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Consider the intersections of dialect and politics in two poets: Tony Harrison and John Cooper Clarke

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To recognise the political implications of dialect within poetry, one must first address the widely held cultural principle it disrupts – namely, the assumed authority of "some kind of law that poetry could only be spoken in some kind of Radio 4 newsreader home counties' type voice".[1] (Andy Burnham in Cecile Marshall). Indeed, this commonly perceived "law" of poetry is somewhat unconscious. It resembles poetry's longstanding assimilation with, and positioning within, "high culture"[2], in cultural theorist Raymond Williams' terms, as part of a "great body of cultural skills and the great works which embody and represent them" fostered by the "contemporary social structure" of the upper class. This often causes the perception of class and poetry as one conflated hegemonic package. This is, however, unreasonable; Williams postulates that the class hierarchy "confuses its temporary, local or self-interested features with the received and selected high culture that it offers to justify or to ratify them".

The class sentiments encased within the language of "high culture" are further dismantled by Basil Bernstein's theory of elaborated linguistic code. He claims that this is "induced by the social relation" – i.e. the middle or upper classes - to "express… *and* regulate"[3] their social structure – which is seemingly the role of "high culture" itself. "Elaborated" code is comprised of a "higher level of syntactic organisation and lexical selection than… restricted code". It holds its main significance in its "function"; the much-revered stanzaic poetic form is an example of this. Conversely, Bernstein's "restricted" code confines lexis to the "concrete, descriptive, or narrative". "Restricted code" originates from "a common set of closely shared identifications and expectations self-consciously held by members"[4] where "all the words… are wholly predictable for speakers and listeners". This describes the informal language of dialect, which originates from the "shared identifications" of regional and social groups. This description also encompasses broader varieties of common speech like vulgarism, which I will thus also be considering in my examination of dialect; by Bernstein's definition of "restricted code", vulgarism is just as "concrete" and "predictable" as dialect. Terry Eagleton postulates: "language is the medium in which both Culture and culture – literary art and human society – come to consciousness"[5]; thus, I will synthesise the theories of Bernstein and Williams to explore the "codes" of dialect and

[1] Cecile Marshall, '"Yan Yan Tethera": The Uses of Dialect in Tony Harrison's Poetry' in *No Dialect Please, You're a Poet: English Dialects in Poetry in the 20th and 21st Centuries,* ed. by Claire Hélie, Élise Brault-Dreux, and Emilie Loriaux (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020)
[2] Raymond Williams, 'On High and Popular Culture' in *The New Republic,* 22 November 1974, at https://newrepublic.com/article/79269/high-and-popular-culture [Accessed 10/05/2022] (para. 7 of 18)
[3] Basil Bernstein 'Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences', *American Anthropopogist,* 66:6 (1964), 55-69 (p.257)
[4] Ibid., p.255
[5] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read A Poem*, (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) p.9.

vulgarism, and their interaction with literary "high culture", to discuss their political functions in the poetry of Tony Harrison and John Cooper Clarke.

Tony Harrison, in 'V', unravels cultural receptions of the poetic tradition. At its commencement, the poetic form is quickly interrupted by the dialect-speaking Leeds vandal. The two conflicting poetic voices debate the value of working-class literary representation; it becomes apparent that simply substituting poetry's traditional "elaborated code" of elevated language with the "restricted code" of dialect is an insufficient and problematic representation, which disregards dialect's social history. As such, it cannot simply be adopted as a one-dimensional representative device; Yorkshire dialect originates from a working class demographic, far removed from the elitist cultural roots of literary "high culture" – which, in the poetic form of 'V', it is brought into. This incongruity is evident in the vandal's reception to the literary form; dialect's use in poetry is irrelevant to the concerns of his community - "it's not poetry we need in this class war".[6] This raises questions about the cultural appropriation of dialect, which seems intrinsically problematic in its poetic representation. Harrison thus casts doubt upon the value and legitimacy of the poet in this social context - "I go through growing gloom / still years away from being skald or skin". He addresses the 'skaldic' tradition of the genre, irretrievably rooted in social constructs of the past; the bardic figure is incongruous and defunct in the modern community Harrison writes for, and to.

