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**The Poetry and Poetics of Douglas Oliver, 1973-1991**

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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN  
MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE, CULTURE AND THOUGHT

THE POETRY AND POETICS OF DOUGLAS OLIVER, 1973-1991

SUMMARY

This dissertation is about the poetry and prose, published and unpublished, of the British poet Douglas Dunlop Oliver (1937-2000), written between 1973-1991. It traces the development of Oliver's poetics from his early prose through his later poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. The dissertation makes extensive use of archive material stored in the Douglas Oliver Archive at the Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, the vast majority of which has thus far received little or no critical commentary or appraisal.

Contained in the archive are a set of unpublished essays Oliver wrote as a mature undergraduate at the University of Essex between 1974-1975. In my first chapter, I discuss these essays and examine their philosophical and aesthetic standpoints in order to understand and expand upon Oliver's published claims about the experience of reading poetry in his theoretical monograph *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (1989). Oliver's thinking about prosody and poetic language are then discussed in relation to his books of poetry on explicitly political subjects, *The Diagram--Poems* (1979) and *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985).

My second and third chapters present close readings of Oliver's poetry with a view to understanding and critiquing the political arguments conducted therein. My second chapter, on *The Diagram--Poems*, adds to the discussion of prosody the historical significance of Oliver's thinking about "stupidity," and reads the poetry's political intervention in the light of such thinking. My third chapter, on *The Infant and the Pearl*, reads the poem's critique of the contemporary political landscape with the help of the extensive scholarship on its prototype, the medieval *Pearl*, in order to explain and critique Oliver's poem's emphasis on national and inter-personal "unity."

The dissertation argues throughout that the inseparability of poetic form and political feeling is at the heart of Oliver's practice as a poet.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree, and that this work is entirely my own original research.

Signed:

Joseph Luna



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## Abbreviations

Abbreviations are used in the references to the following texts by Oliver for ease of repeated citation:

<i>CAAS</i>	Oliver's autobiographical essay in Joyce Nakamura, ed., <i>Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series</i> , Vol. 27 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1997), pp.242-261.
<i>K</i>	<i>Kind</i> (London, Lewes and Berkeley: Agneau 2 - Allardyce, Barnett, 1987).
<i>PNP</i>	<i>Poetry and Narrative in Performance</i> (London: Macmillan, 1989).
<i>PP</i>	<i>Penniless Politics</i> (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1994).
<i>SP</i>	<i>Selected Poems</i> (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1996).
<i>THB</i>	<i>The Harmless Building</i> (London: Ferry Press, and Pensnett: Grosseteste Review Books, 1973).
<i>TTL</i>	'The Three Lilies,' in <i>LAMB</i> , ed. Anthony Barnett, No. 3 (Jan., 1982), pp.17-24.
<i>VTH</i>	<i>Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: Selected Poetry and Prose</i> (London: Paladin, 1990).
<i>WL</i>	<i>Whisper 'Louise': A Double Historical Memoir and Meditation</i> (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2005).

The following abbreviations are also used:

<i>DOA</i>	Douglas Oliver Archive (various boxes), Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex, Essex, UK.
<i>NLT</i>	<i>Nous les Tupamaros, suivi d'apprendre d'eux par Régis Debray</i> , trad. Elisabeth Chopard Lallier (Paris: François Maspero, 1971).

## Introduction

This dissertation is about the poetry and prose, published and unpublished, of the British poet Douglas Dunlop Oliver (1937-2000), written between the years 1973 and 1991. Oliver's work is not now widely read or discussed by many people beyond certain communities of poets, critics and students of the UK and North American experimental and avant-garde poetry scenes. Yet during his later life, at least, Oliver was the recipient of a wide range of plaudits and enjoyed some impressive public claims for his poetry. The reception of his work by the mainstream of the English press and literary organs was often as enthusiastic as its celebration in the pages of smaller, avant-garde journals. Writing in *The Times*, Peter Ackroyd named Oliver's 1987 collected poems *Kind* "the finest poetry of the year."<sup>1</sup> Patrick Wright and Howard Brenton both heaped praise on Oliver's *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985) and *Penniless Politics* (1991) in the *London Review of Books* and *The Guardian* respectively, with Brenton in 1992 claiming the latter poem had set "the literary agenda for the next two decades," invoking both Eliot and Milton as comparable precursors.<sup>2</sup> Bloodaxe Books reprinted *Penniless Politics* in 1994 with Brenton's ecstatic recommendation as a foreword. Oliver was declared by Ian Sansom in 1997, again in *The Guardian*, to be "one of the very best political poets writing in English."<sup>3</sup> By the time of his death in 2000, Oliver had become one of the most publicly and internationally visible of all the poets whose writing careers began in earnest in the college rooms, grounds, domestic environs and pubs of Cambridge, UK in the 1960s. Partly this has to do with Oliver's shifting geographical locales. His work as a provincial journalist in Cambridge in the 1960s, his frequent travels between various English cities and Paris as a journalist in the following two decades, to New York in the late 1980s upon his marriage to the American poet Alice Notley, and back to Paris in the 1990s where he lived and wrote until his death, allowed him the opportunity to establish connections with communities of writers in Britain, France and North America with relative ease. Partly, too, it was the result of a deliberate courting and attempted cultivation by Oliver of a wider audience for his poetry than the one he had established, originally amongst the Cambridge

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1 Peter Ackroyd et al, 'Bringing the year to book...', *The Times*, Saturday, November 28<sup>th</sup> 1987, p.13.

2 Patrick Wright, 'A Journey through Ruins,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 16 (September 18<sup>th</sup> 1986), p.10; Howard Brenton, 'Poetic passport to a new era,' *The Guardian*, Tuesday, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1992, p.38. See also Patrick Wright, 'Poet of the lower depths,' *The Guardian*, October 24<sup>th</sup> 1991, p.23, on *The Infant and the Pearl*, *Penniless Politics* and Oliver's authorship in general.

3 Ian Sansom, 'Toffee of the universe,' review of Ian Sinclair, Douglas Oliver and Denise Riley, *Penguin Modern Poets 10*, *The Guardian*, Thursday, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1997, p.A11.

milieu in the late 1960s, many (but by no means all) of whom have since been grouped for critical expediency under the shorthand “Cambridge School,” and latterly in the 1970s amongst the poets gathered at the new University of Essex. Oliver remained a loyal friend to these communities and a committed supporter of their work his entire life.<sup>4</sup>

The poet and publisher Andrew Crozier noted the recognition afforded to Oliver by the mainstream press in his obituary of 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2000. Crozier described Oliver’s desire to move away from the small press poetry scene with which he had most often published in the following terms:

Even before [the playwright] Howard Brenton’s outburst in the *Guardian* in 1992, acclaiming *Penniless Politics* (1991) as setting the literary agenda for the next two decades, and invoking both *Paradise Lost* and *The Waste Land*, Oliver had taken the step, necessary in order to reach a broader public, of publishing with a trade paperback house.<sup>5</sup>

Such visibility as I have noted above did not, in fact, translate into the larger readership to which Crozier appeals, and which Brenton, in his enthusiastic hyperbole, made a deliberate attempt to encourage into existence. Since this readership did not, in the end, materialise, Brenton’s claims today sound almost awkwardly impassioned. They were a genuine attempt to promote Oliver’s work out of the obscurity in which it nevertheless remains. It is perhaps unsurprising that Crozier, a close friend of Oliver’s, greeted Brenton’s discovery, in the last decade of Oliver’s life as he then was, with some eyebrow-raising. Brenton’s 1992 review is an “outburst,” late to recognize the vital work of an important poet that had been slowly and painstakingly cultivated through the small press scene (to which Crozier was himself a significant contributor) for decades. The word finds in Brenton’s rhapsody a tone of flustered tardiness;

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- 4 Oliver’s authorship presents a problem for any clean-cut definition of “Cambridge School” poetry. Published by Ferry Press and Allardyce, Barnett for most of his life, Oliver’s mature poetry resembles nothing like the poetry, often derided (and sometimes praised) as hermetic and wilfully obscure, that many have transferred by lazy association from J.H. Prynne’s late work to an amorphous group picked out usually for their very association with, or relationship to, Prynne himself. One of the problems with the moniker, as Andrea Brady has pointed out in correspondence with Robert Archambeau, is that it is difficult to tell who is “in” the “Cambridge School” and who is not. As Brady writes, “If the Cambridge School did exist, then it existed between the years of the publications of the *English Intelligencer* [1966-1968] and *A Various Art* [1987]. But these days there’s a great deal of obscurity around, in Manchester, London, Newcastle, Glasgow, and Totnes; is all this poetry not “Cambridge School” unless it is branded with the mark of Prynne? If Barque [Press] is the modern home of the CS, then that field stretches also to Paris, Berlin, China, New York and Winnetka. If it’s all about geography, would we say that Dell Olsen is now Cambridge School, because she lives in the episcopacy? Do the most recent Yankee immigrants Justin Katko and Ryan Dobran know what they’re in for?” See *Cambridge Literary Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Lent, 2010), pp.244-249 (247).
- 5 Andrew Crozier, ‘Douglas Oliver: A poet articulating ethical values in a world of injustice and joy,’ *The Guardian*, Saturday, May 6<sup>th</sup> 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/may/06/guardianobituaries.books> [accessed 05.12.2014]. The trade paperback house to which Crozier refers is Grafton Books (then a division of the Collins Publishing Group), which published Oliver’s *Three Variations on a Theme of Harm* under its Paladin Poetry imprint in 1990. The entire Paladin Poetry series was pulped less than three years later.

some of us, intimates Crozier, have known about this stuff for a long time. Crozier's Ferry Press published more of Oliver's work than any other press during his lifetime, that is, three collections of poetry and a novel between 1969 and 1985. Crozier's wording in his obituary is interesting. It speaks to the anxiety of recognition, of the question of the public, and of publicity, that has since become something of a critical instrument with which to accuse the "Cambridge School" poets of hypocrisy. One recent formulation of this position can be found in Robert Archambeau's article 'Public Faces in Private Places: Messianic Privacy in Cambridge Poetry,' first published in 2009 by the *Cambridge Literary Review*.<sup>6</sup> Archambeau argues that "poets of the Cambridge School," with which he associates most prominently J.H. Prynne, but also Peter Riley, Tom Raworth, Simon Jarvis and John Wilkinson, as well as Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady, "create a hermetic poetry, circulated outside the regular system of publication among a small group of cognoscenti."<sup>7</sup> The charge of hypocrisy is made when Archambeau suggests that "Cambridge" poetry "is often justified and explained as a poetry with a specific and far-reaching political goal and effect," an impossible effect in contradiction with the limited public afforded by small press and private distribution.<sup>8</sup> Such circulation "defies the idea of a poetry of public, political significance."<sup>9</sup> Archambeau is at times careful to reckon only with those who champion J.H. Prynne's poetry with "far-reaching political [...] effect[s]," but his argument slips into more direct criticism of all "Cambridge" poets' alleged agendas when he concludes by asserting "both the apparent futility of Cambridge School poetry's political ambitions and a sense of the comforting private confinement in which it has so often circulated."<sup>10</sup>

In my second chapter, I detail some of the ways in which Douglas Oliver was (or would have been) sympathetic to a critique of this kind, and was so some thirty years before it was first levelled at the "Cambridge School" as an entity. Oliver privately but vociferously pressed charges of elitism and obscurantism at the modernist canon to which he was himself indebted, and his career as a poet is intricately bound up with his search for what he called, in retrospect and near the end of his life, a

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6 Robert Archambeau, 'Public Faces in Private Places: Messianic Privacy in Cambridge Poetry,' *Cambridge Literary Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Michaelmas, 2009), pp.199-215, reprinted in Emily Taylor Merriman and Adrian Grafe, ed., *Intimate Exposure: Essays on the Public-Private Divide in British Poetry Since 1950* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2010), pp.31-42.

7 Archambeau, 'Public Faces...', p.31 (Merriman and Grafe ed.).

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p.32.

10 *Ibid.*, p.41.

“democratic tone.”<sup>11</sup> Between the 1970s and the 1980s Oliver made a conscious effort to alter the way he wrote poetry, if not exactly in order to appeal to *more people* than he previously had done (he was not, during these decades, publishing with trade paperback houses), then certainly so as to produce in verse the “democratic tone” that did justice to the social questions tackled in his poetry. In 1980, Oliver wrote to his friend, the poet Peter Riley, that he was “shedding my avant-garde *manners* but not, I hope, my poetic attitudes in other respects.”<sup>12</sup> One of these attitudes was a keen sense of loyalty to the people who had first supported him, and Oliver continued to publish with presses like Ferry, Street Editions, Allardyce, Barnett and Reality Street right up to his death. The difference in tone, style and form between Oliver’s first collection *Oppo Hectic* (1969) and the later works discussed in this dissertation, *The Diagram--Poems* (1979) and *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985), is certainly substantial. Yet in many respects the themes, types of social address and kinds of political desire in Oliver’s early work remain rooted to the spot for the duration of his writing life. It is true that Oliver harboured great “political ambitions” *in*, rather than *for*, his poetry, and one of the aims of this dissertation is to begin to make sense of these ambitions through close readings of Oliver’s poetry and prose. By the distinction *in* Oliver’s poems as opposed to *for* them, I mean to convey something of the sense of my first chapter, in which I describe the background to, and the influences upon, Oliver’s theory of prosody. Between 1973 and 1989 Oliver developed a phenomenological theory of poetical language that asserted the possibility of an intersubjective encounter between poet-author and reader, activated by the stresses in verse lines. The sheer, perhaps baffling, enormity of such a claim is something I work through in all three of my chapters, firstly with reference to a set of unpublished essays Oliver wrote as a mature undergraduate at the University of Essex in the first half of the 1970s, and secondly with regards to *The Diagram--Poems* and *The Infant and the Pearl*. It is a commonplace amongst the existing literature on Oliver, academic or journalistic, to note the “ambition” inherent in Oliver’s poetical project. But it is precisely the breadth and intelligence of this ambition that requires an explanation if the true measure of Oliver’s contribution to English-language poetry in the twentieth century is to be taken.

Here is Oliver describing, in his 1989 monograph *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, the experience of reading verse:

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11 CAAS, p.249.

12 Oliver to Riley, 1980, DOA, Box 9. The letter is, infuriatingly, undated except for the year.

Author and reader create, through their own implied personification in the text, a special intersubjectivity – a perfecting of the emotional and semantic fields through a shared experience of space and time, owing to the mystery of artistic form. The process reveals what our everyday experience and speech could be like if, when our emotions were real and not imaginary, our hearts and heads were in temporal consonance.<sup>13</sup>

This is a truly *mysterious* vision of aesthetic and social identity. Its scope conceptually exceeds the formulation of the problem of pretensions to radical literary efficacy in terms of chapbook sales or readership. It exceeds such a formulation not only because the transformation asserted to take place during the act of reading a poem is essentially incalculable, “owing to the mystery of artistic form,” but also because the desired end of such an act, at the furthest possible boundary of quantifiable social consequence, is the bringing into consciousness of something like a utopian state of what Oliver refers to as emotional, imaginative and temporal “consonance.” The reason this “consonance” is a “political ambition,” and not simply or only an aesthetic one, is that Oliver firmly believed that poetic form and social life were intimately intertwined; that “unity,” a theme to which he returned again and again in practically everything he wrote, was the object of artistic, ethical, and social endeavour alike; that, as he put it in 1990,

Unity of form disappears into ambiguous dark whenever we examine it analytically, but its heart is like the always beating heart of a poem: it is the precious origin of our lives’ form, or of a true politics.<sup>14</sup>

The ramifications of this complicated claim, and its practical political resonance in Oliver’s major works of the late 1970s and 1980s, are the subjects of the close readings of Oliver’s poems of that period over the course of my second and third chapters. My readings of *The Diagram--Poems* and *The Infant and the Pearl*, themselves a fraction of Oliver’s complete works, are by no means exhaustive. But some important questions raised by Oliver’s substantial body of work are, I hope, broached here in some detail. Most prominent among these are: what bearing do the philosophical influences on Oliver’s unpublished 1970s essays have on his prosodic theory? How do Oliver’s theory of prosody and the politics in, and of, his mature poetry relate to one another? What kind of challenge to literature’s relationship to politics does Oliver’s work provide? To what extent does Oliver’s poetry refuse practical political suggestion in favour

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13 *PNP*, p.172.

14 *VTH*, p.107.



of the poetical ideal of social identity which all his major works strive to exemplify and provoke? These concerns could be summarised under the single query: what is politics *doing* in these poems?

Both *The Diagram--Poems* and *The Infant and the Pearl* are poems in which every syllable and stress of every line is positively rigged with politics. Politics, as I hope to show, both begins and begins to end in these poems. The political agenda indissoluble from the grain of prosody by which these poems exert their powers of argument, persuasion and imperative is one that finds confirmation of its aspirations to social justice in the aesthetic result of poetic composition itself. In other words, the poems' "political ambitions" are not expressed as a by-product or neatly extractable result of their polemic, but are in fact made possible in the first place by the formal properties of poetic language. They are poems in which political desire is made from the very stuff of poetry. Perhaps an attempt to understand how and why this is the case might aid us in loosening the stranglehold of the contemporary prevailing narratives of mandatorily uneasy aesthetic and political cohabitation – as if the meaning of the two categories were somehow mutually constituted, when it comes to political poetry, by their inability to reconcile each other to their own particular kind of purchase on social life – and allow us instead to start thinking about the kinds of politics that only poems have the capacity to present, promise or predict. Such an attempt as is made in the present work may plausibly go some way towards thinking about how, in a very specific sense, politics gets made in poems, and by extension, how poems – whole poetries, in fact – are liquidated into lifeless component particles when criticism promotes their political thinking to the status of an advertising tagline (whether for 'world change' or for 'subjective transformation') rather than attending to the full-blown complexity of their formal virtue, their fantastic gift. I mean by this interjection to distinguish such thinking (but by no means to divorce it entirely) from the ways in which, for example, a Coleridgean or Byronic Orientalism feeds into, to quote Said, "the making of an imperialist tradition," or the ways in which Wordsworth's poetry either formalises a European revolutionary imperative, or curdles into a nationalist Tory humanism, or both.<sup>15</sup> The specific ways that "politics gets made in poems" that I have in mind here would be more local and ancillary to such large-scale, historically and culturally discursive readings, and would involve, as they do in Oliver's work, the conscious effort in verse to conduct the experience of social relations into something that identifies itself as, or in contradistinction to, political organisation. I want to suggest that speculations of this sort might aid us in determining what,

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<sup>15</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.15.

exactly, “a poetry of public, political significance” at the cynical dénouement of the twentieth century actually meant, as well as to reflect upon what this “significance” comes to mean in the hyper-virtualised barbarity of the early twenty-first. The work of Douglas Oliver presents one vital opportunity to practise these questions at the highest pitch of their social and literary significance.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 – Introduction

During the third year of his bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Essex, 1972-1975, under the supervision of the Shakespearian and scholar of French Renaissance literature, Dr. (now Prof. and OBE) Michael Edwards, Oliver wrote a series of five essays dedicated to theorising and explaining what he called “the dynamics of artistic creativity.”<sup>1</sup> The essays offer readings of Chaucer, Husserl, Heidegger and Bataille.<sup>2</sup> A sixth essay, which contains scraps and fragments as well as large paragraphs of concerted argument, and which is most likely an unfinished draft of the second essay, discusses Husserl and Heidegger.<sup>3</sup> The essays are composed in a somewhat more personal style than is common for academic work of their genre. They are densely written and contain a number of interwoven strands of argument. In this chapter I focus on those arguments most prominently related to the development of Oliver's theory of prosody, and which pertain especially to prosody's “function” – the instrumental nature of which will become apparent as we proceed – as well as its effect in the experience of composing and reading verse.<sup>4</sup> Central to this development is Oliver's relationship to philosophy, expressed in the essays through his selective appropriation, and idiosyncratic account, of elements of Husserl's mature phenomenology. These early essays are exceptionally revealing. They contain the

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- 1 Oliver, ‘Introductory Essay to a series of five concerning the dynamics of artistic creativity. On transcendence and relativity in *The Canterbury Tales*,’ *DOA*, Box 1, p.1. Hereafter ‘Introductory Essay.’ This box in the Douglas Oliver Archive at the University of Essex contains a substantial amount of unpublished prose, largely written during the period 1973-1975. It also contains one autobiographical essay, published by the Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series in Detroit, MI, in 1997. Excepting the essays described and examined in the present chapter, the box's contemporaneous content comprises: three third-year French Renaissance course papers on Racine, Descartes and du Bellay; an essay for a course in Applied Linguistics on wh-movement; notes for another Linguistics essay, the completed version of which does not seem to be present, and a series of typed or hand-written notes on various monographs. These are C.W. Cassinelli, *Free Activities and Interpersonal Relations* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966); José Ortega y Gasset, *On Love: aspects of a single theme* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957); Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955); Charles Rycroft, *Imagination and Reality* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), and Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Penguin, 1974).
  - 2 All of which are contained within *DOA*, Box 1.
  - 3 This essay, ‘Who does the poet think he is in presuming to share his consciousness with the reader? A theme from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* seen in the light of Heidegger's *Existence and Being*,’ (hereafter ‘Who does the poet’) contained in the same box in the *DOA* as the other essays referred to here, appears to be in draft stage, with many sections of the essay duplicated, revised, or otherwise broken-off. Some of its passages are repeated verbatim, some altered, in the second essay in the series on Husserl and Heidegger. It is therefore most likely to be an unfinished early draft of this second essay, although it may potentially also represent an attempt at a revision or expansion of the same. Unfinished or not, this essay contains some important speculation that resonates with the other five essays, and I will refer to it when necessary.
  - 4 Oliver, ‘An examination of “prosody” in the light of theories already expressed,’ *DOA*, Box 1, p.8. Hereafter ‘An examination.’ “[P]rosody” here refers to a wide-ranging set of formal poetical devices, not limited to metrics alone, but including rhythm, stress, enjambment, diction and tone, as well as overall form and general shape.

origins of an argument that found full public expression only by the time of Oliver's 1989 theoretical monograph *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*. Written at a formative stage in Oliver's career as a poet, their aim is to "establish an argument about the dynamics of poetic consciousness at the moment when it acts," by means of "an exploration of the dynamics of 'self' as it acts poetically."<sup>5</sup>

After leaving school at 16, Oliver took a number of different jobs before settling on journalism and moving to Cambridge with his wife, Janet Hughes, in the early 1960s. Employed by the *Cambridge News* until the couple's move to Paris in 1970, Oliver's time in Cambridge was indelibly marked by his friendship with, and tutelage by, the poets J.H. Prynne, John James, Wendy Mulford, Andrew Crozier, Anthony Barnett, Denise Riley, Peter Riley, John Riley, Tom Raworth and Lee Harwood.<sup>6</sup> This cadre of poets, with Raworth, Harwood, Denise Riley, Peter Riley and John Riley described as being part of "a far wider circle" than the rest, appears in Oliver's posthumous memoir *Whisper 'Louise'*.<sup>7</sup> Oliver's first book, *Oppo Hectic*, was published by Andrew Crozier's Ferry Press in 1969. In 1973 Oliver's novel *The Harmless Building*, a book which he later described as "the mother plant" from which all subsequent collections grew, was jointly published by Ferry along with John Riley and Tim Longville's Grosseteste Review Books.<sup>8</sup> Upon their return from Paris in 1972, Oliver and his family moved to Brightlingsea and Oliver enrolled as a mature student at the new University of Essex, a decision taken, he later reflected, in order "to fill in holes in my education."<sup>9</sup> The faculty at the university, founded in 1963, would have been attractive to Oliver. Donald Davie, surely known to Oliver through Davie's former student and colleague J.H. Prynne, established the Literature department at Essex during the early 1960s. In 1965 Davie invited the American poet Ed Dorn, a poet whom Oliver read and admired (and had also most likely been introduced to by Prynne), to teach at Essex. Oliver's mature undergraduate period (1972-5) saw the composition and publication of *In The Cave of Suicession* (1974), the creation of the campus "poetry service" *Aiken Jacks* (an endeavour to print "anyone's poems at all"), and the publication of five issues of the journal *The Human Handkerchief* (an editorial collaboration between Oliver and the poets Ralph Hawkins, Simon Pettet and Charles Ingham), as well as a spate of letters, of which particular mention should be made of those between Oliver and the poets Peter Riley and J.H. Prynne.<sup>10</sup> Oliver maintained a steady, if sometimes patchy, correspondence with both of these poets from the time of their first meetings

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5 *Ibid.*, p.1.

6 In October 1969 the *Cambridge News* became the *Cambridge Evening News*.

7 *WL*, p.54.

8 *CAAS*, p.251.

9 *Ibid.*, p.252.

10 *Ibid.*

in Cambridge in the 1960s until his death in 2000.

The extant record of this correspondence in the Douglas Oliver Archive in the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex represents a significant contribution to the documentation of mid-late twentieth-century literary culture. Prynne especially seems to have exercised a deep and abiding influence during the Essex period, an influence which continued throughout Oliver's life. The trajectory of Oliver's development as a poet (and editor) at the time of writing his 'undergraduate' essays is thus well established; so too is his indebtedness to the atmosphere of comradeship and correspondence created by his friends in Cambridge and his colleagues at Essex. Prynne is thanked effusively in a note appended to the first essay of the series of five. This note reads: "Throughout all these essays I owe a considerable debt to Mr. J.H. Prynne, of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, whose letters and conversation have suggested many turning points for me."<sup>11</sup> The American poet Ted Berrigan, who in 1973-1974 taught at Essex as Poet in Residence following the departure of Ed Dorn, is credited in a late autobiographical essay with having performed a service of a similar magnitude to Prynne's: "No-one in my adult life," Oliver recalled, "has taught me more about how to *use* emotion wisely."<sup>12</sup> It is testament to the breadth of what Oliver would later reflect upon and celebrate as "Poetry's Subject" that he felt equally influenced by, or at least in later life felt the need to assert the broadly equivalent influence of, both J.H. Prynne and Ted Berrigan, poets for whom, it might be claimed, the only conceivable commonality was a mutual friendship with Douglas Oliver.<sup>13</sup> The essays are therefore neither juvenilia nor merely assignments; they represent some of Oliver's most concerted efforts to apply himself, in an institutionally rigorous manner and in a period coeval with poetic composition and passionate correspondence and debate, to the questions of poetic language and authorship to which he would return time and time again over the course of his life.

## 1.2 – Prynne, Oliver and philosophy

In the aforementioned note in the references to the first of the series of five essays, Oliver thanks his friend, the poet J.H. Prynne, "whose letters and conversation have suggested many turning points for

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<sup>11</sup> 'Introductory Essay,' p.9.

<sup>12</sup> *CAAS*, p.252.

<sup>13</sup> See Oliver, 'Poetry's Subject,' *PN Review* 105 (Vol. 22, No. 1; Sep.-Oct., 1995), pp.52-58, later revised and extended in Philip Davis, ed., *Real Voices on Reading* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997), pp.83-102.

me.”<sup>14</sup> Given that the essays contain a substantial amount of discussion centred around the late work of the philosopher Edmund Husserl (and in the second and sixth essays, around those of Martin Heidegger), it seems extremely likely that one such “turning point” involved thinking comparatively about poetry and philosophy, especially phenomenology. The essays are comparable with the early prose of J.H. Prynne in terms of the questions they ask and the answers they give to those questions. As with the Prynne of the 1961 essay ‘Resistance and Difficulty,’ the Oliver of the early essays expresses a keen interest in phenomenology. Oliver’s use of phenomenology resembles Prynne’s in that it is introduced in order to elucidate a problem which philosophy alone cannot fully solve or overcome. Like Prynne’s essay, Oliver’s essays deal with phenomenology in a way that is preparatory, conceptually if not chronologically, to a description of the powers specific to poetic language. Both poets use philosophy as evidence to support an argument that poetry can do things that philosophy alone cannot, since poetry is able to produce proofs unavailable to philosophic description, proofs discoverable *only* in poetry. For Prynne, poetry, which he conceives as a product of the imagination, solves the problem of the existence or non-existence of the outside world by proving the “ontological priority” of that world through encountering the “resistance” it offers the creative imagination: this is the imagination’s “peculiar function,” its privileged domain.<sup>15</sup> For Oliver, poetry solves the problem of whether or not it is possible to experience *exactly* what another individual experiences. It solves this problem positively, since poetry allows us to experience a situation in which self and other are not hard and fast categories into which human experience is forever split, but rather one in which this distinction, that between self and other, collapses. It collapses in “fleeting glimpse[s] of transcendence” that indicate the potential for a perfect “fusion of self and other.”<sup>16</sup>

In ‘Resistance and Difficulty,’ which discusses Husserl and mentions Heidegger, among many others, Prynne argues that the imagination is the human faculty most fully capable of acknowledging the existence of the world outside subjective experience. It is capable of this task thanks to its capacity to augment reality and not merely to reflect it, and it augments reality by producing poems:<sup>17</sup>

It is the imagination’s peculiar function to admit, draw sustenance from, and

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.9.

<sup>15</sup> J.H. Prynne, ‘Resistance and Difficulty,’ *Prospect* 5 (Winter, 1961), pp.26-30 (30).

<sup>16</sup> Oliver, ‘Some groundwork towards investigating the poet’s creative dynamic,’ *DOA*, Box 1 (hereafter ‘Some groundwork’), pp.3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Insightful commentary on ‘Resistance and Difficulty,’ to which I am indebted for this reading, can be found in Keston Sutherland, ‘J.H. Prynne and Philology,’ unpublished PhD thesis (University of Cambridge, 2004) pp.106-110.

celebrate the ontological priority of this outside world, by creating entities which subsequently become a part of the world, an addition to it. Hence the tensions between metre and rhythm, between credibility and dramatic cogency, in fact the stringencies of artifice and discipline generally which constitute the dimensions within which the imagination is realised and becomes intelligible, embody both the process and its difficulties, and the resistance proper to its substance.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage the prosodic detail of a poem, its “tensions between metre and rhythm,” for example, are a direct result of the difficulty involved in the realisation of “imagination’s peculiar function.”<sup>19</sup> They are, for Prynne, the hallmarks of a specific kind of difficulty which provides evidence that the world exists and that we are in it. This description of rhythm and metre, and the experience of the “tension” between the two, as evidence of an ontological condition, bears a significant relation to Oliver’s thinking about prosody.

For Oliver, prosody contains the answer to the question whether or not we can ever directly experience what someone else experiences. His thesis on the matter, in the form of a “CREDO,” is set out in the fifth essay of the Essex series:

CREDO: the function of all details of prosody, especially the finest details, is to ensure that the reader, by assenting all along to the music of the language as emotionally apt for himself as well as for the poet, tunes the process of his thought to that of the poet more exactly than ordinary language makes possible.<sup>20</sup>

As a matter of belief, a “CREDO,” it is the “function of all details of prosody” to effect the attunement of the “thought” of the reader to that of the poet-author. It will be the task of the present chapter to offer a theoretical framework with which to understand and critique this complicated claim. This explanation, in summary, will proceed as follows: philosophy, specifically the late transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, presents the problem of the experience of the other, of an alter ego, otherwise organised under the rubrics of empathy and intersubjectivity. For Husserl, ego and alter ego are “two primordial spheres [...] *separated* by an abyss I cannot actually cross.”<sup>21</sup> Oliver maintains that poets, for whom the acknowledgement of this “abyss” is at the core of composition as he describes it, have always practiced, and continue to practice, methods which allow for the experience of “ambiguity” between “self” and “other.” This is the result, says Oliver, of “the poet’s creative dynamic.” Such ambiguity is desirable,

18 Prynne, ‘Resistance and Difficulty,’ p.30.

19 *Ibid.*

20 ‘An examination,’ pp.8-9.

21 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an introduction to phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), p.121. Emphasis in original.

since it proves “the fusion of self and other really to be perfect in some instant of the encounter.”<sup>22</sup>

Oliver finds useful elucidation of the problem of the alter ego and intersubjectivity in Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, but corroboration of his desire for “fusion” distinctly lacking. He therefore requires that poetry provide an object of experience that can bridge the gap between self and other, between ego and alter ego, in a manner that transcendental phenomenology cannot. Poetry comes closest to achieving this aim during “moments” when a “sharing of consciousness” between poet-author and reader is possible; such “moments” are first described in the essays in terms of narrative structure, then in more detail as the minutest iterations, the “finest details” of prosodic sound and shape, and finally, by 1989, as contained within the “notional instant[s]” of poetic stress.<sup>23</sup> These moments, in the experience of reading poetry, engender the “special intersubjectivity” which would abolish the “abyss” between subjectivities that Husserl, amongst other philosophers and theorists, describes as fundamental.<sup>24</sup> Belief in this process is required since the kind of moment Oliver wants to describe cannot, finally, be rationally or empirically identified and must therefore remain “notional.” In this aspect of his argument Oliver displays the influence of Romantic accounts of poetical composition, specifically Coleridge’s methodological tenet in the *Biographia Literaria* that his practice involved the attempt

to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.<sup>25</sup>

For Oliver, the suspension of disbelief also involves the suspension of the abyssal distance between self and other, and it is suspended through an act of “poetic faith,” as announced by the “CREDO” about the function of prosody. In poetry, Oliver says,

It is as though the ego were in some *dynamic* becoming properly relative to the Other which always to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the perfection of the dynamic) came near to presenting itself *originally* to the ego but never quite managed such perfect relativism which would, indeed, be that of perfect identity between self and Other.<sup>26</sup>

The language of this passage, and in particular the vocabulary of “presenting [...] *originally* to the ego,”

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22 ‘Some groundwork,’ p.4.

23 ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.2; ‘An examination,’ pp.8-9; *PNP*, p.161.

24 The phrase “special intersubjectivity” appears at the apotheosis of Oliver’s development of his theory of the poetic “moment,” *PNP*, p.172.

25 James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 7, Part 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p.6.

26 ‘Who does the poet,’ p.7. Emphasis in original. Note that Oliver’s capitalisation of “Other” is not consistent.



as we shall see, is drawn from Husserl. But the argument here goes beyond Husserl's definition of either empathy or intersubjectivity.

Husserlian empathy [*Einfühlung*], as A.D. Smith points out, is the term employed to register "experiential awareness of another subject."<sup>27</sup> Intersubjectivity [*Intersubjectivität*] in Husserl goes no further than establishing how the "*transcendentally meditating philosopher*" may make sense of the appearance of other transcendental subjectivities.<sup>28</sup> The desire for a kind of fusion in which the alter ego presents "itself *originally* to the ego" is therefore, despite being couched in the language of the *Meditations*, something that the *Meditations* rule out as a condition of their enquiry, and which is furthermore quite alien from their entire project – is, in fact, alien to phenomenology as Husserl practises it. In what follows, this line of argument will be developed with more detailed reference to both Husserl's and Oliver's texts. For now it will suffice to point out that Oliver's argument about "perfect identity between self and Other," when it comes to phenomenology, is couched in terms whose original context is at some remove from, and often at odds with, their deployment in the essays. The question of, let alone the desire for, "perfect identity," could not be farther from Husserl's philosophy, and the argumentative tools Husserl uses therein are not designed to establish, support or corroborate it. The result of this disconnect between Oliver's vocabulary and his sources is that the poet's use of philosophy is creative and speculative, designed to achieve a certain aim without worrying too much about the historical semantic freight of the terms used to get there.

Where we get to is also a matter for speculation. In the passage quoted above, "[i]t is as though the ego" and the alter ego were becoming perfectly identified – it is not *literally* the case; "perfect identity" is "never quite managed." Oliver's position on whether or not "perfect identity" is achievable *at all* differs depending on the context; in this passage, it is "never quite managed," but elsewhere, especially in the later monograph *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, perfection is certainly glimpsed, if not momentarily achieved. Achievable or not, "[t]he complete ambiguity [between self and other] is thus [...] an ideal to aim at," Oliver asserts in the second essay of the early five, and *qua* ideal it remains unverifiable by any standard determined by the rigour of philosophic proof, and especially by Husserlian apodicticity. The notion of apodicticity itself is rejected wholesale, along with many other elements of Husserl's system, as we shall see. This distinction allows Oliver to raid Husserl enthusiastically for a set of concepts that are useful to his project, but ultimately to reject transcendental phenomenology as a

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27 A.D. Smith, *Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p.213.

28 *Ibid.*, p.249.

framework in favour of the qualities and ramifications of the “creative dynamic” that are unavailable to philosophers, even as they are defined on the basis that they will solve problems that properly belong to philosophy.

There is another important sense in which Oliver rejects Husserl. Throughout the essays, Oliver consistently asserts the poet’s crudity in comparison to the philosopher. This is something Prynne, by comparison, never does. The poet, Oliver says in the second essay, entertains “philosophically crude presuppositions about self and other,” and as such operates from within what Husserl would call the “natural attitude,” that is, the vulgar sense of self that is inauthentic compared to the transcendently meditating subject of the *Cartesian Meditations*.<sup>29</sup> The poet does not exist, says Oliver, as a transcendently meditating subject, but as an everyday subject who “cannot explicitly match the subtlety of a philosopher like Husserl”:

Lacking a reduction, poets do not construct a systematics of self–other relations; they don’t need to, since by expert practice of the dynamic they enter the process of that relation which is a more vital and poetic experience of the dynamic (though less systematic) than a philosophical explication [*sic*] of its structures.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to Oliver that poets are not philosophers; important too that poets engage in a “more vital” “relation” between self and other than philosophers. He repeats this distinction, in various guises, time and again in the essays, emphasising that he does not

attempt to refer, like Husserl, with his transcendental ego, to an underlying level of meaning which is apodictically true. I am referring to the actual way in which our consciousness works, moment by moment, in an unphilosophical attitude as it thinks, despite all radical doubt, of itself as a self which both endures and suffers changes.<sup>31</sup>

The obvious questions that all this must raise are: if Oliver’s usage of Husserl is finally anti-Husserlian, and fundamentally at odds with the sense and methodology of the philosopher’s late transcendental meditations, then why adopt *any* elements of his philosophy? Why import philosophical jargon to deploy it against the structures it was conceived to support, and why elucidate the poet’s “creative dynamic” with a philosophical system whose central requirements are jettisoned in the course of the elucidation?

One answer, as will become clear in the rest of the present chapter, is to be found in the fact that

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Some groundwork,’ p.3; Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.37.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Who does the poet,’ p.7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

Oliver certainly does retain certain elements of Husserlian phenomenological thinking in his schema, most importantly Husserl's description of the transcendental subject's constitution [*Konstitution*] of the alter ego in the fifth meditation. I detail this important retention of Husserl below.<sup>32</sup> Yet philosophy remains inadequate to the problems it suggests to Oliver, and it is in the "moments" engendered by the workings of the "poet's creative dynamic," themselves inflected by, but by no means beholden to, Husserlian method, that Oliver finds the answer to the question of explaining (and engendering) intersubjective perfection. Oliver would insist on the role of the "moment" or "instant" in various permutations throughout his career; in almost every major work, whether long poem or explanatory prose, they assume the cardinal function of the work's efficacy. The essays discussed in this chapter represent Oliver's earliest attempt to theorise such moments and their function in and for poetry – specifically, the promotion of what he would later call a "special intersubjectivity."<sup>33</sup>

The rest of this chapter will proceed by explicating the sense of the "dynamic of poetic creativity" which is informed by Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* but whose strictures cannot finally account for what happens in a line of poetry. This will incorporate discussion of the "moment" theorised by Oliver as the site of the "glimpse of transcendence" which *can* provide an answer to the problem of the self–other divide, albeit one which confirms only the ideal perfect fusion's closest possible approximation, rather than established confirmation of the experience of such fusion over time. The answer, as I will show, lies entirely within the remit of the "fleeting" instances contained within lines of verse, and the chapter ends with a description of the moment's theoretical culmination in Oliver's 1989 book *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*. The theory of the moment discussed herein contains the foundational principles of Oliver's literary output between the early 1970s and his death in 2000. Every major work of poetry and prose is organised around the central principles which the unpublished early essays begin to formulate, as it will be one of the tasks of the rest of this dissertation to show. But before embarking on a more detailed discussion of the dynamic and the moment, we must elucidate the so fervently desired "perfect identity" itself.

### 1.3 – Perfect identity and utopian politics

What Oliver wants to establish in these essays is the possibility of "perfect identity between self and

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<sup>32</sup> See below, section 1.4.

<sup>33</sup> *PNP*, p.172.

Other.” The closest the essays come to conclusively detailing what this means is in the “CREDO” quoted above. Here, “perfect identity” seems to pertain exclusively to communicative authenticity engendered between subjects, that is to say, communication between two people for whom the semantic and emotional content of that communication has reached a maximum of reciprocal understanding. Elsewhere in Oliver’s oeuvre, as in the culmination of the project which the early essays begin, the 1989 monograph *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, “perfect identity between self and Other” when most nearly realised means that:

Author and reader create, through their own implied personification in the text, a special intersubjectivity – a perfecting of the emotional and semantic fields through a shared experience of space and time [...] The process reveals what our everyday experience and speech could be like, if, when our emotions were real and not imaginary, our hearts and heads were in temporal consonance.<sup>34</sup>

This explication of “special intersubjectivity” resembles the “CREDO” in its insistence on “a perfecting of the emotional and semantic fields,” but hints obscurely at a further kind of attunement potentially achievable if “our emotions were real and not imaginary.”

This is an extraordinary throwaway statement that is left undeveloped towards the end of *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*. Emotions are only “imaginary” in the “process” under discussion because they are the result of the perceived emotional cartography of *literary* experience. What Oliver therefore seems to be suggesting is that the kind of intersubjectivity only available in poems is in effect a model for an unrealised but essentially desirable “everyday experience,” one in which human beings attain a greater perfection of emotional and semantic communication than is usually the case. The “ordinary language” referred to in the “CREDO” becomes in the passage from *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* the ordinary lives of human beings, which “could,” poetry shows us, achieve a clarity of intellect and expression impossible, for whatever reasons, under current conditions. In the type of experience that poetry affords, and “in the repeatability of a shared mental experience[,] lies the hope that we can enrich our perception and human sympathy.”<sup>35</sup> Since our lives outside of prosody cannot be in “temporal consonance,” Oliver assumes, we must look to poetry to provide the model for the type of experience that would allow us to ascertain what this enriched, perfected sympathy, would feel like. It turns out to feel like the experience of poetic stress.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

Because stress is a particular incident in the organisation of any given poem's total set of formal properties, its experience gives us a glimpse of unity not only in terms of an intersubjective encounter, but also in terms of the unity of artistic form itself. Stress is a microcosm, a "tiny experience of artistic form[.]" and literary form

fills the apparent 'instant' of time with mental content, an operation which ought to be impossible and, in fact, is only achieved in a paradoxical way. But because the paradox is infinitely repeatable, literary form allows the reader to think he is sharing this 'instant' with the imagined author of the text.<sup>36</sup>

The coincidence of the experience of literary (poetic or narrative) form and of a perceptually and sympathetically enriched life is a theme Oliver emphasises in the autobiographical prose/poetry sequence 'An Island That Is All The World' (1990). Here, "a true politics" is analogously linked to a similar experience to that described in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*:

Just as a poem creates form by starting with the smallest occasions of [stress] [...] building through syllable, through musical verse unit and silence, up through cadence and stanza to the whole poem, so do our lives build a coherence from the smallest incorporations of outer world into inner self [...] Unity of form disappears into ambiguous dark whenever we examine it analytically, but its heart is like the always beating heart of a poem: it is the precious origin of our lives' form, or of a true politics.<sup>37</sup>

The various iterations of "perfect identity between self and Other" to be found in the work thus encompass a range of possible interpretations, suggesting perfected communicative, perceptive, sympathetic, political and even psycho-somatic (as in the "beating heart" of the poetic encounter) consensus.

The correlation between "[u]nity of form," "our lives' form" and "a true politics" in the above passage from 'An Island That Is All The World' is highly instructive, since it brings together the essential strands of Oliver's poetic in one succinct, if somewhat obtuse, statement. Unity of form and unity of persons, of poet-author and reader, are, as we have seen, a key feature of the desired "perfect identity between self and Other" that Oliver is striving for both in the early essays and in later works. Poetic stress is the locus of formal unity which serves as the place where the perfected unity of persons is fleetingly, infinitesimally established. That this double unity is furthermore "the precious origin [...] of a true

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5, p.xiii.

<sup>37</sup> *VTH*, p.107.

politics” is a mysterious statement. What kind of politics is hereby announced? Why is it especially “true”? Oliver says that “Unity of form [...] is the precious *origin* [...] of a true politics.”<sup>38</sup> What, then, would this “true politics” become after its original establishment through unity? What I suggest is that the kind of politics that Oliver founds on such unity is essentially utopian: it is founded on the principle of harmonious reconciliation of humankind through perfected identification of the universal nature of our common humanity. This is the meaning of “perfect identity between self and Other” which attains its fullest expression in the poetic, rather than the theoretical oeuvre, and it is most apparent in Oliver’s 1985 poem *The Infant and the Pearl*. Jameson’s statement that “utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political” is useful here, since, as it will take the course of this dissertation to show, it is the case in every major political poem that Oliver wrote that politics is at some crucial moment suspended in favour, as *The Infant and the Pearl* puts it, of the kind of “union between / people” that I have been describing, and which I intend to establish in this chapter as a theoretical touchstone for the poetry.<sup>39</sup> But Jameson’s definition also needs complicating, because for Oliver such “union” is always the “origin” of politics, or of a “true politics,” never its culmination or exception. It remains to show, in the present chapter, the development of Oliver’s argumentative framework in the early essays which would so deeply inform his later work.

#### 1.4 – The creative dynamic and Husserl

The phrase “dynamics of artistic creativity” was likely suggested to Oliver by Norman N. Holland’s 1968 book of psychoanalytic literary theory, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. The book is cited as having aided Oliver’s discussion of Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale” in the notes to ‘On transcendence and relativity in *The Canterbury Tales*.’<sup>40</sup> The “dynamics” in Holland’s book concern the processes by which literature engages the reader through the manipulation of fantasy. In a chapter titled ‘The Willing Suspension of Disbelief,’ Holland proposes that literature is the formal management of fantasy to which the reader responds by introjecting those fantasies as if they were their own. The literary process “embodies a mental process of transformation” from “a normally unconscious fantasy” to “conscious intellectual meaning.”<sup>41</sup> In Holland’s account, this explains literature’s potential for enormous emotional

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38 *Ibid.* My emphasis.

39 See Fredric Jameson, ‘The Politics of Utopia,’ *New Left Review* 25 (Jan.-Feb., 2004), pp.34-54 (43); *SP*, p.73.

40 ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.9.

41 Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1975) p.95,

affectivity. Holland's thesis involves some heavy-handed appropriation of certain psychoanalytical concepts, pressed into the service of explaining emotional reactions to literature. "Introjection," for example, has a long, complicated and often contradictory history of usage in analytic literature, but is deployed by Holland simply to refer to the act of psychological consumption of the means of gratification; his glossary entry for the term reads: "*Introjection*. Mentally taking an object [...] into one's mind, often with the fantasy that it has been physically incorporated through eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or skin."<sup>42</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis define the term with greater care when they refer in their definition of "Introjection" not to "mind" but to the "inside" and "outside" of the subject's "ego" or "ego-ideal": "in phantasy, the subject transposes objects and their inherent qualities from the 'outside' to the 'inside' of himself [...] it does not necessarily imply any reference to the body's real boundaries (introjection into the ego, into the ego-ideal, etc.)."<sup>43</sup>

The attraction of Holland's book for Oliver likely lay in the insistence on the transformation of interiority that Holland describes as a necessary process of the experience of literature:

We experience the work [...] by introjecting it, taking it into ourselves, feeling the nucleus of fantasy and the formal management of that fantasy as though they were our own [...] the central fantasy and its formal organization are not only supplied by the text but also shared by the reader.<sup>44</sup>

This "central fantasy," which Holland maintains is the central principle of all works of literature, resonates with "our own highly individual fantasies" to produce the engrossment typical of literary experience.<sup>45</sup> Such an experience involves the satisfaction of primitive emotional states that point to the pre-individuated self, and produces "an encapsulated regression to our earliest oral experience of a pre-self in which we are merged with the source of our gratification."<sup>46</sup> Oliver does not cite Holland's book except to refer to its analysis of Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' and does not incorporate any of the psychoanalytical terminology used therein into his essays. But the description of an experience of literature involving a transformation, whether conscious or unconscious, involving one's sense of "self" would have been appealing to Oliver. It was certainly influential enough for him to refer to "self" throughout the essays, as opposed to the more philosophical jargon of "subject" or "subjectivity," more

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p.90.

42 *Ibid.*, p.363.

43 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 2004), p.229.

44 Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, p.90.

45 *Ibid.*, p.87.

46 *Ibid.*, p.89.

familiar from the realm of transcendental phenomenology, but used sparingly by Oliver in comparison to “self.” There is another sense, connected with this last, in which *The Dynamics of Literary Response* is important for the essay series and the arguments developed therein. As an example of 1960s literary ego-psychology which developed in Holland’s later work into more canonical instantiations of reader response theory, *Literary Response*’s focus is the literary object as phenomenon to be encountered; its arguments are concerned entirely to explicate exactly what is understood to take place between the work of literature and its reader. This is precisely the hermeneutic territory of Oliver’s essays.

The first essay of the five introduces a version of the “moment” to be elucidated by philosophy (but not solved by it) in the second. It is entitled ‘Introductory Essay to a series of five concerning the dynamics of artistic creativity. On transcendence and relativity in *The Canterbury Tales*,’ and begins as follows:

This begins a set of essays which aims to establish an argument about the dynamics of poetic consciousness at the moment when it acts. In an everyday sense of the word, that involves exploration of the dynamics of “self” as it acts poetically; and it would of course have been convenient first to have defined “self” so as to ground my whole inquiry. However, at least since Descartes the notion of “self” has become ambiguous; and since Husserl and his successors developed a post-Cartesian phenomenology into sophisticated doctrines any discussion of “self” becomes perilous. This opening essay will show that it has perhaps always been perilous, since we cannot search for the poetic “I” in some great narrative work like Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* without seeing an ambiguity that can strike us as extremely modern infecting the presumptions of the narrative.<sup>47</sup>

The “moment[s]” when “poetic consciousness [...] acts,” the fleeting instances of poetical intensity and emotional particularity from which lines of verse derive their propensity to act upon our consciousness, would remain central to Oliver’s thinking about poetry and poetics for the rest of his life. Their peculiar function within the speculative theoretical framework developed by Oliver across the early essays is complex; this complexity occasionally lapses into the radically oblique thanks to the tendency of the essays to veer from a specific poetic example, such as a line or motif in Chaucer, to the comparison of Oliver’s general theory with such reference-points as the tenets of contemporary astrophysics. Describing the effect of “ambiguity” in Chaucer, for example, Oliver writes:

Thus real elements of the poem enter an ambiguity which makes our brains work at creating out of opposite signs a singularity – a figure of giant-like

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.9.



significance whom we so nearly glimpse. To judge by modern astrophysical mathematics, singularity or *somesuch* [*sic*] can be seen as the condition of universal “creativity.”<sup>48</sup>

In a sense this kind of complexity is entirely appropriate to Oliver’s subject matter, since the experience his “moments” attempt to articulate operates at the level of “maximum ambiguity”: that of the relation between authorial “self” and its implicit or explicit “others,” both internal to poetic composition and external to the same, the latter in terms of a readerly other’s “assent” to the music of verse as it plays out in all its prosodic minutiae.<sup>49</sup>

Oliver’s argument develops chronologically across the set of five essays. In order to retain a balance between clarity of explication and critical evaluation, I follow here broadly the same trajectory, citing recapitulations or alternative phrasings from the whole body of early material where necessary. Oliver read his source material for these essays in a selective fashion. Chaucer, Husserl, Heidegger and Bataille are fairly well raided for a set of conceptual coordinates that are useful to Oliver’s project; he makes no claims to the contrary, and is in fact at pains to acknowledge what he calls the “predatory” nature of his scholarship when some aspect of a writer’s work does not suit his needs.<sup>50</sup> Oliver’s intellectual habits in general had always been various, wide-ranging and to a certain extent scattershot. He recounts in his memoirs that “in Cambridge in the late sixties I used to look on the shelves where the books ordered by the dons for their personal reading were stacked: and I’d buy those books.”<sup>51</sup> His personal project, begun when he was an out-of-school teenager at 16, to “study under” Coleridge by following up the poet’s reading as traced by John Livingstone Lowes’ *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), marks Oliver out as a voracious autodidact.<sup>52</sup> It is unsurprising then, when we come to examine these early essays, to see Oliver digest his chosen materials through his own hermeneutic idiosyncrasy, rather than offering detailed, academic readings of all the relevant texts. The American poet Alice Notley, married to Oliver between 1988 and his death in 2000, recalls that when she first met Oliver at Essex in 1973, “he was impressively well-read and had a totally coherent philosophy of his own.”<sup>53</sup> This recollection is instructive, since it suggests that the essays Oliver produced for Michael Edwards were primarily an exercise in recapitulating, organizing and consolidating an already well-planned theoretical outline. It

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48 *Ibid.*, p.6.

49 The phrase “maximum ambiguity” appears in ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.6; the term “assenting” in ‘An examination,’ p.8.

50 Oliver uses the word with regards to his reading of Husserl. ‘Some groundwork,’ p.7. See below for his treatment of Husserl’s concept of the *eidōs* ego.

51 See *WL*, p.55.

52 See *CAAS*, p.245.

53 Alice Notley to the author, personal communication, 10.12.12.

would be this outline that, revised, expanded and furnished with a great many more examples, Oliver would publish in 1989 as *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*.

