

Popular Front Politics and the British Novel, 1934-
1940

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My dad, Richard Taylor (1947-2006), would no doubt have been pleased.

Popular Front Politics and the British Novel, 1934-1940

Abstract

This study considers how examining the Popular Front movement against fascism in Britain sheds new light on thirties leftist fiction. It brings into view a range of critically neglected texts, focusing on the work of John Sommerfield, Arthur Calder-Marshall, Jack Lindsay, Lewis Jones and James Barke. The thesis shows how their fiction relates to and participates in a mobilisation of cultural forces against fascism both at home and abroad.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part One, 'Realism and Modernism' begins by examining how British writers negotiated the respective claims of the developing Soviet aesthetic of socialist realism, the mobilisation of European intellectuals against fascism and the heritage of literary modernism (chapter one). These currents of thought are then explored through readings of John Sommerfield's *May Day* (chapter two) and Arthur Calder-Marshall's *Pie in the Sky* (chapter three). Part Two, 'On English History', discusses leftist writings of the history of England under the rubric of anti-fascism; at its heart is a reading of Jack Lindsay's trilogy of English historical novels (chapter four). Part Three, 'Class, Nation, People', first examines the 'national' turn in Communist politics as it was negotiated in the work of the Scottish novelist James Barke (chapter five), before turning to the fiction of the Welsh proletarian novelist Lewis Jones (chapter six). In both *We Live* and *The Land of the Leal*, the Spanish Civil War plays a key role in mediating the relationship between working-class historical experience and the demands of internationalist anti-fascism.

The chief contributions are firstly a recovery and critical reconsideration of a range of marginalised works, and secondly a demonstration of how these novels can be read in terms of a radicalised and populist realist aesthetic, consonant with and interpretable in terms of the work of Georg Lukács in the 1930s.

Introduction

Overview

The Popular Front means a struggle for a genuine popular culture, a manifold relationship to every aspect of the life of one's own people as it has developed in its own individual way in the course of history.

Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', 1938¹

This study examines British fiction produced during the period of the Popular Front movement against fascism (1935-1940). It considers how the specific political formation of the Popular Front helps to illuminate these novels, but also positions the key texts as active interventions in the production of that politics. The study brings into view a range of critically neglected texts and authors, showing how their work relates to and participates in a mobilisation of cultural forces against fascism both at home and abroad. The chief contributions are firstly a recovery and critical reconsideration of a range of marginalised works, and secondly a demonstration of the way that an understanding of the specific forms that leftist politics took in the interwar years yields important critical insights, enabling connections to be made and themes to be elaborated that are not otherwise clearly visible. Through the prism of the novel, the study examines British Marxism at a crucial moment in its history; through the prism of the Popular Front, it sheds new light on a literary moment.

Out of the crisis of the thirties – what Piers Brendon terms the 'dark valley' of global depression, advancing fascism and the failure of democratic governments to offer effective resistance to it – emerged the Popular Front.² Popular Front here refers to a strategy intended to organise resistance to fascism by encouraging alliances between Communists and other groups willing to co-operate in the cause of countering fascism in Europe and the inertia of national governments that seemed unable or unwilling to mount

¹ Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 57.

² Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. xiii-xiv.

effective challenges to the advances of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. Although originating in the Communist International (Comintern), the strategy successfully brought together Communists, elements of the Labour left, trade unionists, Liberals and even some dissident Conservatives, as well as independent groups and individuals. The Comintern emphasised ideological struggle and placed greater emphasis on the role of culture in political struggle than it had previously done. The earlier climate of anti-intellectualism and inflexible prioritisation of political struggle is exemplified by a 1932 memorandum by the Communist Party of Great Britain's chief theoretician, Rajani Palme Dutt, asserting that 'the first role of intellectuals who have joined the Party is to forget they are intellectuals and act as Communists, that is enter fully into the Party fight'.³ A space was created in which intellectuals and artists could engage with Communism *as* intellectuals and artists.

Central Figures

The central novelists in this thesis are John Sommerfield, Arthur Calder-Marshall, James Barke, Lewis Jones and Jack Lindsay. These writers were all active participants in the cultural life of the left, and were all self-identified Communists during this period. Not all were card-carrying members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and they occupied different positions of tension in relation to the 'official' line of the Party (trajectories as far as Party membership goes are discussed in the relevant chapters that follow). They represent something of a cross-section of the literary left: from the almost archetypal fellow-traveller Calder-Marshall (educated at public school and Oxford⁴) to the unequivocally proletarian Lewis Jones, educated in the Labour Colleges and with a background in grass-roots industrial organisation.⁵ The largely self-educated Scottish novelist James Barke is a figure in whom we find a focal point for the tense entanglement of concepts of class, nation and people, engaging in sustained exploration - within and beyond his novels - of the question of the relevance of Scottish national history and identity to the ideal of a broad, popular alliance against fascism.⁶ Although his thirties

³ Qtd. John Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), p. 153.

⁴ See Calder-Marshall's autobiography, *The Magic of My Youth* (London: Cardinal, 1991).

⁵ See Dai Smith, *Lewis Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press & Welsh Arts Council, 1992).

⁶ A succinct account of James Barke's life and politics is given in John Manson, 'Did James Barke Join the Communist Party?', *Communist History Network Newsletter*, no. 19 (Spring 2006), pp. 5-11.

novels are neglected, Barke translated his interwar engagements with popular and radical history into commercial success in the post-war period, making a lasting impression on Scottish literature with his bestselling novels about the life of Robert Burns.⁷ John Sommerfield, Communist organiser in working-class districts of London, volunteer in the International Brigade and author of what might be the paradigmatic Popular Front novel, *May Day* (1936), inherited and reworked the strategies of metropolitan modernism.⁸ Jack Lindsay, an Australian émigré whose long career spanned seven decades, underwent a conversion from a Nietzschean-influenced modernism to Marxism during the mid-thirties, documenting his intellectual evolution in an outpouring of novels, critical works, biographies, poems and translations.⁹ The length of Lindsay's career gives a unique frame in which to view his development in the thirties, especially given that he was the only writer listed here still writing as a Communist Party member after the cataclysms of Nikita Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.¹⁰

Although this is a small group, their work is situated in the thesis within a wider context in which a much greater range of writers participated, including Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Storm Jameson, Montagu Slater and Stephen Spender, all of whom are discussed in the following chapters. The advantage of the central grouping outlined is that it cuts through the narrow demographic of classic studies of thirties literature, most notably Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation*.¹¹ Focusing entirely on English writers (with the important exception of Louis MacNeice) born at the turn of the century, Hynes overlooks Scottish and Welsh writers, women writers and writers who were older than the Auden group. My alternative grouping has its limitations, especially in its all-male focus; however it does enrich and extend the canonical view of thirties writing as the province of upper-middle class, university-educated, metropolitan (London-based)

⁷ The 'Immortal Memory' sequence: *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (1946), *The Song in the Green Thorn Tree* (1947), *The Wonder of All the Gay World* (1949), *The Crest of the Broken Wave* (1953) and *The Well of the Silent Harp* (1954).

⁸ An overview of Sommerfield's life and work is available in Andy Croft, 'Returned Volunteer: The Novels of John Sommerfield', *The London Magazine*, April 1st, 1983, p. 61-70.

⁹ Ben Harker, "'Communism is English': Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay, and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front', *Literature and History*, Third Series 20/2 (2011), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ Lewis Jones had died in 1939; Calder-Marshall had become disillusioned by 1941; Barke remained on the left but distanced himself from the Communist Party, dying after many years of ill health in 1958; Sommerfield left the Party in 1956. See footnotes 4-9 above for biographical sources.

¹¹ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1976).

English leftists – the ‘little circle of English writers’ whose political phase ended with the departure of Auden and Isherwood for America and was obituarised in Auden’s ‘September 1st, 1939’¹² – redirecting attention to the work of writers of different class, regional and national backgrounds, who followed different political and literary trajectories. This more complex biographical network in turn allows a different reading of common themes; in so doing it is possible to challenge readings of thirties political literature in terms of the conventional idea that young, middle-class, university-educated writers were in a primarily generational revolt, attempting to define themselves against their elder brothers and the generation who fought the Great War.¹³

This emphasis on a complex of shared biographical factors has led to a reading of literary politics in diagnostic terms; Rod Mengham, for example, argues that, ‘The expectation of the need for sacrifice – which never came – and the resentment stored up against those who had demanded sacrifice in their own interests, were transformed into a potent psychological inheritance whose conflicting pressures made it easier to accept the alternatives of Fascism and Communism.’¹⁴ Writers’ engagements with leftist politics during the 1930s have been overshadowed by a narrative of ‘going over to the workers’ (and its various encodings of border- and frontier-crossing¹⁵) that applies unevenly and equivocally in relation to the selection of authors presented here. Only in the case of Calder-Marshall might that story convincingly apply. The most prominent proponent of this narrative is perhaps George Orwell, who insisted that the attraction of writers to Communism during the interwar years was largely an effect of middle-class unemployment: ‘Who now could take it for granted to go through life in the ordinary middle-class way, as a soldier, a clergyman, a stockbroker, an Indian Civil Servant, or what-not?’¹⁶ This question gives rise to Orwell’s famous description of British

¹² Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (1051; London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. xvi.

¹³ Michael Roberts, for example, in his preface to *New Country* (1933) describes himself and the thirties group the anthology canonises as [s]ergeants of our school O.T.C.s, admirers of our elder brothers, we grew up under the shadow of war’ (‘Preface’, *New Country*, 1933; Penguin, 1971, p. 9). See also: Spender, *World Within World*, p. xvii; Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 55; Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, pp. 19-21.

¹⁴ Rod Mengham, ‘The Thirties: Politics, Authority, Perspective’, in Laura Marcus, ed., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 359-360.

¹⁵ Valentine Cunningham’s chapter, ‘Going Over’, in *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), gives a very full account of these literal and metaphorical crossings, pp. 211-241.

¹⁶ Orwell, ‘Inside the Whale’, in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol. XII., ed. Peter Davidson (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), p 102.

Communism as the ‘patriotism of the deracinated.’¹⁷ Orwell’s central assumption is that the faith of the English bourgeoisie in its cultural and political status was shattered by the War and its after-effects, and that intellectuals of that class sought to transfer their loyalty elsewhere – to the working class, and/or the Soviet Union. This conversion story was bolstered by the recantations and disavowals of former Communists that began appearing from the early 1940s, most famously collected in *The God That Failed*.¹⁸ Seeming to iterate what E.P. Thompson would later call the ‘cultural default’ of the British intellectuals,¹⁹ the novelist and fellow-travelling Communist Arthur Calder-Marshall wrote early in 1941:

I think most writers who began their careers in the ‘thirties are like me in looking back on that decade with a sense not of triumph, but of shame and failure. We accomplished something, but how little it was compared to what was necessary, or compared to what we could have done if we had been wiser, braver, more provident and energetic!²⁰

There is, unavoidably, something of the tone of thirties self-criticism here; but there is, too, something important that those type of accounts elide, which is the deeply felt sense of responsibility to an enormous task. Calder-Marshall does not write of his delusion or accuse others of misleading him; rather he laments the inability of writers to perform a wholly unrealistic task. The note of self-ridicule seems to resonate from this realisation. It is the sense of frustrated responsibility rather than of relieved dereliction that should be kept in view. This study tries to reconstruct the literary project that Calder-Marshall was, however briefly, committed to: to think clearly about what was at stake and what success might have looked like.

The over-arching argument is that there was a sustained attempt to mobilise cultural resources for anti-fascist ends. Central to this enterprise was an idea of ‘the people’ as a broad progressive group, not always identical with the proletariat as a political

¹⁷ Orwell, ‘Inside the Whale’, p. 103.

¹⁸ Edited by Richard Crossman, and featuring contributions by Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender, André Gide, Ignazio Silone, Louis Fisher and Richard Wright (1949; New York: Columbia UP, 2001).

¹⁹ E.P. Thompson, ‘Outside the Whale’, in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 214.

²⁰ Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘The Pink Decade’, *New Statesman and Nation*, 15 February, 1941, p. 157. Calder-Marshall’s article is useful for its proximity to the thirties. We however find echoes of it through the later retrospectives of many others; Stephen Spender, for example, only partly ironically referred to himself as part of ‘the Divided Generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right’: *World Within World*, p. 197.

subject. There was a continually occurring creative tension between the assertion that the people in this sense already existed as a latent constituency, and a claim that such a formation did not yet exist and must be nominated and brought into being. In one direction there was a quest for a latent or repressed progressive popular consensus, outside of authorised structures of representation (clearly seen in Lewis Jones's novels), and in another there was an attempt to *create* such a formation (the novels of both Lindsay and Barke are good examples of texts that are attempting both). Cultural productions of the left, I argue, can be best understood in relation to this dual dynamic, and the novels I focus on are shown to be central sites in which the contradiction between them is negotiated. Jack Lindsay's poem for mass declamation, 'not english?' (1936) is an exemplary instance of this double movement but it is a central principle in these novels too, as is acutely shown in the pursuit by the Leveller characters in Lindsay's *1649* of an 'Agreement of the People'.²¹

Readings of leftist literature in terms of its 'failure' turn on questions of the relationship between art and commitment; in a footnote to her anti-fascist polemic, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf warns – via Sophocles – that to 'use art to propagate political opinions' leads only to travesty: 'Literature will suffer the same mutilation that the mule has suffered: and there will be no more horses'.²² For Woolf, freedom, conceived as opposed to commitment, was essential to cultural resistance to a fascism set on destroying it. In his appraisal of the problem of value in relation to thirties writing, Frank Kermode noted that it is the thirties' attempt to 'unify bourgeois intellect and proletarian culture' that has come to seem 'embarrassing', and best forgotten, as much as its proposed failure.²³ However, in his collection of essays on literary modernism, Fredric Jameson remarks that what is needed if we are to 'derefify' modernism's canonical texts, is an

²¹ Lindsay's 'not english?' figures a history of the dispossessed, addressing itself to 'those who are not the english' and evoking a past of resistance, humiliation and defeat before recomposing its audience in a new unity:

'Come, changelings of poverty, cheated of the earth,
 Albion or Land of Brut or Avalon,
 Coal-ghetto that was once the Isle of Apples,
 call it what you will, there must be in it
 Soviet Republic.'

Lindsay, 'not english? a Reminder for May Day', *Left Review*, II:8 (May 1936), pp. 356-7.

²² Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938), ed. Jane Marcus & Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, 2006), p. 202.

²³ Frank Kermode, 'Value at a Distance', in *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon: 1988), p. 96.

‘aesthetics of failure’ that might undo the alienating power that emanates from the ‘success’ of institutionalised modernist works.²⁴ In one sense what I propose is an inversion of Jameson’s suggestion in respect of leftist novels: I suggest that the a priori assumptions of ‘failure’ that dominate the literary memory of the thirties alienate us from experiments made in literary form, in cultural theory and in the political imagination no less than the entrenched terms of success do for modernist works.

The Popular Front

The study covers the period beginning with the formation of the British Section of the Writers’ International early in 1934, which inaugurated the influential journal of culture and politics, *Left Review*, up until the end of the ‘Popular Front’ as a political strategy in the disarray that followed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939/1940, which brought the imperatives of the defence of the Soviet Union and opposition to fascism into direct contradiction.²⁵ The pact placed British Communists in an impossible situation and alienated many Communist sympathisers. The Popular Front describes a strategy endorsed by the Communist International at its Seventh Congress in August 1935, elaborated as an anti-fascist organisational technique which had as its base a ‘united front’ of working-class organisations and, predicated on that, a wider popular alliance of groups and individuals opposed to fascism.²⁶ This popular alliance extended to social democrats, socialists, liberals and some conservative elements. The formal adoption of the Popular Front strategy marked a decisive and dramatic shift from the Comintern’s earlier, ultra-sectarian ‘class against class’ policy, which had denounced non-Communist elements as ‘social fascists’ and forbade Communists from creating alliances.²⁷ Popular Front governments

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, ‘The Poetics of Totality’, in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 3.

