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Lawnmower Poetry and the Poetry of Lawnmowers

'The lawnmower is not the sexiest of subjects', asserts Brian Radam in *Lawnmowers: An Illustrated History*.[1] This is both an apology and the start of an apology, as his study takes us through the lawnmower's invention, its meteoric rise in popularity (the industry is now worth around 50 billion dollars annually in the UK, USA and Europe alone), its many types (from the camel-drawn to the voice-activated) and the mechanical principles for cutting grass (cylinder, rotary, reciprocating knife and flail).[2] In the same vein, the microgenre of lawnmower poetry is captivated by the lawnmower's capacity both to bore and to endlessly suggest, often simultaneously. It modifies genres such as the pastoral and the georgic; tackles themes such as violence, childhood, mortality, masculinity and the 'quotidian'; juggles classical and biblical contexts; and negotiates binaries such as man and machine, nature and machine, the country and the city (or, more specifically and ambiguously, the country and the suburb), agency and determinism, destruction and preservation, and conflict and harmony.

This article will explore a representatively diverse sample of lawnmower poetry through the lens of technography, a theoretical approach clustered around the Open Humanities Press series edited by Steven Connor, David Trotter and James Purdon. The series explores 'the cultural (written) history of material technologies', arguing that technology's origins in the Greek philosophical concept of techne (τέχνη, making/art/craft) and its common contemporary usage (a machine, system or piece of kit) are still very much intertwined.[3] It also stresses that, naturalised as it has become, writing is itself a technology, in being a mediating system which we ourselves have invented—and the converse is true: 'all machines are also media', in that they 'come between their users or originators and those users' purposes, as well as providing substitute ways to achieve those purposes'.[4] As James Purdon states, '[t]echnography does not presuppose where, if anywhere, text begins, and the machine stops'.[5] A text, then, might not just be concerned with technology in terms of its content (i.e. a poem is about a machine) but through its form (i.e. a poem functions like the machine that it is about).

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As summarised by Pryor and Trotter, technographies ‘attend equally to the rhetoric sedimented in machines, to machines behaving rhetorically, to rhetoric that behaves mechanically, and to rhetoric behaving in pointed opposition to mechanism’.[6] Previous topics of research have ranged from ticker tape to slot machines; this article puts lawnmowers on the technographic map, offering a further focussed study of a particular machine.[7]

Mowers and lawnmowers

The best-known poem of the microgenre is Philip Larkin’s ‘The Mower’:

> The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found
> A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
> Killed. It had been in the long grass.
>
> I had seen it before, and even fed it, once.
> Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world
> Unmendably. Burial was no help:
>
> Next morning I got up and it did not.
> The first day after a death, the new absence
> Is always the same; we should be careful
>
> Of each other, we should be kind
> While there is still time.[8]

Larkin really did kill a hedgehog, as a letter to Judy Egerton dated 10 June 1979 testifies: ‘[t]his has been a rather depressing day: killed a hedgehog when mowing the lawn, by accident of course. It’s upset me rather’.[9] But his resulting poem also joins a chorus of lawnmower poetry in the 20th and early 21st centuries, with many of these writers responding at some level to the early modern mower poems of Larkin’s fellow Hull poet Andrew Marvell. Larkin himself praises the ‘charming and exquisite poems in the pastoral tradition about gardens and mowers’ in an article about Marvell, evidencing his close and granular engagement with these texts during the late 1970s, which also saw the production of his lawnmower poem.[10]

Larkin toys with Marvellian tradition in ‘The Mower’ most obviously in the figure of the mower becoming a lawnmower, his scythe its blades. The ‘long grass’ recalls Isaiah 40:6, ‘All flesh is grass’: compare ‘Damon the Mower’ (‘’Tis Death alone that this must do/For Death thou art a

Mower too'), or 'The Mower to the Glow Worms' ('Shining unto no higher end/Than to presage the grass's fall', 3–4).[11] And Marvell's unspoiled Eden perverted by extravagant early modern hybridising, grafting and dividing is ironised in Larkin's dull, respectable suburban lawn (c.f. 'The Mower against Gardens': 'He first enclosed within the gardens square/A dead and standing pool of air'; 'No plant now knew the stock from which it came;/He grafts upon the wild the tame', 5–6; 23–24). At first glance, 'The Mower' seems to be a commentary on the twin poisons of increasing mechanisation and urbanisation, whereby the late 20th-century lawnmower is disruptor of the natural and harmonious cycles of life, of harvests and lifespans passing by each in their proper place and at their proper time. Accordingly, in an early handwritten manuscript, Larkin changes 'among' the blades to 'against' the blades, the deixis more firmly stressing the yielding of the organic and animate to the inanimate nature of machinery, while 'killed' also replaces the less implicative and implicating 'dead'.[12] But Larkin's deeper awareness of the pastoral and the georgic, genres which have always thrived on the ambiguous boundaries between the 'natural' and the 'unnatural', render his poetry more unsettling than this; the poem actually discovers an uneasy affinity between the natural and the mechanical.

This article would like to suggest a fifth source for 'The Mower' which Larkin observes as closely as Marvell's four pastoral mower poems—the mower episode in 'Upon Appleton House':

> No scene that turns with engines strange
> Does oft'ner then these meadows change […]
>
> With whistling scythe, and elbow strong,
> These massacre the grass along:
> While one, unknowing, carves the rail,
> Whose yet unfeathered quills her fail.
> The edge all bloody from its breast
> He draws, and does his stroke detest;
> Fearing the flesh untimely mow'd
> To him a fate as black forebode. (385–400)

It is vital that Marvell compares the changing of the seasons and the labour this prompts to the complicated machinery employed during the smoothly operating and smoothly operated scene change of a court masque ('no scene that turns with engines strange/Doth oft'ner than these meadows change', n. 385).[13] Rather than the natural as interrupted by the mechanical, this is the natural as mechanical. In what is frequently

considered an allegory of the civil war, the mowers then 'massacre the grass along', 'while 'one, unknowing, carves the rail', a bird crouched in the grass. The 'edge [of the scythe] all bloody from its breast' prompts a meditation on 'the flesh untimely mow'd' as a result of larger, inflexible, automatic, undeviating cycles—of the seasons, of warfare (the field is described as a 'camp of battle', 420)—dominating human lives and determining human actions (Larkin's letters also often half-joke about lawnmowing as warfare: 'new lawnmower ready for the spring offensive […]'; he writes to Colin Gunner on 1 April 1981).[14] Marvell's mower fears this involuntary submission to higher forces in their cool, mechanical, unobservant impersonality, fears killing and being killed, choicelessly.

'Upon Appleton House' has been described as variously, and sometimes both, pastoral and georgic; the borders of the two genres are permeable, and this article agrees with Terry Gifford that 'there is a need for a new framing of the pastoral-georgic tradition that recognises texts that complicate any simple polarisation of idealisation and responsibility, the aesthetic and the practical, repose and labour, *otium* and *negotium*'.[15] This passage is a presentation of mowing as inflected by georgic as it is by pastoral; here the task is perhaps closer to *negotium* and *labor* than the more idealised and pastoral occupations under the umbrella of *otium*, such as shepherding. Indeed, while scythes are symbolically instrumental to the amorous and elegiac subgenres of pastoral in Marvell's mower poems, they are also tools with a practical, agricultural purpose. Accordingly, in the first georgic when discussing the harvest Virgil stresses that their use should be coupled with respect, forethought and intentionality —'neque ante/falcem maturis quisquam supponat aristis,/quam Cereri torta redimitus tempora quercu/det motus incompositos et carmina dicat' ('nor let any put his sickle to the ripe corn, ere for Ceres he crown his brows with oaken wreath, dance artless measures, and chant her hymns').[16] Sympathy for injured or dying animals, often as a result of hunting or overwork, is also a georgic trope; as Richard F. Thomas briefly points out about 'Upon Appleton House' specifically, 'the apostrophe and sympathy' which follows this episode ('Unhappy birds! what does it boot/To build below the grass's root') is redolent of 'Virgil's empathetic view of the dying plough ox' in the third book of the *Georgics* (409–10).[17]

Killing an animal in grass with a blade or blades, forgoing kindness in the unthinking completion of a task: the similarities between Marvell and Larkin's poems are striking. What is disturbing in 'The Mower', then, is not the idea that nature is vulnerable to technological disruption, it is the idea there is something mechanical and deterministic about nature itself in working order, and that we work mechanically and deterministically within this working system. It is not the purposiveness of hunting or

the necessity of toil which is foregrounded, as is typical of georgic, but instead that the death of the animal is collateral damage. This view of nature and our place within it might be considered georgic, in that it is unforgiving, self-evidently complex and sometimes violent, driven by change and seasonal cycles ('No scene that turns with engines strange/ Does oft'ner then these meadows change'), and presented as already mediated and requiring mediation.[18] But it is also not unpastoral, especially in the harmonious (and as a result potentially uncanny) coupling of human and natural actions: as in, for instance, Alexander Pope's 'Spring', in which the flowers bloom in affinity with the shepherds competing alternately in a singing contest: 'Then sing by turns, by turns the Muses sing,/Now hawthorns blossom, now the daisies spring'.[19]

Marvell's mower kills the rail accidentally but unthinkingly with his sharp and systematically operated scythe; in Larkin's poem the hedgehog's death is also caused by the lawnmower's efficiency. The mower is a labour-saving device, and labour-saving devices enable us to keep up with processes which will not stop for us. If the grass did not grow back every time he cut it, Larkin would not have to use a machine to complete the job quickly, efficiently and repeatedly, sacrificing attentiveness. In reacting and submitting to, and therefore mirroring, forces greater and crueller than us, in other words, we commit our own great acts of cruelty. A certain amount of numbing pleasure emerges in the space for contemplation created by labour saved when using a machine, which, as Connor states, 'depends upon [a] subsidiary piece of work […] of subtractive calculation.'[20] While efficiency clears space for contemplation, it simultaneously creates a loop whereby the contemplative space opened up is immediately closed down again, invested via mechanical, laboured calculation back into the mechanistic process. What disrupts this loop for Larkin is the hedgehog's body jamming up against the blades of the machine, so that it stops working. Drawing on Heidegger, Bill Brown proposes in his 2001 essay 'Thing Theory' that when objects stop working for us, they become 'things', and we have to confront their 'thingness'—we realise that the story of objects is less about objects themselves than 'a particular subject–object relation'.[21] As Rachele Dini has pointed out, Brown engages specifically with Heidegger's distinction in *Being and Time* between objects '"ready-to-hand", whose only concern for us is their end-function', and the '"present-to-handedness" disclosed when an object falls apart or obstructs our work'.[22] Or from Heidegger: 'this *conspicuousness* presents the ready-to-hand equipment as in a certain un-readiness-to-hand […] Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment, but only to withdraw to the readiness-to-hand of something with which one concerns oneself—that is to say, of the sort of thing we find when we

put it back into repair'.[23] As Graham Harman states, '[t]hese entities were once silent and withdrawn, but have now become obtrusive', although it is equally as important to remember that a 'reversal is possible at any moment'.[24]

