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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Poetry and Secrecy

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In this editorial essay for a special issue of *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, we introduce the issue's seven articles, and share some speculations about the nature of the secret in its relation to poetry.

Keywords: secrecy; secret; Simmel; surveillance; poetry; censorship; state secrecy; data; privacy

The Utopian Secret

It's tempting to simply identify secrecy with privacy, in distinction from publicness. But the secret can also be usefully thought of as an unstable hybrid of the public and the private. Poems and artworks, publicly displayed, may be harbouring the secret in plain sight. The secret can belong solely, entirely, and definitively to the individual, or something secretive may ground a shared identity. The secret can even constitute a kind of public. In this editorial essay for a special issue of *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, we introduce the issue's seven articles, and share some speculations about the nature of the secret in its relation to poetry.

The seed of this issue was a symposium, 'Secret Poetry,' held at Northumbria University in Newcastle in April 2016. The event was written up, meticulously and with aplomb, by David Spittle, in an earlier issue of this journal.¹ Maybe it would have been more accurate to call those two days 'Secrets in Poetry,' or 'Secrets and Poetry,' or 'Secrets in Modern and Contemporary Linguistically Innovative Anglophone Poetry.' Or, as this special issue is titled, 'Poetry and Secrecy.' The speakers at that symposium, minus a few, are the contributors here. Many topics are broadly the same as they were, but in most cases the content has not only been expanded but also evolved substantially. Spittle's [summary](#) is certainly worth a read as an ancillary

to this issue. Jordan Savage, for instance, spoke that day about Anna Mendelssohn, Fredric Jameson, and Susan Sontag, whereas here she discusses Mendelssohn and Tom Raworth; Nisha Ramayya presented on Fred Moten, whereas here she gives us an article on D.S. Marriott.

Speaking of new castles. We don't say, 'Can you hide a secret?' What we say is, 'Can you *keep* a secret?' and by saying it we delicately alter the qualities of the word *keep*, imparting it with a slight stony silence, a slight lofty watchfulness.² Several contributors to this issue explore the notion of poetic language as a sturdy refuge, a place of strange strength replete with corners where the fragile, the inchoate, and the untimely may be temporarily tucked away. Poetic language might also be where such things are cared for and cultivated, and the word *keep* can convey warmth and care: the sense that secrets are kept like gardens or pets are kept, or like a room is kept tidy. If poetic language is carved with secret havens, within which something like the Blochian utopian impulse survives, then poetry might just, in Anna Mendelssohn's words, 'address a different world'.³

So is it up to literary critics to storm poetry, to tear down its defences, and scatter its contents in the sunlight? Jordan Savage's and Vicky Sparrow's articles make a significant contribution to the small sum of Mendelssohn scholarship. It seems appropriate that both authors seek to open up her work only via meditations on what is better left undisturbed.

A tidy castle is exactly what looms in a line in Mendelssohn's poem 'Staged whispers', which imagines a woman who 'uses syntax like a broom sweeps across an old fortress'.⁴ This fortress may easily be made to stand for more than a heap of stone. Mendelssohn's poetry often figures itself as a preservation against imposing structures with designs on her life: courts, prison,⁵ patriarchy within counterculture, the university, perhaps language itself.

But however we read this fortress, the special secretiveness of Mendelssohn's line has something to do with a suspicion that its *own* syntax has been disturbed like dust: perhaps concealing the proverbial 'old broom' which – while it may not sweep the structure clean – does know its corners. Do you know a secret corner where you can go when you need to? But such a place may be compromised, if in

the past you've given out precise directions to find it ... or even outright admitted its existence. This is poetry that understands that it is being watched and is careful about whom it can trust. Turning to another of Mendelssohn's poems, 'to any who want poems to give them answers', we can let dust in broom-bristles constellate with diamonds filling tree branches:

a poem is not going to give precise directions.
 you mustn't touch the hiding places.
 they address a different world
 where trees are decorated with diamonds⁶

In his 1906 essay 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', Georg Simmel – the influential and early sociologist and critical theorist – draws a suggestive connection between interpretation and violence. Simmel first supposes, a little sweepingly himself, that people generally feel they have a right to know everything which 'through purely psychological observation and reflection, it is possible to ascertain'.⁷ And yet, he points out, 'indiscretion exercised in this way may be quite as violent, and morally quite as unjustifiable, as listening at keyholes and prying into the letters of strangers'.⁸ For Simmel, such interpretative violence can be internal – 'entirely the labor of one's own mind' – and it can extend to spontaneous, involuntary perception.⁹

This raises not only questions about managing and surrendering one's own power of interpretative violence, but also the question of whether it's possible to anticipate and defend against such interpretative violence. In [Sparrow's article](#), "[A] poet must know|more than a surface suggests": Reading and Secrecy in the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn', Sparrow considers Mendelssohn's construction of a kind of secret poetic knowledge, in the light of Walter Benjamin's contention that 'the being of beauty lies in the secret'.¹⁰ Sparrow attends to Mendelssohn's small pamphlet, *An Account of a Mummy, in the Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at Dresden* (1986), conducting a close reading perpetually sensitive to the possibility that it sometimes must not – 'mustn't touch the hiding places' (q.v.) – get *too* close.

Savage's article, "'I don't talk to the police except never': Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life writing', performs two major manoeuvres. First, work by Mendelssohn and Raworth is figured as distinctively secretive – elusive in ways which go beyond the fruitful difficulty of ubiquitous fragmentation and oblique reference – in that such work forces readers to acknowledge their *own* force, the force they exert in reading. Strongarming these poems into meaning, according to Savage, risks breaking links between the text and the poet's lived experience. These links, however fragile and secret, are what motivate Savage to characterise such poetry as a kind of life writing. Second, Savage goes more deeply into Mendelssohn's life writing, distinguishing it from Raworth's by figuring it as 'anti-confessional' life writing.

Neither Savage nor Sparrow altogether denies that they want this poetry to 'give them answers' (q.v.). But both acknowledge that, without 'precise directions' (q.v.), they have to proceed with care, aware they risk doing harm. At the very least, appetitive and aggressive criticism may get outfoxed by the poetry. It may return home with fewer good answers than it could have got with a bit more circumspection and Keatsian negative capability. As Sparrow writes: 'What might be secreted in the poem's "hiding places" will never be revealed through answers given under duress and might, in the end, serve only to represent what cannot be assimilated into unifying interpretive explanation'.¹¹

It feels very normal for poems to be 'inspected,' 'looked at,' 'examined,' 'investigated,' 'explored,' and even 'interrogated.' This kind of language – woven casually and pervasively through literary criticism, as if to join together the bits that really matter – has the air of needing no justification. Apparently, this is scrutiny without a price-tag, except perhaps the opportunity cost of not having authorised some even more revealing scan. Even more than this, the whole practice of literary criticism tends to organise itself around the inspectability of its objects, and the necessary alignment of scrutiny and knowledge. By contrast, Savage and Sparrow both consider poetry as potentially obliging its reader to discretion and withdrawal. Perhaps poetry can be a space where it is not only the capacity to seek knowledge that is awoken and compensated in complex ways, but also the capacity to draw back from knowledge, to honour the keeping of secrets.

Interpretation may be violent. On the other hand, preventative discretion, or the attempt to exercise judgment about when to exercise judgment, must be careful not to slip into dogmatic deference to secrecy. If *keeping* a secret is at all like *castling* a secret – the special move in Chess – then the fortified corner won't last forever, and if it is rigidly prolonged when it ought to grow ragged, then it may smother its contents. The secret that at some point in its existence addresses 'a different world' (q.v.) may at last fail to keep. True, maybe this secret can be invested with some radical and transformative charge, which may one day be multiplied – just like Blake's 'Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find' – but maybe it can also fester, spoil, and contaminate – like the rose-sickening 'dark secret love' of Blake's 'invisible worm'.¹²

And if interpretation can be a kind of violence, the same may surely be said of the secret. The political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, alluding to the failure of the socialist revolutions of the last century, cautions that 'one ends up identifying with an enemy whose structure one does not understand'.¹³ While the secret is linked with the radical and the transformative, it is just as plainly linked with the conservative, the reactionary, and the generatively oppressive. To withdraw oppressive power behind a screen of inscrutable, categorical legitimacy is to create secrets. Likewise, to impose silence, invisibility, triviality, or illegitimacy on the oppressed is to create secrets. And maybe *vice-versa*: if the stratifying power of the secret is, as Simmel seemed to think it was, something that makes possible society itself, then the society that it is actually making possible is one of hierarchy and domination. It is patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism.