²⁵ For the founding of the Writers’ International, see Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword: A Poet At War* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 157. The period of turmoil between the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and Operation Barbarossa is recounted in Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics* (Manchester: MUP, 1989), chapters 5 and 6.

²⁶ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, p. 196.

²⁷ Matthew Worley’s *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London & NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), deals in depth with the rationale and consequences of the ‘class against class’ line. The class against class line has been characterised as an unmitigated disaster by historians, including the Party historians Noreen Branson and Willie Thompson (Worley, *Class Against Class*, p. 13). Martin Myant gives a measured account of how the line was partly a response to the avowed anti-Communism of the European Social Democratic parties. A ‘sober analysis’ of strategy was forestalled by such events as the firing on a Communist demonstration by Prussian police in 1929, killing 32, on the orders of the Social

were elected in France and Spain in 1936, both of which in due course fell under advancing fascism, while in Britain attempts were made to construct a broad alliance to challenge the National Government's inertia and appeasement of Hitler.²⁸

Behind the dramatic reorientation was the spectre of fascism sweeping Europe. The inefficacy of the class against class line was brought home early in 1934 with an attempted putsch by French fascists in Paris, after which the French Communist Party entered an alliance with the social democrats.²⁹ The Soviet Union's entry into the League of Nations in 1934 signalled its willingness to work with the capitalist countries in the interests of collective security.³⁰ Simultaneously, in the wake of Hitler's assumption of the Chancellorship of Germany in March 1933, intellectuals had begun exploring the possibilities for alliances. The Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, supported by an international body of intellectuals, was instantiated in 1932 and convened an influential congress in August of that year.³¹ The congress included Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Maxim Gorky, Bertrand Russell, H.G. Wells, Albert Einstein, Heinrich Mann, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos.³² In Britain, the founding of the British Section of the Writers' International in December 1933, and the setting up of the *Left Review* in 1934,³³ provided space for a cultural discussion of the possibilities offered by the new climate of alliance and co-operation in the name of anti-fascism.

The crucial articulation of the new line was the speech by the General Secretary of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, at the Seventh Congress. The speech encapsulates the key elements of the Popular Front ethos: an analysis of fascism as the strategy of a section of the bourgeoisie (leaving open the possibility of alliance with other bourgeois elements), an emphasis on the need for unity, and the assertion of the importance of working, as

Democrat police chief; Martin Myant, '1935: The Turning Point', in Jim Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), pp. 31-33.

²⁸ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, pp. 271-272.

²⁹ Myant, '1935: The Turning Point', p. 37.

³⁰ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, p. 20.

³¹ David James Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 158-159.

³² Fisher, *Romain Rolland*, p. 160.

³³ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days, Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 40.

Kevin Morgan puts it, ‘with the grain of mass culture’ in Communists’ own countries.³⁴ Dimitrov, who commanded enormous personal esteem as a result of his courageous conduct on trial for the burning of the Reichstag, advanced an analysis of fascism as ‘*the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.*’³⁵ This line of argument represented a shift from earlier analyses of fascism as a phase: the final phase of decaying imperialist capitalism which could only end in proletarian revolution, which implied that any effort to organise resistance was pointless. It also resisted a stronger equation of fascism with capitalism; Bertolt Brecht was a vocal dissenter from this equivocation, arguing that those who were against fascism without being against capitalism were ‘like people who wish to eat their veal without slaughtering the calf’.³⁶ It was this ‘practical truth’ of the identity of capitalism and fascism that underpinned Brecht’s rejection of the Popular Front and the aesthetic controversy between Brecht and Lukács.³⁷ Isolating fascism as a sectional attack on the masses, Dimitrov argued for broad, non-sectarian alliances. Ideological struggle against fascism was brought to the fore; what fascism threatened, he argued, were national cultures and histories in their entirety:

The fascists are rummaging through the entire *history* of every nation so as to be able to pose as the heirs and continuators of all that was exalted and heroic in its past, while all that was degrading or offensive to the national sentiments of the people they make use of as weapons against the enemies of fascism.³⁸

The battle against fascism was a battle fought on the ground of popular and national history, a battle to defend from ‘the fascist falsifiers’, ‘all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation’.³⁹ While maintaining that Communists were implacably opposed to ‘bourgeois nationalism’, Dimitrov nonetheless warned against ‘*national nihilism*’: ‘proletarian internationalism must, so to speak, “acclimatize itself” in each country in

³⁴ Kevin Morgan, ‘The Communist Party and the *Daily Worker*, 1930-56’, in Kevin Morgan, Nina Fishman and Geoff Andrews, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto, 1995), p. 142.

³⁵ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 10, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties’ (1935), in *Galileo* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 137.

³⁷ The key texts are Lukács’s ‘Realism in the Balance’ and Brecht’s ‘Against Georg Lukács’, both in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (1980; London: Verso, 2007), pp. 28-59 & pp. 68-85.

³⁸ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 69.

³⁹ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 70.

order to strike deep roots in its native land.⁴⁰ This detachment of the idea of the nation from the stigma of nationalism was bound up with Joseph Stalin's turn to 'socialism in one country', which deferred the possibility of world revolution and the dissolution of 'bourgeois' nation states; likewise, the recasting of fascism as an extreme and anomalous strain of capitalism underwrote Soviet foreign policy by enabling the matter of defending the Soviet Union against fascism to be treated as a separate issue to the question of how to end capitalism worldwide.⁴¹

But despite its strategic service of Stalinist aims, the consequences of the speech were far reaching in the Western democracies. As Kevin Morgan describes, such an acclimatisation of struggle meant an abandonment of 'abstract, utopian sloganising' and, as Dimitrov put it, accepting that the masses 'must be taken as they are, and not as we should like to have them.'⁴² This more realistic approach encouraged Communists to co-operate with and work within existing organisations and institutions. The attempt to create unity around existing cultural resources was memorably lampooned by George Orwell as 'the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa-magnates, publishers, duchesses and Labour MPs marching arm in arm to the tune of "Rule Britannia"'.⁴³ Shortly after the Seventh Congress, Ralph Fox, novelist, critic and translator, wrote in the *Daily Worker* of the 'vast new prospects' for intellectuals promised by Dimitrov's address and the Popular Front strategy in an article pitched to simultaneously appeal to intellectuals and argue for a less dogmatic attitude towards them: it is 'silly', Fox felt, to criticise the 'honest intellectual' who tries and fails to fully understand Marxism.⁴⁴ While this is the first clear statement in the *Daily Worker* of the cultural meaning of the Popular Front turn, it in fact reflected developments that were already happening on the Left beyond the purview of the Party. It is significant that Dimitrov's speech served to legitimate developments that were already happening in Britain, and among intellectuals in Europe at large. Six months before the Seventh Congress, the poet and dramatist Montagu Slater wrote in *Left Review* that, 'Let our slogan, then, be that we are going to utilize history (and as writers let us

⁴⁰ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, pp. 70-1; emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, p. 6.

⁴² Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, p. 33; Dimitrov, *Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 21.

⁴³ George Orwell, 'Review, *Workers' Front* by Fenner Brockway' (1938), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. I, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 305.

⁴⁴ Ralph Fox, 'The Fight of Communism on the Front of Culture', *Daily Worker*, 11 September, 1935, p. 4.

include literature) for the purposes of the class which is going to build socialism'.⁴⁵ This rallying call to intellectuals prefigures Dimitrov's assertion that Communists should try to 'enlighten the masses on the past of their people' and to 'link up the present struggle with the people's revolutionary traditions and past'.⁴⁶ This turn towards the popular and the historical displaced a rhetoric of class and of imminent revolution; instead, the 'outlines of a better future were now to be detected in the patterns of the nation's past'.⁴⁷ These prefigurations may explain why Dimitrov's speech seemed to enter the bloodstream of the left almost immediately, and why Dimitrov became a crucially inspirational figure.⁴⁸ In John Cornford's 1936 poem, 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca', the poem's conflicted moment - the war in Spain in which Cornford would shortly after lose his life - is constructed explicitly as the extension of Dimitrov's lone heroism:

But now the Leipzig dragon's teeth
 Sprout strong and handsome against death
 And here an army fights where there was one.⁴⁹

Essential to the strategy advocated by the Comintern was the building of a mass movement that extended beyond the Communist Parties, which remained small in Europe (the membership of the British Communist Party never exceeded 20,000 members in the 1930s; at its wartime peak (1943), it had around 55,000).⁵⁰ The sudden Communist enthusiasm for working with groups so recently denounced in the strongest terms has led to the Popular Front being variously stigmatised as the dereliction of commitment to world

⁴⁵ Montagu Slater, 'Writers' International', *Left Review*, I: 4, January 1935, p. 127.

⁴⁶ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 70.

⁴⁷ John Callaghan and Ben Harker, *British Communism: A Documentary History* (Manchester: MUP, 2011), p. 127.

⁴⁸ Dimitrov himself offered his experiences at Leipzig as an 'invaluable stock-in-trade of revolutionary practice and thought': 'Dimitrov to Writers', *Left Review*, I: 10 (July 1935), p. 344. Ralph Fox described Dimitrov's story as 'an epic of our time which demands that the artists should give it life', *The Novel and the People* (1936; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979) p. 121. Martin Myant argues that the near-unanimous support for Dimitrov suggested, in itself, the potential for a broad anti-fascist alliance: Myant, '1935: The Turning Point', in Jim Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), p. 36. Jack Lindsay's 1937 essay 'The Historical Novel' and Georg Lukács' influential work of the same title both quote the report in making comparable cases for the potentially vital role of historical writing in the anti-fascist struggle: Lindsay, 'The Historical Novel', *New Masses*, 12 July, 1937, p. 16; Lukács *The Historical Novel* (1937; London: Penguin, 1976), p. 325.

⁴⁹ John Cornford, 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca', in Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Penguin, 1964), pp. 137-139. For a reading of the tensions in the poem's attitude to 'what the Seventh Congress said', see Stan Smith, "'Hard as the Metal of My Gun": John Cornford's Spain', *Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 5-6 (2005-2008), pp. 357-373.

⁵⁰ The most detailed membership statistics available are given in Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 43, No.3 (September 2000), pp. 777-800.

revolution,⁵¹ an ‘unholy alliance between the robbers and the robbed’,⁵² a reconciliation with the forces of liberalism,⁵³ and as a counter-productive distraction from the real political needs of the moment.⁵⁴ Jim Fyrth, by contrast, convincingly argues that the years between 1934 and 1939 were ‘the most fruitful period in the history of the British left and of the Communist Party in particular.’⁵⁵ Fyrth insists that a genuine mass (though always minority) movement did arise and that it extended beyond the Communist Party: the women’s movement, student radicalism, anti-imperialism as well as traditional labour movement priorities (workers’ and tenants’ rights, for example) were all resurgent in the mid- and late thirties;⁵⁶ by 1938 some two million people were reading newspapers that supported the Popular Front, while the Left Book Club, formed in 1936, grew to number 57,000 members.⁵⁷ Perhaps the exemplary Popular Front campaign was Aid Spain, ‘the biggest movement of international solidarity in British history’, in which the Communist Party played a key role, but alongside other groups and individuals contributing autonomously.⁵⁸ The institutional bases of the Popular Front continued to grow even as the international situation deteriorated, suggesting that the need for mass, allied action became more compelling as war approached, rather than ebbing away with the optimism of 1936.⁵⁹ (As Samuel Hynes remarks, 1936 was ‘a good time to be a left-wing idealist’;⁶⁰ Popular Front governments were elected in France and Spain; Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts were prevented from marching through the East End of London by united working-class action, and there was a surge of international solidarity for the Spanish Republican Government at the outbreak of the Civil War.) Democracy and constitutionalism were central rallying points: fascism at home and abroad threatened to destroy the institutions of constitutional democracy that, from the Communist point of view, were recast not as the apparatus of bourgeois power but as the materialisations of hard-won democratic liberties that had to be

⁵¹ By Leon Trotsky, most obviously, in *The Transitional Programme* (1938); see particularly section 2, ‘The Proletariat and Its Leadership’. Online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/>.

⁵² Orwell, ‘Review, *Workers’ Front*’, p. 305.

⁵³ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge New Critical Idiom, 2000), p. 46.

⁵⁴ Ben Pimlott, *Labour and The Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp. 162-163.

⁵⁵ Jim Fyrth, ‘Introduction: In the Thirties’, in Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), p. 15.

⁵⁶ Fyrth, ‘Introduction’, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁷ Fyrth, ‘Introduction’, p. 23.

⁵⁸ Fyrth, ‘Introduction’, p. 19.

⁵⁹ Fyrth, ‘Introduction’, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Samuel Hynes, ‘Introduction’, in Christopher Caudwell, *Romance and Realism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1970), p. 12.

defended in the immediate term in order for an advance towards socialism to be possible. This advocacy for democracy was central to the appeal of the Popular Front beyond the ambit of the Communist Party: a lively series of exchanges on the issue appeared in the liberal *Manchester Guardian*, for example, in the summer of 1936, with the paper arguing for a left alliance on the grounds that '[t]he problem is not so much how to save us from another five years of Tory administration as to uphold and preserve democracy itself. That task is beyond the power of any single party.'⁶¹

Cultural Crisis

In Britain, the strategy of the Popular Front was, as Andy Croft writes, 'crucially defined by cultural considerations – nationality, tradition, democracy, intellectual liberty and the arts.'⁶² Leftist intellectuals advocating for a Popular Front rhetorically positioned themselves in relation to a cultural crisis; the early issues of *Left Review*, featuring discussions on the subject of the establishment of the British Section of the Writers' International and the content of its founding statement, are premised on the notion of a 'crisis in ideas'. Douglas Garman (who, like the poet and critic Edgell Rickword, moved in the course of a decade from the *Calendar of Modern Letters* to the *Left Review* and the Communist Party⁶³) offered a contribution clearly positioning the Writers' International in a role of ideological leadership: 'the chief value of the Writers' International lies in its ability to make clearer the nature of the forces that are disintegrating contemporary society, and by doing so to show that the future of civilization depends on the achievement of Communism.'⁶⁴ The actual institutional role of the Writers' International was rather limited, and was eclipsed by PEN, so that the organised ideological leadership Garman seems to envision did not come about except in a more diffuse way. But the idea of crisis and the possibility of a resurgent, wide-ranging intellectual response to it are clearly felt in the important 1937 essay collection *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, edited by C. Day Lewis. Day Lewis appropriates Shelley's Preface to

⁶¹ Unsigned, 'A Popular Front', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 August, 1936, p. 8.

⁶² Andy Croft, 'Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party, 1920-1956', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto, 1995), p. 92.

⁶³ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 86.

⁶⁴ Douglas Garman, 'Controversy', *Left Review*, I: II (October 1934), p. 180.

