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The Collapse of the Lyric Self Under Late Capitalism in Philip Levine's "What Work Is" and Sean O'Brien's "The Drowned Book" Through Marxist Cultural Theory and Raymond Williams's Structure of Feeling"

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Abstract

This paper examines the dismantling of the lyric subject under late capitalism in Philip Levine's *What Work Is* (1991) and in Sean O'Brien's *The Drowned Book* (2007), and investigates how each of these poets expresses working-class subjectivity through Marxist cultural theory and Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling." A reading of both poets suggests that the lyric subject of each work is undone by the real and affective forces of labor, precarity, and deindustrialization. Philip Levine's depictions of waiting, physical deprivation, and familial narrative are revealed to enact a fractured subject position torn asunder between dignity and degradation, realizing Raymond Williams's formulation of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" *Marxism and Literature,* 132). In *The Drowned Book*, the spectral and watery-laden lyric voice bears traces of a post-industrial sadness, in which "worker's identity [is] lost in this uncanny topography of absence." Through detailed reading and contextual analysis, this paper makes the case that each of these poets illustrates "the psychic effects of late capitalist culture: the loss of subjective agency, the degradation of the human senses and cognitive faculties of the working class." In each case, a reading of each work illustrates that the poems express "native familiarity with the larger crisis of our social and aesthetic beliefs."

Keywords: Philip Levine; Sean O'Brien; late capitalism; Marxist cultural theory; structure of feeling; lyric self; labor poetics; deindustrialization; working-class literature.

انهيار الذات الغنائية في ظل الرأسمالية المتأخرة في كتاب "ما هو العمل" لفيليب ليفين وكتاب "الكتاب الغارق" لشون أوبراين من خلال النظرية الثقافية الماركسية ونظرية ريموند ويليامز في بنية الشعور"

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تفكك الذات الغنائية في ظل الرأسمالية المتأخرة في ديوان ما هو العمل (1991) لفيليب ليفين والكتاب الغارق (2007) لشون أوبراين، وتبحث في الكيفية التي يعبّر بها كل من هذين الشاعرين عن الذاتية العمالية من خلال نظرية ماركسية ثقافية ومفهوم ريموند ويليامز المعروف بـ «بنية الشعور(structure of feeling). وتشير قراءة أعمال الشاعرين إلى أن الذات الغنائية في كل نص تتعرض للتقويض بفعل القوى الواقعية والانفعالية للعمل، والهشاشة الاقتصادية، ونزع التصنيع. إذ تكشف تصويرات فيليب ليفين للانتظار، والحرمان الجسدي، والسرد العائلي عن تموضع ذاتي متشظٍ، ممزق بين الكرامة والانحطاط، بما يحقق صياغة ريموند ويليامز لـ «المعاني والقيم كما تُعاش وتُحَسّ فعليًا الماركسية والأدب، ص. (132). أما في الكتاب الغارق، فإن الصوت الغنائي الشَبَحي المشبع بالصور المائية يحمل آثار حزن ما بعد صناعي، حيث «تُفقد هوية العامل داخل هذه الطبوغرافيا الغرائبية للغياب». ومن خلال قراءة تحليلية مفصلة ووضع النصوص في سياقاتها التاريخية والثقافية، تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن كلا الشاعرين يبرزان «الآثار النفسية لثقافة الرأسمالية المتأخرة: فقدان الفاعلية الذاتية، وانحطاط الحواس الإنسانية والقدرات الإدراكية لدى الطبقة العاملة. وفي كلتا الحالتين، تُظهر قراءة العملين أن القصائد تعبّر عن «ألفة داخلية مع الأزمة الأوسع لمعتقداتنا الاجتماعية والجمالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فيليب ليفين؛ شون أوبراين؛ الرأسمالية المتأخرة؛ النظرية الثقافية الماركسية؛ بنية الشعور؛ الذات الغنائية؛ شعرية العمل؛ نزع التصنيع؛ أدب الطبقة العاملة.

