

Trading on Strikes: Trade Unions in Steve Ely's 'Ballad of the Scabs' and Helen Mort's 'Scab'

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In the past few years there have been a number of poetry collections which concern themselves with trade unions and strike action. This essay will focus on two of these collections, Steve Ely's *England* (2015) and Helen Mort's *Division Street* (2013), to examine the ways in which these poets not only contend with representing trade unions, but also how these poems seek to complicate our relationship with any easy comprehension of the miners' strikes of the 1970s and 1980s and the unions that were responsible for the commencement of these industrial disputes.

The publication of these two works—along with Paul Bentley's *Largo* (2011), Ely's debut collection, *Oswald's Book of Hours* (2013) and Paul Batchelor's selection in 2013's *Oxford New Poets*, all of which contend with trade union representations in some form, particularly in regards to the 1984–5 miners' strike—show a renewed interest in, and turning back to, a period in recent British history that has in many ways been

marginalised, no doubt partly due to the relative weakness of the trade union movement today.

Owen Jones writes in his 2011 book, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, that “the unions, whatever their faults and limitations, had given the workers in these [old industrial] communities strength, solidarity and a sense of power. All of this had sustained a feeling of belonging, of pride in a shared working-class experience” (48–49). Jones’ statement is situated in his discussion of a Thatcherite legacy so damaging to trade unions that “when Labour came to power in 1997, Tony Blair could boast that even after his proposed reforms, trade union laws would remain ‘the most restrictive’ in the Western world” (49).

In a UK in which zero-hour contracts are rife and for many job security is near unattainable, trade unions provide an essential bulwark against exploitative labour practices. Yet, be it as a result of a disillusionment with unions and their ability to affect substantive change in the workplace, a lack of awareness surrounding the benefits that unionisation affords or an increasingly temporary and transient workforce that unions struggle to reach, union membership continues to fall year-on-year. At the heart of many of these issues is that of the individual and the collective. It is as an individual worker with individual concerns that one joins a union yet, in many ways, once you have joined a union, your voice becomes marginalised, you become part of a system which seeks to “benefit” the collective.

Turning to the poems, and the most recent of the two works, Steve Ely’s second collection, *Englaland*. *Englaland* is described in its blurb as “an unapologetic and paradoxical affirmation of a bloody, bloody-minded and bloody brilliant people. Danish huscarls, Falklands war heroes, pit-village bird-nesters, aging prize-fighters, flying pickets, jihadi suicide-bombers and singing yellowhammers”. In Ely’s book, trade unions, strike action and violence pervade poems which are littered with acronyms from industry and politics, most of which come in the book’s second movement ‘The Harrowing of the North’. ‘The Harrowing of the North’ refers to William I’s—alternatively known as William the Conqueror or William the Bastard—Harrying of the North (1069–70) where brutal attempts were made to quell uprisings in the north of England. Ely draws a not too subtle parallel between that event and the war against trade

unions—and more specifically the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers)—during the miners’ strikes of the 1970s and 1980s, while also tracing concerns, dating back for centuries, regarding stately oppression and workers’ resistance to the present day. The title also, of course, echoes Christ’s ‘Harrowing of Hell’.

‘Ballad of the Scabs’, the centerpiece and longest poem of ‘The Harrowing of the North’, works as a potted history of the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers), and more broadly the trade union movement, during the 1970s and 80s:

In ‘72 the NUM
shook the Tory State
closing down the cokeworks
there at Saltney Gate.

The miners’ flying pickets
and their comrades in the TUC
showed the power the workers have
when they act in unity.

(Ely 136)

Ely’s opening to the ballad situates power to destabilise the state with the NUM.³ However, through the first two stanzas there is a gradual shift as we see ‘the NUM’ become ‘miners’ and then ‘workers’. The shift from ‘NUM’ to ‘workers’ presents both a sense of the erosion of a sense of organisational belonging—in that the ‘protection’ afforded through being part of a union is removed—while simultaneously re-establishing the concerns and actions of those miners who were striking (and part of the

³ As the miners decided to strike in winter, in the 1972 strike it only took the miners a month to bring Britain to a halt: on the 9th February Prime Minister Edward Heath was forced to declare a ‘state of emergency’, with the 3-day working week following two days later. The strike was finally called off two weeks after on 25th February with the miners agreeing to a wage increase of between £5 to £6, plus other benefits (“BBC ON THIS DAY | 25 | 1972: Miners Call Off Crippling Coal Strike”). In the 1984–5 strike, the strike began at the beginning of March when the call for coal was much lower.

NUM) within the wider community of class—‘worker’—conflict and resistance. This holds true for how we conceive of our histories; in her book on collective memory, Astrid Erll states that “there is no collective memory without individual actualization” (107). It is the individual who must produce a ‘memory’ for the collective, which then feeds back to the individual in a constant cycle of change and augmentation. This is one of the common issues when talking about trade unions and strike action: how should we refer to union organisations and how or where do we attribute power? There is a constant tension between the view of unions as a homogenous organisation and unions as being comprised of workers who often share the same profession but not necessarily the same views on how their unions should operate.⁴ The 1972 miners’ strike predominantly centred around increasing wages for NUM members—albeit in an industry that had already seen hundreds of pit closures at the cost of approximately 430,000 jobs since the late 1950s (num.org.uk). Yet, Ely chooses to focus on the broader political impact that the 1972 strike had on the ‘Tory State’.⁵ This is an important distinction to make because it situates trade unions in direct opposition to the ‘state’. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to Ted Heath’s calling of a ‘state of emergency’ on 9th February 1972.⁶ Ely essentially elevates the 1972

⁴ In 1972 only 58.8% of miners voted to go on strike—just exceeding the 55% required (Beckett and Hencke 2009: 23).

