

## Clipart Pastoral: Image and the Labour of Lyric Selfhood in Contemporary British Poetry

In an article for the Spring 2012 issue of *The Rialto*, Emily Berry writes that

For me writing primarily feels somatic, so it's easier to talk about the outward trappings of it, rather than whatever comes before that. Perhaps it's also that 'poet' is such a nebulous category to slot oneself into, with so little to back it up [...], that an appearance of writerliness can be as important as actually writing. [...] If being a poet is actually an identity it's one that is, largely, cultivated.<sup>1</sup>

Poetic identity here consists of its own external appearances. In surrounding the poet-subject, like a crust or exoskeleton, they constitute her. Berry refers in particular to her typewriter, but she might just as well refer to many other contemporary objects denoting cultural capital: the Moleskine or Leuchterm notebook, the coordinated hardback or paperback (*I Love Dick*, Elena Ferrante, *10:04*, etc), the Melville House tote bag, the #amwriting hashtag, etc. Poetry itself is only the sum of so much decoration, the constellations of an interiors supplement. The typewriter as object signifies more fully and more readily than whatever is written on it. But the objects that constitute “writerliness” are readymades, themselves situated within, and deriving this meaning from, the symbolic order of literature as material production and set of social relations. Poetic identity, then, is a form of self-fashioning, the formation of a pose, but one that takes place within a closed symbolic system that is apparently not made but found<sup>2</sup>. This is, in one sense, a roundabout way of describing the structure of what's known, in its own sheepish parlance, as the “poetry community”.

This is the world that, in the words of Sam Riviere, forms the backdrop of, in this case, the work of Chelsey Minnis: “a sphere of undisguised ambition, narcissistic careerism, where people ‘perfect each other’ through congratulatory ‘creative enterprise’”, in which you must be relied on “to wear the right face to readings or say the right things in workshop”<sup>3</sup>. That last description indicates some of the dialectical tension that sustains

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1 Emily Berry, 'On Poetry and Type: Emily Berry on Emily Berry', *The Rialto* 74, 2012, p. 30

2 Cf. Marx's dictum that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.” 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker, New York, W.W. Norton, 1978, p. 595

3 Sam Riviere, 'Poetry Column: The Morals Of A Meat Slicer — Sam Riviere On Minnis, Leon & Seidel', *The*

this symbolic system: ambition is never “undisguised”, because the notion of disguise still requires a privileging of depth over surface; “the right face” and “the right things” here are the genuine form of ambition as the good health of an apparently self-directed community based on common goals that transcend the immediate social frame. For the fetishism that creates the kernel of value of these objects – the “secret” that Marx claimed for the commodity<sup>4</sup> – derives, itself, from a larger referential scale – present immanently within the charmed circle of the poet-subject. I’ll attempt in a moment to sketch a genealogy of this situation, but I’d just like to add a few details about the specific turns of the dialectic here.

In a post on the Sidekick Books blog from June 2014, Jon Stone describes an apparent disconnect between the experience of the poetry community’s activity as literature – “a growing collection of intensely idiosyncratic, vibrantly multifarious books [...] filled with play and dance, wisdom and strangeness, violent shifts in temperament and technical virtuosity” – and poetry’s appearance “in the public sphere, where it is acknowledged and talked about”. Here, “it seems to amount to the vague and unaccountable indulgences of the sentimental and the terminally comfortable [...] It is oddly pleased with itself, at the same time as squirming with insecurity. It constantly insists that it is Important and Brilliant, but when asked why, it sulks and storms off to its bedroom. [...] It looks like an isolated empire in opulent decline.”<sup>5</sup> But the binary opposition between the privacy of literature and its public image is not so secure. The qualitative distinction Stone makes merely reverses the terms in which poetry is usually characterised: the opposition between the lone author and the institutions and ‘communities’ who respectively provide the platforms and audiences for poetry, and to whom the poet-subject is accountable. The “poetic community”, in other words, models itself at microcosmic level on the macrocosm of the “public sphere”. If the figure of poetry’s “vibrancy”, that is, a species of value, is that of a (Whitmanian) multitude (“myriad lived experiences, intelligences and lives of the mind”), then poetry’s privacy ultimately derives it from the society at large that apparently casts it in such a distorting light. Vice versa, the unflattering claims poetry apparently makes for itself, that it is “Important” and “Brilliant” within a public context emerge precisely through the humanist claims of poetry as Whitmanian multitude, as – as we will see –

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*Quietus*, published April 19<sup>th</sup> 2015 <http://thequietus.com/articles/17698-sam-riviere-poetry-column-jon-leon-mono-haha-chelsey-minnis-frederick-seidel>

4 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, ed. by Ben Fowkes, London, Penguin/New Left Books, 1976, p. 163

5 Jon Stone, 'Five Fixes For Contemporary British Poetry Culture', *Sidekick Books*, published 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014 <http://sidekickbooks.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/five-fixes-for-contemporary-british.html>

the microcosm of human community. These two images are in effect the same.

