of the eye to the light” (303-304). The song displays all of these interests. Thomson also revisits the themes of patriotism, liberty, and resistance to tyranny, which are all important parts of

Bolingbroke's concept of the patriot king. Hilbert Campbell notes that Thomson included these political ideals in his poems *Britannia* and *Liberty* as well (127).

On the question of Thomson's authorship, William Bayne sees several connections with Thomson's efforts in *The Seasons*: "no more fitting lyricist than he who sang so admirably and so unremittingly of Nature and of man, and the social and industrial glory of his country, could have composed the unchallenged paean of the nation's greatness" (160). Campbell also connects the lyrics to "the patriotic exuberance of some of the earliest passages of Thomson's *The Seasons*" (127). Similarly, Douglas Grant insists that "only Thomson could have written in such a spirit of lyrical patriotism," and that "Mallet could imitate his friend's blank verse well enough but such a noble flight was quite beyond his power (194).

Mallet, as critics other than Grant have suggested, should never be placed in the same literary class as his friend Thomson. Dr. Johnson concludes of Mallet's work that "conveying little information and giving no great pleasure, [it] must soon give way, as the suggestion of things produces new topics of conversation and other modes of amusement" ("Mallet" 410). Nonetheless, Mallet was a force in British literature. In 1737, the same year that Thomson was offered patronage, Mallet was named under-secretary for the Prince of Wales. For Mallet, it was the culmination of years of success in obtaining patronage from England's elite. Sandro Jung's recent work on Mallet argues that as an Anglo-Scot Mallet's achievement of more than three decades of patronage is a credit to his ability to assimilate into English aristocracy (160). This ability may have led to Johnson's comment that "he was the only Scot whom Scotchmen did not commend" ("Mallet" 403).

If Johnson's comments were even partly accurate, it is unlikely that Thomson, another Anglo-Scot, would desire a working relationship with Mallet on *Alfred*. As late as a letter dated March 31, 1747, Thomson was writing to Mallet about their respective literary projects, and it seems that they were on at least on cordial terms (McKillop Letters 187-188).<sup>36</sup> In addition to their connections through patronage, education and Scots ancestry, Thomson and Mallet also shared an appreciation of Bolingbroke's patriot king philosophy. According to Jung, it was Mallet who collected Bolingbroke's work into the *Works of the Late Right Honourable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (1752-4) and helped Bolingbroke suppress "unauthorized copies" of the *Patriot King* that were published by Alexander Pope (137-138).

What often gets lost in the debate over the song's authorship is that the song was not written as a national anthem for Great Britain. *Alfred* was meant to praise the Prince of Wales through association with the ancient king of England, thus connecting Frederick with what was good and noble about the British people themselves. Mallet and Thomson's libretto goes from the distant past of a king born in the ninth century CE, to a future vision of a Great Britain that dominates global trade with a formidable navy. Modern interpretations of the song often isolate it from the masque as a whole, a whole that was meant to rally hope that the Prince of Wales would become a patriot king and rid Britain of the likes of Walpole and his supporters. Divorced from the wider context of Alfred's message, critics tend to see "Rule, Britannia!" as being focused on the colonial hopes of Britain in Thomson's time. However, the song is the culmination of a tremendous collaboration of cultural leaders intended to fuse contemporary opposition politics and a vision of national identity with music and poetry. To defend "Rule,

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<sup>36</sup> James Thomson died on August 27, 1748.

Britannia!”), Roger Fiske provides a similar argument: “the lyric has been accused of vainglory, of claims to control all the oceans, but in fact it has been misunderstood; the sentiments are not unreasonable for a constantly-invaded island in the ninth century, and they had topical relevance in 1740” (190). In essence, the first production of *Alfred* was a performance of Britishness, not Englishness, because it represented the efforts of two Scottish writers and an English composer to define the future of British nationality—a future where a German-born prince would unite Great Britain into a cohesive and noble land.

With John Rich’s management, Arne’s musical compositions, Mallet and Thomson’s words, the stage was now set for the first performance of *Alfred* and its enduring anthem, “Rule, Britannia!”. Although the masque was, in Grant’s words, “eminently suited to the occasion,” it did not become a canonical work of British literature (192). McKillop argues that the “thin libretto” was the result of the restrictions placed on the authors by the genre of the masque itself, especially with Rich and Arne’s contributions (“The Early History of *Alfred*” 312).

Although the choice of genre connects the work to the troubled relationship between poetry and spectacle from the time of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones and Milton’s efforts on behalf of poetry in *Comus* and *Arcades*, as a masque, *Alfred* wins no battles for the cultural dominance of poetry over music and visual spectacle. The popularity of “Rule, Britannia!” essentially eclipsed any artistic contribution that the masque would make to British poetry. Since McKillop’s 1958 introduction, *Alfred* has not received critical attention beyond its role as a vehicle for delivering “Rule, Britannia!”. Still, as McKillop argues, in terms of its setting alone, *Alfred* was very much a part of the

prevalent literary forms of its time: “a pastoral setting would be taken almost as a matter of course in view of the traditions of the masque form (as in *Comus* and *Arcades*), the currency of ballad-opera, and the wooded background of the natural amphitheater at Cliveden” (“The Early History of *Alfred*” 316). The fact that McKillop links the initial performance of *Alfred* so strongly to Milton suggests that Arne, who had set the music for the adapted version of *Comus*, and the accomplished poets Thomson and Mallet, would have made a deliberate choice to use the traditionally English form of the masque to present their vision of a Britain that has its “native oak” roots.

It also could be argued that the song “Rule, Britannia!” adapts ballad traditions that reach throughout the British isles, including the use of quatrains, iambic tetrameter, alternating rhyme, and the refrain. In *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*, Suvir Kaul argues that Thomson composes verses “that are populist in their ballad-like ease” (1). Yet, in the masque itself, the song is entitled “An Ode,” not “Rule, Britannia!” Considering the lack of strophe, antistrophe, and the epode, or the stanza forms traditionally used in English odes by Cowley, Marvell, or Dryden, the title must have been meant more in a figurative sense than a formal one. With its metrical regularity and emphatic refrain, the song shares perhaps its greatest similarities with Christian hymns. Whatever classification one uses, the popularity of the song is generally attributed to the successful union of music composed by an English composer and words composed by a Scottish poet.

After the Prince of Wales, his family, and his guests first witnessed *Alfred*, the popularity of “Rule, Britannia!” eventually eclipsed the larger work that it came from. Increasingly, as with Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, the message of the work was

interpreted to serve a variety of political platforms. According to William Hayman Cummings,

The Masque is forgotten: poet and composer, and they who first heard its thrilling burst from chorus and orchestra are mouldering in their tombs; the halls through which the strain resounded have long since perished; but the enthusiasm then awakened still vibrates in the British heart to the sound of the words [to “Rule, Britannia!”]. (115)

Cummings wrote these words in 1912, and his unabashed patriotism is rare in recent criticism of the song. Today, critics view the song retrospectively, as if it were simply indicative of the era’s hunger for global dominance. To establish the political context for the development of the song’s message, Richard Armitage posits in *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* that “it is now an historiographical commonplace that the 1730s and early 1740s marked a watershed in the history of the British state and empire” (170). Armitage argues that the primary use of “Rule, Britannia!” was as a political device for a controlled form of patriotism: “the prevalence during the anti-Walpolean agitations and long thereafter of the conception of the character of Britain and its empire as Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free had rendered it [the kind of patriotism seemingly professed in the song] seemingly natural and inarguable, as no doubt its proponents intended it should be” (174). Tim Fulford similarly notes how, “the poem naturalizes patriotism, disguising its arguments as facts about British nature. It is successfully ideological because it is insidious: its ‘facts’ are accepted as such because they are presented simply enough to stick in the mind” (“Britannia’s Heart of Oak,” 198).



Suvir Kaul notes how Thomson, “enables a weighty world-picture here and does so in a form and vocabulary that naturalizes, assimilates, renders popular” (1).

Added to the prevalent critical suggestion that the song seems “simple,” “natural,” and “inarguable,” Christine Gerrard argues that, even with “an apparently straightforward expression of patriotism—[the song] proves resistant to analysis” because it was one in a series of several muddled statements on patriotism that appeared in the era, and its politics are not clearly defined in relation to these other statements (3).

Gerrard’s statement is compelling because it removes Thomson’s and Mallet’s personal politics from the equation. She notes that, although it “began life as a potent piece of opposition propaganda,” the song “became the unofficial national anthem” (3).

In order for the song to transform from “opposition propaganda” to “unofficial national anthem,” the performance of the song had to exist outside of the original performance at Cliveden. Quite simply, only a select few guests of the Prince of Wales had heard the song. For it to reach the rest of Britain, it would have to travel back to London’s theatres, where, according to Tim Fulford, it “took on a life beyond its original context and beyond the printed book” (“*Britannia's Heart of Oak*,” 197). The masque was reworked to varying degrees and restaged three separate times in 1745, 1751, and 1773. For the 1745 revival at Drury Lane, the masque’s basic narrative remained intact. The only significant alteration was by Arne, who moved “Rule, Britannia!” to the “grand finale” of the masque (“*Britannia's Heart of Oak*,” 197). The preliminary announcement in *The Daily Advertiser* from March 1, 1745, reports that the masque was, “to conclude with a *Celebrated Ode in Honour of Great Britain* in imitation of those formerly sung at

Banquets of Kings and Heroes” (Scouten 1161). It is assumed that this note refers to “Rule, Britannia!”, and if so, the song must have already achieved some renown.

For the 1751 production, again at Drury Lane, Mallet essentially rewrote the entire masque. Since Thomson had died in 1748, Mallet would not have to risk upsetting his writing partner by making changes to the masque. In his prompter’s diary, Richard Cross records the reception of the performance:

This Masque was wrote about eleven years ago, by Mr Malet & Mr Thomson, & Play’d in the Garden at Clifden before the P: of Wales & c.— Mr Malet has now alter’d it, & it was play’d with great Applause, only some of the dances being too long were dislik’d. (J. Stone, George Winchester 238)

As McKillop notes, by the 1751 revival, “the original political intentions soon became less relevant, and the enveloping poetry, never very robust, was completely subordinated to musical settings and elaborate scenic effects” (“The Early History of *Alfred*” 320). In 1751, Mallet would also rework Arne’s contributions to *Alfred*. Disappointed by Mallet’s changes to his score, Arne published the following disclaimer in the February 26 edition of *The General Advertiser*:

As Mr. Arne originally composed the Music in the Masque of Alfred, and the town may probably on that account imagine the Music, as now perform’d, to be all his production, he is advised by his friends to inform the publick that but two of his songs are in that performance, viz.: the first song beginning *O Peace thou fairest child of Heaven*; and the Ode in Honour of Great Britain, beginning,

*When Britain first at Heaven's Command, with the chorus, Rule Britannia, Rule the Waves, &c.* (J. Stone, George Winchester 238)

With only the retention of two of the original songs from the masque, “Rule, Britannia!” was further removed from its original context. McKillop also notes that “the 1751 manuscript also shows Mallet, probably in collaboration with Bolingbroke, tampering with the ode itself” (“Introduction: 'Rule, Britannia'" 179).

After 1773, “Rule, Britannia!” finally parted ways from *Alfred* and assumed its current role as a patriotic anthem. From this point, the song was used for a multitude of political platforms. Tim Fulford remarks that in several theatrical performances, the song “formed the climax of dramatic entertainments designed to commemorate naval successes” (“Britannia's Heart of Oak," 197). One example of this use is in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Critic* (1779). The play concerns a critic named Mr. Dangle who is entreated to view the rehearsal of a new play by a Mr. Puff, called *The Spanish Armada*. Mr. Puff’s play ends with an elaborate scene:

*Flourish of drums—trumpets—cannon, &c, &c. Scene changes to the sea—the fleets engage—the music plays ‘Britons strike home.’--Spanish fleet destroyed by fire-ships, &c.—English fleet advances—music plays ‘Rule Britannia.’—The procession of all the English rivers and their tributaries with their full emblems, &c. begins with Handels water music—ends with a chorus, to the march in Judas Maccabaeus. During this scene, Puff directs and applauds everything—then*

PUFF: Well, pretty well—but not quite perfect—so ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we’ll rehearse this piece again tomorrow. (Sheridan 549)

For Puff's overblown performance of patriotism, "Rule, Britannia!" is a natural and appropriate choice. However, for Sheridan and his critic, Dangle, Puff's production is too pretentious and manipulative because it creates a spectacle that demands a patriotic response from audiences. In "Sheridan and the Theatre of Patriotism: Staging Dissent During the War for America," Robert W. Jones remarks how "Sheridan's point, of course, was to show that such a brazen prostitution of the theatre to the needs of the government could only succeed in producing bad drama and a worse effect on the audience" (40). Thus Sheridan, like Gay with his choice of tunes in *The Beggar's Opera*, takes a medley of renowned music and places it in the service of ironic associations. In this way, Sheridan simultaneously affirms the popularity of the song and subverts its use as government propaganda.

In 1745, the same year that *Alfred* was first performed for London audiences, Thomas Arne, who was the music director for the theatre at Drury Lane, provided his own arrangement for the song that would become known as "God Save the King (Queen)." The song, written by an anonymous poet, originally appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Unfortunately for Arne, his setting of the song would not become the standard arrangement. As with "Rule, Britannia!," "God Save the King (Queen)" has been set to several different arrangements. Concerning the original arrangement of "Rule, Britannia!," Cummings reports that "as originally composed it was very strong, virile, and characteristic of Arne" (123).

As an expression of patriotism, "Rule, Britannia!" might appear to be less relevant to the Great Britain of today, especially since the British Empire has declined dramatically. Such an explanation may explain the difference between a comment by a

late Victorian critic—“the immortality of *Rule Britannia* arises not only from the inspiring and noble music to which it has been wedded, but from its indisputable literary value” (Bayne 155)—and a comment by a more contemporary Thomson scholar—“the song is memorable more for Thomas Arne’s music than for Thomson’s lyrics” (Scott 231). Although it is characteristic of a historical moment, one where British naval power was at its height and the Empire was expanding, “Rule, Britannia!’s” role as a popular anthem diminishes its position as an important work of British literature. This is partly because social attitudes towards colonialism have changed in Britain, and partly because the tune of the song is often divorced from the words in popular culture.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Part 4: The Poetic Legacy of *The Beggar’s Opera* and “Rule, Britannia!”**

In an essay on *The Beggar’s Opera*, William Empson notes that

Clearly it is important for a nation with a strong class-system to have an art-form that not merely evades but breaks through it, that makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home with each other. This may be done in odd ways, and as well by mockery as admiration. (199)

For Gay’s Britain, the “unity” that Empson suggests partly develops from the widespread popularity of the ballad tunes Gay uses. Discussing the special role that ballads play in Gay’s opera, Steve Newman contends that “the songs lead us to acknowledge that our own selves are not as integral or unique as we may think. In building his opera on ballads, Gay makes us aware that we, too, are to some degree made *of* songs, of common snatches of music and verse that circulate around the streets” (39-40).

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<sup>37</sup> An example of this is in film, where the chorus of “Rule, Britannia!” is often heard when a scene shifts to Britain. Such a use is prominently featured in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997).

Despite the prevalent feeling that it was a cultural threat, the Italian opera that was staged during Gay's time never achieved the widespread popularity that *The Beggar's Opera* did. Handel's musical compositions did not tap into the ballads that Londoners used to commemorate military victories and to rail against Walpole and the injustice of the South Sea Bubble. As a matter of fact, Handel's operas never appealed to enough of an audience to pay for the tremendous costs of producing them. If anything, as Gay's letter to Swift shows, Italian opera was only an exotic fad, as were its castrati, dueling sopranos, and visual spectacle. Roger Fiske also notes how "opera in a foreign tongue has always had a strong snob appeal for those who wish to be thought cleverer than they are" (66).

In retrospect, if it could be said that *The Beggar's Opera* defeated Italian opera at all, then it was only through the fact that the audiences pouring in to see it were not paying money to see Italian opera. As an "art-form," the ballad opera became the genre of choice for the decade that came after Gay's opera premiered. However, as Richard Platt contends,

Though *The Beggar's Opera* dealt a blow to Italian opera, it did not offer a serious or lasting alternative. It actually restricted the development of English opera by opening the floodgates to light music in the form of popular ballad tunes, which despite their melodic charm and the satirical possibilities of the genre, could never build up a musical structure capable of real dramatic depth. (132)

As stated earlier, *The Beggar's Opera* was revived throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century. During Victorian times, it fell out of favor with British audiences,

but experienced a rebirth with the tremendously popular 1920 production at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Through the use of eighteenth-century costuming, the show's producer, Lionel Playfair, established *The Beggar's Opera* as a period piece. It became more of an attempt at national cultural continuity than a modern update that rewrote Gay's work as a response to contemporary political and cultural concerns.

Like the 1728 performance, the 1920 revival inspired productions in other parts of the world, including a 1920-1921 production at New York's Greenwich Village Theatre. In 1922, American music critic Henrietta Straus noted that the London revival—by this time the production was past its thousandth performance—led to an “awakened national music consciousness” in England (696). Furthermore, Straus remarks how the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* resulted in the revival of the opera's sequel, *Polly*, and that “these works are so purely and so characteristically British in both their music and their texts that they appear to imply the same protest against foreign influence today as they did when they were written.” (696).

Despite Straus' suggestion that the 1920 production of *The Beggar's Opera* reasserted the British musical tradition, there was one member of the audience who saw the play's political message as a means of resistance in a non-British context. In 1921, Bertolt Brecht's secretary, Elizabeth Hauptmann, saw the opera and translated it into German. What resulted was Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*. Brecht's 1928 reworking of *The Beggar's Opera* adapted Gay's political satire to a contemporary setting. Written during the rise of Adolf Hitler, Brecht's opera reestablished Gay's work as an overtly political statement. Brecht's reworking of Gay's opera revitalized *The Beggar's Opera*'s role as social and political commentary. In “John Gay, Bertolt Brecht, and Postcolonial

Antinationalisms,” Aparna Dharwadker notes how Gay’s “conceptions of human character, behavior, and social organization appear almost instinctively to have created a versatile grid for representations of power and powerlessness in various social and political dispensations.” (8). She further argues that Brecht’s rendering of the themes of Gay’s operas influences subsequent postcolonial plays that are clearly based on the story, including Wole Soyinka’s *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) and P. L. Deshpande’s *Teen Paishacha Tamasha* (1978) (Dhardwadker 7).

Another reason why *The Beggar’s Opera* began to lose its power as a British barrier against outside culture was the country’s changing tastes in music. In the wake of World War I, the cultural exchange between the United States and Great Britain included popular art forms like silent film and jazz. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band began recording in 1917, and their popularity quickly spread to Europe. In France, Impressionist composers like Camille Saint-Säens, Maurice Ravel, and Claude Debussy were busy creating new forms of orchestral music. Meanwhile, in Britain, Sir Edward Elgar’s music, the most famous piece being *Pomp and Circumstance* (1901), began to fall out of fashion, with no apparent successor.

What remained popular during this period were performances in music halls, where audiences and performers sang the choruses of songs together. During World War I, which, according to Barry J. Faulk, was the “commercial zenith” of the music hall era, audiences and performers sang patriotic songs like “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” “Pack up Your Troubles,” and, “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1). In fact, the popularity of the music halls probably contributed to the success of the 1920 production of *The Beggar’s Opera*. The tunes of many of the airs in *The Beggar’s Opera* would be familiar



to music hall patrons, who often heard traditional folk ballads performed. However, as radio broadcasts improved, American jazz, swing, and big band music became overwhelmingly popular, and the music halls gradually went out of business.

World War II devastated Great Britain's economy, and following the war, popular culture generally took its cues from the United States, where big band music was giving way to the era of the pop singer. Resisting this cultural domination were British composers like Benjamin Britten and Noël Coward. Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946) was an attempt to attract a new generation of listeners to British orchestral music, and Coward's theatrical revues, which featured song and dance, and lampooned aspects of British culture. Perhaps in resistance to the increasing popularity of American music, and hoping to capitalize on the past success of Gay's opera, the newly formed English Opera Group commissioned Britten to rework *The Beggar's Opera* for its 1948 season. The production received mixed reviews, and it certainly did not match the success of Playfair's 1920 production (Kildea 91-92). However, Britten's reworking of the opera provided a very important artifact in the history of the musical contribution of *The Beggar's Opera*: a detailed musical score that can be reproduced with accuracy.<sup>38</sup> Britten's realization of Gay's opera was to set it as a modern opera, complete with a full orchestra. Although this is a tremendous achievement for British musical history, Britten's version failed to achieve lasting popularity.

In both the period adaptations of *The Beggar's Opera* that rely on the traditional ballad tunes and the revised adaptations of the work that followed Brecht's, the opera's ability to "break through" to a variety of audiences, not only historians or literary

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<sup>38</sup> In 2005, a recording of the original 1920 Lyric Theatre cast's performance of the opera was discovered and digitally remastered.

scholars familiar with the historical contexts, remains remarkable. The continued success must rely partly on the popular appeal of the lyrics, music and spectacle, which are the hallmarks of the original. Because the political and artistic contexts of Gay's time are likely unfamiliar to later audiences, contemporary versions must allude to contemporary politics or ignore them in favor of the preservation of Gay's original. Thus, the play can perform a reactionary, nationalist role or a resistant, subversive role, as in the case of Brecht's and other adaptations that consciously alter Gay's words.

Empson's comment that society desires art that "makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home with each other" may be applied to "Rule, Britannia!", which also transformed from a masque specifically staged for royalty to one of Britain's most ubiquitous expressions of national identity. Echoing Empson's attention to breaking class boundaries, Tim Fulford remarks that "it was sung in theatres by actors and audience, uniting the gentlemanly [sic] occupants of boxes with the common people watching from the gods" (Fulford "Britannia's Heart of Oak," 197). This sense of community, linking the rich in the priciest seats (boxes) with the poorest in the cheapest seats in the upper balconies (the "gods") was made possible by the simplicity and clarity of the words and the rousing strength of the tune.

A few years ago, the relevance of "Rule, Britannia!" to contemporary British culture combined with a question about the cultural relevancy of the Poet Laureate. The September 14, 2008 edition of *The Sunday Times* featured a profile of former Poet Laureate of Great Britain, Andrew Motion. The profile concluded that, despite Motion's important contributions as a preservationist of British poetry, "Motion has never written a

memorable line in his life" ("Head of the Deadly Dull Poets Society" 23).<sup>39</sup> A few weeks later, *The Times* printed a response to the article that suggests that Motion could still leave behind a valuable contribution:

Sir,

Recently there has been talk about the role of the Poet Laureate. May I suggest that there is one very necessary task he could be asked to perform, which is to revise the words of Rule Britannia. At present, the anthem contains some phrases which are totally inappropriate nowadays; for instance, reference to wider bounds and ruling the waves. I am sure Andrew Motion could compose a more suitable version which could enhance the marvelous music and celebrate the many things that people of this country can be justly proud of, such as our general tolerance, inventiveness, grit in the face of adversity and the selfless commitment to the men and women of the Armed Services. Please let us have an anthem fit for our times, which can be sung by enthusiastic Promenaders with genuine feeling.

Frances Ingersent

Sutton Bonington, Notts. (Ingersent 25)

Since throughout the song's history a variety of words were added to the familiar tune, this may not be such a shocking suggestion (Cummings 130-132). At least, the song could reflect more contemporary hopes for Britain's future, as Thomson and Mallet originally intended.

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<sup>39</sup> One example of this preservation is Motion's efforts with the online Poetry Archive ([www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)), contains free recordings of poets reading their work.

The conclusion of Ingersent's letter references the audience's singing of several British patriotic songs at the conclusion of the BBC's *Last Night of the Proms*. The setting of this performance in Royal Albert Hall is full of flag waving and carefully staged patriotism. Considering the September 29, 2008, publication of Ingersent's letter, it is possible that the live broadcast of *Last Night of the Proms* from September 13, 2008, was still fresh in the author's mind.<sup>40</sup> The collection of patriotic songs featured a rendition of "Rule, Britannia!" that was sung by Welsh opera star Bryn Terfel. For his performance, Terfel wore a suit jacket with the Welsh dragon prominently displayed on the reverse. The right lapel of the jacket bore a Union Jack, the left lapel bore St. George's cross, the right sleeve bore an Irish tricolor (significantly, the flag of Northern Ireland was absent), and the left sleeve bore a Scottish flag. At the conclusion of the chorus of the third verse, which he sang in Welsh, he produced an assortment of British flags from each sleeve and tossed them into the audience. Finally, as he received the audience's applause, Terfel completed his magic act by producing a handkerchief with "19 Gold" stitched on it, thus commemorating Great Britain's gold medal count from the 2008 Summer Olympic games in Beijing.

Despite the British patriotism Terfel attempts to elicit, it is unclear how audiences would interpret it. For Frances Ingersent of Sutton Bonnington, Nottinghamshire, it is the words of the song that are "inappropriate," not the spirit of patriotism that it promotes; for other audience members, though, the reaction might seem more like Dangle's reaction to Puff's play in Sheridan's *The Critic*, which suggests that such overt patriotism is a populist appeal that is anachronistic.

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<sup>40</sup> To view a recording of this performance, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_cWz9MrHskk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cWz9MrHskk).

As Ingersent suggests, centuries of association with British Empire have diminished the relevance of “Rule, Britannia!” What complicates alterations to the lyrics of the anthem is the fact that the song is so familiar that it seems to have seeped into the cultural bloodstream of the country: to remove it for “repair,” would likely cause a firestorm among more traditionally minded cultural preservationists. Read within the context of Thomson’s appreciation of Bolingbroke’s patriot king philosophy, the work reflects the hopes for what Britain might become. For Thomson, the poetry of *Alfred* had a purpose beyond patriotism. Suvir Kaul contends,

“Rule, Britannia!” is not simply evidence of the centrality of the nationalist concerns of contemporary poets; it is testimonial to the fact that poets in the long eighteenth century imagined poetry to be a unique and privileged literary form for the enunciation of a puissant (and plastic) vocabulary of nation, particularly one appropriate to a Britain proving itself (in fits and starts to be sure) great at home and abroad. (5)

In the following chapters, I will explore how twentieth-century poets continue the discourse of poetry as a “privileged literary form for the enunciation of a puissant (and plastic) vocabulary of nation.” Although Britain saw declines in international prestige and power throughout the twentieth century, especially during the era of decolonization that followed World War II, poetry remained an “appropriate” means of expressing national identity. Furthermore, I argue that popular music increasingly becomes an appropriate means of expressing national identity, especially in the wake of the British invasion. As in Gay’s and Thomson’s time, a hybrid national identity lies at the intersection of poetry and popular music that defies a stilted Englishness.

## Chapter Two: Yeats and the Anglo-Irish Ballad

To the Editor of the *Irish Times*.

Sir,

I would go into mourning but the suit I kept for funerals is worn out. Our tomfools have blown up the equestrian statue of George II in St. Stephen's Green, the only Dublin statue that has delighted me by beauty and elegance. Had they blown up any other statue in St. Stephen's Green I would have rejoiced.

Yours etc,

W. B. Yeats. [included in a letter to Lady Dorothy Wellesley, dated May 14, 1937] (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 152)

Yeats's imaginative relationship to his culture was a double one, both as insider and as outsider. Indeed he typifies the symbolist's alienation from society, yet sees himself as more truly representing the traditions of society from which he separates himself than does the predominant middle class that has lost contact with both the high tradition and the low. (Hoffman 31-32)

### Part 1: Yeats's Nonmusical Background

Throughout his poetic career Yeats explored a synthesis between music and poetry through a specifically Anglo-Irish lens.<sup>41</sup> In the early part of his career, Yeats, like the Young Ireland poets he admired, incorporated folk music in his poetry as a way to reach out to a wider Irish audience to inspire their patriotism. Led by Daniel O'Connell, the Young Ireland movement attempted to force the repeal of the 1800 Irish Act of Union with Great Britain. In his early critical writing, Yeats pointed to particular Young Ireland poets James Clarence Mangan, Thomas Davis, and Samuel Ferguson. However, later in

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<sup>41</sup> I follow traditional Yeats scholarship that divides Yeats's career into different periods. I consider Yeats's early career to contain his work through *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). I consider the middle part of his career to contain his work from *In the Seven Woods* (1904) through *The Tower* (1928). I contend that the late part of his career contains the work from *Words for Music Perhaps* (1932) to the time of his death in 1939. The divisions I use are based on Yeats's conscious attention to a synthesis between poetic and musical form.

his life, Yeats abandoned Young Ireland's idealism on both political and aesthetic grounds. In the middle part of his career, Yeats also abandoned folk music: it was as though folk music was not esoteric enough for Yeats's mature vision. At the very end of his career, after his literary reputation was firmly established and his career as an Irish statesman ended, Yeats returned to folk music as part of his desire to leave a legacy for the Irish populace. What remains consistent throughout his career is that Yeats's use of folk music was tempered by his identity as an Anglo-Irish poet. His reluctance to lose one part of his identity creates a poetry rooted in a dualistic tradition—his love of English poetry traditions mixed with Irish landscape and folk culture.

Despite a few attempts to learn the Irish language, Yeats never attained fluency; he was left to use the English language as his vehicle for the incorporation of Irish folk traditions, including Anglo-Irish ballads, into his poetry. Yeats was not a Catholic. His father's family had come from Yorkshire some time in the seventeenth century to settle in Dublin, eventually marrying into the prominent Anglo-Irish Butler family—the origin of Yeats's middle name (Jeffares Biography 1). Yeats himself never lived exclusively in Ireland for an extended period of time. He retained a residence in London, and later Oxford, well into the 1920s. Later in life, he often returned to England to visit friends. He also lectured in America and, in the hopes that his health would improve in a warmer climate, spent much time in southern Europe. In fact, Yeats died in the French Riviera town of Roquebrune.

Because Yeats's father abandoned the study of law to become a portrait artist, because his brother Jack and his daughter Anne were also painters, because William Morris was such a profound influence on him and his sister Lily, one might assume that

Yeats's poetry would reflect this visual impetus, even leading to a preference for *ekphrasis*<sup>42</sup> over poetic song-writing. Indeed, as Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux notes in her recent work on twentieth-century poetry and visual art, poems including Yeats's "Municipal Gallery Revisited" and "Lapis Lazuli" do just that ("Private Lives" 36). At times in his career, Yeats yearned for a synthesis between poetry, visual arts and music, such as appears in his *Four Plays for Dancers*, "Sailing to Byzantium," and "The Fiddler of Dooney." Such an accomplished and synthetic production of "the Image," to incorporate Frank Kermode's concept, becomes, for Yeats, "the purpose of art" (Kermode 84).

It is widely known that Yeats did not play an instrument, or have a musical ear. Much of this evidence comes from Yeats himself. Discussing the veracity of Yeats's claims that he was not musical, Adrian Paterson warns that "we should temper them with the realization that his recourse to music happened consistently and often" (155). Despite his complex aesthetic and his sympathies for the Anglo-Irish ascendancy in Ireland, Yeats yearned to write "words for music" that would attain the status of anonymous "folklore" (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 32). Although substantial scholarship on Yeats's use of ballads and folk music confirms his desire to speak to a mass audience of Irish people, it is rare to find a critical work that gives full credit to Yeats's conflict between desiring "the clear rhetoric of 'popular poetry,'" especially when it is combined with music, and acknowledging that "[popular poetry's] literary ideal belongs more to England" than to Ireland<sup>43</sup> (W. B. Yeats "'Popular Poetry'" 350). Ironically, in recreating authentic Irish folk ballads, Yeats writes them in English and composes them in the style

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<sup>42</sup> The most common use of *ekphrasis* refers to a poetic description of a visual work of art, such as a painting or sculpture.

<sup>43</sup> The most notable exception is Michael Yeats's "W. B. Yeats and Irish Folk Song."



of English ballads. His attempts to solve this aesthetic conflict take two forms: 1) his early use of Irish myth and folk customs, and 2) his later use of specific events from Irish history. According to Ronald Schuchard, “seeing himself as the inheritor of the Irish bardic and ballad traditions, he set out to reconcile in his work the ancient Gaelic tradition with the Anglo-Irish tradition” (5).

What remained constant in Yeats’s “popular poetry” was the autonomy of the English words themselves. By the end of his life, Yeats viewed any collaborations between poetry, music, and the visual arts as a strictly unequal partnership—nothing should distract from the voice of the poet. For later admirers, especially Seamus Heaney, Yeats’s command of the English language was tantamount to a kind of verbal music. That Yeats never reached the “folk” with his songs is perhaps more a sign of the times that he lived in than a failure on his part: the audience for ballads and poetry was diminishing as an effect of modernity, and Yeats was aware of this.

For anyone who has ever visited Sligo, Ireland, it is clear that Yeats’s role in Irish literature is iconic. As with the work of many modernist poets, Yeats’s poetry is eclectic, providing something analogous to an archaeological dig in a modern Irish city—it is just that the ancient pieces in Yeats’s site were more intact and better preserved than those found in the dig sites of modernists like Eliot or Pound. Yeats created a place for himself using the artifacts of an Anglo-Irish tradition.

## **Part 2: Yeats’s Early Interest in Irish Folk Traditions (1889-1904)**

During the early part of his career, Yeats liked to use the “folk” as a trope, but he did not necessarily think that folk *art* was worth imitating. When he wrote “folk” ballads, they resembled the literary ballads of Keats and Wordsworth, not the kind of ballads in

Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which derived from earlier popular musical sources. The novelty of ballads wore off for Yeats around the time of *In the Seven Woods* (1904), when he began looking for inspiration in more ancient, and often less Irish forms of art, including Byzantine mosaics, the image of the dancer, and Japanese court drama. One possible explanation for this shift is that Yeats went from thinking on a national scale to focusing on his personal response to Irish history. Richard Ellmann argues that "the ultimate purpose of Yeats's use of nationality in his verse, was, paradoxically, to enable him to transcend it" (The Identity of Yeats 15). Considering that Yeats was Anglo-Irish, it seems logical that he gradually felt less connected to the Irish "folk," a Catholic majority that needed to establish an identity that was distinct from its former colonizer's. Still, his early interest in ballads and Irish folk culture evidently never completely left him. The elder Yeats seems to have wanted his final poetry to reconnect with his youthful patriotism.

At the time of Yeats's birth in 1865, the kind of satirical, politicized ballads found in *The Beggar's Opera* were still being written by the poets in the Young Ireland movement. These ballads were published in newspapers and magazines and sung in the streets of Dublin as acts of resistance to English rule. English language poets from the generations preceding Yeats, including James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson, often "translated" the Irish folk songs they heard in the countryside. In his essay on his father's use of Anglo-Irish ballads, Michael Yeats explains:

it was only with the spread of the English language that folk songs in Ireland adopted the ballad form, telling a story, in words that were direct, simple, but often crude and clumsy. There is a world of difference

between these ballads and the graceful, elegant, poetic songs of Gaelic Ireland. (176-177)

Similarly, Yeats writes in 1902 that “it does not see, though it [the Young Ireland Movement] would cast out all English things, that its literary ideal belongs more to England than to other countries” (“Popular Poetry” 350). Thus, Yeats was aware early in his writing career that even something as seemingly innocuous as poetic form still reflects the influence of its origins. For Yeats in his early use of ballads, attempting to fight this influence was a lost cause, it was too entrenched to be destroyed. Instead, Yeats deployed a style of attack that, on the one hand, employed the colonizer’s form, but on the other hand incorporated personal knowledge of the native landscape and local history to provide aesthetic resistance. Overlooked in favor of other early poems like “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” “When You Are Old,” and “To Ireland in Coming Times,” Yeats’s early ballads mark milestones in his approach to defining Ireland and his own Irishness.

Because Yeats was not musical, his early interest in songs, especially ballads, likely came from his early alliance with the Young Ireland poets. In critical writings and in his poetry, Yeats narrowed his Irish influences to “Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson,” as they appear in Yeats’s poem “The Nineteenth Century and After.” It seems that Yeats was primarily attracted to these poets for their ability to reach out to the masses with patriotic balladry. However, for Yeats, who was familiar with and attracted to the subtleties of literary verse, these poets did not achieve a literary status for Ireland that Yeats would be proud to support. In “What Is ‘Popular Poetry’?” Yeats looks for an Anglo-Irish synthesis:

I thought one day—I can remember the very day when I thought it—‘If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him, and we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland. (W. B. Yeats "Popular Poetry" 345)

Ultimately, though, as Roger McHugh notes,

The Young Ireland poets created no poetic style of their own; but it is possible that their ballads, many of them still sung in Ireland, taught Yeats something of the power of that simple form which he used repeatedly throughout his poetic career, from the simple ballads of his early poems (occasionally marred by *faux-naïveté*) to the dramatic and controlled rhetorical ballads of his last years. (8)

Thus, although Yeats refused to settle for the mediocrity of the poetry created by the Young Ireland poets, he desired their ability to reach a wide audience.

The essay “‘An Imagined Music’: Yeats, Music and the Irish Tradition,” further explores Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson’s influence on Yeats’s use of ballads. As for Thomas Davis (1814-1845), Adrian Paterson argues that, although Yeats did not particularly admire Davis’s skills as a poet, especially disliking his “blatant emotive appeal, he did envy and admire his power to communicate” (153). Yeats also feels that such an ease in communication was desirable for his own work. He writes in an early essay, “I wanted to write ‘popular poetry’ like those Irish poets, for I believed that all good literatures were popular” (“Popular Poetry” 346). After further consideration, Yeats says of Davis in 1914, “he was not, indeed, a great poet, but his power of expression was

a finer thing than I thought” (Tribute to Thomas Davis 12). The early Yeats was not ready to proclaim such an uncomplicated profession of Irish resistance as Davis does in the seventh stanza of “Tipperary”:

Let Britain brag her motley rag;  
We'll lift the Green more proud and airy—  
Be mine the lot to bear that flag  
And head the Men of Tipperary! (Davis 195)

Of the three poets mentioned in “The Nineteenth Century and After,” “the only Irish poet of the era whom Yeats continued to respect aesthetically was the maverick James Clarence Mangan”(Foster "Yeats" 770). Yeats was attracted to Mangan’s unique interpretation of Irish folk ballads. According to Paterson, “just as Mangan did not really understand the complexities of Irish, so Yeats did not really understand the complexities of music. Drawn to the unknown, this lent them both an almost complete freedom to interpret their material” (162). Yeats notes of Mangan that “he can never be popular like Davis, for he did not embody in clear verse the thoughts of normal mankind” (Yeats and Kinsella 25). Instead, Mangan was given to melancholy, or what Yeats termed “misery.” Take the wistful tone of the opening stanza of “The Fair hills of Eirè, O!”:

TAKE a blessing from my heart to the land of my birth,  
And the fair hills of Eirè, O!  
And to all that yet survive of Eibhear’s tribe on earth,  
On the fair hills of Eirè, O!  
In that land so delightful the wild thrush’s lay  
Seems to pour a lament forth for Eirè’s decay.

Alas, Alas! why pine I a thousand miles away

From the fair hills of Eirè, O!

(Mangan "The Fair Hills of Eirè, O!" 72)

Unlike the fervent speaker in Davis's "Tipperary," Mangan's speaker does not call the reader to action. Instead, he expresses melancholy for his absence from Ireland, which is in a state of "decay." Mangan's Romanticism is the poet's personal response to the nation instead of calling others to duty.

Another of Mangan's poems reflected in Yeats's early poetry is "Dark Rosaleen," an address to Ireland as a woman. The speaker again expresses his personal suffering for his nation:

Woe and pain, pain and woe,

Are my lot, night and noon,

To see your bright face clouded so,

Like the mournful moon.

But yet...will I rear your throne

Again in golden sheen; (Mangan "Dark Rosaleen" 223)

The poem was "translated from the Irish," and appeared in the Young Ireland journal *Nation* on 30 May 1846 (Mangan "Dark Rosaleen" 222, 224). According to Sean Ryder's introduction, the poem "purports to be an allegorical address from Hugh [the Red O'Donnell, a poet] to Ireland on the subject of his love and struggles for her" (Mangan "Dark Rosaleen" 222). As in "The Fair hills of Eirè, O!," these struggles are intensely personal ones.

Michael O'Neill connects Yeats's symbolic rose in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" to Mangan's poem and to Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty."<sup>44</sup> O'Neill contends that in Yeats's poem, "English and Irish Romanticisms criss-cross: James Clarence Mangan's dark Rosaleen and Shelley's Intellectual Beauty lend their colouring and loftiness to Yeats's symbol" (34). As O'Neill suggests, Yeats combines Irish tradition and English tradition into an Anglo-Irish symbol for nation. Yeats concludes "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time" with a refrain:

Come near; I would, before my time to go,  
Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:  
Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days. ("Rose" 101)

Yeats appears to echo an epic invocation, resembling the opening lines of the Aeneid. Like Vergil, Yeats's singing bard/speaker is looking back to the cultural foundations of a nation. Rob Doggett argues that the lines in "To the rose upon the rood of time" "are intentionally ambiguous, suggesting Yeats's own ambivalent position as both modern artist and national artist" (135). Unlike in the poetry of Davis Mangan, and Ferguson, where the role of Ireland is clearly defined, Yeats clouds the symbolic relationship between the rose and Ireland. The poem describes the exploits of Cuchulain, Druids, and Fergus. Discussing the choice of the rose as a symbol, Yeats provides his own note to the poem:

The rose is a favourite symbol with the Irish poets. It has given a name to more than one poem, both Gaelic and English, and is used, not merely in love poems, but in addresses to Ireland, as in De Vere's line, 'The little

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<sup>44</sup> O'Neill seems to arrive at these connections through Yeats's notes on the poem, which mention Shelley, Mangan, Spencer, and De Vere.

black rose shall be red at last,' and in Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen.' I do not, of course, use it in this latter sense. ("Notes" 798-799)

O'Neill notes that because Yeats's comment is absent in future editions, it shows that he was perhaps "too hastily restricting the scope of his symbol." Yeats's distancing from Mangan and Aubrey De Vere could also be read as a way to prevent his rose from being read as something as simple as Ireland. In later notes, Yeats writes that "the quality symbolized as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar" ("Notes" 842). Taken together, Yeats's notes show that the symbol of the rose takes from English and Irish traditions but becomes Yeats's own. Mangan, the poet who uses Irish language poetry as his source material, becomes part of Yeats's source material.

In Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886) Yeats found someone who translated and catalogued Irish song more thoroughly than Mangan, but who lacked the political fervor of Davis. Like Ferguson, Yeats also cataloged folkways, such as local myths and legends, with his friends Katherine Tynan, Lady Gregory, and Maude Gonne. For Yeats, such interests seemed to flow out of an interest in the preservation of Irish culture. According to Rob Doggett, "Yeats experienced modernity at the colonial periphery," which prevented a "passive acceptance of modernity" that was characteristic of Eliot and Pound (125, 126). Yeats saw in Ferguson the value of tapping into the extant cultural discourse of Irish ballads to reach contemporary audiences for nationalistic purposes. Paterson notes the importance of this in Yeats's work as a whole:

Yeats performed "two kinds of 'translation' of music into poetry: firstly via a cluster of sonically obsessive imagery drawn from the natural world,



of song, tone, voice, lay, and music; and secondly by a very definitive idea of the printed page as somehow translated from past song. These two conceits, central to Yeats's poetics, were derived in part from the poetry of Samuel Ferguson. (149-150)

Despite his conscious reworking of the original material, Ferguson's ballads often gave the appearance that they were as faithful to the Irish original as possible, even preferring to retain Irish words where English words would not do, as in the first stanza of "The Coolun":

OH, had you seen the Coolun,  
Walking down by the cuckoo's street,  
With the dew of the meadow shining  
On her milk-white twinkling feet.  
My love she is, and my *cailin oge*,  
And she dwells in Bal'nagar;  
And she bears the palm of beauty bright  
From the fairest that in Erin are. (Ferguson 54)

Though "Coolun" means "fair-haired one," and *cailin oge* simply translates into "young lass," Ferguson leaves the words in the poem, as if something too valuable would be lost in translation. Because Yeats never learned Irish well enough to translate Irish ballads in this manner, he does not retain all of the "authenticity" of Ferguson's ballads. Despite this, Yeats adopted Ferguson's frequent use of specific Irish place names to create a sense that the speaker was at least familiar with his settings. This sense of Ireland as a source of

inspiration is one aspect of Yeats's poetry that survives throughout all of his creative periods.

In addition to the use of Irish place names, Yeats adopted Ferguson's attempts to emulate epic poetry with heroic depictions of Irish heroes. Concerning Ferguson's role in Yeats's triumvirate, Yeats says, "the nation has found in Davis a battle call, as in Mangan its cry of despair; but he [Ferguson] only, the one Homeric poet of our time, could give us immortal companions still wet with the dew of their primal world" (Yeats and Kinsella 31). As his career progressed, Yeats would frequently revisit this kind of mythmaking, from the obvious attempts in his plays *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Death of Cuchulain*, to his attempts to create modern mythical heroes in poems like "Easter, 1916," "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited."

Although Yeats's early ballads are not as overtly political as Davis's, as full of Mangan's "misery," or as "authentic" as Ferguson's, with their untranslatable Irish words, they are certainly full of a particularly Irish spirit that is rooted in folk culture. Yeats's early ballads could easily be read as simply nostalgic. Although he was tapping into the nationalist discourse of the Young Ireland poets, he was avoiding overt political statements. Helen Vendler comments on Yeats's interest in ballads:

No other modern poet was so determined as Yeats to make the ballad a substantial and lifelong part of his *oeuvre*. Nobody—to give Yeats credit—was so willing to fail at reviving the ballad-genre. To him, the ballad represented not only the strongest modern link to oral literature but also his own indispensable connection to the Young Ireland poets he had

read in his youth, and to those ‘Fenian rhymes’ he had heard from the servants in his grandfather’s house in Sligo. (144)

As Vendler suggests, Yeats’s early ballads were images and echoes of the Ireland of his youth. They were composed at a time when Yeats was experiencing an identity crisis as a young poet in London. Yeats’s father moved the family from Dublin to London in 1887, and his poetry seems to reflect a certain homesickness. After moving in Dublin literary circles that wrote with nationalist fervor, Yeats entered into *fin de siècle* London. Shortly after returning to England, Yeats used his father’s connections to meet William Morris, whose Kelmscott House was often a gathering place for aspiring artists and writers. It was at Morris’s house that Yeats first met Ernest Rhys, with whom he would found the Rhymer’s Club in 1890. Yeats’s fondness for joining literary circles seems to indicate that he sought solidarity for his own aesthetic views, but more practically it connected him to a multinational group of friends and confidants, something that Yeats valued to the end of his life.

In 1889, Yeats published his first major collection of poetry, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*. The volume contained two poems that strongly echo the influence of Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson, “To an Isle in the Water,” and “An Old Song Re-Sung.” The poems first appear in a manuscript signed and dated 1888, which would suggest that Yeats was already homesick early in his family’s return to London.<sup>45</sup> That

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<sup>45</sup> George Bornstein beautifully describes the manuscript, which is housed in the special collections department of the McFarlin Library at The University of Tulsa: “**TUL** is a single leaf with ‘An Old Song Re-Sung’ (later, ‘Down by the Salley Gardens’) written on one side and ‘To an Isle in the Water’ on the other. Both Poems are written in black ink faded to brown on unlined white, woven paper measuring 18cm high by 12.5cm wide. The leaf was formerly pasted to a card. Yeats signed both sides ‘W. B. Yeats/1888’ in a different, nearly gray ink” (Bornstein xxxiii).

the poems appear next to each other in the manuscript and in the published edition is perhaps more than a coincidence, especially considering the subject matter.

In “To an Isle in the Water,” Yeats appears to mimic English literary ballads. The poem describes a domestic scene where a speaker observes his lover and imagines taking her away to “an isle in the water.” The song employs a traditional English ballad rhyme scheme, rhyming a-b-x-b, and generally follows alternating lines of iambic tetrameter with lines of iambic trimeter. Musically speaking, the poem does not appear to be intended to be sung or accompanied by music. The first line of the first stanza—“Shy one, shy one,” becomes rhythmically discordant in the first line of the second stanza—“She carries in the dishes.” In its diction, Yeats’s ballad is simple. Perhaps for an extra touch of nostalgia, he slightly inverts the syntax of line eight to “with her would I go.” The poem concludes with a final, intimate look at the poem’s subject”

She carries in the candles,  
And lights the curtained room,  
Shy in the doorway  
And shy in the gloom;  
  
And shy as a rabbit,  
Helpful and shy.  
To an isle in the water  
With her would I fly. ("To an Isle" 89)

The poem is easy to overlook in Yeats’s oeuvre, but the poet urges readers not to do so, consistently including it in collections of his poetry. Colin Meir notes how “Yeats

distinguished his 'Irish' poems from his more literary work, but in naming them and not the ballads [poems with "ballad" in the title from *The Wanderings of Oisín*] he is tacitly defining an Irish poem as one that is not narrative but lyrical" (15). Considering the lack of specific Irish imagery in the poem and its formal English ballad conventions, it is unclear why Yeats would consider it as an Irish poem. Still, it seems tied to the ballads of the Young Ireland poets, if not because of politics, at least in its appeal to the folk.

Discussing Yeats's early ballads, Charles Altieri argues that Romantic and Victorian poets saw the ballad as, "an attempt to recapture the basic or primary elements of human experience" (41). If this was Yeats's intention in "To an Isle in the Water," then the poem could be read as verse composed under the influence of the British poets Yeats grew up reading and desiring to emulate. In the poem, the "primary elements" of love and desire conflict with the mundane domestic exercises of putting away dishes and lighting candles.

On the other side of the manuscript page from "To an Isle in the Water" is the poem "An Old Song Re-Sung," renamed "Down in the Salley Gardens." It shows a rapid development in Yeats's conception of the ballad. Here, Yeats reconnects with Mangan and Ferguson's "translations." In a note included with the poem in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, Yeats claims that the poem is "an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old woman in the village of Ballysodare, Sligo, who often sings them to herself" (Finneran *Yeats Reader* 462). In his commentary on Yeats's poetry, Jeffares offers at least three potential sources for the song, which shows that it was plausible that Yeats was familiar with the original tune, if not some of the words from an earlier song (12-13). Thus, it seems that Yeats, in the

spirit of Ferguson and Mangan's "translation" of Irish folk songs, is reworking an actual song.

The fact that Yeats has an extant tune to work with helps him make the song more musical than "To an Isle in the Water." Reminding readers yet again that Yeats supposedly did not have a musical ear, Paul Cohen comments that "considering his tone-deafness, it is not surprising, though, that these early efforts [at song writing] were (with an occasional exception such as 'Down by the Salley Gardens') generally frustrating" (15-16). Yet, despite the lingering musical accompaniment, the song differs in only subtle ways from an earlier version of the song. Michael Yeats contends,

it is quite clear that the old peasant woman of Ballysodare must have remembered far more than three lines of this old folk song; for if a comparison is made it shows that Yeats's poem follows closely the wording of the folk original. As a result of his re-writing it becomes smoother, more literary, less typical of the naïve and unaffected utterances of simple country folk. Even so, as he left it, it still remains in essence the country love song which he heard some eighty years ago from that old woman of Sligo. (158)

As Charles Altieri suggests about the goal of Romantic and Victorian ballads, Yeats returns to the "primary elements" of love and desire that appear in "To an Isle in the Water." In this way, the poems are appropriately put together into Yeats's portrait of Ireland: they both display the emotional simplicity of peasant life in Ireland.