The “ambiguity” Oliver identifies in Chaucer is found in the Prologue to Sir Thopas, as we “Bihoold the murye wordes of the Hoost to Chaucer” [“Behold the merry words of the Host to Chaucer”] directly following the Prioress’s Tale:

Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man  
As sobre was that wonder was to se,  
Til that oure Hooste jape tho bigan,  
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,  
And seyde thus: “What man artow?” quod he;  
“Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,  
Fore evere upon the ground I se thee stare.”<sup>54</sup>

[Now when they heard this miracle every man  
Was sobered; it was marvellous to see.  
But in the end our Host again began  
His jokes, and then he turned and looked at me,  
And thus he spoke: ‘What man are you?’ said he,  
‘You look as if you were trying to find a hare,  
Scanning the ground with such a steady stare!']<sup>55</sup>

Oliver concedes that one common reading of this passage is to acknowledge its “witty narrative value” and move on. “But we can also,” he suggests,

regard so closely these words, “For ever upon the ground I se thee stare,” that they half-awaken a mysterious and profound life lying behind the poem, as though some greater, well-nigh superhuman intellect is on the verge of raising his gaze to level with ours.<sup>56</sup>

This moment “speedily passes,” since we are reading the poem and must continue reading it. It is precisely the nature of these moments to be fleeting, suggests Oliver, before reflecting that “one of poetry’s greatest gifts is that we may return at such times to those moments where we seem on the verge of some greater thought than language seems normally to have any capacity to express.”<sup>57</sup> The vocabulary used to describe this moment of recognition is that of relative scale: the profound life of the poem is “greater,” personified as a “superhuman intellect,” enabling us an experience of “some greater thought.”

Later in the same essay, Oliver describes the same moment as engendering the recognition of “a

<sup>54</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.212.

<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.176-177.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

figure of giant-like significance[.]”<sup>58</sup> For Oliver, this “greater thought” is contained with the figure of “Chaucer,” whom he puts into inverted commas to make his point:

For there’s a question here which I take to be cardinal to the understanding of poetry’s extraordinary effect upon us: “who” is the anonymous presence so near to our understandings, so contingently affecting our emotions, at this moment?<sup>59</sup>

In order to answer this question, Oliver situates Chaucer’s authorship in a tripartite schema of subjectivity. From Geoffrey Chaucer, as historical figure and author of *The Canterbury Tales*, emerges “whatever elements of that entity [which] form the *Tales*’ transcendent author, from which emerges the transcendent narrator.”<sup>60</sup> It is important to Oliver that he use the jargon of phenomenological *epoché* in his schema: “transcendent” here is appropriated from Husserl’s “transcendental subjectivity.”<sup>61</sup> The “transcendent narrator” is himself split, “into self-as-subject and as member of that ‘other’ world bound together by [the] Host.”

Oliver then catalogues these selves accordingly:

In the domain of self appear: all instances of the use of “I”; all personal and subjective colouring of the story including observation upon other characters; all actions of self described from this subjective pole; the two tales of Sir Thopas and Melibeus seen as emitting from this pole; and so on. In the domain of “other” appear: Chaucer seen as pilgrim by the others; all the others supposedly faithfully reported in their speech or actions; all the other tales, but also including those elements of Chaucer’s own tales which can be similarly distinguished as “other” from their subjective elements through yet another analysis of the narrator as transcendent to his own story and supposedly reporting faithfully the actions of others seen as objective.<sup>62</sup>

What this amounts to is a description of the “ambiguity” inherent, for Oliver, in reading the passage of the ‘Prologue to Sir Thopas’ quoted above. The entity accosted by the Host whose eyes are fixed “For evere upon the ground” is not Geoffrey Chaucer, nor is it some purely fictional “I” embedded in the narrative of the *Tales*. It is Chaucer-as-pilgrim recognised in the narrative world created by Geoffrey Chaucer, the artificer of *The Canterbury Tales*, whose *real* historical self is further glimpsed as the ultimate ground of the very narrative, reflexive, lyrical palimpsest we are describing. It is “a moment of maximum ambiguity,” notes Oliver, because all these selves are simultaneously fused and sundered in the act of

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>61</sup> See below, section 1.4.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.5.

reading the Host's recognition.<sup>63</sup> As readers, we experience this process *qua* process, as the depth of Chaucer's reflexive narrative stretching to its fictional limits. The explication of this experience in terms of depth is pertinent: the horizon of these same fictional limits is the poet-author Geoffrey Chaucer, because he is what the poem "reaches back" towards, "to the poet as maker and thus eventually to Chaucer as a historical figure."<sup>64</sup>

The fact that we cannot resolve moments such as the Host's recognition of Chaucer into a stable figure of either narrative or "transcendent" authorial subjectivity is the source of their power to engender the multiplicity, the complexity, and the creative alterity of literature. "Who is this figure with downcast eyes?"

Call the "self" the "+" side: is he the historical Chaucer, the transcendent author, or the narrator narrating? On the "-" side of "other," is he the pilgrim seen in the *Host's* subjectivity? But, then, that subjectivity is utterly ambiguous, for it is created by the narrator, transcendent author, and historical Chaucer. All quasi-entities of self or other that we question must for this instant be granted a "±" sign in which the instant is not one of emptiness but of plenitude; these entities "really do" embody both states of the sign and the instant is full of that ambiguous potential, the very mark of creativity. Thus real elements of the poem enter an ambiguity which makes our brains work at creating out of opposite signs a singularity – a figure of giant-like significance whom we so nearly glimpse. To judge by modern astrophysical mathematics, singularity or *somesuch* [*sic*] can be seen as the condition of universal "creativity." I don't want to be that grandiose: I'm only saying that Chaucer makes our brains *work* at that relativistic task because of literary dynamics that are not so very complicated that they could not appear when he trusted the relativistic force of his own creative imagination.<sup>65</sup>

There are at least two identifiable strands to this argument. The first is that creativity, and hence the literary dynamic which the essays attempt to grasp, is exceptionally well represented by "ambiguous potential." Ambiguous potential is characteristic of creativity because it remains open to an infinite variety of possibility. This argument is strongly influenced, I will argue, by the concept of the *eidōs* ego, derived from Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. Oliver discusses Husserl's *transcendental* and *eidōs* egos in the second essay of the series of five, and I will look in more detail at Husserl's phenomenological method and its bearing on Oliver's poetics in what follows. The second identifiable strand to Oliver's argument in the passage quoted above is that "literary dynamics" entail cognitive labour on the part of the

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63 *Ibid.*, p.6.

64 *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

65 *Ibid.*, p.6. Emphasis in original. Oliver's use of the symbol "±" here is not meant to reference the mathematical indication of the precision of an approximation, but to intimate that self (as +) and other (as -) have merged into an "ambiguous" singularity.

reader. Chaucer “makes our brains *work* at [a] relativistic task” that mirrors the relativistic “self–other ambiguity” that takes place within the fecund complexity of the poet’s (in this case, Chaucer’s) creative dynamic. Literary dynamics make possible a dual process of authorial and readerly *work* that, together, realise the productive ambiguity of self and other as fundamental to poetic experience.

In the unfinished draft essay, ‘Who does the poet think he is in presuming to share his consciousness with the reader? A theme from Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* seen in the light of Heidegger’s *Existence and Being*,’ Oliver explains this same process in the following manner:

The poet writes from a centre that we may as well identify in an everyday sense as his notion of self, yet because of the originality of his process he in some way feels that his consciousness is engaged – at least partly – in a new kind of language which, despite its originality, other people will consider not just apt but also capable of making reborn in them something approaching the original writing process [...] Put crudely, the poet begins with elements of consciousness which are in [a] state influenced by the distinction between self–other. And, by a grand act of creativity, he reforms them into a state where the *process* of reformation may be shared with another person, the reader.<sup>66</sup>

This explanation, like that of Chaucer’s narrative ambiguity, resonates with phenomenological overtones. It is a description of poetic creativity strongly evocative of the Husserlian notion of monadological appresentation – the manner in which other people are “appresented” to me by analogy, as mirror images of my own subjective consciousness. For Husserl, “we must discover in what intentionalities, syntheses, motivations, the sense ‘other ego’ *becomes fashioned in me*” first and foremost, before it “becomes verified as existing and even as itself there in its own manner.”<sup>67</sup> This phenomenological priority informs the sense of the “original writing process” that Oliver uses here. It renders passages in the essays like the one above decidedly at odds with contemporary developments in theory, and in particular post-structuralist considerations of the distinctly *de*-centred self, of which Lacan is perhaps the most influential exponent.

Oliver was aware of these developments. He read Lacan, Derrida and Foucault in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>68</sup> In his 1970s correspondence with the British poet Peter Riley, Oliver remarks disparagingly on what he perceives to be the uncritical deferral to post-structuralist positions in the literary criticism of the day. In a letter to Riley of 21<sup>st</sup> February 1978, he writes:

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Who does the poet,’ pp.1-2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>67</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.90. Translator’s emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> See *WL*, pp. 55-56.

It's apparent the kind of damage an arrogant essay like Blaser's in the collected works can do: it places theory above poetry and sends everyone scampering to the latest French magi to borrow insights. I've read some Derrida + Lacan with interest; but I hope I know how to keep that interest in its place.<sup>69</sup>

The essay referred to, unkindly, is Robin Blaser's 'The Practice of Outside,' printed in his 1975 edition of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*; the writers to whom Blaser refers most prominently in the essay are not Derrida or Lacan, but Merleau-Ponty and Foucault.<sup>70</sup> Derrida and Lacan, however, feature heavily in the article which Oliver excoriates in much of the rest of the letter. This article is 'The Orientation of the Parasols: Saussure, Derrida, and Spicer,' by Colin Christopher Stuart and John Scoggan, from the 1977 special issue of *boundary 2* magazine.<sup>71</sup>

The article, which employs a Derridean vocabulary to theorise the major divergences of Jack Spicer's work from that of his Black Mountain contemporaries, is dismissed by Oliver as

just very bad and that's all there is to it: the usual university thing of thinking that understanding someone else's ideas is the same as having ideas of your own [...] There can be no insight from [...] such a hurry to catch on to the post-structuralist scene in France as though one would be then (a) up-to-date and (b) *therefore* truer in one's literary analysis.<sup>72</sup>

Oliver had previously described *The Harmless Building*, in another letter to Riley, in terms that refer to French post-structuralism with similar disinterest, writing that anyone "who should take my novel as a new juggle with reality-imaginary neo-French etcetera misses the point" and is a "dunderhead."<sup>73</sup> Nowhere in his letters to Riley does Oliver mount a critique of post-structuralism that goes beyond such dismissals, which more often than not, as in the letter quoted above, discuss secondary literature which quotes from Derrida or Lacan, rather than Derrida or Lacan's own authorship; nowhere are specific texts by either Derrida or Lacan mentioned. Oliver's generalised antipathy towards the use of contemporary French theory in "literary analysis" was not, then, rooted in sustained argument with these thinkers' texts, but in a combination of distrust in academic trends *per se*, and a belief in the relative merits of the arts compared to hermeneutic models of explication, of poetry compared to theory. Derrida and Lacan should be attended to, Oliver intimates, but only to the extent that interest in their thought be kept "in its place";

69 Oliver to Riley, 21.02.1978, *DOA*, Box 9.

70 See Robin Blaser, ed., *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), pp.271-329.

71 Colin Christopher Stuart and John Scoggan, 'The Orientation of the Parasols: Saussure, Derrida, and Spicer,' *boundary 2*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Jack Spicer (Autumn, 1977), pp.191-258.

72 Oliver to Riley, 21.02.1978, *DOA*, Box 9.

73 Oliver to Riley, 19.12.1971, *DOA*, Box 9.

theory must not be allowed “above poetry,” and insights must not be “borrowed.” Oliver’s “original writing process” comes from “a centre” that is not only inaccessible to the writer or critic steeped in (or even influenced by) theory; it is fundamentally anathema to theory’s explicatory designs upon it, since it obscures the “insight” of “your own ideas.” Oliver’s position on “originality” here is thereby inflected by an anti-theoretical contrarianism which further serves the privilege of poetic communication over all other discourse. The “original writing process” is, then, doubly “original,” since it both comes first – the poet must write something before it can be read – and communicates directly with “another person, the reader” without the need for the secondary apparatuses supplied by theory.

To draw together the strands of argument in the two passages from the first essay quoted above: ambiguity is channeled into a moment (in this instance, of the Host’s recognition of “Chaucer”) such that a plenitude of ambiguous potential is resolved in the “figure of giant-like significance whom we so nearly glimpse.” The resolution is transient and momentary. As readers of poetry, we assume the role of re-creating the process by which the “self–other ambiguity” involved in the moment under examination was originally composed – we re-enact the blurring of distinction between “self” and “other” to the point of indiscrimination. The poet’s creative dynamic entails the meeting of minds in this fashion: originally in the creative act of poetic composition through the inevitable involvement of a productive ambiguity between self and other as it exists in the mind of the poet-author, and secondarily in the mind of the reader as the re-combination and re-articulation of this *original* ambiguity by the conscious effort of readerly work. All of the essays, it should be remembered, aim to “establish an argument about the dynamics of poetic consciousness at the moment when it acts.” Contained in the moment from the Prologue to Sir Thopas, then, is a diagram of poetic consciousness at one particular moment of its acting.

Are the lines in the Prologue the only such moment in this particular tale, or the *Tales* in general, or is *The Canterbury Tales* full of them? Patently not, since we know this moment to be unique to the few lines identified; we seem to have encountered a contradiction. How can the dynamics of poetic consciousness act at certain moments and not others? Are these moments promoted, as it were, by the particular function of a lyric self, an “I,” or an otherwise manifest and explicit narrative or personal agent? This confusion stems from the manner of Oliver’s explication. Chaucer, he says, in this moment of Sir Thopas,

makes dramatic, in personifications of the poetic self and its relationship with all that is seen as “other,” a creative dynamics which acts at the smallest

details of all good poetry – at the level of syllable and consonant and in some quite-tremulous way even within the minute *durées* of syllable and consonant.<sup>74</sup>

The moment we have been reading in great detail is not *the* moment, in ‘The Tale of Sir Thopas,’ of poetic consciousness in action. Rather, it is *emblematic* of a process that takes place at the smallest level of poetic composition, ingrained into the minutiae of all “good” poetic language. “[T]he syllable,”

as it moves within the poetic dynamic and yet appears almost to stay a unit, [...] bears witness to the same creative process as that dramatised by Chaucer and so puts us in touch with a notion of truth-as-general.<sup>75</sup>

This “truth-as-general” can be summarised as follows: poetic consciousness, acting at all levels from dramatic narrative content to micro-tonal syllabic and consonantal durations, engenders communicative authenticity between subjects, and blurs the distinction between self and other.

The second essay of the series of five is entitled ‘Some groundwork towards investigating the poet’s creative dynamic: Husserl on the Ego and Heidegger on temporality.’ It is related to what I am referring to as the “sixth” unfinished essay, ‘Who does the poet think he is in presuming to share his consciousness with the reader? [...],’ through a shared subject matter, namely, a description of certain features of Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian temporality with a view to elucidating “the poet’s creative dynamic.”<sup>76</sup> Oliver does not, in either of these essays, advocate a whole-hearted adoption, or even adaptation of, Husserlian terms to explain his creative dynamic. He is extremely sceptical that such an adaptation is even possible, let alone desirable. “And yet,”

in Husserl’s explication of the transcendental ego reside certain clues to the condition of that flux point as it is generated within a poet’s perhaps philosophically crude presuppositions about self and other. For one thing, in considering the way in which ego as ownness is experienced, Husserl notes that the ego is the *original* sphere of these two primordial spheres whereas the sphere of the “other” is only *appresented* [...] I must say that this in some sense or other rings true for me even when translated into this crude world of the everyday which the poet wrestles with – where “selves” are “selves” and “others” “others,” so to speak.<sup>77</sup>

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74 ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.3.

75 *Ibid.* And see also in the same essay, “We receive the poem’s power from this transcendent author because he is the home of the poem’s relativity, a relativity that appears in some guise or other at each moment of truly poetic relation [...]” (p.4).

76 This “sixth” essay is most likely a rough, early draft of what became the official, as it were, second essay. It contains many similar sentences and phrasings to those found in the second essay.

77 ‘Some groundwork,’ p.3.



Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, based on the philosopher's introductory lectures to phenomenology delivered at the Sorbonne in February 1929, were first published in a French translation by Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas in 1931. A German text of the *Cartesianische Meditationen* comprises the posthumous first volume of Husserl's *Gesammelte Werke*, the *Husserliana*, and was published in 1950 under the auspices of Stephen Strasser. Oliver read the *Meditations* in the 1973 edition of Dorion Cairns' English translation, first published in 1960.<sup>78</sup> Oliver's reading of Husserl in translation is by no means thorough. He makes no indication of having read any other works by the philosopher, although he certainly did read a select secondary literature whose focus extends beyond the *Meditations*.<sup>79</sup> What he does read is largely digested in the manner of the above quotation. His focus here and elsewhere is on the manner in which the alter ego is appresented to "myself" as having been constituted in its alterity by "my" transcendental subjectivity.<sup>80</sup>

It will quickly become clear that what Oliver refers to in his first essay as the "transcendent narrator" of Chaucer's *Tales*, split "into self-as-subject and as member of that 'other' world bound together by [the] Host," is hardly, to say the least, a rigorous application of Husserlian philosophical categories into literary theory. Oliver had read the *Cartesian Meditations* and was inspired by its methodology and terminology; what he proposes as categorical distinctions between various aspects of the Chaucerian narrative or lyric self resembles a fairly liberal cross-pollination of relative terms rather than a concerted *phenomenological* approach to literature. Oliver's attraction to Husserl as it emerges in the second essay is as follows: the general model of intersubjectivity in which the *Meditations* famously culminate, in which the priority of "my" self-constituting transcendental ego is a condition of the constitution of any and all alter egos, suits the model of authorial "transcendence" that Oliver identifies in Chaucer because the poet-author as self is the creative *origin* of a self-other distinction or ambiguity activated by and in particular moments of verse, re-produced *secondarily* for the reader through their own attentive "*work*."<sup>81</sup>

The *Meditations* present an introduction to transcendental phenomenology as a radical beginning

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78 See the notes to 'Some groundwork,' p.9.

79 The secondary material mentioned in the notes to the second essay comprises: Suzanne Bachelard, *A Study of Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Lester E. Embree (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Richard Schmitt's entry for Husserl in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4 (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, and London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1967), pp.96-99 (98); Marjorie Grene, *Sartre* (New York, NY: New Viewpoints, 1973), and Werner Brock's introduction to Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, trans. Douglas Scott, R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick (London: Vision Press, 1956).

80 "My" and "myself" are consistently used by Cairns in his translation to render Husserl's discussion of the *solus ipse* to which "I" must reduce itself in order to effect the transcendental meditation.

81 See Oliver, 'Introductory Essay,' p.2.

philosophy, that is, a philosophy of first principles aligned with the *prima philosophia* of Descartes' *Meditationes* in the following sense: that it aims "to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their [Descartes' *Meditationes*] spirit, the radicalness of self-responsibility" and to "uncover thereby for the first time the genuine sense of the necessary regress to the ego[.]"<sup>82</sup> The regress is a necessity since it is only by this method that we may ascertain with absolute certainty the universal experiential foundation for knowledge.<sup>83</sup> Such a foundation is the only guarantee of apodicticity [*Apodiktizität*] or, the "absolute indubitability [*eine absolute Zweifellosigkeit*]" of critical philosophical reflection.<sup>84</sup> Phenomenological method as Husserl conceived it entails, like Cartesian doubt, the stripping away of all pre-supposed knowledge of the outside world beyond subjective consciousness in order to reflect upon the contents of that consciousness. It is impossible to elucidate the nature of reality from a standpoint secured from within that reality, and operating wholly within its premises, since the available evidence for such a reality will always be pre-supposed by our acceptance of its existence.

Thus transcendental phenomenology is the process of reflection by means of the transcendental *epoché* – the suspension of the so-called "natural attitude," which includes epistemological and metaphysical assumptions concerning (and therefore pre-emptively deciding upon) the reality of the world.<sup>85</sup> This attitude, the pre-philosophical comportment towards the existence of things that we unthinkingly adopt in everyday practice, must be set aside if we are truly to grasp the nature of things as I, the subject, apprehend them. The *epoché*, the decision to suspend belief in the outside world in order to examine its objects as they appear to our consciousness (or in the phenomenological jargon, are *given to us*), enables a universal reflective attitude to prevail over the natural one, not by eliminating its relevance for human experience, but by the parenthesising or bracketing [*Einklammerung*] of its validity. The new attitude thereby brought into play is itself what is called "transcendental": it is the reflection, by means of reduction, upon the contents of consciousness *qua* phenomena, as they are given to me in my transcendental subjectivity. In this sense the phenomenological method espoused and followed in the *Meditations* is not so much an investigation of the contents of experience, as an investigation into the

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82 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.6.

83 The following summary of Husserl's project, and particularly as it pertains to the specifics of the *Cartesian Meditations*, draws primarily on: Bachelard, *A Study*; Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993); Marvin Farber, *The Aims of Phenomenology: The Motives, Methods, and Impact of Husserl's Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Edmund Husserl: *Founder of Phenomenology* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005); Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967); Smith, *Husserl*, and Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

84 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.15.

85 *Ibid.*, p.37.

possibility both of experience, and the meaning of experience, in the first place.

Husserl's method, notes one commentator,

[...] has the significant effect of bringing our consciousness to bear on consciousness itself, leading to a kind of 'doubling' of the ego, with one side of it acting as a non-participating spectator towards the ongoing activity of natural, conscious life.<sup>86</sup>

This "spectator" is a transcendental and universal reflective subjectivity: it is the capacity to experience everything and is not restricted to any individual human subject's field of perceptual activity. The ego thus "doubled" in Dermot Moran's gloss is not split into two separate subjects. Since the entire *epoché* is an act of concerted mental activity performed by a single reflecting subject, the relation between these two types of subjectivity, empirical or natural and transcendental or universal, is one of degree: "The empirical subject is the same subject, but now apprehended and interpreted as an object in the world[.]"<sup>87</sup> Husserl and his commentators are quick to point out that nothing is lost in this formulation; the transcendental process of reduction entails "an enrichment of one's subjective life – it opens infinitely before one," since what unfolds for reflection is antecedent to, and provides the grounds for the possibility of apprehending, natural or empirical subjectivity.<sup>88</sup> As Husserl himself suggests,

Natural being is a realm whose existential status [*Seinsgeltung*] is secondary; it continually presupposes the realm of transcendental being. The fundamental phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché*, because it leads back to this realm, is called transcendental-phenomenological reduction [*transzendental-phänomenologische Reduktion*].<sup>89</sup>

The obviousness, or pre-givenness [*Selbstverständlichkeit*] of the world as we normally, pre-philosophically perceive it, obscures the fact, fundamental to Husserl's mature thought of which the *Meditations* are exemplary, that consciousness bestows meaning on the world and its objects: that subjectivity is the condition for the appearance and meaning of the world. It is in this sense constitutive, or sense-giving; the German noun that names this process is *Sinngebung*.

Paul Ricoeur summarises the *epoché* with respect to constitutive subjectivity as follows:

The *epoché* is a break en bloc with the world-belief [*Weltglaube*]. The world

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86 Moran, *Edmund Husserl*, p.8.

87 Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, p.49.

88 Moran, *Introduction*, p.147.

89 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.21.

is implicated as an unenumerated totality by this act which brings it together, strips it of absolute existence, and refers it globally to the cogito. Hence, it is the unity of an act of rupturing which permits anticipating the unity of an act of constituting.<sup>90</sup>

Constitution [*Konstitution*] is a term Husserl inherited from Kantian and Neo-Kantian philosophy. In Husserl's mature writings on transcendental subjectivity, it refers to the manner in which consciousness bestows objectivity on entities, and "includes a kind of passive construction of all the meanings found in consciousness."<sup>91</sup> The *epoché* reveals the constitutive nature of consciousness: "Constitution is a universal feature of conscious life; all meanings are constituted in and by consciousness."<sup>92</sup> The source of all meaning then, for me, is in transcendental subjectivity, and is specifically my transcendental ego. Husserl's interpretation of the ego developed over the course of his career through a variety of complex permutations, but his position in the *Meditations* is clear: all meanings, all objects, and, as we shall see, all alter egos, are for me constituted in and by my transcendental ego, which since it continually reflects upon the evidence of its own existence is itself constitutive *of* itself; is in fact a perpetual act of self-constitution [*Selbstkonstitution*]. It is in this sense that Ricœur, Moran and others emphasise Husserl's "egology," that is, the transcendental subject's self-constituting origin of meaning-making *for* which the world is, and *from* which meaning is bestowed.<sup>93</sup>

"Objects exist for me," Husserl states in the opening of the fourth meditation, "and are for me what they are, only as objects of actual and possible consciousness."<sup>94</sup> The same, then, must hold for the regular, psychological ego:

I exist for myself and am continually given to myself, by experiential evidence, as "*I myself*." This is true of the transcendental ego and, correspondingly, of the psychologically pure ego; it is true, moreover, with respect to any sense of the word ego.<sup>95</sup>

In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl names what he calls "the ego taken in full concreteness [*in voller Konkretion*]" the monad, a term borrowed from Leibniz. By "full concreteness" Husserl refers to the sense in which all the variety and "flowing multiformity" of experience is consolidated in a single life.

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90 Ricœur, *Husserl*, p.95.

91 Moran, *Introduction*, p.166.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Suzanne Bachelard's reminder of the limits of constitution is useful here. There is, she says, "no restriction to be placed on the truly universal affirmation: *Every* existence is "constituted" in subjectivity. But it is not necessary to understand constitution as a *creation* of beings. To say that every existent is constituted in subjectivity means that it has its sense and being-status there. It does not mean that subjectivity forges it." Bachelard, *A Study*, p.161.

94 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.65.

95 *Ibid.*, p.68. Emphasis in original.

The passage directly above from §33 continues:

Since the monadically concrete ego includes also the whole of actual and potential conscious life, it is clear that the problem of *explicating this monadic ego phenomenologically* (the problem of his constitution for himself) must include *all constitutional problems without exception*. Consequently the phenomenology of this *self-constitution* coincides with *phenomenology as a whole*.<sup>96</sup>

Ricœur announces that this passage “marks the total triumph of interiority over exteriority,” and explicates its sense as the first step towards the Husserlian phenomenological conception of the alter ego, the Other, as constituted *for me* in my consciousness.<sup>97</sup> The second is the *eidōs* ego. This is the realm of pure possibility of which the transcendental ego is one actualization. The *eidōs*, says Husserl, “is a beheld or beholdable universal, one that is pure, ‘unconditioned’ – that is to say: according to its own intuitional sense, a universal not conditioned by fact.”<sup>98</sup> The transcendental ego exemplifies the *eidōs* ego by pertaining to one concrete possibility among a universe of possibilities. The *eidōs* is “the purity of myself reached through imaginative variations on my own life” of which the transcendental ego determines only one.<sup>99</sup> The *eidōs* ego provides the grounds for Husserl’s apparently solipsistic cul-de-sac at the end of the fourth meditation, and, as Ricœur’s gloss suggests, anticipates the *Meditations*’ account of intersubjectivity which prioritises absolutely the constituting ego over “objective” correlates.

The manner in which the *eidōs* ego is ascertained, and in Ricœur’s commentary especially so, bears a strong similarity to Oliver’s description of the self–other distinctions in the Chaucerian narrator. It involves:

[1] the transcendental reduction of the being of the world and [2] the eidetic reduction of the factual ego. [...] The remarkable and strange thing is that this passage to the *eidōs* ego brings into play only variations on my own ego (*Selbstvariation meiner Ego*) and has no reference to the Other in the second person. Thus, I imagine myself as other without imagining an Other.<sup>100</sup>

We have seen that since consciousness is sense-bestowing, entities receive their meaning from the ego.

What is true for objects given by experiential evidence is also, in Husserl’s system, true for other people.

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Ricœur, *Husserl*, p.107.

<sup>98</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.71.

<sup>99</sup> Ricœur, *Husserl*, p.92.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p.108. Ricœur’s gloss is potentially confusing here, since the majority of commentators reserve the sense of “double reduction,” as he puts it, for the description of the epochal move into the “sphere of ownness” in the fifth meditation.

Phenomenological method, the method of the *epoché*, disqualifies an examination of the relation between subjects from some third-person, as it were, perspective; it can thus “only be treated as a transcendental problem through a radical *mich-selbst-befragen* [...]” or relation to another subject as they are given to me in my experience.<sup>101</sup> Ricœur begins his analysis of the fifth meditation with the explanation:

[...] the sense “Other” is drawn from the sense “me” because one must first give sense to “me” and to “my own” in order then to give sense to the “Other” and to the “world of the Other.” There is something “alien” (*étranger*) because there is something “own” (*propre*), and not conversely. The sense “ego” is transferred from me to the Other if it is true that the Other is “alter ego.”<sup>102</sup>

The account of intersubjectivity [*Intersubjectivität*] in the *Cartesian Meditations* is amongst the most provocative and controversial of Husserl’s theories. It is through the account of temporality as it pertains to egological genesis in the latter stages of the fourth meditation, and the lengthy explanation of intersubjectivity that comprises the majority of the fifth, that provide the most relevant material for Oliver’s project, and comprise therefore the particular facets of Husserl’s work that we must tackle before the sense behind Oliver’s hunch about the other’s “appresentation,” above, can be fully understood.

During the composition of the essays, particularly the second and sixth, Oliver read Suzanne Bachelard’s 1968 critique of Husserl’s *Transcendental Logic*. Bachelard summarises the priority of the self-constituting ego in the following terms:

Not only the world of things, but also others exist for me in the same way. It is in my ego that the alter ego as such has his sense and his status. It is for me that the alter ego has that sense whereby for him I am an alter ego just as he is alter ego for me [...] Hence, all that exists has existence only for me; all that exists is “constituted” in me.<sup>103</sup>

The importance of all this for Oliver’s theme resides primarily in the Husserlian conception of the ego, and in the deductive move from transcendental subjectivity to transcendental *intersubjectivity*. Oliver does not, as I have already indicated, import Husserl’s structure of the ego, transcendental or otherwise, from the *Meditations* or anywhere else, wholesale into his account of the creative dynamic. Instead, Oliver leaps in and out of Husserl’s *Meditations* in order to furnish his own poetic theory with an equally

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101 Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, p.112.

102 Ricœur, *Husserl*, p.119.

103 Bachelard, *A Study*, p.163.

“creative” appropriation of phenomenological process.<sup>104</sup> Thus his first port of call in the second essay is transcendental subjectivity as it pertains to Husserl’s fourth meditation. Oliver intended this second essay not as an explanatory sibling to the first, but as a parallel investigation into the creative dynamic. “In no sense,” he declares, “am I seeking to extend the significance of my Chaucerian analysis by bald use of Husserl’s theories.”<sup>105</sup> He aims instead to set alongside the explication of the vagaries of the poetic self he identifies in ‘The Tale of Sir Thopas’ a description of one philosopher’s theory of the transcendental ego in order to illuminate a condition that subtends them both: “For the two men are employing or investigating a dynamic fundamental to creativity.”<sup>106</sup> And “fundamental” to this dynamic are the twin strands of temporality and self–other distinctions.

“What we are talking about here,” Oliver remarks, “is the experience of the ‘other’ seen as a kind of genesis.”

Now, it could theoretically be that in his normal experience of the “other” and also as he considers the “other” notionally for the sake of writing a poem, the poet puts his own ego into a kind of flashpoint, an absolute flux moment in which there is *absolutely* no difference in status between himself and “other” and in which both are *originally* present within that moment. It could seem that in the “±” signs with which I endowed the Chaucerian ego at such a flashpoint (in my first essay) this implication could be drawn – not least since I called that instant a plenum in which the signs “really” held true. In fact, what we have at such a moment is but an imperfect, fleeting glimpse of transcendence, however how much hope it may give us [...] What goes into the experience from *our* perspective is our own ego, voyaging into the maelstrom in search of the other, and what comes out of it is still our ego as the potential agent, again from our perspective, of our approach to any new encounter of self and other. Either the ambiguity of sign is a condition we more or less perfectly strive for in this genesis or there would have to be some explanation of how identity emerges from loss of it – if we believe the fusion of self and other really to be perfect in some instant of the

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104 We might compare, on this point, George Oppen’s “intensive and often idiosyncratic reading” of Heidegger, analysed by Peter Nicholls in his *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. ch. 3, pp.62-72. Oppen’s interest in the disclosure of Being as a matter for poetic thought to draw upon and incorporate provides a pertinent counterpoint to Oliver’s selective mining of Husserl. Nicholls cites Oppen as referring in his correspondence to “a ‘cadence of disclosure,’” and quotes from Oppen’s unpublished notes the following: “‘Prosody: the pulse of thought, of consciousness, therefore, in Heidegger’s word, of human *Dasein*, human ‘being there.’”” The connective leap expressed here between what prosody *is* or necessarily entails on the one hand, and what it “therefore” relates to “in Heidegger’s word,” is instructive: it shows the nature of the poet’s engagement with philosophy not as a systematic unity to be processed and written through, but as material to embellish and hone the prosodic coordinates of poetic practice; to provide this practice with a philosophical correlate, rather than an exhaustive philosophical framework. Nicholls is excellent on this point, suggesting that “Oppen’s attention often seemed to focus more on particular words and phrases than on the larger outlines of philosophical argument,” that he “was often fascinated by a single phrase or sentence which seemed to promise illumination, and possibly access to another world of thought,” and even that his reading of one particular essay by Heidegger “effects a radical departure from the sense of the original” (pp.76-81). Oppen’s reading and digestion in translation of a single sentence in Hegel’s *Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, without, it seems, having read the rest of the book, is another case in point (pp.110-135).

105 ‘Some groundwork,’ p.1.

106 *Ibid.*

encounter.<sup>107</sup>

The key passage from Husserl's fourth meditation that Oliver quotes directly beneath these speculations is the following, from §39:

Only through the phenomenology of genesis does the ego become understandable: as a nexus, connected in the unity of an all-embracing genesis, an infinite nexus of synthetically congruous performances – at levels, all of which fit the universal persisting form, *temporality*.<sup>108</sup>

Oliver comments: "A refinement of this picture of genesis, removed from considerations of *epoché*, will be one of my aims during this series."<sup>109</sup> In other words, Oliver abandons the central tenet of Husserlian methodology, the *epoché*, whilst retaining the structural and hierarchical divisions between ego and alter ego that emerge in the course of that methodology's progression. He does this in order to assert that poetry creates "moment[s] in which there is *absolutely* no difference in status between [the poet-author] and 'other' and in which both are *originally* present within that moment."

Oliver thus deliberately employs a philosophical system in his exegesis of the creative dynamic that cannot support on its own terms the ends he intends this dynamic to attain: the philosophical attitude must therefore be abandoned in favour of the "natural attitude" of "the crude world of the everyday which the poet wrestles with."<sup>110</sup> Only poetry can solve the problem of "perfect identity between self and Other," because philosophy, in the shape of Husserl, declares that it is impossible. Or rather, it declares that *it is not really a problem for philosophy*, or not, at least, for phenomenology. For Husserl the notion of original presentation of the other is simply a category error, since

Neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to what is essentially his own, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were, if what belongs to what is essentially the other's ownness were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence.<sup>111</sup>

Yet becoming a "moment of [each other's] essence" is precisely what Oliver desires of the self-other dyad in the moments engendered by the creative dynamic.

Here is another example of the divergence between Oliver's use of Husserlian terminology and

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

<sup>108</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.81.

<sup>109</sup> 'Some groundwork,' p.4.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Smith, *Husserl*, p.219. Smith's translation.



the schema that terminology was designed to support. Husserl's concept of genesis in the *Cartesian Meditations* relates to the temporal constitution of the ego for itself: "The ego constitutes himself for himself in, so to speak, the unity of a 'history.'"<sup>112</sup> Time is thus "the universal form of all egological genesis."<sup>113</sup> Genesis, divided in the *Meditations* into "passive" and "active" variants, is essentially the manner in which my transcendental ego constitutes the world around me through time, whether in terms of a generally acknowledged, but never directly attended to, background behind which life goes on (passive genesis) or in terms of "productively constitutive" ego-acts that pertain to the foreground, as it were, of the life of the ego (active genesis). Genetic phenomenology supposes that I constitute, whether actively or passively, objects for my perception; furthermore, "it is owing to an essentially necessary genesis that I, the ego, can experience a physical thing and do so even at first glance."<sup>114</sup> If we are looking for an application of these philosophical coordinates to a literary theory, then plainly the passage from Oliver's essay quoted above weaves in and out of Husserl's meanings so casually as to be obfuscatory.

"Genesis," for example, seems in Oliver's prose to refer more to the meeting of self and other as engendered through literary means, than to the manner in which objects in the world are given sense by temporal intentional consciousness. Similarly, "transcendence" in Oliver only scans in terms of a glimpse of an authorial self *escaping* his ego towards the realm of another, fictional or otherwise, for the briefest of moments; it is nothing to do with a reduction effected by the *epoché* which reveals the fundamental structures of *Sinngebung*. But no strict application is intended or effected. Rather, Oliver effectively translates phenomenological jargon into a schema for literary creativity. Fleeting "transcendence" gives us "hope," since it entails the relinquishment of selfhood in the ambiguity of self-other relations activated by the poem, a relative unity available only in verse, in which we potentially lose ourselves in order to find the Other. We recall that the theme of these essays is the "dynamics of poetic consciousness at the moment when it acts" and not transcendental consciousness at each and every moment; we recall too, that "an exploration of the dynamics of 'self' as it acts poetically" is not the self acting within the universal potentialities of the Husserlian lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*], but within the lines and ligaments of a poem. This goes some way to explaining the idiosyncratic digestion of the *Meditations* in the essay.

As a further example, take Oliver's treatment of the *eidos* ego. After explaining its role in Husserl's system as "the universal transcendental background to what actually 'happens' when the de facto transcendental ego intends an object," Oliver goes on to admit that:

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<sup>112</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.75.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.

I can make little sense of the eidetic ego unless I see it in the context of a haphazard, drifting dynamics[,] not those fiercely directed dynamics of artistic creation. This would be a cost, for my present purposes, of the phenomenological reduction.<sup>115</sup>

Despite seeming to reject the *eidōs* ego “for [his] present purposes,” Oliver certainly does employ certain conceptual ramifications that emerge from its description in the *Meditations*. At the end of the second essay, Oliver makes recourse to Werner Brock’s general introduction to Heidegger’s thought in Brock’s 1956 edition of *Existence and Being*.<sup>116</sup> Oliver’s presentation of Heidegger is secondary in nature and short in duration. He emphasises, after Brock, that “for the Temporality of *Dasein* the future is the somehow ‘guiding’ and dominant mode” of all three temporal *ecstasies*.<sup>117</sup> Such a schema, in which “[t]he ‘past’ originates from the ‘future’ so as to engender the ‘present,’” is fortuitously suited to a poetic theory in which the relationship between moment (of poetic consciousness acting, of intersubjectivity) and motion (of readerly experience that is comprised of such moments) is fundamental.

After introducing Heidegger, Oliver returns to the question of the “moment” he identified in Chaucer, citing six characteristics of that moment. These characteristics figure the moment in terms of a Heideggerian ecstasy that “seems to unite mysteriously [...] all the self–other relationships that occur” within the poem, implying “an assumption of responsibility for the whole poem during this brief instant.”<sup>118</sup> This, Oliver suggests, now explicitly recalling the sense of Husserl’s *eidōs* ego, could be called “a glimpse of the total potential of the poem (and so of the author) as it stands at this instant,” before evoking the distinction between transcendental and *eidōs* egos by asserting that “we are [in this moment] in contact with a de facto transcendence, arising from the poem as given [...] we are offered time as at maximum potential forwards or backwards *within* the poem.”<sup>119</sup> This is certainly characteristic of what Oliver calls his “predatory use” of Husserl, although perhaps not exactly what he himself meant by this phrase.<sup>120</sup>

As a summary of his use of Husserl, Oliver lists seven points of relevance of the philosopher to the theory of creative dynamics he is developing.<sup>121</sup> The most important of these is the seventh, in which

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115 ‘Some groundwork,’ p.5.

116 Heidegger, *Existence and Being*. Oliver’s reading is, once again, selective; since his references are all to Werner Brock’s exhaustive introduction, it seems likely his needs were served by the explanatory material alone.

117 Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, p.93.

118 ‘Some groundwork,’ p.7.

119 *Ibid.*

120 *Ibid.*, p.6.

121 *Ibid.*

is summarised the interpretative schema Oliver claims for his reading of the philosophical system found in the *Meditations*:

I don't think that making Husserl more crude by discussing not the phenomenologically-reduced ego but the natural-attitude's "self" need prevent me from reverting to this Husserlian insight: by each constituting act of the ego we originate in a genesis (to a greater or lesser extent perfected, I add) a de facto state of the (transcendental) ego from a background of wider possibility. I suggest that this general pattern remains true at whatever level we enquire.<sup>122</sup>

What Oliver performs here is an explicit re-working, and an implicit criticism, of the *epoché* in order to suit the dynamics of "artistic creativity." The fact is that Husserl's method would precisely prohibit the kind of manoeuvre that Oliver wants to make. To discuss the "transcendence" of the natural ego "from a background of wider possibility [...] at whatever level we enquire" is already to move outside the remit of the reduction within which all the thinking of the *Meditations* takes place. Phenomenological method would prohibit Oliver's freedom of enquiry because the entire process, for Husserl, is only possible within the reduced sphere of phenomenal understanding set in train by the bracketing of the world in the service of transcendental reflection. Oliver ignores the very systematic procedure of transcendental phenomenology in order to adapt its terminology to what he asserts are the "more crude" creative processes employed by poets, and in doing so he effectively levels the criticism at Husserl that the distinction between the "eidetic" and "natural" attitudes should be discarded. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Oliver's adaptation of philosophical jargon can be understood merely as a set of signs delivered of their referents. Crucially, Oliver clearly understands the production of what he has previously called "self-other ambiguity" in a manner that is fruitfully comparable with, if not consciously drawn from, egological constitution. His theory figures the author-poet's production of narrative and lyric selfhood (as in the example from Chaucer) as the primordial sphere of constituting subjectivity, in and for which "others" are constituted as part and parcel of the creative process, and with which the reader, in their own sphere of constituting subjectivity, comes into contact by a reciprocal effort of attention.

A philosophical exposition of intersubjectivity is thereby folded into a general theory of literary communication and consensus: Oliver's description of what happens when we read a poem is structurally akin to, but emphatically not the same as, Husserl's description, late in the *Meditations*, of what the latter

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

refers to as a “community of monads.”<sup>123</sup> Oliver’s theory is not the same as Husserl’s because Oliver reads poetry as striving to obtain as closely as possible, in those moments of fleeting duration, a relational coincidence of original presentation. For Husserl, this promise is not only impossible, it is decidedly beside the point, since something so epiphenomenal as my desire to experience the other originally can have no bearing on the complex of *Sinngebung* by which I understand “two primordial spheres [...] separated by an abyss I cannot actually cross.”<sup>124</sup> Oliver’s entire appropriation of Husserl is founded on the desire to interpret poetry as the one object of experience which is most closely capable of crossing this “abyss.” He explains the process in the fifth essay in the series, ‘An examination of “prosody” in the light of theories already expressed,’ thus:

My point is – as throughout – dynamic; the way in which poetic music works to bring the poet, as “self,” and the reader, as “other,” into a creative ambiguity, a “text,” in which each bears a double-double sign [...]<sup>125</sup>

The “double-double sign” refers to the ambiguity between self and other on both sides of the author-reader divide. In both the fifth and the unfinished sixth essays, this ambiguity is the pre-condition for what Oliver calls a “sharing of consciousness” – an absolute moment of consensus achieved through mutual recognition of common emotion. Creative ambiguity is necessarily intersubjective: the divide between author and reader is bridged by poetry that through its minutest iterations provides the grounds for this recognition.<sup>126</sup>

It is worth examining in more detail Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity, since Oliver’s second essay abstracts from this account a set of priorities which are held to be as relevant to the creative dynamic as the moment from Chaucer we have seen analysed in the first essay. These priorities are developed by Husserl throughout the *Meditations* and culminate in the fifth meditation’s description of intersubjectivity. There, they are collected under the rubric “ownness” [*Eigenheit*]. Because the

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123 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.120.

124 *Ibid.*, p.121.

125 ‘An examination,’ p.1.

126 Georges Poulet’s description of reading in his ‘Phenomenology of Reading’ bears a striking resemblance to the kind of experience Oliver is trying to elucidate: “Reading [...] is the act in which the subjective principle which I call *I*, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*.” Poulet’s essay reads at times like the (secondary) experience of the reader in Oliver’s essays, tuning his thought to that of the poet-author’s: “Everything happens [...] as though, from the moment I become prey to what I read, I begin to share the use of my consciousness with this being whom I have tried to define and who is the conscious subject ensconced at the heart of the work. He and I, we start having a common consciousness.” Poulet’s description shares, too, the phenomenological priority of the authorial subject in such an encounter, since as the dominant consciousness it is “active and potent” and “occupies the foreground,” whereas “I myself [the reader] play a much more humble role.” See Georges Poulet, ‘Phenomenology of Reading,’ *New Literary History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, New and Old History (Oct., 1969), pp.53-68 (57, 59).

phenomenological reduction effects a reflection upon the pure transcendental ego as primordial sense-bestowing subjectivity,

We must, after all, obtain for ourselves insight into the explicit and implicit intentionality wherein the alter ego becomes evinced and verified *in the realm of our transcendental ego*; we must discover in what intentionalities, syntheses, motivations, the sense “other ego” *becomes fashioned in me* and, under the title harmonious experience of someone else, becomes verified as existing and even as itself there in its own manner.<sup>127</sup>

“These experiences and their works,” Husserl tells us, “are facts belonging to my phenomenological sphere. How else than by examining them can I explicate the sense, existing others, in all its aspects?”<sup>128</sup> The phenomenological method demands this starting point: it has always been the starting point for a philosophy beholden to Cartesian principles as the only fitting basis for the understanding of objectivity.

It is important to note here that Husserl explicates intersubjectivity as the ultimate ground of objective reality. The “retreat,” as it were, into transcendental subjectivity was always effected with the world of the experience of others in mind. Since my body is the originally perceived location of my experiences of the world, the centre and circumference of myself, the problem the fifth meditation broaches is: “how *another* body can be constituted in my experience: hence, how can I perceive an external material object as sensitive, as active, and as the null-centre of perspectives on the world.”<sup>129</sup> The answer brings us back to Oliver’s sense, above, of what “rings true” for him in Husserl’s philosophy: by analogy.

Smith describes the process such that

taking an external material thing to be a body is founded upon a perceived *likeness* between that thing and my own body. It is such a likeness that motivates a ‘transfer of sense’ from my own body to the external thing, whereby the latter is apperceived as a living body.<sup>130</sup>

And quotes directly from his own translation of the *Meditations*:

There is an ‘analogizing apprehension whereby a material thing in my primordial sphere, being similar to my own body, becomes apprehended

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<sup>127</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.90. My emphasis.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Smith, *Husserl*, p.221. The following account of intersubjectivity in the *Meditations* draws heavily on Smith’s lucid commentary.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.

likewise as a body.’<sup>131</sup>

Such is the nature of appresentation: someone else is appresented to me because their experiences are not *originally* accessible; “they are alien to my sphere of ownness.”<sup>132</sup> Another ego is constituted in me like any other external object considered by my transcendental ego; but other egos are also the seat of true objectivity, since “as a result of the other’s ‘insertion’ into my world I perceive the other as perceiving [...] the very things that I perceive.”<sup>133</sup> The world of objective things is constituted in its objectivity thanks to its perception by monads other than myself – “Every object perceivable by me is open to alien perspectives that I, given my actual situation, cannot have.”<sup>134</sup> It is in this sense that “the alienness of the other at one stroke transforms my ‘world’ into a truly objective world.”<sup>135</sup> The objectivity thus made manifest consists of a “*community of monads*,” each of whom by acknowledging the co-constitution of all the objects for transcendental subjectivity themselves constitute “a single universal community.”<sup>136</sup>

This is the background to the sense of intersubjectivity that Oliver inherits from Husserl and folds into his theory:

Lacking a reduction, poets do not construct a systematics of self–other relations; they don’t need to, since by expert practice of the dynamic they enter the process of that relation which is a more vital and poetic experience of the dynamic (though less systematic) than a philosophical explication [*sic*] of its structures. Consequently, in its overt statements much poetry is a mix of naïve and profound statement about the self of the poet, as far as it appears in the poem as persona, or in various guises. At all its great moments, the poem implies the profundity even where it cannot explicitly match the subtlety of a philosopher like Husserl. For such a case, it is enough for my purposes that I should have a notion of self sophisticated *enough* to create the dynamic in a way that poetry really does create it – a notion moreover which should correspond to a “natural attitude” in a way sufficiently general as to remain applicable to a very wide spectrum of good poetry and to remain sufficiently versatile at this level of analysis as not to contradict Husserl’s best findings at more fundamental levels.<sup>137</sup>

Poets do not reduce; they *expand*. Specifically, they create the conditions for the experience of expansion, of transcendence, in Oliver’s (leap-frogging Husserl’s) terminology; they are responsible for the moments that allow for the fleeting perception, by the reader, of the “figure of giant-like significance” within whom the primordial distinction between self and other is made sufficiently “ambiguous” to engender a “sharing

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131 *Ibid.*

132 *Ibid.*, p.228.

133 *Ibid.*, p.232

134 *Ibid.*

135 *Ibid.*

136 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.140.

137 ‘Who does the poet,’ p.7.

of consciousness.” Such a theory follows the conceptual priority of Husserlian distinctions at the same time as abandoning the method which Husserl demands we must follow in order to understand that priority. Oliver conceives poetry to be the object whose formal properties not only allow but actively encourage us to encounter, as far as is possible, a state of original presentation of the other. Oliver consistently asserts the poet’s crudity compared the philosopher, as we have seen. He does not do this in deference to philosophical thinking, but because such crudity is the measure of an “everyday” authenticity that confirms poetry’s distinction from philosophy, and from philosophy’s own hierarchy of the “authentic” itself; it can do things that philosophy cannot, or refuses to do, because it is grounded in the world of self–other relations, not removed from them by the abstractive subtleties of hermeneutic reflection. It is for this reason that poetry is able to come closer than anything else to establishing the “perfect identity between self and Other.”

But Oliver’s system nonetheless figures some basic assumptions fundamental to Husserlian phenomenological method into its theoretical agenda. Firstly, and primarily, that the poet-author as poetic “self” is productive (in phenomenological jargon, constitutive) of a self–other ambiguity in verse. Secondly, and secondarily, that the reader of poetry, designated “other,” is capable, through readerly “work,” of experiencing, even re-producing this ambiguity in the equal and opposite experience of appresentation of the authorial “other” engendered, likewise, in verse. “Ambiguity,” described in terms which display the influence of the pure possibility of Husserl’s *eidos* ego, is the blurring of the line between self and other that tends towards the direct experience of another person.

### 1.5 – The moment and poetic stress

The ideas developed over the first four essays are concluded, both chronologically and conceptually, in the fifth. The fifth essay returns to the question of the “moment” identified in the first essay. It completes Oliver’s argument about self–other relations in poetry by identifying prosody – by which Oliver refers simply to the entire gamut of “verse techniques” – as that which “significantly aids (and does so constantly in the ‘perfect poem’) a self–other transcendence of equivalent dynamic to that which I discerned in Chaucer.”<sup>138</sup> A “self–other transcendence” both draws on, and eludes the conceptual remit of what is called, in Husserl’s terminology, transcendental intersubjectivity. Oliver’s phraseology draws on

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<sup>138</sup> ‘An examination,’ p.1, and see fn. 1.

Husserl in the sense that, as I have shown, the diagrammatic relationship between poet-author and reader is figured by Oliver in terms analogous to those of Husserlian monadological appresentation. The kind of intersubjective encounter that Oliver wants to describe shares the prioritising of a poetic subject who creates (constitutes) the conditions for otherness in verse; this is the poet's "creative dynamic" that is encountered by the reader. But what Oliver names a "self–other transcendence" equally eludes Husserlian conceptual boundaries through an active promotion of "ambiguity" tending towards a "sharing of consciousness," desirous of a "perfect identity between self and Other." What we have been calling "ambiguity" is thus the possibility engendered in verse of what Oliver would later call a "special intersubjectivity," reminiscent of the impossible realm of Husserl's negatively defined original presentation.

The fifth essay offers readings of poems by the American poets Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley. During a close reading of the latter's canonical 'I Know a Man,' which discusses the varying forms of tension and release produced by the poem's consonantal patterns, Oliver remarks that "the impression that is of deciding importance is the transcendent union of two minds, poet and reader, along the detailed process of versification[.]"<sup>139</sup> And in relation to Dorn,

the *major* effect of [certain verses of Dorn's *The Cycle*] is created in their finest details, though in poetry it is often at moments of special poetic expertise that this build-up of emotion created in detail is discharged in a sudden transcendence.<sup>140</sup>

Oliver was influenced in his emphasis on emotional tension and release, in effect throughout the essay, by Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1968 *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*.<sup>141</sup> Smith's study employs models extracted from early twentieth-century psychologies of music to account for the experience of poetic form. Its theme is the perception of poetic objects as they pertain to our understanding of formal structural coherence. The reader's experience "is not only continuous over a period of time, but continuously changes in response to succeeding events," enjoining the reader to engage "in a steady process of readjustment and retrospective patterning."<sup>142</sup> Poetic structure is "an inference which we draw from the evidence of a series of events. As we read the poem, it is a hypothesis whose probability is tested as we move from line to line and adjusted in response to what we find there," causing "every disruption

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> See Barbara Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

Oliver quotes the book directly only once in the essay, although its influence is clear throughout.