Prometheus Unbound: ‘The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring or is about to be restored’.⁶⁵ This revolutionary image of lightning, the moment in which separated powers which should by nature be in accord are unified, recurs in the revolutionary and universalising gestures that feature in the novels discussed in this study. The sentiment is echoed, Day Lewis finds, in Rex Warner’s statement that ‘[c]apitalism has no further use for culture.’ However based on Warner’s own premises it would be more accurate to reverse this: it is culture that has no further use for capitalism, which ‘can no longer invite the support of the general ideals of culture and progress.’⁶⁶ Here is evident what Perry Anderson recognised as the momentary, unfulfilled possibility ‘when a collective defection threatened to create a dissident intelligentsia.’⁶⁷ The various essays in *The Mind in Chains*, variable in quality, as Raymond Williams notes,⁶⁸ are nonetheless unified by shared senses of alienation – of the scientist from society at large, in J.D. Bernal’s contribution, or the English people from their ‘real history’, in Edgell Rickword’s – that rely to a certain extent on theoretical improvisation; as Francis Mulhern points out, the advent of Marxism in Britain was ‘remarkably belated’.⁶⁹ Rickword’s contribution is illuminating in this regard. Rickword, who joined the Communist Party in 1934 and edited the *Left Review* in 1936 and 1937,⁷⁰ describes a cultural crisis, symptomized by the relativism of high modernism, pessimism, mysticism, the abandonment of ‘absolute truth’ and characterised by a failure of totalisation: ‘the reason cannot classify the whole of experience’; the best minds fall victim to sophistry because ‘they live in an atmosphere where the basic reasons of existence, food and shelter and love, are no longer realised in their origin as solely the emanation of human labour’.⁷¹ The connection between totality and reification – ‘the destruction of

⁶⁵ C. Day Lewis, ‘Introduction’, in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Frederick Muller, 1937), p. 11.

⁶⁶ Rex Warner, ‘Education’, in Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains*, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, *New Left Review*, I/50, July-August, 1968, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958; London: Hogarth Press 1987), p. 270.

⁶⁹ Francis Mulhern, ‘The Marxist Aesthetics of Christopher Caudwell’, *New Left Review*, I/85 (May-June 1974), p. 39.

⁷⁰ Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword*, pp. 155-7.

⁷¹ Edgell Rickword, ‘Culture, Progress and English Tradition’, in Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains*, p. 250.

every image of the whole⁷² - is clear, even if the terms are not present. But what is also important is the unavoidable sense that Rickword reaches this conclusion through a kind of improvisation: lacking the conceptual framework of the 1844 Manuscripts, or, for that matter, Lukács's elaboration of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*,⁷³ Rickword arrives, as part of his programmatic call for alliance, at a theory of the *general* experience of capitalism in order to bring the intellectuals into the fold: capitalism universally dehumanises, and resistance to it is now the vocation of humanism. That 'real history', Rickword suggests, lies in the persistent ideal of popular sovereignty, the idea that 'the foundation of law lies in the people', as he quotes the Leveller, Thomas Rainborough, declaring.⁷⁴ British writers on the left were in no doubt as to what was at stake in the crisis: Rickword's pamphlet, *War and Culture* (1936), makes clear that the disintegration of culture was bound up with preparations for war.⁷⁵

This socialist humanism – the term would be revived as a rallying cry for British Marxist dissidents after 1956⁷⁶ – wrought out of the anti-fascist struggle, is an important corollary to the crisis in humanism that Jed Esty argues emerged at the point when imperial contraction meant that the English experience could no longer be taken as the normative or universal human experience; at this point, metropolitan modernists performed an 'anthropological turn' as they confronted English particularism.⁷⁷ The apparent concurrence of these two developments – the Popular Front national turn and the late modernist 'Anglocentric revival'⁷⁸ – is striking. The anthropological turn performed by

⁷² Georg Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin, 1975), p. 103.

⁷³ The 1844 Manuscripts were not published in German until 1932; the first English translation was made in the late 1950s. I have found no evidence the central writers of this study were familiar with the Manuscripts in the 1930s, although Jack Lindsay read them in the 1940s. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* was suppressed by Stalin for its supposed voluntarism and idealism. For the circumstances of this see John Rees's introduction to Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, ed. John Rees, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 17-24.

⁷⁴ The idea of a national situation that was repressed by authorised mechanisms of representation extended to the present: see the *Left Review*'s centrefold of photographs of hunger marchers by Humphrey Spender, entitled 'The Men Baldwin Would Not See', *Left Review*, II:15 (December 1936), pp. 824-5.

⁷⁵ 'The struggle to prevent the further deterioration owing to the war preparations can only be carried through if it is regarded as what it really is, a phase of the struggle against capitalism'. Rickword, *War and Culture: The Decline of Culture under Capitalism* (London: Peace Library Pamphlets, No.7, 1936), p. 13.

⁷⁶ See E.P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 129-132.

⁷⁷ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), pp. 5-6.

⁷⁸ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 12.

writers on the left is not separate from, but nor is it equivalent to that performed by canonical modernists in their ‘late’ phases. As Ben Harker has shown, the idea of the Popular Front provides one way of reading the politics of late modernist works such as Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941), with its anxious appropriations of popular cultural forms.⁷⁹ The anthropology of home, as Mass Observation had it, entailed, Esty argues, an inversion of a High Modernist epistemology that ascribed intelligibility to marginal cultures while mystifying knowledge of the centre, displacing it with a newly representable vision of a ‘shrinking’ England.⁸⁰ If Esty’s readings of the thirties are curiously silent on the role of fascism in forcing the confrontation with national particularism, and also over the significance of the Soviet Union as offering - at that moment - one kind of universalism, they might nonetheless illuminate the tremendous appeal of the socialised humanism inscribed, however hollowly, in such documents as the speeches of the first Soviet Writers’ Congress,⁸¹ but we also find important counterpoints to it that suggest these currents of thought were not continuous. The Marxist critic Alick West provides one such counterpoint. West argues for the perspective of humanism against the claim he finds in Oswald Spengler and T.S. Eliot that ‘cultures are mutually incomprehensible to each other’,⁸² a notion that would seem to mark both imperialism’s apex and its most acute contradiction. It is the world market, West thinks, that makes such a proposition invalid: to make ‘west Europe into a distinct social entity’ is simply ‘to preserve capitalism from the consequences of its own action in creating a world market’, erecting ‘cultural barriers against socialised humanism’.⁸³ Yet this internationalist vision of mutual cultural intelligibility is tempered, as so often in Popular Front texts, with an assertion of an essentiality of the nation. In his reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, West argues that Stephen is unable to repair the ‘damage to space and time’ wrought by imperialism by his failure – Joyce’s failure, West assumes – to move beyond a purely negative rejection of

⁷⁹ Ben Harker, ““On different levels ourselves went forward””: Pageantry, Class Politics and Narrative Form in Virginia Woolf’s Late Writing”, *ELH*, 78(2), 2011, pp. 16-34.

⁸⁰ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 7.

⁸¹ Published by Martin Lawrence as *Problems in Soviet Literature* (1935), and discussed in chapter one, below.

⁸² Alick West, ‘On the Relativity of Literary Value’, in *Crisis and Criticism* (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 103.

⁸³ West, ‘Relativity of Literary Value’, p. 103.

Church and State.⁸⁴ The logic of the critique emanates from a nationally-mediated cultural internationalism, with no aim in sight of the dissolution of the nation state.

Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne take West as exemplar of an English Marxist criticism ‘compromised by the cultural politics of Stalinism’ that was shortly ‘hegemonically defeated by the more formally acute “new” criticism’ of Richards, Leavis and Empson.⁸⁵ West’s resistance to ideological criticism ‘owes more to the insular peculiarities of English Marxism than to explicitly theorized resistance’.⁸⁶ In fact, Popular Front cultural activities were often carried out in some tension with the wishes of the Party. The popularisation of Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, caused concern among some in the Party hierarchy.⁸⁷ In the literature as much as in the social and political initiatives of the late interwar period, there is often a tension between the idea of organised Communism as represented by the CPGB and the utopian ideal of some much looser and more pluralistic, radical democratic politics.⁸⁸ The shape of such a popular, national version of Communism is best discerned in the work of Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay, and especially in their anthology of radical texts, *The Handbook of Freedom*, which traced an unbroken thread of resistance in English history from Anglo-Saxon poetry through to opposition to the First World War.⁸⁹ Significantly, this text was a formative influence on E.P. Thompson; in it he found ‘the conjunction between an international socialist theory and a vigorous national historical practice’, an emphasis on ‘complex cultural actualities’ that could underpin ‘the struggle for vitality and for actuality against the *déraciné* uniformity and abstracted internationalist *lingua franca*’ of Stalinism.⁹⁰ Indeed, the anthology did meet with suspicion from the Communist Party, which perceived in its eclectic presentation of voices which were ‘passionate but never “correct”’, as

⁸⁴ Alick West, ‘James Joyce: *Ulysses*’, *Crisis and Criticism*, pp. 107-8.

⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton & Drew Milne, Introduction to Alick West, ‘On the Relativity of Literary Value’, in Eagleton & Milne, eds., *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 103.

⁸⁶ Terry Eagleton & Drew Milne, introduction to Alick West, ‘On the Relativity of Literary Value’, in Eagleton & Milne, eds., *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 103.

⁸⁷ Kevin Morgan, ‘The Communist Party and the *Daily Worker*, 1930-56’, pp. 145-150.

⁸⁸ For an account of the practicalities of negotiating alliances from the Communist Party’s point of view, see Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991* (London: Pluto, 1992), chapter 2.

⁸⁹ Republished during the war as *Spokesmen for Liberty* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941).

⁹⁰ E.P. Thompson, ‘Edgell Rickword’, *PN Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (September-October 1979), pp. xxvi-xxviii.

Thompson puts it,⁹¹ a challenge to the authority of the Party hardliner Emile Burns' *The Handbook of Marxism*, and thus to Burns' selections from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.⁹² For this reason, I concur with Michael Denning's rejection of a 'core-periphery' model of the relationship between the cultural formation of the Popular Front and the Communist Party in so far as such a model misleadingly suggests ideas radiated from a central point within the Party, and furthermore it obscures the fact that cultural practitioners even working within the Party were not simply reproducing 'orthodox' thinking on cultural and historical issues.⁹³

For Thompson, then, this exemplary Popular Front text performed a mediation between the national and the international that was not short circuited by the Soviet Union. The type of national and popular Communism that began to be imagined in the Popular Front years was soon stifled by the outbreak of war, which brought the Party's first priority of loyalty to and defence of the Soviet Union back into view, but nonetheless it is possible – and, indeed, valuable, to reconstruct the principles of that version of radicalism. The contradictions, however, were never far from the surface; Jack Lindsay threw himself with extraordinary energy and commitment into the historicising and popularising projects of the Popular Front, and yet, as I suggest in Part Two, his trilogy of English historical novels charting the rise of capitalism continually – and unintentionally - brings into question the identification of a 'progressive' bourgeoisie. The cultural energy unleashed sometimes over-ran the pragmatic political premises that supposedly underpinned it.

⁹¹ Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', p. xxviii.

⁹² Hobday, *Edgell Rickword*, p. 168. If the national and local emphases of British Popular Front productions suggested a covert anti-Stalinism, the principle of turning to local resources was, in Europe, effective as an anti-fascist strategy. See Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligott's 'Introduction: Community, Authority and Resistance to Fascism', in their edited collection, *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 1-11. In Spain, Helen Graham argues, the Popular Front's greatest successes came as a result of its localism, rather than a 'generalising internationalism': 'Spain 1936: Resistance and Revolution: The Flaws in the Front', in Kirk and McElligott, eds., *Opposing Fascism*, p. 66.

⁹³ Michael Denning, *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London & NY: Verso, 1997), p. xviii.

The Popular Front Novel

The focus of this study is the way that the realist novel during this period is implicated in the imagining of a version of the people. For all the official Communist talk of taking the masses as they were,⁹⁴ of learning to speak the language of the English people,⁹⁵ the cultural productions of the left, and especially the novel, recognised that such ideas as ‘the masses’ and the ‘English people’ could not be taken as they were, but rather required construction and elaboration if they were to perform the imaginative function of unifying an anti-fascist movement. While, as Ben Harker argues, poetry occupied a special position in the cultural criticism of the Popular Front, ‘a particularly striking test-case of cultural alienation’, perceived as it was to originate in communal experience from which it had since been severed,⁹⁶ I make a case here for the novel, which had less obviously communal sources, as a domain in which we see British Marxist thought developing, experimenting and confronting contradictions. The realist novel, I argue, often expresses two dynamics at once: on the one hand, identifying real resistant structures of feeling and modes of opposition generated by the historical experience of ‘the people’, and on the other, searching for some more definite, politically coherent popular subject. This generates an equivocation between materialism and idealism, an equivocation Mick Wallis detects in the Popular Front pageant,⁹⁷ but which can be clearly felt in Sommerfield’s *May Day* which oscillates between the citation of real historical events (particularly the 1926 General Strike) and a sense of a larger, idealised history of which those events may be part.⁹⁸ I suggest that Georg Lukács’s work – especially his work on realism in the thirties, but also his earlier work on the epic ancestry of the novel in *The Theory of the Novel* (1914/15) and his elaboration of capitalist subjectivity in *History and Class Consciousness* (1922) – provides the most adequate conceptual frame for reading this attempt in the

⁹⁴ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 21.

⁹⁵ ‘[T]he Communist Party is learning to speak to the English workers in a language they understand’ – Party organiser Ted Bramley in *Inprecorr*, 29th September, 1936, reprinted in Callaghan & Harker, *British Communism*, p. 134.

⁹⁶ Ben Harker, ‘Edgell Rickword’, p. 22. We see this clearly in The Left Book Club poets’ group, which established an exemplarily Popular Frontist little magazine, *Poetry and the People*, exploring folk poetry and the oral tradition, ‘to wield the weapon of poetry in the cause of the people’: ‘Editorial’, *Poetry and the People*, no. 1, July 1938, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Mick Wallis, ‘Pageantry and the Popular Front: Ideological Production in the Thirties’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol.10, issue 38, May 1994, p. 143.

⁹⁸ The novel recasts the strike as a ‘rehearsal’, subordinating it to the reality of the imagined mass strike in the text. Sommerfield, *May Day* (1936; London: London Books, 2010), p. 204.

thirties novel. This is not to suggest the direct influence of Lukács on British writers during this period. The (limited) engagements of the writers I focus on with his work are considered in the relevant chapters that follow, but for the most part I am suggesting only that Lukács's terms best clarify the conceptual underpinnings of their novels in ways that these writers themselves could not at this time formulate. By these means we might make sense of their preoccupations with isolation and estrangement, their epic resonances, their investment in questions of nationality and the nation-state, and their multivalent involvement in problems of collective forms and subjects. The novel's investment in inherently social issues – the nature of the individual in society, the status of history – made it a laboratory, in a sense, for the wider social and cultural ambitions of the Popular Front.

All the novels I focus on are concerned, in different ways, with the problem of alienation: in Sommerfield, the dereifying potential of the montage form is explored; in Calder-Marshall, we find an insistent concern with class-generated self-division and disarticulation; in Barke's novels, with dispossession and the alienation of labour; in Jones's, with reification and the alienation of subjectivity under capitalism; in Lindsay's, with the long history of capitalism's severance of the people from the means of production, and of the institutions of the state from popular consensus, figured through the struggle for recognition. These novels also deal with activism and militancy, bringing such activities frequently to the fore (and therefore against Lukács's argument that militancy in non-revolutionary countries is not typical⁹⁹). More generally, and with a less definite political accent, they are invested in the idea of an ethics of active life, social engagement and responsibility. British novelists on the left were more concerned with capitalism's totalising effects – its universalising process of estrangement and alienation – than with the specifics of class struggle, but in so doing they, in an improvisational manner, adumbrate a humanist, pluralist Marxism. Lukács's categories help us to mediate and grasp the meanings of these terms, which often coexist in leftist discourses. In adopting this theoretical approach, demonstrating the consonance of British writers' approaches to capitalism with Lukács's philosophy and aesthetics, I suggest that the theoretical and

⁹⁹ Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937; London: Penguin, 1976), p. 360.

philosophical poverty of Marxism in Britain in the thirties has perhaps been overstated.