The cultural scale of contemporary poetry's subjecthood consists, then, of a kind of trick perspective. The secluded, low-budget, discontinuous, small-scale, apparently personal work of the lyric poem is continually staged on a larger public screen – readings, publication, prizes, feverish diagnostic commentary on 'the scene': in other words, its instantiation in the heaven of the culture industry – that is itself haunted by the notion of intimacy, of the closed circle of sociality that is poetry's sphere of production. This topsy-turvy situation prevails in the long shadow of the transformations of lyric subjecthood between Romanticism and the aftermath of modernism.

Poetry's declining share of the literary marketplace throughout the Victorian period entailed an entangled series of shifts in the microcosm of lyric selfhood and the poet's public function. In centring poetic form on "the real language of men"<sup>6</sup>, the younger Wordsworth had proposed a contiguity of the lyric I, that the poem constituted and that constituted the poem, with the plebeian-universal subject position posited by enlightenment thought (in his own work, we can point most obviously to *The Peddler*, *The Recluse* or *Michael, A Pastoral*). A philosophy of language, an image of subjecthood and craft production as a form of being-in-the-world are triangulated. For Wordsworth, poetry has, in Geoffrey Hill's formulation, "the central place in the sphere of civic intelligence"<sup>7</sup>, because culture is posited as – the phrase is Raymond Williams' – "a whole way of life" in a manner not subject as yet to the division of labour. The harmony and order posited by the forms of the Augustan period are at once naturalised and displaced into a conception of the subject that exists in an organic relation with the labour that constitutes it.

By the period of Tennyson, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, poets began "to feel that what they were doing was simply unnecessary and redundant"<sup>8</sup>. The autonomy of category of the aesthetic after Kant entailed a new division of labour, a technical restructuring in which the lyric subject was separated from the sphere of production; as Armstrong puts it, the poet is forced "to conceptualise him- or herself as external to and over or against what comes to be seen as life"<sup>9</sup>. But this exclusion is itself constitutive of "life": just as the technical

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6 William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/1802)', *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, London, Wordsworth Editions, 2003, p. 5

7 Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 501

8 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 4

9 Ibid, p. 6

composition of variable capital, the formation of an industrial proletariat, requires the actual and conceptual creation of a surplus army of labour, so the creation of a sphere of “life” requires the promise of culture as what will realise the promise of neutered and specialist life – culture as “a whole way of life”. To modify Geoffrey Hill's terms, “poesy's' drift into the derelict margins of the commonweal” is actively predicated on the “fanciful” assumption “that it has the central place in the sphere of civic intelligence” assigned to it by Wordsworth, among others<sup>10</sup>. The public function of the lyric subject, became ever more thoroughly emphasised and pressurised as it was hollowed out, as the production of lyric subjectivity began to lose any of its craft aspects. To return again to Hill's description of the situation in the nineteenth century, “the exclusion works two ways and to the total detriment of the commonweal. The 'men of the world' [...] are fully enabled, consciously or unconsciously to exclude [the poet] from the centre of the places of civic power”, precisely because they possess “a virtually unlimited tolerance that [they] are willing to extend to visionaries of the Emersonian type, [which] turns the visionary himself into a mere spectator of his own isolated intensity.”<sup>11</sup>

This is in effect the origin story of what comes to be known as the “poetry community”. The increasing self-reflexivity of poetry in the Victorian period is, in Armstrong's account, displaced into “*relationships* and their representation [that] become the contested area”<sup>12</sup>. The carapace of the poetic persona, as the locus of the 'excluded centre' of society that culture becomes, becomes ever more reified as the productive labour of the lyric subject becomes ever more alienated and redundant. This is the development of what Frank Kermode names, in a now slightly quaint phrase, as “Romantic Image”. For Kermode, the cipher of “the artist in isolation”, deprived of the compensations of an integral society, contains within it, as “the reward of that agonising difference”, the Image as immanent redemption, the object or vehicle for the potentially liberatory work of the lyric subject<sup>13</sup>. It is as the situation of the lyric subject worsens, slipping further into a kind of iconographic self-parody, that the burden of the Image – as the development from high Victorian to Aesthetic describes – increases. The Delphic blasts of Yeats come as if cradled between scare-quotes. Later, the oracular pretensions of Pound, Eliot, HD, MacDiarmid, Cocteau, etc. have an ironic cast to them, the bitter adoption of outmoded finery, in practising a now self-consciously minority art, which nonetheless arrogates to itself, and

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10 Hill, p. 501

11 Ibid, p. 502

12 Armstrong, p. 6

13 Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, London, Routledge, 1957, p. 4, 8

has forced upon it, the responsibility for the central human role of culture.

