

‘You know all them things’: Nostalgia, Idealization, and Speech in Working-Class Poems by Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lucille Clifton

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Abstract

This essay examines nostalgia, idealization, and speech in poems from the latter half of the twentieth century in the US and the UK that convey working-class experience, identifying nostalgia as a binding feature of such poems and tracing it to the 18th-century ‘nostalgia poem.’ I will first establish briefly how nostalgia in poems by Philip Levine, James Wright, and Robert Hayden results in idealizations that resist sentimentality and then demonstrate that the various forms of local speech employed in some other post-1945 poems about working-class life by Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lucille Clifton act as a stay against such idealization, effectively transforming them into more explicitly anticlassist –and, in the case of Brooks and Clifton, antiracist and antisexist –forms of social critique and defiance. Their poems interrupt and complicate the idealization of the familiar working-class surroundings they seek to reenter, familiar and familial realms that are not just temporal and spatial but linguistic. They honor their characters’ fortitude in the face of working-class encumbrances not by idealizing them but by concentrating on their working-class characters’ linguistic origins. Manifestations of local speech in these nostalgic poems amount to a poetic resource that disrupts idealizations of working-class experience, critiquing, in that process, classism and, in Brooks and Clifton, revealing classism’s intersections with racism and sexism. These poems don’t just desire to go back to earlier worlds but *do* go back linguistically to working-class, nonstandard languages – their particular forms of original local speech –that refuse the conditions that would subordinate those languages and the people who speak them.

Keywords

Working-class literature, poetry and poetics, twentieth-century poetry, linguistics

It goes without saying that poems about working-class life would be concerned with labor and impoverishment. As Janet Zandy has observed, another definitive aspect of working-class experience is domesticity; she begins her anthology of twentieth-century working-class women’s writing by announcing, ‘Home is a good place to begin,’ explaining that in working-class cultures across that century in the US, ‘a pattern is evident of overlapping public and private spheres, of interrelated work life and homelife, and of conflicts between family life and individual aspirations’ (1990 pp. 1-4).¹ In twentieth-century working-

¹ Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson have observed that the communal nature of working-class life is an integral aspect of working-class literature: ‘Unlike the middle-class aesthetic, the working-class literary aesthetic does not focus on individuality. Because working-class people live in harsh conditions and know themselves to be individually powerless, working-class culture, as a result, does not celebrate individuality. It instead recognizes the interdependence of units of

class poetry in both the US and the UK, home is a place to return to. Indeed, poems about twentieth-century working-class life often register a poignant longing to go back to family origins. In such poems, labor is typically presented as a hardship to counter poverty, and the enduring individuals usually portrayed are often contextualized as family members in domestic spaces, depicted as at once fatigued if not embattled and noble if not heroic. Think of the young brother in Philip Levine's 'You Can Have It,' his twenty-something-year-old hands already 'yellowed and cracked' as the poem imagines him and other men like him asking, breathlessly, 'Am I gonna make it?' (1994 pp. 196-97); or the simultaneously 'proud' and 'ashamed' men, 'starved wives, and beautiful sons' in James Wright's depiction of the mill town of 'Martins Ferry, Ohio' (1971 p. 113); or the father in Robert Hayden's 'Those Winter Sundays' working early in the 'splintering, breaking' cold to keep his family warm with a fire (1985 p. 41).² The father's efforts are thankless, and the poem registers in him a deep current of anger. And yet despite the shivering cold and the simmering rage, the poem travels back to that stern childhood home to extend finally a compunctious thanks to the enduring, dignified elder. Similarly, the men in Wright's Ohio are 'gray,' 'ruptured' workers but also wistful, told to be 'Dreaming of heroes,' while Levine's poem shuttles back thirty years to the bedroom of a pair of siblings exhausted from factory work, the older brother beseeching God to 'Give me back my young brother.'³ These poems are marked by nostalgia, a persistent desire to return to the homeplace, despite the attendant impoverishments of those homes, and they are inclined to idealize their characters while they resist sentimentalizing them.

This essay examines such nostalgia for family life in poems from the latter half of the twentieth century on both sides of the Atlantic that contemplate working-class experience, identifying nostalgia as a binding feature of such poems and tracing it to what Aaron Santesso calls the eighteenth-century English 'nostalgia poem' (2006 p. 12). It also examines how such nostalgic poems in the twentieth century negotiate between idealizing and sentimentalizing working-class origins, families, and spaces. I will first establish briefly how nostalgia in the poems referred to above results in idealizations that nevertheless resist sentimentality and then demonstrate that the various forms of local speech employed in some other post-1945 poems about working-class experience set in Northern Ireland and in the US by Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lucille Clifton act as a stay against both sentimentality and idealization, effectively transforming their poems into explicitly anticlassist – and, in the case of Brooks and Clifton, antiracist and antisexist – forms of social critique and defiance.⁴ In their efforts to theorize working-class literature,

people: family, community, friends, unions' (1999, p. 76). And yet working-class poetry in the twentieth century often asserts individuality against harsh social conditions that would obscure it. Paul Lauter also points up the group aspect of working-class experience, to which I am adding, along with Zandy, Christopher, and Whitson, family: 'Much working-class art is created and experienced in group situations – not in the privacy of a study, but in the church, the hall, the work site, the meeting hall, the quilting bee, or the picket line. It is thus rooted in the experiences of a particular group of people facing particular problems at a particular time' (2014, p. 65).