Yeats's simple lyrics for the tune may have made the song seem like a traditional, anonymous ballad, but Yeats's later literary celebrity caused it to become associated with Yeats country in particular, as Michael Yeats notes:

The folk version was at one time known all over Ireland, and had no special connection with Sligo, but the popularity of Yeats's song has nowadays quite changed this position. The good people of Sligo have now in fact discovered a grove of willow trees which are, they say, the original Salley gardens of the song, and these are shown with pride to foreign visitors to the district. Thus are traditions made. (159)

In an attempt to achieve more authenticity for Yeats's poem by determining the precise location of Yeats's "salley gardens," James P. McGarry argues,

Some say that those referred to by Yeats were on the bank of the Garavogue river opposite the Imperial Hotel, Sligo. It is more likely they were on the bank of the Ballysadare river between the Ballina road and the mills. There was once a row of small thatched houses on this bank of the river, and each of these had a salley (willow) garden to provide scallops for the thatch. (79).

Such disputes over mapping Yeats's geographical references show just how important it is for certain critics and the Irish people to connect Yeats to Ireland, and especially Sligo, but one must keep in mind Yeats's claims that the words to the song are only "imperfectly remembered." In most of his early ballads, he is not trying to provide a concrete image of Sligo or its people but to capture a more abstract vision of rural Irish life. In a 1935 letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats looks back on the composition of the

song and seems to have forgotten the old lady altogether: “the Free State Army march to a tune called ‘Down by the Salley Garden’ without knowing that the march was first published with words of mine, words that are now folklore” (Letters on Poetry 32).

Although Yeats’s comments may be read as vanity, it is the anonymity behind the song’s popularity that most impresses him. He seems proud to have reached the common men and women of Ireland, which was an increasingly important goal of his late in his life.

Considering Yeats’s movement back and forth between Ireland and London in the 1890s, it is likely that he often worked with images from memory, conveniently matching place names with words that had the desired rhythm or rhyme for a song. This feature is apparent in the first stanza of “The Fiddler of Dooney”:

When I play on my fiddle in Dooney,  
Folk dance like a wave of the sea;  
My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet,  
My brother in Mocharabuiee. ("The Fiddler of Dooney" 178)

Jeffares notes that by the time the poem was published in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), the third and fourth lines had been changed from the original 1892 version, which had read, “My brother is priest of Kilbarnet / My cousin of Rosnaree” (Commentary 71). In the “Fiddler of Dooney,” Yeats returns to the traditional English ballad for his rhyme scheme, but his meter is much more refined, avoiding alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines. If “Mocharabuiee” is pronounced as George Yeats claims her husband pronounced it—“Mockrabwee,” then the substitution retains three enunciated syllables, and the line arguably would scan the same way as “My cousin of Rosnaree” (Jeffares Commentary 71-72). Thus, instead of retaining a sense of “authenticity” for place names, Yeats must



have preferred the sound of the substitute town. The ballad is more of a hybrid form than “To an Island in the Sea,” and it shows Yeats’s development away from traditional English ballad form. Specifically, Yeats distances himself from his English predecessors through his use of specific Irish place names in the ballad, which is a feature reminiscent of Ferguson and Davis’s poetry. That said, Yeats’s changing of one place name to the next to suit his ear shows that, in this case, the poet does not assign special meaning to the particular places. Instead, Yeats’s constant attention to poetic form shows that names are interchangeable so that they fit into the soundscape of his poem.

As he developed as a poet, Yeats increasingly saw rural Ireland as a more “authentic” background for his own experiences than London or Dublin, not merely a quaint pastoral setting or a rallying point for revolution as did his predecessors Mangan, Ferguson and Davis. C. L. Innes notes how, “throughout his poetry, the making of Irish history, the possession of Ireland and its historical narrative, is linked by Yeats inextricably with his own personal history and place” (Innes 147). The speaker in “The Fiddler of Dooney” uses his song to place the artist in County Sligo and in the business of making “Folk dance like a wave of the sea.” For Yeats, who was living in London, yet longing for his grandfather’s home in Sligo, reminiscences of Ireland were a vital part of his early identity as a poet. Furthermore, the ease of his early ballads shows little of the “labour to be beautiful” that would define his work after the turn of the century.<sup>46</sup> As Yeats switched from popular poetry to a more introspective verse, he abandoned what Alrieri termed the “primary elements of human experience” for a much more abstract vision.

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<sup>46</sup> “Labour to be beautiful” is a phrase taken from Yeats’s poem “Adam’s Curse” (1902). In *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats*, Marjorie Perloff uses the poem to illustrate a transitional poem between Yeats’s early and middle periods.

Colin Meir argues that, Yeats's placement of "The Fiddler of Dooney" at the end of *The Wind Among the Reeds* is vital to an understanding of Yeats's evolving aesthetic:

In a light-hearted way it exalts the Irish song-maker above the Irish priest, though both are of the same family. It is Yeats's signature to a volume of complex poems whose aesthetic principle was to see art as an expression of the spiritual and mystical, and it is particularly appropriate for an Irish audience since both poet and priest had for centuries been part of the life of the general community in the west of Ireland where the poem is set.

(38)

Meir's suggestion that Yeats's new focus is on "art as an expression of the spiritual and mystical" reflects Yeats's growing interest in mysticism, something he shared with Maude Gonne. Jeffares notes in his biography of Yeats that, by the end of the nineteenth century, "Yeats's relationship with Maud had become deeply entangled not only with his desire to create an Irish Order of Mysteries but with the nationalist politics into which he had entered, partly to impress her, but partly out of seeing himself, briefly, in the role of a leader" (103). In this way, "The Fiddler of Dooney" addresses Maude's two loves—the struggle for an independent Ireland and mysticism.

### **Part 3: Labouring Without Music (1904-1932)**

Yeats was in his mid-twenties when he and Ernest Rhys founded the Rhymer's Club in 1890, and by the time that he became close friends with fellow member Arthur Symons, he was close to thirty years old.<sup>47</sup> Although it may be difficult to argue that Yeats's friendship with Symons left a profound influence on Yeats's verse, their

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<sup>47</sup> Jeffares suggests that Symons's sub-letting a room to Yeats from October 1895 to March 1896 is evidence of their growing friendship (Jeffares 81).

friendship allowed Yeats a degree of independence. Until Symons sub-let Yeats a room in 1895, Yeats had only lived with his family. Thus, in addition to being notoriously shy, Yeats had led a fairly sheltered life. His leaving home, if only to live alone in a different part of London, allowed him to talk with a man his own age about his obsession with Maude Gonne and his budding relationship with Olivia Shakespear. In *Yeats's Ghosts*, Brenda Maddox notes how Yeats's bachelor's residence marked a new phase in Yeats's life: "he had clung to his virginity until the age of thirty, when a beautiful, unhappily married woman [Olivia Shakespear] relieved him of it" (27). Concerning his friendship with Symons, Jeffares comments, "Yeats could talk freely to him, could express more of the thoughts that he had earlier felt able to discuss only with women" (Biography 81).

It is likely that in addition to conversations about Yeats's love life, the two friends discussed Symons's growing interest in French symbolism, which would culminate in the 1899 publication of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In regards to the connection between symbolism and music, James Longenback contends that "Yeats's interest in the music of symbolism is an indication of his political values," and further that "the desire for any art to reach the condition of music—whether it is felt by Debussy or Yeats—is motivated by political rather than by exclusively aesthetic concerns; more properly, the desire is a function of the space where politics and aesthetics become inseparable" (85). Longenback argues that Yeats's interest in symbolist music was directly tied to his interest in creating an inner circle of intellectuals that shared his political and aesthetic views. As is evident in his critical writings of the period, Yeats was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the political views of middle-class Ireland. Longenback

and Seamus Deane argue that Yeats was searching for a more intimate audience for his politics. According to Deane,

From *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) Yeats's poetry embarks on a relentless quest for an Irish audience which would, when formed, be the chief recipient of his work and, while being formed, would be one of the work's chief preoccupations. His search for a new style is part of that quest. The discovery of style is also a discovery of audience. The discovery of audience is, as much as the style, an attempt to define the specific quality of Irish experience in order to differentiate it from all that is philistine and popular. (35)

Longenback is careful to note that "Yeats's rejection of nationalism (at least as it was defined by the mob) for the world of the self was not a rejection of politics, however. To replace that middle-class mob Yeats wanted something like Debussy's secret society" (86). Ultimately, as H. T. Kirby-Smith notes, "Yeats was not completely seduced by the magic of the musical world, even in his early years, and even though he had met Mallarmé in Paris and had assisted Arthur Symons in the composition of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*" (268). This critical debate reminds us that Yeats's views on politics, art, and popular culture became increasingly complex with the start of the twentieth century, while his interest in popular music decreased.

Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) left a lasting impression on Yeats, and on modernism more generally. A reviewer for popular periodicals, Symons was also one of the most outspoken supporters of London music halls. It was not the patriotic "popular" music performed in the halls that attracted Symons, but the

movements of the performers' bodies. According to Arthur Beckson, the performers' bodies offered Symons a "seeming liberation from his puritanical upbringing" (82). Symons found art in pop culture. Barry J. Faulk notes how, in his reviews of music hall entertainment, "Symons equates the experience of modernity with the prevalence of new forms of mass entertainment that blur segregated tastes and social groups; further, he seeks to speak for the modern from vantage points not limited to his own" (61).

In a word, Faulk argues that Symons loved the music hall because it was quintessentially "camp": "Historically, camp taste has smuggled cultural contraband across carefully patrolled borders, often in the plain view of arbiters of taste. Camp legitimizes the distasteful, or the socially abject; it lightens prejudice toward the unconventional" (54). Camp taste allowed Symons to begin to elevate music hall dancers to, what Ian Fletcher terms "something quasi-religious" (260).

Why Yeats did not seem to find much poetic inspiration in music hall is uncertain. He may have seen music hall as too English or at least too urban for his attempts to combine Irish music and verse. He was much fonder of the traditional, and often rural, folk song. In this way, Yeats was a bridge between the traditional ballads that Young Ireland poets used to compose their patriotic songs and an Anglo-Irish vision for Ireland's artistic future. Yeats would increasingly abandon popular song for the power of the physical Image, including that of the dancer. Despite the fact that there are no direct references to music hall in his poetry, Yeats's interest in the image of the dancer may have been influenced by Symons's interest in music hall dancers. Frank Kermode illustrates Yeats's tortuous journey from the popular song to the esoteric image:

The poet is not like the others. Joy makes him free for his task of stitching and unstitching, of labour at the higher reality of the imagination. But this labour is what ruins life, makes the body shapeless and common. Solitude grows with what Yeats calls the growing absorption of the dream; the long series of indecisive victories, 'intellectual recreations of all that exterior fate snatches away,' increase it further and torment the poet. His fate is a ruined life, intermittently illuminated by the Image. (28)

Kermode is certainly not alone noting the increasing complexity of Yeats's poetic, culminating with "The Circus Animal's Desertion." Kermode's use of "labour" is especially poignant in describing Yeats's attitude towards art in this period, and "labour" combined with "stitching and unstitching" echoes Yeats's own words in "Adam's Curse."

In the decade between the composition of "The Fiddler of Dooney" (1892) and "Adam's Curse" (1902), Yeats's artistic life was profoundly affected by his friendship with Augusta, Lady Gregory. According to Michael Yeats, she may have had as much to do with Yeats's "dissatisfaction" with ballads about Irish peasants as his friendship with Symons:

this dissatisfaction may have stemmed in part from his visit to Aran in 1896, and his first meeting the same year with Lady Gregory, events which were to bring him for the first time into close contact with the folk idiom. Previously his sources in folklore had been largely literary, now he became steeped in the living oral tradition of the Galway peasantry. (159-160)

On his trip to the Aran Islands, which are west of Galway Bay in Ireland, Yeats was accompanied by the young J. M. Synge. As evidenced in his play the *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), the trip must have profoundly influenced Synge's view of the Irish peasantry. If Synge's enthusiasm was not enough for Yeats to see the Irish peasantry in a different light, then his folklore gathering expeditions with Lady Gregory would have at least given him more exposure to the social world beyond his Anglo-Irish family in Sligo and his literary friends in Dublin and London. It was perhaps his early isolation from the folk that made Yeats desire to reach out to them in song. Yet, as Colin Meir suggests of Yeats's early ballads, "when he claimed that the Irish ballad was a 'poem of the populace' he [Yeats] was arguing in quite untenable primitivistic terms" (9).

Near the turn of the century, James Loftus notes,

Yeats discarded the idea of presenting a realistic picture of peasant life, and it is significant that his attempts to do so are found only in his early verse. He did not abandon either the peasant or the ideal of 'an unpremeditated joyous energy,' but he found more satisfactory images, or symbols, for the expression of that peasant ideal. (50)

One way that Yeats indirectly employs the peasantry is through the image of the laborer. In "Adam's Curse," the poet-speaker contends that the difficulty of the poet's occupation surpasses that of domestic and manual laborers:

I said: 'A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.  
Better to go down upon your marrow-bones

And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;  
For to articulate sweet sounds together  
Is to work harder than all these, and yet  
Be thought an idler by the noisy set  
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen  
The martyrs call the world.' ("Adam's Curse" 205)

As a poet, the speaker would rather toil as a poor laborer than be one of “the noisy set” of bourgeois busybodies who know nothing of art. By the end of the poem, the “much labouring” that’s required for art, beauty, and love makes one “weary-hearted.” It is perhaps not Mangan’s “misery,” but the state of the “primary element” of love has changed dramatically from the one that appears in “To an Isle in the Water.”

Seamus Heaney’s reading of “Adam’s Curse” posits that the labor to “articulate sweet sounds together” is a metaphor for Yeats’s poetic, which he describes as a music defined by tension and release:

Scrubbing pavements, breaking stones—these things are contrasted with the craft of verse only to partake of its nature in the context of the poem itself. The abrasive and unyielding are necessarily present in the creative encounter, the mill of the mind has its work to do, for, as the lady affirms a little later in ‘Adam’s Curse,’ ‘we must labour to be beautiful.’ Thoughts do not ooze out and into one another, they are hammered into unity. (The Makings 15)



That Maude Gonne might be a source of inner tension for Yeats would be difficult to deny, especially given Yeats's many rejected proposals of marriage to her. Gonne's refusal of Yeats was a consistent source of frustration for the amorous poet. According to Brenda Maddox, after his affair with Olivia Shakespear ended in 1897, Yeats "threw himself into his furious whirl of political, Celtic, and mystic activities, seeing 'any number of spirits' (with the occasional help of a tab of mescal)" (29). These activities were all that Yeats shared with Gonne, and although they shared common interests, she continued to offer reasons that they could not marry. In large part, "Adam's Curse" is such a moving poem because it shows how Yeats has turned this growing frustration into artistic tension. Consider the closing stanza:

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. ("Adam's Curse" 206)

In its formal structure, the poem is a far departure from his early songs, yet the final lines are quite musical. One could scan the final lines as perfect iambic pentameter except for the anomalous line thirty-seven, which contains a caesura and an extra, unstressed syllable (I scan "and" as unstressed, which allows the line to end smoothly as iambic). The first line of the final stanza is quite emphatic—all of the stresses fall on monosyllabic words, which leads the listener to "beautiful" in line thirty-five, which is further emphasized by preceding a caesura. Yeats then returns to stresses on monosyllabic words in line thirty-six before the rhythmic mastery in line thirty-seven,

which bogs down ironically on “happy,” the extra syllable extending the line and further slowing the somewhat faster pace of the first three lines. Yeats enjambes the longer line into the concluding line, which serves as a reminder that the poet has created a concluding stanza that is a single syntactic unit: one powerfully moving sentence. Furthermore, Yeats returns to the strict iambic pentameter of the first three lines of the stanza.

In *Poetic Closure*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith demonstrates the effect of the type of controlled metrics Yeats uses at the end of the poem:

Metrical regularity at the end of a poem, especially when accompanied by monosyllabic diction, has closural effects for several reasons. First it is a re-establishment of the norm, the most probable and therefore the most stable arrangement of stresses. (Its closural effect will be strongest, of course, when the preceding lines or the poem as a whole have exhibited the widest metrical variations.) (160)

The near rhyme of the concluding stanza obscures the rhyming couplets from the early stanzas, especially in the first five couplets of the poem. Despite the fact that “grown” and “moon” are not perfect rhymes, they adequately complete the couplet, which is another important form of poetic closure. Again, Smith notes how in poems like “Adam’s Curse”:

end-rhymes in poetry correspond to the most typical and effective source of closure in music, that is, the return to the tonic. The occurrence of the key tone at the conclusion of a piece of music, it is said, is not only analogous to rhyme but represents the same psychological phenomenon,

the satisfaction for the listener arising, in each, from his expectation of a particular sound. (46)

“Adam’s Curse” shows Yeats’s tremendous skill for bridging traditional poetics with modernity. Rob Doggett contends,

Crucially, then, the experience of Irish modernity is one in which art is always linked with political opinions and practical value, in which power remains, so to speak, on the surface. The artist is continually faced with the imperatives of both imperial control, the compulsion to embrace Enlightenment rationalism and capitalist utilitarianism, and of nationalist conformity, the compulsion to produce explicitly political art.

(129)

In *Adam’s Curse*, “beautiful old books” have made their impression on the poet-speaker, and yet, the modern world has made the weary speaker-poet’s desire to follow (to reference the printing error in *The Gael*, where the poem was first published) “the old highways of love” a task too difficult to desire to begin. And yet, of course, the speaker-poet rediscovers and successfully employs the “old high ways” of expressing love.

Unlike the ballads of his early work, Yeats’s synthesis of musical and lyrical form appears more orchestral than the incorporation of a simple tune or the plainsong chant.

“Adam’s Curse” is more ornately wrought than the earlier ballads, and yet the “labour” it takes seems effortless. The simple diction that is used in the poem seems conversational.

“Adam’s Curse” is a response to Yeats’s changing aesthetic. Gone is the desire for popular modes of expression—there are references to particular people in the poet-speaker’s life; gone is the description of peasant life—the peasants are not the subject but

a trope for the kind of labor needed to create high art; gone is the ballad stanza and folk wisdom—the poem echoes the troubadours in a “learned” way; and perhaps, most significantly, gone are particular geographical references to Ireland. It seems that Yeats has abandoned nationalism for closer attention to the aesthetic tensions associated with his craft. In *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats*, Marjorie Perloff discusses “Adam’s Curse” as a transitional poem in Yeats’s use of rhyme:

In “Adam’s Curse” nine of the nineteen rhymes (47%) are approximate, but of these nine rhymes, seven fall into categories already found in the Early Period: there are five tertiary-stress rhymes, one secondary-stress rhyme, and one eye-rhyme. The consonant-rhyme ‘grown’ / ‘moon’ and the contrast rhyme ‘enough’ / ‘love’ are, however, new types; their appearance indicates what is to come in the later poetry. (Rhyme 39)

As Perloff suggests, the time of “Adam’s Curse” marks a period of artistic transition from Yeats’s artistic interest in popular music to the visual arts. This transition also was influenced by the changes in Yeats’s personal life. Just after the turn of the century, when Yeats began to be considered a successful poet, his family began to seek his financial assistance. He provides his aging father, who never achieved financial success as a painter, with studio space in Dublin. His sisters desired to start a William Morris-style artisan shop in London. According to David Holdeman,

By the summer of 1902, the sisters, who lived in London with their father, had decided to return to Ireland and to join a venture that became known as Dun Emer Industries. Susan Mary ‘Lily’ Yeats had once sewn tapestries for William Morris and planned to set up an embroidery department for

the business, while E. C. Yeats would print books with an Albion handpress similar to the one used at Morris's Kelmscott Press. (30-31)

Lily Yeats was not the only one who was influenced by William Morris. Soon after Yeats's return in London in the 1890s, Morris provided several valuable opportunities for the young poet—including a ready-made social network that included young literary figures like Ernest Rhys—a friendship which led to the founding of the Rhymer's Club. In addition to this, Yeats saw Morris as a prominent ideological figure interested in art as a craft. According to David Pierce, "Yeats learnt from Morris the patience of commitment, how art is part of Adam's curse, a 'trade' (99). Richard Ellmann contends that Yeats's early poetry resembles the tapestries that Morris and Lily Yeats revived:

The tapestry analogy manifests itself in various ways. Each of Yeats's early books is unified in tone, and each has the form of a series of related panels. He groups the details in each poem, as a rule, around a single image, such as an old woman, a lovely lady, or fairies on horseback. Grammatical devices enable him to secure an especially close texture. (The Identity of Yeats 22)

Ellmann includes Yeats's abnormally frequent use of the conjunction "and" as one example of the "grammatical devices" (The Identity of Yeats 22-23). Yet, it must be stressed that Yeats was moving away from such simple form and imagery. Thus, as Yeats's sisters pitched the practical possibilities of starting a printing press for their poet brother, they were relying on Yeats's still seeing value in the Morris aesthetic of his past as his own aesthetic was evolving.

Dun Emer Industries, later Cuala Industries (renamed in 1908), was a new vehicle for Yeats's evolving vision of the poet-artist in an Ireland that was increasingly moving away from his youthful association with the patriotic ballads of Young Ireland.<sup>48</sup>

According to Jeffares, what began as “an outlet for the work of Irish girls,” became another distraction for Yeats, one that taxed him both financially and perhaps artistically (Biography 140). Michael Yeats notes,

During the seven years from 1908 and 1915 the Cuala Press published a monthly series of broadsides containing the words of songs and ballads, most of them traditional. As Editor of the Press, there can be little doubt that Yeats had a good deal to do with the preparation of these broadsides.

But from now on his direct interest in folk song waned somewhat. (169)

As Michael Yeats shows, Yeats had not completely lost his earlier interest in songs and ballads, especially traditional ones. Yet it seems that he increasingly saw them as belonging to the past and having no real place in his own poetry. Instead, music entered into Yeats's other new interest at the turn of the century, the theatre. Lady Gregory's assistance in gathering financial support for the theatrical interests that she shared with him gave Yeats another outlet for his campaign to redefine the literary landscape of Ireland. Especially with the plays of Synge, the Abbey Theatre became a site of intense debate over the artistic representation of Ireland, with the end result that Yeats was often left to publicly defend their artistic choices. According to R. F. Foster's biography of Yeats, Yeats's attention to the theatre created a situation where, “by late 1901 WBY[eats] had identified his approach to the next phase of cultural enterprise—through drama—in Ireland” (A Life I: 256).

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<sup>48</sup> “Dun Emer” translates “Emer's Fort,” Emer being the wife of mythical Irish hero Cuchulain.

Yeats spent many summers at Lady Gregory's home, Coole Park, and during these visits, she and her family became the models for Yeats's version of the ideal Anglo-Irish aristocrat (A Life I: 171). Because she was a widow, because she was not required to follow the dictates of Lord Gregory, because she was fond of Ireland—even learning Irish, because she worked to promote a high standard for Irish art, and because she provided a stable refuge for Yeats at a time in his life when his identity must have seemed conflicted by his constant relocations and Ireland's move towards independence from Britain, Yeats admired Lady Gregory and her family to the extent that he could not imagine an Ireland without their leadership. As his relationship with the Gregory family intensified, Yeats increasingly saw them as an integral part of Irish history.

Whether or not Yeats was fully convinced that the Anglo-Irish minority should be the ones to lead the future of Ireland has been the subject of critical debate for decades. However, as Yeats walked through the halls of Coole Park, he was confronted by the portraits of Anglo-Irish and English aristocrats who had made history. According to Foster's biography, Gregory "flattered him with a shared language of caste" (A Life 171). Increasingly, as his connection to Lady Gregory and her family developed and Ireland moved violently towards independence, Yeats began to find his next great artistic tension in expressing the clash between history and the figures called upon to make that history. James Loftus notes, "Yeats believed the aristocracy gave much more than mere support to the artist, it provided as well that quality of human nobility that informed all great art" (54).

It should be remembered, however, that Yeats's fondness for the Anglo-Irish aristocracy primarily stemmed from his ties with Lady Gregory and her family. In reality,

Yeats's views cast him as poet laureate of Coole Park than as a fervent supporter of the Ascendency. It seems logical to assume that Yeats saw Lady Gregory and her family as exceptional, even among Anglo-Irish aristocrats. And since, as Neil Innes notes, "the Anglo-Irish were embroiled in the imperial enterprise, not merely as victims, but also as perpetrators, and sometimes as both at once," it would also seem logical that Yeats, as his fame and influence as a poet grew, was aware that he shared this divided and minority identity with Lady Gregory (143). Whereas his poetry addresses the Gregory's family history, it only does so in places where it intersects with his own personal history and/or the history of Ireland; he rarely addresses Anglo-Irish aristocrats outside of his adopted family from Coole Park.<sup>49</sup>

Neil Innes notes how Lady Gregory and her family formed one important aspect of thematic development in Yeats's poetry:

Whereas Yeats was able to reimagine and reclaim Ireland geographically in his early poems, the tension and changes arise when he seeks to confront history, or, rather, to weld together the historical and the geographical. The pressure to do this comes from the First World War (and Robert Gregory's involvement in it), the Easter Rising, and then the establishment of the Irish Free State, all events which force him to see Ireland as not merely space to be reclaimed, but a state involved in and making contemporary history. (145-146)

In other words, between 1897, the year Yeats spent his first summer at Coole Park, and 1932, the year that Lady Gregory died, the history of Ireland changed dramatically. As

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<sup>49</sup> Prominent examples include: "Coole Park, 1929"; "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death"; "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory"; "The Wild Swans at Coole"; "For Anne Gregory"; "Coole and Ballylee, 1931"; and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited."



Yeats looked back on this period, the simple patriotic ballad must have seemed inadequate to express how everything “changed utterly,” and yet, music still ran as an infrequent undercurrent in his poetry.<sup>50</sup>

#### **Part 4: Yeats’s Later Folk Songs (1932-1939)**

By 1932, when he was 67, Yeats had married Georgie Hyde-Lees (1917), he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature (1923), he had served as a senator in the Irish Free State (1923-28), and he had suffered from the onset of heart disease and arthritis, which had caused him to consider living permanently in Rapallo, in southern Italy (1928) (Foster "Yeats" 778). Despite his tremendous accomplishments and advanced age, Yeats was prolific during the last seven years of his life. A letter written to Olivia Shakespear while he was recuperating in Rapallo in 1929 shows his enthusiasm for a new project:

I am writing *Twelve poems for music*—have done three of them (and two other poems)—no[t] so much that they may be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself. I want them to be all emotion and all impersonal. One of the three I have written is my best lyric for some years I think. They are the opposite of my recent work and all praise of joyous life, though in the best of them it is a dry bone on the shore that sings the praise. ("Letter to Olivia Shakespeare" 758)

The work Yeats mentions would eventually grow into a sequence of twenty-five poems, known as *Words for Music Perhaps* (1932). Both thematically and structurally, the

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<sup>50</sup> For example, between 1904 and 1932, poems in Yeats’s major collections included only a scattering of poems with “musical” titles, including, from *In the Seven Woods* (1904)—“Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland”; from *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910)—“A Drinking Song”; from *Responsibilities* (1914)—“A Song from ‘The Player Queen’”; from *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919)—“A Song”; “Two Songs of a Fool”; and “Another Song of a Fool”; and, from *The Tower* (1928)—“Two Songs from a Play.” Despite their titles, none of these poems really develop Yeats’s musical aesthetic.

sequence was a dramatic departure from the poetry in *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1929). That Yeats saw the poems in *Words for Music Perhaps* as musical, but “no[t] so that they may be sung,” shows that he was reinventing his poetic once again.

In some ways, the poetry in *Words for Music Perhaps* hearkens back to Yeats’s early ballads: he has left the intensely personal world of his recent poetry and stepped back outside to address rural Ireland. However, a character like Crazy Jane, with her subversive female sexuality and blasphemy, is not a part of the early ballads. These featured priests in a fairly flattering light, or at least a familiar background feature in poems such as “The Fiddler of Dooney,” but the unflattering portraits of priests in *Words for Music Perhaps* represent a loss of innocence. In the opening poem of the sequence, “Crazy Jane and the Bishop,” Jane describes the Bishop:

The Bishop has a skin, God knows,  
Wrinkled like the foot of a goose,  
*(All find safety in the tomb.)*  
Nor can he hide in holy black  
The heron’s hunch upon his back,  
But a birch-tree stood my Jack:  
*The solid man and the coxcomb.*  
("Crazy Jane and the Bishop" 508)

James Loftus sees the change from Yeats’s early ballads to his late ballads as a gradual process:

The romantic and sentimental overtones of the early ballads disappear, and the reader is confronted by a powerful, although stylized, symbol of

human vigor that seems to penetrate to the center of man's physical being.  
The fiddler of Dooney and Moll Magee give way to the beggar, the fool,  
and Crazy Jane. (50)

Formally, Yeats returns to the traditional literary ballad because, according to Colin Meir it "objectifies his [Yeats's] own feelings and at the same time makes it seem as if they came out of a popular tradition" (109). Denis Donoghue also defines Yeats's efforts as a kind of "popular" poetry: "the words are for music, not because they are to be sung, but because their burden, like that of the ballad, belongs to the *folk*." (379).

Helen Vendler posits that in "combining some aspect of the ballad" with "some aspect of the Yeatsian intellectual lyric," Yeats creates "hybrids" (129). With these "hybrids," he shows a renewed interest in tapping into the vitality of folk traditions, albeit in a very artistic, and arguably modernist, way. Daniel Hoffman argues that Yeats intentionally avoids a "slavish fealty to a [ballad] form" in order to focus on characters and "the other spaces" of human experience (49). Taken together, these critics show that Yeats appears to be deliberately manipulating rural characters and landscapes to make his poetic commentary be "all emotion and all impersonal." Unlike "Down by the Salley Gardens," supposedly an actual ballad sung by an actual peasant woman, in *Words for Music Perhaps* Yeats does not want the reader to lose focus on the words, for these words challenge the reader to explore the deeper questions behind those of insane or seemingly unreliable speakers.

That Yeats intended the poems to be "all praise of joyous life" could be a response to his own failing health or the impending loss of Lady Gregory, who died in 1932. Many critics have remarked on Yeats's frank displays of sexuality in the sequence,

which were not a prominent trope in his earlier work. If Yeats had settled on the type of ballads he composes in *Words for Music Perhaps*, it might suggest that he transformed the traditional ballad into a more artistic genre with a hybrid form and disengaged and subversive speaker. However, by the end of his life, Yeats returned to ballads that were meant to be sung. *Words for Music Perhaps*, as the title suggests, were experiments by a poet who was reluctant to test his hypothesis that there is a vitality in the ballad form that will make the poet immortal in Ireland. What Yeats was soon to discover was that his hybrid ballads in *Words for Music Perhaps* were missing one vital component—history.

In 1935, the Cuala Press published a series of ballads entitled *Broadsides: A Collection of Old and New Songs*. According to R. F. Foster, Yeats decided that, in order to help the troubled finances of his sister's Cuala Press, a new series of ballads should be produced, the first series having been printed between 1908-1915 ([A Life](#) 504). In the first series, Yeats did not contribute his own ballads; starting in 1935, with the second series, Yeats once again began writing traditional ballads. Why Yeats chose to write some of the ballads for this new series is unclear. On the one hand, it continued his interest in music that he had explored in *Words for Music Perhaps*; on the other hand, the format of the second series of *Broadsides* was truly a family affair—besides his sisters' interest in running the press, Yeats's brother Jack provided illustrations for three of the ballads in the series.

In addition to the physical production of the ballads, *Broadsides* brought other artistic collaborations, especially between composers and poets. For the 1935 collection, Yeats worked with F.R. Higgins, who wrote some of the music for the songs and assisted Yeats with the preface to the work. That Yeats and F. R. Higgins chose the title “Anglo-

Irish Ballads” for their preface to the 1935 edition of *Broadsides* shows their desire to link the contemporary ballads in the collection with a much older tradition. For instance, they note how, “at the close of the eighteenth century Dublin street singers had some wealth and much influence; a political ballad had more effect than a speech” (Yeats and Higgins). They go on to mention that political ballads were still being composed in the 1930s. As the preface continues, the authors rant against classically trained musicians who, in their opinion, are too tied to the chromatic scale to appreciate the “gapped” scale of Irish folk singers, and in turn create the music of “civilisation” that resembles “a bundle of dry sticks” (Yeats and Higgins).<sup>51</sup> Despite the interest in traditional Anglo-Irish ballads that Yeats and Higgins profess in the preface, *Broadsides* is mostly a collection of contemporary ballads, including a few by Yeats.

For the 1935 collection of *Broadsides*, Yeats included his “The Wicked Hawthorn Trees,” “The Rose Tree,” and “The Soldier Takes Pride,” which had been published prior to 1935. “The Wicked Hawthorn Trees” was taken from *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, Yeats’s Noh-inspired play, published in 1934. “The Soldier Takes Pride” was formerly one part of “Three Songs to the Same Tune,” which was published in different forms no less than five times before its appearance in *Broadsides* (Loizeaux “Art of Resistance” 162). In “The Art of Resistance: Jack Yeats, W. B. Yeats and the Cuala Press *Broadsides*,” Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux notes that Yeats composed the ballad for Eoin O’Duffy’s Blueshirts, a in Irish fascist group. According to Loizaeux, although Yeats later distanced himself from the Blueshirts, the poem remains his “response to the threat of political disintegration” (“Art of Resistance” 163). To fight the loss of order, the speaker proclaims that it is “Time for us all to pick out a good tune, / Take to the roads

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<sup>51</sup> A gapped scale, such as a pentatonic scale, contains fewer than the seven notes of a diatonic scale.

and go marching along” (Loizeaux "Art of Resistance" 171). This poem sets the tone for Yeats’s later ballads, which contain fewer references to Irish folk traditions, myth, and ancient history.

Unlike “The Soldier takes Pride,” “The Rose Tree” appears to be more grounded in Yeats’s early interest in folk ballads. Yeats allegorizes Ireland as “our Rose Tree,” which is in need of protection and nourishment from “nothing but our own red blood” (W. B. Yeats "The Rose Tree" 183). According to Jeffares, the poem was first published in *The Dial* in 1920; it represents “a different kind of Ireland from the Rose symbolism of the earlier poems” (Commentary 194). Jeffares argues that Yeats’s inspiration comes from the “Liberty Tree” tradition of planting a tree as an act of political opposition (Commentary 194-195). The 1920 publication date indicates that the poem is a link between Yeats’s early and later ballads. The poem reports an imagined conversation between Irish patriots Pearse and Connolly after both are “changed, changed utterly” by the events of Easter 1916. Yeats has added them to the ranks of Fergus, Oisín and Cúchulainn as legendary fighters for the “Rose” of Ireland. Unlike “To the rose upon the rood of time,” “The Rose Tree” is more clearly patriotic and more in line with Davis, Mangan and Ferguson’s poetics. This desire for political clarity became increasingly important to Yeats towards the end of his career and may explain why Yeats chose “The Rose Tree” for the 1935 *Broadsides*.

Around the time of the 1935 collection of *Broadsides*, Yeats was collecting poetry for an anthology of modern verse to be published by Oxford University in 1936. It was through this work that Yeats met a new friend, Lady Dorothy Wellesley, in whom he would find another fervent supporter of his new efforts in writing songs. Yeats writes to

Lady Wellesley in a letter dated January 28, 1937, “I write poem after poem, all intended for music, all very simple—as a modern Indian poet has said ‘no longer the singer but the song.’ (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 135). Thus, as usual, Yeats was finding inspiration in diverse places. However, his desire for writing songs only lasted for a few years. He writes to Lady Wellesley in March 1937, “I must go back to the poems of civilization” (Letters on Poetry 148).

Although Yeats was interested in songs during this brief period, he was careful to argue that the words for the songs are the vital part of the equation, not the tune. Hence, “the song” is more prominent than the efforts of “the singer.” Despite giving the appearance of a poet not wanting the attention to the words to be lost to another form of art, Yeats often cited the history of Irish folk music as evidence for his beliefs. Michael Yeats, whose wife Grainne was one of the best known Irish folk singers of her time, notes:

‘Abair amhrán,’ a Gaelic singer will say, ‘say a song,’ never ‘sing a song,’ and he will rarely worry about what tune he uses. No matter how fine his voice or beautiful the tune, he knows that he will only retain the interest of his audience if his words are clear and intelligible. This was the characteristic [...] which must have aroused Yeats’s life-long interest in folk music. (163)

Once again, Yeats saw the potential in this tradition to reach a wider audience than “the poems of civilization.” He writes to Lady Wellesley in February 1937,

‘Music, the natural words in the natural order.’ Through that formula we go back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is

the nation's clothing of what is ancient & deathless. I do not mean of course what musicians call the music of words—that is all corpse factory, humanity melted down & poured out of a bottle. (Letters on Poetry 139)

Essentially, Yeats was searching for something that used both words and music (and occasionally, visual art, in the case of the fine editions of *Broadsides*) to create a hybrid form of art that transcends each of the separate component arts. The goal was to tap into and express the collective unconscious of a nation. In an ideal performance by “untrained singers,” Yeats’s songs would do this, but in practice, the collaborations with the musicians that provided tunes and instrumental accompaniment were often filled with tension. Michael Yeats notes, “Yeats was indeed most ready to dictate to his musicians but, knowing no music himself, was very often unable to make them understand his wants” (171).

By the 1937 publication of the final collection of *Broadsides*, now subtitled “A Collection of New Irish and English Songs,” Yeats had refined his theory as to how his latest ballads should be performed. He had also found a few fervent supporters, including Lady Wellesley and the Australian composer W. J. Turner. In addition to Wellesley’s work, Yeats included a poem by another Englishwoman, Edith Sitwell. Thus, the project was no longer purely Irish in scope. The preface, co-authored with Lady Wellesley, notes that “the musician who claims to translate the emotion of the poet into another vehicle is a liar” and that “we reject all professional singers because no mouth trained to the modern scale can articulate poetry. We must be content with butchers and bakers and those few persons who sing from delight in words” (Yeats and Wellesley “Music and Poetry”). The sentiments of Yeats and Wellesley return the reader to Yeats’s “Adam’s



Curse,” which keeps the poet and the “pauper” in artistically separate worlds, yet connects them through the difficulty of their labor. In the *Broadsides* preface, the “butchers and bakers,” who presumably sing while performing their labor, or at least, sing without concern for the position of their notes on the chromatic scale, are in essence an integral part of the artistic process of creating the kind of ballads that Yeats and Wellesley suggest. For a ballad to become artistic, it requires a performative aspect that requires an expression of the spontaneous emotion of the performers—one inspired purely by their love of words, not by their knowledge of musical correctness.

Again, Yeats and Wellesley’s preface fits well into the discourse of poets who are concerned about the loss of meaning for language when it is combined with music and/or visual spectacle, yet, in his letter to Wellesley, Yeats is careful not to profess the “corpse factory” of the “music of words.” What exactly lies beyond words and music, what is “the nations clothing of what is ancient & deathless,” is unclear. Still, this would be a trope that Yeats would not abandon. In “Under Ben Bulbin,” one of Yeats’s *Last Poems* (1938-1939), Rob Doggett contends that Yeats “seeks to perpetuate a neocolonial vision of an Ireland guided by a benevolent aristocracy, famously enjoining ‘Irish poets’ to ‘Sing the peasantry, and then / Hard-riding country gentlemen’” (153). Ultimately, Doggett concludes that, for Yeats, “what remains is not song but the possibility of song, not directed thought or language but that which exceeds thought and language” (154).

What Doggett terms “the possibility of song” seems to define the music of the folk ballad that Yeats finds so attractive, the one that he wants to share with as broad an audience as possible. It was in this interest that Yeats wished to incorporate music into a series of four BBC broadcasts that began on April 2, 1937. How this music was to

accompany the words to the poems became the foundation of an argument between two of Yeats's musical friends, the composers W. J. Turner and Edmund Dulac. Their debate explodes several assumptions about the troubled relationship between music and poetry on the eve of the second World War.

Wayne McKenna sums up the main events of the disagreement:

there were quarrels between Yeats and Dulac in June and July 1937 and between Dulac and Turner in November 1938.

Documents in the Hausermann Collection of Turner Papers in Neuchâtel clarify the nature and intensity of the discord and suggest that Dulac became a more skeptical participant in Yeats's project than has so far been acknowledged. (225-226)

Yeats apparently met Dulac through Ezra Pound sometime between 1915 and 1918, and a working relationship between Yeats and Dulac went back to Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers*, which were loosely based on Japanese Noh plays (Qamber 39). For these plays, Dulac provided musical compositions, created the costume designs, and even carved the masks that the performers wore (Qamber 66,67).<sup>52</sup> Thus, on the surface, it would seem that Dulac's diverse artistic talents would lend themselves to the unique challenges of Yeats's vision for the BBC broadcasts. However, Dulac simply could not come to terms with the singers chosen for the performances. In what McKenna titles the "Neuchâtel Document," Dulac expresses his concerns that, over time, music and poetry have taken very different paths:

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<sup>52</sup> Yeats even wrote a poem for his friend Dulac entitled "On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac," which was published in *The Tower* (1928).

It is as absurd to expect these two successful partners [music and poetry] to work together satisfactorily as it is to expect two successful partners, who have broken their association in order to set up rival establishments, to help each other. [...] If one is to revive the association it is the music that must give way. It must—pending further developments—be an accompaniment pure and simple and at no time, even in songs, must the melodic line assume a quality of its own that would necessitate the use of more than a few notes. (McKenna 232)

This would seem to echo Yeats and Wellesley's preface, which allows for a limited use of "sustaining notes," but Dulac goes on to explain that another key concern of his is that he felt that the singers chosen to perform on the broadcasts could not carry a tune (Yeats and Wellesley "Music and Poetry").

On the other side of the argument, Jeffares explains Turner's position on the issue:

Turner, however, did not care whether Yeats knew if a singer was in tune or not, because he saw that Yeats was interested in expressiveness, and he did not think that trained musicians necessarily supplied what Yeats wanted...and that was the expression of something totally alien to current intellectual fashions, a sense of the spiritual imagination for which Yeats had, after all, been searching since the nineties, and which Turner believed was still alive in Ireland. (Biography 339)

McKenna echoes Jeffares:

Fundamentally, then, Turner's commitment to Yeats's 'Broadsides' came from what he judged as its repudiation of 1930s intellectualism and its regeneration of natural life and imagination—which for Turner was 'spiritual imagination,' that faculty which gave art its potential to create a revelation for our infinitude. (231)

Ultimately, Dulac's concerns were not enough to derail the BBC broadcasts. Whether or not the BBC's audiences thought the singers were out of tune or singing the songs as the poet intended is open to debate. In the end, what seems important is that Yeats saw the performance as a uniquely Anglo-Irish one; they were authentic folk tunes because he said they were.

Despite the obvious care that he took to write them, Yeats's later ballads did not attract the critical attention and acclaim given to many of the poems in *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939), including "Lapis Lazuli," "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited," "Under Ben Bulbin," "The Man and the Echo," and "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Still, several critics note the strength of Yeats's final ballads. Daniel Hoffman notes that "his later ballad poems have an unexpected power, being both simple and dense, both direct and complex. They are the most accomplished literary ballads in our language" (46). Charles Altieri comments that "in his earlier years Yeats had never been able to reconcile in his ballads the conflicting demands of concrete and universal, but his late ballads blend an almost total concreteness with an often profound universality" (11). For most critics, though, the reaction to the ballads is mixed; take, for example, Alan Gillis:

Overall, then, Yeats's folk and ballad poems are radically antagonistic towards the 'common man' he claimed to write them for. And, while they

contain his poetry's most explicit critiques of the State, they mostly revel in the stasis and dislocation Yeats divines in contemporary history, rather than proffer a way out of it. Predominantly they speak of conflict, fatalism, absurdity, and bitter discontent; while their musicality is often quite jarring, creating an unsteady momentum without direction that is implosive as often as eruptive. And yet the poems were vital to Yeats, and probably pivotal to the type of choices he made in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, providing a counterpoint to the contemporary poetry he disliked, epitomized in the recent work of Ezra Pound. (191)

In the 1937 collection of *Broadsides*, Yeats includes five of his own ballads: "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites," "The Three Bushes," "The Curse of Cromwell," "The Pilgrim," and "Colonel Martin." Although they were not published as broadsides, Yeats's two poems on Roger Casement—"Roger Casement," and "The Ghost of Roger Casement"—also date from this period. The subtitle for "The Three Bushes" is "*An incident from the 'Historia mei Temporis' of the Abbé Michel de Bourdeille.*" Thus, Yeats provides a similar historical background as he does for "Down by the Salley Gardens." By using an external source, the ballad becomes more authentic. In "The Pilgrim," Yeats mentions "Lough Derg," a return to the Sligo in "The Fiddler of Dooney." In a sense, these two poems are bookends to his early work

For his ballads on historical figures, Yeats chose people directly responsible for the course of Irish history. Unlike his memorials in "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" and "Easter, 1916," in these later poems Yeats does not personally know the historical figures. According to Charles Altieri, Yeats designed the two poems about Roger

Casement poems to correct the distortions of English history: “The two Casement poems have thrown into question English rhetoric and official versions of history, so that unofficial ballad history is necessary to set the record straight and give a proper view of the Irish revolution” (299). For Yeats, the authority for the “official versions of history” in his earlier poems came from the poet’s personal knowledge of his subjects.

In the Casement poems, Yeats works from the point-of-view of the resistant Irishman who desires “that some amends be made” (“Roger Casement” 582). Here Yeats politically returns to his earliest associations with the Young Irelanders. Yet the poems are consistent with other Yeatsian ballads like “Down by the Salley Gardens” and “The Three Bushes” in that they are inspired by another person’s song or writing: Yeats subtitles “Roger Casement,” “(After reading ‘*The Forged Casement Diaries*’ by Dr. Maloney)” (“Roger Casement” 581). Sir Roger Casement, who petitioned Germany for arms to fight the English, was hanged in 1916 for treason. During his trial and appeals, rumors about Casement’s homosexuality were circulated, and according to a book by “Dr. Maloney” (an Irish-American physician), the British went so far as to forge a diary that was supposedly Casement’s (Finneran Collected Poems 507-508, n. 338). Although forensic tests in 2002 proved the diaries to be authentic, there are still skeptics who question the validity of the tests and contend that the British secret service forged them (Burns 3).

In “Roger Casement,” the speaker gives a no-nonsense recollection of Casement, stating that he “Did what he had to do,” and that he was a “gallant gentleman” (“Roger Casement” 581, 582). Considering the informal diction and the simple syntax of the

poem, it seems appropriate that it was first published in a newspaper.<sup>53</sup> The poem implicates the British ambassador to the United States during the Casement trial, Cecil Spring-Rice, as the one who chose to “whisper” the rumors of Casement’s homosexuality. After the final line of the poem, Yeats notes that the ballad is to be sung to the tune of “The Glen of Aherlow” (“Roger Casement” 582). This note is significant because Yeats means that the ballad is actually meant to be sung. He intentionally sets it to an Irish ballad tune.

In “The Ghost of Roger Casement,” Yeats continues his simple diction, but has Casement stand for an abstract force capable of subverting the British empire:

O what has made that sudden noise?

What on the threshold stands?

It never crossed the sea because

John Bull and the sea are friends;

But this is not the old sea

Nor this the old seashore.

What gave that roar of mockery,

That roar in the sea’s roar?

*The ghost of Roger Casement*

*Is beating on the door.* (“The Ghost of Roger Casement” 583)

The fact that the British forgery was uncovered and exposed to the world becomes a rallying point for resistance against British cultural dominance of Ireland. Casement’s ghost, newly vindicated by Maloney’s book, can sound a “roar of mockery” for those that wished to ruin his reputation. To make his political point, Yeats uses “*The ghost of Roger*

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<sup>53</sup> The poem was first published in *The Irish Press* on 2 February 1937.

*Casement / Is beating on the door*” as the refrain for all three stanzas. Even if the diaries are authentic, as recent tests prove, Yeats vindicates Casement not in terms of his sexual orientation, but in terms of Casement’s heroism.

Yeats’s ballad “Come Gather Round Me Parnellites” also works to correct the nationalist legacy of a historical figure—Charles Stewart Parnell. Parnell’s affair with Katherine O’Shea contributed to a loss of confidence in his leadership of the Irish resistance movement near the end of the nineteenth century (Finneran Collected Poems 508, n. 341). As in the Casement scandal, the Parnell-O’Shea scandal was exploited for political purposes. By 1936, Yeats’s political career had ended nearly a decade earlier, but it is clear that he was still resisting the same middle-class moral standards that he spoke against as an Irish senator, especially in his 1925 opposition to a proposal to make divorce illegal in Ireland (Ellmann Yeats: The Man and the Masks 252).<sup>54</sup> In his speech against making divorce illegal, Yeats comments that “we are [...] the people of Parnell,” which is a loaded reference considering Parnell’s affair with a married woman (Ellmann Yeats: The Man and the Masks 253). Yeats also ascribed to the belief that O’Shea’s husband would have allowed for a divorce if Parnell had been able to pay him £20,000 (Finneran Collected Poems 508, n. 341.527).

“Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites” contains features that makes it of one of Yeats’s finest ballads. As in the Casement poems, Yeats seems more comfortable with his Irish patriotism than he did in his early ballads. In his early ballads, Ireland was conveyed largely in metaphor or symbolized by simple folk traditions. In these later ballads, the future of Ireland is symbolized by the actions of historical figures. In “Come

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<sup>54</sup> In his discussion of Yeats’s speech against making divorce illegal, Ellmann notes that Yeats’s views on this issue were closely tied to his feelings on class structure in Ireland (Ellmann 253-4).



Gather Round Me, Parnellites,” Parnell’s affair with Kitty O’Shea is reinterpreted as one of his strengths because he clearly loved her:

The Bishops and the Party  
That tragic story made,  
A husband that had sold his wife  
And after that betrayed;  
But stories that live longest  
Are sung above the glass,  
And Parnell loved his country,  
And Parnell loved his lass.

("Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites" 587)

Arguably such a blatant celebration of adultery would seem out of place before Yeats composed the Crazy Jane series of poems and became disenchanted by socially restraining political reforms. Although turning Irish history into what is essentially a drinking song (consider the phrases “Come fill up all those glasses”; “pass the bottle round”; and “above the glass”), Yeats gives Parnell a reputation as a proud man, a lover, a fighter, and a savior for “the Irish poor.” Yeats inflates Parnell to the extent that “Every man that sings a song / Keeps Parnell in his mind” (“Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites" 586). Yeats’s desire to remake Parnell as a folk hero through the popular medium of folk ballad was deemed effective, especially by Michael Yeats:

Perhaps the nearest that he [Yeats] ever came to the true folk style was in his political ballad ‘Come Gather Round Me Parnellites.’ Certainly this is the only ballad of his which may still be heard occasionally at a convivial

gathering, sung not because it was Yeats who wrote it, but because it was a good song, and someone felt moved to sing it. This ballad [...] has a good deal of the simple strength and vigor of Irish street song. (177-178)

The desire to write a “good song” seemed to appeal to the aging poet. As mentioned earlier, Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley that the army sang his words to “Down by the Salley Gardens,” and again in a letter from September 5, 1937, Yeats wanted Wellesley to know that he had the pride of hearing his “The Curse of Cromwell” being sung without his prompting: “after I had left the Academy Banquet somebody called for the ‘Curse of Cromwell’ and when it was sung a good many voices joined in” (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 159). The poem was reworked and commented on in several of Yeats’s letters to Dorothy Wellesley, and it seems to have been an important poem to Yeats. In the September 5, 1937 letter to Wellesley, Yeats considers the song, along with “The Municipal Gallery Revisited,” “perhaps the best poem I have written for some years” (159).

The speaker of the poem is a roving bard who finds throughout Ireland “Nothing but Cromwell’s house and Cromwell’s murderous crew” (“The Curse of Cromwell” 304). Yeats writes to Wellesley that “I speak through the mouth of some wandering peasant poet in Ireland” (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 119). “Cromwell’s house” is contrasted with the “great house” in the final stanza, which contains “all my friends,” yet becomes an “old ruin” when the speaker awakes the next morning (“The Curse of Cromwell” 305). Laura O’Connor argues that the speaker is once again focusing on class, and the Protestant Ascendancy in particular (104-105). The trope of the “great house” as a refuge for the artist appears in other Yeats poems, including “In Memory of Major

Robert Gregory,” “The Tower,” “Coole Park, 1929,” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.”

