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Languishing in 'rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric': The phono-politics of Douglas Oliver's *The Infant and the Pearl*

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Abstract

In *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985), the British poet Douglas Oliver draws on the alliterative and allegorical features of medieval verse to create a dream-like satire of Britain under Margaret Thatcher’s Tories. Once a central feature of most Old English poetry, since Chaucer, alliteration and rhyme have often been used in the service of parody and satire. But, how do complex patterning of alliteration and sound-structures aid satire and generate political content? Drawing on Oliver’s poetic and critical work, as well as contemporary research into prosody and politics, this article argues that the sound patterning in *The Infant and the Pearl* creates a caricatured or hyper-real version of Thatcher’s ‘politically unsound’ Britain. Oliver uses sonic patterns to create an artificial parody of the bathetic ‘uncommon rhetoric’ of consumerism and the political classes and where people are subjected to the ‘false pearls’ of the state. Far from being an accessory to meaning, the sound structures are, I argue, foremost in as a vehicle for parodying the operations of the rhetoric of the ‘unreal’ apparent in social and political discourse from the common to the Commons. Oliver envisages sound patterning – as performed with every private and public reading – as offering recalibration of people’s experience of language and the world as well as leading to glimpses of a communality beyond political and social division.

Keywords

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Introduction

The poet, novelist, journalist and teacher, Douglas Oliver (1937-2000) was tirelessly interested in the intersections between literary aesthetics and politics throughout his life. Many of his poetic sequences – earlier published with small presses, but latterly with Penguin, Paladin and Bloodaxe – tackled political issues and repeatedly questioned poetry’s role and function in bearing witness to, and in providing alternatives to, political and social injustice. While Oliver’s earlier poems could be recondite and were written under the influence of nineteen seventies and ’eighties Cambridge-based poetry and its Marxist politics, he wanted his later poetry to be more accessible, motivated by the belief in the role of literary aesthetics in highlighting political injustice. For example, in his later work, such as the 1991 sequence *Penniless Politics*, Oliver imagines a new political party formed by the underclass in poverty-stricken New York.¹ Similarly, in *A Salvo for Africa*, published posthumously in 2000, Oliver attempted to, as he puts it, ‘pass outside [his] western body and to regard [himself] from the Third World standpoint’ and he explored Western and African relations and politics, all the while questioning the poet’s complicity in global inequalities and their (White European) ability to write about Africa at all.²

¹ Douglas Oliver, *Penniless Politics* (London: Hoarse Commerce, 1991). *Penniless Politics* was republished by Bloodaxe in 1994.

² Douglas Oliver, *A Salvo for Africa* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000). Oliver, ‘Poetry’s Subject’, p. 58.

The burgeoning accessibility of his poetry over the years – what Oliver described in a 1995 lecture called, ‘Poetry’s Subject’ recent ‘step to restore urgent speech’ – reflected his decision that, for poetry to be effective, it must avoid creating formal barriers that exclude readers rather than include them in a vision of social and political change.³ But, in the same lecture, Oliver argues that poetry should as far as possible be non-partisan and that poets should use all of their resources to highlight political injustices. ‘Without intense experimental inquiry,’ Oliver writes, ‘poetry becomes complacent, especially politically complacent; without popular outreach, poetry risks becoming driven in upon itself.’⁴

As Denise Riley suggests in a memorial piece for Oliver in a collection of essays published shortly after his death, sequences such as *Penniless Politics* and *A Salvo for Africa* in particular have been criticised for being too explicitly and glibly ‘moralistic’.⁵ But, his commitment to investigating the political potential of poetry was life-long and each stylistic shift was deliberate. As Carol Watts argues in an essay on Oliver’s political poetics, ‘there is a continual process of reflection about the relation of writing to events,’ in his work as well as, she continues,

the necessity (and impossibility) of poetic engagement “in the course of the world,” in Theodor Adorno’s words, “which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings.” Necessity, because “our greatest cruelties often arise from a failure to imagine” (*A Salvo for Africa*). Impossibility, because the lyric self as a vehicle for expressive poetic commitment is already in ruins.⁶

The formal characteristics of Oliver’s work evolved alongside his negotiation of the necessity, as well as the impossibility, of poetic engagement. Watts explores the implications of Oliver’s drive towards a greater clarity of political commitment in his work and concludes that, while ‘the political desire articulated by [his later] poetry is clear in its identifying of collective want’, they lack the ‘visionary reach’ of earlier poetic sequences such as *The Diagram Poems* and *The Infant and the Pearl*, whose acoustical intricacy and drama of conflicting voices (as opposed to the singular,

³ Douglas Oliver, ‘Poetry’s Subject’, *P N Review* (Sept 1995) 105, 22:1, p. 58. Oliver delivered this piece as the Judith E. Wilson Annual Lecture on Poetry at the University of Cambridge in 1995.

⁴ Oliver, ‘Poetry’s Subject’, p. 57.

⁵ Denise Riley, ‘Doug’s Prose’, in *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver and 27 Uncollected Poems* (Cambridge: infernal methods, 2002), p. 18.

⁶ Carol Watts, ‘Piercing the Screen of Words: Reflections on the Political Poetics of Douglas Oliver’, *Discourse* (Spring and Fall 2005) 27.2 & 27.3, pp. 199-200. Watts quotes from Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’ in *Notes to Literature II*. trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson, ed. Rolf Tiedermann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 80, and Douglas Oliver, *A Salvo for Africa* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 9.

angry and dogmatic personae) negotiate the complexities of poetic and lyric complicity as well as offer up glimpses of political utopia.⁷

The long sequence, *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985) is *mid-career* Oliver, straddling the difficult poetics of his youth and the more direct poetry of his later life. The sequence is complex, surreal and formally dense, but there is also a strived-for clarity and directness in the political vision of the poem. In the sequence, Oliver develops a poetics willing to pick its way through the messy contingencies and grubby contradictions of class-war-torn Britain towards a clear message of social solidarity. Much of Oliver's earlier works mine dense phonic patterns as ways of realising or providing glimpses of greater truths. His collection, *In the Cave of Suicession* (1974), for example, is told from the perspective of an 'inquirer' called 'Q'. One July evening, Q decamps to an abandoned lead mine called 'Suicide Cave' in the Peak District, UK with a typewriter, a candle and some provisions to test the limits his oracular vision and poetic style. What emerges in this long and bizarre sequence is a unique and straining language comprised of echo and mistype and which might be called echo- or echoic-poetics. Denise Riley has written about the ways in which echo and re-iteration can produce self-ironising and reflective spaces from which satire and critique can operate. In these spaces, as she puts it, '[t]he word, now as thing, is wrenched into a novel sense or nonsense, made strange by the brute fact of its re-presentation'.⁸ Oliver's creation of formal spaces for critique, satire and the realisation of particular truths that glimpse the possibility of other political distributions in *In the Cave of Suicession*, are also found in abundance in the alliterative lines of *The Infant and the Pearl*. The sonic density of Oliver's poetic sequences were motivated by his conviction that only complex linguistic structures could outflank debased public language and renew our attention to the disenfranchising operations of political rhetoric. But such practice was also informed by his academic research with spectrometers during the nineteen eighties, where he developed a theory of poetic rhythm, sonic patterns and stress and their relation to collective performance. This work would be published in his 1989 book, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*.⁹ This article outlines what I am going to call the 'phono-politics' in Oliver's poetry and is illuminated or, more properly, ultrasonically revealed, by his own academic work. Oliver's dialogue with both his turbulent political environment as well as literary historical form produces a distinct political vision tied up with sound patterning and phonic dimensions that elude full meaning.