⁵ It is perhaps surprising that Ely refers to the ‘Tory State’, as opposed to simply the ‘state’; from 1970–1974 Prime Minister (PM) Edward Heath led a Conservative government, however, from 1964–70 (PM Harold Wilson) and 1974–1979 (Wilson and then James Callaghan) the Labour party held office. By calling the state ‘Tory’, Ely does not just refer to the elected government at the time, but to an idea that the structure of the state itself is based on conservative principles and ideas.

⁶ Section 1(1) of the 1920 Emergency Powers Act reads that a state of emergency may be called ‘if at any time it appears to His Majesty that any action has been taken or is immediately threatened by any persons or body of persons of such a nature and on so extensive a scale as to be calculated, by interfering with the supply and distribution of food, water, fuel, or light, or with the means of locomotion, to deprive the community, or any substantial portion of the community, of the essentials of life, His Majesty may, by proclamation (hereinafter referred to as

miners' strike from an industrial dispute to a conflict between workers and 'the state'. The union here becomes situated as a political organisation, defined by its political, and not labour-based, impact. Still, it is through the suppression and withdrawal of their labour—'closing down the cokeworks'—that unions have political efficacy. Ely presents the union as 'proactive', even if it is the NUM's ability to organise an absence of 'work' through picketing and strike action that affords them the greatest political agency. By choosing not to contextualise the 1972 miners' strike, Ely appears to expect a readership already conversant with the strike of 1972. This is unusual given that *Englaland* was published in 2015 and the 1972 strike has largely been ignored in popular culture in favour of the 1984–5 miners' strike.⁷ Due to the fact, perhaps, that as trade union membership numbers have declined relatively steadily since 1985 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 22)⁸, the strike of 1984–5 is often seen as the beginning of trade unions' waning influence in the UK. Also, through positioning the NUM as the poem's subject, an NUM which destabilises the 'Tory State' without accounting for the reasons behind these actions, Ely presents a proactive, as opposed to reactionary, union. In the poem's opening, the NUM are not defending their members' jobs or working conditions against the state; in fact the job of mining is not mentioned. The NUM are the 'aggressors' whose main aim appears revolutionary.

a proclamation of emergency), declare that a state of emergency exists' (Emergency Powers Act 1920). The 1964 Emergency Powers Act broadened the scope so that 'the words from "any action" to "so extensive a scale" there shall be substituted the words "there have occurred, or are about to occur, events of such a nature"'. Section 2 of the 1964 Act also allowed the use of the armed forces to engage in any work of 'national importance' during an emergency period (Emergency Powers Act 1964).

⁷ The movies *Pride*, *Billy Elliot*, and, to a lesser extent, *Brassed Off* (which is set ten years after the strike) all have the 1984–5 strike as a backdrop.

⁸ The periods 1997–1999 and 2004–2007 saw slight increases in trade union membership but these were not sustained. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 22)

The NUM's proactivity is mirrored against the 'TUC' (Trades Union Congress)⁹, which becomes almost a subsidiary of the NUM in the poem through 'the miners' flying pickets/ and their comrades in the TUC' (Ely 136). As the 'comrades' are *in* the TUC and not simply 'the TUC' there is a tension between the organisation and the individuals within it. A possible implication is that the TUC is not supporting the NUM, but some of the 'workers' in the organisation are.¹⁰ The TUC was 'not directly involved in any way' in the 1984–5 strike. Scargill, rightly, believed "that if he allowed the TUC into the conflict he would lose control because the general council would have been far more amenable to seeking a compromise and an early settlement of the dispute" (Taylor 251). Jones describes miners, unsurprisingly, considering Britain's reliance on coal in the 20th century,¹¹ as "the vanguard of the union movement in Britain" (55). Yet, it is worth noting that in this verse the NUM is 'replaced' as we shift from political concerns to more explicitly strike-based actions. It is clear that while the unions call industrial action, it is the members of the unions that must 'enact' the strike through withholding their labour. However, it is still the NUM that close 'down the cokeworks', not the workers. Where the NUM 'shook' the state and are 'closing down' factories, the miners and 'their comrades' 'showed' their power and 'act' in unity. The 'workers' perform their actions, supporting the activity of the NUM in the opening stanza. As Ely terms

⁹ The Trades Union Congress is not technically a trade union itself but a federation representing a large majority of trade union organisations in the UK; their 'mission' being to "be a high profile organisation that campaigns successfully for trade union aims and values; assists trade unions to increase membership and effectiveness; cuts out wasteful rivalry; and promotes trade union solidarity" ("About The TUC").

¹⁰ In 1972, the TUC's 'greatest' achievement would probably have been the release of the 'Pentonville Five', jailed after the 1972 dock strike—"shop stewards of the Transport and General Workers' Union, [who] were arrested on the picket line, committed for contempt and put in Pentonville Prison" ("TUC | History Online").

