The Blown Definitions:

Towards a Poetics of the Multi-Vocal Poetic Radio Play

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Creative and Critical Writing (Poetry) PhD Thesis

Declaration of Authorship

I Kate Potts hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.

Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Abstract

The introduction of radio broadcasting in the early twentieth century, at a time of rapid

development in global communications and travel technologies, prompted a radical re-

imagining of the poet – and poetry's – role in this new public, communal space. This thesis

seeks to explore and define, critically and creatively, the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic

radio play, a sub-genre fundamentally shaped by this reconfiguration.[1] The thesis examines

the development, form, and functioning of the multi-vocal poetic radio play which, I argue,

is a sub-genre distinct from both the prose radio play and single-voice works of radio poetry.

This thesis proposes that the multi-vocal poetic radio play is a reworking of western oral

poetry traditions – originating in the oral heroic epic as authoritative, mnemonic, pre-

literate repository of collective cultural memory – in the context of the twentieth and

twenty-first century's increasingly globalised, pluralistic and documentary modes of

representation. Through the simultaneous mechanical reproduction of multiple poetic

voices – through the troubling and breaking down of boundaries regarding presence and

absence, intimacy and distance, subjectivity, mortality, time, and space – the multi-vocal

poetic radio play tends to evoke and refer to dialogic and polyphonic traditions grounded in

the liminality of communal ritual and festival.[2]

My original multi-vocal poetic radio play script *The Blown Definitions* imagines a long-

distance, elegiac dialogue between a man whose indigenous culture and land is

disappearing and his second-generation English-speaking granddaughter. The play examines

the potentials of the poetic radio voice, utilising telephone conversations, electronic

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis the 'multi-vocal poetic radio play' is defined as a radio play for more than one voice written expressly for radio broadcast by a poet and containing or consisting of poetry. In using the word 'play' I am purposefully avoiding confining myself to the Aristotelian structures commonly associated with the word 'drama', and urging a more open and flexible consideration of structural possibilities. I am drawing on Terry Eagleton's definition of 'poetry': "A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end" (Eagleton 25). See introduction and chapter 1 for a more detailed explanation of this definition.

[2] The thesis uses the terms 'dialogic' and 'polyphonic' in opposition to 'monologic' – as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin – to signify the incorporation of many voices, styles and references (Bakhtin 1981).

dictionary definitions, and (fictional) radio broadcasts. *The Blown Definitions,* and the multi-vocal poetic radio play more generally, through its form and function, exposes and interrogates poetry's functioning in relation to social dynamics – the "social moorings"[3] of the poetic utterance – underlining poetry's capacity to celebrate, critique and reconfigure the imagined communities that shape it.

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[3] See Donald Wesling's discussion of poetry and dialogism.

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Critical Component

Introduction

The ear is the poet's perfect audience, his only true audience. And it is radio and only radio which can give him access to this perfect audience.
Archibald MacLeish

[A poetics is] a question of technology as well as inspiration.
Jerome Rothenberg

1.   **A New Definition: The Multi-Vocal Poetic Radio Play**

As one of a series of technological advances in communication, from the advent of written text to the invention of the printing press, to the more recent development of internet and mobile phone technologies, radio fundamentally altered our conceptions of distance, physical and imaginative space, and interpersonal relationships. Like the internet, radio technology was initially attributed wildly utopian and dystopian potentials. In his 1921 essay 'The Radio of the Future', Russian poet and Futurist Velemir Khlebnikov predicted that radio would bring about improved health, wealth, equality and education, political stability and global peace (Khlebnikov 392-396). In *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics and the BBC* Todd Avery argues that the BBC's first Director-General, Lord Reith, achieved "a profound alteration of the psychocultural landscape" (Avery 13). Radio broadcast brought into being a new mode of public space, "a culture in common to whole populations and a shared public life of quite a new kind" (Scannell qtd. in Avery 6). John Reith saw broadcasting as an "instrument of democratic enlightenment" that could promote social unity, harmony, and stability by incorporating all social classes within the same "social and political order", and enable citizens' informed participation in the democratic process (Scannell and Cardiff 7,9). Reith aimed to use public broadcasting to make "the treasures of our culture" available to all, and to widely disseminate a particular, colonial model of ethics, culture, and imagined community, bringing "rural areas [. . .] into direct contact with [. . .] Empire institutions, the clock which beats over the Houses of Parliament, in the centre of the Empire, is heard echoing in the lowliest cottage in the land" (Reith qtd. in Avery 18). Since the founding of radio broadcasting companies and corporations in the early part of the 20th century, poetry – with its particular focus on sound, voice, and the less 'informational' and denotative aspects of language and communication – has maintained a presence on the airwaves. In Europe and North America, works for multiple voices which included or consisted of poetry emerged in the 1930s, reworking oral, reading and performance traditions and poetry

traditions polyphonically for the radio age. Through the mechanically reproduced radio voice experienced simultaneously across large geographical spaces, poets sought to draw attention to and reinvigorate the oral, pre-literate origins and "social moorings" of poetry (Wesling), as well as the broader social dynamics of the bodily voice. In the UK, poets attempted to maintain, create and explore shared cultures, and to fulfil the BBC's professed determination to "inform, educate and entertain". Early poetic radio works combined 'verse' with song and with prose dialogue in innovative structural arrangements. By working – through critical analysis and creative work – towards defining the poetics of one particular sub-genre, the multi-vocal poetic radio play, I intend to illuminate the interrelation between communications technologies, social dynamics, and the functioning and development of poetry traditions. In this way, I hope to contribute towards a broader understanding of poetry's place in a world in the process of massive and unprecedented social and technological change – particularly in relation to global communications and travel technologies. I also hope, by working towards defining a model of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics, to contribute towards the opening up of space for further discussion and study of radio poetry, and of the multi-vocal poetic radio play in particular.

Multi-vocal poetic works for radio have been categorised in many different ways. For example: 'panorama in verse and song', 'verse drama', 'verse play', 'play for voices', 'poetic drama'. Multi-vocal poetic works written expressly for radio by poets have developed, as I will demonstrate, their own distinct poetics, shaped by their authors' awareness of poetry traditions, by the demands of mass sound broadcast, and by the "secondary orality" – orality existing within the context of a literate culture – facilitated by radio broadcast technologies (Ong 1995: 70). In undertaking the work of exploring and defining the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play, I intend my delineation to function not as a bordered and exclusionary territory but as a place name on a broader map that includes and charts other genres such as the radio drama, the radio feature, and verse drama for the stage –

acknowledging cross-genre influence as well as the existence of grey areas between forms, genres, and sub-genres. I intend to work towards a definition that celebrates influence and cross-fertilisation across genre and form, while at the same time providing a useful model of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's particular development and functioning as a sub-genre.

The multi-vocal poetic radio play shares many characteristics and concerns – including a clear distinction from the conventions of stage drama – with the radio play more generally. As John Drakakis points out, without a visual dimension radio drama cannot make use of visual information, spatial dynamics, and tensions and differences between visual and aural cues as stage drama can (Drakakis "Essence": 126). Characters must be carefully distinguished from one another in the listeners' mind. All radio plays, as sound-only pieces, tend to share a focus on internal and imaginative space rather than physical space. Radio is particularly suited to the communication of interior mental images of the sort apprehended in memory, imagination, interior consciousness and dream – as opposed to the audio-description of external reality (Drakakis 21). The radio play's inherent suitability for focusing on mental processes in this way, combined with its lack of a visible spatial dimension, enables radio voices to imitate the mind's cognitive and imaginative agility. Influenced and enabled my recording and editing technologies and techniques, interior monologue and shifts in time and space through flashback and cross-cutting have become structural components of the radio play (Drakakis 21). In contrast, psychologist T.H. Pear, writing in 1931, noted that early attempts to compensate for radio's lack of visual dimension through descriptions of concrete, exterior physical reality tended to result in a clunky 'stage set' perception of constructed space, that is "diagrammatic, two-dimensional and half-unreal" (Pear 90). This distancing effect can of course be useful if used, for example, to purposefully draw attention to the constructed nature of a play's reality. In terms of form, the 'blind' space of radio tends to encourage some sort of narration – perhaps describing or commenting on dramatic action – rather than or as well as dramatic dialogue. As Arlene

Sykes suggests, "many of the best radio plays are in structure much closer to narrative form, to the tale told and the ballad sung round the camp fire, than to what has been regarded as conventional stage form" (Sykes qtd. in Lewis "Radio Drama": 178). Adaptations of novels and stories are dramatised in a manner that recalls pre-radio modes of reading aloud and of performance. The dramatised novel for radio was initially, according to Ian Rodger, "an embellishment of the style of Dickens, who used to give public readings of his novels; offering the added pleasure of dialogue performed by a group of actors and not by a single voice" (Rodger 28). Radio plays, particularly those written expressly for radio, tend to be structured according to concerns relating to rhythm, texture and narrative, rather than more Aristotelian, action-focused dramatic shifts between acts. Peter Lewis describes the "short scenes" characteristic of radio drama as "movements in dialogue, patterns of dialogue, akin to the structure of musical compositions, where tunes, themes, melodies, occur, recur, and flow in a pattern of words, sounds and silences" (Lewis "Radio Drama": 178). In order to focus as clearly as possible on the demands of radio as a medium and the influence of these demands on the shaping of the multi-vocal poetic radio play I will be focusing, for the majority of the thesis, on works written and produced expressly for radio – though I will discuss the strong tradition of radio adaptations of fictional and dramatic works (24), and the adaptation and reworking of texts for radio in early multi-vocal poetic radio works of Ezra Pound and Robert Desnos.

    There is, as Sean Street argues, something distinctly 'poetic' about radio – and particularly about the radio play and the radio feature – in terms of their focus on sound. Taking its name from the feature film, and influenced by contemporary modernism in cinema and the arts, the BBC radio feature aimed to combine cinematic aesthetics and techniques with poetic language to create "sound pictures" (Scannell and Cardiff 134-135). The BBC's experimental sound studio was set up to explore the expressive potentials of radio in 1937. This work, as well as the exploration of dramatised documentaries and talks

that had begun within the Talks Department, was continued after World War II by the

newly-formed Features Department (1945-1964). Composers as well as writers contributed

original material to radio features, often working collaboratively. The BBC studios at

Portland Place became, in the 1930s and 40s, "the cultural centre for composers and

musicians as well as poets, dramatists and writers of all kinds" (Rodger 69). Radio writer and

producer Lance Sieveking defined the radio feature as "an arrangement of sounds, which

has a theme but no plot", though from 1947 onwards the boundary between radio feature

and radio drama became increasingly blurred (Siveking qtd in Lewis: 34). As contemporary

radio feature-maker Alan Hall explains, the less denotative or informational aspects of

sound and music ally the radio feature with other non-linguistic art forms:

> In the world of the everyday, sound's potency occupies the shadows between music
> and speech [. . .] In crafting radio features, the producer is using sound not only for its
> everyday, informational qualities [. . .] but for its metaphoric qualities. These are
> *musical*, *poetic*, or even *balletic* [. . .] Sound offers a kind of *portal* through which a
> deeper, often inarticulate consciousness can be glimpsed
> (Alan Hall qtd in Street 4).

Radio broadcast – and the BBC radio feature in particular – foregrounds and utilises,

therefore, the sounds both within and outside speech that are beyond semantic meaning,

beyond translation. In this way, it mirrors and colludes with the idea of poetry as

communicating beyond the confines of informational and denotative language – a sort of

translation from the silence. The radio documentary feature as form, Street argues,

privileges a poetic "way of making" as opposed to a journalistic impulse (Street xii). While

Street's comparison of journalism with a more poetic approach avoids the potential breadth

and creativity of journalism, his descriptions of the radio feature's mode of functioning are

useful. Features, Street argues, echoing T.S. Eliot's writing on the "auditory imagination",[4]

create "imaginative pictures that directly evoke responses in the mind *before*

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[4] For an explanation of Eliot's concept of the auditory imagination, see T.S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism,* 118-119.

understanding" (Street 7). The radio feature is "not a document of the reality – the subject –

necessarily" but "a document of the maker as they try to find their way through it" (Street

5). The radio feature tends to function as a portrait in sound, evoking and exploring mental

images of a particular person, community, or place. All of which testifies to the 'poetic'

qualities of the radio feature – but how might we distinguish the inherently 'poetic' radio

feature or radio play from the multi-vocal poetic radio play?

   As Terry Eagleton points out, the poetry/ prose distinction is "ripe for dismantling":

"there is hardly a device thought of as 'poetic' that some piece of prose somewhere does

not exploit" (Eagleton 2007: 25). In order to establish the distinction between the radio play

or radio feature and the multi-vocal poetic radio play, let's first consider the word 'poetic'.

Oxford Dictionaries current online English dictionary defines 'poetic' in this way:[5] "1.

Relating to or used in poetry; 1.1. Written in verse rather than prose". 'Verse' is defined as

"Writing arranged with a metrical rhythm, typically having a rhyme". An archaic use of the

word 'verse' listed to explain the word's etymology as part of the Oxford Dictionaries

definition refers to lines of poetry, the word's origin being from the Latin versus: "a turn of

the plough, a furrow, a line of writing". There is, of course, no definitive definition of poetry.

There are however a series of characteristics that serve to mark out, at a particular time and

within a particular cultural context, the parameters of what we expect poetry to be and to

do. For example: a focus on the materiality of language itself; visual and/or aural form,

technique and aesthetics as part of meaning and/or impact; a focus on rhythm, sound and

musicality; figurative language and descriptive imagery; language that is more

complex, loaded and resonant than 'everyday' language (even if this is just because of the

way it's deliberately arranged on the page or in time); language that is ambiguous, leaving

space for the reader's imaginative interpretation; communication and impact that goes

beyond informational and semantic meaning. For Veronica Forrest-Thomson, the deliberate

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[5] See https://en.oxforddictionaries.com.

space and self-aware artifice of poetry are key to its identity: "statements are changed by their insertion into a poem" (Forrest Thomson X). And yet, all these qualities and characteristics may occur in other art forms too. The work of filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky, David Lynch and Chris Marker might be labelled 'poetic' due to its focus on image, symbol and form at the expense of more conventional action-focused drama; Samuel Beckett's radio plays are highly linguistically playful and also eschew conventional dramatic form.

   In *How to Read a Poem*, Terry Eagleton defines poetry in this way: "A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end." Eagleton uses 'moral' here in the older, broader sense of dealing in "human values, meanings and purposes", and 'fictional' to indicate piece of writing detached from empirical context and put to wider uses (Eagleton 2007: 31). Roman Jakobson defines the "poetic function" of language, the "dominant, determining function of poetry" as "focus on the message for its own sake" as opposed to the "referential" function of language (Jakobson 355). The "poetic function", however, occurs both within and outside poetry and, as Eagleton suggests, poetry may be "verbally inventive" without necessarily drawing attention to its own artifice: "Poems differ, so to speak, in the ratio they establish between signifier and signified" (Eagleton 47). Ultimately, then, it is Eagleton's insistence on the poet's deliberate line endings that distinguishes his definition of poetry from a broader definition of prose. This, of course, omits the grey area within which prose poetry, and other formally inventive poetry that doesn't contain deliberate line-endings, exists. However, for the purposes of this thesis I will define 'poetic' using Eagleton's definition, utilising the concept of verse in terms of the metrical verse line, with its intense attention to rhythm, sound and musicality, and also its etymological roots in the ploughed furrow – the line of poetry. The radio plays examined here, then, are all written expressly for radio and for more than once voice, and are all comprised wholly or

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partially of poetry written using deliberate line shapes and endings. Because the traditions, contexts, and cultural parameters of what is considered 'poetry' and 'poetic' are fundamental to the poetics of the poetic radio play, I have chosen to focus primarily on multi-vocal poetic radio plays written by practicing poets.

The multi-vocal poetic radio play is, of course, a work consisting of sound, produced through the collaborative efforts of poet, producer, actors or speakers, and sound engineers. Its 'poetry', according to Sean Street's definition, is contained in both verbal and non-verbal sound. However, if we consider the poetry – as defined by Eagleton – contained within the plays' verbal language, then we can see that the multi-vocal poetic radio plays discussed in this thesis use and/or contain poetry in the following ways:

- Poetry using metrical patterns and/or deliberate lineation is included within the body of the play, interspersed or partially counterpointed with prose:

   The Testament of Francois Villon (Ezra Pound, 1931)

   La Grande Complainte de Fantomas (Robert Desnos, 1933)

   Under Milk Wood (Dylan Thomas, 1954)

   Night Thoughts (David Gascoyne, 1955)

   A Turn Outside (Stevie Smith, 1959)

   The Lamplighter (Jackie Kay, 2007)

In these cases, poetic technique such as rhythmic patterning and figurative language is often used within prose dialogue or narration, highlighting and drawing on the 'poetic' qualities of vernacular speech. The distinction between prose dialogue and poetry is often challenged or highlighted.

- The majority of the play is written using metrical verse patterning:

   Air Raid (Archibald Macleish, 1938)

   *The Dark Towe*r (Louis MacNeice, 1946)

   Pink Mist (Owen Sheers, 2012)

- The play script is written using deliberate lineation:

Three Women (Sylvia Plath, 1962)

Erebus (Jo Shapcott, 2012)

All of these models highlight and draw attention to the poetic and musical qualities of the verse line, and of relational speech. The multi-vocal poetic radio play is, I contend, a sub-genre distinct from both single-voice radio poetry and the prose radio play. The polyphonic poetic radio play echoes and explores understandings of the human voice as an instrument developed for song and social bonding – or "social grooming" (Dunbar) – as well as for the purposes of information exchange. In the context of mass broadcast, this social function of the voice may become engaged in the discussion, imagination, and re-imagination of common cultures, and of nationhood. Benedict Anderson, discussing the construction of national identity, suggests that the nation presents itself "both as a historical fatality and as a community imagined through language" (Anderson 146). Drawing on the deep links between community, cultural continuity and language, the multi-vocal poetic radio play reworks western traditions of oral epic poetry as preliterate repository of collective cultural memory – as well as the reinterpretation of oral epic narrative in Ancient Greek tragedy – in the context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' increasingly globalised, pluralistic and documentary modes of representation. It also, through the radio voice's disruption of notions of presence, absence, time and space, and through its poetic, polyphonic, sound-focused language, tends to allude to and evoke vocal practices related to liminality in ceremony, ritual, and festival. The influence of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's forebears and contemporaries is evident: the poetic drama of the English Renaissance, opera, popular ballads, the closet drama, staged verse drama, radio journalism and film have all impacted on the writing and production of poetic radio works. However, the multi-vocal poetic radio play is, I intend to demonstrate, a distinct sub-genre whose form, style and conventions are

influenced primarily by the traditions of oral epic poetry, of Ancient Greek tragedy, and of

the BBC radio feature.

A number of publications have included some discussion of the relationship between

radio, orality, and poetry. Both Rudolf Arnheim's *Radio: An Art of Sound* (1936) and Donald

McWhinnie's *The Art of Radio* (1959) consider radio as a medium essentially allied with pre-

literate, primary orality. Arheim writes:

> Speech [. . .] is the real form of expression of broadcast drama. It is the most spiritual
> form of expression that we humans know, and from this it follows that wireless,
> although it may be the poorest of all arts in sensory means of expression, on spiritual
> levels is, with literature, the noblest.
> (Arnheim tr. Ludwig 175)

McWhinnie compares the work of the radio writer with "that of the bards; like them it has

to win the listener's ear, charm it with words, melody, rhythm, pattern; it has to

communicate a complex inner vision" (McWhinnie 42). Until recently, though, very little

critical writing has focused specifically on radio poetry. Milton Kaplan's *Radio and Poetry*

(1949) attempted to provide an overview of the relationship between poetry and what was

then a relatively new broadcast medium. John Drakakis's *British Radio Drama* (1981)

includes in-depth consideration of poetic radio work by Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas.

More recently, Sean Street's *The Poetry of Radio: The Colour of Sound* (2012) offers a

comprehensive exploration of the radio feature and the 'poetic' functioning of sound in

radio broadcasting. Street's book is part of a recent resurgence of book-length writing on

the artistic use and functions of the voice in radio and other reproductive technologies,

which includes the following works: Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead's *Wireless*

Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde (1994), Adelaide Morris ed*. Sound States:*

Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies (1997), Tim Crook's *Radio Drama: Theory*

and Practice (1999), Allen Weiss ed. *Experimental Sound and Radio* (2001), Dermot

Rattigan's *Theatre of Sound: Radio and the Dramatic Imagination* (2002), and Todd Avery's

Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics and the BBC, 1922-1938 (2006). These publications have

been preceded by texts which aim at far broader sociological analyses of radio broadcast as

a medium, usually as part of a consideration of broadcast culture as a whole, such as

Raymond Williams' *Communications* (1968). We might view the recent increase in work that

specifically examines radio art, and the function of the voice within it, as part of a broader

shift towards considering media products such as film, television and radio works as 'texts'

that are worthy of critical analysis within the academy. The timing of these latest

publications also coheres, broadly, with a huge increase in access to digital recording and

reproduction technologies, and a corresponding increase in access to recorded material via

digitised archives and the internet. No critical work that I'm aware of has so far sought to

explore or examine the particular poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. Such work of

definition has, in the past, been avoided because of the difficulty of taxonomy and

classification within a newly emerging field, and also because of the ways in which pre-

existing classifications have been insufficient or limiting. When applied to creative work in

early radio, such categories often failed to incorporate or capture the particular qualities of

the medium. McWhinnie complained that "the use of terms such as 'radio play', 'feature',

'adaptation', 'dramatisation', has in the past led to a considerable misunderstanding of the

scope and particular quality of the medium" (McWhinnie 12). As John Drakakis, Peter Lewis

and Ben Maier all point out, radio work has also suffered, in the past, from an "intellectual

snobbishness" through which it has been considered "second-best" to theatre or to

literature in part because of unease at its mass audience and appeal: "Some of the

unfavourable [. . .] comment that radio drama elicits has its origins in a conservative, even

reactionary critical orthodoxy deeply suspicious of and resistant to the 'media' (Lewis "Radio

Drama": 177). This has been compounded by unease at radio's 'ephemerality' when

compared to text, a relative lack of critical interest, and the lack of a medium-specific critical

vocabulary such as the one developed, over time, to analyse film works (Lewis "Radio

Drama": 173). Ben Maier, in his thesis *Radio Poetry*, responds to this valuing of 'concrete'

text over 'ephemeral' sound by seeking to develop a new vocabulary and methodology for

the study of radio poetry that values and analyses radio poetry as sound rather than

translated or transmuted text. While I recognise the value of this work, since my creative

project focuses on the writing of a poetic radio play script rather than a play's writing and

production I have largely focused my analyses on the construction of poetic radio play

scripts, with discussion of sound arrangement in particular productions where necessary. I

am in no way asserting that the poetic radio play script represents the poetic radio play

itself, any more than a musical score might represent a symphony. My decision to work with

scripts is also influenced by the absence of recordings for two of the plays studied. Ben

Maier's thesis *Radio Poetry* argues that both single and multi-voice works of radio poetry

are part of the 'mode' of radio poetry, a means of artistic production influenced by and

incorporating other art forms and media that cannot be contained within the parameters of

genre (Maier 2014). Building on this work, I contend that the multi-vocal poetic radio play

had developed, by the mid-twentieth century, into a sub-genre with identifiable parameters

in terms of form, function, and its place within broader cultural traditions. My own analysis,

exploration and classification of the multi-vocal poetic radio play will, I hope, enable a more

thorough and in-depth understanding of the sub-genre, and of the mode of radio poetry

more generally, rather than limiting or complicating further study and understanding as

some early, misapplied or ill-mapped classifications may have done.

In the critical component of my thesis I work towards a poetics of the multi-vocal poetic

radio play through critical analysis of a range of poetic radio works. My original multi-vocal

poetic radio play script *The Blown definitions* further examines and explores the distinct

poetics of the sub-genre. The critical element of the thesis is structured as follows: chapter I

will consider early experiments in multi-vocal, poet-authored poetic radio work of the

1930s, focusing on adaptation and representation of poetry texts and on the influence and

interplay of oral and literate cultural modes; chapter II discusses the consolidation of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as a sub-genre in the 1940s and 1950s through its reconfiguration of the oral heroic epic and of Greek tragady; chapter III will consider women poets' re-imaginings of the tropes and traditions of the oral epic in multi-vocal poetic radio plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and will explore possible reasons for the absence of multi-vocal poetic radio plays at the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s; finally, chapter IV will consider the impact of transcultural and contra-colonial forces on the "imagined communities"[6] of the contemporary multi-vocal poetic radio play. Throughout my analyses, I utilise Walter Ong's work on the characteristics of oral (pre-literate) and literate cultures, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and Victor Turner's concept of liminality and ritual as outlined in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) in order to develop a model of the social dynamics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. In this way, I will develop an outline of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's form, function, and stylistic elements, and of its place within broader cultural traditions.

2. **Radio Technology, Radio Art, and The Poetic Voice**

As Walter Ong suggests, sound evokes physical presence in a way in which images or text used alone cannot (Ong 1995: 68). In pre-literate cultures, Ong argues, sound includes and incorporates individuals into the community as a whole; it functions as an aggregative force.[7] Within radio's 'secondary orality', the radio play reflects the literate culture in which it's composed and disseminated. However, it also shares several characteristics with 'voicings' in pre-literate, oral cultures: its simultaneous reception by listeners and its ability

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[6] See Anderson 146. Anderson uses the term "imagined communities" to refer to the construction of nations and nationalism. In this thesis, I use the term to refer to nations, and also to refer to the "imagined communities" created, sustained and/or evoked through broadcasting and/or through specific texts or poetic radio plays.
[7] "A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonising) tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies [. . .] with situational (again holistic, with human action at the centre) rather than abstract thinking" (Ong 1995: 68).

to incorporate its audience through a common physical experience, its potential creation

and strengthening of common cultures, its focus on bodily sound, and its focus on the less

semantic and informational aspects of language and voice – on the sounded, as opposed to

textual, aspect of language. Without the aid of digital recording and reproduction

technologies, the listener cannot easily re-visit the piece.[8] This, together with the absence of

a visual dimension, means that the radio writer often relies on mnemonic devices such as

sonic and rhythmic patterning and repetition in order to create a strong sense of shape and

form, and to enhance and emphasise the memorability of image and narrative. In this

context, it is useful to consider the similarities and differences between long narrative

pieces stitched together at each 'voicing' in exclusively oral cultures, and solo-authored

contemporary poetry pieces written for radio broadcast.[9] Some of the mnemonic patterns

Walter Ong cites as characteristic of (pre-literate) oral performances or 'voicings' have,

unsurprisingly, a great deal in common with many commonly recognised characteristics of

poetry: "heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns" [. . .] "repetitions or antitheses [. . .]

alliterations and assonances "(Ong 1988: 34). And yet, a multi-vocal poetic radio play is not

an improvised performance: it's performed or recorded using a carefully constructed script.

As with textual poetry and narrative, the audience is distant and imagined rather than

inhabiting the same physical space as the speaker. As the first chapter of this thesis will

demonstrate, the multi-vocal poetic radio play is the product of, and exists within, a highly

literate culture and, as such, utilises both oral and literate cultural modes. Poetry pieces

written specifically for radio, though they may utilise the sounds and cadences of everyday

language, consist of or include explicitly artificial language. Such language cannot create the

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[8] The 'ephemerality' or the radio play is beginning to be challenged, currently, by the availability of digital audio files.

[9] Milman Parry's 1930s work on the Homeric poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* explains how the distinctive features of Homeric poetry might be "due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition" (Ong 1988: 21). Parry suggests that epithets in Homeric poetry were often chosen to suit the metrical requirements of the passage, rather than for their precise meaning. The stories were stitched together at each new telling from fixed, formulaic, prefabricated parts – very much like clichés – rather than memorised verbatim, or composed by 'lone geniuses'.

impression of being inconspicuous, cannot merely facilitate or point to the engine of the play's dramatic action. The language itself becomes part of the play's explicit focus, and this is one of the ways in which the structure shifts away from more straightforward linear narrative or more conventional dramatic form.

The poet and radio producer Michael Ladd emphasises the physical impact of radio poetry: "Sound offers [. . .] a material (though invisible) presence that I find exciting and full of potential as a writer. You're making something happen in the air and the body as well as the mind" (Ladd qtd. in Street 115). The radio voice, of course, is crucially distinct from the live voice in performance. Arguably all voices broadcast over the radio, like telephone voices, automatically both disrupt and draw attention to the notion of unified identity and of presence as linked to the body. Where *is* the person speaking situated? As Philip Horne points out, the telephone reminds us of distance, the absence of embodied presence and, ultimately, mortality (Horne 18). These associations are also inhabited – though slightly differently – by the mechanically reproduced radio voice. In the 1950s, the use of technological advances in electronic sound that suggested distance from its human sources further complicated notions of voice and physical presence, suggesting links with the imaginative borderlands of the supernatural and science fiction. These experiments later came under the auspices of The BBC Radiophonic Workshop (Street 120). As Sean Street argues: "Language is sound, but sound itself is a language, even when it moves beyond words [. . .] These sounds pass through space into the inner ear, thence to the mind where they interact with the imagination and then continue their journey into memory" (Street 123). The development of sound recording and reproduction technologies and their use within radio fundamentally shaped the development of radio drama, radio features, and the multi-vocal poetic radio play. Below are the key moments in the early development of radio sound and broadcast technology in terms of impact and influence on the making of multi-

vocal poetic radio plays.

- **1922**: the British Broadcasting Company makes its first broadcasts of music, drama, 'talks' and news. Plays and extracts of plays can only be broadcast live from theatres or from single studios.

- **1928**: the dramatic control panel or mixing panel is introduced, through which (live) sound can be transmitted from separate studios and mixed together – 'faded in' or 'faded out' – allowing writers and producers to depart from more conventionally theatrical or narrated scenic divisions to create shifts in narrative space and time (Drakakis 4, Guthrie 11).

- **1930s and 1940s**: the BBC begins to use magnetic wire recording to record programmes. Marconi-Stille recorders are installed at Maida Vale studios in 1933. The reels of steel tape are a metre in diameter, and cumbersome and dangerous to operate. Recording on location is possible, but difficult at first. Laurence Gilliam pioneers the use of 'actuality' broadcasting, the broadcasting of voices recorded on location, producing the BBC's first 'actuallity' feature *Opping Oliday* in 1936 (Holme 1981: 38). The majority of programmes, however – including Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* in 1954 – are still produced entirely in the studio, and recorded in very few takes. The recoded speech of interviewees and other speakers scripted and then performed by actors (Holme 38).

    In **1947** the transistor radio is developed in the US. However, ownership of transistor radios doesn't begin to become standard in the UK until the 1960s. The transistor radio is cheaper, more efficient, and more portable than the wireless valve. Crucially, it transforms the listening experience from a communal/ static one to a more portable and individual one. Radio begins to be treated as 'background' rather than the main focus of attention (Crisell 138, 139).

- **1950s**: developed in Germany in the 1930s, magnetic tape recording is introduced at the BBC in the 1950s. Far safer, less cumbersome and potentially far more portable than wire recording, magnetic tape recording revolutionises radio production. Sound can be recorded – either in the studio or on location – and also erased, re-recorded and duplicated. By cutting and re-joining tape, producers are able to edit programmes for the first time (Wade 240). Magnetic tape recording also facilitates sound recordings created entirely by electronic means, making possible much of the work of the BBC's radiophonic workshop (1958-1998). The aesthetics of the BBC radio feature, and of the multi-vocal poetic radio play, with their rapid shifts in time and space, dynamic choreography of sound and voices, and documentary influence, are ideally suited to the editing made possible by magnetic tape.

- **1955**: multi-track recording is developed, allowing for the mixing of multiple individually recorded tracks to create more complex radio works.

  In **1955** the BBC's first VHF transmitters are opened, offering freedom from interference, better sound quality, and a larger number of stations (Crisell 137).

  From the **1950s**, television begins to overtake radio as the main source of mass entertainment (Crisell 138).

- **1980s**: digital audio recording becomes available. More portable and enabling higher quality recording than magnetic tape, it also allows for re-recording without deterioration of sound quality (Crisell 268).

Each successive development, then, made possible greater freedom in terms of the construction and complexity of radio works. These shifts also moved the focus of production away from the enclosed, unified, more theatrical space of the single studio performance and into the more abstract, imagined 'space' of the work itself, within which boundaries of time and space might become blurred and elastic, as sounds and voices from

disparate times and locations, both real and imagined, were combined to create

choreographed compositions that required a musical – rather than a more conventionally

theatrical – ear.

   In the 1920s, radio sound effects drew on traditions developed for the theatre. However,

these well-used effects were often impractical and far from subtle. For example, the sound

of thunder had often been created, in theatre, using a cannonball rolling down a trough and

onto a large drumhead (Mott 10, 11). Artists previously employed to produce sound

effects, particularly in vaudeville theatre, began to shift their attentions to radio. The

development of more subtle and effective radio sound effects changed the nature of

writing for radio: sound was no longer described or referred to but heard directly. With the

development of tape recording, and as recording became more portable, more 'authentic'

recorded sound-effects were used. However, contemporary radio plays continue to use and

rely on 'spot effects' created by Foley artists using objects such as the thunder screen or the

gravel box. Alec Nisbett, a BBC producer who worked as one of three studio managers on

Douglas Cleverdon's original production of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* in 1954,

compares the radio sound effect's relationship to radio speech to that of graphic images

accompanying text. The image and the radio sound effect are, he writes, "comparable

forms of illustration" (Nisbett 332). NIsbett's creation of manually produced sound effects

or 'spot effects' was a complex and painstaking process: the use of wire recording and the

difficulty of editing meant that the programme needed to be recorded in one take, or as

close to it as possible, as NIsbett explains:

> you tried to get it all in one clean take but remember the play is an hour-and-a-half
> long. I believe later Douglas Cleverdon decided one part needed redoing and brought
> back some of the cast for retakes. I've always hoped it wasn't my sound effects which
> were the problem.
> (Nisbett qtd. in Dowd).

In terms of sound effects, as with speech and music, advances in sound recording and

reproduction technologies shifted the focus away from the performance space of the

recording studio and towards the collaging and arrangement of sound in production.

3.   Adaptation and Innovation: The Influence of Verse Drama, Theatre, and the Novel

The writing of dramatic stage works in verse was, for much of the UK's history, entirely

conventional. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, despite its

continuing popularity, contemporary verse drama was beginning to be viewed as unwieldy

and anachronistic. The exception to this trend was Shakespearean drama, which continued

to be valued highly. Writing in 1883, the playwright Henrik Ibsen argued that the use of

verse in contemporary drama for the stage was bound to become extinct "just as the

preposterous animal forms of prehistoric times became extinct when their day was over"

(Ibsen 367). In 1959, Denis Donoghue criticised poets writing verse drama in the UK for their

"faltering grasp" of Aristotelian ideas of plot and of "organic unity",[10] as well as the

incongruity between the "language of a play and the language of an audience" (Donoghue

10, 15). Shakespeare's plays appear to have been exempted from the demand for more

accessible and realistic dialogue by their historical status. In his analysis of the verse dramas

of Yeats, Eliot and Masefield, Donoghue points, in particular, to the plays' deliberate artifice

and their marked separation from everyday reality: Yeats' habit, in his early plays, of

hanging a gauze veil between stage and audience (28); Eliot's aim to use dramatic verse "to

show us several planes of reality at once" (Eliot qtd. in Donoghue 17). Questioning the

current near-ubiquity of prose in contemporary drama, Richard O'Brien notes the enduring

popularity of Shakespeare as a seeming anomaly. Might contemporary verse drama,

partially because of its explicit artifice, offer us something prose drama cannot? Might we,

in dismissing verse drama, "lose sight of everything else that theatre could be, and once

was, at the time when it produced some of its most enduring and memorable successes"?

(O'Brien). As Denis Donoghue observes, it is verse drama's focus on poetic language and

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[10] See Stephen Halliwell's *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

form, and its potential to privilege moral and philosophical ideas over the construction of

character and/or plot, that constitute verse drama's greatest potential weaknesses. A poorly

made verse drama might consist of clunky, badly-formed metre and rhyme that doesn't

serve the broader structure. Moral and philosophical concerns may be didactically

illustrated rather than dramatically explored. Writing about W.H. Auden and Christopher

Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6,* Donoghue complains that the play moves "away from the

play as a thing itself towards the psychological lessons that may be abstracted from it"

(Donoghue 69). The verse drama, then, seems caught up in and complicated by broader

cultural shifts: from explicit artifice to theatrical 'realism'; from the externalised, person and

plot-focused narratives we associate with oral tradition and myth to a more 'literate'

concern with interior psychology and individuality. In its use of myth and symbol, its explicit

artifice, and its moral and philosophical concerns, verse drama shares some of the

characteristics and concerns of Greek tragedy, of the morality play, and of Epic Theatre.[11] It

also, in its focus on sound and its multiple poetic voices, precedes the multi-vocal poetic

radio play – though it differs crucially because of its visual dimension. Eliot, considering

verse drama, emphasises the impact of sound and musicality: "the possibility of reinforcing

and deepening the dramatic effect by the musical effect of a varied pattern of style" *Eliot

qtd. in Donoghue 17). Yeats, writing about his verse drama *The Shadowy Waters* (1900),

describes "a play that will be more like a ritual than a play, and leave upon the mind an

impression like that of a tapestry" (Yeats qtd. in Donoghue 33). These emphases on musical

and ritualistic structures in poetic drama are borne out and further developed through the

multi-vocal poetic radio play.

In the early years of BBC radio, radio drama consisted primarily of adaptations of stage

drama and prose fiction rather than original works for radio. In fact, in the early days, there

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[11] Epic Theatre was a political theatre movement in which the drama made clear the constructed nature of its reality, encouraging its audiences towards 'rational' reflection (Willett). See my discussion of Louis MacNeice's multi-vocal poetic radio play *The Dark Tower* (1946) from page 78 of this thesis for more detailed analysis and discussion of Epic Theatre.

were radio broadcasts of plays direct from theatres (Lewis 174). There was an absence of

original material written for radio. John Reith complained that early radio relied too much

on the "theatre effect"[12], yet radio drama was seen by the many within the BBC as a means

of education and cultural betterment by making existing material that was part of high

culture, such as the plays of Shakespeare and Chekhov, available to all. The first full year of

broadcasting in 1923 included excepts from the following Shakespeare plays: *Julius Caesar*

(16th February), *The Merchant of Venice* (23rd May), *Henry VIII* (7th June), *Romeo and Juliet*

(5th July), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (25th July) and *Macbeth* (18th October). This

'democratisation' of culture was, however, riven with tensions and difficulties. Plays from a

classic repertoire would not necessarily be understood and enjoyed by an audience without

the historical and social context – and indeed, the certain set of opinions and prejudices –

that more exclusive theatre audiences tended to have access to. As Ian Rodger explains,

theatrical diction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries largely consisted of

'Oxford English' and, for the portrayal of working-class and rural people, three

"approximations of dialect": 'Cockney', 'Mummerset' and 'Northern' (Rodger p41). The

more formal, declamatory style of early twentieth century stage acting would not connect

with a radio audience; both writers and performers needed to find a more intimate,

naturalistic style. This, in turn, influenced shifts in both stage and film dialogue (Rodger 12,

25). Speech needed to be differentiated, but without resorting to clumsy stereotypes.

Without a visual dimension, the circumstances of a scene had to be cued in advance. As

previously noted, a narrator was often introduced in order to instruct and guide an audience

beyond the social space of the theatre. (Rodger, 38). Adaptation for radio initially consisted

mostly of cutting. John Drakakis, discussing the relationship between text and adaptation in

early radio, suggests that the lack of recording technologies and of a visual element added

to a sense of unease about the existential ephemerality of the play itself – encouraging

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[12] John Reith qtd. in Drakakis 2.

critics to view adaptation as a "process of extraction" focused on "those *permanent* or

universal qualities of the text that it is the function of the *ideal* performance to illuminate"

(Drakakis 1981: 129). The radio adaptation – and radio drama more generally – was

therefore often viewed as "second best" to live theatre and to literature (Lewis "Radio

Drama": 174). Louis MacNeice, in his introduction to the script for *Christopher Columbus*,

advises the radio writer to "forget about "literature" and to focus on sound", encouraging us

to reconsider the performative origins of "literature": "the Homeric or Icelandic bard

shouting over the clamour of the banquet" (MacNeice 1944: 19). The multi-vocal poetic

radio play emerged, therefore, in the context of these adaptations of canonical texts and

stage works, and also in the context of verse drama for the stage. Its distinct poetics

developed, in part, in response to the problems posed, in the early twentieth century, by

both verse drama for the stage and radio adaptations of older poetic drama: how to appeal

to a diverse mass audience while at the same time encouraging that audience to access

'canonical' cultural material; how to balance the artifice of poetic form and language with

the contemporary demand for realism; how to create structures that appealed to the ear

rather than the eye. Discussing the early development of original radio drama at the BBC in

The *Radio Times* in the 1920s, future BBC Head of Production Val Gielgud criticised the plays

of writers such as Tyrone Guthrie and Lance Sieveking. Their characters were, he wrote, "so

abstract or so symbolical that they are without the sufficient identity to make them

interesting" (Gielgud qtd. in Rodger 19). This use of 'archetypal' characters, or characters as

'puppets' of circumstance, draws on the traditions of Greek tragedy and of the morality

play, and prefigures Epic Theatre. It is in part, as Ian Rodger points out, a response to the

demands of writing for a mass audience – and audience which did not necessarily have

access to "the private jokes and limited social consensus to be found in the theatre" (Rodger

19). In this context, the multi-vocal poetic radio play's focus on, exploration of, and

reworking of shared myth, symbol and archetype, is an apt and logical response to creation

of a large, socially and culturally diverse and widely geographically dispersed audience.

4. **Monologue and Dialogue: The BBC Radio Feature**

The novel, Mikhail Bakhtin argues, is a consequence of a more globalised, culturally

interactive and polyglot world than the relatively "monologic" epic (Bakhtin 1981: 12-13).[13]

Michael Eskin, like Bakhtin, points to the difficulty of achieving polyphony – multiple voices,

registers, and points of view – in poetic utterances, because the homogenisation inherent

in poetic style and form must be overcome. And yet, he argues, tension between

monologue and dialogue – and the echo of the poet's voice within a poem's multiple voices,

registers, and points of view –may create work that is more ethically aware (Eskin 388). As

we've seen, in the early twentieth century the BBC radio 'feature', as opposed to more

traditional BBC drama productions, was constructed as a documentary patchwork of sound

and voices without an overarching editorial view – part of a desire to democratise and

broaden BBC productions by allowing the voices of 'ordinary' people to be represented

(Holme 38). The feature, as documentary 'sound picture', made use of choreographed

sound and music as an integral part of the art work, rather than as something illustrative. By

working with composers and sound technicians, writers and producers created a new form

that was specific to radio (Rodger: 87). As Head of Features Laurence Gilliam was asked, in

1946, to continue to produce the sort of documentary and current affairs programmes that

had been made in wartime. Dramatisation, however, had often formed a key part of such

documentary programmes. In its aims and objectives and in its form, then, the feature was a

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[13] In his 1941 essay 'Epic and Novel' Mikhail Bakhtin characterises the epic as inherently concerned with a separate and total "absolute past" rather than with the emerging present, portraying national tradition rather than individual experience. Bakhtin characterises the epic rhapsode as "a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, [with] the reverent point of view of a descendent" in an era of "closed and deaf" monoglossia (Bakhtin 1981: 12-13). While this model of structures in the epic and the novel fails to recognise the dialogic elements and potentials of the epic, it is a useful model – particularly in relation to Ong's ideas of oral and literate cultural modes, and in relation to the impacts of globalisation on the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play.

fundamentally dialogic. The feature – sometimes controversially – tackled contemporary

social issues, such as the impact of the economic depression in the 1930s. The radio

audience could act as witness, creating a space for testimony: "This new kind of witnessing

was a good deal more than simple factual description. It was witnessing by the

representative of an institution and on behalf of an audience" (Scannell and Cardiff 142).

