

‘Thou Breath of Autumn’s Being’: Voicing Masculinity in the Poetry of Late Life

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Abstract: This article argues that lyric poetry is a form suited to contesting dominant ideas about masculinity because of its thematic and formal preoccupations with voice. It argues that voice offers a different way of viewing the social constrictions that accompany male experiences of ageing to the well-known theory of the mask of ageing. Through a study of a long history of Western lyric verse, which includes writers such as William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost and Philip Larkin, the article explores the significance of restricted breathing in relation to dominant norms of masculine reticence and the physiological deterioration of the vocal profile in age. It then explores the possibility of counter-voicings of masculinity in poems with intergenerational themes from a group of post-war British poets.

Keywords: ageing; masculinity; lyric poetry; voice; reticence; silence

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Introduction

In strictly formal terms, an essay on masculinity and ageing in lyric poetry does not fit within a special issue of a journal themed around the subjects of narrative and gender for the simple reason that lyric poetry is not narrative. As Scott Brewster puts it, lyric poetry is an ‘interlude’ or, more specifically, ‘a unique intensification of an everyday experience’.¹ It does not narrate a story. Narrative verse does – epic, romance, even ballad – but lyric ordinarily conceived does not. However, when Brewster refines his definition of lyric’s function as interlude, he describes poems as moments self-consciously ‘separated from a larger narrative’.² It is through recognition of the way that lyrics address and offer fresh perspectives upon larger cultural narratives to which they stand adjacent, connected yet separated through their form, that this essay argues for the value of the mode in interrogating and seeking new ways to envision the relationship between narrative and gender. Without operating *as* narrative, lyric addresses, feeds into, disputes, discloses traces of, and most importantly offers space for counter commentary on, the cultural norms and dominant critical concerns of the theme of ageing masculinity in Western literature and culture.

The title of this article includes the phrase ‘the poetry of late life’, which signals broadness, perhaps even hinting at some totalising experience or grand claim about masculinity and old age. This is not the case, and it is widely accepted that masculinity and ageing are not universal but culturally particular. Even so, the lyric poem, time-specific, yet leaning into something atemporal, the apex of which is the notion of the poem as ‘moment’s monument’ (l.1) in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s words,³ and particularly reflexive in mode – which means it is allusive and interwoven with its own intertexts, as Harold Bloom made a career of arguing – is an area where cultural norms and inherited ideas, myths and motifs coincide with individual poetic utterances. Poetry is a ground which resounds to the ‘moan’ of ‘many voices’ (l.56), as Alfred, Lord Tennyson put it in his dramatic monologue *Ulysses* (1833), by which he partly means the voices of the cultural and literary past.⁴ *Ulysses*, which reworks the aftermath of Homer’s *Odyssey* as imagined by Dante Alighieri, foregrounds anxieties about poetic authority and fatherhood for the ageing warrior-king who hopes it is ‘not too late to seek a newer world’ (l.57) but is about to pass into myth as he transfers power to his son, Telemachus.

In Bloom’s terms, the poem is about poetic influence as the ‘many voices’ of earlier poets threaten to drown out that of Ulysses who is a proxy for the young Tennyson.

¹ Brewster (2009: 6).

² Brewster (2009: 6).

³ Rossetti (1957: 212).

⁴ Tennyson (2007: 93). Hereafter Tennyson’s verse is given by line number in the text.

But the rhetorical power of Ulysses, highly age-conscious, as he implores a group of his men to nerve themselves ‘To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield’ (l.70), is first medium and then subject of the poem as it ebbs, then flows, then ebbs again across clauses: ‘you and I are old; / Old age hath yet his honour and his toil; / Death closes all’ (ll.49–51). It is possible to approach these lines as evocative of the Bloomian model of anxious influence which conjures vocal impediments, where anxiety shares its roots with *angst* (from the German *enge* meaning ‘tight’ or ‘restricted’ and the Latin *angustiae* meaning ‘distress’), which Bloom argues ‘emphasizes the characteristic of restriction in breathing’.⁵ Equally pertinent is Freud’s ‘equation of anxiety with symptoms of hyperventilation’ where inspiration or influence – literally breathing in – results in the ‘restricted expulsion’ which is the poem:⁶ anxiety is ‘a lack of breathing space’ and a ‘holding-in of breath, until some space is cleared for it’.⁷ And yet it is important not to miss the fact that Tennyson’s lines are equally about voice conceived in biological and sociocultural terms and the way these mediate depictions of anxieties surrounding masculine ageing and loss of power. It is where the explicit focus on the ageing male voice as subject intersects with the shadows of poetic influence conceived of in Bloomian terms that *Ulysses* provides a starting point for a discussion of what I will argue is a long poetic history – or even narrative – of ‘clearing space’ for alternative accounts of masculinity against dominant social norms.

Poetic history, revealed through allusion or at least shared idioms, provides its own context as we will see. But, to narrow the focus within the wider subject, I will argue that the recurrent motif of ‘holding-in’ or restriction, applied above to breath and voice, is manifested in the common theme of linking masculinity with emotional reticence in Western culture. To guide us towards the topic of reticence, and prompted by *Ulysses*, I will first sketch what I propose is a dominant arc to lyric poetry that has addressed the qualities of the ageing male voice, necessitating some broad movement across the work of a range of poets including William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Graves and Robert Frost. Focus on the comparatively neglected topic of voice, as distinct from more familiar age-related themes such as the mask of ageing, as I set out below, aids our understanding of the theme of ‘late style’ in lyric poetry, which can be demonstrated by examples from Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. But, it also invites consideration of the poetry and poetics of ‘late life’ in terms that are not confined simply to whether or not a poem is written during late life.⁸ Indeed, some of

⁵ Bloom (2005: 43).