Recurring tropes in “The Curse of Cromwell” include “dancers,” “an old beggar,” which appear in poems like “Among School Children” and “Beggar to Beggar Cried.” In his commentary on the poem, Jeffares notes Yeats’s repetition of images that appear elsewhere in his poetry (Commentary 383-384).

Because it was somewhat popular, because it tells an Irish view of English invasion, because it was from a productive period inspired by his friendship with Dorothy Wellesley, because it links Yeats’s popular ballads with icons from his “poems of civilization,” “The Curse of Cromwell” is perhaps Yeats’s most accomplished ballad. Unlike “Down by the Salley Gardens,” “The Curse of Cromwell” seems much less anomalous in the light of the rest of his oeuvre. It is a lament for a past time when art had an ideal purity, one like those in Yeats’s Byzantium poems. It also places the artist outside of the “money’s rant” that the masses engage in and the need to explain a firm political platform. The speaker’s refrain gives little attention to the particulars of politics: “*O what of that, O what of that / What is there left to say?*” (“The Curse of Cromwell” 305).

Helen Vendler notes, “Yeats cherished to the end of his life the hope that some of his works might pass into the mouths of the people; works with such potential, he thought were his simpler lyrics, his marching songs, and above all, his ballads” (122-123). Paul Cohen claims that “Yeats’s songs were designed not only to broaden his audience but to extend it into the future as well. The songs would give him a kind of immortality in the minds of those who would sing and hear them” (23). That Yeats’s “The Curse of Cromwell” continues to attract critical attention, especially in Laura O’Connor’s 2006

book *Haunted English*, speaks to its role as the culmination of Yeats's efforts to write a "popular" poem that has an artistic integrity with which he could be comfortable. Still, the song never became a standard Irish folk song.

### **Part 5: Yeats's Legacy of Englishness/Irishness**

Neither Yeats, Davis, Mangan nor Ferguson authored "A Soldier's Song," which became the Irish national anthem. Instead, the relatively unknown poet Peadar Kearney was responsible for the song that ousted "God Save Ireland" as the national anthem in 1926. Kearney was a patriot, playwright and property manager of the Abbey Theatre. The opening lines of his song are emphatic:

Sons of the Gael! Men of the Pale!  
The long watched day is breaking;  
The serried ranks of Innisfail  
Shall set the tyrant quaking.  
Our camp fires now are burning low;  
See in the east a silvery glow,  
Out yonder waits the Saxon foe,  
So chant a soldier's song.

Kearney wrote the song during the height of revolutionary fervor in 1907, and unlike the Anglo-Irish Yeats, Kearney's loyalties were not divided. Kearney served time in prison after the uprising of 1916 was quelled, and was buried in the "Republican Plot in Glasnevin Cemetery" in Dublin ("An Irishman's Diary").

As the letter that serves as one of the epigraphs for this chapter shows, Yeats viewed art, or at least “beautiful lofty things” as transcendent of national politics. Hazard Adams provides an excellent description of how

Yeats’s nationalism was from beginning to end antithetical in the sense of critical opposition to forms of nationalism that tended toward superficiality and suppression. It is this stance of seeking to provide a necessary antithesis rather than any consistency of doctrine or political position that characterized Yeats’s career. (165)

Given this critical stance, Yeats’s choice to write popular songs was political because it was meant to resist “superficial” popular songs that espoused a particular brand of nationalism. These inner conflicts were fuel for Yeats’s intellectual fire. Georges-David Zimmerman, on the other hand, sees the choice to write popular songs as “something paradoxical and typical of Yeats in the half-confident attempt to speak to the multitude and the few alike in offering alleged street ballads to a limited and sophisticated audience” (195).

Marjorie Howes also sees Yeats’s later ballads as full of a more uneasy nationalism:

Yeats began his career believing that the individual and the nation were or should be homologous, and therefore harmonious; Irishness was a resource and support for individuals. Later he moved to formulations that complicated such propositions and emphasized conflict between individual and nation and the potential violence embodied in conceptions of Irishness. (2)

Similarly, Elleke Boehmer contends that “Across his long career as an Irish man of letters, Yeats’s conception of nationality constantly shifted in line with his changing ideas about Irish community, class, and femininity, and of the relationship of these with English culture” (191). For Yeats, William Morris made a huge impact on his poetic “labour” and his sisters’ efforts with Dun Emer Industries and the Cuala Press. Yeats’s criticism on English poets like Shakespeare, Shelley, and Blake also shows that he had accrued huge debts to English culture. In response to a letter accusing his Casement poems of anti-English sentiment, Yeats responded, “How can I hate England, owing what I do to Shakespeare, Blake & Morris. England is the only country I cannot hate” (Yeats and Wellesley Letters on Poetry 111). Yeats’s response was repeated for the benefit of his friend, the Englishwoman, Lady Wellesley, who was one of many friends from across the Irish Sea. Yeats’s wife, the former Georgie Hyde-Lees, was also English and they were married in London. David Pierce comments on Yeats’s often intimate relationship with England:

In the 1930s, if events had turned out differently, Yeats could have secured his future as a poet within an English tradition, and he might even have identified himself more openly with the English Establishment. In late spring 1930, for example, there was considerable support in the English press for Yeats to succeed Bridges as Poet Laureate. (253)

Yet, confronted with this possibility, Yeats disqualified himself with a joke about his earlier “Fenian” associations (Pierce 253). The fact that Yeats was not buried with the other revolutionaries in Glasnevin cemetery does not mean that he was not later to become a cultural icon in Ireland, especially in the “Yeats Country” around County Sligo.

Yeats died on January 28, 1939. Because of the start of World War II, Yeats's body was not returned to Ireland until 1948, where he was finally buried at Drumcliff, just outside Sligo Town and under Ben Bulbin. According to Foster's biography, Yeats's burial in Ireland cemented his identity as an Irish poet:

the ceremony at Drumcliff on 17 September 1948 announced that WBY[Yeats]'s reputation belonged neither to government nor family, but to the country whose consciousness he had done so much to shape, and which would declare itself a republic at the end of that year. [...] In 1948 he was at last celebrated as a national poet. The arguments about 'placing' him, so marked at the time of his seventieth birthday and during the aftermath of his death nine years before, had been resolved.

(A Life II: 657-658)

According to Richard Ellmann, the arguments about Yeats's position in English versus Irish literature were never an issue with Yeats's poetry: "it was deliberately Irish. The Victorians gave little conscious thought to literature as a vehicle of nationality. We can be sure that Yeats was deliberate because his verse had no reference to Ireland until he was twenty" (The Identity of Yeats 13). Although Yeats made a conscious decision to write Irish poetry, he and other poets had to establish the Irishness of Irish poetry written in English.

Ultimately, Yeats's attempt to define the Irishness of his poetry highlights Englishness as a similarly carefully constructed exercise in myth-making. That Yeats would cite his Fenian roots to resist cultural assimilation into Englishness is vital. Despite this, Yeats never renounced his hope that the Anglo-Irish would remain the leaders of

Ireland. His ballads are a part of this: they connect him to the Young Irelanders' popular appeals and revolutionary fervor, but they also tap into the cultural resources of English poetry. Given this, it is easier to understand Yeats's disappointment that someone would chose to blow up the statue of George II in St. Stephen's Green instead of another less aesthetically pleasing statue. For Yeats, art transcends nation, history, and politics. One must remember that George II, though an English king, was German-born—a duality the Anglo-Irish Yeats could appreciate.



## Chapter Three: Music and National (Female) Identity in Edith

### Sitwell and Stevie Smith's Poetry

Smith and Sitwell took advantage of the gender ambiguity of their personas to further call into question the still functioning separation of spheres in poetry, which allowed women poets to share in the emotive and personal lyric but reserved supposedly 'larger' statements about nationality, empire, and politics for their male counterparts. (Severin "Acting" 46)

In recent debates about Englishness and the part played by English literature in creating and sustaining national feeling of images of the nation, scholars and critics, if they are men, have concerned themselves almost exclusively with male writers. (Light 237)

#### **Part 1: Persons from Porlock**

Despite being from two different generations and from two very different social backgrounds, Dame Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) and Stevie Smith, born Florence Margaret Smith (1902-1971), shared several artistic ideals, including a love for nursery rhymes, a love for combining music with public performances of their poetry, and a love for writing poems that address canonical English poets in subversive ways. Their work is frequently categorized as "light" verse, sharing territory with the poetry of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. When not prepared to consider their work "light," most critics contend that both poets are at least difficult to place in the canon of English poetry. In their critical writing and interviews, both poets were passionate and eloquent about the composition of their art. Their eccentricities often haunt their legacies as canonical British poets, but their playfulness as performers and poets should not be confused with carelessness.

Both poets demonstrate a desire to represent women in nontraditional ways. In particular, both address the unique being that is the Englishwoman. Thus, they are not important participants in the discourse on Englishness simply because they were women but because, in both their personal lives and in their writings, they actively resisted a sense of prescribed Englishness for women. Both employed elements of popular culture in public performances of their poetry, including the music and theatrics of the music hall and the simple language and rhythms of nursery room literature. These aspects of their art indicate a desire to find a popular audience for their poetry and to shatter perceptions about their roles as British women, and poets.

In her poetry and critical writings, Sitwell resisted the stilted Englishness of the poets that preceded her. Gina Wisker says of Sitwell's magazine, *Wheels*, that it "set out to provide an opposition to the 'Englishness' of the Georgians and largely published poetry that was international, often experimental, and eclectic" (303). In particular, John Pearson calls the magazine a "counterblast to Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry*," but he notes that the press viewed the first edition as "one more 'Society anthology'" (106, 107). The magazine was published yearly from 1916 until 1921, a period when Imagist magazines were prominent in London. Unlike those magazines, *Wheels* had no set artistic manifesto, and was more a vehicle for the poetry of Edith and her two brothers. With the exception of Aldous Huxley, other poets published in *Wheels* are read less frequently today even than the Sitwells.

Like the verse she published in *Wheels*, Edith Sitwell's poetry from the period was increasingly "international" (in thematic scope at least), "experimental," and "eclectic." In the second edition of *Wheels*, her poem "The Satyr in the Periwig" is one of

only two poems in the anthology that, for John Pearson, “show the way her talents will develop” (117). A few lines show how the poem might serve as an early draft of a more experimental poem from *Façade*:

Small bird-quick women pass me by  
With sleeves that flutter airily,  
And baskets blazing like a fire  
With laughing fruits of my desire:  
Plums sunburnt as the King of Spain,  
Gold-cheeked as any Nubian,  
With strawberries all goldly-freckled,  
Pears fat as thrushes and as speckled. (Collected Poems 150)

*Façade* is Sitwell’s masterpiece. The work was a collaborative effort between Sitwell and a young composer and family friend, William Walton. The work was conceived as a performance piece that features the recitation of poetry with accompaniment from a small orchestra. The music references tunes from British popular music. Although *Façade* does not contain a cohesive narrative, the poems contain several recurring images and subjects. *Façade* combines the playfulness of music hall with the edginess of avant garde art.

As in “The Satyr in the Periwig,” *Façade* contains an eclectic and international collection of images. However, “The Satyr in the Periwig’s” “international” images are placed within the perspective of the mythical satyr, a holdover from allusive pastoral English poetry. This would change in *Façade*, where the speaker’s perspective is more ambiguous and less gender-specific. Beyond the imagery, the soundscape of “The Satyr in the Periwig” is a good example of Sitwell’s developing interest in words purely for the

sake of rhythm and sound. The poem is not entirely “experimental,” but it is eclectic enough to suggest Sitwell’s upcoming efforts in *Façade*.

By the time of *Façade*, appeared a year after the final edition of *Wheels*, Sitwell’s experimental side would fully emerge. In one poem from the collection, “Popular Song,” Sitwell uses another satyr as a subject. Unlike in “The Satyr in the Periwig,” the satyr in “Popular Song” is not the speaker of the poem. It is a dog-like minor character that cannot catch his prey, the dynamic and resistant Lily O’Grady. Lily, simultaneously “Silly and shady,” captures the speaker’s attention, not the satyr. Sitwell’s work with *Wheels* came at a time when her artistic ideas were blossoming, and her role as a female editor of a literary magazine should not be underrated. This role was perhaps reflected in a new, more resilient and resistant set of female characters who feature prominently in *Façade*. Sitwell has abandoned the often sentimental themes of her juvenilia to challenge readers to catch the meaning of female characters as slippery as Lily O’Grady and her version of Queen Victoria.

Such resistant female characters are also a feature of Stevie Smith’s poetry and fiction. The main character in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), her best known work of fiction, anguishes over whether or not she should marry what she feels is an unsuitable partner. Ultimately, though, Pompey Casmilus rejects the match and keeps her independence as a woman working for a publishing company. This character points to Smith’s own involvement with magazines. Unlike Sitwell’s editing of a literary magazine, Smith was employed as a private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson at Newnes Publishing Company from 1923 to 1953. Newnes published magazines for women, most of which perpetuated traditional gender roles (Severin *Resistant Antics* 8). Smith’s three

decades of employment with Newnes shows that she did not follow the advice of the magazines she helped her boss publish. Rather than to get married and keep house in the most womanly way possible, Smith remained single and lived with her aunt until 1968.

While the parallels between Pompey Casmilus and Stevie Smith are enough to suggest an autobiographical reading of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith's poetry contains many female characters that resist such reading. In Smith's oeuvre, female experience is as dynamic as the poet's imagination, and no one experience is promoted over another. From the female poet with writer's block in "Mrs. Arbuthnot," to the Brigadier's stoned wife in "Drugs Made Pauline Vague," to Ms. Pauncefort, singing at the top of her voice in "The Songster," to the "refined" woman in "The Englishwoman" with no bosom and no behind," Smith's poetry is a catalog of many kinds of women who are encouraged to speak freely. (S. Smith Collected Poems 68). Her catalog of women at many levels of society parallels a new, diverse set of roles for women in post World War I Britain. It is an underappreciated contribution to British poetry.

Sitwell's greatest contribution to English poetry may have been to forge connections between Continental and British modernisms. This began with *Wheels*, but reached its zenith with *Façade*. Laura Severin suggests that "her 1920s performance of *Façade* marks the transmission and assimilation of the European *avant garde* performance movement into English culture" ("Acting" 43). In reconnecting music with poetry, Sitwell affirmed the imagiste's insistence (as reported to F. S. Flint): "as regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (Flint 135). It is one way that Sitwell's work may be reevaluated after years of neglect. Debora van Durme is one critic that gives attention to the connection between

Sitwell's "music" in *Façade* and similar experiments in Continental Europe. In "Edith Sitwell's Carnavalesque Song: The Hybrid Music of *Façade*" van Durme reflects on the work's connection to other modernist works that express a fascination with popular culture (94). Still, for many critics, Sitwell remains under the shadow of F. R. Leavis's 1932 proclamation that "the Sitwells belong to the history of publicity rather than of poetry" (73).

Stevie Smith's relationship to any distinct literary period is more tenuous than Sitwell's. She cites influences that reach back into the days of Tennyson and beyond, and she seems to have intentionally isolated herself from the artistic community. This was the opposite of the Sitwells, who positioned themselves in the main currents of modern poetry. This difference was likely the result of Smith and Sitwell being from different social classes. Smith claimed that she seldom read contemporary poetry. Furthermore, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) established her reputation as a fiction writer before her poetry was widely read in the early 1960s. Despite these complications, Smith actually shared a number of traits with two male poets, Philip Larkin and Sir John Betjeman. All three poets structured their verse in a hybrid manner, using traditional stanza forms and thoroughly modern syntax and diction. None of them are truly modernists, but all have affinities with poets like Yeats and Hardy, who also straddled modernism and tradition.

Smith and Sitwell both found inspiration in the work of canonical English poets. For one, they shared a fascination with Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Smith's poem "To the Person from Porlock" attacks Coleridge's assumption that his visitor should be read as an unwelcome nuisance. Alison Light argues about Smith that "hers is a national literature at once enshrined and debunked as an unthinking part of consciousness; deromanticised and

yet personalized; a central point of public reference and yet privatized” (244). Thus, despite being inspired by the canonical work of a male poet, the poem charts new territory for women poets, a territory that lessens the seriousness of artistic inspiration to incorporate poor Porlockians.

Sitwell gave less sustained attention to Coleridge’s poem, but nevertheless dedicates her autobiography, *Taken Care Of*, “To the Persons from Porlock.” This dedication also suggests that her life is richer for the interruptions to the serious work of composing verse. Considering that Sitwell’s autobiography is largely an apology for her poetics, similar to Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, her dedication links her to her predecessor beyond a simple reference to her inspirational friends: it also challenges the authority of Coleridge’s often solipsistic theory of poetic inspiration.

Such direct references to the canon, especially to the literary giant Coleridge, show that Smith and Sitwell were well versed in English literature. But why did they choose a male poet over a female poet like Elizabeth Barrett Browning? In general, neither poet expressed a fondness for most female poets. Sitwell’s one major exception was Rossetti. In a 1925 article published in British *Vogue*, Sitwell develops her argument for Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” as an example of excellent women’s poetry. She claims that “there is no faltering anywhere; inspiration and form are one and the same,” and that the poem “is the perfect poem written by a woman” (Salter and Harper 191). She compares Rossetti’s efforts to the “would-be mannishness” of “modern women verse writers” (Salter and Harper 192). In the Rossetti article, Sitwell mentions strengths in Amy Lowell’s poetry and attacks the use of the manly sonnet form in E. B. Browning. Yet, as Celeste M. Schenck argues, Sitwell’s insistence on new verse forms for female

poets places her in the awkward position of tacitly supporting the political beliefs of male modernists who also wanted to break with traditional forms:

The differences among women modernists, particularly as established across the divide of poetic form, encourage us to think of genre, not as a pure, hypostasized, aesthetic category, but instead as a highly textured, overdetermined site of political contention, a literary space constructed often ex post facto from the conflicting materials of critical, political, racial, and sexual bias. (243)

It may seem strange that Sitwell's most carefully developed critical analysis of woman's poetry appeared in *Vogue*, which today's readers know as a fashion magazine. Such magazines were concerned in the inter-war period with what Aurelea Mahood terms a "complex dialectic between high culture and fashion" (38). Mahood details the magazine's attempt to educate "the discerning woman of fashion" about cultural trends, including literature (37). As *Façade* was making Sitwell into a known poet in her own right, the three articles that Sitwell wrote for *Vogue* gave her an opportunity to provide "an analysis of contemporary literature and the female writer as opposed to the broad delineation of the genesis of an artistic movement" (Mahood 43). And yet, instead of establishing a self-sustaining artistic discourse among female poets throughout British literature, Sitwell's *Vogue* articles established her poetry as an example of how women's poetry could break from the poetry of her generally disappointing female predecessors. Instead of building on the foundations laid by earlier female poets, Sitwell wanted future women poets to break new ground—just as she had done.



Sitwell's letter to Oxford don C. Maurice Bowra from January 24, 1944, is often quoted as evidence for the case against Sitwell's position as a feminist poet, but a close reading reveals something that is reflected in her early poetry: despite not professing a love of women's poetry, it is clear that Sitwell had read, and was familiar with, several women poets. Despite claiming that women's poetry is "simply awful," Sitwell offers a few exceptions, namely Sappho (whom she admittedly read in translation), Rosetti in "Goblin Market," and "a few deep and concentrated, but fearfully incompetent poems of Emily Dickinson" (Selected Letters 116). Her disclaimer to Bowra that "I have no Greek" was appropriate, considering that Bowra was a professor of classics at Oxford University. It also shows that the education system was not as open to Sitwell as it was to men.

In the letter to Bowra, Sitwell describes women's poetry as "incompetent, floppy, whining, arch, trivial, self-pitying," (Selected Letters 116). This has been read as Sitwell's distaste for female poetry as a whole, but within the context of the entire letter, it seems more likely that Sitwell was attempting to establish a poetic identity for herself and for female poets who might follow her. She offers the following advice: "any woman learning to write, if she is going to be any good at all, would, until she had made a technique for herself (and one has to forge it for oneself, there is no help to be got) write in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible—strange, but believed in" (Selected Letters 116). In short, what has been considered Sitwell's criticism of women poets could be considered Sitwell's manifesto for female poets.

In 1969, Smith analyzed her own poetry for the readers of *Vogue*. Her "What Poems Are Made of" provides a brief tour of her images and themes:

Why are so many of my poems about death, if I am having such an enjoyable time all the time? Partly because I am haunted by the fear of what might have happened if I had not been able to draw back in time from the husband-wives-children and pet animals situation in which I surely should have failed. (128)

As a critic, Smith, unlike Sitwell, stays within her own work, choosing not to cast a global net over women's poetry. In reviewing an anthology of women's poetry, Smith names Rossetti as one poet amongst other "old friends," including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontës, and Emily Dickinson" ("Poems in Petticoats" 180). Yet, she questions the purpose of such an anthology: "Why have poems by women only?" ("Poems in Petticoats" 180). Writing poetry never inspired Smith to write a manifesto for future women poets. Instead, she looked into a time before modernism for inspiration.

Unlike Smith, Sitwell was well-connected to a global artistic community and found inspiration in modern art. As a child, Sitwell traveled with her parents throughout Europe. Her move to Paris and her friendship with Gertrude Stein that began in 1924 provided her with opportunities to meet artists like Picasso, Matisse, Ford Madox Ford, and Pavel Tchelitchew (Salter and Harper 149). In her autobiography, she cites Liszt and other Continental composers as an inspiration for her poetry, and although she never attended Oxford, she counted dons and distinguished alumni as friends and acquaintances.

In addition to using music as a trope in her work, Edith Sitwell wrote songs before her collaboration with composer William Walton on *Façade*. With Lady Wellesley's assistance, Yeats chose Sitwell's "The King of China's Daughter" for his 1937 series of

*Broadsides*. The poem was one of Sitwell's most popular poems, seemingly inspired by the nursery room world that filled the rhythms and imagery of her early poetry. It was not her most profound work, but it certainly fit Yeats's overall conception for his project. It may also be that Yeats included the early poem because it reminded him of his "The Cap and Bells," a connection which Sonja Samberger points out in *Artistic Outlaws* (195). Ironically, Samberger suggests that Sitwell's allusion to Yeats's poem was meant as "ridicule" (195).

Although after *Façade* Sitwell would not attempt another major collaboration with a composer, her later poetry was eminently suited to music, as Benjamin Britten found with her poem "Still Falls the Rain."<sup>55</sup> Musically, Sitwell broke from the static rhythms of her predecessors and took a cue from Continental modernisms, finding poetic inspiration outside the rigid metrics of Georgian poetry. About Sitwell's poetry, Gina Wisker notes that "this is writing for and to music, sound appearing to take over from sense, rhyme, and rhythm, with witty, dreamlike comment dominating the whole" (304).

Because she came from much more humble beginnings, Stevie Smith did not enjoy the same access to artistic and academic circles as Sitwell. Smith spent most of her adult life working and living in the London suburbs, with most of her poetic influences coming from books, not actual artists. Still, the hymns from her Anglican upbringing and nursery tunes from her often unhappy childhood provided Smith with rhythmic inspiration. In her essay, "Stevie Smith: Girl Interrupted," Jessica Walsh contends that

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Britten completed his arrangement for "Still Falls the Rain" as "Canticle III: Still falls the rain" in 1954, which was the same year as the Decca recording of *Façade*, featuring readings from Britten's partner Peter Pears. "Canticle III: Still falls the rain" is arranged for tenor (Pears was a tenor, and a frequent collaborator on Britten's vocal works). These overlapping artistic associations were common for the Sitwells.

Smith uses the “sing-song rhythms of nursery rhymes and the haphazard violence of fairy tales to tackle the difficulties of an unwelcome adulthood” (57).

In addition to church music, Smith also found artistic inspiration in music hall. Sitwell also drew heavily from music hall style. From its origins in Victorian Britain until the advent of television in Great Britain, the undercurrent of cultural change continued to be reflected in the music hall. Sitwell’s and Smith’s attraction to music hall was not because of nostalgia for a more innocent time or an attempt to redefine Englishness. Rather, the variety of music hall acts and the strength of female performers inspired both poets to create a diversity of female characters to set against the passive English woman stereotype that defined British poetry well into the twentieth century.

Despite the music hall inspiration for the music in *Façade* and Smith’s “sung” poems, Sitwell’s and Smith’s poetry seems to have been mainly inspired by the performative element of music hall. As Laura Severin and Deborah van Durme note, in this particular way music hall had a profound influence on both poets (Severin 43 and van Durme 103). One of the characteristic attributes of late Victorian and early twentieth-century music hall performers, including Charlie Chaplin, was the adoption of a “characteristic costume” (Lee 101). The wearing of such masks appealed to both poets.

As it gradually decreased in popularity throughout the early twentieth century, music hall became a preservationist niche for traditional British music. During the wars, music hall was full of patriotic sentiment and the “creation” of national values. As the music halls began to close, those that lamented their loss transformed the remaining music halls into shrines of Englishness. Barry J. Faulk argues that concerns about the loss of music hall culture spawned a critical movement:

literary professionals ranging from Max Beerbohm to Elizabeth Robins Parnell to T. S. Eliot formulated a well-nigh Manichean opposition between music-hall entertainment and what they cast as middle-class conformist culture. In the process they produced a new genre, the music-hall lament, in which what was most vital and most endangered about the English people could be found in the music hall. Thanks to this genre, the music hall retained its centrality as trope for England long after it ceased to be a privileged entertainment form. (24)

If Englishness in poetry may be seen as a defensive, if not isolationist posture, then it parallels the criticism of popular music that took place in the interwar period, one that James J. Nott sees as a “reflection of anxiety about Britain’s changing position in the post-Great War world” (231). The inspiration that Sitwell and Smith found in music hall was the variety of artistic expression, a sense of play between “high” and “low” culture, that attracted them.

Musically speaking, despite the growing influence of composed music on popular music in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, music hall music often relied on traditional, well-known tunes. As Anthony Bennett explains in his essay “Music in the Halls,” music hall had its musical roots firmly planted in tradition:

the infiltration of composed music had gone on long and steadily enough to have produced an irreversible shift [...] away from a tradition [...] based on purely melodic, modal thinking, towards a reliance on harmonically conceived structures. The harmonies underpinning these structures were limited, and the melodic and rhythmic gestures which they

governed had an equally restricted expressive range, largely because English musical theatre had always resisted the deliberately dramatic style of Italian opera in favor of simple lyricism, and from *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) onwards, had itself been happy to draw on traditional material. (3)

What Bennett states could be applied to the entirety of British popular music in the twentieth century. It is typically British to take the “melodic and rhythmic gestures” of foreign music and “limit” them with the “simple lyricism” of folk music. However, as the century progresses, especially after American popular music became popular after World War I, the opposite happened: British musicians overlaid the simple rhythms of jazz, blues, and rock with composed music’s harmonic structures to soften, or “Europeanize” the music.

According to Anthony Bennett, the typical ensemble of musicians in Victorian music hall consisted of, “two violins, flute, cornet and double bass, plus a piano which could fill out the harmony” (7). Biographer Geoffrey Elborn reports that Walton, the composer of the music in *Façade*, “scored the work for flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, cello, and percussion” (38). Elborn is quick to note that the ensemble was an “unusual combination ” chosen “mainly because they were cheap” (38). Still, the relative size of the ensemble was similar to the ones found in music hall: not large enough to overpower a vocalist, but diverse enough to create a variety of different moods.

Another similarity that *Façade* shared with music hall was the use of popular dance rhythms. Hints for this are found in a few of the poem titles: “Polka,” “Tango-Pasodoble,” and “Country Dance.” According to Bennett, “the two main dances of the later nineteenth century, the waltz and the polka, provided the basis for countless songs,

and even when the *tempo* demanded by the words makes these models unsuitable, the regularity and simplicity of rhythm characteristic of dance music is still present” (10). Debora van Durme comments that “in ‘Polka’ [...], he [Walton] creates a recognizable polka-feel through an oompah bass, dotted rhythms, and characteristic snippets of melody, yet his setting could by no means be mistaken for the original dance” (102).

Although Stevie Smith never collaborated with a composer for performances of her work, her later poetry readings showed that she was prone to a bizarre, off-key “singing” of her poems. In *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics*, Laura Severin plainly argues for the influence of music hall on Smith’s “singing” poems to audiences:

In her sung poems, performed largely during the sixties, Smith used the Victorian music hall tradition to further movements away from conservative definitions of femininity. Frequently, her sung poems challenge social texts through musical parody. Also, mournful songs add sympathy to caustic poems, thereby enabling Smith to critique ideology yet exhibit sympathy for those women who have conformed to it.

(Resistant Antics 22)

Severin notes how Sitwell and Smith adopted unique, often unsettling personas for their public performances. Sitwell adopted the affectations and costume of Queen Elizabeth I (whom Sitwell claimed as a distant relative through Plantagenet roots), and even at an advanced age, Smith often dressed in the garb of a schoolgirl, complete with a girl’s bob hairdo. Severin’s work is profound in the way it defines the resistance within the performances of these two poets, especially since their performances of their work was a major part of their popularity. Seamus Heaney’s fond reminiscence of Smith comes

primarily from how she “chanted her poems artfully off-key,” a feature of her work that he finds integral to the process of understanding her poetry (“A Memorable” 211).

Sitwell biographer Victoria Glendinning notes that, in the wake of *Façade*’s popularity, Sitwell gave “numerous” readings during 1923-1924 and would do so for the rest of her life (18). Performing *Façade* became an important part of Sitwell’s public identity.

Although Severin and other critics mention how the personalities of music hall performers figured into the poetic personas of Sitwell and Smith, they do not address how music hall music figures as a trope in the poetry itself, or how popular music inspired each poet’s unique poetic rhythm. Instead, Severin points to how their personas “allowed them to exist outside the boundaries of ‘normal’ femininity,” and address subjects usually reserved for male poets (“Acting” 44)..

Towards the end of their lives, both Sitwell and Smith had complicated their artistic legacies as poets by actions that made them appear to be eccentric and theatrical in a time when British poets of “The Movement” were trying to strip down the language and forms of poetry to the bare bone. Yet, in an artistic environment where women were few in number (Elizabeth Jennings is the only woman generally associated with The Movement), Sitwell and Smith’s performances required their respective audiences to notice that the poets were female *and* poets. Their public performances and poetry combine to form a great challenge to Englishness because they use popular, accessible “texts” like music hall performance styles and nursery room literature to deconstruct the inspirational authority of the English poetry canon.



## **Part 2: “Sheer nonsense through megaphones”: Edith Sitwell’s *Façade***

In 1922 there was a buzz about London that Edith Sitwell and her two brothers Osbert and Sacheverell were working on a performance piece to showcase Edith’s poetry. To provide musical accompaniment, Sacheverell enlisted a young composer that he had met during his brief time at Oxford, William Walton. At the beginning of the collaboration, Walton had yet to turn twenty years old (Glendinning 72). In her autobiography, Sitwell describes the process of working with the young composer: “William Walton and I were in closer collaboration than is usual when poems are set to music, because he was then sharing a house with my two brothers. The idea that we should collaborate originated with them, and the first performance took place privately and peacefully at their house in January, 1922” (Taken Care Of 139). Sitwell’s comment suggests that it may have taken some persuasion to get her to work with Walton. Despite the fact that her work often uses music as a trope, she was not the one who sought out the composer’s services.

When she first heard about the Sitwells’ efforts to combine poetry and music, Virginia Woolf described the Sitwells’ early work with *Façade* to her sister Vanessa as “sheer nonsense through megaphones,” which shows that not everyone saw the work as a groundbreaking, genre-defining moment in British literature (Glendinning 77). Granted, Woolf had not seen the performance; she had only heard about it from her friend Violet Dickinson (Glendinning 77). Woolf was present for its first public performance on June 12, 1923, and remarked that “I heard so little that I could not judge” (Glendinning 78). Considering that the first performance featured a reader, Edith, who had to compete with several musicians, Woolf’s reaction was not surprising. By all accounts, the performance

was not as polished and professional as it could have been.<sup>56</sup> Despite its inauspicious start, with the future assistance of professional conductors and actors, *Façade* ultimately became the sort of “entertainment” that Walton and the Sitwells originally intended.

As Glendinning reports, the origins of *Façade* show that it was truly a family affair:

Osbert and Sacheverell were impresario and stage manager. The idea of uttering the poems through a mask in a curtain was Osbert’s; he was being sculpted by Frank Dobson at the time, and when Dobson heard of the project he offered to design and paint the curtain. Sacheverell got the megaphone—called a Sengerphone—from a singer called Senger up in Hampstead. It was large and made of papier mâché, and fitted over the speaker’s face. (73)

In the first public performances, Edith read all of her poetry from behind a curtain, apparently to remove the reader’s personality from the performance. The Sengerphone was held up to a hole in the screen, which formed the mouth of a painting of what appeared to be a sort of tribal mask. The concealment of the reader was Osbert’s suggestion, prompting Laura Severin’s suspicion: “one has to question the motivations behind Osbert’s erasure of his talented sister, whose literary abilities exceeded his. Her disappearance would not seem to have helped the cause of her artistry” (“Acting” 47). In contrast, Debora van Durme sees the hidden reader as fitting with other avant-garde artists’ attempts to “mystify,” if not intentionally frustrate audiences (100). Regardless, it was not because of Edith Sitwell’s stage fright. Her readings, especially in her later life

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<sup>56</sup> In her biography of Sitwell, Glendinning provides several reviews and opinions from the Sitwells’ contemporaries and the press.

when she took on the character of Elizabeth I, were full of colorful displays of wardrobe and spirited performances.

Although the use of the Sengerphone to recite poetry was a first, the combination of music and poetry was not a new concept. Critics compare *Façade* to two other notable modernist performances, namely *Parade* (1916-1917), by Jean Cocteau, Erik Satie, and Pablo Picasso, and *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), by Albert Giraud and Arnold Schoenberg (Bryant 245 and van Durme 97). With its use of popular music forms, including jazz, *Façade* also shares similarities with Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). *Façade* also seems worthy of a consideration with Brecht's predecessor John Gay. It addresses, at least artistically, the climate of its time, with no shortage of political critique in both ironic musical references and provocative verses.

Although *Façade* references popular culture and political figures, it was never quite as popular as *The Beggar's Opera*, which means that it went largely unnoticed by the common Briton. Part of the reason for this was that the text of the work sacrifices easily comprehensible meaning for a certain soundscape of imagery. Instead of thinly-veiled critiques of lawyers and politicians, Sitwell places a former Queen (Victoria) on an iceberg and a Poet Laureate (Tennyson) in the underworld with "Sir Beelzebub," seemingly for the delight of the images themselves. The deliberately artistic mood of *Façade* only references popular culture in brief places: the majority of the work is constantly at play with concrete meaning. Still, despite the artistry, the work is meant to be entertaining. As Sitwell herself claims, "the audience is meant to laugh" (Taken Care Of 141).

Sitwell comments that “the poems in *Façade* are abstract poems—that is, they are patterns in sound. They are too, in many cases, virtuoso exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty, in the same sense as that in which certain studies by Liszt are studies in transcendental technique in music” (Salter and Harper 131). Thus, Sitwell was not attempting to create a work that would appeal to mass audiences of Londoners; like her fellow modernists Eliot and Pound, she was trying to breathe life into an increasingly anemic art form, poetry.

In addition to the use of music as part of the entertainment, Debora van Durme claims that Sitwell wanted to depart from the “‘monstrously dull’ metres, rhymes, and stanza structures favoured by the Georgians” and connect with the “‘high’ art tradition of French Symbolism” (95). Such an approach is a further departure from Gay’s and Brecht’s versions of the *Beggar’s Opera*, which uses simple lyrics and familiar tunes. Walton’s music, while containing passing references to popular music, resembles technically proficient chamber music. Glendinning aptly describes the music as “witty and elegant, full of pastiche and reference” (72).

The early performances of *Façade* were not without controversy. It received merciless attacks from the press and from satirists. One such attack came from playwright Noël Coward, whose 1923 revue *London Calling* contained a sketch depicting the Sitwells as “The Swiss Family Whittlebot.” Coward followed-up the sketch with his own reading on the radio of poems supposedly written by Miss Hernia Whittlebot. The attack was unkind, prompting Edith to cancel a performance of *Façade* at Oxford under Osbert’s advice. In a letter to Harold Acton, who was to assist in an Oxford production of *Façade*, Sitwell expresses her disappointment at the cancellation:

I am feeling miserably disappointed. I've seen Osbert, who tells me it is impossible for me to do *Façade* at Oxford. He says in the first place, they have decided to go abroad, which will mean Willie Walton will not be there,—and I cannot manage the music side of it,—also he says that after *London Calling* I cannot risk it, as probably little Coward's supporters (being far in excess of intelligent people in number) would flock to the performance to insult me, and that it would be too undignified to expose oneself to it. (Selected Letters 29-30)

Osbert may have been the controlling figure here, as Sitwell seems convinced not to perform because of Walton's absence rather than simply because of the threat posed by Coward's supporters. Geoffrey Elborn comments that "it is unlikely that she ever regarded Coward as a serious threat, but she was upset all the same and her brothers demanded an apology from Coward, which she eventually received" (51).

If Coward had been the only critic of the Sitwells then the early performances of *Façade* may have gone more smoothly. Eventually Walton published a score and the number of poems performed was reduced from thirty-four to eighteen. This helped standardize the performance and make it more appealing to audiences, but the early performances were difficult for audiences to follow. Most of the criticism for the work came from members of the press, who, according to Sitwell, were "enraged and alarmed" by what they saw (Taken Care Of 140). Sitwell notes that eventually the work received positive attention: "Never, I should think, was a larger and more imposing shower of brickbats hurled at any new work. These missiles have now been exchanged for equally large and imposing bouquets" (Taken Care Of 139).

By the time of the 1953 Decca recording of *Façade*, Sitwell began to receive assistance with reading the text, especially for the faster poems. In the recording, the assistance comes from actor Peter Pears. Concerning the sharing of reading responsibilities, Glendinning reports that “other than herself, the only readers of *Façade* that she ever wholly approved of were Constant Lambert and Peter Pears”<sup>57</sup> (350). Once Sitwell begins to share the responsibility of reading the poems, *Façade* becomes less a showcase of Sitwell’s verse and more of an entertainment, especially when it featured trained performers.

“Hornpipe” appears as the first track on the 1953 recording and opens with six short lines that set a quick tempo:

Sailors come  
To the drum  
Out of Babylon;  
Hobby-horses  
Foam, the dumb  
Sky rhinoceros-glum (Collected Poems 153)

In these lines, the reader encounters the drum, the ocean waves, horses, and the sky above. Yet, Sitwell does not describe these images blandly. The sound of the drum comes “Out of Babylon,” the sea foam resembles “Hobby-horses,” and the sky is “dumb” and “rhinoceros-glum” (Collected Poems 153). The title, which could identify a musical instrument or a popular sailor’s dance, sets a spirited tone for the work. The poem contains several end rhymes, but the pattern does not repeat in a regular way. The poem

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<sup>57</sup> See footnote one. Sitwell dedicates “Popular Song” to composer and family friend Constant Lambert.

ends with a closing couplet, which shows that the poet mixes conventions from traditional poetry with modernist experimentation with language and form.

Some critics see Sitwell as composing the poems in *Façade* primarily on the basis of creating an abstract association of sounds, but the opening lines of “Hornpipe” are arguably more dynamic. If one reads *Façade* as a whole, several images from these lines recur: sailors, drums, eastern images, and the sea, in particular. Considering the lack of a linear narrative or an overarching theme to *Façade*, these repetitions create a sense of cohesion to the work. The words “hobby-horses” and “rhinoceros-glum” also evoke the playful, nursery room tone of the work. L. P. Hartley notes that “most readers get from *Façade* images more precise and meanings more articulate than any that could be conveyed by a word-pattern and it is inevitable they should” (111). As Hartley suggests, Sitwell’s use and reuse of words shows that there are patterns of meaning and imagery in addition to patterns of sound.

As an opening poem, “Hornpipe” contains what could be called an invocation: the poems comprising *Façade* are poems from civilization—as far back as Babylon it seems—and include all of the wondrous images that imperialism has provided for the contemporary British person, including a sky that is bulbous and grey as a rhinoceros. This is made possible by sailors braving the seas and bringing these items into British culture. Although the poem does not focus on the intricacies of the imperial enterprise, the reader certainly gets a glimpse into the types of actors playing in the drama of empire: including a “fat” emperor, a “fibroid” Shah, a “stout” Captain, and a “hot” native woman. Sitwell’s interest in these characters seems limited to the absurdity of their juxtaposition.

Sitwell names other characters: “Glaucis,” “Lord Tennyson,” Queen “Victoria,” and “Sir Bacchus.” All of the poem’s characters are loosely associated by their various responses to Venus. The male figures seem to lust after Venus, but the Queen clearly states that Venus is “not the goods for me.” She says this to Tennyson, who does not respond. Tennyson “wrote a Gloria free,” or liturgical poem, before the Queen arrives on the scene, which means he is composing verse that is far removed from the lusty scene Sitwell describes, he is writing in praise of Victoria, or he is praising Venus as a heavenly beauty and writes his “Gloria” for her. Because Sitwell gives Tennyson such an ambiguous and limited role, the reader does not focus on him as the primary subject of “Hornpipe.”

The powerful Queen Victoria seems frigid, or at least chilled by the iceberg she stands on. She is the antithesis of Venus, whom the Queen sees as “Hot as any hottentot.” The Queen as a passionate force is further cooled by the loss of her husband, Prince Albert, which is referenced by her remembrance of the flowers on his “tall memorial.” Sitwell presents the mourning Queen, who lived nearly forty years after her husband’s death, but she also gives Victoria words that are perhaps inappropriate for a queen, referring to Venus as a “minx,” and referring to “drinks.” Despite these words, Victoria seems prudish by comparison to Venus. The speaker sees Venus “on the settee of the horsehair sea” and considers her to be “shady.” Venus is presented as a sexual object for several men and a foil the frigid Queen.

The speaker’s presentation of Venus is more ambiguous than the Queen’s. There is prudery perhaps in the speaker’s naming of Venus as a “shady” lady, suggesting a woman of ill repute, but the speaker does not dismiss Venus simply as an object of male



lust. She is, first of all, a “Lady.” Venus precedes Victoria in the poem and Victoria and the male characters center their comments and actions around Venus. If Sitwell intends the Venus in her poem to allude to the goddess associated with love, beauty, and fidelity, then she does so with irony. For instance, for Venus to be a “minx” and “shady” suggests a lack of fidelity.

Yet, it is possible that Sitwell is referencing a pre-existing model for her Venus. That Venus is called a “hottentot” by the Queen alludes to a pair of African women, known collectively as the “Hottentot Venus.” Of these two women, a Khoekhoe woman named Saartjie Baartman, was the best known. Baartman was the star of a popular sideshow attraction during the early nineteenth century in Britain and Paris. By using this figure, Sitwell displays the colonizer’s instinct to co-opt foreign cultures that are part of the empire without providing cultural contextualization. In her sideshow, Baartman was displayed primarily for the curiosity surrounding her anatomy.<sup>58</sup> After her death in 1815, she was dissected in Paris and studied by doctors. Historian of science, Stephen Jay Gould, comments about the controversy: “Saartjie Baartman herself continues to fascinate us across the ages; her exploitation has never really ended” (303). By referencing a “hottentot” Venus, Sitwell participates in a century-old exploitation of Saartjie Baartman. Although not out of place in Victoria’s time or in Sitwell’s time, Sitwell’s use of racial stereotypes could account for dwindling attention to *Façade* as a performance piece.

In addition to her familiarity with the sideshow figure of “The Hottentot Venus,” music hall audiences during Sitwell’s time were also familiar with another exploitative

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen Jay Gould devotes a chapter in *The Flamingo’s Smile* to Baartman in (Gould). Khoisan women like Baartman generally share a genetic characteristic known as *steatopygia*, which is an enlargement of the buttocks due to deposits of fat.

representation of people of African descent, minstrelsy. Minstrel shows were introduced to London audiences as early as 1836, and by the time of Sitwell's youth, they had developed their own unique Britishness (Pickering 70, 73). In his essay "White Skins, Black Masks," Michael Pickering argues that as they attained their own sense of Britishness, the minstrel shows formed an essentially two-fold social commentary: on one side, there was an exotic quality to the southern plantation slave's life; on the other hand, minstrelsy served as a metaphor for an exploration of British cultural and class distinctions (73, 76). Pickering argues that this was partly manifested in a "shift towards spectacle in attire, particularly among the court-dress minstrel troupes who 'dressed in elaborate costumes of the English court, plush coats and kneebreeches, stockings and buckled shoes, and powdered white wigs'" (76). Ultimately, Pickering argues that "minstrelsy was just as much about English social relations as it was about a scantily known Afro-American population" (84). The tragedy of this is that slaves were bought, sold, and forced to build the Empire, and further used as stereotyped, racist masks to explore white British culture.

That Sitwell did not recognize the racist nature of minstrelsy as she composed *Façade* is troubling in a modern context, one in which minstrelsy has been abandoned as a culturally acceptable form of entertainment. Yet, it was a common entertainment in music halls, and Sitwell uses her dark skinned people in many of the same ways that British minstrel troupes did—dressing them up in the king's new clothes and poking fun at pretensions within Victorian society.

Very little seems intentionally malicious in her depictions, but with her diction and assumptions about race, Sitwell participates in a racist discourse. Marsha Bryant

argues that “Sitwell employs images of Africans and Asians for comic effect, unsettling English propriety and imperial unity while simultaneously reinforcing racial stereotypes” (244). According to Bryant, Frank Dobson’s design for the curtain that was used in *Façade* to conceal Sitwell contained “a large female face with African features (wooly hair and wide nostrils); it was painted half red and half white on the actual curtain, layering racial signification with harlequinade” (249). This again echoes the variety of music hall, where performers participated in such stereotyping.

The colonial authority of the British Empire is affirmed even in the music of *Façade*. Bryant notes that “like Walton’s musical allusions to Britannia, Sitwell’s recurring imagery of oceans, sailors, and admirals both undercuts and reinforces the naval power behind British imperial conquest and commerce” (252). This undercutting and reinforcement also appears in the imagery of the poem. Victoria’s frigid stance on the iceberg, and silly position on “the rocking-horse / Of a wave” downplays any sympathy that the speaker may share with the Queen. Yet she is still there, and the mere mention of such a personage evokes the British Empire at its most powerful moment. The Queen’s association with Tennyson also implicates him in the silliness. The British Empire is only a part of the discussion, with Venus’s admirers offering her the world: “far Asia, Africa, Cathay.”

Concerning the use of the term “hottentot,” Bryant argues that “one cannot ignore the specifically African meaning of ‘Hottentot,’” and that Sitwell “draws from Victorian and modernist racial stereotypes even as she mocks Victorian prudishness and gender roles” (253, 254). Again, such a posture suggests Sitwell’s knowledge of minstrelsy. Venus is certainly on display, objectified and sexualized by the gaze of a racist and

disapproving Queen and several men. She is not allowed to speak in response to the Queen's accusations that she is a "minx," and "without remorse" for being "Hot as any hottentot." And yet as a foil to the Queen's prudishness, Venus adds an exciting dimension to the opening of *Façade*: this "entertainment" promises to be a bit bawdy, if anything—full of lusty sailors and a supporting cast of mythical beings, rulers, and poets.

When following Walton's score, "Hornpipe" must be read quickly and requires a reader that has excellent diction. In fact, the task of reading the poem eventually proved too difficult for Sitwell herself; she asked Osbert's lover, David Horner, to read it in a 1948 performance at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Glendinning 278). As Glendinning reports, "she found in rehearsal that she could no longer recite the fast staccato" (278). In the 1954 recording, Peter Pears reads the poem: his diction is crisp and his pace astonishingly fast. The need for such fast reading comes from the music itself. The poem is accompanied by a tune that references "The Sailor's Hornpipe," a tune also referenced by the earlier song "The Pirate King" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* and the theme for the animated cartoon *Popeye the Sailor*. Such a popular reference shows Walton's sense of play with popular culture, not unlike Pepusch's efforts in *The Beggar's Opera*.

The music for the poem "Popular Song" opens with a brief interlude that contains a few "blue" notes that seem to be inspired by jazz, but the rest of the music is lighter. The poem introduce a new character, Lily O'Grady, who shares the "shady" epithet with Venus in "Hornpipe." What differentiates Lily is that she is also "silly" and "Longing to be / A lazy lady" (Collected Poems 145). The scene changes from the sea to "Georgian stables." After a few lines, it is clear that Sitwell is telling a "fairy tale" where "children

gathering strawberries / Are changed by the heat into Negresses.” Yet the children’s hair remains blonde. The children are named after a seemingly random selection of characters from Roman and Greek mythology. Such naming seems to echo Augustan poetic diction. The plainly named Lily O’Grady reemerges and we learn that she is a “Negress black as the shade,” but it is unclear whether or not, like the “children earlier in the poem, her change in skin tone is the result of the heat.

Unlike Venus in “Hornpipe,” Lily is not content to remain on display; she flees from a lusty, “dog-haired” satyr. She escapes by plunging into a lake that contains fish named “Adeline, Charlottine, and Victorine.” The poem ends with a clever quatrain:

Now Pompey’s dead, Homer’s read,  
Heliogabalus lost his head,  
And shade is on the brightest wing,  
And dust forbids the bird to sing. (Collected Poems 156)

Sitwell returns to Rome and Greece to reduce two political figures and an epic poet to a silly nursery rhyme. Finding out how Heliogabalus “lost his head” is left to the reader’s research. By comparison with the beginning of the quatrain, the last two lines of the poem are much more serious and ambiguous. That darkness shades “the brightest wing” and “dust forbids the bird to sing” casts an ominous tone on the seemingly “silly” tale of Lily O’Grady. Yet, this tone is not reflected in the musical score, which ends in a neat recapitulation of the main, lighthearted theme. James D. Brophy adopts another approach to the closing couplet of the poem:

Edith Sitwell, who in 1920 denounced the ‘petits bonheurs’ of the British music hall, has not in ‘Popular Song’ produced a ‘tin-pan alley’ antithesis

to *The Waste Land*. The poem, in fact, ends with a perception entirely consonant with that of Eliot's poem,

*And Shade is on the brightest wing,*

*And dust forbids the bird to sing*

'Shade' in this context, as in qualifying Lily O'Grady, is evocative of an extensive range and depth of association. (145-146)

Brophy suggests that if Sitwell adopts music hall style at all, she does not do so in the haphazard way of music hall. Brophy argues that the final couplet of the poem shows that Sitwell was in full command of the meaning of her work: she refuses to leave the reader with the type of hackneyed conclusion found in "tin-pan alley" ballads.

In "Popular Song," Sitwell mixes the childishness of fairy tale with the classics of Homer and Greek and Roman history. But the end of the poem challenges the canon as "dusty." The new work that Sitwell is creating is cast in contrast, building as all great poetry does, from traditional sources. However, the poet's relationship with these traditions is called into question. As Brophy suggests, referring to this poem as a sound experiment unfairly reduces its rhetorical complexity. Yet, *Façade* is an artistic manipulation of music hall, not an outright rejection of it. Sitwell combines music hall with the classics to explore the consequences of such juxtaposition. Debora van Durme contends that Sitwell's letters show that she, in fact, "genuinely enjoyed and appreciated the exploits of popular culture *Façade* so insistently refers to" (108).

"Sir Beelzebub" often receives the most attention among the poems in *Façade*, but "Popular Song" is Sitwell at her rhythmic best. Glendinning describes the song's rhythm as "silky and swooping" (90). Gordon Bottomley praises it: "the poem dances, its

lines sway like dancers' draperies on a Greek vase: it is the essence of Miss Sitwell's early work, of that season of 'firstness' when poetry has a bloom on it which is an enchantment—and which must be foregone for the greater things" (69). Bottomley's comments echo Laura Severin's contention that Sitwell's later, subversive public persona allowed her to comment on the "greater things," presumably political subjects that were considered the exclusive reserve of male poets ("Acting" 46)..