BBC radio features, initially produced within the Talks Department, are best understood in

the context of news and documentary-making technologies of the time. Portable recording

technologies were initially clunky and impractical – magnetic tape recording was not

generally available in the UK until the 1950s – and, as Christopher Holme points out, in news

reports "reported speech generally had to be simulated by script writers and actors" (Holme

38). This practice continued for some time after it was necessary due to anxieties about the

clarity and content of recorded speech, and because of a reluctance to shift the 'making' of

radio programmes away from the performance space of the studio. These circumstances

blurred the boundaries between recorded, simulated and invented representations of

reality, creating a fertile space for hybridity, irony, and parody. As we've noted, the BBC

Drama Department was initially largely concerned with producing radio adaptations of stage

plays, leaving the vast majority of original work for radio to the Features Department

(Rodgers 86). In between 1945 and 1955 every BBC entry for the Prix Italia radio drama prize

came out of the Features Department. The BBC radio feature had a profound influence on

the shaping of the multi-vocal poetic radio play; the majority of the BBC's early multi-vocal

poetic radio plays were produced within the Features Department. Drawing on the poetic

qualities of everyday speech, the multi-vocal poetic radio play's use of poetic form and

language makes the artifice of its construction explicit. This explicit emphasis on artifice

encourages the listener's active awareness of, and imaginative engagement in, the process

of making meaning.[14] In its documentary structures and concerns, the BBC radio feature

mirrors the supposedly communal construction, through retelling, of the oral heroic epic.

Through my analysis of multi-vocal poetic radio plays, I will examine the ways in which the

conventions and traditions of epic poetry, Greek tragedy, and the BBC radio feature

combine to celebrate, critique and reconfigure poetry traditions.

5.   **Liminality and Imagined Community**

As previously stated, the mechanically reproduced voice has the potential to trouble and

bring into focus boundaries regarding presence, time, geographical space, and mortality.

Steven Connor, drawing on Denis Vase's work, suggests that the voice is "like the navel, the

enactment both of severance and continuity between self and other" (Connor 388). The

radio voice can be linked, Guy Rosolato suggests, to the formative experience of sound and

language: "This sensual, nonvisual, fleshly "language" [. . .] can create the illusion of

recovering something that has been lost (most notably the "sonorous envelope" of the

mother's voice heard by every infant in the womb) and can therefore rekindle a primal,

deep-seated pleasure linked to identity formation" (Conley 104). Poetic language may

trouble boundaries through its associative stretching of language, through its focus on

sound, prosody, and the para- and extra-linguistic. [15] The poetic radio voice, then, is

particularly suited to the description and evocation of what Victor Turner defines as

liminality, or "thresholdness": the un-boundaried state symbolically associated with death

and with birth (Turner 1974). Within the multi-vocal poetic radio play voices may represent

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[14] As Veronica Forrest-Thomson, observes: "it is only through artifice that poetry can challenge our ordinary linguistic orderings of the world, make us question the way in which we make sense of things, and induce us to consider its alternative linguistic orders as a new way of viewing the world"(Forrest-Thomson Xi).

[15] Writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, Julia Kristeva defines poetic language as being related to and influenced by a space outside the rules of language. Kristeva's essay 'Revolution in Poetic Language' defines her notion of "the semiotic" – a poetic and subversive modality expressed in the fissures and prosody of language, associated with a pre-language multiplicity of drives, and contrasted with "the symbolic": rule governed, culturally sanctioned speech (Kristeva 89-136).

distinct characters, but they may also function as manifestations of internal psychological

conversations or of opposing metaphysical forces. Voices may overlap in their roles and

material, may merge and diverge in their subjectivities and identities, may be presented as

heard internally and/ or externally, as living and as dead. Like the voices of spiritualist

séances, voices of the dead within the multi-vocal poetic radio play may enact a

"commentary upon the powers of technology to capture and stimulate not just the forms

but the essential forces of life and thereby to throw into question the relations between the

living and the dead" (Connor 390). In *The Ritual Process*: *Structure and Antistructure* (1969)

Victor Turner defines liminality as the state of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the

middle stage of seasonal or rite of passage rituals, when social hierarchy and boundaries

have been dissolved but not yet reinstated. This is also the ritual phase reflected in the oral

epic narrative trope of the nekuian katabasis, a journey to the underworld, or a summoning

of the dead, through which a community is imagined as maintaining continuity through

time. The multi-vocal poetic radio play's potential for examining, through the reproduced

poetic voice, the boundaries between self and other, in combination with the aggregative,

social bonding potentials of poetry's "recursive or echoic" qualities (Ramazani 76),

encourages the exploration of constructions of individual subjectivity and of community. In

my analysis of poetic radio works I will examine the ways in which the multi-vocal poetic

radio play's unique stylistic, structural, and phenomenological aspects combine to evoke,

celebrate and critique ideas of "imagined community" in the context of a rapidly globalising

world. I will begin, in chapter I, by examining and discussing early experiments in multi-voice

poetic radio work, focusing on the radio work of Ezra Pound, Robert Desnos, and Archibald

MacLeish.

Chapter I

Poetic Radio Works: Early Experiments and Explorations

We were listening with the greatest clearness and comfort to someone talking in London, unconnected with us by so much as a telephone wire [. . .] "Bags of Hungarian onions," the wandering voice under the stars was saying; and a little later, "English mutton 8s." It was fascinating; and one soon gathered that this huckster of cold commercial pudding was not having it all his own way. Like the traditional ghosts that wander in space, seeking to find a way within human cognisance, the ether was chock-full of voices striving to gain one's ear. If it goes on, some angel will have to read the Riot Act. Normally, of course, you pick up what you want and hear it through; but we were just experimenting, and the man at the levers switched us all over the kingdom.

 (*Manchester Guardian*, October 29th 1923)

The advent of radio broadcast in the early years of the twentieth century created

opportunities for radical artistic experimentation, facilitating a re-imagining of the poet's

role as public orator that was profoundly influenced by oral, pre-literate cultural traditions

as well as by new, globalising communications technologies. This chapter will examine multi-

vocal poetic radio works' initial responses to the capabilities, potentials and limitations of

radio programme making and broadcast in the 1930s. Charting the formative development

of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's distinct poetics, I will consider the 1930s multi-vocal

poetic radio works of Ezra Pound, Robert Desnos, and Archibald MacLeish. This work,

together, demonstrates the impact of literature, stage works, and film works, and also the

influence of oral poetry traditions, together with evolving broadcast technologies, on the

development of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. In this chapter I will focus in particular on

these elements of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics: the interrelation of oral and

literate cultural modes; the interplay of monologue and dialogue; and the exploration of

individual subjectivity and imagined community. I have chosen to include work produced

outside the BBC in an attempt to do justice to the range of multi-voice, poet-authored

poetic radio work produced in this period, and also in order to demonstrate the significance of cross-cultural influences in the subsequent development of the multi-vocal poetic radio play at the BBC. I have also included work which adapts and reworks existing texts in order to examine the influence of adaptation, and to explore early multi-vocal poetic radio works' complex preoccupation with the relationship between 'ephemeral' sound and written text. In the 1930s, I contend, multi-voice poetic radio works tended to be formed as patchwork concoctions that drew heavily on non-radio forms and genres such as, for example: opera, the staged verse drama, the ballad, the feature film, the cinematic newsreel. From the 1940s onwards these influences begin to coalesce and to give way to a radio-focused reconfiguration of the heroic oral epic – influenced by the traditions and structures of Greek tragedy, and of the BBC radio feature – forging the multi-vocal poetic radio play's distinct poetics as a unique sub-genre.

Public radio broadcast, as we've discussed, brought new "cultures in common" into being (Scannell qtd. in Avery 6). Public radio broadcasts were the first means by which large numbers of people, including the illiterate and those without formal education, could share a common experience simultaneously without being physically present in the same place. Radio broadcasts utilised, and jostled for attention with, other collective, popular and public forms of vocal performance and address such as sermons and speeches, musical performances, and stage plays. At the same time, the development of new recording, reproduction and communication technologies coincided with developments in experiences of the supernatural. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spiritualist séances became, as Steven Connor suggests, "a renewed ceremony of reparation for the disembodying effects of acoustic technologies" (Connor 390). Both séance and radio broadcast recalled, at first, the already familiar "structure of hapto-sonorous hallucination", the hearing of voices – whether through religious, supernatural, or other psychological experience (Connor 392). The BBC's mission was and remains to "inform, educate, and

entertain'. According to BBC Director-General John Reith's philosophy, broadcasting was a means of channelling potentially disruptive energies, enabling listeners to transcend their material circumstances, and encouraging adherence to particular social and moral ideas – but also, significantly, it was seen as a way of strengthening community and cultural identity (Avery 15).

How did early multi-voice, poet-authored poetic radio works harness and utilise the power of radio's novel technology, in particular with regard to sound? How did this impact on the development of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics? Multi-voice poetic radio works are usually performed or recorded using a carefully constructed script and, as with textual poetry and narrative, the audience is distant and imagined. But, as we have seen, radio material shares several characteristics with 'voicings' in pre-literate, oral cultures: its ability to aurally incorporate its audience, its potential creation and strengthening of common cultures through aggregative, simultaneous experience, its focus on bodily sound, and its focus on the less semantic and denotative aspects of language and voice such as rhythmic patterning and metaphor, and vocal tone and timbre. As previously noted, some of the mnemonic patterns Milman Parry and Walter Ong view as characteristic of (pre-literate) oral performances or 'voicings' suggest that poetry *should* be ideally suited to radio broadcast. However, some characteristics of 'voicings' in oral cultures such as "epithetic and other formulary expressions" and "standard thematic settings" are not such familiar presences within contemporary poetry traditions. Multi-vocal poetic radio works clearly refer to and utilise some pre-literate (oral) linguistic and cultural characteristics: the orator as voice of cultural memory and wisdom; language as epideictic, communal and externalised. Yet, as my analyses of poetic radio works in this chapter will demonstrate, twentieth-century multi-vocal poetic radio work is also inherently (and often determinedly) influenced by literate culture, and by poetry as text. While strong links with oral traditions persist in much contemporary poetry – in its focus on prosody and on the less informational

and semantic aspects of language, and in its concern with voice, culture, and place –

poetry's 'fixing' on the page frees it from the necessity of mnemonic devices. These factors

create a knotty set of problems and preoccupations for the contemporary writer of a multi-

voice poetic radio work: how to utilise less denotative and informational and therefore

more culturally specific material for a large and varied audience; how to retain the interest

and attention of a wide variety of listeners without over-using formulaic stylistic and

structural devices; and how to best use the multi-vocal poetic radio work's potential for the

celebration, examination and critique of both individual subjectivity and imagined

community. Poetic radio works of the 1930s were performed and broadcast live rather than

pre-recorded, and were therefore relatively limited in terms of complexity and variation,

and in terms of sound-effects – although the introduction of the dramatic control panel in

1928 allowed for the mixing of sound produced in different studios.

In the early years of radio broadcast, its power was wielded both as a force for truth-

telling and cross-cultural understanding and, especially when state-controlled, as a means

of disseminating propaganda. Sound evokes physical presence (Ong 1995: 68). And yet

the mechanical reproduction of the bodily voice via telephone (and, by extension, via

radio) complicates and disturbs previous ideas of presence: "In a telephone exchange the

persons speaking to one another are imaginatively in two places at once, their selves

divided" (Horne 19). At the same time, as Steven Connor points out, the technologically

reproduced voice highlights both "severance and continuity between self and other", a

paradoxical sense of both intimacy and distance (Connor 388). This complicated or

troubled notion of presence and subjectivity was exploited in Nazi propaganda

broadcasts. Choices of form, content and auditory effects were of course essential in

determining the impact of the reproduced radio voice: of the Nazi propaganda

broadcasts, Margaret Fisher argues that particular auditory effects reinforced the idea of

a total community of listeners: "By including in its broadcasts the sounds of a euphoric

crowd, German radio found it could cancel the listener's critical response as an individual

and restore his or her sense of belonging to the group" (Fisher 55). Drawing on the

example of Nazi Germany's use of radio propaganda, Marshall McLuhan's 'Radio: The

Tribal Drum' (1964) suggests that the sense of ambiguous presence and shared cultural

community created by radio broadcast is inherently dangerous, activating tribalistic and

nationalistic impulses that are associated with 'primitive', pre-literate cultures:

> The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns
> and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power
> to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.
> (McLuhan 299)

For McLuhan, more individualistic, literate, 'Gutenberg' culture is linked to economic

"take off" (capitalist economic development), cultural tolerance, and the ability to resist

the "violent, unified implosion and resonance" brought about by radio.[16] In contrast to

McLuhan's ideas, Audience Reception Theory, developed during the 1980s and 1990s,

suggests a more active role for the audience member.[17] McLuhan's warnings regarding

radio's activation of what he calls "the resonating Africa within" seem to amount,

ultimately, to a fear of the loss of individual autonomy and subjectivity (McLuhan 297-

308). McLuhan's fears regarding the radio voice, as well as the utopian hopes of writers

such as Velemir Khlebnikov, are likely to have originated, in part, in uncertainty due to the

shock, novelty, and evident power of radio technology. However, such utopian and

dystopian predictions – as well as the particular concerns of poets writing multi-voice

poetic radio works – can also be considered in the light of theory regarding the voice and

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[16] McLuhan connects radio broadcast's homogenising effect to a rise in extremist 'mass' ideological movements such as fascism and communism – though he does also concede, in contradiction, that radio is ultimately "a decentralising, pluralistic force", arguing that radio broadcast has led to an increase in the valuing of place-specific language and the vernacular tongue (McLuhan 298).
[17] In *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1980), Stuart Hall suggests that audience members' interpretations of media texts vary and are dependent on a number of factors including each audience member's relationship to the "dominant ideology" of the text.

its role in early childhood development and identity formation. Radio broadcast's

reproduced, non-visually identified voices can evoke a sense of disconcerting intimacy,

due to their association with the listener's direct, relatively uncensored and deeply

personal internal vocal and auditory imagination and experience. Sound, transmitted

through the mother's body, becomes perceptible through the skin and skeletal structure

of the human foetus from sixteen weeks (Shahidullah and Hepper). Research suggests

that late-term foetuses demonstrate recognition of repeated maternal sound patterns

(*DeCasper, Lecanuet, Busnel, Granier-Deferre,* & Maugeais). The radio voice can be linked,

as previously discussed, to our formative experience of sound and language, and, through

this, to early experiences of identity formation (Conley 104). Considering these

fundamental links between physical voice, identity formation, subjectivity, and power

relationships, it's perhaps not surprising that radio broadcast – with its voices that

complicate notions of presence and unified subjectivity, and intimacy and distance – was,

in the early years of radio, associated with anxieties and hopes regarding the erosion or

strengthening of individual and communal autonomy, agency, and identity.

   As we've discussed, radio broadcast paradoxically facilitates a collective experience and

an extremely individual one. Simultaneously reproduced language and sound, particularly

that which is patterned and recursive, includes and incorporates its audience, but listeners

are also atomised – physically alienated from the source of reproduced sound and from

each other. Unlike readers of text, radio listeners have the added information of the

sounded bodily voice, but the absence of a visual element and of vocal interaction means

there's a great deal of room for individual and idiosyncratic imaginative interpretation.[18]

Unlike McLuhan, Walter Ong presents oral and literate cultural modes as equally though

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[18] According to Walter Ong, "Primary orality [language use in non-literate societies] fosters
personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and more externalised, and less
introspective than those common among literates" (Ong 1988: 69).

differently valid, pointing to the strong traces and influences of primary orality within

modern literate cultures. An ongoing interplay and tension between oral and literate

cultural modes, and between the listener as incorporated member of an imagined

community and as individual is, as I will demonstrate, clearly discernible in the 1930s multi-

voice poetic radio works of Ezra Pound, Robert Desnos, and Archibald MacLeish.

This preoccupation with, and expression of, interplay between constructions of individual

and communal identity, and tensions between text and oral 'voicing', also draws on the

structures, traditions and preoccupations of ancient Greek tragedy. Like the multi-vocal

poetic radio play, and like the oral epics that preceded it, Greek tragedy sought, through

myth and poetic language, to reinforce a sense of continuous group identity. Through its

focus on dialogue and action rather than narrative, tragedy creates a greater sense of moral

agency for its characters than the oral epic. As Aristotle explains in his *Poetics*, character is

revealed in tragedy through action and through speech: "Just as the imitation of character

reveals moral purpose in choosing or avoiding specific action [. . .] so thought is revealed

when someone speaks from one side or other or an argument" (*Poetics* 6 qtd. in McLeish

15). Tragedy cannot juxtapose multiple registers or discourses or allow us to access

characters' internal and unspoken thoughts as the novel or the radio feature can. However,

tragedy is – unlike the oral epic – built around dialogue, which is counterpointed by the lyric

interludes of the chorus. Greek tragedy is concerned not with the representation of physical

deeds but instead with "accounts of deeds and feelings" (McLeish 17). The play presents

different attitudes and arguments, exploring the emotions and philosophical concerns of its

characters. The focus on shared myth, on the communal consideration of difficult and taboo

acts and emotions, and on dialogue rather than the representation of physical action, make

Greek tragedy an attractive model for writers of multi-vocal poetic radio works. There are,

however, some crucial differences between the structures of the multi-vocal poetic radio

play as it developed from the 1940s onwards, and the structures of Ancient Greek tragedy.

Let's first consider the functioning of plot within tragedy. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*,

"Tragedy is a mimesis not of people but of actions and life [. . .] It is not the function of the

agents' actions to allow the portrayal of their characters; it is, rather, for the sake of their

actions that character is included" (*Poetics* 50a 16-39 qtd. in Halliwell 138). The action, then,

and the agents who are the "causative force" of the play are what creates the series of

events – the play's plot (Halliwell 146). Action and plot if the focus, facilitated by character.

The characters act, ultimately, in pursuit of *Eudaimonia*: "the goal and idea of the good life"

(Halliwell 148). The chorus is classified by Aristotle as, effectively, another actor within the

plot. And yet, as Stephen Halliwell asserts, the *melopoeia* or lyric poetry of the chorus

cannot be contained within these parameters:

> no 'functionalist' assessment of [the choral odes] could do justice to the imaginative
> qualities which they share with a long tradition of Greek lyric poetry. Aristotle's
> notion of tragic plot, which carries within it twin concepts of structure and unity,
> makes no allowance for tragedy's use of the lyric mode or imagination, nor for its
> independent potential as a complex means of enriching the significance of drama
> without itself being a wholly integrated part of the dramatic plot.
> (Halliwell 240).

The choral lyric, therefore, expressed through song and dance, exceeds and disrupts

Aristotle's model of actor-driven plot. It occupies a space outside or beyond the time and

space of the dramatic dialogue. In its performance, through group song and dance, it

suggests and recalls the social bonding of communal ritual. Early multi-vocal poetic radio

works, through their juxtaposition of poetry with prose dialogue, or of lyric and dialogic

verse, often draw on and re-work the structures of Greek tragedy – as we will see in the

poetic radio works of Pound, Desnos, and particularly Archibald MacLeish. However, as the

multi-vocal poetic radio play develops its own distinctive poetics, particularly from the

1940s onwards – influenced by the radio feature and by the increased freedoms created by

new sound recording and reproduction technologies – borders and distinctions between the

lyric chorus and dialogue, and also between epic narrative and dialogue, are questioned and

broken down. The multi-vocal poetic radio play develops towards shared, dialogic narrative whose structures are rooted in the epic, rather than sustained dramatic dialogue.

Radio broadcast's initial association with 'incorporation' of its audience, with populism and political authority, made it an unattractive prospect for many radical early twentieth-century artists and writers. In his 'Second Manifesto', the Surrealist André Breton warned: "The approval of the public is to be avoided like the plague [. . .] I must add that the public must be kept panting in expectation at the gate by a system of challenges and provocations" (Breton qtd. in Birkenmaier 359). Work disseminated to the general public through journals or through radio broadcast might risk, through its attempts to communicate, accepting conventional or majority belief systems and art forms rather than attempting to challenge, change and advance them. Similarly, Ezra Pound saw traditional physical theatre as "a gross, coarse form of art [. . .] the play speaks to a thousand huddled together" (Pound qtd. in Fisher 8). The playwright Bertolt Brecht believed, initially, that if the general population gained access to the means to produce and broadcast radio content themselves then radio had the potential to develop into a participatory and revolutionary medium (Willet 52). Ultimately, though, Brecht viewed radio as problematic – a means for one-sided distribution of cultural material that alienated the listener. He also criticised early radio productions for unimaginatively aping the style and structure of the theatre, opera, and other existing art forms and media.

Despite these misgivings about radio's potential for coarse populism a number of poets, including certain members of early twentieth century avant-garde movements the Futurists, the Surrealists and the Modernists, recognised and explored radio's radical possibilities. They were attracted by radio's valorisation of the embodied voice and also by its emphasis on the oral traditions so integral to poetry's history and identity. Most importantly, these poets recognised radio's radical alteration of the ways in which "aesthetic, social and ethical values were transmitted, shared and contested". (Avery 6). They set out to use radio's

power and potential for their own artistic and political ends and, in doing so, began to shape

the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics. As Margaret Fisher points out in *Ezra Pound's*

Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933:

> Radio would achieve effortlessly and silently that which futurism attempted through
> machine-induced cacophony – erasure of its own history – and that which dada
> attempted through human pandemonium – erasure of the singular persona or artist.
> Of course, radio could invent history and glorify the persona as well. When it did so,
> these new constructions […] gained a tensile strength, like music, from their
> imposition upon a primary base of silence (or atmospheric noise).
> (Fisher 43)

There were many ways in which radio worked as a "decentralising, pluralistic force": radio

broadcast crossed national borders, troubled categorisations of culture and class, and

disseminated alternative perspectives and philosophies, including those previously

marginalised. As James A. Connor contends, the nature of early radio technology, with its

different frequencies and registers, worked against monopoly and homogeneity,

encouraging plurality and subversion (Connor in Morris ed. 24).

The Testament of Francois Villon: A Melodrama (1931)

Early radio drama pioneers were uncertain about how to deal with the medium's

characteristics – its reproduced voices and lack of a visual dimension – in their work. The

first 'sound play' written for radio in the UK, Richard Hughes' *A Comedy of Danger* (1923) is

set at night in a Welsh coal mine and voices the fears of three trapped visitors facing death.

The characters are as much in the dark as the audience, and the struggles depicted are

largely internal and psychological. The actors do not declaim their lines, but instead give the

impression of being unknowingly overheard. Space, in *A Comedy of Danger*, is configured as

small, dark, and claustrophobically tight: the characters' focus is escape (Hughes 147-159).

In a moment that now seems prescient of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, Hughes'

character Bax exclaims: "Goodness knows! I'd expect anything of a country like Wales! They've got a climate like the flood and a language like the Tower of Babel, and then they go and lure us into the bowels of the earth and turn the lights off!" (Hughes 147). Listeners were advised to listen to the play in the dark, so as not to be distracted by vision. By contrast, Ezra Pound's *The Testament of Francois Villon: A Melodrama* (The BBC's Regional Programme, Tuesday October 7th 1931) inhabits a broader imaginative space – though it's closely based on existing textual material rather than written expressly for radio. The musical sections of the radio opera were originally conceived and performed in the 1920s as a concert piece. Pound's radio operas of the 1930s *The Testament of Francois Villon:* and *Cavalcanti* (which was commissioned but never broadcast) were written for the newly-formed BBC almost a decade before Pound's notorious fascist broadcasts in Mussolini's Italy.[19] Like John Reith, Pound aimed to expose the population to great art, and great literature in particular:

> to take the world's greatest poetry out of books, to put it on the air, to bring it to the ear of the people, even when they cannot understand it or cannot understand it all at once. The meaning can be explained but the emotion and beauty cannot be explained.
> (Pound qtd. in Fisher 20)

The Testament of Francois Villon: A Melodrama celebrates the work of the fifteenth-century French poet Francois Villon, exploring the trope of the great, misunderstood genius, as well as ideas of immortality, voices from beyond the grave, and experience as non-chronological and contemporaneous – themes Pound also explored in his long poem *The Canto*s. For Pound, Villon represented "the end of a tradition, the end of the medieval dream, the end of a whole body of knowledge" (Pound 104). This notion of elegy, not only for lost life but for lost knowledge, recurs in *Cavalcanti*. It's likely that Pound's radio operas were also

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[19] For the full BBC script of *The Testament of Francois Villon: A Melodrama* see Fisher. The radio opera was performed live and no recording was made. All analysis is based on the script and on a recording of the (pre-radio) musical concert piece.

influenced, in style and structure, by his interest in Japanese Noh plays. In *The Testament of*

Francois Villon lines by the fifteenth-century poet Francois Villon, in the original Old French,

are set to music and performed – like the lyric poetry of Greek tragedy – as song. The music

is interspersed with Pound's original prose dialogue which contextualises and introduces the

poetry. Pound clearly differentiates between poetic and more utilitarian language modes,

but by juxtaposing Villon's original poetry with colloquial prose dialogue he creates a new

context for the poems, suggesting their contemporary relevance and engaging, through the

opera's polyphonic structure, in dialogue with them. Pound hoped, by setting the poetry to

music, to revive the medieval troubadour art of poetry as song and to communicate a sense

of the original poetry through the music without compromising its integrity through

translation into English (Fisher 21). In this way, Pound attempts to create a work through

which different cultures, as well as different time periods, are in dialogue with one another,

while at the same time acknowledging the cultural and temporal specificity of language and

the inadequacy of translation.

   Testament is structured around and focused on Francois Villon's original poetic work *Le*

Testament de Villon – written in the context of a sentence to death by hanging – as artefact.

In its structure, which juxtaposes prose dialogue with sung poetry, *Testament* recalls the

structures of dramatised radio adaptations of novels, as well as the juxtaposition of dialogue

with the choral lyric in Greek tragedy. By presenting Villon's text in this way, Pound

mediates the 'high culture' of Villon's poetry for a mass audience. He also grounds his work

in the perceived permanence of text. As John Drakakis, writing about the relationship

between text and sound in radio adaptation, explains: "The traditional appeal to 'literature'

effectively neutralises the threat from existential ephemerality of performance by focusing

on those *permanent* or universal qualities of the text that it is the function of the *ideal*

performance to illuminate" (Drakakis "Essence": 129). The radio work becomes, in effect, a

translation or re-versioning of the original text that seeks to preserve or illuminate its

'essence' (Drakakis "Essence": 128). Such work is, however, as my analysis will demonstrate, both difficult and complex in terms of its relationship to a mass audience.

   The Testament of Francois Villon tells the imagined story of Francois Villon's (historical) arrest and possible hanging in Paris, focusing on emotional states rather than narrative progression. There is minimal narrative framing to contextualise the action: the opera is introduced by an announcer and each new scene is preceded by only one or two words from an anonymous voice in the manner of intertitles in silent films, for example: "The warrant", "His world", "The gibbet" (Pound in Fisher 206). Pound uses the tolling of church bells, the striking of a clock and the beating of a drum to signify shifts in time and space between the scenes, which take place in the bars and streets of Paris. The dialogue, in prose form, is differentiated by the vocabulary, syntax and rhythm of each character's words, and phonetically described accent is used to suggest character and social position. For example, the colloquial speech of The Watch is contrasted with the relatively formal speech of the Captain:

> CAPT: What do you think is behind it?
> WATCH: Ow! A little bit of awl right, I suppose...
> (Pound in Fisher 207)

In the carnivalesque space of *Testament*, interweaving voices speak and sing in different languages and registers, creating contrast and counterpoint and echoing the tuning in and out of signals on the radio dial.[20] As well as the highly choreographed sound of the poems set to music, there is, in *The Testament of Francois Villon*, regular use of highly colloquial language – a sort of hybrid of English and American slang which echoes T.S. Eliot's use of the demotic in *The Waste Land.* Along with the old French of the songs, such language dis-locates the imagined space, and time, of the opera:

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[20] I am using 'carnivalesque' here to refer to Bakhtin's ideas regarding boundary and status disruption in carnival: "They [the folk carnivals] offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin 1984: 6).

    YTHIER: What ch'you doin'?
    VILLON: Lamentin'. Ever heard of an elegy?
    VILLON'S FRIEND: Wot?
    (Pound in Fisher 220)

Reviews of The Testament of Francois Villon in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Star*

criticised Villon's use of slang as "incongruous" and disruptive. In *The Star*'s article, entitled

'The Bright Young Department Runs Riot', Eric Dunstan wrote:

    Occasionally someone shattered such fifteenth-century atmosphere as was achieved
    by breaking into cockney or modern slang, such as "They ain't got nothing on me" or
    What the hell are you doing, Frankie?" – Frankie being, if you please, Francois Villon,
    the poet.
    (Dunstan qtd. in Fisher 128)

As Margaret Fisher points out, the debate over Pound's use of language (within the BBC as

well as in the press) was really part of an argument against the use of slang and in favour of

the 'standard English' of the educated classes which the BBC was helping to disseminate and

promote (Fisher 93). Yet Pound's parodic use of slang in *The Testament of Francois Villon*

was not inconsistent with Villon's use of everyday idiom in his work.

    Through the use of these multiple and hybrid languages, *Testament*'s imaginary space

(and place), while referencing Paris, is self-consciously constructed as every place and no

place, very much like the 'space' from which the reproduced radio voice speaks. Pound, like

Villon, and drawing on the aesthetics of the BBC feature, continues to explore the

relationship between text and oral performance in terms of 'truth', memory, mortality, and

identity. Rather than using a more conventional narrative structure, Pound's setting of

Villon's poems reflects his idea of time, and of literary tradition, as non-chronological and

contemporaneous. Pound's fidelity to Villon's text is a significant part of what drives

Pound's *Testament* away from more conventional creative choices in terms of form and

structure, and also away from formal and stylistic techniques associated with 'voicings' in

oral cultures. Pound's lack of geographical and temporal specificity in his *Testament* is, in part, an attempt to make the opera accessible in a pluralistic manner, evoking what Jane Lewty calls "the imaginative force of poetry in bridging the post-babelian linguistic gap, if only in a dream" (Lewty). *The Testament of Francois Villon* constructs its audience as varied, plural and individual rather than as a culturally coherent mass. This attention to the idiosyncracies and varieties of vernacular speech and to varying speech modes and registers – to the dialogic potentials of the poetic utterance – forms a key component of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics. But for all the contemporary radicalism of Pound's use of dialogue, it is the setting of Villon's poems to music that remains the most intriguing element of the work.

Francois Villon wrote his collection of poems *Le Testament* in ballade and rondeau forms, creating poetry that is mnemonic and highly musical in its use of metre, rhyme and repetition, yet also firmly rooted in written language. As Elissa Guralnick suggests, radio "yields appropriate conditions for releasing the music in language: namely, a performance space at once empty and dimensionless, from which words can emanate free of any material associations" (Guralnick qtd. in Fisher 100). Villon's lines are set to Pound's original music, except the Priest's hymn to the Virgin, whose text and melody is taken from Walter Rummel's 1913 collection of troubadour songs (with translations by Pound) (Albright 144). Pound's music is in part an attempt to mitigate the lack – or the impossibility – of English translation by representing the emotion and beauty of the words through music. He had, he wrote, "been reduced to setting them to music as I cannot translate them" (Pound 1961: 105). The songs are introduced in much the same way as songs in opera or 'numbers' in musical theatre. For example, Villon's musings to the barman about time and mortality introduce a section of Villon's 'Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis', shifting from a relatively concrete, utilitarian and boundaried discussion of the matter of Villon's bar tab to the lyrical, elegiac, emotional and philosophical content of the song.

BARMAN: Eh, you'd pay me before you cash in, sir.

VILLON: How soon would that be?

BARMAN: Young fellow like you.

VILLON: Thirty-nine.

BARMAN: Plenty of time, sir.

VILLON: The good die...

BARMAN: You're not so good as all that, sir; I'll fetch it.

VILLON: Dying...

(sings)   Et mourut Paris et Helaine,

                   ... Qui lors voulsist etre son plege

(Pound in Fisher 209).

The lyric voice of Villon's poetry also contrasts with Pound's spoken dialogue in terms of its

comparative emotional directness, intimacy and intensity:

VILLON:

(sings)   Je plains le temps de ma jeunesse,

              ... Et ne m'a laisse quelque don

(Pound in Fisher 211).

I mourn the season of my youth,
... And hasn't left me any gift

(my translation)

Throughout his *Testament* Pound uses a sort of 'shorthand' of selected lines from Villon's

poems to suggest the larger works. Here he uses the first and last lines of Villon's stanza.

The result is a fractured, elliptical style far more in keeping with the modernist aesthetic

than Villon's complete poems. Pound's 'shorthand', as well as the absence of English

translation from the original Old French, inevitably means that the lines have far more

impact, meaning and depth for those listeners already familiar with Villon's work. The use

of song rather than spoken voice for Villon's poetry references the traditions of opera, the

medieval troubadours, and ancient Greek lyric poetry, emphasising voice and the less

informational and semantic aspects of language, moving towards what Adriana Cavarero

labels "the sonorous, libidinal, and presemantic materiality of logos" (Cavarero 102).

However, like Pound's selection of non-sequential lines from Villon's poems, the setting of

the poetry to music in Pound's *Testament* is structured in such a way as to limit and disrupt

certain pleasures often associated with voice and song – and with Villon's poetry – such as

the anticipation and enjoyment of regular rhythms and tonal patterning. Of his musical

compositions, Pound wrote that: "The HOLE point [is] that the moozik fits the WORDS and

not some OTHER WORDS" (Pound qtd. in Albright 148). In this case, his painstakingly precise

and controlling musical micro-notation demands hesitations and accelerations that

emphasise the irregular rhythms of real speech. For example, in 'Dame du Ciel', the time

signature moves from 33/16 to 21/8 to 5/4 within three bars (Albright 145). Pound saw

himself as entirely responsible for the musical content – singers were expected to precisely

follow Pound's exacting instructions. As Daniel Albright observes, "For the most part,

Pound's rhythm is less rhythm (in the ordinary sense) than departure from rhythm. The

concreteness of the text is made conspicuous through a species of music that over-stresses

the bumps and gnarls of speech" (Albright 146). Pound's music creates a counterpoint to the

lines' metrical patterns. He refuses to allow the words themselves to be incorporated within

regular rhythmic patterning; he is determined to highlight the words' pronunciation, the

moving of the muscles "within the organs of speech" (Albright 148). Tonally, the music uses

the modal system of the medieval troubadour tradition (which would have been out of

place in Villon's actual lifetime) and often consists of simple scale sequences. Pound also

based his melodies on what he saw as the natural tonal properties of the words. Though

idiosyncratic, his music was not inconsistent with ideas and practice in contemporary music

of the time.[21] In particular, Pound's practice displays similarities with Leos Janacek's earlier

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[21] See Arved Ashby, ed. *The pleasure of modernist music: listening, meaning, intention, ideology.*

focus on the idea of "speech melody", in which tonal patterns of everyday speech are used as the basis for melodic phrases (Wingfield).

Through his complication of memorability in rhythmic and tonal patterning, Pound seems determined to avoid a defining characteristic of voicings in oral culture – their function as an interactive space for the practice and reiteration of communal cultural remembering through mnemonic, aggregative, patterned sound and familiar image and metaphor. Instead, the poetics of *Testament* are firmly rooted in the textual fixing of meaning. The music itself is so complex and so precisely and minutely defined by its creator that it cannot be performed in the absence of textual notation. Through his idiosyncratic mixing of cultural codes and his focus on Villon's poetry, Pound seeks to educate his audience rather than assuming and drawing on common cultural knowledge. It is likely that the BBC's relatively independent, non-commercial status – as well as Reith's determination to "educate and elevate" the masses rather than giving them what they wanted – made this approach far more tenable than it would have been had Pound been writing for a commercial broadcaster. My comparative analysis of both Desnos's *Fantomas* and MacLesih's *Air Raid* supports this argument. Reith's (universalist) notion of democracy involved opening up "the treasures of our culture" to "all those who had been denied [them] by a limited education, low social status and small income" (Crissel qtd. in Avery 18). The relative creative freedom of the BBC facilitated the engagement of modernist aesthetics and experimentation in early radio art. In keeping with Pound's ideology regarding the reading of poetry as set out in his *ABC of Reading* (1934) *Testament* presumes and encourages autonomy in the response of each individual listener – in contrast to Pound's later, far more didactic radio broadcasts. However, unlike a text, Pound's *Testament* could not be returned to, repeated, or analysed at length by its audience. Because of this, *Testament* tends to favour listeners with a particular type of pre-existing cultural knowledge and experience. Pound's adaptation and 'translation' of Villon, and his insistent counterpointing of literate and oral cultural modes,

makes for a fascinating meld of influences and confidently demands that the listener work

at their listening. In *ABC,* Pound argues that

> One has to divide readers who want to be experts from those who do not, and divide, as
> it were, those who want to see the world from those who merely want to know WHAT
> PART OF IT THEY LIVE IN.
> (Pound 1961: 42)

Testament aims to cater for both groups, though it favours the former. In contrast with

Pound's stated musical aims, *The Testament of Francois Villon* is, ultimately, highly textual,

resisting the radio voice's potential for popular authority and incorporation used so readily

by other poets. Significantly, Pound's techniques work to disrupt and counter the idea of the

listeners' group or mass experience relating to existing common cultural knowledge.

However, through his creation of an imagined, idiosyncratic 'no place', and through his use

of an imagined cross-cultural demotic, Pound creates his own imagined community, which

he invites the listener to imagine themselves part of.

La Grande Complainte de Fantomas (1933)

By the 1930s, in France, the poet Robert Desnos had broken away from Andre Breton's

Surrealist group – a move caused in part by Desnos's refusal to join the Communist Party or

to commit to collective action as espoused by Breton – and was keen to engage with the

wider public, both artistically and politically, via the medium of radio. Joining forces with his

old friend, businessman and radio pioneer Paul Deharme, and the writer and musicologist

Alejo Carpentier, Desnos set out to explore the new medium. In 1930, Deharme described

his ideological and revolutionary approach to radio broadcast:

> The surrealist doctrine and my idea of a new form of expression, proper to the wireless,
> are opposed. To dream is no longer at the origin of a work; it is its goal. Half-sleep is no
> longer used as a creative state of mind, but as a receptive one. The automatic play of
> associations, the author's impregnation with subconscious material made of images
> that are created in the preconscious is not necessarily his domain anymore, but the
> public's. Now the rotten apples and crystal balls belong to them!

(Paul Deharme, 'Pour un Art Radiophonique' (1930), qtd. in Birkenmaier 359)

Between 1933 and 1939 Desnos and Carpentier wrote almost exclusively for the commercial

radio studio 'Phonoric', of which Deharme was manager until his death in 1934, as well as

producing and directing their own work. Radio's 'wireless' communication mirrored

Desnos's earlier quasi-telepathic communications in Breton's 'sleep-state' sessions, in which

participants had entered hypnotic trance-like states and accessed intense and seemingly

unrestrained creativity. These sessions, and the utterances and writings they produced, had

formed the "keystone" of Breton's definition of surrealism in his 1924 *Manifesto* (Conley 16-

18). Radio broadcast, with its troubling of boundaries regarding presence and regarding

internal and external speech, was an ideal medium through which to explore a fascination

with dreams and the internal, subconscious mind. Radio's sound focus seemed to promise

freedom from more analytical reasoning, creating strong and highly personal mental images

and sensations in the listener in contrast to film which, Deharme believed, superimposed its

own images on to the viewer's imagination (Birkenmaier 363).[22]

The use of radio broadcast was a way of practically engaging with the breakaway

Surrealists' revolutionary and anarchistic ideas, and of communicating them to a large

audience. Deharme, Desnos and Carpentier associated the ability to dream with the

freedom to imagine alternate worlds, and so potentially to create them. Radio stimulated

the individual imagination, representing "a counter-culture to the material world"

(Birkemaier368). Deharme, Desnos and Carpentier also saw the intimacy of radio broadcast

as potentially therapeutic in a similar way to the psychotherapeutic model: listeners would,

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[22] According to physiologist and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, writing in 2001, when we perceive a visual scene we activate sensorimotor brain regions that simulate the actions we perceive: "typical human cognition activities, such as visual and motor imagery, far from being of exclusively symbolic and propositional nature, rely and depend on the activation of sensorimotor brain regions" (Gallese 522). The same process of sensorimotor brain region activation and action simulation can occur when we read text or listen to speech and use our imaginations to create mental images, as we do when we read or listen to the radio. Interestingly, and in correspondence with Deharme's theory, in these instances the process is active – conscious and deliberate – rather than automatic.

they hoped, be able to explore imaginatively individual fantasies and traumas within the

'safe' framework created by the radio play, achieving the sort of catharsis supposedly

facilitated by psychoanalysis, and by ancient Greek tragedy.[23] Phonoric's programmes

included playful, improvised nonsense poems and *La Cle des Songes*, in which Robert

Desnos read aloud and analysed the dreams of the audience and "came to humorous

conclusions about the state of the 'collective unconscious'" (Birkenmaier 361). Desnos's

poem 'The Voice of Robert Desnos', first published in 1953, demonstrates a fascination with

the individual voice and its power. The poem's ritualistic, shamanistic invocation sees the

voice collapsing and manipulating time and space and evoking liminality, just as the radio

voice can, and summoning the living and the dead across geographical distances:

> I call to me those lost in the fields
> old skeletons young oaks cut down
> scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and linen drying in farm county
> I call tornadoes and hurricanes
> storms typhoons cyclones [. . .]
> (Desnos tr. Kulik 2005: 26).

Unlike Ezra Pound's radio operas, Desnos's work for Phonoric uses popular form and metre,

and is often explicitly influenced by oral traditions. Desnos hoped that this approach would

connect more successfully with his audience – tired after a hard day's work and seeking

entertainment as well as instruction – than more experimental forms.

   Desnos' first radio success was *La Grande Complainte de Fantomas*, first broadcast on

Radio-Paris on Friday November 3rd 1933.[24] The poem around which the play was

constructed is a detective story in verse about the exploits of a dastardly, fantastical master-

criminal. Desnos's *La Grande Complainte de Fantomas* is based on the highly popular

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[23] "Through pity and terror [tragedy] effects the purgation of these emotions" (*Poetics* 6 qtd. in McLeish 8).