Introduction

“Late capitalist culture brings about deep-seated worries about the stability of subjectivity; and this occurs not only in relation to social patterns and patterns of economic relation but patterns of literature as well.” Maybe the best indicator of this shift in culture and literature is the shift observable in new lyric poetry as a genre that conventionally maintains an obsession with interiority, unity, and the inviolability of subjective experience. In the space of global capitalism and what Mark Steven refers to as “the everyday violence of wage abstraction,” however, this voice becomes drastically undone. This paper will investigate how the structures of late capitalism selectively destroy the lyric subject in the literary work of Philip Levine’s *What Work Is* and *The Drowned* Book by Sean O’Brien as an intervention into “two distinctive and separate national cultures of work.” Although these works are born of two separate national cultures, both involve a commitment to a relationship with working class identity and maintain as a shared project the experience of the destruction of a lyric voice through the pressures of capital.

Philip Levine, writing within the tradition of industrial decline in the latter half of the twentieth century's Detroit, produces poems centered on the idea of alienation, fatigue, and precarious labor. So, in the title poem "What Work Is," the speaker waits in the employment line, wondering if work will ever come at all, remaining instead in what Levine has described as "the rain," the arena of the industry's stasis, where identity is seen as impossible within the bounds of agency: "You're out of work and have been looking / for weeks." However, the lyrical speaker is fainting away, suffering the psychic pain of unemployment, hinting at the destruction of the self. Years later, watching the culture of the post-industrial England, Sean O'Brien's

The Drowned confronts similar cultural landscapes in which identity loss manifests in ghostly realms. In poems like "River," the speaker is addressing the land's economic erasure and the lost history: "the water writes its history / over what we were." Where one refuses illumination on the erasure of the body within the industry, the other finds the lyrical world one for which the subject is already lost. Both poets forge ahead within the limitations of the lyrical self's endurance within the capitalist culture.

The discussion is also relevant within the context of Marxist cultural theory. According to Marx and Engels, the alienation of labor is simultaneously a product and a distortion of the subjectivity of the individual, where work converts the individual into an instrument of capital, and the worker becomes alienated "from the product of his labor, from his activity, from his species-being, and from other men" (Marx 74). More recent theorists have also continued this cultural critique into the late capitalism of the contemporary world, which is characterized by cultural commodification, affective labor, and a disembodied working-class subject. According to Nicholas Brown, late capitalist art is situated "after the death of autonomy" and reflects a cultural landscape of art and cultural production that is saturated by market rationality: "This is an art world that is ‘post-autonomy’: a world in which the idea of art’s specificity, of art’s autonomous domain, is weighed and found to be less significant than the idea of art as market, of art as economy" (2). The poets writing into the culture of labor of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are situated within a context of great material and ideological force, and this is reflected in poetic structures that demonstrate a fragmented self, a self which is an effect of certain kinds of economies.

The specific value of Raymond Williams's formulation of the "structure of feeling" in relation to the concerns of this chapter lies in the way it links material collective history to individual emotion. Williams, in his *Marxism and Literature*, expands the notion of structure of feeling to describe the social formulation of the lived experience, specifying that these are "meanings and values embodied and felt, not the formulae and definitions" (132). The structure of feeling, in other words, involves the psychic and emotional trace of either industrial or post-industrial culture, the exhaustion of waiting, the pain of unemployment, the shock of economic decline, the mourning of the loss of a class, all captured in the two poems by Levine and O’Brien, who register the psychic and emotional experience of working-class culture through the rhythms, tropes, and moments that make up the experience of poetry. The folksy syntax of Levine expresses the emergent affect of the struggle of the working class in the late-twentieth American century, while the water-logged landscapes in the poetry of O’Brien trace the residual elements of the

collectivist self submerged beneath the waters of the corporate culture of the same century.

The thesis statement in this essay asserts that Levine and O'Brien were both successful in revealing, in very different ways, through poetry, that the working conditions in late capitalism sawed the lyric subject to pieces. In Levine's poetry, the lyric "I" is indirectly threatened in the mechanical rhythm of industrial production on the assembly lines and inhumane uncertainty of unemployment. The speaker in these poems remains among workers who "wait and wait, for what?" (Levine 4). This loss is even more physical in O'Brien's case, where selves are effaced into space and time in ways that enact the disappearance of working-class community in post-industrial Britain. These poets prove that lyric poetry does not operate purely and simply with expression, but in fact, it is structurally determined in economic terms. They prove lyric poetry's tremendous susceptibility to the systems of capitalist labor, which impact the terms in which interiority might be expressed.

