
Part I

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“To Get the News from Poems”

Poetry as Genre

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The difficulty of crafting a precise definition of poetry that could include high-art formalism and Creole performance poetry, sonnets and collage poems, W.B. Yeats and Gertrude Stein, should not be underestimated. Like epics, comedies, novels, and works in other genres and modes, poems are threaded together by family resemblances, but their variousness is hard to fit under one conceptual roof, built out of identifiable formal and thematic characteristics. In the *OED*, poetry is defined as:

Composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition.

Traditionally associated with explicit formal departure from the patterns of ordinary speech or prose, e.g. in the use of elevated diction, figurative language, and syntactical reordering.

In an introduction to a poetry anthology, *The Poet's Tongue*, W.H. Auden famously defined poetry as “memorable speech,” explaining that poetry heightens “audible spoken word and cadence,” “power of suggestion and incantation,” “alternating periods of effort and rest,” and “tension between” personal and inherited rhythms, while emphasizing “[s]imiles, metaphors of image or idea, and auditory metaphors such as rhyme, assonance, and alliteration” and “the aura of suggestion round every word” (*English Auden* 327). Though profoundly useful, these and other genre distillations are vexed by what they exclude: poems that avoid patterning or intensity, free-verse poems without mnemonic structures, poems written not in “elevated diction” but in a vernacular or dialect, and so forth. They are also vexed by what they inadvertently include, such as sermons and political speeches, hard-to-forget jingles

and James Joyce's novels. Auden was well aware that the qualities he ascribed to poetry—rhythm, figuration, sound patterning, and polysemy—aren't exclusive to it, and so he cited alongside Housman and Shakespeare a popular song and a schoolroom mnemonic for remembering a Latin gender, as well as the "good joke" made by the poetry-phobe who unwittingly "creates poetry" (*English Auden* 329). But this laudable theoretical elasticity doesn't resolve all the issues: if it did, and if Auden thought jokes and schoolroom mnemonics were indeed poems, why didn't he include them alongside the sonnets, ballads, and epigrams indexed in *The Poet's Tongue*?

One way of trying to get around the difficulties of defining poetry is the adoption of a more circumscribed vocabulary of genre, such as "twentieth-century British sonnets" and "modern American elegies." It limits the scope of the problem and avoids flattening historical and cultural differences. Even so, intractable boundary questions remain. What, for example, gets included and shut out by "British," "American," or "modern"? Does "sonnet" mean any fourteen-line poem, or are specific meters and stanzas and themes also prerequisites, and what about near-sonnets? Does "elegy" include only poems of mourning for individuals or also blues poems and group laments and works of self-mourning (Ramazani)? What is the relation between historically and culturally disparate instances of each subgenre? Whether framed broadly as "poetry," or limited to the sonnets and elegies, villanelles and aubades of a particular era and culture, definitions of genre are inherently unsettled by their porous, shifting, and uncertain boundaries.

But to discard genre as an interpretive framework because of its untidiness would be to make unrecognizable the specific ways in which individual works invoke and resist genre conventions. The "transgression requires a law," writes Tzvetan Todorov (14), and Jacques Derrida adds that a text "cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text" (65). Genre descriptors like "poem of mourning for the dead" and "fourteen-line poem"; or "patterned arrangement," "intensity," "distinctive style and rhythm," and "elevated diction, figurative language, and syntactical reordering"; or "speech" made "memorable" by rhythm, figuration, sound patterning, and polysemy, should be seen not as strictly defining elegies, sonnets, and poems but as pragmatically delineating what cognitive psychologists call "schemas" and what Hans Robert Jauss terms "horizons of expectation," which "can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced" (88). Because genres are historically and culturally differentiated, and because individual works both activate and press against the genre assumptions brought to bear on them, critical use of the term "poetry," as well as "elegy," "sonnet," "ballad," "sestina," "ghazal," "pantoum," and the like, requires a pragmatic awareness both of the power of genre terms and of their unavoidable overreach and imprecision.