⁶ Heys (2014: 19).

⁷ Bloom (2005: 84).

⁸ My focus is on providing a reading of the lyrical construction of attitudes to age rather than excavating poets’ biographies. These are of occasional interest to me in providing context, but, post-Barthes’s ‘death of the author’, are usually seen as reductive if given too much prominence.

the most striking examples of the intersection of masculinity and the ageing voice in the post-war era are found in poetry of younger writers, where they reveal awareness of intergenerational friction, of the sort established by Tennyson, and the potential for, if not the full realisation of, new discourses of maleness. In the final section of this essay, I will concentrate on a selection of examples deriving from post-war British writers that are particularly concerned with reticence in father-son relationships. These poets, including A. Alvarez, David Wevill and, most extensively, Tony Harrison, offer what I regard as intergenerational commentaries on masculine power dynamics, where the business of poetry is clearing space in order to speak out of an interlude within a grander narrative characterised by emotional restraint.

Ageing Vocal Profiles: Restricted Breathing and Emotional Restraint

First a word on voice. In general use, voice is a peculiarly figurative term. It regularly means more than the sound produced in the larynx and uttered through the mouth, standing in for other words such as ‘opinion’, ‘viewpoint’ or, more politically, ‘representation’. This is the case, for example, in the Latin phrase *vox populi* or ‘the voice of the people’, where the sound, the tonal quality of voice, is of no particular concern to the representation of the opinion of the people. This figurative notion of voice is not my primary interest here, but it needs establishing as it is a concomitant of vocal analysis in some of what follows. Voices can be suppressed, silenced or, when heard, departicularised. This is what I believe Gayatri Spivak means when she distinguishes between ‘speaking’ and ‘speaking *as*’.⁹ Spivak objects to the way her voice or viewpoint is often taken as indicative of a collected set of opinions about what it means to be, in her case, an Indian woman or a feminist. Without wanting to equate Spivak’s socio-cultural position with the poetry I examine, which represents white and male viewpoints, it is the case that her notion of ‘speaking *as*’, when transferred to this poetry, reveals tensions between the typical privilege assigned to masculinity and the potential marginalisation or loss of authority that Tennyson’s Ulysses fears comes with old age, which would otherwise be hidden. The cultural construction of ‘old man’ proposes age-appropriate views or behaviour often inflected and challenged through focus on voice. These can be identified in some introductory examples of age-conscious verse from Yeats, Hardy and Graves.

It is for this reason I mostly adopt the term ‘speaker’ rather than poet, as is customary in literary criticism, to refer to the lyrical subject who speaks the verse.

⁹ Spivak (1990: 60).

The most obvious example is the contrast, noted by Samuel Hynes, in the tonal quality of the late poetry of Yeats and Hardy. Yeats's raging voice, refusal to be marginalised and unwillingness to accept decline in sexual potency is, for Hynes, the means to understand that 'outside there is the caricature Age, and inside, the passionate heart',¹⁰ which is another way of expressing what Featherstone and Hepworth famously called the 'mask of ageing'.¹¹ Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928) is remembered for its image of the scarecrow: 'An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing' (ll.9–11).¹² The key to reading these lines is not the mask but the attention given to voice. The old man must sing even louder than in youth to be heard and to regain significance. So too 'The Spur' (1938), where the speaker defies decorum, adopting the second-person pronoun to directly confront his auditor on the subject of his attraction to younger women:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (ll.1–4)

These lines pulse to the provocative dance of the negative passions, 'lust' and 'rage', that rhyme on softened consonants, before the cluster of voiced and aspirated plosives in 'plague', 'young', 'spur' and 'song' assert masculine authority. The speaker will not be alienated from his own poetic subject – love – and defies social attitudes that separate ageing from sexual feeling and heightened emotion.

Where Yeats refuses to go gently into the evening of old age, Hardy's lyric poetry, following the death of his wife Emma in 1912, is notable for its hushed and hoarse tones. The most prominent example is the lyric that Hardy titled 'The Voice' (1914). The poem ostensibly addresses the feelings of a widower who misses the sound of his wife's voice and imagines he hears it only to realise it is the sound of the wind. The poem is equally concerned with the voice of the ageing male speaker. The repeated appeal for the voice to 'call to me, call to me' (l.1) prompts only a stumbling string of monosyllables: 'Saying that now you are not as you were / When you had changed from one who was all to me' (ll.2–3).¹³ The wheezing, sibilant quality of the penultimate stanza that focuses on the 'breeze' (l.9) and rhymes 'listlessness' (l.9) with 'wistlessness' (l.11) is prelude to the sudden contraction of line length in the final stanza which further performs narrowing of space but also vocal range: 'Thus I; faltering

¹⁰ Hynes (1998: 181).

¹¹ Featherstone and Hepworth (1991).

¹² Yeats (2008: 95). Hereafter Yeats's verse is given by line number in the text.

¹³ Hardy (1984: 56). Hereafter Hardy's verse is given by line number in the text.

forward, / Leaves around me falling, / Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward' (ll.13–15). The fricatives enact vocal hesitancy, as much as the falling leaves indicate hair loss, evoking Bloom's description of anxiety as 'restriction in breathing'. They participate in the aural production of the effects of the loss of muscle mass in the larynx, thinning vocal cords and drying mucous membranes that lead to changes in the voice where characteristically men speak in a higher pitch as they age.