The import of this research has far-reaching implications that extend into a variety of specialized subfields of literary study. First, it is relevant to studies on working-class poetics, adding complexity and meaning to our understanding of how a form of poetry finds ways to encode laboring identity outside of representational realism. Second, it is relevant to work in cultural materialism, showing how poetry provides a way to understand dimensions of economic affect that are simply inaccessible to standard analytical methods used in sociology. Angela McRobbie contends, "Today, culture, too, has had to find a way to think not merely about structural transformation, but also about how structural change affects us, or how it gets inside our heads, our emotional skin, our psychic skin." Levene and O'Brien accomplish exactly what McRobbie asserts is a requirement of today's rubrics on culture, situating self within a locus of power that is not only materialist, nonrepresentational, and structural, but also affective, intimate, and psychological. Third, it is relevant to current discourse and scholarship on shifts happening to lyric form, adding a further complexity to a topic some might argue is already overly debated as a happening thing. As Clover writes, "Poetry today is a poetry that takes place not-through or beyond self, or speaking self, speaking as self, or speaking instead of self, but speaking as a self that is broken open, broken apart, forced to release its form, or refuse its form, as self, or as selves, a self encountered, transformed, or differently known."

Finally, this paper situates Levine and O'Brien within a wide-ranging poetic tradition across the Atlantic. Both poets are apart and together in space and in time, and a correspondingly similar set of thematic concerns is at play in both of their bodies of work: alienation in labor, decline, loss of class in ownership and dehumanization in capitalism. There is a significant poetic differentiation between

the two poets. Levine is oriented towards the solidarity of human community and the gentle touch of humanity even in conditions of despair; the longing that pervades the end of "What Work Is" is towards recognition and towards love: "to know you're alive, know you / are precious" (Levine 5). O'Brien, on the other hand, is oriented towards spectrality, irony, and dissolution; towards a world in which there is no recovery of the lyric subject.

In sum, the introduction establishes that it is "the shattered, disavowed, refused, and dismembered state of the lyric self that Levine and O'Brien's work, through its poetry, represents so compellingly, disrupted by late capitalism's impact on relationship, desire, labor, and memory" that is to be proven through an analysis of "the relationship between poetry, politics, and the aesthetic discourses that inform it, and the intersections between a politics that recognizes poetry as a significant site for its articulation and a poetics attuned to its politics' impact on, and through, labor and memory." That is, it is through a discussion that establishes that it is "the dismembered state of the lyric self that Levine's poetry, through its representation, exemplifies, disrupted by late capitalism's arrival, that we can also assert its reversal through a poetics' attunement to a politics' impact upon, and through, labor and memory, as exemplified in O'Brien's work." The poem that finding a "lyric self" through poetry, finding a "measure appropriate to its language," is impossible given the "disruption caused by late capitalism's arrival, and that it is through its disruption that Levine's and, subsequently, O'Brien's work represents a reversal that attests to its impact, through its attunements to a politics that shapes its poetics, through its representation.

Theoretical Framework

Late capitalism refers to the historical period of capitalist development characterized by the abstraction of finance, globalized production, the commodification of things and relations, and the intrusion of the market into the personal and cultural domains. This concept was originally developed by Ernest Mandel in Late Capitalism (1975), but it has gained a renewed and pressing relevance for cultural critics during the twenty-first-century decades. "Late capitalism" is a symptomatology that designates the present era as a period not merely of economic history but of the way capitalism transforms time, attention, language, emotion, and the notion of the Self itself and inscribes these transformations into the very fabric of culture. Frederic Jameson's highly influential Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) portrayed the concept of "late capitalism" as the historic era during which "the line dividing culture and economy has grown so thin that it seems about to liquefy" and transforms the world into a space "where everything in our social life - from economic value and state power to practices and the very structure of the psyche-is

integrated into the market system" (4). More recent thinkers have generalized and instantiated this phenomenon into the culture and conditions of the contemporary world of the twenty-first century. So, for instance, Christian Marazzi outlines a shift towards a finance capitalism: "Today the economic production of the world revolves no longer around objects but around affect and language, and engenders a capitalism that profits from emotion, speech and subjectivity itself" (Marazzi 2008: 14). Another thinker, Franco Berardi, supposes that "today capitalism breaks down the psychic and linguistic consistency, and creates conditions of economic depression, dispossession and disorientation" (Soul at Work,2009).