² For the poems quoted in this essay, I cite from either the print version of the poet's collected or selected poems the first time a poem is quoted and then proceed without citations. All of the poems discussed in this essay except Gwendolyn Brooks's 'Hattie Scott' and Lucille Clifton's 'study the masters' are available at the Poetry Foundation website: poetryfoundation.org. Clifton's 'study the masters' is available online at Yale University's *Reflections* magazine (<https://reflections.yale.edu/article/sex-gender-power-reckoning/study-masters-poem-lucille-clifton>). Brooks's 'Hattie Scott' is not available online.

³ Hayden's poem was first published in a slightly different version in *A Ballad of Remembrance* in 1962. Wright's poem is from *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963). Levine's 'You Can Have It' is from his 1979 book *7 Years from Somewhere*.

⁴ Lauter explains that traditional working-class figures have been neither women nor BIPOC: 'The traditional image of the American industrial worker . . . is male, in part because of ignorance about the role of women, historical and current, in United States industry. And the traditional image is also white, reflecting the racially segregated job structure that still persists in some industries' (63). Lauter, along with Nicholas Coles, has helped amend this omission in *A History of American Working-Class Literature* (2017), which includes chapters on colonization, early African American culture,

Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson have asked, ‘if poetry is defined as an intense distillation of language, rather than a portrayal of experience, and a working-class poem is one rooted in working-class experience, can a work even be said to be a working-class poem?’ (72). They answer that question in part by acknowledging that ‘[w]orking class writers attempt, in various ways, to record the realistic speech patterns of people who do not speak standard English nor conduct conversations along intellectually analytic lines’ (76). Paul Lauter has pointed out that these realistic, nonstandard speech patterns are especially amplified when sounded against the highly composed patterns of poetry: ‘Language [in working-class poetry]. . . is often simpler, even commonplace and less ‘heightened’ than that of ‘high culture’ verse’ (64). Such speech may not, in many cases, reach for the heights, but nonstandard speech has equal potential to go as deep as any other species of language when it is enlisted to make poetry. Like Christopher and Whitson, Brooks has also described poetry as ‘life distilled,’ and her poems, along with Heaney’s and Clifton’s, demonstrate that working-class speech can be the very material to achieve that distillation when it is patterned into poetic form (Brooks, cited in Gayle, 2003 p. 124).

Much poetry about working-class life harkens to a time of adversity and perseverance that is familial and familiar: such poems regularly situate themselves in family contexts and domestic settings. This desire to return to working-class domestic origins – origins that, such poems suggest, have been escaped – supplies such poetry with its definitive aspect: nostalgia. The word comes from the Greek *nostos* meaning ‘return home’ and *algia* meaning ‘pain,’ coined by a 17th-century physician named Johannes Hofer who identified it as a physical illness (*Oxford English dictionary* 2003, nostalgia entry). Nor in literature is nostalgia an untroubled element, for it skirts dangerously close to the sentimental, a quality thought inherently fatal to poetry in the twentieth century, especially after the breakthroughs of literary modernism, which sought to convey the complications of modern life by reflecting difficult emotional experiences via language rather than beautifying, inflating, or resolving those experiences. August Kleinzahler has suggested that Wright, like most of his post-1945 contemporaries and successors, has often fallen into the trap of literary bathos: ‘Much of’ his poetry ‘drifts perilously close . . . to sentimentality’ (n.d. *FSG*). But to Kleinzahler, Wright’s ‘Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio’ is exemplary precisely because it avoids the sentimental: Wright in this poem, Kleinzahler says, ‘manages to bypass sentiment and, in doing so, he succeeds in achieving an emotional intensity seldom encountered in American or British poetry of that era.’ Avoiding sentiment, in other words, was a way toward a potent authenticity prized in twentieth-century poetry—and difficult to achieve. Kleinzahler attributes the circumvention of sentiment in Wright’s poem to its countervailing formal attributes: ‘The tone of voice is neutral, dispassionate, in counterweight to the material, a technique which serves to complement the poignancy of the poem. Localness is enhanced by the use of place names – Shreve, Tiltonsville, Benwood, Wheeling. We are in a specific place, in a particular window of time, but it is everywhere, throughout time.’ In other words, Wright’s poem keeps sentimentality at bay even as it evokes timelessness and omnipresence by balancing with localisms its impersonal tone and generic referents – Polish men drinking beer, Black men working at a furnace, proud fathers, ‘clucking’ wives, high school football players.⁵ Hayden produces a similarly somber tone, though his poem’s methods

women’s writing in the early nineteenth century, slavery in nineteenth-century poetry, twentieth-century African American literature, and globalization and migration. Coles and Janet Zandy have also worked to fill these lacunae in their 2007 anthology of *American Working-Class Literature* that includes women and BIPOC authors from Phillis Wheatley in the colonial period to Lucille Clifton, who wrote into the twenty-first century.

⁵ Lucy Alford adds brevity to the ‘working-class’ formal features grounding Wright’s poem: ‘The poem could not take a single additional line. Its brevity is power, earthbound by the working-class proper names and population markers: Tiltonsville, Benwood, Wheeling Steel, Polacks and Negroes, grayed with labor as the watchman is ruptured by night and by long-held insomniac vigilance’ (2020 p. 2).

are not at all impersonal: the adult son's eloquent yet anguished regret builds palpably to the poem's pained repetition in its penultimate line: 'What did I know, what did I know.' Levine's poem, too, is thoroughly personal while also raising that quality to the level of paradigm: a young man listens to his brother and declares that 'each man / has one brother who dies when he sleeps.' The poem combines the brothers into a singular, representative figure: 'together they are only one man / sharing a heart.' These nostalgic poems about working-class life are not sentimental – their emotions are never manufactured but wholly authentic. They do, however, idealize their characters by presenting them as borderline archetypically tragic working-class figures: not only are Wright's men 'Dreaming of heroes' but their wives are 'Dying for love' and 'Their sons grow suicidally beautiful'; Hayden's adult son wisely regrets his youthful apathy toward a stoic father who used to polish his shoes; and Levine's speaker remembers when he and his brother valiantly 'stacked cases of orange soda for the children / of Kentucky.' Such poems looking back to the exigencies of working-class life are, it would seem, predisposed to idealization because they are, by nature of that backward look, nostalgic, the word itself deriving from a painful yearning to 'return home.'