The State Secret

The UK criminal justice system, and the life it seeks to surveil, entrap, conceal, suppress, and destroy, is what concerns Luke Roberts' article 'Grave Police Music: On Bill Griffiths'. Roberts places Griffiths' poetry about prison in its social and historical context, including mass protests within English prisons, and the activism of Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners. As Roberts shows, Griffiths' work stretches outward to large impersonal forces and institutions, and inward to concrete

particulars; it 'gives character, gives names, gives voices to the cold statistics of punishment and death at the hands of the State'.¹⁴ Bill Griffiths is also the subject of an earlier special issue of this journal (Volume 6, Number 1, March 2014).

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt writes that 'real power begins where secrecy begins'.¹⁵ Within state power specifically, the arrangement of secrets is intimately associated with the arrangement of personal and impersonal power. This can be seen in many disputes over the balance between executive and legislative power. For instance, in 1660, the last days of the Commonwealth, John Milton's tract *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* endorsed a fairly strong executive, a Council of State, for 'the carrying on som particular affairs with more secrecie and expedition'.¹⁶ Here Milton would be dismissing fears articulated in, for example, the 1648 Leveller petition *England's New Chains Discovered*: fears that executive power creepingly concentrated and expanded under 'vail and cloak' might eventually be wielded to abolish Parliament altogether, presumably on populist pretext.¹⁷

This same rough pattern also plays out throughout the contemporary imaginary of constitutional liberal democracy. The more secretive, the more personal. That's the idea. That is, the more shadowy the exercise of executive power, the more it is supposed to resemble the agency of an individual, or even the *arcanum imperii* of the monarch. In this sense, the personal manifests itself most definitively when an official's action is not determined by the procedures of their office. In this way, state secrecy – like sovereignty itself in Carl Schmitt's formulation – becomes about the exception rather than the rule.¹⁸

The connection between secrecy and personal agency is how state secrecy comes to be framed as a regrettable necessity, one which preserves the executive ability to act in a timely and decisive fashion. The more an action is covered in confusion and murk, the more permissible it is to claim it springs from a seed of single-minded alacrity. State secrecy is endorsed as a kind of last resort, whose use should always pertain to exceptional circumstances like war and threats to national security. In such exceptional circumstances (but supposedly in no others) the state must free itself to act with decisiveness and expedition – with what the civic republican

tradition sometimes called 'energy' – unhampered by obligations of transparency, deliberation, accountability, and sentimental morality.¹⁹

Giorgio Agamben puts serious pressure on this story, theorising the state of exception as having become, only a little paradoxically, business-as-usual.²⁰ Far from being a last resort, secrecy looks like it has become a permanent dynamic in state power, something winding through the gaps between the law and the bare life on which that law takes purchase – the life which, in its vibrancy and concrete particularity, necessarily exceeds that law. As Alysia E. Garrison has recently put it, '[t]he secret, in its boundless ubiquity, becomes so visible that it is no longer seen'.²¹

Then again, what if we were to set aside such objections, and pretend that state secrecy *could* somehow be validly switched on and off in different areas and at different times, as contextually required? Even so, demarcating a 'legitimate' shift in the quality of power – from the impersonal power of offices to the personal power of officers – does not necessarily tell us much about the status of state secrecy *specifically* within such a shift. Even worse, the problem would remain that the power to classify official information is an instrument well-suited to circumvent or dismantle whatever constraints are imposed upon that power.²² Attempts to furnish state secrecy with oversight, accountability, and checks and balances should not be glibly dismissed. The details of their implementation have significant impact on real lives. Nevertheless, within the imaginary of constitutional liberal democracy, the problem of state secrecy does finally appear impossible to solve or contain.

As if the changing nature of state secrecy were not complicated enough, it is intricately and unpredictably linked with the changing nature of privacy. The national security state is also the surveillance state. Its citizens are always potentially its enemies. As Dennis Broeders has written recently, 'the individual's ability to keep secrets diminishes and the volume of state secrets rises'.²³ But the surveillance state does not only collect secrets; it also generates them. Just as an act of theft can retroactively recast something as a possession, so the surveillance state asks itself a very leading question: what *is* all this daily life going to such lengths to hide?

Thinking through the workings of contemporary surveillance can also be a way to start rethinking the nature of the state itself. Crucially, Broeders also notes that ‘those state secrets [...] become more vulnerable’.²⁴ Whilst the hooded eye of a wall-mounted security camera may still be the quintessential symbol of state surveillance, the materialities of surveillance have transformed radically over the last few decades. Loosely speaking, we appear to be in a situation where the socio-economic capacity to produce secrets far outstrips the capacity to keep them. This has occurred not least through the datafication of society: the rise of social media and online commerce, and the digital convergence of previously discrete surveillance systems and techniques. The surveillance state is today inseparable from surveillance capitalism, equipped with digital platforms that elicit and gather data on a dizzying scale.²⁵

Secret Data

So if there is some instrumentarium into which our secrets sneak behind our backs, we may hesitate to identify it either with the state, with the market, or even with their synthesis. As we try grapple with this more elusive deterritorializing and reterritorializing flow of secrets, images which rely too much on gazes and commonsense Euclidian space – such as the surveillance camera, or the interview room with the one-way mirror, or the aggregate visual field of Big Brother’s watchful telescreens, or even the secret twirling eyes of Bentham and Foucault’s Panopticon – frequently don’t feel good enough.²⁶ Poetry could seek alternative and experimental ways of construing the ambiguous and dynamic surveillant assemblage we find ourselves a part of.

Dorothy Butchard takes up the themes of surveillance and data in her article ‘Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic ‘Data-Bodies’’. In her exploration of Zoë Skoulding’s 2013 collection *The Museum of Disappearing Sounds*, Butchard traces ‘a melding of human and machine’ in which ‘Skoulding figuratively mixes the intimate sounds of the human body with those of electronic mechanisms’.²⁷ Here the cyborg marks an effort to think through what is happening to surveillance in the contemporary world. The fixed categories of human and machine are unsettled as a way of mixing together the watchful state and the watchful market, private and public, place and space, citizen and enemy.

In her reading of Redell Olsen's 2004 *Secure Portable Space*, Butchard again picks up on cyborg imagery, in this case 'data-bodies'.

How can we go anywhere,
even across-town
without our data-bodies knowing, (flesh,
no object) [...] ²⁸

In part, Olsen's poem is interested in fleshifying data – in insisting that a data body is not an 'object', but rather organic, vital, and flourishing – and it redoles of the body horror of Aristotle's account of usury, or Marx's account of the extraction of surplus value, accounts which similarly fleshify economic value.²⁹

Butchard also looks at Marianne Morris's poem 'Who Not to Speak To', a poem which 'plays with the capacity of typography and formatting to capture an impression of chaotic expression'.³⁰ Morris's poem carefully withholds any space outside of these abundant, chaotic textures, denying the reader a space where they might take stock of whom they should or shouldn't speak to. It offers the poetic equivalent of wondering if you can trust Google, and so just Googling it. In other words, maybe one of the people you shouldn't be speaking to is the poet. But even within the poem's messy elusiveness, there are some deadly serious top tips. Since this is a poem about the 'CYBERSPHERE', perhaps it's suggesting you don't need to speak to all those annoying people you meet online. 'Who Not To Speak To' certainly alludes to a contemporary self that is distributed across social media stages – from scenes of nervous self-fashioning, to intimate melt-downs, to the tracking and ranking of labour on gig economy platforms, to online deliberation in civic, vocational, and various other modes – a self that performs its existence in forms which are simultaneously social and machine-readable. Perhaps the people you shouldn't speak to are people like the bad faith interlocutor, the concern troll, the earnest would-be comrade or ally, the uninvited debate champ, the friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend with infinitely accurate opinions.³¹ All of these social types, made available by the conditions of contemporary digital sociality, may hungrily absorb – in a sense different but related

to that used in the previous section – your *energy*. Conserving energy might be seen as a tactical response to the impossibility of satisfactorily protecting your secrets, and protecting the integrity of your identity. Just because someone has an ‘in’ – knows a secret about you, knows something you don’t know about yourself, or thinks they do – doesn’t mean you owe them something.