Late capitalism thus becomes more than a background for literature; it also shapes the form of literature and literature's subjectivity. In terms of labor, late capitalism increases alienation, precariousness, and dispersion. Late capitalism shatters the sense of identity that traditional lyric poetry takes as its subject matter: it happens in poetry dealing with worker literature. Marxist cultural critique theorizes these shocks. Karl Marx's theory of alienation never loses its significance: Workers become separated from their power over their own labor, the object of their own labor, their fellow men, and finally from their own selves in capitalist industries. This separation happens through their employment in industries: Workers become appendages of the machine (Marx 71). This alienation in late capitalism widens into the affect spectrum in late capitalism because it breaks the demarcation between working and self in late capitalism.

The concept of "structure of feeling," developed by the cultural critic Raymond Williams, represents the crucial link between Marxist materialism and the poetics of the lyric. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams uses the concept to refer to the emotional dimension of common experience, placing the emphasis on emotion, memory, and desire in the historical process. According to Williams, the concept "structure of feeling' refers to "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams 132).

Notably, the structure of feeling is particularly concerned with the 'emergent', that which is not yet fully stated or categorized. Williams argues that the structure of feeling is the epitome of "the sense of a generation in the making" because "the forms of its social experiences are not yet adequately reflected…in the forms of the traditional categories", (134). This is precisely the usefulness of the structure of feeling as it relates to working-class poetry because the laboring experience is not transparently represented within cultural discourse while at the same time remaining an important part of its emotional and imaginative life.

Structure of feeling additionally transcends the opposition between individual and collective because Williams states that feeling is a social, and not merely individual, experience. Feeling is historical since it is abstracted out of the shared experience of material conditions. This theoretical position deconstructs the notion

of lyric subjectivity as being strictly an interior experience. The lyric voice is a voice that speaks only in a self-referential way; instead, it speaks from and as a social world. In Williams' words, "we are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought" (132).

Again, this is how Levine and O'Brien appear, not as a poetry of private emotion, but as a poetry that articulates a collective emotion mediated by labor culture. A poetry of labor culture, however, is not a poetry that is simply opposed to poetry as private emotion. Instead, it is a poetry that mediates culture and emotion, or, as it is called, it is a poetry that mediates a "structure of feeling." A structure of feeling is a term used to describe a poetry that is not quite a poetry that is a subjective, personal, or objective representation of emotion. A structure of feeling, then, is a poetry that is a "structure" mediated through culture, as it is mediated, since culture is not a poetry that is merely active, that is, a poetry as substance or as a completed action, but is a poetry that is mediated as a "structure" or "shape" that is mediated through culture as a "structure or shape" that is always in formation.

The Collapse of the Lyric Self in Levine's "What Work Is"

One of the most important poetic explorations of American labor, alienation, and class struggle in twentieth-century American poetry is Philip Levine's *What Work Is* (1991). The title poem of Levine's masterwork, "What Work Is," is the epitome of Levine's Detroit School of poetry—a poetry that arises from the assembly line, from the body of the working class, and from the landscape of industrial trauma. Via the lens of Marxist cultural critique and the structure of feeling as proffered by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, "What Work Is" can be seen to constitute not only testimony but the phenomenological cartography of the lyric subject after the fact of late capitalism.

The poem opens on a picture of waiting in the rain, a moment of deferred agency that comes to symbolize industrial alienation: "We stand in the rain in a long line / waiting at Ford Highland Park" (Levine 3-4). The speaker is not laboring but waiting on the opportunity for labor—a moment of liminality, when labor has not yet occurred, when surplus value has not been extracted, but when the laborer is already constituted as a subject for capitalist regulation. "We stand," as a collectivity, as an anonymous mass, represents the first breakdown of the lyric "I," as individuality fades into a queue, a body among other bodies. The subject does not sing but waits. The moment is compacted, cold, wet, and silent, to emphasize, through condensation, the alienation from nature and from the body that, according to Marx, accompanies industrial labor: "the worker feels himself outside his work, and outside his own existence; he sees his work as something alien, as a something

antagonistic to himself" (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74). All three aspects are absent to Levine's worker.