According to Lesley Mathieson, 'All parameters of the vocal profile can be affected by the degenerative changes of old age'.¹⁴ If Yeats and Hardy have a 'late style' then it is one that registers in the way poetry's attention to vocal profile impresses associations of rejecting or acquiescing to the cultural ideas of 'speaking *as*' an old man. In both cases the poem is a type of restricted expulsion of breath – a dynamic of holding in and clearing space – in terms of poetic technique but also in response to the theme of the 'caricature Age'. In Graves's 'The Face in the Mirror' (1957), the speaker likewise exhibits a critical self-awareness of the consciousness – but also, on this occasion, the risk – of speaking *as* an old man and so confirming a set of fixed ideas about age-appropriate behaviour. Graves's speaker stares into the mirror on the cusp of shaving his beard:

Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring
 From wide, uneven orbits; one brow drooping
 Somewhat over the eye
 Because of a missile fragment still inhering,
 Skin-deep, as a foolish record of old-world fighting.

Crookedly broken nose — low tackling caused it;
 Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic;
 Forehead, wrinkled and high;
 Jowls, prominent; ears, large; jaw, pugilistic;
 Teeth, few; lips, full and ruddy; mouth, ascetic.

I pause with razor poised, scowling derision
 At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,
 And once more ask him why
 He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,
 To court the queen in her high silk pavilion (ll.1–15).¹⁵

The face tells a story which is a story of masculine self-fashioning. The 'pugilistic' jaw is fit for boxing, the broken nose a result of an old rugby injury. More importantly the face is that of the old soldier, with scarring from the 'missile fragment'. It is a

¹⁴ Mathieson (2001: 183).

¹⁵ Lucie-Smith (1985: 41–2).

personal story, although it would not be going too far to say that what stares from the mirror is the history of Western masculine norms that construct the man as hero. Pride and derision coincide. But the eyes, 'haunted' yet defiantly glaring, exude different ideas about masculine strength and vulnerability. The 'pause' is the interlude that confirms or counters the narrative to which the final stanza alludes wherein the face reoccupies its public role in the tradition of the courtier.

Notwithstanding Graves's sexuality and the issues of closeting, rather than study the mask of ageing, the poem is really a study of masculine reticence; the pause is another version of holding in or anxiety, this time against the poetic tradition of courtly love lyric and simultaneously the pain and trauma of war. Tita Chico describes the female dressing room as a space for the construction of 'progressive and retrograde versions of femininity' and here we see the same exchange in terms of masculinity.¹⁶ If the overt message of the speaker is a half-resigned 'I should know better by my age', then that is a product of the internalisation of cues to age-appropriate behaviour, a subjective counter-voicing of a masculine stereotype, the old soldier and ageing lothario (other common stereotypes include the miser, the curmudgeon and the bore). Even so, the question is self-directed, and masculinity cannot voice its plurality publicly. It only exists in the interlude of lyric; it exists because the poem holds in its dissent, waiting for a time when it can clear space in a larger cultural narrative to which the speaker indicates he is about to return. Taking off his beard is here akin to putting on a mask or, as Spivak has it, a 'distancing from oneself'.¹⁷ It is significant that we pick up on the shift into the silence of the inner mental life through a phonetic pun on the word 'inhering', meaning both embodiment *and* the sound of the missile still 'in hearing' for the veteran. Ironically, only acknowledgment of the spoken word, even when read silently, unlocks this.

So very different in the way they voice consciousness of ageing, 'The Spur' and 'The Voice' are nonetheless reactions to the same cultural narrative that expresses male ageing as physical decline and loss of potency. Hardy's speaker is unmanned by the narrowing range of voice; Yeats's speaker growls out his defiant and deliberately vulgar protest that seems the only alternative. But the other alternative to speaking out is holding in, and 'The Face in the Mirror' is a poem that ultimately broods and is inward-looking. Culturally, the poem partakes of one quality of Western masculinity which is what Thomas Strychaz calls the 'masculine psychic economy of emotional restraint'. Put simply, reticence is a signature of manliness. Strychaz argues that in the work of Ernest Hemingway, for example, 'restraint characterizes masculinity', where

¹⁶ Chico (2005: 10).

¹⁷ Spivak (1990: 60).

‘narrative silences are somehow “about masculinity”’.¹⁸ In this manner, ‘The Face in the Mirror’ is an example of silence as a commentary on maleness.

Manliness as ‘holding-in’ is also akin to the *omertà* of Southern Italian culture, or the pride in refusing to talk, where *omertà* derives from the Sicilian *omu* (meaning ‘man’) via the Spanish *hombredad* (meaning ‘manliness’). Quiet men retain an emotional power over themselves and others that does not expose them to signs of physical – or for this article, vocal – weakness. That is not an idea confined to North America and the Mediterranean. We might supplement this tradition with the great text on manliness from the British Victorian period, Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840). Carlyle values emotional restraint, where silences are about masculinity as a category. He criticises the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau because, ‘He had not “the talent of Silence”’:

The suffering man ought really ‘to consume his own smoke’; there is no good in emitting smoke till you have made it into fire [...] He that can walk under the heaviest weight without staggering, he is the strong man [...] A man who cannot *hold his peace*, till the time come for speaking and acting, is no right man.¹⁹

It is important to recognise variation: as Lynne Segal argues, ‘stereotypes of white masculinity – the typical silence on feelings and inability to express emotions for example – are so much at odds with the Black jazz, soul and reggae tradition.’²⁰ Likewise, Sam de Boise explains that extroversion is more typically female in white Western culture.²¹ Graves, therefore, places his speaker within a literary history he shares with Tennyson, Hardy and Yeats, where ‘emotional displays were acceptable but must not be excessive, lest a man “become ... the plaything of his imaginations and passions”’ as Christopher Forth puts it in *Masculinities in the Modern West*.²² Exceptions tend to uphold the fact that the phenomenon is widely present enough to amount to a myth, in which verbosity equates to masculine weakness, which hushes counter voices.