John Cooper Clarke combines the two linguistic codes, but, unlike in Harrison's 'V', seemingly uses these to explore the intersections between "high culture" and working class culture. 'Evidently Chicken Town' sees his repurposing of "restricted codes" - vulgarism and dialect – for the poetic functions of "high culture". The vulgarism "fucking" constructs its historically conventional rhyme scheme, which is sustained by so-called "restricted" speech. 'Kung Fu International' depicts the landscape of modern-day working class recreation; its content demonstrates the changing responsibilities of the contemporary poet to reflect modern culture. This responsibility is apparent in much of Cooper Clarke's work, which is encompassed by the political punk movement.

The epigraph of 'V' comes from politician Arthur Scargill, who represented those in the trade union: "'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words'". The relationship between language and class hierarchy is flagrantly highlighted, demonstrating Bernstein's association of "elaborated code" with its "function" and thus its allocation of power. This metanarrative informs Harrison's navigation of Leeds' linguistic elements, and their subsequent indications of power. This begins with the graveyard's epitaphs of residents past. The imposition of class struggle upon individuals' lives and deaths is apparent in the pervasive lexis of religion, ("brief chisellable bits from the good book") and war ("those who laid their lives down at the Somme") in these memorials. This imposition is further solidified in Harrison's mention that these words were "whatever length they could afford", alluding to the ultimate determiner of lasting, posthumous lexical representation – money. Harrison's ensuing narration of graffitied vulgarisms - "CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!", shift the poem's focus to Leeds' modern social crisis of industrial disenfranchisement and crime. The chronology of the poem's social issues, represented by this change in language, prompts the poetic voice's discussion of these.

[6] Tony Harrison, 'V', 2nd edn., (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989)

Indeed, the main poetic voice leaves its own imprint upon these themes, in its mannered descriptions of them. His “deep aspirations”, and speeches “in the name of love for peace’s sake” are comprised of pious religious and multisyllabic lexis. This authoritarian means of expression is intrinsically linked to his privilege of classical education; thus, even in its ethical intentions, his speech is distinguished from that of the “skinhead”, widening their social distance. This raises questions about the condescending nature of intentions to diversify class representation within forms of “high culture”; the voice declares: “the reason why I want this in a book / s’ to give ungrateful cunts like you a hearing”.

The “skinhead” speaker proclaims - “Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t’fucking dole / ‘ave got about as much scope to aspire / above the shit they’re dumped in, cunt, as coal / aspires to be chucked on t’fucking fire”. His words are connected semantically to the social issues of his community; the slang “dole” (and, later, “dole-wallah”) relates to its unemployment crisis, and the simile of “coal” connotes the harsh working conditions of coalpits, and present economic aftermath of their closures. Slang words, such as “super-bevvy” and “nowt” are examples of dialect specific to the poverty and crime of Leeds’ social climate. The aspects of social history encased within the origins of these words seat such language within the class hierarchy; the dialect of the speaker is an emphatic testament to the social hardships he speaks of. He further reinforces his class positioning in his unwillingness to represent his community in a literary tradition it holds no social affinity with: “A book, yer stupid cunt, ‘s not worth a fuck!”. Classical language, to this speaker, symbolises a patronising elitism in its very utterance: “So don’t speak Greek. Don’t treat me like I’m dumb”. This directly addresses the disharmony between the literary form of the poem and working class dialect; the wider contexts of these two linguistic elements cannot coalesce, as the former is, inherently, in cultural conflict with the latter. These distinct styles of dialect and elevated language (embodied in two separate poetic voices) are not only emblematic of conflicting social classes, but of the fractured contemporary relationship between them. At the poem’s end, reconciliation is not reached between these two voices, suggesting the perpetuation of class conflict. Hegemonic literary forms like poetry cannot lay centuries of class oppression to rest, but can approach these issues. Harrison admits the difficulty of this undertaking, and the responsibility of the poet in its execution; “this pen’s all I have of magic wand”.