This nostalgic aspect of such working-class poems links them to the 18th century nostalgia poem, a style of poetry created before the word *nostalgia* became 'a kind of catchall term for all forms of sentimental longing or regret' and referred more specifically to 'longing for home' (Santesso, 2006 p. 15). Santesso has established that in the eighteenth century 'nostalgia matured as a literary device' in classic poems such as Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' and Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.' Those and other eighteenth-century English poems effected this maturation by 'stylizing' nostalgia as impersonal precisely in order to idealize it (2006 p. 15). The eighteenth-century nostalgia poem, unlike, say, earlier nostalgic pastoral poetry, 'reflect[s] the influence of a literary tradition rather than personal experiences. Nostalgia, in other words, can be seen in a different way [from that earlier body of poetry]: as an impersonal, highly literary mode of idealization responding first and foremost to the concerns of the present' (2006 p. 13).⁶ Santesso asserts that although nostalgia is generally defined in a poem as 'a desire for the past,' it is 'idealization' rather than longing that is the 'necessary' attribute of the nostalgia poem (2006 p. 16). Nostalgic poems about working-class life in the twentieth century effect idealization in ways that run contrary to the eighteenth century nostalgia poem: they make use of local and specific detail and advance highly personal impressions, affections, and contentions. We've already seen how Wright makes use of localities, Hayden pays late homage to a beloved but feared father, and Levine renders the shared bedroom of two adult brothers.

But what of twentieth-century poems about working-class ordeals that take this contrast to the eighteenth-century nostalgia poem even further, appearing to resist not just sentimentality but idealization? How do such poems, already embedded with nostalgia, prevent or at least interrupt and complicate the idealization of the familiar surroundings they seek to reenter? One answer lies in those poems whose familiar working-class realms are not just temporal and spatial but linguistic. Representative examples by Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lucille Clifton honor their characters' fortitude in the face of working-class encumbrances not by idealizing them but by concentrating on those working-class characters' linguistic

⁶ Santesso elaborates on Hofer's consideration of nostalgia as a 'malady' and as 'homesickness' (2006 p. 15). He concludes that a 'standard definition today' of literary or poetic nostalgia 'might be an intimately personal longing for the past—a stylized form of homesickness' (2006 p. 13). He also points out that as early as 1783, James Beattie had referred to nostalgia as a condition of 'natives of certain countries . . . d[ying] of a desire to revisit their native land,' revealing early on the term's sociopolitical inflections (2006 p. 14).

origins.⁷ Manifestations of local speech in these nostalgic poems amount to a poetic resource that disrupts idealizations of working-class experience, critiquing, in that process, classism and, in Brooks and Clifton, revealing classism's intersections with racism and sexism. These poems don't just desire to go back to earlier worlds but *do* go back linguistically to working-class, nonstandard languages—their particular forms of original local speech—that refuse the conditions that would subordinate those languages and the people who speak them.

Heaney's elegiac sonnet sequence to his mother, 'Clearances,' begins with an epigraph that relays both his mother's learning from her uncle and her teaching her son how 'to split coal' by angling the 'grain and hammer right' (1998 p. 282).⁸ The lesson in manual work is a lesson for the work of poetry, too, for like his uncle and mother, the poet-son must learn 'to hit' and 'to loosen' precisely in order to make something usable. Part of the hitting, loosening music in Heaney's poems is produced from his regional speech, and he often punctuates his Northern Irish farm-life family memorials with examinations of such speech.⁹ 'Clearances' elegizes Heaney's mother often by remembering her at work: for instance, the poems go back to the speaker's childhood farm to re-envision the floors, cups, bowls, and jugs she polished. In the third sonnet, the sequence comes closest to sentimental idealization, creating a tableau in its first eight lines – the sonnet's octave – of mother and son silently peeling potatoes together while everyone else is 'away at Mass' (1998 p. 285). In the sonnet's last six lines – its sestet – the son moves ahead in time to his mother's deathbed: while everyone else is praying and crying he's remembering the earlier scene of them working together: 'I remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives— / Never closer the whole rest of our lives.' If that scene at least idealizes their relationship, the

⁷ Perhaps the most overt example of a poet whose entire career is marked by examining in poetry the sociolinguistics of working-class experience is Tony Harrison. I don't include Harrison here because I have recently written elsewhere and at length about the affiliations of working-class northern English speech and traditional forms in his most famous poems, those from the 'The School of Eloquence' sequence and his long poem 'v.' (see Fogarty, 2020). In her book on Seamus Heaney, Rosie Lavan compares Heaney's poems chronicling his relationship with his working-class parents to Harrison's poems doing the same (2020 pp. 78-83). Neil Corcoran first made the link between the fourth 'Clearances' sonnet, discussed in this essay, and Tony Harrison in his classic study on Heaney's poetry: "'Clearances' 4," Corcoran remarks, 'is virtually the territory of Tony Harrison's poems' (1998 p. 160).