As Deborah Lupton points out, we ‘cannot easily escape becoming a subject of digitisation’.³² Within the contemporary surveillant assemblage, the secret can seldom be separated cleanly – like some Lucretian image-veil cast from the surface of an object, to be swallowed by the eye – from the body that originates it.³³ Instead, the technosocial infrastructure we daily navigate grows more hungry for and responsive to the data we feed it, and this infrastructure returns the favour, by feeding us back ourselves, dangling slices of data-flesh as morsels to provoke fresh engagements. We walk around tangled and smeared in our data; when we smile, there is data between our teeth. Wherever we arrive, we arrive uncertainly: has the shadow of our data preceded us and prepared the ground? Even for the relatively privileged subject, every targeted or perhaps-targeted Facebook ad, every girder of digital persuasion architecture, every spooky coincidence, every unaccountable ritual reluctance whilst navigating bureaucracy, may provoke at least a little of the sick feeling of being inspected, enjoyed, stalked, groomed, or of being positioned for detention, assault, deportation, or destitution.

Heroically hiding from digital platforms may have its limits. Just as a poetry reading can tune the public ear to the unvoiced nuance of the page, so the performance of an online self may be intimately bound up in the infinitesimal intelligibility of the offline self. The forms of sociality available remain shaped by the structures of digital platforms, even when a specific actor resists subsumption by those structures. In Morris’s poem, the ‘CYBERSPHERE’ – a term in its own right, but also suggesting a just faintly ridiculous conflation of *cyberspace* and *public sphere* – has perhaps collapsed into a sphere under its own gravity. What this strong gravity pulls in most ravenously are political passions, passions which thereby become delinked from practical projects, and instead get trapped within a delusive and abundant system of recursive reference. Within the gravity of the

'CYBERSPHERE', the impulse to assert and stabilise one's identity cannot be trusted – it could be a waste of energy, or worse, a donation of energy to some operation of structural violence. Among those we shouldn't speak to are the cop, and the poet: and in the cybersphere, anybody could be a cop or a poet. With such uncertainty around how your data is being used – such uncertainty about what your data double is getting up to behind your back – you could even be a cop or a poet yourself.

In this connection, Butchard suggestively brings in another sphere: the 'filter bubble', a putative effect whereby your own opinions – or at least, the opinions you share with your double – are constantly reaffirmed, in part because eager-to-please social media algorithms try to boost engagement by showing you content you like.³⁴ Butchard, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, points out how "[t]he image of a "digital mirror" neatly suggests a narcissistic and self-monitoring impetus in online communications, as participants observe themselves rather than others'.³⁵ The other becomes the medium in which the self is performed and sought. 'Have Your stick insect Say', invites Morris's poem, and in response we could playfully invert Ludwig Wittgenstein's well-known thought experiment: say that everyone – going around glued to their phones, rather than to their boxes – can only see *everyone else's* beetle, and never their own.³⁶

Self-care, the management of private affect, and a refusal to be lured into performing the self underneath exhausting and treacherous stage lighting, may be ways of claiming autonomy and sovereignty. At the same time, in the context of the ongoing datafication of society, we may often be mistaken about the extent to which obscurity guarantees secrecy. No matter how brilliantly we defend our subjectivities – evading judgments, gazes, and the imposition of illegitimate social debts – within the space of the surveillant assemblage we are not *only* being observed and produced *as subjects*. Even if the light which flows around us cannot find the contours of our subjectivity, we still cast a shadow. As Fred Moten caustically notes:

[...] today we are prompted to ask: why worry about the subject at all, why go through such beings to reach the general intellect? And why limit

production to subjects, who are after all such a small part of the population, such a small history of mass intellectuality?³⁷

The spread and development of data analytics is a significant factor here. Such automation of interpretation means that *any* activity – not only something easily construed as identity performance, something which insists that a subject is present – any activity or alleged activity may be automatically gathered and grafted to a data double. Data accumulates through a ubiquitous harvest without seasons; enormous data sets are aggregated, cross-referenced, analysed, and made the basis of prediction and experiment.³⁸ This may also go some way to explain what feels so sinister about Olsen's 'data-bodies knowing, (flesh,/no object)'. The data body, or 'data double', is more like you than anyone else is ... and yet it is not even really structured like a subject. The data double can be experienced as the uncanny and lossy doppelganger, the unelected delegate who visits 'a host of scattered centres of calculation', determining access to power and resources, and colluding in strategies of 'governance, commerce and control'.³⁹

Butchard also highlights an intriguing moment in Morris's poem: 'patriotic debate/about themselves'. In this line, the atomic neoliberal subject is modelled not on the entrepreneurial firm but on the jingoistic nation. Narcissism is associated with the faux isolationism of right wing populism, perfecting its border by seeking to control both sides absolutely. Butchard notes the 'theoretical tendency to discuss questions of "secrecy" using language of borders and sovereignty', both in relation to state secrecy and individual privacy.⁴⁰

Of course, it is all very well to reject the idea of the sovereign self, who as a subject of surveillance manufactures secrets for export to the state or to the private sector. Things are, as Butchard suggests, definitely more complicated. Within contemporary literary studies, despite the influence of the ontological turn, the breaking down or blurring any limit is still liable to sound like a job well done. However, as Jacques Derrida reminds us (in a slightly different context), the point of such a move is 'not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and

multiply'.⁴¹ By weaving theory with close readings of work by Redell Olson, Marianne Morris, and Zoë Skoulding, Butchard not only demonstrates the inadequacy of the 'language of borders and sovereignty' for tracing the secret in their poetry, but also gestures speculatively toward alternative understandings. For instance, perhaps the collision of the commodity with the gift provides a basis for some alternative approach: flows of finance and data inevitably interlock with systems of generalised exchange which partly elude surveillance and quantification. Or perhaps this poetry addresses a version of the secret which isn't really anything excluded from any particular space, nor anything hidden within any particular space... but rather the secret infrastructure on which such exclusion and invisibility depends in the first place.⁴²

The Belated Secret

Can there be a secret that is *so* secret that *nobody* knows it? Some poetry seems to entertain this notion. Anna Mendelssohn's 'hiding places' certainly have this sense of serendipitous haven, as do some of the contortions of Peter Manson's 'language surface', elaborated by Thomas Betteridge in his article. Maybe the secret does sometimes crop up, as it were, 'naturally,' as something a bit distinct from the unknown, the obscure, the inaccessible, the private, or the deeply personal, even if there are many overlaps. Mathematics might furnish examples of such 'secrets that nobody knows': for instance, in the unpredictable locations of prime numbers (handy for cryptography). The easiest way to make sense of this version of the secret, of course, is as something with strong family resemblance with the more familiar kind of secret – the kind that is hidden away from some people but not others.

What if *everybody* knows it? Can there be a secret that everybody knows? Quite possibly there is nothing that everybody knows, let alone a secret that everybody knows. Nevertheless, publicity and secrecy may not be as incompatible as you would at first expect. Knowledge which has germinated in the darkness may, at least for a while, preserve an air of confidentiality as it flourishes out in the open. The 'open secret' might be something which is widely known, but little spoken about, or something which is spoken about plenty but which nevertheless preserves some

stylistic features of secrecy. Or the open secret can be something which is widely known, but which – by existing in the gap between theory and practice, or between fact and norm – lacks what appear to be its natural consequences, and therefore acquires an aura of irreality. Indeed, some secrets might not even really exist *except* in the finding or the telling. They may be assembled by the very same play of forces that disintegrates what seemed to shelter or to screen something. The ‘well-kept secret’ of travelogues could be one example: a kind of secret that is tied much more intimately to publicity than to privacy.