Big Manly Voices and Masculine Decline in Western Lyrical Tradition

Lyric poetry’s power to query masculine social norms comes partly through the way it highlights the quality of voice to convey or conceal emotion, which becomes

¹⁸ Strychaz (2003: 22).

¹⁹ Carlyle (1852: 290).

²⁰ Segal (1997: 188). See also, McKay (2005: 254).

²¹ De Boise (2016: 31).

²² Forth (2008: 47).

increasingly significant within the context of masculine reticence. Lyric is a form of literature that bears traces of its origins in oral culture through metrical recuperation of speech patterns, however much it happens to be engaged with print, and it is unsurprising to therefore find that voice itself is one of the main recurring focal points when masculinity and age are depicted. Three famous examples, from Shakespeare, Shelley and the Roman poet Horace, set up a dominant poetic mood and cluster of images that provide a further relevant framework for defining ageing masculinity. It has not previously been remarked that the common factor they share is the way they draw attention to the significance of vocal profile.

Horace is the father of Western lyric verse. Ageing is so embedded in his series of *Odes* as to almost consume them, most obviously in the case of the *carpe diem* philosophy, which amounts to an urgency to drag as much pleasure from youth as possible because it is short-lived and time flies. Old age has its own perspective on what it means to seize the day that responds to the ordinary way in which age is conceived by youth as a time of forthcoming regret. Horace's speaker's fire may have gone out in one sense although not another, but the poetry speaks eloquently of loss and the inability to kindle the kind of blaze of masculine power identified by Carlyle. *Ode* 3.14 announces public retreat:

Soon palls the taste for noise and fray,
When hair is white and leaves are sere:
How had I fired in life's warm May [...] (ll.25–7)²³

Loss of hair pigment is associated with withered leaves – like Hardy's 'Leaves around me falling' – and a time of life where memory indicates loss, and perhaps regret, and yet the fire of life's May time, suitable to the taste of youth, now palls the older poet's palate (here 'palls', in John Conington's translation, carries its old meaning of smoke, which links it to the smouldering of the old age of the ageing socialite Lyce in 3.14). In *Ode* 4.1, the speaker dismisses Venus, goddess of love, with tears cascading, but finds without youth, he can 'relish love no more' (l.29) and is simultaneously made voiceless: 'Wherefore halts this tongue of mine, / So eloquent once, so faltering now and weak?' (ll.35–6). This contrasts with the voice of youth, which is 'n'er tongue-tied, / Master of each manly taste' (ll.14–15), centring manliness on vocal resonance in this case rather than reticence. Weakening voice is causally linked to declining sexual and social energy and increased introversion that alienates the muse and unmans the poet resulting in a creative stammer.

The 'Seven Ages of Man' speech of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c.1599), which we can take as a lyric monody within the larger scene, is so widely

²³ Horace (1865: 84). Hereafter Horace's verse is given by line number in the text.

cited in discussions of ageing as to need little reference were it not for the fact that the common focus on the boy and man playing ‘many parts’ through the stages of his life somewhat occludes the focus on voice and speech, and so is worth quoting again in full:

All the world’s a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players;
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
 And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
 Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
 Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
 Seeking the bubble reputation
 Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
 In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
 His youthful hose, well sav’d, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II, vii, 139–66)²⁴

The progress across the stages of the life course is characterised by alterations in the resonance of the male voice. Beginning with the infantile ‘Mewling’ and ‘whining’ of boyhood, graduating to the role of lover ‘Sighing like furnaces’ and the ‘oaths’ of the soldier, then to the ‘wise saws’ or sayings of maturity, which is demonstrated through rhetorical composure, manliness is measured in the achievement of the bass-baritone of the ‘big manly voice’. Shakespeare identifies the weakening voice as an auditory accompaniment to old age that cannot be masked, the male voice returning to a

²⁴ Shakespeare (1998: 173).

quavering, ‘childish treble’, and, ultimately, the ‘whistles’ of non-signifying ‘sound’. Departure from the prime of life is heard in the catch in the throat, the restriction in breathing space, that is taken as a symbol of, or prelude to, failing physical and mental powers.

Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* (1820), unlike the pessimistic sentiments of Jaques, is often presented as a poem of youthful, Romantic optimism. It *is* optimistic but it inherits much from Horace and Shakespeare about ageing. The poem’s central metaphor is of the west wind being the ‘breath of Autumn’s being’ (l.1), which the poet-speaker wishes to channel into his own verse.²⁵ The season of autumn is often a signifier of ageing, but the breath which gives the wind voice has strength, depth and resonance of the sort to which Tennyson’s Ulysses rhetorically aspires. The speaker turns to the wind for inspiration not in an imaginative sense but in the older sense where inspiration means inhalation:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone (ll.57–60)

The leaves are hair, looking back to Horace and forward to Hardy. Also, like Horace, and perhaps heard in the ‘Sighing like furnace’ of Shakespeare too, Shelley’s autumnal tones are linked to the quality to inflame:

... by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! (ll.65–9)

Shelley’s speaker imagines readers reading his verse aloud – ‘incantation’ – recuperating his own ageing voice that through his lips becomes ‘prophecy’, a Romantic adjustment of God’s instruction to Moses in *Exodus* 4:11 that he will not ‘stutter and stammer’ if God speaks through him. Although a poem about ageing, it is dominated by the standards of authority poetically enshrined by the ‘big manly’ voice of middle years.