⁸ 'Clearances' consists of eight sonnets and appeared in Heaney's *The Haw Lantern* in 1987. A sonnet is, generally, a fourteen-line poem with various organizing principles typically determined by rhyme schemes. Two of the most well-known versions are the Petrarchan sonnet and the English or Shakespearean sonnet. Petrarchan sonnets are divided into two parts, an octave (eight lines) that typically sets up a problem, and a sestet (six lines) that resolves or attempts to resolve the problem. The English version that Shakespeare wrote in has three parts: three quatrains (four lines each) and a closing couplet (two lines). Petrarchan sonnets rhyme *abbaabba* (standard notation uses letters to show rhymes) in the octave and *cdecde* or *cdccdc* in the sestet. English sonnets rhyme *abab cdcd efef gg*. Sonnets at the time of Petrarch and during the English Renaissance were often employed to idealize the object of the poet's love or sexual desire. But sonnets have always been used—and continue to be used—for other purposes, often ironizing those original idealizing aims (*Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics* 2012, sonnet entry).

⁹ Adam Hanna helps clarify Heaney's working-class origins: 'Heaney's position in class terms is not straightforward. His upbringing in a thatched cottage in which he, three adults and eventually eight brothers and sisters were divided between three rooms could hardly be termed typically middle class. However, his father's status as a cattle dealer and small farmer who owned his own land put his family in a more secure position than many of their poorer neighbours. The class trajectory of Heaney's life was determined by his time as a boarder at grammar school in Derry, which initially gave him 'the notion that [he] was going to be a secondary school teacher, living the generic life of the newly upwardly mobile eleven-plus Catholic'. Heaney's ascent of the social ladder via the education system, and his membership of a religious minority whose urban working class was increasingly beleaguered, put him in a complex position when he achieved prominence' (2017 p. 337).

next sonnet swiftly undercuts that idealization. There, the speaker recalls pitching his language to his mother in order to maintain connection despite their different adulthoods: ‘You / Know all them things,’ his mother says to him with ‘more challenge than pride,’ with, in other words, a sense of estrangement; the speaker responds, ‘So I governed my tongue / In front of her’ because ‘the wrong / Grammar kept us allied and at bay’ (1998 p. 286).¹⁰ The poem is, like the other sonnets in the series, nostalgic: the son here seeks to return to the kitchen where the mother worked, but rather than idealizing her or their relationship it presents them in a kind of linguistic contest. In fact, its sonnet structure seems to pit son and mother against each other as the octave and sestet each examines the other’s manipulation of speech as a strategy to try to stay aligned despite their different experiences, making the mother’s and son’s conflicting versions of ‘affectation’ and ‘betrayal’ its primary subject matter rather than the son’s nostalgic longing.

The poem’s return to the past, then, is linguistic, marked by what it calls the son’s ‘relapse’ into speaking ‘wrong.’ From the outset, while the son instrumentalizes nonstandard speech in order to connect to a mother whose formal education involves splitting blocks of coal, the mother stages her own lingual maneuvers to display her commitment to her class: ‘Fear of affectation made her affect / Inadequacy.’ She willfully injects errors into her speech to showcase loyalty to her working-class origins, origins that idealize being ‘hampered and inadequate’ as virtues. The son does the same thing: although he states outright that he throws the competition, pretending to know less when he knows he ‘knows better,’ the poem actually winds up enshrining the son’s triumph over the mother: he can ‘*naw*’ and ‘*aye*’ all he wants, as the poems says, but they both know he ‘knows better.’

Indeed, the poem scrutinizes both characters’ efforts to use their language only *to seem* humble and uncomplicated, effectively repudiating those sentimentalized and stereotypical characteristics of working-class people. The lexical repetitions in the poem belie simplicity: ‘affectation’ and ‘affect,’ ‘hampered’ and ‘hampered’ again, ‘inadequate’ and ‘adequate,’ ‘betray’ and ‘betrayal.’ Other words in the poem reinforce a verbal environment that sidesteps the idealizations of elegy by denoting the guile and cunning that class distinctions necessitate even in the way a mother and son relate to one another: ‘Fear,’ ‘askew,’ ‘well-adjusted,’ ‘challenge,’ ‘governed,’ ‘relapse,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘allied,’ ‘at bay.’ Classism necessitates that mother and son must maneuver slyly to prevent becoming adversaries while the poem’s familiar surroundings demand a semantic shrewdness to establish class allegiances. These verbal efforts to prevent competition are a competition itself, and the poem yearns partly to go back to that familiar, familial contest.

Gwendolyn Brooks also suggests idealization and nostalgia in her poetic returns to working-class life—but even more explicitly and consistently than Heaney, she refuses both by setting Black local speech in traditional verse forms to respond directly to the deleterious social conditions that classicism, sexism, and racism produce. In ‘kitchenette building’ from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks’ first book, local language and the formal effects of poetry demonstrate that a tenement apartment in Chicago’s African American South Side neighborhood—the ‘hypersegregated center of Chicago’s Black Belt’ (Morgan

¹⁰ Most recently, Rosie Lavan has explored the working-class elements of ‘Clearances,’ describing this poem as ‘a remembered scene with mother and son [that] indicates that education has permanently altered the family dynamic’ (2020 p. 79). Lavan reminds us that the phrase ‘governed my tongue’ is an especially significant one for Heaney: it recalls the name of his ‘T. S. Eliot lectures [on poetry and politics] delivered at the University of Kent in 1986, published [eventually] as *The Government of the Tongue*,’ one of his collections of prose (p. 80). Lavan remarks, ‘the title . . . is significantly invoked here, as politic restraint is a protective measure to keep the peace between mother and son. What the son knows ‘better’ he knows not to introduce; he knows that his mother knows ‘better’ too, but there is a loyalty owed to origins, even if it entails for the child between worlds a performance which has itself become a kind of reverse affectation’ (p. 79-80).