<sup>142</sup> Smith, *Poetic Closure*, p.10.



of our expectations” to engender “some kind of emotion.”<sup>143</sup> Oliver’s readings of Dorn and Creeley are designed to accomplish a description of an experience of close reading that would identify, in more minute terms than Smith’s book, such a “disruption” – of the solidity of the difference between self and other, resulting in the “transcendent union of two minds.”

Whereas the example of this disruption from ‘The Tale of Sir Thopas’ was large-scale and narrative in nature, the examples in the fifth essay are all local to the minutiae of Dorn and Creeley’s syntactical “fissures” and “tiny cracks,” operating on the level of syllable, sound-patterning and stress.<sup>144</sup> The crux of the entire essay series, a summary of the function of prosody as it encapsulates and produces the effects we have been discussing throughout this chapter, is presented, as we noted above, in a Coleridgean article of poetic faith:

CREDO: the function of all details of prosody, especially the finest details, is to ensure that the reader, by assenting all along to the music of the language as emotionally apt for himself as well as for the poet, tunes the process of his thought to that of the poet more exactly than ordinary language makes possible.<sup>145</sup>

“We create,” Oliver continues, “between reader and poet a self-other ambiguity, a dynamic process of “±” and “⊥,” that now familiar dialectic of singularity, the mode of love and relativity.”<sup>146</sup> These are moments of “love” because the union between self and other is fleetingly yet nominally complete; of “relativity” because the union is one of absolute equivalence. It is debatable whether this “dialectic” has become “familiar” over the course of the essays, or whether, for that matter, it is in fact a “dialectic”; certainly Oliver does not discuss “love” at any length in the essays previous to this statement. The statement serves to ground the conceptual remit of the essays by nominating “love” as the form their discovery takes in the “crude world of the everyday.” This world is invoked again in the fifth essay when Oliver describes the relation of the “moment” in Chaucer to the “moments” of prosodic minutiae. The difference is one of degree: moments such as the Host’s recognition of Chaucer, those “‘great moments’ of poetry [...] arise when we are suddenly, because of some gifted discovery by the poet, made *more consciously aware* of

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

<sup>144</sup> ‘An examination,’ p.7.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8-9. Returning to Oliver’s “CREDO” as we do here, we may now appreciate what speech-act theory might designate the perlocutionary consequences of his concept of prosody. Indeed, poetic language in the shape of poems entails perlocutionary acts *par excellence*, since “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something,” i.e. when reading a poem aloud, or in silence to oneself, emphatically transcends Austin’s examples “such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading” by bringing about – in addition to all of these possible affective orientations – the attunement of the reader’s consciousness to that of the poet-author’s. See J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.109.

<sup>146</sup> ‘An examination,’ p.9.

the sharing of consciousness which has been conducted along the rhythms and word-signs.”<sup>147</sup>

Oliver then compares the experience to a moment of social clarity:

Anecdotally, it is comparable to one of those instants involving a group of people sitting amid some atmosphere of unusual seriousness when one person suddenly says something which catches everyone athwart his feelings. Because each person *knows* then that all are sharing the same thought and the same consciousness there's a sudden quite extraordinary deepening of awareness which spreads almost like a blush across the countenance: it is the uncanny experience of mutual transcendence.<sup>148</sup>

The knowledge asserted in the experience of collective emotion during intimate social gatherings, perhaps those of the community of poets gathered at the University of Essex during the time of the composition of these essays, is not the apodicticity of phenomenological method. This knowledge is, however, described in the terms Oliver has consciously liberated from exactly such methodology. What Oliver intimates by “transcendence” is the prosaic striking clarity of mutual understanding. Yet the residual semantic freight of Husserl's terminology ensures that the “CREDO” operates at least within the purview of transcendental intersubjectivity; it is certainly beholden to Husserlian phenomenological intentional priorities concerning the constitution of the objective world by a mutually corroborating community of monads. The reader “tunes the process of his thought to that of the poet more exactly than ordinary language makes possible.” The appearance of a new musical analogy (perhaps suggested by Smith's reliance on psychologies of music) should not blind us to the fact that this description is essentially of a piece with the claims Oliver had been making for verse since the first essay. And they are the same claims, albeit expressed in a more professional and academic tone, that Oliver makes fifteen years later in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*.

Between his graduation from Essex in 1975 and the publication of *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* in 1989, Oliver published four articles which contain thinking either directly or indirectly relevant to his theory of prosody. These are: the article ‘Even Poets Can Have Beliefs About Poetic “Stress,”’ published in *Grosseteste Review* in 1979, two papers on phonetics from 1983 and 1984, both published in the *Journal of Phonetics*, and a comparative article on English and French poetry, published in 1986 in the *Journal of the British Institute in Paris*.<sup>149</sup> All four contain material that Oliver later folded

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* My emphasis.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> ‘Even Poets Can Have Beliefs About Poetic Stress,’ *Grosseteste Review*, Vol. 12 (1979), pp.12-32; ‘Fundamental frequency studies as a preliminary to the literary criticism of poetry,’ *Journal of Phonetics*, Vol. 11 (1983), pp.1-35; ‘Voicing patterns as one key to the pace of poetry,’ *Journal of Phonetics*, Vol. 12 (1984), pp.115-32, and ‘A

into the book-length *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*.<sup>150</sup> In the latter, Oliver maintains that poetic stress is a paradox, a “notional instant with content.”<sup>151</sup> The reason for this is that although we can “tap an instant of stress with a finger,” an instant “should have no content” or duration; thus “[b]y a sort of mental trick we ‘give’ this instant a tiny sonic, intellectual and emotional content from the past of the poetic line and from its future considered from the standpoint of that instant.”<sup>152</sup> We know the instant has occurred, and yet it is imperceptible in its singularity given the flux of temporality.

At least since the 1979 article ‘Even Poets Can Have Beliefs About Poetic Stress,’ Oliver considers “stress” to be the aspect of prosody most conducive to producing the effects of what is called “prosody” in the early essays. By 1989, stress is more broadly defined as the concatenation, in a spoken line of verse, of natural linguistic rhythmic properties (with or without the imposition of metre), and the concomitant emotional and psychological effects of these properties, in relation to the poem as a whole:

Our sense of poetic stress arises from our conscious belief that we have, just recently, in a notional instant, unified some of our experience of a poem’s developing sounds [...] with some of its developing intellectual-semantic and emotional significance, attaining that unification through the medium of the sound and bringing into the unity at least some of the poem’s past and future by anticipation and retrospection. By ‘unity’ is meant a working model of it in memory to which we attend and which includes our sense of expectation.<sup>153</sup>

The moment of stress, Oliver argues, cannot be confined to an empirical-metrical analysis of the type undertaken in the two articles published in the *Journal of Phonetics*, but is inflected by the emotional and semantic attributes of the syllable, word, line and ultimately the entire poem, not to mention the emotive sensitivity of any given reader. It is “notional,” therefore, not only because a truly isolated instant in time is imperceptible to even the finest, most detailed empirical survey, but also because it is determined precisely by what cannot be measured empirically and must remain, ultimately, “a matter for speculation,” namely, a felt or intuited experience of unity.<sup>154</sup>

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Method for Comparing the Music of English and French Poetry,’ *Franco-British Studies, Journal of the British Institute in Paris*, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp.41-56.

150 Material from ‘Fundamental frequency studies as a preliminary to the literary criticism of poetry’ can be found throughout *PNP*, esp. in chs. 1, 2, 3 and 6; ch. 4 is a revised version of ‘Voicing patterns as one key to the pace of poetry,’ and ch. 5 is a revised version of ‘A Method for Comparing the Music of English and French Poetry.’

151 *PNP*, p.161.

152 *Ibid.*, p.ix.

153 *Ibid.*, p.112.

154 *Ibid.*, p.xviii. Jon Clay, in his *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Identities* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010) offers a confusing description of Oliver’s account of stress. Clay’s reading of Oliver, amongst others, through a select theoretical optic informed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “sensation,” results in the elision of “stress” in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* with Deleuze and Guattari’s “percept.” As such, stress is deemed to be “a force that exists within a poem and that acts

This rationale is in effect a version of the emphasis on “ambiguity” that we saw in the early essays. Recall the statement, quoted above, that

Literary form fills the apparent ‘instant’ of time with mental content, an operation which ought to be impossible and, in fact, is only achieved in a paradoxical way. But because the paradox is infinitely repeatable, literary form allows the reader to think he is sharing this ‘instant’ with the imagined author of the text.<sup>155</sup>

Oliver continues:

Its full value only appears when the text is activated by a performance, because in the repeatability of a shared mental experience lies the hope that we can enrich our perception and human sympathy.<sup>156</sup>

Significant in this line of argument is the figuring of the paradoxical moment as being filled “with mental content,” since such a characterisation is continual with the proximity of Oliver’s thinking to the phenomenological conception of “constitution” discussed above. The “moment” is bestowed with a certain sense in any given reading that generates the constantly shifting dynamics of articulated prosody; this is an elaboration of the discussion of “sharing of consciousness” in the early essays. Another elaboration is that the “perfect identity between self and Other” is here and elsewhere in *Poetry and Narrative* developed into an ethical program of “human sympathy” to supplement the structural, phenomenologically-influenced formulations expressed fifteen years prior; intersubjectivity is now as clearly defined as it ever would be in Oliver’s prose as the utopian prospect of unfettered inter-personal unification.

We now return to the statement, quoted above, that:

Author and reader create, through their own implied personification in the

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upon (and in conjunction with) a reader, having a real and material existence. In a performance of a poem, a reader actualizes stress through the dynamic process that the performance is. Readers do not decide where the stress will be; stress is not a result of readerly intention.” (p.54). Although Clay appears to elucidate Oliver’s quoted definitions of stress by providing them with a Deleuzian gloss, the fact that this gloss is entirely at odds with the sense of Oliver’s meaning is left unexplained. The independence of stress from the intentionality (or indeed, from any “state” at all) of any perceiving reader, *qua* Deleuzian percept, does in no sense correlate to Oliver’s “notional instant,” since such an instant is a psychological entity which requires “belief” to be an object of ideal unity. Early on in his study, Oliver states that his “whole concentration is [...] upon what happens psychologically when we think we have experienced a stress upon a given syllable of a poetic line. (Ultimately, this can only be matter for speculation).” (p.xviii). The nature of Clay’s deployment of the Deleuzian term is such that it remains unclear whether Clay intends to use the “percept” to contradict Oliver’s account, or whether he in fact believes the two to be congruous; whatever the intention, Oliver’s theory is thoroughly obscured in the process.

155 *PNP*, p.xiii.

156 *Ibid.*

text, a special intersubjectivity – a perfecting of the emotional and semantic fields through a shared experience of space and time [...] The process reveals what our everyday experience and speech could be like, if, when our emotions were real and not imaginary, our hearts and heads were in temporal consonance.<sup>157</sup>

Ideally, our “everyday experience and speech” would be more like the experience of reading a poem, because only within this experience can “temporal consonance” between poet-author and reader, in the form of the “notional instant with content” be fleetingly achieved. “Emotion in ordinary life cannot fuse perfectly with thought,” but poetry “discovers a way to unify the time-scales of emotion, concept and verbal music,” and it is “through the accord of concept and emotion that a more profound perfection and intersubjectivity are attained.”<sup>158</sup> This spiritually-inflected intersubjectivity thus begins and ends in poems: it requires the poet to create an object in the world to which the reader must attune, and which will then provide an exemplary case of the condition of perfected identity desirable but ultimately unavailable in everyday life, yet repeatedly available in poems.

## 1.6 – Conclusion

Thinking about moments of what the early essays call “perfect identity between self and Other” is at the centre of Douglas Oliver’s poetics. It is a thinking with a clearly identifiable phenomenological inheritance. In various guises and permutations it remains the conceptual heart of Oliver’s poetry and prose from his early 1970s work until his death, whether implicitly (as in *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics*) or explicitly (as in ‘An Island That Is All The World’). This thinking combines a creative interpretation of phenomenological method with the closest attention to the music of verse to identify and nominate the “precious origin of our lives’ form, or of a true politics” in poems. Poet-author and reader co-constitute, at every potentially realisable moment of prosodic iteration, a readily available model of harmonious intersubjective unity. The ethical dimension that inheres in such an encounter is effectively assumed, and not rigorously worked out or demanded in Oliver’s post-Essex work; it is the necessary correlate to a theory of communicative authenticity whose ideally harmonious configuration is transferred by metaphorical economy to the status of a behavioural code. This code forms the moral backbone of the poetic oeuvre between 1979 and 1991.

In the chapters that follow I trace the arguments that arise from the consideration of this code in

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166, p.172.

the light of specific political contexts, and its ramifications for political thinking more generally, through Oliver's major works of the 1970s and 1980s. Before I do so, it is worth pausing over the quiet enormity of Oliver's claims for poetry. Recall that poets, in Oliver's account, "do not construct a systematics of self–other relations" like philosophers; "they don't need to," because

by expert practice of the [creative] dynamic they enter the process of that relation [between self and other] which is a more vital and poetic experience of the dynamic [...] than a philosophical explication [*sic*] of its structures.<sup>159</sup>

Poets "enter the process" of that which the philosophers can only systematise, and what they do there is to create in verse the "precious origin" not only of an intersubjective harmony, but of a "true politics." What the philosopher calls "a single universal community" need not, in the poet's hands, necessitate the rigour of philosophical expostulation, because its image is found in the very grain of prosody, its promise lodged in the very nature of composition.

This is the demand Oliver places on poetic composition as political intervention. What it comes to necessitate in Oliver's own work as a poet, as we noted above and explore in greater detail below, is that political context in the major poems of the 1970s and 1980s be suspended at crucial moments in order to assert the value of a "true politics" over currently existing political ideology of all stripes. And here is where the phenomenological inheritance of a *particular kind* of "single universal community," that is, Husserl's "community of monads," exerts its continued influence on the politics of the major poems. What emerges in the poems after 1975, as socially and conceptually prior to politics itself, is a potentially universal pacifistic consciousness freed from the harmful depredations of any and all political dogma or allegiance. This poetic must establish the pre-conditions for a "true politics" and thus the relative falsity of all existing versions of such a thing, a process for which the phenomenological reduction inherited from Husserl provides a useful model, because Husserl's method suspends the question of the existence of the world in favour of what is given, decrees the objective equality of all men be understood as the universal community of mutually constituting transcendental subjects, and nominates the sphere of "politics" as every bit as epiphenomenal as any other content of the world. Such a poetic also ensures Oliver's major poems of the 1970s and 1980s manifest an extraordinary faith in the material efficacy of poetical work, and it enables his poems to exercise a power and a breadth of emotional conviction largely unparalleled in contemporary Anglophone poetry.

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<sup>159</sup> 'Who does the poet,' p.7.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I follow the narrative arc and major arguments of Oliver's first sustained and cohesive work of political poetry, *The Diagram--Poems*, in order to critically assess these arguments and their implications. I do so by following the preoccupations of Oliver's poetry, prose and letters up to and beyond *The Diagram--Poems*, including the important early novel *The Harmless Building*. Any critical assessment of Oliver's mature political poetry must contend with the fact that his politics are, as the conclusion to the previous chapter suggests, extraordinary. A mixture of mystical and medieval Christian paradigms combined with an insistence, heavily reminiscent of Rousseau's writings, on the virtuous innocence of infantine ignorance, are developed in Oliver's poetry and prose of the 1970s and 1980s into a writing that urges the pacifistic transformation of political subjects into a community of individuals unified by their common, essential nature. The utopian grain in Oliver's writing between 1979 and 1991 is both its greatest strength and the source of its most glaring contradictions. The treatment of political violence in *The Diagram--Poems*, and the eschewal of state-sponsored violence and left-radicalism alike in favour of the spiritual and international harmony that the poems advocate, is as extraordinarily ambitious as it is politically problematic.

This chapter will elucidate these problems through close attention to *The Diagram--Poems* and relevant moments in the rest of Oliver's oeuvre. It should be kept in mind throughout that it is sometimes extremely difficult to paraphrase Oliver. The nature of his development of concepts like "stupidity" is such that a critical voice risks sounding tendentious even when the intention is simple explanatory recapitulation. Oliver's use of "stupidity" in the early 1970s, like his use of "ignorance" in *The Infant and the Pearl*, is so challenging that to deracinate it from its context in verse or prose often risks the feeling of a critical shortcoming, of not having done justice to the concept as it is deployed within Oliver's writing. This is a necessary risk of scholarship on such a complex and idiosyncratic poet. A concept such as "stupidity," as we shall see, abjures and refutes the necessity for, and even the intelligibility of, any such critical apparatus. It is thus not only difficult to assess the valency and critical purchase of "stupidity" and its various permutations across the oeuvre, but appropriately so.

*The Diagram--Poems* is the third book of poetry that Oliver published.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation I refer to *The Diagram--Poems* using a double hyphen in order to accurately reflect the imagistic typography on the front cover of the first complete individual collection of the poems, the 1979 Ferry Press edition, in which a connective hyphen between the all-caps “M” and “P” of the title appears split in two, leaving two facing ends in jagged, broken dovetail. We recall that the phrase “self–other relations” in Oliver’s early type-written essays contains an unbroken hyphen or en-dash.<sup>2</sup> 1979’s broken hyphen, which is not reproduced in any other edition’s typesetting of the title, presents a visual metaphor for the following condition, explored in the poems and in detail throughout the present chapter: the disconnection between human beings, caused by our inability to realise the “perfect identity between self and Other” globally, in terms of what Oliver later called “an international kinship.”<sup>3</sup> In *The Diagram--Poems*, the image of this “international kinship” is a “land silvery with democracy,” “glistening” with Elysian “wheat,” and the representative figures of our failure to establish such a place on earth are Uruguay’s urban guerrillas of the 1960s and 1970s, the Tupamaros.<sup>4</sup> The specific context upon which the poems draw is the Tupamaros’ raid on the town of Pando, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1969, which ended in defeat for the rebels. But the guerrillas’ actions and the repercussions of their actions, which include the capture and torture of many of the guerrillas, are also the impetus in *The Diagram--Poems* for the discovery of “spoken kindness” in the most desperate of situations.<sup>5</sup> “[S]poken kindness” is the communication of pacifistic commonality that is the natural expression of “kinship.” As such the guerrillas’ story, as it is narrated by Oliver in the poems, provides a limit case for the universal nature of “kindness” itself: the fate of the Tupamaros is the vantage point from which our common humanity becomes most shiningly and pertinently visible. For the poet of *The Diagram--Poems*, our capacity for unity is recognized as innate and essential at the very moment at which unity is most surely destroyed by conflict and antagonism.

Here is the second stanza of the penultimate poem of *The Diagram--Poems*, ‘U’:

The lost child’s voice should speak softly but undyingly  
across a land silvery with democracy  
and glistening with wheat, trembling at the spoken kindness;  
the voice should temper the muttering  
of bank clerks across the mica counters  
and ring in the money slipping from their fingers.

1 Unless otherwise stated, references to the “poems” in *The Diagram--Poems* include reference to the diagrams themselves.

2 See, for example, ‘Who does the poet,’ p.7.

3 The phrase “international kinship” appears in ‘An Island That Is All The World,’ *VTH*, p.92.

4 *K*, p.121.

5 *Ibid.*



We know this. Everyone. But we let the voice break in our throats  
 the laughs, little distinguished from coughs,  
 echo discretely across stone floors;  
 softness unheard;  
 until a man with a light machine gun this day  
 springs on to the cash desk and, astride there,  
 we know this, waves the muzzle where all the arrows  
 of acquisition, law and management have come and gone.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics* the discovery of something essentially human does not depend upon, or even feature, a moment of such distinct and localised crisis. The disconnection between human beings in the particular context which *The Diagram--Poems* describe is part of the evidence the poems marshal in support of their central argument: that the origins of ethical human action are in harmony with their (our) naturally connective links of “kindness,” “innocence” and “mildness.”<sup>7</sup> It is not an injunction that is urged lightly, or without complication. The last poem of *The Diagram--Poems*, ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal,’ explicitly discovers “innocence in the heart of swift cruelty.”<sup>8</sup> The use of the adjective “swift” in this context recalls, and is likely a reference to, Pound’s ‘The Return’: “These were the swift to harry; / These the keen scented; / These were the souls of blood.”<sup>9</sup> To “harry” is, by the *OED*’s first definition, “to make predatory raids or incursions; to commit ravages,” a definition that, in Oliver’s account, aptly fits the “predatory raid” committed by the Tupamaros.<sup>10</sup> They too, the reference intimates, are a band of fallen warriors gone “pallid” from the failure of their adventure and the violence which they inflict and which is inflicted upon them.<sup>11</sup> “[C]ruelty” is not innocent, and it is destructive of self–other relations. Nevertheless, “innocence” is found “in the heart” of “cruel” people and events, such as the situation described in the passage from ‘U,’ above, in which a “man with a light machine gun” (a Tupamaro guerrilla) both interrupts and makes audible (this is the twofold effect of the word “until”) the “softness” and the “kindness” which “we know” to be innate and inalienable. “[S]poken kindness” is thus revealed as the articulation in speech of a common bond of universal identity.

Innocence, kindness and mildness are very closely related concepts in *The Diagram--Poems*. They are all attributes of the poet-speaker’s dead son, “Tom,” the “lost child” referred to above.<sup>12</sup> Tom, Oliver’s real-life Down’s syndrome child who died in infancy, appears in *The Diagram--Poems* as a guide to the “land silvery with democracy.” He is a guide in the form of an exemplary manifestation of

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6 *Ibid.*, pp.121-122.

7 *Ibid.*, p.102, p.121, p.126.

8 *Ibid.*, p.125.

9 Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p.85.

10 *OED* online [accessed 27.01.14].

11 Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems*, p.85.

12 *K*, p.121-122.

the qualities of “kindness,” “innocence” and “mildness.” An “innocent” baby like Tom naturally radiates “kindness” and “mildness”: he is the perfect image of our capacity for “perfect identity” between people everywhere, regardless of age or intelligence.<sup>13</sup> The Tupamaros are not like Tom. They, like us, lack “the one innocence” that would confirm our “international kinship.”<sup>14</sup> They exhibit a “revolutionary flamboyance” and because of their violent means are fated to meet violent ends.<sup>15</sup> *The Diagram--Poems* and their introductory prose call for an “authentic politics” that would abjure all forms of violence, whether state-sanctioned or in the form of armed resistance.<sup>16</sup> The work’s introductory prose defines this “politics” as a combination of “the mildness of your [in the context of the introduction, Oliver’s own] dead baby with the stern wisdom of an elder minister: some beneficial balance.”<sup>17</sup> This “authentic politics” is the precursor in Oliver’s oeuvre, I contend, to the “true politics” which “[u]nity of form” engenders in the later autobiographical prose/poetry sequence ‘An Island That Is All The World.’ The three terms “land silvery with democracy,” “an authentic politics” and “an international kinship” are, I suggest, closely linked. Considered together, they indicate a major preoccupation of Oliver’s poetry and prose across the decades: the elucidation of a state of political harmony the constituent elements of which are partially visible, but the full realisation of which is finally unobtainable. In *The Diagram--Poems*, elements of an “authentic politics” in the world at large are sometimes glimpsed, and they are sometimes audible, but a truly “authentic politics” is finally unavailable; in the poems’ extended aural metaphor it remains “unheard.”<sup>18</sup> Since this is the case, the best that “we” can “hope” for, as the final line of *The Diagram--Poems* reads, is that “grace and courage arrive calmly in us.”<sup>19</sup> An “authentic politics” based on “beneficial balance” remains, therefore, the preserve of the poems themselves, in the prosody of which the “special intersubjectivity” we discussed in Chapter 1 is most nearly achieved.

Numerous different versions of *The Diagram--Poems* were published during Oliver’s lifetime. The poems present Oliver’s first attempt to consolidate and systematise, in verse, some major preoccupations of his previous writing, both published and unpublished. A total of eight different versions of *The Diagram--Poems*, in part or in whole, were published between 1972 and 1996. The textual variations between successive publications of the poems are most significant between the first appearance of the first two poems of the sequence in 1972, and the third printing of the full sequence of eight poems

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13 *Ibid.*, p.122.

14 *Ibid.*, p.126.

15 *Ibid.*, p.102.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, p.122.

19 *Ibid.*, p.126.

in 1987. The poems' numerous textual variants, which include major revisions to the work's introductory prose, are an indication of the efforts to which Oliver went, over the years of their publication, to establish, clarify, complete and develop both the poems' textual and diagrammatic content as well as an interpretative framework for their reception. The latter is effected by means of variations on the explanatory prose introductions accompanying either individual poems, the sequence as a whole, or both, and which supplies historical, political and anecdotal or autobiographical background to the poems; this prose first appears in 1974. The introductory material is occasionally edited, revised or removed completely depending on the place of publication. It achieves a somewhat arbitrarily final form in the last version of *The Diagram--Poems* to be published before Oliver's death in 2000, that is, the prose that introduces the selection of *The Diagram--Poems* made for the *Selected Poems* (1996). The content of the text and diagrams of the *The Diagram--Poems* differs significantly from their first to their last appearance in print.

*The Diagram--Poems'* publication history begins in the early 1970s. The first published versions of two of the poems, 'Team Leader' and 'Importantly,' appear in the Winter 1972/1973 issue of *Sesheta* magazine.<sup>20</sup> These two poems were published again, accompanied by additional introductory/explanatory prose and with the diagrams re-drawn, in the second issue of the "European Edition" of *Chicago* magazine, edited by the American poet Alice Notley, Oliver's future wife, in February 1974.<sup>21</sup> An excerpt from Oliver's *In the Cave of Suicession* also appears in the same issue of *Chicago*; the full text of this poem was published later the same year by the poet Wendy Mulford's Street Editions. The first printing of the complete sequence of eight *Diagram--Poems* appears in *Ochre* 4, under the editorship of Oliver's colleagues and co-editors at Essex, the poets Ralph Hawkins and Charles Ingham.<sup>22</sup> This issue of *Ochre* is undated; it is most likely to have appeared in 1978.<sup>23</sup> Both 'Team Leader' and 'Importantly,' the latter now re-titled 'P.C.,' are herein revised and the diagrams once again re-drawn. In *Ochre* 4 the introductory/explanatory prose which in *Chicago* announces and describes the textual and diagrammatic elements of each poem is removed from the head of any and all poetic texts. The *Ochre* publication of the poems does, however, include the first prose introduction to the sequence of eight poems as a whole, composed in part from the excised portion of introductory prose which previously accompanied the poem 'Importantly.' Subsequent publications of *The Diagram--Poems*, either whole or excerpted, follow the

20 *Sesheta* 4 (Winter, 1972/3), ed. Andi Wachtel and Richard Downing, pp.4-7.

21 *Chicago* 2 (European Edition No. 2), ed. Alice Notley, (Wivenhoe, Essex: The Chicago Press, February 1974), unpaginated.

22 *Ochre* 4 [1978(?)], ed. Ralph Hawkins and Charles Ingham, unpaginated.

23 Ralph Hawkins to the author, personal communication, 01.10.2013.

basic presentation of the eight poems and eight diagrams established in *Ochre* 4. The 1979 Ferry Press edition, the first printing of the work as a single book, contains more revisions and alterations; the diagrams were again re-drawn, this time by the poet David Chaloner. Twelve copies of the Ferry Press edition feature holographic material on the back-inside cover. The hand-written poem, which begins with the quotation “Do not always revolve your thoughts around yourself...,” is reproduced in a slightly revised form in the *infernal methods*, Street Editions and Poetical Histories publication *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver*, where Peter Riley identifies it as the poem replaced by ‘The Fire Station’ in *The Diagram--Poems*.<sup>24</sup>

The version of the complete sequence of *Diagram--Poems* which appears in the 1987 collected poems, *Kind*, contains yet more revisions to prose and poetry alike, and the diagrams were once more re-drawn for this edition, at the publisher’s request, by Oliver himself.<sup>25</sup> Both the Ferry Press and *Kind* versions are dedicated to Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley. After *Kind*, changes made to the work included in the anthology *A Various Art* (1987) and the Talisman House publication of Oliver’s *Selected Poems* involve only alterations to the explanatory prose that introduces the poems. Such changes are not, however, devoid of interest. They continue to show Oliver concerned to influence the reception of the poems, and to a certain extent also concerned to legislate for the reader’s interpretation of the poems’ mediation of political events. Work on the introductory prose segment continued during and after 1987 as a response to the publication opportunities afforded by the poems’ collection and anthologisation, in the first instance through a selection made for the anthology edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, *A Various Art*, also published in 1987 but after *Kind*; and secondly through the selection included in the *Selected Poems*.<sup>26</sup> The introductory prose that accompanies the three texts (‘Central,’ ‘U,’ and ‘The Diagonal is the Diagonal’) re-produced, without diagrams, in *A Various Art*, contains, for example, significant emendations to the prose that introduces the full sequence of eight texts and diagrams published earlier that same year in *Kind*. The introductory passage in *Selected Poems* reverts to the same version used in *Kind*. All in all, *The Diagram--Poems* went through more public revisions, were published in a greater variety of versions, were more widely collected and anthologised, and were revised, re-written and published, in all their various guises, over a longer period of time than any other of

24 Wendy Mulford and Peter Riley, ed., *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver* (Cambridge: *infernal methods*, Benhall: Street Editions, and Cambridge: Poetical Histories, 2002), p.[4], p.52. In a note below the poem in the copy of the Ferry Press edition of *The Diagram--Poems* contained in the Essex archive, Oliver has written: “The birds in ‘The Fire Station’ diagram relocated to the English Midlands.”

25 Anthony Barnett to the author, personal communication, 25.09.2013.

26 See *K*, pp.99-126; Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, ed., *A Various Art* (Manchester and New York: Carcanet, 1987), pp.197-224; *SP*, pp.10-33.

Oliver's poetic sequences, collections or individual poems.

## 2.2 – Knowledge, stupidity and modernism

The length of time over which the periodic revisions to *The Diagram--Poems* were made resulted in the poems' composition and re-composition overlapping with a number of other projects. During the years between Oliver's exposure to *The Diagram--Poems*' source material between 1970-1971 and the publication of the poems as a single book by Ferry Press in 1979, Oliver published the novel *The Harmless Building* (1973) and the poetic sequence *In the Cave of Suicession* (1974), as well as completing the essays and editorial projects detailed in the previous chapter whilst a student at the University of Essex. The year of *The Diagram--Poems*' publication by Ferry Press coincided with an issue of *Grosseteste Review* (12) containing two substantial articles by Oliver.<sup>27</sup> Work on *The Diagram--Poems* was thus intermittently sustained whilst other writing projects were undertaken and completed. One reason Oliver returned to these poems so many times over the course of his career, during and in between the composition of other works, I suggest, is that they represent his first attempt to consolidate in verse the preoccupations, themes, political arguments and biographical experience that he had explored in his writing in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Thematic content, characters and political reference from *The Harmless Building*, *In the Cave of Suicession* and, to a lesser extent, *Oppo Hectic*, are carried through into the composition of *The Diagram--Poems* in a manner which enables the 1979 poems to develop and reflect upon this content.

Oliver's son Tom first appears in *Oppo Hectic* in the poem 'Mongol in the Woods.'<sup>28</sup> Uruguay and the Tupamaros make their first appearance in Oliver's oeuvre in *The Harmless Building*.<sup>29</sup> The Tupamaros are referred to in the book by the fictional name "Creadores."<sup>30</sup> The name is Spanish for "creators." This moniker may conceivably have been chosen in humorous, deliberate reference to its own thinly-veiled fictitiousness; the name is "created," "made-up." Or it may refer more seriously to an aspect of the guerrillas' actions which Oliver felt he could uncomplicatedly admire; that is, their creation of situations full of the promise of what the *Various Art* prose introduction to the poems calls "emotional

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27 These are 'Even Poets Can Have Beliefs About Poetic "Stress"' and 'J.H. Prynne's "Of Movement Towards A Natural Place"' ; see *Grosseteste Review*, Vol. 12 (1979), pp.12-32 and pp.93-102.

28 *K*, p.41.

29 *THB*, p.6

30 *Ibid.*, p.16.

urgency.”<sup>31</sup> In all likelihood, however, the name was also intended to convey the negative connotations denoted by Oliver’s denigration of the guerrillas’ “flamboyance”; the poem ‘Central’ from *The Diagram--Poems* refers to the guerrillas’ “creations of total emergency.”<sup>32</sup> The name is therefore further likely to be a reference to the near-contemporary (in the late 1960s) “creations” of the Situationist International, whose stated “central idea” was “the creation of situations,” “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.”<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, Oliver’s perception of these kinds of activities was coloured by his antipathy towards what he understood to be an irresponsible and overweening optimism on behalf of the contemporary radical left, especially and precisely its “passional” excesses. Invoked as they are by association through the term “Creadores,” any response to the Situationists’ own claim that they were “gambling that change will usually be for the better” by “pushing ever further the game of creating new, emotionally provocative situations” remains undeveloped in *The Harmless Building*.<sup>34</sup> But it is a central motivating factor of *The Diagram--Poems*’ argument about revolutionary violence that this “gamble,” and those motivated by similar ideologies in the field of organised insurrection were, and always are, a bad bet.

In *The Harmless Building*, the first version of a series of related claims in various publications of *The Diagram--Poems* appears. This claim is that the novel does not refer to the concrete reality of political struggle in Uruguay:

[...] do not imagine that I know *any more* about Uruguay than the next man. It would be unpardonable if an ill-informed fiction sought to have some factive meaning for the affairs of that country. Particularly, I do not refer to any real guerrilla movement or to any real elements of a “current situation” there, however apparent a connection may seem.<sup>35</sup>

Oliver here makes pains to distance himself from the twentieth-century tradition encompassing Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and J.H. Prynne, whose poetics share the absolutely central position allocated to knowledge in terms of an organising literary and philosophical principle, and to the poet’s knowledge in particular as precisely differentiated from “the next man[’s]” by the fact of its comprehensive scope and special insight. I discuss this tradition – and Oliver’s break from it – in greater depth below. Oliver makes

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31 *A Various Art*, p.214.

32 *K*, p.114.

33 Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action,’ Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp.25-43 (38, 41).

34 *Ibid.*, p.42.

35 *THB*, p.6.

a similar claim in the first edition of *The Infant and the Pearl*, stating in his Author's Note that "no real politicians either appear or are attacked in the dream: only the phantasmagoria that flit across the world of the media and float into our subconscious."<sup>36</sup> A footnoted caveat in the second edition of the poem states that "Margaret" in the poem "stands not for Margaret Thatcher herself, but Mrs. Thatcher as presented to the electorate."<sup>37</sup> *Penniless Politics* (1991) and *A Salvo for Africa* (2000), however, make no attempt to distinguish their respective representations of Reagan's or Bush's America, or African colonial history and contemporary political situations, and the corresponding situations on the ground.

Early versions of *The Diagram--Poems* develop and moderate the claim. The 1974 *Chicago* publication of two *Diagram--Poems* includes the following as part of the prose introduction to 'Importantly':

Whatever the factual basis for these events, I want to disavow any direct relationship between them and the poem which, in any case, distorts the facts.<sup>38</sup>

Claiming not to refer to "any real guerrilla movement" has become a disavowal of "any direct relationship" between the poems and political reality. There is nonetheless a relationship between the two. A disavowal would ignore, repudiate or refuse that relationship, not deny its existence. This claim does not appear in either the *Ochre* or the Ferry Press publications of the complete set of *Diagram--Poems*. It all but disappears too, from the prose introductions to the *Kind* and *A Various Art* publications of the poems. There, in both cases, the claim is complicated into one that no longer "disavow[s] any direct relationship" between politics and the poetry, but rather insists on the imaginative transformation of any such relationship as a necessary condition of the poet's creative dynamic.

In *Kind*, for example, the Tupamaros are named and their "Operation Pando," the day of insurrectionary action which was the major inspiration for the poems, is described. But Oliver maintains that

[the] poems that came from this [information] cannot be pure: they begin in the guerrillas' movements in the notes made about them, before reaching their own imaginary landscape, singed by the real.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Oliver, *The Infant and the Pearl* (London: Ferry Press for Silver Hounds, 1985), unpaginated.

<sup>37</sup> *SP*, p.40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ochre* 4, unpaginated.

<sup>39</sup> *K*, p.103.

In *A Various Art*, the artifice of the project as it moves away from the political reality to which it nonetheless cannot help but refer, is emphasised thus:

Poems emerged, more distorting even than journalism. The final job of this deliberately impure art was to recreate emotional urgency out of fantasy.<sup>40</sup>

These later assertions are attempts to refine exactly what kind of “relationship” to political reality the poems do articulate if they do not refute a “direct” one. “[E]motional urgency out of fantasy” is qualitatively different from the Situationists’ “emotionally provocative situations” because the former resides and has its effects in the “fantasy” of literary artifice, not in the street or on campus; it is thus incapable of hurting anyone. All these claims emerge from Oliver’s thinking about the status of knowledge both in general, and with specific regard to literary, narrative or poetic fiction. From his earliest work onwards, Oliver valorises the unlearned, the undogmatic and the intuitive in contradistinction to what he identifies and lambasts as the intellectual assertion of established, especially political, opinion. He does this not to reduce the possibility of unity and “perfect identity,” but rather to expand and encourage it. “[I]nternational kinship” is founded on the universality of common humanity; as such it is untainted by the pretensions to specialised knowledge which obscure its reality and prevent its recognition. Such assertive knowledge is represented in *The Diagram--Poems* by the vanguardist Marxist-Leninist insurrectionary praxis of the Tupamaros.

In order to follow the trajectory of Oliver’s thinking about “stupidity” or “ignorance” and its repercussions for his poetic practice, we must first attend to the most extreme iteration of the claims above, that is, the specific assertion that *The Harmless Building*’s “Creadores” do “not refer to any real guerrilla movement.” This assertion is in part designed to ventriloquise a particular strain of post-structuralist emphasis on the production of meaning within narrative fiction: that it is intrinsic to the play of signification and difference within a given *texte*. In *Whisper ‘Louise’*, Oliver reminisces that

*The Harmless Building* [...] satirised French deconstruction and American fragmented prose styles [...] there is decoherence, absurdist metaphor, much about writing and body image, a parody of Lacan introduced by the line “Late abed seagulls circle overhead calling out *Jacques Lacan, Jacques Lacan!*”, and a Derridean refusal of unity and closure.<sup>41</sup>

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40 *A Various Art*, p.214.

41 *WL*, p.56.



The “line” Oliver refers to is part of the first sentence of the twelfth chapter of *The Harmless Building*.<sup>42</sup> It is likely to have been influenced by Lacan’s essay ‘The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,’ first published in French in 1966.<sup>43</sup> In the essay, Lacan describes the child’s induction into the metaphorical landscape of signification. When a child declares that “the dog goes meow, the cat goes woof-woof,” it thereby

in one fell swoop [and] by disconnecting the thing from its cry, raises the sign to the function of the signifier and reality to the sophistics of signification, and in his [the child’s] contempt for verisimilitude, makes necessary the verification of multiple objectifications of the same thing.<sup>44</sup>

Oliver parodies Lacan’s example by having the seagulls “go” “*Jacques Lacan, Jacques Lacan*,” thus “raising” the psychoanalyst’s name to “the function of the signifier and reality to the sophistics of signification.” The reason Oliver jokes about Lacan in *The Harmless Building* in this way is that Lacan’s writings became, for Oliver, the contemporary representative of a form of elitist, specialised knowledge, proponents of which would pride themselves on their own esoteric sophistication.

During his employment as a local reporter for Cambridge’s local newspaper, the *Cambridge News* (later the *Cambridge Evening News*) in the late 1960s, Oliver encountered student radicals whose glib philosophical and theoretical pretensions seemed to him riven with hypocrisy. He twice recounts the following anecdote:<sup>45</sup>

The student left had a mouthful of democracy but expressed it in anti-democratic sneers. At the height of the ’68 sit-ins, I became exasperated with a bunch of them: “How on earth is a whole nation’s consciousness going to change just because you’ve changed the ownership of the means of production?” “Haven’t you read Hegel, p. xyz?” snarled a well-bred student.<sup>46</sup>

In the version of this anecdote that appears in the 1997 *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Oliver’s account contains an important extra clause: “the student left had a mouthful of democracy but

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42 *THB*, p.102: “In the park, late-abled seagulls [...]”

43 For this insight I am indebted to Tomas Weber, whose unpublished undergraduate ‘Part I’ dissertation on Oliver and Lacan points out some useful correspondences between ‘The Subversion of the Subject’ and *The Diagram--Poems*.

44 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p.682.

45 *WL*, p.81.

46 *Ibid.*, p.54.

they didn't have a democratic tone; so I didn't think them socialist."<sup>47</sup> The (retrospective) ascription of socialism depends not on political ideology, party allegiance or even principle, but upon the "democratic tone" of the individual. The importance of "tone" for Oliver is established by its manifestation as part of the spoken language of prosodic music, the value of which in turn, as we saw in the previous chapter, emerges from prosody's intimations of intersubjectivity. Elsewhere Oliver notes that students "had a mouthful of Herbert Marcuse[.]"<sup>48</sup> The imputation is that it is precisely these mouthfuls of theory which prevent the students from understanding and utilising a truly inclusive language. Whether or not the students were less interested in "democracy" than, for instance, communism, especially since, given the discussion of "the ownership of the means of production," they may conceivably have been discussing the *Communist Manifesto*, is perhaps a moot point. They fail to express in civil, day-to-day social interaction what they profess to believe in, or what Oliver assumes in retrospect they believed in.

In Cambridge, Oliver experienced first-hand the class caricatures perpetuated by "Conservative dons" and student radicals alike: "Townies like me," he recalls, "were patronised as, fundamentally, second-rate intellectuals."<sup>49</sup> Oliver's seagulls, despite his later claims, do not present a very cogent "satire" of either Lacan or Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rather, they mimic the sneering name-dropping practised by the Cambridge students whom Oliver felt patronised by and condescended to because of his non-University affiliations. The seagulls in *The Harmless Building* sycophantically parrot the name of a contemporary French theorist. Oliver's exasperation with those whom he calls Cambridge's particular brand of "privileged brats" extends, at least in retrospect, to the entire radical student left in 1968, whom he upbraids in *Whisper 'Louise'* by asserting that the "student revolutions of the late 1960s achieved little but a transition accompanied by a rapid loss of hope," and that the activists were betrayed by their own "irresponsibility and over-optimism."<sup>50</sup> Oliver notes that his reading of the works of Marxist and utopian thinkers in this period was extensive. He read, "struggling through the French where necessary," works by "Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kropotkin, Gramsci, Marcuse, Althusser, Vaneigem" and "Debord," as well as "Tel Quel magazine," Foucault and Sorel.<sup>51</sup> Yet as we have seen from his 21<sup>st</sup> February 1978 letter to Peter Riley, Oliver was not keen on "scampering to the latest French magi to borrow insights."<sup>52</sup> An interest in theory must be "kept in its place," this letter affirms, and not allowed to assert any special

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47 CAAS, p.249.

48 WL, p.82.

49 Ibid., p.83.

50 Ibid., p.79.

51 Ibid., pp.82-83.

52 Oliver to Riley, 21.02.1978, DOA, Box 9.

prominence above “ideas of your own.”<sup>53</sup> The students Oliver met in Cambridge in the late 1960s had no ideas of their own: they could only squawk in facile one-upmanship the page references of German idealist philosophers.

The claims in *The Harmless Building* and in versions of the introductory prose to *The Diagram--Poems*, about knowledge of Uruguay and the “factual basis for [the] events” from which the poems emerge through a process of textual and diagrammatic representation, emerge from Oliver’s thinking about the value of knowledge itself. This thinking begins negatively in Oliver’s oeuvre. *The Harmless Building* lampoons the privileged promulgation of a certain type of theoretical knowledge that Oliver experienced as bratty arrogance. In consecutive versions of *The Diagram--Poems* Oliver sheds the “satirical” element of the novel in favour of a more directly positive affirmation of the value of “fantasy” and “impur[ity],” and an emphasis on the importance of “mildness” for an “authentic politics,” a simplicity devoid of the revolutionary “flamboyance” of the student radicals and the Tupamaros alike. Just as the students stuff their mouths with theory but lack a “democratic tone,” the Tupamaros are stuffed full of revolutionary “heroics” but cannot hear the “spoken kindness” of a “child’s voice” behind their own “laughs.”<sup>54</sup> Both are effectively accused of practising an inclusive, coterie politics exacerbated by selfishness. By emphasising and recounting, twice, the anecdote about the Cambridge students citing Hegel, Oliver claims this moment as a primary scene of his political enlightenment. The revulsion that he experienced when confronted with the snotty intellectualism he felt epitomised student radicals in 1960s Cambridge is offered as a precursor to his attitude towards the Tupamaros in the 1970s, and towards the left-wing in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. It seems to have been a conscious literary-biographical manoeuvre on Oliver’s part to make this connection; certainly his comments about the students echo across all his future denunciations of what he would later call “loony left” politics.<sup>55</sup> Oliver’s discomfort with what he characterises as harmful myopic intellectualism is thus an important background to the poetry and prose’s insistence on the value of “innocence,” “mildness,” “stupidity” and “ignorance.” All variations on this theme valorise “ideas of one’s own” over those of “sophistical” theory and its pseudo-“insights,” and “imagination” and “fantasy” over the “factive” and documentary.<sup>56</sup>

The death in his cot of Oliver’s son Tom in November 1969 was the tragic impetus for the

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53 *Ibid.*

54 *K*, p.105, pp.121-122.

55 *WL*, p.207.

56 *WL*, p.83.

following reflections on intellectual bravado, this time amongst poets, rather than students or activists. They were made in Oliver's correspondence with Peter Riley during Oliver's employment with Agence-France Presse in Paris. The letter makes clear that at this time Oliver was completing the manuscript of *The Harmless Building*.<sup>57</sup> Over the course of the previous few months, Oliver would have heard reports of the Tupamaros' activities in Uruguay, including their capture and execution in July-August 1970 of the American FBI agent Dan Mittrione, whom the guerrillas accused, among other things, of training the Montevidean police force in the torture techniques to which members of their organisation had been subjected.<sup>58</sup>

I come down to this fact: there is in me – and I swear in most other people too – an area which is basically stupid, quite unargued, perhaps nineteenth century, perhaps suburban, whatever. It is an area I can easily ignore, for which I have many available antidotes (sometimes they are masks); but ultimately I cannot escape it because its foundation is the necessary impossibility of knowing fully all that we “know.” You take the current English or American poet. You know damn well that stupidity is there but it never appears in a text that is, in every one of its stages, clever. Meanwhile, what are all these ellipses, these slick jump-cuts between image and image, thought and thought? They are, of course, part of developed modern technique, cinema influenced and so on. Behind the ellipses skulks an area of personality the poet never puts into his poem.<sup>59</sup>

The “area of personality” that Oliver accuses contemporary poets of dissembling through “clever[ness]” is “basically stupid.”<sup>60</sup> “You know,” and you know “damn well,” that it is there. The truthfulness of this “area of personality” is confirmed by the “impossibility of knowing fully all that we ‘know.’”<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting to note here the convergence of Oliver's thought with a central tenet of Lacan's, despite the former's hostility towards the latter. The “impossibility of knowing fully all that we ‘know’” is highly reminiscent of Lacan's conception of *savoir* [knowledge], (as opposed to *connaissance* [also translated as ‘knowledge’]), that is, knowledge of the symbolic order and of the subject's relation to the symbolic order, as well as “that relation itself.”<sup>62</sup> Since this kind of knowledge pertains to the symbolic

57 “At present I am writing prose, not poetry, though the text contains poems -- that most dangerous combine [...] The task I set myself was to write a stupid book. I may well have succeeded.” Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

58 For near contemporary accounts of Mittrione's involvement in the increasing sophistication of torture techniques and the escalation of their application in Uruguay, see Alain Labrousse, *The Tupamaros, Urban Guerrillas in Uruguay*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp.102-104, and Tom Wodetzki's afterword in Carlos Núñez, *The Tupamaros, Urban Guerrillas of Uruguay* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), pp.47-48.

59 Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2010), p.94.

order in which the subject finds itself, it consists of “the articulation of signifiers *in* the subject’s symbolic universe.”<sup>63</sup> The unconscious itself is therefore “simply another name for symbolic knowledge insofar as it is an ‘unknown knowledge,’ a knowledge which the subject does not know he knows.”<sup>64</sup>

Bruce Fink, in his reading of Lacan’s ‘The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,’ describes such “unknown knowledge” in the following terms:

There is no self-knowledge at the level of the subject of the unconscious, for there is no self there [...] What is unconscious is known *unbeknown to* the “person” in question [...] it [what is known] is written in the subject without the subject being conscious of it. This unknown knowledge is locked into the connection between signifiers – it consists in this very connection.<sup>65</sup>

Malcolm Bowie meanwhile, without distinguishing between *savoir* and *connaissance*, describes as “incurably paranoiac” the condition of knowledge in Lacan’s early work, commenting that “[h]uman knowledge begins from an illusion [...] and constructs an inescapable autonomous system in its wake,” such that psychoanalysis, in “its play of system upon system and delusion upon delusion[,] is the closest approximation to truth that human beings can expect to achieve.”<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein to Oliver’s reading of Husserl, it would appear that the relation between Oliver’s theorising (in this instance about “knowledge”) and his philosophical-critical forebears (or contemporaries) reveals a kind of poetically-minded conceptual osmosis. Lacan’s ideas seem to have seeped into Oliver’s description of “all that we know,” but are interpolated in a manner that demands even less systematic philosophical or analytic procedure than the use of the concepts of transcendental subjectivity and *eidos* ego does in the early theories of the poet’s creative dynamic. Again we see a specific kind of accumulation of knowledge directed towards specifically poetic ends: if Oliver was influenced in his conception of knowledge by Lacan it was certainly not by the letter of the Master’s teaching, but by the tone of his general drift, a tone more usefully malleable in the service of Oliver’s polemic against “the current English or American poet,” and in particular against poets who “know” so much that they are “concerned to tell other people *exactly* how it is.”<sup>67</sup>

In a letter of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1970, Oliver had already made explicit the connection between Tom’s Down’s syndrome and “the theme of unintelligence” which was to pervade his work from then on:

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63 *Ibid.* My emphasis.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp.106-128 (109).

66 Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), pp.38-40.

67 Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

“Because my son was a mongol,” he writes to Riley, “I find myself haunted by the theme of unintelligence; he could not hide inadequacy through display which is what the rest of us do the whole damn time.”<sup>68</sup> In the New Years Eve 1970 letter to Riley, Tom is described as both a limit case of the ability of humans to please each other and once-living proof that they can do this through their sheer existence, without striving for intellectual superiority. Tom’s Down’s syndrome essentially confirms his natural goodness, which shines through his “inadequacy,” as it should through our own:

[...] for two years I had a mongol son whose lack of intelligence did not one whit affect his ability to give pleasure (if only we were excellent enough to accept that gift unaffectedly) and who, when he died, had less justice in doing so than if I had died myself (having taken more of my life share than him).<sup>69</sup>

In *The Harmless Building* the child “Uncle Aubrey,” who is a fictionalised version of Tom, glows with “the true blessedness allowed only to the really low in IQ.”<sup>70</sup> In all of Oliver’s work, Tom is the spiritual icon of a universalism proven by reference to the natural state of our humanity which we nonetheless refuse to acknowledge or act upon. The truth of our own “inadequacy” does not shine through us; we are not anywhere near “excellent enough to accept that gift.” Oliver reserves special opprobrium in the letter for “left-wing poets,” describing them in a similar manner to the English and French student-radicals he would later condemn:

So why are all the left-wing poets intellectual snobs? Why are their structures so carefully cemented so that no one should see through the gaps? Why are they so concerned to tell other people *exactly* how it is? Why are they the heroes of their own poems all the time?<sup>71</sup>

The figure against whom such accusations are levelled is composite, but it seems highly likely that they are, in particular, frustrated descriptions of Oliver’s friend and tutor J.H. Prynne. I discuss the reasons for this likelihood below in the context of Oliver’s response to his modernist inheritance.

The identification of pervasive cultural snobbery remained central to Oliver’s critique of British and American poetry, of left-wing radicalism, and of Western manners in general, for the rest of his life. Oliver’s letters to Riley in the 1970s and 1980s often lament the arrogance of named and un-named poets of all political persuasions that, it seems to Oliver, perpetuate this kind of snobbery. It is perpetuated by

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68 Oliver to Riley, 28.03.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

69 Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

70 *THB*, p.13.

71 Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

both latter-day modernist or avant-garde poets on the one hand, and anti-modernist schools of poetry on the other. Oliver, for example, is critical in his letters of both Charles Olson and Philip Larkin, though nothing like equally – Olson is denounced with far more frequency than Larkin. Snobbery is perpetuated by the poets of the former camp, Oliver repeatedly suggests, in the production of poetry which requires what he calls, in a letter of 20<sup>th</sup> February 1979, “initiates,” rather than readers, that is, poetry that is “gnomic” and that, as he characterised it in a letter four years later, neglects “intelligibility.”<sup>72</sup> Oliver defines the “gnomic” as

a modern sense of writing that means a lot but is so concerned to be “pithy” that the “moral concept” doesn’t clearly emerge: like some enigmatic phrase uttered with solemn emphasis.<sup>73</sup>

It is “easier” to write like this, Oliver asserts, because

the lines are more easily made tense; it’s easier to live on the forefront of what you say; you can hop quite quickly from one statement with its presuppositions to the next with its, without having to bother about the linkages enough.<sup>74</sup>

Pound, and later Olson and his followers, are to blame for the trend: “Ideogrammatic technique, so valuable at first, has permitted this [style of contemporary poetry to flourish],” Oliver says on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1979, referencing Pound’s influential interpretation of the Chinese ideogram, whilst in a letter written three months previously he places the blame squarely on Olson, Louis Zukovsky and Robert Creeley, as well as unnamed French “rhetoricians” (we can assume, given the letter of 21<sup>st</sup> February 1978 we saw in the previous chapter, that Oliver means especially Derrida and Lacan):

I do think the gnomic prose made popular by Olson out of Zukovsky, by Creeley, and by, in another way, the French rhetoricians has had grave and harmful effects [...] a clarity has gone out of the language.<sup>75</sup>

In the same letter, Oliver goes on to suggest that

What’s been lacking – in Olson’s work particularly – is a proper humility about form [...] That is, it won’t do to have intellectual perceptions about

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72 Oliver to Riley, 20.02.1979 and 28.10.1983, *DOA*, Box 9.