Horace, Shakespeare and Shelley offer a cluster of common images related to waning masculine force: youth is fire while age is cold, or fire extinguished; hair, dry, falls like leaves; age means retreat from public life. Above all, we have the dimensions of a masculine vocal profile recounting different features of ageing: where Shelley finds depth to move in the wind’s breath, Shakespeare gives his account of the physiological

²⁵ Shelley (1977: 221). Hereafter Shelley’s verse is given by line number in the text.

loss of chest capacity and diminishing vocal strength, which creates the ‘treble’ and ‘whistles’ that signify the ageing male voice, while Horace shows voice marginalised and made hesitant by the poet’s alienation through age from the very topic he once sang more evocatively than others: love and lust. Biological, functional and aesthetic concerns overlap where the spoken word and the sound of the voice itself point us to issues of masculine ageing. In the final section of this essay, I will draw the interweaving threads of these traditions into a reading of a selection of the work of British post-war poets.

Clearing Space: Intergenerational Variations in Post-War Lyrics

In its reflexive way, what is striking is how frequently and with what variety lyric poetry uses its traditions of restricted breathing as typifying the ageing voice to explore ideas of masculine decline. It is in lyric verse that study of voice most clearly supplements the more commonly remarked socio-cultural theories of the mask of ageing. Many examples could be quoted from the twentieth century. The ageing man resiles from his public heroism into ‘stertorous silences’ (l.20) in W. H. Auden’s ‘After’ (1926–7); the death of the gods of masculine achievement are accompanied by ‘a stertorous after-dinner doze’ (l.12) in W. E. Henley’s ‘The gods are dead’ (1921).²⁶ Auden alludes to Shelley in ‘Now the Leaves are Falling Fast’ (1938), while R. S. Thomas extrapolates the Shelleyan intertexts further in ‘An Old Man’ (1961) who is voiceless and ‘destitute as an old tree stripped / Of foliage under a bald sky’ (ll.7–8).²⁷ When Philip Larkin rages against the resignation and submission to decrepitude in the somewhat shocking poem ‘The Old Fools’ (1973), amongst his harsh accusations, what is most uncomfortable is the ranting tone in the context of a care home, where the voice of youth demands some emotional reaction: ‘Why aren’t they screaming?’ (l.12).²⁸ The question is directed to the reader who judges that the speaker misses something of his own later description of ageing as ‘the constant wear and tear / Of taken breath’ (ll.39–40). Larkin even slips in a Shakespearean intertext to underline the association when he calls old age ‘The whole hideous, inverted childhood’ (l.47).

These examples explore ‘Autumn’s being’ through shortening breath and a voice that has consequently lost the ability to command or even the capacity to be heard. In contrast to Larkin’s aggression, Robert Frost’s ‘An Old Man’s Winter Night’ (1916) tones down the Shelleyan resonant ageing voice into a muted memory as the old man

²⁶ Auden (1994: 175), Henley (1921: 74).

²⁷ Hewett (1989: 240, 302–3).

²⁸ Larkin (1988: 196). Hereafter Larkin’s verse is given by line number in the text.

of the poem slumbers before his own 'unextinguish'd hearth': 'The log that shifted with a jolt / Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted, / And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept' (ll.23–5).²⁹ It is a poem, like Hardy's 'The Voice', about narrowing or constriction, indicated by the vocal profile, but where the 'quiet light' (l.17) (deliberately 'quiet' rather than 'dim'), is seen as sufficient in retirement. The poem turns in the final three lines on the shift from the incredulous statement of youth about the old man's apparent incapacity to run, or be happy within, his home – 'One aged man – one man can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside' (ll.26–7) – to the softer conditional 'or if he can, / It's thus he does it of a winter night' (ll.27–8), which acts as an audible, positive counter-voicing of masculine self-containment away from the 'sounds, familiar' (l.12) of the world 'out-of-doors' (l.1).

Despite the obvious differences in their vocal profiles, the poems of Larkin (rasping, angry) and Frost (gently spoken), like Hardy and Yeats before them, share similar ideas about, though react differently to, the process of ageing as acquiescence, or even complicity, in a process of physical deterioration that is set out by earlier poets. But, as I have argued, two different types of restricted expulsion seem to recur in depictions of the male voice in the history of Western lyric verse – one physiological, one sociocultural – and the other, which I have described as emotional reticence or self-silencing, also requires incorporation in analysis of my final set of examples. For Larkin and Frost, vocal deterioration from the standard of the 'big manly voice' of Shakespeare is accompanied by an inability to emote, which is a product of mishearing by a younger voice that speaks out, to different ends, with contrasting, forthright ignorance.

That intergenerational aspect is most commonly found in poems of the post-war era that explore father–son relationships through attention to vocal profile. What is notable is that, in examples from Alvarez, Wevill and Harrison, each lyric interlude raises possibilities of counter-voices within the long cultural narratives I have set out by placing these traditions of manliness in dialogue with each other. The poems bear the traces of the inheritance of lyric poetry's obsession with the power or weakness of the male voice that I have outlined, but, through this, develop further than we have previously seen the possibility of clearing space within the long cultural shadows of male reticence. It is notable that an intergenerational context facilitates not just a possibility of throwing off the oppression of a dominant patriarchal voice, which is the case with Alvarez, but integration of different voices through focus on emotional ties, which is a position we see Wevill approaching and Harrison more fully enacting. If vocal decline indicates weakness and reticence equates to strength, the ageing voice and its impediments is the site at which the cultural signs of masculinity can be inspected and alternatives, through motifs of clearing space after a metaphorical

²⁹ Hewett (1989: 281). Hereafter Frost's verse is given by line number in the text.

holding in of breath, imagined. More than just metaphor, as is the case with Bloom's ideas of poetic influence, we find that the restricted expulsion of air is both content and formal device, where understanding becomes a matter of listening more attentively, unlike the speakers of 'The Old Fools' and 'An Old Man's Winter Night', as the weakening male voice in old age offers an interlude to counter emotional reticence.