Perry Anderson argues that British Marxism in the thirties,

was the passing product of a political conjuncture, and developed no serious intellectual dimension to it at the time. Marx's own work, and the development of his theory after his death, remained virtually unstudied.¹⁰⁰

Anderson explains that 'their inherited liberalism often subsisted quite unaltered, beneath their new political allegiance.'¹⁰¹ The novel, with its investment in philosophical categories and its historical association with 'liberalism' as a way of mediating the relationships between individuals and society, might prove a useful testing ground for such a claim.¹⁰² Anderson's larger argument is his well-known assertion that British Marxism lacks a conceptual centre. As to the category of totality, Anderson is emphatic '*Britain has for more than fifty years lacked any form whatever of such thought.*'¹⁰³ To Anderson this is the 'absent centre' in British thought. I am not suggesting that a theory of totality, or of reification or mediation, can be systematically reconstructed out of a handful of leftist novels. However I do want to suggest that their thinking tended in this direction: circumstances in which they found themselves both created a space for and actively demanded such an elaboration.

To focus on the realist novel - with its authoritative and 'monologic' connotations¹⁰⁴ - might seem obtuse, given the widespread engagements both with more innovative forms - documentary film, for example - and with more obviously popular forms and genres (science fiction, the thriller). But, as I suggest in chapter one, deep and unresolved ambivalence about the terrain of popular culture as it actually existed pervades the leftist cultural work of the time. This ambiguity arises in attempts to distinguish between notions of popular culture – regarded as 'authentic' and mobilisable against fascism, and mass culture, conceived as the ideological means of working-class incorporation into the capitalist order. *Mass Observation* illustrates this tension quite well.

¹⁰⁰ Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', p. 11.

¹⁰² Pericles Lewis discusses the relationships between the politics of the liberal state and the formal techniques of the canonical realist novel in *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 8-10.

¹⁰³ Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', p. 12, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁴ The classic poststructuralist statement of this position is Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980; London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 56-69.

On the one hand, Mass Observation appears to be a sociological and epistemological enterprise endeavouring investigate the ‘British Islanders’ so as ‘to get written down the unwritten laws and to make the invisible forces visible.’¹⁰⁵ Yet, as Penny Summerfield notes, it can appear simultaneously as a transformative project, serving the ends of both ‘academically respectable research and the creation of social change’.¹⁰⁶ Making ‘invisible forces visible’ might suggest that these ends were unified by the assumption that the creation of knowledge about British culture as it actually was could be an act of transformation in its own right. But this implication was often tempered by a deep distrust of mass culture: as Nick Hubble has argued, Mass Observation’s *Britain* seemed to suggest that ‘pleasure in the shape of popular culture (with the singular exception of the Lambeth Walk) is the practical shape in which Fascism invades the politically isolated home life of the masses’.¹⁰⁷ Unsettled and contradictory attitudes to mass and popular culture were common among leftist writers. Christopher Caudwell’s *Illusion and Reality*, often considered the major work of criticism produced by a British Communist at this time,¹⁰⁸ resounds with loathing for commercialised mass culture, ‘a mass-produced “low-brow” art, whose flatness and shallowness serve to adapt [the working class] to their unfreedom.’¹⁰⁹ Though Philip Bounds reads this tendency as evidence of writers ‘pandering to [their fellow intellectuals]’ most virulent prejudices’, Popular Front intellectuals – including Caudwell, who himself wrote thrillers – engaged widely with popular cultural forms not obviously amenable to a radicalised politics.¹¹⁰ These appropriations reflect a belief that forms that had wide popular appeal - even when traditionally used for politically conservative ends - could be successfully appropriated in

¹⁰⁵ Mass Observation, *First Year’s Work, 1937-38* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1938), p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Penny Summerfield, ‘Mass Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 20 (1985), p. 439.

¹⁰⁷ Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ Caudwell’s status as a major figure is suggested by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, pp. 277-8; and by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne in their introduction to Caudwell, ‘English Poets: The Period of Primitive Accumulation’, in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 91. Others such as E.P. Thompson have been more cautious, both about the status of Caudwell himself and about whether *Illusion and Reality* is his major work: Thompson, ‘Caudwell’, *Socialist Register* 1977, pp. 228-276. I would suggest that *Illusion and Reality* is dynamised by a tautly polarised account of society, which in the final chapter (‘The Future of Poetry’) is rather laboriously transformed into a more Popular Front-type argument, although the odd rhetorical structure of the chapter is in keeping with formal preoccupations with public speech.

¹⁰⁹ Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (1937: London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1946), p. 107-8.

¹¹⁰ Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2012), p. 99.

the service of the progressive popular culture that was seen as integral to mass action against fascism. The most striking example is the appropriation of the pageant form by Communists. Mick Wallis's ground-breaking work on these pageants offers exemplary analyses of the rhetorical strategies of the Popular Front, the process of constructing and deconstructing relationships between viewers and participants. Wallis illuminates the complex ways Popular Front cultural productions envision the nation and the people as ideas rooted in something essentially common and pointing to something essentially universal. Such works mediate nationalist and internationalist concerns through the 'folk' and the 'people'. These mediations generated 'a sense of an international, universal folk: the roots of a common democracy'.¹¹¹ A deeply felt national sensibility resounds in many texts produced on the left, but so too does a concern with the universally human; indeed, Mick Wallis detects in the pageants a discourse of humanism consonant with Marx of the 1844 manuscripts that had yet to be discovered in Britain.¹¹² The pageants are an illuminating example of Communists working within an existing formal tradition so as to transform it, turning the pageant – with its connotations of empire and English chauvinism – to the expression of a radical alternative tradition.¹¹³

As the chapters that follow will show, the realist novel performs important work in this project of differentiating between existing tendencies within British culture, identifying those elements that could be repositioned and connected within a discourse of popular anti-fascism, and giving emotional weight and coherence to those connections. In this productive function, the realist novel differs from fiction in other modes and genres, which tend to perform monitory and diagnostic functions. In the genres of speculative fiction and allegory we find diagnoses of fascism and explorations of the national past. Futuristic fictions proliferated to such an extent that the *TLS* complained about the sheer number of books 'forecasting the destruction of the next war.'¹¹⁴ Women writers made a particular contribution in this area; important speculative works like Katharine Burdekin's

¹¹¹ Mick Wallis, 'Pageantry and the Popular Front', p. 137.

¹¹² Wallis, 'Pageantry and the Popular Front', p. 141. The 1844 manuscripts were first published in 1932, but did not become known to British Marxists until the 1940; Jack Lindsay, a central figure in chapter four of this study, was among their early enthusiasts, recalled reading them in around 1940: Lindsay 'Towards a Marxist Aesthetic', in *Decay and Renewal: Critical Essays on Twentieth Century Writing* (Sydney: Wild & Woolley; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), p. 433.

¹¹³ Mick Wallis, 'The Popular Front Pageant: Its Emergence and Decline', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol.11, no. 41 (February 1995), p. 20.

¹¹⁴ Qtd. Croft, *Red Letter Days*, p. 7.

Swastika Night and Storm Jameson's *In The Second Year* envisage a fascist future for England. This contribution has yet to be fully explored, though important light has been shed on them by several interesting essays in Maroula Joannou's collection *Women Writers of the 1930s* which address issues of genre and women writers' relationships with non-realist modes.¹¹⁵ Perhaps the best-known allegorist writing from the left was Rex Warner; Warner's novels of this period *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937), *The Professor* (1938) and *The Aerodrome* (1940) (and in a lesser way his children's novel, *The Kite* (1936)), explore crises of authority and the roots of authoritarianism.¹¹⁶ Although leftist work in these genres remains relatively under-explored, discussions of it appear in the work of Andy Croft, Chris Hopkins and, in relation to Rex Warner, Glyn Salton-Cox.¹¹⁷ This study's theoretical concern with realist novels precludes extended engagement with other genre, which, to do these interventions justice, would require a different theoretical apparatus attuned to their investment in utopian and speculative traditions, their rendering of history's 'turn to the grotesque' in the era of fascism.¹¹⁸

Literature Review

There is very little sustained scholarship on the texts at the centre of this study. All are relatively under-researched, while little critical attention has been directed to these authors' careers more generally. A short biographical study of Lewis Jones was published by Dai Smith in 1984, and a symposium on the work of Jack Lindsay was held at the Institute for Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, also in 1984.¹¹⁹ A recent

¹¹⁵ See Sylvia Vance, 'Lorca's Mantle: The Rise of Fascism and the Work of Storm Jameson' (pp. 123-137) and Keith Williams, 'Back From The Future: Katharine Burdekin and Science Fiction in the 1930s' (pp. 151-164), as well as Joannou's introductory essay (pp. 1-15): *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1999).

¹¹⁶ Warner, *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937. London: Merlin Press, 1990); *The Professor* (London: John Lane /The Bodley Head, 1938); *The Aerodrome* (1940; London: Vintage, 2007).

¹¹⁷ Chris Hopkins, *English Fiction in the Thirties*, chapter 10, pp. 138-157; Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days*, pp. 220-242; Glyn Salton-Cox, 'Syncretic Utopianism, Transnational Provincialism: Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase*' in Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell, eds., *Utopianism, Modernism and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 111-129.

¹¹⁸ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 147.

¹¹⁹ Dai Smith, *Lewis Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press/Welsh Arts Council, 1992); Robert Mackie, ed., *Jack Lindsay: The Thirties and Forties* (London: University of London Institution of Commonwealth Studies Australian Studies Occasional Seminar Papers, 1984). Lawrence & Wishart republished John Sommerfield's *May Day* the same year, suggesting the ways that social crises of the Thatcher years brought the thirties back into view.

doctoral thesis by Keir Elder focuses on James Barke as writer of Scottish modernity.¹²⁰ There are signs, however, of growing interest in the work of John Sommerfield; Nick Hubble and Stuart Laing have both published appraisals of Sommerfield that are illuminating, in both cases tracing the synergies between Sommerfield's literary work and his work for Mass Observation.¹²¹ The work of Arthur Calder-Marshall, however, has suffered almost complete neglect since his death in 1992, and his works of thirties are not readily obtainable. The Popular Front as a cultural formation is likewise under-studied, and there is no British equivalent of Michael Denning's ground-breaking study of American Popular Front cultural politics.¹²² John Coombes' *Writing from the Left: Socialism, Liberalism and the Popular Front* (1989), offers a usefully international perspective on the engagements of British and European intellectuals in anti-fascism, including French, Spanish and German interventions. However, Coombes situates the British Popular Front primarily in the political developments of Bloomsbury figures such as Leonard Woolf and John Middleton Murry, and in the Stalinist turn of Fabians like Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Coombes' central argument, that the Popular Front was essentially Liberal in its political co-ordinates, will be disputed throughout this thesis; a more expansive engagement with figures who occupied more diverse positions in terms of class and intellectual background reveals the limits of Coombes' selection.¹²³

Despite the lack of sustained scholarship on the literary history of the Popular Front, this thesis nonetheless intervenes in four strands of current scholarship: (i) the reconsideration of the thirties as a literary period (canonical figures; key themes and institutions); (ii) the history of Communism and Marxism in Britain; (iii) the cultural history of the interwar period (in relation to the dominant periodization of modernism and

¹²⁰ Keir Elder, *James Barke: Politics, Cinema and Writing Scottish Urban Modernity*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Dundee, 2013. This thesis was made publically available too late to be discussed as part of the chapter on Barke here.

¹²¹ Nick Hubble, 'John Sommerfield and Mass Observation', *The Space Between*, Volume VIII:1 2012, pp. 131-151; Stuart Laing, 'Presenting "Things as They Are": John Sommerfield's *May Day* and Mass Observation', in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980, pp. 142-160.

¹²² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London & NY: Verso, 1997).

¹²³ John Coombes, *Writing from the Left: Socialism: Liberalism and the Popular Front* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989); see especially chapter one, 'The Last Days of Bloomsbury' (pp. 7-41), and chapter two, 'Stalinism and the Fabians' (pp. 42-67).

postmodernism); and (iv) the revaluation of the role of the nation in interwar and mid-century literature.

(i) Until comparatively recently, studies on the literary history of the thirties have been dominated by a focus on W.H. Auden as a central figure, with Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene and George Orwell all occupying secure positions. Such a configuration of the literary thirties appeared entrenched before the decade itself had really closed: John Lehmann's survey of the thirties, *New Writing in Europe* (1940), focuses on the Auden group, which he regards as 'the real core of the movement of the 'thirties, its central and most active motor'.¹²⁴ Major critical studies that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s tended to reproduce this grouping, as exemplified by Samuel Hynes's seminal study, *The Auden Generation*. Hynes's work does much to connect texts and contexts and bring to light intertextual relationships, although, as I indicate above, this study rejects the central grouping in favour of a wider demographic focus.¹²⁵ Both Richard Johnstone's *The Will to Believe* (1982) and Bernard Bergonzi's *Reading the Thirties* (1978) adopt the same canon of writers, and in both cases are at pains to argue that writers on the left were critically blinded by 'a simple, sentimental Russophilia'.¹²⁶ It is difficult not to sense the ideological pressures of the Cold War, of course in these issues (and one might suggest that Auden's centrality to this version of the thirties relies in part on his post-war politics). During the same period, studies from the left attempted to offer correctives to anti-Communist rewritings of the thirties, such as John Lucas's edited collection, *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (1978) which sees the decade from a point of transition at which a few of the leading literary figures were still alive, mixing criticism with memoir, anecdote and previously unpublished material (the book's first chapter is an illuminating interview with Edgell Rickword, conducted by Lucas¹²⁷). Unquestionably, the major study is Valentine Cunningham's prodigious *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988). Cunningham explores the thirties through wide-ranging surveys of key tropes ('Going Over'; 'Destructive Elements',

¹²⁴ John Lehmann, *New Writing in Europe* (London: Pelican, 1940), p. 47.

¹²⁵ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: Pimlico, 1976).

¹²⁶ Richard Johnstone, *The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1982); Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), p. 135.

¹²⁷ John Lucas, 'An Interview with Edgell Rickword', in Lucas, ed., *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), pp. 3-13.

‘Movement of Masses’) that enable him to approach texts from a range of angles in an associative manner.¹²⁸ Although usefully complicating the canonical grouping, it is the work of those writers that remains central, supported by peripheral evidence from other texts. Cunningham’s readings of texts produced from the left are, as this thesis will show in relation James Barke’s novels, for example, often clouded by misreading of the aesthetic demands placed especially on Communist writers.¹²⁹

During the 1980s scholars such as such as Andy Croft and H. Gustav Klaus emerged, and this thesis is much indebted to their work in recovering and reassessing neglected thirties texts.¹³⁰ Croft’s *Red Letter Days* documents the extraordinary, and still under-researched, proliferation of left-wing fiction during the thirties, and Croft’s insights into the appeal of the historical novel are, I hope, developed and elaborated in the chapters that follow here. Croft’s edited collection, *A Weapon in the Struggle*, reveals a rich history of culture in the Communist Party, despite George Orwell’s characterisation of the Party as doctrinaire and anti-intellectual, encompassing essays on film, classical music, jazz, visual art and fiction.¹³¹ Klaus’s *The Literature of Labour* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985) situates socialist fiction of the thirties in a longer tradition of working class writing, and offers some of best available readings of Sommerfield and Barke. Many of the texts here, when they have been discussed, have been discussed in the context of studies of socialist or working-class fiction; many of these are insightful but by their nature tend to overlook the specific political formation of which they were a part, and focus on a relatively narrow set of themes (unemployment, labour, housing conditions) – David Smith’s work is typical here¹³² – reading these novels as either socialist or working-class novels misses a number

¹²⁸ Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

¹²⁹ Cunningham’s readings of the ‘mass’ in the leftist novel are especially hampered by an over-estimation of the rigidity of ‘socialist realism’ as it was transmitted into Britain, and thereby tends to treat their experiments with form as mere curiosities or anomalies (pp. 296-9). He is also much too quick to suppose that Marxists ‘held more or less conventional and commonsensical views of language, and so of texts, as being simply mirrors on to reality’ (p. 4). Such texts as Barke’s *Major Operation* (which Cunningham in fact devotes some attention to) would suggest otherwise, as I discuss in chapter five.

