

Douglas Oliver and Political Poetry

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*Ah! he is gone, and yet will not depart! –
Is with me still, yet I from him exiled!
For still there lives within my secret heart
The magic image of the magic Child*
– S.T.C.

Art is redemptive in the act by which the spirit in it throws itself away.
– T.W.A.

The work of the British poet and novelist Douglas Oliver (1937-2000) 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 collected poems *Kind* (1987) "the finest poetry of the year."¹ 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.² 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."³ 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 milieu in the late 1960s, many 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, where Oliver studied and taught. Oliver remained a loyal friend to

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

2 Patrick Wright, 'A Journey through Ruins,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 16 (September 18th 1986), p.10; Howard Brenton, 'Poetic passport to a new era,' *The Guardian*, Tuesday, April 7th 1992, p.38. See also Patrick Wright, 'Poet of the lower depths,' *The Guardian*, October 24th 1991, p.23.

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

these communities and a committed supporter of their work his entire life.

The poet and publisher Andrew Crozier noted the recognition afforded Oliver by the mainstream press in his obituary of 6th 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.⁴

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 about "[setting] the literary agenda" sound today 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; 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 brickbat with which to accuse the "Cambridge School" poets of hypocrisy. One characteristic formulation of this position can be found in Robert Archambeau's essay 'Public Faces in Private Places: Messianic Privacy in Cambridge Poetry,' first published in 2009 by the *Cambridge Literary Review*.⁵ 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."⁶ The charge of hypocrisy is made when Archambeau suggests that "Cambridge" poetry "is often justified and

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- 4 Andrew Crozier, 'Douglas Oliver: A poet articulating ethical values in a world of injustice and joy,' *The Guardian*, Saturday, May 6th 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 'Public Faces,' p.31 (Merriman and Grafe ed.).

explained as a poetry with a specific and far-reaching political goal and effect," means and ends that he identifies as a resistance to communication and instrumentality, and a "messianic role" in "challenging the public sphere."⁷ These positions, argues Archambeau, are at odds with the limited audience for small press publications, because such a circulation "defies the idea of a poetry of public, political significance."⁸ Archambeau is at times careful to reckon only with those who champion the poetry of J.H. Prynne 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."⁹

This essay is about "political ambitions" and poetry. Archambeau's criticism suggests that without a broad public circulation and national readership, it is a contradiction in terms to describe any poetry as having a "political significance." But would it not be fruitful to think about the "political ambitions" that poems harbour, and the "political significance" that they construe, as a way of teasing out the aesthetic ramifications of precisely what "political poetry" is, has been, or could be? Without claiming anything like a summary, or even to catalogue a set of tendencies among the hugely various strands of contemporary poetry that might be deemed "political," I want to think about a single poet's singular work as a means of exploring the dimensions of that term as it pertains to contemporary poetic practice. Douglas Oliver never achieved, and likely never will achieve, the kind of readership that would legitimate his practice in the critical sights of essays like Archambeau's. What he did achieve was, I think, far more compelling. His oeuvre is broad but not vast. The differences in style, form and tone between Oliver's first collection of poetry *Oppo Hectic* (1969) and his only novel *The Harmless Building* (1973), and the later works *The Infant and the Pearl* (1985) and *Penniless Politics* (1991), are certainly substantial. Yet in many respects the themes, personae and desires in Oliver's early work remain rooted to the spot for the duration of his writing life. Most prominent among these are: firstly, the fictional representation in prose and poetry of Oliver's son Tom, who was diagnosed with Down's syndrome and who died in a cot accident as an infant, as a figure of beatific, redemptive ignorance and innocence; and secondly, moments of untrammelled intersubjective union, defined (or left only intimated) in various ways across Oliver's oeuvre, but usually connoting an ideal form of communicative and emotional coincidence. These moments drive both Oliver's theory and his practice as a poet. In his theoretical prose Oliver argues that poetic language – the language in poems – is the language capable of creating the potential for such moments to occur between poet-author and reader. In his mature poetry, moments of intersubjective unity are dramatized in the course of long narrative arcs which they punctuate at key points, and which express an extraordinary moral imperative to realise an ideal social relation more magical than material. 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.