Alvarez was first associated with the Movement poets, noted for their nostalgia and anti-modernity, but moved away from this ethos and some of his most powerful poetry focuses on dreaming (he published a study of dreams in 1995 titled *Night*). In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1974), Alvarez uses the delineation of his experience of waking from a nightmare in which he revisits his father's death to explore the constriction and release of grief and feelings of guilt in relation to ideas of masculinity that haunt the present. The abruptness of the speaker's return to consciousness before full light is set in turbulent contrast to the peace inside and outside the home: 'I wake up struggling, silent, undersea / Light and a single thrush is tuning up / You sleep and the baby sleeps' (ll.13–15).³⁰ Reminders of his own recent fatherhood contrast with the struggle to remove the distressing image of his father's 'blue' (l.1) face from his mind's eye. Most distressingly, within the nightmare sequence that opens the poem, the father's death is attributed to "Death from strangulation / By persons known" (ll.9–10), suggesting perhaps an image of guilt framed as Freudian castration anxiety. The title's reference to Freud's own *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) should not pass unnoticed, wherein melancholia indicates a loss that an individual is unable to fully comprehend, occurring in the unconscious mind. The dream's image-content also plays with the idea of silencing the father in an aggressive act – strangulation – which in this case means silencing a set of values associated with the power of the father to shame the son, as the poem begins to make clear.

Breath and voice are the key ingredients to unlocking the poem's melancholia. While we are told that outside 'Foxes are out on the Heath' (l.16), where they 'sniff the air like knives' (l.17), slicing through the clear atmosphere, the speaker's bedroom forms a restrictive space, tomb-like in its construction, in ironic counterpoise to the announcement that 'Three years back my father's corpse was burnt' (l.20), or cremated, with his 'ashes scattered' (l.21) on the air. In what reads as an almost-Gothic scene of reprisal, the ashes of the father are imagined returning to restrict the breathing of the son:

Three years back my father's corpse was burnt,
His ashes scattered. Now I breathe him in
With the grey morning air, in and out.
In out. My heart bumps steadily

³⁰ Lucie-Smith (1985: 162). Hereafter Alvarez's verse is given by line numbers in the text.

Without pleasure. The air is thick with ash.
In out. I am cold and powerless. His face
Still pushes sadly into mine. He's disappointed.
I've let him down, he says. Now I'm cold like him.
Cold and untameable. Will have to be put down. (ll.20–8)

These lines evoke the rhythms of panicked breathing and the constricted chest where the initial regularity of 'in and out', in response to inhaling the weight of a father's expectations, collapses through the loss of the conjunction into the more rapid 'In out', suggesting the struggle to clear space against the suffocating metaphorical ash. The repeated 'In out' captures a lack of breathing space with the speaker unable to cry out in distress or risk waking the house and, in the process, unmanning himself. In an inversion of the nightmare, the speaker experiences his own asphyxiation as he remains 'silent' while it is the voice of the father that speaks out bluntly and with authority in the present tense: 'I've let him down, he says'.

The poem comes to rest in a scene of masculine reticence linked to vocal impediment; holding in without yet clearing space, it is a 'restricted expulsion' in Bloom's terms that identifies but queries a history of masculine restraint. If the younger speaker's ventriloquising of the father's voice establishes it not, in fact, as the voice of decline but as still resonant and powerful, then the poem, and idea, can only exist as interlude. The enforced silence of the speaker indicates that the lyrical interlude within the history of manliness is, like Graves's 'The Face in the Mirror', poised, preparatory to clearing space in the cultural narrative that presents the father as distant and emotionally cold. 'Now I'm cold like him', reaffirms the role to which the speaker is about to return, but the interlude voices dissent. The dream, and the domestic context of the speaker's own new fatherhood, raises possibilities for a model of masculinity that is more tender and less domineering.

Age-consciousness, becoming or replacing the father in a Freudian psychodrama in this case, draws the contrasting ideas of vocal power and emotional reticence that I have been exploring to the fore but the poem fails to wholly clear space for alternatives. That same theme appears to work in different ways in Wevill's 'My Father Sleeps' (1961), in which he tackles even more openly than Alvarez the Calylean inheritance of the heroic, taciturn strongman embodied in the figure of his sleeping father.³¹ The severity and distance of male relationships is first reflected in the physical features: 'By these lines his mouth and his eyes / Have fixed' (ll.4–5).³² But the mouth – the eyes are closed – becomes the centre of characterisation as we are informed 'without further

³¹ David Wevill is a Japanese-born Canadian poet, but he belonged to the British literary world in the 1960s 'by residence and adoption', as Edward Lucie-Smith puts it (1985: 197).

³² Lucie-Smith (1985: 197). Hereafter Wevill's verse is given by line number in the text.

talk' (l.5), his father 'Taught me at last how to walk' (l.6). If the instruction suggests constraint and discipline, that 'at last' hints at a subsequent overcoming of the learned behaviours of boyhood. The speaker notes that there is a departure from the painful memory of his father's 'anger bred / Of disillusionment' (ll.10–11) with his son, which 'has gone with age' (l.11), that indicates emotional mellowing.