2017)—is not to be idealized in poetry even as it suggests so by centering on the word ‘Dream.’¹¹ Rather, the tenement supplies the actual raw material for arrangement into the forms of poetry. The poem is set within the walls of a building so suffocating it threatens to devitalize its residents: ‘We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in, and gray’ (1987 p. 20). In this circumscribed world, people are reduced to ‘things’ and subjected to the monotony (‘dry hours’), coerciveness (‘involuntary plan’), confinement (‘Grayed in’), and drabness (‘gray’) of urban poverty caused and reinforced by systemic racist practices such as redlining.¹² Critics tend to read the poem as a condemnation of the debilitating effects of claustrophobic city life, thereby at least insinuating that the poem idealizes an escape from that life. Hannah Brooks-Motl, for instance, describes the poem as asking ‘us to think about what happens to people when social forces squeeze them into smaller spaces and closer proximity’ (2010). According to her, the poem has an underlying nostalgic quality: it conveys the struggle for dreams to survive in such crowded impoverishment.¹³ But if the poem is concerned with life in close quarters and dreaming beyond them, it is also thinking about the function and persistence of language in those quarters. In fact, the poem quickly turns its attention away from the social ‘plan’ that creates degrading living conditions and begins ruminating not on dreams per se but on the sound of the word ‘Dream’ and contrasting it to local language: ‘‘Dream’ makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like ‘rent,’ ‘feeding a wife,’ ‘satisfying a man.’’ Here, the sounds of two kinds of language – one ‘giddy,’ one ‘strong’ – are juxtaposed, suggesting that the poem might contrast them and perhaps make a case for one over the other, say ‘Dream’ over ‘rent.’

However, the next stanza fuses these two registers of language:

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms.

The poem answers the question it poses – can a dream in a kitchenette building ‘send up,’ ‘fight,’ ‘Flutter,’ or ‘sing’? – by bringing the inanimate ‘things’ of the tenement – ‘onion fumes,’ ‘fried potatoes,’ ‘garbage,’ ‘rooms’ – into concert through a series of overlapping sound effects that include internal and end rhymes (‘fumes’ and ‘rooms,’ ‘white’ and ‘fight’), assonance (‘white,’ ‘violet,’ ‘fight,’ ‘fried,’ ‘ripening’),

¹¹ Brooks has discussed her poetry as rendering the South Side Chicago neighborhood she lived in: ‘I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street. I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner [of 63rd Street in the ‘Bronzeville’ neighborhood of Chicago’s South Side], and I could look first on one side and then on the other. There was my material’ (1972 pp. 133-34).

¹² In her study of Chicago’s South Side in relation to American segregation and institutionalized racism, Natalie Y. Moore explains redlining: ‘By 1930, blacks were spatially isolated to a high degree in American cities, with Chicago leading the way. The Home Owner’s Loan Corporation was formed in 1933 as part of the New Deal and provided funds for refinancing urban mortgages in danger of default. But the Depression-era government program institutionalized redlining, a practice that excluded blacks by color coding black neighborhoods based on loan risk. The lowest color was red, where blacks lived. Redlining influenced lending practices of the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration of the 1940s with regard to blacks’. (2016 p. 42)

¹³ D. H. Melhem claims that the tenement’s conditions in the poem defeat art: ‘The speaker doubts that art, ‘an aria’ sung by the dream, can survive its physical habitation’ (1987 p. 23). For Harry Shaw, ‘the environment’ of the tenement building ‘precludes the survival of any dreams’; the poem’s theme, he argues, is ‘spiritual death’ (1980 pp. 62-63). Brooks-Motl perceives the poem as more ambivalent than these earlier readings. Her overall view of the poem is that ‘agency and self-determination in the kitchenette are problematic at best,’ but she acknowledges that ‘its aural effects work effortlessly’ (2010). Although for her the poem ultimately communicates that dreaming could never be fully possible in a tenement, the fact that it can be partly possible suggests at least a little hope.

alliteration ('fight,' 'fried,' 'Flutter'), and consonance ('fried,' 'garbage,' 'ripening').¹⁴ These sounds strung along the mostly five-beat lines affirm that a kitchenette building doesn't need a dream to send up its fighting song. For the second stanza already set the 'things' of tenement life to song by melding the 'giddy' dream sounds and the 'strong' facts of tenement life. The 'dream' is described as the same color as a purple onion ('white and violet'), and although the first stanza seemed to contrast the dream's 'giddy sound' with 'strong' colloquial phrases about rent, wives, and men, the second stanza suggests that the 'dream' sound may be 'strong,' too – strong enough to 'fight.' Further, the long *i* sound of the second and third lines – 'white,' 'violet,' 'fight,' 'fried,' 'ripening' – rises up with the strong odors of frying potatoes and yesterday's garbage. The 'ripening' garbage might not be pleasing, but the language used to describe it is. Here we have what Heaney would call in *The Redress of Poetry* a 'representation of things in the world' arranged into a 'process of language' that performs the very singing the poem wonders about (1995 p. 5). Apparently, the giddy sounds of tenement life can quite strenuously 'sing an aria down these rooms.' The formal effects of 'kitchenette building' sound out an unexpected and unidealized sense in a tenement: self-consciously poetic sound effects insist that the everyday, rather than idealizations of the everyday, is poetic.