As I suggested above, I am interested in the "political ambitions" that Oliver harboured *in*, rather than *for*, his poetry, and the aim of this essay is to begin to make sense

7 *Ibid.*, p.36.

8 *Ibid.*, pp.31-32.

9 *Ibid.*, p.41.

of these ambitions through a reading of Oliver's poem *The Infant and the Pearl*. By the distinction *in* Oliver's poems as opposed to *for* them, I mean to differentiate the ways in which Oliver construed the particular efficacious nature of poetic language from the effects, of any kind, that such language can be deemed either to have, or to fail to have, in the world. My focus here is on the ways in which Oliver's poetry both prefigures and exceeds the question of literary efficacy in Archambeau's or any other sense – whether quantitatively in terms of numbers of readers, or qualitatively in terms of its transformational potential, on any sliding scale of public or private significance. Between 1972 and 1989 Oliver worked on a phenomenological theory of poetical language that asserted the possibility of harmonious intersubjective encounter between poet-author and reader, activated by the stresses in verse lines. This theory began its life in a series of essays Oliver wrote as a mature student at the University of Essex, 1972-1975, and was developed into the major thesis of Oliver's only theoretical monograph, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (1989).¹⁰ Here is Oliver describing the experience of reading verse:

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.¹¹

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," or "special intersubjectivity [...] through a shared experience" 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.¹²

¹⁰ For a full account of the origin of this theory, much of which Oliver developed at Essex long before *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* was published, see the first chapter of my 'The Poetry and Poetics of Douglas Oliver, 1973-1991,' unpublished PhD thesis (University of Sussex, 2015).

¹¹ Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989) p.172.

¹² Douglas Oliver, *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm: selected poetry and prose* (London: Paladin, 1990), p.107.

What are the ramifications of such a complex and daring claim? The equivalence of “our lives’ form” with a “true politics,” a phrase that itself seems intrinsically unstable and counterintuitive, let alone the idea that “unity of form” is the “precious origin” of either, is self-evidently not a claim that can be evaluated according to any schema of sociological confirmation. The quotation is taken from a series of 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. But neither is it a claim the allegorical, metaphorical or otherwise symbolic nature of which can prevent its purchase on social life from exercising a kind of wild improbability, which is to say, it is impossible not to conclude from the statement above, wildly and improbably, that the reconciliation of form, life and politics represents the serious object of a self-avowed poetical labour in the late twentieth century. It is precisely this seriously fantastical nature of Oliver’s poetics – what I want to call their pragmatic utopianism – in which their value for current thinking about political poetry resides: as a rejoinder to the taxonomical sobriety of establishing whether, at what point, and exactly how much transformational potential *per reader* an artwork might plausibly lay claim to; but also as a form of political ambition the structure of which is perpetually in excess of the rational or realistic object of political discourse. Douglas Oliver’s major poems are fundamentally about, and labour to create the conditions for, an ideal social relation that, in practice, only poetry can produce and make available to us. They demand to be read as the blueprints for a politics made possible by the formal properties of poetic language. Herein lies their greatest problematic and their greatest accomplishment.

The Infant and the Pearl was begun in Brightlingsea, Essex, in 1979, completed in Paris in 1985, and first published in London in the same year, as a stapled chapbook from Ferry Press and Silver Hounds. It 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. Like *Pearl*, Oliver’s poem is composed of one hundred and one twelve-line, alliterative and densely rhymed stanzas in nineteen sections of five stanzas each, and one section of six stanzas. Unlike *Pearl*, the so-called ‘extra’ stanza in Oliver’s poem appears in the twentieth, rather than in the fifteenth, section of the poem. 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.”¹³ He later described the number of stanzas in *The Infant and the Pearl* in the following terms: “100 [stanzas] for perfection, 1 for unity.”¹⁴ 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”].¹⁵ It is implied in the poem, though not, as some scholars assert,

13 Douglas Oliver, *The Infant and the Pearl* (London: Ferry Press for Silver Hounds, 1985), unpaginated.

14 Douglas Oliver, ‘Douglas Oliver,’ Joyce Nakamura, ed., *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Vol. 27 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1997), pp.242-261 (254).