¹³⁰ Andy Croft’s *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) is the major study, but Croft’s other key contributions include *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler* (Manchester: MUP, 2002) and ‘Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party, 1920-56’ (cited above) among many others.

¹³¹ Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1998).

¹³² David Smith, *Socialist Propaganda in the Twentieth-Century British Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

of crucial factors. Reading Lewis Jones, for example, in the context of Popular Front themes sheds a different light on his work to studies aligning him with a tradition of proletarian fiction.¹³³ More recently, however, Christopher Hilliard has usefully complicated the idea of a separate tradition of working-class writing, demonstrating the complex relationships between working-class writers and middle-class literary institutions, their work shaped by commercial, artistic and sometimes political pressures.¹³⁴ In so doing, Hilliard is able to shed light on the vast terrain of work produced by working-class people who were not committed socialists or communists, and to whom the paradigms associated with proletarian fiction cannot apply. Hilliard demonstrates – rather in contrast to Croft’s claim of the CP’s success in nurturing working-class literary talent¹³⁵ – that Communist-associated publishing institutions like Martin Lawrence and the *Left Review* were inept at dealing with working-class writers, compared to writers’ circles and correspondence courses.¹³⁶ Hilliard’s work is an important reminder of the need to return attention to the material conditions and processes of production that lie behind the published (or, for that matter, the unpublished) literary work.

(ii) Since the dissolution of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1991 in the wake of the collapse of the USSR studies of its social, political and cultural history have yielded important insights. Kevin Morgan’s work is at the forefront, his *Against Fascism and War* is a crucial source for Popular Front cultural historians. British Marxism – as a theoretical tradition or set of intersecting traditions – remains under-studied, even as histories of the political left, and especially of the CPGB, have illuminated the currents of radical and revolutionary politics in Britain. Edwin A. Robert’s study of British Marxism features chapters on John Lewis, J.D. Bernal, J.B.S. Haldane and Maurice Cornforth, and seeks to establish ‘analytic Marxism’ as a distinct tradition and object of study; it fails however to convincingly construct a shared philosophical base between these figures, although it does offer useful intellectual biographies of these now very marginalised

¹³³ For a reading of Jones as a proletarian novelist, see Carole Snee, ‘Working-Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?’ in John Clark, et al. eds., *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), pp. 165-91

¹³⁴ Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing In Britain* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard UP, 2006).

¹³⁵ Croft, ‘Authors Take Sides’, pp. 85-91.

¹³⁶ Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents*, pp. 135-138; a more extended account is given in Hilliard, ‘Producers by Hand and by Brain: Working-Class Writers and Left-Wing Publishers in 1930s Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (March 2006), pp. 37-64.

thinkers.¹³⁷ Philip Bounds' recent *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939*¹³⁸ also works partly as a series of intellectual biographies of Ralph Fox, Alick West, Christopher Caudwell; Bounds is interested especially in how 'orthodox' these figures were in relation to thirties Communism, but this, I suggest, is already to over-state the existence of an orthodox position. Especially in relation to Fox, Bounds tends to treat the critical work in isolation from other activities (journalism, creative work, political activity);¹³⁹ my approach here tries to show that central preoccupations – realism, the nation, history – are elaborated within literary works as well as other forms, and that literary texts illuminate currents and tendencies of thought that were not, and could not be, fully articulated in the critical sphere.

Gradually, as the Cold War recedes into history, British intellectuals' engagements with the Soviet Union during the Stalinist period have begun to be reconsidered in more nuanced ways, often facilitated by the release of previously classified documents.¹⁴⁰ Matthew Taunton has recently reconsidered a well-known controversy between H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw on the subject of Soviet Communism to argue that the left intelligentsia cannot be schematically divided into 'Soviet-sympathisers' and 'anti-communists'. Taunton's analysis demonstrates the complex role the Soviet Union played in the leftist imagination, beyond Bernard Bergonzi's assumption that leftist intellectuals could only either be willing accomplices or 'useful idiots' in their relations with Stalinism.¹⁴¹ There has been an increasing willingness to engage with writers' political commitments in a manner more reflective than the criticism of 1970s and 1980s, and to look afresh at such received terms as 'neutrality' and 'commitment'. Benjamin Kohlmann, for example, examines the history of critical receptions of William Empson's work in order to challenge dominant readings arising from formalist (universalising, aestheticizing) analysis; such analysis, Kohlmann argues, assumes that Empson's famously poised

¹³⁷ Edwin A. Roberts, *The Anglo-Marxists: A Study in Ideology and Culture* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

¹³⁸ Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2012).

¹³⁹ See Bounds' reading of Fox on pp. 141-141: a series of odd, speculative explanations in terms of 'unconscious' influences are given for apparent inconsistencies in *The Novel and the People*, which could be more credibly explained by reference to a *conscious* Popular Front turn to national cultural resources.

¹⁴⁰ See particularly James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), which considers security service monitoring of such figures as Auden, Orwell and Spender.

¹⁴¹ Matthew Taunton, 'Russia and the British Intellectuals: The Significance of the Wells-Stalin Talk', in Rebecca Beasley and Matthew Taunton, eds., *Russia in Britain, 1880-1940* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 220-223; Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties*, pp. 134-5.

ambiguity can be detached from its historical context, and read as a gesture against ‘engaged’ literature.¹⁴² Kohlmann instead traces the ways that impartiality was itself construed as political, in order to sympathetically reconstruct Empson in the context of an ‘Old Left’ politics.¹⁴³

(iii) The thirties have been central to recent reappraisals of the conventional periodization of the twentieth century into a modernist and postmodernist phase: the question of where the thirties sit in relation to those paradigms, but moreover to the more acute questioning of the assumptions that underpin that image of the century. One strand of this movement has been the exploration of ‘intermodernism’, often linked with a re-evaluation of the ‘middlebrow’, to complicate the positioning of ‘high’ modernist aesthetics as the privileged aesthetic of twentieth-century modernity. Kristin Bluemel’s introduction to her edited collection, *Intermodernism*, attempts to argue that the terms can at once refer to a kind of writing (an aesthetic category), a social formation (an institutional, materialist category), and an expression of shared values (an ideological category).¹⁴⁴ But this very capaciousness leads to a lack of conceptual solidity (‘shared values’ being, I suggest, the most problematic, if simply because literary scholars lack an obvious methodological and theoretical framework by which to gauge them). In several of the most engaging studies of the period, questions of perspective and the mediations of seeing are brought to the fore in order to understand thirties fiction’s relations with both (post)modernity and the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism. Keith Williams examines the interaction between literature and other media, using a range of concepts drawn from postmodern criticism to read backwards into the thirties an awareness of the ‘hyperreal’.¹⁴⁵ Williams is right that the question of totality, and the possibility of representing totality, are crucial; however, while Williams argues that such techniques assert a newly relativized, media-saturated reality, texts produced on the left in fact adopt the techniques of new media for stabilising, rather than relativizing, ends, and that such appropriations cannot be easily assimilated to a postmodern paradigm. In Popular Front texts, the desire to construct a coherent alternative narrative is at least as strong as the desire

¹⁴² Benjamin Kohlmann, ‘An Honest Decade: William Empson and the Ambiguities of Writing in the 1930s’, *ELH*, vol. 80, no.1, Spring 2013, pp. 222-223.

¹⁴³ Kohlmann, ‘An Honest Decade’, p. 222.

¹⁴⁴ Kristin Bluemel, ‘Introduction’, in Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media, 1930-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 1-5.

to unmask the contingency of all discourse.¹⁴⁶ In many ways echoing Williams, Lara Feigel has described the emergence and decline of a ‘politically committed filmic British writing’,¹⁴⁷ though I would suggest that Feigel’s reading of the idea of popularity in leftist writing is too quick to associate it with popular cultural forms such as the cinema; there is another way of reading popularity, as I suggest in the next chapter, which is less directly about the capturing of a mass audience or readership.

The Mass Observation Archive held by the University of Sussex continues to function as the material base for a range of studies, most recently by Nick Hubble and James Hinton. As Hubble points out, the complexities of its methods mean it cannot be treated simply as a repository of ‘social context’ for those studying interwar literature, and his own interpretations productively read the workings of MO in relation to, for example, William Empson’s elaboration of pastoral.¹⁴⁸ Hubble however offers a rather limited interpretation of the Popular Front as favouring a somewhat narrowly realist aesthetic; on this basis, he suggests that Mass Observation’s ‘essence as performance’ distinguished it from Popular Front cultural productions.¹⁴⁹ I would suggest, however, that the performative function was crucial, even to the ‘socialist realist’ novels that are assumed to have a purely representative function. I would hope that a closer examination of the specifics of Popular Front literary aesthetics would illuminate these connections.

(iv) In focusing on questions of the popular and the national, this study intersects with contemporary currents of scholarship reappraising the literary map of the interwar years and the mid-century. The nation as a formation has been at the heart of important

¹⁴⁶ For an analysis of such a practice in relation to the living newspaper form, see Ben Harker, ‘Mediating the 1930s: Documentary and Politics in Theatre Union’s *Last Edition* (1940)’, in Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, ed., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009): ‘The apparently ‘objective’ form of the newspaper is shown to reflect and reproduce a dominant crisis in perspective in which history is available neither to meaningful analysis nor to coherent narration, but instead is reified into discrete, sealed episodes’ (25). But the living newspaper is an also an attempt to integrate, to generate coherence from the fragments (28). Such impersonations and appropriations of media voices are ubiquitous in Popular Front texts; Rickword’s pamphlet *War and Culture*, with its alarming, telegraphic subheadings (‘THEY ARE PLANNING A BIG BANG, THOUGH’; ‘GERMANY THE WARMAKERS’ DREAM OF HOME’) might be considered a comparable exercise in ‘consciousness raising.’

¹⁴⁷ Lara Feigel, *Literature, Cinema and Politics 1930-45: Reading Between the Frames* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2010), p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ Hubble, *Mass Observation*, p. 227. James Hinton has recently published a less theoretically-engaged but meticulously researched study of Mass Observation: *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: OUP, 2013)

¹⁴⁹ Hubble, *Mass Observation*, p. 161.

reconceptualizations of the literature of this period. Jed Esty's work, referred to above, describes how the 'Anglocentric revival', in which texts usually considered to be 'late' modernist may be said to participate, posits an inherited cultural legacy 'as the agent required to mediate between totality and particularity, between unity and fragmentation, or between the collective and the individual.'¹⁵⁰ This indeed stands as a description of the textual expressions of the Popular Front – but both the imagining of that inheritance and the nature of the mediation it performs differ. There is therefore a dialogue between the textual formations here: late modernism as Esty construes it and Popular Front fiction as I discuss it below. Like Esty, Marina MacKay has challenged the dominant assumptions about 'late' modernist writing, but argues that the nation was always a central issue in modernist writing, rather than a preoccupation arising in its residual phase. Reading against modernism's own rhetorical rejections of the nation and metropolitan self-construction, MacKay positions the emergence of a definite national focus in the war years not in terms of a rupture, but as an 'end' in the sense of a realisation as well as a conclusion.¹⁵¹ As the war approached, writers had to decide what, if anything, could conceivably be worth going to war about: the pursuit of a part, 'whether ravaged metropolis or timeless rural backwater, to stand for the newly post-imperial whole'.¹⁵² The tension between a national emphasis and an internationalist outlook is often explicit in the texts studied here, and emerges from a different political matrix to the texts MacKay analyses, and yet they too are part of the literary history of Britain's transition from a 'class-bound Empire to a medium-sized welfare state'.¹⁵³ MacKay asserts that this transition is best understood as a transformation rather than, as conventional periodizations of modernism have had it, a process of decline or decay. In light of Esty's argument that 'canonical English writing of the prewar period established key tropes and concepts for the postwar reclamation of England's cultural integrity and authenticity',¹⁵⁴ it is possible to suggest that these tropes were signs of a general cultural transition – rather than themes 'established' by canonical texts – of which Popular Front explorations of the progressive capacities of national culture were one part.

¹⁵⁰ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 2-3.

¹⁵² MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, p. 5.

¹⁵³ MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, p. 3

¹⁵⁴ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 2.

Chapter Outline

In the first part of the thesis, ‘Realism and Modernism’, I outline how writers on the left theorised realism as a remedial strategy to counter the disconnection between the intellectuals and the people within a nexus of influences including British modernism, European anti-fascism and Soviet literary theory (chapter one). Chapters two and three consider how these influences interplay to produce formally experimental texts, focusing on John Sommerfield’s *May Day* (1936) and Arthur Calder-Marshall’s *Pie in the Sky* (1937), respectively. In both cases, the utopian prospect of Communism is held in tension with the practical realities of politics at a time of increasingly disturbing world historical events. In spite of their often divergent political messages, both novels propose a solution to the isolation of the modern subject that inheres in a socialistic vision.

In the second part, English history is to the fore. If, as Neil Redfern argues, Popular Front politics exhibited a ‘tendency to treat fascism as a threat to democracy, rather than as a response to the revolutionary strivings of the working class’,¹⁵⁵ Popular Front cultural productions seek to mediate this apparent opposition by asserting the significance of radical popular struggles for democracy. Chapter four first discusses how British Communists constructed a radical and popular account of English history through key interventions of A.L. Morton, Rickword and Lindsay, while also acknowledging the contradictions and tensions inherent in that project. The chapter pursues these themes through a reading of Jack Lindsay’s trilogy of English historical novels, focusing especially on the way Lindsay posits the loss of the common lands as a foundational experience in English history, an experience that is expressed in different forms across time. I pay particular attention to Lindsay’s handling of the cataclysm of 1848 (which is also a key moment in the conditioning of the novel form, as per Lukács’s account) in his *Men of Forty-Eight*. The chapter argues that the Popular Front historical novel, as represented by the texts chosen, was a space in which to think about moments of possibility in which legality and legitimacy might converge, promising the restitution of that original injustice, while also reflecting on the cultural form of the novel in history.

¹⁵⁵ Neil Redfern, *Class or Nation: Communists, Imperialism and Two World Wars* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 84.

In the third part, ‘Class, Nation, People’, I first consider, in chapter five, the ‘national’ turn in Communist politics, which seemed to be assimilated relatively unproblematically by Rickword and Lindsay, and yet which presented contradictions for novelists who wrote from within class and national communities in subaltern positions. The chapter charts the trajectory of James Barke’s writing in the later thirties from the subaltern modernism of *Major Operation* (1936), in which class precedes nation, and the immediacy of crisis predominates over history, towards the popular, socialist realist epic, *The Land of the Leal* (1939). The ‘national turn’ performed by Barke inheres in the shift in definitions of identity from the civic, class-based identities of *Major Operation* to the national-popular alignments of *The Land of the Leal*. Finally, chapter six discusses the Welsh proletarian novelist Lewis Jones through readings of his *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939), in which a specific national class fraction merges with a concept of ‘the people’ as progressive force in history, generated by the shared experience of active and creative resistance to the violence of external authority. In both *We Live* and *The Land of the Leal*, the Spanish Civil War plays a key role in mediating the relationship between working-class historical experience and the demands of internationalist anti-fascism.