This could not be more applicable in the case of Larkin's lawnmower, seen in a changed light upon breaking down. Confronted with the thingness of the object, contemplative space opens up, not to indulge in pleasure through the work of subtractive calculation, lulled by efficiency back into automatism, but enabling a different, higher kind of work transcending the deterministic cycle, an active exploration of the agency which Larkin had sublimated into the object. Re-emerging, this renewed responsibility places a dividing line between Larkin as subject and lawnmower as object. But, more complexly, Larkin also sees how he has behaved and will again behave mechanically (one implication of the partially self-convincing final lines), in accordance with—almost joined to—a mechanical object. The lawnmower has acted and will again act, as objects and machines often do, as a form of prosthesis or extended personhood. For Brown, the 'thingness' of bodies can also become evident when they are interrupted—like when we get a papercut or trip over something.[25] As Larkin stalls along with the lawnmower, his body becomes a thing, uncomfortably proximal to the 'thing' that is the machine: 'the mower', after all, only definitely assumes the contours of the lawnmower, and not Larkin himself mowing the lawn, with the introduction of the noun 'blades' at the end of the second line of the poem, an ambiguity stressed from the title onward. So too is there an unstable triangulation of human–machine–animal, as Larkin realises how easily each of us can become the 'thing' that the hedgehog's broken body has become.

Sarah Barber's poem 'The Lawn Mower' is another useful illustration of this technographic reading of Marvell's poetry:

> I like my mower
> turned over among the glowworms,
> a monstrous dandelion as unnatural as we
> are, out in a garden […][26]

Alongside the more obvious allusion to 'The Mower to the Glow-Worms', when Barber's speaker examines the broken mower, there is a subtle reference to the rhetoric of 'The Mower against Gardens' which puts it into dialogue with Marvell's other explorations of nature and *in utramque partem* interventions into the early modern *furor hortensis* (compare Marvell's 'Mower against Gardens' with the contrasting

arguments in 'The Garden' or his Latin poem 'Hortus', for example).[27] The ambiguity of expression suggests that the lawnmower is an unnatural dandelion, but could also imply that a dandelion is itself already monstrous, in the original sense of monster as hybrid (which most species of dandelion are: 'the genus Taraxacum is characterised by prevailing complex multiple hybridity').[28] This of course undermines the rhetoric of 'The Mower Against Gardens', in which hybridising is the unnatural result of man's grafting, a sinful intervention into natural processes; the dandelion is a natural hybrid. Is nature still as 'plain and pure' as Marvell's anti-horticultural mower considered it (4)? This once more blurs any easy distinctions among man, nature and the technological arts: we are as unnatural as technology and techne-based practice, which are in turn as unnatural (i.e. as mediated) as nature itself. Indeed, as Nigel Smith suggests, 'Although [Marvell's] mower is against grafting, the poem is, in effect, a verbal grafting of two different poems to form a hybrid: it therefore imitates in its form the subject of its complaint'; further, it is implicated in it.[29]

Barber's poem, in which the speaker's neighbour is injured while pushing a lawnmower, comes to the same conclusion as Larkin's poem concerning 'thingness' but instead relishes in this disruption; injury, albeit not fatal, produces pleasure rather than horror. When he has had stitches, she 'can finally admit/[She] think[s] it is all fantastic', focussing on what the broken mower, flipped over to reveal its parts, reveals about human vulnerability. When this 'teenage Adam too dreamy to manage/ his motorized scythe' is wounded pushing the lawnmower over cups and pots left in the grass by 'silly Eve' in their 'Suburban Eden', the speaker confesses that she 'did like the thin thread of red/on his upper lip', the intrusion of enlivening georgic violence into the lulling *otium* of the pastoral garden.[30]

Machines, then, do not just disrupt, suppress, juxtapose or extinguish life: they are insensitive things reminding us of our own mysterious sensitivity, a sensitivity made all the more numinous and strange because of our capacity to behave insensitively. Connor suggests that '[a] machine is what it does, without remainder'.[31] We are not—or, perhaps more accurately and more importantly, we are not always. To conclude with J. H. Prynne's 'Acquisition of Love', which encapsulates this complex relationship between man and machine:

> As I try to mend the broken
> Mower, its ratchet jammed somewhere
> inside the crank-case, I feel the
> blood all rush in a separate spiral […][32]

'Only their [the children watching's] blood/seems to hold out against the complete/neuro-chemical entail', notes the speaker. By the poem's close:

> The
> mower works now, related to nothing
> but the hand and purpose, the fear of
> collapse is pumped round by each linked
> system & the borrowed warmth of the heart.[33]

Still time

Many of Larkin's poems might themselves be described as machine-like: as insensitive things which remind us of our own sensitivity. 'The Mower' jolts us to the kindness of attention in exactly this way. Carried through from 'Upon Appleton House', there is a separation in 'The Mower' between the moment of attention and the undeviating cycles of nature and of history, whereby the only relief from the latter is through the former. This makes the last word of 'The Mower', 'time', important to attend to.

The final lines seem to convey a straightforward message when compared with Larkin's typically equivocal endings: 'we should be kind/ While there is still time'. If 'The Mower' functions like a machine—to repeat, an insensitive thing with the capacity to jolt us into a single moment of awareness about our own sensitivity—then it is worth running, in straightforward terms, through the literal time of 'The Mower' and where it positions the opportune moment to be attentive and to be kind. It is significant that although the poem stresses the importance of this moment, it never contains this moment—the speaker returning to himself because of the stalling of the lawnmower slips away from us immediately (and after it stalls, tellingly, twice). The moment is, we quickly ascertain, reported in the past tense: the poem then seems to become more present with '*now* I had mauled' in comparison to 'it had been […]' and 'I had seen […]', but we are suddenly jostled along to the (still past tense) burial and to 'next morning'. 'The first day after a death' appears briefly to pull us back; however, although we shift into the present tense, it is crucially not the present moment—there is an immediacy in 'new absence', but the maxim-like 'is always the same' moves us to the present simple tense used to express repeated action: we are again only ambiguously oriented to the here and now. The close launches into the conditional and the possible with a repeated modal auxiliary verb ('we *should* be careful of each other', 'we *should* be kind'); the final stanza

is also curtailed by one line. In this poem, what time have we had, really? What opportunity for the pause that generates attentive kindness—that generated it in Larkin, prompting the poem in the first place?

But it is this breaking of the machine-like poem in the final line, the exposing of its 'thing-ness' as it falls short and fails to deliver up the moment of kindness, which paradoxically creates this very moment. This is true of so many of Larkin's poems, often concerned with or structurally emulating quasi-mechanical drudgery until their final one or two lines, where some kind of breakdown of form or sense simultaneously perfects them somehow, stimulating a feeling of transcendence in the reader: the half-rhymes at the close of 'An Arundel Tomb' and 'High Windows' ('prove'/'love', 'glass'/'endless'), for example, or the probing questions of 'Going' ('[w]hat loads my hands down?'), or the uncertain adverbs of 'Sad Steps' and 'Wild Oats' ('somewhere', 'perhaps').[34] Larkin's engagement with breaking or malfunctioning machines, from the lawnmower to the 'outdated combine harvester' in 'High Windows', seems to be inspired by, and perhaps to inspire, this prominent impulse in his poetry.[35]

Especially at night

Charles Bukowski's 'man mowing the lawn across the way from me' similarly explores the lawnmower's relationship to human sensitivity (and insensitivity) through the melding of the unthinking lawnmower and the unthinking eponymous character. This figure, in the speaker's eyes, is freed from the pains of heartbreak through his moronic lack of awareness: 'you're too stupid to be cut like grass,' the speaker states, 'the girls won't use their knives on you'.[36] Once more, we observe the biblical association of people and grass, a motif Bukowski also tests out in an earlier poem of 1965:

> and what's left of my life
> stands there
> checking glints of green flying […]
> suddenly I understand
> old men in rockers
> bats in Colorado caves
> tiny lice crawling into
> the eyes of dead birds.[37]

But here, the focus is heartbreak. In this, Bukowski's poem harks back to Marvell's 'The Mower's Song' ('[a]nd flow'rs, and grass, and I and all,/Will in one common ruin fall' because of his love for Juliana) and 'The Mower to the Glow-Worms' (Juliana his 'mind hath so displaced/That [he] shall never find [his] home'), but most importantly to 'Damon the Mower'—'By his own scythe, the mower [is] mown' after being wounded by Juliana (21–22; 15–16; 80). Marvell's mower verse is not the only poetry to explore the interaction between mowing and the subgenre of amorous pastoral in the early modern period; it is one of Coridon's acts of service for Phillida in Nicholas Breton's 1600 'Fair Philis is the Shepherds' Queen' ('And *Phillida* dooth walke the Meades,/though *Coridon* be he that mowes them'), while in Robert Herrick's 1648 'Pastoral Sung to the King', the coming and going of Amaryllis leads the shepherd Mirtillo to remark 'How each thing smells divinely redolent!/[…] like a medow being lately mown'.[38] In Christopher Morley's 'Amor Constans', discovered in the Bod. MS Eng.misc.d.239 manuscript and first printed in 1988, meanwhile, the productiveness of mowing is in fact a bulwark against the pains of love, born of idleness: 'mowe thy meddowes and plant well thy grounde,' advises Dickie, 'For sicker yt is which most menne sayne,/That loue firste sprange of an idle brayne.'[39]

In Bukowski's poem, women replace Marvell's self-injuring mower figure to become the mowers themselves, the 'sharp edge[s]' of their scythe-like knives poised to lacerate the speaker. The rich, tortured inner life fuelling tumultuous love affairs, though, is a state 'wasted on you [the lawnmowing man]'. From the first line of the poem—'I watch you walking with your machine'—this man and his lawnmower are analogised, with the former pressing as calmly and unreflectingly onwards as the latter, gliding across the lawn of his life in neat, quotidian lines mirrored in Bukowski's repetitious stanzas: from the anaphora of 'you're too stupid […]/you're too stupid […]', to the fact that he is interested 'only in baseball games and/western movies and grass blades', the polysyndetic listing blurring the mundane task of lawnmowing with his equally grey, semi-interchangeable hobbies, to the resurfacing of the title throughout the poem. The technomorphism of Bukowski's verse is unstable, with the implied simile confusingly formed and reformed: mowers are deadly, like 'the girls', and they are quotidian, like the man mowing the lawn across the way. In both cases, though, these lawnmower people are unthinking machines—unlike the speaker, who sees what the types around him cannot.