15 E.V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p.3. 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 throughout 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).

definitively established, that this “perle” is the dreamer’s infant daughter who died before reaching her second birthday. The coincidence of the death of Oliver’s own infant son Tom with this (contested) plot point of *Pearl’s* was a major factor in Oliver’s initial attraction to the poem. Whilst asleep, the narrator of *Pearl* experiences a vision of an earthly paradise bedecked with precious stones and surrounded by “crystal klyffeꝝ” [“crystal cliffs”].¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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 perleꝝ” [“precious pearls”].¹⁹

A survey of the plot of Oliver’s poem, and close attention to its reliance on the formal and narrative devices of the original *Pearl*, will provide an introduction to its political thinking. It begins:

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.²⁰

Oliver’s poem, like *Pearl*, begins with a loss. This loss is twofold: that of the possibility of a Labour 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.” After Rosine’s disappearance in the first stanza, Oliver’s narrator-dreamer is taken on a tour of Conservative Britain in which *Pearl’s* descriptions of the earthly paradise recur ironically, as the landscape of “Chance

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p.9

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

20 Douglas Oliver, *Selected Poems* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1996), p.40. I quote here and throughout from the last published edition of *The Infant and the Pearl*.

ruling commerce" in London's financial district, 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."²¹ 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 notes to the *Selected Poems* (1996) point out, to the "fancy restaurants much used by politicians."²² He is "set up to spout / for party and people, proud that Parliament / had seduced me," and is presented as the epitome of a competent but self-deceptive careerist and opportunist.²³ 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* from the "Paradyse" ["paradise"] on the far bank in *Pearl*, and from where the Pearl-Maiden stands and delivers her homilies to the dreamer.²⁴

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 Sam Aaronovitch's book *The Road from Thatcherism* (1981), interpolating Aaronovitch's critique of inflation under Thatcher, and he ventriloquizes 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."²⁵ 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' (l.859) ['thoroughly have knowing,' i.e. 'completely understand']. In consequence, the Dreamer [...] becomes a comic figure, struggling in vain to dominate a world which is not his and which he does not understand.²⁶

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,

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.²⁷

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.42; *Pearl*, p.3.

²² *Selected Poems*, p.56.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Pearl*, pp.5-6; *The Gawain Poet, Complete Works*, pp.128-129.

²⁵ *Selected Poems*, p.60, and see Sam Aaronovitch, *The Road from Thatcherism: The Alternative Economic Strategy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981).

²⁶ A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.106.

²⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, ed. Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp.13-14.

Oliver's dreamer's stupidity is in supposing what he knows to be the best way to tackle Tory policy: "I'd / read Aaronovitch 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."²⁸ The dreamer's eagerness to announce what he has read marks him out, "absurdly, as a "scholar." And the counterintuitive simile in the lines confirms rather than explains the speaker's ultimate confusion: he starts "magnificently, like a sinner," and in doing so he confirms both his bullish attitude and his need of guidance by *his* Pearl-Maiden, Rosine, who duly reappears to chastise and instruct. Aaronovitch's language (and the language of Marxism more generally) is invoked in the poem as a specimen of inadequate critique, devoid of compassion, 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 deliberately fastidious, bombastic and 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 but the expectation
 of price rises to come, which pushed
 up purchasing demand [...]²⁹

The sound the speech makes thus condemns its sense to absurdity even before Rosine begins to admonish the dreamer for his attachment to what she deplores as the "whole hollow / conformity of creeds," an absurdity of which the dreamer is as yet blissfully unaware.³⁰ 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).³¹

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."³² She appears in lines which announce their construction of symbolic significance in a manner reminiscent of

28 *Selected Poems*, p.59.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, p.71.

31 *Selected Poems*, 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." David Aers, 'The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*,' *Speculum*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jan., 1993), pp.54-73 (60).