¹¹ In 1920 coal accounted for 99% of Britain's fuel input for electricity generation and remained at over 50%—bar during the miners' strike of 1984–5 when it dropped to around 45%—until 1995 (Department of Energy and Climate Change 2013).

this demonstration of unity an ‘act’, we have the twin ideas of ‘performance’ and ‘action’ being presented. Yet, this ‘act’ is one that is required for the presentation of ‘power’ that industrial action requires. Having said that, the use of ‘when’ in ‘when they act in unity’ (136) could trouble this reading by suggesting, as it does in a conditional clause, that this power can only be shown ‘when’, in some hypothetical future, this ‘unity’ actually occurs. With this work being published in 2015, and with trade union membership having decreased consistently since 2007–8 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 22), there is a sense that Ely is commenting not just on workers’ unity in the early 1970s but also on the decreasing influence of unions and the lack of collective organisation today. He is, perhaps, bleakly suggesting that worker unity in 2015 is nothing more than a utopian ideal. On the other hand, this can be viewed to serve as a reminder of past union strength and to argue the need for the development of a new collective (rather than individualistic) culture.

Ely continues his separation of union and worker in the following verses, with the union responsible for political change but with workers forced to bear the brunt of the repercussions:

In ’74 they finished the job
and forced out Edward Heath
they chipped in from their pay rise
to buy capital a wreath.

The ruling class got nervous
and planned a counter-attack
to perpetate [sic] their power
and put the workers on the rack.

(Ely 136)

The ‘they’ at first appears to be a continuation of the ‘workers’ from the previous stanza, but as the line echoes the opening of the poem I would posit that ‘they’ is both the ‘workers’ and the ‘NUM’, positioning them as inseparable. As a result, what we get is a somewhat ambiguous ‘job’. There seem to be three possible readings of ‘the job’: the ‘job’ completed

is that of forcing Edward Heath from power;¹² that there are two ‘jobs’, presumably that of getting a ‘pay rise’, and of forcing out Heath, both of which are given equal weight; or there is the ‘primary’ job—‘pay rise’—and a resultant effect, the end of Edward Heath’s government. It could be argued that these distinctions are unimportant, particularly considering the difficulty in securing the ‘they’; however, what these distinctions do is go to the heart of what a union should be *doing*, what they should be *for*, and the interaction between ‘lay’ members and union officials. The simplest reading of the poem is that ‘the job’ unions do is all of these things, and that what is intentional, and what is not, is inconsequential. Yet, intention becomes necessary to determine when considering how unions are viewed by the general public. For example, according to an article in *The Telegraph*, it is estimated that nationally 55,000 jobs are reliant on the UK’s defence exports (Wilson). While many people are opposed to the UK producing and selling arms, as a trade union, is your immediate concern to secure existing jobs? Are unions bound to serve the economic improvement and/or security of their members, without consideration for the direct/indirect social impact of the jobs in which they are employed? Or are unions’ primary aim to affect public policy in regards to labour legislation? As Alison L. Booth points out in her book, *The Economics of the Trade Union*, “while we have considerable information about outcomes, and the issues that are bargained over, it is problematic to infer union preferences from this information, since the outcome reflects the preferences and constraints of *both* parties” (87). Ely seems to attempt an answer to this question when ‘they chipped in from their pay rise/to buy capital a wreath’. There is a certain sense of complacency and naivety to the lines, since the pay rise is both a victory over and a result of ‘capital’, which is far from dead. However, although a general first reaction to ‘wreath’ is that it is for a

¹² In the 1974 miners’ strike, 81% of miners voted for strike action, the ballot called by the NUM, and were widely credited with toppling the Heath government after he was forced to hold an election just three weeks after the vote to strike, an election he subsequently lost to Harold Wilson’s Labour party (Beckett and Hencke 2009, 26).

funeral, a ‘wreath’ can as easily be used to signify a wedding or simply a decorative adornment. In this more troubled reading, the workers and union (‘they’) become complicit with capital and the ‘chipping in’ becomes a way of giving thanks, rather than paying last respects. It is this tension between being separated from and yet a part of the state that plagues trade union organisations. As Stanley Aronowitz states in his book on American labour unions: “organized labor is integrated into the prevailing political and economic system; so much so that it not only complies with the law but also lacks an ideology opposed to the prevailing capitalist system”. Aronowitz’s judgement, of course, cannot be directly mapped onto British labour relations, since there have been innumerable examples of unions breaking the law.¹³ Yet, it is undeniable that the 1972 and 1974 miners’ strikes both complied with UK law and that the aim of these strikes was not for workers to remove themselves from a capitalist system, but to be able to function more effectively within it through increased spending power. It is ironical that, in Ely’s poem, the first thing the workers do after receiving their pay rise is to feed money back into the capitalist state.

In the poem, the state returns to attack the unions during the 1984–5 miners’ strike when attempting to sue Arthur Scargill and the NUM on ‘behalf of’ the Conservative government, and imprison him for contempt of court:¹⁴

¹³ There are still those who believe that the 1984–5 strike was illegal as the NUM never held a national ballot.