⁷ Watts, 'Piercing the Screen of Words', pp. 205 & 212 respectively.

⁸ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 157 and see 'Echo, Irony, and the Political', pp. 146-84.

⁹ Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

Poetic Ambition; Poetic ‘Cognition’

Ben Lerner begins a recent polemical essay entitled *The Hatred of Poetry* with Marianne Moore’s famous statement of her ambivalence towards poetry, which she expressed in the truncated 1967 version of her poem ‘Poetry’. In this poem Moore writes that, while she, too, dislikes it, and reads it with ‘perfect contempt’, she discovers ‘in / it, after all, a place for the genuine.’¹⁰ For Lerner, while poetry ‘is always a record of failure’,¹¹ poets’ continued faith in it ‘arises from the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical [...] and to reach the transcendent or divine.’¹² One is moved to write poetry, Lerner argues, ‘because of that transcendent impulse’, but as soon as the actual poem is produced, ‘the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms.’¹³ For Lerner, the apperception that a poem can offer a ‘place for the genuine’ is something that motivates poets’ continued labour, despite the finished article always falling short of the aspirations driving its creation. Poetry is stuck in what Lerner, after Allen Grossman, calls an “undecidable conflict” between the poet’s desire to sing an alternative world’ and the always compromised material process of composition.¹⁴ ‘In order to perceive a particular thing to be imperfect,’ Lerner writes summarising Plato’s argument in *Phaedo*, ‘we must have in mind some ideal of perfection’.¹⁵ Poets labour to achieve glimpses of perfection through language and tools that are always already sullied by their in-built compromised imperfections. Writing poetry is an ambivalent enterprise, but Lerner argues that the readers of poetry also experience this ambivalence and this is because, he argues, poetry is broadly understood to have ‘tremendous social stakes’.¹⁶ At funerals, weddings, political rallies, christenings and bar mitzvahs, poetry is used to express universal truths and to command a place for the expression of the profound and the authentic. Poetry is also frequently charged with intervening in social and political issues. Poetry, such as the work of Paul Celan, or Claudia Rankine, or by numerous soldiers back from the front line, with all its resources of metre, rhyme and transformational formal features, is

¹⁰ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016). The 1967 version of Marianne Moore’s poem reads, in full: ‘I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine.’ Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* [1967] (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 36.

¹¹ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 13.

¹² Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, pp. 12-13.

¹³ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 13. Lerner quotes from Allen Grossman, ‘My Caedmon: Thinking about Poetic Vocation’, in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) p. 15.

¹⁵ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 35

¹⁶ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 19.

somehow more capable of confronting political and traumatic issues and, crucially, is generally perceived as offering the potential of uniting people in condemnation or praise. Poetic production and recitation can afford glimpses of an alternative world or ways of being. And if it fails, it fails us all.

Behind Lerner's argument draws from a conviction that poetry offers particular registers and forms or formations of thought and that the characteristics of such registers and thought patterns are located in the material properties of rhythms and rhymes. Over the last twenty years much critical ink has been devoted to the ancient idea that formal poetic resources offer epistemological alternatives to other rational systems of expression. Since 'Longinus' located access to the sublime in the figures, diction and 'dignified and elevated word-arrangement' of poetry, poets and readers have tried to specify those formal features and artifices that 'excite awe' rather than produce 'repulsive pictures'.¹⁷ Considerations as to the 'cognitive' functions or qualities of verse and, more particularly, prosody, are part of, as Derek Attridge concisely puts it, 'the long history of the debate about the contribution of the sounds of words to sense, a debate whose beginnings lie at least as far back as Plato's *Cratylus*'.¹⁸ Writers such as Attridge, Simon Jarvis, Isobel Armstrong, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, for example, have laboured long to identify specific formal locations of such cognition (if we can call it that) and their work has garnered new generations of critical thought excavating the cognitive and affective dimensions of verse.¹⁹

The legacy of this type of thinking about so-called poetic cognition achieved its apotheosis in 2011 when David Nowell-Smith set up the journal *Thinking Verse*. The description of the journal on the website outlines its aspirations:

Thinking Verse aims to provide a forum for discussion and debate in poetics, specifically regarding verse as a feature of writing, and the different kinds of thinking -- aesthetic, linguistic, philosophical -- that verse engenders and necessitates. In so doing the journal seeks to reconcile a close attention to the technical aspects of verse art with these broader stakes, not least given that it is through an engagement with technical minutiae that these

¹⁷ 'Longinus', 'On Sublimity', in D. A. Russel and Michael Winterbottom, eds. *Classical Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 149 & 150 respectively.

¹⁸ Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 77.

¹⁹ See, for example, Derek Attridge and Thomas Carper, *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Derek Attridge, *Moving Words*; Simon Jarvis, 'Prosody as Cognition', *Critical Quarterly* Vol. 40 no. 4 (2003), pp. 3-15; Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves*.

stakes are articulated, and that without an understanding of these stakes the focus on such minutiae cannot grasp the object it purports to discuss. In particular, it seeks to reconcile a close attention to the technical aspects of verse art with these wider questions for ‘thinking’.²⁰

The essays in the five issues of the journal published so far bridge the gap between close, critical schematisation of the ‘technical minutiae’ of verse and wider issues and speculate as to the knowledge-carrying nature of verse art in contributing to these ‘broader stakes’. What is at stake, it seems, is the defence of verse and, more broadly, aesthetics, as offering specific and unique types of thinking and insight into lived experience. Essays in the first volume, for example, examine J. H. Prynne’s poetic rhythms as moments for performed aesthetic and social engagement and pleasure, or P. B. Shelley’s phonic patterns as offering a performative dwelling place for a reader to linger outside of capitalist time to ponder his much vaunted ‘as yet unapprehended’ knowledge.²¹ As Nowell-Smith outlines in his introduction to the first volume of the journal, many of the essays also argue from the perspective of a reader’s experience of verse, and the types of effect these experiences have in engendering new understandings of language and the world.²² Criticisms of the ‘poetry as cognition’ conceit wagon might point out that the nature, characteristics and uniqueness of poetic ‘cognition’ or ‘verse thinking’ are still rather murky.²³ However, the essays in *Thinking Verse* – much like the work done by Russian Formalists in the early to mid- twentieth-century – do a great service in schematising verse techniques – particularly rhythm and rhyme –, and they also postulate wider implications of the experience of the performance of these aspects of poetry on individual readers and broader

²⁰ David Nowell-Smith, ‘About us’, *Thinking Verse* < <http://thinkingverse.org/about.html> >. Accessed 16.02.2018.