A major reason for poetry's ineluctable messiness as a concept is that genres are not sealed off from one another, transmitted in isolation through the centuries, but responsive, in A. K. Ramanujan's words, "to previous and surrounding traditions; they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbours" (8); "a whole tradition may invert,

negate, rework, and revalue another" (9). Genres constantly absorb materials from other genres, even those against which they define themselves. Hence, all genres are ineluctably intergeneric, and all genres are *genera mixta*. In a dialogic understanding of genre, poetry is infiltrated by and infiltrates its generic others. Writers are constantly enlarging (Marianne Moore's poeticization of "business documents and // school-books" ["Poetry"]) and narrowing (Stéphane Mallarmé's restrictive "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" ["Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe"]) the intergeneric scope of what is understood to be "poetry," "lyric," "sonnet," "elegy," "ballad," and so forth. Narrow it too much, and a genre risks choking in self-parody. Enlarge it too much, and it risks vanishing into unrecognizability, unable to activate the genre-based assumptions that propel the hermeneutic circle of literary engagement.

In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," William Carlos Williams implicitly identifies poetry's specificity by placing the genre in an intergeneric context:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

(ll.317–21)

Although the news is usually seen as essential for modern citizenship, poetry as a leisure option, Williams's famous declaration of poetry as the soul-sustaining opposite of the news inverts center and periphery. The implications of his claim may be worth pursuing for the genre-based study of modern and contemporary poetry, since among the many genres that constitute the discursive field out of which poems are carved, the news has a particular power and pervasiveness under modernity. The news is an especially insistent discursive other in relation to which poetry's distinctiveness can be understood.

"Every morning brings us the news of the globe," laments Walter Benjamin, "and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories" ("Storyteller" 89). Benjamin famously theorized the newspaper as the generic opposite of storytelling. Although his insights have more often been brought to bear on the novel, much of Benjamin's argument in "The Storyteller" applies more forcefully to poetry. In his analysis, the news is shallow and ephemeral, whereas the traditional story is, like a poem in Auden's distillation, strongly oral, mnemonic, and grounded in a long tradition:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time . . . [A] story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the

chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis.

("Storyteller" 90–91)

Concentrated, compact, durable, memorable—these are qualities also invoked by Auden and others to characterize our expectations of poetry, a discourse with "an amplitude that information lacks" ("Storyteller" 89). Whereas the storyteller, like the poet, seeks to instill thoughtfulness and reflection, Benjamin writes in "The Newspaper" that "impatience is the state of mind of the newspaper reader," an "all-consuming impatience," a "longing for daily nourishment" by fragmentary and disconnected facts ("Newspaper" 741). The newspaper, in Benjamin's analysis, commodifies information, "the scene of the limitless debasement of the word" ("Newspaper" 742). If transience, impatience, fragmentation, and linguistic debasement seemed to afflict the newspapers in Benjamin's 1920s and 1930s, the rise of electronic and digital news media since that time has only exacerbated these features of the news. The main requirement for information is the appearance of "prompt verifiability," that it seem "'understandable in itself'" ("Storyteller" 89). In contrast, poetry and storytelling depend on long traditions to legitimize their far-fetched imaginings, their stretch, their amplitude.

If we take our cues from Williams, Auden, and Benjamin, one approach to the impossibly general question, "what is poetry?," is the almost equally general answer: under modernity, poetry is what it is by virtue of not being the news. Compared with the news, poetry seems compressed and memorable, phonetically patterned and figuratively rich, if also slow and often counterfactual; compared with poetry, the news seems instantaneous and transparent and dense with information, if also ephemeral, denotative, and flat. But these contrasts obviously oversimplify, less because the news sometimes aspires to poetry in, for example, punning headlines, than because poetry is itself sometimes shot through with the news. If we turn to a handful of modern and contemporary poems, we see that, in accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic model of genre, poetry both incorporates and resists the news. After all, pace Williams, if we tried to get the news of the last century or so from poems, we wouldn't come up empty handed. In English-language poems, we'd learn a great deal about the world wars, especially the first; the Great Depression; the decolonization of European empires since Ireland's Easter Rising; changes in gender relations; the rise of new technologies; the wars in Vietnam and Iraq; and so forth. More recently, the news event that outstripped all others was the September 11 destruction of the World Trade Center, my starting point in analyzing individual poems in relation to the news. By exploring the news as one of modern and contemporary poetry's generic others and simultaneously as one of its generic cousins, I consider both poetry's specificity as genre and its infiltration by, and engagement with, other discourses—that is, how poetry echoes and inverts, plays on, and absorbs the news, among other genres.