[24] The 'complainte', or lament, is a form of ballad rooted firmly in the oral tradition, often concerned with lost or ill-fated love and/or social satire See also Tim Dee's use of 'Lady Franklin's Lament' in his production of Jo Shapcott's *Erebus* (Chapter IV)

Fantomas character created by novel writers Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre in the early

twentieth century century. The *Fantomas* series of silent films were highly regarded by the

surrealists. Desnos's *Fantomas* poem was written in the form of a popular ballad from the

early nineteenth century, 'La Complainte de Fualdes' (Dumas in Desnos 1999: 736). The

original music was composed by Kurt Weill. Antonin Artaud voiced the main character and

produced the piece, while Carpentier was responsible for musical production. Like Pound's

radio operas, *Fantomas* presents a character with a significant prior existence outside the

context of the radio piece and, like Pound's operas, *Fantomas* has a deeper and richer

meaning and context for those with prior knowledge of its source texts. However, Desnos

purposefully chose a character and narrative that already had popular rather than literary

appeal: *Fantomas* is not nearly so focused on the permanence and 'essence' of the text(s) it

adapts as *Testament* is. Rather than translating high culture for a mass audience, Desnos's

Fantomas re-tells a story with which much of his audience will already be familiar. As a

narrative illustrated with sections of dialogue, it is similar in structure to radio adaptations

of novels and other narrative texts although, as with Pound's *Testament* and *Cavalcanti*,

Desnos adapts his source text as sung poetry –a 26-stanza ballad – interspersed with prose

dialogue. The sung narrative of Desnos's *Fantomas* describes a sequential, episodic series of

events in the life of Fantomas in the straightforward language of its audience. The subject-

matter, style and form of *Fantomas* is heavily influenced by the gothic and fantastic in

popular pulp fiction, silent film and comic-book narratives of its time.[25] The ballad form's

strict rhyme, traditional French seven-syllable metre, and repetition are emphasised by the

regular, repetitive melody and accompaniment.[26] The seven-syllable lines are perfectly

matched by the waltzing rhythms of Weill's folk-like melody (Desnos 1960). The resulting

ballad is entrancing; it seems designed to cast something of a spell on its audience. The

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[25] See Erin A. Smith's "Pulp sensations" for an overview of popular novels in the late nineteenth and
early twentieth century.
[26] No recording of the original broadcast is available but a 1960 radio version of Desnos's *Fantomas* is
available through France's Institut Nationale de l'Audiovisuele.

stanzas' repeated ABBACC rhyme scheme, with each first line repeated, reinforces the sense

of the villain's infallibility and longevity:

> Allongeant son ombre immense,
> Allongeant son ombre immense
> Sur le monde et sur Paris,
> Quel est ce spectre aux yeux gris
> Qui surgit dans le silence?
>
> Fantômas, serait-ce toi
> Qui te dresses sur les toits?
> (Desnos 1999: 757)

> Extending his immense shadow,
> Extending his immense shadow
> Over the world and over Paris,
> What is this spectre with grey eyes
> Who looms in the silence?
>
> Fantômas, might it be you
> Who prowls on the rooftops?
> (my translation)

Fantomas is introduced, first of all, through the prologue. A voice speaking in the manner of

a radio show host directly addresses its audience members, asking them to transport

themselves back to the past – "Vous, Monsieur, vous etiez un tout jeune garcon/ Et vous

mettiez votre premier pantalon long" – and sets the scene: an evening in autumn 1913 or

spring 1914, in the boulevards of Paris. In the dialogue that follows, a couple order drinks in

a bar while the scene is dominated by the shouts of newspaper sellers, building through a

crescendo of cries that emphasises the notoriety of Fantomas. In using these framing

devices, Desnos situates his multi-vocal poetic radio play firmly and explicitly within

contemporary French oral traditions of popular and public song in communal space while

also, like Archibald MacLeish, utilising the radio voice's associations with authority,

simultaneity and the national free-flow of news and information. This meta-referential

framing device also serves to emphasise the artificial nature of the story. The chansonnier's

voice sings the ballad narrative, interspersed with dialogue sketches that illustrate, expand and bring to life scenes from the story as well as providing additional narrative material. As in Pound's *Testament*, these sketches are named and introduced, as they might be within silent film, as miniature episodes within the greater story: "La cloche sanglante", "Les roses noires ou les fleures empoisonnees" ("The bloody bell", "The black roses or the poisoned flowers") (Desnos 1999: 746-750). The spoken intertitles serve to contextualise and draw together scenes that take place in different geographical locations and involve a variety of characters. The language of Desnos's ballad is identifiably poetic and mnemonic in its use of metre and rhyme, but also relentless – and closer to oral epic than to lyric traditions – in its narrative drive: each episode is recounted in the most straightforward way possible, using only as much descriptive and figurative language as is absolutely necessary. *La Grande Complainte de Fantomas* is designed, first and foremost, to be entertaining and accessible for a wide audience. Like *The Testament of Francois Villon*, Desnos's *La Grande Complainte de Fantomas* has no explicit political agenda, but it is nevertheless highly political in its use of form, structure, address, language, and choice of cultural material. *Fantomas* conforms to Deharme's revolutionary agenda in encouraging the radio listener's conscious, cathartic engagement in an imaginative world, and it also strongly expresses Desnos' anti-elitism and love of popular and communal culture through its form and content.

   Despite Desnos and Carpentier's best efforts at creating and producing imaginative, participatory programming for radio and at "stabilising the collective unconscious", Carpentier later complained that writing for commercial radio had necessitated simplistic, clichéd material rather than great art, questioning whether such popular mass entertainment could in fact successfully stimulate listeners' individual imaginations (Birkenmaier 370-372). Phonoric was compelled, by its commercial nature, to produce work that was easily accessible and had a broad appeal. While more direct advertising content certainly contained simplistic, clichéd and manipulative material, *Fantomas* is more complex

and ambiguous. However, its reworking of the *Fantomas* stories affirms and celebrates, rather than challenges or reconfigures, existing cultural material. More generally, Carpentier came to believe that the therapeutic 'framing devices' Phonoric had sought to create for listeners were not sufficient: the listener was liable to forget the mediating machinery of radio broadcast and reception; the radio voice created a false sense of intimacy and authority that was potentially dangerous rather than therapeutic, manipulating the listener's anxieties and emotions rather than enabling their cathartic release.

   After his time at Phonoric, Carpentier went on to have a long career as a successful novelist and essayist, while Desnos was arrested for his resistance activities in 1944 and died of typhoid at Terezin prison camp shortly after its liberation in 1945. A possibly apocryphal but much-repeated story of Desnos' time as a prisoner continues to illustrate his belief in the positive, communal, revolutionary potential and 'material reality' of the imagination. One day when he and his fellow prisoners were on their way to the gas chambers Desnos began enthusiastically to read their palms, forecasting long lives filled with happiness and success:

> The guards became visibly disoriented. Minutes before they were on a routine mission the outcome of which seemed inevitable, but now they became tentative in their movements. Desnos was so effective in creating a new reality that the guards were unable to go through with the executions.
> (Uhl 2003: 310)

Air Raid (1938)

Archibald MacLeish's multi-vocal poetic radio play *Air Raid* was broadcast in the USA five years after *La Grande Complainte de Fantomas,* on Thursday October 27th 1938, as part of CBS's Columbia Radio Workshop. Like MacLeish's 1937 play *The Fall of the City*, *Air Raid* draws on the structures of ancient Greek Tragedy in order to explore and discuss moral and philosophical questions in a public space. *Air Raid* demonstrates a new sense of confidence, authority, and freedom in its construction of imagined space. This is no doubt the result of

greater exploration and development of radio writing, and of recording and broadcast

technologies, in the intervening years; it also suggests the continued influence of visual

techniques explored and used in film on the developing aesthetics of the multi-vocal multi-

vocal poetic radio play. The play begins with a journey across the ocean recounted as if from

an aeroplane, before the narration's aerial view 'zooms in' on a particular unidentified

European village. *Air Raid* was broadcast a few days before Orson Welles's infamous

production of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, and uses similar techniques to *War of the*

Worlds to address the listener, as well as exploring a similar idea of impending war against a

naïve and ill-prepared population – albeit from a very different angle. Voices, adapting the

techniques of radio journalism and documentary, build the narrative and create a

semblance of real-time drama by using familiar news story techniques. In its creation,

through sound, of a 'picture' of people and place, *Air Raid* utilises a documentary style that

prefigures the BBC radio 'feature'. The listener is 'taken through' to different geographical

locations to witness the action. *Air Raid*'s first voice, the speaking clock familiar to 1930s

audiences, is followed by that of the 'studio director', whose self-conscious narration

addresses the audience directly:

> You who fish the fathoms of the night
> With poles on roof-tops and long loops of wire
>
> Those of you who driving from some visit
> Finger the button on the dashboard dial
> Until the metal trembles like a medium in a trance
> (MacLeish 1980: 99).

Distances are effectively collapsed as the audience is 'taken through' (connected) to the

unnamed European town where the action takes place, and where the voice of the

announcer functions like the chorus in Greek tragedy, narrating and commenting directly on

events. As *Time Magazine*'s review of *Air Raid* suggested, the radio announcer was, at the

time, "the most accepted public spokesman in 20th-century life," – and was therefore likely

to be trusted and believed. (*Time Magazine,* October 31st 1938). *Air Raid*'s self-reflective

utilisation and manipulation of radio news and documentary conventions, capabilities and

registers in combination with poetry traditions, as opposed to the multi-art form collage

approach of earlier works, illustrates the development of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's

distinct poetics. By this point, in the late 1930s, the multi-vocal poetic radio play was

reaching maturity as a genre, confidently drawing on and playing with the potentials and

aesthetics of radio broadcast itself rather than seeking only to transplant or reframe non-

radio art forms such as opera or staged verse drama. *Air Raid*'s directly narrated sections

maintain a varying but regular iambic metre. Language, including dialogue, is simple, direct,

and homogenous in terms of accent, dialect and lexicon; it is designed to be widely

accessible and easily understood. McLeish uses variations in metre, rhythm, rhyme and

mode of address to signal and emphasise shifts in perspective:

> You have one thought tonight and only one:
> Will there be war? Has war come?
> Is Europe burning from the Tiber to the Somme?
> (MacLeish 1980: 99)

Here, the use of caesura, iambic metre and end-rhyme suggests the military 'march' and the

inevitability of the impending war, with the short, repetitive sentences ("Will there be

war?") emphasising the centrality of the question. The iambic heptameter repeated

throughout the poem as a whole – "You think you hear the sudden double thudding of the

drum" (repeated with small variations) – keeps the question of war in mind, asking the

listener to maintain an anticipatory vigilance. The men's voices, often in iambic tetrameter,

contrast with the women's longer hexameter lines, though in the end all of these structured

utterances are surpassed by screams as the bombing raid arrives. In contrast, the Studio

Director's cinematic, lyric narration of an aerial view of the continent uses a comparatively

loose and unmemorable structure in terms of metre and rhyme:

> Otherwise sun: the Tyrrhenian Sea all sunshine:
> The Adriatic creased with curling light.

> The Atlantic tumbles forward into morning on those beaches.
>
> The whole continent lolls in summer sunlight:
> (MacLeish 1980: 100)

The disruption of iambic metre, combined with long vowel sounds such as in "shine" and "whole" works to slow the pace of the narration, suggesting and encouraging a contemplative awe of the scene, which is described in the manner of radio reportage. However, the imagery employed goes beyond the conventions of reportage and into poetic metaphor: the Adriatic is imagined as a creased fabric; the sea tumbles forward in time as well as space; the continent "lolls" like a body. MacLeish's narrative voices employ the conventions of (relatively utilitarian) reportage, establishing a veneer of directness and verisimilitude, while at the same time contradicting or counterpointing this with the use of poetic metre, rhythms, and figurative language. The 'action', played out through the citizens' dialogue with no consideration of individual or internal chacacter, is contextualised through the lens of MacLeish's three levels of narration: 'voice', 'studio director' and 'announcer'. *Air Raid* communicates outrage at the changing nature of warfare, which MacLeish perceives as moving from the traditionally male arena of the battlefield to the targeting of domestic, civilian settlements. The outbreak of war is displayed in a recognisable, though geographically distant, domestic setting, a simple and unsuspecting pastoral idyll where civilians – women and children as well as men – are now seen as legitimate targets for bombing. The village's naive women seem to modern British ears to be clumsy stereotypes rather than the accessible archetypes MacLeish probably intended. Faced with the ominous prospect of the impending bombers, they chorus: "Show it our skirts in the street: it won't hurt us!/ Show it our softness! Show it our weakness! Show it our womanhood!" (MacLeish 1980: 122). MacLeish intended *Air Raid* to educate women about the prospect of war; the play was originally titled *Air Raid: A Play for Women* (Lawson 1938). Yet despite MacLeish's efforts the world view presented in *Air Raid*, as in the multi-

vocal poetic radio plays of Pound and Desnos, is decidedly male-centred, reflecting male

dominance within arts broadcasting at a time when women writers, working with relative

independence as poets, novelists and playwrights, were making incursions into other areas

of literary culture.

   MacLeish was clearly determined to communicate his vision of the reality and horror of

modern warfare in a way that was straightforward, accessible, authoritative and shocking.

The inspiration for *Air Raid* was, according to MacLeish, Picasso's *Guernica*:

> I no longer remember where or how I first came face to face with *Guernica* [. . .] I only
> know that when I saw it first, I heard it – began to hear it: the women's voices at their
> work, the calling children, the radio crew on the roofs somewhere watching the sky to
> the northeast, the scene with which the play begins.
> (MacLeish 1980: 98)

MacLeish saw the poet (and, indeed, the artist) as needing to speak with a public voice, and

as having an intrinsic and embedded responsibility within society – in a way not dissimilar to

the 'wise man or woman' in oral and pre-literate communities as described by Ong.[27] As

previously noted, MacLeish's approach to *Air Raid* was influenced by the form and style of

ancient Greek tragedy, as is evident in its narrative trajectory and in the use of a dramatic

chorus equivalent. Multi-vocal rather than single-voiced radio poetry creates a structure of

relational dialogue and discussion, with the voices of the 'everyday' men and women in the

play often representing and standing in for the voices of the audience. The multi-vocal

poetic radio play's multiple voices create a sense of plurality, inclusivity, and community –

masking (and to some extent diluting) the voice and power of the poem's creator. Yet unlike

the more patchwork models of *Testament* and *Fantomas, Air Raid* is, I contend, essentially

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[27] For MacLeish, the poet's public responsibility was connected to her or his relative independence
from commercial interests. While commercial entertainment and the press might be 'bought' by
fascism, artists, he idealistically predicted, would not: "against them will stand the artists whom
money cannot buy [. . .] No power on earth can out-persuade the great and greatly felt work of art
when its purpose is clear and its creator confident" (MacLeish xiv).

dialectical – and didactic – in terms of its discourse, rather than dialogic. *Air raid* was produced as part of US commercial company Columbia Broadcasting System's experimental *Columbia Workshop* series which was, in part, designed to prove CBS's cultural and educational credentials. MacLeish's sense of the radio poet as having a responsibility towards her or his community of listeners – ethically, or in terms of education or representation – is a common feature of the multi-vocal poetic radio play and an important aspect of its poetics, as I will continue to demonstrate.

Walter Ong argues that narrative in exclusively oral cultures is concerned with cultural memory and, without the 'fixing' effects of text, cannot be ascribed to one single creator. Stories are re-told and reinterpreted, patched together by each teller. Both Pound and Desnos demonstrate the influence of both orality and literacy, and of sound and text, on their radio work through their reworking and adaptation of previous narratives, and through their playful exploration of the boundaries and distinctions between oral and textual forms. Pound's *Testament* is built around a written 'testament' which utilises the ballade and rondeau forms, both associated with French lyric (sung) poetry of the late Middle Ages. The poems are then re-interpreted as sound pieces. Desnos's *Fantomas*, meanwhile, utilises a traditionally oral form (the complainte) to rework narratives from popular novels, and, like Pound, Desnos adds contextual dramatic material using more conventional prose drama. MacLeish, Pound and Desnos also demonstrate the interplay and tension between oral and literate cultural modes through their use of shifting registers and forms: from patterned, mnemonic, and poetic language which focuses on the para- and extra-linguistic and on "the fissures" of language beyond the informational and denotative, to more utilitarian and 'textual' language modes such as scripted prose dialogue.[28] The juxtaposition and mixing of poetic language and more utilitarian prose registers displayed in the works studied in this chapter is, as will be demonstrated, a

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[28] See Julia Kristeva's discussion regarding 'the semiotic' in 'Revolution in poetic language'.

consistent characteristic of the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. Such mixing of form and register also reflects tensions and interactions between monologic and dialogic modes of communication, and between conceptions of group and 'mass' communication. MacLeish, Pound and Desnos all demonstrate a strong belief in the power and potential of the radio voice – and, in particular, the poetic radio voice – in their poetic radio work. As previously discussed, the early twentieth-century perception of the radio voice as psychologically powerful, intimately connected to the listener, and as having almost quasi-religious or supernatural power had to do, in part, with the novelty of radio technology. Yet MacLeish, Pound and Desnos's belief in the power of the radio voice, and particularly in the power of the poetic radio voice, also has to do with the radio voice's particular characteristics and associations, in particular its intrinsic connection with oral cultural modes. Marshall McLuhan's idea of more 'rational' and stable literate culture as opposite to or superior to primary orality fails to acknowledge the orality at the core of textual language. The multi-vocal poetic radio play offers a space for the exploration and radical re-imagining of the oral, pre-literate role of poetry, and of the poet as cultural orator, within a literate, globalised world. MacLeish, Pound and Desnos all demonstrate, in their poetic work for radio, a complex understanding of the potential power of poetic radio voices and a determination to use that power constructively. Radio broadcast's amplified bodily voice, with its power to trouble ideas of presence and mortality and boundaries of place and time, has the potential to sonically incorporate its audience, and also to create, reinforce, celebrate and question "cultures in common" (Scannell qtd. in Avery 6). As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the dialogic discussion and reconfiguration of imagined communities comes to the fore as the multi-vocal poetic radio play begins to reference, more explicitly, the traditions of ancient oral epic poetry.

Chapter II

The Multi-vocal poetic radio play as Dialogic, Polyphonic Epic

1. **On Epic Poetry**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, early poetic radio work drew on a variety of art forms and genres. The radio pieces we have so far analysed utilise, between them, elements of opera, visual film, verse drama, broadcast news, the ballad, and Greek tragedy. Following my exploration and analysis of the radical experimentation of poetic radio works in the 1930s, this chapter attempts to demonstrate the forging and consolidation, in the 1940s and 1950s, of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as a cohesive sub-genre with its own distinctive poetics rather than as a substitute for physical theatre or a collage of related dramatic and literary forms and genres. It is, I aim to demonstrate, chiefly through radio's engagement with the form and traditions of oral heroic epic poetry that the multi-vocal poetic radio play becomes a clear and definable sub-genre in its own right, exploring and consolidating its key structural, thematic and stylistic characteristics.

   According to Walter J. Ong, pre-literate oral narratives are episodic and cyclical, "patched together" from formulaic phrases (Ong 1988: 25). This observation is largely based on Milman Parry and, subsequently, Walter Ong's work on contemporary oral (non-literate) cultures, and on study of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as textual works closely rooted in primary orality. Epic heroes are relatively 'static' and do not change and develop as we generally expect novelistic heroes to change and develop (Bakhtin 1981: 36).[29] This is

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[29] The oral epic is also, as Charles Rowan Beye suggests, a hybrid and, to a degree, dialogic form – not as "monologic" as Bakhtin suggests. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were constructed out of a hybrid mixture of languages that was "totally alien to common speech", yet rich in cross-cultural influences (Beye 2006: 25). Though more radically individualistic and dialogic in scope, the novel fulfils many of

because oral culture is concerned with externalised and absolute knowledge rather than more individualistic, internal modes of experience. In addition, social hierarchies are evident in decisions regarding what and who deserves to be remembered in the heroic oral epic. In an oral, non-literate culture the epic poems function, rather as dictionaries or religious or canonical texts do in literate cultures today, as authoritative records of collective cultural knowledge. The multi-vocal poetic radio play, I intend to demonstrate, embodies a productive creative tension between the form and traditions of the oral epic and more explicitly dialogic. Polyphonic and documentary modes of representation created by literate culture, new communication and travel technologies, and, in particular, new radio recording and broadcast technologies. This tension is played out in the context of poetic radio voices' evocation of polyphonic social bonding behaviours enacted, in part, through the less 'informational' and denotative aspects of the voice (Dunbar). At its most basic, the multi-vocal poetic radio play is composed of sound and silence; however, its broadcast also seeks to incorporate the imagined cultural community of a region or nation. The multi-vocal poetic radio play utilises a language that, through its focus on the less semantic and informational aspects of communication such as metaphor and sound patterning, cannot help but be culturally specific. It is not surprising that poets, faced with this set of material circumstances, alongside the patchwork, polyphonic, 'actuality' construction of the BBC feature, set out to reconfigure the oral heroic epic in explicitly polyphonic ways. It is perhaps also unsurprising that the multi-vocal poetic radio play found a popular place in British culture during and directly after the Second World War. Bakhtin describes the epic world as "a world of "beginnings" and "peak times" in the national history" (Bakhtin 1981: 13). In 1951, the Festival of Britain aimed to create a sense of recovery from the war years and a positive national identity. It was "the British showing themselves to themselves – and the

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the same functions as the oral heroic epic poem, memorialising and also tending to question the cultural values it contains.

world" (Morrison qtd. in 'Festival of Britain 1951'). Joseph Campbell, writing about the role

of ritual elements in myth, explains that the purpose of rites of passage has traditionally

been "to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a

change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life" (Campbell 2008:

6). World War II, occurring during a period of significant social change,[30] brought mortality

and loss to the people of Britain on a grand scale – and such ideas of change, mortality,

continuity and renewal are, it can be argued, the essential focus of both the ancient oral

heroic epic and the multi-vocal poetic radio play. Both Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas

worked extensively in the more prosaic world of radio propaganda at the BBC during World

War II, taking as their focus the culture, traditions and everyday life of Britain. The multi-

vocal poetic radio play then, as dialogic, polyphonic epic, enabled poets to create more

personal and direct explorations of the complexities of trauma and grief in the context of

ideas of national identity and of imagined community.

   The multi-vocal poetic radio play, when it engages with the traditions of the oral heroic

epic, is more likely to question or criticise the status of the lone hero than to celebrate

them, and/or to seek to celebrate and immortalise the entire cultural group/s to and for

whom it speaks.[31] The multi-vocal poetic radio play is a fundamentally dialogic, polyphonic

sub-genre heavily influenced by the 'actuality' traditions of the BBC feature. The availability

of magnetic tape recording, from the 1950s onwards, allowed multi-vocal poetic radio plays

to be recorded and edited, much as visual films were, rather than broadcast live (Wade

240). This enabled writers and producers to create far more structurally complex and

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[30] See Sandra Halperin's *War and social change in modern Europe: the great transformation revisited.*
[31] Speculating on the origins of heroic epic poetry, Charles Rowan Beye suggests that the poems arose "from the need to celebrate the famous deeds of local men, now dead and sanctified, the objects of a local hero cult" (Beye 21). In a similar way, Johannes Haubold, in *Homer's People: Epic Poetry and social Formation*, views the heroic epic as potentially transactional, immortalising strong and powerful men in return for their leadership and protection. For Haubold, though, epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* also highlight the problems of such power relationships in a precarious world without civic structure or democratic representation.

ambitiously polyphonic works. Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (1954) and David

Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts* (1955) both shift from one voice to another, with no central

focus, in order to evoke and engage with the idea of imagined community. In comparison,

Roland, the hero of Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* (1946) engages in difficult

philosophical dialogue with all those he encounters, and is cast as a flawed and

representative everyman on a journey towards war and death. Radio's valorising of the

voice, combined with the more playful, 'irrational,' less translatable, less semantic and

informational aspects of poetic language, serves to emphasise and celebrate the vocal

interplay which, as Adriana Cavarero suggests, constitutes a "reciprocal invocation" of

embodied uniqueness or, to put it another way, a means of social bonding (Cavarero 170).

Cavarero argues that the classification, in the western philosophical tradition, of language as

a visual and abstracted code results in a discourse which tends to deny or ignore the

corporeal, relational and emotional aspects of 'logical' thought.[32] Rhythmic, repetitive sound

experienced simultaneously fulfils, across cultures, an important social bonding function –

as explored by Wiliam H. McNeill in *Keeping Together in Time*. James Anderson Winn,

considering the origins of poetry, suggests that song and, ultimately, poetry originally

developed out of rhythmical action, that "dancing and wordless melody precede the

rhythmic pattern of intelligible words" (Winn 1981). In utilising poetic, relational voices, the

multi-vocal poetic radio play engages the corporeal, relational body in evocations,

discussions, celebrations and critiques of group dynamics, the collective, and imagined

community. The poetic radio voice's potential for the evocation of liminality, through its

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[32] Like Cavarero, Jerome Rothenberg and William Spanos, in 'A Dialogue on Oral Poetry,' argue for a re-evaluation, and valorisation, of the physical voice. Spanos points to German philosopher Martin Heidegger's theory regarding western civilisation's understanding of 'logos':

> the fatal mistake of Western civilisation was made when post-Socratic philosophers translated the word Logos in the sentence "Man is the animal who has *Logos*" to mean "reason" or "judgement." This metamorphosis […] concealed the word's primordial meaning as "talk" or, rather, "oral speech" (*Rede*).
> (Spanos 9)

troubling of boundaries regarding presence, time, and space, tends to shift such evocations of community into the realm of communal ritual, often utilising and reworking the epic trope of the nekuian katabasis – a journey during which the dead are visited or summoned.

2. **On blindness**

Radio broadcast renders both listeners and performers 'blind' in the sense that, though the physical presence of living speakers is clearly signalled by voices, the audience is unable to see the bodies from which these voices originate, or have originated, and the performers are unable to view their audience. Unlike television and theatre, in which the visual dimension is an integral part of performance, and unlike literature, in which all sensory information is encoded in the text itself, radio broadcast involves the virtual presence of mechanically reproduced voices. The human body, rather than being reproduced as a visual image, is "replicated as a wiring apparatus, an exteriorised nervous system" (Connor 362). As previously noted, radio broadcast is far more suited to the communication of interior mental images than to the direct description of external reality. (Drakakis 21). Therefore, enabled by new recording technologies and by radio broadcast's lack of a visual dimension, radio dramatists and poets have explored the evocation and representation of a variety of interior, nonvisual, mental processes.

   The archetype of the blind seer, the person punished through deprivation of physical sight who is gifted with privileged interior vision, is present within western culture from Antiquity onwards.[33] In the ancient Mcyenaean epic world, prophets such as Tiresias could access the 'truth' of human fate: for example, in book XI of *The Odyssey*, in the underworld, Tiresias prophecises Odysseus's return to Ithaca, advising him on how to overcome the obstacles he

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[33] For an exploration of representations of blindness in literature, see Penny Rudge's doctoral thesis *A Novel Consciousness: a practical exploration of fiction's capacity to represent sensory impairment*.

will face on his journey (XI. 90-151). The radio play, we can argue, situates both narrator – if

present – and listener, in a position of privileged access, through sound, to the interior

experience of its characters. By providing access to what is 'unseen', whether within the

space of the play or more broadly, the radio play can enact a particular and powerful form

of witness, recalling or doubling the function of the voice in the spiritualist séance.[34]

Blindness, in the world of ancient epic poetry, is also associated with poetic and musical

giftedness: the singer of epic poetry or 'rhapsode' Demodokus, in *The Odyssey*, is described

as "the excellent singer whom the muse had loved greatly, and gave him both good and

evil./ She reft him of his eyes, but she gave him the sweet singing/ art" (VIII. 62-65). Homer

himself, the supposed narrator of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* is traditionally depicted as

blind. The 'blindness' of radio creates a perspective that privileges sound and the interior

imagery of memory, imagination, stream of consciousness and dream. This imagery, despite

its interiority, shares similarities with the highly poetic language of image, symbol and

archetype projected onto the distanced, externalised world of ancient epic poetry. As

Charles Rowan Beye observes, "Mythology, after all, is really nothing more than the

projection onto phantom or ideal neighbours of all the behaviour and attitudes the human

psyche is capable of" (Beye 39). The motif of blindness reoccurs in the multi-vocal poetic

radio play: blind Captain Cat in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood,* who recalls both Homer

and Odysseus as he narrates his voyages, wise Blind Peter in MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*,

which also alludes to Odysseus's journeying. In David Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts*, blindness

is more explicitly metaphorical. The voices explore and discuss ". . . the great night/ Of all

that is unknown to us, that weights down in between/ One lonely human being and

another" (Gascoyne 1956: 30). These associations of radio poetry with interiority, memory

and dream can, as Marilyn Butler points out, lead to a limiting imaginative solipsism on the

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[34] The voice may become a "form of embodiment and manifestation for non-embodied entities" (Connor 390).

part of the poet, who may be tempted to narrate a personal, interior journey – as MacNeice

does, to a degree, in *The Dark Tower* (Butler 1980). After all, the multi-vocal poetic radio

play is not a collectively composed epic or the result of supernatural inspiration, but a

creation arising from the particular mind of an individual, representing her or his own

imagined version of the culture, tradition and community they seek to conjure, discuss, and

reconfigure. It is the multi-vocal poetic radio play's engagement with the polyphonic and

'actuality' concerns and techniques of the radio feature which tends to counteract this

tendency.

3. Ritual Elements in the Epic

In his studies of communal ritual, Anthropologist Victor Turner describes communal rites as

occurring at times of transition, either in terms of personal status, such as becoming an

adult or getting married, or in terms of the shifts and seasons of the natural world, such as

harvest, or midwinter (Turner 1966: 94-130). Rituals are described as characterised by three

phases: detachment of the person or people involved from an earlier fixed point in social

status and/ or cultural conditions, a "liminal" period of cultural and status ambiguity, and a

phase of reincorporation or rebirth into the social, cultural and conventional order. Turner

describes liminality, the state of 'thresholdness' as "frequently likened to death, to being in

the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, to an eclipse of the

sun or moon" (Turner 1966: 95). The liminal person is outside the conventions, ethics, and

organising structures of their culture and therefore, symbolically, outside human culture.

The liminal state is often represented using images of animality, of pre- or post-life

existence, and of night time. Turner argues that "communitas", a recognition of communal

bonding enabled by the absence of status or social structure, occurs in the liminal phase of

ritual, before normative boundaries are reinstated. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner describes

such rituals as reinforcing the existing social order. In later work he develops this point,

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suggesting that the use of "liminoid" elements in art works in industrial societies, for example, can facilitate social and cultural critique (Turner 1982: 41). More generally, the 'protostructural' system explored through liminality is described as "the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelties will arrive when contingencies in the normative system require it" (Sutton-Smith qtd. in Turner 1982: 52). Mikhail Bakhtin, considering the ritualistic festival of Roman Saturnalia, and the folk carnivals of the Middle Ages, describes a similar phenomenon of barrier and status disruption and communal bonding. For Bakhtin, these festivals are inherently playful and comic, using ambivalent comic laughter – both mocking and celebratory – to disrupt status hierarchies and conventional modes of behaviour.[35] As part of its undermining of status and social structure, medieval carnival focuses on physical grotesquery, animality, abundance, and the cycles of the natural world. As Richard F. Hardin suggests, drama and literature, unlike ritual, are usually representational and distanced illusion rather than something rooted in spiritual belief and expressly intended to enact material change (Hardin 853-855). Yet ritualistic drama and "liminoid" literature can use "incantatory language, masks and archetypal characters" to evoke the timeless, dislocating effect associated with the liminal phase of ritual (Hardin 848). As Barbara Hardy observes, the use of ritual elements in the novel – and, I would suggest, in all art forms – can reveal "the ancient, common life behind and within the individual story. The ordinary clocks and calendars of realistic fiction are stopped by such timeless moments" (Hardy 14). Ritual effects can be strengthened through the breaking down of barriers between actors and audience as, for example, when a crowd of spectators, represented onstage, mirrors the spectating position of the audience (Hardin 857).

It's possible to view the overarching structures of all literature as, ultimately, rooted in ritual. For example, Joseph Campbell describes the hero's standard path, or "monomyth", as

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[35] Participants' actions are characterised by "numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (Bakhtin 1984: 11).

"a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation –

return" (Campbell 23). However, this individualistic, quest-focused model diminishes

Turner's focus on the communal aspects of ritual, as well as ignoring the social bonding

function of polyphonic voices in communal ritual. Ritual effects and structure are, in heroic

epic poetry, perhaps most explicitly evident in the mytheme of the nekuian katabasis – a

voyage during which the dead are visited or consulted. The nekuian katabasis is present in

the ancient Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*, in *The Odyssey*, and in the myth of Persephone and

Demeter. It is also echoed in Christian narratives of the Harrowing of Hell (Leeming 98). The

underworld, or Hades, is a fundamentally liminal dimension in which boundaries of time and

space do not apply, and ancestral ghosts may speak. The hero, challenging the reality of

mortality, travels into this dimension and returns with a quest object or with wisdom – if

only in the form of acceptance of her or his own mortality.[36] The multi-vocal poetic radio

play, as it develops its own distinctive poetics from the 1940s onwards, frequently utilises

ideas of the speaking dead, the underworld – or other liminoid space such as dream – and

memorial of the dead. In doing so, it evokes and emphasises ideas of cultural continuity

through imagined community. *Under Milk Wood*'s carnivalesque voices commune with the

dead – drawing on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and, through it, *The Odyssey*.[37] *The Dark Tower*'s

mythic fable tells the story of Roland's journey to meet the dragon, in which many of his

encounters mirror those in *The Odyssey* – the barmaid who advises him, Neara the Siren

beckoning him at sea. At the journey's end, Roland meets with his dead brothers and his

father. In David Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts* the listener descends, with the narrator, into a

sort of liminoid, communal, capitalistic Hades – the 'Megalometropolitan Carnival'.

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[36] Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung both characterised psychoanalysis as form of katabasis, a journey into the 'underworld' of the unconscious. See Zajko and O'Gorman.
[37] In 1932 or 1933 Dylan Thomas had spoken to his socialist friend Bert Trick about his desire to write a Welsh version of *Ulysses* in which the action was contained within a twenty-four hour framework (Cleverdon 2). See page 67 of this thesis for a more thorough explanation of the links between *Ulysses* and *Under Milk Wood.*

There are, of course, multi-vocal poetic radio works that do not follow this pattern so explicitly or strongly, particularly earlier works and adaptations such as those analysed in the previous chapter, D.G. Bridson's 'radio panorama in verse and song' *The March of the 45* (1936), and MacNeice's heroic quest play *Christopher Columbus* (1942). It is, however, as this thesis will demonstrate, in its engagement with oral heroic epic poetry – and, to a degree, the Greek tragedy that followed it – and particularly in its dialogic, polyphonic, ritual-evoking reworking of the mytheme of the voyage to the underworld, that the multi-vocal poetic radio play finds its strength, and its recurring structural, thematic and stylistic characteristics. The poetic radio voice is time-bound, using poetic language and patterned sound in order to impress itself upon the listener's memory. It seeks to incorporate, evoke, and critique an imagined community. Its formal and stylistic aspects, informed by the material conditions of radio broadcast, are bound up with ideas of liminality, and of polyphonic and rhythmic vocal interplay and bonding. The multi-vocal poetic radio play is therefore ideally placed to develop and explore the structural, thematic and stylistic conventions of the oral heroic epic poem in the context of an increasingly literate, dialogic, polyphonic, globalised culture.

4. **The Emergence of the Multi-vocal poetic radio play**

In 1924, reflecting on radio drama two years after the BBC had begun broadcasting in the UK, John Reith, Director of Programmes, complained that there was "too much striving for theatre effect and too little attempt at discovering the actual radio effect when the play is received in distant homes" (Reith qtd. in Drakakis 2). The multi-vocal poetic radio play's development in the UK in the 1940s and 1950s was significantly influenced by the BBC's regular employment, initially for propaganda purposes, of poets such as Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas, and also by the extraordinary and unprecedented status and value of BBC radio broadcasts as a major source of news, propaganda, and mass entertainment during

World War II. During the war, the BBC expanded both its staff and its output enormously,

and was forced, because of conscription, to employ a number of people who had previously

been employed in other areas (Briggs *History* 4: 26). The BBC became a vital part of the war

effort, and continued to be 'officially guided' by the Ministry of Information until March 31st

1946 (Briggs *History* 4: 27). As Donald McWhinnie explains: "by the end of the Second World

War, thanks to years of blackout and the disappearance of most alternative forms of

entertainment, [radio] commanded a larger audience for one performance than any

impresario had ever dreamed of" (McWhinnie 12). Poets and writers were allies in the

continued creation and maintenance of a sense of national identity and solidarity. The

introduction of the BBC's Third programme in 1946 promised poets an audience dedicated

to the arts – albeit a significantly smaller one than previous work for the Home Service had

enjoyed. With the formation of the BBC Features department in 1945, headed by Laurence

Gilliam, the employment of poets was part of continuing idealistic BBC culture of patronage

of the arts, creating a tight-knit community of writers.[38]

The wartime employment of poets specifically to memorialise culture and to create a

more homogenous and coherent sense of national identity and continuity – at the same

time as seeking to reflect and acknowledge the plurality of Britain's voices – set up the

material conditions for these poets' reworking of the structures, tropes and stylistic qualities

of the heroic oral epic poem. 'Features', as opposed to radio dramas, were originally

essentially documentary or propagandist in nature. In the introduction to the script for his

1944 play *Sunbeams in His Hat* Louis MacNeice describes the BBC 'feature' as "a dramatised

broadcast which is primarily either informative or propagandist (propaganda being taken to

include the emotive celebration of anniversaries and gestures of homage – or hatred – to

anyone or anything dead or alive)" (MacNeice 69). The feature allowed, as MacNeice

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[38] For an analysis of Fitzrovia's literary culture during the war years, see Robert Hewison's *Under Seige: Literary Life in London 1939-45*.

explains, great diversity of form and subject. It enabled greater formal experimentation than was possible within the straightjacket of formal talks or three-act plays. Recording technologies, as we've seen, did not initially allow for the easy recording of people on location for news or documentary purposes (Holme 38). The resulting blurring of boundaries between recorded, simulated and invented representations created an ideal space for cross-genre and cross-form hybridity, irony, and parody. In the US, these opportunities for creative invention had already been ably exploited by writers including Orson Welles and Archibald MacLeish in works such as *The War of the Worlds* (1938) [39] and *Air Raid* (1939).

   Gilliam's work as Head of Features was part of these developments – but also part of a broader ideological mission to create a more dialogic and democratic radio culture by putting the lives and experiences of ordinary people on the air. Producer A.F. Harding was determined that "all people should be encouraged to air their views, not merely their professional spokesmen [. . .] The air at least should be open to all, as the Press quite obviously was not" (Harding qtd. in Butler 1980). Despite opposition from within the BBC and despite technical difficulties, Gilliam pioneered the use of 'actuality' broadcasting, the broadcasting of voices recorded on location, producing the BBC's first 'actuallity' feature *Opping Oliday* in 1936 (Holme 1981: 38). 1928 had, as we've noted, seen the introduction, at the BBC, of the dramatic control panel or mixing panel, through which sound could be transmitted from separate studios and mixed together – 'faded in' or 'faded out' – allowing writers and producers to depart from more conventionally theatrical scenic divisions to create shifts in narrative space and time. (Drakakis 4). Writing in 1931, playwright Tyrone Guthrie described the effects of the dramatic control panel: "A device known as a "Mixing-panel" enables the director of the play, by twirling knobs, to increase or reduce the volume of transmission from each studio . . . the effect rather resembles that of superimposed

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[39] See Gosling's *Waging the War of the Worlds: a history of the 1938 radio broadcast and resulting panic, including the original script.*

photography in the films" (Guthrie 11). By the 1940s, writers and producers were beginning

to fully utilise this new technology. Bearing in mind these historical and technological

circumstances, this chapter will analyse Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* (1946), Dylan

Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (1954), and David Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts* (1955), working

towards an outline of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's distinct poetics.

The Dark Tower (1946)

Poet and classicist Louis MacNeice joined the BBC Features Department in May 1941. His

poor eyesight made war work in the armed forces impossible. MacNeice's early features

work, such as *The Stones Cry Out* (1941), a series focusing on famous British buildings that

had been damaged by enemy bombs, functioned as an extension of war journalism and

propaganda (Muldoon 2007). MacNeice described *The Dark Tower* – which takes its title and

subject-matter from Browning's narrative poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' –

as "parable of fascism," but its mythic quest structure contains more ambiguity and

complexity than this description suggests. *The Dark Tower* was first broadcast on the new

Third Programme on Monday January 21st, 1946, with a musical score composed by

Benjamin Britten. MacNeice had previously written five plays for radio including *Christopher*

Columbus (1942) and *He had a Date* (1944), in which previous experiences vividly re-emerge

in the mind of a drowning man. *The Dark Tower* is, MacNeice suggests, a Morality-Quest in

the mould of *The Faerie Queen*, *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Piers Ploughman* (MacNeice 2008: 22).

MacNeice's work for radio also drew on his background as a classicist, including his

influential translation of *Agamemnon* (1936), discussing philosophical questions through

combinations of verse dialogue and lyric poetry. Despite the evident possibilities of using

documentary technique, structure and aesthetics, MacNeice believed the radio play was

best suited to allegorical, metaphysical, dream-like fantasy (MacNeice 2008: 21). However,

influenced by the radio feature and by the increasing elasticity of form made possible by

new recording technologies and techniques, *The Dark Tower* and the multi-vocal poetic

radio plays that follow it begin to question, break down and reconfigure the boundaries

between verse dialogue, lyric chorus, and epic narrative. The "liminoid" and communal

space of the chorus tends to seep into the wider space of the play, facilitating lyric dialogue,

dialogic narrative, and various other shifts and inter-illuminations between speech modes

and registers.

MacNeice's war features had been characterised by the same sort of "rapid cross-cutting

of short dramatisations, with perhaps a fragment of narration or a verse or a song to keep

the story or argument running" that are utilised to great effect in Dylan Thomas's *Under

Milk Wood* (Holme 70). However, MacNiece's multi-vocal poetic radio plays owe more to his

background as a Classicist, and also to the Epic Theatre movement of the time. Primarily

proposed by Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre was a political theatre movement I which plays

explicitly signalled the constructed nature of their reality, encouraging audiences towards

more 'rational' reflection and emphasising the constructed – and therefore alterable –

nature of reality outside the confines of the theatre (Willett). Recalling the way the gods in

heroic epics and in Greek drama influence life on earth, the characters in *The Dark Tower*

seek to influence and manipulate Roland, *The Dark Tower's* hero, towards or away from his

confrontation at the tower. However, this influence and manipulation takes many different

forms rather than appearing only as the puppetry of superior gods, thus enabling a complex,

ambivalent dialectic on the nature of free will. The play interrogates Ideas of tradition, duty

and necessity. Roland's family is steeped in tradition and set apart from those around it by

its inherited quest. With its higher purpose, its Latin motto – "Per ardua ad astra" – which is

also the motto of the RAF, and its six dead brothers, Roland's family recalls, as Christopher

Holme suggests, the British public school system but also, more explicitly, the armed forces

(Holme 60). Roland is described as "the black sheep" He is "always asking questions"

(MacNeice 2008: 23-66).

The Dark Tower's morality quest structure utilises its characters as ideological ciphers rather than psychologically three-dimensional or naturalistic representations. As a dialectic, the play brings forth and works through different viewpoints, culminating in a final and seemingly inevitable conclusion that threatens to – but does not – shut down the discourse. There is a degree of ambiguity and ambivalence to the play's stark conclusion. Roland's quest is most significantly threatened by these archetypal characters: Sylvie, the childhood sweetheart, who represents a sort of nostalgic British Arcadia; The Soak, a sinister nihilistic, alcoholic solipsist who refers to Roland as "my new puppet"; The Steward, a cynical and hedonistic gambler who manipulates time and fate with his tombola "game of chance" telling Roland "There's nothing in life but profit and pleasure"; and Neara, a Siren-like woman who seduces Roland on his sea-journey by playing the fiddle "in her head" (MacNeice 23-66). A Tiresias-like character, wise sage Blind Peter, counters these persuasions with his insight, through grim experience, into the evil totalitarianism of "the dragon." Describing his previous role as an informer in the dragon's regime, Blind Peter explains:

> They passed a pack of laws forbidding this and that
> And anyone breaking 'em – the penalty was death.
> I grew quite rich sending men to their death.
> (MacNeice 2008: 33)

MacNeice believed that the radio play could not, realistically, sustain the sort of poetic language required of page poetry, but he hoped that he could communicate, in his radio work, "those literary values which literature itself has lost since it was divorced from the voice" (MacNiece qtd. in Drakakis: 31). The language of *The Dark Tower* is in the mode of fairy-tale or folk-tale. MacNeice's stylised dialogue makes skilful use of rhythm and repetition to create emphasis and momentum. For example:

> MOTHER: Hand me the album. No – the black one.
> ROLAND: Not the locked one!