²¹ See, respectively, Lacy Rumsey, ‘The Obstinate reader: Prynne, prosody and degrees of engagement’, *Thinking Verse* I (2011), pp. 44-66 and Isobel Armstrong, ‘Hegel: The time of rhythm, the time of rhyme’, *Thinking Verse* I (2011), pp. 124-136. The P. B. Shelley quotation is from ‘Mount Blanc’. I am indebted to David Nowell-Smith’s clear outline of the essays in the first volume in his ‘Editor’s Introduction: Thinking Verse’, *Thinking Verse* I (2011), pp. 1-16. All here: < <http://thinkingverse.org/issue01.html> >. Individual pdfs. Accessed 16.02.2018.

²² Nowell-Smith, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Thinking Verse’, p. 10.

²³ It is probably more helpful and less confusing to write of the formal or material aspects of verse as a kind of ‘neo-thought’ or what might be called ‘sub-cognition’. In other words, it is painfully difficult (and difficult to read others’ painful exertions) to try and argue for ‘prosody as cognition’ (as, for example, Jarvis has done in ‘Prosody as Cognition’). It is less of a strain to point to certain sub-semantic associative connections that are made by sound patterns, which are exploited by the thinking and writing poet, and which can be subsequently interpreted as types of thought by readers. In his recent *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015) – and in a signature move inaugurated his earliest published work on structuralism – Jonathan Culler subtly relocates the purported cognitive properties of verse prosody from *within* the poem to the readers’ minds and performances. In other words, while a poet may think in and through, for example, paranomasia or associative rhythms, these things are only gain full articulation and expression by readers’ activating performances, recitations and interpretations. See, for example, Culler’s chapter on ‘Rhythm and Repetition’ (pp. 132-85).

society. Oliver's own academic work from the late nineteen eighties was already leading him to draw similar conclusions, but via different paths.

The essays collected in *Thinking Verse* are informed by the thought of Hegel and Kant, as well as broader epistemology, neo-Marxist socio-politics and post- or contra-Saussurean linguistics. Oliver's academic research was also forged in these diverse smithies, but, inspired by the poetics of Charles Olson and 'open-field' compositions, as well as an understanding of the relationship between the poetic line and the poet's body and voice, he also conducted a range of experiments around the physiological bases of poetic performance. Where Oliver's work with poetic rhyme, stress and voicing dovetails with essays in *Thinking Verse*, his concentration on the potential of the performance of poetry to invoke communality between an author and a reader or auditor and between multiple readers and to transform their bodily and cognitive understanding of subjectivity and subjecthood. As he stresses throughout his critical work, he treats poetry as something to be performed rather than as text; that is to say, he is phono- rather than scripto-centric.²⁴ In this sense, while the critical contexts sketched above are important in locating – Venn-diagram like –overlapping sympathies, Oliver was concerned with performance, public communality and what might be called the affective or experiential production of thought and knowledge through recitation of verse. As Culler writes in *Theory of the Lyric* of Northrop Frye's discussion of lyric rhythm: 'in lyric[,] greater importance falls on the various kinds of equivalence, of brief metrical units, lines, and stanzas, but also of the sound patterning of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance and the possible semantic relationships such patterning brings.'²⁵ Sound patterning points to types of equivalence and, in turn, possible semantic clusters and novel associations that a reader activates. As Culler continues: '[s]uch patterning is highly seductive, which is in part to say that a given sequence of sounds does not have some fixed, necessary effect, but invites a reader to an experience.'²⁶ The implied enemies to Culler's assertions here are those who argue that certain prosodic patterns produce 'fixed' 'effects' – to which we might add fixed 'thought'. Rather, for Culler and, I would suggest, Oliver, such patterns are *generally* seductive and offer the occasions of communicable 'experience' for a reader. That is to say, it is not communicative thought or cognition in the sense of fully formed ideas, but rather forms of sub-cognitive and experiential resonances from text to reader. In this sense, formal properties

²⁴ See my footnote 21. In 'Poetry's Subject', Oliver criticises some post-modernist theories of language and consciousness as treating the self as text, rather than as 'a performance set into time', (p. 3).

²⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 133-4.

²⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 134.

are not mimetic of fully formed thought and language *per se*, but rather intellectual and affective clusters of sub-semantic and non-linguistic meaning activated in performance.

Oliver takes a lively, dynamic and dialogic approach to poetic performance, involving a reader in the activation of the potentially transformative rhythms of sound patterns, both in terms of understanding and lived existence. Writing of the insights enabled by spectrometer analysis in the preface to *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, Oliver laments that ‘much of the technical research into prosody has therefore been left to the linguists, whose scientific approach is not always suitable for the application in intuitive criticism.’²⁷ The same can perhaps be said of a number of the analytic and continental philosophical approaches to prosody in some of the articles in *Thinking Verse*. Indeed, one of the progenitors of such thinking already anticipated such pitfalls. As Jarvis points out, most prosodic scholarship to date has tended to concentrate on patterns on the page rather than what might be called active sound patterns. Referring himself to Oliver’s findings *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, Jarvis writes that ‘the diagrams of the prosodists, whether metricians or rhymicians, have often had no referent.’²⁸ This concentration on text has, as Jarvis suggests, obliterated the experiential and bodily aspects of rhythm and rhyme or, to put it another way, the experiencing target of the performed rhythms. As such, Jarvis and subsequent commentators have located ‘cognition’ not just as something that happens as text is translated through the eyes and into the mind, but as an active, bodily experience. As he states: ‘prosody cannot be grounded on the model of measurement of an object’, but rather in the performing body, mind and what Prynne has called the ‘mental ears’ (as opposed to the real ears) of a reader.²⁹ Cognition, then, requires the activation of patterns and rhythms by bodies and minds experiencing in time. As Jarvis puts it: ‘It would be possible to begin thinking about the birth of prosody only upon condition that we stopped thinking of the bodily, and of the musical, as the non-cognitive vessels for a cognitive content.’³⁰ Cognition is a holistic activity, operating and being experienced as such in (rhythmically divided) time. Prosody requires experiential activation; so-called ‘cognition’ requires material apprehension to be considered as such.

²⁷ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. xiii.