Helping examine poetry in its generic particularity and relationality, Seamus Heaney's "Anything Can Happen" might seem an odd example of the newsy poem, since among the many poems about the September 11 attacks, it reworks a 2,000-year-old Latin ode by Horace ("after Horace, *Odes I, 34*") (11). But this very fact tells us something important about poetry and its distinctive approach to the news:

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head
Before he hurls the lightning? Well, just now
He galloped his thunder-cart and his horses

Across a clear blue sky. It shook the earth
And clogged underearth, the River Styx,
The winding streams, the Atlantic shore itself.

(ll.1-7)

The "just now" of Horace's poem ("*nunc*") is renewed, doubling as the now of the ancient past and the now of the immediate present, unlike the singular "now" of the news. To reiterate and adapt Benjamin, poetry "does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time." Heaney's poem evidences poetry's delayed-release capacity by reawakening an ancient poem, highlighting its surprisingly strong resonances with the contemporary (the cloudless sky, the shaking earth, the rivers and shore, the inversions of fortune). It represents itself as an overlay on an earlier poem, showing poetry to be, in words quoted earlier from Benjamin and perhaps especially appropriate for an ode, "still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness." One part of our experience of Heaney's poem is the power of its compact and eerie evocation of the 9/11 attacks, another is our wonder at poetry's transhistorical durability and transnational adaptability: "It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day." Poet and reader encounter the "news event" through a cross-historical and cross-cultural detour into literary antiquity, responding simultaneously to an ancient text and to current reality.

By first publishing the poem then titled "Horace and the Thunder" in *The Irish Times* on November 17, 2001, Heaney emphasized the poem's intersections with the news, but in so doing, he also accentuated the difference between poetry's slow, layered, and indirect way of telling the news and much of what's found in the newspaper. To repeat Benjamin on the news media: "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time." This is what Benedict Anderson calls the "obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing" (35). After the 9/11 attacks, many of us remember feeling that "all-consuming impatience" for news about who, what, when, where, and how, as we

scoured newspapers and radio, TV, and the Internet. Heaney's poem adds nothing to this store of information. And yet it has "an amplitude that information lacks."

Anything can happen, the tallest things

Be overturned, those in high places daunted,
Those overlooked regarded. Stropped-beak Fortune
Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,
Setting it down bleeding on the next.

(ll.8–12)

By intertwining with an ancient poem in another language, Heaney's poem openly declares the transhistorical and transnational dependency of poems on other poems and, more generally, of thoughtful and reflective understanding on long time horizons and vast contexts often absent from the news. Instead of aspiring like the news to what Benjamin calls "prompt verifiability," Heaney's poem isn't "understandable in itself": you have to know something not only about the Twin Tower attacks but also about Horace, Jupiter, the River Styx, and classical Fortune; you have to have some context for the poem's literariness and difficulty, its classical mythology and elevated diction ("Stropped-beak" meaning a beak strop-sharpened like a razor). The poem acknowledges its deep embeddedness within literary tradition, instead of presenting itself as a history-free report of current reality. Like Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," it sees current upheaval as a bird-like assault on the human by the divine. It has, as Heaney says of poetry and Benjamin suggests of storytelling, "a touch of the irrational," "a soothsaying force" (13). With its news orientation and yet also its unpredictable deities, swooping fortune, and hurling lightning, the poem is true to our divided experience of such horrific events, in Heaney's words, "partly as assimilable facts of day-to-day life, partly as some kind of terrible foreboding, as if we were walking in step with ourselves in an immense theatre of dreams" (14).

As memorable speech that remembers prior memorable speech, and yet that also evokes contemporary reality, the poem freely translates Horace to point up references to 9/11, dropping Horace's first stanza and adding a new final stanza:

Ground gives. The heavens' weight
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.
Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.
Smoke furl and boiling ashes darken day.