‘V’ tethers its descriptions of Leeds’ physical disarray to its specific social issues: for the “skinhead”, the “red tick” he graffities is what “they never marked his work with much at school”. Cooper Clarke’s depictions of physical chaos and social corruption are, in the anonymous setting of ‘Evidently Chicken Town’, seemingly more detached, using the same repeated vulgarism twice, for example - “the fucking flats have fucking rats”,[7] “the fucking chief’s a fucking swine”. As the poem progresses, these understated lines form a linguistic complexity. For example, in “the fucking clubs are fucking full / of fucking girls and fucking guys”; the latter use of the vulgarism contains a sexual denotation, which diverges in meaning from the former**.** Furthermore, the tone of “you fucking wait you fucking wait” remains ambiguous, between that of a statement or threat. The semantic dimensions of this vulgarism are various, transcending its written repetition and uniformity. It is used with a variety of intonations (and, thus, meanings), which are prosodically differentiated in its real-life audiotext.[8] Indeed, the semantic exploration of this intrinsically vulgar and often censored

[7]John Cooper Clarke, ‘Evidently Chicken Town’ in *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt,* 2nd edn., (London: Vintage, 2012) pp.49-50
[8] Cloddyclips, *JOHN COOPER CLARKE - EVIDENTLY CHICKENTOWN,* online video recording, YouTube, 25 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJF9M5FgmvQ [Accessed 12 May 2022]

word exposes the richness and depth of its "restricted code". As one of the poem's few adjectives, the descriptive capacity of "fucking" is just as advanced as that of varied or elevated language. This vulgarism, despite traditionally belonging to Bernstein's defined category of "restricted" code, is used for the sophisticated linguistic "function" supposedly performed by "elaborated code".

Furthermore, the vulgarism "fucking", twice-used in many of the poem's lines, creates its metre and rising rhythm, in iambic tetrameter. This is a technical feature which hearkens back to more-widely renowned classical poetic traditions, and yet it is maintained by non-traditional taboo language. As such, Cooper Clarke stylistically recasts historic poetic cornerstones by conflating them with colloquialisms. This is performed more explicitly in another of his poems, 'I Mustn't Go Down to the Sea Again',[9] which subverts the refrain of John Masefield's widely-renowned poem, 'Sea-Fever'.[10] These classical traditions are also renovated by the – relatively contemporary - performance poetry genre, which the poem also belongs to. According to Julia Novak, the "physical co-presence of the poet with a live audience"[11], evokes "levels of communication the visible human body activates and for which no representation whatsoever exists in the written text"[12]. In such a sense, Cooper Clarke devises a new poetic form which transcends notions of "restricted code" by recognising it as a language in its own right, harnessing the performative medium of spoken word (by which dialect and vulgarism originated) and synthesising this with the "high culture" of poetry, making a space where its semantic meanings can be "disambiguated".[13]

Cooper Clarke's poetry, in its musical performance, hybridises the poetic and musical modes. Eagleton argues that "there is a politics of form as well as a politics of content";[14] and subsequently "a major crisis of artistic form… is almost always bound up with an historical upheaval"; a transformation of form itself, is, therefore, politically significant. Certainly, there is a "crisis of artistic form" displayed in the modal mixture and vulgarity of 'Evidently Chicken Town', and even more so in its wider creative context of the controversial punk movement. Indeed, Gerfried Ambrosch states that the words of punk performance communicate the movement's "'aesthetic of dissent'" [15] and form "part of a larger whole… in a reciprocal relationship not only with their musical environment… but also with the culture that begot them and within which they take full effect"; Cooper Clarke's transformation of the poetic form echoes such notions.

The surrounding punk movement of Cooper Clarke's work was one of social mobility and the consequently diminishing dichotomy between classes. Therefore, this political ethos does not eschew "elaborated code", but repurposes it to signify social change. Indeed, Cooper Clarke's 'Kung-Fu International' collocates the "restricted code" of dialect with multisyllabic elevated lexis. The poem is composed of rhyming couplets, which position dialect words and phrases adjacently with elevated language, to describe the same focus -