In a similar way, the ‘openness’ of the open secret might be established *retroactively*, when what *should* have been a disclosure fails to have the effects that were expected, or generates failed expectations after the fact. A revelation can inoculate. Some politician, or other powerful figure, who weathers a revelation that in theory could have damaged their status, may afterwards accrue a kind of imperviousness. If the nature of the secret fluctuates according to the timing and tactics of its telling, then this isn’t just because memory is colourable, but also because mores and norms are colourable. At the same time, this very apprehension – that calling out an abuser may legitimate abuse instead of producing justice – is itself manufactured and manipulated within practices that enforce silence and fortify unequal power structures. So next to this kind of open secret – the kind made out of a discarded petition for justice plus a bogus prehistory of facts having been widely known or assumed – we need to differentiate another kind of open secret. That is, the secret whose openness is a preemptive suspension or deferral of any immediate claim to justice, chosen in order to disclose outside the epistemological regime of rigged accountability mechanisms.

Does the secret necessarily belong to epistemology at all? With secrecy’s upper and lower limits ranged apart like this – so that the secret could be something known by nobody or by everybody, and not just something known to some but not to others – the secret may even become completely detached from questions of who knows what. Instead, the secret might simply be something accomplished as genre and style. Various features consistently attach to things that have been

first hidden, and later imparted or discovered – whether because such hiding or imparting or discovering produces those features, or just through coincidental association over time – and these features can be conjured up whether or not anything is actually hidden from anybody. So far as secrecy is associated with value, such stylistic construction of secrecy may spring from a mistaking of the kind of value it represents. Or it may spring from the desire for, and work toward the end of, publicization. Chance can also play a part in what takes the form of the secret. Certain modes of ‘discovery’ – eavesdropping and the eavesdropping-ish – may transform facts that were already public into gaffes and scandals. A live mic may pick up stray words so that, although the speaker has repeated those same words many times before in public, they now get alchemically converted into a secret exposed.

All of these somewhat strange characteristics are shaped by a simple fact about the secret. You don’t know what the secret really is except to the degree that you have told it, and thus to the degree that it is no longer secret. The context and timing of disclosure deeply inform – it might even be said, construct – that which is disclosed. So we may even talk about the secret as being temporally unsettled, or constitutively belated.⁴³

Little Secrets, Big Secrets, Secret Joys and Secret Sorrows

Belatedness, then, is one feature that might roughly discriminate the secret from other kinds of obscurities and enigmas. We can try to sketch a few others. For instance, the secret, a bit like the story, has a tendency to integrate its parts. By separating itself from outside access, it pulls its constituent parts into more intense relations with each other. So a set of interconnected hidden facts tend to manifest as *a* secret, rather than as *secrets*.

The word *secret* can also imply a kind of compactness. The secret is usually disclosed all at once. You can lean in and whisper it and not worry about getting a crick in your neck. Once the secret begins to become clear, it accomplishes a high degree of clarity quite quickly. And there’s a physical version of this compactness,

so far as the secret suggests deceptively dense or folded space: the cave behind the waterfall, the bunker under the boulder, the forest clearing, the clown car or the TARDIS, or anything that's bigger on the inside than the outside.

The word *secret* also carries a distinctive mixture of emotional possibilities: excitement, shame, anger, fear, delight, hope. When a would-be secret is without emotional salience, it is more likely to shed its history and context, and to completely merge with the background that was supposed to only camouflage it. Lovesickness has particular affinity with the secret. As Dorothy Tennov writes:

[...] no matter how intensely you desire reciprocation you cannot simply ask for it. You cannot simply inquire as to whether or not it exists. [...] Rather than commit themselves, they flirt. They send out ambiguous signals [...] Reason to hope combined with reason to doubt keeps passion at fever pitch [...]⁴⁴

The Innermost Secret

All these features suggest it is possible to triangulate the *subject*, the *lyric*, and the *secret*. We might even go so far as to say that each term mediates for the others. It is the subject that is able to arrange the secret lyrically and to confer secrecy on the lyric; it is the lyric that can engineer the subject as secretive and the secret as subjectivity; it is the secret that can subjectify the lyrical and lyricise the subjective.

Of course, the characteristics of the secret sketched above are all loose generalisations, and if you lean on them too hard, a panel gives way onto cavernous counterexample, above all the byzantine, affectively muddy archival silos of states and corporations. But to the extent that the secret does convey some connotations of belatedness, compactness, tight integration, inwardness and abundance, tricky extensionality, and heightened emotional texture, above all lovesickness, the strangeness of the secret maps onto the strangeness of subjectivity itself. It also maps onto the strangeness of the lyric, that curious hybrid of thought and song.

Simmel sometimes uses the secret to approximately partition the subjective from the objective. Simmel sees this boundary as an incalculably complex and historically

inconstant one. All social relationships 'presuppose [...] a certain nescience, a ratio, that is immeasurably variable to be sure, of reciprocal concealment'.⁴⁵ In other words, for Simmel, the apparatuses of social life are bolted together in many places by question marks. Whatever the subjective content of the secret, the secret has an objective social reality. Modernity, moreover, implies a 'growing objectification of culture' so that 'one only needs to know certain externalities with reference to the other in order to have the confidence necessary for the associated action'.⁴⁶ The way Simmel locates the secret at the threshold of the subjective and objective partly explains his interest in the secret society. In the secret society, Simmel sees in miniature a fundamental dialectic within human experience and within human conduct: on the one hand, the utter privacy of consciousness; on the other hand, the facticity of collective life; and between both hands, the social individual laced like a cat's cradle.

Several contributors to the issue probe the connections between secrecy and subjectivity in other ways. Savage, for instance, remarks that 'Mendelssohn's poetry seeks spaces in which one consciousness can meet and share feeling with another, without being able to define or quantify that feeling, or instrumentalise it within assertions about who is responsible for what'.⁴⁷ Butchard explores elusive relationships between subjectivity, the body, technology, and data, taking a cue from Redell Olsen's remark that 'the lyric "I" exists as a series of subjectivities produced by and in relation to mediatised technologies of representation and capitalism', and arguing that Olsen's work often 'personifies [...] "data-bodies" in terms of possession and connection to the embodied self'.⁴⁸

Is the secret that *cannot* be revealed actually a secret? Consciousness has a definitively private character. This could be a version of the secret so absolute that maybe it shouldn't be thought of as any kind of *privacy* or *intimacy* or *confidence* or *obscurity*, but rather as a secrecy that is unintelligible, that is noumenal, or that is in some other way very strange. The thought experiment mentioned above – part of Wittgenstein's argument that a private language is an impossible notion – enlists the insect kingdom into conveying this deep strangeness:

Say everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a “beetle”. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says they know what a beetle is only by looking at their own beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in their box.⁴⁹

In several articles in this issue, the secret is aligned with some kind of *unrepresented* subjectivity. In this sense, the secrecy of the secret can be either benign – eluding violent systems of quantification, calculation and control – or it can be malign – suppressed, suffocated, precisely that which *is* controlled – or both. It can be merely *de facto* unrepresented, or actually constitutively unrepresentable, or ambiguous between the two possibilities. As Sparrow suggests, the secret disclosed may ultimately ‘serve only to represent what cannot be assimilated into unifying interpretive explanation’.⁵⁰

The secret may even pretend to its *own* subjectivity. The vitality and virality of rumour are one aspect of this, as are the clandestine deeds of the data double, discussed above. But even beyond this, the secret, as it passes from person to person, may be peculiarly imprinted with the personality of its author – or more precisely, of the author of its secrecy. Whenever you tentatively reveal the edge of a secret, and then hurriedly cover it up after all, you may feel as if you have been sworn to secrecy – or asked, charmed, begged, frightened, reasoned, shamed, or teased into silence – *by someone*. People keep secrets, and *vice-versa*. A secret can stimulate us to invoke and simulate a presence, roughly like many poems and novels can. In fact, a secret may provoke speculative narrative concerning its keeping or disclosure. This *someone* seems to accompany and be accompanied by the secret, in roles such as guard, prisoner, confidante, principal, or expert operator.

In this sense the secret cannot always, as it were, put you totally in the dark, but instead must rearrange the play of light and shade, so that as certain aspects of a person or situation are concealed from certain angles, in compensation other aspects become lit. Thomas Betteridge’s article in this issue, ‘Peter Manson’s Language Surfaces’, plays on this idea, suggesting that secrecy may create the conditions for a special kind of *candour*. Betteridge takes the word *candour* from Manson’s

stray remark in an interview. The word operates in his article to both mobilise yet defamiliarise certain adjacent concepts, such as sincerity, authenticity, honesty, truthfulness. The philosophical problems with all these words, perhaps especially as applied to lyric poetry, are pretty well-known. Such problems are by now integrated into the operating infrastructure of much literary-critical research and pedagogy, so that a vast store of secrets really can be reliably unlocked by ascribing features of poems to 'speakers' rather than 'poets'. Perhaps Betteridge's use of *candour* – not unlike Savage's coinage *anti-confessional writing* – hopes to gather together, under a semi-arbitrary rubric, everything that has not been erased from these problematic concepts by their various critiques.