73 Oliver to Riley, 20.02.1979, *DOA*, Box 9.

74 *Ibid.*

75 Oliver to Riley, 01.11.1978, *DOA*, Box 9.

content and apply intellectually those same perceptions to the question of form, which is what I think Olson to some extent did.<sup>76</sup>

Oliver maintained a sceptical attitude towards modernism and what he identified as a modernist inheritance in Anglophone poetry throughout his life. Modernism was to blame for a damaging legacy of obfuscation and pretentious sophistry: “I welcome,” Oliver wrote to Riley in 1980, “any attack on the elitism of modernism and upon its refusal to be clear.”<sup>77</sup> Oliver shared this particular frustration with Philip Larkin, whom he interviewed in the University of Hull library in the early 1970s.<sup>78</sup> Yet Oliver was critical, too, of Larkin-esque conservatism, describing in the same letter from 1980 his own “hostility to what the attack [on modernism] comes from, in the case of Larkin,” which is, Oliver goes on,

that old patrician ground become so faux-moderne that you’d hardly think it had a hope or a human relationship left in the world of *value*, except a narrowed, Beckett-like sense of life-goes-on at the very rim of defeat.<sup>79</sup>

Oliver here uses the image of extension denoted by “rim” to define the paucity of humanist generosity in the Larkins of the poetry world, an image likely picked up from the last line of one of Oliver’s favourite poems by J.H. Prynne, ‘Of Movement Towards a Natural Place,’ from *Wound Response* (1974).<sup>80</sup> To summarise the thrust of Oliver’s argument: the anti-modernists are solipsistic, or at least lonely, disingenuous pessimists; the modernists wilfully opaque obscurantists. In these letters to Riley from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Oliver makes it clearer than anywhere else in his published or unpublished prose that he wishes poets would say what they mean as clearly as they are capable. When they do not say what they mean, Oliver suggests, they are hiding something, and what they are hiding is the “moral concept” of the poem.<sup>81</sup>

Morality is thus obscured by knowledge, or else knowledge, in the form of “pithy” or “enigmatic phrase[s] uttered with solemn emphasis,” provides a cover for the simple lack of a “moral concept” altogether; this is the sense in which poets “hide inadequacy through display”.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Oliver to Riley, 1980; this letter is dated only by the year “1980” inscribed at the top of the sheet. See *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>78</sup> Oliver, ‘Poet who captures the music of daily life,’ interview with Philip Larkin, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1972. See *WL*, p.194.

<sup>79</sup> Oliver to Riley, 1980, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>80</sup> Oliver’s fondness for this poem is attested to not only by the 1979 *Grosseteste Review* article which reads ‘Of Movement’ in illuminating detail, but also by repeated quotation from the poem, as well as statements of affection for *Wound Response* as a whole, in the letters to Riley as well as Prynne himself. See, for example, Oliver to Prynne, 11.09.1974, and Oliver to Riley, 03.01.1975, 05.01.1977 and 21.11.1993, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>81</sup> Oliver to Riley, 20.02.1979, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>82</sup> Oliver to Riley, 28.03.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.



[T]here's so much American and English huff and puff, so much presumption that we *know* and other poets don't, that I've been led to this simple question: if we know why the hell can't we say what we know with more evident effort to share the information.<sup>83</sup>

One of Oliver's most vociferous denunciations of what he perceived as arrogant experimentalism in contemporary Anglophone poetry can be found in a letter of the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1983:

My belief, in fact, is that our generation of avant-gardists neglected intelligibility and coherence according to a presumption of their own authenticity. The amount of sheer allusiveness in much of the poetry of that epoche [*sic*] was quite ridiculous. That, more than anywhere else, was where the poetry went out the window.<sup>84</sup>

Oliver does not date "that epoch" in his letter. But "our generation" is inclusive, and Oliver often makes it clear to Riley that he includes himself in the category of those who were guilty of wilful obscurantism, commenting in 1979 that "I am by no means the least of offenders."<sup>85</sup> The epoch named is thus surely that of the late 1960s, and the poetry would therefore include Oliver's first published works amongst the Cambridge circle with whom he fraternised. Alongside his 1969 collection *Oppo Hectic*, the early work of Oliver's poet friends J.H. Prynne, John James, Wendy Mulford, Andrew Crozier and Anthony Barnett, as well as his present correspondent, Peter Riley, is all implicated. J.H. Prynne again stands out as a target, since the "sheer allusiveness" of Prynne's work of the period – *Kitchen Poems* (1968), *The White Stones* (1969), and *Brass* (1971) – in terms of both intertextual quotation/paraphrase and more abstract literary and philosophical reference points, is far more densely woven into the fabric of his verse than that of any of the other poets here named.

Denise Riley, in her eulogy for Oliver in *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver*, recalls that "Doug's reiterated and confident hope was that poetry could survive whatever poets, at their worst, would do to it," before quoting Oliver: "'British poetry shoots itself in the foot through a sort of oversophisticated sneering, or worse, cowardice.'"<sup>86</sup> The perceived snobbery of poets ("left-wing" or otherwise), students and radicals, as we have seen, is especially prone to Oliver's disapproval. He disapproves of it because it limits the possibility of the expression of what we know "damn well" is there but which we refuse to

83 Oliver to Riley, 01.11.1978, *DOA*, Box 9.

84 Oliver to Riley, 28.10.1983, *DOA*, Box 9. Note that Oliver's misspelling of "epoch" is the French *epoché* minus the accent.

85 Oliver to Riley, 20.02.1979, *DOA*, Box 9.

86 *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver*, p.19.

embrace, and in the case of poetry it obscures or deletes the “clarity” and the “moral concept” of the work, sometimes through the bad modernist inheritance of sophisticated elitism and sometimes through the reliance on equally unhelpful, specifically French, theoretical discourse. In contradistinction to these perceived attitudes, Oliver’s definitive plan for *The Harmless Building*, and his own evaluation of its outcome, was as follows: “The task I set myself was to write a stupid book. I may well have succeeded.”<sup>87</sup>

Oliver admits that whilst writing the novel, “I [...] found myself sneaking away to books to buttress bits of opinion that very obviously stuck out from my narrative; but generally speaking,” he writes,

I have tried to remain as dependent on my natural intellect as possible, leaving in things that I know I could correct with a bit of Merleau-Ponty, Leibnitz, Schilder or a hundred others.<sup>88</sup>

What Oliver calls his “natural intellect” is deliberately deployed as part of a concerted compositional effort to refuse and contradict the vapid intellectualism he saw bandied about by student radicals and by “left-wing poets.” It is this “natural intellect,” unlearned, unreferenced and unintellectual, that becomes a pre-requisite of the “authentic politics” described in the introductory prose to the 1987 edition of *The Diagram--Poems*, and therefore a pre-requisite too of the “international kinship” first avowed (three years later) in ‘An Island That Is All The World.’ “[N]atural intellect” also recalls Oliver’s attachment to the “natural attitude” in Husserl that we encountered in the last chapter. Its symbolic proponent in Oliver’s life’s work is Tom, because Tom’s Down’s syndrome prevented him from dissembling his “natural intellect,” his “mildness” and “kindness,” by intellectual means. To write a “stupid book” in the literary world that emerges through Oliver’s letters was to write a book unbound by the fetters of parochial intellectualism and glum conservatism that between them defined that world. The former’s avant-gardism is far more often the object of Oliver’s reflection than is the latter’s “old patrician ground.” “Too often,” Oliver wrote, publicly this time, in *The Harmless Building*’s year of publication, 1973,

white spaces and breathy rhythms have been failure itself covering its face and not daring to breathe. Tackling harm by trying not to fail risks dullness; yet it’s so important to aim *as far as possible* for continuity, not hiding stupidity.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Oliver, ‘A Response to *Great Works One*,’ *Great Works* 2 (Oct., 1973), ed. Bill Symondson and Peter Philpott,

Once again, the impression here is that the avant-garde irresponsibly covers its bases with technique and craft in such a manner as to dissemble and refuse a more inclusive expression of moral honesty.

Oliver's thinking about knowledge and stupidity was influenced by his antipathy towards certain prevailing winds and literary historical tendencies involving poets he read, admired and in one case knew personally and intimately. His thinking about stupidity runs directly counter to the assertions made about stupidity (and stupid people) by the three poets who collectively constitute what Keston Sutherland has called "the philological tradition in modernist poetry," and these poets are Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and Oliver's friend and early mentor, J.H. Prynne.<sup>90</sup> All three of these poets' oeuvres maintain a consistently vituperative and denunciatory attitude towards other people's stupidity; in Pound's case his oeuvre positively orbits around this attitude. Pound made the aggressive condemnation of ignorance a foundational doctrine of his entire poetic. The stupid, the idiotic, the naïve and the imbecilic appear constantly as culturally parasitic deviations throughout Pound's work, whilst the intelligence that comes with "knowing the facts" is praised as the primary condition for the production of any work of lasting historical importance.<sup>91</sup> "The stupid or provincial judgement of art" is the enemy of the modernist project as Pound conceived it; this judgement "bases itself on the belief that great art must be like the art that it has been reared to respect."<sup>92</sup> Throughout Pound's essays it is the "organic stupidity" of the presses, the critics, the "low-brow reader[s]" and the universities that are responsible for obscuring the function of great art "in the *res publica* [public realm]."<sup>93</sup> This function, which is to maintain the state and the legislature, "the very cleanliness of the tools [and therefore] the health of the very matter of thought itself" in the service of national sovereignty, is betrayed by "loose expression [and] the loose use of individual words" perpetuated by bad art and by the stupid critical misrecognition of bad art for good art.<sup>94</sup> Good poetry, Pound thought, should be "carried as a communication between intelligent men."<sup>95</sup> Ideally, the stupid should not be allowed anywhere near it.

Olson continued the trend of negatively defining his poetic project through the accusation of idiocy when he railed, in 'Human Universe,' against "the stupidities of mysticism" and bemoaned, in his characteristically hammering grammatical machismo, the

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pp.3-4 (4).

90 Sutherland, 'J.H. Prynne and Philology,' p.3.

91 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p.9.

92 Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.57.

93 *Ibid.*, p.18, p.16, p.21.

94 *Ibid.*, p.21.

95 *Ibid.*, p.55.

filth and lumber which man is led by [...] that he damn well can, and does, destroy destroy destroy energy every day. It is too much. It is too much to waste time on, this idiot who spills his fluids like some truculent and fingerless chamaco hereabouts [...] Man has made himself an ugliness and a bore.<sup>96</sup>

“Chamaco” is colloquial Mexican Spanish for “child.” Less important, for our purposes, than the precise object of Olson’s ire at this juncture in ‘Human Universe’ is the fact that he deliberately makes the idiot child, “some truculent and fingerless chamaco,” the icon of a humanity adrift and unnaturally disconnected “from that which” formerly, as Olson coined it in *The Maximus Poems*, “was most familiar.”<sup>97</sup> Oliver, in a direct inversion of Olson’s denigration, makes the (his) idiot child the anti-intellectual and moral icon of every human’s natural, peaceful and innate familiarity with each other. What is more, Oliver’s claims in *The Harmless Building* about the disconnection between his work and political reality (that it does not seek to convey any “factive meaning for the affairs of that country [Uruguay]”) and about the knowledge the author holds about his subject (that he does not “know *any more* about Uruguay than the next man”) are made in the spirit of exactly the kind of “humility” Oliver felt Olson’s project, as a direct descendent of Poundian arrogance, lacked.

Both Pound and Olson made specific claims about the poet’s knowledge and the political efficacy of his (it is always, of course, his) work: Pound through his idealisation of the Chinese ideogram via the hi-jacked notes of the misinformed art historian Ernest Fenollosa and through his belief in the cultural holism of linguistic accuracy, that “the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws” unless poets keep the language efficient through properly rigorous usage; and Olson through his bombastic assertions about the Mayan hieroglyphs he could not read but which he nonetheless believed he understood well enough to proclaim that

I have found [...] that the hieroglyphs of the Maya disclose a placement of themselves toward nature of enormous contradiction to ourselves, and yet I am not aware that any of the possible usages of this difference have been allowed to seep out into present society.<sup>98</sup>

Oliver’s statement in *The Harmless Building*, quoted above, implicitly refuses this kind of pontification,

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96 Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p.162, p.164.

97 Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983), p.56.

98 Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.163; Pound, *Literary Essays*, p.21.

and it implicitly refuses the adoption of the kind of braggadocio sense of poetic vocation from which such pontifications issue. In his letters to Riley, as we have seen, Oliver identifies such behaviour as one of the defining traits of modernist practice. It was a practice he came into direct contact with through his intimacy with J.H. Prynne and his fellow poets in Cambridge in the late 1960s. Oliver's valorisation of stupidity should be read historically as the deliberate contradiction in poetic practice of the tradition he himself inherited through his education in the avant-garde, amongst "our generation of avant-gardists," during his time in Cambridge.

This brings us to the third poet in the "philological tradition," and the poet with which this tradition, as Sutherland argues, comes to a close: J.H. Prynne.<sup>99</sup> Oliver's relationship to Prynne was formative and complex, spanning three decades of friendship, correspondence, mutual influence and disagreement, and I touch upon here only what is most relevant to the topic at hand.<sup>100</sup> Oliver and Prynne met, or at least began their acquaintance and friendship in earnest, in Cambridge in 1968. Oliver recalls that at this time "Prynne would give me free tutorials and the first 'booklist' I'd ever had."<sup>101</sup> Over the years both poets published enthusiastic critical appreciations of each other's work. 'From a Letter to Douglas Oliver,' an extract from Prynne's letter to Oliver of 9<sup>th</sup> January 1972, published in *Grosseteste Review* in 1973, is a rhapsodic endorsement of (the then unpublished) *The Harmless Building*.<sup>102</sup> One of the earliest published reviews of Prynne's poetry was written by Oliver and appears in the Saturday, August 6<sup>th</sup> 1968 edition of the *Cambridge News*. The review is a fascinating and valuable early document, not least for the insight and perspicacity it displays in its reading of Prynne's *Kitchen Poems*, but also for what it tells us about Oliver's understanding of Prynne's politics and Prynne's poetic project as it diverged from the modernists we have already discussed. Consider this paragraph:

He [Prynne] has an insight into the inflationary falsity of personal and political values that takes him beyond the Poundian conception of usury. His elegant, leftist philosophies are totally different from Pound, yet the aim is towards an analogous development of purity in the process.<sup>103</sup>

99 See Sutherland, 'J.H. Prynne and Philology,' p.3: "Prynne's early work ends this tradition and [...] his later work constitutes a fundamental critique of it."

100 At the time of writing only Prynne's side of the correspondence, save for a handful of letters from Oliver, is available for consultation in the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex. These letters are: Oliver to Prynne, 11.09.1974, 26.09.1974, 05.08.1975, 12.05.1994 and 03.09.1995, *DOA*, Box 9.

101 *WL*, p.54.

102 See *Grosseteste Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1-4 (1973), pp.152-54. Prynne herein calls "the whole achievement" of *THB* "quite overwhelming," and admits that "I cannot say how deeply affected I am by having read this book," pointing out that "it will be published and recognised to be 'masterly'; but it is also more than that, part of a truer and higher fineness."

103 Oliver, 'Pioneer in Poetry,' review of J.H. Prynne, *Kitchen Poems* and *Day Light Songs*, *Cambridge News*, Saturday, August 6<sup>th</sup> 1968.

Prynne is a left-wing poet, antagonistic to Pound's politics and anti-semitism yet consciously extending the Poundian drive towards rigour and "purity" in the language. Oliver praises Prynne in the review, and the Cambridge avant-garde milieu in which they both took part, in contradistinction to the general atmosphere of contemporary British letters. Prynne's work, Oliver maintains, "has established a quality of experiment and of technical advance which has not been equalled by an English poet for some years," and

underlines that there is an English initiative to take—and that puts him [Prynne] way ahead of all those writers here [in England] who, incredibly, drag their stale, so-called free-verse rhythms about like sacred relics of a forgotten religion.<sup>104</sup>

It is also significant that in this, Oliver's earliest published commentary on Prynne's poetry, he later refers to the "portentous atmosphere" of *Kitchen Poems*' "large-scale economic constructions."<sup>105</sup>

Above I mentioned that Oliver's letters to Peter Riley are full of both named and un-named objects of critical distaste. At the same time as acknowledging the historical importance and technical innovation of Prynne's verse and in some instances openly praising it, Oliver also, in his letters to Riley, consistently attacks the failings of the speculative figure of a poet whose characterisation amounts to a critical description of J.H. Prynne in all but name. Throughout the letters to Riley we discussed above, Oliver rails against the unintelligible, the obfuscatory and the clandestine in contemporary Anglophone poetry. A short recapitulation of the main objects of his dissatisfaction with poets that we have already seen must include: "left-wing" poets who are "intellectual snobs"; poets whose "structures [are] so carefully cemented [...] that no one [can] see through the gaps"; poets "concerned to tell other people *exactly* how it is"; poets who are "the heroes of their own poems"; poets whose diction is "pithy" and who write in "enigmatic phrase[s] uttered with solemn emphasis"; poets who neglect "intelligibility" in favour of the "gnomic"; poets who write for "initiates"; poets who assume that they "know" what other people don't; poets who favour a large amount of "allusiveness"; and to this list we should add poets who incorporate and, in Oliver's estimation, passively rely on, "fragmentation," and who do so "to prevent us from exposing what is unpoetically worked out in what we have already done."<sup>106</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, not to see behind the accumulation of these frustrations a very profound dissatisfaction not just with the poetry of J.H. Prynne, and the poetry of the post-*Brass* period in particular (although some phrases speak more of the "portentous" lyric sermonising of *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* than

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> This last quotation is from Oliver to Riley, 01.11.1978, *DOA*, Box 9.

anything else), but with the very grain of poetic labour epitomised by Prynne's contemporary method and style.

Sometimes Oliver's decision not to name names in his letters to Riley is explicitly announced, such that the excision of moniker itself becomes the clearest indication of exactly who it is he is talking about, as in this letter from 9<sup>th</sup> October 1977:

On the intervention of a certain "nameless" poet at Cambridge I remember thinking irritably, the person as source won't disappear through reading books about its disappearance.<sup>107</sup>

The disappearance of "the person as source," that is, the disappearance of the lyric subject as organising principle, in full prophetic, emphatic and austere effect in *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*, is arguably a major feature of the "negated lyric" of Prynne's poetry, as Sutherland has referred to it, from *Brass* onwards.<sup>108</sup> When Oliver does discuss Prynne by name in his letters to Riley it is almost always in defence of Prynne's work, or to draw a distinction between Prynne and Prynne's "followers."<sup>109</sup> In the mid-1970s Oliver wrote to Riley that he "felt very close to Jeremy's contemporaneous production of *Wound Response*" during the composition of *In the Cave of Suicession*.<sup>110</sup> In 1977 Prynne was "still the Englishman to look to, in [Oliver's] estimation." In a curiously ambivalent statement in the same letter that speaks more of loyalty than of affection or even of critical appreciation, Oliver also wrote that Prynne's "current work is so difficult that it [...] need[s] our support."<sup>111</sup>

In 1979 Oliver published an extended commentary on a poem of Prynne's he admired throughout his life, 'Of Movement Toward a Natural Place,' from the 1974 collection *Wound Response*. The introduction to this commentary raises to the level of the explicit the object of some of the frustrations in the letters to Riley. Oliver writes

I suppose I understand [Prynne's] poetry rather fitfully myself but the best way to restore a decent public discussion of Prynne's work is to insist upon the most bald and obvious role of its meanings [...] No doubt Prynne's work could sometimes, without important cost, be more explicit about its subject matter – much valuable modern poetry of "difficulty" hasn't in my view yet solved this Pound-like problem of allusiveness.<sup>112</sup>

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107 Oliver to Riley, 09.10.1977, *DOA*, Box 9.

108 Sutherland, 'J.H. Prynne and Philology,' p.8

109 Oliver to Riley, 21.11.1993, *DOA*, Box 9.

110 Oliver to Riley, 03.01.1975, *DOA*, Box 9.

111 Oliver to Riley, 05.01.1977, *DOA*, Box 9.

112 Oliver, 'J.H. Prynne's "Of Movement Towards A Natural Place,"' p.93.

A struggle between the appreciation of innovation and common purpose on the one hand, and frustration with the “allusiveness” and therefore (in Oliver’s view) elitist dishonesty of the work on the other, characterises Oliver’s response to Prynne’s poetry from the beginning to the end of their long friendship. A letter to Riley from the early 1990s helpfully summarises Oliver’s ambivalence from a later historical juncture:

Jeremy’s recent writing [...] seems motivated by concerns very close to my own heart. His line seems to take against Western individualism: if the individualistic voice is abstracted as far as possible out of the language surface (attraction of the ideogram), then a more universal spirit may have more ready access to the creation of meaning [...] While I sympathise with this – although not by giving anyone a free ride over questions so important – I am too worried about poetry’s elitist isolation from common culture to want to follow it [...] <sup>113</sup>

The “creation of meaning” by “a more universal spirit” is attractive to Oliver, but its assumption through an “elitist” abstraction “out of the language surface” of difficult, allusive lines of poetry is no substitute for the admission by the lyric voice of the ground from which we may all have ready access to that same “universal spirit,” and that ground is the unpolluted subjective substance of our commonness or kind.

To reveal the stupidity or ignorance in ourselves, otherwise hidden by “elitist” difficulty, acknowledges rather than recoils from our individualism and thus confronts it for what it is; it does not hide this basic fact of inadequacy through allusive display. Put simply, Oliver believed that Prynne’s poetry was guilty, in the last instance, of avoiding the very issue to which it seemed at first to speak so demandingly. Oliver goes on to say that

I want to admit back into the text that kind of self-reflectiveness which permits modesty; also the white Western poet’s vulnerability and inadequacy and tendency to a bad kind of individualism should be on display. My motives are almost identical to Jeremy’s, I think. <sup>114</sup>

The motive of Prynne’s identified by Oliver with which he claims solidarity is the fact of the compromise and complicity of the white Western male voice with the injustice which it would explicate and denounce:

The western voice is hideously compromised in all that goes wrong: agreed. Not to reveal that *in the voice* seems to me – in Jeremy’s followers, though less in his own originating approach which is properly motivated – a kind of

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<sup>113</sup> Oliver to Riley, 21.11.1993, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*



arrogance.<sup>115</sup>

Solidarity of purpose and motivation is thus combined with distrust of the ramifications of Prynne's work as Oliver interprets it.<sup>116</sup>

Oliver's problem with Prynne by this point in time at least, although arguably since the 1970s, is that Prynne deletes from his poetry the natural, innate locus of "inadequacy," the lyric voice, and hides it with prosodic "display." No matter how technically brilliant the resulting poetry might be, it fails this fundamental test of moral honesty that for Oliver meant the difference between a "democratic tone" that could speak to a "common culture" on the one hand, and elitist arrogance that was displaced from such commonality on the other, and that resulted in a poetry destined to be consumed only by sycophantic "initiates." To return to the 1970s, we should note that one of the ramifications of Prynne's project, in line with Prynne's modernist precursors, was the treatment of the figure of the stupid person. Prynne, in work directly contemporaneous with the Ferry Press edition of Oliver's *The Diagram--Poems*, treats the figure of the stupid person in much the same way as we have seen Pound and Olson treat it, and that is as a parasitic distraction that is the epitome of human indolence and failure. These stanzas are from *Down Where Changed* (1979):

Is that quite all, the stupid creep  
under the stairs and in the gloom  
will do their best to fall asleep  
  
and in the shadow of that room  
we hear the shallow call to deep  
and fail the test, and miss our doom.<sup>117</sup>

The "stupid creep" is condemned by the lobotomised nursery-rhyme tetrameter of these quatrains (their "Idiot's Guide monoglotese," in Sutherland's gloss) as the irredeemable fool incapable even of securing

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115 *Ibid.*

116 Prynne makes assertions of common purpose and shared position central to his correspondence with Oliver. In a letter of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1993, Prynne describes three "terminal point[s]" of his contemporary poetic, before stressing that "these are distinctions I believe and they steal some of the comfort in belief that there are differences between us: I think that truly there are not." On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1994, in a letter in response to Oliver's recently published *A Salvo for Africa* and reflecting upon his own collection *Not-You*, Prynne finds it "interesting that we come to differ so much in the direction taken by work in hand, and that even so we can see clearly the impulsions shaping the directive." See Prynne to Oliver, 23.02.1993 and 03.05.1994, *DOA*, Box 9. A full account of precisely how each poet defines both their bond of common purpose or motivation and the divergent results of their individuated literary, ethical and political commitments, must take into account the full archive of correspondence between the two poets, a task for which there is at this juncture neither the space nor the resources.

117 J.H. Prynne, *Poems* (Tarsset, Northumberland and North Fremantle: Bloodaxe Books and Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005), p.305.

the means of his own destruction.<sup>118</sup> Here is an important contrast between Oliver's and Prynne's work of the period: whilst for Oliver the stupid child is a limit case for the possibilities of human kindness and thus the perfect icon for a universalism founded on just such kindness, for Prynne the stupid person is fit only to be the bathetic image of our capacity for witless annihilation. In Oliver the child "with really low IQ" is blessed, the figure of redemption itself; in Prynne the stupid person barely sleepwalks through the apocalypse. In his letters to Riley, Oliver measures Prynne's poetry against a standard of universalism based on democratic inclusivity, and by this standard Prynne consistently comes up short.

And yet Oliver writes to Riley that his "motives are almost identical to Jeremy's." How are we to understand this identity? One way to do so would be to compare the conceptualisations of "stupidity" that emerge from Oliver's and Prynne's poetry. For Oliver, it is vital to remember, to admit of stupidity in ourselves is the *intelligent* thing to do.<sup>119</sup> In *The Infant and the Pearl*, Oliver writes that "the highest human intelligence is a near / relation of ignorance," and the same can be said of the concept of "stupidity" as Oliver works it out in his writings of the 1970s. To admit of "stupidity," and not to hide it, is a way of acknowledging and securing a bond of common feeling by recognising that which is deeply and inalienably human. Arrogant intellectual posturing is precisely that which prevents us from acknowledging such a bond. For Prynne, the common lapse into stupidity is a perfect representation of our current state of historical entrenchment in moral ruination, and of our propensity to accept as an ethical salve the thrilling sanctimony of despair. In *Down Where Changed*, "deep sadness is a perk / of the iron will," a simple recourse to the indolence and "lazy, dishonest misery" of contemporary political lassitude. The "stupid creep" in *Down Where Changed* refuses his own access to the depths of human knowledge. The "shallow call to deep" is likely a deliberately mutilated quotation from Psalm 42, "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." To "hear the shallow call to deep" is not only to hear a "shallow," and thus inauthentic and inadmissible, "call to deep"; profundity itself suffers a wretched demotion expressed by the grammatical clumsiness of the phrase "call to deep." Profundity is damaged by our very articulation of it. It is damaged because we

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118 See Keston Sutherland, 'Hilarious Absolute Daybreak,' *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary*, Vol. 2, On the Poetry of J.H. Prynne, ed. Ryan Dobran (2010), pp.115-147 (119).

119 And compare on this point Avital Ronell's extensive and multifaceted investigation into philosophical and literary "stupidity" in her book of the same name. Ronell points out early on in her study that "stupidity does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought. It does not stand in the way of wisdom, for the disguise of the wise is to avow unknowing." Ronell goes on to nominate stupidity as that which "[t]he poets know": "The poets know from stupidity, the essential dulling or weakening that forms the precondition of utterance." Oliver's thinking on the matter would both temper and exaggerate this claim: that poets *should* know from stupidity (they do not always), and that such knowledge forms the precondition not only of utterance, but of a proper modesty and moral fortitude essential to good poetry. See Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p.5.

are too stupid to realise it is damaged. Prynne thus identifies stupidity as part of a poetical diagnosis of contemporary political enervation; Oliver enlists stupidity in the service of a utopian project whose aim is the revitalisation of the body politic in the shape of poems. For both poets, the motive force for deploying “stupidity” is the condemnation not just of, as Oliver puts it, a “bad kind of [white, Western] individualism,” but of the entire shape of political discourse built upon the foundations of precisely such a hegemonic ideology.

### 2.3 – Tom, “authentic politics” and unity

*The Diagram--Poems* are the first work of Oliver’s to attempt to formulate and exemplify what he calls in the poems’ 1987 prose introduction “an authentic politics.”<sup>120</sup> They do so by drawing on revolutionary armed struggle in its context, in the case of Uruguay, in military dictatorship and the economic hegemony of foreign capital, in order to critique both dictatorial and revolutionary socialist standpoints. Beyond these standpoints, the poems favour a “political ideal” which develops the “perfect identity between self and Other” discussed in the previous chapter into a utopian democratic vision.<sup>121</sup> The *The Diagram--Poems* name this condition “a land silvery with democracy.”<sup>122</sup> There is some measure of ambiguity in this phrase, and it is not unambiguously a utopian description. “[S]ilvery” is a peculiar word choice. I explore its connotations in terms of monetary value below.<sup>123</sup> It is likewise important to note that it was favoured by poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> century writing in a neo-classical pastoral mode to describe scenes of georgic idyll, and that from a classical and neo-classical perspective the word has further connotations of social and political decline in the sense of a “silver age” following a “golden” one. Despite the ironical tinge the word accrues when these associations are considered, the overwhelming sense of a yearned-for democratic Elysium which its context in the poem ‘U’ brings to mind leads me to treat the phrase here as a utopian vision.

In the introductory ‘Night Shift,’ recounting the poems’ conception whilst working as a journalist in Paris, Oliver writes:

whether the guerrillas were right or wrong, you were dreaming quite obliquely, as you tapped the [news] stories out, of how an authentic politics

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<sup>120</sup> K, p.102, p.121.

<sup>121</sup> The phrase “political ideal” appears in *TTL*, p.23.

<sup>122</sup> K, p.121.

<sup>123</sup> See below, section 2.4.

might combine the mildness of your dead baby with the stern wisdom of a judicious elder minister: some beneficial balance, instead of revolutionary flamboyance and a dictatorship's response of iron rule.<sup>124</sup>

The use of the term “authentic” inevitably brings to mind Heidegger's *eigentlich* [authentic] and *Eigentlichkeit* [authenticity]. Writing in 1987, Oliver would have been well aware of the philosopher's terminology – he read Heidegger, or at least about Heidegger, as we saw in the previous chapter, in the early 1970s. He would possibly have been aware of the fact, too, that the term had since been ruthlessly critiqued in Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*, first published in English in 1973.<sup>125</sup> Given his antipathy to Marxist ruthlessness (as an extreme form of left-wing snobbery), if Oliver was aware of this critical development he may well have employed the term “authentic” in philological loyalty to Heidegger's sense of owning up to the truthfulness of *Dasein's* [Being-there's] existential project in the face of the inauthentically normalised public of *das Man* [the They]. It seems far likelier, however, that the Heideggerian term resonated with Oliver in the same way in which we have seen Husserl's descriptions of transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and Lacan's *savoir*, resonate with him, that is, as a rigorous, philosophical exposition of a far simpler, more “everyday” truth: that, for example, “ideas of [one's] own” are preferable to the intellectual sophistries of contemporary theoreticians. Oliver was a pragmatist and his brief excursions into philosophy are full of the promise of the layman's common sense. I propose, therefore, to follow the moral and political implications of “authentic politics” as they emerge through immanent critique of Oliver's oeuvre, rather than to develop an ontological framework for their explication which risks obscuring the complex moral arguments of the work.

Tom Oliver's death in November 1969 precipitated Oliver and his family's move to Paris early the following year.<sup>126</sup> There he began work on, among other projects, what would later become *The Diagram--Poems*. Tom is a constant presence in all of Oliver's poetry and prose between 1973 and 1985. What Oliver calls in ‘Night Shift’ Tom's “mildness,” and which is elsewhere in the oeuvre referred to as “stupidity,” “innocence,” or “ignorance,” operates in all of the work between 1973 and 1985 as a pacifistic moral compass, often combined with a form of “wisdom,” or “mature cleverness,” that tempers, in equal measure, what Oliver increasingly perceives as the exploitative nature of capitalist societies *and* the harmful pretensions of the radical left-wing politics that would revolutionise those societies.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

<sup>125</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>126</sup> Oliver to Riley, 28.03.1970, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>127</sup> “[S]tupidity” is the term favoured in *THB* to refer to “the sweetness [...] and near harmlessness of a baby,” that,

Whenever they are deployed in Oliver's writing, the terms "stupidity," "mildness," "innocence" and "ignorance" all indicate a natural, innate and morally sound capacity for pacifistic human co-existence.

An "authentic politics" sounds at first like an oxymoron: how can a "politics," a social phenomenon defined by difference and compromise, be singularly "authentic," or for that matter, "true"? The answer is that Oliver's conception of "authentic politics" based on "beneficial balance" does not only, or even primarily, refer to some middle-ground of the political spectrum between capitalist oligarchs and revolutionary socialists. It also refers, and it refers most pressing, to an ideal social relation that is first theorised in Oliver's unpublished essays from his time at Essex, and subsequently developed in *The Harmless Building*, *In the Cave of Suicession*, *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics*, in terms of harmonious, sympathetic and "harmless" human interaction. Between 1973 and 1980 the behavioural code inspired by Tom, and Tom's death, is developed into a political argument of which *The Diagram--Poems* is the first major expression. The notion of harmlessness in Oliver's work originates in *The Harmless Building*. In Oliver's own words, recorded late in his life, the novel was "the mother plant" amongst his publications, because future books emerged from its conceptual field, "propagating like strawberries, as by tendrils leading from [it]."<sup>128</sup> *The Harmless Building* begins with the narrator explicitly mimicking the "harmlessness" of his "mongol" son in order to better project to those around him "an outgoingness and kindness, a lock of coherence, an area of almost no-harm like a clearing in the middle of harm."<sup>129</sup> Oliver persistently refers to his son's disability as "mongolism." In the novel, "mongolism" is the most prescient expression of harmlessness because it makes explicit the underlying "unintelligence" of the affected person, and therefore provides access to an experience of common humanity otherwise hidden, obscured or dissembled.<sup>130</sup>

*The Harmless Building's* first chapter, 'Kind Regards,' opens:

For the moment the truth is hiding in obstreperous fiction. I can, however, say that a real mongol baby died and that his memory affects my life. In his mongolism I find an analogy for my own stupidity. He and I are united at that

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"[j]oined to an energetic and mature cleverness, [...] may become a force for good" [p.5]; "innocence" is used at crucial junctures in *The Diagram--Poems* to refer to broadly similar matrices of ideal human behaviour and moral goodness; "ignorance" is deployed in *The Infant and the Pearl* in much the same fashion. Oliver refers to "mature cleverness" in *THB*, "stern wisdom" in the 1987 introduction to *The Diagram--Poems* and "highest human intelligence" in *The Infant and the Pearl* in addition to his emphases on stupidity, innocence and ignorance.

<sup>128</sup> *CAAS*, p.251. The organicism of this metaphor was likely inherited from Coleridge, whose "full development of the organism as aesthetic model" M.H. Abrams details in his classic study *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp.167-177 (167).

<sup>129</sup> *THB*, p.5.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

primitive level of thought where our ideas are fairly random, not ambitious, only half out of thought-chaos itself. How aptly mongolism is a symbol for the sweetness, 'stupidity' and near-harmlessness of a baby! Joined to an energetic and mature cleverness, such sweetness may become a force for good.<sup>131</sup>

To be "united at that primitive level of thought" exposed by "stupidity" is to enjoy an experience at least analogous to, if not directly congruous with, that of "perfect identity between self and Other." In the pamphlet *The Three Lilies*, first published in 1982 but based on some introductory remarks Oliver made before a reading of *The Diagram--Poems* in 1980, Oliver describes the female figure who represents in his work "the proper resolution of time seen as passing and time seen in its successive instants."<sup>132</sup> This figure, he goes on, is "also a political ideal in which the one-sidedness of idealism itself may be figured, paradoxically, as transcended."<sup>133</sup> The "political ideal" is already by this point explicitly bound up in the language of "unity," specifically that of "time seen as a unity of what has passed and what is passing."<sup>134</sup> In 1985, Oliver literalises this metaphorical and temporal "unity" into the ideal social relation of the "union between / people," named, in *The Infant and the Pearl*, "Socialism."<sup>135</sup>

By 1990, Oliver explicitly refers to the kind of social relation defined by kindness, unity and harmlessness as "an international kinship."<sup>136</sup> In the autobiographical prose/poetry sequence 'An Island That Is All The World,' "international kinship" is defined as a universal commonality apprehensible by a process of subtraction:

Even if, as I was, we're brought up in some middle-class, snobbish, racist suburb, once we touch more profoundly natural unconscious sides of ourselves all the cultural rubbish falls away and we recognize a deep kinship, an international kinship.<sup>137</sup>

This is the moment amongst Oliver's numerous explications of his own poetic labour in which the phenomenological theory of the early essays finds its most cogent expression in terms of a literary project of avowed universalism. This "kinship" is "profoundly natural." It is for everyone, and it is for everyone once "all the cultural rubbish falls away" to engender "recogni[tion]" of ourselves and each other as we really are. It is also the language of the transcendental *epoché* elevated to a vision of global social

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131 *Ibid.*

132 See *TTL*, p.23. *The Three Lilies* was revised and reprinted ten years later in Denise Riley, ed., *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp.276-281.

133 *Ibid.*

134 *Ibid.*, p.22.

135 *SP*, p.73.

136 *VTH*, p.92.

137 *Ibid.*, pp.91-92.

harmony. We “recognize” our “kinship” because it was there all along, buried “deep”; it is the natural, inalienable property of our common humanity. The section of ‘An Island That Is All The World’ quoted above concludes an anecdote about a reading of *The Diagram--Poems* Oliver gave in Luxembourg in 1987. This reading was particularly successful; Oliver recounts noticing an “unusual tension” in the room during the reading; after the reading he was complimented by friendly poets.<sup>138</sup> “[I]nternational kinship,” like “perfect identity,” is most potently recognized through the spoken language of poetry.

We saw above how, in the second stanza of the *The Diagram--Poems*’ ‘U,’ that the “spoken kindness” with which “[t]he lost child’s voice should speak” is precisely the inalienable human characteristic that “we know,” yet fail to recognize, meanwhile “let[ting] the voice break in our throats” “until” the Tupamaros’ gross “flamboyance” speaks with a different “voice” altogether. We are now in a position to note the repetition in this stanza of the emphatic assertion we saw in Oliver’s New Years Eve 1970 letter to Peter Riley, this time with an inclusive plural pronoun substituted for the second person: “You know damn well that stupidity is there,” becomes, in ‘U,’ “We know this. Everyone.” In *The Harmless Building*, Oliver is “united [with Tom] at that primitive level of thought”; through the “mildness” and “kindness” exemplified by Tom, the “lost child” in *The Diagram--Poems*, we acknowledge the radical similarity of humankind as the condition for the realisation of “a land silvery with democracy.” It is not, therefore, ironic that the phrase “we know this” in *The Diagram--Poems* is an emphatic expression of what in *The Harmless Building* and in his correspondence Oliver calls “stupidity,” because this phrase is in fact a corroboration of the same concept. To “know” one important thing does not preclude the possibility of our being harmlessly stupid. What we “know,” even, or especially, in “the heart of swift cruelty” that symbolises both the Tupamaros’ reckless actions, and their subsequent abuse and torture by the police, is that our “unity” in “international kinship” presents a “natural” imperative to manifest the “land silvery with democracy.”

The term “imperative” is used here, and throughout the present chapter, with the implication of its Kantian connotations fully intact; it is crucial for Oliver, I suggest, that what “we know” be made into an incontrovertible moral law. The less we cling to pre-established doctrines of political dogma that justify everything from capitalist exploitation to violent revolutionary praxis, the better we are able to understand, recognize and act upon Oliver’s imperative. This imperative urges us against divisive political creed and towards the inclusivity of universal intersubjective harmony. Oliver believed that

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91. The poet-friends were Wendy Mulford and Jacques Roubaud. Wendy Mulford to the author, personal communication, 27.02.14.

poems provide a glimpse of the “perfect identity between self and Other” in each syllable of prosodic iteration, and that “stupidity” provides access to the natural “kindness” it reveals to be innate and universal. The “true politics” and the “special intersubjectivity” of the former, contained within Oliver’s theory of prosody, is conceptually congruous with the “authentic politics” of the latter. All three of Oliver’s major political poems take this “authentic politics” as their underlying theme; it is the standpoint from which the entire scene of political behaviour, from fascist dictatorships to left-wing extremists, is understood to be morally and spiritually lacking.

In my first chapter, I identified in Oliver’s early essays a phenomenological theory of prosody that tends towards the establishment of a “perfect identity between self and Other,” or a “special intersubjectivity,” by the articulation of poetic music. We saw that, for Oliver, the “moments” of shared consciousness that poetry engenders between poet-author and reader are decidedly non-intellectual, and that they shed the sophistries of philosophical rigour to produce a unity of “everyday” commonality.<sup>139</sup> In this chapter I have so far explored Oliver’s thinking about “stupidity” as a counter to intellectual (poetical) snobbery and left-wing radicalism. This thinking emphasises an “area of personality” that is universal and therefore a potential basis for an “international kinship,” or a “special intersubjectivity” on a global scale. It is only a potential basis; as the last poem in *The Diagram--Poems* has it, we “[lack] the one innocence” that would allow an “authentic politics” to emerge. At the core of Oliver’s poetic project, two simultaneous strands of thinking co-operate: the first determines the possibility of “perfect identity” through poetic music; the second abjures what Oliver comprehends as arrogant snobbery, which includes, but is not limited to, the expression of revolutionary left-politics, in favour of pacifistic common kindness. Oliver’s three major “political” poems, *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics*, all argue in different ways that our failure to recognize the fundamental original unity of human beings, whether in “kindness,” “innocence,” “the union between / people,” or “Spirit,” is the condition of our failure to institute an “authentic politics.” This politics becomes, instead, most prominently accessible in poems themselves. Reading poems traces the microcosm of “perfect identity” whose macrocosmic social articulation remains largely impossible because our “origin[s],” like the Tupamaros’, are “rotten.” In a perfectly literal sense, the “spoken kindness” of *The Diagram--Poems* consists in the poems being read.<sup>140</sup> “[T]rue politics” remains congealed in poems, until our reading of

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139 “The poet writes from a centre that we may as well identify in an everyday sense as his notion of self [...]”; see ‘Who does the poet,’ pp.1-2; and cf. Chapter 1, section 1.4.

140 In the mid-1990s Oliver wrote that “Only at those moments [when a poem is read silently or aloud, or chanted, or sung by the poet or by a reader] can it [the poem] be truly a poem, an artwork alive in time; otherwise it remains



them articulates this relation anew.

There is a long and polyvalent history in literary, political and religious thought of the coincidence of the valorisation of unconventional or otherwise debased, non-doctrinal, unlearned or natural knowledge on the one hand, and spiritual and/or political union on the other. The particular manifestations of Oliver's conception of "stupidity," which include the later emphases on "mildness," "innocence" and "ignorance" should be read, I suggest, in the context of this multi-faceted tradition, which extends from medieval Christian theology and mysticism, through French Enlightenment philosophy, to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic tenets, to early twentieth-century anarchist individualism. This history further illuminates the moral imperative towards pacifistic, democratic unity that "spoken kindness" declares "we know." Two bodies of thought in this vast tradition are of particular relevance, and their resonance with Oliver's poetics will be investigated in what follows. These are Rousseau's political philosophy as contained in the *Discourses*, and Langland's descriptions of *kynde* [kind] and *kynde knowyng* [kind knowing] in *Piers Plowman*.

### 2.3a – Langland and *kynde*

There is a broad scholarly consensus that the concept *kynde*, the faculty *kynde knowyng* and the personification *Kynde* all play extremely important roles in William Langland's fourteenth-century dream-vision, *Piers Plowman*. Evidenced by the sheer volume of critical attention to the terms, their significance is also explicitly emphasised by various scholars. Hugh White, for example, states that "the concept *kynde* plays a highly significant role in *Piers Plowman* in all versions of the poem," and points to the fact that, "strikingly, God is identified as *Kynde* in the second part of the poem."<sup>141</sup> Mary Clemente

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just a text, closed up within a book or opened to critical attention, an object whose relations with time a critic may describe but which remain potential, not actual." It is unclear exactly what kind of "truth" Oliver is appealing to here; it is nevertheless tempting to read the identification of truthfulness with the sonorous iteration of poetic language in terms of the type of authentic intersubjective encounter we explored in the previous chapter. See 'Poetry's Subject,' originally published in *PN Review* 105 [not, as Oliver cites himself in *WL*, 95] (Vol. 22, No. 1; Sep.-Oct., 1995), pp.52-58, later revised and extended in Davis, ed., *Real Voices on Reading*, pp.83-102.

- 141 Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), p.1. The reflections in the present chapter on *kynde* and *kynde knowyng* (or *knowynge*) draw heavily on the following literature: Mary Clemente Davlin, 'Kynde Knowyng as a major theme in *Piers Plowman* B,' *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 22, No. 85 (Feb., 1971), pp.1-19 and 'Kynde Knowyng as a Middle English equivalent for 'Wisdom' in *Piers Plowman* B,' *Medium Aevum*, Vol. 50 (Jan., 1981), pp.5-17; Britton J. Harwood, 'Langland's "Kynde Knowyng" and the Quest for Christ,' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (Feb., 1983), pp.242-255; Michelle Karnes, 'Will's Imagination in *Piers Plowman*,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), pp.27-58; M. Teresa Tavormina, 'Kindly Similitude: Langland's Matrimonial Trinity,' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Nov., 1982), pp.117-128; Edward Vasta, *The Spiritual Basis of Piers Plowman* (London, The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1965); White, *Nature and Salvation*, and Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Davlin, meanwhile, refers to the “crucial importance” of *kynde knowyng* “as a major theme informing the whole of *Piers Plowman*.”<sup>142</sup> There is no comprehensive critical consensus regarding the exact meaning of each of the three terms. Nevertheless, the interpretative work to explicate the basis and importance of *kynde*, *kynde knowyng* and *Kynde* has resulted in some useful interrelated critical distinctions. For our purposes, the two most important of these distinctions are: firstly, *kynde* and *kynde knowyng*’s connotations of natural or innate, and innately moral, understanding; this includes, in some accounts, the essential goodness of mankind as expressed in their *kyndenness*, that is, their relation to *kynde*, and their *kynde* relation to each other, as a natural “force for good”; and secondly, the *kynde* connaturality between human beings, and between the human and the divine that constitutes union with God (personified in *Plowman* as *Kynde*) through Christ.<sup>143</sup> These aspects of *Piers Plowman* present a Christian devotional worldview which bears a strong similarity to the behavioural, moral and political imperative that develops in Oliver’s poetry and prose before, in and after *The Diagram--Poems*. They provide, too, a medieval redemptive paradigm, and a strong emphasis on civic and spiritual unity, which were enormously influential on Oliver’s later writing. *The Infant and the Pearl* is narratively, prosodically and structurally based on the *Pearl* of Langland’s contemporary or near-contemporary, the anonymous poet of *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

It is not entirely clear whether Oliver read *Piers Plowman* before or during the composition of *The Diagram--Poems*. Certainly he read Chaucer, as can be seen from the readings of *The Canterbury Tales* in the essays discussed in my first chapter. Despite this, it does not seem that Oliver had any great interest in other medieval or Middle English texts before his introduction to *Pearl* by John Hall in the mid- to late-1970s – Oliver’s reading of *Pearl* at least post-dates his composition of *The Harmless Building*, and may post-date the composition of *In the Cave of Suicession*. Oliver writes that “John Hall remarked once that *The Harmless Building* reminded him of the medieval *Pearl* poem because of the role a child plays in it. That struck home [...].”<sup>144</sup> John Hall recalls that he gave his personal copy of *Pearl* to Oliver during Oliver’s stay with Hall and his partner in Devon sometime in the 1970s. Hall writes that “I don’t think he knew it [*Pearl*] at all.” Hall also notes that

I did more than recommend *Pearl* to him. I put my own copy in his hand to take home with him and didn’t see it again for a very long time, when he returned it by post without, as I recall, any accompanying note. When he sent

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<sup>142</sup> Davlin, ‘*Kynde Knowyng*,’ p.1.

<sup>143</sup> The phrase “force for good” is White’s. See *Nature and Salvation*, p.92.

<sup>144</sup> *CAAS*, p.254.

it back I didn't know about *The Infant and the Pearl*. Our conversation may have been prompted as much by *In the Cave of Suicession* as *The Harmless Building*.<sup>145</sup>

If indeed Oliver had the inclination to explore other Middle English dream narratives after Hall's intervention, then even if the conversation was prompted by *In the Cave of Suicession* (1974) rather than *The Harmless Building* (1973), this would still allow plenty of time for the influence of *Piers Plowman* to be felt before the first full sequence of *Diagram--Poems* was published in 1978 in *Ochre* magazine. If Oliver did not have a reading knowledge of *Piers Plowman* before he finished composing *The Diagram--Poems*, this does not negate the literary-historical resonance of the following connotations and implications of *kynde* and *kyndeness*, to which Oliver's "kind" and "kindness" still bear witness, intended or not.

After the period of *The Diagram--Poems*, it becomes easier to assume that Oliver was aware of *Piers Plowman*. Not only does the intense study of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century *Pearl* that the entire composition of *The Infant and the Pearl* displays, and that Hall's recollection corroborates, suggest that Oliver was also well-read in the small number of roughly coeval Middle English dream narratives by the mid-1980s at least; furthermore, Oliver's protagonist-dreamer in *Penniless Politics* shares the name of the protagonist-dreamer of *Piers Plowman*, "Will."<sup>146</sup> Despite the lack of corroborating evidence in the correspondence or published prose, this seems too much of a coincidence to attribute to chance. What is more, the concept and frequent usage of the Middle English "kynde" is not unique to Langland. It is a feature, too, of the *Pearl*-poet's vocabulary, who used it throughout his oeuvre. In his highly informative essay on *The Infant and the Pearl*, John Kerrigan records personal communication from Oliver that the title of the 1987 collected poems *Kind* was "partly [...] suggested to [Oliver] by *Pearl*."<sup>147</sup> "Kynde" appears six times in the text of *Pearl* ("kyndely" once), and I take Oliver's communication to Kerrigan on this point precisely as it was given. It was only "partly" suggested to Oliver by *Pearl* because the term's most fecund and productive usage in the Middle English canon occurs in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. In the same article Kerrigan points convincingly to the influence on *The Infant and the Pearl* of both *Piers Plowman*

145 John Hall to the author, personal communication, 13.12.2013. In 1997 Oliver published a short commentary on *Sir Gawain* in Nick Rennison and Michael Schmidt, ed., *Poets on Poets*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), with a section of the poem in a "slightly compromised modernisation" (p.138). The title of his late poem 'The Video House of Fame,' collected in the posthumous collection *Arrondissements* (Great Wilbraham, Cambridge: Salt, 2003, pp.53-156), riffs on Chaucer's 'The House of Fame.' A detailed survey of Oliver's reading of medieval literature follows in the next chapter.

146 Oliver's "Will Penniless" in fact appears to be a conjunction of *Piers Plowman*'s "Will" and Thomas Nashe's eponymous hero "Pierce Penniless."

147 John Kerrigan, 'Mrs Thatcher's *Pearl*,' *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp.181-199 (189).

and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In all of the works attributed to the *Pearl*-poet, *kynde* and its associated terms display nothing like the range and depth of moral and spiritual repercussions to which the contemporary literature on *Piers Plowman* attest. I therefore proceed here to scrutinise these repercussions and to articulate their relevance to Oliver's poetic.

"Kynde" is used in *Piers Plowman* as a noun, an adjective and a pronoun. The term's "great semantic richness," as White describes it, is as much Langland's "resource" as it is the critic's "impediment," since the "extreme polysemy" of the Middle English results in a variety of interrelated meanings and connotations.<sup>148</sup> Langland scholars agree that the term is of vital importance to the dreamer-protagonist Will's allegorical journey towards wisdom and salvation. The Norton editors' gloss of the term provides a useful simplification of three core meanings:

(1) God conceived of primarily in his creative aspect [...] (2) the nature of something, as in the modern expression "this kind of thing rather than that kind" (Langland uses the expression "the law of kynde" to cover what we would call the law of nature as well as the instinctual morality of decent human beings, insofar as the latter seems to be cross-cultural[]); (3) kindness in the modern sense, i.e., benevolence, but conceived of as the norm of human behaviour rather than as some special sort of altruism: to be "unkind" is to be distorted and unnatural as well as cruel. *Kind love*, "natural love": a love that is an instinctive and a natural expression of a benevolent will and cannot be taught [...] Langland's most crucial [...] use of the word is in the term *kind knowing*, "natural knowledge": experiential knowledge – whether interiorly or exteriorly derived – as opposed to reasoning and to book learning.<sup>149</sup>

Already we can see something of the continuity of connotation between Langland's *kynde* and Oliver's "kindness." What the Norton editors refer to as the "instinctual morality of decent human beings" Oliver stresses in *The Diagram--Poems* 'U' as that which "we" can learn from Tom that we already instinctively "know": "We know Tom's voice, we now know this, we see[.]"<sup>150</sup>

Nicolette Zeeman emphasises that "the Latin noun *natura* and its Middle English equivalent *kynde* signify 'innate structure or disposition,'" and points out that the Middle English Dictionary "gives weight to this 'innate' and 'not acquired' aspect of Middle English *kynde*["]"<sup>151</sup> She further notes that

*kynde* has been seen to refer to the essential or habitual nature of things and to a moral and social natural order; it is a name for God the creator as it is for

148 White, *Nature and Salvation*, p.1.

149 William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H.A. Shepherd (Norton Critical Editions: New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2006), p.630.