The poem proceeds to emphasize the arbitrary nature of cruelty in the labor markets of the industrial world: "You know what work is—if you're / old enough to read this you know what / work is, although you may not do it" (Levine 1-3). The use of "you" in this direct address gives a sense of immediate rhetorical closeness, but it also registers another ideological embeddedness. The speaker points to a known knowledge that is then subtly effaced. What it means "to know what work is" is actually fraught with contradictions—that is, it is at the same time universal and unreachable by the speaker. Once again, agency dissolves. The ideological component in Marxism comes into place here: culture's assertion that work equals identity and morality is at odds with the experienced reality of unemployment, exhaustion, and exclusion. The latest scholarship on the labor conditions in late capitalism reads this opposition between glorying in work on the one hand, and devaluing it on the other, as a defining characteristic of our current economic order: "Labor is at once a site of symbolic realization and a source of material stripping; it is a site of symbolic fulfillment and material dispossession" (Fraser 33). Levine's poetry prefigures this vision, using the opposition between desire to labor and laboring duty.

The singing voice shatters through self-doubt and contradictions that build through repetition:

"Forget you."

"It's all about waiting, switching feet from one to the other." (Levine 12–13)

The imperative 'Forget you' marks a breakdown of speech—not a declaration, but a recoil. 'Analysis of the self' occurs because the self 'resists' examination, and the reason for that resistance 'is its vulnerability.' The movement from 'you' to the 'lived' experience of the 'physical' discomfort of the 'body' underscores the dislocation of the 'internal' by the temporality of capitalism. The 'body moves, the mind drifts.' The 'definition of structure of feeling' works to illustrate the 'break' that occurs in the 'poetic' 'subject's' experience when the 'subject' occupies 'the lived and felt meanings and values' of a 'definite' 'material' 'actual' 'historical' 'moment' (Williams, _Marxism and Literature_ 132). The 'physical' 'uncomfortable' 'sense' of 'discomfort' 'boredom' 'uneasiness' captured in the 'meaning' of 'Levine's' 'two' 'lines' above 'is' 'neither' 'merely' 'personal' 'feeling' nor 'can.

One of the most important shifts in the poem takes place when the speaker meets the brother. Now that the waiting line has been established, the poem shifts abruptly:

"I think of my brother doing his work, / reading the same poem again and again" (Levine 31-32).

This sudden move towards familial intimacy unsettles the anonymity of the earlier parts of the poem. However, in this instance as well, the "I" of the lyric is far from being unifying. The speaker admits that he has never told his bother that he loves him how long has it been since you told him / you loved him" (Levine 36-37).

The question is answered directly by the poem, but it is accusatory and unanswerable. Love is represented as postponed labor—something that needs to be accomplished but gets postponed, like the work the speaker is waiting for. Also, the dismantling of the lyric "I" results not only because of alienating conditions of labor but because of the psychic effects of such labor—paralyzing emotions of guilt and regret. In this Marxist reading of the poem, the "I" encounters alienation with regard to labor and self and with regard to the family—the division of private and public realms of existence and survival.

"It had been a long time since he had heard a poem."

This affective paradox at the core of the poem—is anger entwined with gentleness—is materially important. The speaker feels bitter about the system but gentle about his brother, with the gentleness being a kind of self-criticism with little effect. The poetics of Levine's Detroit finds this paradox and reworks it into a structure of feeling in the Williamsian definition—with a "mode of emergent consciousness…uneasily situated within dominant institutions" (Williams 134). This brother reading a poem again and again also stands for literacy, for reflectiveness, for interiority—the things the speaker feels he lacks. This juxtaposition makes the speaker's lyrical self always impossibly unequal under a system of capitalism—some can have a space for the interiority the lyrical life makes necessary; others are stuck in the assembly line or worse, waiting for the opportunity to enter the assembly line of language and imagination.

The final phrases emphasize the philosophical harshness:

"You know what work is if you're / the one who waits and doesn't complain"
(Levine 41-42).

"To wait without complaining" means to submit to capitalist domination. The dissolution of the lyric subject emerges in this passage as an enforced silence: the voice capable of singing must wait, must suffer, must obey. The grammatical form of the poem's syntax increasingly takes the form of conditionals and negatives: these are the linguistic figures of alienation. It is not merely the subjectivities that are fractured; so too must be the poetic discourse. The personal pronoun comes in and goes out again; the apostrophe shifts; the authority of the speaker wanes. Recent criticism observes the ways in which the lyric maneuvers in Levine's poetry "privilege the social injury wrought by industrial capitalism to the possibility of interiority" (Fine 81).