(ll.13–16)

The last line's syntactic complexity ("furl" used not as a verb but as a noun) and its echo of Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" ("The day of his death was as dark cold day" [*Selected Poems*, ll.6, 31]) complete a poem that has built up intensity by deploying a variety of poetic resources, including apostrophe ("You know . . ."); enjamb-

ment (emphasizing “just now” at the end of one line and “Across a clear blue sky” after a stanza break); mixed formal and colloquial registers (“Well . . .”); tension between iambic pentameter and Latinate caesurae; metaphor (“the air gasp”) and simile (“like a kettle lid”); and alliteration (“Ground gives”). Poetry isn’t the news. But when it tells the news, it tells it slant. It mediates contemporary history through a transnational thicket of long-memoried aesthetic structures that, in Pound’s words, help make poetry “the news that STAYS news” (l.29).

Heaney’s poetry was often quoted in the days after 9/11, but the most widely circulated poem was Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” for reasons made obvious by the opening stanza, in which the speaker sitting in one of 52nd Street’s “dives” observes:

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

(*Selected Poems*, ll.6–11)

That Auden’s poem was set in New York City, that it was dated September, that it evoked the onset of violent catastrophe, all seemed, like the Horatian thunderbolt in a cloudless sky, an uncanny anticipation of the Twin Tower attacks—another Benjaminian seed that germinated long after composition. Confirming that even an occasional poem with a date for its name could bear news that stayed news, many news consumers turned to Auden for a more reflective and humanly vulnerable (“Uncertain and afraid”), public yet personal expression of historical trauma (*Selected Poems* 86, l.3).

Toward the end of the poem, which recalls the trimeters and public–private fusing voice of Yeats’s “Easter, 1916,” Auden sets his poetry in opposition to newspapers:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky.

(ll.79–83)

The “folded lie” of the newspaper, as of various ideologies, contrasts with the openness of the poet’s demystifying voice. The newspaper, associated here with the deceptions and dishonesties of romantic love, commerce, and the state, may seem plainer than poetry, but its unsuspected convolutions, like the folds of the human “brain,” can conceal and distort more than they reveal. This poem joins other “Ironic points of light” that flash affirmatively, despite the overwhelming “Negation and despair”

(ll.92, 98). Brightly lit with irony and orality, poetry is seen as affording liberating affiliations among poets, and between poets and readers, in contrast to newspaper-supported political power, with its blindly lustful and coercive “grope.” An Englishman in New York, addressing the German invasion of Poland and drawing on Irish, Greek, Russian, and other cultural sources, poetically embodies a complexly enmeshed world that, like that of Heaney’s “Anything Can Happen,” can’t be neatly divided between “national” and “international.”

Figured obliquely in the kenning of the “folded lie” (Fuller 292), the newspaper is thematized overtly in other poems. Two years earlier, another of Auden’s topical public poems, “Spain,” encompasses its frontline report on the urgent present within a panoramic, global vision that extends back to ancient China and prehistoric Northern Europe and looks ahead to a utopian future, including “Poets exploding like bombs” (l.89). This vast timescale is one of the many differences between the poem and a standard news account, glanced at in the depiction of “the poor in their fireless lodgings, dropping the sheets / Of the evening paper” (ll.33–34). They find in the newspaper no delivery from their constraining circumstances. Like “September 1, 1939,” “Spain” incorporates news discourse but is anxious to assert its difference from it—broader temporal and cultural horizons, utopian longings and admissions of guilt. A few years earlier, Auden’s *The Orators* (1932) included a scathing attack on newspapers, addressed to “Beethameer, Beethameer, bully of Britain,” a conflation of the press barons Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere, the latter of whom subsequently supported Hitler, Mussolini, and the British Blackshirts in his *Daily Mail*:

In kitchen, in cupboard, in club-room, in mews,
In palace, in privy, your paper we meet
Nagging at our nostrils with its nasty news,
Suckling the silly from a septic teat,
Leading the lost with lies to defeat.

(ll.8–12)

Newspapers permeate every corner of modern experience, like a false and deceitful god that appears in both private and public spaces, both inside and outside the body. With the recent explosive growth of digital media, the ubiquity of the news has, if anything, been still more fully realized since Auden’s riposte. A pretend “prophet,” a deceiving “Savior,” the newspaper is—as in “September 1, 1939” and in Benjamin’s skeptical account—a tool of power, commerce, and the nation-state. “I advertise idiocy, uplift, and fear, / I succour the State, I shoot from the hip . . .” (ll.31–32). Like “September 1, 1939,” which links poetry with both love and irony, this poem associates a poetic “awareness of difference” with “love” (75), but sees newspapers as a crushingly homogenizing force: “Newspapers against the awareness of difference” (86). “The newspaper is an instrument of power,” writes Benjamin. “It can derive its value only from the character of the power it serves; not only in what it represents, but also in what it does, it is the expression of this power” (“Karl Kraus” 440). Despite