The possibility for greater emotional connection between the two men, a contestation of the cultural narrative of father–son inhibition, is presented as a product of the father's sleep. That offers an interlude, but it is not quite silence, as the father's heavy breathing provides aural accompaniment to the speaker's memories of the kind of masculine power that is associated with emotional and vocal restraint. Like King Lear, the father was, and remains, 'Afraid of words as of madness' (l.15) and 'A lover of plain-spokenness' (l.17) that marks him 'too much the hero / For our friendship's good' (ll.13–14). Out of the absence of alternatives for male communication, Wevill uses the ageing male voice to query its power to silence alternatives through its own menacing and uncompromising silence by turning to the sound of his father's breath: 'In the sleep of sixty years, jaws firm, / Breathing through the obstacle of his nose / a stubborn air that is truth for him' (ll.24–6). The stertorous breathing indicates decline in personal power that speaks back to and, ironically, contests the earlier descriptions of reticence. The obstacle in the old man's respirations is now a metaphor for the equivalent obstacle to emotional connection with his son, which cannot be spoken, and which makes the hero but mutes the father. In the silence, it is the speaker who finds 'a questioning / Depth' (ll.28–9), 'that in his sleep stirs its cruel beginning' (l.30), the motions of the poem becoming analogous to the prophecy of Shelley's west wind. Yet we are left with an *omertà* between the two men, the interlude of the poem holding in at the final moment, still fighting for a voice that would clear space in the cultural narratives that link male strength with either the manly voice or emotional restraint.

Where Alvarez and Wevill evoke varying degrees of emotional claustrophobia, it is Harrison, perhaps the poet of the British post-war movement most commonly linked to phonetic play, who offers the clearest indication of less restricted masculine expulsion. Harrison's 1978 collection, *The School of Eloquence* is well-titled given its obsession with the speaking voice and the male respiratory system. Three poems, 'Cremation', 'Working' and 'Book Ends', speak to each other in terms that realise more fully the intergenerational connection, and alternative masculinities, that we see emergent in Alvarez and Wevill. In 'Cremation', Harrison tackles the subject of what Alan Kellehear calls 'our reticence to recognize the almost inescapable link between ageing and dying',³³ but in the terms of the figure of the belligerent ageing man who is

³³ Kellehear (2011: 25).

‘clearing his throat’. As with Wevill, we can take it that a vocal obstruction is an emotional one too, as his wife knows, though fails to say, that the old man is ‘raking / ’s death off his mind’ (ll.2–3).³⁴ Harrison, as so often, uses a pun here, as ‘raking’ simultaneously applies to the action of stirring up the coals of the fire to increase their heat and to clearing the throat. Harrison repeats, as a joke, the link we witnessed in Horace and Shakespeare between the voice displaying weakness and the fire of life going out. But raking the coals is presented as a ritual that is largely a distraction from the prospect of emotional engagement – in this case that means being unable to speak to his wife and son about his fears. For Harrison, the backdrop to silence is the struggle of life worked down a Yorkshire coal mine. He has ‘His, his dad’s and *his* dad’s lifetime down below’ (l.9) deeply engrained.

There is an element of grotesquery in the description, ‘He keeps back death the way he keeps back phlegm / in company, curled on his tongue’ (ll.11–12). As the father finally spits contemptuously into the fire, his wife hears ‘the hot coals hiss’ (l.16), another negation of Shelley’s ‘unextinguish’d hearth’, also heard in Frost’s ‘An Old Man’s Winter Night’, where there is no prophecy and are no words, only the sound of fire going out. As with several of Harrison’s other poems, the mouth becomes the focus of oppression as well as repression in emotional terms, but also in a political context which can be framed through Spivak’s ideas of the social construction, and silencing, of some voices in favour of others. Hence, in ‘Working’ from the same collection, Harrison suggests that his social commentary is partly prompted by the reluctance of an older generation of men, associated with hard manual labour, to speak out: ‘Wherever hardship held its tongue the job / ’s breaking the silence of the worked-out gob’ (ll.15–16). The risk, as Harrison implies, is to be castigated for ‘speaking *as*’ a Yorkshire miner, lacking a formal education. Here ‘gob’, slang for mouth, but also, as a footnote informs the reader, ‘an old Northern coal-mining word for the space left after the coal has been extracted’,³⁵ is aptly rhymed with ‘job’. It is implied that it is less a case of cultural assumptions about reticence and strength that silence the ageing father, but that the working man is no longer capable of voicing resistance due to the wear and tear of life’s work. In this case we can align physiological and sociocultural or political ideas of what constitutes a ‘voice’: the physical impediment to speaking out is a product of the realities of social hardship as much as fear of social judgement. The poet’s alternative ‘job’ is to break that silence in verse, clearing emotional space – suitably like the coal from the seam – where masculine cultural imperatives otherwise dictate it should be held in.

Next to this poem in the sequence is ‘Book Ends’, written in two parts, which concerns Harrison’s relationship with his father following the death of his mother.

³⁴ Harrison (2006: 125).

³⁵ Harrison (2006: 124).

Here father and son are united in their reticence about the subject as he recalls the voice of his mother, indicated in the poem by italics:

We never could talk much, and now don't try.