150 K, p.122.

151 Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, p.160.

his creation [...] *Kynde* and its cognates appear when Langland discusses practical or secular ethics and politics, where they retain strongly moral connotations. *Kynde* is associated with the provision and sharing of material goods, sexuality and bodily relations, the means of life on earth; it is connected to ideas of human 'kindness,' the affective bonds between human beings [...]<sup>152</sup>

That which rings with the sound of "spoken kindness" in *The Diagram--Poems* certainly speaks of an "affective [bond] between human beings," a bond obscured and severed by the species' subdivision into mutually antagonistic elements. Such a bond is, in both cases, determined by a "strongly moral" connection, that is, a connection that determines what we "should" do. Britton J. Harwood asserts that *kynde knowyng* in *Piers Plowman*

resonates with – conceivably replaces for him [Langland] – *notitia intuitiva*, one of the terms essential to philosophy for the previous hundred years [before the composition of *Piers Plowman*]. In effect, Will [the narrator and protagonist of *Piers Plowman*] makes intuitive cognition the psychological test for his knowledge of Christ.<sup>153</sup>

Harwood also points out that "the 'kynde' in 'kynde knowyng' signifies first of all the evident character of the knowledge in question, its safety from skepticism."<sup>154</sup> Harwood notes that other, "nontechnical [*sic*]" interpretations of *kynde knowyng* include "intuition," "physical apprehension," "immediate and experiential," and "direct" and "unratiocinative" knowledge.<sup>155</sup>

The "law of *kynde*" is invoked in *Piers Plowman* by various allegorical characters to admonish and teach Will. Hugh White has written carefully and cogently on the various instances in the poem of the expression "law of *kynde*." He suggests that there is "a general desire on Langland's part to see the natural as a force for good," since

Langland much more frequently treats the *kynde* as morally positive than he finds it conducing to evil. The law of *kynde* may on occasion seem questionable in its authority or influence, but Langland is also able to understand it as urging to the good.<sup>156</sup>

As evidence for this, he quotes the following "exhortation regarding those who have suffered at the hands of Fortune or false men" from Passus VI:

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152 *Ibid.*, pp.160-161.

153 Harwood, 'Langland's "Kynde Knowyng,"' p.245.

154 *Ibid.*, p.246.

155 *Ibid.*, fn. 25. The definitions are, respectively, those of Neville Coghill, David Fowler, Edward Vasta and J.A. Burrow.

156 White, *Nature and Salvation*, p.92.

Conforte hem with thi catel for Cristes love of hevene;  
 Love hem and lene hem, for so lawe of [kynde wolde]:  
*Alter alterius onera portate*<sup>157</sup>

[Comfort such at your own cost, for the love of Christ in Heaven;  
 Love them and relieve them – so the law of Kind directs.  
*Bear ye one another's burdens.*]<sup>158</sup>

And comments:

Langland seems to have identified the law of Christ with the law of nature in a way that is perfectly orthodox, but which accords a very high status to the law of nature, and which [...] would be in line with a desire to find the natural a power for good.<sup>159</sup>

In White's commentary, *kynde* is therefore associated with the expression of a natural moral law, a "general law" ingrained into the very fabric of human being.

Zeeman, meanwhile, attends to the Pauline and Augustinian roots of this law's explication; St. Paul

uses the term *naturaliter* to describe the moral law placed by God in creation [...] Their [the gentiles'] bodies are marked with an inner 'writing' of the law, for they show 'opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis' ('the work of the law written in their hearts'). This natural law is indelible, Augustine claims, 'written in the hearts of men, and not even wickedness itself can erase it.'<sup>160</sup>

St. Augustine's heart upon which the moral law is inscribed is alluded to in the line "and a heart on which the diagram is scored" in the final section of the concluding poem of *The Diagram--Poems*, 'The Diagonal is Diagonal':

just a final diagram almost straight  
 and a heart on which the diagram is scored  
 beside the deaths of innocences we have known  
 and even caused a little in the scarface heart.<sup>161</sup>

The quotation from St. Augustine that Zeeman cites is from Book II of Augustine's *Confessions*: "Furtum

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* White here uses the B-text. The Latin is from *Galatians* 6:2.

<sup>158</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p.107.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, pp.171-172.

<sup>161</sup> *K*, p.126.

certe punit lex tua, domine, et lex scripta in cordibus hominum, quam ne ipsa quidem delet iniquitas.”<sup>162</sup> [“Theft is punished by Thy law, O Lord, and the law written in the hearts of men, which iniquity itself cannot delete.”] We know that Oliver read the *Confessions* and numerous other works by St. Augustine; he is referred to extensively in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (1989), the central thesis of which, as I argued in the last chapter, dates back to the early 1970s. The type of diagram that is “scored” onto “a heart” in these lines is “almost straight.” Straightness, of purpose and of design, is contrasted in the *The Diagram--Poems* with the confused premises and chaotic violence upon which the Tupamaros’ meticulous plans are built, and into which they unravel.

The poem ‘P.C.’ opens with the “hope” that a raid on a police station will “go straight and quick” in order to “immobilise a commissariat,” but the guerrillas are interrupted and the plan “curv[es] into turbulence.”<sup>163</sup> In ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal,’ it is the “diagonal” trajectory towards violence that is unfavourably compared with some alternate course of action, left un-described, which would stem from an entirely “innocent” starting point:

[from] the point at which the innocence stays clean  
the diagonal does not speed down  
to these loaded reversals  
police exchange no shots  
there’s no sequel of bestiality.<sup>164</sup>

The “swift diagonal / that slants from the cemetery” also ends up there, and we shall have more to say about the presentation of the guerrillas’ endeavours as inevitably tarred with failure below.<sup>165</sup> “[B]estiality” is Oliver’s euphemism for the torture visited on the captured guerrillas by Uruguay’s Metropolitan Guard and the Montevidean police. A “diagram almost straight” “scored” onto “a heart” refashions St. Augustine’s impression of the legibility of the moral law into an image of ratiocinated abstract knowledge, knowledge won by ambition and quantitatively rated – “scored” puns on both cutting and ranking. Instead of divinely ordained ethical jurisprudence, what is disastrously “scored” onto the

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<sup>162</sup> James J. O’Donnell, ed., *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 3 Vols.), Vol. 1: Introduction and Text, pp.18-19. The translation is Zeeman’s. See also Simon J. Gathercole, ‘A Conversion of Augustine: From Natural Law to Restored Nature in Romans 2:3-16,’ in Daniel Patte and Eugene TeSelle, ed., *Engaging Augustine on Romans: Self, Context, and Theology in Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), pp.150-151: “The *lex aeterna* [...] is the Divine Intellect by which the whole cosmos is ordered, of which the *lex naturalis*, the norm by which rational souls act morally, is a subset. Thus ‘the *lex naturalis*, according to St. Augustine, is the conscious participation of rational man in the *lex aeterna*.’ This *lex naturalis* is that which is written on the heart of every human.” (p.151). Gathercole quotes A.-H. Chroust, ‘The Fundamental Ideas in St. Augustine’s Philosophy of Law,’ *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1973), pp.57-79 (68).

<sup>163</sup> K, p.107.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>165</sup> See below, this section, and section 2.4.

heart by the turbulent radicalism of the late 1960s are over-ambitious revolutionary designs.

The diagrams to which the texts in *The Diagram--Poems* refer and respond are, at least in part, a representation of the imputed inevitable failure of the Tupamaros' schemes, and the guerrillas' subsequent arrest and torture. A diagram is a pictorial representation of a foregone conclusion – its ends are at once as discernible as its beginnings. The poem 'The Diagonal is Diagonal' continues by asserting that "we," in this case seemingly sympathetic distant Western observers of the carnage in Uruguay, have "no right to justify" the "foreign courage" of the rebels,

no right to borrow it, jig it into shapes,  
display it like a wound on our own opening palm.  
But, lacking the one innocence, we are driven into this foreign time  
into falseness in funerals, rehearsals  
leading from the cemetery [...]<sup>166</sup>

True "innocence" would abjure representation as crude as the "shapes" of the diagrams in *The Diagram--Poems* because it would be "excellent enough" to admit to its fundamental ignorance about the complex historical and social contexts of Uruguayan and Latin American politics. Lacking this "innocence" facilitates the poems' composition but at the cost of a brutalising complicity; "we are driven into this foreign time" as into an epoch in which humankind are condemned to an alienated servitude. A "heart on which the [almost straight] diagram is scored" represents what is left of an original and originally innate, *kynde* and harmless moral fortitude embedded in the musculature of our body politic during a time in which social and geopolitical relations are determined by our "lacking the one innocence" necessary to either justify or condemn the Tupamaros' actions. 'The Diagonal is Diagonal' laments that, rather than united in transcendental reflection upon what is true for all of us, our selves (our subjects) are ruinously scarred with extremist plots to prove what is *not* true for all of us.

In Langland scholarship the interpretation of *kynde* extends to its discussion as that which characterises the essential bond between man and man, nature and man, and God and man. Often this bond is discussed in the language of "union." Thus M. Teresa Tavormina speaks of "the *kynde* order underlying the similarity of God and man, and the ultimate union of man and his Maker that follows from that similarity."<sup>167</sup> White concludes, in greater detail, that in *Piers Plowman* the concept *kynde*

becomes the place of reconciliation for mercy and justice, for law and love;

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<sup>166</sup> K, p.126.

<sup>167</sup> Tavormina, 'Kindly Similitude,' p.119.



metaphysically, it proclaims the nature of man and of God, as God and as Man, displaying them as, essentially, Love, and through it suggestions arise concerning an essential unity of human and divine.<sup>168</sup>

Whereas Davlin:

*kynde knowyng* can be a knowledge which grasps the *nature* of the person known through *connaturality* between knower and known; a knowledge which is experiential, loving, *kind*, and second-*nature* to the knower; a knowledge available to humans only because we share the *nature* of God through the incarnation and grace [...]<sup>169</sup>

In Edward Vasta's mystical interpretation, "[t]o know love 'kyndely' is to be consciously aware of the Holy Spirit dwelling in one's heart."<sup>170</sup>

White, though skeptical of Vasta's mysticism, makes a similar claim concerning the coincidence of *kyndeness* and the Holy Ghost in Passus XVII of the poem:

Langland may be suggesting that the *kynde* man partakes of the nature of the Holy Ghost, which is fully expressed only when He is being merciful. Lines [in Passus XVII] seem to point to an identity between the nature of the Holy Ghost and the *kynde* man.<sup>171</sup>

White quotes the following (from Passus XVII) to support his claim – here to be *unkynde* “is a failure to have the *kynde* of the fire which is the Holy Ghost”:

Ac hewe fit at a flynt foure hundred wynter –  
But thow have tache to take it with, tonder or broches,  
Al thi labour is lost and al thi long travaille;  
For may no fir flaumbe make, faille it his kynde.  
So is the Holy Goost God and grace withouten mercy  
To alle unkynde creatures – Crist hymself witnesseth:  
*Amen dico vobis, nescio vos &c.*<sup>172</sup>

[But strike fire from a flint four hundred winters,  
Unless you have tow to take fire from it, tinder or taper,  
All your labor is lost, and all your long slaving;  
For no fire may burst into flame if it lacks kindling.  
So is the Holy Ghost God and grace without mercy  
To all unkind creatures: Christ himself bear witness:  
*Verily I say unto you, I know you not, etc.*]<sup>173</sup>

168 White, *Nature and Salvation*, p.111.

169 Davlin, 'Kynde Knowyng,' p.11.

170 Vasta, *The Spiritual Basis of Piers Plowman*, p.44.

171 White, *Nature and Salvation*, pp.102-103.

172 *Ibid.*, p.102. White quotes from the B-text.

173 Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p.297.

In his treatment of Passus XVII, White argues that the poem

suggests that man is under an obligation, which the *unkynde* man fails to fulfil, to be as the Holy Ghost is in his true and full nature, that is, blazing with a warm and comforting flame of mercy and love.<sup>174</sup>

Such love is not only reserved for the bond between mankind and the divine, but is an element of connatural harmony between all of God's *kynde* creatures. Zeeman stresses the communal associations of *kynde* as follows:

Langland's *kynde* is moral, communitarian, familial, 'kindly,' loving, experiential, bodily; it is associated with the proper use and sharing of material goods and a positive view of the life and functioning of the body.<sup>175</sup>

Does Oliver's poetry lament the diminishing returns of a natural moral law, nonetheless latently persisting, that binds us in essential spiritual unity to each other and to God? Certainly the style in which Oliver chooses to present the interruptions and imperatives of "harmlessness" and "kindness" in his work seem redolent with spiritual associations. The fictionalised Tom in *The Harmless Building* has "the true blessedness allowed only the really low in IQ." The political party established in *Penniless Politics* is named simply "Spirit." We recall that, in the early essays, the "perfect identity between self and Other" most nearly achieved by the articulation of prosody and stress is unverifiable by any standard of philosophic, or any other, proof: it could therefore potentially be described as a mystical notion. If this union is mystical, then its potential for realisation in the expression of democratic "kindness" would seem to retain positively spiritual connotations. The most fully worked-out expression in Oliver's poetry of these connotations, and their political ramifications, is to be found in *The Infant and the Pearl*, with which the following chapter is concerned.

The final lines of *The Diagram--Poems* recall the final passage of *Piers Plowman's* Passus XX.

Here they are:

We cannot ask the prisoners to forgive  
our foreign nations  
but we may hope the dead can kiss  
for us the face of innocence in the rushing dark  
and grace and courage arrive calmly in us.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>174</sup> White, *Nature and Salvation*, pp.102.

<sup>175</sup> Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, p.227.

<sup>176</sup> K, p.126. Oliver may conceivably have been influenced in his use of the word "grace" by the poetry of Frank

The “hope” that “grace and courage” will “arrive calmly in us” is expressed in the manner of Christian prayer. The inclusion of “grace” intimates that the reception of divine favour will be a necessary component of our future salvation. The appearance of “grace” in this manner echoes the last line of *Piers Plowman*, and follows Conscience’s invocation at the close of Will’s dream:

“Bi Cryste,” quod Conscience tho, “I wil bicom a pilgryme,  
And walken as wyde as the wordle [renneth]  
To seke Piers the Plowman, that Pryde [myghte] destruye,  
And that freres hadde a fyndyng that for nede flateren  
And contrepleteth me, Conscience; now Kynde me avenge,  
And sende me happe and hele til I have Piers the Plowman.”  
And sitthe he gradde after Grace til I gan awake.<sup>177</sup>

[“By Christ,” said Conscience then, “I will become a pilgrim,  
And walk as wide as the world reaches  
To seek Piers the Plowman, who might expunge Pride,  
And see that friars had funds who flatter for need  
And contradict me, Conscience; now Kind avenge me,  
And send me heart and health till I have Piers the Plowman.”  
And Conscience cried for Grace until I became wakeful.]<sup>178</sup>

At the close of *The Diagram--Poems*, then, reference to an Augustinian image of innate moral law corrupted under the influence of contemporary radicalism is combined with an intimation of Christian salvation. Despite the perceived failings of such radicalism, both European and Latin American, “hope” remains that “the face of innocence” may yet be retrievable from the damage it has been caused by our diagonal “slant” into harmful depredation and catastrophic violence.

The ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal’ refers to the Uruguayan state’s systemic torture of captured Tupamaros, widely reported at the time, which “our foreign nations” had no interest in abating; but this violence is itself the result of the Tupamaros’ own version of political violence in which consists their original fall from “grace,” a fall in which “we” are implicated but one that “we” might yet “hope” to reverse, even if the guerrillas cannot. Here is *The Diagram--Poems*’ most urgent expression of the book’s central dialectic:

[...] the poetry won’t move from it  
that innocent point exactly neighbour to that other start  
from which team leader became a finger pointing left,

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O’Hara, whose use of this word in many poems, including the oft-cited ‘In Memory of my Feelings’ and ‘For Grace, After a Party,’ pun on the name of O’Hara’s close friend, the painter Grace Hartigan.

<sup>177</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, p.362.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p.363.

that's audience left: for the teams  
 the old sinister direction was, from the beginning,  
 the cemetery.<sup>179</sup>

However proximate in ideals and utopian desires to the innocent pacifism of the human condition exemplified by Tom and his voice of “spoken kindness,” revolutionary left activism is bound “from the beginning” to end in violent failure. The etymology of “sinister,” from the Latin “sinister,” is “left.”<sup>180</sup> The revolutionary left is, in fact, closer than any other political faction to the “innocent point,” because it is “exactly neighbour to [it].” But a diagram drawn from a starting point whose “origin[s]” are “rotten,” however “nearly straight,” can never be “straight” enough. Here is one central paradox of Oliver’s most pressing antagonism with, yet consistent return to, radical politics: the egalitarian ideals exemplified by the Tupamaros are hamstrung for Oliver by the methods used to attempt to realise these ideals. Their methods are doomed to fail. I explore this argument in more detail below. For now we must attend to origins of a different kind.

### 2.3b – Rousseau

Sometimes in Oliver’s work the expression of a latent universal connection between human beings is determined by a more materialist agenda, one perhaps more akin to Ludwig Feuerbach’s (and later the young Marx’s) concept of “species-being,” than it is to any mystical holism. In *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm* (1990) Oliver published a poem which explicitly differentiates between a colloquial, artificial or inauthentic “kindness” on the one hand, and an essentially natural “kind” on the other. Here is the poem in its entirety:

#### *For Kind*

Kindness acts idly or unnaturally,  
 leads you into fear. Act in kind.  
 Kindness makes you idle, worse, unnatural.  
 Don’t be afraid of the darkness of kind;  
 for it’s the birth darkness, vertical twist  
 of opening lips in the night: life that follows  
 belongs to you in kind. Don’t be frightened  
 of darkness of origin: it is this darkness,  
 similar tints of our flesh in the night  
 of kind. The kind you are, with slim  
 mammalian chest and, walking to the bathroom,

<sup>179</sup> K, p.125.

<sup>180</sup> OED online [accessed 03.02.2014].

hip-swag: how naturally your walk sways  
 in kind. You are humankind,  
 my kind, kind to me, born well and gentle.  
 We believe in kind:  
 birth, origin, descent, nature,  
 sex, upbringing, race, our natural property,  
 so many things we naturally have  
 and have no need to struggle for  
 merely out of kindness to each other, or,  
 worse, to struggle for unnaturally.<sup>181</sup>

This poem represents in Oliver's oeuvre a manifesto of the underlying concerns and arguments of the major works. "Kindness" in the poem is not the "spoken kindness" of *The Diagram--Poems*, but a deceptive *cliché* which operates "idly or unnaturally." The "spoken kindness" of *The Diagram--Poems* should be read in comparison to the "kind" of "our natural property" which in 'For Kind' we "have no need to struggle for[.]" We have no need to struggle for it because it is already ours. 'For Kind' was published only three years after the publication in *Kind* (1987) of the last full set of *Diagram--Poems*. In *The Diagram--Poems* the Tupamaros, by contrast, do not recognize "our natural property." They implicitly defy what "[e]veryone knows" by struggling "unnaturally," that is to say, by taking up arms and engaging in "revolutionary flamboyance."

The poem's emphasis on "birth, origin, sex" and "nature" brings us to Rousseau, whose *Discourses* provide a model of natural innocence equally applicable to the universalist concerns of Oliver's work as Langland's *kynde*. Oliver read Rousseau, and about Rousseau, in the 1970s. In 1970 Oliver wrote to Peter Riley that *The Harmless Building* began "as a (much-changed) project [...] to write a Rousseauist confession"; some years later Oliver recommended to Riley Jean Starobinski's critical biography, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, La Transparence et L'Obstacle*.<sup>182</sup> Read through Starobinski or in the original, some important points of contact between Rousseau's thought and Oliver's poetic project may be discerned.

Rousseau's description in the *First Discourse* of originally blissful ignorance destroyed by the moral corruption concomitant with the evolution of the arts and sciences is a paradigmatic narrative of harmonious, innocent unity wrecked by prideful intellect. It is a narrative that re-appears in all of Oliver's political works save perhaps the late collection *A Salvo for Africa*. But the similarity between the two writers extends beyond an adherence to a general structure of a lost moral paradise. We have already seen that certain kinds of knowledge in Oliver's writing are often descried as a kind of posturing radicalesque

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181 *VTH*, p.93.

182 See Oliver to Riley, 31.12.1970 and Oliver to Riley, 07.03.1973, *DOA*, Box 9.

devoid of moral fortitude. This is how Cambridge and Parisian student radicals in the 1960s and the Tupamaros, as well as the 1871 Communards, are treated in his poetry and prose. In contradistinction to these attitudes, Oliver valorises the “stupidity” and “near-harmlessness of a mongol baby” in order to appreciate the pacifistic unity from which any “true politics” must begin. In Rousseau, we find a pertinent historical antecedent for such thinking. “*Ever since the learned have begun to appear among us,*” Rousseau repeatedly emphasises, “*good Men have been in eclipse.*”<sup>183</sup> Ignorance, happiness and moral virtue are all of a piece in the first *Discourse*, which laments the sordid vacuity of the “senseless education” in which “young people are brought up at great expense to learn everything except their duties.”<sup>184</sup> Better by far, writes Rousseau, to abjure the “dangerous reveries of such men as Hobbes and Spinoza” in favour of the recognition of “ignorance, innocence, and poverty, the only goods that can make for our happiness[.]”<sup>185</sup>

In Oliver, the “learned” are often depicted as the bearers of false appearances; recall the sneering Cambridge student radicals who “had a mouthful of democracy” but lacked “a democratic tone” and who made such a lasting impression on the young poet. The Tupamaros too are stuffed with “flamboyance” and theatrical pomposity, as they “[spring] on to the cash desk” in a bank raid. The guerrillas “[lack] the one innocence” as much as “we” do, and as a result are literally “driven [...] into falseness at funerals,” a reference to the funeral cortège the Tupamaros used to disguise themselves as they made their way into the town of Pando, as well as to the wrong-headedness of their plan in the first place. The Enlightenment injunction to unveil and rectify false appearances is one Starobinski understands Rousseau to have dictated to society at large in the *Discourses*, and wrestled with inside the confessional scene of his own “inner drama” in the *Confessions*.<sup>186</sup> In his account of the historical emotional coordinates of Rousseau’s political writings, comparing moments in the *Confessions* and the *Discourses*, Starobinski describes how Rousseau

learns that inner certainty of innocence is powerless against apparent proofs of guilt. He discovers that minds are separate from one another and that we cannot communicate the immediate evidence of inward conviction. From that moment paradise is lost, for paradise was the state of transparent communication between mind and mind, the conviction that total, reliable

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183 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early political writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.7, p.13.

184 *Ibid.*, p.22.

185 *Ibid.*, p.26.

186 Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.6.

communication is possible.<sup>187</sup>

Separation of minds is inseparable from the loss of innocence that accompanies the victory of false appearances over the truth of inner conviction and moral “certainty.”

The coincidence of a loss of innocence with a sundering of the “paradise” of “total, reliable communication” is, as we have seen, proximal to Oliver’s own thinking in the 1970s. “[T]otal, reliable communication” occurs between the poet-author and the reader when the reader articulates poetical music in a manner that is “capable of making reborn in them something approaching the original writing process.”<sup>188</sup> Starobinski goes on to elucidate Rousseau’s nostalgia in terms that must have seemed strikingly familiar to Oliver:

The evil of false appearances and the separation of consciousness from consciousness put an end to the blissful unity of childhood. Henceforth unity is something that must be recovered or rediscovered. Individuals, separated one from another, must achieve reconciliation.<sup>189</sup>

The narrator of *The Harmless Building* and the poet-speakers of *The Diagram--Poems* and *The Infant and the Pearl* are reminded of the “blissful unity of childhood” by Tom throughout both works. Tom was incapable of “hid[ing] [his] inadequacy through display, which is what the rest of all do the whole damn time”; he is therefore the epitome of the type of human being who Rousseau famously describes as one whose “outward countenance [is] always the image of [his] heart’s dispositions.”<sup>190</sup>

Early on in the first *Discourse*, Rousseau contrasts the moral corruption of the nations of the earth with “the morals of the small number of Peoples who, protected against this contamination of vain knowledge, have by their virtues wrought their own happiness.”<sup>191</sup> For Oliver, “vain knowledge” is the enemy of “beneficial balance.” The Tupamaros’ slanted fall from “grace” is indicative of the prideful human condition now wedded to the mutually antagonistic deployment of knowledge against knowledge in the service of two equally harmful exercises of power: dictatorships on the one hand, “revolutionary flamboyance” on the other. *The Infant and the Pearl*, as we shall see, develops this equivalence in its denunciation of what it refers to as “rent-a-Marx” and “Margaret [Thatcher] rhetoric.” In *The Infant and the Pearl*, as in *The Diagram--Poems*, Oliver’s Tom harks back to Rousseau’s polemical speculative

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>188</sup> See Oliver, ‘Who does the poet,’ p.1.

<sup>189</sup> Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, pp.9-10.

<sup>190</sup> Rousseau, *The Discourses*, p.7.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

purity of the childhood of mankind in the form of an image of infantine, harmless goodwill. There is a direct precedent in Rousseau for the insistence on harmlessness as part and parcel of our “natural property”; witness the “revulsion at inflicting or even witnessing hurt” that Rousseau expresses in the second *Discourse* as the “natural repugnance to seeing any sentient Being, and especially any being like ourselves, perish or suffer” that stems from our innate sense of “self-preservation.”<sup>192</sup> The “state of Nature” teaches us this, since it is

the state in which the care for our own preservation is least prejudicial to the self-preservation of others [and is therefore the state] most conducive to Peace and the best suited to Mankind.<sup>193</sup>

It is Tom that is the cause for “hope” that “grace and courage arrive calmly in us,” just as Rousseau’s distinction between “a lost nature and a hidden nature,” in Starobinski’s words, serves to retain the latter in the midst of lamentation for the former; our essential good nature

takes refuge in the depths of our being [...] forgotten but not really lost, and [...] we can snatch away the veils and recover the hidden nature that has remained present and alive within our bosom.<sup>194</sup>

Oliver’s ‘*For Kind*’ is a catalogue of the qualities of this very “hidden nature” that remain in “our” inalienable possession: “my kind, kind to me, born well and gentle [...] birth, origin, descent, nature, / sex, upbringing, race, our natural property[.]” *The Diagram--Poems* are less explicit about the “hidden nature” of man than can trump the “lost nature” that accompanies our inexorable decline. But they nevertheless adhere to the same underlying paradigm. Despite being “driven into this foreign time” we “know” the “voice of spoken kindness” as our own; “I don’t need to tell you but I do, softly” implores the poet-speaker at the end of ‘U’: “that I am my children[.]” For Rousseau the *return* to the natural benevolence of savage moral innocence is an historical impossibility.<sup>195</sup> But for Oliver the recognition and thus the reproduction of our innate connaturality remains not just a possibility, but a singular and pressing imperative.

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii, p.127.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>194</sup> Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p.18.

<sup>195</sup> As Rousseau puts it in the Exordium to the second *Discourse*, “There is, I sense, an age at which the individual human being would want to stop; You will look for the age at which you would wish your Species had stopped. Discontented with your present state [...] you might perhaps wish to be able to go backward; And this sentiment must serve as the Praise of your earliest forbears, the criticism of your contemporaries, and the dread of those who will have the misfortune to live after you.” Rousseau, *The Discourses*, p.133.



## 2.4 – “the factual basis for these events”: *The Diagram--Poems* and the suspension of politics

*The Diagram--Poems* combine material adapted from Oliver’s reading about a guerrilla raid on the Uruguayan town of Pando, then approximately twenty miles northeast of the capital Montevideo, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1969, with autobiographical reminiscence and political and moral argumentation.<sup>196</sup> The poems exhibit a fascination with extreme left-wing anti-capitalism, a fascination matched only by an impassioned moral critique of (what Oliver interprets as) such radicalism’s intellectual, ideological and methodological failings. This approach is developed in Oliver’s subsequent publications. The poems begin to make an argument that is made, cumulatively, across *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics*. This argument is that no political solution to the world’s ills is possible without a fundamental shift in the human understanding of, and in the sympathetic feeling for the social relations immanent to, politics itself. *The Diagram--Poems* begin to make this argument by attempting to establish that revolutionary political radicalism, although justified in its opposition to the world it refuses to accept, is doomed to failure. It is doomed to failure because it does not acknowledge, take into account or act upon the underlying connection between human beings. It therefore obscures and severs that connection. All of Oliver’s major political poems imply that poetry, the very poetry that you are reading as the implication is made, can help us to recognize and act upon this connection in a way that contemporary politics (of whatever stripe) simply cannot. Politics must be suspended so that the blueprint for an as yet unrealised “authentic politics” might become as legible as the diagrams (and diagrammatic thinking) that currently obscure it.

The revolutionaries Oliver read about before and during the composition of *The Diagram--Poems* were members of the Uruguayan Marxist-Leninist organisation the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (Tupamaros) or MLN-T, commonly known then, as now, as the Tupamaros, active between 1963 and 1974. Oliver first came across the actions of this group whilst working on the English desk of the French news agency Agence France-Presse in Paris in 1970, as he relates in ‘Night Shift’:

We used to get their [the Tupamaros’] stories on the English Desk night shift at Agence France-Presse in Paris; they would be wired through by AFP’s local stringer, translated into French and English by the subs, and the next you knew the story would be sold on the streets of news-voracious Tokyo [...]<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> As Montevideo has grown since the late 1960s, Pando is now considered part of the wider metropolitan area of the capital.

<sup>197</sup> *K*, pp.101-102.

The manner in which Oliver received information about the Tupamaros during his employment with AFP significantly affected the way in which *The Diagram--Poems* were composed. The poems incorporate into their narrative and thematic content descriptions of Oliver's original encounters with his source material. 'The Diagonal is the Diagonal' contains the declaration:

I now name these incidents  
so many years after  
they came to me at night in a busy newsroom.<sup>198</sup>

The distance between the poet and the information he drew upon for his work, not just temporally ("many years after") but conceptually, that is, the nature of the relationship between political poetry and politics, are major concerns of *The Diagram--Poems*. The poem 'Central,' for example, thematises both of these relations through the image-complex of a sabotaged telephone line. Information about the politics of a distant, foreign land and the interpretation of these events through the optic of a moral imperative provided by Oliver's son Tom, are mediated through each other. The "guerrillas [...] cut the cables" which sever the connection to "Tom's voice," so that "the ear [which] hears with feeling" can hear no longer – the line is "cut dead."<sup>199</sup> When Tom's voice, the vehicle of "spoken kindness," cannot be heard, disunity and conflict, "creations of total emergency," ensue.<sup>200</sup> It is therefore incumbent upon us to listen to this voice – it is what "we," the plural pronoun explicitly invoked in the later poem 'U,' "should" do.<sup>201</sup>

Before we explore this imperative further, as it is expressed through descriptions of the Tupamaros' actions and their reception by the poet, it is important to note that the account of Oliver's reception of reports about the events construed in the poems referred to in the quotation from 'The Diagonal is the Diagonal,' above, is potentially fictional. Oliver was not working at AFP at the time of Operation Pando, but living in Cambridge with Janet and their children. If by "these incidents [...] came to me at night in a busy newsroom" Oliver means that he was working at AFP when Operation Pando occurred, then the line is a fiction, since he was not; if, however, he is referring to reports about Uruguay that he read whilst working at AFP and that informed the poems, it is not.<sup>202</sup> In either case, his principal

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.124-125.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.121-122.

<sup>202</sup> See *WL*, p.55: "Soon [after the death of Tom], in 1970, we moved to Paris." In the 1987 introduction to the *The Diagram--Poems*, Oliver writes: "That year, the story of the Tupamaros' 'Operation Pando' came to me, once more in French out of the Spanish, but now in a book written by the guerrillas in their own high rhetoric, which I

source of information about the raid is the Tupamaros' own published account of the events of October 8<sup>th</sup> 1969. This account forms part of the book *Actas Tupamaros*, published in Buenos Aires in 1971.<sup>203</sup>

Oliver read the French translation of this book, *Nous les Tupamaros*, when it was published in Paris by François Maspero later the same year.<sup>204</sup> Each of the eight poems in *The Diagram--Poems*, both diagram and text, describes, analyses, embellishes and draws conclusions from one of the situations recounted in chapter fifteen (on Operation Pando) of *Nous les Tupamaros*.<sup>205</sup> This Operation was planned as a lightning raid on the small town of Pando, the immediate objectives being the distribution and creation of propaganda for the MLN-T, the requisition of arms and money, and a celebratory birthday *homage* to the Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara. More generally, the raid was designed as a demonstration to the Uruguayan state of the power of the movement itself, which the guerrillas hoped would inspire increased support and collaboration amongst the Uruguayan people, many of whom already either tacitly or openly supported them.<sup>206</sup> In the 1987 *Kind* edition of the poems, the introductory prose text that precedes the text of each poem is almost always composed of a combination of unreferenced direct translation from *Nous les Tupamaros* and a paraphrase of information gleaned from the same source. Occasionally, as in 'Team Leader' and 'The Diagonal is Diagonal,' the headings contain additional original reflection. The diagrams and poem-texts map the guerrillas' movements by following the descriptions of each separate sub-operation mentioned in *Nous les Tupamaros*. The sequence of poems in *The Diagram--Poems* follows exactly the order in which these sub-operations are described in *Nous les Tupamaros*, where they are lettered "c)" to "i)": 'P.C.' draws on "c) *Commissariat*," 'The Fire Station' on "d) *Caserne de pompiers*," 'Central' on "e) *Centrale téléphonique de l'U.T.E.*," and so on.<sup>207</sup> The first and last poems, 'Team Leader' and 'The Diagonal is Diagonal,' draw on material either side of these sections.

The radicalism of the Tupamaros, who advocated and practised armed struggle against the Uruguayan state based in part on the inheritance of the Cuban model of revolutionary praxis, the so-called

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pored over during the intervals between stories" (K, p.102). Oliver does not refer to *Actas Tupamaros* or *Nous les Tupamaros* by name, nor does he mention a date in the introduction. The phrase "[t]hat year" is therefore confusing, but it can be established from Oliver's letters and autobiographical writings, as well as the publication date of *NLT*, that "[t]hat year" is 1971. In *WL*, Oliver recounts visiting François Maspero's bookshop, 'La Joie de Lire' in Paris' Latin Quarter, where he would have found the newly published *NLT*, in 1971. The shop closed in 1975. See *WL*, p.86.

203 Movimiento de Liberación Nacional–Tupamaros, *Actas Tupamaros* (Schapire: Buenos Aires, 1971).

204 That Oliver had "no Spanish at all," and would therefore have not read the book in its original format, was personally communicated to the author by Alice Notley, 28.09.2013.

205 See *NLT*, pp.96-131.

206 For near-contemporary accounts of Operation Pando, see *NLT*, pp.96-131; Labrousse, *The Tupamaros*, pp.73-78; Maria Esther Gilio, *The Tupamaros*, trans. Anne Edmondson (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), pp.95-127, and Major Carlos Wilson, *The Tupamaros: The Unmentionables* (Boston: Branden Press Publishers, 1974), p.51.

207 *Ibid.*, pp.103-123.

*foco* method of guerrilla insurrection, is admired, and, to a certain extent, celebrated in *The Diagram--Poems* for what they characterise as the “courage” and “urgency” of the guerillas’ heroic “escapades.”<sup>208</sup> But the Tupamaros’ militarism is vociferously rejected in the poems, their (and its) failure regarded as inevitable, and the guerrillas’ “high rhetoric” and “flamboyance” admonished in favour of the “beneficial balance” between “mildness” or “innocence” and “stern wisdom,” both of which they lack.<sup>209</sup> In *The Diagram--Poems*, a pacifistic democratic vista is depicted as the truly “authentic” ideal that transcends the merely spectacular antics of the militant revolutionaries. The crux of this line of thinking in *The Diagram--Poems* occurs in the poem ‘U,’ to which we now return:

The lost child’s voice should speak softly but undyingly  
across a land silvery with democracy  
and glistening with wheat, trembling at the spoken kindness;<sup>210</sup>

It “should,” but it does not:

the voice should temper the muttering  
of bank clerks across the mica counters  
and ring in the money slipping from their fingers.<sup>211</sup>

Again, it does not. During Operation Pando a total of three banks were targeted. These were the Bank of the Republic, Pan de Azucar bank, and Pando bank.<sup>212</sup> In the Tupamaros’ own account of the raid on Pando bank, a number of bank clerks feature. The quoted lines from ‘U’ draw on the following anecdote in *Nous les Tupamaros*:

Distract, n’accordant pas la moindre attention à ce qui est étranger à sa discussion, [un] employé lève brusquement la tête, dit sans prendre en considération l’arme braquée sur lui : « Oui, attendez un petit moment » et se remet à discuter.<sup>213</sup>

[Distracted and paying no attention to anything going on around him, an employee suddenly raises his head and says without acknowledging the gun pointed at him, “Yes, just a minute” before returning to his conversation.]

The clerk’s “muttering” is not silenced or “temper[ed]” by “kindness,” the gentle, childish innocence that

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<sup>208</sup> K, p.126, p.103, p.110.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102, p.105.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.121-122.

<sup>212</sup> See *NLT*, pp.115-123.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

would designate “international kinship” in action, but by the threat of violence:

Tout aussi promptement que lors de sa première réaction, il [l’employé] se réveille brusquement à la réalité, comprend qu’il s’agit d’une attaque à main armée et lève les bras.<sup>214</sup>

[As suddenly as his first reaction, he [the employer] abruptly wakes up to reality, understands that this is an attack, and raises his arms.]

Or, as ‘U’ re-works its source material, the clerk ceases his “muttering” when confronted by “a man with a light machine gun.”<sup>215</sup>

In ‘U’ “the forces of life are few and precious”; they are “commandeered by the banking magnates, by the magnet of their will.”<sup>216</sup> Money is represented in the poem as the agent of “iron law” and capitalist exploitation; yet Oliver does not therefore condone the revolutionary ideology of the Tupamaros.<sup>217</sup> He claims in the prose introduction that

[o]nly a fool, while ill-informed, supports anyone else’s violence; so political judgment [in *The Diagram--Poems*] was suspended: it was held at a distance by a screen of words.<sup>218</sup>

It is important to note that Oliver’s position here is divorced from any partisan critique of the Tupamaros’ actions: it is not a critique of revolutionary violence that begins from, say, a Marxist standpoint, but one whose stated aim is the discovery of a “beneficial balance” that would support “an authentic politics.” In order to constitute the “land silvery with democracy” represented in this poem by the compassion of a “child’s [...] spoken kindness,” both political judgement *and* political radicalism need to be “suspended.” This suspension is highly reminiscent, and perhaps deliberately evocative, of the phenomenological “bracketing” so essential to the Husserlian method whose influence on Oliver’s poetics we examined in the previous chapter. Furthermore, as the universal conditions for human experience which Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity reveals through the process of suspension are authenticated by appeal to the method of *prima philosophia* and the “pure [...] universal” of the *eidos*, so Oliver’s poems determine the general possibility of an “authentic politics” by assertion of the very nature of this politics as universal,

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214 *Ibid.*

215 *K*, p.122.

216 *Ibid.*, p.121.

217 *Ibid.*, p.122.

218 *Ibid.*, p.102.

common knowledge.<sup>219</sup> The poem ‘U’, referring to the “land silvery with democracy” that “should” echo with the sound of “spoken kindness,” continues, as we have already seen:

We know this. Everyone. But we let the voice break in our throats  
the laughs, little distinguished from coughs,  
echo discreetly across stone floors;  
softness unheard;  
until a man with a light machine gun this day  
springs on to the cash desk and, astride there,  
we know this, waves the muzzle where all the arrows  
of acquisition, law and management have come and gone.<sup>220</sup>

The “know” of “we know this” refers to the same natural, intuitive, sympathetic, mutual understanding that “stupidity” reveals in *The Harmless Building*. To reiterate: to “know” “this” one thing does not preclude our being sympathetically and harmlessly “stupid.” Knowledge is in fact, in this sense, very much akin to “stupidity,” and “stupidity” needs to be “joined with an energetic and mature cleverness” to be a “force for good.” What we innately “know” is that a “land silvery with democracy” “should” exist, since its capacity to exist is contingent upon the recognition of our “international kinship.” We “know” that this unity is not just possible, but essential; it “should” be the case. But it fails to be the case.

“We know this. Everyone” is the kind of “moment” in Oliver’s own poetry that he theorises with regard to Chaucer in the early essays, such that it assumes “responsibility for the whole poem during this brief instant.”<sup>221</sup> The line dramatizes at the level of the sentence the common bond that Oliver’s theory of prosody labours to elucidate.<sup>222</sup> But it dramatizes such a bond in crisis. In the sentence “We know this” we find Oliver stating as simply as he possibly could the inescapable reality of a truth the consequences

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219 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.71.

220 *K*, p.122.

221 See Oliver, ‘Some groundwork,’ p.7.

222 See above, p.39. The moment from ‘U’ that I have focussed on in this chapter is thus a good example of the coincidence of Oliver’s prosodic practice with the appeal to a universal community on which that practice is founded. But it is not the only example of this coincidence in *The Diagram--Poems*. The opening lines of the poem ‘Central’ describe the process of beginning to understand what ‘U’ then proceeds to make explicit: “I heard and slowly understood but then I saw / and I saw years ahead in the light of the eye centre / as I’d dimly heard years past in the sound of the earpiece.” What begins to be “slowly understood” here is that which the poet-speaker “get[s]”: “I saw our ageing and I could get it. I saw the airman signal / and I got it. I heard Tom’s voice as from a distant receiver / and I got it.” There is a semantic and prosodic slippage here between “ageing,” “airman” and “Tom’s voice” on the one hand, and what “it” is on the other – a slippage made all the more iconic by the repeated enjambment – that prevents us from locating with any certainty the meaning of “it” in each, or every, one of those things. The emergent clarity of sense impression registered by the opening lines confirms for the speaker the indisputability of what is “understood,” which is then not explained as such but re-confirmed by the repeated assertions of understanding, such as the doubled “and I got it” at the beginning of two adjacent lines. That which is clarified in sense impression remains unexplained precisely because, as ‘U’ will go on to tell us, we already know it. In ‘Central,’ then, the assertion of what the lyric speaker “slowly understood” is resolved by subtraction (of what it is he understood) into the emphatic confirmation of subjectivity itself. The “I” in these lines becomes, by the second “I got it,” transcendental reflection upon the truth of our subjective capacity *to* understand. See *K*, p.113.

of which we nonetheless fail to act upon. The manifest content of the statement is made powerfully emphatic by the imputation of incontestable simplicity. “We know this” is also the most emphatically basic indictment in Oliver’s poetic vocabulary of capitalist greed and “flamboyant” insurgency alike. Both are admonished by the assertion that “the hierarchies of [the] laws” of “banking magnates” and “managers” “should” be imaginatively transformed, “temper[ed],” into a scene in which those “laws” are laterally reconstituted “across a land silvery with democracy,” but will certainly not be so transformed by “a man with a light machine gun.” His failure is intrinsic to his actions, which, like those of his comrades, are, as the final poem in the sequence puts it, “rotten in origin.”<sup>223</sup> Despite Oliver’s rejection in his early essays of the concept of apodicticity as relevant or useful to the poet’s creative dynamic, the attitude struck here is one which rests precisely on the rejection of doubt as a requisite condition of the appeal to a universal subject: “We know this. Everyone.” The “hierarchies of [...] laws” should not be abolished, destroyed or otherwise violently upended. The sound of the “child’s voice” should “ring in the money slipping from the [bank clerks’ fingers].” The re-inscription of monetary value into utopian democracy which the adjective “silvery” retains is not accidental. The vision of harmony here is one in which “kindness,” in all its harmless warmth and tenderness, is superadded to the world as it exists: “kindness” literally “rings” in the same object of social exchange, “money,” that is metonymic of the social order predicated upon its accumulation in the form of capital. It also “ring[s] in” that money in the sense of accumulating it for the right purpose, i.e., the establishment of “a land silvery with democracy,” rather than to the sole advantage of the “banking magnates.” What “we know” is that capitalism is not capable of rendering “the hierarchies of [these] laws” benign and utilitarian; what “we” further “know” is that by attempting to abolish these hierarchies through armed struggle, violent revolutionary praxis betrays the democratic ideal by the use of force, because force inevitably results in “carelessness, and showdowns, and innocent bystanders / left to bleed.”<sup>224</sup>

*The Diagram--Poems* do not exactly lament the existence of groups like the Tupamaros. They acknowledge the movement’s cause as just and the impetus for their actions courageous. What Oliver’s poems lament is the fact that groups like the Tupamaros need to take up arms in the first place. They lament this state of affairs by lamenting the fact that the world is not *already* a “land silvery with democracy”; after all, it “should be,” and “we know this.” Why is it not so? The answer is that we refuse

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<sup>223</sup> K, p.125.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

it; we allow it not to be the case.<sup>225</sup> It is “our” fault the world is not like “this”: “we let the voice break in our throats.” In other words, we deliberately ignore that which we all already know, and, less complicitly, we age (the voice “break[s],”), losing touch with the innocent childhood of our moral, harmless and sympathetic connection to others. Furthermore, we have “let the voice break” for so long, specifically “until” a point in time, riven with political turmoil, when “a man with a light machine gun this day / springs on to the cash desk[.]” The voice breaking as a metonym for ageing relies, of course, on a male referent; another “man” then “springs on to the cash desk.” Both these men do something wrong, and they are exemplary in their wrongness. The failure to institute the kind of “identity between self and Other” that would provide the “perfect” conditions for universal “kindness” is our failure to recognize the truth of our humanity in “international kinship.”

Our failure is reflected in the failure of the Tupamaros. But the former is also potentially redeemed by the latter.

Softness unheard;  
until a man with a light machine gun this day

The grammatical ambiguity of “until” and the reflexive caesura produced by the semi-colon suggest that these lines indicate two possible temporal cruxes simultaneously. Narratively and chronologically the lines describe the result of a situation in which “softness” becomes unheard; the result of this inaudibility is armed, dangerous and “flamboyant” insurrection; a man with a gun “springs on to the cash desk.” But prosodically the lines re-assert the possibility of hearing “softness,” and therefore the audibility of “spoken kindness,” at the very heart of armed revolutionary praxis. The semi-colon followed by blank space and a line break creates a prosodic icon for the present but inaudible. The “softness” of “spoken kindness” is “unheard” “until” the violence of Operation Pando is in full swing. It is “unheard” “until” the moment at which it is most nearly abolished. “[S]poken kindness” is most pressingly reactivated at the very instant of its destruction. At its most recklessly violent, Operation Pando provides a glimpse of the “softness” that the guerrillas must ignore in order to carry out their plans. The pacifistic imperative is thus inscribed here, at the very point at which the Tupamaros’ actions describe most eloquently their violent doom.

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<sup>225</sup> There is a connection here to the monumental insistence in the early poetry of J.H. Prynne of the possibility of our owing up to the Wordsworthian universal fraternity which we essentially *are*, and the fact of our brute refusal of such a condition which has for so long kept us in the dark: “And we *are* ready for this, the array *is* there in / the figure we name brother, the / fortune we wish for, devoutly, as the dip / turns us to the face we have / so long ignored; so fervently refused.” (‘In Cimmerian Darkness’). See Prynne, *Poems*, p.75.



The poem 'U' ends:

I don't need to tell you but I do, softly,  
that I am my children;  
in me their voice breaks with the ear knowledge.<sup>226</sup>

What the Tupamaros fail to hear through their obnoxious "laughs" and their arrogant aggression, the poem's speaker understands. It is "Tom's voice" amongst "[his] children" that "breaks with the ear knowledge," providing the poem's speaker with the means to comprehend the guerrillas' failure. Throughout the poems, the ear and hearing are symbols for the ability to correctly perceive suffering.<sup>227</sup> In 'Arrest,' the "ear" is "[d]amaged [...]" so badly that we fail to hear sufficiently / of the true loss" in which Operation Pando results.<sup>228</sup> In 'U,' Tom's voice of "spoken kindness" teaches the poet-speaker otherwise. It "breaks with the ear knowledge" such that the pressure of "ear knowledge" is the very thing that "breaks" the "voice," deepening and maturing it. "[E]ar knowledge" is deeper, and more profound than cognitive knowledge. "[E]ar knowledge" enables one to hear and to listen to "spoken kindness." It is the natural understanding that engenders harmless sympathetic unity with other people. The speaker does not even "need to tell you" that "I am my children," that is, that he and they are "united at that primitive level of thought," since "you," being the reader of this poem, already "know." The poem designates "you" as the subject that does not need to be told this, but is nevertheless told: "I don't need to tell you but I do."<sup>229</sup> What we already "know," that armed insurrection is a flawed political and ethical act because it does not recognize the connective bond of "spoken kindness," is hereby confirmed. The Tupamaros, with their "carelessness, and showdowns," are deaf to "kindness." Yet all are complicit: in Uruguay, "the voice breaks unheard" by the banks, the guerrillas and the police alike.<sup>230</sup>

Oliver's rejection of revolutionary violence, whether in *The Diagram--Poems*, or twenty years later in his critique of the Paris Commune in *Whisper 'Louise'*, is based in the pragmatic refusal of perceived idealism. The Commune, Oliver writes in the last chapter of his combined autobiography and

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<sup>226</sup> K, p.122.

<sup>227</sup> See also Carol Watts, 'Piercing the Screen of Words: Reflections on the Political Poetics of Douglas Oliver,' *Discourse*, Vol. 27, Nos. 2 & 3 (Spring & Fall, 2005), pp.198-214 (210): "The dynamics of [*The Diagram--Poems*] are [...] acoustical, their drama about what it means to hear the soft voice of the child (both future, and yet past) coming across the wires, and also to refuse it."

<sup>228</sup> K, p.116.

<sup>229</sup> Another connection to Prynne's *The White Stones*, this time perhaps more directly referential, suggests itself; see the last five lines of his 'Song in Sight of the World' for the emphatic assertion of the need to communicate that which "you" already "know": "The light will do all this, to / love is the last resort, you / must know, I will tell / you, this, love, is / the world." Prynne, *Poems*, p.77.

<sup>230</sup> K, p.122.

biography of the anarchist Communard Louise Michel, was as doomed from the beginning of its existence as were the Tupamaros from the beginning of Operation Pando: “The Commune was a sham,” and it was a sham because

[Louise] Michel and [Théophile] Ferré stand convicted of stoking up false hopes that Paris could stand alone and illegally against the rest of France. Thousands of working people died in service of their beliefs.<sup>231</sup>

Against “false hopes” Oliver argues in *The Diagram--Poems* (and, effectively, in *Whisper ‘Louise’*) for the recognition of that which “we know” as the imperative towards a transformation not based in socio-political engineering but in terms of individual comportment towards the deepening of intersubjective identity. In stark contrast to Communard optimism, the “hope” that “grace and courage arrive calmly in us” cannot be “false” because it requires nothing more (or less) than that we acknowledge something already implicit in our connaturality with others.

## 2.5 – Harm, torture and the Tupamaros

The account in *The Diagram--Poems* of suffering, and especially of torture, is a pertinent example of the way in which Oliver’s insistence on the priority of “harmlessness” has a profound effect on the status in his poetry of any politics accused of engendering physical and psychological violence. Oliver is disgusted by torture. In ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal,’ he refers to the account in *Nous les Tupamaros* of the aftermath of Operation Pando in the following terms:

Almost in humility and loathing I kneel  
at the feet of the next account  
which is of bestiality and sadism  
so mucky it makes the scalp creep.<sup>232</sup>

Operation Pando ended with the death of three guerillas and the capture of a further eighteen. Most, if not all of the prisoners, were brutally tortured on the journey back to Montevideo and upon arrival at the capital’s police headquarters.<sup>233</sup> The “account” to which this passage in ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal’ refers

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<sup>231</sup> *WL*, p.415.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.

<sup>233</sup> See *NLT*, pp.128-131; accounts of the torture of the men and women arrested during or after Operation Pando are widespread. A selection of the testimonies of numerous victims of torture were collected in the immediate aftermath of Operation Pando in the publication *Uruguay: torturas 70* (Montevideo: Ediciones Grito de Asencio,

is the section of *Nous les Tupamaros* headed ‘Une meute sanguinaire’; the following excerpt is in particular the source for Oliver’s use of the terms “bestiality” and “sadism”:

Deux des camarades capturés furent blessés par balle et tous les autres le furent par les mauvais traitements que leur infligea la police. On pourrait en dire long sur le comportement des forces de répression et en particulier sur celui de la Garde Métropolitaine ; sur la férocité, la cruauté et le sadisme de centaines d’hommes devenus des fauves, à la différence près que les animaux ne tuent que pour se nourrir ou se défendre.<sup>234</sup>

[Two captured comrades were injured by bullets and all the others by the abuse inflicted upon them by the police. One could speak at length about the behaviour of the forces of repression and in particular about that of the Metropolitan Guard; about the ferocity, the cruelty and the sadism of hundreds of men become savages, scarcely different from animals who kill only to feed or defend themselves.]