If we take his word for it—for we begin to surmise that, as women and neighbour are repeatedly figured as insensitive automata, Bukowski also begins to analogise lawnmower and speaker:

man mowing the lawn across the way from me
don't you see the young girls walking down the sidewalks now
with knives in their purses?
don't you see their beautiful eyes and dresses and
hair?
don't you see their beautiful asses and knees and
ankles?

Here we are introduced to another quasi-mechanical literary type: the obsessive lover. And all working parts are in order, as the interrogatives begin to take the shape of a blazon, that ubiquitous and prototypical feature of love poetry, while the polysyndeton of body parts echoes the list of the lawnmowing man's preoccupations—'baseball games and/western movies and grass blades'—of which the speaker had previously spoken so dismissively. 'Can't you just take one of my knives?', asks the speaker:

here's an old one—stuck into me in 1955,
she's dead now, it wouldn't hurt much.
I can't give you this last one—I can't pull it out yet,
but here's one from 1964, how about taking
this 1964 one from me?

'Here's an old one', 'this last one'; 'here's one from 1964', 'this 1964 one'; 'I can't', 'I can't'—the fraught syntax betrays a monomaniacal obsession which draws closer and closer to the speaker's projected image of the man married to his lawnmower. Indeed, the repetitiveness of the speaker mirrors Marvell's mower's lamenting refrain in 'The Mower's Song': 'What I do to the grass, [Juliana] does to my thoughts and me', as well as the general repetitiveness of its vocabulary—Nigel Smith points out that 'grass' is repeated eight times in Marvell's poem (6, 12, 18, 24, 30).[40]

So, too, is the deixis of 'here' worth attending to, as despite the ostensible specificity, the speaker refers to the present hurt—albeit not much, as professed—of a past heartbreak, abstracted further via metaphor and symbol (women are blades are years). We gain the sense via these increasingly frenetic pleas that the directness of interaction which 'here' presupposes is a kind of poetical wishful thinking, despite the speaker's continually dismissive tone—the lawnmowing man is apostrophised, addressed in the second person, only 'across the way' but in a deeper sense unreachable, an undesired object of desire, neither looking at nor thinking about the speaker at all. If, as Helen Vendler's foundational work on lyric, *Invisible Listeners*, suggests, George Herbert 'horizontalises' the

usual 'vertical' address adopted when writing poetry about God, then Bukowski 'verticalises' the usual 'horizontal' address reserved for people who are in close proximity to us.[41] Oddly for lyric, this initially places the speaker above his object of address, reversing who is typically at which end of the vertical line, but we soon note the carnivalesque reversal, as the speaker attempts to close an intimacy gap through poetry which will not be bridged in reality.

'[M]an mowing the lawn across the way from me' is an expression of the alienation of suburbia, an archetypically safe and familiar place which feels nonetheless somehow continually defamiliarising.[42] As Matthew Gordon Lasner stresses about the American suburbs:

> For all the popular and scholarly interest in the multiplicity of suburban lives and land uses […] we continue to imagine suburbia much as we did in the mid-nineteenth century: a space, above all else, for social reproduction. Mainstream suburban architecture and neighborhood planning, from the grassy lawn to the McMansion, with their emphasis on physical, social, and visual isolation and control, reflect this priority.[43]

Becoming a replica as he attempts to differentiate and distinguish himself, the speaker is the suburban subject par excellence:

> man mowing the lawn across the way from me
> is that all you see—those grass blades?
> is that all you hear—the drone of the mower?
>
> I can see all the way to Italy
> to Japan
> to the Honduras
>
> I can see the young girls sharpening their knives
> in the morning and at noon and at night, and
> especially at night, oh,
> especially at night.

At the close of the poem there is a shift in scale, as the speaker zooms up and away from the suburbs, expatiating and spanning the whole world. But it is implicitly suggested, via the parallelism of 'I can see', that it is only the women in these countries which interest him, immediately re-narrowing the poetic vision and palimpsesting the speaker back onto his perception of the lawnmowing man ('is that all you see? […]/is that

all you hear?'). Is the lawnmowing man, his life contained within appropriate, defined bounds, more satisfied than Bukowski's speaker, ranging without purpose, always looking behind, ahead, beyond? Or might the lawnmowing man feel the same way, with hidden, unspoken desires of his own? The close of the poem raises a central question—what is the lawnmowing man doing at night, as the preoccupied speaker tosses and turns? The answer, either way: not mowing the lawn.

Loving lawnmowers

Mark Waldron's 'I wish I loved lawnmowers' also uses the lawnmower to explore themes of alienation and obsession:

> It's in Southport apparently—
>
> a seaside town 'fringed to the north by
> the Ribble Estuary,' according to Wikipedia.
>
> It would be quite a trip to go up there,
> and I'd almost certainly
>
> have to stay the night. I think I might stay
> in the Prince of Wales Hotel, which looks
>
> conveniently situated for the station
> and the museum too. I can hardly bear
>
> to think how much I'd be looking forward
> to making that trip if I loved lawnmowers.
>
> On the radio they said they have all sorts
> of models from Victorian ones all the way
>
> through to a state-of-the-art robot one
> that's powered by solar energy […][44]

The speaker tells us that, if he did love lawnmowers, he would take a trip to the lawnmower museum he 'just heard about on the radio', describing how he would get there, where he would stay, and what he would see in unrhymed, free-verse couplets suffused with enjambment and breathless half pauses. The only self-contained line is the last, where the whizzing syntax hits a brick wall:

> Exploring the area I discovered
> that Southport looks very much like
>
> Weston-super-Mare, where, as it happens,
> I stayed in a halfway house many
>
> years ago after doing a stint in rehab.
> Now crack cocaine—*that* I loved.[45]

The grimly humoured implication appears to be that human experience is more dangerous, dark, deep, and difficult than the safe, static, stuck-in-the-past tweeness of the lawnmower museum (the 'state-of-the-art' solar powered mower was first mass-produced in 1995; this poem was published in 2017), mocked via the speaker's ironically bumbling intensifications ('quite a trip') and excitable hyperbole ('I can hardly bear').[46] But the line is not absolutely defined; with the speaker once more lawnmower-analogised, the poem suggests that addiction can be deterministic as a mechanism—as Connor expresses it, 'to act like an automaton is to act without freedom, will-lessly'.[47] Lawnmowers are both a distraction from and a reminder of addiction. The speaker notes the similarities between Southport, the location of the lawnmower museum, and Weston-super-Mare, the location of a previously attended halfway house (they are at opposite ends of England): that is, lawnmowers are like the cure, associated with a place of healing. But he 'loved' crack cocaine as he 'wish[es he] loved lawnmowers'—lawnmowers can never be enough like the bad thing which feels so good. Accordingly, the poem is largely modal and conditional, interpenetrated with 'ifs', 'coulds', 'woulds', and 'mights'. The unconvincingly innocent language of contingency and coincidence—'discovered', 'as it happens'—suggests that, in trying to both replace and replicate the euphoric, one-track feeling of addiction, all roads still lead to crack cocaine.

That the speaker never visits the museum, instead experiencing Southport via the mediation of the internet, adds a complicating dimension to the poem. First, he consults Wikipedia, then presumably some sort of informational source on hotels, and then Google Street View:

> If I was planning the visit I'd probably
> have a bit of a virtual walk-round
> on Street View, and in fact I've just done
> exactly that in an effort to capture
> the feeling I'd have if I was actually
> anticipating a trip to the lawnmower museum.

The speaker engages with Street View idiosyncratically as a self-enclosed substitute for, and replacing, the already substitute experience of viewing the street in anticipation of actually taking a trip.

Suggesting what would happen were he to plan the visit does lead the speaker to actually walk around on Street View, although this does not mean that he will go to the museum; rather, it becomes something quite different, and two paths emerge for the speaker. The poem poses the question: 'what can I replace crack cocaine with?' It offers two answers: the simulations of the internet, and a love of lawnmowers. The projected process of overwriting is via modal simile ('the simulations of the internet could be like crack cocaine', 'a person's love of lawnmowers could be like my love of crack cocaine'), which becomes metaphor ('the internet is crack cocaine', 'a love of lawnmowers is my love of crack cocaine'), which becomes de-metaphorised, so that you are left with simply 'the internet' or 'a love of lawnmowers', constructed from crossing the metaphorical bridge from crack cocaine and then burning that bridge. But which should the speaker choose?

Nunes suggests the internet might allow us to construct an alternative body for ourselves:

> Likewise, the virtual body sets us astray from our assumptions about what it means to have a 'real' body […] Internet provides the medium for disrupting models rather than confirming them […] a challenge to modernity's assumptions of self and body […] Internet, rather than presenting a simulation of totality, might provide a space of play.[48]

The internet thus offers the speaker an alternative to the addicted body; the addict is one of the people whom Deleuze and Guattari believe can become the Artaudian 'body without organs', although only at the cost of his own life; this renders him an empty body without organs vulnerable to re-stratification, standing in opposition to the potentially full alternative which, if you were to reach it (and 'you are forever attaining it, it is a limit') maximises potential combinations and becoming without collapse.[49] The internet body similarly erodes and transcends the real body, but this might be a body with which one can experiment, and which might maximise both combination and becoming. The modality of the poem, indeed, inhabits without committing; this also might be what leads the speaker to seek out the lawnmower museum, rather than a working lawnmower—a thing he can see everywhere and likely sees everywhere.