32 *Selected Poems*, p.61.

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.³³

Rosine is "Socialism," and she is a "wise woman"; she also "denote[s] Mercy." Sections XIV-XV and XIX-XX of *The Infant and the Pearl* are stanzas of chiding admonition, 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.³⁴

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

33 *Ibid.*, p.61.

34 *Ibid.*, p.62.

mists the eyes and the majority doubt
no longer that the pearl is false.³⁵

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." When Oliver's dreamer attempts to argue with Rosine in the House of Commons, in a passage that continues in the vein of bumbling ventriloquism that characterises the earlier paraphrase of Aaronovitch, 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.)³⁶

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*. In the opening passages of the *Consolatio*, 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."³⁷ Philosophy's clothing "was originally a seamless robe [...] which was later torn by hostile sects."³⁸ Party-political affiliation is described 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 the Left's 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 the poem's allusion to Boethius claims will damage and destroy the seamless unity which Rosine, invoking the spirit of Lady Philosophy, represents.

The last sections of the poem follow Rosine, now joined by the ghost of Oliver's dead father (he of the "Conservative Christian courage") and the shining Christ-like figure of Tom Oliver – the author's own Down's syndrome infant son – as they upbraid the dreamer for believing that political struggle against Thatcherism is possible without accepting the virtue of "ignorance." 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":

[...] '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

35 *Ibid.*, pp.62-63.

36 *Ibid.*, p.64.

37 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.4.

38 *Ibid.*, p.116.

in rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric [...] ³⁹

And this instruction is swiftly followed by the dreamer's revelation in the poem's ninety-ninth stanza:

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.) ⁴⁰

The argument of the poem up to this point may be summarised in the following terms: political solutions to Britain's contemporary crisis under Thatcher, whether from the left or right – but especially from the left – are incapable of truly solving the national problem. They are incapable of solving it because they do not recognise that political solutions themselves are epiphenomenal to the more fundamental question of the "union between / people." The intelligent recognition of the virtue of "ignorance" as the universal common ground from which such a "union" may become established is that which the figure of Tom Oliver teaches. 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. The reference to Tom's condition by the racist and, until fairly recently, common epithet "mongoloid," as well as being simply offensive, attempts in the stanza to propose the nominally contemptible as that which must be loved, and which in turn loves, unconditionally. Tom's "ignorance" is therefore 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 [...] ⁴¹

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

39 *Ibid.*, p.72.

40 *Ibid.*, p.73.

41 *Ibid.*, p.73.

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. It can render the “Other [...] perfect” in a “paradise / of our self-love.” In the poem, Tom’s 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.”⁴²

The Infant and the Pearl contains, in the voice of Rosine, explicit criticism of both Conservative 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 political economy 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.” What Oliver’s dreamer means by “Socialism” in *The Infant and the Pearl*’s ninety-ninth stanza is clearly something distinct from any rational democratic or revolutionary critique of political ideology. In *The Infant and the Pearl*, and in Oliver’s other major political poems *The Diagram Poems* (1979) and *Penniless Politics* (1991), political context is subordinated at crucial moments to the truth of the inadequacy of its generic type, human politics, as a solution to the problem of human violence, class struggle, 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.”⁴³ 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 clearest expression is “the union between / people.”

In Oliver’s early unpublished 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 language makes possible – it is a “special intersubjectivity,” forged in the “shared experience of space and time” that the reading of poetry makes possible. In *The Infant and the Pearl*’s ninety-ninth stanza, a “sea” of “memory” floods “my mind” with clarity, making the dreamer freshly aware of the hitherto untapped reserves of what he already knows. The recognition of this “memory,” which had always been there, laying “at low tide,” re-asserts that which Oliver’s 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

42 *Ibid.*, p.49

43 Douglas Oliver, *Penniless Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne; Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p.55.

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 common humanity can be, and is, made manifest. In the final, climactic stanzas of Oliver’s poem, Rosine and Tom both promote “ignorance” in the name 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 “unity” 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 yet, as a “nation,” submit to the demand that we recognize unity in our common “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 a phenomenological abyss between subjects. It is the prospect of this figure’s abolition that 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.