>   MOTHER: Yes, the locked one. I have the key.

>   (MacNeice 2008: 24)

Longer speeches tend towards a loose blank verse whose rhythm underscores the stylised,

constructed nature of the dialogue – as well as solemnly prefiguring Roland's pounding

heartbeat during his final confrontation at the play's end:

>   All that we know is there is something there
>   Which makes the Dark Tower dark and is the source

>   Of evil through the world. It is immortal

>   But men must try to kill it – and keep on trying
>   (MacNeice 2008: 27)

Roland's story is told, without a narrator, through a series of dramatic scenes. Shifts in time

and space are signalled using skilful sound-effects – for example, a fade-out, a tolling bell,

the trumpet-call. Moments of comparative dramatic pause – or places in which the realities

of time and space shift and warp in a liminoid manner – tend to be represented by more

lyric poetic language, punctuating the dialogue with a poetry that counters Roland's, and

the story's, dogged narrative progress. For example:

>   ROLAND (quietly)
>   I could tell you, darling, but not today.
>   Today is a thing in itself – apart from the future.
>   Whatever follows, I will remember this tree
>   With this dazzle of sun and shadow – and I will remember
>   The mayflies jigging above us in the delight
>   Of the dying instant – and I'll remember you
>   With the bronze lights in your hair.
>   (MacNeice 30)

In this moment of lyric pause, uncharacteristic psychological depth, and vivid poetic

imagery, Roland attempts to memorialise his life and experience outside the narrow

confines of the quest. "The delight/ Of the dying instant" emphasises the centrality of

mortality in our appreciation of existence. This moment of pause and pleasure contrasts

with Roland's more hedonistic distractions, and counteracts MacNeice's distancing

techniques to add emotional poignancy to Roland's eventual death.

   Roland's quest, as previously suggested, displays some clear similarities with the journey

of Odysseus as he attempts to return home to Ithaca – with the significant difference that

Roland moves purposefully towards "the dragon" and death rather than seeking to return

home. Crossing the ocean in the company of Siren-like Neara and The Steward, Roland is

caught in a strange, ludic limbo in which time behaves unexpectedly. The game of chance

played on the ship "kills the time". Neaera, playing the "fiddle" in her head, seems to be

both seducing Roland and controlling the passing of time:

> NEAERA (*to herself, velvety*)
> …Andantino … rallentando … adagio –
> (MacNeice 44)

Correspondingly, this part of the play uses self-consciously playful poetic imagery, and the

lyric mode, to demonstrate the characters' disregard for the forward motion of the quest:

> ROLAND. The sea today? A dance of golden sovereigns.
> NEAERA. The sea today is adagios of doves.
> ROLAND. The sea today is gulls and dolphins.
> NEAERA. The sea today is noughts and crosses.
> (MacNeice 46)

The layering and building of equivalent metaphors – the dialogic sharing of different

imaginative perspectives, as opposed to the narrative's more prose-like speech style –

creates a sense of awe and imaginative possibility. The ship's ludic and sexual pleasures

distract Roland from the necessity of his quest. The quest's logic is constructed out of

tradition, from lessons learned in the past and remembered. The repeated list of Roland's

dead brothers: "Michael and Henry and Denis and Roger and John" recalls the cataloguing of

the dead in *The Iliad*; here, repetition is used to evoke memory, tradition, continuity, and

purpose. At other times, however, as on the ship, repetition suggests aimlessness and stasis

rather than resolve. When he conjures Roland's experience in the desert, MacNeice uses

repetition and multiple, dialogic voices to create a sense of timelessness and spatial

elasticity. The repeated sound of a ticking of a clock punctuates the voices, experienced as if

through mirages, of those who seek to distract Roland from his path:

    CLOCK VOICE. Tick tock etc.

        SOAK. Left right etc.

(They with draw into the background as the second mirage appears)

    STEWARD. Golden days, sir, golden days.
              In the desert, sir, have you noticed
              One doesn't notice time?
              (MacNeice 2008: 58)

As in the worlds of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the heroic tradition in which Roland exists is

masculine and war-like: Roland is measured against the examples of his father and brothers.

Blind Peter tells Roland:

    You're your father's son;
    Your handshake's not so strong though.
             [. . .] He had a grip of iron

    And what's more he had a will of iron.
    (MacNeice 2008: 32).

Roland's dead father disapproves of Roland's marriage ceremony with the words "I am still

waiting to be your father./ While you malinger you are no son of mine" (MacNeice 2008:

55). Roland's familial tradition, with its unwavering belief in the quest and its

discouragement of questions and "malingering", thus shares some key characteristics with

the totalitarian evil of the Dark Tower. It is Roland's explicit doubting, and his life and

dilaogue beyond and outside the closed logic of the quest, that creates *The Dark Tower'*s

compelling narrative tension. Roland's sacrifice will be far more meaningful, for MacNeice's

audience, if he is able to make it willingly and with due consideration. The listener, then, is

able to consider a variety of alternative narrative perspectives and possible outcomes –

something the heroic epic rarely allows. We can view the weight of these alternative

perspectives – in particular, the vivid imagery that depicts Sylvie's pastoral Arcadia – as

lifting *The Dark Tower*'s discussion of duty and free will beyond a more didactic approach

and into more complex, ambiguous territory. Sending Sylvie home from her thwarted

wedding ceremony, the Priest explains that she must go

> Back to your little house and your apple orchard …
>
> And spray the trees in spring and raise the ladders in autumn
> And spread the shining crop on the spare room floor
>
> (MacNeice 2008: 55)

The recurrence of the lyric mode here, with its concrete and evocative specificity, creates a

sense of nostalgia and longing. This underlines the psychological tension caused by Roland's

conflicting destinies.

    The inscription in stone found by Roland during his time of torturous indecision in the

desert reads:

> To Those Who Did Not Go Back –
> Whose Bones Being Nowhere, their signature is for All Men –
> Who went to their Death of their Own Free Will
> Bequeathing Free Will to Others.
> (MacNeice 2008: 60)

This inscription – the only piece of imagined written text in the play – acts as timely

encouragement for Roland, but can also be viewed as a dedication. It is an explicit

memorialisation of those who MacNeice, through this play, wishes to memorialise: the

soldiers who had lost their lives in a war that ended only eight months before the play was

broadcast, who his listeners would recognise as their own fathers, brothers, and sons.

MacNeice, here, doesn't focus on the patriotic defence of specific national or cultural

values, or on the "imagined community" of Britain, but on the abstract idea of free will – in

opposition to totalitarianism. *The Dark Tower*'s structure and stylistic techniques describe

conflicts between tradition and individual identity, between totality and plurality, and most

importantly, between the oral epic heroic quest and its descendent the religious morality-

quest, and the more dialogic, polyphonic potentials of the multi-vocal poetic radio play.

Christopher Holme points to the parallels between Roland's quest and MacNeice's life:

MacNeice's initially detached, intellectual view of the war against Nazi Germany was

followed by his return to England in order to devote himself to the radio propaganda work

that inevitably crowded out his poetry (Holme 61). Despite *The Dark Tower*'s moral message

and heavy use of archetypes and symbolism the work communicates ambivalence; the

archetypal landscapes and characters seem to spring as if from the torturous psychological

dialogues of Roland's mind. This sense of internal dream-world is emphasised by the

improbabilities of the plot, by the troubling of boundaries regarding space and time, and

through sound-techniques such as the magnified heart-beat that accompanies Roland's

confrontation with evil at the play's end, heightening the sense of bodily presence and

vulnerability while also echoing the ticking clock's reminder of mortality:

> ROLAND. Aha, you piece of clockwork –
>
> > Trying to have your little say while you can
> > Before your wheels run down here in the empty desert.
>
> (MacNeice 2008: 64)

In his introductory note to the script, MacNeice writes: "I have my beliefs and they

permeate The Dark Tower. But do not ask me what Ism it illustrates or what Solution if

offers" (MacNeice 2008: 22).

Under Milk Wood (1954)

Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* is, in terms of critical responses, repeat broadcasts and

recordings, one of the most successful radio plays ever written (Lewis 72). In the years

preceding *Under Milk Wood*, Thomas had begun an attempt at a "play in verse" for radio

which he had abandoned. As he explained in a letter to Marguerite Caetani, "the language

was altogether swamping the subject [. . .] I found I was labouring at each line as though I

was making some savage, and devious, metaphysical lyric and not a play at all" (Thomas

1952: 154). For *Under Milk Wood* Thomas created his own hybrid style of poetic prose which

drew heavily on his wartime feature work. First broadcast on BBC radio's Third Programme

on Monday January 25th 1954, the play built on Thomas's by then considerable radio

experience both as writer, actor and programme compiler: as well as writing wartime

propaganda features, Thomas had acted in the 1950 production of MacNeice's *The Dark*

Tower and the 1946 and 1948 productions of David Jones's Word War I epic – originally

written for the page – *In Parentheses* (Cleverdon 9). As Douglas Cleverdon makes clear in

The Growth of Milk Wood, *Under Milk Wood* draws on a series of reminiscence talks for the

Welsh Home Service broadcast between 1943 and 1945, including the precursor of *Under*

Milk Wood, *Early One Morning* (August 31st 1945) and dramatised documentaries *The*

Londoner (July 15th 1946), for the BBC African Service, and *Margate, Past and Present*

(1946), for New York's WOR station (Cleverdon 9). *Quite Early One Morning'*s first-person

narration showcases the same idiosyncratic prose language as *Under Milk Wood*, with its

expansive listing, alliteration, surreal personification and transferred epithets. The narrator

is more speculative than the narrators of *Under Milk Wood*, tending to guess or imagine

what the town's inhabitants might be dreaming or doing rather than showing us: "Who lived in these cottages? I was a stranger to the sea town, fresh or stale from the city" (Thomas 1991: 12). The town's inhabitants do not speak until the end of the piece – where the form shifts and each character speaks a rhyming quatrain. This shift from narrative to a structured series of monologues, from a relatively naturalistic piece to something more fantastical, is introduced through the image of chimney smoke taking the shape of the previous night's dreams, and then through the device of the voices, as if supernaturally discovered or floating over the air: "Oh! The town was waking now and I heard directly, insistently over the slow-speaking sea, the voices of the town blown up to me" (Thomas 1991: 13). This structural and imaginative shift into a more liminoid and dialogic space is a cruder precursor to the world of *Under Milk Wood*, in which the 'blind listener' is able to transcend barriers of time and space, of interior and exterior reality and – in a manner that recalls Robert Desnos's 'Le Clef Des Songes' broadcasts – to hear the voices of the dead and the dreaming townsfolk.

Early drafts of the 'play for voices' that was to become *Under Milk Wood* were given the working title *The Town Was Mad* (Cleverdon 5). In an effort to impose a more conventional, Aristotelian dramatic plot on the simple time-sequence that had sufficed in *Quite Early One Morning*, Thomas contrasted the eccentric, carnivalesque community with its more conformist, 'sane' surroundings. He constructed a trial in which Llareggub's citizens, led by Captain Cat, argue against the proposed declaration of the town as an 'insane area', and then capitulate – begging to be separated from the sane world as soon as possible – when faced with the Prosecution's description of the ideally sane town (Jones vii). This more didactic structure was dispensed with in favour of a more episodic, repetitive, cyclical and radically polyphonic structure which follows the temporal arc of night and day in Llareggub. As Henry Treece observes:

> *Under Milk Wood* can give no possible support to any belief that Dylan Thomas might
> have become a playwright. It is a series of labyrinthine, microscopic insights,
> magnificently moving, emotionally, in its separate units, but blurred and static when
> seen as a whole.
> (Treece 21)

The Structure and thematic concerns of *Under Milk Wood* owe something, it seems, to the 'Circe' section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and, through this, to Book 11 of *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus communes with Tiresias the blind prophet and the spirits of the dead (XI. 90-151). In 1932 or 1933 Thomas had spoken to his socialist friend Bert Trick about his desire to write a Welsh version of *Ulysses* in which the action was contained within a twenty-four hour framework (Cleverdon 2). In section 15 of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom visit Dublin's red-light district, Nighttown. The narrative is partially constructed of hallucinations – one of which involves Bloom being put in the dock to answer charges from a number of disapproving women (Joyce 433-453). Like *Under Milk Wood*, Section 15 of *Ulysses* consists of narrative sections interspersed with dialogue and song.

We can also see, in *Under Milk Wood*, the clear influence of the BBC feature's documentary 'sound picture' style. The structure of *Under Milk Wood* shares many similarities with Thomas's 1946 feature *The Londoner*, made for the BBC's Africa service. The *Londoner* follows the lives of a supposedly typical Shepherd's Bush couple, Ted and Lily Jackson, and their children, Carole and Len, through a 24-hour period. The bureaucratic, authoritative, omniscient 'questioner' and 'voice of an expert' give way, quite quickly, to a more genial 'narrator' as Ted and Lily tell their stories with increasing confidence. The disparity between the 'official' version of the neighbourhood and that of its inhabitants mirrors the encounter with the 'Voice of a guide-book' in *Under Milk Wood*. Montrose Street is apparently "Too cold in the winter, too hot in the summer.

Ugly, inconvenient, and infinitely depressing" and yet, according to its residents, "It's a

nice, lively street. There's all the shops you want at one end, and there's pubs at both

ends. Mightn't be much to look at but there's always things going on" (Thomas 1991:

76). As in *Under Milk Wood* and following in the tradition of the BBC radio feature,

Thomas foregrounds the colloquial voices of the area described, creating a sense of

'actuality'. The listener enters in to Ted and Lily's pre-waking dreams, and – as in *Under*

Milk Wood – the characters' short dialogues are interspersed with monologues, and

woven into a narrative by the narrator. Strikingly, *The Londoner* juxtaposes the recent

violence and upheaval of the war with the everyday reality of post-war life. Lily dreams

of "Victory night". Ted and Lily remember Ted's three years as a prisoner of war. The

couple's sense of their locale, of the familiar, is presented as an essential comfort. Ted,

remembering his time as a POW, explains: "I used to say to myself, I'm married. I live in

Shepherd's Bush, I've got two kids [. . .] I used to say [. . .] I'm a Londoner, I am" Lily

highlights the importance of wartime radio as both source of information and

reassurance:

> Before they said on the wireless he was a prisoner of war, oh long before, I knew he
> wasn't dead [. . .] I knew he was thinking of me. I used to hear his voice in the silly old
> dance tunes they played on the wireless, but the words weren't silly any more.
> (Thomas 1991: 86)

Although the characters of *The Londoner* are not so vivid –and the patchwork of voices not

nearly so skilfully constructed – as in *Under Milk Wood*, and the diction is far more prosaic,

we can argue that a similar memorial impulse is at play here. Indeed, more explicitly so. *The*

Londoner aims to reinforce the familiarity and stability of Ted and Lily's home within a

broader reality of trauma and loss; a memory – particularly an idealised one – can be

talismanic, a protection against mortality. Ted describes his careful remembering of the

family home and his sleeping children while a prisoner of war:

> at the bottom of Len's bed there's soldiers and a bear and a kind of duck that makes
> the wrong noise when you press it: miaow, like a cat. I remembered that all right.
> And you and me were sitting downstairs just like we are now. And you could *hear* the
> chaps all around you, thinking, as they lay down with their eyes wide open. Some with
> their mouths wide open too, snorting like Spitfires. Dreaming away [. . .] All of us
> thinking about home. Sentimental. Nobody called nobody sentimental then.
> (Thomas 1991: 90)

In *Under Milk Wood* Thomas's careful observation and manipulation of colloquial language

works towards the construction of characters who are often fantastical, archetypal, parodic,

and comic, and who exist within the mythical, imaginary space of Llareggub – yet they are

also rooted in a deeply familiar, documentary-like construction of everyday life in a post-

war, Welsh town. The voices of Llareggub, though speaking largely in English, are often

distinctively Welsh in colloquial syntax and vocabulary: for example, the drowned sailor's

"Tell my missus no I never" (Thomas 1959: 4). The language spoken throughout the play is

also very distinctly Thomas's own. With its long, leggy sentences, expansive lists, piled-up

adjectives, assonance, alliteration and transferred epithets, Thomas's idiosyncratic language

– as in *The Odyssey* and in Joyce's *Ulysses* – is an integral part of the play's character. This

distinctive language is one of the ways in which Thomas clearly signals that this depiction of

place is not intended as a documentary or 'realistically' representative piece but is instead

comic-utopian. Thomas uses broad stereotypes to parody Welsh small-town life, but his

critique is softened, to a degree, by the fantastical and excessive elements of Llarregyb.

  Like ancient epic poetry, *Under Milk Wood* uses sonic and rhythmic patterning and regular

repetition to reinforce its imagery in the listener's mind. For example, 'black' is repeated

nine times in the first three pages of the script; "night" is also repeated nine times here. But

unlike the epic's repetition of standard epithets such as "swift-footed Achilles" or "the wine-

dark sea", *Under Milk Wood* uses repeated individual words as a sort of anchor for a

virtuosic and excessive display of linguistic variation. "Black" is "bible-black", "bombazine-black", "sloeblack" and "crowblack". It is the "slow deep salt and silent black" – the night and also the sea. (Thomas 1959: 1-3). Together, these comparators work to construct and reinforce a sense of social reality. Here, for example, we note the emphasis on Christianity, mourning, the natural world, and the sea on which the fishing-village depends. The use of metaphor here also recalls the 'kennings' of Old Norse and Old English poetry. Thomas's use of lists, as well conveying a great deal of information in a condensed way and allowing for lateral shifts in space and focus, often has something in common with the epic catalogues of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In Llareggub's harbour, "the *Arethusa*, the *Curlew* and the *Skylark*, *Zanzibar*, *Rhiannon*, the *Rover*, the *Cormorant*, and the *Star of Wales*" are anchored (Thomas 1959: 2). This level of detail and specificity adds to the sense of the town's particular reality, but it also functions, within the space of the play, as if creating a documentary or memorial record. The distinctive nature of *Under Milk Wood*'s language makes its world seem both total and fantastical. According to Charles Rowan Beye, the language of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* was similarly removed from common speech, having evolved from the cross-pollination of different Greek dialects. It was "something totally artificial and totally alien to common speech, the charm of which is seductive and addictive" (Beye 2006: 25). Thomas, however, intersperses narration with dialogue which, though carefully choreographed, is colloquial and recognisable – anchored in the everyday.

Thomas refuses of a more conventional plot with clearly defined dramatic action in favour of a narrative arc focused, as in Turner's concept of ritual, on the cyclical rhythms of the natural world. This was viewed by some critics, such as David Holbrook, as a failing (Holbrook 1962). However, if we view the piece in terms of the sub-genre of the multi-vocal poetic radio play rather than measuring it against conventional dramatic theatre of the time, it's clear that this choice of structure is integral to the character and ethos of the piece.

Thomas himself struggled to define his new work, explaining in a letter to Marguerite

Caetani that he was trying

> …to write a piece, a play, an impression for voices, an entertainment out of the
> darkness, of the town I live in, and to write it simply and warmly and comically with
> lots of movement and varieties of moods, so that, at many levels, through sight and
> speech, description and dialogue, evocation and parody, you came to know the town
> as an inhabitant of it.
> (Thomas 1952: 154)

As in Joyce's 'Circe' section of *Ulysses*, Thomas's extensive use of dream and dream space in

Under Milk Wood, and the way in which the residents of Llareggub tend to disregard social

convention, suggests Turner's conception of the "liminoid" in art. It also, in many ways,

suggests Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, liminoid space of carnival, as outlined in his work

on Rabelais. Bakhtin views the carnival, rooted in irreverent folklore rather than more

sombre or static traditions of memorial, as allowing "a special type of communication

impossible in everyday life" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). The idea of ambiguous laughter – both

mocking and celebratory – as disrupting and levelling social status, as "degrading and

materialising" is central to Bakhtin's idea of carnival's anti-hierarchical space.[40] The logic of

carnival is that of the world turned upside-down, of "numerous parodies and travesties,

humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). These

ideas correspond with *Under Milk Wood'*s 'madness'. Llareggub's characters, though clearly

defined, inhabit their social roles in ways that defy and play with boundaries and

convention. Boundaries tend to be troubled or disregarded. For example: Willy Nilly

postman reads the townsfolk's private letters and disseminates the information – in much

the same way as characters' interior dream imagery is shared between characters as well as

with the audience. Lord Cutglass exists in a marginal, timeless world of unreliable clocks; Dai

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[40] This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretence at
immutability, sought a dynamic expression: it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All
the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with this sense of
the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.
(Bakhtin 1982: 10)

Bread has two wives; Mrs Ogmore Pritchard has two (dead) husbands; and Polly Garter's

babies are fathered by unidentified men in the woods. All of *Under Milk Wood*'s characters

trouble conventional structures and boundaries, but in doing so they strengthen the sense

of the town as playful, carnivalesque community. Discussing bodily images of "grotesque

realism" in Rabelais, Bakhtin links these images to "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over

abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual [. . .] but

to the collective, ancestral body of all the people" as well as to transformation and death

(Bakhtin 1984: 19). The joyous, unrestrained description of Llareggub's idiosyncrasies and

excesses, together with the play's focus on intercut interior, unheard and supernatural

voices – dream voices, thought voices, monologuing voices, voices of the dead – creates a

richly textured liminoid space in which the community is tightly bonded, and its experiences

intricately interwoven. *Under Milk Wood*, through the excess and jouissance of its poetic

language, is also determined to question and play with linguistic structures, with semantic

notions of 'making sense'. Like the polyphonic social bonding behaviours – including ritual

behaviours – that developed parallel with the voice as communicator of information, Under

Milk Wood's voices create the sense of a socially bonded and continuous "imagined

community". *Under Milk Wood*, in its determined evocation of community and of communal

bonding, creates and memorialises a utopian world removed from the troubles of World

War II. In *Under Milk Wood* the action is punctuated, and the time kept, by the ritualistic

actions of Rev. Eli Jenkins, whose gentle, forgiving prayers and sermons are spoken – as the

radio voice is – out into the silence:

    And every evening at sun-down
    I ask a blessing on the town,
    For whether we last the night or no
    I'm sure is always touch-and-go.

    We are not wholly bad or good
    Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
    And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
    To see our best side, not our worst.

(Thomas 1959: 79)

Jenkins' paternalism is protective rather than judgemental; his plea for the common

humanity of Llareggub's inhabitants is addressed as much to the audience as to his God.

   Under Milk Wood's spatial and temporal realities are mapped largely through the voices

of the narrators, First Voice and Second Voice, and through the experience of blind Captain

Cat as he hears the town go about its business. The use of a blind narrator, combined with a

strong focus on night time and dream, encourages the reader to imagine and experience an

intensive, sharply focused, intimate and privileged sound-world: "You can hear the dew

falling, and the hushed town breathing. Only *your* eyes are unclosed to see the black and

folded town fast, and slow, asleep" (Thomas 1959: 2). As previously noted, Thomas's lists

create an impressionistic sketch of the town and its various buildings and inhabitants:

> night in the four-ale, quiet as a domino; in Ocky Milkman's lofts like a mouse with
> gloves, in Dai Bread's bakery flying like black flour. It is to-night in Donkey Street,
> trotting silent, with seaweed on its hooves, along the cockled cobbles, past curtained
> fernpot, text and trinket, harmonium, holy dresser, watercolours done by hand, china
> dog and rosy tin teacaddy
> (Thomas 1959: 2).

Here – as often in the play – the images seep and shift though equivalence and association

in a dream-like manner, through metaphor, metonym and transferred epithet. Night is

imagined as black flour in the bakery and then as a trotting donkey as we, and it, move into

Donkey Street. As the play continues, the omniscient narrators continue to introduce and

link each new vignette, shifting back and forth from geographical overview to specific space

and from external view to interior psychological experience. This intercutting of voices

across space and time is highly cinematic, and reflects the marked shift in form brought

about through new audio and visual recording technologies in the 1940s and 1950s.[41] In

Under Milk Wood the anonymity of the two narrator voices, and the sharing of the narrator

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[41] See Briggs *A History of British Broadcasting Volume 4: Sound and vision*.

function with Captain Cat, help to underpin an explicitly non-naturalistic structure in which all voices participate in the telling. The seventy-two voices (plus children's chorus) are utilised in such a variety of ways, and with such virtuosity, that conventional character development and linear narrative are beside the point. Within the distinctively textured language there is a variety of form and register, including narrative, dialogue, monologue, song, poetry, the guide book, children's games, and letters.

As Peter Lewis observes in 'The Radio Road to Llareggub', sections in which the action shifts rapidly from place to place create a similar effect to cutting in visual film: the cooperative interplay of voices creates a sense of community that transcends physical distance, bringing the people of Llareggub together (Lewis 107). For example:

FIRST VOICE

Mary Ann Sailors

MARY ANN SAILORS

praises the lord who made porridge.

FIRST VOICE

Mr Pugh

MR PUGH

remembers ground glass as he juggles his omelet.

FIRST VOICE

Mrs Pugh

MRS PUGH

nags the salt-cellar.

FIRST VOICE

Willy Nilly postman

WILLY NILLY

downs his last bucket of black brackish tea and rumbles out bandy to the clucking back where the hens twitch and grieve for their tea-soaked sops.

(Thomas 1959: 31)

In this sequence, not only is physical distance overridden but the roles of characters and narrators are blurred as the characters describe their own actions for the audience. There is, in fact, no extended dialogue between characters in *Under Milk Wood*. Instead, the voices are tightly woven together through rapid shifts in place, through shifts between speech and unvoiced thoughts, and through the ways in which characters enter into one another's dream worlds – emphasising the sense of shared, un-boundaried space. Llaregub, though grounded in imagined physical space, consists of a community of voices. The drawing together of the town's relatively atomised inhabitants in this way suggests, and in some ways mirrors, the radio listeners' simultaneous, communal experience. Mr Mog Edwards introduces himself thus: "I am a draper mad with love. I love you more than all the flannelette and calico, candlewick, dimity, crash and merino, tussore, cretonne, crepon, muslin, poplin, ticking and twill in the whole cloth hall of the world" (Thomas 1959: 6). This highly non-naturalistic style, in which characters are involved in narration and often voice their emotions and desires very directly, is far closer to the conventions of opera and the musical than the conventions of stage drama. Dylan Thomas gleefully satirises and subverts the idea of the 'dramatised documentary', creating – as he intended – an actuality of community within the play itself.

Thomas's complex, carefully choreographed choir of voices is brought into relief by the "Voice of a guide-book" early on in the play, whose (external) narrative authority is so clearly contradicted by the town's inhabitants: "Less than five hundred souls inhabit the

three quaint streets and the few narrow by-lanes and scattered farm steads that constitute

this small, decaying watering-place which may, indeed, be called a 'backwater of life'"

(Thomas 1959: 23). This interlude constitutes the sole remnant of the external authoritative

judgement of Llareggub and its inhabitants that formed such a key component of Thomas's

earlier drafts of *The Town Was Mad*. Thomas's comic yet compassionate treatment of his

characters – with all their foibles and idiosyncrasies – is voiced most directly by the Rev. Eli

Jenkins. The residents' gossiping, joke-playing, drinking, murderous plots and

unconventional romantic and sexual activities are never condemned and never cause real

harm or hurt. The play occurs in a familiar yet distanced, dream-like space which encourages

the audience to accept and enjoy its idiosyncrasies as we accept the strange or fractured

worlds of dream, myth, or folktale. *Under Milk Wood* is steeped in the ethos of the BBC

radio feature, and as such is dialogic and polyphonic in form and function. *Under Milk*

Wood's more abstract assertions and statements of ethics, unlike those of *The Dark Tower*,

tend to be implicit rather than explicit, gently rather than forcefully coercive, such as the

Reverend Eli Jenkins' prayer: "We are not wholly bad or good/ Who live our lives under Milk

Wood" (Thomas 1959: 79).

Night Thoughts (1955)

David Gascoyne's 'radiophonic poem' *Night Thoughts* was commissioned by BBC features

producer Douglas Cleverdon in the early 1950s as a "work for words and music" and

broadcast on the Third Programme in the year after *Under Milk Wood*, on Wednesday

December 7th 1955 (Gascoyne 1995). Like *Under Milk Wood* and like Joyce's 'Circe', *Night*

Thoughts is a polyphonic piece which focuses on night and the workings of the unconscious

mind. *Night Thoughts* is strongly influenced by the French Surrealist movement with which

Gascoyne was associated.[42] Its unidentified, anonymous voices narrate a journey into the

'underworld' of interior consciousness and dream. In *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, Gascoyne

explains the importance of the realm of night-time and sleep for the Surrealists. They

believed that sleep was, for many people, the only way of accessing "that other plane of

existence, where stones fall upwards and the sun shines at night" (Gascoyne 1970: xi). The

general population was, as they saw it, "cut off from the world of the imagination and from

the possibility of a different life" (Gascoyne 1970: xi). In response, the Surrealist movement

advocated mass access to a particular kind of imaginative waking life which, they believed,

had previously been available only to poets. Published in 1924, Andre Breton's *Manifesto of*

Surrealism railed against the constraints of preconception, rationalism and "civilisation",

highlighting and drawing on Sigmund Freud's valorising of the realms of dream and the

imagination. Here is Breton's definition of Surrealism, inspired by the sleep-state sessions in

which Robert Desnos took part, from Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*:

> n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing or
> by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all
> control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic and moral preoccupations.
> (Breton qtd. in Gascoyne 1970: 61)

The Surrealists advocated the challenging of boundaries between sleeping and waking

states and between 'reality' and the life of the imagination, as well as challenging the

constraints of conventional taste and morality. In 1929, in *The Second Manifesto*, Breton

expands on his original ideas regarding Surrealism, describing its work as aiming towards

determining a certain "spiritual plane on which life and death, the real and the imaginary,

the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are not conceived

as opposites" (Breton qtd. in Gascoyne 1970: 86). Breton's conception of this "spiritual

plane", in which conventional hierarchies and boundaries are challenged and/or

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[42] For an explanation of Gascoyne's involvement with the surrealists, see Gascoyne's *A short survey of Surrealism.*

transgressed, has clear similarities with Victor Turner's observations of the liminal phase of ritual, and the "liminoid" in art more generally (Turner 1974). It can also, perhaps more precisely, be linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories regarding carnival, which we can view as a social construction drawing on the liminal phase of ritual. Recalling the Surrealist world where "stones fall upwards and the sun shines at night", carnival is, as we have discussed, concerned with the idea of 'the world turned upside-down,' the inversion of roles and disruption of boundary and hierarchy (Bakhtin 1984).

   Night Thoughts is structured in three sections: 'The Nightwatchers', 'Megalometropolitan Carnival' and 'Encounter with Silence'. Although there is a clear narrative arc, the play does not follow a theatrical three-act structure. Instead, the first and third sections function, in part, as a sort of framing device for the more liminoid, energetic and excessive dream world of the second section. In a similar way to MacNiece in *The Dark Tower,* and echoing Robert Desnos's concerns that the radio apparatus should be made explicit to the audience in order to avoid manipulative or harmful effects, Gascoyne makes the constructed nature of *Night Thoughts* absolutely explicit from the outset. The voices of *Night Thoughts* do not pretend to represent individual characters; they function, rather, as manifestations of the internal dialogue – and monologue – of a sort of imagined 'collective consciousness'. As in *Under Milk Wood* there is very little actual conversation between voices in *Night Thoughts*. The play consists, instead, largely of interlinked monologue. The first and third sections, 'Nightwatchers' and 'Encounter with silence' address and include the radio audience most explicitly:

> My message is sent out upon the waves
> Of a black and boundless sea to where you drift,
>
> Each in a separate lit room, as though on rafts,
>
> Survivors of the great lost ship, *The Day*.
> (Gascoyne 1995: 27)

The narration of 'The Nightwatchers' begins in blank verse, and though the metre

becomes more and more varied as the section progresses, iambic pentameter remains a

strong presence.

   'Nightwatchers' is a philosophical discussion of the problems of humanity that is

rooted, very much in the manner of W.H. Auden's 'September 1939', in anxieties

regarding the Cold War – but it also expresses utopian desires related to the power of

radio:

                              [. . .] if they but knew

   How to break through the silence and noise of the great night
   Of all that is unknown to us, that weighs down in between
   One lonely human being and another?
   (Gascoyne 1995: 30)

The monologues of the dominant narrative voices are intercut, on two occasions, with

dialogue representing a sort of collective nocturnal conversation:

   [*Voice C*]

                        Russia, The US.A.,

   Atomic Power, Foreign Powers…

   [*Voice F*]

                        Go to sleep. Put out

   That light! The War is over now. It's late.

   Why don't those people go to bed?
   (Gascoyne 1995: 31)

The monologue voices of 'The Nightwatchers' are constructed in lyric, metaphysical mode

rather than seeking to tell a story, as is fitting for the sense of timelessness and stasis in

this section. The monologues describe strange voices "that might come from under

ground" [. . .] Like the sound of distant rioting [. . .] as though crowds underground/ Were

pushing upwards". These voices are identified as being associated with anxiety, fear and

death: "Dread of life and fear of Nothing" (Gascoyne 1995: 35). Subsequently, a

consideration of the night sky gives way to a description of London that, in its mixing of

myth and the everyday, and in its diction, imagery, and use of rhyme, recalls T.S. Eliot's

'Rhapsody on a Windy Night':[43]

> And I have sometimes gone out towards midnight
> Through streets of houses and apartment-blocks
> . . . .
> Inumerable tired executives prepared for bed
> While past street-corner lamps dogs' pensive escorts
> Tugged them on leads [. . .]
> (Gascoyne 1995: 38).

   "Enter the dreams" is proclaimed in the manner of a stage direction or intertitle, and the

dreams, having first appeared as smoke, are described as "drifting in swiftly twisting clouds"

(Gascoyne 1995: 41). But this descriptive mode gives way to the imperative as the listener is

encouraged to "Enter the dream's great glimmering park", the imagined space of a specific

dream, arriving at the Circus (meaning circle) at "The very heart of the primaeval city" and

entering "the lair of the Labyrinth-Omphalos Boss" through an encounter with the

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[43] From Eliot's 'Rhapsody':

Twelve o'clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations,
Its divisions and precisions,
Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.
(Eliot 18-20)

"Unknown" at the foot of the "quicksilver fountain" (Gascoyne 1995: 42-32). Omphalos, meaning 'navel', is an ancient Greek word referring to a sacred stone marking the centre. At Delphi, the omphalos marked what ancient Greeks believed to be the centre – or 'navel' – of the world, the place where oracles were delivered (Leeming 78, 97). The omphalos features in Homer's *Odyssey* and also in James Joyce's *Ulysses.* Gascoyne's use of the image of the omphalos suggests a route into the underworld, as well as the idea of oracle and prophecy.

As the earth yawns wide and the listener enters the underground realm – which is at first, in fact, very much like a London Underground station, the metre of the narrative shifts into anapaestic pentameter, adding to the strong sense of energy, drive and momentum at this point:

[Narration two]

Now you follow the steps and descend to the City's true heart,
And are soon in a Plaza illumined more brightly than day.
. . . .
Close at hand is the brisk business district, just under you lie
The platforms from which the incessant electric expresses
Go rushing from City to faraway Suburbs, and back from the Suburbs again
(Gascoyne 1995: 43)

Gascoyne's 'Megametropolitan Carnival' is a parody of a busy, labyrinthine, excessive city centre. The listener travels further and further down, "Descending past columns of spiralling stairs". Gascoyne's engine-like "Train-wheels chorus" emphasises the mechanistic momentum of the scene with its mindless repetition. Relatively innocuous repeated colloquial phrases such as "Hurry up and get on" are quickly superseded by "The day of Wrath the Atom plan" in a sequence that links the drive for technological advancement with the death drive – and the Cold War (Gascoyne 1995: 45). 'Megalometropolitan Carnival' is the section in which Gascoyne uses the greatest variety of speech registers, shifting away from narrative monologues and using more impressionistic and sound-focused language.

We hear Gascoyne's unidentified narrative voices and the alarmed voice of a "sleeping citydweller", but also the "train-Wheels Chorus", as well as narration and choruses that utilise and parody the language of advertising: "Drink more drink! Wear more clothes! Don't lose hope! Don't forget!" (Gascoyne 1995: 47). The "Commentator," "V.I.P." and "Master of Spring Opening Ceremonies" who appear at the end of the section are, like the "Sleeping Citydweller", types defined by their functions rather than individual characters. Their diction and interaction within the play mirrors the documentary and 'actuality' style of the radio feature, and the conventions of radio broadcast news. This is the only section of the play which is partially spoken in prose: "Tonight is Carnival Time in this great underworld city of platforms and staircases and here I am on the spot to give you a ringside description of the scene. . ." (Gascoyne 1995: 48). By using this technique Gascoyne counteracts the potential distancing effect of the scene's fantastical nature, creating a sense of 'actuality' that emphasises the vividness of dream experience. Unlike the carnivalesque space of *Under Milk Wood*, the 'Megalometropolitan Carnival' is a dystopian vision, a parody of capitalistic excess. The pleasures and drives of this underworld are shown to be spiritually empty and narcissistic, designed to drown out the spectre of the void rather than functioning, as they do in *Under Milk Wood*, as comic 'levellers', markers of common humanity and community. The revellers are a faceless chorus rather than being composed of individual, interwoven voices. Masks, rather than freeing participants from the boundaries of status and set roles, conceal inner emptiness and vulnerability:

                                        [. . .] Masks
    Like snailshells are become, the glossy whorled
    Concealment we excrete to screen our softness from ourselves.
    (Gascoyne 1995: 51)

Gascoyne parodies, through exaggeration, the hedonistic and capitalistic avoidance of fear, death and "the void," creating a very different take on Bakhtin's notion of carnival. There is

no sense of "communitas" or disruption of status or hierarchy occurring within the world of

the play. However, in its parodying of the capitalistic city, in its troubling of boundaries –

and in its ambivalent, comic laughter, both mocking and celebratory – Gascoyne's

'Megalometropolitan Carnival' challenges status and convention in the world outside the

play's reality. The combined spaces of carnival and the underworld (or Hades) allow notions

of time and space to be manipulated, so that Gascoyne is able to construct the fantasy of a

singular, collective dream.

  As a coda following the 'Megalometropolitan Carnival' 's cathartic release of collective

anxiety, 'Encounter with silence' focuses on an individual encounter with silence and

nature. Once again, the narration – essentially a soliloquy – is split between unidentified

voices whose diction is similar. The voices muse on the experience of the carnival:

"Nature, the Earth, Unconsciousness and Death. We are drawn down and back towards

them in the Night" (Gascoyne 1995: 54). Gascoyne uses assonance, alliteration and

repetition to add to the energy and form of his metaphysical rhetoric here, eschewing line

breaks and metrical patterning to create a looser, more open style: "Dream-fugues:

variations of fortuitous themes, intricate tracery unwinding like designs drawn in a trance

across the taut sky of the universal ear" (Gascoyne 1995: 56). As in *Under Milk Wood*,

there is a particular focus on the minutiae of sound, as if the speakers had extraordinary

perception. As one of the voices explains: "Out of hearing stays unthought-of; out of sight

is out of mind. And yet, how haunted we all are" (Gascoyne 1995: 57). This focus on

sounds and sound patterning is part of Gascoyne's Surrealist desire to make the hidden

world of the unconscious tangible. The solitary man's existential and spiritual crisis is

soothed by an encounter with "something vastly fundamental" – perhaps a higher being,

perhaps nature and mortality, or a mixture of all of these. 'Encounter with Silence'

repeats the previous section's journey to the underworld – or katabasis – in a more

abstract, less dialogic mode. Like *Under Milk Wood*, *Night Thoughts* uses its radio voices

to create an evocation of, and hymn to, human interconnectivity and community.

However, the almost total absence of distinct, interwoven characters and voices, and the

far more explicit and linear focus on the journey into interior consciousness and the

unconscious, mean that *Night Thoughts* tends to come across as a single monologue

distributed among many voices. Though dialogic in its use of parody and in its

philosophical discussion, *Night Thoughts* only partially incorporates the polyphonic

'actuality' style of the BBC radio feature. However, the atomised nature of the narrative

voice serves to emphasise and underline the work's plea for connection, cooperation, and

compassion. *Night Thoughts* undermines and, paradoxically, reinforces the utopian

fantasy of radio as creating and enabling a more deeply interconnected world:

> Greetings to the solitary. Friends, fellow beings, you are not strangers to us. We are closer
> To one another than we realise. Let us remember one another at night, even though we do
> not know each other's names.
> (Gascoyne 1995: 61)

The Dark Tower, *Under Milk Wood* and *Night Thoughts* all, in their own distinctive

ways, display the influence of oral heroic epic poetry as a means of memorial and as

repository of collective cultural knowledge. All of these plays are also clearly influenced

by the dialogic, polyphonic ethics and aesthetics of the BBC radio feature, and by the aims

and functioning of radio propaganda features during World War II. Through their

choreographed, interrelated, echoing, recursive voices, these plays evoke the social

bonding and ritualistic functions of the human voice and its role in creating a sense of

imagined community. My analyses demonstrate the ways in which the traditions of the

pre-literate mnemonic oral heroic epic poem and of Greek tragedy were combined with

the material conditions of radio broadcast, the utopian desires of radio producers and

poets, and social and cultural responses to World War II, to shape the multi-vocal poetic

radio play. Influenced by Freudian and Jungian conceptions of dream, myth and the

unconscious, these multi-vocal poetic radio plays sought to rework the hero-focused

mytheme of the nekuian katabasis in a way that reflected and spoke to a diverse mass

audience, evoking and exploring notions of community and common culture. Both oral

and literate, integrating aspects of the oral epic, the 'actuality' feature, and the social

bonding function of communal music and song, the multi-vocal poetic radio play utilises

and dramatises the desires, fears, and tensions inherent in ideas of subjectivity, identity

and imagined community.

Chapter III

A Break in Continuity

1. **Women's Voices**

A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe.
Dylan Thomas

As discussed in the previous chapter, the multi-vocal poetic radio plays of Louis MacNeice,

Dylan Thomas and David Gascoyne reworked western traditions of the ancient heroic oral

epic in a dialogic, polyphonic mode that reflected the "liminoid" qualities of poetry and of

radio broadcast, the documentary and 'actuality' potentials of new recording technologies,

and the political idealism of BBC radio producers, such as A.E.F. Harding. In utilising the

model of the oral epic as repository of collective cultural memory these multi-vocal poetic

radio plays, influenced by epic conventions – such as nekuian katabasis – and by the radio

propaganda of World War II, sought to define, evoke and perpetuate a broadly inclusive

mass culture. At the same time, these plays were engaged in critiquing and reworking the

discourses and aesthetics of their cultural inheritance. And yet, these models of broadly

inclusive communal cultural experience have their limits. What happens when poets whose

subjective experience has historically been marginalised or silenced within their own

cultural traditions – women poets, for example – engage with the multi-vocal poetic radio

play? How did such poets, writing in the mid-20th century, navigate traditional value

judgements and power dynamics regarding memory, cultural continuity, imagined

community, and voice? How did such poets critically engage with their cultural inheritance

to begin to shift and remake not only their own cultural traditions, but, ultimately, the

power structures through which their work was received and considered? As Michelle

Hilmes asserts,

> Media narratives, structures, and audiences are produced in, and themselves help to produce, the same crucible of negotiations of social power that shapes the histories through which we later understand them.
> (Hilmes qtd. in Mitchell 11)

This chapter will examine the form and functioning of and Stevie Smith's *A Turn Outside*

(The Third programme, Saturday May 23rd, 1959) and Sylvia Plath's *Three Women* (The Third

Programme, Sunday August 19th, 1962), analysing the plays' constructions of female

subjectivity in relation to notions of common culture, imagined community, dialogism and

polyphony – and in relation to the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. Stevie Smith's

A Turn Outside was the first female-authored multi-vocal poetic radio play to be produced at

the BBC. Plath and Smith utilise the lyric – 'personal' – mode rather than explicitly grounding

their work in the public space of the western heroic oral epic tradition, yet they both utilise

and refer to ritualistic, dialogic elements within the epic. In these multi-vocal poetic radio

plays Plath and Smith, I argue, challenge contemporary conceptions of the lyric voice as

monologic autobiography and as "'subjective, personal, isolated experience, a transcendent

and self-sufficient *cri du coeur*" (Scanlon 3). Through their use of multiple poetic voices, they

demonstrate Jacob Blevins' notion of the lyric as a potential site of dialogue: between poem

and audience, between the 'self' and other speaker/s in the poem, between individual lyric

poems, and within the discourse of dominant cultural ideologies (Blevins 16).