*You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,
Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare ...*

The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay,
only our silence made us seem a pair. (ll.4–8)

The mother's voice has an eloquence that is also a wilful blindness that does not remark the differences between the two men, coalmining father and poet son. The speaker reflects ironically on their overt dissimilarities, framed by power dynamics linked to eloquence. The poet-son is as equally muted as the ordinarily taciturn father. Without the mediating presence of wife and mother, the speaker rehearses silent reprisals to his father whose own silence now indicates emotional vulnerability rather than distance. The father's need for the son's 'company' (l.11) is made more poignant by the fact that his wife is no longer there to 'tell us we're alike!' (l.12).

The masculine reticence yields to some emotional thawing, however, as, despite the lack of direct or reported speech from the father in Part One, the speaker indicates a union between the two men through the adoption of signs of the spoken word:

Back in our silences and sullen looks,
for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books (ll.14–16).

As in 'Cremation' and 'Working', the abbreviation 's', which occurs here in line 15, is doing a lot of work. It indicates the Yorkshire accent and hence the spoken word. In 'Cremation', 'raking / 's death off his mind' suggests shorthand for 'is', just as it does in 'Working'. In, 'Book Ends', it seems to collapse 'is' into 'us', the latter often used in the Yorkshire dialect to mean 'our' in general use. That subtle shift, phonetically indicated, draws the two men back together, honouring the spoken voice and through it community (us = our), despite the distance suggested by the title of the poem and Harrison's learning that forms a barrier of 'books, books, books'. It prepares the way for Part Two of the poem in which the obstinacy on both sides finds emotional outlet.

In the stubbornness of the father's voice in Part Two, respect and understanding develops as the two men search for the right words for the inscription on the headstone:

*You're supposed to be the bright boy at description
and you can't tell them what the fuck to put! (ll.27–8)*

The son responds: 'I've got to find the right words on my own' (l.29) but recognises he cannot find more eloquence than his father's chosen words, 'beloved' and 'wife'. In masculine terms, Harrison's father admits to being a 'clumsy talker' (l.23), but this is belied by his outburst to his son and the new presence in the poem of the father's direct speech. The collective voices of the poem reveal the frailties of male defiance even in its outburst, unlike the obstacles to utterance depicted by Wevill. It is odd that in some ways Harrison honours that tradition whereby the man 'consumes his own smoke' until speaking becomes most necessary. But his own voice and viewpoint in the poem means it does not come as emotional reticence, but as emotional communication beyond the occasion of its utterance. Focus on the voice of the father is partly a case of revealing the issues of thwarted masculinity – pride and stubbornness but also resignation – for a man who is historically socially muted – in that his education and class leave him disempowered, as we see in 'Working'. In that sense, even while speaking as a poet, Harrison constructs a poetic heteroglossia, 'speaking *as*' his father and men of his generation and background. But it is attention paid to the vocal profile of these poems as examples in the long tradition of the poetry of late life – which, in this case means the interplay between the constrictions or holdings-in that characterise the ageing male voice and the space cleared through intergenerational emotional bonds – that allows us to discern conditions that might make the impediments to voicing alternative ideas of masculinity recede. That is a matter that can be tied to specific social factors, but which emerges most clearly when seen through the lens of the larger intrapoetic theme I have charted in which the ageing, weakening male voice, signifying loss of power, is, in an intergenerational context, no longer just an example of restriction but also an occasion for contesting the cultural associations of male reticence with strength. It is the subject of the ageing voice that enables a lyrical interlude that contests even as it cannot overturn the long tradition of the inability of men to emote. It sounds convenient, but that makes it no less true, to say that if Part One of 'Book Ends' constitutes holding in, then Part Two is signified by clearing breathing space in the model I have set out. The chance to contest the norms of masculine reticence through the marginalisation of the 'big manly voice' as ideal standard, where neither man assumes the privileges associated with it, is provided by Harrison in an interchange between holding in and clearing space that so frequently accompanies lyric poetry's focus on voice.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the interlude offered by lyric poetry's focus on the inheritance of masculine cultural norms can be understood by attention to what I have called

the vocal profile of poetry concerned with late life. Two traditions work independently and, at times, interdependently: the first centres on the diminishment of physical, mental and social power associated with voices that depart from the Shakespearean standard of the 'big manly voice' of the prime of life due to old age; the second comprises a study of power linked not to eloquence but to emotional reticence. Both are in fact facets of the same concern with failures to embody standards of manliness successfully. What has hitherto passed unremarked is that the weakness customarily associated with the ageing voice, when it is the focus of lyric poetry, clears a breathing space for counter-voices in the larger narratives of hegemonic masculinity that privilege reticence. The latter is a type of holding in, both in relation to poetic tradition, as Bloom would have it, but also in terms of the specific depiction of the sound and range of voice. The phenomenon fits with the American poet, Frank O'Hara's assessment that poetry is ultimately the attempt to find 'one's own measure and breath'.³⁶

The tradition of considering the ageing male voice in poetry reaches back as far as Horace and rises in Shakespeare and a subsequent line of male poets that includes Shelley, Tennyson, Hardy, Yeats, Frost and Graves. But, as I have shown, it is particularly prevalent in the work of poets of the post-war period in Britain, who were often dealing with ideas of masculinity associated with war and work and the need as a younger generation to find an appropriate response. It is here that we find, through engagement with the inheritance of cultural assumptions about the ageing reality of big manly voices and lyric's diachronic concerns with its formal derivations in voice and speech, that alternative voicings of masculinity and the emotions begin to be heard in lyric poetry when it makes its business the clearing of space in order to speak out of an interlude within a grander narrative characterised by emotional restraint.

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³⁶ O'Hara (1975: 17).

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