¹⁴ This will be covered in more detail in the section on the 1984–5 strike. However, the context is that, in a case brought by five miners from Yorkshire and Derbyshire, the High Court found the strike to be unlawful, as the strike had been undertaken without a ballot—a point that is still in dispute to this day. This was a ruling that Scargill had ignored, leading to the writ being served on him, NUM vice-president Mick McGahey, general secretary Peter Heathfield and NUM leaders in Yorkshire and Derbyshire (Rogers 1984, 1).

Sir Hector Laing¹⁵ stumped up some cash
 Lord Hanson¹⁶ stumped up more
 they served a writ on Scargill
 on the Labour Conference floor,

A firm of Tory lawyers
 deployed the state machine
 and outlawed Scargill and the NUM
 to the silence of the TUC.

See, all those bastards need to win
 is Brotherhood to fail
 in cringing fear of state assault
 of courts and fines and jail.

(Ely 139)

The TUC's 'silence' is the first concrete example of the factions within the trade union movement, as opposed to simply within a union itself. Not only are Scargill and the NUM 'outlawed' in the poem, but Ely 'outlaws' them by having the line where they are referenced have four iambic feet, rather than the three feet of the other lines in the stanza. Due to this, the TUC becomes more closely aligned, poetically, with the 'state machine' and the 'Tory lawyers', not the NUM. It is also noticeable that the end words of 'machine/TUC' do not rhyme. By withholding the expected end-rhyme, the TUC itself has effectively been 'silenced' by the 'state machine' or has chosen to remain silent. Yet, as three-letter acronyms, the 'TUC' and 'NUM' are linked visually and share a /ju:/ sound with one another. The TUC is presented as being suspended between the forces of the state and its obligations towards the NUM. Ely is warning us of conflating two things, the TUC and the NUM, which appear alike or are presumed to have the same objectives, but which in reality have a much more complex relationship and power dynamic. The

¹⁵ Director of the Bank of England in 1984.

¹⁶ Industrialist who was made a peer by Margaret Thatcher in 1983.

NUM is at the mercy of the ‘state’—the idea of ‘deploying’ the force of the state is indicative of the state as military aggressors that are controlled by the Conservative government—whereas the TUC has the *option* to remain silent. This ‘silence’ can be seen in light of the opening of the poem, where the NUM remove or withhold their labour—‘closing down the cokeworks’ (Ely 138)—to have an impact, the TUC remove or withhold their words. It is then unsurprising that through the final twenty-two stanzas of the poem the TUC are not mentioned again, their silence has effectively removed them, at least in the eyes of Ely, from

having a role to play in the history of the miners’ dispute.

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Perhaps the better-known of these two poets is Sheffield’s Helen Mort. The cover art for her collective *Division Street* is a photograph by Don McPhee of a striker at the Battle of Orgreave,¹⁷ wearing a homemade ‘police’ helmet adorned with the badge of the NUM, face to face with a line of police officers (Fig. 1). Although the title of the collection and the cover art would leave even the most casual browser



Figure 1

¹⁷ ‘The Battle of Orgreave’, as it has come to be known, took place on the 18th June 1984 where miners were ‘secondary picketing’—picketing at a place, in this case a factory ran by British Steel, that is not directly linked to the protest (McSmith 2011, 163). Estimates posit the number of strikers in something of the region of 10,000 and roughly half the number of police officers (Tarver 2014). According to police reports, “93 pickets were arrested, with a further 51 injured along with 72 police officers” (“IPCC Sorry For Orgreave Probe Delay”) To this day, the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign are still pressing the IPCC (Internal Police Complaints Commission) to investigate the South Yorkshire Police in regards to the events that took place on that day. In 2015, the IPCC said they would not be investigating the police officers in Orgreave that day, as too much time had passed (“‘Battle of Orgreave’: Probe Into 1984 Miners’ Clash Policing Ruled Out”).

aware of the nature of Mort's work, perhaps surprisingly, the NUM does not appear anywhere in the collection.

Helen Mort was born in 1985, after the Battle of Orgreave and the 1984–5 miners' strike, at a time when union influence was already on the wane, particularly after the 'defeat' in the 1984–5 miners' strike. In 2012, when the poem was published, the NUM, due to the decline of the mining industry in the UK, had, in reality, ceased to be a force in the British trade union movement.¹⁸ However, the NUM's involvement in the 1984–5 strike cannot be underplayed. The question then becomes, what occupies the space in Mort's work that we may have expected the NUM to inhabit?

The strike and its legacy is contended with in the collection's 'centrepiece' poem, 'Scab'— the only poem longer than two pages in the collection and a possible reference to Jack London's poem of the same name, where he imagines Judas as the ultimate 'scab'. As previously seen, 'scab' also appears in the title of Ely's 'Ballad of the Scabs'. Yet, unlike Ely's relatively atavistic ballad form and concerns with 'memorialising' the union movement, Mort's poem places herself and her questions regarding the direct social legacy of the strike at the poem's centre. One of the earliest examples of 'scab' being used to denote a strike-breaker in an industrial dispute can be found as far back as 1792:

“What is a scab? He is to his *trade* what a traitor is to his *country*... He first sells the journeymen, and is himself afterwards sold in his turn by the masters, till at last he is despised by both and deserted by all.” (Aspinall 84)

The quotation situates the act of 'scabbing' alongside the concept of nationalism or patriotism, and essentially equates 'scabbing' with treason—a crime that until 1998 could have led to execution. Although this points to the writer's belief in the severity of the 'crime' of undermining one's fellow worker by breaking a strike, the quotation also places striking, uncomfortably to my mind, in the same bracket as

¹⁸ The TUC website states that there are only 1,853 NUM members as of March 2016 ("NUM").