At the same time, Betteridge in this part of his article is talking about something quite specific: the mobilisation of form to disguise what is too painful or difficult to say or hear in any other way. Poetry can manufacture ambiguity about the proper weight to ascribe formal patterning – 'did you say that because you *meant* it, or because it *rhymed*?' – and can integrate that ambiguity into how it means. Here then is another kind of secret, or would-be secret, which *cannot* be revealed. The hiding place is empty, and there is no answer which would satisfactorily distribute the poem's store of order between the language and the poet. If you end a line with 'wing', will you end the next with 'sing'? What modifications to your argument and affect are you prepared to roll out, in order to follow 'love' with 'above'? More broadly, when does the formality of verse – let's say, a strict rhyme scheme – send that verse spinning away from the world, accelerated by the arbitrary structure of signifiers into a realm of irrationality and chaos? And when does it actually nudge verse *closer* to the world, drawing on the arbitrary structure of signifiers to go against the grain of mystifying ideology?⁵¹

In Manson's case, the complex and almost biological formalisms are as far from singsong rhyming couplets as can be imagined – and Betteridge talks more about a concern for the materiality of the 'language surface' than about formalism *per se* – but some multifarious condition of deniability, colourability, beautiful noise, and overdetermination does seem to be something Manson's work often contrives and where it often thrives.

Secret Resistance

A character in George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who is working as a kind of poetry censor, stakes a little too much on the kind of formal overdetermination discussed just above. Despairing of finding an acceptable rhyme for 'rod', he decides to leave the original 'God' intact. For this lack of imagination he gets vaporised.⁵² For any poet (who is probably also a poetry censor), virtuoso deployments of secrecy will probably be more than simply ways of confessing awkward stuff without feeling too bad. In order for poems to say things that poets can't say – perhaps because they don't actually know those things – poems need to put their readers to work. So poetry doesn't just mobilise the secret in constructing substantive meanings. It also uses the secret to leave blanks, variables, placeholders, and to thereby sketch out what it might be capable of meaning, if anybody can figure out how to mean such a thing properly. Poets recognise, like Simmel recognised, that the secret has an objective social reality, and they mobilise that reality in intricate ways.

In this sense, reading a 'difficult' poem can be like trying to talk to someone with a big vase of flowers between you. The only difference is that, with a poem, it only *feels* like you can't properly see the other person's expression through those flowers. Really there *is* no such expression. If you didn't quite catch a word, that's because there was no word, or no such word. Likewise if you didn't quite catch a look. As readers, we have to provide all the missing clarity. We have to make the best of it. The difficult avant-garde poem is the true 'just a nice poem about some flowers.' You can't cheat and move the vase somewhere else. That would just make it worse, since the flowers' carefully-aligned stems are actually filling in the fractures in your interlocutor's face, which would otherwise only appear as an archipelago of floating facial fragments. Those lips you are struggling to read past the petals would, if it wasn't for the flowers' interference, just be sporadically disintegrating. Perhaps the poet has put the flowers there, in Savage's words, to avoid 'assertions about who is responsible for what'; as Simmel puts it, 'we cherish not only so much truth, but also so much nescience, and attain to so much error as is useful for our practical purposes'.⁵³

If poetic secrecy can be deployed to inspire, steer, protect, and recompense the reader's labour – perhaps even to transform it into something not quite labour – this also suggests a connection between the secret and resistance. One model of 'difficult' poetry sees its importance as lying in the resistance which it offers readers. On this view, the poem is a kind of pedagogic mangle through which the reader emerges different – perhaps only temporarily, until, cartoon-like, they spring back into shape. Vicky Sparrow's article suggestively ties together secrecy with resistance, drawing on J.H. Prynne's difficult and resistant essay 'Resistance and Difficulty'. Prynne's 1961 essay, in its concern with 'the sum of the world's available reality', foreshadows more recent confrontations between speculative realism and metaphysical positions suspected of over-privileging human experience and human faculties, or as overemphasising – in a manner very characteristic of much humanities scholarship, where such emphasis is often assumed to carry a radical political charge – the contingency and constructedness of material reality.⁵⁴

The secret, whether it is kept or revealed, might supply us with a particular way of thinking about the avant-garde, both in political and aesthetic construals. How much might the most necessary political and aesthetic tasks of the moment depend not on forms of visibility, but on forms of invisibility? Not on pushing an agenda in a public space, but on evading friction, building counterpublics, and using subterfuge to stay one step ahead of political enemies and reactionary systemic forces? On creating safer spaces, sharing information about abusers, and pooling support, solidarity, friendship, and resources? Secret acts may be the resistance of the oppressed. Secret acts may also be a tactical alternative to or deferral of resistance. The long term projects of resistance require not being worn away in the short term. Secrecy can be self-care, going to ground, incubating, speculative separatism, fugitivity. Secrecy can deflect the attritional friction of the resistless matrices of domination.

But many secrets should never have been hidden at all. The secret can also be oppressively imposed silence or unspeakability. The secret may be imposed with an inevitability that has no upside, that should not be spun into a positive narrative.

Sparrow notes that Mendelssohn is at times 'concerned by the possibility that even poetic hiding places might be carceral in structure, or may provide a keep for things repressed by bourgeois society and the machinations of capital'.⁵⁵ The secret can be both the shame of those who suffer, and the remorselessness of those who perpetrate. The aura of being a catalyst, of transforming out of all proportion, which attaches to covert plotting – or which such activities often cultivate around themselves – can be mistakenly ascribed, willy-nilly, to any secret whose secrecy is a function of oppressive power.

A hiding place may moreover go uninspected only out of indifference, born from confidence that its contents are necessarily codified to serve dominant interests. When Simmel discusses the violence of interpretation, the discretion which he sometimes approvingly invokes – for all its intricacy and richness – is inflected by identity privileges. Butchard points out in her article how 'metaphors of "territory" and "domain" are a common feature in discussions of secrecy and privacy'.⁵⁶ Simmel's tacit approbation of delicacy, his lamentation against 'the boring persistence of inquiry', conjure the civil privatism of Wilhelmine upper-class bourgeoisie, and the standoffish conviviality well-adapted to confining injustice, abuse, violence, humiliation, and control to bubbles of genteel patriarchal respectability.⁵⁷

Secreting Blackness

Then there's the verb. You almost never *secret* something away any more. Perhaps you don't all that often *secrete* things away either. More likely you are glimpsed *secreting* something, or you have already *secreted* something. In particular, the popularity of these inflected forms appears curiously linked to their ambiguity: such acts of concealment always carry the faint suggestion that you have emanated the precious peach, pearl or macguffin out of your own proud flesh.

What would it mean for say the adrenal glands, roosting there on the kidneys, to be *hiding* adrenaline in the bloodstream? What if squirrels are furtive only to hide from us the fact that they *lay* acorns? There is something quite suggestive about this linkage of *secret* and *secrete*, with its mystification that does not only hide something, but hides

the kind of hiding it is doing. That linkage is, at least, suggestive in a straightforwardly Marxist sense: it suggests that the entrepreneurial pursuit of factor productivity is a ruse, a distraction from the critique of production, and the expropriation of the expropriators. To put it another way, it may seem as though the important issue is where all the value is hidden – where is it secretly stored? – but the real issue is where the value came from – who secreted it? And of course ‘the point is to change it’.⁵⁸

David Marriott’s poetry and scholarship often enters dialogue with Frantz Fanon, particularly *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952 in French, 1967 in English). In Nisha Ramayya’s article ‘Secreting Blackness in the Poetry of D.S. Marriott’, Ramayya conducts an extended meditation on the intersection between the two writers, taking Fanon’s phrase ‘I secreted a race’ as a point of departure and constant reference. The article figures the historical, social, and psychological conditions of Marriott’s poetry as the secretion of blackness in the lived experience of racism.