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The criticism of the Cold War period tended to turn on questions of orthodoxy and dissidence, in which the most pressing questions were those addressed to writers’ positions in relation to the ideological lodestar of Stalinism. Here, though, I position authors in relation to a Communism that was still felt to be dynamic and mutable, rather than in relation to the ideological polarities of the Cold War era. Such a way of seeing helps read the thirties not as a historical anomaly, a ‘dark valley’ or ‘devil’s decade’,¹⁵⁶ but rather as part of a longer process of cultural transformation that raises unresolved contradictions between the national and the international, as well as between the working class as subject of history and a broader conception of the people as political agent. As Nick Hubble has argued, the narrative of the ‘short’ twentieth century, 1914-1989, as posited by Eric Hobsbawm, presents problems for those of us wishing to suggest that the cultural

¹⁵⁶ The phrases are titles of studies of the thirties by Piers Brendon (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) and Claud Cockburn, a.k.a. Frank Pitcairn, *Daily Worker* correspondent (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973), respectively.

formations of the interwar years express real possibilities for social transformation that are not sealed in a now-ended epoch of a global war between liberal democracy and Communism.¹⁵⁷ If ‘the people’, as Raymond Williams points out, turned out to be a much more ambiguous and politically malleable category than the thirties left supposed,¹⁵⁸ and even if, from another angle, the optimism of the Popular Front was ultimately misled by the mirage of a progressive bourgeois culture,¹⁵⁹ we may nonetheless discover that cultural productions of the anti-fascist campaigns address themselves to problems that continue to articulate themselves in the era of globalisation. Contradictions between an internationalist orientation and a practical politics rooted in the realities of class and community remain unresolved, though no less urgent. This study examines literary attempts manage these contradictions, revealing a seam of writing that has been under-explored, and which forms part of what Michael Denning has described as ‘the forgotten, repressed history behind the contemporary globalization of the novel.’¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Hubble, *Mass Observation*, p. 17. For the ‘short’ twentieth century, see Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Abacus, 1995).

¹⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, ‘Cinema and Socialism’, in Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 108-9.

¹⁵⁹ As Fredric Jameson claims in ‘Reflections in Conclusion’, in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 203.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Denning, ‘The Novelists’ International’, in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel: Vol. 1, History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), p. 725.

Part One:
Realism and Modernism

Chapter One: Anti-Fascist Aesthetics in International Context

This chapter analyses how British writers positioned themselves in the climate of the mid-thirties in relation to the heritage of modernism, the emerging aesthetic of Soviet-sanctioned socialist realism and the demands of anti-fascism in Europe. This process of positioning and negotiation must be seen as a response to a complex of cultural and political factors that forced the concepts of realism, the real and the realistic, as well as those of formalism and idealism, to take on immediate and palpable practical consequences. In particular, the political situation in Europe demanded an answer as to what constituted a practicable political response to the expansion of fascism. Meanwhile, writers on the left were compelled to confront – if only indirectly – the increasingly troubling situation in the Soviet Union at a time when escalating violence was being justified by Stalin as a necessary practical measure during the transition from revolution to the socialist state that now seemed an increasingly distant hope.¹ I situate British leftist writers within this international dialogue, transmitted especially through the Soviet journal *International Literature*, suggesting that Popular Front aesthetics did not entail an outright rejection of modernism, or a rigid adherence to the Soviet line. Rather, British writers are shown to generate a partial critique of modernism, and their aesthetics articulate themselves in part against modernism, but modernism at a distinct moment in its development, as part of a complex of national factors. Although Nick Hubble has characterised Popular Front aesthetics as Stalinised pastoral, entailing a suppression of difference in the name of solidarity, this chapter argues that the integrative and collective aesthetics explored on the left retained a commitment to social transformation.² While Valentine Cunningham has argued that in Britain socialist realism ‘helped to slow down literary experiment and to smash up modernism especially in the novel, thus pushing the novel back beyond Henry James into the arms of nineteenth-century bourgeois naturalism’,³ I show that, far from smashing up modernism, the limited and partial

¹ Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. 403-7.

² Nick Hubble, ‘The Intermodern Assumption of the Future: William Empson, Charles Madge and Mass-Observation’, in Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), p. 184.

³ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 299.

challenges made to modernism by the left kept open a space in which literary experiment could and did take place, as my subsequent discussions of John Sommerfield and Arthur Calder-Marshall will demonstrate. However, the partiality of the critique was problematic, and the problems intensify over the decade, implicated in and magnified by the increasing contradiction between anti-fascism and the defence of the Soviet Union.

1.1 Realism & Formalism in *International Literature*

The promulgation of socialist realism as an approved aesthetic coincided with the Comintern's shift in 1935 to the Popular Front strategy against fascism and the threat it posed to the Soviet Union, and coincided more generally, therefore, with the world Communist movement's process of adjustment to the failures of revolutions in Europe and the subsequent splitting of its energies into the defence of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the halting of fascism's advances in Europe on the other. In the Soviet Union, cultural organisation and policy was overhauled from the early 1930s as part of the entrenchment and centralisation of power; explicitly revolutionary and avant-gardist cultural groups such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) were dissolved and replaced with broader, party-oriented organisations.⁴ A 1932 decree recommended the '[i]ntegration of all writers who support the platform of the Soviet government and who aspire to participate in Socialist construction in a single union of Soviet writers with a Communist faction therein.'⁵ The reconfigured cultural policy this entailed has been described by Keith Williams as representing a shift of demand from 'agitation to integration propaganda'.⁶ Shortly before the unveiling of the Popular Front line at the Seventh Congress, Georgi Dimitrov had clearly linked popular, realist aesthetics with both anti-fascist politics and socialist construction in a speech to the Soviet Writers' Association, the text of which was reproduced in left-wing periodicals in Europe including

⁴ Katerina Clark, et al., *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953* (New Haven: Yale UP), pp. 141-2.

⁵ Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, 'Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations', in Charles Harrison & Paul J. Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 400.

⁶ Keith Williams, 'Joyce's "Chinese Alphabet": *Ulysses* and the Proletarians', in Paul Hyland, ed., *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1991), p. 175, emphasis in original.

Left Review and *International Literature*.⁷ Dimitrov relates his experiences at the Leipzig trial, and conveys his understanding that his defence had to provide a guiding example of anti-fascist resistance, to show that ‘the struggle against Fascism was not only necessary but possible.’⁸ He concludes by demanding that ‘[y]our books must radicalize the millions of unpolitical or Social-Democratic workers, popularize socialist construction and the great achievements of the Soviet Union.’⁹ But questions would continually arise over the aesthetic definition of socialist realism and its relationships with both European and Soviet politics.

A crucial vector for theorisation of socialist realism and its transmission to intellectuals beyond the Soviet Union was *International Literature*, the journal of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, a Soviet body established to coordinate revolutionary literary work beyond the Soviet Union, and which was published in Russian, English, French, German and Spanish editions from 1932 to 1945.¹⁰ The purpose of the journal was two-fold: in the first instance it published translations of Soviet literature and literary criticism, and in the second it published translated material from European Communist journals including *Die Linkskurve* and *Das Wort* as well as contributions from non-Soviet Communists. This remit encompassed the work of major European intellectuals including Georg Lukács and Louis Aragon, American contributors such as Jack Conroy and Granville Hicks, and British contributors including John Strachey, Jack Lindsay and Sylvia Townsend Warner. It can be considered the key resource for British writers wishing to engage with Russian and European literary theory during this period. Although Philip Bounds has assumed that the journal was little read among British Marxists,¹¹ in fact there

⁷ ‘Georgi Dimitrov to Writers’, *Left Review*, I: 9 (June 1935), pp. 343-346; ‘Revolutionary Literature in the Struggle Against Fascism’, *International Literature*, 1935:4, pp. 53-6. The speech was also summarised in the *Daily Worker*: ‘Literature Against Fascism: Dimitrov Talks to Writers’, 17 July, 1935, p. 4. Quotations that follow are taken from the *Left Review* version.

⁸ ‘Georgi Dimitrov to Writers’, p. 343.

⁹ ‘Georgi Dimitrov to Writers’, p. 346.

¹⁰ Christina Lodder, ‘From Futurist Iconoclasm to Socialist Construction: *Futuristy*. *Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov* (1914); *Lef: Levnyi front iskusstva* (1923-5); *Novyi Lef* (1927-8); and *Internatsional'naya literatura* (1933-45)’, in Peter Brooker et al., eds., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume III, Europe 1880-1940 Part I* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 1316. This chapter (pp. 1299-1318) gives a useful longer history of *International Literature* in its Russian edition, but does not discuss its international editions (published in English, German and Spanish and featuring different content). A study of these has yet to be made.

¹¹ Philip Bounds, *British Communism & the Politics of Literature 1928-1939* (Pontypridd: Merlin, 2012), p. 268 fn. 54.

is clear evidence that British writers not only read but contributed to it.¹² It was regularly advertised, reviewed and praised in the *Daily Worker*.¹³

The journal provided a means for transmitting previously unpublished texts by Marx and Engels that were being discovered by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow. These texts were used to lend theoretical support – and Marxist legitimacy – to the project of socialist realism (and, more generally, to provide a basis for a Moscow-approved brand of Marxist literary criticism). One of the most significant publications was Engels' 1888 letter to Margaret Harkness which appeared in 1933. In this letter, later quoted by British Marxist critic Ralph Fox,¹⁴ Engels comments that '[r]ealism, to my mind, implies, beside truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of the principle that the emancipation of the working class ought to be the cause of the working class itself.'¹⁵ James F. Murphy interprets the theory of realism proposed by the letter as one in which 'socialist bias is not expressed in rhetorical pathos or idealized characters, but rather in the undistorted reflection of the actual trends of social and historical development.'¹⁶ Certainly, the intention was to encourage non-Party writers to align themselves with the emerging aesthetic. The changes that take place in the journal between 1933 and 1936 indicate the growing implication of that version of realism in an increasingly violent and repressive interpretation of the 'actual trends' of development. In the journal's first issue, the literary historian Valerii Kirpotin attempted to formulate a political-aesthetic alignment between Trotskyism, idealism and formalism: 'Trotsky spells revolution with a capital R because Trotsky's "Revolution" is a majestic yet abstract entity that is divorced from the conflicting intricacies of the class struggle and the multiform stages of transition.'¹⁷ But elsewhere in the journal during the period of 1933-4, critics attempted to work against this

¹² The most striking example is the discussion of Walter Scott between Lukács and the British Communists Sylvia Townsend Warner and T.A. Jackson: 'Point from Letters', *International Literature* 1938:9, pp. 100-101; this exchange is discussed in chapter five, below.

¹³ E.g., By 'ALM' (A.L. Morton), 'Flesh and Bone of Revolution', *Daily Worker*, 1 August, 1934, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ralph Fox, *The Novel and The People*, (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), pp. 118-9. John Strachey described the letter as 'well-known' in his speech at the Paris Writers' Congress in August 1935 ('Paris Congress Speeches', *Left Review*, I: 11 (August 1935), p. 472, suggesting that it was widely circulated on the European left at the time of publication.

¹⁵ Friedrich Engels, 'Letters and Documents: Marx and Engels on Balzac', *International Literature*, 1933:3, p. 113.

¹⁶ James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature* (Champaign, IL: Illinois UP, 1991), p. 90.

¹⁷ Valerii Kirpotin, 'Trotsky on Literature', *International Literature*, 1932: 1, p. 82.

simplistic alignment, and to acknowledge the revolutionary potential of formal experiment. In 1933 a critical symposium on the work of John Dos Passos was held and the proceedings published in the journal, in which A. Leites compared Dos Passos positively to Joyce, whom he regarded as ‘really insubstantial’.¹⁸ V. Vishnevsky warned against the excesses of anti-formalism: ‘We shouldn’t just spit at form. There is no art without form.’¹⁹ In 1934, Mikhail Bleiman made a further attack on the obsession with form, and yet, far from indicating a turn away from dogmatic theoretical attitudes, his piece implicitly indicates a shift to the more abstract criteria of evaluation. In a discussion of Jules Romains and John Dos Passos, Bleiman argued that the outright rejection of experiment in favour of the stability of the nineteenth-century novel was itself a formalist manoeuvre that leads to critical paralysis: ‘Every attempt to deviate from this form is a symptom of the disease, is a phenomenon of disintegration of consciousness.’²⁰ Bleiman attempts to shift the critical emphasis from the form of the text to the writer’s politics; this becomes a fairly arbitrary ground on which to attack Romains: ‘the genuineness of reality in a book is in the final accounting determined not by the form of reproduction but by the profundity of conception, which is determined entirely by the philosophy of the artist.’²¹

By 1936, the tone of *International Literature* had become altogether more prescriptive in the climate of the escalating terror against Stalin’s political enemies. In December 1936, the Soviet Union adopted a new constitution, codifying bureaucratic organisation.²² This event was routinely assumed – or at least hoped – by Communists beyond the Soviet Union to announce a new, democratic and legalistic phase in Soviet politics, a sign of the stabilisation marking the end of the violent revolutionary period, and signalling a new step on the road to a fully realised Communist state.²³ The onset of a new phase is clearly signalled in *International Literature*. Where earlier issues expressed –

¹⁸ A. Leites, ‘Soviet Literature and John Dos Passos’, *International Literature* 1933:4-5, p. 105.

¹⁹ V. Vishnevsky, ‘Soviet Literature and John Dos Passos’, *International Literature*, 1933:4-5, p. 106.

²⁰ Mikhail Bleiman, ‘Jules Romains and John Dos Passos’, *International Literature*, 1934:4, p. 98.

²¹ Bleiman, ‘Jules Romains and John Dos Passos’, p. 102.

²² Piers Brendon describes the 1936 constitution as ‘a travesty of the socialist Magna Carta it purported to be’ (*The Dark Valley*, p. 402). Further discussions of British intellectuals’ attitudes to the document are pursued in chapter three. For details of the onset and escalation of the purges in 1936-7, see Brendon, *The Dark Valley*, pp. 403-413.

²³ See, for example, Christopher Caudwell’s endorsement of the constitution in these terms: *Illusion and Reality* (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1946), p. 276. Chapter 10 of Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* is devoted to arguing that the constitution codified counter-revolution and dismantled working-class political power (1937; London: Dover, 2004).

however disingenuously – a considerable degree of sympathy and understanding towards the situation of writers in the West, in the wake of the Zinoviev trial in August of 1936 the journal made clear to international revolutionary writers that they were expected to consider themselves under the same obligations as Soviet authors. This change in tone began in early 1935, shortly after the murder of Sergey Kirov and coinciding with the first trial of Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, with the publication of a menacing editorial entitled ‘No Mercy to Terrorists and Traitors: A Statement to All Writers’ calling ‘all foremost writers of the world, all the best minds of progressive humanity’ to ‘revolutionary vigilance with respect to the false friends of the socialist revolution who are in reality its fiercest enemies’.²⁴ Beginning in the summer of 1936, shortly before the first show trial at which Zinoviev, Kamenev and fourteen other old Bolsheviks were sentenced to death, *International Literature* ran an extensive feature on formalism, targeted especially at European modernists. In a splenetic attack on James Joyce, Yuri Olesha wrote that ‘In order to understand what is formalism and what is naturalism, and why they are hostile to us, I will give an example from Joyce. He has written, “Cheese is the corpse of milk.” You see, comrades, how terrible that is. The writer of the West has seen death in milk.’ It was ‘absolutely true. But we do not want that kind of truth.’²⁵ Joyce was attacked on the grounds of being ‘formalist’, as ‘formalism’ came to be used as a generalized term of abuse and denunciation during the many persecutions of writers on the grounds of ‘literary deviation’, and the term lost any critical meaning as the purges intensified.²⁶ This discussion of formalism also featured in translation the infamous *Pravda* denunciation of Dmitri Shostakovich, ‘Chaos Instead of Music’,²⁷ attacking the lack of ‘popularity’ in Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and its experimental techniques as signs of degeneracy, ‘a silly game that may end very badly.’²⁸

²⁴ Sergei Dinamov, ‘No Mercy to Terrorists and Traitors: A Statement to All Writers’ [Editorial], *International Literature*, 1935:1, p. 89.