Indeed, Brooks sets local language to poetic form in order to make a kitchenette building the catalyst for poetry with poetic sound effects and with larger verse structures. Stephanie Burt and Eavan Boland suggest that the poem varies the sonnet form, with its prescribed patterns and divisions, in order to depict the resilient vitality of the imagination in especially strapped circumstances (Burt, 2011; Boland, 2011). For them, as for Brooks-Motl, the poem draws out mostly an unfavorable sense of such day-to-day experience: this 'sonnet,' Burt argues, 'emphasizes the everyday inconveniences of low-income domestic life, as if to say that such hassles, hour by hour and day by day, do more to damage the souls of Chicagoans than any single dramatic event' (p. 311). Similarly, Boland considers the poem's depiction of daily life against what she also sees as its sonnet form: 'It is a cropped sonnet, a thirteen-line word-portrait of claustrophobia and resignation, with a sharp moment of resistance' (p. 214). For her, 'kitchenette building' acquiesces to the crowded conditions of tenement life: 'The poem begins accepting the limitations of cramped space.' She believes the poem ultimately conveys the reality of 'cooking scents' and 'the sounds of the day ending' in order to underscore the contradictions of 'longing for another reality' and the 'the fall-to-earth practicality' of its final stanza (p. 215):

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
 Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
 We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Boland regards the poem as conceding to closed quarters not just at the beginning but with the 'practicality' of its ending as well.

¹⁴ Brooks-Motl (2010) reads the second stanza of 'kitchenette building' as particularly expressive of the building's deterioration. According to her, parts of speech are arranged here to convey the repugnant and detrimental assault on the senses that occurs in these tenement halls: 'Cooking onions become menacing when they produce 'fumes'; the smell of fried potatoes is so ubiquitous that the dream must 'fight' with them; and, most tellingly, the sanitary conditions of the building mean that garbage stays in the hall, 'ripening' and mingling with the other common smells. Against such olfactory concreteness, the 'dream' is barely allowed substance. It remains a stopped-short series of adjectives ('Its white and violet') and a series of verbs that correspond to contradictory subjects (people 'sing' while things 'flutter'). Ultimately, she believes the poem responds to its question about whether or not dreams can survive in a kitchenette building with 'a definitive answer: not really.'

And yet for both Burt and Boland, the vitality generated by the poem's sonnet-like features is only momentary. The poem, to them, doesn't manage a sustained redress of its debasing social context and is, presumably, one line shorter than a traditional sonnet because of it. Waiting for the 'lukewarm water' in the bathroom isn't just an inconvenient 'hassle' but actually 'damage[s]' the residents who have to bathe in it (Burt, 2011 p. 311). And tepid bathwater represents a return to the harsh reality of the first stanza's 'dry hours' (Boland, 2011 p. 215). Boland suggests that the poem divides its thoughts along its sonnet turns, moving from acknowledgement of the tenement's monotony to a bursting forth of linguistic exuberance and back again, yielding to that original monotony. But what happens if we take the poem's structural form at face value? We have three envelope tercets (three lines with the first and third line rhyming) with an envelope quatrain (first and fourth line rhyming) separating the first tercet from the last two: *axa cxxc fxf hxxh*.¹⁵ The quatrain stands among the tercets as an instance of the very singing the poem wonders about: apprehended this way, the poem's length subtly resists rather than concedes to confinements of context. Further, the last stanza of 'kitchenette building' continues to employ its opening sonic effects to counter the 'dry hours' that begin the poem. The lyrical 'wondering' that occurs in the second stanza helps pass the long 'hours' of tenement life – without idealizing that life or dreaming beyond it. By the final stanza, the residents have to move quickly because, as another fusion of 'giddy' and 'strong' language asserts, 'Number Five is out of the bathroom now, / We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.' 'Number Five' (referring to an occupant of apartment number five on the floor) and 'out of the bathroom' correspond to the 'strong' colloquial phrases in the first stanza. Along with 'lukewarm water,' they are also images taken directly from the kitchenette building. Yet simultaneously, the consonance of 'We,' 'lukewarm,' 'water'; 'think' and 'lukewarm'; and 'water,' 'to,' 'get,' and 'it,' as well as the double rhyme of 'minute' and 'in it,' sound like the 'white and violet' 'dream' of the second stanza. In other words, the last stanza continues to sing against 'the involuntary plan' of racist housing conditions. Indeed, the poem's ending anticipates that the 'hope' to get in the bathwater, however lukewarm, will be fulfilled, the 'dry hours' literally – and perhaps figuratively – countered. '[K]itchenette building' demonstrates that the 'strong' sounds of tenement life themselves can achieve the giddiness the residents dream about.