its revolutionary potential, the newspaper, in Benjamin's view as in Auden's, "belongs to capital" ("The Author as Producer" 772). This poem's postscript satirically declares the poet's competition with the ephemera reproduced by the mass press: "10,000 Cyclostyle copies of this for aerial distribution" (*English Auden* 87). Poetry can't compete with the mass appeal of the news, nor does it have the coercive power of the press's commercial and political allies, but Auden attributes to it the power to ironize and demystify.

Despite Auden's defiance of the hegemonic news media, he, like Heaney, is much more of a public writer than many modern and contemporary poets. He even remarked: "in literature I expect plenty of news" and recommends the writer take an "interest in objects in the outside world." An artist has to be "a bit of a reporting journalist"—that is, someone for whom "the first thing of importance is subject"—although Auden also warns that too much journalism "can and frequently does kill" the "sensitivity" (*English Auden* 357). If even Auden's poetry, including news-inflected public poems such as "Spain" and "September 1, 1939," nevertheless pits itself against the discursive norms of the newspaper, purchased daily at that time by 69 percent of the British public (K. Williams 23), then the large bulk of modern and contemporary poems, most of which have no such direct bearing on public events, should also be seen as carving out discursive alternatives to the news media, though often less overtly so. To write poems, whether about love or nature or grief ("mainstream" lyric), or about contemporary language's infestation by commodity discourse (Language poetry), or about the death of a jazz singer, as reported by *The New York Post* (Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died"), is at some level to propose a different way of telling the news of our outer and inner lives.

Another poet can help explore further the poetry of poetry, as measured in relation to journalism, since her poetry, like Auden's, constantly rubs up against the news, yet might otherwise seem to share little with Auden's and Heaney's high literary verse. A news announcement of sorts, "Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie," begins Jamaican Creole poet Louise Bennett's best-known poem, "Colonisation in Reverse" (l.1). Bennett's career was entwined with the news media and with newspapers in particular, perhaps more so than that of any significant modern or contemporary poet. Initially, she published many of her poems on a weekly basis in the Jamaican newspaper *The Sunday Gleaner*, and their popularity, despite the editor's initial reluctance, was a boon to the paper's fortunes. Whether published in newspapers, magazines, books, or aired on the radio, many of Bennett's topical poems vernacularize the headline news, such as the 1958 West Indies Federation and Jamaica's 1962 independence, wartime scarcities and victories, public water problems and overcrowded trams, emigration and race relations, and the women's movement, even visits by politicians such as Adlai Stevenson and Creech Jones, and singers such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. It isn't difficult to get the local and global news from Bennett's poems of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

But does this mean that her poems, initially bound up with the production and circulation system of a national newspaper, approximate Benjamin's characterization

of the news—short-lived, lacking amplitude, exhausted in the moment of its telling? After all, they are more topical than most modern and contemporary poems, have little of the high literary allusiveness of Heaney’s and Auden’s poems, and don’t ground themselves in a slow-germinating writerly tradition that goes back to antiquity. But because of their strongly marked oral and narrative texture, Bennett’s poems are perhaps even more like Benjaminian storytelling than are Heaney’s and Auden’s poems. Written and performed in a robust Jamaican Creole that contrasts with the Jamaican newspapers’ dryly standardized English, her poetic narratives are propelled by the tetrameter rhythms and alternating rhymes of the ballad quatrain. They recontextualize decontextualized news fragments, situating them within balladic narratives about women’s lives and gossip. Many of these orally coded stories, which are as much about the local human impact and circulation of the news as about the news itself, begin in the reading or overhearing of journalism, such as “bans o’ big headline” in “Invasion” about the Allied successes toward the end of World War II (line 2). Elated by the news of Nazi and Japanese defeat, the speaker of “Peace” seizes on it to warn two gossips about the danger of deceit and lies:

Two-face Muriel teck me warnin
 Check yuh wutless 'ceitful way,
 Faas-mout Edna clip yuh long tongue
 Lie an back-bitin noh pay.