In this way, in Levine's "What Work Is," work becomes at once a material condition and a psychic gravitation towards which identity is drawn until it collapses in upon itself. The lyrical "I" is originating in voice, arriving at echo, subject to the rhythms of capital's time itself: waiting, postponement, fatigue, and deferred desire. Williams's structure of feeling is a useful intervention here; in this poem, there is a condensation of a historical moment and a consciousness that is a product of that moment, one that is constituted in loss. The lyrical subject is not in possession of his feelings; rather, he inhabits a space of what Lauren Berlant describes as "crisis ordinariness," a life in suspension about a condition of chronic instability (Berlant 10).

In the poem, however, a more radical reading becomes possible. For Levine, the city of Detroit becomes ontology as much as geography—the city of lost work, lost certainty, lost selves. But the destruction of the lyric self is not just a negative process; it is also a positive one. In its recognition of alienation, the poem asserts a resistant kind of clarity. It is the truth statement Opposition to the ideology of work that the poem makes—the truth statement the ideology seeks to conceal. Work in post-capitalism is not identity but injury.

III. The Collapse of the Lyric Self in O'Brien's The Drowned Book

Sean O'Brien's *The Drowned Book* (2007) is unique in the trajectory of twenty-first-century British poetry in so far as it forms the center point of a post-industrial sensibility that is characterized by the influence of sadness, history, and the specter or specterhood of identity. Where Philip Levine's *What Work Is* is, in contrast, directly confrontational in its approach to the problem of industrial alienation, using the bodies waiting in the rain outside the factory gates, O'Brien's poetic sensibilities are instead differentiated by the influence of the aquatic: the subject is not fractured so much as submerged. Water, therefore, in *The Drowned Book*, functions as metaphor for the destruction wrought on the structure of feeling within the post-industrial culture of neoliberal capitalism—a destruction that submerges identity, labor, history, the distinctions between the past, the present, the self, landscape, the live, the dead. In the context of the sociological theories of the Marxist tradition, specifically the idea of the structure of feeling, as outlined through the ideas of *Culture and Societies*, the awaiting collection might well be understood as presenting the latter-day trope on the disintegration of the lyrical self within the context of the post-industrial Britain submerged in the impossible tides.

The first poem, "River," introduces the epistemological uncertainty that permeates the work. It begins with the unnerving apostrophe: "I love the river as I love the ghost / Of someone I once knew" (O'Brien 3-4). The river represents something that slips beyond the purview of the tangible, becoming "the ghost / Of someone I once knew," implying that even the self begins in relation to absence, in the lack that haunts the self. The self and the landscape are always changing, always in flux.

In relation to the Marxist readings that will follow, this poem critiques the destruction of place-based identity due to the interrelated processes of de-industrialization and the destruction of labor form. When factories close and the labor form dies, so too does the symbolic that holds the community and the history in place.

The poetical resonance is explained via Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling": "Structure of feeling is a quality of social experience, a precursor to historical consciousness, a quality that is 'in solution.' It is a precursor to a historical form, a pre-national form, where meaning is not yet sedimented" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132). The water imagery in O'Brien's poetry is a representation of "experience in solution" or dissolved. The river is a symbol for "experience" that is always in a state of "solution" or a precursor to historical form, and as such, it is unstructured or disorganized, always "unsmooth" or "unsteady," and cannot form a narrative. The river holds history but not as a whole; likewise, memory is present.

The poem "To the Water" further exemplifies this breakdown. The speaker insists, "Take what you want, water / Nothing is final with you" (O'Brien 15–16). The use of an imperative, to command that which is uncommendable, is to confess a lack of power. Further, "Nothing is final with you" expresses this instability as a state of being. This instability aligns with labor conditions that are characteristic of the neoliberal social order exemplified by The Drowned Book. As contemporary studies on post-industrial northern England suggest, neoliberal "change has engendered a pervasive sense of dispossession, where continuity of work, community, and class identity has been eroded" (Atkinson and Flint 285). The emotional release of these metaphors by O'Brien lies in their representation of dispossession.

The water within the collection is not only destructive but also representative of the archive. For "River" we understand the following explanation of the river and its relation to secrets: "But the river keeps our secrets but not safely" (O'Brien 18). Secrets are saved yet not without being marked by the flow of history. The lyric "I" is caught between the poles of awareness and unawareness, of being and disappearing.