However, Waldron both begins and ends the poem with love, however unreachable or maladaptive ('I wish I loved lawnmowers,/I really do wish I did', 'Now crack cocaine—*that* I loved'). Relatedly, although from a slightly different angle, Prynne's lawnmower poem is titled 'Acquisition of Love', introducing verse which brings into question the relationship among love, bodies and machinic determinism as children watch the speaker fix a broken mower ('genetically confirmed', 'the gene pool defines these/lively feelings', and 'we are determined/that they shall do this', 'the rules for/the replication of pattern', '[w]hat they do is an/inherited print').[50] 'Acquisition' is, in typical Prynnian fashion, a military term; 'the initial location of a target or source by radar or other tracking system', as well as meaning simply 'attainment', inscribing technology into the pursuit.[51] Furthermore, we are encouraged to consider in the poem the acquisition *of* love, the acquiring of love by techno-systematic means (love is the object, and it is acquired by the speaker through the children's observation of the repair of the lawnmower's system) and the title as genitive (i.e. love's acquisition), whereby love's process of possessing is a techno-systematic operation, determined by a series of pre-written genetic codes.

To return to Waldron: the speaker's distracted attentiveness, drawn back to crack cocaine as it tries to focus on and make the leap to lawnmowers, sees and acknowledges the common denominator of both. As Matthew Bevis suggests about John Ashbery's conception of attentiveness, 'in some guises, attentiveness can be a way of knowing – or of claiming to know – what you're looking *for* as well as what you're looking *at*'.[52] Waldron's speaker appears to be beginning to feel this out. This leaves the other option, an obsession with lawnmowers and all they represent for the speaker: the ordinary, the mechanical and the very opposite of the liberated body without organs in Artaud's original formulation: '[l]orsque vous lui aurez fait un corps sans organes, alors vous l'aurez délivré de tous ses automatismes et rendu à sa véritable liberté' ('[w]hen you have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms and restored him to his true freedom').[53] This alternate vision of reality injects hope back into such 'automatisms', into the clunkiness of the world and the body in the world, into the sober, puttering, lawnmower-like rhythms of day-to-day life, and it commits to finding a 'true freedom' in living this quotidian life. Love, the unironically quotidian—these are determinisms which resemble addiction in form but require the faith that they do not, and the work so that they will not, resemble addiction in their consequences and effects. Indeed, the curator of the Southport British Lawnmower Museum's book on lawnmowers was self-professedly written 'to celebrate the mundane'.[54]

Lawnmowing men

Andrew Motion's 'The Mower' chooses the lawnmower as the subject of an elegy for his father in order to represent, and to celebrate, the preciousness of the everyday; although mundane experiences may be felt in the moment to go on forever, they do not last forever.

Lawnmowers have long been associated with masculinity, and, more specifically, with fathers and fatherhood. Tom Fort opens his book on lawns with a description of a kind of lawnmowing everyman, conspiratorially described as 'ours':

> I say 'our man', because apart from his maleness and sense of purpose and the fact that he is likely to be between thirty and four score years, I cannot characterize him further. He may be shaven or stubble-chinned, regimentally smart or irredeemably scruffy, self-employed or nine-to-five wage slave, respectably retired, painfully redundant. His demeanour and circumstances tell us nothing. All we may safely say of him is that he cares for the order of the space by his home. We must see him in action.[55]

Is his intended target audience other men? Other Anglo-Saxons (in accordance with the subtitle of his book, *An Anglo-Saxon Passion*)? Other Anglo-Saxon men? Are Fort's mutedly blissful ruminations about 'our man' supposed to constitute a universal experience, and do they? Is the first person plural possessive determiner 'our' intended to be inclusive or exclusive?

A brochure for the mid-to-late 20th-century Webb children's lawnmower accordingly features a grinning child above the slogan 'Just like DAD'S…'; on the reverse, '[i]f Father finds his mowing rather hard, suggest it is time he, too, owned a WEBB' (Figure 1). The sixth episode of season two of *The Simpsons*, 'Dead Putting Society', is an illustrative example of gender-based anxieties playing out around the prototypically masculine domestic chore of lawnmowing. It concerns the masculine rivalry between Homer Simpson and Ned Flanders, opening with Homer dutifully mowing his lawn only to be 'shown up' as a husband and father in his view by Ned's hospitality, lovely house and wonderful family after he is invited over for a beer. He is asked to leave and humiliated further after his wife Marge reemphasises Ned's impeccable neighbourliness. They later cross paths during respective father–son days out at the golf course, another prototypically masculine space, where their rivalry ends up being paralleled by, and in large measure projected onto, their sons Bart and Todd, who enter a golf tournament. Homer and Ned place

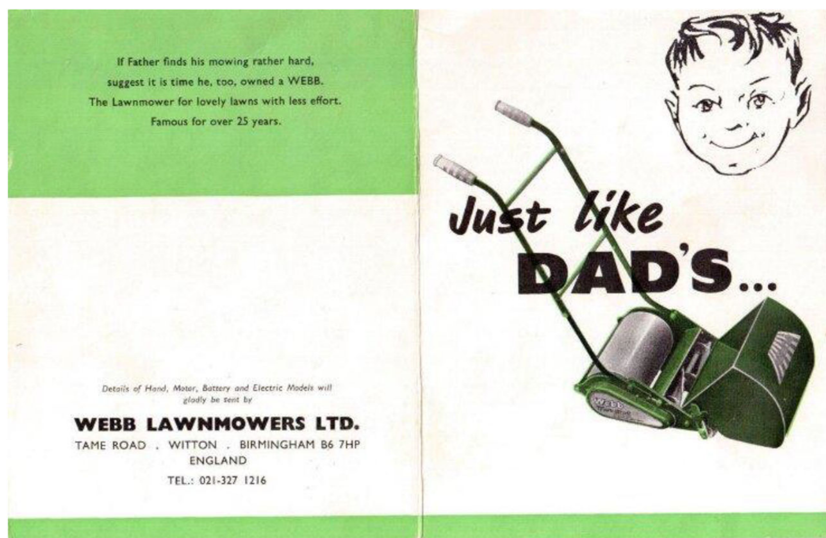

FIGURE 1 The Webb Miniature brochure, c. 1965 (manufactured), H. C. Webb and Co. Ltd. (manufacturer), Birmingham, Young V&A Collection, London (B.297:1, 2–2010). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

bets—the father of whichever son loses has to mow the lawn in his wife's Sunday dress—but when Bart and Todd decide they are equal and split the prize, rejecting the competitiveness between their fathers, both must perform the forfeit (Figure 2). Homer's belligerent insistence on the strict contours of his own masculinity is popped like a pin in a balloon—as are his anxieties surrounding and attempted policing of the masculinity of others, for Ned in fact enjoys mowing the lawn in the dress, re-absorbing the exercise with ease into the rhetoric of homosociality (it 'reminds [him] of his good ol' fraternity days'); even a 'feminised' task is masculinising in a more oblique sense.[56] Carefully toeing the line, as comedy often does, between topsy-turviness and conservatism, Homer is once again humiliated and rendered impotent by Ned, but this itself implies a set of masculine and fatherly standards which it is possible to misunderstand or fall short of, with public knock-on effects for the entire family unit, as if Marge's dress itself were not really needed to enact the process of Homer's 'effeminising' but merely to reveal it to a crowd of suburban onlookers (Figure 3). Indeed, Homer's daughter Lisa comments: 'why do I get the feeling that someday I'll be describing this to a psychiatrist?'.[57]

Fort relatedly muses associatively on the psychology of 'our' lawnmowing man:

FIGURE 2 Homer Simpson and Ned Flanders mowing the lawn in their wives' Sunday dress in 'Dead Putting Society', the sixth episode of the second season of *The Simpsons*, first aired on Fox, 15 November 1990. 23:13. Retrieved October 2024 from Disney+, https://www.disneyplus.com/en-gb/play/553dee8f-bae7-4853-97b3-ec29759c451d. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> His machine has brought order to the lawn; he orders the machine. A psychologist might identify a different order of precedence among the elements of man, machine and herbage; wondering who or what was really in control, who was whose servant, who whose master; might search deeper still, into the possible symbolism of the stripes, recollections of marks inflicted or suffered in school canings, sublimations of flagellistic or masochistic urges. Our man's need might be inadequacy, his desire for control an obsession, his adherence to ritual a mask for a pathetic deficiency of self-esteem.[58]

In the 39th instalment of the Old Lawnmower Club's magazine *Grassbox*, Peggy Miller's poem 'A Lawnmower Widow's Lament' opens: 'I once was loved and cherished by a man who was quite handsome/ But now I'm second fiddle to a Dennis or Ransomes.' [59] From the other side, Tony Hopwood's parody of the hymn 'Morning Has Broken' in *Grassbox* 84 laments the restrictions his wife places on his mowing activity:

FIGURE 3 Flymo advertisement aimed at women, late 20th century, source unknown: via 'Mower: Profiles - MP070: Early "Blue" Flymo', website of The Old Lawnmower Club: Collection, Preservation and Display of Old Lawn Mowers. Retrieved August 2024 from https://oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk/mowers/profiles/mp070-early-blue-flymo. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> Mower has broken,
> Gardener's in mourning.
> Missus has spoken,
> Had the last word.[60]

Advertisements targeting women and mothers, however, did spring up in the latter half of the twentieth century, defining themselves negatively against the established stereotype that the lawn is a man's domain and the lawnmower a man's machine, albeit often accompanied

by a note of reassurance that this particular model is lighter or easier to handle than other models, or a comparison of mowers and lawnmowing to indoor machines and tasks, collapsing the division between the inside domestic jobs and the outside jobs of gardening and 'feminising' the lawnmower so that its use conforms adequately to mid-century gender stereotypes. 'Now lawn mowing's as easy as using a vacuum cleaner' (Figure 3), '[d]inner's at eight [...] An hour to go, the table set, the wine chilled – and you've made sure you're looking good. The finishing touch? A perfect lawn [...]'.[61] The lawnmower has also been used in advertising women's fashion: in 2013, a Qualcast B1 and Webb Whippet, both painted pink, were recorded in *Grassbox* to have been used in River Island's window displays at their Manchester and Oxford Street branches respectively, supporting a mannequin wearing a top and skirt resembling grass.[62] And women's work influenced the development of lawnmowers themselves; Scottish inventor David Cockburn's adaptation of his wife's vacuum cleaner led to the creation of one of the first rotary companies in 1930.[63]