The torture of political prisoners was well-known and widely publicised in the aftermath of Operation Pando. In the late 1970s, when *The Diagram--Poems* were nearing the completion of their first full sequence, Uruguay was virtually synonymous in the international press with human rights abuses, having by 1977 been dubbed “the torture chamber of Latin America.”<sup>235</sup> What the Tupamaros refer to as the ferocity, cruelty and sadism [la férocité, la cruauté et le sadisme] of the torturers’ preferred methods is well-documented.<sup>236</sup>

Oliver’s reaction to this treatment is telling. The “bestiality and sadism” described in the account which he read and which is re-presented in ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal’ in the language of the account itself is “so mucky it makes the scalp creep.” Immediately following these lines the poet-speaker characterises torture as an example of the “swift cruelty” in “the heart” of which he is nonetheless able to find “innocence,” before comparing the “innocent point” of the origins of imagined harmlessness with the “that other start / from which team leader became a finger pointing left,” that is, “the old sinister direction” which the Tupamaros left-wing idealism sent them down in the first place, retrospectively

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1970). Some of the guerrillas’ own recollections of their horrific abuse after Operation Pando, made in interview with the dissident journalist Maria Esther Gilio, can be found in her *The Tupamaros* (originally published in Spanish in 1970), pp.141-172; see also Labrousse, *The Tupamaros* (originally published in French in 1970), pp.76-78, which draws on Gilio’s journalism and *Uruguay: torturas 70*; Carlos Nuñez, *The Tupamaros*, pp.47-48, and Wilson, *The Tupamaros*, p.53. For descriptions of the widespread use of torture in more recent non-partisan accounts, see Peter Waldman, ‘How Terrorism Ceases: The Tupamaros in Uruguay,’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 34, No. 9 (2011), pp.717-731 (728), and Lindsay Blake Churchill, ‘Imagining the Tupamaros: Resistance and Gender in Uruguayan and U.S. Revolutionary Movements, 1960s-1980s,’ unpublished PhD thesis (Florida State University, 2010). Churchill emphasises the “gendered characteristic” of torture techniques used against female Tupamaro prisoners (p.129).

234 *NLT*, p.129.

235 The phrase is the U.S. Senator’s Frank Church, quoted in Andrew Tarnowski’s article in *The Times* of Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1977, ‘Nobody is smiling in Uruguay, the ‘torture chamber of Latin America.’

236 See especially Gilio, *The Tupamaros*, pp.141-172.

confirming their “origin[s]” as “rotten.” Oliver is disgusted by torture because it is an extreme example of the operation of harm in general, harm which the Tupamaros, by their actions, have also caused, and therefore which in no small sense they have brought upon themselves.

This kind of response, founded in revulsion at the “[v]icious events” themselves, as the introductory prose to ‘The Diagonal is Diagonal’ summarises them, is not an isolated response in Oliver’s work, but has its roots in his thinking about “harm” more generally.<sup>237</sup> From his earliest work onwards Oliver is keen to stress his own antipathy towards the depiction of “cruelty” and those complicit in cruel actions or events, especially those that have as their intended object the infliction of physical pain. In *The Harmless Building* one of Oliver’s autobiographical avatars, Donald, walks out of a “war film” during a depiction of torture, overcome by the scene:

In the evening [Donald] went out alone to see his second war film that week. The director’s cruelty of intention unsettled him. An airman, captured by the Germans, was allowed to see through a chink in his cell wall a neighbour being beaten with metal-tipped whips. When the airman himself was given electric shocks, the pain pulled his strapped body nearly upright, like sitting up in bed. At that Donald left the cinema.<sup>238</sup>

We know this account is based in biography because Oliver recalled his cinema walk-outs again seventeen years later in the autobiographical prose/poetry collection ‘An Island That Is All The World.’ There Oliver describes the same event, and others like it, in the emotional context of the stress he experienced before the birth of his first daughter. In order to do justice to the traumatic intensity this episode clearly engendered in him at the time, Oliver needs recourse to a literary analogy:

I suffered a radical attack from Poe’s Imp of the Perverse: the thought that, while you’ve always been good there’s nothing to stop you turning crazed and murderous at any moment.<sup>239</sup>

And continues,

I was interested and went to thriller movies to test my fears. Terrified at myself, I walked out of a German film with slab-like bodies and whippings, a film about a schizophrenic axe murderess, and *The Hands of Orlac* [...] Each walk-out came at a character’s moment of personality change.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> *K*, p.124.

<sup>238</sup> *THB*, p.36.

<sup>239</sup> *VTH*, p.100.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*.

Oliver's later revulsion at torture in Uruguay is in part based in this same fear. At the end of *The Diagram--Poems*, fear of causing harm to "innocent" others is combined with the assertion of a moral propriety which proscribes for Oliver the possibility either of expressing solidarity with the Tupamaros, of "justify[ing]" their "courage," or of confessing to a geopolitical complicity in their torture by "ask[ing] the prisoners to forgive / our foreign nations[.]" The necessity for this propriety derives from the fact that the Tupamaros, through their harmful "heroics," have caused harm to "innocent bystanders." Yet "our foreign nations" are no better, having failed to undertake any serious measures to intervene in the systematic torture of prisoners in distant lands – "asking forgiveness" of these "foreign prisoners" would therefore be an unpardonable insult to their pain and suffering.

Based on this logic of equivalence, it is the fact of the infliction of suffering *per se*, whether directly administered or indirectly sanctioned, that *The Diagram--Poems* finds anomalous. Contemplation of the infliction of suffering leads to its denunciation as quite literally incomprehensible: it makes "the scalp mucky," muddying the clear waters of the untainted consciousness of harmless innocence, which "we know" innately to exert a fundamental moral law. The existence of torture is barbarically anomalous because it contravenes what has been established in the poems as a moral imperative against the infliction of harm; Oliver's cinema walk-outs express the fear of his personal contravention of the imperative years earlier, should he suffer a "personality change" and turn "crazed and murderous." The lines in 'The Diagonal is Diagonal': "the deaths of innocences we have known / and even caused a little in the scarface heart" return us to Tom, whose death Oliver would later explicitly describe feeling "shame" for not having prevented.<sup>241</sup> The death of this paradigmatic innocent and the torture of the captured Tupamaros are part of the same problem. The problem is the paradoxical nature of the infliction of pain and suffering, what Elaine Scarry has called "the simple and absolute incompatibility of pain and the world."<sup>242</sup> "[L]acking the one innocence," that is to say, failing to recognize what "we know" to be our common humanity, we are "driven into [the] foreign time" of harmful neglect and poisonous abuse alike. All harm is "foreign" to our essential nature.

One problem with this line of thinking is that it ignores or deletes politics, ideology and agency from any given scene of torture. It does this, and it must do this, because as a moral and epistemological paradox torture becomes the expression of a failure to recognize a universal law the violation of which is

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241 See *WL*, p.104: "The biggest moment of shame, evidently, was finding my son dead when I should earlier have gone to see why was crying. Let's not go into that. Swallow the damage in, sores in the breath, have the courage to live newly. And don't let sin by habit enter your nature, either."

242 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.51.

achieved through deliberate blindness to reality, rather than the ideologically motivated exercise of repressive power through a violent assertion of political agency.<sup>243</sup> Scarry's classic account of torture, which shares with Oliver's many underlying assumptions, is similarly flawed. Its premise is that torture occurs in a scene in which the "basic moral reflex" of the torturer to the tortured subject's pain has been prevented by the protagonists' incarceration within a drama of blocked exchange.<sup>244</sup> This incarceration is deliberate on behalf of the torturer but imposed upon the tortured. As Scarry writes,

to allow the reality of the other's suffering to enter [the torturer's] own consciousness would immediately compel him to stop the torture [...] It is not merely that his power makes him blind [...] it is, instead, quite simply that his blindness, his willed amorality, is his power, or a large part of it.<sup>245</sup>

Since the artifice of interrogation, dubbed "the question" by Scarry, accompanies the infliction of pain,

[f]or the torturers, the sheer and simple fact of human agony is made invisible, and the moral fact of inflicting that agony is made neutral by the feigned urgency and significance of the question.<sup>246</sup>

The torturer wilfully refuses the world he knows exists; he perversely allows it, and the humanity of the victim of torture, to become "invisible." Like "human agony," the world in which "human agony" occurs is a "sheer and simple fact" which he ignores.

The torturer can torture in Scarry's account, and the guerrilla can inflict collateral harm on "innocent bystanders" in Oliver's poems, because both acts are imputed by the authors to involve a fundamental misrecognition of the "incontestable legitimacy of another human being's existence."<sup>247</sup> We

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<sup>243</sup> Oliver's implicit interpretation and Scarry's explicit account of torture should not be confused with the legal definition of the act, the current internationally agreed version of which can be found in Article 1 of the 1984 United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: "Torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions." Oliver and Scarry's perspectives are therefore more fundamental and more universal than the definition of torture based in jurisprudence, since they are working with philosophical and moral absolutes that would not recognize the legitimacy of suffering "inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions." Oliver and Scarry's common flaw is not that their definition of torture is not comprehensive enough, but that in their very humanist universalism they obscure the reality of political motivation and ideological commitment to torture in the exercise of state, or any other, power. See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx> [accessed 03.02.2014].

<sup>244</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.35.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57. Emphasis in original.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

have seen this logic before in Oliver's description of our refusal of what "we know" by letting the "child's voice" of "spoken kindness" "break in our throats" in *The Diagram--Poems*' 'U.' For Oliver, torture is inhuman, animal-like, "bestial." The compassion for human life in Oliver's poetry of the 1970s is the most passionate testimony to its extraordinary commitment to defining a moral imperative that must exculpate itself from the spectrum of political ideology – in the case of *The Diagram--Poems*, from the real interests of the Metropolitan Guard and their managers – in order to reflect upon the failure of humanism within the scene of politics itself. All politics is harmful when it fails to recognize the inviolability of all life. The refutation of harm, whether state sanctioned, insurrectionary or domestic and paternal, is thus, finally, absolute.

Oliver believed that Operation Pando was "the beginning of the end" for the Tupamaros.<sup>248</sup> The final poem in *The Diagram--Poems* reads:

The place of reassembly in the cemetery  
exactly is the cemetery  
prepared for the ashes of human conduct  
and the fires of human behaviour so rotten in origin  
[...]<sup>249</sup>

According to the Tupamaros' account, the guerrilla teams re-grouped after Operation Pando in a cemetery north of the town.<sup>250</sup> Given the abuses that took place in the wake of Operation Pando, that the "place of reassembly" was "the cemetery" is accordingly made morbidly significant in *The Diagram--Poems*. The guerrillas, Oliver intimates in these lines, were always, in more ways than one, heading for the cemetery. It is their destiny. This argument begins in the very first poem of the sequence, 'Team Leader.' The diagram that accompanies the text of this poem depicts the movements of the guerrilla groups on their way into Pando from Montevideo. The two largest arrows in the diagram both lead to the word "Cemetery."<sup>251</sup> The poem's italicised prose heading states: "*Small boy, nearly hit en route to Pando, is*

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248 Oliver writes in the 1987 introduction: "Operation Pando was, in fact, the beginning of the end for [the Tupamaros]." (K, p.102). Histories of the group contradict this assertion, often locating the turning point in the fortunes of the organisation in the years 1970-1971. Fernando Lopez-Alves, for example, locates "a major turning point" for the group in the August 1970 abduction and subsequent execution of the American police advisor Dan Mitrone, a political kidnapping that "turned out to be fatal" for the Tupamaros, since it caused tensions within the group and led to the direct involvement of the armed forces in their repression. In Lopez-Alves' view, however, the crushing blow came in 1971, with the resounding failure of "the so-called 'Tatu' plan" for rural-based guerrilla warfare. See Fernando Lopez-Alves, 'Political Crises, Strategic Choices, and Terrorism: The Rise and Fall of the Uruguayan Tupamaros,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989), pp.202-241 (228-229, 231). Richard Gott refers to the year 1971 as the "high water mark of Tupamaro activities" in his afterword to Labrousse's *The Tupamaros*.

249 K, p.125.

250 *NLT*, p.124: "i) *Opération Pando-retour* - Toutes les équipes sont arrivées au cimetière."

251 K, p.104.

called “imprudent”: with this word, all the following heroics begin to lose innocence.”<sup>252</sup> This information is taken from *Nous les Tupamaros*: “A la sortie de Montevideo, [la voiture] évite à grand peine un petit garçon qui court imprudemment au milieu de la chaussée.”<sup>253</sup> [“At the exit from Montevideo, the car only just manages to avoid a small boy who imprudently runs into the middle of the road.”] The text of the poem re-states the claim: the eponymous ‘Team Leader’ is “[a]lready bereaved of innocence and late.”<sup>254</sup> Peter Robinson has pointed out that this bereavement is also Oliver’s own.<sup>255</sup> Tom is thus invoked from the first line of the first poem of the sequence as both autobiographical referent and symbol of purity and innocence. The guerrillas are equally immediately deprived of “innocence” by their very actions, actions which instil a sense of such “heroic” arrogance they see fit to blame a small boy for the near-death experience that they ultimately caused him.

They also make jokes in bad taste. In the introductory prose to ‘The Fire Station,’ Oliver notes that “*The Tupamaros’ account of capturing the firemen tries humour,*” before quoting in his own English translation the following anecdote from *Nous les Tupamaros*:

Le gros [homme] continue comme s’il n’avait rien entendu. Sans se troubler, il urine jusqu’à la dernière goutte et enfin se retourne. Il regarde Roli [un Tupamaro] qui le tient en joue, tout en le couvrant d’injures. Alors, sans paraître surpris le moins du monde, il lève paresseusement les bras, comme pour s’étirer... Quels hommes apathiques que les soldats du feu !<sup>256</sup>

[Oliver’s translation is as follows, omitting from the paragraph the first sentence and the first word of the second: (The fat one continues as if he hadn’t heard anything. Unperturbed,) *He pisses right down to the last drop and finally turns round. He regards Roli [a Tupamaro] who is holding him up with a gun and yelling insults. Then, without appearing in the least surprised, he lazily raises his arm, as if stretching. What apathetic men these firemen are!*]<sup>257</sup>

Oliver was apparently so struck by this last aside, which no doubt rung in his ears with the same arrogance as the recollection of the “petit garçon,” that he returns to admonish it in ‘The Diagonal is the Diagonal,’ which recalls “situations which don’t call for wit to *be* funny.”<sup>258</sup> The last line of ‘Team Leader’ sums up the entire operation as “the thing [that] carries off awkwardly, with losses.”<sup>259</sup> The “cemetery” is thus “prepared for the ashes of human conduct / and the fires of human behaviour [...]

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252 *Ibid.*, p.105.

253 *NLT*, p.100.

254 *K*, p.105.

255 See Peter Robinson, ‘End of Harm: Douglas Oliver,’ *PN Review* 139 (Vol. 27, No. 5; May-June, 2001), pp.29-33.

256 *NLT*, p.109.

257 *K*, p.110.

258 *Ibid.*, p.126.

259 *Ibid.*, p.105.



rotten in origin” from the beginning. Why are the Tupamaros’ “origin[s]” “rotten”? The guerrillas’ “heroic” attitude stems from their assumption of knowledge about the correct way to combat injustice. They fail to recognize the truth of the “spoken kindness” which arises from the abandonment of such claims to knowledge. An essential “vanity,” as *The Harmless Building* characterises it, taints all such claims.<sup>260</sup> By contrast, the “authentic politics” of “mildness” and “kindness” stem from the “stupidity,” “ignorance” and “innocence” that engenders pacifistic commonality when combined with “stern wisdom.” The Tupamaros have none of these attributes: they are full of casual vanity and reckless humour. They, like us, “[lack] the one innocence” that would give us, and them, access to the redemptive, unifying politics which the *The Diagram--Poems* name “authentic.”<sup>261</sup> Our sympathetic originary predisposition towards such a redemptive politics is revealed, ironically, by the vanity of political vanguardism, in theory as in practice; such is the value of “stupidity” as Oliver conceived it.

## 2.6 – Conclusion

In ‘The Diagonal is the Diagonal,’ “the old sinister direction was, from the beginning, / the cemetery.” This claim about “the old sinister direction” is a claim about the inevitable failure of left-wing radicalism.<sup>262</sup> Oliver concludes the short pamphlet *The Three Lilies*, first written to accompany a reading of *The Diagram--Poems*, with the characterisation of his “political ideal” as one “in which the one-sidedness of idealism itself may be figured, paradoxically, as transcended.”<sup>263</sup> In the case of *The Diagram--Poems*, the “one-sidedness of idealism” refers to the Tupamaros’ militant anti-capitalism. It is “transcended” in the poems by the attempt to show that a world in which left-wing revolutionary violence is necessary to combat capitalist violence is the wrong world. What we arrive at when we make the effort to transcend this world is the shining “land silvery with democracy” that “spoken kindness” promises. It can promise it most pertinently, and most effectively, in poems. *The Diagram--Poems* articulate a specifically poetical moral obligation to subjective transformation. It articulates this obligation to an inclusive “we” that are the emblematic representation of the possibility of a “special intersubjectivity” because joined, as poet-author and reader, in the performance of a poem. A poem’s language provides the

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260 *THB*, p.5

261 *K*, p.126.

262 Carol Watts notes: “If one movement of the *Diagram Poems* tracks a remorseless diagonal logic of violence, it follows a sinister direction, “fingers pointing leftward,” ending with arrows pointing to the cemetery and loss of hope,” but her account does not follow up the puns on “left” and the connection between violence and leftwing politics to which the puns allude. Watts, ‘Piercing the Screen of Words,’ p.211.

263 *TTL*, p.23.

most powerful opportunity for glimpsing this unity as microcosm.

*The Diagram--Poems* represent Oliver's first attempt to write a poetry of sustained political engagement overwhelmingly determined by moments, such as "we know this," in which the entire gamut of political context on which the poems draw must finally be relegated to the truth of its inadequacy; such moments are recapitulated in *The Infant and the Pearl*'s "the union between / people," equally opposed to Thatcherite economic policy as it is to trade union politics, and in *Penniless Politics* during a speech by the Hispanic character Dolores: "all solutions are false when the spirit is wrong: the biggest mistake / of our age is to think politics will cure our lives."<sup>264</sup> Politics will not cure our lives because unless the re-definition of politics as "true" or "authentic" involves the ethical imperative denoted by intersubjective unity *as a starting point* it is doomed, like the Tupamaros, to failure. In *The Diagram--Poems*, the suspension of "political judgement" is really the suspension of politics, whether it be represented by "cash" or the "muzzle" of a "gun," in favour of the wished-for "land silvery with democracy." The suspension of currently existing politics allows the pre-political foundations which *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics* collectively articulate in their most precious moments of personal and political urgency to shine in the light shed by the promise of redemption, of which the "hope" that "grace and courage arrive calmly in us" is *The Diagram--Poems*' final indication.

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264 *PP*, p.55.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 – Introduction

*The Infant and the Pearl* was first published as a chapbook by Ferry Press for Silver Hounds in 1985. It was republished in its entirety two years later in *Kind*, excerpted (sections I, XVII and XVIII) for the anthology *A Various Art* in the same year, republished again in its entirety as part of *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm* and finally republished, again in its entirety, in Oliver's *Selected Poems*. By contrast with the numerous revisions made over the course of various publications of *The Diagram--Poems*, no changes were made to the text of the *The Infant and the Pearl* between its first and its last publication. A dedication, "for Jan, Kate and Bonamy" always accompanies the poem. These people are Oliver's first wife Janet Hughes and their two daughters. Oliver became estranged from his family, eventually separating from Janet, over the course of *The Infant and the Pearl*'s six-year period of composition; the dedication is perhaps nostalgic, potentially even eulogistic, and may possibly represent the loss of the family structure it names. Authorial material surrounding the poem differs slightly over the course of the poem's publications. The 1985 Ferry Press chapbook contains an "Author's Note" which is not reproduced in any subsequent edition, and the last published version of the poem is accompanied by original footnoted material by Oliver containing explanations and historical references designed to aid the American reader unfamiliar with the poem's British political context. This context is the British political climate during the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher between May 1979 and the time of the poem's first publication in 1985.

*The Infant and the Pearl* was begun in Brightlingsea in 1979 and completed in Paris in 1985.<sup>1</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that the poem was written during a time of great upheaval, uncertainty and even crisis in Oliver's life. Oliver's public and private accounts of the period leading up to the first publication of *The Infant and the Pearl* are fraught with expressions of irreversible and often unhappy transformation in his living situation, and contain frequent reports of internal discombobulation and moral panic; these feelings are registered across the gamut of his personal-relational, authorial and political commitments and affiliations. From at least the mid-1970s onwards Oliver worked sporadically on a novel about

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<sup>1</sup> CAAS, p.253. In a letter to Peter Riley of 21.08.1981 Oliver writes that he has been "get[ting] on with my long Pearl Poem once more"; by the 06.04.1985 "The Pearl poem is virtually finished, except for some tinkering[.]" Oliver to Riley, 21.08.1981 and 06.04.1985, DOA, Box 9.

boxing. This project dragged on into the 1980s. By the middle of the decade it was still incomplete and a source of much frustration and ire. References to this novel in Oliver's letters to Peter Riley betray an increasingly irritable attitude throughout the 1970s and 1980s. A letter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1975 mentions that some "boxing prose" is "*probably* to appear in *Bean News 2*."<sup>2</sup> *Bean News 2* is the 'Daily World Bean Special'; it contains no "boxing prose" by Oliver. By the 21<sup>st</sup> May 1979 the "boxing text" is "showing signs of nearing completion"; on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1980 Oliver writes that "I have just finished (again) the world's most conventional novel -- that damned boxing thing -- and want eagerly to get on with next projects."<sup>3</sup> On the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1985 he writes that the novel "is the perennial white elephant awaiting yet another rewriting until it becomes a swan."<sup>4</sup> Later, in the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* essay, Oliver refers to the novel as "dreadful" and "wretched."<sup>5</sup> Oliver finally abandoned the novel altogether, transferring what must have been a fraction of the projected work into sections of the prose and poetry of 'An Island That Is All The World.'

Oliver's return to France in 1982 to take up a job teaching "English and literature" at the University of London Institute in Paris precipitated the dissolution of his first marriage to Janet Hughes and a period of estrangement from her, as well as from their two daughters Kate and Bonamy; all three, as we have seen, are the dedicatees of every published version of *The Infant and the Pearl*.<sup>6</sup> In his later published reminiscences of the early 1980s Oliver is careful to place the blame for the break-up of his first marriage squarely on his own shoulders: "It turns out my marriage couldn't withstand the move [to Paris]. I accept all the fault for placing my wife under that choice."<sup>7</sup> These reminiscences are often tinged with a shade of bitterness, as can be seen in this account in the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*:

The one who moves agrees to be the villain: that's the best way to work it for those who stay. So be it. Our life ambitions [Oliver's and Janet's] had diverged too greatly: the separation eventually became complete. Half of my life seemed to fall away. Lacking the close contact with my daughters, I became unmoored.<sup>8</sup>

2 Oliver to Riley, 02.12.1975, *DOA*, Box 9.

3 Oliver to Riley, 21.05.1979 and 31.10.1980, *DOA*, Box 9.

4 Oliver to Riley, 06.04.1985, *DOA*, Box 9.

5 *CAAS*, p.253.

6 *WL*, p.207.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *CAAS*, p.253. In *WL* the moment is reported slightly differently: "I had a chance for a new career teaching English and literature; it meant returning to Paris. It turned out my marriage couldn't withstand the move. I accept all the fault for placing my wife under that choice." *WL*, p.207.

Describing the early 1980s in ‘An Island That Is All The World,’ Oliver refers to feelings of “deep moral unease and a rage at necessity that lasted nearly six years of buffeted uncertainty and sea-change.”<sup>9</sup> “[S]ix years” lasts until Oliver’s move to New York with his second wife, the American poet Alice Notley, in 1988. That Oliver frames a period of moral and personal “unease” in between two periods of long-term relationship may well have a significant bearing on one of the major concerns of *The Infant and the Pearl*, that is, its insistence on sexual “unity” as representing and producing virtue and moral worth. Moral crisis characterises all of the reflections upon the period between 1982 and 1988. During his second stint in Paris, Oliver was “separated from all [that he] valued,” a separation that “almost cleaved [his] unconscious identity in half” as he suffered from debilitating “moral tensions” caused by the “irreparable harm” he had caused himself and his family.<sup>10</sup> He describes in 1990 “the unease [which] would become intensified” each time he crossed the channel to visit his family, as “[his] mind shuttl[ed] between Britain and France.”<sup>11</sup>

These are reminiscences written for a published work of autobiography modelled on a Dantean structure of confession and moral responsibility in alternating poetry and prose, and so must be read in the context of a life reflected through the optic of a conscious literary inheritance.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Oliver’s personal and professional life was in no small measure of disarray during the composition of *The Infant and the Pearl*. Shortly after Oliver’s move to Paris in 1982 his mother died and his sister contracted liver cancer, dying shortly thereafter. In 1997 Oliver recounts that

These two deaths intensified the desperation and vivacity which characterised the 1980s for me in Paris, as I worried about the effect of separation on my family.<sup>13</sup>

“Vivacity” is a curious word with which to describe a period of mourning; but we may assume this feeling of the intensity of “mental animation” and conduct, as well as a “liveliness of perception” (as the *OED* defines the noun) partook of the pervasive nervous tension that Oliver was experiencing at the time.<sup>14</sup> A candid letter to Peter Riley from Paris dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1984 expresses the oppressive atmosphere of general crisis recounted in the more self-conscious later writings. Oliver writes that “[m]y own world

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9 *VTH*, p.78.

10 *Ibid.*, p.76, p.91, p.88, p.91.

11 *Ibid.*, p.78.

12 The models are Dante’s *Il Vita Nuova* and *Il Convivio*. Oliver asks Peter Riley to send him a copy of the latter in a letter of 18.04.1983. See Oliver to Riley, 18.04.1983, *DOA*, Box 9.

13 *CAAS*, p.255.

14 *OED* online [accessed 28.07.2014].

has been cracking apart for the last several months,” suggesting despondently that “if I fuck up who else is to blame, etc.”<sup>15</sup> What Oliver calls “deep moral unease” is particularly in evidence at this time. Of what did this “moral unease” consist?

In an ambivalent passage from ‘An Island That Is All The World,’ Oliver is less self-castigating about his life in Paris in the early 1980s than in the other passages we have seen. This passage is as follows:

Daytime, I taught literature; nighttime, I roamed out with journalists, enjoying the free relationship between men and women temporarily established in bars. Later I would smoke a cigar in bed, be warmly drunk [whilst] prostitutes conducted their ballet on the pavement [and] Brazilian transvestites crowded the cafes [...] It was a pleasurable time of self-corruption.<sup>16</sup>

Later in the same collection Oliver says that “[s]ort of, I loved it [this time in Paris].”<sup>17</sup> The ambivalence in ‘An Island That Is All The World’ is not strictly contradictory. Oliver enjoyed his new-found freedom, but loathed his “moral” delinquency. His “deep moral unease” emerges from his feelings of guilt about abandoning his family, whom he loved, and “all [that he] valued” along with them.<sup>18</sup> But it also emerges, quite clearly, from his reflection upon the very enjoyment of what he judged to be illicit and lewd behaviour, namely, casual sexual relationships and drinking a lot.<sup>19</sup> That Oliver’s “moral rhythm” was “broken” during this time is therefore completely of a piece with his enjoyment of Paris’ “free relationship[s] between men and women,” and his sense of “self-corruption” in turn seemingly linked to the instability of such a lifestyle. The scene of “self-corruption” and moral delinquency Oliver sketches with literary acuity in these memoirs would seem to present the negative mirror-image of the idealised “union between / people” celebrated in *The Infant and the Pearl*. We shall return to this theme throughout the present chapter.

Oliver is wont to characterise his life during this time in terms of a self-imposed exile, and to frame the composition of *The Infant and the Pearl* in terms of an exilic lament for the Britain he had personally abandoned and which was simultaneously lost to the ravages of Thatcherism. In *Whisper Louise* his break from Janet, Kate and Bonamy and his taking up residence in Paris is compared, with a

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15 Oliver to Riley, 11.05.1984, *DOA*, Box 9.

16 *VTH*, p.45.

17 *Ibid.*, p.85.

18 *Ibid.*, p.76.

19 “I holed up in a studio above the raucous Avenue de Clichy, had short-lived affairs, and told my friends that during my long summer break they could ring me any time and I would get out of bed and join them in some cafe.” *CAAS*, p.255.

level of self-deprecation but without irony, to Louise Michel's deportation to New Caledonia in August 1873 as punishment for her activities in the Paris Commune of 1871:

Exile [...] has two principal meanings: to be thrust out of the nation by judicial or other sentence; or to leave the nation voluntarily for a long time. The first is the grandiose fate of Louise; the second is the minor story of my middle age.<sup>20</sup>

"Simply," Oliver notes in *Whisper 'Louise'*, "I write better from a standpoint outside Britain," and continues,

Could I have written good poetry in Brightlingsea? Not my urban kind of poetry. Well in England, well, in Scotland? Not my kind.<sup>21</sup>

The period became for Oliver one of broken halves. He had "left in England a whole half of life," "[h]alf of [his] life seemed to fall away" and the stresses of the time "almost cleaved [his] [...] identity in half."<sup>22</sup>

The example of Dante setting out at the start of the *Inferno*, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" ["Midway this way of life we're bound upon"], is a favoured autographical reference point for Oliver; he liked to figure himself as a poet-author in the fashion of the exiled Dante about to embark upon his magnum opus.<sup>23</sup> References to the opening line of the *Commedia* appear in two sections of autobiographical narrative prose. A passage of recollection in 'An Island That Is All The World' dryly compares Britain's plunge into Thatcherism in the 1980s to the descent into the arms of gloomy Dis in Dante's *Inferno*:

Halfway through my life, Britain changed to long-lasting Conservatism which, while I don't say it oppressed all poetry, oppressed my own.<sup>24</sup>

In the 'Preface' to Oliver's posthumous *Arrondissements* (2003), he notes "More than mid-way through my life I have begun writing *Arrondissements*," a huge project whose corpus was to include the poetic sequences 'The Shattered Crystal,' 'China Blue,' 'The Video House of Fame' and 'A Salvo for Africa,' as well as the entire text of *Whisper 'Louise'*.<sup>25</sup> A brusque, pragmatic letter to Riley of the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1983

20 See *WL*, pp.206-215 (206).

21 *WL*, pp.206-207.

22 *VTH*, p.85; *CAAS*, p.253; *VTH*, p.91.

23 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin, 1949), p.71.

24 *VTH*, p.78.

25 Douglas Oliver, *Arrondissements* (Great Wilbraham, Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2003), p.x.

confirms this scene of authorial and personal exile from the perspective of Oliver's contemporary malaise; it lists in numbered bullet points his reasons for leaving England. These include "I am out of Thatcherite Britain and its depressing political discussions, [and] can take a better interest in world politics," and the blunt (considering the letter is to a dear and trusted correspondent) "[p]ersonal reasons."<sup>26</sup>

Throughout this traumatic period, Oliver continued consciously to distance himself from his origins as a self-avowed "avant-garde" poet, writing to Riley in an undated letter of 1980 that "I am shedding my avant-garde *manners* but not, I hope, my poetic attitudes in other respects."<sup>27</sup> These "other respects," as may be conjectured from his assertions of loyalty to J.H. Prynne and his poetry that we noted in the previous chapter, Oliver considered largely personal and collegial rather than formal or stylistic. As a continuation, too, of his disgruntlement with the British and European left that we saw influencing the composition of *The Diagram--Poems*, Oliver recounts in *Whisper 'Louise'* his growing frustration with popular left politics under Thatcher. In Brightlingsea,

Former students conducted bitter, powerless political discussions in the pubs:  
easy just to hate Thatcher and cheer on the doomed miners' strike.  
Conversations combined loony left with anarchism.<sup>28</sup>

The tone of *Whisper 'Louise'* is more belligerently sceptical of left-wing politics than Oliver's earlier writings, and its tendency to dismiss as student arrogance much of the political disaffection of the 1980s more reductive and reactionary than in Oliver's poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. But these reflections are nonetheless instructive. They contribute to the overall mood of disaffection and disillusionment that certainly characterised, and arguably defined, the scene of the six-year composition of *The Infant and the Pearl*. They also, especially when read in conjunction with earlier writings, give us a sense of the relative shape and size of the political objects of Oliver's disaffection: he certainly loathed "Thatcherite Britain," but it is the "depressing" and "powerless political discussions" on the left that Oliver upbraids and denigrates with more energy and clarity of expression than he invests in attacking Thatcher or the Conservatives.

Lastly, note once more the dedication of the poem, "for Jan, Kate and Bonamy." On the same page as the dedication, in his "Author's Note," Oliver glosses the "prescribed extra verse" of his medieval

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<sup>26</sup> Oliver to Riley, 18.04.1983, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver to Riley, 1980, *DOA*, Box 9.

<sup>28</sup> *WL*, p.207.



stanzaic model (on which more below): it represents “a return to the sign of unity.” The poem is in part a deliberate and conscious attempt to provoke and realise in verse exactly the kind of “unity” (political, sexual, relational, moral and spiritual) that Oliver felt at the time of composition was sorely lacking in his life, as well as in the world at large.

### 3.2 – The question of unity

*The Infant and the Pearl* is Oliver’s crowning poetic achievement. It is the most formally brilliant and conceptually demanding poem of Oliver’s entire career as a poet, one that has been regarded by poets, reviewers and critics with equal measures of awe and bafflement. John Kerrigan calls the poem “ambitious [and] often bizarre,” “[e]xtraordinary,” and “the most impressive work to emerge” from the period of what he refers to as a “medieval revival” in British letters in the mid-1980s.<sup>29</sup> J.H. Prynne, in a letter to Oliver, calls it “immense and audacious.”<sup>30</sup> Kelvin Corcoran, reviewing the book in *Reality Studios*, calls it “a remarkable book,” adding that “[t]he work and care of its making is beyond my attempt at the reviewer’s voice to say.”<sup>31</sup> Another contemporary reviewer, Patrick Wright, writes in the *London Review of Books* that the poem “finds a remarkable political narrative in its skilfully contrived collision of autobiography and public symbolism.”<sup>32</sup> As this last accolade suggests, *The Infant and the Pearl* is not a poem whose various aims and achievements can be summarised solely by recourse to Oliver’s contemporary biographical locale. The scene I have set in section 3.1, above, is just that, the background to the poem, and I proceed in this chapter to complicate, extend upon and extrapolate from this scene by close readings of the poem in order to understand *The Infant and the Pearl*’s development of the major questions we have been following through Oliver’s work since the early 1970s. Unity, as we have seen, is a lasting and important theme for Oliver’s entire oeuvre. Rather, the question of unity is the superlative question of Oliver’s career as a poet. The ways in which we have seen this question posed and practised in Oliver’s essays from the early 1970s and in the verse of *The Diagram--Poems* can be summarised in the following terms: how it is possible to articulate the idea and the practice of unity in poems? In other words, how is it possible to achieve in verse a unity that transcends, and is simultaneously prior to, social relations determined by a paucity of recognition and appreciation for our

29 Kerrigan, ‘Mrs Thatcher’s *Pearl*,’ pp.182-183. Kerrigan counts among writers of this revival Alan Jenkins, Barry MacSweeney, David Dabydeen and Peter Reading.

30 Prynne to Oliver, 01.02.1986, *DOA*, Box 9.

31 Kelvin Corcoran, review of *The Infant and the Pearl*, *Reality Studios* Vol. 8, Nos. 1-4 (1986) pp.74-77 (77).

32 Wright, ‘A Journey through Ruins,’ p.10.

fundamental, natural human commonality and co-dependency, and by political antagonism, especially radical left-wing dissent and revolutionary agitation and activism?

In the early essays, and in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, unity is something a poet-author and a reader can achieve together in the realisation of an unfettered intersubjectivity produced in the meeting of minds that poetic stress makes possible. In *The Diagram--Poems*, unity is that which the revolutionary Tupamaros' failure and eventual destruction by the Uruguayan state proves is necessary to political struggle, because without peaceful adherence to mutual human commonality such struggle is doomed. In *The Infant and the Pearl* the question of unity is posed with greater ambition, clarity and concision than it had ever previously been posed in Oliver's writing. In the poem, unity, and especially sexual unity, is that which defines and expresses a utopian political organisation of human social relations based on "ignorance," "mercy" and "virtue." What the poem valorises as "the union between / people" is not limited to, but certainly includes, heterosexual union, that is, straight sex. This is made explicit by such moments as the celebration of the righteous "union of male / and female in fruition" in the poem's fifteenth section, and the relief Oliver's narrator feels when he claims: "I recognized Rosine the way you'd recognise / your lover's look in union as a unity" in the poem's thirteenth section.<sup>33</sup>

Such "union" is also reminiscent of the "moments" of "special intersubjectivity" we detailed in Chapter 1, and that are a foundational principle of Oliver's poetics. *The Infant and the Pearl* is the first of Oliver's works to tackle the question of unity in terms of the *social* application of a *poetical and theoretical* argument Oliver had been formulating since the early 1970s. As always in Oliver's work, unity in *The Infant and the Pearl* is a concept of great moral significance, and from it emerges what I have previously called a "moral imperative": it is what we should strive towards, and act in accordance with, in our everyday lives. Like *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* articulates a moral obligation to political transformation. But the break *The Infant and the Pearl* makes with Oliver's previous writing is that the moral imperative in this poem, instead of being expressed implicitly and abstractly through an image of, for example, "spoken kindness," is instead named explicitly as a specific type of political organisation. The poem names the organisation of human beings around the principles of moral virtue that emanate from unity, in the sense that we have here defined it, "Socialism."

What does Oliver mean by "Socialism"? *The Infant and the Pearl* shares with *The Diagram--Poems* and *Penniless Politics* the treatment of political context and political activity which I outlined at

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33 SP, p.64, p.61. I explain the significance of Rosine below.

the close of the previous chapters, that is, such context is subordinated at crucial moments in all three poems to the truth of the inadequacy of its generic type, human politics, as a solution to the problem of human violence, antagonism and strife. As Oliver would put it in *Penniless Politics*, “all solutions [to social and political crisis] are false when the spirit is wrong: the biggest mistake / of our age is to think politics will cure our lives.”<sup>34</sup> Oliver’s poetic is centrally concerned with getting the spirit right. This involves the subordination of politics to that which must, for him, be the organising principle for a social relation hitherto ignored and actively debased by political affiliation of all stripes. Oliver calls this principle by various names; in the introduction to *The Diagram--Poems* it is an “authentic politics”; in *The Infant and the Pearl* it is “Socialism” and its expression is “the union between / people.” Here is the ninety-ninth stanza of the poem.

A memory sea that had lain at low tide  
in my mind slowly mounted making green  
my dense darkness, radiant liquid  
filled my vision; somewhere, half-seen  
a precious pearl was shining in me; a pellucid  
awareness of all that had passed – all that had been  
born in me one morning when the mongoloid  
eyes of my son stared at me, smiling, serene  
in their way – was eerily glowing again, what I mean  
by Socialism, that our soul and our selves are unknown  
yet unconsciously known in the union between  
people. (I lay in my grey dressing gown.)<sup>35</sup>

*The Infant and the Pearl* is a dream vision in the tradition of the genre of which its namesake is the most formally remarkable and critically divisive example, the fourteenth-century Middle English *Pearl*. *The Infant and the Pearl* mimics the form of *Pearl*, as well as its redemptive, pedagogical plot, very closely, with important convergences of narrative detail. In a moment, I will explore the significance of these convergences in order to illuminate *The Infant and the Pearl*’s major concerns. For now, let us note some important developments of themes we have seen characterising Oliver’s work from the early 1970s onwards.

*The Infant and the Pearl* is a poem about disillusionment and discontent with its contemporary political context. The poem’s response to the British political malaise of the 1980s stems from a broadly left perspective – Oliver did, after all, call it his “anti-Thatcherite poem” – but the poem’s discontent is universal: that is, its political sympathies lie not with any party, or even any version of party politics, but

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<sup>34</sup> *PP*, p.55.

<sup>35</sup> *SP*, p.73.

with the pre-political, intersubjective “union between / people” that is, in the poem, a necessary condition of any authentic human association.<sup>36</sup> In *The Diagram--Poems*, as we have seen, this kind of relation is designated as the wellspring of an ideal “authentic politics” based on essential human commonality, one inflected by the semantic resonance of the Middle English *kynde* and by Rousseauian notions of natural innocence. *The Infant and the Pearl* develops this kind of thinking. An important part of this development is exemplified by the stanza quoted above, in which Oliver’s speaker refers more explicitly to his hidden natural propensity for recognising the truth and moral virtue of essential human connaturality than any speaker does, at any point, in *The Diagram--Poems*. A “sea” of “memory” floods “my mind” with clarity, making the dreamer freshly aware of the hitherto untapped reserves of what, as we saw in *The Diagram--Poems*, “we know.” The recognition of this “memory,” which had always been there, laying “at low tide,” re-asserts that which Oliver’s Down’s syndrome infant son Tom represents in all of Oliver’s poems in which he appears: the irrefutable goodness of pacifistic (“serene”) human co-habitation. Furthermore, the speaker’s corporal frame itself experiences the scene of re-birth in sympathy with Tom, as both infant and mother: the amniotic fluid of some “radiant liquid” “fill[s] my vision,” and the dreamer is figuratively impregnated with the “awareness” that was, and is, “born in me.” The stanza expresses a revelation that is both physical and intellectual: “radiant liquid / filled my vision,” producing a “pellucid / awareness” that is “born in me,” an awareness characterised by an influx of received wisdom and illumination. But “vision” is also meta-textual, since the “vision” is in one important sense the dream vision we are reading and which is *The Infant and the Pearl*; it is in this sense that the poem nominates itself as the very medium by which “awareness” of our hidden nature can be, and is, revealed.

Another aspect of *The Infant and the Pearl*’s development of Oliver’s recurrent themes is the promotion of the figure of Tom Oliver from a pedagogical emblem capable of “spoken kindness” and representative of ideally innocent human nature, to a fully-fledged dynamic allegory for the type of self-knowledge and commitment to a social bond of loving reciprocity that the poem advocates as an alternative foundation for political organisation to the UK’s traditional two-party-dominated system of parliamentary democracy. In *The Infant and the Pearl*, Tom Oliver is more than the guiding “voice” he is in *The Diagram--Poems*; the wisdom he imparts is made structurally and allegorically consistent with the divine wisdom of the fourteenth-century *Pearl*’s Pearl-Maiden. Although the figure of a maiden *also* appears throughout *The Infant and the Pearl* as a character named “Rosine” and is distinct from Tom, the

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36 CAAS, p.253.

two represent and communicate the same imperative to acknowledge the foundational social bond of loving reciprocity conducted in the poem by the emphasis on the value of “ignorance.”

Rosine and Tom thus partake of the same “dynamic” structure of symbolic development that A.C. Spearing and Stephen Russell note in the original *Pearl*’s development of its imagery. In other words, as in *Pearl*, the meaning, characterisation and allegorical significance of the central symbolic characters in *The Infant and the Pearl* accumulate meaning and shades of interpretation as the poem progresses. In *Pearl* the single image of the “precios perle” [“precious pearl”], like “the concept of *clannesse* [cleanness] in the poem *Purity*,” is

[set] in a variety of contexts taken from real situations, so that the idea develop[s] in meaning as the poem extend[s] itself in time. In *Pearl* [...] the development in meaning is co-ordinated with and expressed through a single developing human drama – the encounter between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden.<sup>37</sup>

It is as true for *The Infant and the Pearl* as for *Pearl* that, as Spearing goes on to say, “[t]he whole force and poignancy of *Pearl* derives from its basic structure as an encounter involving human relationship,”<sup>38</sup> and it is equally true that the development of this relation, again as much for Oliver’s poem as for his source text, involves what Russell describes as

a sense of movement from the personal, local, phenomenal, or sensory to the communal, universal, supernal, or spiritual [...] the poem works on both levels, moving simultaneously outward and upward, away from the self and the world and mutability and the senses and toward “unknowing.”<sup>39</sup>

In *The Infant and the Pearl*, the maiden Rosine, Tom and “Socialism” denote different forms or aspects of the poem’s journey towards the expression of “what I mean / by Socialism” in the ninety-ninth stanza. What this means is the expression in universal terms of a spiritually-infused intersubjectivity that promotes self-knowledge and personal fulfilment in the reciprocal recognition of human nature. Recognising human nature – “our soul and our selves” – requires “unknowing.” Rosine, Tom and “Socialism” are structurally co-dependent upon each other; they are also inexplicable in the context of the *The Infant and the Pearl*’s complex symbolic economy without an understanding of their interrelationships. They are linked by the valorisation of Oliver’s own form of “unknowing,” “ignorance.”

37 A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.137.

38 *Ibid.*, p.137.

39 Stephen J. Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p.161.

We explored the background to Oliver's preoccupation with this concept under the name "stupidity" in the previous chapter. In the stanza quoted above, "the mongoloid / eyes of my son" gazing at the speaker impart the wisdom that he requires to see through the mutually obfuscatory, because mutually dogmatic, "rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric" named two stanzas previously, and this wisdom consists in the communication of the value of "ignorance." Remember that, for Oliver, the fact that his son was what he called "mongoloid" gave Tom access to the reserves of hidden nature that we should all strive to discover within ourselves. Tom is a limit case for the exercise of human care and benevolence: his demand on society to care for him in his disability provides by extension the model for the type of responsibility and care we should all have for each other. Tom's "ignorance" is not just unificatory, but divine. Note these lines from the poem's hundredth stanza:

[...] 'The pearl is ourself in which lies  
a rosy reflection of all whom we care for  
enough, the Other rendered perfect in paradise  
of our self-love [...]'<sup>40</sup>

Oliver's choice of "enough" in this stanza, prosodically emphasised and provocatively isolated by its position immediately following a line-break and followed by a strong caesura, echoes *Pearl's* use of variations on "innoghe" ["enough"] as a link-word in its eleventh section during the Pearl-Maiden's explication of the Parable of the Vineyard and the salvation, through grace, of the innocents. In other words, the "care" Tom teaches us we should have for each other is, like Christ's, a means of excess directly proportionate to its ends; it is a *redemptive* and *salvific* sufficiency. In *The Infant and the Pearl* the description of the fictional Tom in *The Harmless Building*, that he radiates "the true blessedness allowed only to the really low in IQ," achieves its fullest expression in verse. In the poem, his divinity is twofold: as well as embodying the Christ-like virtue of serene beatitude, Tom is also a Buddha-like figure of enlightenment, and is so because of his "ignorance": in the poem's sixth section, he is described as "one on whom / innocence and incapability impose an immutable / Buddha face beaming; for Down's Syndrome / [...] had kissed him with mercy."<sup>41</sup>

In *The Infant and the Pearl's* ninety-seventh stanza, Rosine, in the manner of *Pearl's* passages of homiletic instruction, delivers the following encomium to "ignorance":

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<sup>40</sup> *SP*, p.73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49

[...] 'First acknowledge  
 that the highest human intelligence is a near  
 relation of ignorance; let language  
 untwist on your tongues. There's no true idea  
 of political system; so say so; don't languish  
 in rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric [...]'<sup>42</sup>

The "rhetoric" admonished here is that of both Thatcherite economic policy and Tory ideology more generally, as well as that of the trade union lobby and Labour party "Marxists" who opposed them. What exactly Oliver considered such "rhetoric" to sound like we shall explore in greater detail below. But it does not matter, finally, for *The Infant and the Pearl*, precisely in what the politics of either Marxism or Thatcherism consist. It is "enough," and it is bad enough, that they are examples of what the poem calls the "whole hollow / conformity of creeds," that is, that they proceed by dogma and demand (as Oliver's poem represents their "rhetoric") to tell people exactly what they must do to improve their lives and enrich society. Like *The Diagram--Poems*' desire for "some beneficial balance" to replace wholesale the murderous antagonism between "revolutionary flamboyance and a dictatorship's response of iron rule," *The Infant and the Pearl*'s insistence that "[t]here's no true idea / of political system" is the negative correlate to the poem's positive argument about the possibility of a utopian politics.

This argument, developed through the symbolic dynamism Oliver inherited from the original *Pearl*, is as follows: Marxist and Thatcherite ideologies obscure equally the common ground from which a politics based on a pacifistic abundance of care (what the poem calls "mercy") could arise. The key to understanding why both these positions fail to account for, or even properly recognise, the question of unity that we posed above, is that neither of them acknowledges that "ignorance" is the only point from which a truly inclusive universalism can begin to be thought. It might conceivably be argued that Oliver contradicts Rosine's admonition that there is no "true idea / of political system" five years later, in 'An Island That Is All The World,' by naming "the precious origin of our lives' form" a "true politics." But a "true politics," as we explored at length in the previous chapters, is not an "idea," and it is still less a "system": it is an ethical imperative built on the foundations of formal and intersubjective unity. A "union between / people" is not a trade union, because it is more primordial than the cognitive knowledge required to form and act upon the organisational and political imperatives of such an association. A "union between / people" retains the value of "our soul and our selves" being "unknown," or at best "unconsciously known," that is, it retains the intrinsic value of what scholars of *Pearl* concerned to tease

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42 *Ibid.*, p.72.

out the more mystically inflected meanings of the poem call the “ineffable.”<sup>43</sup>

What Oliver’s dreamer/narrator “mean[s] by Socialism” in *The Infant and the Pearl* is essentially both ineffable and, to use another term deployed by *Pearl* critics, figural. Here, again, is how Oliver’s dreamer defines the term:

[...] what I mean  
by Socialism, that our soul and our selves are unknown  
yet unconsciously known in the union between  
people.<sup>44</sup>

Ann Chalmers Watts, discussing *Pearl*, describes “The height of mystical experience” as

the apprehension of the “ineffable,” so-called even in modern parlance because being at one with God must by definition leave all human desire and language far below. By gradual discipline of contemplation, the mystic comes to a momentary experience of God’s light, God’s love, or eternal knowing, and the experience passes beyond desire and language even sooner than it passes human understanding.<sup>45</sup>

The protagonist dreamer of *Pearl*, Watts continues, “desire[s] a union of word to referent, of motion to stillness, not possible to humanity and not compatible with true mystical vision.”<sup>46</sup> This is to say that the *Pearl*-poet

plays off the difference between his dreamer’s inexpressibilities and the inexpressibility that properly belongs to the mystical tradition influencing the poem.<sup>47</sup>

43 It is worth comparing the political value of ignorance as it is deployed in Oliver’s work to Andrew Bennett’s description of what he calls the “politics of contemporary ignorance” in his *Ignorance*. Bennett writes that “[i]gnorance is a pervasive trope of authorship in contemporary poetry,” and produces a taxonomy of authorial positions which in some manner involve an ignorant relationship to the production of poetic work, such as “*I don’t know where my poems come from*” and “*[t]he poem tells me something about myself that I did not know before*.” He further suggests that acknowledgement of such ignorance inflects the post-Romantic condition of authorship with an essential “fallibility” and “uncertainty,” and that ignorance as it pertains to such fallibility “is at the heart of the open society, of tolerance, of democracy.” Bennett focuses on the expressions or avowals of ignorance that colour contemporary poets’ self-descriptions, rather than their use of ignorance as a political function in poems, but his emphasis (via Lorenzo Infantino) on the essential relationship between ignorance and “democracy” is pertinent here, as it is to *The Diagram--Poems*’ “land silvery with democracy.” Oliver in *The Infant and the Pearl*, it should be remembered, is less interested in ignorance’s relationship to “democracy” than its relationship to the ecstatic spirit of “Socialism.” See Andrew Bennett, *Ignorance: Literature and Agnology* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.229, p.232, p.239.

44 *SP*, p.73.

45 Ann Chalmers Watts, ‘*Pearl*, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss,’ *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp.26-40 (29). See also Theodore Bogdanos, *Pearl, Image of the Ineffable: A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983). Bogdanos’ entire monograph is concerned with the idea of the ineffable in *Pearl*; he “regard[s] *Pearl* as a dramatization of man’s encounter with divine reality as this particular poet has envisioned this encounter and has rendered it into a poetic experience with an order and significance of its own as artistic statement.” (p.1).

46 *Ibid.*, p.30.

47 *Ibid.*



The fact of the dreamer's "inexpressibility" in *Pearl* is that which proves, for Watts, the existential certainty – we might say the apodicticity – of the very mystical union, i.e., "being at one with God," that he seeks: "Language protesting the failure of language apprehends the sure being of what cannot be expressed."<sup>48</sup>

At the end of *The Infant and the Pearl*, as we saw above, Rosine exhorts Oliver's dreamer (and by extension – note the plural "tongues" – everyone) to "acknowledge" precisely such an inexpressibility: "let language / untwist on your tongues." What is to be allowed to "untwist" on all of our "tongues" into a state of unbidden natural commonality is "language," rather than speech or vocabulary, since it is "language" itself that remains twisted by our clinging to political "rhetoric." The distinction recalls that of Saussure's *langue* [language] and *parole* [speech], by the imputation that to let "language / untwist" would be to return to a natural system (*langue*) of communicative truthfulness and not simply a negative manifestation of that system's expression in speech or writing (*parole*). Language will not "untwist" by any deliberate act of intelligent eloquence, argues Rosine, let alone by the assertion of any "true idea / of political system," but because it is language's natural action to do so if only we "let" it. Language in its originally untwisted state does not profess a "true idea / of political system" and therefore confronts inauthentic "rhetoric" with the truth of its inexpressible other. Inexpressibility is expressed in the following stanzas' definition of "Socialism" over a line-break: the enjambment "between / people."