Secretion is linked with, and often distinguished from, *excretion*. In this sense it is connected with the ambiguous and deeply political lines between the clean and the unclean. Cleaning and tidying consist in part of infinitesimal acts of secreting and revealing: hiding, for instance, traces chafed from the body, putting things out of sight, frightening spiders into lairs or jars, wiping something and remembering what colour it is, unearthing a lost letter, restoring a lost coin to circulation. *Excretion* suggests waste material, substances that should be got away from the source as wholly and as quickly as possible; *secretion* suggests the hormones that endocrine glands run into the bloodstream, or else substances that should modify a surface: saliva, sweat, the flow of sebaceous glands to oil our skin and hair, mebum to slow the evaporation of the tears we always have in our eyes. Paradoxically, it is excretion that urgently demands to be secreted away (‘the visibility of these substances is a sign that something is wrong’, writes Ramayya); secretion, albeit temporarily, perhaps uneasily, can *stay*: the glands of Zeis, that service the eyelash; the slime that lets the slug glide.⁵⁹

Ramayya uses the juncture of secrecy and secretion, via Marriott and Fanon, to apprehend the contradictoriness of race, including its contradictory communication in the medium of the body that also erases the body. In part, Ramayya’s article enacts a sustained challenge to the affective and aesthetic aspects of the core vocabulary

of social justice as it manifests within literary studies. However indispensable such concepts as estrangement, displacement, alienation, othering, reification, objectification, mystification, and the matrices where privilege and oppression play out, such concepts can accumulate a coolness, a detachment, an intangibility, a cleanness and clarity – even a ‘disarticulation of self by its specular double’ – which is inadequate to the experience they divulge.⁶⁰ Ramayya puts back the language of torture and uncontrolled bleeding, and the white supremacist gaze that figures Black bodies as cannibalistic, bloodied, and smeared with excrement.⁶¹

[Fanon] retains in memory the boy’s fear of being eaten, of literally being turned into shit by an organic communion with the black body. Generally, this absorption of the black body into a fecal object is one of the most depressing and melancholic fantasies ensuing from the psychodynamics of intrusion.⁶²

Ramayya sees race in Marriott’s work as *secreted*: as an exudate discharged into the open, often with a violence nebulously suggestive of imperilled biological homeostasis, and in the very same discharge also veiled, buried, blotted out, cleaned away. ‘The violence of the white man’s exclamation – the impact of his speech – forces the black man out of and into his body, out of and into the world’.⁶³

Subcultures, Coterie, Cadres and Counterpublics

In what ways might the communities involved with avant-garde cultural practice be ‘hiding places’? How might this status produce tensions with their inclusivity? When introducing ‘difficult’ poetry to a new audience, the expectation of secrecy must often be overcome. Don’t worry, you may find yourself promising, this language is not an in-joke. It’s not a jigsaw, some of whose puzzle-pieces have been hidden. It’s not a dialect of the initiated. It’s not a ciphertext to be unscrambled into a plaintext by following a particular procedure. The others in the audience, who seem to know how to use this language, are not applying some well-defined arcane skillset that reliably converts alien experience into familiar experience. The raffle ticket is a normal raffle ticket. You are not joining the resistance.

If an awkwardness accompanies these assurances, perhaps it's because they are half-truths. They spring from welcoming, open-hearted concern for the skittish newcomer. They spring from pedagogic simplification, since half a truth can often be more safely transmitted, and half-truths can sometimes be grown into whole ones, once their roots are bedded in. Besides, how can you yourself ever know *for sure* that there *isn't* a secret? Maybe it's just *you* who's not in on it. Sometimes, perhaps, the secret is not that there is *no* secret, but that the newcomer is welcome to bring secrets of their own.

Similarly, the assurance that there is no big secret may also carry an air of calculatedly obvious exaggeration, of protesting too much. As though what you're really telling the newcomer is that there *is* a secret. Perhaps isn't an unusual technique when it comes to telling secrets. Some secrets can be very difficult to reveal without first adamantly denying that there's anything to hide. Denial can be the first step, the calibration. Denying can prepare the listener to receive information *as* a secret, and the style of denial can prepare them to understand the ways in which it is secret.

David Grundy's article on recent poetry by Luke Roberts invokes secrecy not only as a thematic concern and as a set of formal operations, but also as an aspect of this work's distribution and reception. Grundy writes that 'the history of much Anglophone poetry which figures itself as politically and aesthetically "radical" has been one of obscure publication, ephemeral presence, in-group circulation, and the vexed questions of coterie, elitism, group identification, loyalty, betrayal, and solidarity'.⁶⁴ The article, 'Poetry and Secrecy in Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries*', suggests that Roberts' poetry seeks a dialectical relation between concealing and revealing. At the same time, Grundy thinks it questions certain received methods, habits, strategies, and hunches that might underlie and organise such a search. Yes, a decisive dialectic moment *could* be a synthesis that frees you to move upward and forward. But it could also just be taking a step back for a second – and then another – and then another – until you have fully reversed out of whatever cagy cul-de-sac you and your contemporaries have found yourselves.⁶⁵

Is it still a secret if nobody *wants* to know about it? If your writing is incredibly unpopular, it may be easier to tell yourself that it is just 'secret.' If absolutely nobody cares at all about your poems, because of how bad they are, you may prefer to invent a 'secret' standard by which they are actually quite good. Of course, these are also the standard views of a critic who wants to dismiss something before getting to grips with it. Angry or languid conservatism loves to lampoon presumed vanity – perhaps projected vanity – rather than risk transformative aesthetic encounters. Further, hatred of coteries and networks can emerge from fervor for an entirely make-believe form of literary marketplace. If we could only sweep away the cosy superstructure (such critics intimate) then the deep and pure market of merit would appear. This market would supposedly be an immaterial machine made of agile, subtle data. It would be disembedded from friendship, and from all other social and institutional infrastructure, and it would always accurate in the long run. Such markets are pipe dreams piped directly from the economic realm, where they also don't exist.

Still, the incompetence of the critics does not mean that their criticisms are not sometimes true – in some shading or another – or that they don't shapingly haunt the poetry and the poets that they may be true about. Secrecy and self-doubt go together, secret-handshake-in-secret-handshake. Any poet, looking back on whatever is most secretive in their work, can justly suspect those contours to have been generated in the poet's own systematically wrong judgments. Any poet, and perhaps especially any experimental poet, must negotiate this tension between *obscurity* in its most perjorative sense and *secrecy* in its most valorising sense.

Or, to put it simply, any poet, and perhaps especially any experimental poet, can justly suspect that they are kidding themselves. The coterie – or various loosely related social formations, such as the scene, the counterpublic, the countercultural network, the secret society, the enclave, the solidarity network – may offer some minimal mitigation of this kind of self-doubt. And, minimally mitigated, self-doubt may flourish as self-criticism, or some other richly creative iterative process. The larger structure, however – the coterie for instance – may *also* doubt itself. Georg Simmel describes secrecy as 'an intermediate station equally for progressing and

for decaying powers' and as 'a transition stadium between being and non-being'.⁶⁶ So how does the coterie know whether it is ascendant or declining? Whether it is pointed toward being or non-being? Whether its secrets are worth keeping? If a fuzzy enclave form is sufficient to preserve an exotic standard of value, how does the coterie allow itself to value *the standard itself*, and not discard it in favour of some more pervasive law?

De facto, some notion of 'selling out' may pop up intermittently to fulfil this function. The possibility of selling out arises from the maintenance of a relatively exotic standard of value, and becomes part of the medium in which that standard is cultivated. For aesthetic producers, selling out – especially if it is an unacted possibility, fantasy, or fear – need not literally mean *economic* selling out. To enter some kind of history in some kind of way may be sufficient. Or to be recuperated. Or even to be understood or enjoyed by the 'wrong' sort of person. Perhaps selling out might even mean settling for some fairly reliably tolerated form of criminality. For instance, as Fred Moten writes of the university – perhaps universities generally, he says, but certainly the university in the United States:

[...] it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.⁶⁷

Similarly, while a prohibition on selling out is one way to maintain an enclave of standards and valuations, active pursuit of selling out is another. Quite probably, underground coteries are usually organised around the possibility of *some* radical restructuring of the social form in which its cultural products are instantiated, though it doesn't matter whether this transformation is pursued, resisted, or some mixture of both pursued and resisted. In all these cases, the possibility permits the coterie to discriminate its own special pleading from the half-baked excuses of some

neighbouring cell of sloppy hacks, whose practice is warped around their appetite for counter-evidentiary self-esteem. Put another way: the underground coterie of aesthetic producers manages to keep itself on the whole more secret than obscure by keeping alive the possibility of selling out.