Nevertheless, Motion's thoughtful and sensitive poem recalls memories of an all-male space. The poem might be described as a pastoral elegy; mowers also feature in another Isaiah-inspired passage from Matthew Arnold's 1865 pastoral elegy 'Thyrsis', composed in commemoration of his friend Arthur Hugh Clough—'Where are the mowers, who [...]/Stood with suspended scythe to see us pass?/They are all gone, and thou art gone as well!'.[64] In 'The Mower', the young Motion, his father and his brother enjoy the frustrating unpredictability of their old mower:

> With storm-light in the east but no rain yet
> I came in from mowing my square of lawn
> and paused in the doorway to glance around
> at my handiwork and the feckless apple blossom
>
> blurring those trim stripes and Hovver-sweeps
> I had meant to last. What I saw instead was you
> in threadbare cords, catching the sunny interval
> between showers, trundling the Ransome out
>
> from its corner in the woodshed [...][65]

Northrop Frye argues in his discussion of *Lycidas* that in pastoral elegy the poet who has died is 'a kind of double or shadow' of the elegist.[66] Motion has filial ties to the figure mourned, and the voice of the poem

draws closer and closer to the snippets contained within it of the speech and mannerisms of his father; he is also, of course, pushing a mower himself at the opening. When Motion recalls his father going '[t]o and fro, to and fro, to and fro,/lifting one hand in a hasty wave which said *Stay put!*/but also *I'm in charge!*', he recalls that he and his brother understood 'from the way your whole body lurched lopsided/on the turn this was less than a hundred percent true' (121-22). This good-humoured litotes, proleptically in the poem's time and analeptically outside of it, mirrors his father's euphemistic tone when polishing the grass bucket in the woodshed: 'it never would/shine up much, being what you called venerable' (122).

The time of the poem, particularly at its close, is worth exploring further here. As in Larkin's mower poem, the tense use is disorienting:

> You always did come back, that was the thing.
> As you also come back now in the week you died,
> just missing the first thick gusts of rain and the last
>
> of the giddy apple blossom falling into your footprints,
> with bright grass-flecks on your shoes and trouser-legs,
> carefree for the minute, and young, and fit for life,
> but cutting clean through me then vanishing for good. (122)

The promised eternity of Motion's father 'always' coming back gives way to the past tense of 'did'. Then his father 'also' comes back 'now' (a word which surfaces in many lawnmower poems), but this is in fact an adjective attached to 'in the week you died'. This in turn is framed as belated—'just missing'—and what Motion' father has missed is both a 'first' thing and a 'last' thing. Elegy simultaneously longs and fails to inhabit memory; as Trevor Laurence Jockims suggests, it can be 'contrary to the harmonious temporality of pastoral', so that 'the coming together of *pastoral* and *elegy* in *pastoral elegy* represents […] a coming together of antithetical temporalities, and it is the shepherd-elegist […] who embodies this converged antithesis' (of course, the trope of *et in arcadia ego* has long been crucial to pastoral).[67] The shape of the stanzas mimic the 'square of lawn', forming a quasi-pattern poem, although the frequent cross-line and cross-stanza enjambment disrupts the neatness of the lawn stanzas as the apple blossom continually covers the fresh stripes, as well as Motion's father's own footsteps (121-22). As his father tries and fails to maintain and protect the arcadian space of the lawn, so too do we see that a father's love cannot protect his children against the encroachments of the world, nor against

his own or their own eventual pain and decline, and the pain this causes. We once more observe the Marvellian association of the pains of love, filial in this example, with the blades of the mower—'cutting clean through me'.

Yet apple blossom appears in spring, and so to end with this image is to align 'The Mower' with typical pastoral elegy, which concludes with 'a consolation that turns optimistically to the fact of nature's regeneration'.[68] An elegy revives and sustains memory as it lays it to rest; 'go on' echoes outwards from 'I can't go on'. In his use of apple blossom imagery, Motion had likely been influenced by Louis MacNeice, a poet he was 'very keenly taken with' in his first year at Oxford, to the extent that he sought out his executor E. R. Dodds (who later introduced him to Auden) living nearby.[69] MacNeice's poem 'Apple Blossom' connects the eponymous flower to the tree of knowledge, and the forbidden-fruit-as-apple (n.b. also Motion's reference to the deciduous *Ailanthus altissima* suggestively referred to as by its more common name, the 'Tree of Heaven', separate from the apple blossom but contributing to the poem's religious-arboreal diction): [70]

> The first blossom was the best blossom
> For the child who never had seen an orchard […]
>
> The first apple was the best apple
> For Adam before he heard the sentence;
> When the flaming sword endorsed the Fall
> The trees were his to plant for all […]
>
> But the first verdict seemed the worst verdict
> When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden;
> Yet when the bitter gates clanged to
> The sky beyond was just as blue […]
>
> For the last blossom is the first blossom
> And the first blossom is the best blossom
> And when from Eden we take our way
> The morning after is the first day.[71]

The labour of lawnmowing contained within Motion's poem is both a memory of the Arcadian-Edenic paradise of the childhood lawn and a reminder of paradise lost, but, in the vein of religious georgic, the assumption of the responsibility of lawncare is also the beginning of a larger and wider return, a slow progression towards paradise regained.[72]

The lawnmower is often wedded to formative childhood memories of fathers in the garden. Fort discusses the importance of the machine in his life, in part because of its proximity to his late father: '[h]e loved to stride behind it […] I have no interest in, or knowledge of, the working of machines […] except this one'.[73] Accordingly, Motion's poem joins a chorus of elegies for fathers which contain lawnmowers. William Stafford's 'Elegy' similarly correlates its puttering mundanity with the safety, reliability and dependability of the father figure, accordingly opening with '[t]he responsible sound of the lawnmower/ [which] puts a net under the afternoon'.[74] But sometimes it is revelatory of a cold, machinic, despotism and neglect, as in Michael Laskey's 'The Lawnmower':

> Irreproachable, the racket of the Qualcast
> coming and going in the cool
> of the evening, every so often
> running on the spot while he empties
> the grass box. This is the man
> we've given up kneeling in the window
> watching the gate for. So intent
> on his stripes that he looks straight through
> our headstands, our new backwards skipping.
> Though the motor's died, the blades
> don't stop at once. We keep back,
> do as we're told, don't touch.
> It must be overgrown now, the grave.[75]

The speaker's father, in his treatment of the grass box and his children at the window, stands in stark contrast to Motion's father, who 'careered back towards Kit and [him]/At our place in the kitchen window', waiting patiently 'with [their] cricket things and happy enough/to wait' because they know they will be lovingly attended to, allowed after the emptying of the 'big green metal grass-bucket' and a 'thumbs up' to 'burst suddenly/out like dogs into the sweet air' (121-22).

Like the continual formal disruption of Motion's 'trim stripes', the stripes of Laskey's speaker's father are eschewed by the form of 'The Lawnmower', although this is in opposition to maintenance through the poet's dutiful homage of pushing the machine. Overwritten by the 'headstands' and 'backwards skipping' of the enjambment and the curtailment of the typical 14 lines of a sonnet by one, the poem is rendered a kind of genre-mixing counter-pastoral (and counter-technographic) elegy, a pastoral elegy which resists the assumption of the precise, ordering, completionist lawnmowing role of the elegised, as observed

in Motion's poem. The remembered 'song', far from the neatness and orderliness of his father's aimed-for peace, is overturned in memory to foreground the 'racket' of the machine; it is a song which the speaker has no desire to reproduce. And the presence of the elegised suffuses the poem and yet remains hazy: we are cataphorically introduced to the speaker's father via the pronoun 'he', but even 'the man' in the following line does not explicitly name the figure as the speaker's father (although the definite article implies an ominous sense of all-encompassing influence). This genre-mixing also extends to rendering the poem a sort of counter-georgic; if 'georgic's purest form is didactic', ordering and enacting theoretical and practical knowledge, then the 'exemplary' over-focus on the tediums and tamings of domestic labour is wholeheartedly rejected in favour of the 'headstands' and 'backwards skipping' of childlike pastoral play.[76]

Unlike the bittersweet mixture of temporalities typical of pastoral elegy, the last line, as if in a wish to rid himself of ghosts, is in the unambiguous 'now', an unconvincing end haunted by the lawnmower-father, not broken or dismantled but eerily only temporarily powered down (the verb 'died' is deliberately ambiguous), with the *noli me tangere* warning suggesting that he is still capable of wounding ('the blades don't stop at once'). In this sense, the child has in fact internalised his father's lessons ('do as we're told, don't touch'), taking up the mantle of the deceased shepherd by assuming their burden. He paradoxically erases and embodies these lessons in staying away from the grave, as from the lawnmower.