²⁵ Yuri Olesha, ‘About Formalism’, *International Literature*, 1936:6, pp. 92-3.

²⁶ The extent of the violence of against writers, composers, playwrights and artists during the anti-formalist campaign of 1935-7 is detailed in Clark, *Soviet Culture and Power*, pp. 229-248.

²⁷ Unsigned, ‘Chaos Instead of Music’, *International Literature*, 1936:6, pp. 77-79. In a sign of how British Communists were out of step these developments, *Lady Macbeth* was praised in the *Left Review*: James Findlay Henderson, ‘Lady Macbeth of Mzensk’, *Left Review* II:6 (March 1936), pp. 272-3, and also in a more muted and somewhat perplexed way, in the *Daily Worker*: Ben Short, ‘Lady Macbeth of Mzensk’, *Daily Worker*, 20 March, 1936, p. 4.

²⁸ ‘Chaos Instead of Music’, p. 78.

1.2 The Soviet Writers' Congress

The first Soviet Writers' Congress was held in the midst of the flux outlined, as socialist realism became institutionalised, and the main speeches, published in English in 1935, were a key source for British writers on the left. The debates turned principally on the relationship between socialist realism and modernism. Keith Williams has described the Soviet Writers' Congress as 'effectively an artistic show-trial, branding avant-gardism as "objectively reactionary", and expounding an aesthetic that amounted to 'realism in theory but totalitarian idealism in practice',²⁹ and in so doing draws attention to the political alignment of idealism with dictatorship. These statements are however ambiguous. Common to all is the notion that the Soviet Union had entered a new phase and that, relatedly, a new world historical situation had come into being. All the contributions address themselves, explicitly or by implication, to a question of how writers should respond and adapt themselves to changed conditions. On the one hand, socialist realism appears to be an extension of the work of nineteenth-century realist writers, eulogised by Maxim Gorky as 'those great writers who created critical realism and revolutionary romanticism.'³⁰ These authors, Gorky argued, were attuned to the revolutionary situation of their class. As the revolutionary phase passed, so the bourgeoisie's capacity for invention attenuated.³¹ The greatness of nineteenth-century realism is felt to inhere in its grasp of society as a totality. As Régine Robin indicates, however, there is another way that socialist realism is emphasised which, for the speakers, was not viewed as contradictory, and yet which does not follow necessarily from the first set. That aspect is socialist realism as a utopian, optimistic and didactic venture, a practice always informed by a sense of the inevitability of socialist society and which militated for its creation.³² The Party functionary Andrei Zhdanov, whose name was to become synonymous with intellectual repression, argued that Soviet literature was

²⁹ Keith Williams, 'Joyce's "Chinese Alphabet"', pp. 175-6.

³⁰ Maxim Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', in A.A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 41

³¹ Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', p. 43.

³² Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), p. 59.

optimistic, but not optimistic in accordance with any “inward,” animal instinct. It is optimistic in essence, because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class. Our Soviet literature is strong by virtue of the fact that it is serving a new cause - the cause of socialist construction.³³

He calls for literature and criticism in the service of ‘the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.’³⁴ Socialist realism can appear at once prescriptive and flexible in the extreme: on the one hand, Nikolai Bukharin’s endorsement of *Faust* as expressing a socialist realist aesthetic demonstrates a very broad and thoroughly pragmatic definition.³⁵ On the other hand, Karl Radek’s notoriously splenetic attack on James Joyce demonstrates a much more censorious and prescriptive aspect.³⁶ The emphasis on perspective and totality could suggest a realism of the type theorised by Georg Lukács, in which realism inheres in the representation of ‘tendencies of development’,³⁷ but it could also solidify into a demand for representations of an unrealised socialist future. Indeed, both aspects could seemingly co-exist, as they did in Maxim Gorky’s much-cited address. Gorky suggested realism as a totalising perspective based in a working-class standpoint, inheriting a synoptic and dynamic vision of society from a bourgeois culture that could no longer generate it: ‘The bourgeois will never understand the meaning of the process of cultural development as the need for the development of the whole mass of humanity.’³⁸ But, equally, Gorky suggested a version of socialist realism as a kind of augmentation of reality. In a passage that has been read as a definition of socialist realism,³⁹ Gorky argued that,

Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery – that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add – completing the idea, by the logic of

³³ A.A. Zhdanov, ‘Soviet Literature - The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature’, in A.A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature*, p. 20.

³⁴ Zhdanov, ‘Soviet Literature’, p. 21.

³⁵ Nikolai Bukharin, ‘Poetry, Poetics and The Problems of Poetry in the USSR’, in A.A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature*, p. 256.

³⁶ Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art’, in Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature*, pp. 152-3.

³⁷ Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics & Politics* (1980; London: Verso, 2007), p. 48.

³⁸ Gorky, ‘Soviet Literature’, p. 33. Notable British Marxist citations of Gorky’s speech include Montagu Slater, ‘The Turning Point’, *Left Review*, II:2, (October 1935), pp. 15-16; and Charles Madge, ‘Writers under Two Flags’, *Left Review*, II:5 (February 1936), pp. 228-230. Both these articles are discussed later in this chapter.

³⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958; London: Hogarth Press, 1987), p. 279.

hypothesis – the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a positive way.⁴⁰

Such an augmentation of reality, which takes not merely the objective fact but also the subjectively-determined possibilities of the moment, suggests the familiar propagandist notion of socialist realism. Raymond Williams took this statement as marking a departure from the version of realism as set out by Engels (and which was discussed in *International Literature*) as ‘typical characters in typical circumstances’; while the apprehension of emergent social forces might be compatible with Marxism, Williams found in British writers – singling out Christopher Caudwell – a potentially un-materialist tendency to understand ‘the desired, the possible’ in terms of the ‘subjective energy’ of the individual’.⁴¹ The question is unresolved, in so far as both possibilities are clearly present in Gorky’s speech.

1.3 Realism & Anti-Fascism in Europe

The speeches of the Soviet Writers’ Congress serve the purpose of lauding Soviet writers, articulated against recurring assertions of Western decadence and creative degeneration. The most extensive critique of European modernism came from Karl Radek, whose polemical attack on modernism as the literary form of fascism prefigured the ferocious anti-formalism campaigns that increased apace from 1935. Radek attacked Joyce on the grounds of presenting a world without heroism, in which there are ‘no big events, no big people, no big ideas’, leading to monstrous distortions of perspective: ‘A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope - such is Joyce’s work’⁴² As fascism in Europe advanced, a more wide-ranging discussion of the relationship between fascism, modernism and Western capitalism was necessary, and the Popular Front strategy presented one way of understanding the relationship. As the dominating tone became anti-formalist, Lukács’s essays on realism appeared in the journal as contributions to the debate, often in some tension or apparent contradiction with the

⁴⁰ Gorky, ‘Soviet Literature’, p. 44.

⁴¹ Williams, *Culture & Society*, p. 279.

⁴² Karl Radek, ‘James Joyce or Socialist Realism?’, *Problems in Soviet Literature*, in A.A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature*, p. 153.

direction of travel of Soviet policy. The essay on expressionism that triggered the controversy in *Das Wort* in 1937 was first published in *International Literature* in 1934.⁴³ In 'Narration vs. Description', especially, Lukács's criticism of Soviet writers is important as an acknowledgement that socialist realism had yet to be accomplished.⁴⁴

This Eurocentric current was not, of course, separable from the Soviet aesthetic debates; *International Literature*, although after 1935 increasingly dominated by the Soviet perspective, did feature work by European writers, including several of Lukács's key essays on realism. In particular, the important essay 'The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters', published in both *Das Wort* and *International Literature* shortly after the First Moscow Trial, appears to undermine this emphasis on the writer's own world-view (*Weltanschauung*) by deflecting attention almost entirely onto the mechanics of characterisation. Lukács's argues that what secures creativity in portrayal is the way characters are individualised: their deepest and most vital characteristics. This makes the thoughts, attitudes and arguments each character makes 'appear as the profound characteristic property of each and every one of them.'⁴⁵

In all great writing it is indispensable that its characters be depicted in all-sided interdependence with each other, with their social existence, and with the great problems of this existence. The more deeply these relations are grasped, the more diversely these interconnections are developed, the greater the writing becomes, for the closer it comes to the actual richness of life, to the "cunning" of the real process of development, of which Lenin so often speaks.⁴⁶

Although Lukács argues that the processes of characterisation, the demonstration by characters of their intellectual physiognomy, do in fact correspond to actual processes of cognition, the essay is silent on the question of the relationship between the writer's ideological position and his characterisation. In a move that further diffuses the critical focus and deflects scrutiny from the writer, Lukács writes of a 'culture' of realism: 'A culture that is based upon a concrete sensibility for what is great in life, for the portrayal of

⁴³ Reprinted in *Essays on Realism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1983, pp. 76-113.

⁴⁴ Georg Lukács, 'Narration vs. Description', *International Literature*, 1937:6, pp. 96-7. This section was omitted from Arthur Kahn's translation (as 'Narrate or Describe?', pp. 110-148) in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1970), somewhat surprisingly given Lukács's defensive preface in which he seeks to position the essays as against the dominant tendency of the time (p. 7).

⁴⁵ Georg Lukács, 'The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters', *International Literature*, 1936:8, p. 56.

⁴⁶ Lukács, 'The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters', p. 56.

human greatness as a reality. The classic writers of realism possessed this culture.’⁴⁷ He contrasts ‘late bourgeois culture’ with ‘socialist culture’ in a way that suggests an attempt to forestall criticism based on individual authors’ orthodox or unorthodox position.

What is reflected here is a differentiated analysis of culture that refused to reduce texts wholly to authorial politics – the position was derived from Engels, but it was already being overrun by the momentum of Stalinism. Such a differentiation was crucial for the coherence of the Popular Front strategy; it side-lined the Radek-type anathematisation of bourgeois culture as decadent, as the Comintern’s analysis of fascism isolated it from capitalism as a whole. It gave political legitimacy to Lukács’s broadly progressive, ‘culturally-humanist’ view of *European* history, present from his earlier writings, that viewed Marx and Hegel in a tradition with Goethe and Schiller, a tradition opposed to mysticism and irrationalism, and therefore fascism.⁴⁸ The debates over realism and Expression that took place in the German exile journal *Das Wort* in 1937 and 1938 are a key location of a Eurocentric debate on literature and anti-fascism. A polemical exchange was held in the journal in 1937 and 1938 between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács (Brecht’s contribution was not published at the time⁴⁹), in which Lukács resumed his argument that naturalism and surrealism appeared as expressions of the antinomies of bourgeois thought that only realism had the capacity to mediate. In ‘Realism in the Balance’, Lukács also advanced the important argument that realism had not been eclipsed by modernism at all, but rather co-existed with it; the embattled co-existence of progressive and reactionary tendencies marked culture as a field of struggle, of competing traditions.⁵⁰ Although denouncing modernism, Lukács’s critique is predicated on the assumption of the continued viability of European, bourgeois culture, and thereby departs from Radek’s polemic, positioning realism as an agent in the struggle for ‘the new type of revolutionary democracy that is represented by the Popular Front,’ and in the process casting democracy not as the apparatus of bourgeois power but as the outcome of popular struggles.⁵¹ On this view, realism is a mediation between essence and appearance; modernism, far from

⁴⁷ Lukács, ‘The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters’, p. 82.

⁴⁸ Georg Lichtheim, *Lukács* (London: Fontana, 1970), pp. 85-6.

⁴⁹ David Midgley, ‘Communism and the Avant-Garde: The Case of the Georg Lukács’, in Edward Timms & Peter Collier eds., *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe* (Manchester: MUP, 1988), p. 57.

⁵⁰ Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, p. 29.

⁵¹ Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, p. 57.

signifying a real condition of fragmentation, merely reproduced the surface effects of a totality ever more extensive and tightly knit.

Lukács's most salient critic on this matter was Bertolt Brecht; Brecht had, before the *Das Wort* debate, expressed his refusal to accept that fascism was anything other than 'a historic phase of capitalism': 'Fascism can be combated as capitalism alone, as the nakedest, most shameless, most oppressive, and most treacherous form of capitalism'.⁵² The terms on which Brecht attacked Lukács were the same as those Lukács deployed against the Expressionists: formalism, since Lukács demanded the resumption of a nineteenth-century aesthetic in changed historical conditions, and idealism, in which Lukács appeared withdrawn and detached from reality.⁵³ Lukács, Brecht argued, was complacent and imprecise in his notion of 'the people'; realism must be combative and not merely progressive if it was to serve in the fight against dehumanisation. That the terms of the debate – the question of a realistic response to contemporary threats – were shared among the participants is crucial, and, indeed, echoed as we shall see in the British debates.

These fault-lines were never far from the surface in the thirties, either in theory or in practice: Brecht's modernist rejection of some trans-historical notion of 'progress' and Lukács's endorsement of the cultural past as anti-fascist resource suggested fundamentally incompatible perspectives on history. Intellectual mobilisation in the cause of anti-fascism would be continually vexed by them. The Congresses of the International Association of Writers in Defence of Culture held in Paris 1935 and in Spain in 1937 are a useful index of what the Eurocentric anti-fascism cultural movement looked like, and also of the contradictions that always attended it. The first of these took place before the Seventh Congress – as suggested in the introduction, the Comintern's shift to a Popular Front codified developments already taking place. Paris had been the scene of a failed Fascist coup, followed by days of rioting the previous year; these events provoked one of the earliest attempts by intellectuals to intervene in an organised manner: an appeal for unity was issued, signed by writers including André Malraux and the Surrealists André Breton

⁵² Brecht, 'Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties' (1935), in *Galileo* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 136.

⁵³ Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukács', in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (1980; London: Verso, 2007), pp. 68-9.

and Paul Éluard.⁵⁴ The Paris Congress brought together two hundred writers from fifteen countries, and featured figures as diverse as E.M. Forster, who chaired the British delegation, André Gide and Louis Aragon.⁵⁵ Aragon announced his conversion from Surrealism to realism and Communism: ‘I proclaim the return to reality in the name of this reality which has arisen over a sixth of globe, in the name of the man who was the first to foresee it’.⁵⁶ Brecht, as noted above, rejected the alliances and compromises of the Popular Front and was repelled by the Congress’s refusal to directly confront capitalism; a few days later he wrote to George Grosz, ‘We have just rescued culture. It took 4 (four) days, and then we decided that we would sooner sacrifice all else than let culture perish. If necessary, we’ll sacrifice ten to twenty million people.’⁵⁷ The second Congress, held two years later in Spain in the heat of the civil war, included Stephen Spender, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Edgell Rickword among the British delegation and was marked by a climate in which anti-fascism and Soviet-oriented Communism were in increasingly obvious contradiction. The manifesto issued by the congress made no mention of the Soviet Union, staking anti-fascism firmly on the defence of European culture;⁵⁸ but the event itself was fraught with tensions: the Soviet delegation sought to use the opportunity to attack André Gide and other intellectuals taking a stand against the show trials.⁵⁹ The strategy of the Popular Front, originating in the experience of the French workers’ struggle against fascism before its endorsement by the Comintern, was increasingly incompatible with the security demands of the Soviet Union. Technical and aesthetic questions ceded to statements of defiance against fascism conceived as menacing the existence of culture: the role of writers, wrote Edgell Rickword in his report on the Spanish Congress, was to ‘create books to replace those destroyed by Fascism.’⁶⁰ While exemplifying an

⁵⁴ Enzo Traverso, ‘Intellectuals and Anti-Fascism: For a Critical Historization’, *New Politics*, Vol.IX-4, No. 36 (Winter 2004), online edition. See also Angela Kershaw, *Forgotten Engagements: Women, Literature and the Left in 1930s France* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 56-58.