It might conceivably be argued that Oliver contradicts Rosine’s admonition that there is no “true idea / of political system” five years later, by naming, as we have already seen, “the precious origin of our lives’ form” a “true politics.” But a “true politics” 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. Oliver’s dreamer 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. 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,” and yet “unconsciously known,” that is, it retains the intrinsic value of what scholars of *Pearl* concerned to tease out the more mystically inflected meanings of the poem call the “ineffable.” 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.⁴⁴

44 *Selected Poems*, p.73.

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.⁴⁵

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.”⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

The fact of the dreamer’s “inexpressibility” in *Pearl* is that which proves, for Watts, the existential certainty 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.”⁴⁸ 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.”

Yet despite *The Infant and the Pearl*’s apathy, or even antipathy, towards the trade unions’ battle with Thatcherite economic policy, the very mystical 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

45 Ann Chalmers Watts, ‘*Pearl*, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss,’ *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp.26-40 (29).

46 *Ibid.*, p.30.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*, p.33, p.29.

England, a not dissimilar conception of the universality and inalienability of natural rights plays a critical role. E.P. Thompson's demonstration of the complex social and religious elements of radical politics in England in the 1790s 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. Thompson 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.⁴⁹

The revolutionary implications of the late eighteenth-century conception of universal brotherhood are exemplified 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."⁵⁰ 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 too literal an encounter with Apollyon and back to the pilgrimage of the spirit."⁵¹ 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."⁵² 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*, 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

49 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp.127-130.

50 *Ibid.*, p.130.

51 *Ibid.*, p.129.

52 William Blake, *Complete Writings with variant readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.652.

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.⁵³

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 epe to þe god Krystyin" ["Good Christians can with ease incline"], since "Paradyse" awaits those who recognise that salvation in "Krysteȝ dere blessing and myn, / Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn / Þe preste vus scheweȝ vch a daye" ["Christ's dear blessing bestowing mine, / As in the form of bread and wine / Is shown us daily in sacrament"].⁵⁴ 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 very distance between subjects that "union" must overcome, 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.⁵⁵

Both *Pearl* and *The Infant and the Pearl* 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. The presentation of Rosine in *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" in the poem 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 poet-author and reader on a metrical, rhythmical and syllabic level – the poem's "true reality," in Auerbach's terms, "is present at all times." 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."⁵⁶ *The Infant and the Pearl* is a redemptive poem,

53 Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Life* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p.72.

54 *Pearl*, pp.43-44; The Gawain Poet, *Complete Works*, p.160.

55 *Selected Poems*, p.73.

56 'The Self Mourning,' p.66.

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.⁵⁷ 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."⁵⁸ Utopian, mystical or otherwise otherworldly political solutions are deployed in Oliver's verse with an arduousness 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, and 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 a "true 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.

There are of course a great many problems with the political ambitions in Oliver's poetry as I have just now sketched them. What is so "special" about the "intersubjectivity" activated by poetic language, and why should it provide the model of utopian identity urged in the very prosodic grain of Oliver's own poems? The ethical dimension that inheres in such an encounter as is named by "special intersubjectivity" is effectively assumed, and not rigorously worked out or demanded in Oliver's work; it is the apparently necessary correlate to a theory of communicative authenticity whose ideally harmonious configuration is transferred by metaphorical economy to the status of a behavioural code. Why, exactly, the harmony of self and soul in some specifically dyadic and reciprocal "union" should be regarded as intrinsically virtuous, or why it should entail the recognition of a virtuous sort of political authenticity, or beneficent universalism, are questions to which *The Infant and the Pearl* does not provide any clear-cut answers. The treatment of Marxist critiques of social relations in the poem ranges from the sceptical and glib to the flatly reactionary, and its treatment of organised labour's struggle against Conservative devastation is deliberately provocative – *The Infant and the Pearl* was 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 (18th June, 1984), and a workforce severely cowed by Thatcherite policy which included the Employment Acts of the early 1980s. The gender dynamics at work in the poem are also suspect, and problematize the shape of "union" itself. From the poem's very first stanza, the male dreamer's perceived sexual abandonment and loss are intimately connected with political disenchantment. 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,

57 Oliver's poem would thus be a paradigmatic example of a "redemptive aesthetic based on the negation of life" and a particularly powerful case of the "moral monumentality" of "art that redeems the catastrophe of history," were it not for the signal fashion in which *The Infant and the Pearl* reflects upon and undoes its own redemptive designs. I explore this undoing in my second reading of the poem's final lines, below. See Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.2, p.22.