   As Anne Karpf observes, British radio programming in the mid-20th century tended to

situate women in domestic roles and in domestic space: "Women are placed in the private,

domestic realm by men who operate in the public realm and assume that men are there

too" (Karpf 169). Such delineation of radio space was maintained despite the fact that the

ideal of the middle-class housewife did not reflect the reality of many women's lives. In

1955 for example, 45.9% of all UK women of working age – 15-64 – were part of the Labour

Force (Walsh and Wrigley 2). In the early years of British radio broadcasting, women were

rarely employed as announcers and newsreaders; their voices, in such authoritative modes,

tended to be characterised in the press as shrill, emotional, or otherwise defective. For

example, *The Daily Express*, in 1928, reported that

> Some listeners would go so far as to say that a woman's voice becomes
> monotonous after a time, but that her high notes are sharp, and resemble the
> filing of steel, while low notes often sound like groans.
> (qtd. in Karpf 157)

The configuration of the male voice as language-focused, and able to exist

independently of the body in the cultural realm, and the female voice as sound-

focused, communicating the body, concurs, broadly, with the figurative system of

representation identified in Sherry Ortner's 1974 essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is

to Culture?', as well as with Adriana Cavarero's analysis of conceptions of the bodily

voice in European philosophical traditions: "To put it formulaically: woman sings, man

thinks" (Cavarero 6).

How do female-identified voices – and particularly female-authored, public, poets' voices

situated within western cultural traditions – grapple with their own cultural inheritance?

Elaine Showalter, writing in 1985, argued that women's writing was marked by strategies of

resistance "to the silencing or muting experienced by women in mainstream culture"

(Showalter qtd. in Pumphrey 87). As we have seen, the multi-vocal poetic radio play – as

dialogic, polyphonic epic – evokes and references the liminality of communal ritual and

festival; social hierarchies and boundaries may be disregarded or, potentially, reconfigured.

As Victor Turner suggests, "liminoid" phenomena – phenomena with liminal aspects

occurring outside the socially proscribed structures of ritual – have the potential to involve

"social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos" (Turner 1982: 54). For poets writing from

positions of cultural marginality, however, the particular models of power and subjectivity

associated with liminality and with social identity in oral heroic epic traditions may be

problematic: Smith and Plath's responses to this difficulty incorporate innovative

conceptions of the self as explicitly multiple, decentralised, muted and/or unstable. In this

way, as I intend to demonstrate, the multi-vocal poetic radio play offered, and continues to

offer, rich potential for revisionist mythmaking, and for the radical questioning, subversion

and re-working of cultural constructions of subjectivity. If, as Judith Butler proposes, we

understand gender and its categorisations as "performatively constituted", then we can

begin to deconstruct, parody, question and rework representations of gender, utilising the

"subversive play of gendered meanings" (Butler 2011: 46). Plath and Smith, writing during a

period of significant change in gender politics and in women's material circumstances in the

UK, seek to define their own ideas of female subjectivities, voices, and agency while, at the

same time, working out of a cultural tradition, a "crucible of negotiations of social power"

that tends to view women as 'Other' – as outside or marginal to the cultural discourse

(Hilmes qtd. in Mitchell 11).

A Turn Outside (1959)

Stevie Smith frequently uses different personae and voices in her work. In her lifetime, her

performance of her own work was renowned (Stevenson 24). She performed her poetry on

the radio, but wrote only one multi-vocal poetic radio play. *A Turn Outside* was produced by

Douglas Cleverdon and broadcast in 1959, with Janet Richer playing the part of Stevie Smith

and Hugh Burden as The Interlocutor (Smith 1981: 355). The play utilises the explicitly

dialogic structure of a radio poetry reading and interview, in which 'Stevie Smith' performs

poems for the radio audience and speaks to 'The Interlocutor'. Smith's poems – often tightly

metred and rhymed – are interspersed, like the poetry in Pound's *Testament* and in

Desnos's *Fantomas*, with conversational prose. As with Dylan Thomas's use of the

documentary form, the co-option of this more journalistic 'actuality' style sets up a series of

expectations in the listener which Smith is then able to play with, disrupt, and subvert. The

creation of a fictionalised 'Stevie Smith', in particular, points to the possibility of a

conventionally constructed autobiographical content while simultaneously and deftly

disrupting it. As 'Stevie Smith' says of the voice of 'Muriel', a character in one of her poems,

"Oh it was not I, it was just somebody, anybody, a girl" (Smith 1981: 339). As Martin

Pumphrey points out, this strategy is typical of Smith, whose playful use of conventional

forms enables two sorts of reading: on the one hand, her work can be comfortably

encountered as flippant, unserious, fun – 'just play'; on the other hand, we can view Smith's

playfulness as potentially a serious and purposeful business, intended to unsettle

conventional reality. Like Emily Dickinson, Smith determinedly avoids a romantic, lyric,

unified, authoritative identity in favour of disrupted or multiple identities ("somebody,

anybody"). Stevie Smith's alter ego in 'A Turn Outside' is a sharp paradox, an evasive game:

is 'Stevie Smith' an autobiographical representation of the poet, or is she not? Are the

poems themselves (which also have their own individual lives outside the play)

autobiographical, or are they not? Is the communication of a stable, unified subject possible

– or even, in this context, desirable?

   Smith, in utilising the form of the poetry reading and interview, also plays with the notion

of the authoritative radio voice. 'The Interlocutor', the male voice of authority, is written by

Smith: she carefully constructs her own interrogation. Throughout the play Smith deals with

ideas of originality and the influence of cultural tradition. As the Interlocutor observes, "a lot

of your poems, dear, seem to me sometimes to have tunes to them, I mean as if they ought

to go to music, or as if you had some idea of music when you wrote them" (Smith 1981:

335).[44] These compositions seem to come from an impulse beyond or preceding 'the

symbolic' realm of language, yet they are firmly located within culture – they carry specific

cultural associations. 'Stevie Smith' speaks of the influence of music, particularly hymn

tunes, on her poems, and of her unease about this: "Is that my tune, do you think? . . . These

tunes worry me, and then there is the copyright question" (Smith 1981: 339). These poems,

then, are explicitly defined not as works of individual emotional expression but as dialogic

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[44] The interlocutor's patronising use of 'dear' in this context demonstrates the patriarchal power
structure that defines their relationship. See page 96 for further analysis regarding this term.

reworkings of, and responses to, existing shared cultural material – material which the poet

may feel a deep sense of ambivalence and disquiet towards. 'Stevie Smith' refers to The

Liturgy and *Hymns Ancient and Modern* as sources of musical inspiration. Specifically, the

hymns 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains' (*Hymns* 231: no.265) and 'Jerusalem the Golden'

(*Hymns* 245: no.278) are mentioned. 'Greenland's Icy Mountains' is notable for its

bombastic missionary and colonial zeal:

> From Greenland's icy mountains,
> From India's coral strand,
> . . . .
> They call us to deliver
> Their land from error's chain.

'Jerusalem the Golden' also presents the idea of Christian – and national – superiority: "Oh

sweet and blesséd country,/ The home of God's elect!", and argues for the exaltation of

god, or "King Creator". As the play progresses, 'Stevie Smith' 's references include the

character of Gretchen, who is seduced and destroyed by Faust, and the hymn 'There is a

Green Hill far Away' (*Hymns* 186: no.214), which describes the sacrificial death of Christ. The

more melancholy implications of these references mirror and also drive the narrative

progression of the play as the Interlocutor comes to represent the seductive power of

Death.[45]

There is a recurring theme, in *A Turn Outside*, of cultural and religious constraint and of

'Stevie Smith' 's attempts to deal with it. Explaining her upbringing, for example, she says:

"It was a stiff school I was brought up in. It was a girl's public school but more manly than

the boys' ones are, it outdid them all, in stiffness it did, and keeping a chain on the great

feelings we had." (Smith 1981: 338). Discussing the attraction of death for the character

Muriel she says

> Oh if only we could slough off this beastly religion, that is so cruel, that darkens our
> lives, that clings to us like fire, and if we tear it away we tear the flesh with it [. . .] in

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[45] See also Emily Dickinson's poem 172, 'Because I could not stop for Death', whose depiction of Death as a gentleman caller also shifts towards a realisation of the reality of mortality. Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy (editors) *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*: 1020

the hands of Death she might become free and relaxed and happy…”
(Smith 345)

Death, then, is recognised as outside religious and cultural constraints governing emotional

and sexual behaviour. Death appears, in the play, to be the only means of escape from

cultural constraints that are carried deep within the body (“if we tear [religion] away we

tear the flesh with it”). The “outside” of the title refers to a space outside culture – a space,

as in Smith’s reworking of the myth of Persephone, of liminality and, potentially, of female

power. In this case, “outside” is the space of the play and the poems, as well as the space

“outside” in death (Smith 2002: 134). But is this space “outside” the conventional order one

of exile and loneliness rather than, or as well as, freedom? As is characteristic of Smith’s use

of doubleness, irony and paradox, death is depicted as duplicitous: charming and seductive

yet ultimately associated with silence, horror, and powerlessness. It is also possible to read

this representation of Death as reflecting anxieties regarding ‘Stevie Smith’ ‘s engagement

with the cultural discourse. Despite all her playfulness, tricks and evasion, must such

dialogue lead, ultimately, to her silence?

   Arguably, as previously observed, all voices broadcast over the radio, like telephone

voices, automatically disrupt the notions of unified identity and of presence as linked to the

body. The radio apparatus separates the voice from its source in both space and, potentially,

time. The idea of a unified, authoritative voice speaking from one place is continually

problematised in Stevie Smith’s poetry, and this is certainly the case in *A Turn Outside*.

Towards the play’s end The Interlocutor becomes increasingly forceful and authoritarian,

while ‘Stevie Smith’ struggles to speak:

   S.S: I I I I I…

   I: Don’t stammer. Just think of what you want to say and say it.

   (Smith 1981: 349)

Communication is, of course, not nearly so simple as The Interlocutor suggests. The ‘I’ as an

expression of identity can be deeply problematic: ‘I’ can be multiple, diffuse, unstable, or

supressed. In 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent', Anne Carson explores the potentials

of silence and the incomprehensible in the context of translation. The "catastrophe" of

incomprehensibility or silence may, she argues, be motivated by a "rage against cliche":

"After all, what else is one's own language but a gigantic cacophonous cliché? Nothing has

not been said before" (Carson). Namelessness and the untranslatable, Carson suggests, can

offer a space of possibility outside the organising structures of the language. 'Stevie Smith''s

failure to speak may, therefore, be interpreted as a means of resistance against the

language and culture which defines her. At the same time, the stopped 'I' can also be heard

as an avoidance of the work of the relational bodily voice, what Adriana Cavarero calls "the

simple vocal self-revelation of existence" through which the speaker's uniqueness is

communicated (Cavarero 3). By refusing to reveal herself in this way, and through her use of

invented characters and assumed voices, 'Stevie Smith' may seek to evade and avoid The

Interlocutor's patriarchal power. However, since 'Stevie Smith' is an artificial construct

consisting of spoken language, her continued existence within *A Turn Outside* is contingent

on her being heard.

   'Stevie Smith' 's poetry is steeped in the traditions that seem to pain her. Smith's poems,

within the boundaries of the play and beyond it, utilise and parody western poetic tradition.

In doing so they both assume and undermine the cultural authority and identity of the lyric

voice. 'Silence and Tears are Convenient', for example, is set to the tune of the folk song

'The Death of Poor Cock Robin' and expounds on its themes. Within the structured space of

end-rhymed tercets, Smith describes a mournful funeral scene. Despite the scene's

melancholy inevitability, the mourners are subtly portrayed as inauthentic and/or

emotionally distant, performing the funeral ritual for the sake of show: "Oh how frightful

sighed the mourners as the rain began" (Smith 1981: 337). Smith's form and language,

particularly in the penultimate stanza, recalls the repetition and syntactical constructions of

Christian prayer and hymn, while at the same time straining against these expectations in

rhythm and vocabulary:

> And may the coffin hold his bones in peace that lies below
> And may the widow woman's tears make a good show
> And may the suitable priestly garment not let the breath of scandal through
> (Smith 1981: 338)

Here, tradition and ritual is used to conceal the unsavoury reality of the "military man" 's

death. The institutions – church and military – conspire to obscure the truth. Smith creates

the opposite effect to that of the bombastic hymn tune; this is an ironic, dialogic critique of

traditional British institutions and authority. The line "Pee wee sang the little bird on the

tree again and again" seems slightly incongruous, until we realise the image's origin in the

Grimm's fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*, where the bird tells a hidden story of a murdered child

(Pumphrey 92). Smith is engaged in carnivalesque critique and subversion of the

authoritative persona. Unwilling – or unable – to utilise the convention of the 'authentic',

authoritative lyric voice, she produces poetry which, within itself, incorporates multiple

voices and perspectives. In *A Turn Outside*, Smith's dialogic, polyphonic voices veer between

positions, contradict themselves, interrogate. As part of this subversion, she utilises cultural

material traditionally categorised as low-brow, associated with marginalised groups. She

uses material associated with children, such as fairy tales, nursey rhymes and nonsense

verse, to challenge patriarchal assumptions, including constructions of childhood and

conceptions of "serious" literature (Stevenson 26). The explicit depiction of 'Stevie Smith' 's

poems in *A Turn Outside* as patchworks or reworkings of existing cultural material recalls the

supposed communal construction of ancient heroic oral epic poetry, as well as the

functioning of folk culture. In addition, the work itself departs from 'monologic' lyric and

epic modes. There is dialogue between voice and voice within the poems, between poem

and poem, between poem and cultural tradition, between Interlocutor and 'Stevie Smith',

between 'Stevie Smith' and her imagined audience, and – we conjecture – between 'Stevie

Smith' and Stevie Smith. The space of the poems seems, at first, distinct from the space of

the prose dialogue. Smith's use, within her poetry, of multiple speakers – and multiple

speech modes and registers – allows her to express and explore conflicting points of view,

but also to focus on the potential difficulties of the idea of a singular identity, the stuttering

'I'. Confessional poetry, as Martin Pumphrey points out, suggests the possibility of an

authoritative autobiographical self – something Smith's poetry continually argues against:

> She never strives [. . .] for the consensus of the reviewer who singled out for praise those of her poems that 'look down deep into the soul of suffering humanity.' It is precisely the coercive (because universalising) assumption about individual identity unwittingly revealed in that phrase that Smith's poetry most vigorously contests.
> (Pumphrey 1986: 95)

As Michael Eskin suggests – and Stevie Smith illustrates – the existence of multiple

discourses within a poetic work makes the writer's answerability for her or his work

into "one of its artistically constitutive moments" (Eskin 388). *A Turn Outside*, in its

dialogic and polyphonic interrogations, is deeply concerned with the ethics of its

voices.

It is fruitful to compare Smith's approach to literary tradition with Louis MacNeice's

reworking of Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' in *The Dark Tower*.

MacNeice's 'parable play', set in an explicitly symbolic fantasy world, presents a complex

and conflicted hero and comes to an ambivalent resolution. Stevie Smith's poem 'Childe

Rolandine' (which is not included in *A Turn Outside*) comically transcribes the story's

construction of heroism into a space of seemingly mundane reality. 'Childe Rolandine'

delights in parody, comedy and absurdity, recasting the medieval knight as a twentieth-

century female artist:

> Dark was the day for Childe Rolandine the artist
> When she went to work as a secretary-typist
> And as she worked she sang this song
> Against oppression and the rule of wrong.
> (Smith 2002: 189)

Rolandine's blowing of the bugle, like Roland's, represents supreme self-sacrifice. But

Smith's depiction of the "spirit from heaven", the immortality through art that is the reason for this sacrifice, is loaded with notions of class and gender inequality. The "spirit", much like Rolandine's employer, is exploitative: "That he may live and grow fat we daily die". MacNeice's Roland is engaged in a quest bound up with philosophical discussions of morality, at the end of which he achieves the immortality of our remembrance, the story we tell when he is gone. Smith's Rolandine is bound by her gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and also by the very ideals of truth and art that promise transcendence or escape. The "heavenly spirit", the immortality of art, feeds on her tears; his is the image she draws, just as the words she types in her employment are not her own. Rolandine's toil seems, ultimately, to perpetuate the exploitative power dynamics she rails against. Smith's poem, of course, trains a (comic) spotlight on this conundrum.

Seamus Heaney, writing about Stevie Smith's poetry, says that "the voice, the style, the literary resources are not adequate to the sombre recognitions, the wounded joie de vivre, the marooned spirit we sense they were destined to express" (Heaney qtd. in Stevenson 26). This assessment is, as Pumphrey and Stevenson both argue, missing the point. Heaney's analysis assumes a poetic project more like Heaney's own, as well as a notion of 'authentic' – as opposed to performed – identity. Philip Larkin initially rejected Smith's poems as "facetious bosh" before conceding that "the silliness is part of the seriousness" (Larkin qtd. in Pumphrey 85). Smith's explicitly dialogic utilisation of multiple and varied traditions, registers and voices, and her frequent use of humour, irony, parody, punning and deliberate ambiguity, are part of a determination to question, subvert and avoid the more conventional, authoritative, 'authentic' lyric and epic voice. Perhaps the direct assumption of a lyric or epic authority, in Smith's cultural experience, might risk reproducing the sort of imperialist stance so prominent in 'Greenland's Icy Mountains', the hymn first referenced by 'Stevie Smith' in *A Turn Outside*.

The stories 'Stevie Smith 's poems tell about women, drawing on her experience of cultural tradition, are most frequently concerned with death and/or liminal space – with experience *outside* culture or disruptive of its boundaries. 'Stevie Smith', in recalling her previous experiences of being with Death, refers to Persephone's going into Hades, and, several times, to "the sunlight of Homer":

> this sunshine has the quality of the eternal. It is absolutely classical [. . .] The sunlight was like the sunlight of Homer, it was eternal.

> It is not only the scenery of Homer, the dark sea and the laughterless stone, I remember the other books where the shades must have blood to drink.
> (Smith 1981: 352)

The light of the scene is "classical". Like the immortal "heavenly spirit" that feeds on the tears of Childe Rolandine, the scenery of Homer is "eternal". It has achieved immortality through its transmission through cultural memory, just as the shades Odysseus visits in Hades signify cultural continuity across time. The "scenery of Homer" is also authoritarian – "laughterless". Smith radically questions, and draws attention to the power relations encoded in her particular cultural inheritance but does not, ultimately, reconfigure them. Despite her protestations 'Stevie Smith' is eventually seduced by Death into silence.

Death's initial appearance in the form of The Interlocutor within the world of the recording studio signals that the studio itself is an un-boundaried space. *A Turn Outside* is also a 'turn' (in the variety show performance sense) outside the relatively boundaried space of everyday reality. To emphasise the liminality of the radio studio, the recognisable world of the poetry reading and radio interview gives way to the fantastical space of the poet's conversation with Death. The space of 'Stevie Smith' s poems is thus increasingly enmeshed with the action of the play itself. As part of this process, the prose becomes increasingly poetic. By placing both prose dialogue and poems within the same explicitly artificial space, Smith draws attention to the construction of more 'naturalistic' dialogue, and the power dynamics it communicates. As The Interlocutor complains to 'Stevie Smith':

> you are tricky too, you are up to tricks. Those prose passages you said, about
> where you had seen me, with the hour glass on the moire ribbon and the sunshine
> of Homer, these are also poems, are they not? Just as much as the girl in the dark
> wood was a poem?
> (Smith 1981: 353)

Who is in control here – 'Stevie Smith' or The Interlocutor? Like Odysseus and like Penelope, 'Stevie Smith' uses language and creativity in order to escape entrapment. However, unlike Odysseus – and unlike Persephone – it is not clear that 'Stevie Smith' returns from her encounter with the underworld.

   'The Interlocutor' begins as the voice of the authoritative radio presenter or interviewer. We might think of him as representing the cultural establishment of the time. He begins by asking 'Stevie Smith' "you don't mind if I call you 'dear'?" and, in fact, never refers to her by name. She responds with "No, I would rather have 'dear' than a name, it is less personal" (Smith 1981: 335). 'Dear' is, potentially, both intimate endearment and authoritative avoidance of the other's individual identity. 'Stevie Smith' chooses to understand – and request – 'dear' as the latter. The Interlocutor's patronising use of 'dear', and 'Stevie Smith''s response, reveals and reinforces the patriarchal gender power dynamics at work and under discussion within the play. We can read *A Turn Outside*, like 'Childe Rolandine', as a darkly comic exploration of female creativity within a patriarchal culture. Despite the eventual, and inevitable, departure into silence of 'Stevie Smith', *A Turn Outside* is loaded with wry ironies, acutely aware of its own depth, cleverness, and subversive power – the voice that Smith herself has "slipped in" to the seemingly innocuous poetry reading and interview format, and into the space of her 'childlike' verses: "Things that come on the air are always so dangerous" (Smith 1981: 354).

Three Women (1962)

Like *Under Milk Wood*, *Night Thoughts* and *A Turn Outside*, Sylvia Plath's 'play for voices' *Three Women* was written at the request of BBC producer Douglas Cleverdon. First

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broadcast on the Third Programme on Sunday August 19th, 1962, the play – based on Ingmar

Bergman's 1958 film *Brink of Life* – is particularly radical in its all-female cast of voices.[46] Set,

in the beginning, on a maternity ward, *Three Women* features three unnamed women's

interweaving monologues describing experiences of childbirth. The voices all use similar

syntax, vocabulary and figurative language. They are therefore dialogic but not in dialogue,

as if encouraging the listener to consider the voices as potential, interrelated manifestations

of maternal subjectivity rather than conventionally distinct characters. By focusing on the

actual biological process of giving birth, Plath hones in on a subject – and an experience –

that is strongly identified as female. As Stevie Smith does, Plath uses the multi-vocal poetic

radio play to explore, question and reconfigure ideas of gender, liminality and culture, and

constructions of the lyric and epic voice.

   The voices, in *Three Women*, are heightened and 'poetic' rather than informal and

conversational. Narratives proceed in relatively conventional poetic form, a sort of loosely

formed verse in seven-line stanzas. In *Three Women* Plath, drawing on the figurative and

symbolic language of her cultural inheritance, allies the female body with the 'natural' or

nonhuman world, and maleness with a sort of emotionless, mechanistic idea of culture and

immortality. Linda Lussy Fraser links this construction of maleness to the ideology of the

Cold War, with its fear of controlling technologies and commodification, and its paranoia

resulting from post-World War II repression: "The wounds of war and the wounds of

childbirth are conflated in such a landscape, for birth and war lay bare the technologies

which control bodies and minds" (Lussy Fraser 548). Pregnancy is initially presented, in

Three Women, as mindless, occurring in passive conjunction with the wider natural world –

as First Voice explains:

> Turning through my time, the sun and stars
> Regarding me with attention.
> . . . .

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[46] No recording of the original broadcast is available. My analysis is based on the script and also on
the 1968 BBC radio production.

> I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
> What happens in me will happen without attention.
> (Plath 176)

Like the three women in Bergman's *Brink of Life*, the three women relate three different experiences of maternity: 'First Voice' – ultimately the most contented – gives birth to a boy, 'Second Voice' suffers a miscarriage, and 'Third Voice' is an unmarried university student who gives her baby girl up for adoption. Writing about the idea of the body in Sylvia Plath's poetry, particularly in relation to the male 'confessional' poets of Plath's era, Kathleen Margaret Lant sees Plath as reproducing sadistic and masochistic models of male and female gender identity – the "dominant figurative systems of western discourse" in the 1950s and 1960s: "The female body reminds us only that the female self is unworthy, inadequate and – ultimately – vulnerable rather than ascendant" (Lant 625). The female body plays "a specific and rigidly codified role" (Lant 628). While it's true that *Three Women* reproduces many of the constructions of 'the feminine' identified by Lant – the body as a site of vulnerability and suffering; the necessity of armour and concealment; woman as insubstantial/ unstable; woman as masochist – the play also, to a degree, questions, troubles and plays with binaries of nature/ culture and feminine/masculine as highlighted by Ortner, Cavarero, Butler and others. In focusing on the process of childbirth, Plath validates and celebrates women's agency in this 'work', as well as bringing into focus and questioning ideals of 'the maternal'. In comparison with the women in *Brink of Life*, whom Lussy Fraser describes as being confined by the camera's voyeuristic, clinical gaze, their pain consumed as spectacle (Lussy Fraser 549), the voices in Plath's *Three Women* devise, through language that claims and describes their own bodily experiences, their own strategies of survival. The bodily experience of women is depicted with an ear that both perpetuates and undermines cultural constructions of gender and maternity, as if Plath were worrying at the threads of her inherited figurative and symbolic order, though like Stevie Smith – and like Penelope – she is unable to significantly reconfigure it.

As, in *Three Women*, successful maternity is associated with an identification with the

natural world through First Voice's experience, maternal 'failure' or abdication of maternity

seems to be associated with values defined as masculine. Recalling the moment she became

aware of her miscarriage. Second Voice describes the men in the office where she works:

> There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
> Endlessly proceed – and the cold angels, the abstractions.
> (Plath 177)

Culture, "That flat, flat, flatness", is here constructed as masculine, mechanistic, and

inherently destructive, in opposition to 'nature' and the female body. Second Voice, like

Stevie Smith's Childe Rolandine, is employed as a typist. Her employment, her engagement

with the technologically reproduced language of others, is implicated in her 'flatness':

>   [. . .] Is it so difficult
> for the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?
> The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed
> from my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,
>
> Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.
> I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
> (Plath 177)

This opposition suggests that animalistic maternity, as well as the creativity aligned with

nature, is continually threatened by the mechanical production of culture. There is also a

terrifying, destructive power in Plath's figurative construction of 'nature' and the feminine.

In *Three Women* reproduction, and the female body, are represented as nurturing but also

monstrous, both frightening to men and threatened by them. Men wish to "flatten and

launder the grossness" – the body – "from women's souls" (Plath 179). The doctors move

among the pregnant women as if the women's physical state "frightened the mind." Nature

is potentially exploitative, devouring, vengeful:

> She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
> fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
> . . . .
> Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.

(Plath 181)

Nevertheless, Plath's three women inhabit and/or work hard at positions of passivity and

powerlessness. Second voice insists "I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be

natural./ I have tried to be blind in love, like other women" (Plath 178). Third Voice's

memory of her baby's conception recalls Zeus's seduction or rape of Leda in the mythical

narrative of Leda and the swan. The foetus "went on shaping itself with love, as if I was

ready" (Plath 178). And yet, like 'Stevie Smith', Plath's three women inhabit a space of

potential power – in this case the liminoid space of childbirth. In this space, and through the

liminal associations of the poetic radio voice, Plath subtly questions nature/ culture

distinctions. Reproduction is, in *Three Women*, potentially a horrific, spectacular,

technologized commodification of the body, but Plath also implicitly compares female

biological reproduction with the work of women's cultural creativity. First voice, describing

the pain of labour, uses images of power from the 'natural' world:

> Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
> Its cargo of agony towards me, inescapable, tidal.
> And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
> Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element.
> (Plath 179)

The "voices that overwhelm" recall the ancient Greek Sirens, while registering the

power of the body and its drives. Childbirth is a miracle but a cruel one: "I am the

center of an atrocity" [. . .] "It milks my life" (Plath 1989: 180). The process, though, is

not passive but, like writing, something worked at:

> I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.
> . . . .
> The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
> I am used. I am drummed into use.
> (Plath 180)

Nature's "work" is accomplished by the active subject, "I". The powerful drumming of

bodily rhythms here recalls Kristeva's "semiotic" linguistic field as well as the repetitious,

echoing, aggregative rhythms of ritual, and also suggests the working of unconscious

impulses in creation. Despite its clear links with 'nature', the space and experience of

childbirth is in many ways outside or contrary to western cultural constructions of 'the

feminine'. The body, in pregnancy and childbirth, cannot be subsumed, transcended,

hidden, or controlled. Helene Cixous's work of 'ecriture feminine', *Souffles* (1975), also

uses the metaphor of giving birth to describe the process of writing: "By writing herself

[the verb to write is being used transitively], woman will return to the body that has

been more than confiscated from her [. . .] In censuring the body one censures at the

same time breathing and speech" (Cixous qtd. in Suleiman 17). Cixous, considering the

"problematics of birth and origins", refers to and ironically rereads major cultural texts –

in a manner not dissimilar to Smith and, less explicitly, Plath. Cixious notes that culture

acts as a "barrier forbidding me to enter" (Cixous qtd. in Suleiman 18). As a result, she is

obliged to "steal" the "objects of culture", to engage in a mode of considered, dialogic

reworking that is also prevalent within the multi-vocal poetic radio play.

   In *Three Women* childbirth and pregnancy, as in many religious and ritual traditions,

are frequently identified as outside or troubling the boundaries of cultural constraints.

Second Voice, considering the premature ending of her pregnancy, considers female

childlessness – the absence or refusal of maternal identity – as also a potentially

boundaryless or liminoid space, a polar space:

> I shall move north. I shall move into a long blackness.
> I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,
> Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man,
> Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack.
> (Plath 182).

Plath's frequent, rhythmic repetition of binary identities here encourages comparison

while also pointing us towards the possibility of a subjectivity beyond them. However,

this "shadow" subjectivity is not, ultimately, an achievable one ("I feel a lack"). This

"I" attempts to move towards a space that is genderless and, in a sense, free. And yet,

its identity continues to be defined by traditional gender roles:

> I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.
> I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,
> Holes in the heels of socks
> (Plath 182).

As in *A Turn Outside*, the space outside a rigid, culturally constructed identity does not seem comfortable or, ultimately, habitable. The suspension or absence of cultural identity in childbirth is repeated in the experience of the other women. First voice says, of the newborn babies: "They are beginning to remember their differences [. . .] They are walkers of air" (Plath 183). Second Voice says "The nurses give me back my clothes, and an identity." This, identity though, is something uneasily superimposed – a mask, of sorts:

> How shyly she superimposes her neat self
> On the inferno of African oranges, the heel-hung pigs.
> She is deferring to reality.
> It is I. It is I –
> (Plath 184).

Plath's use of 'she' here, referring to a reflection, signals a sort of split psyche or double identity. The "inferno of African oranges, the heel-hung pigs" suggests, in the figurative language of Plath's time, a sort of wild, animalistic vision of nature that the 'I' seeks to supersede or control. As in *A Turn Outside*, the 'I' is unstable, uncertain, difficult. At the play's end, a more conventional, separate and clearly delineated gender identity seems to be restored for Second Voice:

>   [. . .] My hands
> can stitch lace neatly onto this material. My husband
> can turn and turn the pages of a book.
> . . . .
>
> The streets may turn to paper suddenly, but I recover
> from the long fall, and find myself in bed
> (Plath 187).

Yet this certainty is fragile, unexpectedly disrupted. The streets which "turn to paper" suggest a material world becoming suddenly insubstantial. Second Voice mournfully

leaves her baby girl behind, returns to the university, and begins the process of

forgetting: "It is so beautiful to have no attachments!" (Plath 186). The pregnant

woman's place at the threshold of new life – and, potentially, death – brings her, in

western figurative and symbolic traditions, closer to the space of death. Death, in

Three Women as in *A Turn Outside,* is beyond the physical body. Death is either an

eternity of absence and silence or a liminal, un-boundaried space, or both of these

things. And yet, unlike the hero Odysseus, the women do not return from their

katabasis with knowledge, prophecy, or strength – though one woman returns with a

child. The re-assumption of normative boundary and hierarchy is uncomfortable, and

dis-empowering.

    Both Plath and Smith, then, utilise the multi-vocal poetic radio play's dialogic,

polyphonic, liminoid qualities, referring to nekuian katabasis in order to trouble,

discuss and reconfigure the forms, aesthetics and discourses of their cultural

inheritance, and to critique their own imagined communities. Like MacNeice, Thomas

and Gascoyne, Plath and Smith use the multi-vocal poetic radio play's unique qualities

to discuss and challenge notions of unified and distinct individual subjectivity, and

also to present subjectivity as potentially multiple and unstable. In all of these plays,

the voices function – to a degree – as dialogic, polyphonic manifestations of interior

psychic struggle. At the same time, these poetic voices also evoke and celebrate

communal bonding through carnivalesque experiences in which boundaries of self

and other, interior thought and spoken voice, life and death, are broken down. Smith

in particular uses the multi-vocal poetic radio play to interrogate the idea of the

unified, speaking subject – and in doing so expose the social construction of identity –

while Plath explores the multiple potentialities of the subject. As a result, Plath and

Smith both explore ideas of divergent or non-singular identities in dialogue,

dramatising the challenges and potentials of constructing female-identified

subjectivity within the patriarchal tradition. Such dialogic, polyphonic engagement

with cultural constructions of identity, subjectivity, and imagined community is

fundamental to the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play.

2. A Space or Interval

The end of the BBC Features Department in 1964, which ocurred soon after the death of

Head of Features Laurence Gilliam, saw the beginning of a marked silence in terms of

original multi-vocal poetic radio plays produced at the BBC. BBC radio drama and

documentary became, once again, more traditionally delineated (Plowright 2016). This

delineation may have been made clearer by a decline in public demand for radio

documentaries (Crisell 138) and by advances in recording technology which made the use of

scripting and actors in news and documentary programmes unnecessary. For poets who

were not permanently employed by the BBC, as MacNeice had been from 1941 onwards,

radio work offered little in the way of financial reward or reputation. In addition to this,

regular radio work, as Desnos, Carpentier and Deharme had discovered in the 1930s, was

not necessarily conducive to a poet's "creative flair": "The demands of continuous

production, the constant need to feed the voracious appetite of the microphone, and the

pressures on producers from a bureaucratic hierarchy are all inimical to the service of the

Muses" (Scannell and Cardiff 150). The BBC's *Marriott Report*, published in 1956, had

suggested that the BBC should shift its focus away from spoken word and towards

information and entertainment. According to the report's researchers, only one in every

hundred radio listeners listened to the Third Programme (Briggs *History* 4: 39-40). The BBC

should, the report suggested "seek to cater for the needs of its audiences without seeking,

as it had perhaps done too much in the past, to alter and improve them" (Briggs *History* 4:

40). Verse drama such as that written by T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry in the 1940s and

1950s had fallen out of fashion and the cross-genre experimentation of the multi-vocal

poetic radio play, with its background in World War II propaganda and its exploration of

"culture in common" (Scannell qtd. in Avery 6) was no longer a priority. As Andrew Crisell

observes, the rise of television and of the relatively cheap and portable transistor radio

fundamentally changed radio listening habits; radio audiences were significantly reduced,

and radio became 'background' for individuals rather than the focus for groups of listeners

(Crisell 139). The reorganisation of BBC radio stations and the end of the Third Programme

in 1967 is also likely to have contributed to the multi-vocal poetic radio play's silence (Hendy

32). The BBC launched Radio 1 as a popular music station, the Light Service became Radio 2,

the Third Programme became Radio 3 and the Home Service became Radio 4. Radio 3 was

now primarily devoted to classical music, though it still broadcast a small amount of drama

and documentary. In 1969, in response to decreasing income, the BBC published the report

Broadcasting in the Seventies which advocated a move towards 'format radio' – stations

organised according to particular types of material – as opposed to the Reithian idea of

broadcasting a more diverse range of material on each station (Crisell 149). Despite these

shifts in focus, brought about, in part, to counter the loss of audience figures to television,

BBC Radio continued to broadcast poetry content. In 1938 D.G. Bridson's programme *The*

Modern Muse had introduced a selection of poets reading their work, including settings of

certain poems by young composers including Benjamin Britten (Bridson 205,206). In the

aftermath of World War II poet and producer George MacBeth had responded to paper

shortages by creating "Magazines of the Airwaves" as platforms for new poetry (Motion).

The BBC and the Arts, a BBC report published in 1968, presented the BBC as continuing its

patronage of the arts, stating that the BBC was "by far the largest single supporter of the

writer in Great Britain" and the Third Programme "the greatest single source of poetry

copyright payments in the country" (*The BBC and the Arts*: 21). Writing in 1971, producer

D.G. Bridson argued that that radio's valorisation of poetry in performance had contributed

to a marked shift in public perceptions of poetry:

> However it is read – by the poet himself or by the actor – poetry is now recognised as an art which has the right to be heard. Since Allen Ginsberg let out his first *Howl*, a revolution has been in progress. Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlenghetti, Gary Snyder and others in America, Christopher Logue, Adrian Mitchell and their followers over here have made a new impact with work which would have been utterly disregarded some twenty years ago.
> (Bridson 219)

With the BBC's new delineation and classification in programming in the late 1960s, however, and without the massive and diverse audience that BBC Radio had enjoyed in the mid-twentieth century, the old forms of experimentation by poets working across form and genre seemed to disappear.

Playwrights continued to produce radio drama that was 'poetic' in its language, form and/or symbolism, such as Caryl Churchill's *Abortive* (1971) and John Arden's *Pearl* (1978), but these works utilise relatively conventional dramatic form, and do not share the multi-vocal poetic radio play's explicit concerns of documentary, memorial, and the heroic oral epic. While poets such as Christopher Logue reworked epic narratives in text form, which were then adapted for radio, and renowned performers such as Ivor Cutler recorded their own work for radio,[47] the practice of poets working in the radically cross-genre modes that nurtured the multi-vocal poetic radio play seemed to have ended from 1970 onwards (Plowright). Perhaps more confounding, then, is the question of why the sub-genre of the multi-vocal poetic radio play reappeared in the 1990s.

The introduction of Radio 3's *Between the Ears* series of features in 1993 coincided, broadly, with the increasing availability of highly portable digital recording technologies. In 1996 the BBC launched several new digital stations. The 1990s also saw the introduction of dial-up internet access in the UK, and the beginning of the internet as a means of mass

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[47] Christopher Logue's re-imaginings of Homer's *Iliad, War Music* (1970s) and *Kings* (1980s) and Ivor Cutler's *Silence, Prince Ivor* and *Ivor Cutler Approaches.*

communication. This new technology was initially viewed by many, as radio had been, as a

democratising force: "Just as anyone, anywhere, can launch a web site, so anyone,

anywhere, can start their own radio 'station' and broadcast to the world" (Barnard 2000:

253). Simon Armitage's *From Salford to Jericho* (BBC Radio 4, Monday January 8th 1996) was

constructed from verbatim material gathered from interviews with homeless people in

Manchester, combined with Armitage's original poetry. The piece draws on the 'actuality'

and testimony traditions of the radio feature and, in its construction, recalls Ewan MacColl

and Peggy Seeger's *Radio Ballads*.[48] The play is indicative of a return to the 'actuality'

concerns and aesthetics of the BBC feature, and of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. The

return of the multi-vocal poetic radio play coincides with the rise of verbatim theatre –

which was itself inspired, in part, by Augusto Boal's 1974 work *Teatro del Oprimido,* later

translated as *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Both genres were no doubt aided by advances in

digital recording technologies, and these documentary-type hybrids also occurred (or

reoccurred) at a time when increasing use of global internet technologies was beginning to

facilitate more interactive, dialogic and polyphonic models and modes of mass culture, and

to further question and problematise ideas of cultural value and authority. Post-1990 multi-

vocal poetic radio plays, rather than seeking to represent, appeal or advance the idea of a

common culture, tend to critique colonial values and concern themselves with voices

perceived as marginal or unheard. Increasing cultural diversity in Britain and a shift in the

cultural attention and value given to non-page poetry may also be factors in the return of

the dialogic, multi-vocal poetic radio play. In addition, regular programme slots such as

Between the Ears and *From Fact to Fiction* (2006 onwards) have created space for poets to

experiment with writing for radio, and to work in cross-genre ways. In my final chapter I will

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[48] *The Radio Ballads* (1957-1964), produced by Charles Parker, were a series of features in which original, narrative ballads were combined with recorded voices. For example: *The Ballad of John Axon* (1957).

continue to explore and analyse the return of the multi-vocal poetic radio play through

analysis of three contemporary multi-vocal poetic radio plays.

Chapter IV

The Epic Reconfigured

I had no nation now but the imagination
Derek Walcott

1. **Contra-colonial and transcultural testimonies**

In the second half of the twentieth century the rapid decolonisation of the territories

formerly governed as part of the British Empire, alongside changes in global

communications and travel technologies, had a profound impact on radio's representations

of and within the 'imagined community' of Great Britain. In 1914, 85% of the world's surface

was governed by European nations. Today, fewer than two million people live in non-self

governing territories (Ramazani 141). Through its work at home and abroad, including the

Empire Service – founded in 1932 and later renamed the World Service – and through its

wartime propaganda role and beyond, the BBC explored, defined and sought to champion

and perpetuate what was thought to be the best of British culture (Avery 18). While 'British

culture' now tends to be depicted by the BBC as diverse, pluralistic and anti-exceptionalist,

the construction and exploration of the imagined space of empire remained a key part of

the BBC's function throughout much of the 20th century. In *Imagined Communities:*

Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Benedict Anderson discusses the

particular functions of simultaneity, and especially of poetry and song, in the construction of

the nation. The idea of the nation, Anderson argues, came to prominence in the eighteenth

century and has come to supersede many of the functions previously fulfilled by traditional

religious belief and religious practice, such as ritual and festival. The people, bound together

through simultaneous experience, are imagined as "a sociological organism moving

calendrically through homogenous, empty time" (Anderson 31). As I argue in chapter two,

with reference to William McNeill's *Keeping Together in Time*, the rhythmically patterned,

repetitive, call and response elements of song and poetry can "foster the sense of

simultaneous community" (Ramazani 76,77). The most obvious example of this, in terms of

the nation, is the ceremonial singing of national anthems. This notion of "simultaneous

community", then, may also be invoked by the simultaneous physical experience of

polyphonic, mechanically reproduced voices – musical or poetic voices in particular –

broadcast over a large geographical area. Each multi-vocal poetic radio play analysed in this

chapter refers and responds to this traditional link between the patterned, recursive

qualities of poetry, music and song, and imagined community. BBC radio listening figures

have decreased markedly since the multi-vocal poetic radio play's post-war heyday.

However, contemporary BBC multi-vocal poetic radio plays clearly demonstrate poets'

awareness of the sub-genre's power to evoke ideas of imagined community and

communities through the listeners' simultaneous experience of polyphonic, poetic voices.