The first two poems in Brooks' five-poem sequence 'Hattie Scott,' another poem from her first book, also suggest sonnets without actually being sonnets as they depict an African American working-class woman in a manner that evokes and resists both nostalgia and idealization. The first poem presents an octave and a quatrain (rather than the sonnet's octave and sestet), at once conjuring and pulling away from that high cultural, idealizing form just as it conjures and pulls away from its own hints of idealization. In this first poem, 'the end of the day,' Hattie stares out the door as she finishes her work as a housekeeper, comparing that work romantically at first to the sun setting yet quickly checking such sentimentality by reconceiving the comparison in local speech. The poem imagines both Hattie and the sun saying at the end of the eighth line, 'Cap the job, then to hell with it' (1987 p. 51). The next poem in the sequence, 'the date,' continues this cool, hard, no-nonsense idiomatic style while also summoning the sonnet form without manifesting that form entirely. That second poem, 'the date,' also presents an octave (and only an octave), this time comprised of Hattie's idiomatic responses to a demeaning boss (1987 p. 52). Her retorts, though, aren't vocalized; she thinks them to herself but doesn't say them aloud because she has to keep her job. At the same time, the poem implies the condescending orders of Hattie's boss without actually presenting the boss's speech. What is evident is that Hattie is well used to workplace mistreatment that isn't just belittling but controlling and oppressive in a manner authorized by racism and sexism. And yet we only hear that

¹⁵ The standard system of notation to mark rhyme schemes is to designate them with a letter and sometimes to use *x* for words that don't rhyme.

racist and sexist abuse through Hattie's responses to it. In fact, we might say the boss's implied words constitute the 'missing' sestet if 'the date' were a complete sonnet. What's more, Hattie's speech also goes unheard by the boss even if the poem *is* her speech, for 'the date' is a litany of unspoken reactions to the boss who is callously indifferent to Hattie's time and personal life. Hattie can't respond aloud because she has to protect her livelihood, but if she can't say her replies, she can think them:

If she don't hurry up and let me out of here.
Keeps pilin' up stuff for me to do.
I ain't goin' to finish that ironin'.
She got another think comin'. Hey, you.
Watcha mean talkin' about cleanin' silver?

The colloquial language here is straightforward, but the individual sentences sound somewhat disjointed, too, especially when Hattie says 'Hey, you' at the end of the fourth line and switches from 'talkin' about' ironing to polishing in the next one. According to Bill V. Mullen, the rhyme of 'you' with the second line's 'do' sounds especially precipitous because the phrase 'Hey, you' also represents a shift in the poem's diction: 'Here, the vernacular is the source and symbol of an unabashed working-class talk-back encapsulated in the abrupt rhyme of the shouted 'Hey, you.' The break in poetic diction, its interruptive quality, liberates Brooks's/Hattie's torrential voice of resistance' (1999 p. 169). Mullen hears in this poem the 'self-speaking and coherent' vernacular of 'black . . . female proletarianization' redressing the menial work conditions created by capitalism's race, class, and gender stratifications (1999 pp. 167-68).

The poem does more, though, than amplify 'coherent' working-class speech. Indeed, 'the date' does sound like 'talk-back' even though Hattie doesn't actually utter aloud her rejoinders. But the poem is half of a script for two characters rather than just a collage of plainspoken answers. Hattie is not literally talking back to her boss but thinking back to her in lines that imply spoken orders that go unheard in the poem. In other words, Hattie is responding in her head (or perhaps under her breath) to something like 'if you think you're leaving without finishing that ironing and polishing the silver, you've got another thing coming' and 'Hey, I'm talking to you' (as if the boss has mistaken Hattie's silence for inattentiveness). Hattie's present-tense replies indicate the boss's 'lines,' and she repels those condescending directives by defiantly repeating them while placing rhetorical stress on 'ain't goin',' 'She,' 'think,' and 'you': 'I ain't goin' to finish that ironin'. / She got another think comin'. Hey, you.' Hattie resists day-to-day reality by thinking in what sounds like a language for speaking, an effective method for poetic redress since the poem shuts out the boss's imposing speaking voice just as Hattie would be well used to shutting out that voice as she works. '[T]he date' counters the reality of Hattie's onerous and demeaning workplace, for although only the boss speaks aloud in the actual scene, we hear just Hattie. An imbalance, then, has been corrected: the poem voices Hattie's thoughts, and relegates her boss's talking to the background. Brooks employs colloquial language here to demonstrate one's capacity for defiance even when that defiance cannot be articulated out loud. This working-class poem is nostalgic in the sense that it goes back to a domestic work place to reassert itself in, as Christopher and Whitson have it, 'the realistic speech patterns' of nonstandard speech. Further, this near-sonnet utilizes literary tradition not to idealize Hattie but to amplify that nonstandard speech while silencing her degrading boss—the poem returns to a domestic workspace to reverse Hattie's reality where the boss barks orders that Hattie must silently suffer.

Like Heaney, Lucille Clifton thinks of poetry as a family inheritance, and, like Brooks, she equates domestic work with poetic work. Also like both poets, Clifton is concerned with scrutinizing the language

of working-class people who have gone unheard rather than idealizing working-class characters and experiences, this time not by reproducing actual working-class speech but by ruminating abstractly on nonwhite, female ‘words.’ In ‘study the masters,’ ‘aunt timmie’ represents a collective of unacknowledged word-‘masters’ whom the poem contemplates:

it was her iron,
 or one like hers,
 that smoothed the sheets
 the master poet slept on.
 home or hotel, what matters is
 he lay himself down on her handiwork
 and dreamed. she dreamed too, words. (2000 p. 195)¹⁶

The poem does more than pay homage to Aunt Timmie’s domestic ‘handiwork.’ By stating simply ‘or one like hers’ and ‘home or hotel,’ Clifton renders her aunt’s experience as illustrative of working women of color, bordering on idealizing her: it is not Aunt Timmie’s ‘iron’ alone but ‘one like hers, / that smoothed’ the master poet’s sheets. Whether that ironing occurs in Timmie’s home or in a hotel by an anonymous housekeeper, the alliterating *h* of ‘home’ and ‘hotel’ emphasizes the shared experiences of those locales and connects the ‘handiwork’ to both ‘he . . . himself’ and ‘her.’ The poem states that ‘what matters’ is not so much where but that there ‘he’ rests on ‘her’ work, a connection we hear in that repetition of *h* sounds and in the *d*, *r*, and *w* of ‘down,’ ‘handiwork,’ ‘dreamed,’ and ‘words.’ And yet even as the poem claims that his laying down on her work is ‘what matters,’ the blank space proceeding ‘dreamed’ suggests that the poem is doubling back on that estimation and on the potential idealization of Aunt Timmie: during the pause, it shifts its focus from the master poet back to Aunt Timmie’s ‘words.’ What matters along with the fact that ‘he lay himself down on her handiwork’ is that those words emanate despite him. The poem names the woman who irons the sheets of the ‘master poet’ a ‘master’ herself.