Yet "Popular Song" is not just a study in rhythmic technique. When read within the social change of Sitwell's time, there are a few "greater things" at stake. Marsha Bryant notes that "Sitwell locates this poem in the English countryside so that her shady lady can disrupt the pleasant pastures of Georgian poetry and national identity" (262). Bryant concludes that "in the case of Sitwell's shady ladies, feminist critics have ignored the fact that their *race* proves as crucial as their gender to the text's unsettling of British cultural norms, and more crucial than gender to their excessive behavior" (264). As Pickering argues, the British form of minstrelsy exploits race for the purposes of an exploration of the white British class system. Lily O'Grady is costumed in a gown with "tucks" of green satin and she carries a "Parasol" that is made of "fol-de-rol." With these details, Sitwell shows that Lily's pretension to social congruity is as tacky as her parasol. Furthermore, Lily's pretension makes her stick out from the pastoral scene. However, just as in British minstrelsy, it is this sticking out that exposes the artifice of high society itself.

The 1954 recording of *Façade* concludes with the often anthologized "Sir Beelzebub." Like the two other poems discussed in this chapter, "Sir Beelzebub" displays Sitwell's seemingly uneasy relationship with the canon. In the poem, the looming figure

of Tennyson returns from “Hornpipe,” seemingly for more abuse. “Sir Beelzebub” recapitulates the imagery in the rest of *Façade*, especially echoing the opening poem, “Hornpipe.” For instance, Sir Beelzebub is set to order a drink, his “syllabub,” and one wonders if it resembles “the drinks” that Queen Victoria mentions in the opening poem and refers to the sea. There is also an allusion to Proserpine, who was taken to the underworld by Pluto, who was under the influence of Cupid’s dart, which was requested by Venus. Venus’s role in this narrative is another connection between the two poems. As with the waves in “Hornpipe,” the waves in “Sir Beelzebub” are described through concrete metaphor, and the sky is “hippopotamus-glum,” which is perhaps subtly different from the “rhinoceros-glum” sky of “Hornpipe,” but rhymes nonetheless.

The Tennyson persona from “Hornpipe” returns to “Sir Beelzebub” and is mildly mocked by the speaker, if not simply because the speaker places him in hell. Wisker notes that “emphasis on the alliteration of the *l* and *ll* ties the poem tightly together, as does the rhyme scheme that, while mimicking the forced conformity of rhyme and meter of Victorian poetry, similarly satirizes the restraint and stuffiness of the poets themselves” (304). This is not entirely accurate, since one of the excellent features of the poem is its seemingly haphazard internal rhyme: “benison”—“Tennyson”; “cold vegetation”—“pale deputations”; and in Pears’s performance, “Proserpine”—“gendarmerie.” These rhymes are not “forced conformity” because they do not follow an orderly pattern but play with language.

Despite his anticipated arrival in the underworld, Tennyson does not necessarily seem to be the subject of the speaker’s vicious attack. Wisker considers it to be simply a “mischievous reference” (304). If this is true, then it is more on the playful side of



mischievous than the malicious one. There is little evidence of attack in the following lines:

Nobody comes to give him his rum but the  
Rim of the sky hippopotamus-glum  
Enhances the chances to bless with a benison  
Alfred Lord Tennyson crossing the bar laid  
With cold vegetation from pale deputations  
Of temperance workers (all signed In Memoriam)  
Hoping with glory to trip up the Laureate's feet,

(Moving in classical metres) ... (Collected Poems 156)

The real threat to Tennyson's legacy comes from the "temperance workers" who hope to outdo their predecessor by producing superior metrical "feet" than the sometimes clumsy ones of Tennyson's verse. Placing "Sir Beelzebub" at the end of a performance of *Façade* is particularly relevant to Tennyson, who insisted that "Crossing the Bar" be placed at the conclusion of his poetry editions. As James D. Kissane argues, this may have been a decision based more on a consideration of the popularity of the poem than on its technical excellence:

Tennyson's stipulation that 'Crossing the Bar' be placed at the end of all editions of his poems has invited readers to regard it as an ultimate poetic statement; in any event, it is a splendid and characteristic lyric (though, like its author, popularly esteemed more because it expresses noble feelings than because it does so with rare art). (par. 16)

That Tennyson's poem could be considered one of his more popular poems makes Sitwell's use of it seem more of a convenient cultural reference to a popular work than a mocking gibe.

The reference to *In Memoriam*, however, is potentially more threatening than copycat poets. Looking at the syntax of the poem, the reference is really little more than a pun: it is the closing of the temperance workers' "benison" to Tennyson upon the news of his death. If the poem ended with line fourteen, then the speaker's attitude towards Tennyson could be considered irreverent, but not necessarily damning. Although Tennyson is seemingly on his way to hell, it seems to be a hell that is created by the malicious efforts of the "temperance workers," not the result of Tennyson's efforts as a poet.

The final lines of "Sir Beelzebub" release the tension (and rescue poor Tennyson) by coating the scene with lava and driving the temperance workers into the arms of the "sea's blue wooden gendarmerie" (16). This leaves Sir Beelzebub, who is still without his drink. In closing, to bring his drink. The closing line, ("...None of them come!"), contains enough ambiguity to invite several interpretations. For one, it echoes the demon's frustration with poor service, but it also comes after a full stop, which could place the words in the speaker's consciousness. Thus, it could reference the speaker's desire to lock the strange characters in the fantasy world of *Façade* or the speaker's hope that the temperance workers will not escape their captors. In this way, the speaker makes a final artistic statement: Tennyson's recurrence in *Façade* is an annoyance, a creative, yet sobering distraction to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the rest of the work. Yet, the

speaker/poet feels that she has to acknowledge the legacy of great poets while distancing herself from them.

To pin down the meaning of the poem, James D. Brophy comments that

The exaggerated monotony of “Sir Beelzebub” aptly demonstrates the hellishness of the unrelieved and undifferentiated. [...] the unchanging “classical metre” of Alfred Lord Tennyson” leads us to the final anguished cry, “None of them come!” Hell can be fashionable and elegant—and bright; Beelzebub, in Sitwell’s conception, can be a British lord demanding bar service in his hotel as long as his habitat is sterile and barren and no thing or person experiences growth or fulfillment.

Essentially, Sitwell’s conception of hell accords with Dante’s portrayal of the Inferno’s central frigid immobility. (119)

Brophy’s suggestion is supported by the musical score, which suspends the accompaniment to the words for a single line: “(Moving in classical metres)” Using Brophy’s concept of the “frigid immobility” of the hell of being forced to compose in “classical metres,” only something as dramatic as balaclava-like lava can get things moving again to conclude the speaker’s vision.

Considering the artistic statement in “Sir Beelzebub” as a particularly female one, Sonja Samberger notes that “‘Sir Beelzebub’ reveals the woman poet’s ambivalent attitude towards (male) poetic tradition and the clinging to a canon of well-established poems, and it conveys the feeling that something must change in the literary scene of the 1910s and 1920s” (81). Indeed, as her comments in “Some Observations on Women’s Poetry” show, Sitwell wanted women’s poetry to be fundamentally different from male

poetry in both form and subject. In this way, *Façade* was a dramatic departure from the Englishness that had attached itself to poetry during the Georgian period. No longer following the “classical metres,” the female poet was left to forge a new form.

In *Façade*, Sitwell’s frenetic rhythm, which is a clear departure from Tennyson’s “classical meters” is accented by William Walton’s lively music. The novelty of Sitwell’s and Walton’s approach should not be underrated because such collaboration was uncommon in English poetry, where used in combined performance, music was historically considered subservient to verse. Walton’s score highlights the humor and playfulness of *Façade*. It makes the performance much more “an entertainment” in the tradition of the music hall than a poetry reading with music in the background.

Glendinning argues that *Façade* was representative of Sitwell’s early poetry, which took its inspiration from a mixture of texts from Sitwell’s adult reading, texts from her childhood and objects surrounding her at the family home, Renishaw:

In her early verse, of the period of *Wheels* and for a few years after, nursery-rhyme language is mixed with the sort of evocative nonsense poetry peculiar to England, laced with a set of mannered images that recall the English 1890s as well as the French symbolists. Traditional tales and rhymes, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, J. M. Barrie, the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, the ballet designs of Bakst, the monkeys, negroes, and emperors of the Renishaw tapestries. (87)

Sitwell’s collection of items in *Façade*, what Glendinning terms “mannered images,” are not representative of England in particular, but they could certainly be seen as an extension of empire: museum pieces, animals in a zoo, or sideshow acts taken from the

reaches of British colonial expansion. While they echo colonial conquest, the poems also reflect how these items provide a stark contrast to a mundane Englishness of Sitwell's poetic predecessors. The conflict for contemporary critics comes as one considers Sitwell's participation in modernism's sometimes troublesome politics and Sitwell's own racial insensitivities.

Celeste M. Schenck argues that Sitwell placed herself in a difficult position, one in which she must define an approach to poetics that is distinct from male poetics but not "wallowing and soft" (228). For Sitwell, these poetics could not include forms like the sonnet or the use of blank verse, forms that she felt no woman should use. Instead of tapping into formal traditions (a living discourse) like the hymn or the sonnet, those forms common to women poets for centuries, Sitwell must forge her own form using inspiration from mostly male sources like European composers. Although seemingly contradictory, Sitwell's plan was to garner strength for the female poets that followed her to experiment with new poetic genres.

Sitwell further redefined the role of the female British poet as a performer of her own work. For example, during World War II, Sitwell read her poem "Still Falls the Rain" during an air raid on London in August 1944 and was praised for her heroism ("Acting" 53). She continued to perform *Façade* throughout her life, but increasingly adopted the onstage persona of Elizabeth I. Severin notes how, "after the war, Sitwell's queenly role did not play well. During a Labour government, it could not help but be a reminder of class privilege. In a time when colonies were breaking away, it could only bring back memories of British imperialism" ("Acting" 53). This image returns the reader to the days of *Façade*, where Sitwell saw the world as something that could be

appropriated for England, to make it, ironically, less English through the use of exotic contrast. As with many of her artistic productions, Sitwell's *Façade* sends mixed messages.

About Sitwell's later work, Stephen Spender comments that "her poems have [...] broadened far beyond any personal idiosyncrasies and become more deeply personal" (15). Glendinning, however, is less complimentary:

Because the poetry of her later years is different in mood and manner from her earlier work, a distinction has to be made when evaluating 'the poetry of Edith Sitwell.' It is in her early work—in the vitality and inventiveness of the *Façade* poems, and in the personal fantasy of *The Sleeping Beauty*, 'Colonel Fantock,' 'Madmoiselle Richarde,' and the *Troy Park* poems—that Edith best inhabited her peculiar talent. (97)

There is much left to be discovered in Sitwell's *Façade*. When read within the context of music hall and other forms of popular culture, *Façade* challenges the myth of Englishness by breaking down such cultural icons as Tennyson's metrics and Queen Victoria's global domination. Although early twentieth-century British attitudes towards race, gender, and empire challenge the work's relevance to our time, establishing the contexts of Sitwell's seeming insensitivities shows that the work was very much a product of its time: a eclectic portrait of a declining British Empire.

### **Part 3: Stevie Smith's Playground Songs**

The legend about why Florence Margaret Smith choose the name Stevie for herself holds that while she was riding horseback past a group of young men, they compared her to Steve Donaghue, a famous jockey of the day. That the young men were

possibly mocking young Florence didn't seem to matter to her. Julie Sims Steward contends that the name change shows Smith's "efforts to break free from the limitations assigned her as a woman in Edwardian England" ("Stevie Smith" 309). Indeed, Smith never "limited" herself by being married or having children, but her critical writing and interviews contain little evidence to cast her in the role of a feminist. Regardless, critics continue to debate Smith's feminist leanings. As Laura Severin argues, "though seldom explicitly political, Smith's work often expresses her frustration with the traditional definitions of femininity that effected women's lives and careers" ("The Gilt..." 204).

Many of the gender limitations Smith resisted were artistic ones: she saw canonical British literature as a playground full of underappreciated characters, full of words and rhythms. Smith did not limit her sources to canonical literature, though. She also found inspiration in music hall, fairy tales, popular music, newspaper clippings, religious treatises, observations of cat behavior, and Anglican hymns. Her mixing of high and low cultural forms lent a carnivalesque atmosphere to her work. By her own admission, Smith rarely read contemporary (modern and postmodern) poetry, with its emphases on formal experimentation and difference. Describing her contemporaries' work, Smith comments, "I don't know what they write," and feels thankful that reading them hasn't created a situation in her own work like "getting telephone lines crossed—you get something through, but it's meant for another, not you" (J. Williams 43). Instead, Smith often desired to reach readers through an active engagement with earlier works of literature (J. Williams 42). James Najarian points specifically to the Romantic period as an inspiration for Smith's aesthetic. He considers her a

*feminist* romantic, with distinctly romantic claims for the power of her imagination, even as she disguises these claims. Her work valorizes the imagination as much as any canonical ‘masculine’ romantic poet, only it appears not to be making the same claims—and aims to slip into the canon through a side door, as it were. (475)

The supporting evidence for Najarian’s argument for Smith as a Romantic are her poems that deal with the artist, such as “My Muse,” “The Poet Him,” “To an American Publisher,” “Poet!”, and “Mrs. Arbuthnot.” In these poems, Smith presents the imagination as a sovereign force that can abandon the poet at any time.

The speaker of “My Muse” concludes that she only finds inspiration when she is unhappy:

Why does my Muse only speak when she is unhappy?

She does not, I only listen when I am unhappy

When I am happy I live and despise writing

For my Muse this cannot be but dispiriting. (Collected Poems 405)

Because the Muse is used only occasionally, she “sits forlorn” at the beginning of the poem. The drawing that Smith places with the poem shows a seated, long-haired person with a sad, drooping eyes and eyebrows that slant downward. “My Muse” shows Smith exploring the imagination through the traditional invocation of a muse. However, instead of asking for the muse’s assistance, the speaker leaves “her Muse” wishing that “she had not been born.” Although the speaker strikes a sad note in suggesting that the artistic imagination only becomes accessible when the poet is unhappy, the speaker is clearly in control.



In addition to her attention to the power of the artist's imagination, Smith uses other "side door[s]" to engage with the canon. One alternative route is intertextuality, or direct engagement with art. This approach appears in such poems as "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock" (engages Coleridge), "Intimation of Immortality" (engages Wordsworth), "Dido's Farewell to Aeneas" (engages Virgil), "Childe Rolandine" (engages Browning, or maybe Shakespeare, or maybe a fairy tale, or maybe all three), "Mrs. Arbuthnot," (may engage Wilde's character of the same name in *A Woman of No Importance*, or the nineteenth-century diarist, Harriet Arbuthnot, and maybe even Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot"), "Songe d'Athalie" (engages Racine), "Little Boy Lost" and "Little Boy Sick" (engages Blake). Although these poems engage with canonical poetry, they do so not for the purpose of creating subtle allusions to be appreciated by astute readers but because the speaker seems compelled to respond to the earlier work, as if consumed with a desire to append. Again, the feeling is that of playfulness, a desire to mine another source for poetic inspiration. In this way, Smith echoes Sitwell's use of Tennyson as a character in *Façade*. There is something delightful about driving Tennyson into the underworld and, in Smith's case, wondering what Coleridge was really thinking when his composition of "Kubla Khan" was interrupted by a surprise visitor.

In "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock," Smith's speaker openly challenges Coleridge's curse for the person from Porlock who disrupted the transcription of his dream. The result, according to Coleridge, is a "fragment." In defense of the person from Porlock, Smith surrounds him with a narrative, complete with a fictional "cat named Flo." Julie Sims Steward describes Smith's creation of characters to supplement the backstory for "Kubla Khan":

Not only does she yoke her drawing to Coleridge in the poem, providing a new textual resonance to the old canonical work, but she describes the person said to have interrupted Coleridge in his composition as someone who ‘had a cat named Flo.’ Similarly the drowning tigress who stands as a figure for Pompey/Smith at the end of *Novel on Yellow Paper* is also named Flo. The parallel between the two cats allows Smith to write herself into Coleridge’s poem as an interrupting and interventionary agent in the canon. ("Pandora's Playbox" 76-79)

Smith’s act is intentionally allusive and engaging, but also very subversive. Smith’s deconstruction of Coleridge’s curse against the person who interrupted the flow of his artistic genius takes on a conversational, almost patronizing tone, as if she were peaking to a child. The speaker claims that the curse was “not right, it was wrong,” and yet she forgives Coleridge by stating, “But often we all do wrong” (Collected Poems 385).

In her defense of the person from Porlock, Smith gives him an origin, but not a name:

May we inquire the name of the Person from Porlock?

Why, Porson, didn’t you know?

He lived at the bottom of Porlock Hill

So he had a long way to go,

He wasn’t much in the social sense

Though his grandmother was a Warlock,

One of the Rutlandshire ones I fancy

And nothing to do with Porlock,

And he lived at the bottom of the hill as I said

And had a cat named Flo,

And had a cat named Flo. (Collected Poems 385)

The person from Porlock apparently “wasn’t much in the social sense,” which may explain his discourtesy in dropping on the poet apparently unannounced. His grandmother was from the “Warlock” clan of “Rutlandshire,” which are both wickedly funny puns, and the nursery-room rhyme of “Warlock” with “Porlock” is far removed from the more formal rhyme in Coleridge’s work. Readers receive their last biographical detail about the person when they learn about his cat’s name. The repetition of the line “And had a cat named Flo” gives a sing-song quality to the poem. Najarian reveals yet another connection between the cat, Coleridge, and the poet: “‘And had a cat named Flo’ is repeated as in a music-hall song, seeming to signal its own meaninglessness. The repetition and the seeming inconsequence of the cat makes the reader think that she is making a trivial joke. But the trivial joke stakes a claim: the cat named Flo shares her name with Florence Margaret Smith” (483). Thus, as both Steward and Najarian claim, for the poet, naming the cat Flo has tremendous artistic resonance for both allusive and personal reasons.

Najarian further contends that “Smith creates a space for her own aspirations to vision by denigrating Coleridge. She sees his dream vision as a fiction or even a lie: if Coleridge really had a vision, no person from Porlock could have stopped him” (484). Yet as Stevenson argues, “although the poem directly addresses Coleridge’s text, its

dialogic character mainly derives from radical breaks in the speaker's voice, as Smith renders conflicting 'thoughts' about her subject" (34). Thus, Smith's speaker seems unsure about how to restructure the myth. As Najarian argues, in a lot of Smith's poetry, what is really at stake is the Romantic notion of artistic inspiration (465). What is important is not that she can make sense of Coleridge's story but the fact that as a poet she has the same kind of thoughts as Coleridge. She shares the same kind of artistic struggles as Coleridge, and in the poem, these struggles can be democratized to include everyone else:

These thoughts are depressing I know, They are depressing,  
I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,  
Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting  
To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting  
With various mixtures of human character which goes best,  
All is interesting for him it is exciting, but not for us.

(Collected Poems 286)

Civello argues that "Stevie Smith's professional poetry centers around the debate between proponents of the literary canon and writers of contemporary literature" (39). In "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock," Smith argues that poets have the right to use canonical literature as an inspirational playground. She wants to invite as many people into this playground as possible.

Even though one could create lists of poems in which Smith struggles for inspiration and finds it in canonical texts, there might be equally lengthy lists of poems about lighter subjects, like cats acting in a cat-like way and children playing. The sheer

variety of themes in her work makes possible textual evidence for diverse arguments. One of these arguments is that Smith's work contains a sense of Englishness. In support of this argument, several of Smith's poems comment on what it means to be English. One such poem is the epigrammatic "This Englishwoman," which consists of only two lines:

This Englishwoman is so refined  
She has no bosom and no behind. (Collected Poems 68)

In the true sense of an epigram, the title "This Englishwoman" could be the inscription to a rather unflattering monument. To assist the reader with this image, Smith provides a drawing of a slender woman holding a parasol and wearing a hat adorned with two flowers.

The woman in "This Englishwoman" keeps up appearances despite her apparent physical shortcomings. Alison Light contends that "the Englishness which resonates through Smith's poems is often brisk and sometimes brittle; it keeps up appearances and spirits at all costs, and being matter of fact, its pathos often lies in what reticence represses" (241). Although the message of keeping up appearances is "brisk" in "This Englishwoman," Smith's title indicates that the character is not necessarily meant to stand for all Englishwomen, just "this" particular Englishwoman. The perseverance the poem displays is tied to the woman's high social class, which allows for the privilege of refinement. In Smith's work, such perseverance costs her subjects dearly. In "Drugs Made Pauline Vague," a housewife struggles with her assigned role in society:

Chuff chuff Pauline what's the matter?  
Said the Brigadier to his wife  
Who did not even notice

What a handsome couple they made. (Collected Poems 264)

Such poems reflect profound changes in British culture. For instance, the bland domestic interior that appears in the poem would seem strange in the poetic artifice of Edith Sitwell's poetry. That Pauline needs "drugs" to somehow cope with life is another modern concern. Drugs appear to liberate Pauline from, to use Light's words, "what reticence represses." Instead, Pauline can absentmindedly sit at the

breakfast table

Fingering in a baffled way

The fronds of the maidenhair plant. (Collected Poems 264)

The myth of Englishness often takes the form of a core set of national values, typified by phrases like "stiff upper lip." As Stevie Smith was coming of age between the Wars, these values promoted domestic roles for women. For Smith, the glamour of a happy marriage was a myth perpetuated in magazines that became a harsher reality soon enough for young brides. As Smith, and her fictional heroine Pompey Casmilus knew, domestic life was not all it was cracked up to be. In *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), Pompey muses on life as a "Married Woman":

First of all there is Fiction for the Married Woman. This is how it goes.

Sure enough Miss Snooks has got married to that nice solid young fellow.

But somehow the gilt is off the gingerbread. It is all washing up and

peeling potatoes, and there are several *kiddies*, and the furniture isn't paid

for, and is already beginning to look like it was time for some more. And

oh how dim drab and dreary is life in terms of squawling brats and cash

installments. (Novel on Yellow Paper 169)

As in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, the voice in Smith's poetry sees how 'the gilt is off the gingerbread' of many myths. For example, Laura Severin, who uses Smith's line about gingerbread as the title of an essay, argues that Smith often used fairy tales to resist "the conservative rhetoric of domesticity in the 1930s and 1950s" ("The Gilt..."203).

However, the poet seems reluctant to completely relinquish these myths, as if they still have value to inspire the poetic imagination. Smith revisits and explodes popular myths like fairy tales to escape a total sense of alienation from society, but she is careful to de-romanticize the original messages of the myths. Because she de-romanticizes myths like Englishness, yet recycles them, Smith simultaneously affirms and subverts their power.

With her use of nursery rhyme repetition, fairy tales, simple line drawings, perfect rhyme, short, lyric stanzas, generally simple diction, and infrequent use of formal meter or convoluted syntax, it is tempting to suggest that Smith's poetry lies more on the side of doggerel than canonical poetry. Yet, for one to call her work "childlike or "simple" performs a great disservice to the layered complexity of her best poetry. With careful attention to recurring themes in her oeuvre, to her use of intertextuality, to her choice of drawings to accompany her poems, and to her obsession with rhythm, which one may liken it to comedic timing, Smith's work often achieves tremendous depth whereas it has been dismissed as light verse on par with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.

Just as in music, the form of Smith's poetry often relies on sound imagery to convey meaning. As Sheryl Stevenson argues, "Smith characteristically uses aural images (of tapping, sighing, speaking) to stress impeded communication, the insurmountable isolation of the perpetual outsider" (31). Ultimately, Stevenson argues that "rather than seeing Stevie Smith in terms of one voice or view, we can instead admire the subtlety and

artistry of her representations of voices, which can heighten our sense of the powers and limits of human speech” (43). This seems certainly true of the diversity of media in which Smith worked. The sheer volume of her drawings and poems may seem overwhelming, but even so they are incomplete without Smith’s use of music, especially her choice of tunes for many of her poems. Laura Severin concludes that “Smith’s composite art works to destabilize, and therefore deconstruct, the ideal feminine images of her time by mixing them with her culture’s less ideal images and images from past ‘high’ art and popular discourses” (*Resistant Antics* 53). Smith’s poetry is a “composite art” because she works simultaneously with poetry, drawings and music to communicate with her audience.

Smith is better known among contemporary readers for her visual texts than for her musical tastes. Included with collections of her poetry are her drawings, which she always contended were produced separately from the poems and then later paired for publication. She tells one interviewer that “the drawings are not illustrations for the poems. I take a drawing which I think ‘illustrates’ the spirit or the idea in the poem rather than any incidents in it” (J. Williams 46). Laura Severin and other critics have provided critical work on the connection between the drawings and the text of Smith’s poetry.<sup>59</sup> Smith’s own comments suggest that the drawings do not comment directly on the content of the poems they are paired with. Instead, they express a similar spirit or tone. In this way, the drawings become an addition to the text of the poems—something to challenge, or complicate the meaning of the verse. They are not meant to be literal accompaniment. They are variations on a theme.

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<sup>59</sup> Also see Steward’s “Pandora’s Playbox,” and Bluemel’s “The Dangers of Eccentricity” for in-depth analysis of how Smith’s drawings function in the text.



Romana Huk has created a valuable term for discussing the function of Smith's drawings. She terms them "extradiscursive 'codas,'" which gives the drawings a new life outside the poem they are attached to (247). For Huk, the drawings reveal Smith's knowledge of the limits of language: "like Dickinson, whose many dashes seem to gesture toward the limits of language, Smith emphasizes the uneasy subversiveness of her project by counterpointing any and all emergent statements produced in her poems with [...] her much misunderstood, cartoonlike drawings" (247). Echoing Huk's contention that the drawings are like musical codas, Sheryl Stevenson and Kristin Bluemel read Smith's "doodles" as sound, composing a different voice from the one in the poetry (Bluemel 118).

Regardless of the perspective one takes on the drawings, the danger in discarding them as a part of critical analysis is losing some of Stevie Smith's profound sense of creativity. The fact that she could "match" so many of them to poems written separately shows that she was constantly revisiting certain visual images. For at least one critic, Kristin Bluemel, the drawings are another piece of evidence in the argument for Smith's sense of humor. Bluemel argues that "to insist that readers must take Smith's eccentric doodles seriously is to relieve the poet of some of the burden of her critic's blindness toward her humor" (123).

Like Dickinson, Smith often composed to hymn-like tunes. Like Gay, these tunes were often familiar and very English. Yet her use of them is for dynamic purposes beyond affirming Englishness. She uses the familiar tunes are used to keep the reader or listener focused on a particular rhythm. An example of this type of poem is "To the Tune of the Coventry Carol." Unlike the original song, which is set in common meter, Smith's

poem is written in six-line stanzas, rhyming AABCCB, and repeating the pattern with different rhyming words. Furthermore, a scan of the lines shows that Smith uses dimeter feet for the first two lines, leaving the third and sixth lines of the first and third stanza longer by a complete foot and an extra, seventh syllable. In these stanzas, there are 30 syllables, which does not fit comfortably within common meter, which would have 28 (two tetrameter and two trimeter lines). However, the middle stanza has 28 syllables and could be easily aligned with the tune, although the rhyme would suffer. Because much of the poem's meter and rhyme fit uncomfortably with the original tune, it appears that the poet is not using the tune as an easy template for rhyme and meter. Instead, Smith uses the Coventry carol to add depth to the meaning of her poem. Smith's speaker takes a harsh view towards anything but an honest, uncompromising love:

The nearly right  
And yet not quite  
In love is wholly evil  
And every heart  
That loves in part  
Is mortgaged to the devil. (Collected Poems 25)

Mark Storey contends that the "typically English compromise is condemned as the worst evil" (189). To prevent this evil, the speaker concludes the poem with the antidote for compromise: "Forget him and forget her."

The original song is a Christmas carol about the birth of Jesus and the salvation of his followers. For Laura Severin, "in Smith's rendition, the poem ends up questioning society's (and religion's) expectations that all will love and marry, and thus conform,

regardless of their individual feelings” (Resistant Antics 125). There is perhaps some irony in Smith’s use of the tune, but her poem follows “The Singing Cat” and “Le Singe Qui Swing” in casting just enough ambivalence to escape a bitter tone. Despite Severin’s suggestion, the speaker never mentions marriage directly. What is in question is truly devoted love versus a “nearly right” and a “not quite” kind of love. In this sense, the poem sanctifies true love and argues that the heart that does not love completely “is mortgaged to the devil.” Again, there is a sense of play. Cracking a carnivalesque smile, the poet uses a familiar nativity song to condemn the tendency to sustain flawed relationships.

Beyond the use of hymn tunes to set the rhythm of her poetry, much of Smith’s poetry also has a lyrical quality that critics often term “sing-song.” This is another aspect of her poetry that leads critics to mistake her artistry for simplicity. Arthur C. Rankin’s analysis of the flow of Smith’s poetry sounds reminiscent of Sitwell’s work in *Façade*:

By the subtle use of assonance and vowel music, by varying the length of the lines, by way-out or internal rhyming, by delicate or daring syncopation, by the odd, unexpected word, by sudden lapses into flat or banal verbiage, by skilful punctuation or by absence of punctuation, she achieved an enchanting sense of flow and spontaneity. Her verse sings and dances. (15)

The singing and dancing quality of Smith’s poetry provides another association with music hall. Smith uses music hall conventions to achieve depth in meaning through an association.

For several critics, the lyric quality of Smith's verse originates in her difficult childhood, a childhood that must have seemed to come to an end too soon. Jessica Walsh posits that "infused with the sorrow of loss, she employs the sing-song rhythms of nursery rhymes and the haphazard violence of fairy tales to tackle the difficulties of an unwelcome adulthood" (57). Walsh further reports that, as a child, "her moments of true enthusiasm came during songs, when she would belt out whichever melody appealed to her, regardless of what other girls were singing" (61). This image of the young Florence Margaret Smith is strongly reminiscent of her character Ms. Pauncefort who sings at the top of her voice even though no one understands her. Evidently, this impulse for singing never left Smith. Romana Huk reports on Stevie's adulthood: "she was known for her adeptness at repartee and her tendency to break into some familiar song or ballad, or to recite some part of a favorite poem committed to memory" (243). The inspiration Smith found in song is often overlooked, but it serves as an important part of the "composite art" that speaks to Smith's vision of poetry: it must be seen and sung to be understood properly.

Although Severin's concept of Smith's "composite art" is useful in explaining how one should read Smith's text as a hybrid mix of different forms of art, it does not explain Smith's playfulness in mixing high and low forms of art. That Smith's work may be analyzed using Bakhtinian dialogic theory is widely suggested by critics, but little substantial work has been done on the subject of Smith's poetic landscape as a carnivalesque world.<sup>60</sup> For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque takes the form of a suspension of workaday existence, where the mixing of "high" and "low" forms of culture are the norm

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<sup>60</sup> James Najarian mentions Bakhtin by name in his consideration of Smith's dialogics. He also cites Sheryl Stevenson, Romana Huk, and Martin Pumphrey as critics who have noted Smith's linguistic play (Najarian 472). Bakhtin's most sustained discussion of carnival literature is found in *Rabelais and His World*.

and accepted by everyone. In some way or another, much of Smith's work approaches these aspects of the carnivalesque, especially in how she presents female characters in suspension from their normal roles. This type of subversion is often mistaken for Smith "having a laugh," but as Bakhtin's theory contends, her laughter typically becomes what could be called a carnivalesque expression:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (11-12)

An example of carnival laughter is found in Smith's poem "The Singing Cat." The poem opens with the image of a "fretful" cat whose owner has placed it in a small box so that it may be taken on a "crowded train." The owner then removes the cat "And all the people look at him / He is so beautiful." This collective experience of seeing the cat echoes Bakhtin's need for "all the people" to create carnival laughter. The cat worries its owner a bit ("he pricks and oh he prods / And turns upon her knee") before beginning a mournful wailing. In describing the cat's song, Smith gives ample justification for the laughter of the people on the train:

Then lifteth up his innocent voice

In plaintive melody.

He lifteth up his innocent voice

He lifteth up, he singeth

And to each human countenance

A smile of grace he bringeth.

He lifteth up his innocent paw

Upon her breast he clingeth

And everybody cries, Behold

The cat, the cat that singeth.

He lifteth up his innocent voice

He lifteth up, he singeth

And all the people warm themselves

In the love his beauty bringeth. (Collected Poems 367)

In actuality, the cat is crying out in distress, but the poet ignores this misery to provide carnival amusement for the people on a crowded train. Smith's words provide the "gay relativity" of the experience. Although a wailing cat might be an unwelcome addition to the din on a crowded train, Smith notes that "All the people warm themselves / In the love his beauty bringeth." In terms of expectations, the enjoyment of the passengers is perhaps ironic, but the overall message that the poet provides remains "ambivalent," to use Bakhtin's description, because Smith's description of the cat's song gives a

“mocking, deriding” presentation of religious hymns of suffering and perseverance. The rhymes of the archaic words (“lifteth,” “singeth,” “bringeth,” “clingeth”) emphasizes the sing-song aspect of the poem’s “music.”

The poem, which mixes the pseudo-religious language of hymns with what is essentially a poem about a cat on a train, expresses another aspect of the carnivalesque: the mixing of high and low cultural forms. If Smith intends allegory, then it seems that it is the cat’s song that is meant to express more than wailing. This is evidenced by the language in the poem. Before the cat begins singing, Smith does not employ the pseudo-religious diction. Smith’s poetry certainly addresses religion frequently. Poems like “Oh Christianity, Christianity” contains Smiths questioning of Christian faith: “Oh what do you mean, what do you mean? / You never answer our difficulties” (Collected Poems 417). However, it is the smiles on the passengers’ faces in “The Singing Cat” that complicates its role as a religious poem—unless the cat’s suffering is misinterpreted. Romana Huk describes the somber tone of the poem as a whole:

In ‘The Singing Cat,’ the hymnlike movement of the lines produces a reverent tone that all but overrides any discrepancy between the content—the unintelligible experience of the cat—and the form through which it becomes reinterpreted. But the poem promotes collisions between an archaic language of celebration (artificially introduced in the third stanza) and the cat’s signals of immediate, ‘fretful’ experience—between a discourse of reverence and a discourse of pain, however overpowered. (251)

In Huk's words, Smith's "reverence" for the cat's performance lends credibility to its religious role, but the "hymnlike movement" solidifies Smith's message that the cat's song should not be taken lightly. And still, the carnivalesque creeps in: the ambivalence behind the speaker's reverence suggests that one read (or sing) the poem with a wry smile on one's face.

Another text that lends credibility to Smith's use of allegory is the section from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* that begins "For I will consider my cat Jeoffry." Smart imbues his cat with religious importance, inspiring the speaker to consider the faith of his cat:

For he is the servant of the living God duly and daily  
serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East  
he worships in his way.

For is this done by wreathing his body seven times  
round with excellent quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the  
blessing of God upon his prayer. (1166)

Smith and Smart share a reverence for a cat's seemingly mundane performances. They also share the ideas that observing a cat can teach the speaker about faith. Both poets employ a wry sense of humor and irony in their descriptions of cats; as Smart suggests, a cat is "good to think on, if a man would express / himself neatly" (1168). Although it is unclear whether or not Smith had Smart's cat Jeoffry in mind, there is certainly a shared sense of carnival laughter between the two poets.



“The Singing Cat” is humorous, but certainly not light verse. According to Rankin, the poem “deftly avoids sentimentality” (60). For Larkin, Smith’s fondness for cats (she wrote a book on cats) was one of the things that he found difficult about appreciating her work as a whole (Mallot 172). Still, the poem is not really addressed to cat lovers. As with many of her poems, Smith revisits her theme of ambivalent laughter. Mallot considers this ambivalence to be a form of miscommunication and casts it in linguistic terms: “Smith’s poetry, then, moves from an initial reluctance to emit signifiers to a more tortured position in which the sender and recipient of a message rarely succeed. Complicating this maneuver are Smith’s simultaneous tendencies to pull poetic inspiration from her own life and adopt the many and varied masks of identity” (177). Masks, of course, are the property of carnival. For Mallot, the cat cannot communicate its real feelings to the human observers on the train and is left to suffer an agonizing experience. Like that of the drowning man in Smith’s most famous poem, “Not Waving but Drowning.” Unlike Miss Pauncefort in Smith’s poem “The Songster,” the cat’s song does not appear to give its singer pleasure.

In addition to its use of carnival laughter, Smith’s work reveals a “camp” taste.<sup>61</sup> Creating a world where subversive female personalities are possible is reminiscent of music hall, a world where female performers could sing a sentimental song or dance a seductive dance in the same night. Yet, in public performances of her work, not all audience members followed Smith’s carnivalesque expressions. Steward reports that “her eccentric poetry readings, in which she often dressed like a young girl and sang her poems off key, did not always meet with audience approval” (“Stevie Smith” 310). Still, she allows everyone to participate, as she tells interviewer Jonathan Williams:

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<sup>61</sup> I am using Barry J. Faulk’s use of the term camp that appears in *Music Hall & Modernity* (Faulk 61).

When I was reading some poems the other day, a man in the audience got up and said, ‘I guess I must be the only person here who knows that tune,’ So, I handed him the book and said, ‘Well, I wish you would sing it, because I only get as near to the tune as I can. I have very little sense of pitch or tune.’ So he sang it to the proper tune. And then I said I’d sing it now to ‘my’ tune so the audience could hear the difference. I did. The audience was kind enough to say that I had made a ‘different’ tune, but a nice one. (J. Williams 41)

In another interview, Smith explains that she enjoys singing her poetry because it teaches her audience the natural rhythm of her composition: “that’s why I like reading my own poems aloud—and best of all, singing them—because you can’t really put the accents on paper so that other people will inevitably read them correctly, you see” (Orr 32). As she achieved renown as a poet, Smith’s became more adventurous in her public performances, adding a new dimension to her poetry that readers could not experience by simply looking at them on a page. For example, Anthony Thwaite notes that “the quality of her poems was immensely enhanced by her own reading (or often chanting or singing) or them: her readings *became* her poems, with her inimitable blend of levity, loneliness, and sometimes asperity” (26). According to Seamus Heaney’s description, Smith’s voice was not one that would have played well in a music hall but she increasingly used song as part of her performances.<sup>62</sup> For instance, Laura Severin notes how Smith’s early poetry readings and recordings for the BBC were strictly conventional, whereas she eventually

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<sup>62</sup> Seamus Heaney claims that she “chanted her poems artfully off-key” (Heaney “A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith” 211).

began to incorporate song into her performances as her popularity increased (Resistant Antics 122).

Severin describes one of these later performances:

A typical Smith poetry reading included not only the expected recitation of poems, but also the singing of two or three of her works to familiar-sounding tunes. Although Smith often ‘borrowed’ these tunes from Anglican hymns, folk melodies, popular or music hall songs, and an occasional military march, she also created her own tunes, in imitation of the above genres. (Severin Resistant Antics 117)

Of Smith’s performance at the 1965 Edinburgh Festival, Severin reports that “she ends the performance with the uplifting ‘Le Singe qui Swing,’ sung to the nationalistic tune of ‘Greensleeves,’ which presents a vision of another, more affirmative Britain” (“Acting” 62). As made clear through the song’s reuse as far back as *The Beggar’s Opera*, “Greensleeves” has deep roots in British culture and certainly would be familiar to a British audience, especially one that might have been in a music hall. Severin comments that “though seemingly an apolitical piece, even a children’s poem, she gives it a political context by singing it to the tune of ‘Greensleeves,’ a song that through its familiarity has become representative of Britain” (Severin “Acting” 64). It is not as political as choosing “Rule, Britannia,” but it is not too far off. Smith’s choice of the tune of “Greensleeves” for what is essentially a silly poem both affirms and subverts Englishness. The poem ends with the following quatrain:

Oh ho the swinging ape,  
The happy peaceful animal,

Oh ho the swinging ape,

I love to see him gambol. (Collected Poems 252)

Like Sitwell in *Façade*, Smith takes an exotic image and places it just “Outside the house” (Collected Poems 252). Neither the details in the poem nor the title reveals that the poem is set in Britain. The only association comes from the Englishness of “Greensleeves,” which demonstrates the importance of song in an analysis of Smith’s poetry. The juxtaposition between the traditional English song and the exotic ape ( to highlight this, Smith uses the French word for Monkey or “ape” in her title) is yet another episode of carnival laughter.

“The Songster” is another poem where Smith reveals both her interest in song and carnival laughter. In the poem, Smith places another women outside the norms of social decorum. It is also a poem that is insightful in the context of Smith’s later poetry readings. The poem consists of a single quatrain:

#### The Songster

Miss Pauncefort sang at the top of her voice

(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry down the lane)

And nobody knew what she sang about

(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry all the same). (Collected Poems 30)

If the reader takes “tirry-lirry-lirry” as the burden of the ballad form, then Smith could be placing “Miss Pauncefort” in an old tradition of ballad subjects.<sup>63</sup> Yet there is very little of a narrative to the poem. It is more epigrammatic, with the “joke” about Miss

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<sup>63</sup> In addition to its resemblance to repeated nonsense words in ballads, Smith could also be alluding to Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott,” where Lancelot “sings “Tirra-lirra, by the river.” Additionally, in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Autolycus enters scene 3 of Act IV, singing a song that contains the line “The lark, that tirra-lyra chants.”

Pauncefort's lack of concern for communication coming at the end. The inclusion of what resembles a burden alludes to an earlier tradition of folk song, a tradition of song that is open to the voices of both men and women, a tradition preserved into Smith's time by performances in music hall.

Considering the frustration that many in Smith's audiences experienced at her poetry readings, it is tempting to read the poem as an autobiographical expression of the poet's desire to sing despite the knowledge that her audience is not following the meaning of the words. However, there is simply too little to connect Smith's poetry with Miss Pauncefort's silly song. What the reader learns about the songster is that she is an unmarried woman who is unperturbed about having trouble getting the message of her song across. The liberating act is the singing of the song itself, as loudly as possible.

Despite its brevity, Alison Light sees the poem as,

typical of Stevie Smith's poetry, with their mixture of whimsy and buried melancholy, or archness and sadness [...], her constant use of parody and pastiche, together with the mimic's magpie gift of collecting and savouring odd snatches of social idioms [...], her verses are as likely to irritate as to amuse. (239)

Smith's habit of "collecting [...] social idioms," in Light's estimation, takes on a particularly English quality. About Smith's poems, Light argues that "their throwaway humour and singsong quality sit uneasily with Smith's subject matter and a frequent preoccupation with death and illness, desolation and abandonment" (239). Once again, Smith takes on the theme of miscommunication. Only this time she uses the trope of song, which is generally seen (by Yeats, at least) as a way of communicating to a wider

audience, those unfamiliar with the nuances of literary verse. It results in an artistic paradox that is common in Smith: sometimes the act of creating art is more important than the end result.

Light's concept of "social idioms" at play in Smith's works should not be limited to Smith's Englishness. Instead, one should emphasize the plurality of "idioms," which could be adopted to incorporate a diversity of voices other than the ones usually included in the myth of Englishness within British poetry. In the true spirit of Smith's carnivalesque, the shared laughter needs equal participation from all levels of society. The accessibility of Smith's work, through what Light terms "throwaway humour and singsong quality" makes this possible. Yet there is a conscious grappling with the canon that Smith undertakes in her poetry which makes her work somewhat less accessible. Her work creates a sort of artistic paradox between elements of intertextuality with canonical texts and elements of popular culture like song and line drawings.

Smith's camp taste and carnival laughter have proved a challenge to her position in the canon. Martin Pumphrey puts Smith's legacy in relation to her canonicity:

the particular construction of 'seriousness' that has traditionally validated the procedures of English Literary Studies is at issue here. Like 'excessive' popularity, ephemerality, and idiosyncrasy, play and fantasy have been construed as negative categories against which the literary canon is defined. (98)

Pumphrey was one of the earliest proponents of Smith's role in the canon, but whether Smith would have seen the canon as a fiction to be deconstructed is subject to debate. It

remains to be seen if camp studies will enter the mainstream of literary theory, but Smith's keen sense of camp would provide scholars with ample material for analysis.

Discussing Smith's role in the canon, Light notes that "the English may love nonsense or light verse but they don't like to be found reading it" (240). For years, this has haunted Smith's legacy as a poet. Her doodles are a text that almost instantly colors her poetry as having a similar quickly-dashed-off quality. Yet the drawings can also be read as footnotes like the ones Eliot provides for *The Waste Land*: cryptic and only loosely related to the poems. Like Eliot's footnotes, Smith's drawings give another avenue for interpretation of the text. Although Smith drew pictures and composed verse as separate exercises, it is remarkable how many of the drawings and poems touch on the same themes and subjects.

Another difficulty in placing Smith in the history of British poetry is that she does not comfortably fit in with her contemporaries. She began composing verse in the 1930s, but her work did not become widely read until the early 1960s, when interest in the Movement writers was waning and poetry was losing its force in British society.<sup>64</sup> This is why she is often categorized as an outsider, or eccentric. However, these comprised only a few of her identities. Smith had many more, leaving her to create what Anthony Thwaite calls a "unique mixture of whimsical gloom, eccentric common sense, incantation, nursery rhyme, doggerel and rhythmic subtlety" (25).

In terms of Smith's participation in Englishness, Alison Light argues for a new, more inclusive understanding of women's writing:

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<sup>64</sup> The Movement generally includes Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, Robert Conquest, and John Holloway: the poets anthologized in the collection *New Lines* (1956). For a discussion of the making of this list, see (Bradley 2).

We need another history of Englishness which can include its domestic history and the history of its domestication (or perhaps privatization or exteriorization). Such a history is bound to suggest that we look in other places for the shaping of the collective life of the nation, apart from the usual sites of academic or scholarly research, breaking down the usual literary apartheid between so-called high and low forms: from the poetry of provincial newspapers to the history of recitation, of verse-speaking competitions, Sunday schools, home journals, of funeral verses (the dirge seems to have been very much a woman's form) and albums, the anthologies and popular collections. (254)

Light's words are particularly poignant for a consideration of how poets employ popular forms of music to prevent miscommunication.

Both Smith and Sitwell insist that women will be heard, even if no one is listening or understanding. It is perhaps for this reason that they offered texts that were layered with different media, including elements of popular culture such as fairy tales and music hall conventions. Once again, one returns to their public personas. Laura Severin contends that "by playing the grotesque in elaborate brocades or prim pinafores, they refused to become what women have always been—superfluous—and struck at the heart of national discourse" ("Acting" 65). Often, their resistance to the myth of patriarchal Englishness came from the juxtaposition of proper English traditions with irreverent, and thus resistant, expressions from popular culture. Although this juxtaposition is similar to Gay's use of popular ballad tunes in *The Beggar's Opera* and Yeats's use of English balladry to write Irish ballads in that it combines popular culture with art to resist a



proscribed English identity, Sitwell and Smith also use popular culture to resist a proscribed gender identity. Light suggests that when the “apartheid” between low and high forms of art ends, “another history of Englishness” begins. For British poetry, a challenge to writing a new history is how does one establish a canon of national literature. Sitwell and Smith, with their engagement with canonical English poetry and popular culture, both illustrate the greater inclusivity of such a new conception of Englishness.

## Chapter Four: The Place of Popular Music in John Betjeman and Philip Larkin's Poetry

I have sometimes thought that this collection of Betjeman's poems would be something I should want to take with me if I were a soldier leaving England: I can't think of any other poet who has preserved so much of what I should want to remember, nor one who, to use his own words, would so easily suggest 'It is those we are fighting for, foremost of all.' (Larkin "It Could" 135)

To read Philip Larkin straight is to appreciate his wry regret for the passing of pastoral England, whereas to read him between ideological blinkers is to see his poetry as part of a jaded post-imperial Britain. (Eagleton 96)

### **Part 1: The English Odeon**

Arguably the two twentieth-century poets that best represent the myth of Englishness are John Betjeman and Philip Larkin. Critics often note how they look into England's past to find something to help them cope artistically with profound social change. In critical discourses on poetry, Larkin and Betjeman are not considered equals, Larkin receiving a larger share of attention. Critical attention to Betjeman has never flourished. Even the recent centenary of his birth, the 2007 dedication of a new statue of him in the newly refurbished St. Pancras train station (one of the many architectural landmarks that Betjeman helped save from the wrecking-ball during his lifetime), and a new edition of his collected poetry (2006) failed to create much of a stir. Nonetheless, Betjeman's name continues to circulate within popular cultural and architectural circles.

What separates Betjeman and Larkin from previous poets in this dissertation is that music, especially popular music, does not register in their poetry as a primary mode

of the expression of national identity. For both poets, popular music is a background fixture, a cultural expression that escapes the poet's grasp to measure some aspect of life outside of artistic concerns. There are exceptions to this rule, certainly, but music is noticeably less prominent in the stronger poems of these two poets. As I will argue, there are two primary reasons for this: between the two World Wars American music was profoundly influenced British popular music, and the increased commercialization of popular music decreased its subversive power.

Instead of using popular music to express national identity, poets like Betjeman and Larkin saw popular music as a cause of cultural denigration. In most cases, when music appears in Betjeman and Larkin's poetry, it cannot be separated from the cultural institution it is used to represent. For example, Betjeman often cites the music of church bells ringing, but the sound has little meaning outside of its association through the belfry with the institution of the church. When Larkin mentions the Beatles, it is not because he likes their music but because he recognizes their role in history, of what society looks like after their first LP stormed through British culture. Rejecting music as a mode of artistic expression, by the end of their careers both poets lean towards the visual, sometimes spiritual, iconography of England. Visual icons may come from architecture or the fading lines between city and country as it is in Betjeman's poetry, or in the posters, photographs, and poetic cinematography of the landscape passing by a train window in Larkin's poetry. I argue that the rhetorical tangibility of the visual images in Betjeman's and Larkin's poetry is what makes them seem so English. If audiences can touch icons of Englishness, they can preserve or grasp them before contemporary life sweeps them away.

Artistically speaking, Betjeman and Larkin's choice not to employ popular music as a trope or inspiration for their poetics was parallel to reactionary movements in British music itself. As was true in John Gay's time, the influence of foreign music posed a tremendous threat to native forms. In Betjeman and Larkin's day, however, the threat came not from Italy but from the United States, and the reaction in Britain was to reassert the artistic contributions of British musicians and composers, while tolerating aspects of the foreign music popular with British audiences. James J. Nott describes the situation:

As a bulwark against the Americanization of popular music, there was a growing tendency to develop a distinctive British style of playing, which was largely a result of the survival of traditional music training by many who were influential in British popular music. The international idiom of jazz and dance music underwent a transformation in Britain between 1918 to 1939, where it was Anglicized—shaped to local conditions by assimilating some of the nation's traditional musical styles and techniques. (232)

The “Anglicization” of foreign music continues today, as evidenced by artists like Jamie T, who employs hip-hop elements in his music, and the Rumble Strips, whose music incorporates Jamaican ska. As will be discussed in the following chapter, these efforts at “Anglicization” are often racist in tone. Despite such music's association with Englishness, Betjeman and Larkin both seem reluctant to incorporate popular forms of music in their poetry. Instead, when they address popular music, they generally focus on the commercial side of the enterprise—music as a mechanically reproduced product.