Perhaps Jack Spicer's advice to 'know exactly how much your peaches cost' is not just about getting out at top of the market – that is, converting cultural capital into financial capital without getting shortchanged or hustled – but also about a longing for certainty that you *have* sold out, a longing to narrate and feel one's agency in what is often an ambiguous and bitter drift away from your younger and better aspirations, against a complicated and shifting historical landscape. Something a bit like fear of selling out pops up briefly in Roberts' own article on Griffiths. Roberts quotes this 'bitterly sarcastic' passage:

I take a look back through all the leaflets of the early 70's. They are so fierce and so straight [...] Now it's just a matter of pointing the worst law-breakers out and all will go well. There's a better state network too covering the arts for the whole country. If I'm favoured they may even print this for me, as there is no way I can afford it.⁶⁸

To put it a bit crudely, then, *To My Contemporaries* could be poetry concerned with how much the poet and his contemporaries really get each other, and how much they're politely nodding without understanding, or shamefacedly nodding without listening. It may want to examine Simmel's 'certain nescience [...] of reciprocal concealment'.⁶⁹ It may be poetry concerned with how everyone is really feeling, with what everyone really wants. Poetry concerned with how much they truly believe they understand each-other but are really at cross-purposes. Poetry worried about the secret cost associated with actually getting each other. Its moments of literary self-criticism – 'every parallel/you can think of/pressed into the service/of surface agitation' – could hint at a real desire to deflate and demystify, and to shake off the exotic cultural capital that tends to accumulate when the shortcomings and their critique spill from the same source (the game of

art being, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, 'a game of "loser takes all" [...] the economic world turned upside down').⁷⁰

Close riffing on Roberts's lines 'warm half rhymes/of secret and defeat/never to be reversed/or completed' ('Agitprop'), Grundy also conducts an exploration of secrecy and prosody. Some of the issues implied here are very speculative yet very intriguing. What might it mean to reverse a rhyme? What is the status of words written to rhyme that never find their partners, or their entry points into their systems of echo? Is it meaningful to speak of 'diachronic' rhymes across draft versions of a text? Perhaps most intriguingly of all, do rhymes share sounds the way people share secrets? If so, might we develop an entire taxonomy of secrecy by analogy with the prosodic patterning of language? It is not the same inner ear that hears the first rhyme-word and the second. As the inner ear roves over the contours of verse like a turbocharged whelk, its apperception of rhymes depend not only on the proximity and similarity of candidate pairs, but on the information encountered in the interval: on the iterating texture of sense-in-sound that tinkers all the time with the reader's anticipatory powers, priming them receive or to miss this echo or that rhyme. Could such structures be transposed into social epistemology, as a way of thinking through what it means to share a secret?

Acknowledgements

While studying at Northumbria University, and together with Professor Ian Davidson, we organised two poetry symposiums, one about work in 2015, and one about secrecy in 2016. We – that is, Ed and Jo – decided we'd probably be *so* good at organising symposiums that we'd need to put a kind of check on our activities, in case we accidentally converted all matter in the cosmos into a poetry symposium. So we chose subliminally incredibly cumbersome themes. Work: will any researcher want to contribute to something that sounds like it might be a lot of work? Secrets: will anyone feel completely *comfortable* sharing this Call for Papers? We would like to thank all those who have participated and supported us in the journey from symposium to special issue, especially Ian Davidson, Gareth Farmer, Scott Thurston, Vicky Sparrow, Abhijit Pathre, our secret peer reviewers, and our seven brilliant contributors.

Notes

- ¹ David Spittle, 'Secret Poetry: Fifth Northumbria Poetry Symposium, 2016', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 8(1) (2016), e4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.23>
- ² *Keep* is from the Old English *cepan*: to seek, to desire, to seize, to hold, to heed, to attend to, to observe. As a noun, meaning the innermost stronghold of a castle, *keep* dates from the late sixteenth century.
- ³ Anna Mendelssohn, 'to any who want poems to give them answers', in *Implacable Art* (Cambridge: Equipage, 2000), p. 34. See also Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1–3 (1954, 1955, 1959), translated by Stephen Neville Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).
- ⁴ Mendelssohn, 'Staged Whispers', in *Implacable Art*, p. 3.
- ⁵ The kind of refuge poetry can offer shouldn't be exaggerated. Eleanor Careless writes, 'The Anna Mendelssohn archive holds twenty exercise and drawing books which Mendelssohn used during her incarceration, but many of the pages are blank, and any writing tends to be brief and unsystematic. These slim, barely-used regulation-issue notebooks rebuff the myth of the prolific and productive writer behind bars, epitomised by male authors from Oscar Wilde to Ezra Pound, Antonio Gramsci to George Jackson.' Eleanor Careless, 'Work in the Poetry and Prison Correspondence of Anna Mendelssohn', in Jo Lindsay Walton and Ed Luker (eds), *Work in Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Poetry* (Palgrave, London: 2019).
- ⁶ Mendelssohn, 'to any who want poems to give them answers', in *Implacable Art*, p. 34.
- ⁷ Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906), p. 455. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/211418>
- ⁸ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', pp. 455–456.
- ⁹ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 456.
- ¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 351.
- ¹¹ Vicky Sparrow, "[A] poet must know more than |a surface suggests": Reading and Secrecy in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn'. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.27>
- ¹² William Blake, *Milton* (1810), plate 35. William Blake, 'The Sick Rose', in *Songs of Experience* (1794), plate 39. Cf. also plate 49, 'A Poison Tree': 'I was angry with my friend;/I told my wrath, my wrath did end./I was angry with my foe;/I told it not, my wrath did grow'.
- ¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Luke Roberts, 'Grave Police Music: On Bill Griffiths'. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1) (2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.48>
- ¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1973), p. 403.
- ¹⁶ John Milton, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), in John Milton, David Loewenstein (ed.), *Prose: Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2013), p. 436.
- ¹⁷ John Lilburne, *England's new chains discovered, or, the serious apprehensions of a part of the people in behalf of the commonwealth; (being presenters, promoters, and approvers of the Large Petition of September 11, 1648)*, in Andrew Sharp (ed.), *The English Levellers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 149. Cf. the suggestion that Milton advocated an 'aristocracy of saints' in JGA Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 414.

- ¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922), trans. G. Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁹ In 1788 Alexander Hamilton wrote in 'The Executive Department Further Considered', *The Federalist* No. 70: 'That unity is conducive to energy will not be disputed. Decision, activity, secrecy, and despatch will generally characterize the proceedings of one man in a much more eminent degree than the proceedings of any greater number; and in proportion as the number is increased, these qualities will be diminished.'
- ²⁰ Agamben points out that the exception is 'the condition of being included through an exclusion, of being in relation to something from which one is excluded or which one cannot fully assume'. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 26–27. In developing the concept of the exception, Agamben builds upon and challenges Foucault's work on biopower, first by rejecting Foucault's thesis that sovereign production of the biopolitical body is distinctively modern, and second by acknowledging that it has nevertheless been brought to light in distinctive ways in modernity, as spaces arise in which the state of exception becomes the normal situation, the distinction between legal observance and transgression disappears, and the subject of the law is abandoned to sovereign violence.
- ²¹ Alysia E. Garrison, 'Agamben's Grammar of the Secret Under the Sign of the Law', *Law Critique* 20(281) (2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-009-9057-y>
- ²² State secrecy might be constrained within something a bit *like* rules through stout legal protections for whistleblowers, for journalistic sources, and for infrastructure which enables anonymised leaks. But within the impersonal opacity of state agency, what ultimately plays out is the distinctly personal agency of officials, sometimes well-aligned to laws, regulations, contracts, and norms, but never necessarily so. Excessive confidence in unauthorised disclosure as an adequate check on state secrecy draws close to the notion that, to paraphrase many an NRA member, the only way to stop a bad guy with a secret is with a good guy with a secret. WikiLeaks, of course – on which Dorothy Butchard briefly touches in her article in this issue – is a can of worms that does not even give us the option of not opening it.
- ²³ Dennis Broeders, 'The Secret in Information Society', *Philosophy & Technology*, 29(3), pp. 293–305 (2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0217-3>
- ²⁴ Broeders, 'The Secret in Information Society'.
- ²⁵ Cf. Shoshana Zuboff, 'Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1): 2015.
- ²⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Secker & Warburg, 1949). Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
- ²⁷ Dorothy Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic "Data-Bodies"', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018.
- ²⁸ Redell Olsen, *Secure Portable Space* (Reality Street Editions, 2004), p. 89.
- ²⁹ There is probably more going on here though. There seems to be wordplay on 'no object', although the pun is productively difficult to unravel. Perhaps the poem performs the reification of flesh, insisting that flesh absolutely cannot be an 'object', while simultaneously insisting that this impossibility is 'no object' to flesh nevertheless really being objectified, both as data and the wider materialities containing that data.
- ³⁰ Dorothy Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic "Data-Bodies"', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 10(1): 2018.