²⁸ Jarvis, ‘Prosody as Cognition’, p. 5. J. H. Prynne, ‘Mental Ears and Poetic Work’, *Chicago Review* 55.1 (2010), pp. 126-57. By ‘mental ears’, Prynne means those phonetic patterns that a reader detects on the page and which are somehow different from those which our bodily ears pick. In other words, Prynne’s phrase is part of his broader argument that, while reading texts, our ‘mental ears’ filter and translate different meaning-carrying information than our acoustically processing bodily ears. See, also, J. H. Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought’, *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010), pp. 595-606.

²⁹ Jarvis, ‘Prosody as Cognition’, p. 6.

³⁰ Jarvis, ‘Prosody as Cognition’, p. 11.

As Jarvis's use of Oliver's research implies, no other poetic commentator gets close to his (Oliver's) characterisation of sonic patterning in poetry and its potentially radical implications. As he puts it in 'Poetry's Subject', the levels of sonic patterning a poem can achieve are incredibly fine, 'too fine for reason to examine fully [as] the human processes involved imply responsibility at every juncture, a responsibility arising in each small, emotional and sonic change in the verbal texture.' And, he adds, 'Those human processes lead, of course, to many broader aesthetic, social, political, etc., fields of significance.' Reading Geoffrey Hill's *Tenebrae*, for example, Oliver qualifies his ideological objection to Hill's sympathetic presentation of Charles Péguy with a description of his experience of the awkwardness of voicing certain passages. He writes: 'Performing those lines, I am briefly forced to live through this religious politics because the sacrificial death and the Christian hope in resurrection are brought so vividly together in my own speaking voice.' Adding: 'It rather flusters me, frankly.'³¹ Oliver's experience of a poem's sonic patterning induces a sense of what he call 'poetic responsibility for each word, each consonant', which 'lives again, within myself.'³² For Oliver, humanism and our common humanity are activated through our shared performance of the intricate sonic patterns of language.

Allegory and Poetic Modes – the Spaces in Between

The Infant and the Pearl is a contemporary dream narrative and morality tale allegorising the political and social fallout of Thatcher's Britain of the nineteen eighties. In the poem, Oliver imagines a narrator taking a car trip around a grotesque Britain with two central characters in tow: a dream guide, Rosine, and a hypperreal televisual Margaret Thatcher. The car – a grotesquely inappropriate Bentley – travels though the slums and factories of London, along motorways, through the countryside, up to a place called Steel City and, eventually, to a celestially described House of Commons whose central vestibule becomes a symbolic river.³³ Each of these places feature various manifestations of the poems twin and implicated obsessions: an infant and a pearl. The pearl, for example, represents, by turns, decoration, pearls of wisdom, pearly clarity, but also inflated currency, false promises and the scree and scum of political cant. At one stage, for example, Thatcher is described as 'not iron as the Press / allege but an adman's alloy of steel / and pearl.' (*IP*, 28) And, of course, Thatcher's pearl necklace and

³¹ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 3.

³² Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 3.

³³ Douglas Oliver, *The Infant and the Pearl* [1985], *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: Selected Poems and Prose* (London: Paladin, 1990), pp. 1-36. Citations from this text will be given in parenthesis in the body of the article as *IP* followed by the page number. Re-reading the poem in preparation for publication of this article, Oliver's Bentley, and the economic speculations that go on within via TV screens, reminded me of Don DeLillo's dark portrayal of the billionaire asset manager and currency speculator Eric Packer who rides around in a bullet proof limousine in his 2003 novel, *Cosmopolis*.

ever-present handbag, along with the Bentley, work as forms of grotesque class markers, contrasting with the slums and chaos outside. Many of the characters in this quest are, as in medieval narratives, composites, symbols, avatars of states and concepts. So Oliver presents us with characters such as Sir Pretentious Privilege, the Bishop from the Diocese of Deference, Idle Jack and Dull Dick as well as the giants Want, Squalor, Idleness, Ignorance and Disease. Many of these figures – Idle Jack, for example – satirise political phrases designed to caricature and demonise certain types (idler or ‘welfare scrounger’, for example). The landscape of Oliver’s dream narrative is Bunyanesque, taking place in Hazard Country, where the risks of the free market are insidious. Oliver takes verbal distillations of a particular political era and spins and refines them into something very different.

In order to situate his poem in a space from which Oliver can articulate his vision, as well as communicate ambivalence about the political vision poetry can offer, Oliver straddles poetic history, using a Medieval formal models and allegorical figures to express contemporary themes. *The Infant and the Pearl* is modelled on medieval dream visions and its form is indebted to the complex fourteenth century poem, *Pearl*. Oliver follows the form of *Pearl* closely in writing nineteen sequences of five, twelve line stanzas, and one sequence of six stanzas. Following the complex formal properties and conventions of *Pearl* – which were drawn from Old English and French poetic traditions – Oliver uses abundant alliteration and his stanzas are held together by concatenations (or ‘chaining’) and iterations. As such, the stanzas of both *Pearl* and *The Infant and the Pearl* are characterised by an octave of alternating *ab* full and partial end rhymes, followed by a final quatrain, the first line of which ends with the *b* rhyme linking it to the final line of the octave. The use of ancient metrical schemes and poetic forms can often result in an archaic and ossified poetic tone and register. In using ancient forms, a contemporary poet risks producing the achingly dull verse indicative of ‘New Formalist’ poets, for example. As Lerner writes of an analysis of William Topaz McGonnagall’s poetic ambitions and his spectacularly bad and quaint realisations of these noble aspirations in his poetry:

I find myself implying that a poem could do something like the following: create a rhythm at once recognizably collective [...] and irreducibly individual [...] a rhythm that therefore enacts what the poem attempts to describe – the integration of individual [...] lives into a human community that persists across time. I imply that there is some way to measure – in both poetic and non-poetic sense of “measure” – lives and duration that resists the cold

exchangeability of the numerical and makes the past and present rhyme both literally and conceptually.³⁴

But, *pace* Ezra Pound's translations of 'The Seafarer' and the work of Arnaut Daniel, or Peter Manson's translations of Stéphane Mallarmé, it can also be the site of the novel fusion of the ancient and the modern. *The Infant and the Pearl* records political ambition and acknowledged failure in the struggle of its sonic patterning.