In these final, climactic stanzas of Oliver's poem, Rosine and Tom both promote "ignorance" in the name of the question of unity, and they are both subsumed by the question of unity into acting as functionaries for its expression in the poem's narrative trajectory. They are both exemplary figures of the achievement of "unity" as a moral virtue, but by their very existence as fictional idealisations whose artifice is reflexively couched in the poem's formal and prosodic fourteenth-century inheritance, they condemn the real world's lack of "unity" and chastise its inability to achieve its articulation in everyday social relations. The enjambment "between / people," the spatial and, in any given reading, temporal gap between these two words in the fleeting moment it takes for the reader's eyes to scan back to the left margin, is composed by Oliver to be the icon of our present inability to achieve that which *The Infant and the Pearl* demands that we must achieve: "union between people." That line cannot yet be written, because we do not, as a "nation," submit to the demand that we recognize unity in our common

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48 *Ibid.*, p.33, p.29.

“ignorance” as a basis for “Socialism.” Oliver’s dreamer, and Oliver himself, have a guide in the form of Tom to teach them the truth of this relation, and *The Infant and the Pearl* is, finally, an extension of this didactic relationship. The closest we can therefore come to recognising our potential for utopian politics, for the unity that is in us and that we are, is to read the poem itself – the enjambment “between / people” admits and performs this fact. In the break between these lines echoes the figure of the Husserlian “abyss” between subjects. It is this figure whose prospect of abolition the poem wants to prove by subjecting it to the iconic scrutiny of a line-break, the very performance in prosodic method of a distance the poem exposes in order to make visible the necessity of its collapse.<sup>49</sup> The moment “union between / people” is to *The Infant and the Pearl* what “We know this. Everyone” is to *The Diagram--Poems*: a deliberate performance of the instrumental nature of poetical language to bring us closer together.

All of this points towards the existence in Oliver’s poem of a figural (or “typological”) approach to reality, and in particular, to “Socialism.” In their readings of *Pearl* critics such as Elizabeth Salter and J. Allan Mitchell refer to Erich Auerbach’s “seminal words on the nature of figural poetics” from Auerbach’s 1938 essay “Figura”:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfils the first [...] Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfilment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the Word, or will happen in the second coming.<sup>50</sup>

Salter interprets “the central power” of *Pearl* in the following terms:

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49 A similar moment in the poem occurs in its twelfth section, when Oliver’s dreamer finds himself in the House of Commons: “Like a Douglas Oliver look-alike / the Speaker dreamily searched our side / and ‘recognised’ me, which although autoscopic / for both of us, deepened the dark divide / in myself.” This moment is comparable in its prosodic efficacy to the “union between / people” because both name, or nominate, a moment of absence or negation as part of an argument against that absence or negation, and both do so in the name of unity. The puns on “recognised” and “Speaker,” and “autoscopic / for both of us,” play with the kind of authorial splitting we saw Oliver theorise with reference to Chaucer in Chapter 1, before “deepened the dark divide / in myself” presents a specimen of division as inner turmoil and moral insolvency in the shape of the line-break between “dark divide” and “in myself.” The parliamentary farce that Rosine will shortly bring to a revelatory halt is hereby played out in narcissistic microcosm. As if Oliver’s dreamer was himself simply an incompetent reader, self–other ambiguity leading to a sharing of consciousness (recall Chaucer’s “figure of giant-like significance”) is botched; “although” the experience is “autoscopic / for both of us,” it nevertheless exacerbates the dreamer’s own self-conflict instead of leading to a mutually harmonious encounter with the “Speaker.” Fixated on his own idealistic polemic, the dreamer neglects the “middle-ground” of authentic otherness that the spiritualised/sexualised Rosine exemplifies. The “dark divide / in myself” is split down the middle to emphasise the intrinsic falsity and wrong-headedness of the dreamer’s self-regard, and by extension, of his careerist pretensions to a “true idea / of political system” without “ignorance.” See *SP*, p.59.

50 Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Life* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p.53, quoted by J. Allan Mitchell, ‘The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unfigurable,’ *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2000), pp.86-111 (87).

[The poem] draws upon essentially figural concepts: upon an acceptance of reality of an earthly relationship between dreamer and Pearl maiden, which is not rejected but fulfilled in spiritual terms [...]<sup>51</sup>

Mitchell goes on to complicate this analysis by noting that the Pearl-Maiden in *Pearl* “emphasizes that anagogic reality – the main inscrutable subject of her discourse and of the poem itself – is precisely not immersed in the stream of historical life,” i.e., “not immersed in” the continuum in which Auerbach’s definition of figural “forecasting” takes place.<sup>52</sup>

*Pearl* cannot be figural in Auerbach’s sense for Mitchell because of the manner in which *Pearl* deals with questions of the afterlife and of spiritual salvation rather than “real historical events [that] [...] will happen in the second coming.”<sup>53</sup> Whilst Mitchell both identifies the coordinates for and qualifies a figural reading of *Pearl*, Cary Nelson is less cautious about applying Auerbach’s scholarship directly to the poem, stating that

*Pearl* may serve as a model for a figural reading of poetic structure, for it offers a uniquely formal aesthetic experience. [...] The figural reality of the poem’s structure emerges when its story ends; the nature of the narrator’s final situation is revealed by the poem’s completed form. A figural reading of *Pearl* satisfies an elegiac interpretation of either the narrator’s or the poet’s situation [...] either actual grief or its poetic exploration is an earthly *figura* no less real than what it prefigures: transformed by Christ’s agony, earthly suffering foreshadows the perfect understanding achieved after death.<sup>54</sup>

Focussing on the stanzaic organisation and general narrative trajectory of the poem, Nelson interprets *Pearl*’s “missing” line 472 as a deliberate flaw designed as the formal representation of the figural destiny which the poem as a whole “prefigures”:

The poem has the form of a pearl deliberately flawed, a bitten apple, a broken circle, a world that sorely needs the grace of God. In the end of time God will restore the missing line and complete the poem’s circle.<sup>55</sup>

Oliver’s poem prefigures something similar. Its definition of “Socialism” is as deliberately and spiritually esoteric as it is incorrigibly and archly anti- contemporary trade union politics; the “Socialism” expressed

51 Salter, quoted in Mitchell, ‘The Middle English *Pearl*,’ p.87.

52 *Ibid.*, p.88.

53 Auerbach, quoted in Mitchell, ‘The Middle English *Pearl*,’ p.87.

54 Cary Nelson, *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana, CH and London: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p.43.

55 *Ibid.*, p.33.

is one defined by a state of “union” the lack of which, as we have already established, is all around us, is constitutive of every political “creed” currently on offer, and is the very proof of the necessity of its universal recognition as a natural, inalienable and ineffable human property or propensity, both individually and socially.

Yet despite *The Infant and the Pearl*’s apathy, or even antipathy, towards the trade unions’ battle with Thatcherite economic policy, the very spiritual universalism of the poem’s “Socialism” shares common ground with the origins of the British trade union movement. In the pre-Marxist history of labour organisation, dissent and agitation in England, a not dissimilar conception of the universality and inalienability of natural rights plays a critical role. E.P. Thompson has demonstrated at length the complex social and religious elements of radical politics in England in the 1790s. Thompson distinguishes between, but notes the coextensive and overlapping influence of, what he refers to as the “rational conceit” and the “visionary image” of radical dissent: he discusses the pervasive influence of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* as well as citing, as examples of the combination of “‘combustible matter’ of poor man’s dissent with [...] a revolutionary era,” tracts such as the 1798 Millenarian pamphlet *Unity and Equality in the Kingdom of God*:

The high and the low, the oppressor and the oppressed, shall be reduced to one perfect level. The pampered tyrant, and his indigent vassal; the wealthy peer, and the neglected pauper, shall receive an equitable and impartial sentence.<sup>56</sup>

The revolutionary implications of the late eighteenth-century conception of universal brotherhood are ably exemplified, for Thompson, as much by Blake’s visionary fervour and Wordsworth’s paeans to the French Revolutionary spirit as by the London Corresponding Society’s “rational” collectivist agitation.

The “spirit” of radical dissent, writes Thompson, “whether in its visionary or in its superstitious form [...] was perhaps as long-lasting in its influence as the arguments of Tom Paine.”<sup>57</sup> Oliver’s “Socialism” maintains this spirit by jettisoning regard for, or interest in, agitation, the latter associated in the 1790s with the most radical of Jacobin associations and by the 1980s with the Marxist, Labour and trade union left. The radical inheritance of *The Infant and the Pearl* is therefore closely akin to some of the “prophetic schools” which operated in the mid-1790s such as the “True Baptists” of Norwich, Wisbech and Liverpool, who, Thompson argues, made great efforts to recall their congregations “from

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<sup>56</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp.127-130.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

too literal an encounter with Apollyon and back to the pilgrimage of the spirit.”<sup>58</sup> The spirit of universalism, of the self and soul in mutual harmony which Oliver’s “Socialism” proclaims, retains a kernel of prophetic sermonising as passionate and sincere as Blake’s own vision of universal mutuality in his Jerusalem, “Both heart in heart & hand in hand.”<sup>59</sup> The achievement of this mutuality in a future state of social harmony is the shared preserve of Oliver’s “Socialism” and its precursors, whether in the L.C.S.’s correspondence, eighteenth-century Millenarian tracts, or later nineteenth-century utopian socialism, including elements of Marxist thought. The esoteric spiritual paradox of the question of unity remains in *The Infant and the Pearl*, as it does with the problem of what “we know” in *The Diagram--Poems*, and this is that unity is in us, and we can achieve it: yet we do not. It is there nonetheless, and the enjambment “between / people” reminds us of this fact; unity is waiting for us to recognize and accept it as the only authentic organisational principle for human life; waiting, in fact, to be fulfilled.

For Cary Nelson, *Pearl* expresses a scene of the completion of human history, and the achievement of “perfect understanding [...] after death” congruent with Auerbach’s explication of the “divine order” in figural expression:

[T]he individual earthly event is [...] viewed primarily in immediate vertical connection with a divine order which encompasses it, which on some future day will itself be concrete reality; so that the earthly event is a prophecy or *figura* of a part of a wholly divine reality that will be enacted in the future. But this reality is not only future; it is always present in the eye of God and in the other world, which is to say that in transcendence the revealed and true reality is present at all times, or timelessly.<sup>60</sup>

Does Oliver’s poem, and especially “what I mean / by Socialism,” look forward to “a wholly divine reality that will be enacted in the future”? Oliver’s poem, like *Pearl*, ends in a failure – the dreamer’s failure to cross the “gutter” between himself and Rosine, structurally equivalent to the *Pearl* dreamer’s failure to cross the “strem” [“stream”] which separates him physically, spiritually and allegorically from the dream world, the Pearl-Maiden and the vision of the New Jerusalem she has just afforded him – and like *Pearl* that ending sanctions the message of commitment to a code of moral and social human behaviour, however broadly defined. In *Pearl*, this message is that “Hit is ful eþe to þe god Krystyin” [“Good Christians can with ease incline”], since “Paradyse” awaits those who recognise that salvation in the form of “Krysteȝ dere blessyng and myn, / þat in þe forme of bred and wyn / þe preste vus scheweȝ

58 *Ibid.*, p.129.

59 William Blake, *Complete Writings with variant readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.652.

60 Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Life*, p.72.

each a daye” [“Christ’s dear blessing bestowing mine, / As in the form of bread and wine / Is shown us daily in sacrament”].<sup>61</sup>

At the end of *The Infant and the Pearl*, two stanzas after the “union between / people” is declared, Oliver’s dreamer begins “crossing the gutter that only grace / can cross,” a figure reminiscent of the Husserlian abyss between subjects, but is rudely awakened:

[...] I caught a mere trace  
of grey from [Rosine’s] gowns, her grave frown,  
and awoke in a dawn of our daily disgrace,  
lying down in my father’s grey dressing gown.<sup>62</sup>

Both poems end in a deficit of grace that must be fulfilled by God’s love, Oliver’s poem even more explicitly than *Pearl*, as “grace” rhymes uncomfortably with its ubiquitous, everyday opposite. Recall that *The Diagram--Poems*’ final invocation is the hope that “grace and courage arrive calmly in us.”<sup>63</sup> The presentation of Rosine in section XIII of *The Infant and the Pearl* as “secularized, she was Socialism” is inverted at the climax of the poem, at which point “Socialism” is ardently and emphatically spiritualized. “Socialism” for Oliver is a state of “union” to be fulfilled in a redemptive future moment, and this futurity is what “Socialism” *means* in Oliver’s poem. But this state is also “always present,” because the “special intersubjectivity” provided by poetic language, and emphasised by the iconographic enjambment “between / people,” provides a potentially inexhaustible number of just such moments between reader and poet-author on a metrical, rhythmical and syllabic level. The “memory sea that had lain at low tide” which begins the ninety-ninth stanza is transformed by its end into “a perpetual recollection which becomes a radical, Christocentric, and openly future-oriented reorientation of the self.”<sup>64</sup> *The Infant and the Pearl* is a redemptive poem, its definition of “Socialism” drawn from a spiritualism expressed in the language of Christian eschatology, its solution to political antagonism the wholesale substitution for politics of a utopian moralism to which poetic language is the best available guide.

Thus *The Infant and the Pearl* adds to the emphasis on unity and harmonious intersubjectivity

61 E.V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp.43-44. All quotations from *Pearl* refer to Gordon’s text, the edition read by Oliver. The current standard edition of *Pearl* can be found in Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of The Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014). The English translation used here is that of The Gawain Poet, *Complete Works: Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, Saint Erkenwald, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Marie Borroff (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), p.160. When not otherwise noted translations from the Middle English are my own.

62 *SP*, p.73.

63 *K*, p.126.

64 David Aers, ‘The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*,’ *Speculum*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jan., 1993), pp.54-73 (66).

that is the hallmark of his earlier writings the influence of Oliver's long-standing interest in medieval Middle English poetry, and in particular the genre of dream vision, in a manner which refracts the question of unity through an ideological, spiritual and political framework inherited from the *Pearl*-poet, Langland, Chaucer and their fourteenth-century Ricardian milieu. This framework – that of the narrative structure of didactic, redemptive and eschatological elements of the late medieval dream vision – is adapted by Oliver to serve the question of unity. For Oliver, unity is prior to politics because it is fundamentally and universally what we are capable of, and we are capable of it before (and despite) political factionalism, antagonism and revolutionary struggle. Revolutionary struggle seeks to redefine the political according to a more just organisation of social life. Oliver does not deny this, nor does he disagree with its most general and abstract designs on human society – justice and social equality. His life's work is a testament to the complexity of his admiration for revolutionaries like the Tupamaros and Louise Michel. But Oliver believed that such struggle, epitomised for him by groups like the Tupamaros, is doomed to failure, or worse, risks provoking more violence and “harm” than it is capable of preventing, unless it acknowledges, and derives its energies and designs from recourse to, the “unity” which is in us and which we are, the same “unity” which poetic language and prosodic organisation makes available to us in the form of emblematic fleeting glimpses of what “our everyday experience and speech could be like” if such moments were *not just* the literary expression of a universal imperative or truth, but in fact the common and manifest content of our daily lives, and within them, of our acts of communication. In the previous chapter we saw just such a moment in the line “We know this. Everyone” in the poem ‘U.’<sup>65</sup>

In *The Infant and the Pearl* large swathes of the poem are taken up with the kind of exhortation that only a few lines in *The Diagram--Poems* could afford to carry or express; the entirety of the late sections XIX and XX are overflowing with didactic and exhortative material. It is the inheritance of the narrative genre of dream vision that allows *The Infant and the Pearl* such scope for didacticism, a didacticism that is only given fleeting explicit expression in the earlier works. But the paradox at the heart of Oliver's poetic remains firmly in place in *The Infant and the Pearl*, and is as follows: his poetry dreams of abolishing itself in the service of the achievement in social life of that which only poetry can teach, show and prove to us. Where *The Diagram--Poems* bears traces and contains hints of what this achievement should consist of and accomplish, *The Infant and the Pearl* describes its relationship to, and its designs upon, contemporary political organisation more fully than ever before. Oliver's next poem,

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65 K, pp.120-122 (122).

*Penniless Politics*, goes so far as to provide, in the name of the achievement in political reality of a specifically poetical theory of social relations, a new U.S. Constitution. From here on, this chapter will proceed in the following manner. Firstly, I look into Oliver's reading of *Pearl*. Secondly, I make some major structural and narrative comparisons between *Pearl* and *The Infant and the Pearl*. Thirdly, I attempt some close readings of the *The Infant and the Pearl*'s labour politics and gender politics.

### 3.3 – Oliver and *Pearl*

*The Infant and the Pearl* is impossible to understand fully without a proper grounding in the fourteenth-century dream narrative *Pearl*. Oliver was deeply interested in, and influenced by, dream narratives and the wider tradition of late medieval English and European verse of which they comprise a significant subset. Oliver's interest in medieval English verse, and in dream narrative and dream vision in particular, can be discerned from writings which span the breadth of his career as a poet. We have already explored the significance of Chaucer's poetry for Oliver's early formulation, in the Essex essays of 1973-4, of the poetic "moment" and its role in the poet's "creative dynamic." The semantic and conceptual inheritance of Langland's use of *kynde* in perhaps the most famous of all English dream narratives, *Piers Plowman*, we noted in depth in the previous chapter. In 1997 Oliver contributed a translation into modern English of the first 180 lines of *Pearl* and lines 179-231 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as a short commentary describing the two poems' plots and "brilliant sounds," to the anthology *Poets on Poets*.<sup>66</sup> The posthumous collection of Oliver's late work, *Arrondissements* (2003), includes the poem 'The Video House of Fame,' which derives its title, epigraph, thematic material and narrative structure from Chaucer's dream vision *The House of Fame*. To these English examples we should add the abiding influence upon Oliver of Dante. Although not strictly a dream vision, the *Divina Commedia* shares with the classic English poems of the genre "enough [...] motifs" for it to have been considered alongside the more self-reflexive dream narratives of the later medieval period; its influence on Chaucer's dream visions is widely acknowledged, and its influence upon the *Pearl*-poet has been suggested by scholars.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Poets on Poets*, pp.138-141.

<sup>67</sup> *The English Dream Vision*, p.1; for conjecture on the influence of Dante on the *Pearl*-poet (also called the *Gawain*-poet) from one eminent Medievalist, see Spearing's *The Gawain-Poet*, p.17: "Probably a few Englishmen before 1400 had read the fourteenth-century Italian poets. Chaucer was one of them, and it seems almost certain that the *Gawain*-poet was another [...] He seems to have known at least the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, and well enough not simply to translate single passages in it, but to take and synthesize hints from a number of different places." A survey of other texts which consider in more detail the varied influence on *Pearl* of Spearing's "different places" in Dante, especially elements of "the narrative pattern" of the *Comedy*, can be



Unlike the previous examples, whose influence is bound up in Oliver's thinking about poetry, the influence of Dante can be felt most prominently in the manner in which Oliver was wont to present his own life as a poet. We have already seen Oliver's predilection for describing certain moments of import in his life by tacitly referring to the famous opening line of the *Inferno*.

Oliver read *Pearl* at some point in the mid-late 1970s; certainly he read it after 1973. He was given a copy of the poem by the poet John Hall, who "remarked once that *The Harmless Building* reminded him of the medieval *Pearl* poem because of the role a child plays in it."<sup>68</sup> The plot of *Pearl* is as follows. A grief-stricken narrator swoons into a deep sleep in the garden in which he has lost a "precios perle" ["precious pearl"].<sup>69</sup> It is implied in the poem, though not, as many scholars assert, definitively established, that this "perle" is the dreamer's infant daughter who died before reaching her second birthday. Whilst asleep the narrator experiences a vision of an earthly paradise bedecked with precious stones and "crystal klyffeȝ" ["crystal cliffs"].<sup>70</sup> A virtuous maiden appears who after some confusion the dreamer recognises as "my perle," the same that he had lost, and with whom he debates the nature of salvation.<sup>71</sup> The dreamer, overcome with relief that "[his] perle" has returned to him, makes a number of foolish blunders of spiritual interpretation during their conversation; these include that the dreamer and "[his] perle" will now and henceforth be reunited.<sup>72</sup> The maiden admonishes the dreamer for his various ignominious errors and assumptions and proceeds to instruct him by means of scriptural paraphrase and allegorical reflection in certain particulars of God's grace and mercy (especially those bearing upon the salvation of infants before baptism and the paradoxical nature of heavenly hierarchy), before finally affording him a glimpse of the New Jerusalem. Awestruck, the dreamer attempts to pass over into the heavenly kingdom, but instead awakes from his dream; the poem ends with an exhortation to all good Christians to recognize Christ's "dere blessing" ["dear blessing"] in the Eucharist and to remain God's faithful "precious perleȝ" ["precious pearls"].<sup>73</sup> Scholarly interpretation of the poem is as varied and multi-faceted as the poem itself. But some recurrent trends in criticism illuminate what must have been Oliver's strong attraction to the poem as a starting point and model for the development of his own poetic thinking. These include, but are not limited to, the narrative emphasis on the death of a child, and,

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found cited in Richard Newhauser, 'Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources,' Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, ed., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp.257-275 (268).

68 *CAAS*, p.254

69 *Pearl*, p.3.

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, p.9

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

thematically, the sense of unity posed by the poem's formal organisation as well as its narrative trajectory.

The first of these trends is that which Oliver flags up in his reminiscence over John Hall's gift of his copy of *Pearl* – that *Pearl* concerns the “role of a child,” specifically, the death of an infant daughter. Critics differ in their treatment of the figure of the lost child in *Pearl*. The poem's earliest editors read the poem as an elegy on the death of the poet's infant daughter. This view was challenged as early as 1904 by W.H. Schofield, who introduced a measure of allegorical interpretation of the lost child and her reincarnation as the Pearl-Maiden.<sup>74</sup> Since Schofield, criticism has tended to bifurcate along the lines of an emphasis either on elegy or on allegory as the guiding force of meaning in the poem. More recent twentieth-century criticism has tended to synthesise these two hitherto irreconcilable poles of interpretation, and contemporary criticism can be found across the gamut of theoretical exegetical practice, including Marxist, feminist, queer theoretical and deconstructive interpretations.

Oliver read *Pearl* in E.V. Gordon's Oxford University Press edition, first published in 1953.<sup>75</sup> In the introduction to Gordon's edition we find a reductive but influential case for what Gordon calls “the real experiences that lie at the foundation of the poem,” which include, as he explains, the fact that “the pearl [the dreamer] lost was a maid-child who died.”<sup>76</sup> Gordon continues:

[T]he maiden of the vision accepts the identification, and herself refers to her death in line 761 [“When I wente from yor worlde wete”] (“When I left your world of rain and sleet”) [and] the dreamer himself in lines 483-5 tells us that she was not yet two years old [when she died] and had not yet learned her creed or prayers [“Þou lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede; / Þou cowþeȝ neuer God nauþer plese ne pray, / Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede”] (“You lived in our country not two years— / You could not please the Lord, or pray, / Or say ‘Our Father,’ or Creed rehearse”).<sup>77</sup>

Gordon's editorial gloss emphasises the dreamer's (and poet's) “real” (i.e. biographical) grief as the condition for any doctrinal or allegorical significance the poem might also contain, and places the “elegiac basis” at the heart of its interpretation, asserting that

74 See W.H. Schofield, ‘The Nature and Fabric of The Pearl,’ *PMLA* 19 (1904), pp.154-215, and ‘Symbolism, Allegory, and Autobiography in The Pearl,’ *PMLA* 24 (1909), pp.585-675.

75 John Hall to the author, personal communication, 28.07.2014.

76 *Pearl*, pp.xii-xiii.

77 *Ibid.*, p.xiii, p.28, p.18. For ease of sense I use here Marie Borroff's translation of *Pearl* in parenthesis following the text of the lines referred to in Gordon's edition in square brackets. The Gawain Poet, *Complete Works*, p.147, pp.138-139. For a recent, convincing and exhaustively researched refutation of Gordon's thesis, see John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), pp.151-186.

the doctrinal theme is [...] inseparable from the literary form of the poem and its occasion; for it arises directly from the grief, which imparts deep feeling and urgency to the whole discussion. Without the elegiac basis and the sense of great personal loss which pervades it, *Pearl* would indeed be the mere theological treatise on a special point, which some critics have called it.<sup>78</sup>

It is clear from what we know of Oliver's traumatic experience of family loss and separation – in 1969 with the death of Tom, and during the time of the composition of *The Infant and the Pearl* that we sketched above – that such a gloss would have resonated strongly with his own personal situation. Tom Oliver was himself “not yet two years old” when he died in his cot in Cambridge. Oliver's mother and sister both died during the period of composition.

In Oliver's introduction to his translation of the first three sections of *Pearl* in the anthology *Poets on Poets*, he says:

The general reader may prefer to ignore scholarly controversy and consider *Pearl* as told by a dreamer who has lost a ‘precious pearl,’ an infant daughter.<sup>79</sup>

Given Oliver's habit of styling himself as a “townie,” (see Chapter 2, section 2.2) it is likely that Oliver himself read the poem in this manner. Nevertheless, such a statement proves Oliver was indeed aware of the “scholarly controversy” over the elegy/allegory question, and must at least have had a passing familiarity with its major theoretical emphases. To summarise *Pearl* in the literal, lay terms in which Oliver recommends it to the “general reader” would be to describe it as a poem in which a dead child is transformed into a vehicle of spiritual and moral wisdom. Before he read *Pearl*, Oliver had already begun to experiment on his own terms with the kind of wisdom his dead child could impart: his whole development of the concept of “stupidity” that we traced in Chapter 2 is a testament to this thinking. Here was a framework in which the moral and transcendental significance of the death of Oliver's child could be given the most expressive poetic licence possible. Already in *The Harmless Building* Tom has “the true blessedness allowed only to the really low in IQ.”<sup>80</sup> Oliver's discovery of *Pearl* allowed him to develop the figure of Tom in even more didactic and spiritual terms; as we saw above, he becomes a veritable image of Christ-like virtue, “like a handicapped Jesus,” emanating “slant-eyed saintdom.”<sup>81</sup>

Gordon's edition relegates to “mere theological treatise[s]” interpretations of *Pearl* that

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78 *Pearl*, p.xviii.

79 *Poets on Poets*, p.138.

80 *THB*, p.13.

81 *SP*, p.71.

subordinate an elegiac reading to the doctrinal, allegorical, symbolical, figural, tropological and other various significances and meanings that critics have discovered in the poem before and since. There is not the space here to recount the entire latter day twentieth- and twenty-first century history of the reception of *Pearl*, which is various and complex, and what follows will of necessity plumb this criticism for interpretations that elucidate my own critical reading of Oliver's poem. From Gordon's introduction Oliver would certainly have learned the etymological coincidence of "pearl" and "Margaret," a coincidence which may well have been the original impetus for one the poem's major plot devices and structural ironies: early in the poem Margaret Thatcher's televised visage becomes a "false pearl" that distracts the nation from the spirit of unity it requires to "make a Britain to cheer for."<sup>82</sup> This coincidence is that the *Pearl*-poet/dreamer's "child may have been actually called a pearl by baptismal name, *Margarita* in Latin, *Margery* in English."<sup>83</sup> Gordon's editorial gloss lays no special emphasis on the unity of the form of the original *Pearl*, although many scholars have since done just that.<sup>84</sup> It was clearly part of Oliver's design for his poem that it mimic as closely as possible the unity that some have felt characterise the entire formal and symbolic organisation of *Pearl*.<sup>85</sup> It was also part of Oliver's design, I argue, that the reflexive attention to the question of unity *in* the poem reflects and emphasises the unity of form which *is* the poem. I go on to critique, later in this chapter, some of the ramifications of this emphasis in terms of the poem's labour and sexual politics. First we must meet the poem and its protagonists.

### 3.4 – *The Infant and the Pearl* – form, plot and style

The length and number of stanzas, the rhyme scheme (ababababbcbc), the frequency of internal rhyme, stress and alliteration, and the basic narrative trajectory of the dreamer's vision in *Pearl* are all

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82 *SP*, p.62, p.73.

83 On the first page of the poem in *SP*, Oliver notes that "Margaret [...] means "Pearl" in Greek." (*SP*, p.40). As John Kerrigan points out, the *Pearl*-poet "calls pearls 'margarys'" three times in *Pearl*, at lines 199, 206 and 1037. 'Mrs Thatcher's *Pearl*,' p.184.

84 Scholarly recognition of *Pearl*'s formal and/or symbolic unity is widespread. Dorothy Everett articulates one common idea when she points to the fact that "The echo between the first and last lines of the poem gives the effect of a completed circle, intended perhaps to suggest the idea of the pearl, which in l.738 is called 'endelez rounde' ['endless round']." Hugh White suggests that "[t]he form of *Pearl* appears to be an image of the thing itself. The poem is, or purports to be, an endless round, its parts linked and measured so as to give an effect of the circularity and smoothness of surface proper to an actual pearl," though White also emphasises that "this form is at times breached." See Dorothy Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp.87-88, and Hugh White, 'Blood in *Pearl*,' *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 149 (Feb., 1987), pp.1-13 (8). John Kerrigan points out that "an especially fine pearl is technically known as a 'union.'" 'Mrs Thatcher's *Pearl*,' p.198.

85 The editors of the Cambridge *Companion to The Gawain-Poet*, for example, write that "[a]ll is gathered together, or thought to be gathered together, in a unity" in the work of the *Pearl*-poet, and argue that the "material, moral [and] spiritual elements of life are intimately twined together" such that "the circle of truth, hierarchy, social merit [and] social reality [...] is complete." See *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, p.4.

reproduced by *The Infant and the Pearl* in the style of *Pearl*'s complex prosodic organisation. Like *Pearl*, Oliver's poem is composed of one hundred and one twelve-line stanzas in twenty sections of five stanzas each. Unlike *Pearl*, the 'extra' stanza in Oliver's poem appears in the twentieth, rather than in the fifteenth, section of the poem. Within the (mostly) five-stanza sections, *The Infant and the Pearl* contains its own "refrain-lines," "refrain-words," "echo-words" and "link-words" which so fundamentally structure the fourteenth-century poem.<sup>86</sup> Oliver's reflection upon the length of *The Infant and the Pearl* in the poem's original "Author's Note" is that the 'extra' stanza represents "a return to the sign of unity."<sup>87</sup> He later described the number of stanzas in *The Infant and the Pearl* in the following terms: "100 [stanzas] for perfection, 1 for unity."<sup>88</sup> This statement was made in retrospect in the 1997 *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* pamphlet, but its relevance given our explorations of the emphases and concerns of Oliver's writing previous to 1985 is clear. Such a statement provides more evidence of the attraction of the fourteenth-century poem as a model to be adopted to Oliver's purposes, since its prosodic organisation so powerfully resonates with the "perfect identity between self and Other" and the ideal of a "special" intersubjective "unity" we have argued here and in previous chapters are crucial elements of Oliver's poetic.

The very form of *Pearl*, I suggest, struck Oliver as prosodically mimetic of the major thematic and narrative content of his previous work, that of the expression in poetry of an ideal social relation that, in practice, only poetry can produce and make available to us. We have encountered this paradox before. It is central to Oliver's thinking about the "moment" or "instant" of author-reader intersubjectivity as it is conjectured in the essays he wrote as a mature undergraduate in the early 1970s and as it is developed in his 1989 book *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*. We explored the nature and philosophical background to this "moment" in Chapter 1 and saw how it remained, for Oliver, an emblematic and discrete property of poetic language. The paradox of a uniquely "perfect" self-other interaction whose most complete realisation arrives during the experience of reading poetry we saw further developed in *The Diagram--Poems*, wherein the failure to heed the "spoken kindness" that would institute an "authentic politics" nevertheless provides us with a glimpse of what is it that "we know": that political conflict should be harmoniously and judiciously resolved into the "land silvery with democracy."<sup>89</sup>

Let us compare *Pearl* and Oliver's poem side by side. Here is the first stanza of *Pearl*.

86 I here adopt O.D. Macrae-Gibson's terminology from his 'Pearl: The Link-Words and the Thematic Structure,' *Neophilologus*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Oct., 1968), pp.54-64 (54).

87 Oliver, *The Infant and the Pearl* (London: Ferry Press for Silver Hounds, 1985), unpaginated.

88 *CAAS*, p.254.

89 *K*, p.121.

Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye  
 To clanly clos in golde so clere,  
 Oute of oryent, I hardyly saye,  
 Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.  
 So rounde, so reken in vche araye,  
 So smal, so smoþe her sydeȝ were,  
 Quere-so-euer I jugged gemmeȝ gaye,  
 I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.  
 Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;  
 Þurȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.  
 I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere  
 Of þat pryuy perle wythouten spot.<sup>90</sup>

[Pearl, pleasant to prince's pay  
 to cleanly close in gold so clear,  
 out of Orient, I hardily say,  
 ne proved I never her precious peer,  
 so round, so reken in each array,  
 so small, so smooth her sides were.  
 Wheresoever I judg'd gems so gay  
 I set her singly in singular.  
 Alas! I lost her in an herbere;  
 through grass to ground it from me yode.  
 I dwine, fordolked of love-daunger  
 of that privy pearl withouten spot.]<sup>91</sup>

And here is the first stanza of *The Infant and the Pearl*:

Lying down in my father's grey dressing gown  
 its red cuffs over my eyes, I caught sight  
 of Rosine, my pearl, passing out of my room  
 one night while a dream passed out of the night  
 of my nation. What a robe she was wearing! Brown  
 and sinewy, lion colours in the doorlight;  
 she turned, Laura-like, on her face a light frown  
 to be leaving, not reproving but right-  
 lipped, reddish hair loving the dead  
 facial centre; virtue could've kept her  
 had I enough of it, though I dreamt of it.  
 In my grey gown I would have gladly slept by her.<sup>92</sup>

Oliver's poem begins, like *Pearl*, with a loss. This loss is twofold: that of the possibility of a Labour

<sup>90</sup> *Pearl*, p.1.

<sup>91</sup> I use here the relatively recent (but not the latest) translation of *Pearl* by the late Victor Watts. This translation has the advantage, useful to our purposes of comparison with Oliver's verse, of being extremely faithful to the Middle English both rhythmically and aurally. In Watts' translation the following glosses appear for the quoted stanza: "pay" - "pleasure," "close" - "set," "hardily" - "boldly," "proved" - "found," "peer" - "equal," "reken" - "radiant," "array" - "every setting," "singly" - "as unique," "herbere" - "garden," "dwine" - "went" and "privy" - "my own." "[F]ordolked of love-daunger," as the glossator notes, is a "special allusion to the Old French *Romance of the Rose*," and is paraphrased as "I pine for loss of love." Victor Watts et al., *Pearl: A Modernised Version of the Middle English Poem by Victor Watts*, ed. and glossed by David Fuller and Corinne Saunders (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005), p.25.

<sup>92</sup> *SP*, p.40.

government in the UK given the May 1979 election victory of the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher, and that of the possibility of the realisation of the “dream” associated with “Rosine,” the poet-author’s “pearl.” This “dream” is the vision of “Socialism” based on common human “unity” that Rosine represents and which, later in the poem, she charges the poet-author with forgetting and ignoring. The “dream [that] passed out of the night / of my nation” therefore not only refers to the rise to power of a Conservative government which promised to radically alter the terms of the so-called post-war consensus in favour of business and City interests and against those of the trade unions, but to the “dream” that “Rosine” stands for as an emblem of the ideal social relation captured, for Oliver, by the term “unity.” The character “Rosine” first appears in Oliver’s writing in the early novel *The Harmless Building*. Later, in the revised version of his pamphlet *The Three Lilies*, Oliver describes Rosine as a “desired woman” who “represents” in his writing “a political ideal in which the one-sidedness of idealism itself may be figured, paradoxically, as transcended.”<sup>93</sup> Certainly she is “desired” here: she is “Laura-like,” expressing all the attributes of gendered idealism reminiscent of Petrarch’s famously impeccable object of adoration. The plot of *The Infant and the Pearl* centres around the efforts of Rosine to encourage the dreamer-cum-Oliver surrogate to transcend the “one-sidedness” of his Labour-affiliated “idealism” and to “condemn the also-ran / horse-tail-wagging-the-head, trade-union / inspired, internecine, leftist sycophancy” of which he inadvertently falls foul, as much as (if not more than) he “condemn[s]” the Tories.<sup>94</sup>

In the notes to the *Selected Poems* printing of the poem, Oliver names Rosine as a “representative of a natural, non-doctrinal socialism.”<sup>95</sup> As we have seen, Oliver’s rejoinders to British Marxists had been prickly and sceptical at best, belligerent and reactionary at worst, since the late 1960s. In designating his central character in this fashion he makes a claim for what the poem later calls “what I mean / by Socialism,” “the union between / people,” i.e. that such “Socialism” is “natural” and “non-doctrinal.” Oliver hereby consciously differentiates what he “mean[s] by Socialism” from what most who might self-identify as a socialist in the mid-1980s might express by the term. Oliver promotes “Socialism” to a utopian claim on our universal pre-political hidden nature and our propensity for the expression of loving connaturality, particularly in (specifically and solely heterosexual) sex, which Rosine, earlier in the poem, calls “a union of male / and female in fruition.”<sup>96</sup> The refrain-line of the first stanza of Oliver’s poem, varied and repeated at the end of each of the first five stanzas (a formal

93 ‘Three Lilies,’ Denise Riley, ed., *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd, 1992), pp.276-281 (281).

94 *SP*, p.62.

95 *Ibid.*, p.40.

96 *Ibid.*, p.64.

technique borrowed from *Pearl*) expresses with rising intensity the narrator's assertion that "I would have slept by her," or, as in the third to the fifth stanzas of the first section, "I would have slept *with* her," and, in the fifth and last stanza, "I *should* have slept *with* her."<sup>97</sup>

From the beginning of the poem then, political disenchantment is intimately connected to sexual loss and being sexually unfulfilled, and being sexually unfulfilled is in turn made to express a kind of moral deficit connected with (it is inversely proportionate to) "virtue"; "had I enough of it [virtue]," pines the dreamer in the stanza quoted above, presumably speaking for all of us, Rosine might have stayed put.<sup>98</sup> The scene of mourning in Oliver's first stanza is not just comparable to, but directly concomitant with, the gendered nature of the opening scene of mourning in *Pearl*. In *Pearl* the dreamer is "fordolke of luf-daungere," and in this "familiar courtly language" of the 14<sup>th</sup> century,

the lost object fulfils the traditional feminine role of nurturing life source; she is the man's essential physician without whom his life becomes a disease, a nightmare of emptiness and tormented dreams [...] the narrator's mourning is inextricably bound up with the courtly dynamics of masculine identity and desire.<sup>99</sup>

When Margaret Thatcher's avatar appears at the end of the first section of Oliver's poem, she appears as

An empty voice in my empty head . . .  
and sexual absence inhabiting my bed . . .<sup>100</sup>

"[H]ead" and "bed" both partake of the same 'B' rhyme by which the second line is also bound, and which ends: "then Rosine had fled."<sup>101</sup> Intellectual, (hetero)sexual and political loss – a contemporary "nightmare of emptiness" – are connected by the narrative development and by the intricate sound-play of the stanza-form inherited from *Pearl*, all in the opening section of Oliver's poem. It will be seen as we progress through a comparison of the plot of *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Pearl* that this connection is repeated in various forms throughout Oliver's poem, whether negatively – as in the scene above – or, inversely and positively, as in the scenes of ecstatic recognition of the "union between / people" in the final stanzas.

After Rosine's disappearance at the beginning of the poem, Oliver's dreamer is taken on a tour

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.40-41. My emphasis.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>99</sup> Aers, 'The Self Mourning,' p.57.

<sup>100</sup> *SP*, p.41.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



of Conservative Britain in which *Pearl*'s descriptions of the earthly paradise ironically recur as the landscape of "Chance ruling commerce" in London's City, the dazzling "rych rokkeȝ" ["rich rocks"] and "crystal klyffeȝ" of *Pearl* become the equally overwhelming, but now garishly modern, "city of disdain / circled with steel walls."<sup>102</sup> Oliver's dreamer witnesses the disparity of wealth and means amongst the populace, in a land "where Margaret / ruled without Rosine, true mercy," and "charity" has been forsaken in favour of the City's "reign of Chance."<sup>103</sup> The "chivalric hierarchy" of rich and poor has "no golden chain of charity joining them."<sup>104</sup> This criticism of society is a conservative one: Oliver's dreamer favours a paternalistic, philanthropic elite instead of "an arrogant [...] mighty" one.<sup>105</sup> Oliver's dreamer is ushered into a "blue Bentley" by a chauffeur, and like the dreamer's "bed" in the first section, the car at first seems empty: "There was no-one inside, simply voices / in a light grainy blue-grey like television."<sup>106</sup> The car is suddenly inhabited – "[t]he leader herself 'switched on'" – by two "thin televisual figure[s]."<sup>107</sup> These are Thatcher and Keith Joseph, the former later replaced by an aristocratic caricature "stockbroker" called "Sir Pretentious Privilege," who proceed to guide the dreamer through a scene of contemporary poverty comprised of "the idle, the dull, the deprived" and "the drunks," before introducing him to five dioramic scenes representing the so-called "Five Giant Evils" identified in William Beveridge's 1942 report on Social Insurance and Allied Services.<sup>108</sup> This report, colloquially known as the Beveridge Report, is a foundational document for the establishment of Britain's post-war welfare state legislation. It identifies the "Five Great Evils" afflicting the wartime poor: want, squalor, idleness, ignorance and disease. These appear in Oliver's dreamer's "journey through ruins," with the exception of "*Ignorance*," as resurgent evils under Thatcher's Toryism, but they are dismissed, ignored or downplayed by his hosts.<sup>109</sup> "*Ignorance*" is represented in the poem by a Down's syndrome baby "abandoned by adulthood": the image (and teachings) of Tom Oliver ignored by contemporary society.<sup>110</sup>

John Kerrigan is right to point out that these early sections of Oliver's poem "follow the example of *Pearl* by describing a spectacular landscape," and right too to point to the influence of "Langland and the winter journey in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" during section VI, in which the five "giants" are

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102 *Ibid.*, p.42; *Pearl*, p.3.

103 *SP*, p.42.

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

107 *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.

108 *Ibid.*, p.47.

109 *Ibid.*, p.43.

110 *Ibid.*, p.49.

introduced.<sup>111</sup> But it is difficult to know exactly what Kerrigan means when he describes as “satiric moralism” the opening stanzas of the poem.<sup>112</sup> Certainly the presentation of Thatcher and Joseph as television wraiths solely consisting of images perpetually interrupted by bad “video / reception” and promulgating a vision of the nation’s “adjustable futurity” is a satirical attack on the manner in which Thatcher was marketed to the electorate by Saatchi and Saatchi during her 1979 and 1983 campaigns.<sup>113</sup> And the pompous buffoonery of “Sir Pretentious Privilege,” as he comments upon poverty with his “merciless morals of monetary art,” is equally identifiably satiric. Even the poem’s topological inversion of *Pearl*’s dazzling paradisiacal landscape into the inhumane wastelands of “Hazard Country,” “Steel City” and the City’s “Street of Good Luck” might be designated “satirical,” since the accumulation of such description lampoons contemporary London by depicting the city as a morally corrupt dystopia. But the stanzas we began with, those which combine “loving the dead” with the idealised “facial centre” of the “Laura-like” feminine emblem of unity, “Rosine,” whose “mercy” marks her out as “the pearl’s true minister” over and against the falsity of contemporary political life and debate, seem rather to speak to and promulgate a moralism entirely devoid of satiric intention, and entirely replete with the sincerity of tone that marks so many of the later stanzas of the poem.<sup>114</sup> Even the identifiably satirical elements noted above rely on a distinct moral absolutism that would seem to confirm the sincerity of the moralising early on; on the “Street of Good Luck” the dreamer finds “a hell-sent / inversion of values,” and elsewhere on the same “Street” “all good turned to bad.”<sup>115</sup>

Oliver’s dreamer travels through London to the Houses of Parliament. Here he is transformed into a Labour MP “of the lunched-at-Locketts, dined- / at-Whites variety,” referring, as Oliver’s 1996 notes point out, to the “fancy restaurants much used by politicians.”<sup>116</sup> He is “set up to spout / for party

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111 Kerrigan, ‘Mrs Thatcher’s *Pearl*,’ p.187. Kerrigan’s essay is essential reading. His technique is summarised by his observation that “*The Infant and the Pearl* is not about medieval wages and conditions, but reading it helps one see that the Parable of the Vineyard in *Pearl* is more engaged with fourteenth-century economics, and the literature of complaint and satire, than critics appear to have recognised” (p.192). My method inverts Kerrigan’s: I am interested in what a reading of *Pearl*, and of the literature surrounding it, helps us to understand about the politics and spirituality of *The Infant and the Pearl*.

112 *Ibid.*

113 *SP*, p.45. The line-break between “video” and “reception” mimics the “tearing” of an analogue television picture due to bad reception; Thatcher appears “beside me, though with some ‘tearing’ / of her upper torso towards me” at the end of section IV. *SP*, p.46.

114 All quotes taken from the first section of five stanzas, *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.

115 *SP*, pp.54-55.

116 Lockett’s (Oliver omits the possessive apostrophe) was the former name for what is now Shepherd’s, on Marsham Street in the City of Westminster. By “Whites” Oliver presumably means the oldest and most exclusive gentlemen’s club in London, White’s, which contains a private dining room. Although both are famous for the patronage of MPs, both, especially White’s, are far better known for being Tory, rather than Labour, haunts. It is perhaps not insignificant that on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1975 Lockett’s was the site of an attempted IRA attack; a bomb was planted outside the restaurant but was defused before it could go off. The threat of extreme political violence is therefore just beneath the historical surface of this otherwise innocuously sardonic line, an effect Oliver likely

and people, proud that Parliament / had seduced me,” and is presented as the epitome of a competent but self-deceptive careerist and opportunist.<sup>117</sup> The government and opposition benches in the House of Commons are divided in the poem by a “stream” whose providence is the “strem þat dryȝly haleȝ” [“river that runs a race”] that separates the dreamer’s *locus amoenus* [pleasant place] from the “Paradyse” [“paradise”] on the far bank in *Pearl*, and from where the Pearl-Maiden stands and delivers her homilies to the dreamer.<sup>118</sup>

Oliver’s dreamer lambasts contemporary Tory policy, in particular the reliance on what he understands to be the monetarist basis for government economic policy. He references and paraphrases (although does not name) Sam Aaronovitch’s 1981 book *The Road from Thatcherism*, interpolating Aaronovitch’s critique of inflation under Thatcher into the fourth stanza of section XII, and he ventriloquises an orthodox Marxist position on Tory policy (also sourced, though less explicitly, from Aaronovitch) by drawing attention to “the class bias of this blatant / war on workers, those job losses which / were a deliberate disciplining” in section XIII.<sup>119</sup> Oliver’s dreamer deceives himself through these attacks. His wrong-headedness is modelled on that of the *Pearl* dreamer, who

sees himself not only as a hero but also, more absurdly, as a scholar. He is always ready to bandy argument and texts against the Maiden’s explanations of her situation and his, forgetting that she is one of those who ‘thurghoutly haven cnawyng’ (859) [‘thoroughly have knowing,’ i.e. ‘completely understand’]. In consequent, the Dreamer [...] becomes a comic figure, struggling in vain to dominate a world which is not his and which he does not understand.<sup>120</sup>

Oliver’s dreamer’s worldly, learned heroism is of a piece with the spiritual density epitomised by the typical protagonist of the dream vision genre. As Helen Phillips argues,

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intended to heighten the comparison of political antagonism with the moral failure explored in the following stanzas.

117 *SP*, p.56.

118 *Pearl*, pp.5-6; The Gawain Poet, *Complete Works*, pp.128-129.

119 *SP*, p.60, and see Sam Aaronovitch, *The Road from Thatcherism: The Alternative Economic Strategy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981). The fourth stanza of section XII, beginning “I glossed over Margaret’s giant, *Inflation*,” is in effect a bowdlerised recapitulation of Aaronovitch’s analysis of the causes of inflation on p.41 of his book: “Capitalists trying to improve or maintain profit margins, trade unionists trying to maintain or improve real wages, governments trying to carry through their spending plans – all in a situation of low growth and low productivity – create the conditions for an inflationary spiral.” Although Oliver need not have further sourced the Marxist “rhetoric” in section XIII from Aaronovitch’s book, it is likely that he did so; see “[b]ut of course the Tories are acting completely in their class interests when they try to shift the balance of bargaining power towards business and away from the working people” (p.25) and “[t]he object [of Conservative economic policy] [...] is to ‘knock sense’ into the workers, reduce real wages and rationalize capitalist production, with the weaker going to the wall” (p.31), and compare Oliver: “I lambasted the class bias of this blatant / war on workers, those job losses which / were a deliberate disciplining, with a decadent / fiscal fiddling to facilitate rich / investments abroad and to add to arrant / social disparity at home.”

120 Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, p.106. I translate and gloss using Watts as a reference.

All dreamer-narrators have a tendency to seem stupid to some extent, for the encounter between dreamer and dream, or dreamer and authority figure, is a structure which splits the didactic enterprise in two, into the learning function and the teaching function.<sup>121</sup>

Oliver's dreamer's bad stupidity is in supposing (recall the Tupamaros) what he knows to be the best way to tackle Tory policy: "I'd / read Aaronvitch on the A.E.S. [Alternative Economic Strategy], / so I started magnificently, like a sinner who defied / a heavenly kingdom where the cliffs were of glass."<sup>122</sup> The dreamer's eagerness to announce what he has read marks him out, "absurdly," to channel Spearing, as a "scholar." And the counterintuitive simile in the lines I have just quoted confirms rather than explains the speaker's ultimate confusion: he starts "magnificently, like a sinner," and in doing so he also confirms both his inadequacy and his need of guidance by *his* Pearl-Maiden, Rosine, who duly appears to chastise and instruct.

It is important to point out here that the language of Aaronovitch (and the language of Marxism more generally) is invoked at this specific moment in the poem as a specimen of bad language, stripped of compassion, (good) ignorance and unity, and revealed as the "leftist sycophancy" by which term it is soon to be denounced. Oliver's dreamer's "Marxist" speech already expresses the sound of its own inadequacy before it is explicitly identified as such. Punning on the birth pangs of "labour," possibly as a conscious reference to the use of that phrase by the advocates of revolutionary terror, the word "pushed" is used in all 'B' rhyme positions, encouraging a fastidious, deliberately repetitive plosive alliteration to echo throughout the entire stanza:

[...]  
wages were hiked when unions pushed  
hardest; this, helped by a hapless nation  
whose purchasing exceeded production, pushed  
up prices; then the pound's depreciation  
pushed up import prices, and that pushed  
up not just prices by the expectation  
of price rises to come, which pushed

121 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, ed. Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp.13-14. See also Tison Pugh, *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.39. In his chapter on *Pearl* Pugh quotes Phillips, above, and introducing the quotation states: "The Dreamer's inability to understand even the most basic parameters of the heavenly kingdom reinforces his need to turn to the Pearl Maiden for spiritual guidance, and this excessive ignorance is typical of the dream vision as a genre." Marxism in *The Infant and the Pearl* is excessive (bad) ignorance because it is part of the "whole hollow / conformity of creeds" that Rosine and, figuratively if not literally or linguistically, Tom, upbraid in section XIX.

122 *SP*, p.59.

up purchasing demand [...] <sup>123</sup>

The sound the speech makes thus condemns its sense to absurdity even before Rosine begins to admonish the dreamer, an absurdity of which the dreamer is as yet blissfully unaware. His comic bumbling as well as his physically standing up to debate in the House of Commons (“I stood up to speak”) is reminiscent of, and inherits the attribution to the dreamer of wide-eyed, unreflective stupefaction in, *Pearl*’s “I stod as hende as hawk in halle” [“I stood there as tame as hawk in hall”] (l.184) and “I stod as styлле as dased quayle” [“As a quail that couches, dumb and dazed”] (l.1085). <sup>124</sup>

Rosine then appears in the House of Commons. Oliver’s dreamer “recognize[s] Rosine the way you’d recognise / your lover’s look in union as a unity.” <sup>125</sup> She appears in lines which announce their construction of symbolic significance in a manner reminiscent of scholars’ attempts to unpack the multi-layered significance of the original Pearl-Maiden; she is described, in other words, in self-consciously literary-critical terms:

[...] She doubly symbolized  
both lioness and pearl: lioness in agility,  
pearl in the setting of an immobile paradise  
made active by her movements. In medieval guise,  
she’d denote Mercy, the divine donum;  
secularized, she was Socialism, this wise  
woman walking in the unworldly kingdom. <sup>126</sup>

We might compare this passage to any number of critical descriptions of the Pearl-Maiden, past and present, especially to those by authors concerned to emphasise her polyvalent symbolism such as D.W. Robertson, Stanton Hoffman, A.C. Spearing, Theodore Bogdanos and, more recently, Sarah Stanbury. <sup>127</sup>

Rosine *is* “Socialism,” and she is a “wise woman”; she also “denote[s] Mercy.” Although this

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *SP*, p.59; *Pearl*, p.7, p.39; The Gawain Poet, *Complete Works*, p.130, p.156. The Middle English “hende” has more connotations of “stupefied” and “dumb-founded” than Borroff’s “tame” can summon. See also David Aers on hawks in halls: “the point of the simile is to highlight [...] [the hawk’s] confused, dazzled, controlled impotence - hawks in human halls have been turned from birds of prey into either domesticated upper-class fowl [...] or targets.” ‘The Self in Mourning,’ p.60.