58 Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia,' *New Left Review* 25 (Jan.-Feb., 2004), pp.34-54 (43).

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.⁵⁹

Oliver's poem is heavily invested in the gendered symbolic economy of the dream vision genre that Stanbury describes. The poem consciously drenches itself in this symbolism. The dreamer "loses" the ideally feminised Rosine; he makes a series of blunders that 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 something more troubling than this inherited symbolic economy at work in Oliver's poem, and that is the underlying structure of what is most highly prized in the narrative development in which this symbolism is put to work: the question of unity. Union between people in the shape of the institution of marriage does not have a history overbrimming with connotations of the radical transformation of social relations, but rather a history of patriarchal domination and exploitation, and of the concomitant persecution of sexualities that do not conform to the pattern of heterosexual desire. What *The Infant and the Pearl* valorises as "the union between / people" is not limited to, but certainly includes, heterosexual union, that is, straight procreative sex. This is made clear by moments such as Oliver's relief when he claims that "I recognized Rosine the way you'd recognise / your lover's look in union as a unity" in the poem's thirteenth section, and even more explicitly during the celebration of the righteous "union of male / and female in fruition" in the poem's fifteenth section.⁶⁰ The history of the valorisation of the "union between / people" as a "union of male / and female" 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, most ably exemplified by Proudhon's frankly misogynistic conception of love in his late work *De la Justice dans la révolution et dans l'église* [1858], in which woman "does not count" in the spheres of social and public life, and therein should be considered "as part of her husband," and in his correspondence with the contemporary feminist writer Jenny D'Héricourt.⁶¹ Proudhon's virile misogyny is of a different, far 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 that underpins both Proudhon's gendered essentialism and his socialism is also part of *The Infant and the Pearl's* political argument.

These problems cannot be dismissed simply by reminding ourselves that it is the dreamer whose "I" means "Socialism" in the ways in which I have tried to show, and not the poet Douglas Oliver, since the very expressive power of *The Infant and the Pearl* relies

59 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).

60 *Selected Poems*, p.64, p.61.

61 Stewart Edwards, ed., and Elizabeth Fraser, trans., *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.255.

heavily on the inherited formula of confusion and revelation inherent in the dream vision as genre. But they may be contextualised as part of an honest account of the poem's form, and integral to that form is the deep structural irony of its political ambition. *The Infant and the Pearl* argues that no version of political affiliation, no existing politics, is sufficient to transform the "nation" in 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."⁶² It is "[u]nthinkable" because the "nation's identity" is thereby hi-jacked either by the invasive parasitism of Thatcher's Tory vampires, 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."⁶³ It is worth pointing out, as if it were necessary by now, 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 overwhelmingly demotic and 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: Oliver's poem 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 figure the composition of politics based on the immediate and unmediated meeting of minds, the model for which is the untrammelled inter-subjective union of the poet-author and any reader. This kind of politics is only available in poems.