Oliver chose to model his satire on Thatcher's Britain on *Pearl* because, as the poet's widow Alice Notley, informs us in a review of *Penniless Politics*, his 'theory has been that if a political satire were written in a form such as that of *The Pearl*, it would be dignified and permanent as well as satirical'.³⁵ By 'dignified and permanent' Notley means that the poem is, what she calls, 'distanced' in order to satirise the contemporary world. Oliver's apparent naivety about this 'dignified' distancing achieved through form perhaps reveals the idealist behind his otherwise thoroughly materialist politics and aesthetics. Nevertheless, as Oliver puts it himself in published version of 1995 lecture, 'Poetry's Subject': 'Only by somehow encompassing both tradition and novelty will [poetry] achieve its bedrock qualities: beauty, truthfulness, wisdom, prescience.'³⁶ Oliver's reasoning here reveals his intuition that the highly ornate form of the medieval poem evokes accessible rhetorical and material energy to be harnessed, enabling that the 'dignified and permanent' aspects of form a critique of the contemporary world from a partial distance. He knew that his poem needed to forge an artificial space and distance from which to critique contemporary political discourse and events. Given that one of the dominant formal features of *Pearl* and other poems in the accentual-syllabic tradition is alliteration, it may be that Oliver was also attaching a kind of transcendental value, free from historical specificity, to such practices. How far such rhetorical force and energy can be harnessed across centuries is, however, debatable, and would require the comparison of a range of historically distinct 'familiar verbal collocations and idioms', as Attridge has described them, to extract similar semantic and affective information across the ages.³⁷ In 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', Theodor Adorno is rightly

³⁴ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 41-2.

³⁵ Alice Notley, 'Douglas Oliver's New York poem' [Review of *Penniless Politics* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994)], *Chicago Review* (1999), 45:1, pp. 79-8.

³⁶ Douglas Oliver, 'Poetry's Subject', *P N Review* (Sept 1995) 105, 22:1, p. 57. Oliver delivered this piece as the Judith E. Wilson Annual Lecture on Poetry at the University of Cambridge in 1995.

³⁷ Derek Attridge, *Moving Words*, p. 32. In his chapter on 'Meaning in Movement', Attridge discusses a range of poetic commentaries that have focused on the ways in which, as he puts it of Milton's defense of rhymeless verse, 'the experience of movement produced by meaning [...] is propelled by syntactic and semantic connections' throughout a poem. As Attridge writes: 'Milton understood very well that words occurring in sentences form not

sceptical about the use of traditional form in this manner as there is a danger of it becoming what he describes as a 'game' in which a poet 'goes for broke' by substituting a 'poetic event for a language which is no longer present'.³⁸ However, he does acknowledge that an 'elevated style', like that of the German Romantic poet, Eduard Mörike, is an example of where, 'Language and the rudimentary plot [of the poem] both aid in skilfully equating the *utopia of what is close at hand* with that of the utmost distance'.³⁹ Adorno's argument is that Mörike was able to combine the two experiences of a 'classical elevated style' and objectivity with that of the lyricism of the 'romantic miniature' in a way that, as he puts it, 'balanced them against one another with incomparable tact'.⁴⁰ Mörike does not express what Adorno calls a 'subjectivity indebted to privilege', nor does he indulge in the 'technical illusion of universal cogency'; rather, he keeps in mind what 'could be genuinely attained in his time.'⁴¹ I am not suggesting that Oliver achieves Mörike's elusive balancing in his own poem, but he does draw attention to the grasping hands of privilege which, as Adorno puts it, 'grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded' and all the while hints at that which could be attained.⁴² Oliver's use of a medieval form, as Adorno says of Stefan George's song from *Seventh Ring*, 'retains only the patterns, the pure formal ideas and schemata' of tradition in order to have Rosine (Adorno again) 'speak with an intensity of expression once again in divesting themselves of all contingency'.⁴³ Unlike Stefans, such speaking is achieved, as Adorno writes, by 'making a show of rhetorical figures and rhythms' and of the 'language sullied by commerce' in order to reveal the contrasting clarity of Rosine's speech.⁴⁴

In *The Infant and the Pearl*, Oliver uses artificial form and sound structure to parody the speech patterns of contemporary political rhetoric. The original *Pearl* is also, of course, an example of a medieval dream-vision which were used as the vehicle for a range of often cryptic reflections on contemporary society and politics. As William M. Storm observes, '*Pearl* has been read as

just a chain of meanings but sequences of expectation and satisfaction' that a poet can control and modify so that 'expectations are met, intensified or disappointed' (p. 31). (See my conclusion for an alternative discussion of the political implications of 'anticipation'). Attridge describes these 'familiar verbal collocations and idioms' as 'phrasal movement' or 'phrasing'. In order to work out whether a poet taps into sedimented meaning and – by extension – cognitive patterns attached to, for example, alliterative clusters, we would need to conduct exhaustive research of reading and comprehension across time; this is probably as impossible a task as it is unenviable.

³⁸ Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature: Volume I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 44.

³⁹ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 48 – my emphasis.

⁴⁰ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 49.

⁴¹ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 45.

⁴² Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 45.

⁴³ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 52.

⁴⁴ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 52.

allegorical, parabolic, and elegiac', as 'an image of the medieval church or the medieval universe', as 'an exploration of theology and aristocratic modes of worship' and even as 'a poem on the nature of language use'.⁴⁵ As such, Oliver trades on this allegorical distancing as well as the relative unfamiliarity of such formal practices to a contemporary readership to offer a distancing medium. What Oliver offers is the cut and thrust of debased rhetoric from both sides of the political spectrum and out of this clash emerges a critical space offering both critique and glimpses of harmony. One way in which this is achieved is in his use of the dream vision's dialogic structure. In the medieval poem, *Pearl*, the narrating dreamer and the Maiden conduct a series of dialogues. The Maiden draws on biblical parables in order to persuade the dreamer of his earthly pride and sin. Oliver's Maiden figure, the elusive Rosine, is a comparable dispenser of wisdom; a 'mother of policy' (*IP*, 3), as she is described at the beginning of poem. While pearl-like wisdom interpenetrates throughout, Rosine imparts most of her insights in the debating chamber at the Houses of Parliament, where the dreamer sits for a while as a Labour M.P. Rosine's palliative and clarifying advice usually comes after the dreamer's struggles with the contorted rhetoric of contemporary politics. In sequences thirteen and fourteen of the twenty sections of the poem, for example, the dreamer engages the Tories on Thatcher's economic policies. Buoyed by his reading of 'Aaronovitch on the A.E.S.', he prepares for the 'raucous / attack and counter-attack' of the Commons, only to be faced by 'a sort of solemn, sourpuss / musing' from the other side. (*IP*, 22) Undeterred, he 'lambasted the class basis of this blatant / war on workers'. (*IP*, 23) His diatribe, however, is cut short by the appearance of Rosine from the 'unworldly kingdom' where she is to 'confront the Commons from the world of clarity'. The dreamer describes her voice:

Her speaking stole through our world with a spatio-
temporal delay: I definitely heard
her but what I clearly came to know
was the voiceless knowledge of some quick word
that grips my attention as I gradually go
off to sleep – voice and knowing not severed
like the temporal tricks of Bentley's video
yet knowing a wit-stroke behind the revered
word. And I ached to be whole-hearted
about it and always encountered the phantom
time-lag between the truths uttered
by this Saint walking in the unworldly kingdom

⁴⁵ William M. Storm, 'The Arbor and the Pearl: Encapsulating Meaning in "Spot"', *Glossator 9: Pearl* (2015), pp. 1-2. Available online at <<https://solutioperfecta.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/g9-fitt-1-storm.pdf>>. Accessed 11.10.2018.