In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which BBC multi-vocal poetic radio plays of the

early 21st century use these associations with imagined communities in order to critique, re-

evaluate and reconfigure empiricist and nationalist narratives. They achieve this, in part,

through innovative and revisionist engagement with western oral traditions, and in many

cases through engagement with the storytelling tropes and structures of Homer's *Iliad* and

Odyssey. The multi-vocal poetic radio play, through its reliance on the space of the

imagination, through its allusive language and troubling of physical boundaries of time and

space, is ideally placed to enact what Ramazani calls "the imaginative remaking of space –

the once expropriated topography – and time – the collective historical experience of that

place" (Ramazani 155). I have chosen three BBC multi-vocal poetic radio plays that clearly

fulfil this function in order to demonstrate, as fully as possible, the multi-vocal poetic radio

play's engagement with and polyphonic reimagining of preliterate oral traditions, and

particularly its challenging of the idea of the Homeric epic as mono-cultural repository of

collective cultural memory. Other multi-vocal poetic radio plays may focus, like the radio

feature, primarily on the 'actuality' or testimonial representation of specific communities or

places (Simon Armitage's *From Salford to Jericho*, Katrina Porteous's *Longshore Drift*),

and/or on communal ritual/ festival and the "liminoid" troubling of boundaries regarding

time, space and mortality (David Constantine's *Fisher of Men*). However, the plays discussed

in this chapter combine these structural and functional elements with explicit reworking of

the western oral epic and therefore demonstrate more fullly the multi-vocal poetic radio

play's capacity for cultural critique. In order to analyse the multi-vocal poetic radio play's

discussion of imagined communities in the light of decolonisation, and the form and

functioning of contra-colonial and transcultural forces in the multi-vocal poetic radio play,

this chapter will discuss the following BBC multi-vocal poetic radio plays: Jackie Kay's *The

Lamplighter* (BBC Radio 3, Sunday March 25th 2007), Jo Shapcott's *Erebus* (BBC Radio 4,

Thursday January 12th 2012), and Owen Sheers' *Pink Mist* (BBC radio 4, Monday March 19th –

Friday March 23rd 2012).

2. **Dialogism and decolonisation**

Poetry tends to be embedded in the shared knowledge of its culture, and is often associated

with "particular attachments to mother, home, and native place" (Ramazani 3). At the same

time, cross-cultural influences and hybridisations are, as Jahan Ramazani argues, "among

the engines of modern and contemporary poetic development and innovation" (Ramzani 3).

Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* for example, viewed as foundational within the western

canon, emerged from an ancient Greek culture now known to have its roots in Egyptian and

Semitic cultures, among others (Said 15). Ramazani, rejecting the idea of globalisation and

colonialism (both geographical and cultural) as unidirectional homogenisation, while

remaining conscious of the inequalities of power involved, points to the "creolized nature of

transnational experience", and the impacts of cross-cultural encounter on both coloniser

and colonised, the "complex patterns of assimilation and resistance" (Ramazani 4,9).

Ramazani also recognises poetry's capacity to maintain and perpetuate traces of historical cross-cultural influence and migration: "it is enmeshed, even when stridently nationalist in ideology – by a complexly cross-national weave in its rhythms and tropes, stanza patterns and generic adaptations" (Ramazani 13). Furthermore, poetry's explicitly constructed language has the potential to "illuminate the colonising and potentially decolonising force of naming and renaming in the (post) colonial context" (Ramazani 141). Thus, language functions as a force of both imperial oppression and resistance to imperialism, part of the reimagining and reassertion of cultural identity. Indeed, poetic language itself, through its use of allusion, equivalence, and aggregative rhythm, might be particularly suited to the 'stretch' of cross-cultural dialogue and influence. The multi-vocal poetic radio play is ideally suited to cross-cultural encounter. Through the multi-vocal poetic radio play's simultaneously experienced patterned or "echoic" language (Ramazani 76), through its polyphonic reconfiguration of the collective cultural knowledge passed on through the oral epic, the power of oral traditions is both reaffirmed and reimagined for a rapidly changing world. While the radio plays examined in this chapter are all written by British citizens, they are all essentially dialogic in their treatment of the narratives and discourses of empire; they all display the influence of contra-colonial and transcultural forces.

3. **Meeting the barbarians: encountering the Other**

As argued in multiple critiques of cultural identity such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the imagination and construction of the Other is frequently used as a means to define national and/ or cultural identity This use of the Other has a long history. As Justine McConnell points out in *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora*, "the [ancient] Greeks were much concerned with creating and re-enforcing their sense of self in opposition to the 'barbarians'" (McConnell 23). McConnell also discusses the ways in which writers have used

the Homeric Odyssey as a means of "protesting against [the western canon and culture] while simultaneously appropriating it" (McConnell 3). The Odyssey's colonial resonances – in the heroes' explorations and encounters in strange lands, in its homecoming trope and identity quest – make it an ideal text for contra-colonial reinterpretation. As McConnell points out, Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus invites comparison with colonists' encounters with indigenous populations. Polyphemus's alterity, and his alternative perspective, are signalled by his single eye which Odysseus blinds in the process of his escape. In ancient Greek reinterpretations of the incident, Odysseus's behaviour is explicitly brought into question. For example, Lucian's interpretation of the encounter renders Odysseus's behaviour – "Odysseus's cool appraisal of the merits of the Cyclops' island (Od.9.131-141) and the disparagement of its inhabitants as lacking the qualities of a civilised society (Od.9.112-115)" – as "almost unmistakeably colonial" (McConnell 2013: 9). As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observe, Odysseus's narrative is critical of the Cyclops because they differ from Achaean-style social organisation. The Cyclopes are "uncivilised malefactors" who do not cultivate their land and "have neither laws nor assemblies" (Od. Qtd Adorno and Horkheimer 64). Like the lotos eaters, they seem to be organised along the lines of hunter-gatherer societies. Polyphemus's 'barbarous' behaviour – his cannibalism, principally – is counterpointed by the behaviour of Odysseus and his men who, contravening their own laws of hospitality, enter Polyphemus's home without invitation and eat his food without permission. In this way, their actions bear comparison with those of the suitors back on Ithaca, who demand hospitality in Odysseus's home without invitation (McConnell 26). Odysseus's 'No Man' trick, through which he avoids Polyphemus's apprehension and punishment by withholding his true identity, also troubles the self/ other distinctions contained within the Cyclops episode – yet he is compelled, despite severely endangering himself and his men, to regain his name, telling it to Polyphemus as he leaves in order to garner the fame and remembrance he feels he

deserves (McConnell 29). Cross-cultural writing of the twentieth and twenty-first century –

including work by Aimé Césaire, Ralph Ellison, Derek Walcott, and Junot Diaz – has explicitly

utilised the Homeric construction of encountering Otherness in order to explore and

question transnational influence and to highlight intercultural power relations. The multi-

vocal poetic radio play's distinct poetics – its utilisation of imagined space, its troubling of

boundaries, the highlighting of the monologic potentials of poetic language as well as its

dialogism, the use of 'actuality' and documentary modes and patterned, culturally specific

language, together with the communal function and simultaneity of national radio

broadcasting – create a fertile space for the cross-pollination of cultural traditions, and for

the recognition, and challenging of constructions of cultural similarity and difference.

4. Elegy and the imagined community

Language, and particularly poetic language, is crucial in constructing a sense of

intergenerational continuity and collective memory: "nothing connects us affectively to the

dead more than language" (Anderson 145). The elegy, both Anderson and Ramazani argue,

can be a force in the forging and preservation of imagined communities: "the ritualised,

collective commemoration and group mourning of traumatic loss has often played a role in

ethnic or national identity" (Ramazani 73). Since its inception the BBC has played a key role

in the coordination of national rituals of mourning and celebration. Through "the live relay

of those national ceremonies and functions" Lord Reith hoped to achieve a unified sense of

national identity or, as he put it, "making the nation as one man" (Reith qtd. in Scannell and

Cardiff 7). Like the stone memorials listing the war dead in communities throughout Britain,

list and catalogue structures in the epic – as well as in the multi-vocal poetic radio play– can

function as incantation and inscription, incarnating and eternalising the dead and

maintaining a sense of cultural continuity and of common traumatic loss. Death, in its

unknowability, can only be imagined. As such, Anderson suggests, it can become "the

absent centre around which the nation weaves itself" (Ramazani 92). But while the elegy

can reinforce imagined communities and their cultural values as distinct and separate from

others, erecting "hierarchies of grievability" (93), engagement with death, as in the epic's

katabasis, can also work as a destabilising force. As Judith Butler argues, the space of death

also evades attempts at cultural co-option:

> What grief displays [. . .] is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in
> ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-
> conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the
> very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control
> (Butler qtd. in Ramazani 78).

Grief is potentially destabilizing and transformational. It has "the power [. . .] to make and

unmake the world" (Ramazani 85). The imagined space of death is outside communicable

culture and experience. It is "unlocalisable, irreducible to empirical reality that can be

mapped and known" (Ramazani 84). As with the multi-vocal poetic radio plays of the

previous two chapters, the multi-vocal poetic radio plays examined in this chapter utilise

this unknowable space as part of their both their evocation and their critique of imagined

communities. The narrative trope of the katabasis, particularly the nekuian katabasis,

involving the consultation of dead ancestors, is as previously argued a dialogic structure

rooted in the form and function of communal ritual. The katabasis is, in Homer, an essential

part of the individual hero's character formation: "it is a transformative element, enabling

the development of the protagonist into a figure worthy of respect that prompts stories to

be told about him" (McConnell 34). In the multi-vocal poetic radio play, as in modernist

texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the

utilisation of katabasis and of the elegiac tradition radically destabilises notions of identity

and subjectivity, of cultural values and heroism and, in fact, of the Homeric model of

katabasis. Heroes or protagonists are revealed as racked with doubt, foolish, flawed, or

deeply traumatised by their experiences. Perhaps – as in *Under Milk Wood* – the dead continually and anarchically disrupt and influence the boundaried, culturally proscribed world of the living, rather than only at proper, circumscribed times of seasonal ritual or rite of passage. Perhaps the protagonist does not return, or fully return, from her or his journey to the underworld: the katabasis fails, harms, leaves the hero stranded forever in the underworld; or the distinction between the liminal, marginal instability of the multiple dead and the unified subjectivity and agency of the individual hero is muddied or shown to be false. As in *Three Women* and *A Turn Outside,* there may be a certain amount of power and agency in communal liminality. On the other hand, the cultural identity 'put on' to return to the land of the living might be an awkward fit. As radio broadcast's simultaneous mechanical reproduction of the voice suggests, the borders between death and life, nature and culture, individual subjectivity and communal experience, might be more porous and problematic, less easily controlled, than Odysseus's ritual summoning of the souls of the dead from Hades suggests. Accordingly, the multi-vocal poetic radio play's frequent utilisation of the traditions of the elegy and of nekuian katabasis both celebrates and critiques notions of a cultural continuity and imagined community rooted in, and passed on by means of, oral tradition.

Christopher Columbus (1942)

Christopher Columbus, Louis MacNeice's first original play for radio with an original score by William Walton, was first broadcast on the BBC's Home Service on October 12th 1942. The play was commissioned to mark the 450th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America, and functioned – for the wartime allies USA and Great Britain – as a celebratory expression of mutual support and solidarity. MacNeice utilises a relatively conventional theatrical two-act structure for his heroic epic, but the play has much in common, in its form and function, with the multi-vocal poetic radio plays that precede and follow it. MacNeice dramatises

Columbus's internal psychological struggle through the voices and choruses of 'Faith' and

'Doubt,' "a projection as it were of Columbus's inner dialectic" (MacNeice 1944: 89).

MacNeice's dialogue, though conventionally conversational, fits clearly into a loose blank

verse. He makes use of different registers, including choruses, and of the 'actuality' material

of Columbus's journal entries. In its depiction of indigenous people *Christopher Columbus*

reflects the conventions of North American history as it was then understood in Europe and

North America. However, as with the depiction of Odysseus in the Odyssey, it's possible to

hear *Christopher Columbus* as both celebrating and critiquing Columbus. The crew, made up

of ex-criminals, are welcomed as gods by the 'Indians,' who are depicted by Columbus as

innocents in need of the crew's moral guidance:

You see this island: it is like the garden of Eden,
And you see its naked inhabitants
Who are like Adam and Eve, knowing not good or evil.
(MacNeice 1944: 77)

Columbus at first refuses to believe his notary Escovado's suggestion that he might have

discovered a new world between Europe and Asia, but goes on to claim the glory for his

'discovery' on his return to Spain. The purpose of the adventure is unmistakably the finding

of sources of material wealth and power, as well as the 'enlightenment' of the innocent

natives. The 'new world' is presented as a tabula rasa:

Four thousand miles out there to the West
Lie uncharted lands – they are yours to chart,
Uncounted treasure – yours for the taking,
Aye and countless hordes of heathen men
Who are from now your subjects [. . .]
(MacNeice 1944: 86)

In response to questions about his depiction of Columbus, MacNeice replied that he did not

consider himself qualified to contradict the common understanding of "such a very

historical event of the discovery if America", though he qualified his defence: "It should be

remembered that many of the 'facts' about Christopher Columbus are still open to

controversy" (MacNeice 1944: 90). In his ambivalent, mildly subversive response to the

narrative of Columbus's 'discovery' of America, MacNeice largely avoids the more dialogic,

uncomfortable spaces that define the narrative of *The Dark Tower*. He colludes with an

authoritative version of the history of colonialism which, in the late twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries, the multi-vocal poetic radio play would radically challenge and

reconfigure.

The Lamplighter (2007)

First broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on Sunday 25th March 2007, Jackie Kay's elegiac multi-vocal

poetic radio play *The Lamplighter* was produced by TV, radio and theatre producer Pam

Fraser-Solomon. The play utilises the spaces of the slave-ship hold, and of death, through

which the identity and subjectivity of the women characters is troubled by power relations

that seek to deny both. In 'Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream' Fred Moten

discusses potential issues of power dynamics in black performance: "what have objection

and humanisation, both of which we can think of in relation to a certain notion of

subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity, of black

performance?" (Moten 3). Kay sets out to explore this question, among others, seeking to

reveal, disrupt and avoid a figurative and symbolic order that might reproduce or acquiesce

to colonial power relationships, to "hierarchies of grievability" (Ramzani 85). Writing about

the role of race in the "imagined community" of the USA, Toni Morrison argues:

> individualism is foregrounded (and believed in) when its background is stereotypified,
> enforced dependency. Freedom (to move, to earn, to learn, to be allied with a
> powerful centre, to narrate the world) can be relished more deeply in a cheek-by-jowl
> existence with the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalised,
> the silenced.
> (Morrison 1992: 64)

Like Sylvia Plath's *Three Women* and Stevie Smith's *A Turn Outside*, *The Lamplighter*

questions and critiques individual subjectivity. Within the space of the play the five women

who narrate their testimonies are ghosts and, at the same time, re-embodiments intricately

connected to the world of the living. Using a dialogic, polyphonic form, Kay makes explicit

the integral enmeshment of slavery in British history and culture, as well as its role in the

advancement of global capitalism, while giving voice to the Other. In doing so, she creates a

new "imagined community" of Great Britain, which acknowledges and incorporates the

voices of slaves, and women slaves in particular, in the construction of its history. Kay

determinedly complicates and refuses the "passive empathy"[49] that might allow a British

listener to avoid their own involvement in this story, encouraging instead a "testimonial

reading".[50]

Kay's 'Lamplighter', Anniwaa, is the play's central character and, to a degree, a symbol of

hope, knowledge, and testimony's power: "She is the lamp that guides me" (Kay 61). 'The

Lamplighter' is also a poem by the Scottish poet Robert Louis Stevenson, part of his

successful anthology *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). In Stevenson's poem, the child

narrator wishes to become a street-lamp lighter when they are old enough, even though

"my papa's a banker and as rich as can be" (Stevenson 37). In Stevenson's poem 'Foreign

Lands' (18) the child narrator surveys the world from a cherry-tree in lines that are echoed

in Anniwaa's memory of her childhood home. Through her allusion to Stevenson's poems,

Kay highlights the inhumane treatment, through slavery, of her child narrator – particularly

in relation to Victorian constructions of childhood – as well as the two texts' common

cultural inheritance. The play also seeks to educate those who may have been kept in the

dark by a version of history that excludes, denies or marginalises the voices of British-owned

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[49] See Boler. Megan Boler describes "passive empathy" as the reader's identification with a victim in a way that allows the reader to "consume" the text without considering the broader implications of its power dynamics. "Testimonial reading" is a reading that engages with a text's broader social, historical and cultural context in order to fully explore its impact.

slaves. The script is divided into scenes which focus on (non-geographically located) themes and subject-matter, and the play loosely follows the narrative arc of Anniwaa, the child version of the adult Lamplighter, and her capture, enslavement, and coming to freedom. The play is also the story of the struggle to construct a narrative, of the difficulty and complexity of subjectivity itself. Like Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), *The Lamplighter* enacts a coming to terms with, and a re-mapping of, history and geography: "And my original geography also: the map of the world drawn for my own use, not dyed with the arbitrary colours of men of science but with the geometry of my spilt blood" (Césaire tr. Rosello and Pritchard 125).

We begin with a prose monologue, the voice of Anniwaa in the slave-ship's hold: "I am a girl. I am a girl in the dark. I don't know how long I've been kept in the dark. High above me, there is a tiny crack of light" (Kay 9). The separation of Anniwaa from her brother is a 'cut' that causes the loss of speech: "The words dry under my lips" (Kay 10). In the dark, womb-like space of the hold the boundaries of time, space and subjectivity are disrupted in a way that recalls both the transformative potentials of katabasis and Turner's rite of passage rituals: "I don't know where I am. I don't even know why I'm here [. . .] I can feel I am not myself [. . .] I wonder if I will be a girl when I get out of here" (Kay 9, 13,14). But on the captives' emergence from the hold, new identities and a new order of boundary and hierarchy are violently imposed on them. This experience is not one of knowledge, growth or rebirth, but of trauma. It is only through the dialogic, liminoid space of the play, in conversation with the voices of other dead women – a carnivalesque space reminiscent of communal nekuian ritual or festival – that Lamplighter/ Anniwaa is able to reconstruct an identity and a voice.

Like Stevie Smith and Dylan Thomas, Jackie Kay makes use of and subverts the conventionally authoritative voice – and space – of the BBC radio broadcast. Throughout the play, Kay utilises the structure and model of the shipping news, a regularly broadcast,

utilitarian form that, in its regularity and continuity, and its mapping of the seas around

Great Britain, has become a traditional and familiar part of BBC, and British, culture. The

only male voice in the play, MacBean shifts into other authoritative modes and voices, such

as the ships' logs of slave ships, the records of slave traders, notices advertising slaves for

sale, laws regarding slavery, and other historical material. In the BBC production this

'actuality' and/or actuality-style material is performed in the impersonal, authoritative, RP

mode of the traditional BBC announcer, further emphasising a stark and shocking

disjuncture between content and affect:

> MACBEAN
> New Low, moving rapidly North-east and deepening.
> Occasionally moderate or poor.
> Buryed two slaves –
> A man (no 140) and a boy (no 170)
> Of the gravel and stoppage of urine.
> A boy, no 158, then a girl no 172.
> No 2 died of a flux. No 36 died of a flux.
> (Kay 22)

Here, the Shipping Forecast voice seems to comment, subtly, on the ship's log extract that

forms part of its content ("New Low"). The slaves are not named, but given numbers in the

manner of people held in prisons or concentration camps. Their deaths are described in the

same passive, quotidian tone as the weather, creating an (ironic) impression of inevitability

rather than death as a consequence of human cruelty and neglect. The list form of the

catalogue of the dead mirrors the form of the shipping forecast, particularly in its use of

repeated, rhythmically similar phrases at the ends of sentences. For example: "Occasionally

moderate or poor", and the repetition of "died of a flux." The two forms are also similar in

their use of subject-specific vocabulary, and in the ways in which their utilitarian

constructions reveal, under scrutiny, poetic features. This bringing together of the shipping

forecast and the logs recording slave deaths questions and subverts the shipping forecast's

association with continuity and with an "imagined community" drawn together through

simultaneous experience. MacBean's voice is regularly and increasingly intercut and
interrupted by the voices of the five women who narrate their stories. Through this
juxtaposition, Kay weaves the history of slavery, and an awareness of the power dynamics of
narrative subjectivity itself, into the fabric of her imagined community. In their overlapping,
interwoven monologues that trouble the boundaries of self and other, *The Lamplighter*'s
women recall the inhabitants of Dylan Thomas's Llareggub. Their testimonies, adapted from
historical material, draw on the documentary and 'actuality' influences in the twentieth
century radio feature. In the manner of slave narratives such as *Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1945), the validity of their
testimony, and the reality and authority of their subjectivity, as well as "the simple vocal
self-revelation of existence", is regularly reinforced (Cavarero 3):

> BLACK HARRIOT:
>   This story was written by herself.
>
> MARY:
>   This is Herself talking.
>
> CONSTANCE:
>   I am. She is. You are. They. They is. They are, they are, they are
> (Kay 15).

As the last line here suggests, the collectivity and interrelation of these voices, and their
recognition of each other – rather than the recognition of authorities or institutions – is
crucial to their power. Here, as throughout the play, the construction, functioning and
power of the language itself, the naming of things, is made explicit and brought into
question through repetition. Circular, repetitive, veering between lyric play and narrative
drive, the voices collude in their storytelling, move together and then apart, explore and
confirm the truth of their common experience:

CONSTANCE:
    Visible. Invisible. See. Be not Seen. Hear be not heard.
    To be seen and not heard.
    To be or not to be, that is the Question.

BLACK HARRIOTT:
    When I arrived off the ship
    I was polished with palm oil
    To make my dusty skin shine.
    My anus was plugged with wadding.

MARY:
    To fetch the best price for me.

LAMPLIGHTER:
    A note was placed OVER my head

MACBEAN:
    Good breeding stock

ALL:
    To fetch the best price for me
(Kay 32).

Constance's speech foregrounds the women's struggle for recognition in a manner that also

suggests the idea of ghosts as outside, and excluded from, the world of the living. The

women in their role as commodities are hyper-visible but voiceless, deprived of the vocal

recognition that would confirm their own subjectivity through history, agency and identity.

Constance's lines move from a repetition that draws attention to and questions the violence

of this commodification, to phases that are familiar and often repeated within British

culture. Kay's use, in Constance's voice, of Hamlet's well-known soliloquy further situates

Constance's voice within a narrative space in which, in Ramazani's words , there are

"complex patterns of assimilation and resistance" regarding the dominant cultural discourse

(Ramazani 9). Constance compares her struggle for agency and identity with that of one of

Shakespeare's best-known characters, assuming the cultural authority of that (male,

European) voice, as well as its sense of struggle.

The women, despite their lack of agency as slaves, are not presented as abject victims. Mary, after attacking the owner who repeatedly rapes his slaves, is flogged and left hanging from a tree for three days but survives (31); Black Harriott subverts the powerlessness of her position:

> BLACK HARRIOTT
> I wouldn't let them take me. I took them.
> I grabbed their balls and pulled them.
> I licked their faces. I rode them like
> I was on a wild horse, *Yahoooooo!*
> (Kay 40).

The women's description of their different experiences of being auctioned is typical of the ways in which the women's stories diverge, converge, echo, and are shared between the five voices (Kay 32). The characters and voices are distinct, but together they create a sense of solidarity through shared narrative and common rhythms, individual and chorusing voices.

The Lamplighter echoes the structures of the western heroic oral epic in its use of katabasis, and of voyage and return. The telescopic narrative begins and ends with Anniwaa's memory of her home village. Kay also, however, explicitly uses structural and stylistic features closely associated with the African oral epic, and with the related African oral traditions that survived and developed during slavery. The African oral epics are "long narrative recitations and songs interwoven with praise poems, chants, sermons, hymns, prayers and improvisations", believed to be the precursors of African-American spirituals (Liggins Hill 35). According to Patricia Liggins Hill, the African oral epic is also, like *The Lamplighter*, "sermonic [. . .] in that the griot uses his oratorical skills, eloquence, and literary material, such as religious songs and proverbs, to teach moral lessons and spiritually uplift his people" (Liggins Hill 47). Kay punctuates her narrative with existing and newly composed religious songs, folk-songs, work songs, protest songs, and popular songs. She

makes use of proverbs and other familiar or predetermined phrasing, and of the antiphonal

call and response patterns associated with both African epics and African-American

spirituals (Liggins Hill 32). Kay's use of the African oral epic points to the slaves' cultural

resistance and, in particular, to the potentially oppositional nature of oral cultures within

literate power structures. Their power is in their effervescence: since they might exist only

in memory, they cannot be erased, deleted, or disposed of. Kay carries the characteristics of

the songs – anaphora, repetition, antiphony, rhyme, wordplay – into the script's spoken

poetry, highlighting the distinctions and similarities between song and speech. For example:

> BLACK HARRIOTT:
>   Where can the runaway hide my dear?
>   Where can the runaway hide?
>   In the middle of London, in Yorkshire
>   On the edges of a Jamaican plantation,
>   In the bush or in the mountains,
>   Where can the runaway hide, my dear?
>   (Kay 62).

As previously observed, Kay's voices regularly draw attention to the language itself,

questioning, in particular, the naming of things. Her use of listing recalls the catalogues of

western ancient heroic oral epic poetry. The listing of slave ships in scene 12, in particular,

recalls Homer's list of ships in *The Iliad*:

> CONSTANCE
>   Across the Atlantic, the slave ships sped –
>   The *Ann*, the *Margery*, the *Diana*
>   The *Angel*, the *Jesus*, the *Grace of God*.
>
> MARY
>   The *Grace of God*.
>
> BLACK HARRIOTT
>   The *Blessing*, the *Bridget*, the *Fanny*, the *Hannah*,
>   The *Reformation*, the *Perseverance*.
>
> MARY
>   The *Perseverance*
> (Kay 68)

Simply by repeating these names the voices enter into dialogue with them, drawing

attention to the multiplicity of their meanings outside the privileged, authoritative space of

their original naming. We are, for example, asked to consider the disjuncture between the

business of the slave ships and their names' intimations of Christian morality, the

'perseverance' of the slave traders and owners in contrast with the perseverance of their

slaves. Here, and in her use of British place names, Kay re-enacts "what Derek Walcott calls

"Adam's task of giving things their names" within a post-colonial context (REF! Ramazani).

MACBEAN:
   Ship: to put or take (person or things)
   Ship: to shoulder a burden

CONSTANCE:
   HardSHIP, WorkmanSHIP, WorSHIP, relationSHIP, authorship!
   (She sounds very excited.) AuthorSHIP!

MACBEAN:
   The British System is the most gigantic system of slavery the world has yet seen.

BLACK HARRIOTT:
   London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol,
   Glasgow, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Hull.

LAMPLIGHTER:
   I put those cities on the map
   (Kay 72)

But as well as asserting an alternative view of Britain as imagined community, these lists

also function elegiacally. Along with MacBean's lists of the dead from the slave ships' logs,

*The Lamplighter'*s lists function commemoratively, as a testimonial record of loss and a

means of preserving and passing on memory.

   The Lamplighter employs a variety of strategies in its staging of dialogue between

'actuality' and fiction, and between conflicting historical discourses. The play's description of

the slave rebellions and of the abolitionist movement follows the final 'shipping forecast'

section, in which MacBean's authoritative, utilitarian speech mode shifts further from its

beginnings, losing its 'objective' register and taking on the narrative task of the five

women's voices:

> MACBEAN *(despondent now)*:
>
>> The moon that night was cleaved in half,
>> The night the ships landed in the Americas.
>> The slaves were shined and sold.
>> When the ships unloaded their slaves,
>> The ships shelves were reloaded with sugar,
>> Tobacco, rum, heading for London, Liverpool,
>> Glasgow. Rum weather.
>> Moderate, not good [. . .]
>> (Kay 83)

in another use of repetition, the womens' response to MacBean's rendition of William Pitt

the Younger's abolitionist speech in the Houses of Parliament draws on African-American

traditions of antiphony (Liggins Hill 35):

> MACBEAN:
>> We may now consider this trade as having received its condemnation;
>
> CONSTANCE:
>> Condemnation
>
> MACBEAN:
>> That its sentence is sealed;
>
> MARY:
>> Sealed!
>
> MACBEAN:
>> that this curse of mankind is seen by this house in its true light:
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
>> true light
> (Kay 85).

Kay's use of repetition in *The Lamplighter* serves to emphasise, to question, and also to

thread sections of the narrative together. The idea of the story ("This is my story") and of

memory and forgetting is brought back again and again, for example: on pages

15,18,20,24,25, 35, and so on, emphasising and re-emphasising the idea of embodied voice

and performativity. Certain phrases and passages are repeated word for word, particularly

those that form part of Anniwaa/ Lamplighter's narrative and the story of Constance's

forced separation from her young daughter. Within the play's cyclical structure, there is an

idea of the shared story as a means of creating hard-won identity and subjectivity, and a

corresponding shift in the imagery as the play moves towards its end. We move from

Anniwaa's position of powerlessness and silence at the beginning ("I wonder if I will ever go

home. I wonder if I will be a girl when I get out of here") to Lamplighter's separation of her

former self, Anniwaa, from the reality of her life as a slave:

        LAMPLIGHTER:
            Seems to me
            lived that blessed life, another girl
            . . . .
            a girl who climbed to the tops of trees.
            I like to think she is up there, still,
            mysterious, magical girl,
            that she would never ever
            hear this story.
            (Kay 24)

It is only at the end of the story, in freedom from slavery, that the images and voices of

Anniwaa/ Lamplighter come together to acknowledge and voice the authority and

experience of her years:

        LAMPLIGHTER:
            And one day the years caught up with me
            I turned round and there they were,
            All the years,

        ANNIWAA
            There I was:

        LAMPLIGHTER:
            The years, facing me. Her hair plaited with thread. She has climbed down from the

> tree. She is
> wearing her mother's yellow head-tie. Her arms on her hips.

(Kay 93)

This, then, is where Anniwaa begins, once again, to tell her story – creating a sense of narrative continuity beyond death as well as the notion that stories such as these are also contemporary rather than confined to the past. In *The Lamplighter*'s central nekuian katabasis, the de-humanised Other is given voice in a carnivalesque space of liminality, dialogue, and communal power. These are not the insubstantial 'shades' which are commanded by Odysseus. This is a community of strong, forceful voices which – like the writers and speakers whose testimonies argued for abolition – insist on their own continued, voiced embodiment and interconnectedness within the world of the living and within British culture:

> MACBEAN:
> There is not a brick in this city but what is cemented with the blood of a slave.
>
> CONSTANCE (sings):
> Glasgow belongs to me!
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> My Blood
>
> MARY:
> My sweat

(Kay 75)

Erebus (2012)

Jo Shapcott's multi-vocal poetic radio play *Erebus,* produced by Tim Dee, was first broadcast

on Thursday January 12th 2012, as a BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Play. The play tells the story of

Sir John Franklin's disastrous 1845 sea expedition to the Arctic to find the North-West

passage. *Erebus*, in its title, evokes a space of liminality, the dark place between Earth and

Hades. Like Odysseus, and like Christopher Columbus, Captain Franklin undertakes a voyage.

The narrative is not, though, the story of an individual hero's adventuring, but something

closer to communal elegy. The story is told, initially, in the voice of omniscient dead man

'William Braine, ordinary seaman', a crew member who we discover has died early on in the

story.

  Male Voice (William Braine, ordinary seaman, West Country)

  We'll start with my end.
  On Beechey Island. When things
  were hard but still civil enough
  for a chiselled headstone.

  Sacred to the memory of W. Braine, R. M., H. M. S. Erebus. Died April 3d, 1846, aged
  32 years. 'Choose this day whom ye will serve.' Joshua, ch xxiv, 15.
  (Shapcott 1)

As *The Lamplighter* ends with the beginning of a story, *Erebus* begins with the end of its

central narrator's life. The inscription, like the inscription discovered by Roland in *The Dark*

Tower, highlights the function of the play as elegy and remembrance, but the bible verse

inscribed on the headstone brings Braine's morality (and the morality of the expedition) into

question. In their ambiguity, the words suggest Braine's service on the *Erebus*, but also the

possibility of his being in the service of forces of good and/or evil. William Braine inhabits a

liminoid space outside time and space, with an omniscient view of events in the time before

and since his death. His introduction to the story uses modern-day diction and colloquial

idiom, suggesting a knowledge of contemporary life. Men clamour to join Franklin's

expedition "like you/ would if you thought you'd the chance/ to fly to the moon." Braine

"loved the science talk, the technospeak" (Shapcott 1). Shapcott's frequent use of

enjambment drives the narrative forwards, maintaining rhythmic tension, and there's

frequent use of repeated words and phrases – particularly within sections where list

structures dominate (for example, "I learned," "ice," and "silence" are repeated multiple

times). The narrative of *Erebus* is pinned together from the voices of Braine, Jane Griffith,

and the Inuit man, as well as excerpts from various real and invented historical texts,

including the Ice Master's taxonomical descriptions of the ice. These 'text' extracts, with

their differing forms and tones, act as counterpoints to Braine's often more emotive

narrative thread – as well as adding an aura of historical veracity. The language is more

complex and non-linear within the 'texts', and closer to Ong's idea of more abstract,

'literate' thinking. There is also, in the play's BBC production, the use of the broadside ballad

'Lady Franklin's Lament', which first appeared in around 1850. Interweaving the narrative,

this slow, plaintive melody and storytelling singing voice emphasises the play's echoing of

oral traditions, and particularly its mixing of 'personal' and 'historical' narrative.

While the ships' journey into the Arctic is a katabasis of sorts, it's a journey from which

absolutely no one returns alive. William Braine rather than Franklin who was, historically,

the central figure, is the narrator of the story's cautionary wisdom. The idea of liminal space

is emphasised in Braine's explanation of the ship's name, and of the territory the ships sail

into. Erebus, he claims, means "shadow [. . .] the dark place in Hades/ where the dead wait

to die" (Shapcott 3). The polar space is characterised by its in-between-ness: "I learned: why

it never got light/ here, really, at best a kind of dirty/ dusk in summer" (Shapcott 3). Later,

physical sound seems to trouble and surpass the boundaries of time and space – as radio

sound does:

    [. . .] There are days so cold the air seems
    solid, and then sound travels in the Arctic
    like a speeding ghost. The crew thought
    they heard music from the ship as

they trekked on land more than a mile
away: a man singing, the mechanical
organ buzzing and humming. They thought
they could hear the officers whispering.
(Shapcott 10)

Within this space, the extended monologues of *Erebus* tell us the story but do not interact

or overlap with each other, functioning in much the same way as the sound described in the

previous passage – troubling the boundaries of time and space in their oblique juxtaposition

but never encountering or reflecting one another directly, or engaging in direct dialogue.

The impression created, in general, is not of communal life but of atomised individuals.

While the characters speak in verse, the 'actuality' material in *Erebus* tends to be written

in prose form. Shapcott uses historical 'actuality' material, as well as the invented

documentary source of Jane Franklin's diary, in the tradition of the BBC radio feature.

William Braine's measured, regular verse narrative is counterpointed by the actuality

material of the Ice Master's taxonomy, taken from William Scoresby's *An Account of the*

Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery, 1820. The Ice

Master's taxonomy of the ice forms a lyric, timeless description of the landscape through

which Franklin's expedition moves. Its abstraction and otherworldliness, its rhythmic and

patterned qualities, and the associative, occasionally poetic 'stretch' of its imagery, add to

the sense of liminoid boundarylessness and imaginative possibility in the space. For

example:

The Ice Master

9. A calf is a portion of ice which has been depressed by the same means as a
hummock is elevated. It is kept down by some larger mass; from beneath which, it
shows itself on one side. I have seen a calf so deep and broad, that the ship sailed
over it without touching, when it might be observed on both sides of the vessel at the
same time.
(Shapcott 11)

The extracts are often only tangentially or loosely connected to the narrative, if at all,

focusing instead on mapping the landscape through precise categorisation. Like the shipping news they are both utilitarian and poetic in their construction, with their use of metaphorical ice-jargon, and their precise, descriptive language. The definitions hint at human presence, though never human agency, and they are largely free of affect except in their occasional references to the ice's impact on shipping, and for the use of ice names that also refer to animals or animal parts, such as "calf" and "tongue". This creates a stark contrast with the surrounding narrative. These descriptions are outside the narrative space of the rest of the play and, unlike the shipping forecast in Kay's *The Lamplighter*, they remain so. In this way, *Erebus* suggests the power, beauty, indifference and danger of the nonhuman or 'natural' world.

While, as Johannes Haubold and Adorno and Horkheimer argue, the Odyssey can be interpreted as displaying some ambivalence towards its heroes, *Erebus* functions as a clear and sharp critique of the hubris and assumption of superior culture and knowledge that leaves the crews of the Erebus and the Terror so desperately unprepared for their journey. Braine's initial list of the ships' advantages suggests a utopian modernity:

> railway steam engines (ex-Greenwich
> Line) and screw propellers designed to lift
> above the ice for their preservation.
> Sylvester stoves and a network of piping
> for warmth. A mechanical hand organ
> for each ship, with fifty tunes apiece.
> Materials for our education, during
> long winters in the ice: slates, chalks
> (Shapcott 2).

According to Braine later expeditions discover, in a boat resting on a sledge,

> in short, a quantity of articles of one description and another truly astonishing
> in variety, and such as, for the most part, modern sledge-travellers in these regions
> would consider a mere accumulation of dead weight.
> (Shapcott 13)

The ships' technology is not sufficient to bring them safely through a hostile physical environment of which they have little knowledge. To reinforce this point, the speech style of Braine and the Ice Master is contrasted with the speech of the Inuit man. William Braine lists the ships' equipment, the knowledge he accrued on the ship: "I learned/ navigation and terms, and such" (Shapcott 2). Braine also lists the silences he 'masters' as a dead man: "the silence/ of Erebus trapped in ice for years [. . .] the silence when the dry mouth/ and black gums of scurvy made it hurt/ to speak" (Shapcott 5). Lastly, Braine lists the expedition's remains: "They found: my snow-goggles;/ skeletons, whole and scattered". This cataloguing functions elegiacally, as a record of the dead, and also allows a large amount of information about the expedition to be conveyed concisely. As in *Under Milk Wood* these lists enable associative shifts in subject-matter. In *Erebus*, though, this habit of taxonomy and listing is also linked to a British, Victorian, colonial attitude to knowledge and understanding – a possessive and controlling documentation through which naming and cataloguing denotes ownership. In contrast, the Inuit man's testimony integrates an in-depth, geographically specific knowledge of the natural world into everyday speech. Time is measured, and movement occurs, according to the physical landscape: "There have been four seasons of tall ice since/ this thing happened [. . .] Later, when the sea began to move,/ but still before the big ice-break" (Shapcott 16,18). The man uses multiple descriptions for the time of year:

  [. . .] It was the season when
the darkness starts to change its colour. The season
when the ice in Narwhale Sound begins to sing.
(Shapcott 16)

This listing might seem similar to the Ice Master's taxonomy, but it is differentiated by the way it's clearly linked to human presence within the landscape and the experience of that landscape. In the Inuit man's narrative, objects and aesthetics are also linked to use and to human agency:

> They knew him for a leader because
> of these things and the metal star
> on his breast with ribbons brighter
> than the ones on the skin of the ribbon
> seal [. . .]
> (Shapcott 18)

 Significantly, in the end it's not physical artefacts or written statements or diaries – or nineteenth-century colonial accumulation and classification – but the Inuit man's oral testimony that has the final say. The written materials found by the Inuit family are described as "writings of no use" and given to the children, who enjoy watching the paper fly into the wind. Western assumptions about the permanence of text and the 'ephemerality' of sound are turned on their head. The hubris of Franklin's expedition, together with colonial ideas of superior knowledge and 'civilisation', is exposed and superseded by the power of the voice. These are the play's last words:

> Our cousin spoke of knife marks
> on their bones, of bodies jointed,
> the limbs stacked round the entrance
> to a tent, of sea boots filled with cooked
> human flesh, of bones broken, and sucked
> clean of marrow. He has seen all this
> and his words will survive like metal.
> (Shapcott 19)

No matter what official records of the expedition may show, the truth of oral testimony will survive.

    In depicting the meeting of the indigenous people and Franklin's expedition, Shapcott questions and critiques colonial ideas of 'civilisation'. In the (historical) account of the expedition, Franklin and his men themselves become the ultimate barbarous Other, the equivalent of *The Odyssey*'s Polyphemus, through their cannibalism. This happens because they don't have the indigenous knowledge required to survive in the environment through which they travel – a knowledge which, in the *Odyssey*, is obtained through conversations

with gods and prophets. In a similar inversion of the *Odyssey*'s narrative, the crew are made

snow-blind by their unpreparedness for the Arctic environment: "your/ eyes weep, there's a

pain as if sand/ has been ground into them" (Shapcott 10). Rather than tricking and blinding

the Other as Odysseus does, the explorers are themselves blinded by a strange, hostile

landscape. If Jane Franklin functions as an equivalent to Penelope in her waiting for her

missing husband, she enjoys far more freedom, agency, and voice: "Between ourselves, I

didn't love him, but/ it was a good marriage, a useful/ one" (Shapcott 12).

    Like *The Lamplighter*, *Erebus* is concerned with the idea of testimony and of making the

voices of the overlooked heard. Like late nineteenth and early twentieth century

spiritualism, these plays facilitate "embodiment and manifestation for non-embodied

entities", acting as a form of "witness to the unseen" (Connor 390). The liminoid polar space

and the space between life and death merge to become a very particular threshold, from

which Braine is compelled to speak his truth:

>   If I'm honest,
>   there is no silence up here. The ice talks.
>   The ice won't shut up.
>   (Shapcott 6)

Sir John Franklin's expedition is destroyed, ultimately, by hubris, by lack of indigenous

knowledge and by the environment it sets out to master and to map. [51] The play is, as well

as a critique of Victorian ideas of exploration, mapping, knowledge and symbolic ownership,

a broader analysis of western culture's relationship to 'nature' and the environment, written

in the context of global climate change. The Inuit survive because they have learned, over

time, how to live within and as part of their environment, unlike the supposedly

---

[51] Inuit records report that the explorers eventually died due to lack of food after they shot too many animals in their first year in the Arctic, damaging the delicate balance between human needs and animal reproduction. This account is not referred to explicitly in the play. See http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/archiveAudioInuitTestimonyIndex_en.htm.

technologically advanced explorers.

Pink Mist (2012)

Owen Sheers' *Pink Mist* was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in March 2012 in conjunction

with the BBC's Bristol-based *More Than Words* listening festival. Billed as a 'verse drama',

the play draws on the testimonies of British soldiers gathered as research for a dramatic

work for the stage, *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*, also first performed in 2012 (Sheers 87).

The play is divided into five narrative sections. In a radical departure for the programming of

poetic radio plays, *Pink Mist* was originally broadcast in five distinct fifteen-minute sections

over the course of five weekdays. With its focused attention to the poetic qualities of

colloquial speech, *Pink Mist* is clearly influenced by the documentary and 'actuality'

concerns of the BBC radio feature, as well as by the more recent popularity of verbatim

theatre. Although the play alludes to *The Iliad* in its discussion and depiction of the practical

experience and psychology of war, it draws far more explicitly on another work that arose

from oral tradition, the elegaic medieval Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*. *Y Gododdin,* thought to

have been composed in the sixth century but preserved in the 13th century manuscript *The*

Book of Aneirin, takes the form of a series of elegies – rather than a narrative epic – for men

who died at the Battle of Catraeth in around AD600 (Jarman xiii). Catraeth is now generally

believed to be Catterick in North Yorkshire, currently home to the biggest military base in

western Europe. The ruler of the Gododdin, a Celtic Brittonic people, was Mynydogg

Mwnfawr (Mynydogg the wealthy). According to the poem, he raised an army of 300 young

men, who were feasted for a year at Din Eidyn (now Edinburgh) before fighting and losing a

disastrous battle in which they were overwhelmingly outnumbered (Jarman xxi). *Y Goddodin*

was a major influence on Welsh poet David Jones's post-World War I poem, *In Parenthesis*

(1937). Echoing the structure of *Y Gododdin*, in which each individual stanza elegises and

eulogises a single hero, Sheers focuses, in turn, on the stories of three ex-servicemen:

Arthur, Hads and Taff. Their three stories are bookended by an introductory section, 'After

Before', and a concluding section, 'Home to Roost'. As with the multi-vocal poetic radio

plays previously discussed, *Pink Mist* focuses on internal worlds rather than directly

representing external reality; it is explicitly constructed out of memory, testimony, and

imagination. The play's narrative is told by multiple voices rather than performed as

dramatic action. *Pink Mist*'s monologues are interspersed with sections of dialogue as the

characters discuss and hone their stories.