(ll.25–28)

Hybridizing Jamaican oral tale telling, global news reporting, and the British ballad, Bennett shows her characters turning impersonal and faraway news into moral and social meaning, despite the comically disjunctive fit between global and local, public and private. In these transnationally stretched poems, Bennett’s speakers don’t hesitate to transgress the news’s compartmentalizations by making local use of foreign news, rhyming their private lives with global events.

Bennett’s news poems are meta-news poems, telling stories in which the material reception and human appropriation of the news is itself the news. Although the news media often present events as if apprehended transparently and objectively, speakers of poems such as “Big Tings” (1947) struggle to get the news, in this case pressing her ears to a hole in the wall (“Mi kotch me aise a one li-hole”) to hear the news of a local election (“Miss Mum son dah-read newspapa”) (ll.3, 1). The verbal physicality of poetry, as emphasized by Bennett’s “auditory metaphors” (Auden) of insistent rhymes, jaunty rhythms, and tight ballad stanzas, accentuates the bodily circumstances of news retrieval. Another speaker has access to the news only through a hole, in a poem about the V-Day Parade in London, written while Bennett was there at the end of World War II. The speaker of “Victory” is trying to witness the unfolding of this momentous news event, including a marching contingent of “coloured bwoys” but a woman’s hairdo (a “high upsweep”) comically blocks her view (ll.33, 23).

Me teck time teck me finga bore
 One hole eena de hair,
 An t'rough the gal upsweep me spy
 De whole parade affair!

(ll.25–28)

As sonically underscored by rhyme, the news “affair” is, for this speaker, inextricable from a woman’s upswept “hair.” The little hole she has to bore through the woman’s hairdo represents her vision as partial, limited, physically located, a parodic and poetic inversion of the reporter’s god’s eyed omniscience. In Bennett’s epistemology, even triumphant news is inseparable from the bodily perception of it, as meaning is from poetic sound.

Bennett’s readers and hearers are not passive consumers of the news; they physically re-embodiment it. In “‘Sir,’” the speaker ridicules by phonetic repetition the newspapers’ usual “bus-fuss / An de cuss-cuss an abuse” and “foo-fool / Letta to de edita” (ll.23–24, 27–28), but she is elated to read that a black man, a pre-independence finance minister, has been knighted: “Nayga man tun eena ‘Sir!’” she exclaims, adding, “Lawd me pride an head a-swell up” (ll.4, 5). In other poems, when Bennett’s speakers try to conjure for themselves the newspaper’s huge and impersonal events, they re-imagine them embodied on a human scale. In “Italy Fall,” we learn that “Po’ Italy kick puppa-lick, / Newspapa say she fall!” (ll.3–4). That is, Italy has somersaulted and fallen, showing an upturned buttock that seems ready for a father’s (“puppa”) spank (“lick”) (*Dictionary of Jamaican English* 367). The poetry physically metaphorizes and sonically indigenizes large events to make them comprehensible in terms of the known world. Regarding Mussolini’s disappearance, the speaker remarks: “Soh maybe him dah-hide wey eena / Italy boots toe” (ll.11–12). The clichéd image of Italy as boot-like, ominous under Fascist rule, is imaginatively revitalized in the speaker’s cartographic fantasy of Mussolini hiding in Italy’s toe. Lamenting Italy’s degradation by its alliance with Hitler, the speaker concludes with a proverb about the dangers of consorting with turkey buzzards or carrion crow: “ef yuh fly wid John Crow, yuh / Wi haffe nyam dead meat!” [if you fly with John Crow, you will have to eat dead meat] (ll.31–32). Whereas Auden’s and Heaney’s lyrics are grounded in a Western literary tradition that self-consciously traces itself back to antiquity, Bennett’s poems also have a deeper time than the news: they reanimate the compressed repositories of “folk” wisdom and wit not only in the British ballad but also in Jamaican proverbs, by which she creolizes foreign news. As Benjamin puts it, a proverb “proclaims its ability to transform experience into tradition” (“On Proverbs” 582).

Although the language of poetry is often thought of as being elevated, Bennett’s distinguishes itself, paradoxically, by its lowly register, the supposedly subliterate register of West Indian Creole—the use of which delayed her recognition as a poet for decades. The vividly imagistic physicality and phonetic vibrancy of Bennett’s poetry set it apart from the disembodiment of the newspaper English she parodies.