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of my world. (*IP*, 24).

A little further on, Rosine censures a Conservative outburst with an ‘uncommon rhetoric’. She says:

“Virtue is vulgar; there’s no politic
pretention of phrase in my prescient domain
where the voice of the poor is the voice of the rich
...
The warm heart, when weak, is politically unsound. (*IP*, 25)

Rosine’s rhetorical style is contrasted with the politicians’. Her ‘voiceless knowledge’, ‘quick word’ and the apparent link between ‘voice and knowing’, are set in contrast to the ‘temporal tricks’ and ‘pretention of phrase’ of the politicians whose speak is ‘politically unsound’. In these sequences, heightened alliteration is also used to characterise or caricature debased sentiment, for example the descriptions of ‘Virtue is vulgar’, ‘politic / pretention of phrase’. Rosine criticises the politicians for the too rehearsed, empty and hackneyed nature of their speech. But the quality of Rosine’s voice also jars. There is a ‘spatio- / temporal delay’ to her voice (with the ‘delay’ illustrated and performed by the enjambment), she utters a ‘quick word’ which he can’t quite grip; there a ‘time-lag between truths’. Her voice taps into a vein of knowledge which the dreamer ‘definitely’ knows but which his wit can’t quite grasp. Rosine’s truths, like the words of the poem spilling over into another sequence (‘kingdom // of my world’), straddle domains.

Phono-political Pearls and Performed Politics

In ‘Poetry’s Subject’, Oliver describes his reading of John Dryden’s characterisation of Lord Shaftesbury in his poem ‘Absalom and Achitophel’. Performing the poem, Oliver ‘intensely realised’, he writes, that a lot of Dryden’s scorn for the ‘Sagacious, bold, and turbulent [...] wit’ (Dryden, ‘A&A’ line 153) of Shaftesbury’s political speeches, could have been directed against himself.⁴⁶ ‘For,’ he writes, – to my shame or credit – I have something of the Shaftesburyan restlessness with my country’s present politics.⁴⁷ Oliver’s intense connection with Dryden’s caricature of Shaftesbury highlight his main preoccupations: how a visceral reaction to present politics (the *experience* of inequity, to allude to my discussion earlier) can transmute into a corrosive wit, which is then transferred to rhythmical energies of poetry and which are, in turn,

⁴⁶ John Dryden, ‘Absalom and Achitophel’ in *The Poems of John Dryden*, Volume 1, ed. Paul Hammond (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), p. 467.

⁴⁷ Oliver, ‘Poetry’s Subject’, p. 57.

performed by a reader. In other words, Oliver locates in poetic rhythm a middle register for a poet's critique, which is then affectively registered in a performance by a reader. Oliver's restlessness to critique present politics motivates most of his poetry, but he refuses the allure of the unearned consolations of art and avoids giving his readers a glib lesson in utopian politics. Rather, he represents in style and form a striving towards cognitive, experiential and affective inter-subjective exchanges between people. Poetry can, in some senses at least, perform a possibility of unity.

In *The Infant and the Pearl*, Oliver combines his twin interests of politics and prosody to expose that which the narrator writes of as the 'false pearl[s]' of political rhetoric and what he calls the 'witchcraft of domination' of such language.⁴⁸ In an earlier autobiographical poem and prose sequence, *An Island That is All the World* (1990), Oliver writes that, as a sixteen year old, he 'saw poetry clear in its act of uniting thought and feeling in immediacy'.⁴⁹ In one recollection, Oliver claims that he realised from an early age that poetry allowed him to 'glimpse a pre-linguistic mindset.' He adds:

Art gives us confidence that poetic melody shapes emotions and thinking into the one rhythm, a repeatable vivid present; and it feels as if in that alone lie true knowing, true freedom, and true beginning of memory. Imagined poet and imagined reader meet there, in the poem, without the witchcraft of domination.⁵⁰

The Infant and the Pearl is a document of one dreamer's journey towards experiencing this 'true knowing, a true feeling'. As the dreamer's guide, Rosine, advises from a flickering television screen at the end of the poem:

'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 or relinquish
the winning of wealth to the selfish. Anyone

⁴⁸ Oliver, 'The Infant and the Pearl', in *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Paladin, 1990), v. VIII, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Douglas Oliver, 'An Island that is all the World', in *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Paladin, 1990), p. 75.

⁵⁰ Oliver, 'An Island that is all the World', p. 75.

who works for the poor is the pawn of the rich.
But don't – lying down in your old dressing gown –

lie about serving *this*.⁵¹

'Don't languish in rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric', or, she adds, 'relinquish the winning of wealth to the selfish.' Yet Rosine, the dreamer and a reader know that this languishing in political language is exactly what will continue to happen. One definition of 'languish' in the OED is 'to live in an oppressive or dispiriting place, situation, condition'. Rosine counsels the dreamer who is 'lying down' in his 'old dressing gown' not to *lie* about his role in the complicity with the dispiriting conditions of capitalism. But 'lie about' he will and is, waking from his dream into the grey day. In revealing the prosodic and formal features of domination (or as we might put it, the rhythms and rhetoric of political discourse), and in eliciting a reader's performance in activating them, Oliver creates a poem through which to glimpse the possibility of a 'vivid present' and a 'true freedom' even if we must, as he writes at the end of the poem, always awake, languishing in our 'daily disgrace'.

Rosine gives the dreamer a glimpse of something transcending the 'temporal tricks' of rhetoric, but it is an instant, as he says, 'not severed' up like time, somehow timeless. Passages like these, I would suggest, directly evoke Oliver's theoretical work. *The Infant and the Pearl* was first issued around the time Oliver published articles that would eventually comprise chapters of *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*. In this book, Oliver sought to refine an understanding of the way in which a reader's verbal or mental performance of the contours, stresses and rhythms of a poem carry semantic, intellectual and emotional information. One of the most compelling aspects of Oliver's study is the way that he defines the operation of stress in poetry and the difficulty of stating exactly what happens when we experience it. Oliver tries to answer such questions as how we decide where to put stress in a rhythmic sequence and what factors come into play when we do so. Stress, as Oliver early defines it, is

apparently an instant when we unify into a single conception some of our sense of the form of a poetic line's sound as it has been developing over a small period of time. It necessarily involves unifying with our perception of the sound some conception of the meaning and

⁵¹ Oliver, 'The Infant and the Pearl', p. 35 – emphasis in the original.

emotional significance of the stress-bearing syllable in relation to the overall meaning and emotional significance of the poem.⁵²