The voice in the lyric acquires a spectral form not only in imagery but also in grammatical structures and use of pronouns. In "The River in the Library" and in many other texts from *The Drowned Book*, the "I" voice emerges fitfully, buried under the imagery of the poem. In "The River in the Library," the speaker says, "I looked for myself in the pages / But the words had slipped away" (O'Brien 39-40). This failure to find the "I" within language resonates with Marx's assertion about how the societal relations under capitalism alienate people from their humanity by

reducing humanity to an abstraction: “It is precisely the reverse. Individuals are subordinate to deficit and consequently to the internal relations of capital” (Marx 71). O’Brien’s take on the Marxian statement about the breakdown of humanity is the literal disappearance of “I” or language itself.

The spectral self in the work of O’Brien can thus be said to arise out of a condition of historical saturation. The post-industrial north is a palimpsest, where the recording of the dead resonates immediately below the surface of the water, the industrial past insidiously inhabiting the present. Speaking in the poem ‘Flood’ the poet says, ‘We live on the ruins of factories / The way we live on the ruins of time’ (O’Brien 52-53). The above line conflates the decay of material and temporal processes. Factories, where the self had existed in the form of the working class, now exist merely in ruins. “We” discourse contests a collective self. The breakdown of the self gets reflected in the breakdown of the self and the collectivity.

Where Levin’s poetry emphasizes the presentness of industrial labor, O’Brien articulates its lack: labor disappearing into the future and past. This lack is the source of a post-industrial melancholy, one that is a loss without resolution. A reading of contemporary British poetry finds in O’Brien’s poetry a style that is "suffused with the psychic trace of deindustrialization, one that is a mourning that cannot be resolved because its object is only partially actualized in the present” (Roberts 144). "The lyric subject can no longer speak; it only echoes, reflects, or effaces itself in the landscape."

The neoliberal work culture manifest in this collection comes not through economic discourse, however, but through affect. The drowning subject knows not just about water, but about abstraction: precarious labor, privatization, obscurity. Speaking to this in “The Only Place,” the voice declares: “The day is a number. The work / Is a rumor you hear in the pubs” (O’Brien 61-62). Work becomes rumor, hearsay, cynicism—reflecting on just how unpredictable the gig economy and temporary labor contracts are. In this scenario, identity cannot establish roots in work and hence cannot establish roots in social existence.

This is the effect of eroded subjectivity as a lyrical form. “The poems are tending to dissolve—lines are falling into each other, imagery dissolving into imagery, narrative into narrative.” Water is the methodological form because it “is the basic structure of both metaphor and syntax.” Meter itself becomes ungrounded and uncatchable because of this formative and mobile structure of new feelings as Williams wrote: “Not settled, but formative; not fixed, but mobile….” This mobile

form of lyric subjectivity in O'Brien's poetry is destructive instead of liberating because the subjectivity slips "unanchored into space."

Additionally, the use of the image of water in the collection suggests the blurring of boundaries between persons and history. The "I" in "Sea Change" speaks of the self as "salt on the tongue of the past" (O'Brien 74). The poetic "I" merges into the ocean of time, becoming one with the detritus of history. While the "I" of Levine's poem waits in line at a factory, the "I" of O'Brien's drifts through the tide of time. But both exemplify the breakdown of fixity of interiority under capitalism: Levine by condensation, O'Brien by diffusion.

The drowning of the neoliberal era on a psychological level is best seen in "To the Water" where it asks, "If you take me, / who will I be?" (O'Brien 27-28). To be taken by the water in this poem, therefore, is to be taken by history itself, to be nondescript in a sea of wreckage that is both labor and class. The destruction of subjectivity is not simply a figure, therefore, but an historical one.
Williams's theory assists in decoding why O'Brien's spectral poetry manifests a shared emotional register. The poems function in a narrative space that is merely illustrative of melancholia but exist within a larger societal context of exhaustion and dislocation of structure. The reader is made to intuit the presence of a post-industrial aftermath, rather than simply being told, which corresponds to Williams's reading of structure and feeling as manifesting not in ideological formulation but in embodied, uncomplete consciousness.