The speaker of “Big Wuds” is baffled by a woman’s lumbering abstractions, “dem big wud” like “‘New Nation’, ‘Federation’, ‘Delegation,’” until she realizes she is parroting news reports about plans for the West Indies Federation: “Oh, is newspapa yuh readin / Meck yuh speaky-spoky so!” (ll.2, 3, 9–10). But in the story woven around this tension between discourses, soon the speaker, too, is seduced by big words from the newspaper, such as “development” and “improvement,” “delegation” and “population,” taking to them with zeal (ll.31, 34). They make her feel learned. But there is one potential problem. To speak in abstractions of political unity is ironically to risk breaking (“bus”) her own body:

Me like sey de big wuds dem, gwan like
 Me learnin is fus rate;
 But me hope dat me jawbone noh bus
 Before we federate.

(ll.37–40)

The newspaper diction is made to seem lifeless and clichéd by comparison with richly poetic Creole descriptions of jawbones in danger of rupture, just as the federation will itself come apart in a few short years. Another poem that quotes “bans o’ big wud” from the news (l.9), “Invasion” punningly turns on its head empty news rhetoric by way of explaining the impossibility of anyone with self-respect siding with the nasty Nazis:

For ef yuh cuss nayga “naasy”
 Dem get bex an feel shame,
 But German bawl out tell de whole worl’
 “Naasy” is dem name!

(ll.25–28)

Bennett’s bilingual pun on Nazi (“Naasy”) and nasty (“naasy”), comically compressing and bridging transnational distances, exemplifies the sonic association and semantic friction that poetry so readily elicits from words, in contrast with the transparent one dimensionality and ephemerality of most news reports. Her physical re-embodiment, narrative re-embedding, and transnational creolizing of the news show up poetry’s difference from the news, even when poetry comes closest to it. After Bennett’s initial newspaper contributions, she went on to create popular radio and TV shows, continuing to play with and against the media’s norms, and since then, poetry’s engagement and rivalry with media forms such as TV and the Internet has only intensified, as the news media have ever more thoroughly saturated our lives (Perloff).

Exploring what poetry is not, with the news as our central exhibit, may seem an oddly roundabout way of getting at what it is. But whether overtly or not, all genre definitions depend on contrast, if always complicated by exceptions: a tragedy is a non-comedy, except of course in tragicomedy; epic is neither lyric nor dramatic,

though epics can incorporate lyrics and plays can tell epic stories; and so forth. A genre's others are often multiple. Poetry is not prose, except in prose poetry; poetry is not fiction, except in narrative poetry and in poetic novels. Once we look outside literary systems for areas of overlap and differentiation, these generic others multiply. Poems often draw on song, though they also differ in many ways, most obviously by fastening themselves to the page. Poems sometimes approximate prayer, addressing or petitioning or berating a deity, though their self-conscious artifice and idiosyncrasy also often make them hard to reduce to prayer. Poems can emphasize the verbal precision that brings them close to the law, though poems that directly borrow from legal language and norms also often unmake legal hierarchies and procedures. Poems are rich in philosophical and theoretical reflection, though a tradition going back to antiquity also highlights the contention between poetry and philosophy. The extra-literary discourses and speech genres that poetry draws on and yet distinguishes itself from are many, ranging from post-it notes and text messages to public oratory and ritual incantations. The news is but one of these other genres, if an especially pressing other under modernity, when the media's assumptions about time, information, language, nation, and representation are everywhere—assumptions that, as we have seen, poets often contest. Not that poetry is pristinely uncontaminated by the news. As we have also seen, poems often adapt news-like consciousness of the historical now, even as, in Heaney, they embed themselves within a slow-germinating aesthetic with wider time horizons than those of the news, or, as in Auden, they wield an ironic and disenchanting discourse meant to undo state and capitalist ideologies, or, as in Bennett, they deploy a vernacular, physically rich, proverb-laden language to re-narrate and creolize public circumstance within lived social experience. Poetry's vigorously transnational energies, forms, and affiliations, observed in all three examples, often confound the nationalist imperatives and geographic compartmentalizations of the news. Poetry will never be satisfactorily defined, but under modernity the news is one of the most prominent discursive others against which it defines itself.

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