<sup>125</sup> *SP*, p.61.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>127</sup> Compare, for example, and especially with regard to Oliver’s “doubly symbolized,” Sarah Stanbury’s introduction to her edition of *Pearl*: “The economy of metaphor [in *Pearl*], or rather its hyper-economy, lies in its uncanny ability to express both equivalence and multiplicity; ostensibly an equation of identity, marked by an equal sign, metaphor also adds up to the sum of its parts. The pearl *is* a gem, *is* a two-year old child, *is* a beautiful young woman, *is* the immortal soul, *is* the heavenly city - as well as a collective of the properties that inhere to each term singly.” Sarah Stanbury, ed., *Pearl* (Kalamazoo, MI: Published for TEAMS by Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), available online <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/stanbury-pearl-introduction> [accessed 05.08.2014]. For the other representative emphases on symbolism mentioned here, see the respective essays in John Conley, ed., *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, CA and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), excepting Bogdanos, for whom see Bogdanos, *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable*.

attribution is couched in the conditional it still clearly pertains to the *contemporary* significance of Rosine, that is, her significance for the 1985 poem *The Infant and the Pearl*. Sections XIV-XV and XIX-XX of *The Infant and the Pearl* are stanzas of chiding admonition, and they are structurally equivalent to the passages in *Pearl*, especially IX-XI and XIV-XV, in which the Pearl-Maiden schools the dreamer in points of Christian doctrine. Rosine appears as a “Saint walking in this unworldly kingdom / and my world,” and upbraids Oliver’s dreamer for his Labourite pontificating, arguing that no Labour leader since the second world war has been able to bring economic stability to the country:

Did Labour, with Wilson, show down-the-line  
courage to win on the wage front? Did Jim  
Callaghan grapple with a single, genuine  
solution to the seventies’ gradual slacking  
that the radicals didn’t reject? To undermine  
is so bloody radical that it leaves all the rootless attacking  
the roots.<sup>128</sup>

She continues with a welter of criticisms of factional and idealistic Leftism, which include:

Until you can condemn the also-ran  
horse-tail-wagging-the-head, trade-union-  
inspired, internecine, leftist sycophancy  
in a style fit for it, the state is stuck  
with a Tory for pearl and a falseness for policy.

The warm heart, when weak, is politically unsound  
and even Conservative Christian courage  
like that of your father is sounder.  
[...]

[...] The policy pushed through by your premier,  
though bad, was believed in. Not yours.

[...] Tory cruelty – fight that – but if a vote  
goes monetarist you must work for it, until mercy  
mists the eyes and the majority doubt  
no longer that the pearl is false.<sup>129</sup>

Rosine advocates the practice of patient political acquiescence. Her logic is as follows: Thatcher was voted into office; her policies therefore have a public mandate; these policies should be carried through “until mercy / mists the eyes,” that is, until their truly damaging effects can be felt and the populace realise, in their “heart[s]” and of their own accord, that such policies are “bad.”

*The Infant and the Pearl* contains, in the voice of Rosine, explicit criticism of both Conservative

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<sup>128</sup> *SP*, p.62.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.62-63.

and Labour economic policy. The poem attacks monetarism, inflation and unemployment, and it berates what it calls the “unfunded promises” and “careless schoolboy accountancy” of Labour, Socialist and Marxist economics. But it does so in order to subordinate the question of economics itself to the question of unity, and it does so by diagnosing the problems of what Rosine calls “a virtueless nation” precisely in terms of its lack of “virtue,” “mercy,” “courage” and, finally and catastrophically, “ignorance.” Left opposition to Thatcherism, in the poem, is worse than ineffective without these moral virtues: it is a sycophantic scam dreamed up by careerist “Kinnock-clever” politicians which obfuscates and denigrates the ideal “unity between / people.” When Oliver’s dreamer attempts to argue with Rosine in the House of Commons in section XV, in a passage that continues in the vein of bumbling ventriloquism that characterises the paraphrase of Aaronvitch in section XII, Rosine’s garments immediately become rent and torn:

[...] (The side of her skirt had a tear; it  
was as if my words whipped age on her, a weal  
of grey skin was scored where the cloth parted.)<sup>130</sup>

These lines allude to the appearance of Lady Philosophy in Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*, a foundational and highly influential text for later medieval dream visions, including *Pearl*.<sup>131</sup> In the opening passages of the Consolation, Lady Philosophy appears in a “robe” that “had been ripped by the violent hands of certain individuals, who had torn off such parts as each could seize.”<sup>132</sup> Philosophy’s clothing “was originally a seamless robe [...] which was later torn by hostile sects.”<sup>133</sup> Party-political affiliation is descried as sectarianism of this ilk in *The Infant and the Pearl*. Leftist animosity towards government policy is merest “sycophancy”: it cannot produce an effective argument because its alternative policies have not been voted into office, and they are therefore chastised as not “believed in.” But more decisively, the very *fact* of political factionalism, of the party-political structure itself, is that which section XII’s allusion to Boethius claims will damage and destroy the “non-doctrinal” unity which Rosine, invoking the spirit of Lady Philosophy, represents.

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130 *Ibid.*, p.64.

131 Some *Pearl* critics assert a direct and thematic Boethian influence on the poem. See, for example, John Conley’s statement that “The presumed and belabored issue of *Pearl* – whether the mourned loss is fictitious or real – is, in fact, secondary [...] As the educated person of the Middle Ages would surely have been expected to perceive, *Pearl* is, in brief, a Christian *consolatio*, analogous in theme, situation, roles, and treatment to Boethius’ then-revered *Consolation of Philosophy*.” ‘*Pearl* and a Lost Tradition,’ *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, pp.50-72 (71).

132 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.4.

133 *Ibid.*, p.116.

The last sections of the poem follow Rosine, now joined by the ghost of Oliver's dead father (he of the "Conservative Christian courage")<sup>134</sup> and the shining Christ-like figure of Tom Oliver, as they upbraid the dreamer for believing that political struggle against Thatcherism is possible without accepting the virtue of "ignorance." We have already read these passages in some detail, and noted too the redemptive and salvific elements of Oliver's symbolism in harmony with those used in the original *Pearl*. This section has tracked the basic plot of *The Infant and the Pearl* in order to prove and provide some points of intersection and comparison with the fourteenth-century *Pearl*. We have so far been at pains to point out these convergences of formal, symbolic, philosophic and spiritual significance between *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Pearl*, and through these comparisons to suggest the meaning and significance of Oliver's poem in the context of his oeuvre. We now move towards some more detailed exegesis and critique. What are the practical political ramifications of *The Infant and the Pearl*'s connections to, and inheritance from, *Pearl*, and thus of the arguments, primarily about "unity," "ignorance" and "Socialism" in Oliver's poem? What are the politics of *The Infant and the Pearl*? Is it even possible to describe the "politics" of a poem whose avowed aim is, as I have argued, to undermine the entire structure of political organisation in the UK in order to sanction and support a utopian agenda that is modelled on a scene of poetical encounter between poet-author and reader?

### 3.5 – *The Infant and the Pearl* and labour

We have already established that *The Infant and the Pearl* is not just formally comparable to *Pearl*, but deeply influenced by all aspects of its textuality, from important convergences of narrative detail and plot to significant overlaps of spiritual agenda. This fact is not lost on John Kerrigan, who points out that Oliver "is sympathetic to the belief-structure of the dream-frame of *Pearl*," and at one point refers to the *The Infant and the Pearl*'s "neo-medievalism."<sup>135</sup> In what respects does *The Infant and the Pearl* exhibit "neo-medievalism"? In what ways does the poem inhabit, refer to or otherwise reflect the arguments and paradigms of its formal and prosodic fourteenth-century model?

Towards the end of *The Infant and the Pearl* Rosine delivers a speech in which she makes a positive political recommendation. This recommendation begins in a practical, rather than a spiritual or utopian, vein. The aim of this recommendation is to define a materialist agenda for the spiritualised

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<sup>134</sup> *SP*, p.63.

<sup>135</sup> Kerrigan, 'Mrs. Thatcher's *Pearl*,' pp.185-186.



version of “Socialism” Rosine has just recently (in the previous stanza) promulgated, and into which the recommendation segues as it echoes the valorisation of a spiritually-infused intersubjective unity.

[...] We should idolize  
the giants of Beveridge, make a Britain to cheer for,  
a workforce that works for all we are here for  
on earth: the self and its soul whether known  
in the one or the many [...] <sup>136</sup>

These lines are a complicated mix of exhortation, political enthusiasm, spiritual/mystical utopianism and patriotism. The lines are not as syntactically complicated as much as they are conceptually onerous. “We should idolize the giants of Beveridge” and “make a Britain to cheer for”; we should also “make” “a workforce that works for all we are here for / on earth,” and what “we are here for” is “the self and its soul whether known / in the one or the many.” By “idolize” Oliver means to love to excess in a manner congruent with his adoration of Tom’s “ignorance.” To “idolize” in this sense, then, is to practice a kind of Franciscan veneration of the social ills named by Beveridge; what we “should” do is sacralize the condition of poverty and redeem those who suffer from social injustice.<sup>137</sup> The “self and its soul whether known / in the one or the many” presents a vision of unity both singular and plural, but not specifically dyadic; it is at once a vision of perfect selfhood and of the “perfect identity of self and Other” on a global scale. Thus, in the poem’s penultimate stanza quoted above, *The Infant and the Pearl* argues that the condition for a just universalism (“all we are here for / on earth”) is a patriotism (“make a Britain to cheer for”) that takes its cues from Britain’s early attempts to develop a welfare state (“[w]e should idolize / the giants of Beveridge”).

Such attempts, as Oliver would have read about in Aaronovitch’s *The Road from Thatcherism*, were stalled from the very beginning, since

The [post-war] consensus [...] was for a welfare system that would, as far as possible, not threaten capitalist relationships. The basic principle of the famous Beveridge Plan – security of want without a means test – was *not* fully carried out [...] <sup>138</sup>

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136 *SP*, p.73.

137 J.H. Prynne, in a letter to Oliver of 01.02.1986, reads Oliver’s dreamer’s “grey dressing gown” as a Franciscan symbol, noting that it is “a powerful and deeply-moving device to open with the accidental but evidently pre-rhetorical inheritance of a notionally Franciscan ethic in the overt symbolism of an assumed mantle[.]” See Prynne to Oliver, 01.02.1986, *DOA*, Box 9. I am inclined to follow Prynne in his reading of the gown, since Oliver on occasion explicitly refers to his monkish habit; for example, “I was a new-style, a knowing dreamer, / though a grey friar [...],” “Though I seemed a friar / in my gown,” and “friar though I was and wearing such rough / clothing,” *SP*, p.42, p.52, p.54.

138 Aaronovitch, *The Road from Thatcherism*, p.98.

Rosine's speech seems, then, to confirm Aaronovitch's sense that

The movement to throw back the Tory onslaught [...] should not be separated from the struggle to change the direction and character of the 'welfare state.'<sup>139</sup>

But the transition from a national ("a Britain to cheer for") to an international ("all we are here for / on earth") programme for the development of a "workforce" directed towards the unity of the "self and its soul" in "the one or the many" seems both to radicalise and to undermine this practical struggle. It radicalises it because such a transition is broadly reminiscent of the transformation of labour itself, its emancipation from the strictures of bourgeois economy after the transition from capitalist to communist society, described by Marx in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and discussed at length in Lenin's 1917 *The State and Revolution*. "In a higher phase of communist society," writes Marx,

after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!<sup>140</sup>

There is something inescapably revolutionary about Rosine's demand: to "work for all we are here for / on earth" is to radically exceed – just as the clause exceeds the rhyme – the prevailing imperative to work "for" the accumulation of surplus-value to the infinite advantage of the capitalist, and it exceeds this status quo in the interests of the "all-round development of the individual," self *and* other, and the perfect equality, through "union," of a "we" whose inclusivity is limited only by the global geographical locale "on earth."<sup>141</sup>

But in whose interests does "a workforce that works for all we are here for / on earth" really work? Consider the audacity of such a statement in a poem first published in England shortly after the ignominious end of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike, the conclusion of which left a legacy of government-sponsored police brutality in the wake of the Battle of Orgreave (18<sup>th</sup> June 1984) and a "workforce" severely cowed by Thatcherite policy, including the Employment Acts of the early 1980s. Striking

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

<sup>140</sup> Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme,' Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), pp.75-99 (87).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

workers are hardly “the enemy within” in Oliver’s poem that they were for Thatcher.<sup>142</sup> But in the lines from its hundredth stanza quoted above *The Infant and the Pearl* promotes a work ethic with a specific history of reactionary privilege, and depicts workers themselves as the benign, idealised beneficiaries of a spiritual reconciliation touted as true recompense for their heroic labour. The enjambed transition from “a Britain to cheer for” to “all we are here for / on earth: the self and its soul whether known / in the one or the many” in fact works to separate the practical “struggle to change the direction and character” of the welfare state from the achievement of personal and intersubjective unity, and it thereby undermines such struggle. And it separates precisely that admixture of visionary fervour and rational agitation that characterises the history of English working class dissent that E.P. Thompson describes and which we noted above.<sup>143</sup>

Struggle is undermined because these lines confirm, for Oliver, the irresponsibility of leftwing “trade-union- / inspired” agitation and extremist “rent-a-Marx” “rhetoric” that serves only to obscure the fundamental truth of unity’s claim on our common humanity. Faith in such agitation, in the poem’s account, gives energy to bad types of attitudinising that express resistance against the duty to recognise, and act in accordance with, our own ignorance – that is, the duty to act *more intelligently* than the self-convinced and ego-driven visions of Marxist polemic would allow. Yet the spiritualised character of “Socialism” in the ninety-ninth stanza, the redemptive and salvific implications of “the self and its soul,” and the devotional and eschatological overtones of “all we are here for / on earth” combine to promote a moralistic ethos peculiarly appropriate to the early capitalist societies from which emerged poems such as Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, as well as *Pearl*. In this sense Oliver’s politics, as expressed in *The Infant and the Pearl*, are reminiscent not of Marx, but of Langland and the *Pearl*-poet themselves.

David Aers and John Bowers argue persuasively that the moralistic language of earthly toil in the service of divine ends is precisely that which was deployed by the landed gentry of the fourteenth century in order to reconcile the contemporary “workforce” to the pay and working conditions that same workforce so often attempted to re-negotiate to their own advantage during the turbulent period of economic upheaval following the 1381 outbreak of the Black Death. Aers and Bowers place the authorship of *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl* amongst the elitist milieu most concerned to disseminate this ideology. For Bowers, the extended verse-paraphrase of the Parable of the Vineyard in *Pearl* (sections IX-XI, lines 497-612) emphasises “the lord’s [spiritual or sovereign] absolute right to enforce labor

142 Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Pan Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1993), p.372.

143 See above, section 3.2.

contracts and to determine the wage-level for the laborers hired for the summer harvest.”<sup>144</sup> Noting that *Pearl* was written at a time in which “not everyone [...] would have been so quick to compare Heaven to a country landlord,” Bowers goes on to demonstrate at length and in great detail that

It goes without saying that an equation between a beneficent landlord and a merciful God [as he finds in *Pearl*] could only have come from a writer whose interests lay almost exclusively with the landed gentry.<sup>145</sup>

A “workforce that works for all we are here for / on earth” in the context of Oliver’s appropriation of *Pearl*’s spiritual incentives thus fits uncomfortably well with the contractual obligations which the *Pearl*-poet means, for Bowers, to reinscribe by using the Parable of the Vineyard “to enforce what was for his immediate audience an urgent social as well as spiritual truth.”<sup>146</sup>

David Aers, meanwhile, points out that William Langland’s concern in *Piers Plowman* is to caution his readers against the adoption of market principles which threaten “traditional versions of social organization.”<sup>147</sup> In doing so, writes Aers, and in

opposing what he takes to be the subverters of tradition, the poet attacks lower-class reactions to changed circumstances by deploying a work ethos and moralizing vocabulary which is the *employers*’ response to these same circumstances [...] The development of a self-righteous, moralistic language of attack on working people who resisted employers’ rules and current needs was just one element in the development of an ethos that would prove appropriate to early capitalist societies.<sup>148</sup>

Langland’s intention, however, is to show his readers

how this [work] ethos is now [in the late fourteenth-century] inextricably bound up with market energies that subvert the traditional models of community and morality he wishes to affirm. [...] What Langland evokes is the way a culture of work zealously oriented around a dynamic market creates new desires, transforms ‘kynde’ [kind], and positively encourages behaviour which has traditionally been viewed as sin, as ‘vnkynde’ [unkind], as ‘cruwel’ [cruel].<sup>149</sup>

Oliver, too, wants to affirm a particular type of community – unity – defined in contradistinction

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<sup>144</sup> Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl*, p.46.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42, p.48.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>147</sup> David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p.48.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

to contemporary forms of political and economic organisation. The natural moral law of *kynde* that we investigated in detail in the previous chapter would seem, in *The Infant and the Pearl*, and especially when it comes to the politics of labour, to transform the present by employing a social imaginary more nostalgic and reactionary than potentially revolutionary. Our natural and inherent propensity to know our selves and our souls in harmony with each other exerts a (naturally) concomitant pressure on the “workforce” to “work for all we are here for” without the slightest challenge to the current organisation of labour, let alone any change in the ownership of the means of production. Oliver’s *practical* politics are therefore *utopian*, precisely in the sense Jameson articulates when he argues that “utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political.”<sup>150</sup> Utopian, mystical or otherwise otherworldly political solutions are deployed in Oliver’s verse with an arduity and a commitment that promotes into a spiritual ecstasy the commonplace of human interaction. The result is a political commitment in verse to the task of re-defining politics by first suspending it; indeed, by a process highly reminiscent of the Husserlian *Einklammerung* [bracketing] we investigated in our first chapter.

Oliver’s poetry hereby presents a radically non-contingent counterexample to already existing politics. This counterexample must begin by establishing that no version of currently existing politics is good enough, and by extension, that none ever will be, until the transformation of self and soul in each individual makes an “authentic politics” possible. It is the objective of Oliver’s mature political poetry, and especially of *The Infant and the Pearl*, to declare and make apparent this truth, from the general tone and shape of the poetry’s narrative, argument and allegory, to the minutiae of particular instances of rhyme and enjambment. As a poetic, the argument is revolutionary, because it sweeps aside any and all political imaginaries that would stem from currently existing inequalities and injustices. But mediated by the specific content of Oliver’s poems, and as a case in point, in *The Infant and the Pearl*, it is most often *not* revolutionary, because the resulting *lack* of mediation between the world as it is and the world as it should be ends up relegating contemporary struggle, such as the miners’ strike, to the same realm of political factionalism as the sheer fact of parliamentary democracy itself.

It is not my intention here to critically reinscribe the same lack of mediation I have just now discerned in Oliver’s poetic; that is, it is not my intention to suggest that poetry is simply either revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. That kind of criticism, to which my argument owes a not insubstantial debt, would be reminiscent of the more intractably dogmatic criticisms of the pre-First

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150 Jameson, ‘The Politics of Utopia,’ p.43.

World War and wartime “bourgeois avant-garde” made in the 1930s by Soviet cultural commentators like Lukács and Radek. The debt my argument owes to this kind of criticism is in the form of its attention to the practical political commitments of a literature written in a time of political crisis, at least when it comes to *The Diagram--Poems*, *The Infant and the Pearl* and, although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss in any great detail, *Penniless Politics*. The difference between, for example, Lukács and Radek’s criticisms of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or of “Expressionism” *tout court*, and the present discussion, is that whilst Lukács and Radek condemn (in the case of Lukács) the failure of Joyce’s novel, Expressionism and the avant-garde to depict the totality and thus the reality of social relations under capitalism,<sup>151</sup> or (in the case of Radek) to present any viable opposition to the global catastrophe of the First World War,<sup>152</sup> my criticism of Oliver’s work begins with the attempt to understand how global politics itself is mediated through the claim to formal exceptionalism that Oliver’s early theory of prosody explicitly defines. My criticism begins not from the claim that Oliver’s poetry *does* attempt to depict the totality of social relations as they are mediated by political commitment and desire, or that it *does* respond to, and oppose, global catastrophe (it does both of these things), since this would be to capitulate to the same logic of reductive binarism that animates Lukács’ and Radek’s critiques. It begins instead from discursive attention to the contradictions immanent to Oliver’s poetry and his conceptions of poetical language, such as those discernible from the depiction of the “workforce” we have just now read, contradictions that constantly compel attention to the theme of the wholesale reorganisation of human sociality under the sign of “unity.”

To declare, therefore, as I have done above, that Oliver’s poetic remains “revolutionary” whilst the expression of its most pressing imperatives in Oliver’s mature political poems – that we must change each other and ourselves before we can change the world – certainly becomes “anti-revolutionary,” is to follow the consequences of the poetry’s designs on social relations as they make themselves felt and known in the contemporary conditions of social life. The desired end of “what I mean / by Socialism, that our soul and our selves are unknown / yet unconsciously known in the union between / people” presents a vision of transformed human community the achievement of which must not disturb the current foundations of social life lest that method leave itself open to the charge of following any given “hollow creed” of political factionalism, just as the Tupamaros’ heroism is marred for the Oliver of *The Diagram--*

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151 See Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance,’ Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp.28-59.

152 See Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art,’ Maxim Gorky et al., *Soviet Writers’ Congress, 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp.73-182.

*Poems* by what constitutes an inherent part of their activity, namely, armed insurrection. Oliver's poetry cannot countenance either of these methods of achieving that which the poetry is constantly telling its readers it is possible to achieve, right now, "in the union between / people," because both of them involve the risk (or the necessity) of violence: one snobbish and intellectually exclusive, the other militant and bloody.

Oliver's dreamer's revolution is achieved harmlessly: in the *The Infant and the Pearl*'s last stanza, "rays / of heartening light, rays of no harm / shot from my eyes to my eyes" in a final scene of ecstatic reverie, before, as in *Pearl*, the dream is broken and the dreamer founders on the shores of reality: "[I] awoke in a dawn of our daily disgrace, / lying down in my father's grey dressing gown."<sup>153</sup> That the poem ends on such a note is important. It violently curtails a dream of pacifistic social transformation in precisely the same way that Oliver would end the sprawling multicultural New York epic *Penniless Politics* eight years later:

[...] We walk, 20<sup>th</sup>-century-blind, towards burial,  
pretending that all will come right in some personal heavenly kingdom.  
We wouldn't know Spirit if, Spirit on top, it fucked us up the ass.<sup>154</sup>

The irony of these dénouements – that they violently end a dream of non-violent social transformation – speaks to the poet's skepticism of anything so benignly utopian as a bloodless revolution. The end of *The Infant and the Pearl* and the end of *Penniless Politics* both reiterate the "union between / people" that only poetical language can make available to us, because poetical language intrinsically reveals the formal structure of an "authentic politics," and because in the very grain of prosody we are at least capable of nominating the "moments" in which "special intersubjectivity" and the prospect of "perfect identity between self and Other" are most purposefully and efficiently realised.

### 3.6 – *The Infant and the Pearl* and gender

We noted above the gendered idealism of the figure of Rosine that Oliver deploys as a key symbolic motif in his poetic repertoire. We noted too that in *The Infant and the Pearl* heterosexual sex becomes one of the defining expressions of the theme of unity, and that at the beginning of the poem the male dreamer's perceived sexual abandonment and loss are intimately connected with political disenchantment.

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<sup>153</sup> *SP*, p.73.

<sup>154</sup> *PP*, p.77.

The dynamic of heterosexual anxiety central to *The Infant and the Pearl* has its roots in the sexual dynamics of *Pearl*, and in the wider genre of medieval dream vision. “This genre,” writes Sarah Stanbury,

which is almost exclusively male in voice, frequently has its origins in the loss of a woman: the dead Beatrice, reincarnated in Dante’s *Comedy*; or Chaucer’s Blanche [...] [are] mastered through the work of mourning.<sup>155</sup>

Oliver’s poem is heavily invested in the gendered symbolic economy of the dream vision genre which Stanbury describes. The poem consciously drenches itself in this symbolism. The dreamer “loses” the ideally feminised Rosine; he makes a series of blunders which Rosine, in a role akin to that of Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, must admonish and correct; and he finally comes to an understanding about “ignorance” that Rosine, as divine emissary and intermediary, impresses upon him. But there is a deeper problematic at work in Oliver’s poem that concerns not just an inherited symbolic economy, but the underlying structure of what is most highly prized in the narrative development in which this historically gendered symbolism is put to work, and that is the question of unity. The history of the valorisation of “the union of male / and female,” of the sexual “union between / people” called, specifically, “Socialism,” is one fraught with essentialist definitions of male and female difference designed to liberate women from certain social and religious strictures, but which perpetuate their subordination through the vehement reassertion of the continued necessity of other, especially economic and political, ties. That is to say, the history of the valorisation of heterosexual union as a touchstone for utopian socialism is dominated by sexism.

One of the most striking historical examples of the simultaneous assertion of “unity” between the sexes (often combined with a strong emphasis on the moral basis of future socialist societies), and the maintenance of practical inequality, can be found amongst the nineteenth century French utopian socialists, especially amongst the teachings of the leading Saint-Simonians and, later in the century, in the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Claire Goldberg Moses summarises the feminism of the (mostly male) Saint-Simonian movement in early 1830s Paris in the following way, citing important divergences from their Revolutionary predecessors:

In the first place, they opposed revolution because of its association with violence and terror. Second, they were Romantics rather than Enlightenment

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<sup>155</sup> Sarah Stanbury, ‘The Gaze on the Body of *Pearl*’s Dead Girl,’ Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, ed., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp.96-115 (99).



rationalists. They were spiritual, mystical, and visionary. Concerned with morality, sentiment, and the emotions, they were determinedly nonpolitical or even antipolitical. They called themselves socialists to indicate that they wished to create new ways for individuals and classes to relate to each other. [...] Third, they were internationalists and pacifists, opposed not only to war but even to national boundaries [...]<sup>156</sup>

The Saint-Simonians effectively venerated a divine “union between male / and female.” The metaphysics of their “new Christianity [...] denounced the ‘old Christian’ split of matter and spirit and conceptualized an androgynous God, ‘Father and Mother,’” and their ideological leader Prosper Enfantin espoused a new world order “ruled by a ‘couple-pope,’ the male to represent ‘reflection,’ the female ‘sentiment.’”<sup>157</sup> Whilst Enfantin’s “mystical feminism” eventually “burned itself out” after a couple of years of internal squabble and various charges of immorality, Goldberg Moses notes that the legacy of some female Saint-Simonians had a significant impact on later nineteenth-century feminist ideas, particularly in view of the “contemporary ideology of motherhood” which “extolled female virtues,” enabling French feminists to build “on the respect accorded women as mothers to demand their better treatment.”<sup>158</sup> “In the historically specific circumstances of mid-nineteenth-century France,” argues Goldberg Moses, “the cult of motherhood actually served feminism’s purpose” of increased collective agitation and demand for social reform.<sup>159</sup> But the same ideology was taken up by later male socialist theorists in a manner that intensified and formalised Enfantin’s essentialism to a degree of positive misogyny, ably articulated in the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

Proudhon’s anti-feminism, promulgated in the name of the utopian socialist ideal he spent his adult life advancing, is notorious. At its heart is the union, in marriage, of the patriarchal family unit, the centrepiece of the naturally ordained law of justice:

Marriage is the union of the two heterogeneous elements, *power* and *grace*. Man the producer, inventor, scholar, warrior, administrator or magistrate is the embodiment of the former. The latter is embodied in woman, of whom all one can say is that by nature she is destined to be the living idealization of all the qualities that man possesses in a higher degree, in the three spheres of labor, knowledge and rights. This is why women want men to be strong, brave and clever. [...] And this is why men want women to be beautiful, gracious, modest in speech, discreet and chaste [...]<sup>160</sup>

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156 Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp.41-42.

157 *Ibid.*, p.44.

158 *Ibid.*, p.50, p.232.

159 *Ibid.*, p.232.

160 Stewart Edwards, ed., and Elizabeth Fraser, trans., *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1970), p.254.

Proudhon's conception of love, much like the Saint-Simonians', rests on a vision of mutuality promulgated as "the union between man and woman," a union that "is not a synallagmatic agreement in the manner of the usual contract of mutuality," but instead one in which

Man and woman together, in both the moral and physical sense, form one organic whole composed of two persons, one soul endowed with two minds and two wills. The aim of this organism is to create Justice by stimulating consciousness, and to enable mankind to perfect itself by itself, that is to say civilization and all its wonders. How will this progress towards Justice be brought about? It will be by encouraging the ideal that theologians call grace and poets call love.<sup>161</sup>

Philosophies of love that favour the rights of men over those of women are hardly original to Proudhon; neither does their history end with his writings. But Proudhon's reliance on a theory of moral perfection innate to the species is peculiarly bound up with his utopian socialism in a manner that remains instructive for our purposes. "[Man] carries within himself the principles of a moral code that goes beyond the individual. He does not receive these principles from elsewhere. They are intimately and *immanently* part of himself," and they are "refined" through "social relations" that naturally subordinate female to male in all aspects of "social and public life."<sup>162</sup>

"Are men and women made equal as a result of their union?" Proudhon asks in the fourth volume of his 1858 *De la Justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* [*Of Justice in the revolution and in the Church*].

Yes, from the point of view of dignity and happiness, in the intimacy of the bridal chamber and in their hearts, they are equal. Marriage, which is founded on mutual and absolute devotion, entails the sharing of fortune and honour. But this equality does not and cannot exist in *social and public life*, in anything to do with the business and organization of life, or with the administration and defence of the republic. To put it more clearly, woman does not count in these spheres. She is considered as part of her husband [...] society does no injustice to woman by refusing her equality before the law. It treats her according to her aptitudes and privileges. Woman really has no place in the world of politics and economics. Her function begins beyond these spheres.<sup>163</sup>

The purpose of these historical reflections is to point out some important antecedent convergences of the ideals of morality, heterosexual "union" and "Socialism."<sup>164</sup> Proudhon's misogyny is of a different, far

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p.255.

<sup>164</sup> Proudhon did not go unchallenged in his day. Jenny D'Héricourt, whom by 1860 "had established herself as the

more pernicious order of sexual stereotyping than the use of classically gendered female symbols to be found in Oliver's poem. Yet the structure of fundamental moral absolutism which underpins both Proudhon's gendered essentialism *and* his socialism is also part of *The Infant and the Pearl's* political argument, as is the theory of natural and inviolable moral perfectibility we saw coursing through *The Diagram--Poems*.

We noted above *The Infant and the Pearl's* moral absolutism;<sup>165</sup> in the previous chapter I explored in detail what I called the "moral imperative" of *The Diagram--Poems*. In *The Infant and the Pearl* the male dreamer "carries within himself the principles of a moral code," and this "moral code" is expressed by the allegorical representative of "natural" and "non-doctrinal socialism," Rosine:

[...] The feminine  
is numinous in my masculine: it isn't nonsense  
to picture a pearl placed on a shrine  
inside myself; on the swirling surface  
is Rosine's reflection [...]<sup>166</sup>

The end rhyme "-ine" tucked inside the second line by the colon that separates it from the assertion of common sense, "it isn't nonsense," alerts one to the order of sexuality which subtends the otherwise putatively egalitarian division of gender. The placement of Rosine "inside" "my masculine" is hereby prosodically confirmed, since "feminine" and "masculine" are not afforded an equal position in the formal economy of the line-length but must be separated by the strictures of the rhyme scheme inherited from *Pearl*. Rosine is the "pearl's true minister," the ideal representative of a "non-doctrinal socialism," as the poem's notes name her; the dreamer, we are told, "should have slept with her" instead of delegating his political responsibilities to the "hollow [...] creed" of political factionalism on offer in the House of Commons. Thus the moral righteousness of inner truth is figured as the object of heterosexual male attraction, and the female, whether the "true minister" of Rosine or the "false pearl" of Margaret

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principal feminist opponent of Proudhon," engaged him in a vociferous public correspondence and published rebuttals and counter-arguments to Proudhon's beliefs in her two-volume *La Femme affranchie: Réponse à Mm. Michelet, Proudhon, E. de Girardin, A. Comte et aux autres novateurs modernes* (Brussels: A. Lacroix, 1860), translated (and abridged) anonymously in 1864 as *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman: An Answer to Michelet, Proudhon, Girardin, Legouvé, Comte, and Other Modern Innovators* (New York: Carleton, 1864). Goldberg-Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, p.167. The classic twentieth century feminist critique of the patriarchal family unit as the model and moral centre of "socialist" principle was made by the Wages for Housework movement in the 1970s, for whom the inseparability of women's rights and unionised, revolutionary class struggle necessitated the destruction of precisely the "natural" convergence of heterosexual "union" in marriage and sex with women's unwaged domestic labour. See the articles collected in Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), and see further Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

<sup>165</sup> See above, section 3.4.

<sup>166</sup> *SP*, p.41.

Thatcher, is figured as the passive recipient either of this attraction: “I would have gladly slept with her,” or of an equal and opposite revulsion: the “serious, powdered, severed head / of Margaret.”<sup>167</sup>

The problematic nature of this gendered moral economy is most visible at the end of section IX and in most of section X of *The Infant and the Pearl*. Oliver’s dreamer arrives in the City of London. Swiftly disorientated and contaminated by the “inversion of values” that characterises the rapacious profiteering of City ideology, the “spiritual insolvency” that accompanies the City’s accumulation of capital, and the broader influence of Tory government that “meant ruling the City, the Exchange and the Mint” through monetarist economic policy, the dreamer, his “self-image swelled” to the monstrously phallic proportions of “the proud ‘I’ of Parliament,” sexually assaults a woman. Here is the second half of the fourth stanza and the complete fifth stanza of the poem’s ninth section, and the first few lines of the tenth:

[...] Her carefully-cut Rasta-thready  
blonde hair, her wily nether half  
filled me with: sex = self-will = speedy  
orgasm = self-aggrandizement = ‘Steady  
on, I am the dreamer and can dream up suc-  
cess that’s worth more than a wallet. Already  
you’ve gathered *my* gold on the Street of Good Luck.’

The next bit’s a mystery: mistreating a woman  
— not even the abuse of another’s soul —  
hadn’t any tie-up with the Tories; but the terrain  
of chance, of Steel City, and the whole  
theme of false values now ran  
through my loins like lust; I stole  
up behind the blonde, crowed like a bantam,  
didn’t go for a posterior goal  
but entered her top to toe. A coal-  
blackness blotted out her silk back  
and I reeled in an utter reversal of role:  
all good turned to bad on that Street of Good Luck.

X  
On that street sex was one-sided and sterile,  
an inversion of self-image on its own image  
as Dante was drawn through the dark navel  
of Satan [...] <sup>168</sup>

In the stanzas of section X that follow, Oliver’s dreamer emerges “at the woman’s front, facing her, faint / with despair to have done such self-damage.”<sup>169</sup> These lines, as the first four of section X make clear, are a pastiche of Dante and Virgil’s traversal of the physical body of Satan in the final canto of the *Inferno*.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.40-41, p.71, p.62.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.54-55.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

Oliver's dreamer is made to witness Rosine's disapproving "frowns" at his actions, "her fair eyes sad / at the vicious violation of virtue in / my pretended acts of love, my perverted / rape of the rosy pearl."<sup>170</sup> The dreamer is then afforded a vision (within the larger vision of the poem) of the "shining idol" of the "beaming baby mongol" "*Ignorance*" as it gestates inside Rosine's soul: "The pearl / seed of [Rosine's] Socialism was this subnormal infant."<sup>171</sup> The dreamer seeks "to stabilize the ignorance"; however, in a moment that prefigures the final lines of the entire poem, "the scene" breaks down, and he instead finds himself on his way to the Houses of Parliament, the blonde woman whom he recently assaulted transmogrified into his Parliamentary "secretary."<sup>172</sup>

As Oliver's nod to Dante proves, this entire section of the poem partakes, quite explicitly, of the realm of conscious literary reference and allusion. The scene of the assault, of what is described in the following stanza as Oliver's dreamer's "inversion of self-image" (we shall see how the two are linked shortly) invokes the scene of geophysical and perspectival inversion in which Dante and Virgil climb over Satan's navel and towards the base of Mount Purgatory:

Ed elli a me: "Tu imagini ancora  
d'esser di là dal centro, ov' io mi presi  
al pel del vermo reo che 'l mondo fôra.

Di là fosti cotanto quant' io scesi;  
quand' io mi volsi, tu passasti 'l punto  
al qual si traggon d'ogne parte i pesi.

E se' or sotto l'emisperio giunto  
ch'è contraposto a quel che la gran secca  
coverchia, e sotto 'l cui colmo consunto

fu l'uom che nacque e visse senza pecca;

["You think you're still on the center's other side,"  
he [Virgil] said, "where I first grabbed the hairy worm  
of rottenness that pierces the earth's core;

and you *were* there as long as I moved downward  
but, when I turned myself, you passed the point  
to which all weight from every part is drawn.

You are standing now beneath the hemisphere  
which is opposite the side covered by land,  
where at the central point was sacrificed

the Man whose birth and life were free of sin.]<sup>173</sup>

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170 *Ibid.*

171 *Ibid.*, p.56.

172 *Ibid.*

173 Mark Musa, trans., *Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Vol. 1: Inferno* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp.332-333.

The heightened symbolism and gruesomely euphemistic tone of what is, some lines later, referred to as “perverted / rape,” takes pains to advertise its own artifice amongst a welter of reflexive and self-indicting imagery, most notably the tendentious equivalence of the equals signs uniting “sex,” “self-will,” “speedy / orgasm” and “self-aggrandisement.” We are thus prepared for a deplorable act in the ninth section’s penultimate stanza, when the dreamer’s pollution by City life and philosophy in the previous section announces and prefigures his transformation, his “utter reversal of role,” into a creature capable of the barbarity he is about to commit. The act itself is the culmination of the dreamer, in this “utter reversal of role,” channeling “the whole / theme of false values” which now run “through my loins like lust.” As the stanza approaches the moment of physical violation the diction rises to a pitch of ghoulish flippancy – “posterior goal,” i.e., anal sex – before the phrase “entered her top to toe,” i.e., penetrated her entire body by a kind of corporal suffusion, describes the rape in the facetiously innocuous tone of abstract Ovidian violation.

We should compare the rape scene in *The Infant and the Pearl* to Oliver’s reading, in the first of his essays written as a mature undergraduate at the University of Essex, of Chaucer’s ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale.’

[Chaucer’s] own realism in depicting the wife combines oddly and effectively with the medieval chivalric tradition of service to women. Her own wish for marital “maistrie” colours a traditional theme of the knight (eventually) yielding “maistrie” to weak womankind. All the same, when the knight has yielded the “maistrie” that superior physical force *would* give him, and allows the foul, old woman to decide her own future life with him, a redemptive, magical event occurs, one which incidentally redeems time itself, for the woman grows young as well as true. Earlier, he has raped a young maiden: it is this self-centred, sadistic act which has set him into a desperate relationship with time, for now he has but a year to find the answer to the queen’s question, what do women most desire? A bad relationship with time is here properly allied with distorted body-image (“headlessness”) and bad feelings.<sup>174</sup>

Oliver’s reading here develops a binary moralism based on the gendered spectrum of “foul” and “old” in contradistinction to “young” and “true” women in order to emphasise and countenance the greater good and eventual redemption of the male protagonist. His commentary recalls Carolyn Dinshaw’s reading of authorial perception in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’:

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174 ‘Introductory Essay,’ p.7.

The Wife is a source of delight for this male author [Chaucer] precisely because through her he is able to reform and still to participate in patriarchal discourse; he recuperates the feminine *within* the solid structure of that discourse.<sup>175</sup>

Oliver's knight, like Dinshaw's Chaucer, is "able to reform" by sanctioning what Dinshaw refers to, *pace* Sheila Delany, as the "sexual economics" of exchange (metaphorical or literal) of female bodies.<sup>176</sup>

In both Oliver's early essay and in *The Infant and the Pearl* the rape is "bad" because it represents the male protagonist's "reversal of role" and his "inversion of values." In *The Infant and the Pearl* the rape, like the knight's actions in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,' is "self-centred" and "sadistic": Oliver's dreamer is "faint / with despair to have done such *self*-damage" [my emphasis]. All of these terms apply to the moral depredation sexual assault inflicts self-reflexively upon the rapist. They do not concern the suffering of the female victim. The female victim in *The Infant and the Pearl*, we should remember, is a fantastical embodiment of "false values" whose appearance and treatment is completely of a piece with the inherited allegorical schema and economy of violence that pervades medieval dream vision. The dreamer is dreaming; the narrative is the description of this dream; everything he does is therefore, to some extent, directed towards himself. At this point in the poem Oliver deliberately makes his own authorial avatar complicit in a violent act that cannot be explained away by political corruption: "mistreating a woman [...] hasn't any tie-up with the Tories." He does this, I suggest, with the full knowledge that such a moment risks repeating the historical economy of violence of which it partakes at the same time as expressing horror and revulsion at its continued cost. Rape as a literary trope is self-consciously deployed in order to be literally disgusting. The act is "an utter reversal of role": it is the farthest possible point from the utopian state of social relations that the dreamer desires.

John Kerrigan states that the rape scene in *The Infant and the Pearl* is "allegorical [...] a piece of comic-grotesquerie."<sup>177</sup> What we must also consider is how this allegory functions in the development of the poem's plot and political argument in light of the question of unity. Kerrigan usefully addresses the historical meaning of the scene. He points to *Piers Plowman's* "Lady Meed" as a model for the "wily blonde" in Oliver's poem, noting that Meed "can be viewed as a parodic antitype of the chastely bejewelled pearl-maiden."<sup>178</sup> In *Piers Plowman* Lady Meed is united with False (or "Falseness"), and the

175 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p.116.

176 *Ibid.*, p.118. See also Sheila Delany, *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp.76-92.

177 Kerrigan, 'Mrs Thatcher's Pearl,' p.188.

178 *Ibid.*

two are “enjoined” [“joined”] in matrimony by Simony and Civil Law.<sup>179</sup> Meed “is y-maried more for here goodis / Than for ani vertue or fairenesse or any free kynde” [“is married more for her property / Than for any goodness or grace or any goodly parentage”], making her particularly relevant as an archetypal embodiment of the “false values” of the City of London that Oliver’s poem describes.<sup>180</sup> She is in fact the gendered receptacle of all that is *unkynde* and therefore, in Langland’s worldview as described by David Aers, morally and spiritually reprehensible.

Oliver’s dreamer’s “perverted / rape” of the “wily” City woman updates the setting of this false union but does not change its fundamental allegorical function: to provide a “perverted” “inversion” of “the union of male / and female in fruition.”<sup>181</sup> The structure of fundamental moral absolutism which underpins Proudhon’s essentialism in the name of what is called “Socialism” is also in play in *The Infant and the Pearl*. It is this deep-seated, absolutist moralism, the desired end of which in the *The Infant and the Pearl*’s pedagogical narrative is “Socialism,” that allows Oliver to employ the City woman as a narrative device whose function is the development of his male dreamer’s journey towards moral and spiritual redemption: the assault in section IX affords Oliver’s dreamer with a vision of both Rosine and the “baby mongol” (Tom) that prefigures the ecstatic glimpse of “union between / people” in the poem’s final lines. The woman on “The Street of Good Luck,” just as the “young maiden” in Oliver’s reading of Chaucer’s ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,’ is raped so that she (or, in the case of Chaucer, another woman) may provide by proxy an exemplum of “false” unity; not the “union of male / and female in fruition” that Rosine lauds early on in the poem, but its lewd and deplorable mirror image.

Patricia Klindienst Joplin speaks to this use of the female body in Western literature, and particularly in Greek myth, in her essay ‘The Voice of the Shuttle Is Ours.’ She asks, citing ‘The Rape of Lucrece,’ “why the greatest of our writers, like Shakespeare, represent their own language anxiety in terms of sexual violation of the woman’s body.”<sup>182</sup> Her account is of further relevance here for its discussion of violence:

[...] female chastity is not sacred out of respect for the integrity of the woman as person; rather, it is sacred out of respect for violence. Because her sexual body is the ground of the culture’s system of differences, the woman’s hymen is also the ground of contention. The virgin’s hymen must not be ruptured except in some manner that reflects and ensures the health of the

179 Langland, *Piers Plowman*, pp.28-29.

180 *Ibid.*

181 *SP*, pp.54-55, p.64.

182 Patricia Klindienst Joplin, ‘The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours,’ Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, ed., *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp.35-64 (39).



existing political hierarchy.<sup>183</sup>

In Oliver's poem, "female chastity" would appear to be "sacred" out of respect for *non*-violence, and the rape of the "wily blonde" the signal violation that proves by reflection the pacifistic *kyndeness* of "union between / people."

The scene at the end of section IX in *The Infant and the Pearl* depicts a terrible crime against "another's soul," and it does so in the language of self-disgust designed to powerfully condemn such a wretched act of violation. The scene further allegorically indicts the "whole / theme of false values" for which the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in 1985, its economic and social policies, and its City allies, in the poem, stand. Rape in this poem is the ultimate wrong – "the abuse of another's soul" – and to bring that point home the poem re-enacts it through horrifying euphemism; all the more horrifying since the tone employed forces the reader's imagination to concretise the moral evil into physical assault. But the moment finally suffers from the brute force of its own deliberate toxicity. At this point, the entire play with the model of dream narrative seems transparent and precarious. The gendered moral economy that *The Infant and the Pearl* employs as part of its broader political argument about "unity" further results in the relegation of female bodies to the status of equivalent vehicles of spiritual pedagogy: Oliver's dreamer's victim is miraculously transformed first into Rosine, who "frowns" at the dreamer, instigating his shameful penance in view of the "shining idol" Tom, and then into the dreamer's "secretary," whom he accompanies into the scene of the final lesson regarding "ignorance" and "union" in the House of Commons. Heterosexual rape is denounced in *The Infant and the Pearl* in the strongest terms of the poem's moral vocabulary, terms which include the explicit intertextual intimation of an evil inversion. But in doing so, rape is also phenomenologically promoted to the status of bad union, as well as politically reduced to a crucial stage in the male dreamer's spiritual instruction.

### 3.7 – Conclusion

In *The Infant and the Pearl*'s "union between / people" we find a powerful distillation of the poetic we saw developed in Oliver's essays from the University of Essex in the early 1970s, thinking which also informs *The Diagram--Poems* with the "emotional urgency" of moral obligation. *The Infant and the Pearl* argues that no version of political affiliation, no existing politics, is sufficient to transform the "nation" in

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183 *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

a way that would improve the lives of the country's most disadvantaged; it is, the poem's hundredth stanza asserts, "[u]nthinkable [...] / to pretend that the poor will profit from policies / whose mercy has greyed in the pearly mirror / of the nation's identity."<sup>184</sup> It is "[u]nthinkable" because the "nation's identity" is thereby hi-jacked either by the invasive parasitism of the fluorescent TV-phantoms of Saatchi and Saatchi's Thatcher-avatar, or by the alternative but insolvent strategies of the Marxist left. Both are doomed to failure, because both ideologies lack the necessary "mercy" that would enable them to acknowledge that "the highest human intelligence is a near / relation of ignorance."<sup>185</sup>

It is worth pointing out once more, as we did at the beginning of the previous chapter, how extraordinary this is as a political argument directed against specific institutional targets. Oliver's great achievement in *The Infant and the Pearl* is to level in medieval pastiche a rejoinder to contemporary politics whose terms are infinitely in excess of the material and social situation to which the poem speaks. This enables the poem to exert a purchase on political life in the UK that is at once satiric and utopian, both nihilistic and extraordinarily hopeful. By claiming through the inheritance of a medieval paradigm of spiritual moralism the sheer insufficiency of the contemporary political landscape, *The Infant and the Pearl* makes political transformation contingent on the attention to the object of poetical discourse itself: prosody in Oliver's poem, as the early essays argue of all poetry, is not simply mimetic or representative of "unity," but as close as we can get to its perfected lived instantiation. The line-break "between / people" declares this fact and exacerbates the social efficacy of its design. Moments such as this in Oliver's political poetry figure the composition of politics itself based on the immediate and unmediated meeting of poet-author and reader in untrammelled intersubjective union. This kind of politics is only available in poems.

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184 *SP*, p.73.

185 *Ibid.*, p.72.

## Coda

*The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics* both strive to realise a utopian political vision in verse and both end with damning evaluations of the entire endeavour. Their last lines are, in the case of *The Infant and the Pearl*,

I began crossing the gutter that only grace  
can cross. I caught a mere trace  
of grey from the gowns, her grave frown,  
and awoke in a dawn of our daily disgrace,  
lying down in my father's grey dressing gown.<sup>1</sup>

whilst *Penniless Politics* sinks

[...] We walk, 20<sup>th</sup>-century-blind, towards burial,  
pretending that all will come right in some personal heavenly kingdom.  
We wouldn't know Spirit if, Spirit on top, it fucked us up the ass.<sup>2</sup>

These endings are not the same. But they offer comparable moments of termination in which the poet-speaker (or imagined collective body), prostrate in both instances, is violently wrested from each poem's self-consciously poetical dreamworld and firmly placed in a scene, and a position, of submissive abjection. This kind of termination exercises an overwhelming retroactive power over the rest of the poems, and promises, or threatens, to inflect or undo their every argumentative twist. We have known all along that these are poems – neither poem lets us forget it – but the rebarbative reflexivity with which they both conclude is nevertheless remarkable. It is in the face of this kind of termination that the poems' desire to instantiate a field of political efficacy within the bounds of poetic form itself must be read: not as the unconditional fantasy of the world as it would shine in the messianic light of the infant child's radiance, or by the temporary, heart-warming glow of the ecstatic multicultural and constitutional harmony of Spirit, but rather as the kind of fantasy which the humanity universally implicated by its own collective wish-fulfilment is not even remotely capable of seriously dreaming. It is an indictment the poems level at political consciousness at large.

The jarring despondency of *The Infant and the Pearl*'s ending, at least, is somewhat alleviated by

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1 *SP*, p.73.

2 *PP*, p.77.

the formal conceit of the waking dreamer that its imitation of *Pearl* demands. Yet both endings seem to suggest the unavoidable futility of the poems' own central arguments about political transformation and its prosodic facilitation via the poet's creative dynamic, about the possibility of a "true politics." Why do these poems end in this way? One answer to this question might be: in order to prevent the runaway notion that this very "creative dynamic" exercises any presumption of worldly design outside of the bounds of the intersubjective encounter it so carefully delineates. Politics, these endings might forcefully admonish, cannot, finally, be made here; and by asserting this they underline the effort of the imagination required to produce a scene of social relations unlimited by the failures of parliamentary democratic process, by what *Penniless Politics* calls "our ordinary political failure."<sup>3</sup> Such a reading would serve as a stern reminder of the literary limitations of utopia and of the practical political activity to be maintained in the face of these limitations. But this answer is also too comfortably cynical for any seriously utopian project, and it is furthermore at odds with the effort of passionate political and anti-political thinking that we have consistently discerned in Oliver's work. These endings do not insure the poems against the collapse of their complex dramas of political adventure into agitprop. Instead, I suggest, they play out the literalisation of poetical-political desire into brute complicity with an impotent, sanctimonious and all too predictable dream of a better world, and this play is productive rather than proprietary, a further, brazenly non-contingent apostrophe to the contingency of existing political solutions, rather than a deferential, realistic acknowledgement of their ineffectiveness.

The challenge to the reader of *The Infant and the Pearl* and *Penniless Politics* that their final lines present is this: they ask that the question of aesthetic and social identity be suspended in favour of attention to the urgency of political fantasy which has enabled that identity to emerge, on the horizon of aesthetic contemplation, over the course of the poems' reading. The poems make this challenge in different ways and in different contexts, but the challenge is broadly the same. It is made more violently in 1991 than in 1985. The image of phallic, patriarchal violation is stronger – a more masterful and dramatic flourish of repellent mastery, in common with the gendered moral hierarchy we discerned in *The Infant and the Pearl* – than the language of disgrace. Grace may be conferred in the future, since that is, after all, its function and its purpose for a redeemed humanity; but right now we are fucked, "heaven" a merely "personal" pretence. If the poems ended in a spectacle of triumphant, Dantean spiritual harmony, or if they concluded with an earnest rejoinder to the reader to make up the literary deficit with socio-

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3 *PP*, p.76.

political commitment, their powers to reflect reality from the privileged standpoint of artistic speculation would be betrayed by a garish pretension to wholesale omnipotence. But “if each and every artwork involves a probably aporetic nexus of problems” such as we encounter in these poems, especially in their final lines, “this is the source of what is perhaps not the worst definition of fantasy.”<sup>4</sup> And Adorno continues: “As the capacity to discover approaches and solutions in the artwork, fantasy may be defined as the differential of freedom in the midst of determination.”<sup>5</sup> The endings of *The Infant and the Pearl* and of *Penniless Politics* refuse the autonomy of free-floating reverie, or the authority of clumsy didacticism, by driving the poems into the heart of the world they would transform. By doing so they ensure that the element of fantasy, the “union between / people” realised in a “land silvery with democracy,” is firmly lodged in the midst of the existing. It is the differential of the poems’ internal contradiction between fantasy and reality, powerfully epitomised by their endings, that secures and maintains the fantastical in the face of the real, of what *The Infant and the Pearl* calls “our daily disgrace.” The appearance of these endings binds the poems irrevocably to the world which would condemn their dream of kindness, of spirit, and of unity, to failure. The poems’ last lines thus demand contemplation of another world entirely as the starting point for thinking about the daily practical refusal of this one.

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4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.228-229.

5 *Ibid.*, p.229.

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