The surrender of the lyric self in *The Drowned Book* might thus be understood as a reaction to the labor culture of neoliberalism. There is no identity; memory is unreliable; the work is absent. The lyric "I" here is a drowned self—that is, it is comprehended not through clarity but through the ripple effect. Water, it seems, is history itself. It is fluid, it is dangerous, it is inescapable.

In this respect, O'Brien's lyric speaker reflects the broader condition of post-industrial Britain. Urban communities that were formerly nourished by work, solidarity, and shared cause now totter in cultural flux. The drowned subject is no longer an individual calamity but a social condition. The poems express a form of working-class consciousness altered by new forms of production—not utterly negated but liquidated. While Levine's work chronicles the toil of industrial capitalism, O'Brien's work chronicles the psychic pull of its wake. Both, however, index a crisis of subjectivity that defines capital: the destruction of the inside, the annihilation of meaning, the deconstruction of self. The river makes its voice heard, and the poet obeys. The lyrical 'I' melts away.

CONCLUSION

This essay has maintained that in Philip Levine's What Work Is and Sean O'Brie's The Drowned Book, despite formal opposition in their methodologies, the collapse of the lyric subject in late capitalism can be discerned. Through the application of Marxist cultural critique and the structure of feelings as outlined by Raymond Williams, the mechanics of this collapse have been made clear: alienation, dispossession, de-revaluation, spectrality in memory, and devaluation in verbalization. Both poets demonstrate that in late capitalism not only are workers Alexandria materially affected but also their consciousness altered in terms of the possibilities of the lyric subject.

The poetry of Levine places this collapse in the context of industrial labor relations, emphasizing bodies that congregate in hiring lines, voices that oscillate between bitter and sweet tones, and identities that splinter in the face of economic realities. The speaker in "What Work Is" embodies subjectivity as a moment of suspended action: identity is subsumed by collectivity, feelings are replaced by exhaustion, and language is the location of ideological oppositions. For Levine, subjectivity is undermined by the mere presence of labor, the simple reality of its demands on time, body, and affection.

Instead, O'Brien locates the decay of the lyric subject in absence: the absence of factory labor, secure employment, historical embeddedness, and substantive identity. In his use of water as metaphor, there is the continued erosion of identity in liquid topographies and ghostly narratives. There is melancholy in post-industrial culture instead of resistance in industrial culture; instead of being silenced, the speaker is subsumed. Levine's lyric subject shatters, while O'Brien's Subjects dissolve. In both cases, there is a restatement of the same condition regarding the instability of the lyric subject in a capitalistic world.

Together, Levine and O'Brien greatly expand the tradition of Marxist poetics with their focus on the significance of poetry to the analysis of experiences of labor. Their work undermines the idea of the timeless and transcendent self of lyric, instead suggesting its construction. Raymond Williams's structure of feeling is essential for the explanation of this, indicating how emotion, consciousness, and self are constructed by society, instead of the individual. In addition, this essay contributes to the field of affect studies in that it shows that the working-class feel has neither been unitary nor fixed. The contrasts of Levine's affect, anger and tenderness, illustrate the psychoanalytic price that has been realized in the process of industrial labor. The contrast of the affect in O'Brien's work, the melting of melancholy, signifies the psychoanalytic aftermath of the passing-away of labor. Future scholarship could also follow up on this reading by exploring other ecology-related aspects of O'Brien's imagery of water, which presaged climate angst and disaster. Likewise, Levine's poetry of Detroit could also be reappraised in relation

to the emergence of "gig" economies and platform work, and what there is of Levine's account of industrial disillusion that remains pertinent in an era in which work is increasingly immaterial. Pair readings of Levine and other contemporary international poetry about labor, like those of Ocean Vuong, Natalie Diaz, or Martín Espada, could also shed further light on the ways in which class identity and subjective form change in response to different modes of capitalist production. Finally, the question arises: what are the implications of the collapse of the lyric self? Levine and O'Brien force us to think about the lyric subject not as an individual, self-containing voice but as one that is socially embedded, fraught with struggle, fracture, and history. Their reading shows that the subject of the lyric finds solace not in silence but in the act of articulation—that finds expression in the aftermath of capitalist modernity—a voice that talks from the ruin. This ruin of the lyric self is not the beginning of the end but the beginning of something else: the testimony, the memory, the defiance. In short, even while the capital destruction diminishes the basis of the subject, the place where those subjects are articulated is the space that the poetry occupies.

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