By the end of the Second World War, the increased commercialization of the music industry made it more a cultural expression of economic progress than one of nostalgic patriotism. According to James J. Nott, “by 1939, virtually all aspects of the supply and creation of popular music in Britain had been touched by commercialism” (Nott 226). In my opinion, two results of this commercialization were the eventual death of music hall and an increase in album sales. According to John Mundy,

The consumption of popular music on record was helped considerably by the Decca label’s [in the 1930s] decision to concentrate on developing a catalog of popular as opposed to classical or ‘serious’ music, and by the lowering of unit price as the result of competition from smaller companies that sold their records through retailers such as Woolworths and Marks and Spencer. (37)

Music hall, which had been the center of popular national musical expression since Victorian times, was gradually replaced by commercial music in the form of movie musicals, pressure on the BBC to play popular music, and the development of the affordable long play record (LP), which increased recording times from eight minutes per record (4 minutes per side on a 78 RPM record) to slightly more than 40 minutes per record (both sides of a 33 1/3 RPM record).<sup>65</sup> According to jazz aficionado Philip Larkin, “when the long-playing record was introduced in the middle fifties, I was suspicious of it: it seemed like a package deal, forcing you to buy bad tracks along with good at an unwontedly-high price” (All What Jazz 18).

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<sup>65</sup> From the time of the first major Hollywood musical, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), starring Al Jolson, and the invention of the LP (1948), music hall experienced a steady decline.

Another contributing factor to the death of music hall was the popularity of Hollywood and British-made musical films. Between the wars, movie theatres sprang up all over Britain at a rapid rate. At the center of this construction was Oscar Deutsch, whose Odeon theatres find their way into both Betjeman and Larkin's poetry. Betjeman notes how an "Odeon flashes fire" in his poem "The Metropolitan Railway," and Larkin mentions an Odeon theatre passing by his train window in "The Whitsun Weddings." As one architectural historian reports, 1937 was a watershed year for Deutsch's theatre empire: "by 1937 Deutsch owned over 300 cinemas, both newly built and purchased from other operators, and now Odeons began to be opened at the rate of as many as two a week (Atwell 151). As Odeons and other movie theatres opened, audiences were filling them instead of music halls.

As with British music, other British performance art suffered at the hands of American cultural invasion. John Mundy paints the scene:

The influence of American popular music increased from the late 1930s and early 1940s, affecting the market for those British musicals featuring distinctively British musical artists and musical traditions, as British audience tastes were increasingly seduced by Hollywood films and American popular music idioms. Yet production of British musical films continued, influenced by American popular culture, but with formal, aesthetic and thematic qualities that marked them as distinctive. (2)

Following Mundy's assertion, the implication is that attempts to make a uniquely British cultural product applied both to popular music and musical film. Yet, as Steven Cohan

reports, there was a reason why American musical films, and MGM musicals in particular, were favored by British audiences:

The cultural marginality of the MGM musical in the present day is a far cry from its prominence during the studio era, when the genre epitomized the best of show business, serving as a medium for bringing together talents from stage, vaudeville, radio, and the recording industry along with film stars in two hours of spectacular family entertainment. (2)

The entertainment phenomena of American-inspired popular music and movie musicals would have a long-lasting influence. According to John Mundy, “by the 1950s, the musicals that audiences in Britain saw were overwhelmingly American, itself an indication of the growing hegemonic power of American popular culture in that decade” (4-5). As I will argue in this chapter, the “hegemonic power” of American media was resisted only when the British were ready to mount two successful counter attacks: one led domestically by BBC television and the other led internationally by the Beatles.

With frequent appearances on a variety of BBC television programs, John Betjeman became a cultural icon and gained a new readership for his verse as a result. Arguably, it was partly Betjeman’s overexposure that led to his not being taken seriously as a poet towards the end of his life. Larkin, on the other hand, joined the growing artistic movement that abandoned the populism of popular culture to reassert the artistry and rightful place of “English” poetry after decades of foreign influence. Yet at several times in his work, Larkin felt compelled to address popular culture.

Although music did not often find its way into Betjeman and Larkin’s poetry, it is an important part of their prose work. For Betjeman, hymn-writers and their songs

provided the inspiration for a series of radio talks. For Betjeman, it was not so much the music in the hymns that interested him but how the collective act of singing them creates communal bonds between worshippers (Lowe 578). Larkin's approach was much different. As an album reviewer, Larkin discussed jazz music as a private act of listening to music on one's own gramophone. In many of his reviews, now collected in *All What Jazz*, listening to music is expressed as a hobby where one develops certain critical skills of evaluation, often regardless of, or in defiance of, the general consensus among global listeners. Larkin unapologetically offers his opinions as a listener, seemingly unconcerned with addressing any sort of community that does not share his particular, if not occasionally peculiar, tastes for a particular kind of jazz. Larkin's jazz writings show an awareness of the commercialization of music, especially in the pop world of the 1960s. He writes of the wane of jazz's popularity: "what was actually succeeding it—the inescapable whanging world of teenage pop—had dominated the music industry to such an extent that the 'hot record' was becoming [...] hard to get" (*All What Jazz* 28).

With music forming such an important part of their prose work, it may seem even more unusual that it does not find its way into their poetry. This is where commercialization comes into play. For the poet Betjeman, music and class are intimately connected—if a certain type of music is appropriate to a certain social class, then Betjeman will not neglect to include it. Still, despite this attempt at cultural accuracy, the speaker remains distant from the music. Instead of supplying inspiration, music seems a part of a character's wardrobe, or just another brand name commercial product in a catalog of middle-class items. For the poet Larkin, the commercialization of music is a development that comes "too late" for the speaker to understand or follow



enthusiastically, as in the case of the speaker in his poem “Annus Mirabilis” (Collected Poems 167). Thus, it is left in the background; it becomes something for someone younger. Although Larkin occasionally mentions jazz in his poetry, the music is described as being a personal listening preference, not a way to connect with a larger listening audience.

## **Part 2: John Betjeman’s Hymns of England**

England is such a powerful force in John Betjeman’s poetry that it seemed to surprise no one that he was named Poet Laureate in 1972. According to Peter J. Lowe, “his [Betjeman’s] appointment as Poet Laureate in 1972 was, as some commentators noted, the official acknowledgement of what the British public had already decided: that he was the poetic voice of the nation’s culture” (560). Despite its apparent Englishness, Betjeman’s poetry was simultaneously at odds with and in concord with modern Britain. It was at odds with modern Britain because it disagreed with postwar profiteering (in the guise of rebuilding and economic progress), it ignored the experimental nature of modernism, and often centered on the religious faith of the speaker and his nation. It was in concord with modern Britain because it did not condemn television, modern fashion, popular music, and the growing cult of media celebrity.

Several binaries are at work throughout Betjeman’s poetry: progress vs. preservation, personal faith vs. nationalism, and a nostalgic sensibility vs. a “camp” sensibility, just to name a few. These binaries create artistic tension and cast ambivalence over the poet’s attitude towards Englishness. Whereas critics often dismiss Betjeman as a composer of light verse, the depths of the binaries in his poetry, especially when the verse

is removed from his celebrity status as Poet Laureate, television personality and recording artist, deserve more critical attention than they have received.

It is extremely difficult to ignore Betjeman's cultural position as both poet and minor celebrity. In certain ways, this gave Betjeman's poetry a social status that was rare in his day—it was popular *and* influential. As David Gervais contends, Betjeman's poetry was influential to Philip Larkin: “one of the lessons Betjeman taught Larkin was that it was possible to reconcile oneself to the modern world, through humor, and that to ignore its humanity in favor of the past was a form of sentimentality” (197). In his introduction to the American edition of Betjeman's poems, Larkin himself gives Betjeman high praise: “He offers us, indeed, something we cannot find in any other writer—a gaiety, a sense of the ridiculous, an affection for human beings and how and where they live, a vivid and vivacious portrait of mid-twentieth-century English social life” (“It Could” 216).

In terms of music, Betjeman is an important linchpin between popular culture and aesthetic culture. The continuous sale of recordings of his poetry and references to him in recent popular music show that he resonated with British culture more than many critics might wish to admit. Much like Stevie Smith's poetry, Betjeman occupies a space between popular culture and art. In this space, popular culture becomes art.

Writing a decade before Betjeman's death, critic John Press notes Betjeman's mastery of the media of television:

Anybody who has seen Betjeman on the television screen can hardly fail to be enchanted, whether he is discoursing on Baronial Gothic in Australia, an English country house, or the Metropolitan Railway. He

communicates to his audience a wealth of fascinating information with no trace of pedantry or condescension. His zest, exuberance and gaiety are irresistible. (9)

As Press indicates, Betjeman had many interests outside of poetry, including architectural preservation, travel writing, and an affinity for the rituals of the Church of England.

Justin Gowers, a former administrator of Betjeman's literary estate claims that Betjeman had an interest in music hall and was a fan of the long running BBC television series *Coronation Street* (38). Gowers goes on to proclaim that Betjeman's writing is, "saturated with camp," and that "Betjeman can lay claim to being the most 'homosocial' of English poets" (38). Gowers ultimately argues that Betjeman should be perceived as a "gay icon" in Britain (38).

Theoretically speaking, Gowers's connection between Betjeman and camp culture is a useful one. "Camp" theory provides a device for queer theorists to define a recurring subset of cultural expressions, especially public performances like theatre and film. Susan Sontag claims, "the way of Camp is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (277). Before describing the role of camp plays in MGM musicals, Steven Cohan states that "*camp* can be defined as the ensemble of strategies used to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality. The flamboyance of camp when reflected as style, taste, wit, parody, or drag may seem the antithesis of passing, but to be flamboyant was a fundamental component of the joke" (1).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Cohan's definition of camp differs from Faulk's use of the term in *Music Hall & Modernity* (see page 20 in chapter 2) primarily in terms of its relationship to queer theory. Whereas Faulk's term is used more universally to describe a wider sense of cultural aberrations of taste, Cohan's definition is preferred here because it connects with a particular methodology that illumines Betjeman's critically neglected poetry.

Read as camp, Betjeman's constant companion, a teddy bear named Archibald, becomes an important marker of his sensibilities. As Gowers reports, the bear became the inspiration for Aloysius, Sebastian Flyte's bear in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (38). In 1940, Betjeman penned a children's book entitled *Archie and the Strict Baptists*, which moved Archie's status beyond a poet's eccentricity—Betjeman let others in on the joke. Such a gesture is reminiscent of Stevie Smith's book about cats that caused Larkin's dismay and is the very essence of a camp sensibility.

A reading of Betjeman's poetry as camp-infused, containing the ingredients Cohan lists—"style, taste, wit, parody, or drag"—helps one get Betjeman's "jokes." Although Betjeman does not employ the use of drag in his poetry, he carefully details Oscar Wilde's sense of style in "The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel," with his two furry "astrakhan coat[s]," his fine "morocco portmanteau," and a copy of *The Yellow Book*. In fact, excluding drag, the simple use of Oscar Wilde as a character covers style, taste, wit, parody, or the essence of camp itself. In "The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel," Betjeman meticulously details what he imagines as Wilde's preoccupation with keeping up appearances during his arrest. In the poem, just before his arrest, Wilde wittily comments that "Approval of what is approved of / Is as false as a well-kept vow." The policemen that come to arrest him speak much less eloquently:

"Mr. Woilde, we 'ave come for tew take yew

Where felons and criminals dwell:

We must ask yew tew leave with us quietly

For this *is* the Cadogan Hotel." (17)

Sontag dedicates her essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” to Wilde and quotes liberally from his work. Like Sontag, Betjeman celebrates Wilde as a purveyor of camp.

There is at least one prominent supporter of Betjeman as a purveyor of camp: Andrew Motion. In his introduction to a 2006 American edition of Betjeman’s poetry, Motion defines Betjeman’s use of camp as “to make light of what is in fact taken seriously” (“Introduction” xvii). Motion further argues that camp is “the single most significant quality of the early work in Betjeman’s *Collected Poems*,” yet warns that “the register of his camp is so readily mistaken for mere silliness, and because its texture has a delicacy which can so easily be overlooked, it might also count as a drawback” (“Introduction” xvii).

The critical difficulty in studying Betjeman in terms of his Englishness comes from whether one reads him primarily as a purveyor of camp or of nostalgia. Jocelyn Brooke contends that “Betjeman is, above all, the poet of nostalgia” (28). Brooke also argues that Betjeman uses light verse “not merely as a vehicle for satire or social commentary, but as a means of expressing a peculiar and specialized form of aesthetic emotion, in which nostalgia and humor are about equally blended” (40).

Although she terms the duality of Betjeman’s verse as one of “nostalgia and humor,” Brooke is not the only critic to note the duality or hybrid nature of Betjeman’s poetry. David Gervais comments that “what is original about Betjeman is that he managed to combine a Housman-like nostalgia with a puckish interest in the present” (196). This “puckish interest,” when combined with “humor” forms something approaching the more recent approach of camp theory. Geoffrey Harvey sees Betjeman’s conflicting sensibilities as necessary to create a sense of aesthetic balance:

At the heart of Betjeman's poetry there lies a hard-won equilibrium of temper, and it is this fundamental sense of balance between public and private, imagination and reason, commitment and detachment, sympathy and irony, which marks the basic sanity of his poetry. (93)

Thus, as Harvey contends, to create a sense of sanity in his poetic world, Betjeman must explore extremes.

A nostalgic sense of loss runs throughout certain works in Betjeman's oeuvre, especially when the speaker considers social change to be detrimental to British culture, but the loss is usually presented with enough difference (often in the form of camp) to prevent it from simply being a lament of a lost England. Such a combination of nostalgia and camp may have partly originated in Betjeman's love for music hall. In an essay on Broadway musicals, Rebecca Ann Rugg comments that "sacred nostalgia" and a "profane sensibility of camp [...] have always been inseparable on the musical stage" (48).

Although Rugg is describing the American musical, she provides an important terminology for Betjeman's role in the debate over "Englishness." Critically speaking, Betjeman's view of England's past is a form of "sacred nostalgia," but his "profane" use of camp mitigates the sense of reverence for England's past.

Critical discussion of Betjeman's Englishness often begins with his poetics. The modernists' experimentation with free verse did not interest Betjeman, whose prosody seems to have come from the nineteenth century. David Gervais points especially to "Tennyson, [Winthrop Mackworth] Praed, and Edward Lear," but goes on to argue that "the result was no more Victorian than Tennyson himself would have become Augustan had he written in heroic couplets" (187). On one hand, Betjeman's use of Victorian

prosody nostalgically resembles the verse of the Victorian poets he read; on the other hand, his irreverent combination of minor poets and canonical poets as sources for inspiration could be read as representing a camp sensibility rather than a nostalgic one. John Press contends that “in many poems he is not so much imitating directly as fashioning a pastiche of minor poetry of the late nineteenth century” (23).

Although it predates Press’s suggestion that Betjeman is working with late nineteenth-century models, W. M. Praed’s “The Talented Man” provides an example of Betjeman’s “pastiche of minor poetry.” Praed’s poem is an ironic description of a “new poet” named Tully St. Paul:

He sneers,—how my Alice would scold him!—

At the bliss of a sigh or a tear;

He laughed—only think! when I told him

How we cried o’er Trevelyan last year;

I vow I was quite in a passion;

I broke all the sticks in my fan;

But sentiment’s quite out of fashion,

It seems, in a talented man. (Praed 96)

Praed’s concern with what is in fashion and the use of specific fashion trends, such as a lady’s fan, and the use of the reported speech of a speaker/narrator are also common in Betjeman’s poetry. Betjeman’s conscious pastiche of Praed appears in “Winthrop Mackworth Redivivus:”

It’s for regency now I’m enthusing

So we’ve Regency stripes on the wall

And—my dear, really frightf'ly amusing—

A dome of wax fruit in the hall.

We've put the Van Gogh in the bathroom,

Those sunflowers looked *so* out of date,

But instead, as there's plenty of hearth room,

Real ivy grows out of the grate.

(209)

The title of Betjeman's poem spells out Praed's first and middle names. The Latin *redivivus*, or "come back to life," is clearly directed to Praed's memory, but only for those who know what Praed's initials stand for. The dashes, eight-line stanzas with alternating rhyme are formally consistent with Praed's work, but the humorous, ironic tone shows Betjeman's care in copying Praed's style goes beyond mere burlesque. Unlike Stevie Smith, who will engage with the rhetorical content of a particular work by an earlier poet, Betjeman is much more concerned with duplicating the style of his predecessor. Again, this is evidence of Betjeman's keen sense of camp. He does not engage with Praed as an unquestioned poetic giant like Tennyson or Coleridge, but because he finds the style and wit of Praed's poetry interesting.

Betjeman's use of "pastiche," or hodge-podge poetic is considered a strength to a few critics who see it as a mark of his cut against the grain of Modernism. Again, John Press notes that "it is a mark of his originality and authenticity as a poet that he has always remained indifferent to changes in poetic fashion and dominant critical shibboleths" (18). In a similar way, Jocelyn Brooke argues that "it would be almost true



to say that, formally speaking, he has never written a wholly original poem. His originality, in fact, is a matter not of technique but of thought and sensibility” (36).

Defining Betjeman’s “sensibility” takes an understanding of what matters most to Betjeman. As stated earlier, Betjeman uses different media to explore his diverse passions and interests. Whereas he might discuss English hymn writers on BBC radio and provide a travel narrative for an exploration of the English countryside on BBC television, Betjeman could also be found petitioning newspapers and politicians to save architectural landmarks in London. John Press lists the most common interests in Betjeman’s poetry:

Betjeman is at his most characteristic and moving when he is dwelling with loving particularity on a landscape or on a quirk of human nature, when he is remembering his childhood, or contemplating the way in which past and present mingle. Irritation and frustration may spur him into satirical verse, but he is stirred to write genuine poetry only when affection and compassion arouse the lyrical impulse. (30)

“Affection” and “compassion” are universal themes in many of Betjeman’s works. He may scold, but he almost always works to ensure some sense of humanity. Even in a poem like “Slough,” where Betjeman calls on bombs to fall on a town growing around an industrial estate, he mitigates his satire by making the bombs “friendly,” and his request to “spare the bald young clerks.” Sontag contends that camp taste shares this attitude towards humanity: “Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character’” (291).

“Slough,” an invective against poor town planning and profiteering, contains a greater degree of frustration for the quality of life of Slough’s inhabitants suffers because

of a thirst for profit by people “Who’ll always cheat and always win.” Betjeman opens by noting that “There isn’t grass to graze a cow,” and concludes with a call for the bombs to strike Slough in order to “get it ready for the plough.” Instead of total annihilation and nuclear contamination, Betjeman hopes that the bombs will return Slough to a farming community. The people of Slough have become trapped, or canned, by their obsession with modern life:

Come, bombs, and blow to smithereens  
Those air-conditioned, bright canteens,  
Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans  
Tinned minds, tinned breath. (20)

That the minds of Slough’s residents have been tinned follows the unnatural quality of the food that they eat in Betjeman’s catalog, but the suggestion that the residents’ breath is tinned suggests that they are becoming unthinking machines or robots. Bombing the environment of such dehumanized individuals is merciful: it will “get it ready for the plough.”

The speaker in “Slough” wishes the bombs to “get that man with double chin,” identified as the metonymic profiteer who has ruined Slough:

And smash his desk of polished oak  
And smash his hands so used to stroke  
And stop his boring dirty joke  
And make him yell. (20)

Although the speaker’s call for vengeance on “that man” is mitigated by the man’s namelessness, the call for punishment seems to arise from an acute frustration. As

Jocelyn Brooke states, “it is plain that he genuinely and unequivocally loathes this squalid riverside town on the fringes of London” (27).

After the landscape is wiped clear and the double chinned man is punished in “Slough,” the speaker names those that he wants to save. Patrick Taylor-Martin notes how Betjeman cannot resist “pardoning ‘the bald young clerks,’” because “he knows that they are helpless victims of a depraved system of values” (61). To defend the clerks, Betjeman returns to his theme of modernity’s corruption of nature:

It’s not their fault they do not know

The birdsong from the radio,

It’s not their fault they often go

To Maidenhead

And talk of sports and makes of cars

In various bogus Tudor bars

And daren’t look up and see the stars

But belch instead. (21)

The speaker’s forgiveness of the clerks shows that he or she has followed them about seven miles to the bars in Maidenhead and listened to their conversations. He forgives them for their bad taste in architecture and lack of manners because they are forced to “add / The profits of the stinking cad” they work for. David Gervais contends that “it is surprising how tolerant a satirist Betjeman could be. At such moments, his aestheticism and antiquarianism fall away like masks. At least we feel that he has actually *been* to Slough” (187). In “Slough,” the satire is mitigated by several light touches. Calling the bombs to “mess up the mess they call a town” and noting that the clerks’ wives “frizz out

peroxide hair,” Betjeman lapses into casual diction. The rhyme scheme, which rhymes the first three lines of each quatrain and then rhymes consecutive fourth lines, also lends a sense of nursery rhyme to the poem. Careful attention to form and language causes the poem to alternate between an urbane sense of taste and light verse.

In general, Betjeman avoids generic places, preferring places particular to the speaker’s experiences. In most cases, Betjeman’s poems are not static, with the speaker or characters remaining in an idealized spot. In a single poem, the speaker is sometimes found quickly moving through an entire region of England, or at least several London suburbs. In “A Subaltern’s Love-Song,” this is true, and to less of an extent in “Slough,” where characters travel to “bogus Tudor bars” for entertainment. The effect is of someone who knows what landmark is just around the corner.

In Betjeman’s poetry there are few leisurely walks through the English countryside like the ones in his television programs. Instead, there is rapid movement requiring modern technology: automobiles, trains, and subways. This is not just topography, as some critics term it. It shows the speaker’s desire to be known as a local, or insider, as someone who is familiar with how the particular group of society moves from place to place. More importantly, topography implies just naming a place. Betjeman wants readers to know more than the fact that he knows the name of the place. He wants the reader to know that he knows the cultural nuances of the place as well. This familiarity with his surroundings may account for some of Betjeman’s appeal. Readers may retrace his steps with a tube map, stopping to admire or condemn the architecture of each station he mentions. They may also share in the cultural experience of a particular place in a particular time within a particular cultural context.

Derek Stanford notes this temporal quality of Betjeman's landscapes:

In Mr. Betjeman's topographical poetry, time and place qualify each other. This, perhaps, is another way of saying that his poems of place are also period-pieces—poems of place with the vintage-mark of time, ancient or modern, fairly set upon them. Sometimes, when time and place appear to be saying two different things, we get irony mixed with pathos.

(82)

And thus another critic notes a duality in Betjeman's poetry. Betjeman's sense of poetic time blends "ancient" and "modern" imagery. A particular example—"Middlesex"—contains both the typist's modern dress and "a few surviving hedges" that "keep alive our lost Elysium" (163). Since Elysium is a land of the dead, to "keep alive our lost Elysium" seems to imply a bit of a paradox. Elysium as an "abode of the blessed after death," as opposed to "a place or state of ideal or perfect happiness," is reinforced by the catalog of individuals "silent under soot and stone" in the last line. Betjeman acknowledges the morbidity of the markers of the past, yet tries to keep them alive in his poems. Thus, as Stanford suggests, there is both irony and pathos in such a seemingly futile exercise, especially in the eyes of the typist who passes the hedges without noticing them.

Betjeman's triumph is that he artistically connects modern London's urban sprawl with the ancient pastoral landscape without an obvious sense of remorse. He simply notes the changes for a reader who wants to take the journey back in time with him. Derek Stanford notes that Betjeman often finds such spaces where past meets present: "Mr. Betjeman's special track of country is where the green belts and the built-up areas meet—these last out-posts of pastoral stillness falling before the advance of brick" (73).

In “Middlesex,” the vehicle for going back in time is the “Gentle [River] Brent,” which the speaker remembers having once taken its own course. Such an easily tamed river is urged by the poet to “Recollect” images from its past. Thus, instead of directly calling on the reader to remember the past of the former county of Middlesex, the speaker retraces history through a personified river. The effect of this indirect approach is to free the reader from responsibility for remorse. Combined with Betjeman’s tendency towards camp, the indirect approach also creates a diversity of perspectives on his representation of England.

David Gervais notes how, “the great thing about Betjeman’s England, that makes it liberating when one expects it to feel suffocating, is that he has no inhibitions either about making fun of it or at being unashamedly emotional about it” (197). Such emotion is present in “Middlesex,” where the speaker simultaneously sympathizes with the River Brent’s altered course and with the typist’s frantic journey home to her “sandwich supper and the television screen.” They are both a part of England. If Betjeman is “making fun” of the typist’s modern, materialistic world by his frequent product placements, he does so “Daintily.”

In “The Metropolitan Railway,” Betjeman recycles the places and names from “Middlesex.” For example, “Ruislip” reappears, along with “Middlesex” itself. It is as if Betjeman depicts a different train journey that stops at a few of the same stations. The poem seems all too familiar until Betjeman reaches the last two stanzas:

Cancer has killed him. Heart is killing her.  
The trees are down. An Odeon flashes fire  
Where stood their villa by the murmuring fir

When 'they would for their children's good conspire.'

Of their loves and hopes on hurrying feet

Thou art the worn memorial, Baker street.

(170)

The phrase "An Odeon flashes fire" shows Betjeman's old nemesis: architectural replacement. Here, though, the theatre is not presented simply as an eyesore, rather its blazing marquee threatens as the train passes by. In "The Metropolitan Railway," the consuming activity of the Odeon is set against the "murmuring fir" that used to be there. For Betjeman, a very unusual twist of the knife comes next, where the Odeon's existence is linked with the need to "conspire" for "their children's good." This agency for progress is ironic in comparison with Betjeman's efforts at historic preservation because it pits the interest of the family against the interests of the whole of society. Betjeman's reconciliation comes with the "hurrying feet" of mortality, which somewhat excuses the conspiracy yet leaves a "worn memorial" that is being interpreted by the speaker.

The acknowledged conspiracy in "The Metropolitan Railway" detaches the speaker from the one in a poem like "Middlesex," where humanity is presented in less insidious terms. In "Middlesex," the speaker follows the young typist with compassion and a concern for accuracy in presenting her role in the scene. Although rail travel is implied in "Middlesex," it is not being used as the primary means for detachment as it is in "The Metropolitan Railway," where the train keeps moving; the speaker does not seem to leave the train.

Because Betjeman does not openly preach his political sentiments, he is sometimes considered apolitical, especially in terms of his interest in the class struggle. John Press argues that “he [Betjeman] shows little understanding of the political and social aspirations which animate large numbers of the working classes” (Press 47). Betjeman, if anything, is seemingly more concerned with what members of the middle classes do with their leisure time. Poems about such activities as golf, show jumping, and tennis are testimony to this aspect of his verse.<sup>67</sup> Instead of hard-biting social satire, these light themes are generally only political in their promotion of a particular leisure lifestyle.

Yet, there are also poems like “Executive” in Betjeman’s repertoire, which openly mock the middle-classes that Betjeman generally promotes in his verse. In this poem, Betjeman presents an absurd “young executive” whose sense of progress is diametrically opposed to the “Preservationist” who “attempts to interfere” with it (312). Despite critical pronouncements that Betjeman is not political, the poem is concerned with the politics of progress and consumerism. The young executive boasts of his “Slimline brief-case,” his access to his firm’s Ford “Cortina,” his own “scarlet Aston-Martin” and his “speed-boat” that is made of “fibre-glass.” The executive claims that as he drives his Aston-Martin, he has little regard for the rest of the world: “Pedestrians and dogs and cats—we mark them down for slaughter.”

The biting satire used in “Executive” results from Betjeman’s role as a preservationist, such as the one the executive mocks. Jocelyn Brook contends that “Betjeman, one imagines, is bored by politics and by public affairs in general, except insofar as they help or hinder those causes which are nearest his heart” (35). These causes include architectural and cultural preservation. Peter J. Lowe argues that Betjeman’s

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<sup>67</sup> See “Seaside Golf,” “Hunter Trials,” and “A Subaltern’s Love-song,” respectively.



interest in preservation should not be mistaken for nostalgia: “his [Betjeman’s] work from the 1950s to the 1970s, seen at the time as a prolonged exercise in ‘nostalgia,’ was actually an urgent call to preserve aspects of English culture that were being lost in the drive for post-war modernization and ‘rebuilding’ (560). As Lowe sees it, Betjeman’s main concern was a collective English culture, not a return to England’s past.

Of particular interest were buildings, but as John Press suggests, Betjeman saw not just the architecture: “Betjeman wants to preserve old buildings for a variety of reasons, but mainly because of their human associations, which are indeed inseparable from their aesthetic power and beauty” (13). German bombing during World War II structurally weakened or destroyed huge swaths of London, often making it more economically feasible to raze and rebuild than to restore and preserve. According to A. N. Wilson’s *London: A History*, “it was [...] in the comparatively cozy world of postwar and 1950s London that the decisions were made which would change the London skyline, and the living conditions of Londoners, so irrevocably and with such brutality” (*London: A History* 151). Wilson later argues that this brutality is reflected in the poor architecture of the period. He contends that architecture “is the dominant fact of postwar London: the city had to be rebuilt somehow, and it happened to be rebuilt in a particular way” (*London: A History* 154). Wilson’s argument that poor architecture was forced on Londoners by the urgent drive to rebuild was perceived by Betjeman in terms of its collateral cultural damage. The decisions that affected so many were in the hands of a few architects, city planners and government officials, not the people who had to live in the new London they were building. In addition to the preservationist tone of his poetry, Betjeman fought to save buildings during several television appearances

Geoffrey Harvey also notes how Betjeman's interests in preservation are not based solely on aesthetics: "Betjeman's concern for the preservation not merely of fine buildings but of the human frame of things which they represent, is not reactionary but, ironically in modern society with its commitment to size, growth and change for their own sakes, economically and politically subversive" (74). Larkin echoes Harvey's sentiments: "it is not so much the architecture of a building that appeals to him [Betjeman] as its relation to human use, to human scale and size, and the degree to which it reflects human life and emotions" ("It Could" 208).

Instead of promoting his own nostalgia, Betjeman is protesting the "young executive" who looks for development opportunities in culturally rich towns. The title of the poem is simply "Executive," not "The Executive," "Young Executive," or "An Executive." For Betjeman, "executive" becomes a metonym for a corrupt economic system that devours local culture:

I do some mild developing. The sort of place I need  
Is a quiet country market town that's rather run to seed.  
A luncheon and a drink or two, a little *savoir faire*—  
I fix the planning Officer, the Town Clerk and the Mayor.

And if some preservationist attempts to interfere  
A 'dangerous structure' notice from the Borough Engineer  
Will settle any buildings that are standing in our way—  
The modern style, sir, with respect, has really come to stay.  
(312-313)

Although Betjeman's work displays a level of nostalgia for an England of the past, his work simultaneously affirms England as it was in his time. He does not wish to deny the present, simply infuse it with a knowledge and appreciation for history. Time, for Betjeman, is a living discourse: it contains both threads of history and threads of the present. Still, as a preservationist Betjeman makes deliberate choices on what buildings he wishes to save.

In his book *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, Ian Baucom borrows the concept of *lieux de memoire*, or "places of memory" from theorist Pierre Nora to describe certain locales of Englishness:

largely owing to our nostalgia for the vanishing environments of memory, memory survives the traditionalist moment and pervades the historicist moment as a trace of itself, as a precious residue, a lingering scent haunting certain, prized, *lieux de memoire*. In these places, which can be either textual, monumental, or topographic, the past survives as a fetish of itself. *Lieux de memoire* are therefore cultic phenomena, objects of pilgrimage and veneration, the jealously guarded ruins of cultural ensembles possessed by a need to stop time or, better yet, to launch a voyage of return to the past. (Baucom 19)

If this is a way of identifying the locations of Englishness, which Baucom does with such sites as a manor home, a cricket field, and a train station, it seems directly tied to abstract mythmaking, to creating an essence of a lost England that is outside of time. This is somewhat removed from Betjeman's preservationist leanings, which are meant to preserve a cultural site within time, the passage of which Betjeman presents as impossible

to stop. For Betjeman, the typist in *Middlesex* is undeniably concurrent with the *lieux de memoire* of enclosure-era hedges. Betjeman would argue that the buildings he is trying to save are places of living culture, a link from past to present, not a portal into a past existence that has been lost and needs to be rediscovered. Such a living place for Betjeman was the church.

For Betjeman, there can be no better symbol of the interconnectedness of culture, architecture, and nation than the Anglican church. Betjeman authored *Guide to English Parish Churches* (1958), participated in a BBC Television broadcast entitled *A Passion for Churches* (1974), and a BBC Radio broadcast entitled *Sweet Songs of Zion* (1975-8) (Lowe 562, 576, 577). Geoffrey Harvey notes that “in Betjeman’s world there exists an intimate relation between aesthetic, moral, cultural and spiritual values” (75). For Betjeman, though, it seems necessary to add in among these values one’s relationship with the nation. Again, the Church represented a portal into this relationship. Peter J. Lowe contends that “as the pace of modern life became ever more intense, Betjeman viewed churches as points of connection with a national past and a way of life increasingly valuable because it was not circumscribed by the same factors as everything around it” (562).

Both in Betjeman’s poetry and in his efforts to preserve old buildings, churches become a site where England’s social past and future coalesce. Anthony Thwaite argues that “there is an altogether more astringent side to Betjeman, in which nostalgia, fear, terror, hard-won faith and simple goodness contend, and a feline ferocity that is sometimes startling,” (7). The terror that Thwaite mentions appears in Betjeman’s fear that certain elements of British culture will disappear, but it also appears in what Thwaite

terms the poet's "areas of experience" (7). One of these areas could apply to the poet's experience of war. "In Westminster Abbey," Betjeman expresses the nation's fears of war through the prayer of a London housewife in arguably the most familiar place of worship in Great Britain. Although he mocks the woman, the poem nevertheless expresses the crisis of maintaining some sort of faith in the time of war. The poem's setting should not be taken lightly. According to Kevin J. Gardner, "to John Betjeman, the Church was undoubtedly the most significant institution in England. When he wrote about the Church, he was to his way of thinking also writing of England" ("Faith and Doubt" 91). In the poem "In Westminster Abbey," what Betjeman says about England is more ambivalent than it appears at first glance. In the opening stanza, the speaker removes a glove, listens to the organ begin to play an English hymn, imagines the bells in the tower above, considers the tombs of England's statesmen," and then requests that someone "Listen to a lady's cry" (74). In this stanza, form, tone and diction are suited to the religious setting. For example, line three describes "the beautiful fields of Eden" and line four contains the alliteration of "Bask beneath the Abbey bells."

There is a definite shift in tone from the first stanza to the second:

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.  
Spare their women for Thy Sake,  
And if that is not too easy  
We will pardon Thy Mistake.  
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,  
Don't let anyone bomb me. (74).

Nothing in the first stanza is this irreverent, which may suggest that there is a listener/speaker who wants the phrase “bomb the Germans” to startle readers. The ironic capitalization of “Thy Mistake” is another emphasis of the woman’s hypocrisy, and her hypocrisy will define the rest of the poem. Such an interpretation must have appealed to Patrick Taylor-Martin, who argues that Betjeman presents a middle-class woman, “whose hypocrisy and snobbery are mercilessly exposed” (89). Kevin J. Gardner argues that Betjeman’s feelings for the woman are much more damning: “the speaker is a figure of the most unutterable loathsomeness, and throughout the poem Betjeman’s tone varies from unmitigated contempt for her ethical vacuity to mockery of the ludicrous vanity of her class snobbery.” (“Faith and Doubt” 363)

If read with sincerity, because of its overt racism, genocidal leanings, and “little Englandism,” the poem would be difficult to take in a modern context. In the third stanza, the woman asks God to keep the British Empire “undismembered” by guiding “Gallant blacks from far Jamaica, / Honduras and Togoland.” This forced subjugation of people far removed from the European theatre of war to protect the Empire as a whole is both politically and morally questionable. The woman adds insult to injury by suggesting to God to “even more protect the whites” who are fighting.

In the fourth stanza, the woman provides a glimpse into English iconography with a list of what “our Nation stands for,” including an intact “Empire,” “Books from Boots,” a chain of chemists, “country lanes,” and the brilliantly-rhymed “proper drains.” She lumps in “Free speech, free passes, class distinction, / Democracy” in short succession, as if they were equal parts with the other items and as if they were not contradictory. Although Taylor-Martin is convinced that “there can be no doubt that he [Betjeman] is

aware of just how pathetic and threadbare a catalogue it is,” Betjeman catalogues some of the most frequent icons of Englishness, including the pastoral, the imperial, the political, and the infrastructural items that define England (89). Certainly, there is a camp sensibility in pairing “Boots” with “country lanes,” and “Democracy” with “proper drains.” In short, because of its camp quality, the poem casts doubt on Betjeman’s absolute sincerity in presenting Englishness as the single guiding light through wartime.

Although the woman humbly acknowledges that she is a “sinner” in the fifth stanza, she is careful to note that she has “done no major crime.” This stanza is full of such contradictions, including the promise of faithful church attendance “Whensoever I have the time,” and a request for God to “reserve for me a crown” but not to “let my shares go down.” The mixing of personal financial concerns with the hopes for a “crown” in heaven is a pun that plays on the British 5 shilling coin of the same name. The mixing of sacred and secular imagery continues into the sixth stanza, where the woman promises to help the war effort. She concludes the stanza with a promise to “wash the Steps around Thy Throne / In the Eternal Safety Zone.” In the final stanza, she concludes her visit:

Now I feel a little better,  
What a treat to hear Thy Word,  
Where the bones of leading statesmen,  
Have so often been interr’d.  
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait  
Because I have a luncheon date. (75)

Betjeman returns to Westminster Abbey’s role as a burial place for “statesmen” from the first stanza to emphasize to readers that this is a poem about an uncomfortable mixing of

the secular world of politics and the sacred world of personal faith. There is quite a lot at stake for Betjeman in placing the woman in Westminster Abbey because it is such a prominent seat of British history but it is also a church, and Betjeman promotes religious faith in the poem. According to Gardner,

Is Betjeman's satire merely social? First, that the poem's setting is a church indicates that the persona's social and ethical lapses are in fact a product of her spiritual state. Her moral flaws are, in short, sins. And because she speaks for Britain's ruling class, Betjeman, we can infer, believes that social problems are a direct result of a nation's spiritual sickness. ("Anglicanism" 364)

Critics respond to Betjeman's condemnation of the woman's hypocrisy because Betjeman's religious faith was well documented in his writings and television appearances. His work contains several references to faith, and sacred music in particular. The opening stanza of "In Westminster Abbey," contains a direct quotation ("the beauteous fields of Eden") from a once popular English hymn by Sabine Baring-Gould, who was a clergyman, novelist, hymn-writer, and antiquary. As a hymn writer, Baring-Gould is better known as the author of "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Now the day is over" (Frost 535). These poems, along with the one Betjeman quotes from originated in Baring-Gould's service in the Horbury Mission, where the hymns were written for a children's choir (Purcell 78). The hymn begins:

Daily, daily sing the praises  
Of the City God hath made;  
In the beauteous fields of Eden



Its foundation-stones are laid: (Baring-Gould 457)

In his introduction to William Purcell's 1957 biography of Baring-Gould, Betjeman states that "there can be few English people who do not owe something to Baring-Gould. I know that I am far more indebted to him for a romantic sense of place and local legend than I am to any other writer" ("Introduction" v-vi). Considering the vital roles that "a romantic sense of place" and "local legend" play in his poetry, Betjeman's use of the Baring-Gould hymn in "In Westminster Abbey" is flattery. The fact that the hymn was written for children may also comment on Betjeman's sense of faith.

Given Betjeman's fondness for churches and the rituals of the Anglican church, it is not surprising that he took such an interest in its music. Like his interest in church architecture, his interest in church music, especially hymns, was grounded in its ability to build a community on the twin pillars of common experience and a common nation. The BBC Radio broadcast *Sweet Songs of Zion*, Betjeman suggests that church music was inseparable from the stories behind its creation. For Betjeman, knowing the stories behind the hymns and the words and music of hymns themselves is a powerful way to strengthen one's faith. Discussing Betjeman's broadcasts, Peter J. Lowe suggests that a sense of community was built through a particular act—the singing of hymns: "Betjeman, discussing the work of hymn writers like Isaac Watts, John and Charles Wesley, or William Cowper, explores the growth of the hymn as an expression of personal and communal faith, forged in the intensity of individual experience and translated into shared sentiment through the act of singing" (578). Although such a community appealed to Betjeman, a desire for communal singing could also be interpreted as cultural hegemony. To sing the words is to tacitly accept what they stand for, just as singing "God

Save the Queen,” “Rule, Britannia!” or “Jerusalem” as a part of a public holiday crowd makes one an accepted member of a community of nationalists. “Jerusalem’s” role as a religious hymn, a canonical poem, and a national anthem serves as a perfect example of Betjeman’s love for hymn singing—the community it builds covers much of the ground he holds sacred. Gardner claims that “the potential for communal bonds to form by means of Anglican tradition and common worship represented for Betjeman the best way for a people to preserve its culture and history” (“Faith and Doubt” 94).

Critic Derek Stanford discusses the hymn-like quality of Betjeman’s poetry: “as an Anglican poet, Mr. Betjeman is just outside the metaphysical tradition. He is nearer to the nineteenth-century writers of hymns than to such poets as Herbert, Vaughan, or Donne” (59). The titles of Betjeman’s oeuvre indicate his interest in church music: “Hymn,” “An Eighteenth-Century Calvinistic Hymn,” “Calvinistic Evensong,” “Olney Hymns,” and “Harvest Hymn.”

Although church music plays an important role in Betjeman’s aesthetic, he also collaborated with composers who were commissioned to, or simply wanted to, set his poems to music. Towards the end of his life, Betjeman seemed to enjoy the process of having his poetry accompanied by musical compositions.<sup>68</sup> One of the composers, Mervyn Horder, reports on Betjeman’s desire to broaden his audience:

Betjeman hadn’t much of an ear for music, was no singer himself. What he most liked was to listen to the sound of his own voice declaiming his own poems, but he had a passion for the old-time British Music Hall, the last surviving stars of which were still about in the 50s and 60s and all

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<sup>68</sup> For personal accounts of Betjeman’s enthusiastic participation in the recording process, see Wilson’s *Betjeman: A Life*, Horder’s “Setting Betjeman to Music,” and Wilkinson’s “How Betjeman learned to Boogie.”

known to him personally. He made no secret of hoping that these and other music settings of his work might succeed in making him famous in this kind of world. I found it hard to tell him that his poems were not really songs at all, were far too complex and full of incident to be suitable for this purpose. (39)

Horder reports that he first played his compositions for Betjeman in 1966 (39).

Considering the explosion in popularity of rock n' roll during this time, Betjeman's nostalgia for music hall is anachronistic. Yet the fact that Betjeman wanted his poetry to attract an audience that was familiar with music hall echoes Yeats's desire to write ballads in that both want to contribute to a cultural form that they felt was valuable to future generations.

Horder was not the only composer to set Betjeman's poetry to music. Between 1974 and 1981 Betjeman worked with Jim Parker on a series of recordings for Charisma Records, including *Betjeman's Banana Blush* (1974), *Late Flowering Love* (1974), *Sir John Betjeman's Britain* (1977), and *Sir John Betjeman's Varsity Rag* (1981). There are several ways of reading these recordings. On the one hand, they represent a greatest hits collection of Betjeman's most popular work; on the other hand, their continued popularity gives Betjeman a strange connection with contemporary British music. Betjeman, who once referred to himself as "just a Pop poet," was seemingly the perfect poet to use for such recording projects (Wilson *Betjeman: A Life* 305). His position as Poet Laureate combined with his radio and television exposure to give him a celebrity that few poets could ever hope to achieve. Although some of the music on the recordings may appear "dated" to present listeners, there has been a resurgence of interest in some of

them. An article in *The Guardian* newspaper notes that “rare Betjeman vinyl LPs have been selling on auction site eBay—categorized as ‘funk/soul/R&B’ and recommended for their ‘dope bass action,’ ‘exotic grooviness’ and ‘fat, funky basslines’” (Wilkinson 18). Importantly, though, Betjeman’s poetry gets lost in these updated mixes. Still, they remain as an intertext.

Biographer A. N. Wilson claims that the Charisma recordings “are among the very best things he ever did” (*Betjeman: A Life* 305). Of particular interest for this dissertation is *Sir John Betjeman’s Britain*, which was released, “in honour of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee.”<sup>69</sup> The album contains “Hunter Trials,” “A Subaltern’s Love-song,” “Seaside Golf,” and “Middlesex,” to name a few. Other poems, like “Upper Lambourne” and “Harrow-on-the-Hill” are further reminders of Betjeman’s interest in place names. The mild themes of the collection seem eminently suited to the Poet Laureate’s contribution to twenty-five years of Elizabeth II’s reign. Determining the particular ingredients that contributed to the success of the recordings, Wilson notes the contributions of the composer:

Parker has done much more than create a musical diversion around some spoken songs. He has brought out the inherent quality of lyrics which are, so many of them, the missing link between the songs of the music hall and *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. No one who has heard Parker’s records can ever forget them. For ever afterwards, when you read Betjeman’s lyrics on the page, the music starts. (*Betjeman: A Life* 305)

In his introduction to a 1971 American edition of Betjeman’s *Collected Poems*, Philip Larkin noted that “the English reader is going to need an annotated Betjeman

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<sup>69</sup> This is emblazoned on the top right corner of the front cover of the album.

almost as soon as the American” (“It Could” 215). Almost forty years after Larkin’s statement this is perhaps true. Fortunately, the Internet helps contemporary readers. A poem like “Middlesex” is very inviting for a hypertext—at least links to pictures of all of the products, station points on the underground map, and *Tale of a Nobody* would certainly help. Betjeman’s use of specific, now often anachronistic, detail is one of the ways that he is linked to Englishness. His poetry may be read as preservation of artifacts from the particular time in history when he was composing his verse. Yet this was an unlikely goal because a lot of these artifacts were not chosen for their Englishness.

Betjeman was never tied down to either the metropolis or the countryside. He saw the whole of England as his inspiration, his England consisted of mostly particular places and people he was fond of. He was not promoting cultural diversity. If you did not share his ideals you were left out. Addressing nostalgia for England’s past in general, Raymond Williams points out that

the successive Old Englands to which we are confidently referred but which then start to move and recede, have some actual significance, when they were looked at in their own terms. Of course we notice their location in the childhoods of their authors, and this must be relevant. Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men’s nostalgias offend. (12)

As Williams suggests, Betjeman’s nostalgia for England is his alone—it is not meant to stand in metonymically for an ideal England, but the particular parts the poet chooses to preserve are significant. For Betjeman, because what he wishes to preserve (buildings,

pastoral landscapes, religion, humanity) is presented in poetry so minutely detailed with the products of modernity, the tendency is to see the details and miss the bigger picture.

### **Part 3: Philip Larkin's Private Music Collection**

Unlike John Gay, Larkin did not wish to Anglicize the forms of foreign popular music, nor did he want to tap into the older form of music hall as a means for establishing a sense of national identity. Instead, Larkin took a postmodernist approach to music.

Describing postmodernist poetry in general, Marc Berley anticipates Larkin's attitude towards music:

Whereas modernism ennobled silence, postmodernism tends to silence music, transforming it into the a-musical circumstances of its production.

Rather than bear the awful, romantic burden of aspiring toward a condition of music, postmodernism puts it safely—in a new mode of dissociative repression—between quotation marks. (357)

Considering Larkin's love for jazz, that he would desire to generally place music "between quotation marks" in his poetry seems strange. Music leaves its mark in Larkin's early poetry, in Larkin's personal reflections as a jazz critic, and sporadically in his later poetry. What essentially separates Larkin's music from the other poets in my discussion is that he hordes music for himself and his poetic subjects; he does not use music as a means of expressing his national identity. He uses music in his poetry to transcend his speakers' private, mundane existence for a few moments of personal reflection.

Although there are clear connections between Betjeman's and Larkin's poetry, especially in their vivid and frank depictions of middleclass British society, the two poets seem separated by marked generational differences. Larkin is usually associated with the

poets of The Movement, and Betjeman may be said to be associated with “The Establishment.” Critics, most overtly David Gervais in *Literary Englands: Versions of “Englishness” in Modern Writing*, often link the poets through their Englishness. According to Gervais, in terms of their Englishness, “the difference between the two poets is not, as many think, between the superficial and the profound but between a world that is lively and changing and one that is distant and static” (191).

Larkin’s “distant and static” world was largely one of his own making. It is symbolized by his preference for listening to recorded music over live music and visiting vacant churches instead of singing hymns with the congregation. Unlike Betjeman, Larkin was not interested in the power for hymns to unite Britons. In “Reference Back,” Larkin’s speaker listens to “record after record” to pass his time alone, and in “Church Going,” the speaker enters a church only after he is “sure there’s nothing going on” (Larkin 106, 197).

Just how much Larkin was a victim of being born too early to be a participant of the radical social changes of the 1960s is subject to debate, but, according to Gervais, a sense of being “too late” defines another key difference between Betjeman and Larkin: “Betjeman came just in time to do something the younger poet [Larkin] was too late for: to give, as it were, a geography and an anthropology to the notion of ‘Englishness’” (189). Although Larkin occasionally revisits this “geography and anthropology” in poems like “The Whitsun Weddings” and “At Grass,” by the 1960s, he is forced to chart a new social territory of Englishness that departs abruptly from Betjeman. Larkin’s later cartography is so adept that, despite his speakers’ seeming ambivalence, the idea of England remains strong throughout his oeuvre.

It is Larkin's sense of detachment (or being "distant," as he terms it) that Gervais uses to define the difference between Betjeman and Larkin. In defense of Gervais's argument, Larkin is capable of a double-distancing. This form of detachment is apparent in his masterpiece "The Whitsun Weddings." In *Englishness and National Culture*, Anthony Easthope argues that "the speaker of the poem is presented as detached, critical, not self-deceived, confident of submitting the world to a controlling gaze; in other words, very much the poised, individualized, empiricist subject whose voice has been represented as speaking in English poetry for over two centuries" (185). Larkin, like Stevie Smith, never married. His poetry often reflects an ambivalence towards institutions like parenthood and marriage. For example, in "Dockery and Son," Larkin's speaker questions the assumptions that one should marry and procreate: "Where do these / Innate assumptions come from?" (*Collected Poems* 152). Considering Easthope's suggestion that Larkin's speaker remains "detached" and the poet's prevailing skepticism towards the institutions of marriage and parenthood, it seems likely that the speaker in "The Whitsun Weddings" wishes to remain "not self-deceived."

Where Easthope's contention breaks down is in insufficiently accommodating both "empiricist" views with the speaker's simultaneous desire to achieve a pseudo-spiritual transcendence. Critics have long noted this tension, including Robert Lance Snyder, who argues that "'The Whitsun Weddings' is remarkable for its attempt to bridge the gulf between sacred/sacramental and profane/secular" (131). As the primary example, Snyder offers that "the concluding trope of 'an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain,' though derived from Lawrence Olivier's wartime film of *Henry V* (Motion 288), is inescapably reminiscent of Eliot's finale in *The Waste Land*,



where ‘What the Thunder Said’ bodes the advent of long awaited relief from drought” (Snyder 135). Because he largely abandons organized religion in his poetry, in order to achieve the transcendent experience that combines the sacred and profane, Larkin is forced to create his own cultural rituals, and music occasionally takes such a ritualistic role. Whatever the ritual, the transcendence is usually fleeting, as indicated in “The Whitsun Weddings.”

In “The Whitsun Weddings,” as the speaker observes the actions and physical characteristics of the train passengers, he wavers between feelings of connection and isolation. The message of “The Whitsun Weddings” concerns humanity and ritual, but the actual wedding rituals are merely implied: the ritual Larkin creates occurs as the train nears its final destination in London. Several critics note the importance of Larkin’s use of train imagery in his poetry, including Salem Hassan, who comments that “time passing and the hollow quality of the present are vividly depicted in Larkin’s ‘train poems’” (12). Larkin’s poem captures a time when most of England still could be accessed by train. John Lucas feels that the poem “is undoubtedly the most famous post-war English poem of train travel” (50).