'A lawn is nature under totalitarian rule', suggests Michael Pollan.[77] And while Radam suggests that 'mowing a lawn is a victory over nature', there is an increasing sense that this victory might be ignoble or pyrrhic.[78] Laskey's speaker's father's unwillingness to engage with the messiness and play of life finds its antithesis in Grace Bauer's view of lawn care in 'Against Lawn' (the title potentially an allusion to Marvell's 'Mower Against Gardens' and its rejection of artificial orderliness), where there 'lies luck' in contingency, a kind of magic in the freedom of the clovers the speaker witnesses growing as they will (and though a four-leaf clover is more likely to be found in this profusion, '[t]hree, too, is/an auspicious number' in itself). 'I am right not to manicure/my patch of grass into a dull/carpet of uniform green', the speaker stresses, 'but/to allow whatever will to take over'.[79] This anti-will-to-maintain is gaining environmentalist and ecocritical traction, in the growing popularity of the anti-lawn movement and Plantlife's annual 'No Mow May™' campaign.[80] But it might also be, as in Laskey's poem, a resistance to a general stance, attitude or outlook which is not limited to

lawncare itself, instead prone to spilling over and analogising. On a smaller scale, Laskey's speaker's father's need for domestic orderliness and the limits of his tolerance are reflected in his treatment of the garden. On a larger, national scale is Fort's discussion of lawncare:

> It goes without saying that this lawn, being English, will accommodate immigrants benignly, as long as they behave themselves and follow the rules. Moss, clover, lower forms of grass life, are fine—as long as they know their place and keep it. But they must be restrained in their natural impulse to take over, to alter the essential character.[81]

This is not a passing metaphor:

> I know that there cannot be gardening without weeds. […] Nor am I a racial purist where my lawn is concerned. I am prepared to put up with daisies and clover in moderation […] But there are some invaders whose habits put them beyond the pale. I will not stand aside and permit the odious ribwort and other plantains to have their way […] The notion of team play, live and let live, is abhorrent to them. Their sole instinct is conquest.[82]

'By the time I became fully aware of the menace', he says elsewhere, 'it was too late for liberal compromise' (but we are supposed to be inspired by his conversion: 'I returned from Chatsworth inspired by a new tolerance and appreciation of the multi-ethnic lawn').[83] There is a lawn politic at work here, where the lawn becomes a microcosmic representation of England itself, and thus should be manicured as part of a consistent commitment to Fort's conception of patriotism; its xenophobic undertones are expressed via a heavily ironised tone of plausibly deniable and double-edged 'good humour'. Even as far back as the medieval period, as Lynn Staley has explored, 'the trope of the beautiful island garden became attached to, or was a sign for, the anxieties of the English nation'; this is evidenced across centuries, from the speaker in 'The Mower against Gardens' referring to the ornamental garden as a 'green *seraglio*', full of foreign, artificial and unwelcome (though uncomfortably enticing) plants, to Tony Hopwood's more lighthearted parody of the Blakean hymn 'Jerusalem', opening 'And did those wheels in ancient time,/Roll upon England's lawn so green?' (27).[84] And the association of immigrants with weeds is a classic orientalising metaphorical practice; while conservatively applied by Fort in an arch-'Little England' tone, his passage on weeds can be compared with, for instance, the critique of the Western in

A Thousand Plateaus as hierarchised, ordered, organised and arborescent: 'does not the East […] offer something like a rhizomatic model opposed in every respect to the Western model of the tree?'.[85] Deleuze and Guattari also quote Henry Miller on the subject:

> China is the weed in the human cabbage patch […] The weed is the Nemesis of human endeavour […] Eventually the weed gets the upper hand. Eventually things fall back into a state of China […] The weed exists only to fill the waste spaces left by cultivated areas. *It grows between* […][86]

Practical and theoretical treatments of grass and weeds are frequently motivated by attitudes towards the perceived challenges presented by, and assimilability (or otherwise) of, other people—and indeed, sometimes, the more opaque, singularised 'other'—into an established and entrenched vision of the world.

Work and play

The figure of the child resurfaces throughout the microgenre; indeed, the lawnmower is a popular object in books written for children.[87] Amos R. Wells' 1902 'The Song of the Lawn-Mower' is one example:

> Twas the gayest lawn-mower that ever was seen,
> Its body was red and its handle was green.
> It ran on the lawn for the most of the day,
> And oh! how it rattled and clattered away!
> It had a wide mouth and a long, twisted tongue,
> And this is the song that the lawn-mower sung:[88]

Zoe Jacques suggests that children's literature can 'offer potentially radical destabilizations of hierarchies of being which can be read in the light of posthumanism's interest in ontological mutability', and that they are 'works that challenge the ideological separation of the human, animal, natural and artificial'.[89] Wells' poem examines the relationship between all of these categories; let us treat them in turn.

From the opening lines of 'The Song of the Lawn-Mower', the eponymous character is constructed as ambiguously human. We are told that 'its body was red', with 'body' acting as a noun which can refer either to 'the complete physical form' of a human being or, disorientingly, only the 'main, central, or principle part' of a physical object.[90] The child reader is a body *in toto*, but is sequentially informed via the technique of

structural parallelism—'its handle was green'—that the lawnmower is not; as it has an extra part, the resemblance can only be partial (humans are also not red and green) and any projection onto or identification with the lawnmower must be refigured accordingly. Immediately afterwards, we are informed that it 'runs', a verb which may once again refer to human or machine, only for the verbs in the following line to be stripped of human movement once more ('rattled and clattered'). The clunky sound of the cutting blades indicates that the lawnmower in Wells' poem would have been a push mower with no engine or motor; the first U.S. patent for the machine was granted in 1868, while gasoline-powered lawnmowers were first manufactured in America in 1914.[91] In a kind of destabilised summary, the final two lines of the stanza, which give the lawnmower a human face and the capacity to sing—'[i]t had a wide mouth and a long, twisted tongue'—render it, like Jacques′ description of Pinocchio, an object which 'mimics but also parodies human forms', its features exhibiting something of a stretched humanity.[92] Wells' poem also opens with a description of the lawnmower′s anthropomorphised feelings—it is the 'gayest'—yet the grounds for comparison are stressed to be other lawnmowers only ('gayest *lawnmower* that ever was seen'). Further, like its features, its superlative feeling suggests a kind of overreaching which extends beyond the human as it grasps at humanity—that the posthuman creature's behaviour 'is built upon an excess of [...] virtues that makes the toy alien'.[93] The frame narrative, too, ensures that the poem is mediated by the voice of a trusted and authoritative human narrator, supervising a reader or listener's interactions with the strange object and referring to it with thing-like pronouns (it/its) rather than person-like pronouns. But the lawnmower subsequently uses the first-person pronouns 'I' and 'me' in its direct speech, suggesting from the outside a certain personhood and sense of subjectivity.

Although a child's relationship to the lawnmower is uncertain, it is an intentionally delightful and likeable character. And yet this excess of enthusiasm—with the poem, quoting and functioning as the lawnmower, ploughing forward with its the refrain of 'Ke-clickety, clickety, clickety, klot!'—also renders the lawnmower capable of indiscriminate violence:

> Ke-clickety, clickety, clickety, klot!
> The work, it is hard, and the day, it is hot.
> And down in the grass, when I listen, I hear
> The grasshoppers squeaking, half crazy with fear.
> The ants and the worms and the katydids dread
> To hear me come clattering on overhead
> With my clickety, clickety, klot! (69–70)

The verb 'clattered', implicitly compared to and contrasted with the more human 'runs' in the first stanza, polyptotonically recurs here ('clattering'), now reminding a reader or listener that the lawnmower is no toy; the machine destroys all in its path with a joyful, unthinking lightness. But Wells' poem has more to offer than overly simplistic, spoon-fed didacticism—rather, there are multiple, and incompatible, lessons to be learned from this poem. The killing and exposing of insects is framed quite differently in the previous stanza:

> Ke-clickety, clickety, clickety, klot!
> The work, it is hard, and the day, it is hot,
> But all of the sparrows are grateful to me,
> And all of the robins are coming, you see.
> The crickets and worms they can easily spy,
> So they pounce on their dinner when I have gone by
> With my clickety, clickety, klot! (69)

If the lawnmower harms one form of life, it helps another. Indeed, we are no more like insects than we are like machines, both equally alien: '[o]ne would be inclined to say that the insect comes from another planet, more monstrous, more energetic, more insane, more atrocious, more infernal than our own', states Maurice Maeterlinck, '[…] there is, no doubt, in this astonishment and lack of understanding a certain instinctive and profound uneasiness inspired by those existences.'[94] But, to rephrase this sentiment, we are also equally *like* insects and machines. Accordingly, says Wells, if you are in some sense like the lawnmower, and in some sense like the insects, you, child, are also in some sense like the robin and the sparrow. Brian Boyd suggests that children are 'fascinated with the boundaries between humans and other animals, and between animate and inanimate, not because they have serious problems distinguishing one from another' but rather because they rejoice in 'the sheer pleasure of the surprise, of seeing that there could be other ways to be'.[95] Wells suggests that the questions thrown up by this play have ethical import, even if—especially if—they provide no definitive answers.

Finally, what of the reader's identification with the two human characters in the poem and their relationship to the lawnmower?

> Ke-clickety, clickety, clickety, klot!
> The work, it is hard, and the day, it is hot.
> But Susie will like it, the dear little lass;
> How happy she is in the newly cut grass!

It's good for her tennis and good for croquet,
And gladly for Susie I'll labor away
With my clickety, clickety, klot!

Ke-clickety, clickety, clickety, klot!
The work, it is hard, and the day, it is hot,
And Charley, the lad who is pushing me now,
He carries a terrible frown on his brow.
For Charley is lazy and Charley's a shirk,
But spite of it all I must stick to my work
With my clickety, clickety, klot! (68–69)

The lawn or garden the mower keeps tidy is for Susie a kind of Eden in which she can enjoy pastoral leisure, or *otium*, while the work of keeping it tidy is aligned with Charley's (albeit lack of) georgic work and practicality, *labor* and *negotium*. Wells would have been familiar with classical genres as professor of Greek at Antioch College, and he had published texts for the United Society of Christian Endeavour entitled *How to Work* and *How to Play* just 2 years previously, both of which offer insight into the theological relationship between the two states in the poem.[96] They are both interrelated responsibilities for Wells—'it is becoming the duty of one who cares for the welfare of his brothers to place emphasis upon the duty of Christian play, as upon the duty of Christian work'.[97] For Wells, play is also frequently something children do best: we should aim to be 'lift[ed …] to the level of the child' on this matter (132). Susie is a particularly good player, in that her sports are, as Wells prescribes, 'co-operative' and 'co-recreative'—'recreation must be unselfish', he says in *How to Play*, and it must have a *telos* (exercise, sociability, 22). Wells sees literature as akin to play, too: reading, 'to be permanently recreative, must be reading with a purpose' (109). He holds up lawn tennis, which Susie also plays in the poem, as a particularly good example of play ('perfection has been claimed', 'it is a royal sport', 87–88), with croquet also receiving a mention (25; 161–62). As well as a model player, Susie would presumably be the poem's model reader or listener.