We understand where to place stress by combining our perceptual experience of the sound of the lines with an intellectual grasp of both the ‘meaning and emotional significance’ of syllables, but also of our developing sense of their relation to the overall significance of the poem. A constant and difficult preoccupation for Oliver was how a reader could possibly stand outside the duration of stress in order to comprehend its function at a particular moment. The only way to solve this dilemma is to accept that an instant of recognition – if there is one – will be, as he puts it, apparent and notional. As Oliver explains elsewhere: ‘Our sense of poetic stress arises from our conscious belief that we have, just recently, in a notional instant of time, unified some of our sense of a poem’s developing sounds’.⁵³ Understanding stress position is to comprehend the poem’s unity by intuitive expectation and anticipation. This apperception of a still instant in time is ambiguous. But, as Oliver writes,

If stress is an example of artistic form and if we could have an unambiguously “eternal” awareness of that form in an instant, along with all the past and future movements of sound that created it, then the awareness would lack the ambiguity of real spatio-temporal dynamic. Although the movement of sounds would be within the conception, the movement would be trapped within the instant. The passive stillness of such a formal conception would stand right outside the poetry.⁵⁴

In *The infant and the Pearl*, the dreamer experiences the same ‘spatio-temporal’ ambiguity described here. Rosine’s performance and voicing patterns gives a glimpse of this ‘passive stillness’ producing a ‘phantom time-lag’ and also of what Oliver calls elsewhere an ‘external standard of truth’,⁵⁵ an ‘ineffable’ ‘voiceless knowledge’; an intimation of what Oliver describes as ‘pure ideality’. And these glimpses at ideality hinted at in theory and gleaning through in *The Infant and*

⁵² Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 5 – my emphasis.

⁵³ Douglas Oliver, ‘Even poets can have belief about poetic “stress”’, *Grosseteste Review* (1979), vol. 12, p. 29. The phrase ‘some of our sense’ here grants credence to my tentative descriptions of the neo- or sub- cognition involved in the exchange between the text and a reader.

⁵⁴ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, pp. 104-5.

⁵⁵ Douglas Oliver, letter to his step-son, Anselm Berrigan dated Tuesday, July 2 1996 and published in Anselm Berrigan, ‘Poetry and Narrative in Performance, part I’ at the *Poetry Foundation* website <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/10/poetry-and-narrative-in-performance-part-i>. Accessed, 8.2.2018, up.

the Pearl are also political; a hint of the author's desire to give shape and substance to the 'world of clarity' (*IP*, 23) from which Rosine briefly speaks.

In his critical work, Oliver was particularly interested in the reader's role in the performance of these politicised instants and in the concomitant potential of achieving connectivity. An instant of this comes during another of Rosine's speeches to the Commons. At this stage, the dreamer is attacking the 'Socialist Spirit' (*IP*, 26) of Rosine's argument and his words 'whip age on' (*IP*, 26) Rosine, tearing into her clothes, dulling her spirit and making the 'Grail' of light which she offers dim amidst the looming grey of the Commons. (*IP*, 27) This harm towards Rosine precipitates the dreamer's crisis of conscience, and it sends her further away across the symbolic stream, which divides her world of redemption from his own. The narrator describes the scene:

Shallow water wet my feet
while the same water wet hers which wore
the wavelets like colourless footwear – fit
galoshes for such sandals. The more
I gazed the quicker time's oar beat
down a river running without a roar.
She let me look at her; the glassy light
that shone across from that crystal shore
cast a greying glamour on to the floor
where the Commoners crowded together, our rows
frozen into silence, our stillness the sculptor,
as she stopped on the shore, her sandals in the shallows.

"These shallows," she said, "show us the way
to judge the extreme; it's only one edge
or the other of the fast-flowing play
of the river purling between us in a passage
so swiftly exact that nothing can stay
its course; it careens by the clear verge
of my world like a wasting away
of potential perfection. The ideal cannot purge
your chamber of Thatcherism: no thaumaturge
can cure a thaumaturge. Follow those
who keep the centre current of courage."
She spoke sadly, her sandals in the shallows. (*IP*, 27)

In these rich and remarkable passages, Oliver creates a vivid 'sonic hierarchy' where every part of the sound structure, as he writes elsewhere, 'is a smaller or larger example of our perceiving an artistic form both as a succession of moments and as part of a developing whole'.⁵⁶ Sound and

⁵⁶ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. xii.

semantic patterns seems to coalesce here to sum or glimpse something greater, a sort of unified affect. To mention just a few of the startling effects: the way in which the alliterating ‘w’ of the opening lines imitates the rhythmic movement of the stream; the emphatic double stress of the enjambment of the ‘beat / down’ of ‘time’s oar’ from the fifth to the sixth line in the second stanza; the way in which, after the word ‘extreme’ in the second line of second stanza, we strongly expect, yearn even, for the word ‘stream’ after the phrase ‘fast-flowing’, but instead get ‘play’ (here, there is a form of phenomenological material persuasion operating on us); and the conflict between the end-rhymes and a reader’s expectation of the final lines of the second stanza in which the ‘urge’ sound, associated with the false ‘thaumaturge’ of Thatcherism, is aborted by the modifying ‘-idge’ of ‘courage’ which ends Rosine’s speech. A pleasing formal symmetry is achieved by the concatenation or the chain-rhyme of the word ‘shallows’, which begins and ends, as well as links, the two stanzas. The repetition of the word reinforces the sadness of the lines, where the image and sound of Rosine’s sandals being invested with a palpable poignancy. Form interpenetrates with content where the ‘potential perfection’ of Rosine’s vision is rapidly ‘wasting away’ in the ‘purling river’. Nevertheless, despite such pleasing parsing, we – or I – realise that we are in danger of being charmed away into dull delirium by the poem’s rhetoric as the river’s movement is, after all, describing the ‘wasting away / of potential perfection’; we, like the dreamer, cannot hold the instant, but we have glimpsed it.

Rosine’s homily in the second stanza amounts to what could tentatively be called ‘phono-politics’ or – to hedge another phrase – ‘politicised sonics’. The edges of the stream Rosine describes are inhabited by factional and changeable politics subject to the ‘fast-flowing play’ of the river. The dreamer should, instead, Rosine counsels, ‘Follow those / who keep the centre current of courage’. The ideal is located in the still middle of the river. The image of this central current, I would suggest, is the fulfilment of what Oliver describes in a letter to his step-son, Anselm Berrigan, as the possibility of a ‘perfect tune which arises within the performance [of a poem] like an ideal form’.⁵⁷ ‘I accept that forms are never perfect,’ he elucidates later,

but someone has to explain why an audience when it sings along knows exactly at what moment to clap and knows when it gets the beat slightly off. It is not a moment of exact mathematical interval between the beats, but a much more mysterious interval which depends on formal perception.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Berrigan, ‘Poetry and Narrative in Performance, part I’, up.