‘loyalty’ to the state or country. However, this is complicated somewhat by the statement that the ‘scab’, after selling out the ‘journeymen’, will in turn be ‘sold...by the masters’. Here there appears a separation between the ‘state’ as defined as the ‘country’ and those that own the means of production, the ‘masters’.

In the UK, trade unions were not legalised until 1871, with the publication of the Trade Union Act of the same year—although the TUC was founded a few years earlier, in 1868. It should be highlighted that it is not necessary for a ‘scab’ to be part of a union that is striking. There have been numerous incidents of companies employing outside labour to continue production while a strike is in effect. ‘Scabs’ can also be employed in a workplace that has a union which is calling for workers to strike, but where the ‘scab’ is not a member of that union, or any union at all. However, particularly in regards to miners’ disputes in the UK, a large majority of those who scabbed were members of a striking union who had chosen to contravene the orders of their union to strike.¹⁹

In the penultimate stanza of the poem, Mort writes. ‘*They scabbed in 1926. They scabbed / in 1974. They’d scab tomorrow / if they had the chance...*’ (22). Although italicised, I cannot determine whether this is a quotation Mort has used or her own words. Either way, what the statement suggests is that scabbing is entwined with industrial disputes, particular those like 1926, 1974 and 1984–5, in which tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of workers went on strike. We have no specific details about ‘who’ scabbed, but we have a ‘they’, the other. Through the use of ‘they’ what occurs is an act of ‘flattening’ or a homogenisation of strike history whereby individual choice and social context for the scabbing is removed or intentionally ignored. This is itself somewhat misleading. By the end of February 1985—the strike ended on the 3rd March 1985—the total number of miners who had abandoned the strike

¹⁹ The Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), which was officially established in 1985 (mostly by Nottinghamshire miners who refused to strike, or wished to return to work during the 1984–5 miners’ strike) as a ‘breakaway’ union from the NUM, is a case in point, and can be considered a ‘scab’ union.

“exceeded 93,000” of the between 186,000 and 188,000 NUM members (Jones 184). ‘They’ made up almost a majority of the union membership. Yet, those who had scabbed—even as far back as 1926—continue to be ‘scabs’ from that point onwards in the reminiscences of those who did not. Having posited this, the tone of the final conditional phrase, *‘they’d scab tomorrow / if they had the chance...’*, seems to combine a lingering anger at those who crossed the picket line with a sorrow that there is no opportunity for anyone to do so, because of the destruction of the mining industry. You can only scab if you are supposed to be on strike, and in most instances strikes only occur with the presence of a (strong) trade union movement. A strike is useless without jobs to protect or working conditions to improve, as are trade unions. Those who ‘scabbed’ remain as a reminder that there was once a trade union and other striking colleagues for them to undermine.

Not only is a ‘scab’ a person who works during a strike and undermines it, but a wound which, while beginning to heal, still bears the visual mark of damage having been done. As the ‘scab’ in this second sense is still evident in Mort’s poem in 2013, the repercussions of the strike are yet to have disappeared. The poem itself positions us directly in the midst of the strike:

A stone is lobbed in ‘84,
hangs like a star over Orgreave.
Welcome to Sheffield. Border-land,
our town of miracles—

(Mort 16)

Mort is showing us the first ‘division,’ where the past and present are divided by time. Yet, the event still resonates now. Without explaining what happened in 1984, in terms of the strike, or what is or was ‘Orgreave’, the poet is presenting these events as indelibly linked to any discussion of Sheffield—enough to constitute a ‘Welcome’. This can also be read as setting up a division between the poet and reader or, more specifically, those who come from ex-mining communities and those who have not lived (directly) with the legacy of the strike of 1984–5. In the poem, 1984 *is* the strike and Battle of Orgreave; no more explanation is

needed apart from these two references. Opening the poem in the present passive voice—‘is lobbed’ rather than the more grammatically suitable ‘was lobbed’—a tense usually used for repeated actions, to describe an event which happened nearly 30 years previous—‘in ‘84’—, presents not just the violence of the event, but also the contemporary ramifications of the event itself. We are given no agent who ‘lobbed’ the stone, with the implication that it has become much larger than the individual lobbing or than the action itself. Using ‘lobbed’, as opposed to ‘threw’, suggests that there is no specific target, just a general direction, and that everyone is a potential victim. Mort removes all human figures in the first two lines. With no thrower or intended victim, Mort figuratively leaves the stone suspended in mid-air, never reaching the ground but shining down ‘over Orgreave’ until the poem’s close. This is a place where time has stood still, the action of the strike arresting any forward movement, yet at the same time ‘illuminating’ everything that has come since, and proving a fitting introduction to *Sheffield*. The single star over Orgreave brings to mind either the Pole (or North) star by which travellers would navigate their way or the star of Bethlehem from the Bible, signifying the birth of Christ. In the poem, the stone, which Mort likens to a star, and Orgreave which lies beneath it, becomes a focal point around which people can ‘rally’. Orgreave and the protest which happened there come to symbolise something infinitely bigger than the event itself. However, if we push the Bible story idea further it is the ‘wise men’ who, after seeing the star, report it to Herod who then calls for the execution of all the young males in Bethlehem, so as to prevent the loss of his throne. Transposing this reading to the poem the stone/star becomes not only a rallying point, but also that which causes untold suffering for years to come. This may appear hyperbolic; however, as the closure of the mines led to the destruction of many mining communities and lack of jobs for future generations—“at the onset of the strike, the NCB [National Coal Board] employed a workforce of 208,000 ... Within ten years, more than 90 per cent of the jobs were gone” (McSmith 169)—this analogy is in fact