Raphaël Ingelbien notes that “The Whitsun Weddings” is “often taken to be Larkin’s most appealing manifesto of post-war Englishness” (213). Ingelbien’s suggestion that the poem goes beyond nostalgia to the point of “manifesto” requires a critical discourse that equates rail travel and the rest of the poem’s imagery with Englishness. In a sense, Larkin composes the poem with a special emphasis on capturing a particularly English landscape, but the speaker in the poem adopts a neutral attitude towards what he or she sees. For Roger Craik, what sets “The Whitsun Weddings” apart

from Larkin's other poetry is "the weight it achieves while giving the impression of spontaneity by means of matter-of-fact observation" (73). Larkin opens the poem with all the efficiency of "matter-of-fact observation":

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:  
Not till about  
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
Of being in a hurry gone. (Collected Poems 114)

There is nothing typically English in these lines except for the tradition of "Whitsun," a religious observance of the Holy Spirit's descent upon Christ's disciples after the Resurrection. The opening lines could take place anywhere in Britain. It is not until the final line of the first stanza that the particular region is identified as "Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet."

Despite being set in England, "The Whitsun Weddings" does not always contain an idealized portrait of England or English people. In the second stanza, Larkin's landscape reflect, "Canals with floatings of industrial froth" and "acres of dismantled cars," alongside pastoral imagery such as cattle, farms, hedges, and the smell of grass. Donald Davie feels that "canals and smashed cars come along with hedges and cattle simply because they come along like that in any railway journey through England" (65). Thus, the description in the poem seems to be as accurate as a documentary film.

In terms of formal conventions in "The Whitsun Weddings," Larkin composes the poem in such a way to suggest the passage of time, which will serve his desire to create a

brief, transcendent ritual. According to Calvin Bedient, the lines of the poem more like a train journey: “the lines frequently pausing as if at so many stations, yet curving on in repeated enjambments past scenes swiftly but timelessly evoked, as though the stanzas themselves were the wide windows of a moving train” (92). This feeling of train travel is also expressed by the way the stanzas are structured. Salem Hassan notes,

Structurally speaking, the sense of unbroken continuity through time has been maintained by the rhyme-scheme: a sequence of similarly rhymed stanzas (all ababcdedce) conveys a sense of sustained movement through time which matches that of the train. Rhythm, together with rhyme effect, keeps on the continuous movement of the poem as a whole and leads the reader gently to the conclusion. This, in turn, mirrors the movement of the train and consequently the fleetingness of time. (83).

Despite the unflinching realism of the description of the landscape, the poem displays an acute attention to formal poetic conventions to suggest “the fleetingness of time.”

In terms of the use of language in the poem, David Lodge argues that, “as the poem goes on, Larkin unobtrusively raises the pitch of rhetorical and emotional intensity—and this corresponds to the approach of the train to its destination: the journey provides the poem with its basic structure, a sequence of spatio-temporal contiguities” (78). The speaker’s emotional distance appears throughout the first two stanzas, where he is focused on the passing landscape and his immediate surroundings in the train. In the third stanza, the full meaning of the title emerges when the speaker acknowledges how “At first, I didn’t notice what a noise / The weddings made.” The speaker’s excuse for not noticing the wedding parties on the station platforms is “reading.”

Once the speaker begins to understand that he is riding a train that is increasingly full of newly married couples, he begins to explore the potentially ritualistic significance of the event. As Bruce Martin contends, “the traveler in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ indicates his increased interest and emotional attachment to the newlyweds by an increased use of figurative language” (102). In the final three stanzas of the poem, the speaker shifts his attention back to the passing landscape and notes that it no longer seems frozen in time as it was in the first stanzas: the arrival in London is fast approaching and threatening the end to the Whitsun experience. The images pass more quickly than in the first few stanzas. One of these images is of “An Odeon,” also an iconic image in Betjeman’s “The Metropolitan Railway,” published four years before Larkin’s poem. At several points in these last stanzas, a sense of urgency is conveyed in words such as “hurried,” “Just long enough,” “running,” “raced,” “nearly done,” and “ready.” The rapidly passing images and urgent language create a sense of tension that needs to be “loosed.”

The speaker’s role in the poem is a much debated topic among critics. Some feel that the speaker wishes to remain distant from the other people on the train and on the platforms; other critics feel that a strong connection is made between the speaker and the wedding parties. Andrew Swarbrick suggests both a sense of connection and distance: “the speaker has shared in an experience of which the other participants remain ignorant (and in that sense is characteristically voyeuristic) and the poem carries an undertow of skepticism which resists a fairy-tale ending” (107). Donald Hall places the speaker further out, arguing that, in the context of Larkin’s body of work, the poem is “characteristic in the place it is spoken from – a little to the side of life, watching, commenting – it is both empathetic and aloof, both superior and wistful” (167). The

speaker has a fluctuating attitude towards others that culminates in his own personally transcendent experience. At first, he provides unflattering descriptions of the physical appearance and actions of the wedding parties, but as the poem reaches its conclusion, he recognizes the beauty and power of the “frail / Travelling coincidence” of being on a train with so many newly married couples. However, the speaker also recognizes that he may be the only one aware of the significance: “none / Thought of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour” (Collected Poems 116). None but the speaker, who creates this postnuptial train ritual for his own purpose.

Much of the critical debate about the speaker’s attitude towards the wedding parties comes from his description of them that begins at the end of the third stanza: “We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls / In parodies of fashion, heels and veils.” The description continues at the end of the fourth stanza:

The fathers with broad belts under their suits  
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,  
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes.

(Collected Poems 115)

Marjorie Perloff contends that for the speaker, “ordinary people, it seems, girls who can’t afford real jewelry or leather gloves, who perm their hair and wear ‘parodies of fashion’ – such people are not entitled to happiness, not capable of sorrow or deep feeling” (“Diminished Thing” par. 55). The speaker’s attitude does appear unnecessarily harsh, as if all of the wedding parties look the same, and there is certainly elitism in the easily spotted fake luxury goods. Still, such details work effectively towards what Swarbrick

identifies as how Larkin “resists a fairy-tale ending.” Although there is something beautiful in the shared experience, these are not princes and princesses. They are working class people who take advantage of the holiday to have an extra day of honeymoon before they return to work. Again, what makes them special is the sanctification that the speaker gives them for providing him with a moment of pseudo-spiritual transcendence.

The poem’s title is somewhat deceptive in that the poem itself does not really talk about the ritual of marriage at all. Instead, it is the ritual of gathering that is important to the speaker. Richard Hoffpauir comments, “significantly, the religious or legal center of the actual marriage ceremony is not recounted, but rather the immediate social consequences, and even those only from the perspective of a somewhat detached, passive, bookish traveler who only gradually becomes interested” (281).

As in Larkin’s balancing of the sacred and the profane, the conclusion of “The Whitsun Weddings” contains a metaphor about the power of shared ritual:

and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being charged can give. We slowed again  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

(Collected Poems 116)

Larkin scholars continue to debate the meaning of the closing metaphor in “The Whitsun Weddings.” David Lodge suggests that “this metaphor, with its mythical,

magical and archaic resonances, is powerful partly because it is so different from anything else in the poem” (78). John Lucas sees it as “both orgasmic and detumescent, holding out the hopes of fertility and fears of loss” (52). Salem Hassan reads the arrows as “ambivalent values; they imply death, as well as fertility. Taken in a wider perspective, man’s life is a journey which involves sexual fulfillment and the renewal of life and ultimately it ends in death” (86). Finally, Tom Paulin interprets the arrow shower as a uniquely English metaphor:

Most daringly, the sense of falling in ‘the Whitsun Weddings’ becomes an ‘arrow-shower’ like the clothyard arrows in Olivier’s film of *Henry V*. The poet summons both the play’s patriotism and that of the film (it was made during the Second World War), but the reference is typically oblique. Perhaps only readers of a certain generation – those brought up on Victorian children’s literature – will recognize that bows and arrows, just as much as cricket bats and oak trees, are icons of patriotic devotion in English culture. (779)

That the poem ends on a potentially sexual metaphor is significant for the honeymooners and the possibly voyeuristic speaker who acknowledges the (carefully non-religious) part of the ancient ritual of being joined both physically and spiritually. Although the bride is not addressed directly, Larkin’s poem is nearly an epithalamium, a poem written for a married couple on the way to a bridal chamber. The closing image suggests fertility happening “out of sight, somewhere becoming rain”; it is not localized in the couples on the train. The arrow image is where the poem potentially has the

national implications that Paulin suggests, but these are momentary and present only the speaker's private transcendent experience.

National identity is important to Larkin. In terms of poetics (or aesthetics) it is expressed differently than in Betjeman's use of architecture, which houses humanity. In Larkin's poetry, England is presented as a motif catalogued in a librarian's memory. Music is another small entry in this catalog. Larkin relegates music to a safe, well-defined place; like England, it never seems the primary focus of his poetry. Had Larkin concluded his writing career in 1958, the year "The Whitsun Weddings" was completed, the argument that he was a poet of consummate Englishness would be more convincing than when one considers his oeuvre. On the eve of the 1960s, "The Whitsun Weddings" is a time capsule that preserves England in the days before Larkin's new attitude towards art, particularly jazz, and his new attitude towards sex.

Larkin's personal love for music was focused on jazz that was a carefully constructed world of escape. Having discovered jazz as a student at Oxford, Larkin became obsessed with defining the jazz that suited him best. In his introduction to a collection of his articles on jazz, Larkin comments on his discovery that "jazz was that unique private excitement that youth seems to demand" (All What Jazz 15). This "private" experience meant that Larkin was not an active participant in the jazz scene, and this was often seen in his departures from the standard views of particular styles and musicians. As Palmer argues about Larkin's jazz reviews, Larkin's bias against a musician or style may soften or harden from one album to the next.<sup>70</sup> He certainly uses

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<sup>70</sup> See pages 39-40 in Palmer's *Such Deliberate Disguises* for examples of Larkin's constantly shifting attitudes towards trumpeter Miles Davis.



the language of any good jazz critic and his knowledge of musical terms is beyond perfunctory:

My opinion of Brubeck (not lately revised) is that despite his battery of unvarying devices (the reiterated triplets, the automatic crescendos, the blind-man's buff modulations), his records may be relied upon to contain a few of those moments when the proceedings drift away on a long ripple of understanding between him and Paul Desmond that evokes an answering wave of applause. (All What Jazz 116-117)

Despite the nearly academic approach to his reviews, employing quotations from jazz musicians and critics, Larkin clearly bases his reviews on his opinions as a listener. Not having been a professional jazz musician or received the formal education of a musicologist, Larkin is left to invent his own credentials. To Larkin's credit, he does not try to pass himself off as anything but an intellectual listener. At times, he uses his gifted control of language seemingly to amuse himself and like-minded readers. When Larkin initially discovered jazz, he felt it "was something we had found for ourselves" (All What Jazz 16). One feels the excitement of discovery in a brilliant, if emasculating, simile he uses to describe the improvisational style of legendary pianist Art Tatum: "For my taste, Tatum is rather like a dressmaker who, having seen how pretty one frill looks, makes a dress bearing ninety-nine" (All What Jazz 156). Professional jazz critics see Tatum's improvisational abilities differently. For example, Len Lyons and Don Perlo note Tatum's "incontestable mastery of the variations-and-embellishment style of improvising"(492). Jazz producer and critic Orrin Keepnews argues that Tatum's "preference was for intricate extemporaneous choruses that even rhythm accompanists

often had trouble following” (155). Thus, Larkin’s jazz criticism often cut against the grain but was generally qualified with reference to his personal “taste.” *All What Jazz* reveals that Larkin evaluated each album as if it were created in a vacuum. Unlike other professional jazz critics, for Larkin, a musician’s oeuvre was only as good as his latest album.

Although Palmer and Leggett attempt to reconcile his lifelong love of listening to jazz to the almost complete absence of jazz in his poetry, Larkin clearly separated his two primary creative interests for unknown purposes. Considering the critical association between Larkin’s poetry and Englishness, it may be argued that jazz, an American cultural import, was too foreign for Larkin to put in his English poetry. However, Leggett notes that “the appeal of jazz, in Larkin’s view, was precisely that it was *not* foreign; it was something his generation took as their own because they had discovered it for themselves” (27). Undoubtedly, jazz finds its way into Larkin’s poetry, but it is never the driving force for poetic inspiration that Palmer and Leggett might want readers to recognize.

A vital thing to remember about the second edition of *All What Jazz*, the collection of Larkin’s jazz reviews, is that it contains reviews from 1961-1971, a period of Larkin’s career as a poet where the Betjemanian observations in “The Whitsun Weddings” give way to the harsh pronouncements in later poems like “Sunny Prestatyn,” “Annus Mirabilis,” “This Be the Verse,” and “High Windows.” In the 1968 introduction to the first edition of *All What Jazz*, Larkin supposedly declares himself as anti-modernist:

I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetuated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps neither to enjoy nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power. (All What Jazz 27)

The grouping of Pound, Picasso, and [Charlie] Parker is perhaps simply an alliterative convenience rather than an accurate expression of Larkin's true feelings about exactly who is responsible for the type of art he resists and detests. Because Larkin owes so much to modernism (Yeats and Eliot, in particular), his pronouncement against it is suspect. Still, there is evidence in Larkin's work that the "contradiction of human life as we know it" was a major concern.

The 1968 date of the introduction places Larkin within the third and final period of his poetic evolution: there is the early poetry (1944-1954), the middle period (1955-1964), and the late period (1965-1984). These periods begin and end with Larkin's most prominent collections: *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974). Within Larkin's early period, the influence of modernists like Eliot and Yeats is pronounced in Larkin's lyric form and language. Even though this period was close to the origin of Larkin's love affair with jazz, the poems contain few jazz references. Larkin was careful not to mix his hobby with his art.

About Larkin's interest in jazz, Richard Palmer points out that "a sizeable number of jazz critics consider Larkin a hopeless Mouldy Fig, someone who got off the train in

about 1945 and could do little more thereafter than sneer foolishly down the track” (Palmer 3). Later in his book, Palmer convincingly argues that the dynamic nature of Larkin’s reviews overturn the assumption that Larkin’s musical taste was somehow limited to music from before the end of World War II. The year 1945 is especially significant as it was the year of publication of Larkin’s first major collection of poetry, *The North Ship*.

Often ignored by critics as “early Larkin,” or part of a period before Larkin hit his stride, *The North Ship* contains some of Larkin’s most overt flirtations with musical form. Unlike Betjeman, who may be accused of favoring a Victorian aesthetic over a contemporary one, Larkin was much more in touch with aesthetic movements than many critics (and Larkin himself) would claim. One of the things that jumps out about *The North Ship* is Larkin’s seemingly rigorous attention to balanced stanza forms. The volume contains lyric poetry in a metrically regulated form that Larkin would not use again until much later in his career. Although jazz does not noticeably appear as a trope within the language of the poems in *The North Ship*, the lyric stanzas evoke popular jazz songs, especially the blues. According to Palmer, “the jazz he [Larkin] loved was a music which spoke through simple forms—e.g. the 12-bar blues and the 32-bar popular song. Whatever the form, such jazz handled sentiment while eschewing sentimentality and spoke to all manner of people” (8).

According to Robert Crawford, “in various ways, Larkin’s work depends on, and develops from, Modernism. He may put forward his interest in jazz as being popular and anti-Modernist, but jazz is one of the strongest demotic elements in Picasso, Stravinsky, or, for that matter, in the work of [Eliot’s] *Sweeney Agonistes*” (274). As a poet, Larkin

was obsessed with creating a popular art: one that was aesthetically accomplished but open to everyone. His early poetry is defined by a troubled balancing act of his primary aesthetic influences—his love for popular music, his love for English poets like Betjeman and Hardy, and the modernist poets he read at Oxford and whose influence he could not escape at first.

Poem “XII” from *The North Ship*, which begins “Like the train’s beat,” is one of Larkin’s earliest poems involving the trope of travel and human contact, a trope he revisits in his masterpiece “The Whitsun Weddings.” The poem contains another pseudo-spiritual transcendence derived from the mundane act of train travel. The poem opens with a quick tempo:

Like the train’s beat  
Swift language flutters the lips  
Of the Polish airgirl in the corner seat.  
The swinging and narrowing sun  
Lights her eyelashes, shapes  
Her sharp vivacity of bone. (Collected Poems 288)

As in “The Whitsun Weddings,” Larkin’s ability to convey a sense of the train’s movement is accomplished. In the few lines above, verbs present the subject of the speaker’s observation. The sun not only “lights” and “[s]hapes,” but it also is “swinging” and “narrowing.” The sun’s activity is not unlike that of the poet, who is directing this play of light to narrow in on his subject. Although the girl is only talking, her physical features are animated by words that denote motion and life (“Her sharp vivacity of bone,” and “Hair, wild and controlled”). Larkin also uses metrical devices to quicken the pace of

his opening lines. There is no metrical uniformity in the poem, and most of the lines are short: only lines three and sixteen contain more than ten syllables. Enjambment also quickens the pace. The first nine lines of the poem contain only three sentences, and enjambment frequently occurs throughout the rest of poem. Besides quickening the pace of the poem, enjambment obscures the rhyme scheme of the poem. The rhyme scheme is an informal one to begin with, which forces the reader to consider it carefully. The first stanza's rhyme scheme is *ababcdbd*, and the second stanza rhymes *efgefhegg*. Because of Larkin's predominant use of slant rhyme, identifying the rhyming pairs is a complicated process. The first rhyming pair is clearly marked by the perfect rhyme of "beat" and "seat," but the subsequent rhymes are more difficult to pick out. In the passage above, Larkin rhymes "sun" with "bone;" "lips" with "shapes."

At first, the stylistic effects of the poem seem to work against the expression of "the train's beat." The subject of the first sentence is "language." Michael Tierce argues that "poem XII of *The North Ship* seems to be a conscious revision of Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper'" (22). There are certain similarities between the two poems – both poems describe women who speak a language that is foreign to the speaker in the poem, and both poems compare the woman to a bird. Acknowledging these similarities, Tierce goes on to posit that "through the girl the poet [Larkin] glimpses the promise of humanity, that he recognizes the potential beauty of human nature" (Tierce 22). The word "humanity" appears in line thirteen of Larkin's poem, but the poem says about as much about humanity as it does about trains, which is very little.

Raphaël Ingelbien feels that, by using the "Polish airgirl," Larkin is expressing "his own sense of alienation from English wartime culture by adopting the perspective of

a female refugee” (211). Furthermore, Ingelbien feels that Larkin’s inclusion of “English oaks” and other “traditional symbols which England resuscitated in the 1940’s” are used by Larkin only “to be erased by a decentered perspective” (211). Ingelbien’s suggestion largely relies on biographical speculation, and thus it runs the risk of connecting the speaker in the poem with the poet’s own conscious intention. However, Ingelbien raises the issue of why a poem that was written during wartime does not mention the war. The answer to this concern lies in Larkin’s prose writings. Addressing the question of what makes a war poet, Larkin writes:

A ‘war’ poet is not one who chooses to commemorate or celebrate a war but one who reacts against having a war thrust upon him: he is chained, that is to a historical event, and an abnormal one at that. However well he does it, however much we agree that the war happened and ought to be written about, there is still a tendency for us to withhold our praise on the grounds that a poet’s choice of subject should seem an action, not a reaction. [. . .] Again, the first-rank poet should ignore the squalid accident of war: his vision should be powerful enough to disregard it. (Required Writing 159)

Taken as an example of outside criticism, Larkin’s comments about war poetry are illustrated in poem XII from *The North Ship*. First of all, Larkin succeeds in transcending the need to address World War II in the poem. Ingelbien’s comment that the “Polish airgirl” is a refugee is not supported by the text. If the poem had been written twenty years after the 1944 publication of *The North Ship*, then the “airgirl” would most likely only denote a foreign employee of an airline. The word “airgirl” connects the

Polish woman to the bird imagery in the second stanza, and seems to suggest very little of her biography. Another aspect of the poem that supports Larkin's feelings about war poetry is the fact that the poem is more of an "action" than a "reaction" to World War Two. If Ingelbien's suggestion is correct, then the context of World War II caused the encounter between the poem's speaker and the Polish airgirl.

"Like the train's beat" attempts to transcend the bleakness of World War II England. Although the train passes "English oaks," the speaker's experience of the Polish airgirl and the rapid movement of the train take him far beyond a mundane journey through war ravaged Britain. It is the woman's physical beauty and the sound of her voice, the "whirling notes" that allow the speaker to experience a spiritual transcendence. The woman is truly "a voice/Watering a stony place." This final sentiment, which can be read as an allusion to the parable of the Sower and the Seed in Matthew 13 and Mark 3, lends a religious tone to the poem. As in "The Whitsun Weddings," the speaker's transcendence is fleeting.

After *The North Ship*, Larkin's poetry became less lyrical. In an interview on the release of *All What Jazz*, he gives an often repeated statement:

I had in my mind a notion that there might have been what I'd call, for want of a better phrase, an English tradition coming from the nineteenth century with people like Hardy, which was interrupted partly by the Great War, when many English poets were killed off, and partly by the really tremendous impact of Yeats, whom I think of as Celtic, and Eliot, whom I think of as American. (Harvey 5-6)



According to critics like Gary Kissick, Larkin's poetry was a reaction against high modernist poetry. Kissick writes that "the cosmopolitan poetry of Pound, Yeats, and Eliot was not English, reeked of foreign allusions, and was often inaccessible. After that pompous lot, Larkin's unpretentious poetry must have seemed a breath of fresh air, even if it did blow across a graveyard" (par. 8). Beyond allusions, the imagery of Larkin's verse rarely leaves England's borders, yet the England he describes is representative of Larkin's present. Richard Palmer argues that "it would be absurd to suggest that the England Larkin described from 1950 to 1975 is nowhere to be found anymore; however, many assumptions that underlie or inform his poems now need fairly lengthy explanations to a young audience" (xix). As Larkin once said in his introduction to an American edition of Betjeman's poetry, his own work now needs glossing for younger readers.

Larkin's presentation of postwar England was very much the result of his desire to connect to something that transcended the grim reality of mundane existence. Larkin thought of this desire as predominantly a private one, not a national one. Jed Esty argues that Larkin was not alone in looking for rituals for spiritual experiences:

For English intellectuals invested in the reconstruction of a cohesive national culture after empire, the return to native rituals, to historical supply lines, to the everyday habits of a genuine people have an almost irresistible allure. Like any of the other cultures taking new post-British shapes after Empire, England has been susceptible to the loving but narcissistic clench of nativism. (225)

This, for modernists like Eliot, was a very learned process. Larkin made it more accessible by giving more popular references to music, film, and riding on a train, like the ones that appear in “Like the Train’s Beat” and “The Whitsun Weddings,” but he never could fully commit to, or perhaps never fully saw the need for, a complete cultural reconstruction on the scale of Eliot’s poetry or Pound’s *Cantos*. Instead, Larkin captures moments, images of transcendence.

Although Larkin was older than the other members of the Movement, he shared many of their aesthetic pronouncements. In *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Literature*, the authors define the Movement in national terms:

the Movement remains crucial to recent literary history because in the 1950s the writers associated with it reimagined and promoted discourses of national identity in order to make of necessity (the reduced role of Britain in world politics) a virtue. This involved complex, sometimes contradictory and provisional adaptations of an argument that set an English poetry and a tradition of Englishness in poetry over and against cosmopolitan Modernisms identified as non-native—an opposition that is at the root of divisions in British poetry that continue to influence the production and critical evaluation of poetry in the present.

(Tuma and Dorward 510)

Larkin’s accomplishment is that, by the end of his career as a poet, he mastered this “contradictory” approach to poetry by tapping into both England’s past and present. In a recent article on Larkin’s masculinity, Praseeda Gopinath argues that “Philip Larkin’s poetry assumed such cultural and national resonance in post-war England *because* of its

imbrication within, and adaptation of, an inherited stylization of hegemonic masculinity, or what I call imperially inflected gentlemanliness” (374). The element that links Larkin’s early poetry with his later work is a more conscious clash of popular culture with what Gopinath terms “an inherited stylization of hegemonic masculinity.”

Richard Palmer argues that the poems “‘Love Songs in Age,’ ‘Reference Back,’ ‘Show Saturday’ and ‘Mr. Bleaney’ demonstrate in their different ways, [that] Larkin had an unwavering affection for popular culture, despite moments of irritation and unblinking awareness of its decided limitations” (62). Of the four poems Palmer mentions, two of them are about music and both of those appeared before the British masses heard rock ‘n’ roll. This is significant because Larkin’s critical attitude towards popular music changed in the 1960s.

In “Love Songs in Age,” the speaker primarily addresses music as a physical artifact:

She kept her songs, they took so little space,

The covers pleased her:

One bleached from lying in a sunny place,

One marked in circles by a vase of water,

One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her

And coloured, by her daughter— (Collected Poems 113)

In addition to the covers pleasing her, the music itself recreates “the unfailing sense of being young.” Like many of Larkin’s poems dealing with music, the woman in “Love Songs in Age” experiences music in a personal and private way. The reader learns that she is a widow and that she discovers the songs “looking for something else.” Ultimately,

as she is putting the songs back, the speaker suggests that the “glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love” from the songs fails “to solve, and satisfy.” The rediscovery of the songs leads the woman to both joy and tears.

The use of music in ritual also appears in “Reference Back.” The poem describes the ritual of listening to records and is one of the few direct references to jazz in Larkin’s poetry. The poem’s speaker is visiting his mother and the music creates an unusual transcendence of the mundane act of listening to records:

Oliver’s *Riverside Blues*, it was. And now  
I shall, I suppose, always remember how  
The flock of notes those antique negroes blew  
Out of Chicago air into  
A huge remembering pre-electric horn  
The year after I was born  
Three decades later made this sudden bridge  
From your unsatisfactory age  
To my unsatisfactory prime. (Collected Poems 106)

The speaker is clearly familiar with the recording history of the album: he or she knows the band, the song, the city it was recorded in, the acoustic horn that captured the sounds and vibrated a diaphragm that carved a wax cylinder, and the year the album was recorded (in 1923, a year after Larkin’s birth). In the next and final stanza, the speaker muses on the passage of time and does not return to a further discussion of music. As in “Love Songs in Age,” music is a ritualistic way to inspire thoughts that transcend the mundane act of listening to a particular piece of music. In “Reference Back,” the speaker

claims that “Truly, though our element is time, / We are not suited to the long perspectives / Open at each instant of our lives” (Collected Poems 106). Such “long perspectives” lead to a realization of “losses” and “what we have as it once was, / Blindingly undiminished.”

In “Love Songs in Age” and “Reference Back,” popular music inspires the speaker’s pseudo-spiritual transcendence, and gives it a kind of sanctity. This attitude towards popular music would change for Larkin. In his jazz reviews, Larkin openly dismissed popular music of the 1960s. In a blurb on the Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), he writes, “I can only say that the Beatles, having made their name in the narrow emotional and harmonic world of teenage pop, are now floating away on their own cloud. I doubt whether their own fancies and imagination are strong enough to command an audience instead of collaborating with it” (All What Jazz 186). The Beatles hold a special place in Larkin studies. They are the only popular band to appear in both *All What Jazz* and Larkin’s poetry.

In *All What Jazz*, Larkin reveals that he was a keen observer of the Beatles’s evolution. In the wake of Beatles’ *Help* (1965), Larkin writes of their music that “its appeal has shifted from the Edwardian ballad and comic-song tradition overlaid with syncopation to the genuine blues overlaid with the hybrid and plangent romanticism that is the Lennon-McCartney hallmark” (All What Jazz 146) Part of this is Larkin’s disappointment that pop songs were being passed off as “legitimate” jazz. Yet, Larkin continued to be compelled to talk about the seemingly all-pervasive influence of the Beatles.

The 1950s was a vital period in Larkin's development as a poet. As Thomas Osborne argues,

One of the most striking things to note from Larkin's *Letters* is the extent to which the decade of his post-Oxford maturity, the 1950s, was both a defining cultural period and simultaneously a period of equally defining deprivation. Indeed, it could be said that out of the 1950s swells an entire experience of 'Englishness,' even it seems for later generations. The 1950s represent in that sense, a kind of 'central case,' as philosophers of science might say, of the experience of English diminishment. Central here, indeed, is the question of a certain exhaustion with everything. (57)

By the mid-1960s, though, this "exhaustion" was dramatically replaced with a new, cultural energy represented by movements in popular music like Beatlemania. According to Iain Chambers,

Around 1964-5 there occurred a decisive shift in the economy of public imagery surrounding pop music. Pop stopped being a spectacular but peripheral event, largely understood to be associated with the teenage working-class taste, and became the central symbol of fashionable, metropolitan British culture. It had moved from being a show business mutant to becoming a symbolization of style. (Urban Rhythms 57)

This may have been true for some, but not for Larkin, who found himself in the difficult position of both jazz aficionado and artist under the influence of poets like Betjeman and Hardy. It is from this position that Larkin composes "Annus Mirabilis."

“Annus Mirabilis” contains the most direct references to popular culture in Larkin’s oeuvre. As B. J. Leggett notes, the tone and intended audience for the poem is subject to debate. He asks, “how seriously are we to take the speaker’s lament? Is the poem a parody of popular art, a piece of doggerel created for the amusement of the ‘slumming’ academic reader, or an earnest appropriation of a popular style? (189). According to Richard Palmer, “what Larkin is up to in this poem is partly historical analysis (stanza two) and partly contemptuous spoof of facile claptrap masquerading as sociological commentary (the other three stanzas)” (86). Taken together, these critics suggest a poem that is both consciously historical and culturally carnivalesque.

Working in favor of the interpretation that “Annus Mirabilis” is carnivalesque is an intertext. The title of the poem is the same as a much longer work by John Dryden, which was written in 1666 to commemorate “various successes” of England’s naval war against Holland. In contrast with Larkin’s version, Dryden’s poem is 1,216 lines long, and is full of the kind of poetic diction one expects from Seventeenth-Century poetry. Here is the final stanza:

Thus to the Eastern wealth through storms we go,  
But now, the Cape once doubled, fear no more;  
A constant trade-wind will securely blow  
And gently lay us on the spicy shore. (“Annus Mirabilis” 86).

In sharp contrast, here is the final stanza of Larkin’s poem:

So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me) –

Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban

And the Beatles' first LP. (Collected Poems 167)

Although Larkin's poem shares more with a song from "the Beatles' first LP" than it does with Dryden's poem, there is a certain excitement about the present state of affairs that both poets share. Larkin's use of the Latin title for his poem was meant to add significance to the message of the poem, and borrowing Dryden's title also adds a certain canonical bit of name dropping that is humorous when the two poems are compared.

The two "intertexts" of "Annus Mirabilis" mark two important events in British social history: the unofficial end of Victorian ideology (after the Lady Chatterley trial), and the entry of rock and roll into mainstream British culture (after the commercial success of the Beatles). Lolette Kuby feels that these "two incidents," "mark the point of significant alterations in society and culture" (170). Kenneth O. Morgan discusses the significance of the *Lady Chatterley* case in particular:

The general long-term effect was to promote a slow revolution in which the unrestricted use of native English became easier, the accurate revealing of sexual or other experiences became natural, and in which the very ingenuity with which the Lord Chamberlain and other censors were challenged or evaded became in itself a force for free expression. The centuries-old campaign against the puritan ethic was nearer to victory.

(People's Peace 186)

Morgan's comments echo throughout Larkin's poetry of the sixties, especially in poems like "Sunny Prestatyn," (1962), and "High Windows" (1967). It seems that reversal of the ban against *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was partly responsible for Larkin's change in poetic



diction. For example, Salem Hassan comments on how Larkin's use of rhyme contributes to the tone of the opening stanza:

Paralyzed by time, the poet loses any drive to enjoy the sexual freedom of the young. A sense of ironic detachment can be detected here; a sense which is re-enhanced by the rhyme words: 'began' and 'ban.' Thus the difference in the rhyming parts of speech ('began' is a verb and 'ban' is a noun) produces a difference in meaning: while sexual freedom is enjoyed by the young, it is inaccessible to the poet. (119)

As Hassan suggests, the poem as text contains rhyming pairs that create subtle contributions to the poem's meaning: the rhyming of "bargaining" with "ring" further emphasizes the economic aspect of relationships that led to marriage, which previously was the only socially approved way to experience "Sexual intercourse." B. J. Leggett comments on these words as having a particular rhetorical effect: "the terms of his conception of sexual relations demonstrate his inability to think outside the old sexual paradigm" (192-193).

Perhaps in an effort to keep the overall tone of the poem light, "Annus Mirabilis" contains several pleasing, and sometimes humorous, rhymes, such as the rhyme of "been" with "sixteen," which also echoes the rhymes of popular songs. Despite having missed out on the sexual revolution, the speaker does not express anger or bitterness. Lolette Kuby feels that "the mildness of tone in 'Annus Mirabilis' is partly due to the speaker's satisfaction with the present" (170). Janice Rossen disagrees,

Something rings slightly false in his [the poet's] celebration of the miraculous event. For one thing, the change fails to eradicate the link

between sex and money. Sex remains a business deal, and the optimistic hope that everyone will participate in breaking the bank seems a deliberate naïveté. Secondly, the choice of a specific date, 1963, seems suspiciously reductive. It is all too simple. (150)

Rossen further states that “the tone of the entire poem is a puzzling mixture of sincerity and irony” (150). Stephen Regan calls the poem an “ironic tribute to the 1960’s” (129). “Annus Mirabilis” has its share of irony, but it also has an elusive quality that makes it difficult to define the speaker’s attitude. For instance, “Sexual intercourse began,” but it is unclear who exactly is engaging in the sex, because it happened “rather late” for the speaker in the first stanza, and “too late” in the final stanza.

Parlophone released *Please Please Me*, the first Beatles LP released in the UK, on March 22, 1963. The Lady Chatterley trial took place in 1960, so “Sexual intercourse” began quite early in 1963. The speaker is not attempting to establish an authoritative social history. Instead, the speaker is establishing a personal history of when he first began to notice that attitudes about sex had changed. The second stanza seems to further complicate the issue of distance between the speaker’s life and other peoples’ lives. The lines “A sort of bargaining, / A wrangle for a ring” could represent dowries and wishes for wedding proposals, but the meaning of “A shame that started at sixteen / and spread to everything” is much less clear. It could be the speaker’s personal age assignment to a rite of sexual passage, or it could be a certain sexual practice like masturbation that “started at sixteen.” Still, the suggestion that it “spread to everything” implies venereal disease or at least, a growing sense of shame over premarital sex acts. This negative theme continues into the third stanza, where life has become “A quite unlosable game.”

Here, the speaker sounds like a casino hawker, encouraging gamblers to attempt “A brilliant breaking of the bank,” but the final stanza reveals that this winning streak has past; the luck has run out. In the end, it appears that the speaker has cheated the reader out of sexual promise. The poem begins with “Sexual intercourse began,” but it is not revealed until the end that the time of ultimate sexual freedom is over: “life was never better than / In nineteen sixty-three.” The speaker’s trickery is accomplished through subtle language devices that lull the reader into a sense of hope and pleasure, only to disappoint the reader with the knowledge that there never really was this ideal time.

In “Annus Mirabilis” there is irony, sarcasm, regret, and happiness. This is quite a wide range of emotion for such a short poem. B. J. Leggett contends that “the wit of ‘Annus Mirabilis’ is easily accessible to the ‘literary’ audience—the Lawrence audience—but the Beatles’ audience came along ‘just too late’ to read it as anything more than a popular poem about the sexual revolution” (198-199). In contrast, Thom Gunn provides a younger poet’s experience of early Beatlemania:

London had never seemed more fertile: I think of that twelve months  
[from July 1964 through June 1965] as moving to the tunes of the Beatles,  
for it started with their movie *A Hard Day’s Night* and was punctuated by  
the rebellious joy of their singles. They stood for a great optimism,  
barriers seemed to be coming down all over, it was as if World War II had  
finally drawn to a close, there was an openness and high-spiritedness and  
relaxation of mood I did not remember from the London of earlier  
years. (180)

Ultimately, if Larkin felt he was “too late,” he still was compelled to memorialize, even if in a mocking way, the significance of the moment. As Gunn suggests about the general zeitgeist, the middle 1960s also breathed a new life into Larkin’s verse.

Because of its references to popular culture and its accessible language and imagery, Larkin’s poetry is still widely read. Unfortunately for Larkin’s contemporary readers, the positive reception of his work is marred by well substantiated accusations of racial prejudice, misogyny, and strange alliances with reactionary figures like Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell that were brought to light with the publication of Larkin’s correspondence and Andrew Motion’s biography of Larkin. Since these publications, “Larkin studies” generally fall into three camps: 1. attempts to heap more on the condemnation pile, and 2. attempts to explain the heap and rescue Larkin’s artistic legacy, and 3. attempts to set aside Larkin’s personal problems and focus squarely on the poetry itself.<sup>71</sup> This third camp, which is apparently derived from the New Critic’s intense focus only on what is inside the text, is troublesome because Larkin’s legacy should own his inexcusable outbursts as much as it owns its often brilliant artistic output.

Ultimately, the critical conundrum that defines Larkin studies is a healthy one for the study of British poetry because it dismantles the myth of Englishness in a way that its pieces may be seen more clearly in isolation. Larkin, whose poetry is supposedly *very* English, was also, in the words of Terry Castle, “a peculiar wanker” (82). Had he been a

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<sup>71</sup> Here are a few prominent examples. Camp 1: Tom Paulin’s “Into the Heart of Englishness” (1990) and James Fenton’s “Wounded by Unshrapnel” (2001). Camp 2: Richard Palmer’s *Such Deliberate Disguises* (2008) and Terry Castle’s “The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin” (2009). Camp 3: A. Banerjee’s “Larkin Reconsidered” (2008) and Robert Lance Snyder’s “‘Elbowing Vacancy’: Philip Larkin’s Non-Places” (2007).

rock star, he would have been forgiven for his sins,<sup>72</sup> but, despite his Oxford education, the poet's role as a public intellectual requires an urbanity which Larkin could not maintain. Larkin's tactless comments confirm the association of Englishness with reactionary politics and right-wing idealism, but the progressive diction and subject matter of his poetry also capture images of a dynamic time in England.

Although Larkin's fondness for Betjeman provides a link between the two poets, Larkin has recently been linked to another poet of his time, Ted Hughes. Two recent essays discuss Larkin and Ted Hughes as polarities. Thomas Osborne suggests that "whereas Larkin burrowed into inwardness, the poetry of Ted Hughes aspired to the status of a kind of externalized, dramatic, mythopoetic becoming" (47). Ryan Hibbett argues that "though Hughes's equal in popularity, Larkin depicts himself as marginalized from the successful poet-public relations enjoyed by Hughes—as a private rather than public poet, who exists outside of this direct communicative exchange" (128).

Hibbett goes on to suggest that

Larkin's issues with Hughes perhaps have less to do with a personal confrontation (they hardly knew one another) or a debate about poetic content than a confused or complicated sense of poetic identity in relation to audience, and a growing awareness of a popular domain to which 'serious' poets should not belong, yet which could potentially prove useful in the construction and marketing of poetic identity.

(130-131)

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<sup>72</sup> In '*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*,' Paul Gilroy highlights Eric Clapton's "admiration for Enoch Powell," and David Bowie's pronouncement that "Britain was in need of a right-wing dictatorship" (Gilroy *Union Jack* 121).

It is the fundamental desire to relate to a more inclusive audience/reader in that makes reconciling jazz with poetry difficult for a poet like Larkin. A complete adoption of jazz as a primary aesthetic inspiration is not the right posture because it crosses too much into an elitist locale, a place where Larkin's poet/artist cannot dwell. Hibbett notes that "Hughes's success is a threat to Larkin, not only because it challenges his status as England's best living poet, but also because it undermines his own sense of audience: if readers are responding positively to Hughes, then Larkin's value as a poet who reconnects poetry with an otherwise neglected, general reader becomes suspect" (130).

If Philip Larkin's poetry is reflective of post-war English society, then what explains his popularity with today's readers? Gary Day argues that Larkin's popularity is not due to the "accessibility of his verse but because his rhythms correspond to the rhythms of modern life, both imposing a kind of order on otherwise unmanageable reality" (46). The "rhythms" that Day mentions are partly established by Larkin's unique brand of prosody, which also sets him apart from his contemporaries. As a stylist, Larkin greatly eclipsed the poetic creations of his fellow members in the Movement. For Stephen Regan, Larkin's poetry is superior to the poetry of other poets associated with "The Movement" because it: "not only exemplifies a deeper imaginative apprehension of social experience and its contradictions, but [ . . . ] it exhibits a far greater range of formal and stylistic devices and a more profound sense of the linguistic and aesthetic possibilities of modern colloquial English" (25).

Critics have long debated the question of the "Englishness" of Philip Larkin's poetry. Certainly, English images find their way into his poetry, but do these images resemble loving postcards of his native land, or do they just provide familiar backgrounds

for scenes about the human condition? Tom Paulin suggests that Larkin's England is "a cold country inhabited entirely by hard-working Anglo-Saxon Protestants who wear cheap ugly clothes and drink beer" (779). Reading "The Whitsun Weddings," for example, could lead one to the assumption that Larkin's England is not idealized. On the other side of the issue, Seamus Heaney feels Larkin's response to England is more personal and positive:

He sees England from train windows, fleeting past and away. He is urban modern man, the insular Englishman, responding to the tones of his own clan, ill at ease when out of his environment. He is a poet, indeed, of composed and tempered English nationalism, and his voice is the not untrue, not unkind voice of postwar England, where the cloth cap and the royal crown have both lost some of their potent symbolism and the categorical, socially defining functions of the working-class accent and the aristocratic drawl have almost been eroded. ("Englands of the Mind" 100).

In response to Heaney's comments, Raphaël Ingelbien argues that "far from being the quintessential post-war insular Englishman that Heaney makes him out to be, Larkin is still very close to a pre-war generation of aesthetes whose relation to England was much more complex" (193). Larkin was interested in reaching his audience with common language, yet Larkin's best work sought a very private spiritual transcendence of mundane English life. Although music occasionally plays a part in the speaker's ability to transcend the mundane, it never seems to connect the English people in terms of a common national identity, nor does Larkin define his own identity through native English

musical forms. For Larkin, as he states in “Annus Mirabilis,” it was “too late” for music to have such an effect.



## Chapter 5: Derek Walcott and Grace Nichols—The Politics and

### Poetics of Dub

In many ways, Walcott's artistic journey could be described as a search for home—for community to replace the one left; a place where his creative schizophrenia needs no defense, where his artistic voice requires neither explanation or modulation. Poetry for him has become the meeting place of different dialects and discourse communities. (MacDonald-Smythe 111)

[Grace Nichols's] poetry reflects the diverse cultural currents of late twentieth-century Britain; she is one of a number of writers whose work challenges traditional notions of Englishness, reworking racial and gendered stereotypes and reflecting its many-layered identities. (Scafe 260)

#### **Part 1: Popular Music, Poetry, and Postcolonial Identity in Britain (1976-1985)**

In a 1990 interview with *Rolling Stone*, five years after Live Aid, the landmark concert he helped organize to aid Ethiopian famine victims, Bob Geldof makes the following pronouncement: “pop music changes nothing. Pop songs change nothing. They can focus attention on a problem. You can still use pop to draw attention to something” (Tannenbaum 80). For the two poets featured in this chapter, popular music occupies exactly the position Geldof suggests—it has the ability to draw temporary attention to something, but ultimately changes nothing. Unlike the other poets in this dissertation, Derek Walcott and Grace Nichols do not employ popular music to define their identities as English or British. They define their identities not in terms of a particular nation but in terms of a collective, hybrid experience of which music is only a small part.

A poet's profession of a hybrid, postnational identity negates his or her Englishness because the poet cannot be exclusively associated with England. This may seem obvious, but it has not stopped Derek Walcott from inclusion in anthologies of English poetry or Sheila Scafe's assertion that one of Grace Nichols's artistic aims is to challenge Englishness.<sup>73</sup> In addition to grounding the geographical settings for much of their verse in the Caribbean, both poets feature Caribbean music in their poetry. In Britain during the 1970s the most prominent forms of British-Caribbean music were consciously resistant towards Englishness. Lyrics expressed frustration with the British government's economic and social policies towards immigrant communities and the style of the music was unfamiliar to white musicians. That was the case until Two-tone bands of the early 1980s co-opted some of the Caribbean sound and altered it to suit white Britons. Despite this co-optation of musical style, the music of Caribbean musicians Bob Marley, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean "Binta" Breeze continue to imply an authenticity of social protest that both Nichols and Walcott found useful for expressing their own identities in resistance to the ones critics would apply to them as British poets.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Caribbean music became one of the most prominent musical genres of social protest in Britain for three main reasons. First of all, Caribbean music was imported and sold to Britain through neighborhoods primarily populated by Caribbean immigrants. Additionally, Caribbean music was played for predominantly Caribbean audiences through shop-front sound systems and in dance halls. British-Caribbean DJ's would "toast" or dub over the imported music with their own lyrics. A "toast" is an extemporaneous interjection by a DJ over a recording where the vocals have

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<sup>73</sup> See Scafe's comments in the epigraph to this chapter. Derek Walcott was first included in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* in 1986 (King 426).

been removed. These interjections vary in length from brief dance instructions to complete narrative poems that cover the length of the song. “Dub” primarily differs from a “toast” in that a “toast” is only part of a live performance and “dub” poetry is either recorded or transcribed. “Toasts” and “dub” often reflect the immigrant community’s struggles against the widespread racism of politicians like Enoch Powell and whites-only organizations like the National Front.

Just before the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) severely limited Caribbean immigration, Claudia Jones reports that

by mid-1962, over three hundred thousand West Indians were settled in Britain. The yearly immigration and the growth of community settlement illustrates the rate of growth of the West Indian settlement. For example, the emigration of West Indians to the United Kingdom in mid-1955 totaled 24,473 and by 1961 this figure soared to 61,749. (49)<sup>74</sup>

Despite these growing numbers, Jones reports that in 1962, “the presence of West Indian immigrants (who together with other Afro-Asian peoples total nearly a half million people) represent less than one percent in an overall Anglo-populace of 52 million” (50). The supposed “threat” that immigrants posed was a manifestation of mythologized fears of white Britons, and became, according to Jones, “a canker of racialism” (51).

The second main reason Caribbean music became associated with social protest was that it was regularly featured as a part of public protests, starting with the 1959 Notting Hill Carnival and continuing through the mid 1970s, when the Carnivals often turned violent. The 1959 Notting Hill Carnival was organized in the wake of race riots in

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<sup>74</sup> Claudia Jones was the founder of the first black newspaper in Great Britain, the *West Indian Gazette* and one of the central figures in what would eventually become the Notting Hill Carnival (Goodwin 6).

1958 and prominently featured Caribbean music (Gutzmore 336). It was based on the pre-Lent Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago. According to one of its founders, the aim of the Notting Hill Carnival was to, “present West Indian talent to the public which at that time could not see Caribbean people as anything other than hewers of wood and drawers of water” (Goodwin 9). Reflecting the national origins of its organizers, the first Carnival featured mainly, “steel and costume bands from the Eastern Caribbean,” which one writer argues were, “totally *unthreatening*” to British whites (Gutzmore 340). They were “unthreatening” because they performed in front of fairly small gatherings of people.

According to Cecil Gutzmore, it was the 1975 introduction of reggae, played for outdoor audiences swelling to five hundred thousand people when, “the Carnival entered the domain of *threatening culture*, because it was then mass culture, active mass culture” (340). Attempts to control this “active mass culture” caused violent conflicts between police and Carnival goers in 1976. According to Ashley Dawson, “this event and the carnivals that followed it in 1977 and 1978 are generally regarded as the coming-of-age ceremonies of the second generation of black Britons” (78). Reggae music was more appealing to a wider audience than “steel and costume bands” because it was not isolated to a specific region of the Caribbean. By 1977, Bob Marley, reggae’s international superstar, had been performing for over a decade with his band the Wailers.<sup>75</sup>

The third main reason Caribbean music became associated with social protests was that reggae music, when played on a sound system, could be transformed from performance to performance by the “toasts” of a DJ, which eventually developed into a separate literary genre known as dub poetry. Because these performances were not a part

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<sup>75</sup> According to Paul Gilroy, Marley’s “work found considerable support in the new pop markets of Latin America and Africa” (Gilroy Union Jack 170).

of the original musical recordings, they could be altered to address current events in the lives of British-Caribbean performers and audiences. As Cecil Gutzmore claims, toasts are “not always sounds in English, or even creole, although the sound always, as I understand it, has significance of some sort: it might be rebel language, it might even be revolutionary language” (340). In Carnival performances, DJ’s created a hybrid music: there was a backing track from a Caribbean reggae band and the DJ’s British-Caribbean toasts. Because the DJ’s were toasting live, they could communicate directly and immediately to their audiences.

Paul Gilroy sees the resistance provided by reggae as empowering at least one white British genre of music, namely punk: “though many punks refused to play reggae, the music remained a constant point of reference and a potent source of their poetics” (Union Jack 125). The most conspicuous example of this occurred when The Clash covered reggae legend Junior Murvin’s “Police and Thieves” in 1977. Gilroy is also careful to note that “the genesis of punk coincided with militant action by young blacks in the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival riot” (Union Jack 125). The shared “poetics” of punk and reggae, that of resistance to social and cultural hegemony, was in stark contrast to what was going on in most of the rest of British popular music.

For Caribbean music to become a form of social protest for a mass British audience, British audiences must view popular music as unable to mount such a protest on its own and view Caribbean music as a challenge or threat to social norms. One cause of the inability for British music to mount social protest was the increased commercialization of popular music, especially rock ‘n’ roll. According to Paul Gilroy,

assigning a “non-commercial status” to imported music allowed it to create the impression that it was more politically subversive than British pop:

The identification of imported music as free from the commercialization which characterized the British music industry is an important expression of the politics which infused the roots music scene. The supposedly non-commercial status of imported records added directly to their appeal and demonstrated the difference between black culture and the pop-world against which it was defined. (Union Jack 167)

Although Caribbean musical genres such as like ska, reggae, rocksteady, and dub achieved limited commercial success, their cooptation by white musicians proved even more profitable. A major commercial development in popular music was the emergence of mass outdoor rock concerts, begun in the United States in 1967 with the Monterey Pop Festival, and in Great Britain with the 1968 Isle of Wight Festival. These concerts often introduced the next wave of musicians to audiences of hundreds of thousands and expanded the scope of rock as a commodity.

An exemplary figure during this period was Eric Clapton, who transformed himself in the early 1970s from guitarist in various bands to an influential solo artist. One of the clichés of rock ‘n’ roll’s popularity during this time is the oft cited graffiti on the Islington tube station bearing the statement “Clapton is God.”<sup>76</sup> Throughout his career, Clapton seemed split between crediting his African-American musical influences and making racist comments. For example, in 1974, Clapton’s cover of Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff” reached #1 in the UK, and even outsold Bob Marley’s version in Jamaica (Chambers Urban Rhythms 171). Yet, during a 1976 concert, Clapton made a single

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<sup>76</sup> As reported on Clapton’s website [www.ericclapton.com](http://www.ericclapton.com), April 12, 2010.

pronouncement which may have solidified the role of popular music as a form of social resistance. Simon Frith and John Street credit Clapton's inflammatory remarks for the establishment of a musical movement known as Rock Against Racism:

RAR was provoked into life by Eric Clapton's infamous remarks at the Birmingham Odeon in August 1976. From the stage, Clapton said he wanted to "Keep Britain White"; he also expressed support for the British politician Enoch Powell, who had made political capital since the 1960s from playing on the 'dangers' of immigration. (67-68)

In the wake of Clapton's comments, Rock Against Racism organized a series of concerts that featured mostly reggae and punk bands, including Steel Pulse, Aswad, Matumbi, The Clash, Sham 69 and other performers like Elvis Costello (Szatmary 262, 264). In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy also implicates David Bowie as another prominent racist in popular music. Gilroy notes that Bowie "had not only said that Britain was in need of a right-wing dictatorship but declared Hitler to be 'the first superstar'" (*Black Atlantic* 121). Gilroy adds "the image of Bowie besides Hitler and Powell was to recur in RAR's visuals" (*Black Atlantic* 121).