⁵⁸ Douglas Oliver, letter to his step-son, Anselm Berrigan dated Tuesday, July 2 1996 and published in Anselm Berrigan, ‘Poetry and Narrative in Performance, part II’ at the *Poetry Foundation* website

Oliver's phonic idealism – this mysterious understanding of a poetic form and of a potential norm of stress distribution perceived many people – is implied in Rosine's presentation of an ideal state of unity between mankind, a socialism of spirit, or what Adorno refers to in 'On lyric Poetry and Society' as a 'collective undercurrent' in which both Goethe and Baudelaire's poetry share.⁵⁹ Oliver's intensive study of speech contours using a spectrometer gave him visual evidence for his intuition of a consensus reading of a poetic line. And it was in this consensus of performance that Oliver located the conditions and possibilities for political unity and harmony; a kind of harmonious accord located in the deep connectivity of phonic patterns.

As Riley writes of Oliver's work on poetic stress in performance, to Oliver, '[t]he stress carries an emotion, as the poem is performed. And like song, the voicing patterns in poetry point to democratic potential.'⁶⁰ Not only that, but the physical images of spectrometer readings (figures 1-3) – which we might, perhaps call, after-figures of performed concord – were metaphoricalised by Oliver to imply metaphysical accord.

Figures 1-3: Spectrometer readings of multiple voice performances of lines of verse.⁶¹

In these spectrometer readings Oliver saw the frequently evoked image of the river dividing the earthly from the paradisiacal found in medieval dream visions like *The Pearl*. Such scientifically gathered imagery illustrates a wave-form consonance at the centre of which lies a potential

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/10/poetry-and-narrative-in-performance-part-ii>. Accessed, 8.2.2018, up.

⁵⁹ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 46.

⁶⁰ Riley, 'Doug's Prose', p. 20.

⁶¹ From *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, pp.75 & 77. Describing this readings, Oliver writes: 'The machine traces lines of light across a screen, each line indicating a frequency filtered out from the overall sound waves of the voice as the performer reads. There are 12 filters per octave and 96 in all, spaced at intervals of a keyboard semitone. The fundamental frequency contour [...] can generally be seen as the path followed by the cluster or band of frequencies (formant) at the bottom of the screen.'

perfection of unified voicing (imagine lots of the same figures on top of one another), but it also illustrates a possible political ideal: voices glimpsing a phonic ideal of harmony. In life, as in the poem, however, these moments in the ‘centre current’ are infrequent, and too rapidly give way to dissonance and dis-content.

Conclusion

When reading Rosine’s speech a reader experiences glimpses of these idealised moments along with the dreamer; they are along for the phonic-ride. As Oliver outlined in *An Island That is All the World*, a poem is a place where the ‘Imagined poet and imagined reader meet’.⁶² In the final chapter of *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, Oliver sketches his ideas for how writers distance and transform real emotion into conceptual material and argues that a reader’s performance provides ‘resolution and control of emotional and conceptual *space-time* in poetry’. ‘The concord,’ continues Oliver, ‘brings delight at truthfulness; and the delight occurs at minor moments of formal perception as well as major.’⁶³ As Riley writes in her contribution to *A Meeting for Douglas Oliver*, to him:

Good poetry was utopian only in the exact sense that it resolved this tension in the instant into an achieved harmony. Poetry was an anticipation of a concord. The performed poem becomes an enactment of this concord; it prefigures in one realm what might ideally happen in another. He asserts ‘It is a cliché to say that poetry and narrative render perfect what is unsatisfactory in our lives, whether by “happy” or otherwise satisfactory endings. But it is through the accord of conception and emotion that a more profound perfection and intersubjectivity are attained, a task that our small-scale investigations of stress, syllable, voicing pattern and melody have shown being performed.’⁶⁴

The putative harmonic unity of poetic form prefigures a political unity, providing glimpses of Oliver’s ‘poetic socialism’ (to use Patrick Wright’s phrase).⁶⁵ But, these are just glimpses; Oliver will not provide a happy ending. As Lerner writes of all good poetry whose aspirations of transcendence and unity are always held-back by in-build obsolescence and failure, reading *The Infant and the Pearl* is to experience a glimpse of the ideal as well as its loss. So, in the one hundred

⁶² Oliver, ‘An Island that is all the World’, p. 75.

⁶³ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 169.

⁶⁴ Riley, ‘Doug’s Prose’, pp. 20-1. Riley quotes from Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 172.

⁶⁵ Patrick Wright, ‘A Journey Through Ruins’, review of Oliver *The Infant and the Pearl* (London: Ferry Press, 1985), in the *London Review of Books*, 18 Sept., 1986, p. 10.

and *first* stanza which concludes the poem and whose structural anomaly as the only six-stanza sequence is devastatingly appropriate, the dreamer has described his ultimate experience of unification and concord:

The pearl that lay in the baby's palm
centred all thought and in it my face
enlarged, smiling; I saw the smooth arm
of Rosine around my neck. Then rays
of heartening light, rays of no-harm
shot from my eyes to my eyes. But the space
between us was widening; in alarm
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. (*IP*, 36)

As Adorno observes of Goethe's 'Wanderers Nachtlied', 'peace cannot be achieved without the dream of disintegration'.⁶⁶ The experience of happiness and clarity at the start of this stanza is deflated by the bathetic alliteration and rhymes, which usher the dreamer and reader back into the shabby dressing-gown of reality. If we experience the pathos and sadness of the 'sandals' of Rosine in the 'shallows' of rapidly retreating idealism, we also, here, experience the bathos of the rhymes of 'down' and 'gown'. The poem's form and sound patterns have made us glimpse the redemptive power of concord and unity, the possibility of what Adorno describes in Mörike's poem, 'Auf einer Wanderung' as 'the utopia of what is close at hand'.⁶⁷ Oliver's spectrometer analysis of readers' performances of sonic patterning of poetic lines in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* led him to conclude that could be such a thing an 'ineffable "neutral" tune' in lines to which everyone is attuned.⁶⁸ 'The truth is,' he writes, and 'as the evidence makes plain, that we can glimpse such neutral tunes, unattainable in the absolute though they might be.'⁶⁹ And for Oliver, it was in this performed space – glimpsed, if not fully attained – that a truth of community and commonality is possible. As he puts it of an author and reader sharing the instant of performed rhythm: 'in the repeatability of a shared mental experience lies the hope that we can enrich our perception and human sympathy.'⁷⁰ But to end there would be a retreat from the real on Oliver's part, and that is something he won't abide; the real is, alas, for too

⁶⁶ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 46.

⁶⁷ Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', p. 48.

⁶⁸ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. x.

⁶⁹ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. xi.

⁷⁰ Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. xiii.

compromised for the ideals of the dream to gain traction. In *The Infant and the Pearl*, the 'space between us' and these ideals is 'widening' and this distended stanza sends us back, bereft and disquieted to languish still in the recognition that it was all just a dream.