depressingly apt.²⁰ And if you destroy an industry, you inevitably destroy the union that represents it. In light of this, *Welcome to Sheffield* takes on a far more demoralizing resonance as a place unable to forget or move on, as a city in a state of arrested development where the ‘miracles’ consist of the ‘wine turning to water in the pubs’ (Mort 16). In *Staging the UK*, Jen Harvie’s work on the relationship between performance and cultural identities, it is stated that “remembering can be a progressive or regressive political act” (41); here, remembering is being used to show how development has not simply been arrested but is actively regressing.²¹

‘Scab’ ends with the stone from the poem’s opening finally crashing through ‘your windowpane’, where the ‘you’ is ‘left/ to guess which picket line you crossed’ (Mort 22). The past comes crashing into the present of the poem, destroying the ‘view’ of the strike that had been created, challenged and undermined through various recollections and reconstructions of the strike, and through the refashioning of these events as a poem. Further, as Seumas Milne states, “far from being remote from our time, the miners’ opposition to Thatcher’s market and privatization juggernaut makes even clearer sense in the wake of the 2008 crash than it did at the time” (397). Both the reader and Mort become the ‘scab’ of the poem’s title. The ‘you’ is left to ‘guess’ which picket line was crossed, the arbitrary nature of the guess implying that all of us have in some fashion ‘crossed the picket line’, without being fully aware of it. Yet, these crossed borders—‘a gilded College gate/ a better supermarket, the entrance to your flat’ (Mort 23)—speak to the feeling in the 80s that “no longer was being working class something to be proud

²⁰ In his report on Ex-Mining communities Simon Parker quotes David Parry, spokesperson for the Coalfields Communities Campaign, as saying: “*You get 50 jobs created in a place where 2,000 men used to work and this means older men in particular are parked outside the labour market*” (2005, 5).

²¹ After the closure of the Kellingley pit in North Yorkshire in December 2015, there are now no deep coal mines operational in the UK.

of: it was something to escape from” (Jones 40). And, additionally, Mort’s own personally unresolved sense of class unease in regards to her time as an undergraduate at Cambridge, which is explored in the ‘other’ narrative strand of ‘Scab’. Mort is suggesting that we are now becoming, or have become, products of the legacy of the strike. The stone thrown from the miners’ strike 1984–5 becomes a symbol of what has been forgotten in terms of the ideals of social equality that underpinned the strike. In the same way that, in Harrison’s ‘V.’ (perhaps the most famous strike poem), he was concerned with leaving behind his ‘heritage’, Mort has brought the same concerns bursting into the 21st century and ends the poem with an allusion to Harrison: ‘someone/ has scrawled the worst insult they can—/a name. Look close. It’s yours’ (Mort 23). The ‘look close’ conjures the image of someone straining to read a name, that, while theirs, has become unfamiliar to them. And as earlier in the poem, where a re-enactor is kicked until ‘he doesn’t know his name’, here the name is never given to us and it shifts to become that of the reader. The poem breaks through the ‘glass’ which positions the reader as an observer, and repositions the reader as both the subject and the object of the poem. The reader becomes the ‘you’ who has crossed the picket line and the ‘scrawled’ name becomes the reader’s own. The act of reading the poem becomes an act of scabbing in itself. The reader becomes complicit in the continuation and dissemination of real/fictionalised events of the strike simply through the act of reading the poem and inferring conclusions from the material Mort has ‘repackaged’ for us. The legacy of the miners’ strike 1984–5 is conveyed as being so pervasive that there is no ‘you’ (reading the poem) that is exempt from its influence and legacy.

This concern with naming continues in the ‘third section’ of the poem, moving to 2001 and focusing on one of the most unusual works created in response to the miners’ strike 1984–5, artist Jeremy Deller’s re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreave. The re-enactment featured ‘eight hundred people, many of whom were ex-miners or police involved in the original encounter’ (Mort). Here it seems appropriate to quote the section in its entirety:

This is a reconstruction. Nobody
will get hurt. There are miners playing

coppers, ex-coppers shouting
Maggie, Out. There are battle specialists,
 The Vikings and the Sealed Knot.
 There will be opportunities to leave.
 a handshake at the end. Please note
 the language used for authenticity:
 example—scab, example—cunt.

*

This is a re-enactment.
 When I blow the whistle, charge
 but not before. On my instruction.
 throw your missiles in the air.
 On my instruction, tackle him,
 then kick him when he's down,
 kick him in the bollocks, boot him
 like a man in flames. Now harder,
 kick him till he doesn't know his name.