Charley, however, is a particularly bad worker (and, by extension, presumably reader). He is also not a good player; it is not that Charley merely wants to play instead of work, for the 'sluggish folks, the heavy, ponderous folks, the procrastinating folks that are always thinking that they would like to do something—tomorrow' are selfish and cannot play properly either (55). He misunderstands work as he would misunderstand play: 'No one can "make drudgery divine," for it is already so', says Wells, quoting Herbert's 'The Elixir':[98]

> A servant with this clause ['for Thy sake']
> Makes drudgery divine:
> Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
> Makes that and th' action fine.[99]

Fort suggests that this might be a particularly American sentiment when it comes to lawncare: '[t]he link between the condition of a lawn and the moral rectitude or otherwise of its owner was established overtly and explicitly in the United States, whereas in Britain it has remained, if it can be said to have taken root at all, nebulous and implicit'.[100] The chore of mowing the lawn apes, and is a rehearsal for, fully realised adult work, consistently metaphorically rendered in Wells' *How to Work* as a biblical harvesting of the fields: God's 'liberal fields […] are crammed with guaranties for labor' (21). The uncomplaining and enthusiastic anthropomorphised lawnmower, in this sense, provides a kind of model for Charlie: it puts us in mind of the etymology of 'robot' (although the sense is post-1920), from the Czech *robota*, 'forced labour, drudgery'.[101] 'Robot' was originally 'a central European system of serfdom, by which a tenant's rent was paid in forced labor'; according to Karel Čapeck, his brother Joseph suggested it to him (he originally wanted to coin a word from the Latin *labor*).[102] Although the 'forced' nature of the drudgery is undoubtedly vital in many literary and extra-literary contexts, as Jacques suggests we do not have to 'limit the ontology of the robot to purely servile enslavement'; here Wells uses the mower, who would 'like to please all', as an emblem of Christian service (70).[103] 'Lazy folks […] take the most pains, while they think they are taking the least', intones Wells in *How to Work*. As the 'lazy' Charley pushes the mower reluctantly, the 'rattl[ing]' and 'clatter[ing]' lawnmower is propelled forward by Charley, making the most of what it can do in spite of its rudimentary mechanics. The two characters are foils for one another; the lawnmower is a machine doing its utmost, while the boy fails to live up to his God-given dignity and potential. Trying hard to 'please all', the lawnmower is like the ideal baseball player in the story Wells recalls his Professor telling in *How to Work*, working for others rather than for himself: 'in life, you must not ask yourself first, "How can I make a big record for myself?" but "how can I put in my work so that it will be best for all concerned?"' (48). It may be objected that Charley, while lazy, is in fact pushing the lawnmower and doing the work. But 'the zeal of Christ's workmen is of the Spirit and not of the success, of the work and not of the result', says Wells, citing elsewhere a story of dispassionate brakemen who call out the stations at 'the very last minute', 'feebly whisper their announcements' ('Nestay Aundle' for

'Next station, Auburndale') or 'drawl out their calls as if they were pulling a long rope of molasses candy', or 'clip off their calls as if every word were cayenne pepper', versus the one brakeman who 'sings out cheerfully and with perfect distinctiveness, "The next station is Allston"', retiring 'with great dignity' (91; 98–99). Charley is far from the perfect gardener, capable but lazy, to be contrasted with the gardener of Louis MacNeice's father's rectory mowing the lawn, unskilful but dutiful: 'He was not quite up to the job./But he took a pride in the job'.[104]

However, it is not simply that we should internalise the lawnmower's mantra that 'As long as I work I am happy and gay,/And so I keep pegging and pegging away' (70). In an echo of Ecclesiastes 3 (3:1: '[t]o every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven') and the fourth book Virgil's *Georgics* ('omnibus una quies operum, labor omnibus unus', '[a]ll have one season to rest from labour, all one season to toil'), Wells stresses in *How to Play* that 'God's way is best; God's way, that fits to each rest its toil, to each toil its rest' (91).[105] In *How to Work*, he expresses it in the following terms: 'we believe in rest—for horses. We believe in fallow seasons—for soil. But for men we say, "The busiest man is the one to go to, if you want anything done."' (127). The mower is an excellent worker, but it lacks humanity because it is *only* a worker, like the discarded personified mower in Roy Mitchell's 'Ode from an Old Mower':

> A drop of fuel, a squish of oil
> Is all I'm asking for my toil.
> I've done my job for many years
> I haven't caused too many tears. [...]
> But smart new fly boys crowd the scene
> And I'm a creaky old has been.
> So now that time are getting hard
> I s'pose I'll see the knacker's yard.[106]

Radam, at a right angle to Wells' poem, recalls Brian May's donation of his 21-inch Hayter Harrier mower to the British Lawnmower Museum, reasoning that he hopes he might have the same peaceful retirement.[107] As with the other lawnmower poems we have seen, Wells' poem asks its readership to continually re- and de-'similise' themselves with the lawnmower. Should we work like this machine? We should, but only while working. Like Larkin's mower, its insensitivity leads to violence and reminds us of our own sensitivity; its work also reminds us of our capacity for play and for leisure. If the lawn is a microcosm of the

harvested, georgic field, it is also a kind of Eden, with the mower 'labor [ing] away' to enable Susie's *otium*. It takes work to restore a paradise that we can enjoy.

Conclusion

> The mower, unhampered by soul
> Makes me play the role of machine;
> We move with equal control
> Through our miniature pastoral scene.[108]

The lawnmower poems focussed on in this article explore every facet of these lines from Hollis Summer's 'The Lawnmower': the notion that the lawnmower is 'unhampered by soul', the determinism of 'makes me', the *otium* of 'play' and 'pastoral scene', and the idea of man and machine's 'control', as well as the 'equal[ity]' of this control. The Latin name for an early lawnmower model—the Multum in Parvo, produced by Greens—would also make a fitting motto for the poetic microgenre which lawnmowers continue to inspire.[109]

Notes

1 Brian Radam, *Lawnmowers: An Illustrated History* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2020), 4.
2 Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 11–15; 4; 27, 70; 6.
3 'Books: Technographies', *Open Humanities Press*, retrieved August 2024 from http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/series/technographies/; *OED s.v.* 'techno-, *comb. form*, *etymology*'.
4 Steven Connor, *Dream Machines* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017), 160.
5 James Purdon, 'Texts, Technics, Technographies', unpublished lecture given at the TextTechniques workshop, Universität Erfurt, January 13, 2016, quoted in Connor, *Dream Machines*, 9.
6 Sean Pryor and David Trotter (eds), 'Introduction', in *Writing, Medium, Machine: Modern Technographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016), 7–17 (p. 16).
7 See Robbie Moore, 'Ticker Tape and the Superhuman Reader', in *Writing, Medium, Machine*, 137–52, and Beci Carver, 'Absolutist Slot Machines', in *Writing, Medium, Machine*, 178–90.
8 Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Twaite (London: The Marvell Press, Faber and Faber, 2003), 194.
9 *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940–1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 601.
10 Larkin, 'The Changing Face of Andrew Marvell', *English Literary Renaissance* 9.1 (1979), 149–57 (p. 149).

11 'Damon the Mower', in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2007), 135–39 (ll. 87–88). All subsequent references to Marvell's poetry are to line numbers in this edition unless otherwise indicated.

12 Early draft of 'The Mower' (12 Jun 1979), Philip Larkin Collections at Hull History Centre, U DPL/1/8/32.

13 See also Howard Marchitello, 'Nature's Art', in *The Machine in the Text: Science and literature in the Age of Shakespeare and Galileo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 154–84, for an exploration of the machine-like garden in the early modern period.

14 Larkin, *Selected Letters*, 647.

15 Terry Gifford, 'What is Georgic's Relation to Pastoral?', in *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre*, eds Sue Edney and Tess Somervell (New York: Routledge, 2022), 13–25 (p. 14).

16 Virgil, 'Book 1', *Georgics*, in *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 98–135 (ll. 347–50); Robert Fitzgerald translates *falcem* as 'scythe' in his translation 'Passages from Virgil's First Georgic', in *Spring Shade: Poems 1931–1970* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 162–72 (p. 167).

17 Richard F. Thomas, 'The "Georgics" of Resistance: From Virgil to Heaney', *Vergilius* 77 (2001), 117–47 (p. 138).

18 This is not to say that change cannot be a feature of pastoral poetry, too —see, e.g., Alexander Pope's discussion of seasonality in Spenser's *Shepheards Calender* in *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. Norman Ault, vol. 1 (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1936), 301.

19 On technology and the pastoral, see (alongside Howard Marchitello's above-cited chapter in *The Machine in the Text*) Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alexander Pope, 'Spring', in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–7 (ll. 41–42).

20 Connor, *Dream Machines*, 67.

21 Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), 1–22 (p. 4).

22 Rachele Dini, 'Bill Brown, Other Things', *European Journal of American Studies* (2017), 1–6 (pp. 1–2).

23 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 102-03. It is also worth pointing out that Heidegger, whose youth 'bespeaks the simplicity of a farming town', engages with mowing in 'The Pathway' - see Thomas Sheehan (ed.), *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), 3-4, and 'The Pathway', trans. Thomas F O'Meara, rev. Thomas Sheehan, 69-71 (p. 69): 'Time and again when my thinking is caught in these same writings or in my own attempts, I go back to the trail traced by the pathway through the fields. It remains just as ready for the thinker's steps as for those of the farmer who goes out to mow in the early morning'.

24 Graham Harman, 'Technology, objects and things in Heidegger', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34.1 (2010), 17–25 (p. 19).

25 Brown, 'Thing Theory', 3–4, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie et al., ed. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 163.

26 Sarah Barber, 'The Lawn Mower', *Poetry* (February 2009), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/52160/the-lawn-mower. Subsequent references are to the page.

27 For a thorough overview of the importance of *in utramque partem* in rhetoric throughout the early modern period, see Emily Pitts Donahoe, '*In Utramque Partem*: Arguing Both Sides of the Question in Othello', *English Literary Renaissance* 48.3 (2018), 314–38 (pp. 315–19).

28 See the now-obsolete but influential sense, *OED s.vv.* 'monstrous, *adj*., *adv*., *interjection, n*.1.a': 'deviating from the natural or conventional order; unnatural; extraordinary', and the original sense of 'monster, *n., adv*., *adj*.1.a': 'a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms'; Jan Kirschner, Lenka Jáveská Drábková, Jan Štěpánek, and Ingo Uhlemann, 'Towards a better understanding of the Taraxacum evolution (Compositae-Cichorieae) on the basis of nrDNA of sexually reproducing species', *Plant Systematics and Evolution* (2014), 1135–56 (p. 1135). See also Peter van Baarlen, Hans J. de Jong, Peter J. van Dijk, 'Comparative cyto-embryological investigations of sexual and apomictic dandelions (*Taraxacum*) and their apomictic hybrids', *Sex Plant Reprod* 15 (2002), 31–38.