[9] John Cooper Clarke, 'I Mustn't Go Down To The Sea Again' in *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt,* 2nd edn., (London: Vintage, 2012) p.14
[10] John Masefield, 'Sea-Fever' in *The Elementary English Review,* 2:10 (1925), 350
[11] Julia Novak, 'A Definition of Live Poetry' in *Live poetry: an integrated approach to poetry in performance,* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011) p.62
[12] Novak, 'Comparing Written Poem and Performed Poem' *Live Poetry*, p.73
[13] Ibid, p.71
[14] Eagleton, *How To Read A Poem,* p.8
[15] Gerfried Ambrosch, 'Punk as Literature: Toward a Hermeneutics of Anglophone Punk Songs' in *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik,* 42:1, (2017) 101-120, (p.101)

as in the successive lines “he was no bigger than a two-bob fart / he was a deft exponent of the martial arts”. The diminutive and reductive phrase “two-bob fart” has a comedic value, reflecting the realism of the drunken brawl. Meanwhile, the phrase “deft exponent” provides a more clinical, objective clarification, yet both play a vital role in the poem’s descriptive depth, and thus the value in both types of language is illustrated. Describing the same subject in different registers creates a sense of social duality of the poetic voice, which can be observed in the undulation of these contrasting language types. This reflects the condition of the (upwardly mobilising) working class culture, which transcends the border between working and middle class – and therefore between “elaborated” and “restricted” code. In so doing, Cooper Clarke inaugurates a mixed register which captures the image of the (ever more vaguely defined) working class of the 1970s and 80s.

This upward social mobilisation generates an identity crisis for the poetic voice in ‘V’, as he contemplates his own belonging in the (now less strictly defined) working class scene, which, in its evolution, produces his isolation - “the places I learned Latin, and learned Greek / and left” – and that of others - “His children and grandchildren went away / and never came back home to be interred”. Harrison’s panorama of Leeds’ social history details how, in striving for “a better life than this one”, former generations initiated the social mobility which separates him from their Leeds dialect: “can’t you speak / the language that yer mam spoke”. Thus, the long anticipated social advancement (i.e. class mobility, racial diversification) described in this community ignites divisions within it, as the divergent language varieties borne out of these social changes cause a cyclical return to “old violence and old disunity”, giving way to newer racist slurs like “paki”. Thus, Harrison emphasises the nature of community, which, in ‘V’, uses the shared language of dialect as the battlefield of its hidden conflicts. The various racial and vulgar slurs within the communal dialect potentially reflects “old violence and old disunity” as a constant within this (and indeed any) modern community, which will always experience challenges to its social structure. In writing about, and on behalf of, Leeds, Harrison perhaps does not attempt to draw awareness to such problems, but rather to enhance awareness of the ephemeral lifecycles of human community: “the ground these fixtures are fought on’s Man”.

Both poets use dialect to confront conventional attitudes of “high culture”, by combining this dialect with its traditional forms. Harrison approaches this by creating a literal dialogue between the voices of traditional poetic form and dialect language, which typify their hegemonic classes - the two voices are seemingly aware of the representative function they hold. This prompts a wider cultural dialogue which illustrates the substantial cultural reconciliation still needed in a society where class has long been engrained within specific language types. This perhaps begins with the stanzaic back-and-forth dialogue between these forms, which, itself, makes a composite of these different class constructs. Conversely, John Cooper Clarke enlists dialect to rearrange the cultural paradigms aligned with class structures, and, in his doing so, grants this process a literary form of its own: performance poetry. Thus, his work, is, in itself, a response to the opposition represented by Harrison’s poetic voices, as it attests the outdatedness of the divided structures like “elaborated” and “restricted” code, and indeed of class divisions, which are arguably diminished with (and evidenced by) the rise of the punk movement.

In their diverse creative purposes, both poets utilise dialect to insert its social representation into the world of “high” culture; this task is perhaps easier conducted in their era of production during the 1970s and 80s. Political movements such as punk harboured

significant changes in mainstream culture, where the formerly influential culture of literary tradition becomes, in Williams' terms, "residual",[16] yet "still active in the cultural process, not only… as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present". Indeed, this process created the fresh cultural space which allowed Harrison and Cooper Clarke to draw up their depictions of, and make commentary upon, their elected social issues.

[16] Raymond Williams, 'Dominant, Residual and Emergent' in *Marxism and Literature,* (Oxford: OUP, 1977) p.122

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