The principal narrator Arthur is positioned, when we first encounter him, "Up on Dundry

Hill, under the transmitter", a place which equates his voice with the radio voice's power to

trouble and disregard boundaries of geographical space, internal and external voice, time,

and mortality (Sheers 5). Like William Braine, Arthur is, we eventually discover, deceased;

however, like the ghosts of *Under Milk Wood* he retains the ability to communicate with the

living. Towards the end of the play, Arthur describes the communications techniques of

British and Taliban forces and, in doing so, evokes the visceral power of orality and of radio

poetry:

> Sometimes at night, around Sangin, Tajaki,
> they'd howl like dogs. To communicate,
> we had our radios, our channels,
> They had the call of animals,
> the darkness, a terrain they knew,
> black and green through our NVGs,
> like the world had turned computer screen.
> (Sheers 71)

The enemy's power lies in their knowledge of the landscape. Their use of animal calls

situates them within, rather than separate from, the natural world. These are 'primitive' but

effective methods. It is the Allied Forces' visual technology, though, that most clearly

distinguishes the two groups. A world "turned computer screen" reminds us of *Operation*

Afghanistan, the computer game played by Hads after his return from war, a visual

representation of the conflict in which all bodies are fundamentally de-humanised.

Arthur's 'haunting' of his loved ones is constructed as something occurring through

collective memory, and yet he is also a distinct character who exists independently of his

conversations with others, and who speaks directly to the audience:

GWEN

I still hear him, so for me he isn't gone.
He's here, in my head, my memories
(Sheers 81).

ARTHUR

I watch over them, talk to them.
They hear me, and sometimes talk back too.
(Sheers 82)[52]

Where is Arthur's speaking voice situated? Just as the recorded voice of someone long gone

might, in reality, continue to speak to us over the airwaves, Arthur's voice remains 'in the

air', in a space in between two states: presence and memory, the land of the living and

Hades. Like the spectres of more traditional ghost stories, Arthur has unfinished business – a

message that he feels must be heard. Arthur's voice, as the central narrative voice, weaves

the monologues together. As in *The Lamplighter*, the characters' shared liminality

emphasises the strength and power of communal experience and of comradeship. The

stories told overlap, validate one another and, occasionally, question or contradict. Sheers

uses a dialogic structure in order to piece together the narrative, and *Pink Mist* reflects the

collaborative process of pre-literate composition through this polyphonic construction. This

structure also has the effect of making the performative retelling explicit, as when Odysseus

tells his stories in the Odyssey. We are always aware that this story is a combination of

embodied subjectivities, not the view of an invisible narrator. Our first introduction to the

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[52] Faber's 2013 version of *Pink Mist* is slightly different, in places, to the script used for the broadcast. For example, the original line here is "They hear me too, and sometimes talk back." For the purposes of this thesis, I am using the 2013 version.

experience of being in Afghanistan is this:

    ARTHUR
 And then, when we came down the ramp
under the tail of the plane –

         HADS
     Wham. That heat.

    ARTHUR
Like an opened oven door.

         HADS
     Yank voices.

    ARTHUR
Dust on your lips. The landing strip, moonlit. A smell of –

         HADS
     Afghan. That Afghan smell like…

    ARTHUR
Shit, And burning. Burning shit.
(Sheers 26)

While such construction of continuity through elegy – particularly elegy experienced

simultaneously by a large number of people via radio – may, as Anderson and Ramzani

suggest, work towards maintaining a sense of national identity, of "a sociological organism

moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time", *Pink Mist* also, conversely, works

to counter and complicate this function (Anderson 31). Arthur, Hads and Taff are clearly and

precisely located, through voice, language, and description, in Bristol. Taff (Geraint) is of

Welsh heritage while Hads (Hayden) is British Somali. At war, the designated boundaries of

power, status and identity are impossible to maintain. Taff is deeply troubled by his

involvement in the accidental killing of Afghan civilians, and is later physically and mentally

wounded by 'blue on blue' fire from US military personnel. In *Pink Mist* men decide to fight

not for their nation or region but for reasons related to money, pride, and ideas of

masculinity and identity. Ultimately, however, they fight for the lives and deaths of their

comrades, a motivation Arthur labels "an abuse of love" (Sheers 82):

    ARTHUR

It's more about keeping your mates alive.
Or avenging the ones who've already died.
Cos that's what fuels war, though no one will say it.
Love, and grief, it's rougher underside.
(Sheers 55)

In *L'Iliade ou le poeme de la force*, Simone Weil discusses the functioning of 'force' within

The Iliad. She defines force as a sort of dehumanising power, that which turns a human

being into a thing (for example, a corpse): "The human soul seems ever conditioned by its

ties with force, swept away, blinded by the force it believes it can control, bowed under the

constraint of the force it submits to" (Weil tr. Holoka 45). The Achaeans and Sheers'

servicemen are, as groups, alike in their difficulty controlling or managing the forces that

shape their lives. In attempting to escape low-paid, unfulfilling, monotonous work with poor

prospects, Arthur, Hads and Taff gain, at first, a pleasing sense of their own strength, ability,

power and purpose. Yet the physical imagery that signals this shift – their reflections in the

Army Information Centre window, in the butcher's window – are tinged with discomfort: the

army uniform superimposed on Arthur's body, the men compared to slaughtered meat.

Purpose and power is given and, at the same time, taken away:

    ARTHUR

Yeah, they built us up alright.
Built up the muscle layer by layer,
just as they took us away, layer by layer.
Fair exchange, perhaps –
Three hots and a cot and a packet of pay,
the promise of duty and seeing the world,
not much, I guess,
for handing them your body

and giving what's left of your mind away.
(Sheers 44)

Bastion's 'Rose Cottage', introduced at the play's beginning and returned to at its end, is not the traditional British idyll the name suggests but Bastion's morgue – its name derived from the rose oil used on the skin of the Afghan dead. This image in particular is emblematic of the ironies of nationhood: the utopian "imagined community" is sustained in part by the death and suffering of the county's service personnel.

 Pink Mist begins with the line "Three boys went to Catterick", echoing *Y Gododdin's* repeated phrase "Gwyr a aeth Gatraeth gan wawr" or "Men went to Catreath with the dawn" (Sheers 2013: 1). Sheers draws, more generally, on *Y Gododdin's* patterns of stresses, alliteration and rhyming and on its structural characteristics in his use of repeated phrases at the beginning of stanzas. *Pink Mist's* language is recognisably colloquial but clearly arranged with artifice, employing techniques closely linked with orality and oral tradition: familiar and clichéd phrases, repetition, strong and repetitive rhythmic patterns. For example, in the first section multiple phrases repeat the words "three" and "boys", first encountered in the first line: "and three of us did what boys always have" [. . .] "three boys going to Catterick for basic" [. . .] "Three boys. Yeah we might have thought ourselves men" [. . .] "Just three friends who'd once linked arms at school" (Sheers 3). The rhythm returns often, in Arthur's monologue sections, to an insistent anapaestic tetrameter, stressing the turn of each line:

> fishermen blowing on their fingerless gloves,
> the current pulling their fishing lines tight
> That's how it was that morning when
> the three of us did what boys always have
> And left our homes for war.
> (Sheers 3)

 Sheers' language, from the beginning, is determinedly contemporary:

> friend us on facebook and you'll soon see
> how quick our profile shots scroll back
> from battledress to uniform
> (Sheers 4).

Facebook is also, of course, a shared documentary record – as these testimonies purport to be.

Sheers' language is determinedly rooted in place: "It was January,/ snow pitchen on the severn" (Sheers 2013: 3). Sheers uses dialect words, for example "pitchen", "painen", to strengthen the story's sense of locality, and to give a sense of the men's social background. He also uses non-standard English grammar and syntax patterns, for example: "We was on our fourth or fifth cider when I told them" and "Nah, cant do it, sonner. Not for me" (Sheers 14,18). Military jargon – for example, "bluey" and "Camelbak" - also situates the speakers firmly within military culture. This language is not explained to the listener, and its use emphasises the gulf between military and civilian life. In this way, speech and language is utilised in a way that signals social class, culture and locality without making the narrative unintelligible for others whose knowledge of the language functions outside those specific contexts. This 'actuality' aesthetic follows in the footsteps of radio features such as *The Radio Ballads* in its desire to document and communicate a specific shared experience to a far wider British audience – giving voice to specific communities to create a broader, more inclusive sense of a shared public life, a "culture in common" (Scannell qtd. in Avery 6). The power of language is further evoked through Taff's description of the Pashto and Dari language card he receives before he leaves for Afghanistan. The list, or catalogue, of translated words, like a nightmarish version of a tourist's phrase book, condenses a great deal of information about the servicemen's experience. For example:

Man – Saray

Woman – Zan

Child – Halak

Human bomb – Insaani bam

(Sheers 56)

Pink Mist utilises some of the telescopic narrative structures common in works arising

from oral traditions, as well as more linear, novelistic ones. We begin, as in *Erebus*, at the

end of the story. Arthur returns to the events of the past, as well as affirming the continuity

of the present. At the same time, he signals foreboding and the notion of irrevocable

change:

> And look how far we've come. Full circle.
> Back where we left from – Bristol.
> Bonfire night, and all of us hiding like dogs
> From the whizz-bangs, the bright and sparkly fun.
> (Sheers 4)

The narrators withhold certain information – such as the fact of Arthur's death – in order to

create narrative tension, but this device also relates to the functioning of memory and

trauma. The katabasis of *Pink Mist* is not only a journey into the hell of war but, more vitally,

a journey into the hell of posttraumatic memory. The play's knowledge, as in *Erebus*, is

offered to the listener: we become Odysseus summoning the dead from the underworld and

these plays offer us cautionary guidance for our (collective) journey.

Sheers also utilises poetry's capacity for the evocation of sensory experience in the men's

reminiscences. The narrative is structured, in part, around recurring imagery. The image of

the three friends, arms linked in the playground, "chanting like fools,/ *Who wants to play*

war?" recurs throughout the first section, 'After Before' and at the end of Arthur's story. It's

also the image that ends the play. Through this central, repeated image and refrain, Sheers

highlights the youth and inexperience of the men as well as contrasting the darkness of their

experience with their initial enthusiasm. Sheers also highlights imagery related to risk,

daring of a particular, almost nihilistic kind, and achievement. Explaining his decision to join

the army to his girlfriend, Gwen, Arthur remembers a suicide attempt, a man he saw

jumping from Clifton suspension bridge as a child in "A perfect ten-out-of-ten high-board

dive" (Sheers 10). It isn't the man's action itself but the committed manner of it that inspires

him. In an echo of this image, Arthur describes Hads being thrown in the air by the landmine

he steps on:

> Arching in the air, his arms flung wide,
> as if he was back at school again,
> high-jumping for a top spot – a record-beating Fosbury flop
> that left his legs behind.
> (Sheers 31)

Sheers brings us back to the bridge once more with another image that symbolises Arthur's

relationship to risk. On leave, he remembers climbing the cliffs to reach a peregrine's egg, to

the consternation of his two friends: "One day I thought I'd give them a scare,/ so I climbed

further out, past the dare" (Sheers 60). Although the stealing is transgression, the egg is a

thrilling prize, "something just mine." It's this moment that Taff returns to in his attempt to

explain the experience of losing Arthur, his friend:

> For me it's like we're back on the cliffs
> and we've dared him to touch
> some rock far out.
> (Sheers 81)

Images such as these function in the memory, creating meaning out of equivalence and

resonance, gesturing at what might be beyond language; they also allow the speakers to

create a shared understanding of the past.

Pink Mist is deeply and explicitly political. It presents, through its form and content, a

model of human experience as fundamentally communal, each person's experiences

impacting and resonating as part of a shared narrative.[53] The play was written and broadcast

in the context of the UK's involvement in protracted military conflicts in both Afghanistan

and Iraq. Arthur's monologue at the play's end states a clear objective, a desire for political

change. In the meantime:

> [. . .] if people knew what [war] is,
> that would be enough.
> . . . .
> So that's all I hope for.
> When the debate's being had,
> the reasons given,
> That people will remember
> what those three letters mean
> (Sheers 83).

Like the multi-vocal poetic radio plays discussed in the previous chapter, *The Lamplighter*,

Erebus and *Pink Mist* are all concerned with the dialogic, polyphonic reconfiguration of the

traditions of the ancient oral heroic epic, via radio broadcast, in order to evoke, explore and

critique western cultural values, and constructions of shared public life and shared culture.

However, in contrast to *A Turn Outside* and *Three Women*, these plays imagine a far greater

degree of power and freedom for their narrative voices: "Freedom to move [. . .] to learn, to

be allied with a powerful centre, to narrate the world" (Morrison 64). The voices are often

oppositional, and speak from spaces associated with death and rebirth. They may trouble

conventional constructions of self and other, and of subjectivity, but they are not distinct,

set apart, or excluded from the cultures and the imagined communities they seek to

question and explore. Rather, their imaginative reconfiguration of traditional narrative, and

of symbolic and figurative structures, is positioned as part of the continuing evolution of

shared – and at the same time plural – cultural material. In these plays, as in the plays

discussed in chapters two and three, the threshold between Hades and the land of the living

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[53] While *Pink Mist* relates the experience of different ethnic groups within the UK, its dialogue is not transcultural. The people of Afghanistan, for example, are not given a voice.

is not confined to the proscribed structures of ritual and festival, but is part of the landscape of the everyday. In contrast to *A Turn Outside* and *Three Women*, the plays examined in this chapter emphasise the agency and power of their voices. The liminoid, in these plays, is an enabler of social and political critique and change.

Mechanically reproduced, simultaneously experienced bodily voices speaking poetry's "recursive or echoic" language recreate and question ideas, experiences, and narratives of community and nation (Ramazani 76). This, in combination with poetry's capacity for both culturally specific monologue and transcultural dialogism, creates a fertile space for the discussion and re-imagination of national identity. In an era of rapid globalisation, the multi-vocal poetic radio play offers an opportunity for the critique and reimagining of cultural identities and imagined communities.

Conclusion: The Blown Definitions

My original multi-vocal poetic radio play The *Blown Definitions* began as a series of

experimental sketches for multiple poetic radio voices. The problems I sought to overcome

as I wrote it, and the structural and stylistic choices I made, were closely related to the

multi-vocal poetic radio plays I analysed as part of this thesis. For example: how to avoid a

clunky 'stage set' voiced description of the play's reality; how to balance and contrast poetic

and more utilitarian language modes; how to manage and utilise the interplay of various

modes: textual and oral, monologic and dialogic. My play's central conceit, which originally

involved two people speaking to one another using archaic radio equipment, shifted to

become a long-distance family relationship explored through telephone conversations. In

developing my play script I sought to discover, through my practice, what formal, stylistic

and thematic choices might be suggested or necessitated by the constraints and possibilities

of a poetic, multi-voice radio play. My choices were increasingly influenced, as my critical

thesis progressed, by my analysis of the work of others. To conclude the critical component

of my thesis, I will begin by analysing and discussing the relationship between my critical

analysis of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as sub-genre, and my original multi-vocal poetic

radio play, *The Blown Definitions*. I will focus on key aspects of the multi-vocal poetic radio

play's poetics, demonstrating how these are reflected in my own creative work.

1. **Monologue and Dialogue in the Multi-vocal poetic radio play**

Drawing on my knowledge of the multi-vocal poetic radio play, and of the BBC radio feature,

I wanted to try to differentiate, through rhythm, imagery, syntax and lexicon, between my

characters' voices. I was also keen to utilise the textural variation of different registers and

speech modes. Through its juxtaposition of different forms, registers, and speech modes,

the script questions, problematizes and draws attention to the distinctions between prose

and poetry, between narrative, dialogue, and lyric, and between academic or informational

and 'poetic' forms and registers. However, such variety, particularly when it involves shifts between prose dialogue and poetry, is potentially problematic in terms of establishing the internal logic and 'believability' of the play's world. Readers of my script initially found the unexplained shifts between relatively naturalistic dialogue and longer, more explicitly 'poetic' monologue difficult and jarring. As outlined in my introduction, the multi-vocal poetic radio play is formed either of interrelated monologues, of 'poetic' dramatic dialogue and monologue, or, less frequently, of a combination of poetry and illustrative or contextualising 'naturalistic' dramatic prose dialogue. The prose dialogue I had created was not 'poetic' enough to enable relatively seamless shifts, in the voice of a single speaker, from more naturalistic dialogue to poetic monologue, despite the fact that I had opted for a loose, non-metrical poetic style. The insertion of Gil's radio broadcasts, and of the dictionary definitions, allowed me to use more conventionally lyric and 'poetic' form in a way that was contextualised within the play's reality. However, the (unexplained) shifts between dialogue and monologue in Rosa and Gil's voices, particularly at the play's start, remained problematic. I attempted to resolve this by moving large portions of Gil and Rosa's monologues into the relatively liminoid spaces of internal speech, Gil's radio broadcasts, and Lucia's narration. Although I wanted the constructed nature of the play's reality to remain explicit, I didn't want my structural and stylistic choices to entirely prevent an audience's emotional engagement.

Like the encyclopaedia entries in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams 1979), my dictionary definitions function as a way of highlighting and providing insight into the differences between the characters' cultural experiences. They are therefore a way of providing a 'window' onto the characters' lives without resorting to clunky exposition. Within my play the dictionary definition is also, like the 'number' in a dramatic musical or the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy, a lyric Interruption or intervention in the narrative flow of the play. The dictionary definition form also necessarily involves listing. As

in many of the plays analysed in this thesis, the list structure enables non-narrative and

lateral shifts, while offering distilled forms of description. The list structure, in this context,

also draws attention to the function of listing as memorial, or as a guarding against loss – as

in the Homeric catalogues. Like the shipping forecast, or like the Ice Master's taxonomy in Jo

Shapcott's *Erebus*, a dictionary definition is designed to be functional and informational, not

aesthetically beautiful. Influenced by the 'actuality' concerns and aesthetic of the BBC radio

feature, the use and reworking of such ostensibly utilitarian forms further challenges and

complicates distinctions between utilitarian and artistic – between 'informational' and

poetic – modes. A dictionary definition works through equivalence and association, as

poetry often does. A definition may inadvertently contain poem-like sound patterning,

repetition, and distinctive syntax. A dictionary definition also demonstrates that word

meanings evolve and shift, and are potentially imprecise; it highlights the uncertain,

ambiguous spaces of etymological and translational shifts and distances, which are

themselves often beyond the reach of more informational or denotative language. Like

experimental poetry written using other dictionary-based constraints and procedures, such

as Jackson McLow's Light poems and Tina Darragh's 'adv. fans – the 1968 series' (Darragh:

27-34), dictionary definition form in poetry appropriates and questions the cultural and

communal authority of the dictionary. It asks the reader to be aware of their own agency in

constructing meaning from text, and in working with and actively re-working the language.

   Robert Pinsky suggests that every word is "an artefact, with a secret shroud or aura [. . .]

an assembly of countless voices that have uttered it or thought about it or forgotten it"

(Pinsky 81). Therefore, the dictionary, like an epic poem, may function as a repository of

collective cultural knowledge. The dictionary definition may highlight the interrelation and

contrast between knowledge as abstract data and knowledge as situational, contextualised,

and specific to action and environment. In this way, I thought my use of dictionary definition

form appropriate to the multi-vocal poetic radio play's reworking of the oral epic. When

writing my dictionary definition sections, I was mindful of their formal and textural function

in terms of the play's overall sound and structure. Since the dictionary definitions are

voiced, in the world of the play, by computer software, I asked an actor to record one of the

definitions in a voice similar to those currently produced by electronic speech synthesisers,

but closer to human speech in its tonal variation. The resulting recording emphasises the

interplay between informational or denotative language and more 'poetic' speech. The

relative disconnect between the tonal properties of the voice and the emotion suggested by

the definitions problematizes and underlines the implied emotional content.

2.   Liminality and Imagined Community

By bringing the multi-vocal poetic radio play in to a context that reflects, and projects

forward, precariousness in an age of climate change, mass migration, and cultural, social

and economic change brought about, in part, by new technologies and globalisation, I aimed

to begin to examine the impact of these changes on notions of identity, subjectivity, and

imagined community. Initially drawing on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I used the impending

storm to represent the ungovernable power of weather and climate. This descent into the

world of the storm, through which boundaries are troubled and disrupted, is paralleled in

Rosa's pregnancy and the impending birth of her child. Within the world of the play, both

storm and childbirth are spaces of liminality or "thresholdness", the state in which boundary

and hierarchy are troubled or disrupted, symbolically associated with death and with birth

(Turner 1974). In this way, I point to and discuss anxieties regarding childbirth, familial

relationships, cultural continuity and loss. Through the birth/ storm/ climate change

allusions I question, disrupt and reconfigure classifications of culture and 'nature' as

opposing or separate. The troubling and reworking of this distinction is also echoed in

various narratives told, telescopically, within the world of the play, such as the 'selkie' story,

and the story of Claude Mesito. I also, through Gil's radio broadcasts, and particularly

through Lucia's narration, utilise the liminality evoked by radio broadcast's capacity to

question notions of presence and absence, intimacy and distance, mortality, time, and

space.

3.   **The Multi-vocal poetic radio play as Dialogic, Polyphonic Epic**

When I began to write my multi-vocal poetic radio play, I aimed to revisit Shakespeare's *The*

Tempest – and through it, I later realised, the world of *The Odyssesy*. I also wanted to

imagine a world, fifty years or so in the future, in which climate change had progressed as

predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I researched possible future

scenarios using the IPCC's data, as well as experiencing as much climate change-related

fiction, film and art as possible. In its distance from the present day, and in the imaginary

location of Gil's island home, the world of the play resembles the "absolute past" of the

epic. As in the heroic epic, however, the play's narrative is not 'monologic'. Rosa and Gil

inhabit different languages and different locations. Unlike Prospero, the exiled coloniser of

Shakespeare's play, Gil is a native who has chosen to return to his island. Gil's broadcasts

and conversations, as with constructions of cultural identity and imagined community in

many of the multi-vocal poetic radio plays in this thesis, work as a (limited) incantation

against loss, and a gesture towards cultural continuity. Though Gil may control the content

of his broadcasts, he is not able to anticipate or control Rosa's questions, or the power of

the coming storm – which arrives at the play's end rather than its beginning as in *The*

Tempest. I incorporated a variety of voices and registers, drawing on traditions of

documentary, 'actuality' and testimony in the BBC radio feature and in the multi-vocal

poetic radio play: telephone conversations, answerphone messages, dictionary definitions,

weather forecasts, interviews, poems, and internal and external voices. In this way, I hoped

to create a dialogic, polyphonic exploration of the play's world and of its characters' lives.

4. The Epic Reconfigured

The play uses structural components of *The Odyssey*: journeying and returning home;

Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus (echoed in Gil, Lucia, Ruben, and Rosa's relationships);

Odysseus's encounter with the 'Other' Polyphemus, on the island of the Cyclopes. The play

suggests a reworking and disruption of katabasis as we descend into Gil's memory, as well

as into the spaces of storm and childbirth. Within these spaces, constructions of cultural

continuity and change, and of "imagined community", are discussed. We may – as in Smith's

A Turn Outside – be witnessing Gil (and his island)'s passing into silence. The island's cultural

heritage may survive and/or, in some sense, be reborn.

In creating and describing the ilha, I wanted depict a place, and a culture, that was not

recognisable as being directly analogous to the real world. I was very much aware of the

potential ethical implications of attempting to 'represent' a culture I'm not familiar with.

While considering the complexities and risks of creating an imagined cross-cultural

encounter, I found two texts particularly helpful. Firstly, Aminatta Forna's article 'Don't

Judge a Book by its Author' (*The Guardian*), in which Forna argues against the classification

of prose fiction, or the narrowing of its scope or subject-matter, according to the author's

personal identity or identities: "Writers try to reach beyond those things that divide us:

culture, class, gender, race. Given the chance, we would resist classification" (Forna 2015).

Discussing issues of 'authenticity' and of appropriation, Forna argues for the value of

imaginative engagement with people "outside your little circle", while asking that we

remain respectfully aware of the potentially problematic power dynamics involved in

representing our own and others' experiences. The multi-vocal poetic radio play, of course,

is not prose fiction. Poetry, because of its traditional association with physical voice, tends

to be directly associated with the poet's identity and experience – in a way that prose fiction

generally isn't. Yet the spatiality of the multi-vocal poetic radio play avoids some of the

dangers of single-perspective domination. The multi-vocal poetic radio play offers, through

its explicit dialogism and polyphony, a potential space for the meeting of cross- and counter-cultural forces through the dialogic potentials of poetic language. Gil – in his positions as Maphachti-speaker, Portuguese-speaker, and English-speaker, and as both islander and mainlander, inhabits multiple and often conflicting identities and communities.

As discussed in chapter IV, Began Boler, in 'The Risks of Empathy', suggests that the problems relating to cross-cultural empathy, identification, and understanding in literature may be due, in part, to readers' passive identification with the subjects of literature. A more privileged reader, positioned as consumer, may forget her or his position in relation to the power dynamics of the text. While no text can dictate or predict the ways in which it will be received and heard, the multi-vocal poetic radio play's explicit poetic artifice, in combination with its 'actuality' concerns, discourages the listener from forgetting the means of its construction. Just as "statements are changed by their insertion into a poem" (Forrest-Thomson X), the forms and functions of speech are altered and explored through the artificial space and language of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. The distancing effect created by the multi-vocal poetic radio play's form and aesthetics is similar, in its function, to the "V-effekt" utilised in Brecht's Epic Theatre (Willett). In the case of *The Blown Definitions*, the explicitly constructed nature of the island's language and culture, and the future world in which the play is set, also discourages "passive empathy". It encourages, instead, an empathic response that recognises the social construction of language and culture, as well as the difficulty and complexity of communication. By removing the action from a specific and 'real' contextual setting, I have attempted to discourage the use of existing models and categorisations in the reception of its characters. I hoped, by attempting to create a trans-cultural, dialogic setting, to highlight and lay bare the personal and political power dynamics operating within and beyond the world of the play.

5.   **Towards a Poetics of the Multi-vocal poetic radio play**

In both the critical and creative components of this thesis, I aimed to explore and examine

the case for a poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as a sub-genre distinct both from

the prose radio play and from single voice works of radio poetry. I defined the multi-vocal

poetic radio play as a poet-authored, multi-vocal work written expressly for radio and

consisting of or containing poetry. I asked, firstly, whether such a poetics existed, and then,

if it did, how I might work towards a definition. I sought to answer these questions through

critical analysis of multi-vocal, poet-authored poetic radio works from the 1930s onwards –

and through the creation of an original script for a multi-vocal poetic radio play, *The Blown*

Definitions. Using Walter Ong's conceptions of orality and literacy, Mikhail Bakhtin's

conception of monologism and dialogism, and theories of liminality in communal ritual and

festival from Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin, I developed a model of the multi-vocal

poetic radio play as dialogic "picture in sound" that reworks the structures and tropes of the

oral epic in its evocation and exploration of cultural continuity across time. Through my

analyses in chapters I and II of the critical strand of my thesis I traced the multi-vocal poetic

radio play's development – influenced in particular by developments in recording and

broadcast technologies and by verse drama for the stage, adaptations of text works, and

Greek Tragedy –and its consolidation as a distinct sub-genre rather than as a patchwork of

other art forms and genres. In chapter II, I examined the ways in which British poets, aware

of the poetry and radio traditions out of which they were working and of the unique

potentials of national radio broadcast, sought to rework the tropes and structures of the

ancient heroic oral epic – particularly the Homeric epic – in order to speak to ideas of

subjectivity, cultural identity, and imagined community in the context of globalisation.

The multi-vocal poetic radio play, as I have demonstrated, explicitly draws on and

reworks oral traditions, including the tradition of oral heroic epic poetry as a repository of

collective cultural memory. The multi-vocal poetic radio play's focus on and exploration of

the use of rhythmic reiteration or equivalence, antithesis, simile, and metaphor emphasises

poetry's mnemonic and reiterative capacity, and its association with remembrance. The

multi-vocal poetic radio play also often refers to other public and communal oral traditions

such as folklore, ballad, and polyphonic song and ritual. Through the interplay of monologic

and dialogic forces – through the influence of the epic, and of radio's 'actuality',

documentary, and testimonial potentials – the multi-vocal poetic radio play celebrates,

draws attention to and challenges constructions of individual subjectivity, cultural identity,

and imagined community. The multi-vocal poetic radio play's explicitly dialogic and

polyphonic structure, in combination with the aggregative potentials of poetic language,

encourages a consideration of multiple and competing discourses that is ethically aware,

politically charged, and sensitive to ethical complexity and ambiguity. The multi-vocal poetic

radio play's focus on sound, voice, prosody, figurative language, and the less denotative and

'informational' aspects of speech, in combination with the mechanically reproduced radio

voice's disruption of notions of presence, absence, and embodiment, enables and

encourages the exploration of ideas of liminality or "thresholdness". If the voice is, as Denis

Vase suggests, "like the navel, the enactment of both severance and continuity between self

and other", and if poetic language is associated, as Julia Kristeva suggests, with "the

semiotic", a pre-language multiplicity of drives, then the dialogic, polyphonic, poetic radio

play emerges as a space for the exploration of identity formation in the context of the

communal. This, in combination with the oral epic's function as a repository of collective

cultural memory, creates a unique space for the interaction of cross- and counter-cultural

forces. This idea is supported by my analyses of constructions of identity, subjectivity, and

imagined community in the multi-vocal poetic radio plays I've discussed. The multi-vocal

poetic radio play's capacity for evocations of liminality, in combination with the radio voice's

simultaneous reception across large geographical areas, its aggregative function, and the

repetitious or echoic potential and patterning of poetic language, tends to lead writers of

multi-vocal poetic radio plays towards utilising and exploring structures of communal ritual, festival, and imagined community in their work. Not all multi-vocal poetic radio plays contain all of the elements I've mentioned. The utilisation of the Homeric epic and of the nekuian katabasis within BBC multi-vocal poetic radio plays reflects peculiarly western (and British) cultural values. However, I contend that all of the multi-vocal poetic radio plays analysed or listed in this thesis allude to oral traditions in order to celebrate, explore, challenge and rework ideas of individual and cultural identity and subjectivity in the context of community.

In the face of previous difficulties, concerns, and reluctance regarding classification of poetic radio works, my research offers a new model for discussion. I have utilised theories of language and of social behaviour in order to better understand the social functioning of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. My findings suggest that the constraints and possibilities of the multi-voice, poet-authored poetic radio work have facilitated the development of a distinct sub-genre. By focusing specifically on the "social moorings" of the poetic utterance (Wesling), on the form and function of multi-vocal poetic radio plays in relation to the social, I have developed an outline of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's distinct poetics. My thesis builds on and adds to a variety of analyses of individual poets' poetic radio works, as well supporting and building on work on the functioning, in art, of the mechanically reproduced voice. Most importantly, my thesis, by defining a model of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as sub-genre, aims to open up a space for the continuing study and creative evolution of the multi-vocal poetic radio play. For academics, for critics, and for creative practitioners, this thesis offers a working definition of the multi-vocal poetic radio play that others may work with, build on, reconfigure, or refute. My work, I believe, demonstrates the complex and still evolving relationship between poetry and communication technologies, and offers an account of the importance – as well as the difficulty – of the multi-vocal poetic radio play as a means of reconfiguring ideas of individual identity, subjectivity, and imagined community.

I have limited my analyses for the most part to English-language BBC productions,

creating a model of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics that is particular to British

ideas of imagined community and to British radio. I was unable to include, for example,

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai's *Kiling Him* (tr. Makov-Hasson and Seelig 2008). Further

research might consider the poetics of the multi-vocal poetic radio play through analysis of

the development and functioning of poet-authored, multi-voice poetic radio plays outside

the UK, and by looking at works produced by smaller independent and commercial

broadcasters. I am aware, however, that the multi-vocal poetic radio play's development in

the UK has been facilitated to a large degree by the BBC's unique position as a relatively

independent, non-commercial, public service broadcaster, and I have so far found far fewer

examples of the sub-genre elsewhere. The scale of my study has also been dictated by the

scope of the PhD project, and by the availability of sound recordings. I have endeavoured to

provide a chronological survey of multi-vocal poetic radio plays while at the same time

providing sufficient close analysis to be able to construct a model of the poetics of the multi-

vocal poetic radio play. Further research might broaden the focus to include a larger survey

of multi-vocal poetic radio plays, as well as analysis of works related to the multi-vocal

poetic radio play that fall outside my classification, such as The Radio Ballads, or poetic

works written and produced for podcast rather than broadcast. As travel and

communication technologies continue to advance, my work might be used as the basis for

analysis of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's development – particularly in relation to

political power structures becoming, at the same time, incorrigibly more global and more

plural.

In order to build up a picture of the multi-vocal poetic radio play's poetics I found it

necessary to use research material from a variety of disciplines, including media studies,

philosophy, and anthropology. At the start of my research, I endeavoured to keep critical

and creative elements separate though interrelated. I was aware of the different skills and

mindsets required for these different strands of the thesis, and I was wary that a critical and

analytical mindset might get in the way of creative inspiration and experimentation. What

surprised me, eventually, was the manner in which creative and critical discoveries impacted

on one other. In practice, progressions in my academic work were often made possible by

creative leaps and structural and thematic decisions in my creative work, and vice versa.

Critical and creative components were constructively harnessed to one another to create

work that is genuinely practice-led.

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The Blown Definitions

By Kate Potts

"There are places we fear, places we dream, places whose exiles we became and never learned it until, sometimes, too late."

Thomas Pynchon

Characters:

Gil Laundacht: a retired journalist in his eighties living on the island of Ilha de Pinheiros

Lucia Cardoso: a software developer and Gil's ex-partner (deceased)

Rosa Huse: a secondary school teacher living in South-East England

Piotr Damine: Rosa's parter – a metropolitan housing worker

Dictionary: online dictionary software (an electronic female voice – somewhere between robotic and human)

Lisel Carevas: an expert on Claude Mesito and his poetry

Weather forecast chorus: all speakers (except dictionary voice)

Major Tuleo: Gil's high school headteacher

Grandma: Gil's grandmother

David Anteus: the archivist

Kell: A woman from the mainland (in David's story)

Luis: Gil's godson

Pronunciation Key: Maphachti words

Wari *[**wa**-ri]*

Maphachti *[ma-**fax**-ti:]*

Keino *[kʌɪ-**i:**-nəʊ]*

Pachtel m'kanto *[**pax**-tel ɛm-**kan**-təʊ]*

Quam'tchi *[**kwam**-chi:]*

Su *[su]*

Radjetv *[**rad**-tchɛv]*

N'whaldu *[ɛn-**wal**-du]*

Qee *[ki:]*

Sei *[**seɪ**-i:]*

Khendree *[**kɒn**-dri:]*

Ai *[**aɪ**-i]*

Peptu *[**pep**-tu]*

Despreet *[des-**pri:t**]*

Todil *[təʊ-**di:l**]*

Krentdel *[**krɛnt**-da:l]*

Mani-palden *[**man**-i:-**pal**-dɛn]*

Werden'krit *[**wer**-dɛn-**kri:t**]*

Maro *[ma:-rəʊ]*

Em'kator *[ɛm-keɪ-tɔːr]*

Marooat *[mar-u-ʊt]*

Ke'toon *[keɪ-tun]*

Paunit *[paʊ-niːt:]*

N'bal chir *[ɛn-bal si:r]*

Woden *[wəʊ-dɛn]*

Pai *[pʌɪ-i]*

(all 'r' sounds using alveolar trill)

The sound of different channels/ conversations (music and talk) as if moving from radio channel to radio channel, fading in to

digital ringtone sound

LUCIA

(interior voice)

He doesn't expect the ether to have a voice.

He doesn't expect that voice to be English.

What are the chances? With his temperamental equipment, flimsy web connection…

It happens early one Sunday – a fizzing of sound from his tablet

like an alka-seltzer sinking in digital bandwidth,

digital ringtone music fading in

like a sudden thrum of rain. A signal! A phonecall!

His office is sickly-looking, *sombrio,* pre-daylight. His office

seems lacking in celebration, but the screen pictures the ringtone

as spangled pock-marks, then as zig-zag peaks.

He traces the marks with his thumb – little spits and constellations.

A signal! A call!

GIL

It's like –

a pattering of gravel on my windowglass –

LUCIA

A steady bristling of cold, white stars.

ringtone music becomes louder then cuts abruptly

Of course, there's always the odd call from Luis, or Joti.

But this one is different …

ROSA

(telephone voice)

Olá?

                                        pause

GIL

Who is this?

ROSA

It's….

(coughs)

It's Rosa. Rosa Huse.

I'm… I'm not sure if you remember?

GIL

I can't say I…

ROSA

Ruben's daughter – your son's daughter.

Your granddaughter.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Remember?

He remembers a snapshot Ruben sent him, some years back.

                            airport interior sounds

A strong, sulky girl who's a little nonplussed by the triple

cone with whipped cream and sprinkles he has apparently

(unwisely) foisted on her, but who – graciously – eats, raises

her smile like a flag. San Cristobal airport. Twenty forty-five.

ROSA

D'you you want to know how I got your number?

pause

Jeanetta came to the funeral. She gave me Luis's number. He gave me this one for you.

Luis reckoned you went back to Pinheiros.

Is that where you're living now?
 On the Ilha?

LUCIA

(Interior voice)

In the photograph, he is wearing a cheap, papery raincoat. This little girl, Rosa,

Clamps her fingers around his shoulder. She's already as tall as his chin.

He doesn't remember San Cristobal, or the taking of this photograph.

GIL

(telephone voice)

Listen –

I'm a little busy just now.

ROSA

(overlapping)

What with?

GIL

Sorry?

ROSA

With what?

I mean…what is it you're busy with then?

GIL

Listen, could you cut to the quick? I mean, to the…

ROSA

Chase?

GIL

That's the one.

ROSA

I can't just call you to say hello?

beat

Dad was talking about you, just before he died.

There was never much chat about the ilha – and then,

out of nowhere, these long, woozy stories –

The menagerie, the pet rook. Brew Street and Kinga street.

Those square, white houses. Like teeth he said…

GIL

Gone now, Kinga Street.

ROSA

(overlapping)

That's what I heard, yeah.

Dad said you'd gone back to the ilha.

I said I'd look you up. He didn't tell me not to. But then, to be fair,

he wasn't saying much at all by then.

I never really understood the thing with you and dad;

Sometimes he called it 'the cold war'.

GIL

(overlapping)

Listen – I'm sorry. It's been…

quite a while now. How many years? Twelve? More?

And I've been so busy. And not exactly the golden boy me.

So I didn't expect to hear –

ROSA

(interrupting)

Look, I wanted to…

GIL

Listen – I did hear about Ruben, what happened. I…

beat

(Sigh)

Are you still in Mecta 17 then, Rosa? Inglaterra?

DICTIONARY

Mecta

noun

1. An administrative entity or suburb at or well beyond the bounds of a traditional metropolitan area, characterised by grand-scale, identikit housing bunkers stacked vertically in rows.

ROSA

There was astroturf on the rooves originally. Now it's just shingle.
Officially we're 'metro-sector'. Piotr calls it the 'commuterbin'.

We're fifty-five minutes from the city, if you take the bullet.

What made you go back there Gil? To the island?

GIL

Rosa – it's my home.

*radio show music 1 ('*Le Mogon'*, from Mali Music)*

GIL

(radio voice)

Lup Tolernos and his Violent Orchestra there. It's six thirty this glorious

Wednesday evening. Greetings, bem-vindo

and *kaino* to all of you out there. It's been a boozy, breeze-scuffed day

here on the ilha. The pine trees

are spilling out that curious, cough medicine scent. So, as you slink yourselves

home, in the last of the light,

it's time for some Ilha tales from Lisel Carevas. Today, we're shooting the breeze

about our esteemed friend, our island poet, Mister Claude Mesito…

LISEL

Thank you, Gil. Well of course there's no shortage

of stories about Mesito – o malandro velho.

I'll begin with only flat-out what I know,

and omit all rumour and gossip…

Claude Mesito was a fisherman.

His boots were patched with tar;

he whistled birdsong under his breath.

On Sundays in summer he'd sleep on the front porch,

flat out, jaw lolling open –

GIL

Remember that monstrous beast of a cat that slept on his chest?

LISEL

Lolo, yes. That thick blanket of cat, even in summer…

Mesito was a quiet one. He hardly spoke, except

to buy his newspaper and groceries.

GIL

Which means there were stories galore about him.

Once, when my father was five years old or so, for a dare,

he sneaked into Mesito's one room hut.

Sound of children chattering, laughing

Dad only stood beyond the beech wood door

for three, tight, breaths, but afterwards he claimed to know Mesito's secrets.

GIL'S FATHER (BOY 1)

 At night, he sleeps in a big tin bath.

GIRL

He makes weird tisanes and potions at night:

fish-blood and witching herbs. If you get too close, he'll turn you into a –

GIL'S FATHER (BOY 1)

He eats cat food out of a tin! I saw him.

GIL

He'd boil you up for dinner if you got too close, we said;

he'd use your skin for new boots, your hair for fishing nets.

LISEL

Those were the popular legends, yes.

I remember Claude as bloodshot, but strong-toothed.

He went out, oilskin buttoned to his chin,

every day except his rest-day, observing the sea

as if it were a giant cow he tended to.

the sea, gulls

At four am, when the island was hush-hush and the sky

still licorice, he'd tumble down to the jetty and set out.

His catch was tuna, shrimp-fish, monkfish, yellow crab.

GIL

And he sold it?

LISEL

To the cafés and restaurants as far as I know, here and on the mainland. Households, too.

He conversed, occasionally,

with Mala at the grocery store, about the cricket –

matches he'd picked up on his giant, leather-jacketed radio.

sea/ radio dial sound fading in

No one had known Mesito's father and they said his mother

was an outlander. She'd appeared on the sands one day,

half-cut and sea-draggled, regarding her own, distended belly

as if astonished by the sudden imposition.

She offered it up in her hard, brown hands.

GIL

Growing up, I thought of Mesito as part of the weather. Always –

LISEL

Looming, I suppose – yes. Hands in pockets.

He hung – like sea-mist – about the corners of the island.

But he was content, I'd like to think: a steady, winter snail.

One fall, we hadn't seen him for at least a week.

GIL

(overlapping)

It was my uncle Theodor who found him, face down in the bunk…

LISEL

His flesh was already sunken, but so pickled with salt and fish guts

there was no other scent.

GIL

A heart attack.

LISEL

That's what the doctor said.

It was the grocer, Mala, afterwards – sweeping and airing the room

to keep Mesito's spirit comfortable – who found the poems.

GIL

The notebooks.

LISEL

Mmm – in the bread bin. Lacy with age and larvae, spiral bound, the *Silvine* brand.

Mala sat cross-legged on the floor and read each one:

that sooty, schoolboy text. The island in squared, biro handwriting:

all its crags and curiosities.

GIL

And the poems? Can you tell us more?

LISEL

As it stands, we have only what was found in Mesito's house that day.

All in Maphachti – no Portuguese, no English.

After the first discovery, there were other 'discoveries' of his work –

but they were all found to be fabricated.

GIL

Could you, perhaps, read us something of Mesito's?