Heaney’s mother has her lingual strategizing, Brooks’ ‘Hattie Scott’ has her Black- vernacular thinking, and Clifton’s Aunt Timmie has her ‘chanting as she iron[s]’ to sound out against silencing forces. In fact, Timmie’s dream, like that of any ‘master poet,’ is a dream of ‘words,’ in her case, ‘some cherokee, some masai and some / huge and particular as hope.’ As Cheryl A. Wall points out, the poem connects unheard workers directly to unheard poets: ‘As the spatial arrangement of the lyric affirms, the worker’s dreams are as important as the poet’s; her song, no less than his, defines America’ (2005 p. 541). Again, Clifton employs blank space to make a subtle movement: in the slight pause between ‘dreamed, too’ and ‘words,’ the poem imagines that Timmie the cleaner is also a poet—not only does she, like the master poet, dream ‘too,’ but her dreams are made of words like any poet’s dream would be. Hers is a dream in language that derives from specific, nonwhite identifications. That the ‘master’ poet in this American poem is called a ‘master’ suggests the white supremacy that structures American society. Meanwhile, ‘aunt timmie’ has Native and African lineages. The poem refers generally to ‘some cherokee’ and ‘some masai’ words to emphasize that the ‘master’ being studied here is an American working-class woman of color with non-European ancestral ties. It portrays Timmie as a ‘particular’ working woman in one line (‘it was her iron’) and then connects her in the next line to a ‘huge’ community of women (‘or one like hers’). The poem goes back to Aunt Timmie’s home or hotel to recover a crucial voice of American existence that social

¹⁶ Clifton’s ‘study the masters’ appeared as one of the new poems in *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000* (2000).

hierarchies have attempted to eradicate: listening to Aunt Timmie's masterly chanting as she irons elucidates the link between 'form and line / and discipline and order / and,' as the poem's one-word final line tells us, 'america.' Likewise, the niece's depiction of that chanting is not a sentimentalized portrait of a hard-working family member but a lesson in craftsmanship: a formalized, lineated, disciplined, ordered Black female working-class language epitomizes the poetic language of 'america.'¹⁷

Poetry in any century we might say often seems to desire idealized worlds. And yet Heaney, Brooks, and Clifton resist idealizing the family figures in their working-class poems as they honor and even long for them. Rather, idealization in these twentieth-century poems is implied and then disrupted by, namely, Heaney's lingual betrayals, Brooks' Black vernacular arranged in traditional verse forms, and Clifton's American, female, nonwhite poetic constructions set wholly apart from those of the sanctioned white male American poet. Santesso claims that in the eighteenth-century 'poets were doing something more ambitious than expressing unthinking nostalgia: they were teaching their audience what nostalgia was and how to feel it—with specific, often political purposes in mind' (2006, p. 21). They employed nostalgia in order to idealize so that they could 'create a sentimental reaction' to contemporary issues and problems 'in a broad range of readers.' Idealization was a way, in other words, to elicit empathy. Working with nostalgia strategically, Santesso demonstrates, can be frustrating for a poet to the point of artistic crisis: how does a poet convey nostalgia in way that others will relate to it without sentimentalizing the origins it seeks to return to? The twentieth-century working-class poems discussed here demonstrate that one way to create relation to others while resisting sentimental idealization is to create a longed-for familiar environment that is linguistic; such poems wield nonstandard original languages not to universalize experience but to directly refute the conditions that would suppress them with particularized, local nonstandard speech.

What these working-class poems also illuminate is that as much as nostalgia is embedded in them so is the very concept of address: who is the speaker, who's being spoken to, what kind of language is in use, and what is the relationship between these factors? Brooks often explained her poetic ambitions in terms of address: 'My aim . . . is to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call'. . . all black people, black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones' (1972, p. 183). Clifton was likewise concerned with who her language was reaching: 'What I hope is to write poetry that my Aunt Timmie can understand on one level; the cab driver can understand on another; and the Ph.D. can understand on yet another' (Clifton, cited in Witmyer 2001, p. 26-27). Finally, Heaney, who didn't discuss explicitly the address of his poetry but focused throughout his career on its redressing properties, conceived of nonstandard local speech as a way to write an 'answering poetry' and thus a 'responsible poetry': poems in the poet's 'own language,' he says, can produce 'an adequate response to conditions in the world' (1995, p. 191). Part of that adequacy in these poems is that they don't idealize working-class origins or, for that matter, conditions in the world. Rather, they go back to those origins linguistically in order to speak directly from or about those worlds and their conditions.

¹⁷ For Wall, the poem 'posits a democratic ideal that revises our understanding of the heroic and the beautiful' by paying 'homage to past masters of American vernacular poetry, such as Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes' (2005 p. 541). Clifton is placing 'aunt timmie' alongside those male poets.

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