*

This is a reconstruction.
 It is important to film everything.
 Pickets chased on horseback into Asda,
 running shirtless through the aisles of tins.
 A lad who sprints through ginnels,
 gardens, up somebody's stairs,
 into a room where two more miners
 hide beneath the bed, or else
 are lost—or left for dead.

(Mort 21–22)

The opening line serves almost as a warning to the reader of what is to come and a reminder to those taking part that this is not a 'real' battle. There is an interesting shift in the opening lines of the verses from 'reconstruction' to 're-enactment' and back again. By reconstructing or re-enacting something you are, in essence, creating something 'new', for both actions can only ever be an approximation of the 'original', separated

as they are by time if nothing else. In her work on site-specific performance Harvie asserts that:

Site-specific performance can enact a spatial history, mediating between the past and the present most obviously, but also between the identities of the past and those of the present and future, as well as between a sense of nostalgia for the past and a sense of otherness possibly felt in the present and anticipated in the future. (42)

However, despite everything that Harvie contends, any reconstruction—particularly of an event such as the battle of Orgreave—will always be influenced by the evidence available that the reconstruction is based upon and the person organising the reconstruction. Therefore those ‘identities’ are still subject to the person creating the performance. In Mort’s poem the ‘reconstruction’ is immediately undermined by the assertion that ‘nobody will get hurt’ and the fact that in some cases the miners and ‘coppers’ who were involved will be playing the ‘parts’ of one another.²² It is also quite possible that many of these miners and police officers would have come from the same community and class as one another. Mort is highlighting the fallacy of the act, the process whereby ‘history’ is reduced to a staged presentation of reportedly ‘true’ events. As Richard Schechner, by way of Baudrillard, comments, if “the simulation can seem real, the opposite is also true—the real can appear to be simulated” (138). Not only does Schechner’s quotation speak to the event Mort is commenting upon, but also to the poem itself. The poem is a poetic ‘reconstruction’ of an event which was itself a reconstruction of a previous event. It could be argued that through each transformation of the initial event we are moving further away from the ‘truth’ of the event itself. Yet, as Mort repeatedly highlights, through the performative action of the ‘reconstruction’ and through her own work, we are constantly being made aware of the way that accounts of an event can change and be reconstructed—to build something again, but not

²² In the documentary surrounding the re-enactment, *The Battle of Orgreave*, it is said that at least some of the re-enactors were being paid to take part (Figgis 2001).

necessarily in the way that it once was. In the initial reconstruction parts are assigned depending on the needs of the performance; in Mort's work they are assigned according to the 'needs' of the poem. However, a reconstruction does not make something an inferior copy of the original; it is "neither a pretense nor an imitation. It is a replication of...itself as another" (Schechner 117). Both Mort's poem and Deller's reconstruction are original pieces of work, and original pieces which omit trade unions. As Mort's work draws on Deller's reenactment, as opposed to the 'real' Battle of Orgreave, for the poem it shows the way that myths can be started and disseminated and how they can be appropriated to fill a particular need or narrative. Mort has specifically chosen to use Deller's staged and documented event as her starting point, rather than the memories of miners involved in the original event, to show the arbitrary fashion by which history is constructed. One of the most telling lines is where Mort writes, 'This is a reconstruction. It is important to film everything.' The reconstruction of the event was a single, staged performance intended as a piece of performance/conceptual art, while the need to 'film everything' shifts the temporal into something more permanent. As the mainstream media at the time of the strike "mostly portrayed the strike as an anti-democratic insurrection that defied economic logic" (Milne 2014: xii), the desire to capture the reconstruction on film can be viewed as a way of redressing the anti-miner narrative of the media version of the strike.²³ Yet, as the line 'it is important to film everything' is preceded by another assertion of the reconstructive nature

²³ Famously the BBC news version edited the film from Orgreave so that it appeared that the miners had attacked the police, not vice versa as was the case. In their "eagerness to select and shape events to fit a pre-formulated interpretation" the BBC "missed by a mile what was to become the main story of Orgreave" (Masterman 1984: 105). In the BBC's news report, "the violence at Orgreave was presented unequivocally as picket violence...with picketing turning to rioting and destruction and the police compelled to act defensively to retain control under tremendous pressure" (Masterman 1984, 101-102). However, ITN's footage showed that "the decision to 'turn nasty' was one deliberately made by the police. The film showed the police lines opening up, the horses galloping into a group of pickets, who were simply standing around, and the riot police following up wielding their truncheons" (Masterman 1984, 102).

of the performance, and the poem is essentially informed by a documentary about the reconstruction, there is a sense that the doctored image that was presented by the media is being replaced by another stylised view of the struggle, if this time more transparent about the fact. As Alan Sinfield comments, it is “the contest between rival stories [that] produces our notions of reality” (26–7). As a great deal of the Battle of Orgreave was not filmed, the re-enactment, which by being filmed passes into something approaching permanence, becomes another ‘official’ version of events.