The poem *The Infant and the Pearl* knows this about itself. The poem's proposal of its own legitimacy is at the same time that legitimacy's undoing by the fantasy that sustains and nurtures it. The political ambitions in the poem are inseparable from its anti-political argument about "rent-a-Marx/Margaret rhetoric," a supposed equivalent bind the escape from which is formally constrained by the poetic object definitively in front of us. *The Infant and the Pearl's* great weaknesses are obvious: the rank equivocation just now mentioned, its tendentious reliance on a scene of heterosexual possession as the epicentre of moral and spiritual harmony. But the poem's greatest strength is to make ardently apparent something like the difficulty of thinking through the shape of equivalence and harmony as they are bound to this world, and to each other, by the history of their purchase on the aesthetic imagination. This history the poem both fantastically abolishes and seriously wants to begin: it turns equivalence and harmony into a dream the manifest content of which is the desire for their instantiation as a form of relation for the very first time in human history. In doing so, the poem formally announces the contingency of all political "solutions" themselves at the same time as it urges the necessity of reaching beyond the contingent to an undisclosed but practically magical and redemptive future starting point; the poem looks forward to this future up to the point at which its narrative structure

62 *Ibid.*, p.73.

63 *Ibid.*, p.72.

demands that it cease doing so.⁶⁴ Above I called *The Infant and the Pearl* a redemptive poem, and I think it is, but it is also the case that redemption is cancelled in the poem as a condition of its fleeting proposal. *The Infant and the Pearl* and Oliver's later sprawling multicultural New York epic *Penniless Politics* each strive to realise a utopian political vision in verse, and both end with damning evaluations of the entire endeavour. *The Infant and the Pearl* ends, as we have seen,

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.⁶⁵

Penniless Politics, referring to the "spirit" of radical communal co-operation and social engagement, as well as the fictional populist political party "Spirit" (the origins and history of which *Penniless Politics* narrates), ends like this:

[...] We walk, 20th-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.⁶⁶

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 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.⁶⁷

64 I draw here on Tom Jones' recent book *Poetic Language*, and the relationship between contingency and necessity that he describes in the introduction to the book, such that "attitudes towards language and its relation to reality are revived and reoriented in specific ways by poetic language, to the extent that the contingent and yet necessary relations within language systems and between language and practical life are known and felt. Poems make the merely possible appear necessary, and the necessary appear to be chosen." See Tom Jones, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.3.

65 *Ibid.*, p.73.

66 *Penniless Politics*, p.77.

67 If indeed Bersani's definition of the redemptive aesthetic applies to Oliver's poems, as I suggested above that it could, then we need also to consider Bersani's definition of solipsism, which he applies to the anti-redemptive work of art, such that "the writer's limited authority, even his political effectiveness, depends on [a] stripping away of all authority, on the recognition of the work of art as an impotent discourse. The work's solipsistic existence in the margins of history undermines, or at least helps to delay, the eventual,

The jarring despondency of *The Infant and the Pearl's* ending, at least, is somewhat alleviated by 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 in poems themselves, about the possibility of a "true politics." Politics both begins and begins to end here. Why do these poems end in this way? One answer to this question might be: in order to prevent the runaway notion that poetic language exercises any presumption of worldly design outside of the bounds of the dyadic "special intersubjectivity" between author and reader that Oliver claimed it made possible. 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."⁶⁸ 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 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, 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, rational 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-political commitment, their powers to mediate reality from the privileged standpoint of aesthetic 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."⁶⁹ Adorno continues: "As the capacity to discover approaches and solutions in the artwork,

inevitable complicity of all art with a civilization's discourse of power." *The Culture of Redemption*, p.170.

The ways in which Oliver's poems end effect the entire structure of their comportment; they claim impotence as a function of historical trauma and formal exceptionality.

68 *Penniless Politics*, p.76.

69 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.228-229.

fantasy may be defined as the differential of freedom in the midst of determination."⁷⁰ 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, that of the "union between / people," is firmly lodged in the midst of the existing. It is 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 that would condemn their dream of spirit, and of unity, to failure.

The Infant and the Pearl and *Penniless Politics* are poems in which every syllable and stress of every line is positively rigged with politics. 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 here may plausibly go some way towards starting to think about how, in a very specific sense, politics gets made (and unmade) 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.⁷¹ I want to suggest that speculations of this sort might aid us in determining what, 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" might come to mean in the hyper-virtualised barbarity of the early twenty-first.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.229.

⁷¹ "Covertly the poem transforms [the] vernacular to a prosodic gift whose agency flourishes in the bodily time of an institutional and economic evasion." See Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), p.83.