According to Gilroy, "Rock Against Racism was formed by a small group of activists in or around the Socialist Workers' Party" (*Black Atlantic* 121). The political motivations of these founders and the musical interests of the bands and audiences combined to form popular music with a social consciousness. In the words of RAR's organizers, "Bowie and Clapton were the last straws—how dare they praise Hitler or want to repatriate the race that had created the music they profitably recycled. We loved music, hated racism and thought it was about time rock and roll paid back some dues"

(Szatmary 262). Although RAR was never on the scale of the huge outdoor rock concerts that began in the late 1960s, it publically linked white British punk with Jamaican reggae and ska as the primary musical genres of social activism in Great Britain. Paul Gilroy shows how the link began, at least, ideologically:

Drawing on the language and style of roots culture in general and Rastafari in particular, punks produced not only their own critical and satirical commentary on the meaning and limits of white ethnicity but a conceptual framework for seeing and then analyzing the social relations of what *Temporary Hoarding* called ‘Labour Party Capitalist Britain.’

(Union Jack 122-123)

Certainly nothing of the magnitude of Rock Against Racism happened in the world of British poetry, but British poetry of the time explored the theme of music as a vehicle for social change. This poetry mixes curiosity with aggressive calls for change. This was especially true for Caribbean-British poets Grace Nichols, Jean “Binta” Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and John Agard. In his poem “Listen Mr Oxford don” (1985), John Agard writes of the struggle for artistic recognition in the style of dub poetry:

I ent have no gun  
I ent have no knife  
but mugging de Queen’s English  
is the story of my life (1084)

Agard’s poem may be considered a dub poem because it plays on a few trademark elements of dub poetry: the use of Creole, suggestions of violent resistance to the cultural



hegemony of West Indian artistic expressions, and expression of the racial politics of the period.

Although dub poetry employs a closer bond between music and poetry than poetry that merely uses music as an intertext, it has not achieved canonical status in Britain. Recent scholarly works on dub poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, also known as LKJ, and Jean “Binta” Breeze suggest that this attitude is changing.<sup>77</sup> Another reason these dub poets are difficult to canonize is that music is intertwined with the meaning of their lyrics. For example, although LKJ’s work was printed, it was his performances with musical backgrounds that made him legendary. In the opinion of one ethnomusicologist, contributions by Johnson’s musical collaborators, especially Dennis “Blackbeard” Bovell, cannot be ignored: “The pairing of Johnson and Bovell begat one of the great creative partnerships in the history of reggae” (Veal 231). According to Michael E. Veal,

despite the graphic depictions in Johnson’s lyrics [...] one of the music’s prime attractions was the tone of his voice, the seeming matter-of-factness of which is belied by a melodious tone and cadence. In this context Bovell’s mixes, blending deep bass, warm electric organ and bubbling hand drums, worked as a perfect counterpoint to the cadences of Johnson’s patwa recitations. (232-233)

In short, LKJ and Bovell’s performances were melodically and tonally interesting beyond the meaning of the words that comprised the lyrics. LKJ’s recordings are far from what one imagines a poet reading over background music would sound like; the music and lyrics are seamlessly intertwined.

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<sup>77</sup> See Sharpe, Jenny. “Cartographies of Globalisation,” McGill, Robert. “Goon Poets of the Black Atlantic,” and Dawson, Ashley. *Mongrel Nation*.

In *Cut 'n' Mix*, Dick Hebdige comments that “[Linton Kwesi] Johnson’s reggae poems mix the music of three continents and are the result of 400 years of history. But though the reggae rhythm, the language and the dread are Jamaican, and the beat goes right back to Africa, the words deal emphatically with life here in Britain” (102). For example, in his song, “Inglan Is a Bitch,” LKJ describes the difficulties of finding and keeping work as a Caribbean immigrant:

Inglan is a bitch  
Dere’s no escapin it  
Inglan is a bitch  
Dere’s no runnin’ whey fram it ("Inglan Is a Bitch")

Beyond “life here in Britain,” LKJ’s dub poetry specifically deals with the attitudes of an individual Caribbean poet towards a particular political and social climate in Britain—a climate where Caribbean immigrants are blamed for many of society’s ills and look to other, international sources for solidarity. Such an emotion is adopted in LKJ’s “If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet,” which begins:

if I woz a tap-natch poet  
like Chris Okigbo  
Derek Walcott  
ar T. S. Eliot  
  
ah woodah write a poem  
soh dam deep  
dat it bittah-sweet

like a precious  
memory  
whe mek yu weep  
whe mek yu feel incomplete

like wen yu lovah leave  
an dow defeat yu kanseed  
still you beg an yu plead  
till yu win a repreve  
an yu ready fi rack steady

but di muzik done already ("If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet" 1)

The poem mentions no less than ten different poets.<sup>78</sup> Robert McGill argues that “the text is self-conscious not only about dub poetry’s exclusion from Euro-American literary canons, but also about its possible assimilation into those canons and potential to transform them” (561). McGill’s reading is insightful, exploring the implications of including T. S. Eliot with a list of mostly black poets, Johnson’s use of different canons of literature, and appreciating the ambivalent role of the speaker within his list of “tap-natch poets.” Ultimately, McGill contends that “‘Tap-Natch Poet’ foregrounds politics through art”(572). Yet, McGill does not adequately develop music’s role in the canonical and social politics of Johnson’s poem. The poem makes several references to how music specifically holds the speaker back from becoming a “tap-natch poet.” It is as if the speaker, having chosen the specific genre of dub poetry, is caught up in the musical time

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<sup>78</sup> If one counts the dub poet Bongo Jerry, who is quoted in the epigraph, LKJ mentions 11 poets. The other are Chris Okigbo, Derek Walcott, T. S. Eliot, Kamau Brathwaite, Martin Carter, Jayne Cortez, Amiri Baraka, Tchikaya U’tamsi, Nicholas Guillen, and Lorna Goodison.

that accompanies it. Thus, the speaker must move quickly from issue to issue before “di muzik done,” which is a problem that literary poets do not face, that is unless LKJ means music to stand as a metaphor for mortality. The speaker in “Tap-Natch Poet” acknowledges that the musical style that he has chosen is subject to “my own sense a time,” which implies that he has freely chosen the occupation despite its inherent demands that cause the “goon” poet to “step in line.” The speaker decides that if she or he were to write a poem like the “tap-natch” poets mentioned, it would be “puerile” and lack “hawtenticity.” Beyond the fear that an attempt to be a “tap-natch” poet would be seen by readers as expressing a lack of authenticity, the speaker also fears that writing like the other poets will cause him or her to “looze im tongue.”

Presumably the speaker needs his “tongue” to address international black politics, including the political jockeying between Nelson Mandela and Mangosuthu Buthelezi in the post-Apartheid South African elections of 1994. According to McGill, “it is clear that Johnson’s persona prioritizes the fight for political amelioration in South Africa over the jousting and sparring of literary debate” (571). In fact, LKJ’s poem uses the hybrid genre of dub (reggae and poetry) to suggest that the genre itself requires a political response. In this way, LKJ’s poem is an example of how, in Paul Gilroy’s words, “the musics of the black Atlantic world were the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness which this population seized upon and adapted to new circumstances” (Black Atlantic 82).

As LKJ established himself as “Britain’s leading dub poet” he used his influence to reach out and promote other dub poets from Britain and the Caribbean (Sharpe 444). One of the poets he promoted was a female Jamaican dub poet named Jean “Binta” Breeze, whom LKJ brought to London from Jamaica. Breeze, who has lived in London

since 1985, provided a voice for Caribbean women in Britain (Sharpe 445). Jenny Sharpe's recent work on Breeze explores the contexts surrounding Breeze's beginnings in reggae:

the music has increasingly been taken over by gun talk and 'slackness'—the propensity of DJs to make sexual puns and wordplay, particularly ones that are demeaning to women—it is associated with the consumerism and the free market liberalism promoted by Edward Seaga, who became Jamaica's prime minister after the violent 1980 general election.

(447)

Although Sharpe's link of Jamaican music to Jamaican politics is vital to an understanding of Breeze's resistance to "slackness," an emphasis on consumerism is not relevant only to Jamaica. As stated earlier, reggae was seen in Britain as a music form resistant to commercialism because of the prevalence of free sound system broadcasts that boomed from storefronts and during festivals, and as Gilroy argues, because it was imported (Union Jack 167). Because Breeze remained connected to Jamaica through the family that she left behind, her arrival in Britain gave her two perspectives on reggae: on the one hand, she was connected to the authentic, native sounds and styles of reggae from Jamaica; on the other hand, she was connected to British-Caribbean audiences who looked to reggae to address their political concerns.<sup>79</sup>

Beyond consumerism, Breeze's parody of slackness also raises feminist concerns. According to Sharpe, "slackness also expresses ambivalence about female sexuality that allows women to assume sexual agency within dancehall culture. Since the singer

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<sup>79</sup> Jenny Sharpe reports that Breeze "spends a few months each year in Sandy Bay, a coastal town in Hanover [Province, Jamaica], to be with her children" (Sharpe 445).

expresses his sexual prowess through his ability to satisfy women, he indirectly acknowledges women's need for satisfaction" (448). It is this feature of slackness that Breeze utilizes to promote "female self-empowerment" within the context of participation in the overall performance of dancehall reggae (Sharpe 448). Such a direct empowerment of the Caribbean woman's body is reminiscent of Grace Nichols's efforts in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. What separates the two poets is that Breeze grounds her work in the need to reassert female agency after a change in the ideological basis of reggae from Rastafari idealism to consumerism, whereas Nichols's women empower themselves through a largely unwritten female history, which includes less specific artistic expressions like dance and song.

Whereas LKJ began writing in an era when reggae provided a "rasta" or "roots" based resistance, Breeze had a new challenge—one where an emergent cultural hegemony (what Sharpe names as the free market capitalist mentality of Prime Minister Seaga) removes some of the resistant apparatus as defined by reggae lyrics. A strain of "roots" and "rasta" remained alive in reggae, but it was no longer the most popular form. As Sharpe suggests, part of Breeze's contributions to dub are in subverting slackness through the process of ironic inversion of male sexism. In "Slam Poem," Breeze demands condom use from her lover, citing numerous consequences for unprotected sex, including AIDS and pregnancy. Here is the refrain.:

Zim Zimmer

Who's got the packet wid de slammer

who am I

de man dem sugar

how can I  
make love to a fella  
nat in a rush  
put awn de rubbers an hush (42)

The patwa is reminiscent of LKJ and other dub poets, the overt sexuality in the poem is reminiscent of slackness, but the stand the female speaker takes on the issue of condom use oscillates between the puns of slackness and the bodily command of a feminist.

Although punk, reggae, and their various musical/literary offshoots provided an avenue for social protests from the mid 1970s through the early 1980s, there were other social movements and economic factors that contributed to dramatic social change in Britain. In *Mongrel Nation* Ashley Dawson contends,

The traditions of polycultural solidarity that emerged from autonomous antiracist defense groups like the Southall Youth Movement, from the popular resistance at the Notting Hill carnival, and from organizations such as Rock Against Racism transformed British popular culture for a whole generation. The creativity with which such groups tackled Britain's postimperial legacy helped stimulate a renaissance in the popular arts that would put Britain on the cutting edge of artistic and theoretical innovation during the 1980s and 1990s. (93)

The Southall Youth Movement began in 1976, the same year of the first Notting Hill Carnival riots and the origin of Rock Against Racism. Because the Southall Youth Movement was founded by mostly Asian youths, it did not draw on Caribbean music for

its soundtrack. Formed in 1978, the Bradford Asian Youth Movement was a similar organization. In an essay on Asian youth movements, Anandi Ramamurthy writes that although they did not use popular music, these organizations frequently included the “songs and experiences of their elders” in their protests, with many “elders” having participated in the struggle for India’s independence (47). Whereas the Asian youth movements were ideologically united with anti-racist causes in African-Caribbean community through “the broad-based concept of political black identity,” government funding of immigrant communities bifurcated this solidarity into “Asian and black” (Ramamurthy 56).<sup>80</sup> So the “polycultural solidarity” that Dawson identifies was short lived at best.

By the mid-1980s, British popular culture caught up with the social resistance of reggae and protest concerts. Evidence for this comes from the development of two-tone pop and the groundbreaking benefit concert Live Aid. Two-tone is a genre of music that was named after the record label that released the genre’s first albums. Two-tone bands included Specials, Selecter, The Beat, and Madness. With the notable exception of Madness, most of the prominent two-tone bands were a mixture of black and white musicians, yet the bands never pushed what Hebdige calls, “the rhetoric of anti-racism” in their performances (112). Hebdige reports that some Madness fans went so far as to chant “*Sieg Heil*” at their concerts (112). That two-tone did not adopt an adamant anti-racist stance from the start is strange, considering that the music was essentially “ska at 78 rpm,” or at least a mixture of musical forms from several countries (Hebdige 111).

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<sup>80</sup> Ramamurthy reports that this funding was a result of the 1981 Scarman report, which expressed a need for funding of “ethnically disadvantaged” communities (Ramamurthy 56).



Hebdige argues that the rapid rise and fall of two-tone marked a particular moment in British culture:

As the sun sets on the British Commonwealth, Two Tone braided musical strands from England, America and the old Caribbean colonies, and turned the wake into a carnival. They gave us the Ghost Dance of the British Empire, played out at the moving point where the pre-war Lambeth Walk meets Peter Tosh's Steppin' Razor: Culture-Clash converted into fun—  
*Knees Up Mother Brown* with Coconuts. (110)

According to Hebdige, what was so British about two-tone was that “many of the groups spiced things up with a distinctively British sense of humour which derived from the old music halls and which blended in neatly with the ska tradition of boasting, self-mockery and bad-mouthing” (111). Although two-tone is mostly dance music developed from Caribbean rhythms, the variety-show aspect of music hall humor did not make it any less popular. Music hall often provides a link between contemporary British popular culture and its ethno-musical roots that stretch through *The Beggar's Opera* and beyond through Continental, Welsh, English, Scots, and Irish ballads. Referencing music hall taps into a collective unconscious that young two-tone audiences may have seen as pure Englishness.

Reggae, Rock Against Racism, the dub poetry of LKJ and Breeze, and the singing of independence songs by the Asian Youth Movement were efforts to establish hybrid British political identities that resisted racism in British popular music and the commercial cooptation of reggae music by two tone movement. The musical resistance of British immigrant and antiracist groups reached its culmination in 1981, a year that saw

several transformative events in British culture: the passage of the British Nationality Act, riots against police authority that spread throughout England, and the death of Bob Marley. Ian Baucom notes the unprecedented legal nature of the Nationality Act:

Whereas through the entire preceding history of the British Empire, Britishness had been affirmatively grounded in a law of place, the 1981 Nationality Act codified a theory of identity that sought to defend the ‘native’ inhabitants of the island against the claims of their former subjects by defining Britishness as an inheritance of race. (8)

In legal terms, the Act removed the concept of *Jus soli*, or automatic citizenship by virtue of being born in Britain. Instead, the Act holds that, regardless of a child being born in Britain, at least one of the child’s parents must have British citizenship for the child to also attain British citizenship. The Act, although it contains several less-prohibitive provisions, is a clear stance against citizens of former colonies who may have wanted to seek permanent employment or settlement in Britain.

Riots erupted in 1981 out of racial tensions between police and residents within mostly black Brixton (a part of London) and spread to Manchester and Liverpool. Britain was suffering from an economic recession, and over half of young black males in Brixton were out of work at the time of the riots (Benyon 164). Kenneth O. Morgan reports that in the summer of 1981, “the economy continued to lapse into decline, with manufacturing output having fallen by no less than 10 per cent in the past twelve months” (People’s Peace 457). On April 10, 1981 in the London area of Brixton, Britain’s economic woes were met by potentially catastrophic social woes. After the Brixton riots, where rioters employed stones, bricks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails against the police, Home

Secretary William Whitelaw commissioned a report to be prepared by a committee chaired by Lord Scarman (Clare 46,47). The report shed light on what the residents of Brixton already knew: there were harsh inequalities between racial groups in Britain.

For reasons that I will discuss in the section on Walcott, Bob Marley's death in 1981 marked a convenient end point for the popularity of "roots" and "rasta" reggae. Again, as Dawson, Gilroy, and Hebdige have noted, changes in reggae were as likely to have come from political and economic changes in Jamaica as from the loss of its most known figure. Still, 1981 must have deflated the positive attempts by Rock Against Racism and the Southall and Asian Youth Movements to enact major social change.

In 1985 popular music as a form of social activism was revived by a much more ambitious event, Live Aid. The pivotal figure in its success was Boomtown Rats band member Bob Geldof. Live Aid developed in the wake of the song "Do They Know It's Christmas," which was written by Geldof and Ultravox member Midge Ure. The song was released in 1984 as a response to the famine in Ethiopia and featured thirty-six British pop stars, including Culture Club, Sting, Wham!, Phil Collins, and U2 (Aaseng 18-19). The idea for the song and subsequent concert came from Bob Geldof, who tells *Rolling Stone* that while he was "despondent" over the Boomtown Rats' struggles he saw a 1984 BBC television report that made him feel, "disgusted, enraged and outraged" (Tannenbaum 74). About Live Aid, Frith and Street comment,

It was this event that demonstrated the political power of popular music; it was this that gave musicians a new role, that of statesman or woman. In his appeal to our 'humanity,' Bob Geldof moralized a mass music, a music which could no longer pretend to be countercultural or subversive, but

which was still able to articulate a sense of concern to raise vast amounts of money. (75)

The motivation behind Live Aid was to raise money for famine relief, not to raise political capital against racism or foster direct participation in Africa itself. Unlike the domestic message of Rock Against Racism, Ethiopians remained geographically distant, recipients not immigrants. This may be evidenced by the appearances of both David Bowie and Eric Clapton at Live Aid, both of which were the focal points for an entire movement to address racism in music. In a book on Geldof's role in organizing Live Aid, Nathan Aaseng explains: "on July 13, 1985, the stage was set for Geldof's "global jukebox," the ultimate pop concert. More than 72,000 people crammed into London's steamy Wembley Stadium. Over 90,000 poured into JFK Stadium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania under an equally hot sun" (24) Ultimately, Aaseng reports that "an estimated 1.4 billion people from 169 countries tuned in to the giant concert" (25).

Compared to Rock Against Racism, which David Szatmary reports reached its height in April 1978, and, "had organized 56 chapters and attracted more than 80,000 adherents to the Anti-Nazi League Carnival in London," Live Aid was a social juggernaut (262). The genius idea behind Live Aid was Geldof's combining ubiquitous musical artists with a separate, unfamiliar social cause. This distance was absent in Rock Against Racism, where the punk and reggae bands played for a cause that was much closer to home. Thus, despite the political posturing of Live Aid, nothing on the level of policy or profound social change happened—it simply raised a lot of money. This lack of real change may have prompted Geldof to make his pronouncement five years after Live Aid that "pop music changes nothing."

## Part 2: Music as Improvisation in Derek Walcott's Poetry

Derek Walcott was born on the island nation of Saint Lucia in 1930, while it was still a British colony.<sup>81</sup> Although the time and place of his birth makes him a British colonial subject, significant changes to immigration laws in Britain during his lifetime make his claim to British citizenship a complicated one. Not having claimed to be a citizen of one, distinct nation, Walcott identified himself early in his career as a citizen of a natural world that did not acknowledge political borders:

To be born on a small island, a colonial backwater, meant a precocious resignation to fate. The shoddy, gimcrack architecture of its one town, its doll-sized verandahs, jalousies and lacy eaves neatly perforated as those doilies which adorn the polished tables of the poor seemed so frail that the only credible life was nature. A nature without man, like the sea on which the sail of a canoe can seem as interruption. ("Twilight" 14)

Walcott both generalizes and particularizes where he is from. There are several places that could be described as “a small island, a colonial backwater,” but his correlation between architectural details and cultural handicrafts shows his intimacy with his native land. Yet, his island is somehow not fully “credible” to him. This aesthetic elusion is characteristic of Walcott's poetry. Rowan Ricardo Phillips notes that “Walcott's work continually poeticizes the Caribbean's chief export—its picturesque faux-exoticism—in its full (though perhaps failing) splendor, remaining cognizant that it remains a site of imminent and ruinous difficulty” (129).

There is a constant oscillation that must happen between culture and nature to prevent what Phillips terms “ruinous difficulty” within Walcott's art. In Walcott's poetry,

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<sup>81</sup> St. Lucia gained its independence from Great Britain in 1979.

popular music provides an infrequent, yet illustrative symbol of his attitude towards culture and nature. In music, Walcott sees an opportunity to have poetic subjects perform their hybrid identities. Despite Walcott's appreciation of and background in canonical British poetry, like Stevie Smith, he sees canonical poetry as if it were a musical theme—one that the artist augments with his or her own variations. One of these variations concerns a reluctance to promote any one national identity.

The formal and linguistic style of Walcott's poetry shows that he was educated on a diet of English poetry, and if he did not share any clear national connections to English poets, he shared artistic ones. In 1970, he writes, "I saw myself legitimately prolonging the mighty line of Marlowe, of Milton, but my sense of inheritance was stronger because it came from estrangement" ("Twilight" 31). Walcott's feeling of artistic inheritance combined with a feeling of geographical estrangement finds its way into one of his early poems, "A Far Cry From Africa." It concludes,

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live? (Collected Poems 18).

According to Walcott's biographer King, the poem was inspired by an argument between Walcott and students over the politics behind the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya from 1952

to 1960 (204). For King, the poem is, “about universal guilt and the need for compassion rather than taking sides” (102).

The escape from deciding which side to take during this social unrest comes from nature. In “A Far Cry from Africa,” Walcott presents Africa as a living thing, complete with a “tawny pelt,” and “bloodstreams.” Nature, in the form of a “worm,” presented as “colonel of carrion,” is the only one that treats the dead on both sides of the conflict as equal. In the second stanza, Walcott articulates the tension between culture and nature: “The violence of beast on beast is read / As natural law, but upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain” (Collected Poems 17). The conscious contrast between the desire to inflict pain that marks colonial politics and the violence necessitated by the need to survive in nature becomes the critical issue for the speaker: it’s easier to take sides when politics are not an issue.

King is not alone in arguing that Walcott refuses to take a certain side in “A Far Cry from Africa.” Paul Breslin extends the poem’s struggle to one of an inherited style, mainly modernism: “The stylistic quarrel within modernism itself, between loyal and disloyal Europeans, has been reenacted within the poem, where it becomes an iconic representation of the poet’s own ambivalence” (61). A study of the poem’s end-rhyme shows that, although Walcott follows no predictable rhyme scheme, there are many rhyming words throughout. Additionally, the length of the stanzas appear uniform, but are composed of ten-, eleven-, and twelve-line stanzas, respectively. Thus, although giving a suggestion of order, the forms are not strictly regulated. Again, even in form, the poem refuses to stand clearly on one side of any divide.

Describing what she calls, “Walcott's anxiety to locate himself within both a regional and an international poetics,” Antonia MacDonald-Smythe comments that “for Walcott, not choosing was itself a choice, one that offered the Caribbean man, necessarily hybrid because of his diasporic experiences, full access to all existing artistic traditions” (92). Although Walcott employs the artistic privilege of hybridity in his poetry, he often acknowledges how it comes at a great personal cost, even creates enemies. Walcott contends that “for the colonial artist the enemy was not the people, or the people’s crude aesthetic, which he refined and orchestrated, but the enemy was those who had elected themselves as protectors of the people” (“Twilight” 35). Such “enemies” could include Edward Kamau Braithwaite and his supporters, who feel that Walcott’s poetry is too marked by European sophistication. Patricia Ismond’s 1971 article “Walcott Versus Braithwaite” sets the scene for the conflict:

Braithwaite is hailed as the poet of the people, dealing with the historical and social themes that define the West Indian dilemma. Walcott is a little more difficult to place—appears at times to pay passing attention to these matters, but more consistently he seems to be a type of poet’s poet, the kind of luxury we can ill afford, and which remains Eurocentric.

(“Walcott Versus Braithwaite” 220)

In my opinion, the greatest refutation to pro-Braithwaite / anti-Walcott claims are found in Walcott’s unflinching approach to presenting racial politics in his work, especially in poems like “Blues” and “The Glory Trumpeter.” Although the erudite persona in these poems does not resemble a “poet of the people,” his personal experience with racism is not tantamount to solipsism or Eurocentrism, as Ismond charges. The



speaker's experiences are not efforts at assimilation with European traditions but attempts at building a universal culture drawn from several traditions.

"Blues," according to biographer King, was Walcott's memorial to his being mugged while walking home after an "Italian festival" (157). In the poem, Walcott clearly has race in mind:

A summer festival. Or some  
saint's. I wasn't too far from  
home, but not too bright  
for a nigger, and not too dark.  
I figured we were all  
one, wop, nigger, jew,  
besides, this wasn't Central Park.  
I'm coming on too strong? You figure  
right! They beat this yellow nigger  
black and blue. (Collected Poems 111)

According to King, "Walcott claims domestic truths as absolute and seeks a plain style, a dry bleached, hard style that works best in 'Blues,' 'Elegy,' and 'Negatives,' where, faced by irreconcilable harshness, the attitude is forget it" (252). King presumably takes this attitude from the final two words in the poem, but the poem memorializes and signifies the experience rather than desires to forget it. What is striking in the poem is that the speaker is not viewed as a neutral outsider (had he spoken, the muggers would likely know his accent was not a local person's). Instead, the speaker faces the muggers' violent essentialism of his racial otherness. Ironically, the speaker's resistance

incorporates essentialism, yet doing so through a sense of shared, universal suffering. Walcott takes it beyond a single race, conflating “wop, nigger, jew, ” and later in the poem, “The spades, the spics.” The language of the poem is unflinching, full of offensive epithets and stark details: “They beat this yellow nigger / black and blue.” This clarity is not unlike blues lyrics, which generally take a gritty approach to detailing the songwriter’s sufferings in life.

The reference to blues as a specific musical genre is likely meant to encompass a shared culture of suffering derived from an outsider’s violent essentialism. In this case, the speaker does not avoid the impending violence. Instead, he remembers to remove his new “sports coat,” a gesture which becomes an “olive-branch,” reflecting both the color of the jacket and the speaker’s resignation to the violence of life. Throughout his experience, the speaker never harbors ill will. The tragedy, it seems, is that the muggers evidently “don’t get enough love” to keep from wanting to hurt others.

In the final stanza, the relevance of the title shines through:

You know they wouldn’t kill  
you. Just playing rough,  
like young America will.  
Still, it taught me something  
about love. If it’s so tough,  
forget it. (Collected Poems 112)

As he does in “The Glory Trumpeter” and as he will do in “The Light of the World,” Walcott chooses a specific kind of music that is relevant to the poem’s setting. In this case, the blues are a traditionally American form of music. And often, as the final stanza

shows, blues combines suffering and love, with the songwriter often taking the “forget it” attitude towards love after experiencing abuse. Thus, unlike King’s suggestion that the speaker calls for a resignation to “irreconcilable harshness,” the speaker views love, symbolized by his earlier action of turning the other cheek, within the musical tradition of the blues—becoming a painful memory that the lyricist feels compelled to sing about before being able to move on and “forget it.”

As in “A Far Cry from Africa,” the speaker’s political position in “Blues” is that of ambivalence. Although the speaker is brutally beaten, he has difficulty condemning those who commit the crime. There is obviously a condemnation of racism as social reality and an acknowledgement that sometimes one must seek survival at a great cost to one’s sense of human dignity, but the speaker does not condemn the specific people who attack him. As in “A Far Cry from Africa,” the idea of nature in opposition to human politics is interwoven subtly into the poem. In “Blues,” nature takes the form of the jacket as olive branch, which is a natural symbol that also contains dynamic, resonating cultural contexts. From a personal experience, the speaker creates a sense of community through a shared, rugged language, a common urban setting, and cultural contexts like olive branches and pop psychology.

A shared sense of community that is tied in with racial politics and music can also be found in “The Glory Trumpeter,” Walcott’s poem about Eddie, the jazz trumpeter of the title. The speaker makes several specific references to music, including a popular song (“Georgia on My Mind”), a hymn (“Jesus Saves”), and jazz styles (“jesus-ragtime” and “gut-bucket blues”). These references are used to show Eddie’s ability as a musician to shift seamlessly from style to style, or “tear / Through” them “With the same fury of

indifference.” The speaker’s knowledge of the tunes Eddie is capable of referencing in his playing illustrates the historical intimacy between African-American secular and religious music. This connection is vital to the overall meaning of the poem, which casts Eddie as a saint status, if only to illustrate the association between Africa-American religious practices and New Orleans music—as in “When the Saints Go Marching In” or jazz accompaniments to funeral processions.

Like the musical references, language joins the secular to the spiritual in “The Glory Trumpeter.” Eddie appears “like a deacon at his prayer,” and his trumpet is compared to the Biblical Joshua’s “ram’s horn wailing for the Jews.” Patricia Ismond contends that “a figure like Eddie assumes full stature and significance as the equivalent of the Old Testament Joshua leading his people’s struggle against bondage” (Abandoning 121). Eddie’s spiritual “stature” comes from the speaker’s perspective, as Eddie presumably exhibits the same “fury of indifference” throughout the scene. Eddie’s performance is transformed from secular to spiritual by how it draws the speaker into a sudden awareness of the racial oppression he shares with Eddie and others with African ancestry in the Western Hemisphere. Patricia Ismond considers the moment an “epiphany.” Eddie becomes “an ancestral figure” because his performance links his experiences with the speaker’s and the speaker’s own ancestors (Abandoning 123). According to Ismond, the speaker’s experience “is one of self-confrontation for Walcott, as he comes to face the limitations in his understanding of the tragedy of race and his attitudes to it so far” (Abandoning 122).

The moment of the speaker’s “epiphany” in “The Glory Trumpeter” comes from a sudden flash of light from the bell of Eddie’s trumpet:

a flash

Of gulls and pigeons from the dunes of coal  
Near my grandmother's barracks on the wharves,  
I saw the sallow faces of those men  
Who sighed as if they spoke into their graves  
About the Negro in America. That was when  
The Sunday comics, sprawled out on her floor,  
Sent from the States, had a particular odour;  
Dry smell of money mingled with man's sweat.

(Collected Poems 64)

Paula Burnett notes that “The poem [...] relates the image [of hills of coal] to an enlarged human dimension, that of the whole abused black race in the Americas” (163). As in “Blues,” nature forms the basis for the political shift from personal to communal. The “gulls and pigeons” emerge from the reflected flash of light from the trumpet and become the vehicle that take the reader from the gulf coast of America to the docks of St. Lucia. The link is that gulls and pigeons are common to many different waterfronts around the world. As with the sea swift that recurs throughout *Omeros*, Walcott also uses the birds in “The Glory Trumpeter” as a flash from nature transforming a journey from secular to spiritual.<sup>82</sup>

Burnett also points out that the image of the coal mounds in “The Glory Trumpeter” will appear again in *Omeros* (Chapter XIII: II). However, the repetition of

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<sup>82</sup> In *Omeros*, two notable appearances of a sea swift with spiritual connotations are the swift that guides Achille on his boat journey and the fabric swift that Maud Plunkett sews into what becomes the silk used to drape the bier at her funeral. These will be discussed further in the section on *Omeros*.

the coal hills image in *Omeros* is not from the narrator/poet's perspective (Burnett 162).

In *Omeros*, it is Achille who remembers a scene from his childhood:

From here, in his boyhood, he had seen women climb  
like ants up a white flower-pot, baskets of coal  
balanced on their torchoned heads, without touching them,

up the black pyramids, each spine straight as a pole,  
and with a strength that never altered its rhythm. (*Omeros* 73)

By transferring the image into Achille's memory in *Omeros*, Walcott extends the image into even a more inclusive experience that moves beyond what King sees as the underlying meaning of "The Glory Trumpeter": "the inner defeat of the apparently successful exile" (349).

Patricia Ismond considers Eddie to be a performer of "black spiritual music," but "The Glory Trumpeter" specifically references jazz (*Abandoning* 121). It is a poem about jazz because Eddie, despite his spiritual connections, is as comfortable in a "cathouse" as he is at a "wake." Blues and ragtime were important predecessors of jazz, with blues coming out of slave spirituals and ragtime coming from a social desire to dance.<sup>83</sup> Having a hybrid origin of dance and spiritual music is an important part of the jazz idiom, especially in establishing its authenticity. When a jazz musician referenced tunes from either musical world, it opened a connection to broader spectrum of African American music, or more generally, to use Paul Gilroy's terminology, the music of the Black Atlantic. According to Gilroy,

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<sup>83</sup> In chapter seven of *Cultural Codes*, William C. Banfield gives much corroborating evidence for these contentions.

Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self-understanding articulated by the musicians who have made it, the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers, and the social relations which have produced and reproduced the unique cultural expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element (Black Atlantic 75).

Jazz historian Lawrence Gushee concludes that “at the outset and for decades to follow jazz was functionally music for dancing,” and this dancing has rhythmic roots from the Caribbean and earlier in Africa (36). Thus, jazz works as a powerful metaphor for hybridity that would appeal to Walcott’s desire to connect black people from two different places—America and the Caribbean—through African musical roots.

Describing characteristics of African-American music in general, William C. Banfield gives ample evidence of what Walcott desires in Eddie’s performance:

Consider the following elements found in African American music which are based on African roots: the music is communally based; it reflects collective and individual improvisation; it is spirit led; it exhibits rhythmic dynamism; it features the ‘sound’ of the Black voice or uses the horn as an extension of the Black voice; it includes social commentary and employs inexhaustible variations of repetition and metric layering, which includes guttural expression (moans, groans, screams, shrills) as beautiful; it encourages active listener participation and reaction; and the expressions incorporate physical movement as part of the performance practice. (95)

Banfield's description emphasizes the communal characteristics of African American music in performance, which is important to both "Blues" and "The Glory Trumpeter." By contrast, in "The Light of the World" and *Omeros*, Walcott turns from live performances to the use of recorded music as the background for Walcott's social choreography, where the speaker's imagination improvises a performance of cultural understanding and interpersonal connection.

In a 1985 interview with Edward Hirsch for the *Paris Review*, Derek Walcott comments that

I yearn for the company of better Caribbean poets, quite frankly. I feel a little lonely. I don't see what I thought might have happened—a stronger energy, a stronger discipline, and a stronger drive in Caribbean poetry.

That may be because the Caribbean is more musical: every culture has its particular emphasis and obviously the Caribbean's poetry, talent, and genius is in its music. (Hirsch 106)

On the surface, Walcott's statement could almost be taken as a kind of artistic essentialism: Caribbean poets (except for Walcott) can't escape the music that undermines every one of their poetic expressions. If true, this interpretation would put Walcott in line with Yeats's feelings about music during the middle part of his career—music is something to toy with, a connection to the masses, but it cannot form the basis of legitimate poetic art. There is evidence in Walcott's work that he feels poetry and popular music should not be seamlessly intertwined, especially in "The Light of the World," where the poet-speaker admires Bob Marley's music as a way to connect a community



but feels he can offer the community something more reflective of their particular experience.

Before he conducted his interview with Walcott in 1985, Hirsch claims that Walcott was working on “The Light of the World.” The poem contains an epigraph taken from Bob Marley’s song “Kaya” and mentions Marley’s music playing on an island transport. Combined with Walcott’s comment about Caribbean music, the fact that Walcott was working on a poem that foregrounds Bob Marley and the Wailers, arguably the most popular musical export from the Caribbean, suggests that Walcott was actively thinking about the connections between Caribbean music in general and St. Lucian culture in particular. This is a clear departure from “Blues” and “The Glory Trumpeter,” where the music in question is clearly African-American.

By 1985, reggae and dub were firmly established in Great Britain as protest music. Although generally speaking, reggae and dub were a means to express the views of the politically marginalized, Bob Marley’s music was marketed for a popular audience. In fact, in 1977, Bob Marley and the Wailers appeared on BBC TV’s musical program *Top of the Pops*. In *Cut ‘n’ Mix*, Dick Hebdige records the startling imagery of the performance:

Against a huge painted backdrop of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie, Marley sung the song which tells the story of the ‘movement of the Jah people’ from Africa to Jamaica and on towards ‘Holy Mount Zion.’ And this in the hallowed studios of the BBC at the heart of the old British Empire! (81)

Although Hebdige finds this image startling, he is careful to note how Marley was able to present his resistant message in a musically seductive package. He writes that “part of the reason why Marley’s music broke through in this way is that his songs are basically melodic. The music always sounds sweet, even when the lyrics include scathing attacks on the colonial system” (Hebdige 81). Like LKJ, the music of Marley’s songs softens the subversive lyrics.

Beyond the Wailers’ musical efforts in Jamaican recording studios, their music was deliberately re-engineered to please the ears of white Britons. The man responsible for this reengineering was Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, who signed the Wailers to their first UK recording contract. According to Hebdige, “after the masters for the Wailers’ first album reached England, Blackwell considered it a little too heavy for the white audience, so he remixed it [...]. He brought Marley’s voice forward and toned down the distinctive bass. He also added some flowing guitar riffs recorded by local British session men to the original tape” (80). Despite what may be seen as taking the edge off of the potentially political statement of the music’s tonality, their appearance on Top of the Pops shows Blackwell’s financial gamble on the Wailers paid off. Yet, despite their popular appeal, the Wailers saw their success as a way to promote political agendas. After the founding of Rock Against Racism, The Wailers released a b-side in Great Britain in 1977 entitled “Punky Reggae Party.” The song mentions punk bands “The Jam,” “The Damned,” “The Clash,” and “Dr. Feelgood” and invites listeners to imaginatively join punk and reggae as having common social goals.

Bob Marley and the Wailers’ conquest of Britain was also influential in establishing reggae as a representative music for Black Britons. According to Michael E.

Veal, “reggae signaled the ascension of black Britain as a newly potent cultural force in the global articulation of ‘blackness’” (251). Marley’s global popularity brought attention to Marley’s causes, but the subsequent popularity of reggae as a genre brought attention to the politics of other reggae musicians from both the Caribbean and abroad.

Walcott did not necessarily choose to include Marley’s music in “The Light of the World” because of its influence on British culture. King emphasizes that in his 1985 interview with Hirsch, Walcott “declared himself as a Caribbean writer, seeing his work as West Indian and not in the British tradition” (King 445). So much for wanting to follow Milton and Marlowe, as Walcott had professed as a goal of his early career (Walcott “Twilight” 31). Patricia Ismond characterizes “The Light of the World” as outside of Walcott’s “Caribbean phase,” where he lived and worked from residences within the Caribbean (Abandoning 1). By 1985, Walcott was experiencing what Ismond terms a “dual residency” between the United States and the Caribbean (Abandoning 1).

In his introduction to his interview with Walcott, Hirsh notes that “‘The Light of the World’ is a large poem of guilt and expiation, and it gives a good sense of Walcott’s inner feelings during the time of our interview” (96). Now that Walcott was outside of his Caribbean phase, he felt the need to explain his absence from his native land as something other than betrayal. According to Antonia MacDonald Smythe, “regardless of his migration, Walcott is still held fast by the power of provincialism. Indeed, it is as though the Caribbean province requires from Walcott acknowledgement of an ancestral debt—leave-taking is therefore not unencumbered and requires some degree of appeasement” (95).

In “The Light of the World,” the “appeasement” that MacDonald-Smythe mentions takes the form of the poet’s desire to leave his countrymen with lasting art that is a credit to the land and its people. To do this, he is forced to contend with Bob Marley’s music that has been more broadly accepted than the speaker’s poetry. The poem describes the poet-speaker’s journey on a transport during a return to St. Lucia.<sup>84</sup> A line from the Wailers’ song “Kaya” forms the poem’s epigraph, but Paul Breslin notes a mistake in Walcott’s transcription of Marley’s song:

In the version of “The Light of the World’ published in *Partisan Review*, Walcott’s epigraph mishears the words as ‘Got to have Zion-ah,’ which was corrected to ‘Got to have Kaya now’ in *The Arkansas Testament*.

‘Kaya’ is the title cut of a Wailers LP that came out in 1978, with the song lyrics printed on the album cover. That he could make this mistake in 1986 suggests that he was not an avid Marley listener. (239)

While Walcott may have not been an “avid Marley listener,” Breslin sees the mistake as fortuitously telling of Walcott’s feelings for the potential social function of Marley’s music: “the word Walcott chooses to replace ‘Kaya’ may be taken as evidence of his predisposition. If so, it would confirm my sense that despite its decentering gestures, this poem harbors a longing for an earthly and transcendent center, a ‘Zion’” (239). Breslin may be right in assuming that Walcott is seeking common, transcendent ground with the passengers on the transport, but this “Zion” is ultimately an imaginative one, an improvised performance by the virtuoso poet, not an “earthly” one.

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<sup>84</sup> A transport is a kind of van or mini-bus that is used as overland transportation between different parts of St. Lucia. Hector’s transport in *Omeros* is decorated with his own personal touches, including painted flames and leopard-print seat covers (Walcott *Omeros* 117-118).

During the journey, the poet-speaker contemplates several women in and around the transport. The first woman, a passenger on the transport is introduced humming Marley's song. To say that the poet-speaker objectifies the woman is a gross understatement. The woman is studied as if she were posing for a portrait artist or sculptor:

I could see where the lights on the planes of her cheek  
streaked and defined them; if this were a portrait  
you'd leave the highlights for last, these lights  
silkened her black skin; I'd have put in an earring,  
something simple, in good gold, for contrast, but she  
wore no jewelry. ("The Light of the World" 184)

Considering Walcott's accomplishments as a painter, he is certainly in his element here, studying the "lights on the planes of her cheek," desiring to add an earring for effect, and later considering how she resembles a "statue," or subject of the painting "Liberty Leading the People" by the French painter Eugène Delacroix. It appears that the speaker/poet sees the woman as an idealized beauty, a subject worthy of the highest (within European traditions) forms of artistic expression. In this sense, Marley's music is just a starting point, one minor (and intentionally subjugated) detail in a rich tapestry of verbal imagery that is under the control of the poet-speaker.

As in "Blues" and "The Glory Trumpeter," Walcott uses natural imagery to transcend the mundane. In "The Light of the World," the first woman the speaker observes transcends her mundane physical beauty through an association with untamed nature. As the poet-speaker observes her, he senses, "a powerful and sweet / odour

coming from her, as from a still panther” (“The Light of the World” 184). As the light fades in the transport, the poet-speaker observes how the light on the woman’s cheek remains, and he thinks to himself, “O Beauty, you are the light of the world!” Combined with the “powerful and sweet” natural imagery, the desire to make her the subject of art, and the association of “the light of the world” with the divinity of Jesus, it becomes clear that this woman symbolizes more than an object of the speaker’s physical lust.<sup>85</sup>

The poet-speaker’s physical desire comes in the third stanza, where he considers two young women as he waits for the transport to move. Over one of them, he “lusted in peace,” but found “the other less interesting.” It is unclear what to make of this seemingly insignificant bit of mental philandering except to say that it comes in a stanza where the houses in the town are “perverse” in their “cramped” relation to one another and the poet speaker voyeuristically “peered into parlours / with half closed jalousies.” In an earlier writing, Walcott presents “jalousies” as being representative of a “colonial backwater” and not “credible” somehow (“Twilight” 14). In “The Light of the World,” however, the poet-speaker could be read as having been corrupted by his time exploring the town of his birth and getting caught up in the commerce of the Saturday market, where even after the market closes, “shadows quarreled for bread.”

What saves the poet-speaker from giving in to carnal desire over artistic desire is the old woman who arrives in the fourth stanza. She is unremarkable except for what she says, “*Pas quittez moi à terre,*” which is translated by the poet/ speaker in three distinct ways:

- 1) “Don’t leave me on earth.”
- 2) “Don’t leave me the earth.”

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<sup>85</sup> In John 9:5, Jesus says, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (KJB).

3) “Heavenly transport, / Don’t leave me on earth, I’ve had enough of it.” (“The Light of the World” 185)

The poet-speaker’s knowledge and translation of the patois of the old woman’s statement shows both an insider and outsider status. At this point in the poem the poet-speaker argues that he can make a contribution to the people on the transport despite having left them to live in another country; he can translate their physical and linguistic beauty to the world.

Despite providing this helpful transcription/translation of the old woman’s words, the poet-speaker uses the fifth stanza to express his regret over his earlier “abandonment” of the island and its people. The regret returns him to lust, where he notes that he “was deeply in love with the woman by the window” and fantasizes about an overtly sexual encounter with her:

I wanted her to change  
into a smooth white nightie that would pour like water  
over the black rocks of her breasts, to lie  
simply beside her by the ring of a brass lamp  
with a kerosene wick, and tell her in silence  
that her hair was like a hill forest at night,  
that a trickle of rivers was in her armpits,  
that I would buy her Benin if she wanted it,  
and never leave her on the earth. (“The Light of the World” 186)

As with the first woman, his physical obsession is artistically mitigated by a focus on nature; he wants to express to her that “her hair was like a hill forest at night, / that a

trickle of rivers was in her armpits.” (“The Light of the World” 186). Thus, her beauty becomes transcendent to the point that it makes him think of “the others.”

In the sixth stanza, the poet-speaker becomes aware again of the presence of Marley’s music, but this time it is wrapped up in his abandonment:

I had abandoned them,  
I had left them on earth, I left them to sing  
Marley’s songs of a sadness as real as the smell  
of rain on dry earth, or the smell of damp sand,  
and the bus felt warm with their neighbourliness,  
their consideration, and the polite partings  
in the light of its headlamps. (“The Light of the World” 186-187)

This regret of abandonment pains the poet-speaker to the point of distraction. He imagines himself walking back to the quiet and perhaps silencing “Halcyon Hotel.” He is saved from this distraction by the bus stopping and one of its passengers shouting the his name. However, the passenger does not want to extend friendship beyond returning the poet-speaker’s pack of cigarettes to him, which prompts the final lines of the poem:

He gave it to me. I turned, hiding my tears.  
There was nothing they wanted, nothing I could give them  
but this thing I have called “The Light of the World.”  
 (“The Light of the World” 187)

Paula Burnett casts these feelings in economic terms. For her, Walcott’s poem, “records his humble recognition that in the cultural economy of human exchange they lacked nothing he had to offer. His only gift, of double advantage to them, is the global attention



that art can evoke” (24). Thus, in “The Light of the World,” the poet-speaker’s art is superior to Marley’s because it is not the product of a more global consumerist culture (an item to be traded in the market), but the particular attention to the details of St. Lucia and its people. Paul Breslin notes how, “Marley’s song, suffusing the transport long after his death, has become the unselfconscious music of the community, the sign of its wholeness and authenticity, which has to be translated somehow into the more ‘literary’ music of Walcott’s poem” (238).

Breslin’s argument for the poem’s “authenticity” makes it seem almost like Walcott considers his poem an artistic performance improvised over an existing recording. Laurence A. Breiner suggests that the poem “can be described as Walcott’s characteristically bent version of a dub poem” (38). As evidence, Breiner argues that “Walcott’s poem plays with the idea of a verbal text being improvised over a prerecorded musical track, but at the same time it teasingly refuses to be a dub poem,” and that “the presence of the epigraph suggests we are to understand that the music is playing not only throughout the trip, but metaphorically also throughout the poem” (38). Indeed, Walcott mentions Marley’s song in three different places in the poem.

Breiner explains that Walcott chooses “Kaya” because it is a reggae song:

There are two poets’ voices here, Walcott’s and Marley’s, and so two concurrent songs. Marley’s is a fixed performance, mechanically reproduced and playing for an audience sitting motionless in the dark, in their transport. Walcott’s is the living voice in the foreground, and we are being invited to hear him as a deejay, playing the B side of the Marley

tune and improvising his own performance, his own story, over the classic track. (39)

To explain the discrepancies between the style of “The Light of the World” and the style of an LKJ poem, Brenier offers the argument that, in Walcott’s poem, “the effect is to invoke the model of dub poetry without actually imitating its form or its texture” (39).

Brenier’s argument that “The Light of the World” is a kind of dub poem is compelling but possibly weakened by his earlier statement that Walcott did not know the song well enough to get the words right for its first publication. Brenier also suggests that the poem contains “a touch of envy” over “the intimacy of their [the passengers on the transport] relationship with Marley, the Jamaican National Hero who provides the music of their lives” (38). As suggested by the power the poet-speaker gives art, “envy” is probably too strong a word to describe Walcott’s feelings for Marley’s song. Still, its existence as a deliberate intertext cannot be negated by the poem itself. Charles W. Pollard contends that “Walcott knows that those who sing Bob Marley’s songs will outnumber those who recite his poems, but he still affirms the power of poetry to offer its audience ‘The Light of the World’” (144). Again, this runs the risk of giving a spiritual dimension to the poem as a work of art. The poem seems to suggest that the spiritual dimension is in the grace of the people of St. Lucia and the poet’s production is only sanctified through that grace—that stopping to remind the poet-passenger that he left his cigarettes on the transport reminds the reader that the poet only has a limited time to experience this grace.

Despite his efforts in “The Light of the World” to justify his abandonment of St. Lucia, a fully formed connections between the land of Walcott’s birth and the multitude

of places he has found inspiration in is perhaps only possible in a work as inclusive as epic. For Walcott, *Omeros* was this attempt. George B. Handley provides an excellent introduction to Walcott's efforts in *Omeros*:

The poem's multiple forms, wide-ranging allusions, insistence on amnesia at the root of New World experience, and self-conscious metaphorizing articulate the foundations of Walcott's New World epic vision, which had come to maturity for Walcott in recent years. Epic poetry of the Americas for Walcott must avoid the excesses of Whitman's wide embrace; it must be autobiographical and epiphanic, telluric and yet ironic, forged in direct apprehensions of the particulars of St. Lucia's natural environment and in awareness of other cultures and the recession of History. (301)

Handley's argument is compelling, especially in suggesting that *Omeros* is partly "autobiographical." Classifying *Omeros* as "epic poetry of the Americas" also prevents the suggestion that Walcott intends a deliberate association with traditional, European epic. There are several arguments against the status of *Omeros* as a traditional epic, including Walcott's own:

I think that if we rely only on the traditional definition of epic, it is not an epic. It is not like the epic of Eneas [sic], for example, where there is a heroic narrative, in which the primary character does something for others. The hero in my poem is a simple fisherman who doesn't conquer anything and who works with his element—the sea. That's the life of the Caribbean. That's what the poem refers to in terms of the elements that make it up. It is not about a glorious epic poem of the Caribbean. (Cabrera 43)

Walcott's words are misleading, inviting the reader of *Omeros* to look closely at the hero he points to, Achille, when one could as easily suggest that the hero of *Omeros* is the Caribbean poet who completes what Handley terms a, "New World epic vision." I take this argument from Walcott's oeuvre, one that culminates in *Omeros*, his masterpiece. As suggested earlier, Walcott uses nature as the only "credible" way to attain artistic inspiration. In *Omeros*, like the frame narrative's hero Achille, the poet's "element" is the sea. After reading "The Light of the World," one could easily conclude that the poet-hero "does something for others" by so movingly describing St. Lucia and its people.

*Omeros* is the ultimate apologia for Walcott's poetics: the epic presents the artistic mind's heroic effort to withstand racial oppression, to endure divided social consciousness through colonialism and "abandonment" of his native land, and to love humanity (especially the people of his native land) to the extent that it hurts.

If the reader is to take Achille as the hero, then as Walcott suggests, he does not seem to be worthy of his own epic. Towards the end of *Omeros*, Walcott inverts epic tradition:

I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son,  
who never ascended in an elevator,  
who never had no passport, since the horizon needs none,  
  
never begged nor borrowed, was nobody's waiter,  
whose end, when it comes, will be a death by water  
(which is not for this book, which will remain unknown

and unread by him). I sang the only slaughter  
that brought him delight, and that from necessity—  
of fish, sang the channels of his back in the sun.