Astrid Erll contends that “it is only through media in the broadest sense that contents of cultural memory become accessible for the members of a mnemonic community” (104).²⁴ In this way Mort’s poem is accessing that media—or, at least, the documentation of the reconstruction—but seemingly questioning what it is that is being retained. What Mort has retained in the poem are the figures of the ‘battle specialists’, the new authority figures giving instructions—‘When I blow the whistle, charge / but not before’—during the re-enactment and the performative aspects of the ‘language used for authenticity’, while the original miners involved in the battle have been marginalised. Harvie states that site-specific performance “may validate identities that have been historically marginalised or oppressed, and they may revise potential imbalances in the power dynamics between communities” (41). However, in the poem the identities are in fact invalidated by the switching of ‘roles’. To swap roles suggests that there is no validity in your ‘original’ role, just in the role you are *assigned* for the performance; the fact that the people are ex-miners or ex-coppers becomes irrelevant. Conversely, if roles are assigned regardless of the participants’ original job, there is a suggestion that, as both miners and police officers would

²⁴ As well as Deller’s Orgreave re-enactment, Joshua Oppenheimer’s (truly harrowing) documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2013), foregrounds the notion of the ‘mnemonic community’. In the movie, members of Pancasila Youth, an Indonesian pro-regime paramilitary group, are encouraged by Oppenheimer to re-enact a number of the (between 500,000 and 1 million) murders carried out by their group during the 1965–66 Indonesian Genocide.

often have come from similar class (and community) backgrounds, they could easily have been on the other side during the miners' dispute. David Griffiths, a miner at the Taff Merthy Colliery in Wales, recalled that during the strike "more and more police were drafted in and even though the government strongly denied it, many miners believe the army were also on the picket line. I saw it with my own eyes, a miner on a picket line with me spotted his own son, who was supposedly in the army fighting for his country...this man would never speak to his son again" (Butts-Thompson 22). Although this is anecdotal, and in reference to the military and not the police, it illustrates the way in which members of these professions would often be recruited from the same class background, if not the same family. And, at one time, that these types of jobs would have offered security and a decent wage for many.

When one re-enactor is 'told' to 'kick him till he doesn't know his name', there is tension between the assertion that 'nobody will get hurt' in the re-enactment and the overt encouragement of violence. Although "each instance of remembering constitutes its subject differently and subjectively, eliminating some details and enhancing others as changing conditions demand" (Harvie 41), it is important to look at what details are being presented. If the re-enactor is instructed to kick the person until 'he doesn't know his name' there is the implicit suggestion that the name itself holds some value. Yet, we as a reading audience do not know the name of the re-enactor or the role they are supposed to be playing—it could be either picketer or police officer—and ironically we are being told to forget something that has apparently already been forgotten or is not presented to us. It is that which is forgotten that becomes our focus.

Taking the point further, Mort appears to be questioning the attention afforded the violence at Orgreave rather than those involved in the action, and highlighting the way in which the human aspect can be lost through the retelling and restaging of events. The section of the poem ends with two miners hiding 'beneath the bed', not sure if they are 'lost' or 'left for dead'. Here the image of the miners beneath the bed remains but the names of the two do not. The miners' names are erased by the re-enactment, by the poem and by the system that forced them out of work in the first place without adequate support.

*

Ely's and Mort's poems serve to highlight the inherent difficulties that come from trying to conceive of trade unions as a homogenised institution. Ely's work seems to clamour for a return to a time in which trade unions and the class struggle were at the centre of UK politics, Mort does not. 'Ballad of the Scabs' ends with the lines, 'stay true to your comrades and your class: / the war is won by unity.' (142) Although Ely's subject matter—the miners' strike—and the ballad form may be seen to constitute a form of 'nostalgia', the final lines position his concerns regarding class 'war' directly in the 21st century. The miners' strike is long past, but the issues that led to its commencement—security of jobs, fair pay, the need for collective action—still require attention today. Ely's is a political poem in its clearest sense, a poem about and for political action. Yet, Ely's is a politics that is deeply rooted in notions of the collective. Mort, conversely, ends her poem with a call to the 'you': 'It's yours' (23). Whereas Ely situates the 'burden' for change with the collective, Mort places the 'burden' on the individual, yet an individual who is unable to extricate themselves from the 'legacy' of the miners' strike 1984–5—'You're left / to guess which picket line / you crossed' (22–23). A 'guess' can only ever be an approximation, Mort is emphasising the near impossibility of 'securing' a singular historical narrative. Mort and her readers are both subject to *and* producer of the strike narratives in 'Scab'. In 'Scab' each individual reading of an event produces its own individual history. What both poems examined here do is complicate our strike and trade union narratives. A restaging of an event, or a poem reflecting on an event, while bringing to light issues surrounding the event itself, and perhaps revising "potential power imbalances in the power dynamics" (Erl 41) and narrative, is essential to 'revive' the voices and narratives of those who have been 'left for dead' by the state and prevailing, mainstream, media narratives. Yet, that is not to say that it

poetry's job to revive these voices.²⁵ What Ely's and Mort's poems do, and show that poetry about political action can do, almost (and over) thirty years after these industrial disputes, is present us with a space in which alternative, marginalised *and* competing voices can be heard, while refusing to allow us as readers to draw overly concretising or reductive conclusions about how we *should* read our collective histories.

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²⁵ Katy Shaw's *Mining the Meaning* excellently demonstrates the role that poetry written by miners played during the strike of 1984–5, both in terms of raising campaign funds for the continuation of the strike and empowering those involved in picketing to find a ‘voice’.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Mcphee, Don. *Miners’ Strike, Orgreave*. 1984. *Division Street*. By Helen Mort, London: Chatto & Windus, 2013.

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