To return to Berry: note that she describes the provisional identity of 'poet' as “largely, cultivated” – a word from the vocabulary of the eclogues. Identity, then, is a matter of labour. In an essay originally published in *Jacket*, the editors of the Bay Area press Commune Editions note that, while poetry, once considered “an acme of aesthetic achievement [...] has been largely evicted from the catbird seat”, it still seeks to reflect or absorb the formal specificity of other arts (painting, photography, film, etc.) as it did during its splendid isolation in the modernist period<sup>14</sup>. “[T]his desire”, they write,

to arrive where painting already is, has a self-submerged class character. One need only consider the well-known phenomenon [...] of the poet's jealousy when the painter comes strolling out of his or her studio at end of day, clothes smudged and streaked with lovely and serious-looking oils, runoff turpentine staining sturdy shoes. This envious sense that painters, e.g., *go to work* and *have work clothes*, that they actually *make things*, that they work with their hands – well, this is not terribly challenging to decode.<sup>15</sup>

They go on to suggest that poetry has, in effect, already experienced the dematerialisation of the art-object that transformed fine art in the 1960s and 70s, with its attendant processes of deskilling and the loss of any residual craft character. As we have seen, this technical unemployment of the lyric subject is precisely what intensifies the double-nature of poetry's public appearance: the need to exalt its hypothesised role in restoring the alienated part of private human potentiality – a kind of high-minded Human Resources Management of the soul – is shadowed by this jealous lack in its own wish-image. The labour of lyric identity, and its attendant flicker of transcendence, the Image, comes to replace a labour that no-one really performs anymore in any case.

Writing, in the same piece as mentioned above, on Frederick Seidel, Riviere suggests that the necessity, reading his work, of “continual referral to the image of the poet” disarms the public value that is poetry's superego<sup>16</sup>. The well-turned political vileness of Seidel's work is referred back to the figure of the poet as moral

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14 Commune Editions, 'Elegy, Or the Poetics of Surplus', *Cesura//Acceso*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, p. 67-68

15 Ibid, p. 68

16 Riviere, 'Poetry Column'

agent; but there's nothing there: “Open the mummy case of this text respectfully. / You find no one inside.”<sup>17</sup>

Image abolishes the Image's burden, breaking the circuit that relates private labour to public expectation. The lyric subject luxuriates here in its unemployment, wrapping identity about it like a seedy dressing-gown. 'the new sunsets', a poem from Riviere's last book, *Kim Kardashian's Marriage*, answers the question of what “life [is] really like / in an active-adult retirement community” with a thumbnail: “Sunset thru the trees. / It's always beautiful.”<sup>18</sup> Another, 'beautiful pool', ends with the instruction or option, “View images as a 'river of photos', / immaculate and perfect.”<sup>19</sup> Image here is a form of stasis, the “life” that poetry famously set itself against now “like” nature's intentless goldfall or the half-perceptible movement of water; a spurious, depthless radiance, it abolishes the referential index of the image-as-symbol, its transcendent function.

But labour, conspicuous by its absence around these images of *ex nihilo* plenty, isn't banished from this sudden Eden. Riviere comments that the subjective aporia of Seidel's work is “the circumstances shared by every subject under capital”<sup>20</sup>. But the universalising scope of the account of capital implied here is one without class. The “insider” status that Seidel's imagery flags up so heavily foregrounds the distinction between different forms of idleness – between leisure and 'scrounging'. What is, as Riviere writes, shared as the shaping condition of subjectivity, is a form or quality of labour, not a relationship to it. Riviere wrote the poems in part by collaging Google search results, and the sense of a lyric voice here is fragile and provisional, the result of a momentary overlap between linguistic readymades. The lyric I here doesn't possess these images even as an immanent reality: in 'beautiful sunglasses' the first person of the opening line – “Since I am a model I have to think a lot” – recedes into the leering third person of a *Daily Mail* sidebar: “Actress Nicollette Sheridan was enjoying / the beautiful beaches / [...] wearing / the new Christian Dior”<sup>21</sup>. The frame of the lyric I here *is labour*: the immaterial labour of curating these commodity-images to appear as a voice, as we all curate our Facebook profiles and thus donate Mark Zuckerberg our surplus value, this time as a demonstration of anti-“writerliness” that reproduces the coordinates of “writerliness” described by Berry. Rather than being reintegrated, the public sphere of production, now directed by semioticians and SEO executives rather than the

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17 Quoted in *ibid*

18 Sam Riviere, *Kim Kardashian's Marriage*, London, Faber, 2015, p. 9

19 *Ibid*, p. 8

20 Riviere, 'Poetry Column'

21 Riviere, *Kardashian*, p. 47

liberal bourgeoisie of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, takes up residence in the soul.

If contemporary poetry has yet to process and overcome its primal history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century's divisions of labour, unable to return even to its insufficient promise of a connection between the privacy of craft and the public sphere of social value, between civic power and the margins of subjectivity, between place and capital – at least not without the blunt expedient of lyric's selfhood's catastrophic shattering or sublimation into algorithms (as in the case of neo-conceptualism) – then perhaps what's necessary is not the voluntaristic embrace of its latest, hellishly intensified manifestation, but a return to its most fractured, dialectically tense moments. Berry herself seems to approach this, in the malfunctioning, deadpan thought processes of the narrators of her dramatic monologues, a technique that recapitulates the Brownings and Tennyson. The crime scene of the lyric subject – to adapt an image of Walter Benjamin's<sup>22</sup> – littered with the knackered bourgeois furniture of its “external appearances”, may only be decodable by those who know the futile limits of detective work.

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, London, New Left Books, trans. by Kingsley Shorter and Edmund Jephcott, 1979, p. 48