29 Nigel Smith, introduction to 'The Mower against Gardens', in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 131–33 (p. 132).

30 *Otium*, while commonly associated with rest, peace, and leisure, has also often been proximal to idleness and carelessness: see, e.g., Brian Vickers, 'Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of Otium', *Renaissance Studies* 4.2 (1990), 107–54.

31 Connor, *Dream Machines*, 19.

32 J. H. Prynne, 'Acquisition of Love', in *Poems*, 3rd edn (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), 111.

33 Ibid.

34 Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 116–17 (ll. 40–42), 129 (ll. 18, 20), 51 (ll. 7–10), 144 (l. 18), 112 (l. 24).

35 Ibid., 129 (l. 7).

36 'Man mowing the lawn across the way from me' was originally published as part of Bukowski's contribution to the *New York Quarterly* 14, Spring (1973), 92–93. All subsequent references to the poem are to these pages.

37 Bukowski, 'grass' (1965), in *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems 1955–1973* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 54.

38 Nicholas Breton, 'Fair Philis is the Shepherds' Queen', in *Pastoral Poetry of the English Renaissance: An Anthology*, ed. Sukanta

Chaudhuri (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 194–95 (ll. 19–20); Robert Herrick, ‘A Pastoral Sung to the King’, in *Pastoral Poetry of the English Renaissance*, 497–98 (ll. 19–21).

39 Christopher Morley, ‘Amor Constans’, in *Pastoral Poetry of the English Renaissance*, 403–07 (ll. 177–78).

40 Nigel Smith, introduction to ‘The Mower’s Song’, in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 144.

41 Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9.

42 Bukowski once worked as a mailman in post-war Los Angeles, ‘where homogeneity spread as suburbanisation unrolled vast fields of houses’: see Drew Tewksbury, ‘Charles Bukowski’s Odes to Los Angeles: A Selection of Poems’, *PBS SoCal* (November 13, 2014), retrieved October 2024 from https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/artbound/charles-bukowskis-odes-to-los-angeles-a-selection-of-poems.

43 Matthew Gordon Lasner, ‘The Complex: Social Difference and the Suburban Apartment in Postwar America’, in *Making Suburbia: New Histories of Everyday America*, eds John Archer, Paul J. P. Sandul, Katherine Solomonson, and Margaret Crawford (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 343–63 (p. 347).

44 Mark Waldron, ‘I wish I loved lawnmowers’, *Poetry* (May 2017), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/118580/i-wish-i-loved-lawnmowers. All subsequent references to the poem are to this page.

45 Waldron later changes ‘crack cocaine’ to ‘heroin’—see ‘I wish I loved lawnmowers‘, in *Sweet, Like Rinky-Dink* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2019), 13–14.

46 Re solar powered mowers, see Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 72.

47 Connor, *Dream Machines*, 161; for the lawnmower as automaton, see Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 20.

48 Mark Nunes, ‘Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity’, *Style* 29.2, *From Possible Worlds to Virtual Realities: Approaches to Postmodernism* (1995), 314–27 (p. 326).

49 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2013), 190, and see also 332–33; 174.

50 Prynne, ‘Acquisition of Love’, 111.

51 *OED s.vv*. ‘acquisition, *n*.3’; ‘acquisition, *n*.2’.

52 Matthew Bevis, ‘In Search of Distraction: The Rewards of the Tangential, the Digressive, and the Dreamy’, *Poetry* (November 2017), par. 15, retrieved August 2024 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/144656/in-search-of-distraction.

53 Antonin Artaud, *Pour En Finir Avec Le Jugement de Dieu*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 13 (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 65–104 (p. 104).

54 Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 4.

55 Tom Fort, *The Grass is Greener: An Anglo-Saxon Passion* (London: William Collins, 2001), 3–4.

56 'Dead Putting Society', *The Simpsons*, Disney+ (first aired on Fox, November 15, 1990), 22:06, retrieved October 2024 from https://www.disneyplus.com/en-gb/play/553dee8f-bae7-4853-97b3-ec29759c451d.

57 Ibid., 21:50.

58 Fort, *The Grass is Greener*, 11.

59 Peggy Miller, 'A Lawnmower Widow's Lament', *Grassbox* 39 (2002), 4.

60 Tony Hopwood, 'Mower Mantra', *Grassbox* 84 (2013), 5.

61 Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 69, and see this page for further advertisements targeting women.

62 Reported in *Grassbox* 84 (2013), 16.

63 Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 66.

64 'Thyrsis', in *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, eds C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 262–69 (ll. 127–30).

65 Andrew Motion, 'The Mower', in *The Mower: New and Selected Poems*, intr. Langdon Hammer (Boston: David R. Godine, 2009), 121–22 (p. 121). All subsequent references to the poem are in-text. See also Langdon Hammer's introduction, including a discussion of Motion's relationship to Marvell, 7–12 (especially pp. 7–8).

66 *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 27.

67 Trevor Laurence Jockims, 'Mourning Place in Pastoral Elegy', *Connotations* 13.3 (2003), 191–212 (p. 194).

68 Geoff Hamilton, 'Life Goes On: *Endgame* as Anti-Pastoral Elegy', *Modern Drama* 45.4 (2002), 611–27 (p. 619).

69 'Poetry in the Beginning', *Granta Mag* (November 27, 2017), retrieved August 2024 from https://granta.com/poetry-in-the-beginning/, par. 37; Motion also discusses MacNeice, for example, in 'Louis MacNeice', Proms Plus Literary, BBC Radio 3 (September 2, 2013), retrieved August 2024, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b039bfph.

70 In Western Europe the forbidden fruit is frequently depicted as an apple; this is possibly due to a conflation of the Latin *malum*, meaning 'evil', and Latin *malum*, borrowed from the Greek μῆλον, meaning 'apple'.

71 Louis MacNeice, 'Apple Blossom' (1966), *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 172–74 (p. 173).

72 On the pastoral of childhood and the child as pastoral figure, see Galia Benziman, '"To be as those children were": Unmasking the pastoral child in *Far from the Madding Crowd*', *Hardy Society Journal* 16.1 (2020), 17–39 (p. 18).

73 Fort, *The Grass is Greener*, 91.

74 William Stafford, 'Elegy', in *Traveling Through the Dark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 13–14 (p. 13).

75 Michael Laskey, 'The Lawnmower', in *Permission to Breathe* (Leeds: Smith/Doorstop, printed by Peepal Tree Press, 2004), 63.

76 Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, 'Introduction', in *Georgic Literature and the Environment*, 1–9 (p. 6).

77 Michael Pollan, 'Gardening Means War', *New York Times* (June 19, 1988), section 6, 24, retrieved August 2024 from https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/19/magazine/gardening-means-war.html.

78 Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 8.

79 Grace Bauer, 'Against Lawn', repr. from *Lake Effect* 8 (2004), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48196/against-lawn.

80 See, e.g., Nancy Jiang, 'ALL NATURAL: I'm trying to convince my wife to join the 'anti-lawn' movement – I've made the best discoveries by letting it grow wild', *The Sun* (May 23, 2024), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/28103873/anti-lawn-tips-gardening-tricks-movement-reddit/; 'Why does the carefully tended, great British lawn make the greens see red?', *The Telegraph* (June 4, 2021), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/04/does-carefully-tended-great-british-lawn-make-greens-see-red/; 'Turf Wars: the artists who want to mow down the menace of lawns', *The Guardian* (September 14, 2022), retrieved August 2024 from https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/sep/14/turf-wars-the-artists-who-want-to-mow-down-the-menace-of-lawns; 'Why Do We Need No Mow May?', *Plantlife,* retrieved August 2024 from https://www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/nomowmay/.

81 Fort, *The Grass is Greener*, 218.

82 Ibid., 253.

83 Ibid., 256.

84 Lynn Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Language of Nation from Gildas to Marvell* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 2; Tony Hopwood, 'Mower's Mantra 3', *Grassbox* 65 (2008), 2.

85 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 19.

86 Ibid.; for more on this metaphor, see Katy Masuga, 'Henry Miller, Deleuze and the Metaphor of China', *McNeese Review* 49 (2009), 79–103.

87 E.g., in Prynne's 'Acquisition of Love'; see also Yvonne Jones, *The Little Mower that Could* (U.S.A: LHC Publishing, 2016), Jon Pitcher, *Lawrence the Lawnmower* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2023), Jared Matthew, *Growin' & Mowin': A Lawn Mower Book for Toddlers* (independently published, 2022), Nicole L. Smith (author) and Kiran Akram (illustrator), *Mad Mower Mo: A fun, rhyming story about Mo, the racing lawn mower, as he causes chaos as he races for his best mow time yet!* (Australia: Buttafingers Creations, 2024), John Carter (author) and Andrew Gentilli (illustrator), *Grandad's Lawnmower* (England: independently published, 2020), Skyamity Design, *Count the Lawn Mowers: A Fun Picture Puzzle Book for Kids, Boys and Girls* (independently published, 2024).

88 Amos R. Wells, *Rollicking Rhymes for Youngsters* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1902), 68–70 (p. 68). All subsequent references are in-text.

89 Zoe Jacques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5; as Radam documents, Ransomes called some of their early mowers 'Manimal'

machines (*Lawnmowers*, 24), and see also 19–20, 23, 26, 27, 36 for the role of animals in the lawnmower industry.

90 *OED s.vv*. 'body, *n*.I.1.a.i'; 'body, *n*.II.5'.

91 For more on early American lawnmowers, see Radam, *Lawnmowers*, 41; 'Ideal Power Lawn Mower', R. E. Olds Transportation Museum, retrieved August 2024 from https://web.archive.org/web/20111017111606/http://reoldsmuseum.org/ideal-power-lawn-mower.

92 Jacques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, 217.

93 Ibid., 219.

94 Maurice Maeterlinck, 'Preface: The Insect's Homer', in Jean-Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Spider*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1912), 7–35 (pp. 9–10).

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