- ³¹ 'SUCH PASSIONS ABOUND/in the CYBERSPHERE!': but how sarcastic is this observation really? Does the poem just blast the cybersphere, or does it bless it as well? Perhaps there is a fundamental undecidability at work, suggestive of the breakdown between devotee and critic: admiration and contempt are shown in the same way, by sharing content, and thus colluding in its possible virality.
- ³² Deborah Lupton, *The Quantified Self* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).
- ³³ Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (c.50 BCE), Book 4.
- ³⁴ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You* (London: Penguin, 2012).
- ³⁵ Dorothy Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic 'Data-Bodies'', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 10(1): 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.30>
- ³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Gertrude E. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §293. Also see 'The Innermost Secret' section of this introduction.
- ³⁷ Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), Kindle Locations 947–949.
- ³⁸ What hidden formula determines the mise en scène which confronts you when you open Facebook or Instagram, the precise arrangements of elements which digitise all the lives that fill your life? The company's organisational structure, which hybridises hierarchical structure with loose, semi-autonomous teams pursuing tests and tweaks, ensures that there are multiple and ever-changing formulae – perhaps, in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, 'liquid' formulae – which underlie the moment-by-moment user experience. At the time of writing in March 2018, an apparently large scandal is breaking regarding Facebook's sale of data access to the political consulting company Cambridge Analytica; it remains to be seen whether this or any similar future events may gain enough traction to provoke any significant organisational, regulatory or legal changes from this basic pattern.
- ³⁹ Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, 'The Surveillant Assemblage', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51: pp. 605–622 (2000), p. 613. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020015280>
- ⁴⁰ Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic 'Data-Bodies''.
- ⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, trans. David Wills, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), p. 398.
- ⁴² In combination, these two clues – the secret flourishing at the interface between capital and generalised exchange, the secret as the infrastructure which determines openness and secrecy in the first place – hint that value may be a key element for further theoretical development. Value, wrote Karl Marx, 'converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language. [...] The determination of the magnitude of value by labour time is [...] a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in the relative values of commodities'. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I* (1867), extracted in Jon Elster (ed.), *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 66–67.
- ⁴³ In thinking of the secret as temporal disjunction, we can't help but allude to Derrida's concept of hauntology, and the notion that the secret is usually something ghostly, something neither present nor absent. What Derrida writes about secret of Marx's commodity might even be fruitfully applied to any secret: that the secret is 'is at the same time profound and superficial, opaque and transparent, a secret that is all the more secret in that no substantial essence hides behind it'. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993), trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 154.

- ⁴⁴ Dorothy Tennov, *Love and Limerence* (New York: Stein and Day, 1999 [1979]).
- ⁴⁵ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 448.
- ⁴⁶ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 449.
- ⁴⁷ Jordan Savage, "I don't talk to the police except never": Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life Writing', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018.
- ⁴⁸ Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic 'Data-Bodies''.
- ⁴⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §293.
- ⁵⁰ Sparrow, "[A] poet must know more than | a surface suggests": Reading and Secrecy in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn'.
- ⁵¹ This is an old controversy, of course: Ben Jonson saw rhyme as 'Cozening judgment with a measure/But false weight'; Samuel Daniel insisted it is 'most delightfull to see much excellently ordred in a small-roome, or little, gallantly disposed and made to fill vp a space of like capacitie' and that 'for sure in an eminent spirit whome Nature hath fitted for that mysterie, Ryme is no impediment to his conceit, rather giues him wings to mount and carries him, not out of his course, but as it were beyond his power to a farre happier flight'.
- ⁵² The poem is by Rudyard Kipling, a poet Orwell elsewhere describes as a 'good bad poet', locating his virtue in a platitudinous conservatism and false world view which nevertheless prompts him to 'imagine what action and responsibility are like'. George Orwell, 'Rudyard Kipling', *Horizon*, (London, February 1942). Accessed online: orwell.ru/library/reviews/kipling/english/e_rkip.
- ⁵³ Savage, "I don't talk to the police except never": Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life writing'; Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 444.
- ⁵⁴ J.H. Prynne, 'Resistance and Difficulty', *Prospect* 5 (1961), p. 27. Speculative realism is represented by writers such as Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux. The theme of resistance arises in speculative realism's broadly Heideggerian contention – e.g. against some of Bruno Latour's work, which it nevertheless draws heavily on – that things which exist withhold a secret reality independent of all their relations. Many other contemporary materialisms, such as Jane Bennett's vital materialism and Karen Barad's agential realism, join speculative realism in rejecting anthropocentrism and seeking to do justice to the vast, vibrant, secret reality beyond human action and experience. However, unlike Harman et al., by preserving the importance of political critique, they thematise resistance in a rather different way; they tend to be more sensitive to the customary mix of Foucauldian, Deleuzian, Butlerian and Derridean metaphysics of much contemporary literary studies, and seek to inform political resistance through a concern with becomings, blurrings, and social constructions that are materially recalcitrant in some ways but not in others. Paul Gilroy argues that humanism, perhaps as reparative humanism, is a likelier site of significant political resistance, and rejects any rejection of anthropocentrism that functions to conceal the history of racialization. However, Prynne's 'Resistance and Difficulty' also forges its own distinctive methods and terminology, and its treatment of resistance, difficulty, and secrecy runs parallel with or away from these contemporary debates as often as it intersects with them.
- ⁵⁵ Sparrow, "[A] poet must know more than | a surface suggests": Reading and Secrecy in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn'.
- ⁵⁶ Dorothy Butchard, 'Secrecy, Surveillance, and Poetic 'Data-Bodies''', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018.
- ⁵⁷ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 456.
- ⁵⁸ Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerback' (1845/1888), extracted in Jon Elster (ed.), *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 23.

- ⁵⁹ Nisha Ramayya, 'Secreting Blackness in the Poetry of D.S. Marriott', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.38>
- ⁶⁰ Marriott, *Haunted Life*, p. 42.
- ⁶¹ Marriott, *Haunted Life*, pp. 42–43.
- ⁶² Marriott, *Haunted Life*, p. 212.
- ⁶³ Ramayya, 'Secreting Blackness in the Poetry of D.S. Marriott'.
- ⁶⁴ David Grundy, 'Poetry and Secrecy in Luke Roberts's *To My Contemporaries*', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1): 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.28>
- ⁶⁵ From Savage's vantage, life writing might well include experimental writing such as Luke Roberts' *To My Contemporaries* (2015) (as well as Peter Manson's 'raven A' (2016), 'Four Darks in Red' (2006) and *Adjunct: An Undigest* (2001), discussed in Betteridge's article). Savage's notion of 'anti-confessional writing' might also be fruitfully applied, as much to see where it fits badly as to see where it fits well.
- ⁶⁶ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 447.
- ⁶⁷ Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), Kindle Locations 209–213.
- ⁶⁸ Bill Griffiths, *An Account of the End* (Cambridge: Lobby Press, 1978), n.p.
- ⁶⁹ Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', p. 448.
- ⁷⁰ Luke Roberts, *To My Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Self-published, 2015), n.p. Also republished in *The Chicago Review* 60(3): 2017. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 21.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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