LISEL

Mmm.

 I'm going to read number seventy-two, which is untitled, from the first folio:

In translation, of course, from the Maphachti:

Sea/ radio dial sound fading in

Over my little boat, the clouds go reeling.

They're cauterised with fire, like the saints in church windows!

Cold air coughs in my windpipe; fish

weave intrigues of shadow. They sluice by, gawp

at my planetary face – its creases and canals.

What do you think of, fish, in your shale valleys and gulleys?

This morning I think of saying to hell

with all of this business, swimming out into air

as viscous and giving as water. All of us:

Mala, Pepito, the boys at the cliff-end,

lifting our feet up, flippering out.

digital ring-tone sound

GIL

How goes it?

ROSA

So-so.

My students are fractious – the weather, I reckon.

They're tired too. Thank god it's nearly the end of term.

GIL

And they're how old?

ROSA

Fifteen, sixteen…

GIL

A tricky age.

ROSA

Exciting though. All that discovery.

GIL

Yes, I remember Ruben at that age.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

He remembers, at least, the slump of Ruben's telephone silences, always

overcast with sleep; his calculated drawl…

ROSA

Have you given it any thought?

GIL

By *it* I presume you mean your scheme to uproot me all over again….

ROSA

(overlapping)

I'm not scheming, Gil –just saying.

I'm being practical.

How many of you are there left now?

GIL

Fourteen, fifteen or so – sometimes more or less. It depends.

Listen: the house is than halfway up the Maro. And we're not

off-web here. We have hydro, turbines, solar. Enough desalinated water.

Plenty of blather and chatter if I want it…

fading in: people chatting, a fishing boat coming in to the harbour, a dog barking in the

distance

And have my radio show. All my listeners.

ROSA

beat

Well – it's up to you, of course it is…

weather forecast music

low wind humming in the distance

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Moving on to the East Atlantic landmass and surrounding islands:

In the early hours from two am, we can see

an intense area of low pressure starting to spiral rapidly towards the continent,

hitting the west coast with rising winds, successive banks of heavy rain…

ROSA

(interior voice)

- Strong currents, pounding their hooves on the bedrock.

galloping horses crescendo

- Great lugs of sand and muck; loose plankton, shoals of great white shark and, up above, migrating geese blown off course, and scrags of polythene – like kites, like albatrosses.

LUCIA
- The wind: a whimper rising to gale force seven;
- the wind, herding vast bisons of cloud across the badlands of the sky.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Some disturbance of sleep; some damage to fences and unhoused livestock.

ROSA

(Interior voice)
- The air like flint sparking; like a left-hook connecting with jawbone.
- The gulls, braying like dogs.

animal hooves sound fades out

LUCIA

At night Rosa is startled, every now and then, by sirens.

siren sound music, distant
the sound of bed covers turning

ROSA

(groggily)

What if it's a storm lockdown? Another bomb alert?

PIOTR

Go back to sleep, love. It's nothing – miles away….

LUCIA

She hunkers and ploughs on in her sleep's dumb heaviness.

Outside, the buildings are silver with pixel-light, their cracked paint

damp with night-sweats.

Some nights, she wakes and shifts the kitchen vent panel free of its teeth.

She climbs up, shivers her body into the cooling tunnel then

dull sound of clanging metal

up, to the roof.

ROSA

digital ringtone sound; low babble of voices

The megacity stews in its juices, like a giant puddle of pin-light:

all those call centres and offices wired for other time zones –

that smog of nighttime voices.

LUCIA

The tarmac oozes heat, and the soles of Rosa's feet roast and thicken, or soften

in the yellow dregs of rain.

winds, low creaking of girders

On storm-nights, she curls like a bean

in their bed, eyes clamped shut, and almost sees her rooftop eyeline –

ROSA

The rain, walling down, grey as the estuary, pissing down from an oily cloudburst.

LUCIA

Winds leans the building so its girders sing.

girders droning – low sounds and harmonics

Winds etches new, wraith-harmonics into her sleep.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Tonight's storm won't bring the record surges we saw last month

but defences are liable to be breached.

Citizens are advised to remain in secure, bonded lock-down

until 09.45 tomorrow, standard time.

pause

digital ringtone music, with metallic crackling sound

GIL

(telephone voice)

You sound as if you're in a fishtank…

ROSA

I'm in the off-limits.

GIL

You're where?

DICTIONARY

Off-limits

noun

1. An edge land; a barren, wasted land.

ROSA

Not necessarily wasted. Or barren. Just somewhere that used to be lived in but isn't.

DICTIONARY

(overlapping)

Where the earth holds itself sloppy as mouldered leather; a shrunken sprawl of abandoned hulks – brick-box buildings on shallow soil; any (pre-lived) floodplain hinterland speckled with scrub and brush.

GIL

A floodplain then?

ROSA

Most often. The word can be used to mean naff, too: a bit beyond the pale…

DICTIONARY

2. An area lacking something: *Culturally, the town was an off-limits.*

3. A depository for lost things: blossoms of polythene, polypropylene, tendrils of yellow piping.

ROSA

Dumbbells, fridges, blister packs, six-packs, empty tinnies…

GIL

I thought those floodplains were all locked down now.

And dangerous, surely?

ROSA

Not dangerous, if you know what you're up to.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

That first time Rosa ran to the offlimits, she'd slammed out of a row with her mother.

ROSA

All my hackles raised, and glowing!

LUCIA

She rode the bullet train out, then went further,

on to the bounds of nowhere.

sound of birdsong, rustling of trees/ grass

No signposts: just the shells of empty houses still weighed down

with splintered junk: trinkets, contorted furniture.

Curtain-rags flapping like bunting.

low bass pulsing in the distance

ROSA

Sometimes, I think I see creatures – humans maybe – out here:

slunk in doorways or scuttling over the tarmac.

Sometimes, in an upper storey, there's a low pulse of voices.

pause

LUCIA

To run is to migrate upstream or inshore, as fish run in shoals.

Or to unravel, as threads are prone to –

ROSA

As my best laid plans do…

GIL

(telephone voice)

What's going on, Rosa?

ROSA

What d'you mean?

GIL

Well it's early – it must be, what, five thirty a.m. your time.

ROSA

No – nothing. Nothing's wrong, I mean. I've just.

I've been feeling a little bit – off. You know.

I'm having trouble sleeping.

GIL

So you go there for the quiet, this place?

ROSA

I'm a little bit….

Pregnant?

GIL

(pause)

Well my god Rosa that's… that's wonderful.

Me – a grande-avó! I never would have thought it.

And of course, I know it's probably tricky logistically.

beat

But people still find a way, don't they?

And you and, em, Piotr, you're both still earning, both insured?

You're doing OK?

So….

How are you feeling?

ROSA

(Sighs)

Like a sick, dumb, baby-making machine.

Like something's leaching all the common sense from my brain.

It's far too early – we can't afford it.

What if I'm a really shitty mother?

And also….

also, I suppose. I suppose I'm…

glad?

GIL

I *knew* there was something.

How long have you known?

Were you planning this – the baby?

ROSA

I'm only just three months gone. No bump really.

Just a bean budding in the dark…

Piotr knows, of course, but I haven't told anyone else.

And yeah – maybe it is what we wanted after all, but –

we hadn't even talked about it.

It's going to make things really tricky. We'll have to move out of our mecta.

I can't afford much leave.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Rosa's a worrier of course. But then, who wouldn't be?

The scorchers, the lockdowns…

ROSA

You're my only family now, Gil – with Lucia and Ruben both gone.

on my side, I mean.

GIL

But Piotr is family.

ROSA

Well of course, but I mean – flesh and blood. From the ilha.

GIL

Ah, the ilha….

All of a sudden you want to know about the ilha. Why is that? Now, I mean?

You've never so much as set foot here.

ROSA

I –

GIL

(interrupting)

It's never seemed to bother you before, this ilha business.

It never seemed to bother Ruben.

ROSA

(overlapping)

How would you know what bothered Ruben, Gil?

When was the last time you two actually spoke? Was it ten years ago? fifteen?

GIL

pause

Ah… Rosa?

Listen, I think I've…

I'm late for my radio show.

We'll speak –

(hangs up – engaged tone)

the sea; birds

*radio show music 2 (*Rocky Marsiano - O Jogo do Desafino*)*

GIL

We'll be playing your requests as usual from three. Keep them coming in.

In the mean time: Lisel? What do you have for us today?

LISEL

Today I'm going to read

Mesito's poem number fifteen.

GIL

Does it have a title?

LISEL

It does:

Nwhaldu.

Leagues below, on night's seabed

you come – solemn, like molasses –

through sleepy homesteads,

bare-ankled, towards me. The sky

is the sky is the sky is the skin

of the night. I inhale your spirit, bitter

like a tin-cup of burnt coffee.

You sit in the green of my belly, hear

my blood hum its gospel, slow.

I can't speak. I will speak to the notch

and leather of your elbow, your scarred

knee. I will bring you a glass of water.

extended digital ringtone, fading to the background beneath hospital sounds: low voices,

footsteps, the scrape of a chair leg etc.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

What is it about that dial tone? Listening to it, Gil pictures

the Porthastown hospital. The first time he's really

seen it in years. All those hours we waited for my son – our son, Ruben, to arrive.

GIL

(interior voice)

So much coffee…

feet tapping, nervously

new baby's cry, crescendo

LUCIA

And my voice, roaring, howling still,

and above all that, our baby: Ruben's brand-new, testy wail.

GIL

And then –

I think I remember my own voice too, ringing

somewhere farther out.

distant, indistinct and muffled adult voices; baby's cry

hospital sounds fade out

ROSA

(telephone voice - awkward)

Quam'tchi. Su radjetv?

GIL

(laughs)

Quam'tchi Rosa. Yes – I'm doing all right.

ROSA

So that's 'hello – how are you?' Right?

GIL

Well – quam'tchi. Yes, it's a greeting. A little more robust than hello, I think –

more of a welcome.

ROSA

Dad said you used to know the language really well.

GIL

(overlapping)

I did. I mean I do.

I learned Maphachti from my mother, and from Mala; I taught it too.

Yonks ago – thirty years ago maybe –for a month or so my godson and I…

ROSA

Was that Luis?

GIL

Yes.

We'd eat breakfast every Sunday on the quay bench: *Khendree*. Tigernuts.

I'd tell him the old names, the ones

they didn't teach in school. The tongue my grandpa never spoke

in daylight. He kept it safe for his own ghost-taming, potion-brewing…

harbour sounds, distant

GIL

(non-telephone voice)

Sounds funny, na?

LUIS

(awkwardly)

Qee – se – i

GIL

Qee sei

LUIS

Qee sei

GIL

(telephone voice)

But my mother, when she spoke Maphachti,

spoke it clearly and ordinarily, to greet home-time buses,

to say 'good morning' to me, and to the radio*.*

N'whaldu, qee sei? Su radjetv? Then back to the usual Portuguese:

O que você gostaria para o café da manhã? What shall we eat?

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Gil kept those old, Maphachti words close*,* like mantras. To himself, he was

n'whaldu. Never *pequeno* or –

MAJOR TULEO

You, Boy!

LUCIA

In the schoolyard with Major Tuleo, on the mainland ferry and when he was alone,

picking at his toenails, on the scrubby hilltop wishing

he was Troy Marcusson the boyband star. Growing his little body, Kissing the dust

with twitchy bench presses and daydreaming

of glory*,* honeycomb-choc-whipped milkshakes, cervejas, mainland hotel balconies.

Always *n'whaldu*, no matter how big or aged he grew.

GIL

(telephone voice)

When my grandma died, I was twenty-two – still skinny, living in a squat

in Santa Meli, smoking *maconha*.

ROSA

When was that?

GIL

Oh, way way back. 2001 I think. Before I met Lucia. Before Ruben.

She'd summoned me, *minha avó*. We drank coffee on the porch.

She was shivering , even though it was dog's-breath heat.

Next morning she refused to leave her bed, a little delirious...

I think she *knew*. I was going out and she stopped me as I passed

her door – spoke a few words with a flick of the hand, as if swatting a bug...

GRANDMA

(sighs)

Ai, peptu. Despreet.

Si radjetv.

GIL

I'd never heard her speak Maphachti before, couldn't catch

the sense. Twenty minutes later I returned to the house

and my aunt's zen pronouncements...

       sound of indistinct women's voices in calming, repetitive cadence

and *minha avó* shrunk and much, much too still in the big, old wooden bed.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

So, Gil moved back to write his 'news from nowhere' blog for The Argot,

To learn his own tongue.

       typing sound

Beyond his own small room he'd hear:

       washing machine spin sound, as if next door

GIL

(interior voice)

Did you think we all laundered by hand, on river-stones?

LUCIA

He'd hear:

       the distant sound of vehicles traipsing over rough earth or gravel,

and sawing and sanding sounds as if from a workshop

He'd hear the horizon's morning purple –

GIL

(interior voice)

The boxy workshops all squatting, like geese over the harbour....

Harbour sounds, fading

ROSA

(telephone voice)

And what does it actually mean, *radjetv*? Is it just Maphachti for 'OK'?

DICTIONARY

Radjetv

adj

1. Perfectly rooted or balanced; in absolutely the most cushti place or position – as a zen pine tree at the fjord; as when a bevel or joist is justly aligned.

ROSA

A bevel?

DICTIONARY

Bevel, yes. It's a carpentry term.

GIL

It's to do with that sense of *rightness*. But that's not the whole definition.

Listen:

DICTIONARY

2. At comfort or ease; in ecstasy – as a dog lolloping after rabbits in sleep, as a month-old baby all but asleep and still suckling the swell of its mother's breast. Or to be or have been comforted…

ROSA

Or consoled?

DICTIONARY

Yes - to have landed soundly home at high tide.

GIL

In winter, long before the inundations of salt and water, before the puckering
 of our land, we'd sit in the cricket club bar drinking *todil*.

indistinct voices, the clink of glasses

We'd tell our stories – spiked with lies. Each one (Mala, Luis, the boys,
even my *grandi*) was out to trump the last teller:

the time Rob toppled his boss's plush new car into the river; Mala waking,
unexpectedly, naked at the pine-tree top –

her other, epic sleepwalks. To be by the stove with a *todil* in hand –
the ultimate *radjetv*.

ROSA

But not now, Gil There's hardly anyone left now.
And the ilha's blasted, riddled with sea…

GIL

It's not *safe*, no – but it's *radjetv*: in the right place.
I'm in the right place.

radio show music 3 (FSOL 'In Solitude we are Least Alone')

GIL

So – welcome back. Later on this morning we're going to discuss the latest instalment
in Kadare's *Telegraph* miniseries…

But first, let's come back to Ilha de Piñeiros.

More than a century ago, in 1962, the scholar Dee Gutcheon

set out to map the island from nose to tail: the original

Maphachti names, as well as the colonists' labels.

She met with some resistance: slashed tyres and stony faces, mostly.

This was just after the US military base controversy of course, so things were… tense.

Let's hear from archive-keeper, David Anteus…

DAVID ANTEUS

Obrigado, Gil. Well…

Ms Gutcheon's map was the most elaborate paperwork we'd ever seen in the library:

metres of bright, cumbersome paper

scawled with burnt sienna ink. We knew, of course, that our island was bulbous

in shape – like a tear or, in another light, a goat dung….

GIL

And Gutcheon's map? What did it show?

DAVID ANTEUS

Well, the ilha was divided into stripes and splotches: who owned what marked out.

GIL

Dee was half-native?

DAVID ANTEUS

Yes – an islander on her father's side.

She'd also marked, in Maphachti script, the caves where we laid out our dead,

the rocks and wells we still slunk to, back then, with our offerings:

low sound of chanting – folksong

roses and coca-cola, or velveteen, lace-winged gulls.

Dee had marked in red the river places where the islanders sang incantations:

sometimes awkward or drunk, or sometimes utterly with conviction.

They'd stand, backs flush to the rock so their voices revved and echoed.

folksong sound crescendo, then cut

GIL

And it was controversial of course, this map.

To mark down these place names permanently like this.

To commit them to ink.

DAVID ANTEUS

For the older residents it would have felt like witchcraft, I imagine. A betrayal.

GIL

So Dee was a pioneer.

DAVID ANTEUS

She was.

I will give you just a few now; the less, er, controversial place names:

GIL

Yes – please.

DAVID ANTEUS

Krentdel: dumb-bleat field – here, goats were tethered to be slaughtered.

Mani-palden: Mani's ledge – a sandstone outcrop at the river's edge. A place for diving and,

for a while during the Portuguese occupation years, the point from which to escape

downriver.

And here, *Werden'krit*: the island's biggest store, which, until it finally closed in 2064, had been an institution for as long as anyone could remember. Loosely translated, the name means 'bounty stash'.

GIL

I remember it very well. So small, but they seemed to stock absolutely everything.

DAVID ANTEUS

Cuban cigars. Bibles. pistols and arsenic, apparently.

Milk and cookies and false moustaches….

GIL

Thank you, David. We'll hear more from you in a few minutes, but right now

it's eleven thirty: time for the forecast.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

From midnight Saturday, standard time:

Moving up from the North of the continent,

this new, more settled weather front brings –

ROSA

(interior voice)

Stale air. Skies clear as gin and stuck with stars.

A sludgy, molten sea – barely stirring.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

With temperatures veering between

45 and 50 degrees, we advise you to hydrate,

remain indoors or within shade. We expect

this weather to break, quite spectacularly, in the next few days.

                                        low city noise, traffic etc.

GIL

(telephone voice)

But you haven't told me how it went yet, the scan.

Did Piotr get the time off work?

ROSA

He couldn't this time, no.

He said to imagine all those other women carrying their big bellies

like trophies were actually shoplifters. It sort of helped.

GIL

And the baby?

ROSA

It's a girl, would you believe it.

She's pretty much still all skull and belly, but growing crazily fast.

Making out the image this time was

like trying to read a dictionary in a typhoon. But she's well, still healthy.

D'you know what one of my students said?

GIL

No. What?

ROSA

just *Miss – I thought you were too old*

for that sort of thing.

I think she was actually just being honest.

                                *radio show music 4 (*Bassekou Kouyate, 'Bala'*)*

GIL

In other news today…

news bulletin points in different voices from different announcers on different stations, as if

patched together/ switching between fragments

- Fernando and Merstiz will meet in Malmo this week to finalise the sixteenth ceasefire, ahead of scheduled energy blackouts….

- What will delegates at the global Biocorps awards in Beijing decide? With nominees set to give the green light to bright new innovations in lamb and wool, facial grafting, and plumage tags for sport, we could see all these products available from the second quarter of next…

- sector two: CEO Lucas Sierra will set out phase three of the controversial sector two enforced resettlement programme, incorporating coastal areas. Elena Menenov – how do you think this is going to…

- ….Meli Severn – the finale of a career! The show of a lifetime! Fans will be flocking to Porthastown later for what promises to be a spectacular send-off. With tickets selling for upwards of sixteen-thousand…

low ilha noise (sea, wind in trees)

ROSA

(telephone voice)

Gil –

GIL

Yes?

ROSA

About your 'cold war'…

pause

GIL

It's a joke. Sort of.

Ruben had – your father had – an odd sense of humour.

We just never spent much time together.

ROSA

Who chose that? You or him?

GIL

Well, I'm not sure about *choice*.

 I'd say it was my doing. And then his doing.

It's troublesome when somebody lives so far away…

ROSA

Talking is easy.

GIL

Is it?

beat

Tell me, Rosa - have you ever been silent for so many days

that when you next open your mouth to greet a real, live human

your larynx is so dry and flabby you croak like a toad?

ROSA

No.

Nope - that's never happened to me.

GIL

I can believe it.

Well OK…..

Where to begin?

LUCIA

(interior voice)

He could have begun with me in that office lobby: young me: flesh and bone,

not this voice from the hinterland, from limbo.

He could have begun with the coffee foam smear on my chin –

our small node of quiet in all the chrome and leather.

Or further on, later….

GIL

(telephone voice)

I'm not making excuses, by the way…

                                             beat

When Ruben was born, Lucia and I were very young.

Well – I think we still *felt* very young.

ROSA

In your twenties?

GIL

I was only just gone twenty-six. We knew it was a gamble, us still both

so green. But worth a shot, absolutely. So – Ruben was born, and then,

suddenly, a stroke of luck: I was, unusually, in demand. There were work offers –

ROSA

Writing assignments.

GIL

Yes. In Porthastown, Cativá, Paris...all sorts; covering

the global corps summits – you remember those?

Beat

LUCIA

(interior voice)

We needed the money of course.

GIL

Your grandmother, Lucia, and Ruben, our son, were absolutely the locus, the constant

centre. But when, after the birth, we returned

home to the flat and our hastily bought baby things – basket, nappies, wipes –

the scene was disjointed somehow: it felt like somebody else's life.

young baby's crying and woman's humming/ cooing begins

Less a home, more of a weird assortment of broken stools and magazines…

LUCIA

Time, between all three of us slowed down to a stretched out pulse.

slow heart beat under crying/ cooing

GIL

As if I might, at any moment, accidentally, unaccountably

smash or mangle a glass, or bowl, or our baby's un-knit skull; I might

snap the elastic of his slack, lolling neck. Or say or do something otherwise

cruel, or crass, or utterly unforgivable.

LUCIA

Unforgivable? Did you never stop to think it was hard for me too?

GIL

(overlapping)

I become exceptionally cautious, speak only when necessary –

LUCIA

(interior voice – as if through gritted teeth)

He measures out each word

against our stagnant calm, against the mass of our son's soft bones.

Beat

baby's crying growing louder

LUCIA

Where to this time?

GIL

Geneva.

LUCIA

How long?

GIL

Ten days. Maybe less, depending on how the talks pan out.

LUCIA

And me? Ruben?

GIL

I know. I'm sorry, love.

Listen: it's just this last one.

LUCIA

That's what you said last time.

GIL

This one *is.* I'll stay home. Take a break, even. How does that sound?

(interior voice)

But I take on more and more, convince myself

that this is caring.

I barely return to the flat

except at night, picking my way through the debris…

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Rickety toys, an undertow of milk and urine…

GIL

Ruben's little, laboured breaths; Lucia crashed out, knackered, beside him.

LUCIA

(interior voice - resigned)

A ghost in his own home; a fugitive before we've begun.

GIL

Do you want to hear more? It doesn't really get any better.

Although I do, of course, make an effort to make things up with Ruben later….

radio show music 5 (FSOL, 'Tokyo Travel')

GIL

(radio voice)

A weather system of quite some force

is scrapping its way eastward across the continent, gathering pace.

It's scheduled to arrive in the Eastern Atlantic sector

sometime within the next two days…

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

With winds already barrelling to fifty-five kilometres and sheet rain

forming close behind, affected citizens are on lockdown.

GIL

(interior voice)

The wind's getting up. It's that sound again. Always *that sound*. That swell.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

O little bagpipe-lung of suck and howl, scorcher of eardrums, siren punch to the gut…

(businesslike)

He remembers this:

GIL

(interior voice)

Ruben, head in the crook of Lucia's shoulder, griping. A continent of vomit on her shirt

as she moves in measured steps, like a tightrope walker.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

He takes the warm, clammy meat-sack, our child, from my arms, slapstick-staggering. He kisses

Ruben's forehead, in a way he imagines is fatherly. It's three weeks since Gil was last home.

GIL

(interior voice)

I jiggle our meat-sack son.

Gil's voice - aimless, not particularly tuneful humming, fading in
then baby's crying, fading in and getting louder

I don't know the right songs. His crying ratchets to something scathing, an engine.

There's a new string of photos pegged to the wall: prints

Lucia made. Ruben's brown eye blown up to the size of a planet: thorn and filament.

Ruben won't feed, won't sleep. I want to inhale silence. I want to smother this

animal cackle. I try to imagine it's music: something lively on the radio.

humming and baby's cry fade out

beat

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Coastal areas are hoisting and battening defences.

Blockades and off-limits are set to bear the brunt of the surges…

pause

ROSA

(telephone voice)

I've been looking for more Maphachti words but there's not much online –

just the touristy stuff: hello and goodbye, please and thank you.

I found some recordings from an archive somewhere near Chicago…

GIL

I suppose Ruben never spoke Maphachti with you?

Did you ever hear your dad speak it?

ROSA

Only very few words: the ones he taught me – because I made him.

GIL

We've compiled our own dictionary. We have Lisel's archive too…

ROSA

Tell me some more words, Gil. Ones I won't have heard?

GIL

Let me think.

beat

OK – this is a good one:

(slowly)

Em'kator

DICTIONARY

Noun

1. A particular species of long-winged, passerine bird with reddish wingtips (as if paprika-dusted), noted for its migratory habits; a bird with a cry like an urgent, gargling macaw.

GIL

More like a cockatoo than a macaw, I'd say. And Em'kator isn't just a bird.

It's also one who leaves and returns, leaves and returns to the ilha several times – like a

yoyo,

 caught up in its own momentum.

DICTIONARY

2. A flibbertigibbet; a turncoat; one who flits between places, cultures, decisions; one who cannot make up her or his mind between cities –

GIL

Lovers –

DICTIONARY

Butter or margarine; fried or scrambled eggs.

GIL

An em'kator – in the past, at least – would always come back, would breathe the muggy,

salt and pine-sap air as the ilha ferry docked, or as the aeroplane door slid open,

and find, in that dusty, fishbone earth, some vital molecule, some chemistry that

made the place, despite everything, irresistible.

You like that one?

ROSA

Yeah.

Another one?

GIL

(overlapping)

Something different. A bit more functional.

I know…

(slowly)

Marooat

DICTIONARY

Adverb

1. A negative – used to indicate stubborn denial or dissent; not at all, in any degree or possible circumstance, not by any means.

GIL

From the Maro – the ilha's long-dead, tight-lipped volcano that grouches over the land.

DICTIONARY

Actually, the word existed before the volcano.

GIL

Before?

DICTIONARY

Do you think your language is only as old as the ilha?

It means no, basically.

GIL

It means, most often, never – and you have no right to ask.

ROSA

Another? Something rarer, maybe.

GIL

Rare? Let me think…

OK – here goes:

(slowly)

Ke'toon

DICTIONARY

Noun

1. A particular time of the year, a week or two after the first buds of the rainy season.

GIL

Not just the time of year. Not exactly by the calendar, I mean. It's also to do with weather patterns and the moon. What you get is:

dry bottled heat, then piddly thunderstorms, then deep, massaging sun, then apocalyptic downpour…

rain, and birdsong, fading in

DICTIONARY

Heavy precipitation.

GIL

Apocalyptic downpour.

DICTIONARY

Have it your way: downpour - until the island is running with muddy veins, the coffee fields and groves spangled with papery blossom, the porch-fronts blaring out purple rosebay and papelillo, all of nature pumped with adrenaline, verdant, dancing a bad, drunken uncle dance with itself…

LUCIA
(interior voice)

Until, back then, the hibiscus and azaleas threatened to overwhelm us with their sickly

blossom,

fronding leaf and *suco,* and we retreated indoors, a little high on oxygen and pollen.

GIL

Legend has it that traditionally all of the children

on Ilha de Piñeiros were conceived in ke'toon.

ROSA

Can I access the dictionary?

GIL

Any time you like. It's a fascinating read. But don't think you'll find the ilha there.

All that's there is –

ROSA

Memory?

LUCIA
(interior voice)

Absence and forgetting; the distinct shape of our vanishing.

*Radio Music (*DJ Shadow, 'Six Days'*)*

GIL
(radio voice)

It's five fifteen and I'm here out on the Maro, with our dispenser of ilha wisdom,

archivist David Anteus.

David: we were talking, yesterday, about the ilha's sacred – or *paunit* – places. We're going

to talk, today, about one of our sweetwater places, *N'bal sir* or 'sweating rock'.

DAVID ANTEUS

Thank you, Gil. Yes.

So, as we've said, this was – according to the myths – the very first spring on the ilha,

the water that brought life and liveliness to this hulk of volcanic rock.

GIL

These days, of course, it's full of seawater more often than not.

DAVID ANTEUS

Yes -

But for a long time the pool was absolutely sacrosanct. There are many stories

about this rock, and the spring. The one I'm going to tell is pretty recent, actually.

But we know it incorporates earlier tales. I must have heard this version from my cousin….

GIL

Great. Go ahead, David.

DAVID ANTEUS

So –

One dry summer, a mainland city woman stays

on the island, alone with her child in a house at the edge of the village.

A hydro corp accident's done for her little girl's father;

his strong lungs have starved of air until

they've quietly imploded. Things aren't easy for the woman: mourning

his body, picturing his hands at the lock each time night rattles the shutters….

The ilha's weird geographies remind her of the child's father.

The islanders show her kindnesses,

reveal their idiosyncrasy, some secrets:

the wild zones; where the best coffee berries grow; places

for swimming on sun-blenched days; wild garlic to eat

and, of course, fish.

KELL

(interior voice)

Sardines, mackerel, perch –

DAVID ANTEUS

There is one place, though –

> *slow splashing of water, birdsong*

on a blue hillside just beyond what used to be the village, where the water

pools, snow-cold and almost unnaturally limpid, like buffed aspic–

where locals rarely fish, or swim. This, despite

the perch swimming beneath the weeds.

KELL

It's sacred – I've heard.

DAVID ANTEUS

While local teenagers might once have lounged and littered

in the island's other waterways, this place remains

undisturbed, even by breezes.

KEL

The water, they say, comes from an ancient spring,

This is where the island's mosses, pine trees and green hills very first burst forth.

DAVID ANTEUS

Although, to the objective eye, the pool looks

as if it might be filled by crag-caught, trickledown rainfall.

LOCAL 1

It's a cure for sickness: fevers, rashes, liverache –

LOCAL 2

Don't know about that. Wouldn't go near it if I were you.

Don't touch, I was told –

DAVID ANTEUS

If the pool is disturbed by one iota, one story goes,

the spirits that bless the spring might take offence and hide

beneath the earth's mantle forever, leaving the island stark and bald.

pause

One Saturday afternoon, at the very height of summer, when her girl

is barely a year old, the woman takes her child on a walk in the hills.

baby babbling, birdsong and trees

Rounding a corner, she comes to a rough set of steps cut out of thick turf,

leading down to a scraggy, rock-strewn pool.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

She sees, at once, that this is the mythical place described in the bar-tales.

DAVID ANTEUS

Rushes and bladderwort strain up and away from the water.

Her own reflection (bundled,

with the child on her back) looms, sharp in the pool.

The sun hangs thick in the sky, a heavy coin branded onto the haze.

KELL

(as if talking to the baby, calming)

You lie down here in the grass here.

I don't believe those stories – do you? Water is water.

So cool and green….

DAVID ANTEUS

Kneeling, with the child in the juicy grass beside her,

the woman bends forward and gently cups a palm into the water.

The shock of cold numbs her finger-joints, but the water is sleek and downy.

splashing sound of water being scooped up and drunk

The taste is mossy, and there's something else – a metallic edge. She lowers her face.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

She notes the glassy meteor of her own dark eye –

DAVID ANTEUS

And continues to splash, to drink. Bone-white, tiddler fish flash amongst

the rocks; baby snuffles, contented on the grass.

Sweat courses and pools in the small of the woman's back; the water soothes her gullet –

LUCIA

Like iced honey**.**

She strips off her T-shirt, bra, cut-offs and knickers, sloughs off her sandals

and plops her feet, step by step, into the softness of the water.

Wading/ water sound

The rocks drop sheerly away beneath her; the pool is deep – up to her chest

in a few, small shuffles. Her toes stir humus and plankton in the shingle.

The water mutes her skin to pudgy amber.

sharp intake of breath, then muted, underwater

She crouches her knees, draws her head down underwater.

drumbeat/ heartbeat, getting louder

LUCIA

(interior voice)

For all her ears' silence and bellow she only hears the rough beating

of her own heart, brimming over a cramped cage of bones.

KELL

(interior voice)

Next thing, I think I hear –

baby crying, as if from underwater

LUCIA

The baby, just woken.

DAVID ANTEUS

She kicks her legs, and her body powers upward, as if one,

sinewy mass of brawn. She can't feel her toes –

LUCIA

They must be numbed…

DAVID ANTEUS

Pushing her shoulders up, she surfaces.

heartbeat, louder

gasping sound, as if desperate for air

baby squawking, full-throated

The woman launches her body towards shore, flailing on the slippy rock.

It's OK, she says, but her voice, as she hears it, is all wrong – fat and gravelled

as if the pond's murk churned and clogged in her larynx. *It's OK lovely*, she says –

white noise/ tuning in shifting to low-pitched porpoise sound

LUCIA

(interior voice)

but the consonants are barely audible; the vowels gripe and groan

like the last throes of a broken accordion.

DAVID ANTEUS

She flaps her tired arms but can't grasp the overhanging slates or branches.

The water's stone-cold now, and tight, banded around her lungs.

She hears herself cry out, and the sound is strange: lone and heavy

as a gull moping at the fisheries.

porpoise sounds

The small boy who comes, in the early evening, attracted by the baby's

whimper, finds the pool disturbed by a large, dark-eyed porpoise,

its whiskers honed, like antennae towards the cawing of the baby.

GIL

And, not knowing what else to do, the boy toddles

the hungry child towards its honking mother, down in the water.

DAVID ANTEUS

And when darkness falls –

DAVID ANTEUS/ GIL

The villagers haul mother and pup away to the godless sea.

the sea, gulls

ROSA

(telephone voice)

What do you lot do all day Gil – on the ilha?

GIL

That depends. We've given up on working the land, these days. We mostly stay indoors, clatter at tablet keys.

When I woke up today I went straight down to the harbour to see the woden.

ROSA

The what?

DICTIONARY

Woden

Noun

1. The plume-white, hospital-white light that exhumes from the ilha's horizon in windy season, as if from a sea-grave.

GIL

It's a bright white – like an enormous deep freeze. Something to do with the mist just before dawn.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

The *woden* palls them all in an eerie glare, as if they were lit from inside by some sort of bio-luminescent algae, or by radium.

underwater porpoise sounds, fading in

DICTIONARY

2. Also: the state of being in that light; the back-lit translucence of limbs.

sea/ porpoise sounds fading out

ROSA

(recorded voice)

Hi! This is Rosa. I can't answer your call at the moment. Please leave me a message, if it's important.

GIL

pause

Just checking in, Rosa. I'll call back later.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Five fourteen now, this Sunday afternoon.

This is a code red hurricane lockdown directive;

lockdown is now in full enforcement.

Citizens are now required to enter the nearest certified sanctuary facility.

digital ringtone

ROSA

The shuttles are all full to the gills.

It took me two hours to get home.

GIL

No such problems here…

ROSA

I suppose not.

I'd leave if I could but it's too late – everything's grounded.

GIL

You'll be fine there, Rosa. The barriers will hold.

ROSA

(overlapping)

And what about you?

GIL

I'll probably catch the tail end. It'll just be a grouchy breeze by the time it reaches the ilha.

ROSA

That's not what the forecasts say.

There's still time for you to go.

GIL

And where would I go?

<div align="center">

beat

</div>

I'm really not a city person, Rosa. Not a mainland person either.

ROSA

You've lived in other places before now.

GIL

(sighs)

All quite an age, quite a stretch ago now though.

ROSA

Lucia left. Almost everyone left.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

If there'd been a war, we would have known to get out at the start,

before the soldiers' swarming, before drones.

If there'd been famine (which I'm sure is hardest – to watch flesh diminish,

see the dust flock and gather) we would scarpered – left our shrinking land.

GIL

What do you think it's like, Rosa – to see each surge tide,

muddy and glut your homeland's coastline, blot the land with river and dung?

 Our sandbags were little offerings: popcorn, crumbs the sea gulped back.

When the rains came, the land was already riddled with moons of water….

ROSA

Lucia told me about it once. She said –

LUCIA

(interior voice)

You cannot halt the seasons, hold back an ocean.

GIL

Each summer surge brought a foot of water lapping in the kitchen, sucking joists

and skirting boards to a salty pulp. The electricals, the paintjob – ruined.

Our neighbours were long-gone. Resettlement was a housing project

six-hundred mainland miles away.

ROSA

What was the project like? A dump?

GIL

Not exactly. My mother loved it: tiled floor, screen wall, new cooker.

But like me, she lay awake in the small hours listening through the papery walls.

drone of traffic noise, low bassline, footsteps, police siren in the distance

Heels on tarmac marked the seconds. The city was encroaching, spoiling for a storm surge.

city sounds (traffic, sirens etc.) fading in and out, in sea-like waves

This was the seventeenth floor, but each morning saw a foot or so of city lapping

at the kitchen cabinets.

ROSA

The *city* was encroaching?

GIL

Grit marks frilled the sofa, clogged up the upholstery. My mother sat

and watched the breakfast news, placid as the city nipped at her ankles –

LUCIA

(interior voice)

But Gil couldn't abide its swash and drag.

ROSA

And after that you went back to the ilha.

GIL

Yes. And then again a while later – to learn the language. And then with Lucia.

And then this last time.

ROSA

I know it's really none of my business….

GIL

No – it really isn't.

Listen – let's go back to the beginning.

ROSA

Of what?

GIL

You know. Like this.

(brightly)

So – how was it, your day?

ROSA

Well, OK…

(pause)

OK.

So: I can't walk without swaying, these days. I'm like an egg on legs.

This morning, Piotr took the shuttle to Mercato,

GIL

That's where he's working?

ROSA

Uh-huh. For the next two weeks.

Half of this morning's class didn't turn up, because of the weather they said –

but it's still calm as glass out there.

GIL

And you're well?

ROSA

I think so. The baby's re-enacting some kind of Busby Berkeley musical

inside me. Everyone's ready for lock-down.

It's dead quiet here, except for the shuttles. It's going to be monumental,

this storm. What will you do?

GIL

I'll hope up in the bunker with a bottle of whisky and a good book.

ROSA

And if the water gets in? If there's a surge?

GIL

We know how to plan for these things, Rosa.

There's an art to living here….

(pause)

I think it's time you got some sleep.

radio show music 6 (FSOL, 'Somatosensory')

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Winds forcing at one-hundred and twenty kilometres per hour in Eastern continental

sectors.

GIL

Barriers secure and holding…

LISEL

Today I'm going to read Claude Mesito's poem number one-hundred and fifty-three,

titled *Pachtel em'kanto*.

GIL

Your own translation?

LISEL

Yes. From the Maphachti…

The title translates as 'Under your inexorable discipline':

I want to know everything, be it ever so unfortunate:

tell me about waking up scorch-mouthed, as dawn bears in.

In your dream, you were doing something wrong:

stealing a bird's egg, eating

the last pancake, telling a lie.

Tell me about the geese, how they *whurrup*

and coast, cranking out their greyscale wings.

You say the afternoon coffee is pissweak

and reminds you of singed hair.

Here, in the lightning's galvanising

dalliance, in its flickering branch and filament –

short-circuiting the bloating sea –

I will espouse your curious electricity:

The shark-pout of your mouth as it troubles

mine; your brilliantine voice

edging towards sighing.

There's riptide in my belly as you eat

your sandwich, shovelling, thoughtless

as an eight-year-old boy. Meantime,

surprisingly, our blood still circuits.

ring tone

GIL

(Recorded voice)

This is Gil Landaucht. Leave a message. I'll get back to you.

PIOTR

Gil – listen, it's Piotr – Rosa's Piotr.

She wanted me to call you to let you know we're going to the hospital.

We'll be there overnight at least. She has a bit of pain, but

it's probably nothing. Just to be safe.

We're not due for a little while yet. I said I'd let you know. So –

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Winds forcing at one-hundred and twenty-four kilometres per hour in eastern Atlantic sectors.

Humidity at eighty-one percent.

Sea surges expected at approximately 0600 hours, standard time.

Noise as if switching channels or tuning on a short wave radio dial/ stormy sea

GIL

I hope you're all shaping up well in this little smattering of weather.

This programme will be indefinitely…

 We'll be underground for the duration.

Thank you for your messages of support. We shall indeed hold fast.

WEATHER FORECAST CHORUS

Winds now forcing at one-hundred and thirty kilometres per hour in Eastern Atlantic sectors.

Hurricane-eye due to hit at Porthastown and extended megacity areas in the next forty minutes. Humidity at ninety-three percent.

Sea surges rising and advancing.

digital ringtone

ROSA

(recorded message)

Hi! This is Rosa. I can't answer your call at the moment.

Leave me a message.

GIL

Rosa –

Listen: I've been trying to get hold of you.

I got Piotr's message.

digital ringtone/ ringtone music

ROSA

Hi! This is Rosa. I can't answer your call at the moment.

Leave me a message.

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Listen, listen:

stormy wind and sea, crashing waves

The ocean's tentacles – clawing their way up the beach.

Soon they'll be making a grab for Gil's limpet-clump, the huddle of houses.

GIL

(telephone voice)

I wanted, just in case, to wish you luck, Rosa.

It's pretty cosy in the bunker. I have my camp bed, my kettle.

But who knows what will greet me, if I surface?

Maybe just a boundless platter of sea.

I wanted to tell you that I know how this – how we, how I, with my ilha – must seem to you:.

ROSA

(interior voice)

Like a bandy-legged insect stuck fast,

fossilised in amber….

pause

GIL

Perhaps you'll understand it when you're older. Maybe you won't. All places

shift and alter. It used to be unusual, though, to lose a land to the sea.

Why did I come back? Well, *em'kator* that I am, idiot that I am, my memory began

to draw me back to that peculiar, pine and salt-mud scent –

LUCIA

(interior voice)

Those picture-postcard images we all construct, concoct: the old quay at low tide,

the squiffy tilt of the headland and of the *Maro*.

GIL

(interior voice, overlapping)

my mother smoking roll-ups at the kitchen table

LUCIA

The brazenness

of her humming when she didn't know you were listening.

pause

white noise fading into end music (Burial)

Appendix

BBC Multi-vocal poetic radio plays

Armitage, Simon. *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*. Radio 4: Afternoon Drama, 24th August 2011.

---. *From Salford to Jericho*. Radio 4: The Monday Play, 8th January 1996.

Barker, George. *The Degradation of Guatemozin*. The Third programme, 10th May 1947.

Bridson, D.G.. *The March of the 45*. The Home Service, February 1936.

Constantine, David. *Fisher of Men.* Radio 4: The Friday Play, 12th March 1999.

Dharker, Imtiaz and Michael Symmons-Roberts. *Cleaning The Pipes.* Radio 4: From Fact to Fiction, 10th May 2006.

Farley, Paul and Jo Shapcott: *Inside the Bonfire*. Radio 4: From Fact to Fiction, 6th November 2010.

Gascoyne, David. *Night Thoughts*. The Third Programme, 8th December 1955.

Kay, Jackie: *The Lamplighter*. Radio 3: The Sunday Play, 25th March 2007.

MacNeice, Louis. *Christopher Columbus*. The Home Service, 12th October 1942.

---. The Dark Tower. The Third Programme, 21st January 1946.

Porteous, Katrina. *Longshore Drift*. Radio 3: The Verb, 1st February 2003.

---. *Dunstanburgh: A Secret as Old as the Stones*. Radio 3, 2004.

---. *The Refuge Box*. Radio 3: Between the Ears, 2007.

Plath, Sylvia. *Three Women*. The Third Programme, 19th August 1962

Shapcott, Jo. *Erebus*. Radio 4: Afternoon Drama, 12th January 2012.

Sheers, Owen. *Pink Mist*. Radio 4, 19th-23rd March, 2012.

Smith, Stevie. *A Turn Outside.* The Third Programme, 23rd May 1959.

Symmons-Roberts, Michael. *Men Who Sleep in Cars*. Radio 4: Afternoon Drama, 5th February 2014.

---. *The Sleeper*. BBC Radio 4: Dangerous Visions, 15th June 2013.

Thomas, Dylan. *Under Milk Wood*. The Third Programme, 25th January 1954.