I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea. (*Omeros* 320).

According to Joseph Farrell, one of the most ardent supporters of *Omeros* as epic, “such a passage is literally perverse, turned backwards, alluding in the poem’s final chapter to the conventional opening of a canonical epic” (261). The inversion extends to the sinking of landmass into the Caribbean Sea, becoming “our wide country,” and leaving “a nature without man, like the sea on which the sail of a canoe can seem as interruption” (“Twilight” 14). Again, as far back as 1970, Walcott was thinking of the sea as this “credible life.”

Beyond incorporating the tradition of the epic invocation, Farrell also argues that Walcott alludes to the hero’s obsession in the *Iliad* with defining oneself through one’s ancestry. The twist for Walcott is that *Omeros* taps into a less homogenous ancestry than the Greeks had access to. Farrell notes that “*Omeros* makes of itself a paradigm for the contemporary individual’s relationship to the various cultural legacies that he or she inherits or wishes to claim” (266). For the poet-hero, these “cultural legacies” are far reaching, and unlike Achille, certainly knowing what it is like “to have ascended in an elevator.”

The extent of Walcott’s allusions to the Classics suggests Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Pound in *The Cantos*, but the civilizations that underlie these allusions remain less

credible than the sea for Walcott. Still, Walcott has a use for them, as Lorna Hardwick suggests:

Classical languages and culture had a dual potential in their cultural situation depicted by Walcott, partly because of their role in colonial education and partly because in more recent times, ancient culture underwent a diaspora of its own as it became progressively detached from the colonizing classes who had appropriated and transformed it but who gradually ceased to have a use for it. As a result, Greek and Roman texts were liberated for re-interpretation and refiguration as a strand in newly developing literatures. (239-240)

Thus, as Hardwick suggests, Walcott potentially reinvigorates the Classics for future Caribbean poets, but he more importantly claims them as an ennobling association for his heroes.

Whoever the hero of *Omeros* is meant to be or whether the hero is a proper subject for epic is ultimately irrelevant to Joseph Farrell:

My response to those critics who feel compelled to deny that *Omeros* is an epic poem is twofold: first, to base such a denial on a desire to claim *Omeros* as an *Afro-Caribbean* poem ignores those contemporary studies in world epic that go well beyond the literary tradition defined by European poets such as Homer and Milton; second, to distinguish *Omeros* from its predecessors in the canonical epic tradition on the basis of its capacity to celebrate alterity ignores the European epic's capacity for self-questioning and for radical reinterpretation of its own generic roots. (252)

Addressing its tendency towards epic “alterity,” Jason Lagapa argues that “the genre of mock epic precisely captures Walcott’s poetic and parodic aims: Walcott at once invokes the epic tradition and purposely subverts it” (120). Whether Walcott is interested in the to subversion of epic or simply inversion, as Farrell suggests, is open to debate. However, the heroes of mock epic, if one may take Don Quixote or Don Juan or Belinda in Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* as examples, are juxtaposed against the heroes of traditional epic for social parody. Walcott’s sincere respect for his characters, especially Achille, seems to suggest that he is not meant to stand in comic opposition to the heroes of traditional epics but to parallel them within his own detached cultural context.

Following on Walcott’s generally positive presentation of characters in *Omeros*, Victor Figueroa gives a strong counter to Lagapa’s suggestion that Walcott has parodic aims. Figueroa argues that whereas Walcott’s earlier poetry was concerned about the poet-speaker’s questioning of his identity,

By the time Walcott publishes *Omeros* in 1990, there is a fundamental twist in his approach. The ontological question remains important, but the emphasis has shifted toward a different kind of question, one that could be described as ethical. Thus, while some of the characters in the poem are still engaged with questions of identity, Walcott seems more interested in examining the possibility of alliances between different ethnicities and cultures, and in questioning unequal and unjust relations within power structures, than in articulating identity. (25)

Walcott’s creation of meaningful “alliances between different ethnicities and cultures” is tantamount to the battlefield scenes in the *Iliad*. In several of these scenes,

music plays an important role, especially at Maud Plunkett's funeral. In terms of the presentation of recursive visual, aural, and cultural material, Walcott's artistry in this scene is of the highest caliber. Maud Plunkett is the Irish wife of Major Plunkett, a white Englishman who settled in St. Lucia after his military service in World War II. Her death brings the community together to mourn, including the poet-speaker who narrates the scene. Anna Boyagada gives an insightful reading into how the swift that Maud had sewn into the silk that now drapes her bier reminds Achille of his earlier journey to discover his African roots and his St. Lucian community:

Walcott intends us to understand this motley chorus as a community which circumvents racial loyalties is clear from the way he draws Achille's (and thus the reader's) eyes to the swift [the bird on Maud's silk]. Achille recognizes the swift, which acted as guide on his journey to Africa and back again, as representative of the African component of this chorus, but he recognizes it as part of a larger group rather than as primary; it is one bird among many, one voice in the island's silent chorus.

(83)

According to Boyagada, in this scene and others, Walcott is "focused on the irreducible heterogeneity of the modern Caribbean, a heterogeneity borne of multiple, intertwined diasporas that lead to a collective resettlement as the post-colonial society of St. Lucia" (Boyagoda 81).

Beyond the visual imagery of the swift, there is also a weaving of music and collective humanity at Maud Plunkett's funeral:

Plunkett's falsetto soared like a black frigate-bird,



and shifted to a bass-cannon from his wattled throat,  
Achille lowered his head for the way it circled

high over our pews, and I heard the brass bugle-note  
of his khaki orders as we circled the Parade Ground,  
and then the hymn ended. (Omeros 266-267)

It is here where Walcott reminds the reader of the battlefields of epic. Plunkett's voice sounds like a cannon and the poet-speaker's memory opens to the ironic image of colonial subjects preparing themselves to fight for the colonizer. Yet, Walcott leaves this as a fight that never happened. It implicates Plunkett in the colonial enterprise, but it also takes the poet-narrator into a shared experience with his conflicted heritage.

Music, in the form of a sound system, appears earlier in *Omeros* and marks another potential violence of sorts between cultures. During a performance, DJs are toasting their own poetry, poetry that will eventually be challenged by the poet-narrator:

Frenetic DJs  
soared evangelically from the thudding vamp  
of the blockorama,  
“This here is Gros Îlet's  
night, United Force, garcon, we go rock this village  
till cock wake up!” (Omeros 110)

That the DJs' toasts would be presented “evangelically” suggests that Walcott gives them credit for desiring an “United Force,” or at least naming themselves this way. As a United Force, the poets give the town its moment to be proud and celebrate.

In Chapter XXXI of *Omeros*, the poet-narrator provides his own toast over the background of Bob Marley's music. In the scene, Achille begins to clean out his boat before he launches it into the sea:

A remorseful Saturday strolled through the village,  
down littered pavements, the speakers gone from the street  
whose empty shadows, contradicted the mirage  
  
of last night's blockorama, but the systems' beat  
thudded in Achille's head that replayed the echo,  
as he washed the canoe, of a Marley reggae— (Omeros 161)

The song is Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" (Omeros 161). As he mops, Walcott brings the music of the song into concord with the with the sounds of nature and the sounds of Achille's mopping: "Between the soft thud of surf the bass beat wider, / backing his work up with its monodic phrasing" (Omeros 161). From this point, Achille assumes the role of "the black soldier" in the song (Omeros 161). He misinterprets the song a bit, imagining "Red Indians" on horseback, charging the beach he's on: "he saw, like palms on a ridge, the Red Indians come / with blurred hooves drumming to the music's sweet anger" (Omeros 162). Then Achille aims his oar at the treeline, imagining it as a "Winchester," and firing, felling, "more savages, until the shore / was littered with palm spears, bodies: like Aruacs / falling to the muskets of the Conquistador" (Omeros 162). Throughout this scene, the music accompanies all of the action, even the "Red Indians" are "bouncing to a West Indian rhythm" (Omeros 161).

What the music has to do with Achille's imagination is a complex relationship between the song's narrative, the collective and brutal history of the Americas, and the power the poet-speaker in *Omeros* gives Achille as writer/creator. As in "The Light of the World," Marley is the vehicle for a feeling of community, of a shared history. The phrasing "like Auruacs" removes some of the agency from Achille for violence. In his reality, Achille sees only palm trees as generic "Indians."

This scene of Achille's interpretive dance to Marley's music sits as the prequel to what Walcott is about to do in Book Four, where the speaker's imagination will extend farther into the Americas, a passage that troubles some critics, but is partly made possible by the creative work he has already done—why would a Jamaican musician be interested in American soldiers? The challenges of Books Four and Five of *Omeros* are found in reconciling the following lines with the rest of the imagery: moving from the negative feel of "Art has surrendered / to History with its whiff of formaldehyde" to the more affirmative, "Art is immortal and weighs heavily on us, / and museums leave us at a loss for words" (*Omeros* 183).

The silencing effect of museum art, accepted, canonical, is something that the artist must resist, and throughout Books Four and Five of *Omeros*, the speaker revisits places of living inspiration, places of sustaining artistic identity. Like Walcott's life, these places are transnational. But even as the speaker travels through the Americas and Europe, he sees images from St. Lucia everywhere: "Achille!" outside a Boston museum (183), "Omeros" on the Thames (194), In Ireland, he hears "one of the airs Maud Plunkett played" (201). Throughout these books, Art is dynamic, building images on top images. His museum collection of images complete, the speaker returns to St. Lucia in

Book Six. It is as though the speaker is reverse colonizing, returning to St. Lucia after plundering the word's museums of its treasures.

Walcott's *Omeros* is not a celebration of Englishness in any sense. In the epic, England, to borrow Benedict Anderson's term is an "imagined community." For the poet-narrator, the Thames eventually flows into the open sea of his transnational cultural consciousness. Presented as an ancient bargeman on the Thames, Omeros sees evidence of England's empire in London's landmarks:

He read the inverted names of the boats in their element,  
he saw the tugs chirring up a devalued empire

as the coins of their wake passed the Houses of Parliament.

But the shadows kept multiplying from the Outer  
Provinces, their dialects light as a ginkgo's leaf, their

fingers plucking their saris as wind picks at water,  
and the statues raising objections; he sees a wide river  
with its landing of pier-stakes flooding Westminster's

flagstones, and traces the wake of dugouts in the frieze  
of a bank's running cornice, and whenever the ginkgo stirs  
the wash of far navies settles in the bargeman's eyes.

(Omeros 195-196)

Omeros cannot see England's Englishness because colonial enterprise has left an indelible mark on England. In the blending of art and nature in his poetry, Walcott creates a cultural language that transcends the desire for a homogeneous identity such as Englishness. Popular music, such as Marley's reggae, provides a common tune for Walcott to establish a theme of cultural connection, but Walcott improvises his own virtuoso verbal performance, creating a hybrid song like a DJ's toasts.

### **Part 3: Grace Nichols—Defying Silence with Song**

I begin my discussion of Grace Nichols's work with two of her poems that were published in children's books. The first, "Sea Timeless Song," appears in her collection *Come on into My Tropical Garden*. The poem concludes:

Tourist come  
and tourist go  
but sea—sea timeless  
*sea timeless*  
*sea timeless*  
*sea timeless*  
*sea timeless*

("Sea Timeless Song" 38)

Nichols includes the same poem in her collection of poems entitled *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. With its simple, yet persistent refrain, the poem could be a lullaby. Still, there are echoes of Walcott's insistence that the Caribbean sea is an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

The second poem, “My Gran Visits England,” appears in a collection of Caribbean poetry edited by Nichols and her partner John Agard, entitled *Under the Moon & Over the Sea*. In the poem, the speaker’s grandmother arrives at his or her home in “Shoreham,” and is “As Caribbean as could be” (“My Gran” 67). The grandmother bypasses catching up with the family and ventures straightway into the back garden. According to the speaker, what the grandmother “found” in the English garden was that “the ground was as groundy” as her native soil. The grandmother speaks the final words in the poem—the speaker quotes her directly: ““Boy, come and take my photo—the place cold, / But wherever there’s God’s earth, I’m at home”” (“My Gran” 67). The illustration, provided by Sara Fanelli, would not be out of place in Stevie Smith’s work: it features a woman bent over and looking backwards through her striped skirt. The grandmother has five different hands, and each hand holds a different inhabitant of the garden, including two frogs, an earthworm, and two kinds of weeds. In the distance, a simply drawn, bearded figure holds a shutter release cable that is attached to a camera on a tripod, while another frog looks on with him. This extradiscursive illustration highlights the poem’s focus on the grandmother’s strange desire to find a connection between England and the Caribbean.

Taken together, “Sea Timeless Song” and “My Gran Visits England” represent Nichols’s primary subject: the aesthetic inspiration of Caribbean imagery (female bodies, nature, and language) and the realities of life as a Caribbean immigrant living in England. To date, critics have focused on the former subject matter. However, Nichols’s oeuvre is full of the immigrant experience and, like LKJ’s and Jean “Binta” Breeze’s work, it has a lot to say about the immigrant’s role in resisting a prohibitive Englishness.

Nichols immigrated to England from her native Guyana in 1977, yet her poetry continues to revisit the Caribbean to explore her cultural roots. It is an exile that Nichols shares with Caribbean writers like Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, with their remote cultures remaining a “timeless” source of inspiration. Denise deCaires Narain argues that Nichols, unlike Walcott and Brathwaite, does not represent the Caribbean as a female body that is ravaged by colonialism and defended by post colonial males:

both poets [Walcott and Braithwaite] have consistently represented the Caribbean landscape in feminized terms and the Caribbean subject in search of agency as resolutely male. If, in colonial discourse, the New World was routinely represented as virgin land to be penetrated, conquered, and mapped as territory, then nationalist/post-colonial discourses have also routinely metaphorized the nation as woman—as that which is being fought *for*, the symbolic currency through which competing claims for the land are made visible. ("Landscape" 42-43)

Resisting the poetics of Walcott and Brathwaite that define the Caribbean as woman, Nichols presents the Caribbean woman as an individual, self-affirming agent of her own history and destiny.

In *Mapping Englishness*, Simon Gikandi notes how presenting women as anything but individuals in their own right is a characteristic of postcolonial literatures:

Often seeking to align themselves with poststructuralism and postmodern theory, postcolonial theorists find it easier to talk about women in the colonial project as intercessors of a homosocial

relations—a process of male exchange or struggle in which both black and white women are deployed as the mediators of racial anxieties or objects of fantasies and desires—rather than subjects in their own right. (122)

Nichols plays with these “fantasies and desires” with a poetry that, according to Suzanne Scafe, “refuses to constrain and narrowly categorize the cultural and personal identities of her subjects, preferring instead to explore and reveal their contradictions and complexities” (257). Nichols’s female subjects are often at liberty to narrate their own experiences, even if it contains “contradictions.” In a voice and a history for a female subject, Nichols’s speaker is careful not to define the subject through essentialist assumptions about race or objectified beauty.

Nichols captures the “complexities” of her female subjects through difference. A poststructuralist awareness of language facilitates such readings of Nichols’s sense of linguistic *jouissance*. Suzanne Scafe notes that Nichols “exults in the sensuality of language” (259). Nichols herself acknowledges that language can be a contentious affair: “it is the battle with language that I love. When writing poetry, it is the challenge of trying to create or chisel out a new language that I like” (“Battle” 284). Allison Easton adds earlier poststructuralist and feminist readings of Nichols’s poetry with a vital element: history:

It appears then that a celebration of the female body will not be possible without first consciously and directly subverting the white traditions of signification and those narratives they call history. Whereas the semiotic appears to be a largely unconscious subversion without conscious



motivation or element or artistic control, in Nichols' poems we shall find a strategic reworking of that history. (59)

Although Nichols acknowledges outside culture dominated by the white patriarchy, the women in her poetry rework these cultural references in their own images. This is often in sharp contrast to Walcott who generally affirms the power of extant cultural references to connect readers to his message without having to dramatically subvert them. In particular, Walcott and Nichols use music in vastly different ways. Whereas Walcott views popular music in the later part of his career as something that can be culturally "improved" by the poet's variations on its themes, Nichols uses popular music as an expression of female resistance. For Nichols, popular music provides the opportunity for at least two forms of resistance. It gives women the cultural authority to participate in dancing, either with or without male partners, and it allows them to "toast" or "dub" their own poetry over male-produced soundtracks.

In her first collection of poetry, *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1983), Nichols engages with history's silencing of Caribbean female subjects. Mara Scanlon suggests that "Nichols leads the reader through an archetypal Afro-Caribbean woman's history, from African to slave and mother to revolutionary victor, painting the portrait of a woman who suffers, dreams, works, loves, triumphs" (60). For instance, in "Eulogy," Nichols's speaker reflects on the experiences of slave women "caught in the Middle Passage / limbo," and asks, "How can I eulogise / their names" (Long Memored 17). The speaker also asks "What dance of mourning / can I make?", which combines Nichols's primary modes of resistance—words and dance—against the silencing of the slave women's stories to "whispers." It seems that before the speaker shares these whispers

with readers that only the speaker can hear them. That the voices of the slave women are “darting like pains” in the speaker’s head implies that something must be done to acknowledge their suffering.

Although the speaker in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* feels compelled to interpret the whispers she hears, she is uncertain how to “eulogise” the whispering women. Nichols is careful to note that her male poetic predecessors did not provide an adequate model. The speaker in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* must invent a new model. Critical assessments of Nichols’s first collection often make comparisons with Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s poetry.<sup>86</sup> Donnell and Welsh point specifically to how “its poem-cycle structure and its merging of the particular and the universal, the concrete and the mythical [...] can be seen as parallel in some ways to Brathwaite’s long trilogies” (369). In addition to a different presentation of the female body, a key difference between Brathwaite’s trilogy *The Arrivants* and Nichols’s collection is that Brathwaite’s speaker remains in control of how the subjects are to be presented. In “South,” the speaker begins,

But today I recapture the islands’  
bright beaches: blue mist from the ocean  
rolling into the fisherman’s houses.  
By these shores I was born: sound of the sea  
came in at my window, life heaved and breathed in me then  
with the strength of that turbulent soil. (*New Arrivants* 57)

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<sup>86</sup> In addition to Donnell and Welsh, Denise deCaires Narain also notes how perception of Nichols’s volume was that “Brathwaite had already ‘done it’ (*Contemporary* 182).

By contrast, the speaker in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* struggles with how to acknowledge the sufferings of the past and present and move to a place where art can heal. Nichols's work is full of questions, such as the one in "Among the Canes":

O who will remember me?  
Who will remember me? she wails  
holding her belly  
stumbling blindly  
among the canes (Long Memored 27)

The speaker rarely answers the subject's questions; the effect of the poetry is one of call and response—the subjects call out their questions and the speaker responds by repeating the questions to the readers.

To accomplish a sense of healing for her subjects' suffering, Nichols argues that, despite the struggle presenting this suffering responsibly, the speaker in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* "articulates her situation with vision," and "is a priestess figure and employs sorcery when necessary" ("Battle" 288). To be a "priestess figure" allows the speaker to transform into "something of a mythic figure" and circumvent historical silencing because the priestess had the power to speak in patriarchal societies ("Battle" 288). It also allows the speaker to heal suffering with her own blend of rhetorical "sorcery," a combination of chanting and a "dance of mourning."

Though the speaker does not always present the struggle for acknowledgement of her subjects' suffering as resolving itself completely or satisfactorily, she argues that the artist must not deny that she is a witness to an often unrecorded history. According to Alison Easton, "forgetting, as the poems of *I Is a Long Memored Woman* centrally

reminds us, is to be silenced, to be ‘without song’”(59). “Without Song” is a title of one of the poems in the collection. The poem describes children who have been left no means of self-expression:

The faces of the children  
are small and stricken and black  
They have fallen  
into exile  
moving without song  
or prayer (Long Memoried 25)

That the children are “moving without song / or prayer” is fascinating because the speaker suggests that music, movement, and prayer should be viewed as mutually inclusive, as if movement without these forms of expression is meaningless. The children later “have fallen / into silence.” In the fifth stanza, the poem undergoes a movement towards nature for inspiration that is reminiscent of Walcott’s poetry:

And the sun burns to copper  
yet the rains, the rains gather  
like diamonds  
in the fleece of their hair (Long Memoried 25)

Nature seems to negate its role in the children’s suffering; it both “burns” and sanctifies the children with “diamonds” or rain. The beautiful and resonant image makes it difficult to “forget and be blind” as the speaker suggests in the following stanza. In case readers are willing to forget, the speaker reminds them of what they would be forgetting:

to forget the Kingdom of Ancestors

the washing of throats with palm wine

to not see that woman, female flesh

feast coated in molasses (Long Memoried 26)

Again, as with Walcott, cultural references are literally bathed in nature imagery. In Nichols's poem, palm wine carries a long list of traditions from the role of the palm tapper in the community to its ceremonial uses. The poem is set on a "little sugar island," which provides an ironic contrast between the ceremonial use of the palm wine and the "feast" of the woman who is "coated in molasses," with molasses as a by-product of refining sugar. That palm wine and molasses are natural products transformed by human labor shows that the laborer's importance in providing these products should be equated, even though one is a traditional African product and the other is an empire-building product from the Caribbean. What is important is that we "see" the laborer behind the product, not just the product itself.

As in "Without Song," Nichols addresses the suffering of children as well as slave women. In her essay "The Battle with Language," she is concerned with remythologizing the world to include a wider diversity of people to inspire future generations. She wants a myth for children where, "when they look out on the world they can also see brown and black necks arching toward the sun so they can see themselves represented in the miraculous and come to sing their being" ("Battle" 288). Again, to "sing" also requires movement, necks "arching toward the sun," as if in a ceremonial dance. The speaker-as-priestess in *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* ritually sanctifies her subjects through dance, song, chanting (words of the poet *and* words of the priestess), and the sacrifice of

personal well-being to attain a “vision that is hopefully life-giving in the final analysis” (G. Nichols "Battle" 288). According to Alison Easton, with the creation of her unique speaker and poetic subjects, “what she is resisting are damaging stereotypes which have roots in slavery but continue to disable black people” (64).

In *I Is a Long Memored Woman* Grace Nichols wants to grow new identities from a diverse network of roots. Nowhere is this desire more clear than in the final poem in the collection, “Epilogue”:

I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
from the root of the old one  
a new one has sprung (Fat Black 64)

Mark Stein comments that “the image of migration, of journeying, is not only central to this poem but is a prime motif in Nichols’s poetry and in black British literature more generally” (59). Although *I Is a Long Memored Woman* seems to focus on the Caribbean and Africa, she follows the diaspora onward to Great Britain itself, which is a prime feature of the film inspired by Nichols’s book.

The film version of *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1990) presents Nichols’s poetry in several ways: through interpretive dance, through drawings, through film footage of her native Guyana, through the voices of actresses, and through song. Soon after the film begins, Grace Nichols is shown reading from her book as a clock ticks quietly in the background. Then the scene cuts to footage of London and the camera focuses on black Londoners. Eventually, Grace Nichols is seen walking among them. Before the poem “Epilogue” is read, Nichols is filmed talking about Caribbean people

journeying to or settling in other places (Solomon). The combination of dance, song, and words in this film version fits well with the book's recurring theme of hybrid artistic expressions. Gabrielle Griffin argues that reading the printed text of *I Is a Long Memored Woman* alone is inadequate to understanding its meaning as *écriture féminine*: "it is poetry that needs to be performed, that requires the presence of the voice and the body—its appeal is not purely cerebral" (33). Griffin's assertion that Nichols achieves *écriture féminine* through "the conscious aim of creating difference 'on the page,' and 'in the ear'" has fallen under scrutiny from Alison Easton and Denise deCaires Narain (Griffin 33). According to deCaires Narain,

Nichols' emphasis on presenting positive images of black women signals a belief in the power to shift the resonances of words and images without a radical challenge to the symbolic system which generates such images and words. As such, it is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that Nichols writes *about*, rather than *writes* the body.

(Contemporary 195-196)

Alison Easton contends,

Griffin's sense of a refusal of symbolic order and an embracing of the pre-social semiotic in Nichols' work becomes problematic in the face of the material context of both slavery in the Americas and a tribal Africa which sold Africans to the slavers. (58)

Easton and deCaires Narain establish that even limited knowledge of terms like "middle passage," "exile," and "palm wine" opens a web of historical, symbolic language that is a vital part of Nichols's poetry. To say that Nichols's use of difference subverts the

importance of these terms undermines the poet's desire to have the reader share in the many historical journeys implied in those terms. Griffin bases her conclusion partly on a consideration of the poetry as a performance piece that demonstrates the movement of the female body. Griffin's argument seems weak because she bases it in part on a performance at the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton featuring Jean "Binta" Breeze and Ntozake Shange, not Nichols herself. At the performance, Griffin becomes aware that "movement and gesture become part of the performance of this poetry—voice and body are equally used in its presentation" (32-33). Griffin's comments are problematic because Nichols is forced into Griffin's category of "this poetry," which is presumably all poetry written by black women "in the context of an oral tradition" (Griffin 32). As Nichols writes in "Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women," there is a critical tendency to lump black female writers into restrictive categories, which is something Nichols actively resists.

It takes a reading of Nichols's poetry as a dynamic oeuvre to resist the critical placement of her work into restrictive categories. For instance, in *Lazy Thoughts of Lazy Woman*, a text that Griffin does not mention in her essay, Nichols takes a more intertextual approach to writing, using a diversity of literary sources from Walt Whitman to Shakespeare to Jean "Binta" Breeze herself. The use of these literary sources show that Nichols sometimes consciously desires to work within a symbolic order.

I agree with Griffin that any reading of Nichols is enhanced by a consideration of the unique traditions of British-Caribbean poetry in performance, especially the dub poetry of Jean "Binta" Breeze and Linton Kwesi Johnson. Describing Breeze in performance, Bruce Woodcock comments that "she sees music as integral to poetry and



her electrifying performances deliver her work with a marvelous mix of drama, mime, song and personal dynamism” (66). Woodcock’s comment makes it easy to understand Griffin’s attraction to the power of such a performance. Nonetheless, it is a description of Breeze, not Nichols. In contrast to Breeze, Nichols’s public readings are much more subdued.<sup>87</sup> Still, Nichols’s connections to the Caribbean –British artistic community (including Breeze) and the frequent presence of music and dance in her poetry reveal her interest in hybrid artistic expressions.

The combination of music and physical movement (often dance) is a powerful mode of expression in Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic. According to Gilroy, “the association of music and dance in black culture may itself betray a sense of the limitations of spoken and written languages as well as an enthusiasm for total forms which, by combining different media, communicate more than each can convey on its own” (Union Jack 212). Such “total forms,” such as the one that appears in the film *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, appeal to Nichols because they contain both traditional elements and live interpretations and improvisations. Nichols will continue to pursue this idea in her next volume, *The Fat Black Women Poems*. Here, Nichols narrator transforms from poet-priestess to an overweight and mischievous character meant not to be challenged by social realities but to challenge social realities. Alison Easton contends that the main character in *The Fat Black Women Poems* was inspired by a dream Nichols had (58). This knowledge sheds light on the imaginative view of the world that the fat black woman takes, one that contains seemingly endless possibilities for herself.

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<sup>87</sup> I base this opinion on video of Nichols and Breeze reading that are available online. For Nichols, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bACVeAclpU>; for Breeze, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5Q3Pe4YGMs>

For the fat black woman, music's relationship with bodily movement is as artistically vital as it is in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. For example, in "The Fat Black Woman's Instructions to a Suitor" Nichols employs a tradition from soul, R&B and early rock 'n' roll where the singer performs a song that requests listeners to perform a series of popular dances. In the second stanza the speaker requests a trans-historical and trans-national dance repertoire:

Do the tango  
Drop yourself like a mango  
Do the minuet  
Spin me a good ole pirouette  
Do the highland fling  
Get down baby  
Do that limbo thing (Fat Black 21)

That the speaker requests dance forms originating in Argentina ("tango"), France ("minuet" and "pirouette"), Scotland ("highland fling"), and Trinidad ("limbo") shows that she requires her suitor to possess some form of multicultural awareness, if only through dance.

The international scope of dance requested in "The Fat Black Woman's Instructions to a Suitor" also implies a certain degree of difficulty, showing that the fat black woman has the right to be demanding because of her beauty and sexuality established in other poems of the sequence. Denise deCaires Narain claims that the fat black woman actually "challenges men with her sexuality" (Contemporary 186). The exact nature of this "challenge" should not be confused with promoting fear of her beauty

or sexuality, but a sense that the challenge is one that needs to be met with creativity and appreciation on the part of her male admirers. This is reminiscent of Jean “Binta” Breeze in her dub poetry. Built within the dance challenge addressed to the suitor, for instance, is the final instruction that he save enough energy to “carry me across the threshold” (Fat Black 21).

Despite the tongue-in-cheek humor throughout the volume, Nichols is careful to present the deeper implications of her creation:

Although The Fat Black Women’s Poems came out of a sheer sense of fun, of having a fat black woman doing exactly as she pleases, at the same time she brings into being a new image—one that questions the acceptance of the ‘thin’ European model as the ideal figure of beauty.

("Battle" 287)

The fat black woman is not meant to be attractive in simply an aesthetic sense. Her sexuality is part of her mystique and power. As early as *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, Nichols presents the female body as an active force in terms of its generative ability for both female and male inspiration. Discussing Nichols’s use of the female eroticized body, Alison Easton comments,

What we are dealing with then is not a matter of overthrowing the female body taboos of the puritanical West, but the black body as the site of oppression, oppression of blacks by whites and women by men and, in reaction to this, the possibility of revolutionary change imagined through an erotic body. (62)

As Easton suggests, when it comes to the presentation of sexuality as resistance to oppression, *I Is a Long Memored Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* are essentially two sides of the same coin.

In "Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath," the speaker confronts institutionalized oppression:

Steatopygous sky

Steatopygous sea

Steatopygous waves

Steatopygous waves

O how I long to place my foot

on the head of anthropology (Fat Black 15)

According to Denise deCaires Narain, the use of the word "steatopygous," "signals the long history of the fetishizing of the black woman's buttocks in anthropological discourse" (Contemporary 187). DeCaires Narain also points out the use of the word "steatopygous" is a possible connection to the exploitation of Saartjie Bartmann (Contemporary 187). Nichols's poem provides a vindication for Bartmann and other women who were oppressed by "anthropology," "history," "theology," and "the slimming industry's / profitsome spoke" (Fat Black 15). Having her speaker lovingly assert the subversive power of her own body, Nichols makes the fat black woman into a stubborn "foot," who can "swig" her breasts at history, use "dogma" to scrub her back, and to stick "soap" in the wheel of market-made images of beauty. The reality of the fat black woman's corporal existence is its own authority.

Continuing Nichols's theme of reversing social misconceptions, "The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem..." is a series of couplets in which each couplet contains an affirmative metaphor for blackness. Such a simple form leans toward doggerel but the meanings of the metaphors themselves are so dynamic and elusive that the poem achieves more depth than it appears to do at first glance:

Black as the blackness  
of a rolling ship

Black as the sweetness  
of black orchid milk

Black as the token  
of my ancestor's bread

Black as the beauty  
of the nappy head (Fat Black 16)

The final couplet of the poem, "Black as the spraying / of a reggae sunsplash," is a fine example of the depth of the images in the poem (Fat Black 16). Like Nichols's achievement in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, music in "The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem..." is an active force that crosses artistic boundaries. According to Mara Scanlon, the final couplet of "The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem...", "ends the poem with the celebration of a musical heritage which has traditionally been an outlet for communication in the Caribbean" (63). Because Nichols

points to a specific genre of music and not a more general sense of “song,” the kind of “communication” she intends by choosing reggae is partly a “celebration” of Caribbean music as Scanlon suggests, but it is also a somewhat subversive choice. The politicized message of reggae, especially for the immigrant community in Britain, was well established by the publication of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. Other metaphors in the poem support this argument. The first, “Black as the intrusion / of a rude wet tongue,” is a startling starting point. The poem follows Nichols’s efforts to alter extant mythologies and stereotypes through such frank images. Reggae has a place in this message.

To break up the authority of the mythologies and stereotypes surrounding a particular place, Nichols locates her speakers as shifting continents between the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. Nichols makes little mention of England in *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, but Scanlon notes that she places her fat black woman in a British setting:

throughout the poetic sequence, the fat black woman systematically struggles with a world not ready to accept her as a viable mythological icon, a sexual being, or an authority figure. She moves through modern London much as Nichols herself might, an alien nationally, socially, and physically. (61)

Despite her “alien” status, the fat black woman has carved out a niche in her new country. In “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping,” the speaker notes how shopping for clothes in England does not suit her because they are not “accommodating” enough and that the winter weather makes the journey difficult (*Fat Black* 11). As she shops, the Fat Black Woman’s frustration mounts:

The fat black woman curses in Swahili/Yoruba  
and nation language under her breathing  
all this journeying and journeying (Fat Black 11)

In describing the fat black woman's frustration, the speaker uses Edward Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "nation language." Brathwaite uses the label to cover what others may term patwa, creole, or dialect. For Brathwaite, nation language applies to a particular formulation of language:

It is nation language in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree. (History 13)

Nation language is a form of resistance, defying the colonizer's attempts to remove African influence from the language that was forced on slaves. By suggesting that the fat black woman speaks two different African languages in addition to nation language, Nichols goes a step further than Brathwaite in suggesting that language can resist social conformity. By speaking Swahili and Yoruba, two languages prohibited by the colonizers, the fat black woman curses her situation yet preserves her hybrid identity, one developed from constantly "journeying, journeying." Although "the choice is lean" in terms of fashion, the fat black woman retains the ability to express herself with her own language.

In addition to the Fat Black Woman sequence, the volume also contains a sequence from *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, and sequences entitled “In Spite of Ourselves” and “Back Home Contemplation.” The speaker of “In Spite of Ourselves” echoes the Fat Black Woman’s struggles with cultural alienation of the Caribbean woman in Britain by ironic inversion in the poem “Skanking Englishman Between Trains.” The speaker encounters a “small yellow hair Englishman” who has co-opted the Caribbean culture of his “lovely / Jamaican wife” (Fat Black 33). The man becomes “full-o-jive,” which has both negative and positive connotations for the character.<sup>88</sup> The man is “walking in rhythm to reggae sound,” and this gives him some authenticity, but his identity as Englishman and posing and pretensions amuse the speaker to a level just shy of anger or deep resentment. The Caribbean person’s struggle to establish an identity within dominant cultural surroundings does not allow a member of the dominant culture to intrude. Having a Jamaican wife does not turn Englishmen into Caribbean men.

*The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* concludes with a reprinting of “Epilogue” from *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. Because of its reference to a “new tongue,” or language, the poem’s reappearance anticipates what Nichols accomplishes in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*. For all three collections, the language is one of resistance, or at the very least, an insistence on being heard, to prevent being left ‘without song.’ The “new tongue” that develops between the end of *I Is a Long Memored Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* expresses the Caribbean woman’s immigrant experience in Britain, and the “new

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<sup>88</sup> The *OED* lists four meanings of the word used as a noun. Of these, “talk that is misleading, untrue, or pretentious” (1), “lively and uninhibited dancing” (2b), and “Marijuana” (4) could all work comfortably in the poem to describe the man’s antics (“Jive” Def. 1, 2b, 4) and establish a sense of the speaker’s ambivalence towards the man.



tongue” that develops between *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* addresses a more literary culture, what LKJ might call “tap natch” poets.

Despite the desire to develop her “ new tongue,” Nichols often works with nation language, a feature that she shares with other Caribbean poets. In her essay, “The Battle with Language” Nichols explains,

I like working in both standard English and Creole. I tend to want to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two worlds, Creole and standard English, were constantly interacting, though Creole was regarded, obviously, as the inferior by the colonial powers when I was growing up and still has a social stigma attached to it in the Caribbean.

("Battle" 284)

The combination of directly addressing of the canon and using nation language in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* creates an association between “high” and “low” British cultures that resembles the use of popular music in the earlier poets in this work, especially since nation language is such a vital component of reggae music and dub poetry.

In “The Body Reclining,” Nichols references Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, adapting Whitman’s “I SING the Body electric”:

I sing the body reclining

I sing the easy breathing ribs

I sing the horizontal neck

I sing the slow-moving blood

Sluggish as a river

In its lower course

I sing the weighing thighs

The idle toes

The liming\* knees (Lazy Thoughts 4)

Nichols glosses the asterisk after “liming” with the statement that it is a “West Indian expression for standing around, idling away the time” (Lazy Thoughts 5). With her dedication “(*With a thought for Walt*)” and the Whitmanesque bodily catalog, it is clear that Nichols rewrites Whitman to incorporate her unique perspectives as a Caribbean woman. The Caribbean-specific verb “to lime” is not included in the *OED*, but the noun “limer” is, coming from print sources from Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados (“Limer”). The *OED* entry equates the practice of liming with loitering, or to “hang about the streets.” The etymological quotations and wording of the entry in the *OED* differ only slightly from Nichols’s use, but the more negative connotations are reworked in Nichols’s contemporary publication of *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*.<sup>89</sup>

The choice of and deliberate gloss of “liming” incorporates many of Nichols’s themes in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*. According to Denise deCaires Narain, “Nichols’ version [of *Leaves of Grass*], much less grandly universal in scope than Whitman’s, ‘domesticates’ his vision and celebrates the reclining woman’s body (the ‘lazy woman alluded to in the title of the collection) as sweet release from the repetitive drudgery of dusting and scrubbing” (Contemporary 189). Read in this way, “liming” is more of a method of relaxation than a form of loitering on the streets. Yet, the term gives

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<sup>89</sup> The third entry for “limer” first appears in the second edition of the *OED*, which was published in 1989, the same year as *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*.

a subversive edge to domestic activities, as if they were meant to be equated with the young, usually male limers on Caribbean streets.

A much more irreverent allusion to canonical literature appears in the poem “With Apologies to Hamlet,” which humorously implores,

To pee or not to pee

That is question

Whether it’s sensibler in the mind

To suffer for sake of verse

The discomforting slings

Of a full and pressing bladder

Or to break poetic thought for loo

As a course of matter

And by apee-sing end it. (Lazy Thoughts 6)

Although the poem occupies a liminal space between doggerel and finely wrought lyric, the subject matter is characteristic of Nichols’s work. For Nichols, the body, with all of its conflicting social histories, creates its own “pressing” urgencies that cannot be ignored simply for the sake of poetic pretension. Denise deCaires Narain suggests that in the poem, “in deploying an irreverent humor to undermine the seriousness with which patriarchal bards take themselves, Nichols offers a critique of the powerful, all-knowing poetic ‘I’ which is a feature of many male canons” (Contemporary 190). Resisting the “all-knowing poetic ‘I,’” another dividing line between Nichols and male Caribbean poets such as Brathwaite and Walcott, allows Nichols to allude to canonical literature but

not let it define her own work. In that way, Nichols is much like Stevie Smith—using the canon to break new ground, not build upon old foundations of form and language.

Where Nichols differs from Smith is the breaking of decorum to foreground the body. In “With Apologies to Hamlet” and many of the *Fat Black Woman’s Poems* this theme is treated more lightly than in *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, where oppressed female sexuality is transformed into positive affirmations. Because Nichols views the female body as a more urgent source of inspiration than the one canonical literature provides, it implies that literature has become inert and in need of a jolt. Denise de Caires Narain comments, “rather than the weight of a written tradition, Nichols suggests that it is the erotic energy of the sexual which propels her poetry into being” (Contemporary 190).

Although I agree with deCaires Narain that sexuality is a vital part of Nichols’s catalog of artistic inspiration, I would argue that an appreciation for life in a more general sense, and Caribbean life in particular, drives Nichols’s poetry. She writes in her essay “The Battle with Language” about Caribbean culture that “just thinking about all the different cross-influences and mixtures—Amerindian, African, Asian, European—gets me high” (“Battle” 283). For Nichols, her human poetic subjects are to be celebrated primarily because they possess these “cross-influences and mixtures.” Yet, as the fat black woman struggles to have her definition of beauty transform European sensibilities, many of Nichols’s subjects experience a conflict between two homes—one British, and the other Caribbean (and Amerindian and African and Asian and European) origins.

In “Beverley’s Saga,” Nichols includes another dedicatory epigraph—this time for “Beverley and Jamaican dub-poet, Jean Binta Breeze.” That Nichols includes both Whitman and Breeze in epigraphs to her poetry, especially considering their relative

canonical acceptance, shows that Nichols treats them equally in terms of their influence on her work. The style of “Beverley’s Saga” is a departure from most of Nichols’s poetry in several ways. The poem is set in italics to indicate that the poet is departing from her former style and emulating the dub style of Breeze. This is reflected in Nichols’s copying of Breeze’s use of rhythmic nation language, repetition of certain phrases (a proto-chorus), and the pervasive and subversive sense of humor that comes from an outspoken Caribbean woman in British society.

“Beverley’s Saga” opens with Beverley’s urgency to carve out a solid place within British culture:

*Me good friend Beverley  
Come to England. She was three.  
She born in Jamaica, but seh,  
Dis ya she country.  
She ancestor blood help fe build it,  
Dat is history.  
Dih black presence go back  
Two, three century. (Lazy Thoughts 35)*

Throughout the poem, Beverley defends her British identity, which she claims is established by her ancestors’ role in empire building. Her insistence resists others in the poem who threaten her with police violence and suggest repatriation back to Jamaica. In addition to her ancestors’ contributions to British history and culture and her having lived in Britain for most of her life, Beverley’s feeling that Britain is her home comes partly

from a trip she took to “*Uncle Sam / For a six week vacation*” where she becomes “*homesick fe England*” (Lazy Thoughts 36).

Although Beverley presents a thorough and sound argument for why she belongs in Britain and should not be repatriated, her identity is called into question by an “*ole English Lady*” who stops her and asks, “*Miss are you on holiday*” (Lazy Thoughts 36). Beverley’s response to the woman’s question is no less demonstrative than her earlier statements. She ultimately tells the woman that the presence of a black Britain is an integral part of “*ya history*.” The choice of “*Saga*” in the title also indicates an accretion of history that contains both Beverley and the white woman. The poem ends with Beverley’s invitation that the woman join her and discuss the matter of her place in British history and culture further:

[‘]O mek we tek a lickle walk,  
It so nice an sunny.  
Summer is hearts,  
Ana a dread de wintry.  
But a have me lickle flat  
An a have me lickle key.  
You want to come in  
For a lickle cup-o-tea?’ (Lazy Thoughts 37)

The concluding line combines Nichols’s use of nation language with the ubiquitous English ritual of sharing a cup of tea. It is not to be forgotten that the presence of tea, like Beverley’s presence in Britain, is the result of British empire-building.

The poem “With Glenda in Brixton Park” also deals with the experience of Caribbean women in British society. The poem uses a poetic diction and grouping of images that is unusual for dub-poetry and even somewhat unusual for Nichols. The poem details a trip that the speaker and her friend Glenda take to the park to feed the ducks. As they begin to toss bread to the ducks, the speaker comments that “we cast our bread like fate” and it becomes clear that the activity of feeding ducks is meant to become symbolic. (*Lazy Thoughts* 49). Both characters notice how “small white birds” gather the breadcrumbs before the ducks are able to. Glenda comments that the white birds are “vicious little things” and the speaker notices that her words have caused a change in Glenda’s expression. Nichols’s subjects often take such an imaginative journey back into their origins, but in “Beverley’s Saga,” it is transposed onto a character that must find the “fortitude” without the aid of having the “priestess” quality of Nichols’s early speakers. Unlike the female characters in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, who generally find fortitude in their diverse Caribbean cultural identities, and unlike the subject of *The Fat Black Women Poems*, who finds fortitude through her definition of Caribbean beauty, Glenda is left to find it in Brixton—the heart of racial tension between Caribbean immigrants and white Britons.

Given Brixton’s association with riots in the 1980s, it may be tempting to read Nichols’s poem as racially symbolic—the “white birds” representing relentless socio-political persecution of the Caribbean immigrant community. Yet, the “slow pond-ducks” are not presented as racially other—their color is not presented in the poem. The poem hinges not on any explicit racial commentary but Glenda’s need to find fortitude in a life full of responsibilities (a life that cannot be lived “clothesless / husbandless / babyless”

except in the imagination). Although naming Brixton as the setting of the poem acts as a vehicle bringing in the cultural history of the immigrant experience in Britain, Glenda's transnational journey beyond Brixton captures her identity as a woman rather than simply as a British or a Caribbean woman. This transnational identity shifting is a challenge to Englishness—as Beverley comments to the white Englishwoman, the history of the British empire is far reaching and the Caribbean immigrant in Britain is a reminder of the shared histories of many nations.

I conclude with “Of Course When they Ask for Poems About the ‘Realities’ of Black Women.” On the surface the poem seems to conflict with the realities presented in “With Glenda in Brixton Park.” Glenda is the mother of a young child in the conflict-filled neighborhood of Brixton. It seems that the harsh realities of her life are presented as if upon request. Yet, in her poetry, it is as if Nichols acknowledges such realities but prefers her vision of women as full of a “fortitude” that comes from their bodies and from their cultural roots that they share with so many different ancestors. “Of Course” is the culmination of this vision. What Nichols rejects in “Of Course” is the presentation of black women as

a specimen  
whose heart is in the dust

A mother-of-sufferer  
trampled, oppressed (G. Nichols Lazy Thoughts 52)

Discussing the validity of the literary stereotype of the broken, victimized black woman, Nichols comments, “I know too many black women with a surmounting spirit



and with their own particular quirkiness and sense of humor to know that this is not true” (“Battle” 284-285). In addition to the stereotypical black woman’s experience, “they” (presumably critics or Nichols’s audience) also ask for a presentation of black women as “a perfect song.” Nichols’s responds,

I say I can write  
no poem big enough  
to hold the essence  
of a black woman  
or a white woman  
or a green woman (Lazy Thoughts 52)

The implication seems to be that a song is simply not an expansive enough form to capture a woman’s essence. Importantly, not being able to compose the “perfect song” does not mean that the speaker will leave her subjects “without song,” as Nichols describes the children in “Without Song” from *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. Instead, Nichols argues that it is her desire to give voices to as many women as possible so that together they will emerge, “Crushing out / with each dancing step / the twisted self-negating / history / we’ve inherited (Long Memored 54). In many ways the “dancing step” that carries “crushing” consequences for a brutal, “inherited” history is a poignant metaphor for Nichols’s work as a whole. Much like an accomplished dancer, Nichols follows the intricate choreography of a blend of British traditions in poetry with elements from her biographical and ancestral past lives. Included in this blend are several contemporary musical forms, including reggae and dub poetry. Although the soundtrack for Nichols’s dance may sound more like Bob Marley and The Wailers than a traditional

English ballad, it is no less intertwined with British cultural history, as the Fat Black Woman herself might say.

## Epilogue: Members of the Village Green Preservation Society

As popular music in Great Britain became exemplified by the commercialized multinational effort of Live Aid, Bob Geldof's question still remains as to whether or not pop music changes anything. Tracing the role of popular music throughout the course of British poetry shows that poets from diverse backgrounds with a diversity of political agendas saw popular music as a way to suggest an artistic identity and to connect with a wider audience. As Steve Newman suggests about *The Beggar's Opera*, the use of popular music contains a "democratizing energy" (18). Whether or not that identity is meant to be English or British or multinational or transnational is ultimately less important than the perceived vitality of combining popular music with poetry.

British poets have often considered their national identities, but as Jay Parini argues, this does not mean that they desired to speak as "the voice of a nation." In fact, British poets in this dissertation were often at odds with the politics that critics ascribed to their work. Although *The Beggar's Opera* is said to attack Walpole and Italian opera, John Gay was also concerned with developing his unique mixing of genres and reestablishing the artistic supremacy of poetry over music. Because the music he used was popular, Gay's lyrics stood out from the ones audience members would have associated with the tunes. Based on Bolingbroke's ideal of the patriot king, James Thomson's *Alfred* hoped to define a moral leadership for the newly united Great Britain, one where the monarch was an informed patron of the arts. Instead, his traditional

English masque was dismantled to exploit the popularity of “Rule, Britannia!”, which became an anthem for British colonial dominance.

As Britain’s colonial dominance wanes, poets from former colonies work to define their artistic identities in opposition to Englishness. Although these poets desire new identities, they often construct them through the colonizer’s relics, especially the English language. Of these poets, Yeats is the quintessential example. By using English ballad form and the English language to attempt to define the aesthetics for the future of Irish poetry, Yeats desires to leave a legacy of song for the Irish populace that was grounded in an Anglo-Irish tradition. Similarly, Derek Walcott views his aesthetic relationship with English poetry as a part of his artistic identity that could not be forsaken. Instead of turning away from English poetic traditions in favor of national language and African roots, Walcott weaves as many cultural elements as he can into his poetry, including popular music.

Writing within England, but outside of the traditional roles for Englishwomen, Edith Sitwell, Stevie Smith, and Grace Nichols used popular music to allow women additional means for artistic expression. Although Sitwell’s *Façade* borrows music hall style to add whimsy and theatricality to poetry, her engagement with canonical English poetry proves that she was interested in more than delight and entertainment. Like Sitwell, Smith and Nichols engage with canonical poetry to free space for female artistic expression. Smith’s “singing” of her poetry to hymn and popular song tunes was a way to show how she composed her work with clarity and precision, despite the suggestion that her work is light verse. Nichols lends music to her subjects to allow them the avenue of

song or dance to tell their stories, yet she acknowledges that writing the “perfect song” to capture a black woman’s essence is impossible.

I adopt Nichols’s concept that there is no definable essence of a black woman to argue that there is no definable essence of Englishness. Even in the poetry of John Betjeman and Philip Larkin, work that is often described as representing the epitome of Englishness, there are numerous examples where both poets acknowledge that English society is changing at a rapid pace. Despite Betjeman’s attempts to slow this change through historic preservation and appeals for a collective singing of Anglican hymns, he acknowledges that England will be left in the hands of “Elaine the bobby-soxer,” and “bald young clerks.” Larkin also acknowledges that changes in British culture are passing him by, but unlike Betjeman, he does not secretly relish the new style. Instead, Larkin works to define clearly his reaction to these changes. As with his reluctance to incorporate his interest in jazz into his poetry, if Larkin asserts Englishness at all, it must be read as the expression of a self-professed and self-critical curmudgeon.

I close with lines from The Kinks’ “The Village Green Preservation Society”:

We are the Skyscraper Condemnation Affiliate  
God save tudor houses, antique tables and billiards  
Preserving the old ways from being abused  
Protecting the new ways for me and for you  
What more can we do  
God save the Village Green. (Davies)

The song ostensibly proclaims a desire to promote Englishness. Among the songwriter’s catalog of items that should be promoted are “Donald Duck,” “Desperate Dan,” “Mrs.

Mopp, “Old Mother Riley,” “the George Cross,” “Sherlock Holmes,” “Fu Manchu,” “Moriarty,” “Dracula,” “little shops, china cups and virginity.” The song is remarkable for the diversity of its items: Donald Duck is the property of the American media company Disney, Desperate Dan is a comic book character based on the wild west days of America, and Mrs. Mopp and Old Mother Riley were famous music hall characters. Sherlock Holmes, Fu Manchu, and Dracula are likewise characters from popular British culture. The inclusion of “the George Cross,” simultaneously Britain’s highest civilian honor and England’s national flag, shows the author’s equation of high and low forms of British iconography. That Donald Duck has as much to do with British culture as “Draught Beer” lends suspicion to the authority of these icons. As with the poets in this dissertation, the songwriter acknowledges both the power of popular culture to define national identity and the diversity of sources that popular culture absorbs. To separate the essence of Englishness in poetry from the diverse British culture that produced it ignores the efforts of these poets to reach past, present, and future readers.

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