⁵⁵ Margot Heinemann, ‘Left Review, New Writing and the Broad Alliance against Fascism’, in Edward Timms and Peter Collier, eds., *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe* (Manchester: MUP, 1988), pp. 115-117.

⁵⁶ Louis Aragon, ‘The Return to Reality’, *International Literature*, 1936:1, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Cited in Tom Kuhn et al., eds., *Brecht on Art and Politics*, (London: Methuen, 2003), p. 162.

⁵⁸ International Association of Writers in Defence of Culture, ‘Manifesto’, *Left Review*, III: 7 (August 1937), p. 445.

⁵⁹ Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword: A Poet At War* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 189-194.

⁶⁰ Edgell Rickword, ‘In Defence of Culture’, *Left Review* III: 7 (August 1937), p. 383. Charles Hobday notes that Rickword focuses on the Congress speeches by writers opposing the Soviet delegation’s attempts to enforce ideological control: *Edgell Rickword*, p. 193.

unsectarian, Popular Front stance, such a position always threatened to elide European culture, and especially literary culture and the prestige arts, with human culture as a whole and to endorse an unexplored privileging of 'great' literary works. The term 'culture' will remain a central location of tension throughout this study; often productive, but sometimes confining.

1.4 British Developments

There are, therefore, several layers to the relationship between realism, Communism, and Popular Front anti-fascism that must be borne in mind: a Soviet account of realism as the only alternative to formalism and political 'deviation'; a more Eurocentric version articulated by Lukács as a mode in which fascism could be resisted and which ultimately paved the way for revolutionary democracy; and Brecht's class-centred, avant-garde version which could throw into critical relief the relationship between fascism and European conceptions of culture and progress. These currents and possibilities all exist within the British Popular Front formation, sometimes through direct interaction with the international context, but more often they appear refracted by intuitive and improvisational responses to political conditions at the national level. The Soviet debates were transmitted in partial form in Britain through the periodicals *International Literature* and *Left Review*, which published its first issue in October 1934. As Peter Marks has shown, other left-leaning journals showed relatively little interest in these developing debates.⁶¹ The Communist Party of Great Britain's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, barely covered the Writers' Congress at all,⁶² nor was there any significant development of cultural policy within the CPGB during this time.⁶³ As a result, writers and critics wishing to engage with politicised aesthetics did so without a clear guiding line. The British Section of the Writers' International was established in 1934. Although a British delegation - Bob Ellis

⁶¹ Peter Marks, 'Illusion and Reality: The Spectre of Socialist Realism in Thirties Literature', in Keith Williams & Stephen Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism & After* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), pp. 23-24.

⁶² However the American *Daily Worker*, organ of the CPUSA, did cover the conference in some depth; see for example Vern Smith, 'Soviet Authors in 'Daily' Interview Tell What Writers' Congress Achieved.' *Daily Worker* (USA), 24 September, 1934, p. 5. The CPUSA and its press were markedly more engaged with cultural issues than their British equivalents.

⁶³ See Andy Croft, 'Authors Take Sides', in Geoff Andrews et al., eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto, 1995), pp. 86-7.

and Harold Heslop – attended the Second International Conference of Revolutionary and Proletarian Writers in Kharkov, Ukraine, in 1930, and had pledged to establish a British Section, it took three years to do it.⁶⁴ The establishment of revolutionary cultural organisations therefore lagged behind that of the USA, for example, where the *New Masses*, published since 1926, and the John Reed Clubs, established in 1929, provided a framework for the development of a radical literary culture.⁶⁵ The *Daily Worker* commented in 1934, ‘The revolutionary movement in Britain has always been weak on the literary side: compared with Germany or America, British revolutionary – let alone proletarian – literature can hardly be said to have existed at all.’⁶⁶ *Left Review* was met with suspicion and at times hostility in the *Daily Worker*, which commented in 1935 that, ‘We have nothing to say against people publishing experimental exercise books if they wish, but to apply the term ‘Left’ is to indicate position direction and purpose. These the latest issue of the ‘Review’ hardly exhibits.’⁶⁷ In March 1935, after the Writers’ Congress had announced an integral role for literature in political struggle, the paper offered the apparently rather grudging comment that, ‘Novels are an excellent means of introducing propaganda. In discussions round the dinner-hour a tale of working-class life, tactfully sold or lent, can start the flame’.⁶⁸

British writers on the left faced several national peculiarities in attempting to formulate a nationally-located Popular Front aesthetics. These included the absence of a tradition of proletarian fiction, and the specific forms and course of development that modernist writing took in Britain which together condition a certain aesthetic, but there were also important national particularities to the economic and political crisis of the interwar years. Where in the USA, for example, the Depression was met by the New Deal, a ruthlessly modernising programme of capitalism, Britain, as Piers Brendon notes, ‘plumped for a conservative consensus’.⁶⁹ Consumerism was stimulated and middle-class

⁶⁴ ‘Reports on the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers’, *Literature of the World Revolution*, Special Number, 1931 (no month), p. 9 (delegate list); pp. 226-7 (Heslop’s contribution). This journal was retitled *International Literature* later in the year, reflecting changes in literary organisation referred to above.

⁶⁵ *New Masses* is archived online at <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewMasses>.

⁶⁶ Unsigned, ‘Wednesday Book Feature’, *Daily Worker*, 19 September, 1934, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Unsigned editorial response to ‘Left Review Defended’ by FM Roy, *Daily Worker*, 9 January, 1935, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Unsigned, ‘The Novel and the Struggle’, *Daily Worker*, 13 March, 1935, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 164.

incomes rose, but the limited reach of the remedies proposed by the National Government elected on a 'doctor's mandate' in 1931 made little impact on the devastating scale of mass unemployment.⁷⁰ Although after 1918, piecemeal and belated efforts were made at standardising and stimulating technological and scientific advances, Britain continued to lag behind the USA and Germany as a competitive economy,⁷¹ leading to what Francis Mulhern describes as a 'combination of unplanned growth and unchecked decline'.⁷² The effect of such a combination of capitalist expansion without modernisation could support a thesis of capitalism entering a terminal crisis; localised effects of Britain's unevenly developed modernity could be taken as signs of the generally deleterious effects of capitalism on culture and human development. In turn, this move could ground a call for alliance for cultural and intellectual workers, as it does throughout the Popular Front essay collection, *The Mind in Chains*.⁷³ The New Deal stimulated a radical, popular modernism in the USA, so that, as Michael Denning argues, John Dos Passos's formally radical *U.S.A.* trilogy 'served as a charter for the Popular Front; its starting point, its founding mythology.'⁷⁴ British writers' responses to American leftist writers are, however, surprisingly ungenerous; reviewing the proceedings of the American Writers' Congress in 1935, the poet and Mass-Observation founder Charles Madge used the opportunity to assert that, though American capitalism might be advanced, it was nonetheless the Soviet Union, 'a civilization which is modern in a sense in which the rest of the world has ceased to be modern,' whose modernity was in the ascendant.⁷⁵ In a striking display of insecurity, Madge dismissed American writing as plagued by 'backwardness', not merely because the centre of modernity had shifted to the Soviet Union, but also because American writers lacked European cultural traditions, and were therefore accused of putting on 'the airs of a literature which belongs to another world.'⁷⁶ This dual attempt to defend both the Soviet Union and the privileged status of European culture reflects a particular set of anxieties

⁷⁰ Brendon, *The Dark Valley*, pp. 164-5.

⁷¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Abacus, 1995), pp. 151-154.

⁷² Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 6.

⁷³ *The Mind in Chains*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Frederick Muller, 1937). See especially Rex Warner's essay, 'Education', pp. 19-37.

⁷⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London & NY: Verso, 1997), p. 167.

⁷⁵ Charles Madge, 'America's Lead', *Left Review* II: 8 (May 1936), p. 405.

⁷⁶ Madge, 'America's Lead', p. 407.

about modernity, while also suggesting the relatively narrow room for manoeuvre British Marxists had.

We may trace this characteristic strain in British Popular Front thinking to the founding statement of the British Section of the Writers' International and to the first issue of its journal, *Left Review*. The Statement declared that 'There is a crisis of ideas in the capitalist world to-day not less considerable than the crisis in economics.'⁷⁷ That crisis was no less than 'the collapse of a culture, accompanying the collapse of an economic system', and was symptomatized by the 'decadence of the past twenty years of English literature'.⁷⁸ Foreshadowing Lukács's later argument in 'Realism in the Balance', the statement declared that 'Journalism, literature, the theatre, are developing in technique while they are narrowing in content'; the experiments in relativity and perspectivism characterising literature since 1914 were, on this view, nothing other than a fetishization of form precipitant on a withering away of social content.⁷⁹ In proposing a direct connection between the fate of a world system and that of a national literature, the Statement seemed to suggest that it was the system that must be the site of intervention. The Statement addressed writers under three unclearly separated categories, the first being those who saw fascism as 'the terrorist dictatorship of dying capitalism and a menace to all the best achievements in human culture, and consider that the best in the civilization of the past can only be developed by joining in the struggle of the working class for a new socialist society.'⁸⁰ There are three parts to this claim, which as a whole reflects an equivocation between the sectional analysis of fascism explicitly announced by Dimitrov the following year, and the equation of capitalism with fascism in the manner of the Third Period. But in its construction of a polemical antinomy between the 'best achievements in human culture' and the 'terrorist dictatorship' of fascism, this perspective risked closing off a dialectical account of history, blocking off that scepticism towards the achievements of human culture encapsulated in Walter Benjamin's apprehension that '[t]here is no document of

⁷⁷ Writers' International (British Section), 'The Statement', *Left Review* I:1 (October 1934), p.38.

⁷⁸ Writers' International, 'The Statement', p. 38.

⁷⁹ Cf. Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', p. 41: 'a growing paucity of content, extended to a point where absence of content or hostility towards it is upheld on principle.' Perhaps the most memorable dissenting contribution, however, is that of Lewis Grassic Gibbon who, while quick to describe himself as 'a revolutionary writer', announced that it was nothing but 'bolshevik blah' to 'say that modern literature is narrowing in "content"'. 'Controversy', *Left Review*, I: 5 (February 1935), pp. 178-9.

⁸⁰ Writers' International, 'The Statement', p. 38.

civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.⁸¹ To isolate fascism as a sudden, unprecedented menace to 'human achievement' is to veil the violence against and amid which those achievements have always been won. Here this threat is distanced, but not contained, by the assertion that such preservation is bound up with class struggle, the priority that would shortly be displaced by the Popular Front turn. The second and third groups to whom the Statement addressed itself were those working-class writers seeking to 'express in their work, more effectively than in the past, the struggle of their class', and those writers seeking to defend the Soviet Union, the country where 'the foundations of Socialism have already been laid', as well as nations enduring imperial oppression.⁸² It is unclear – and indeed the journal never clarified – whether these were taken to be three different groups, or whether members of the Section were expected to commit to all three; in particular, as Peter Marks points out, taken together the propositions equivocate over a defence of existing culture and a commitment to the transformation of that culture.⁸³ Certainly, the second of these failed to become a major element of the journal. Although competitions to encourage working-class writing, overseen by Amabel Williams-Ellis, ran during the journal's first year,⁸⁴ a special issue on working-class writing in 1936 never appeared,⁸⁵ and the *Review* struggled to develop productive relationships with working-class writers.⁸⁶

The text of the 'Statement' is therefore notable for its ambiguous account of modernity as well as for the fragility of the connections between its separable claims. A dissenting voice – though one attempting to suppress its dissidence – was that of Montagu Slater, whose 'minor quarrel' with the narrative of cultural crisis in fact revealed an acute

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, New York: Random House, 2007, p. 256. The necessary mediation between culture and violence was attempted slightly later in the decade by Jack Lindsay, especially, the most dialectical but also in many ways the most modernist thinker under consideration. It is an important paradox of the Popular Front that it brought intellectuals like Lindsay to the Party and stimulated their thinking in directions not necessarily compatible with its premises.

⁸² Writers' International, 'The Statement', p. 38.

⁸³ Peter Marks, 'Illusion and Reality', p. 27.

⁸⁴ Williams-Ellis discusses the paucity of working-class writing, and the difficulties she anticipates in stimulating it, and announces the first writing contest in 'Not So Easy', *Left Review* I:1 (October 1934), pp. 39-41.

⁸⁵ Edgell Rickword, 'Reply to Reaction' [Editorial], *Left Review*, II: 13 (October 1936), p. 668.

⁸⁶ *Left Review*'s somewhat amateurish and high-handed organisational style seems to have played a major part in its failure in this regard, rather than its political affiliations: see Christopher Hilliard, 'Producers by Hand and by Brain: Working-Class Writers and Left-Wing Publishers in 1930s Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (March 2006), pp. 44-5.

contradiction within it: '[t]he truth is that capitalism never found literature a comfortable ally: the bourgeoisie blunted the pen whenever it could'; crisis is 'a permanent symptom of capitalism, for 150 years'.⁸⁷ Here, then, Slater attempts to deflect the attack from recent history and its modernist symptoms onto modernity itself. Modernity excised man from history, leaving him vulnerable to fatalism and mysticism; fascism was a symptom of modernity's de-realisation of man. Slater was a relatively long-standing Communist, and in one way his argument here is resistant to the emerging Popular Front rapprochement with bourgeois culture.⁸⁸ Slater's 'quarrel' does, however, resolve into a characteristically Popular Front argument posed in the terms of humanist salvation: 'Art', Slater argues, has 'lost its subject matter':

This subject-matter – man – can only exist in social relations: and art at last may rediscover him, not in social relations in the older civilized sense of the term, but in social battle, in class war, in the war to end the atomic capitalist regime.⁸⁹

The 'decadent' literature post-1914 represents the final loss of an artistic subject. But in these terms there was no obvious rationale for a return to the cultural past, to the 'best achievements' of human culture. Discussions of modern and modernist literature in *Left Review* often pull in two directions at once: on the one hand, towards a Soviet-style denunciation of modernism framed in a narrative of general cultural decline in Europe, and on the other, in the direction of a discussion of canonical modernists as representative of only a particular tendency, leaving space for the amplification of persisting progressive traditions within Europe.

The critique of modernism from the left was expedited by the rightwards shift of some major Anglophone modernists – a factor more pronounced in Britain than elsewhere.⁹⁰ Chief among them was T.S. Eliot, the 'symbolic stake' in British debates over literary modernism,⁹¹ whose *After Strange Gods*, published six months before *Left Review* was established, was reviewed by Douglas Garman in the first issue as an exemplary writer

⁸⁷ Montagu Slater, 'Writers' International', I:4 (January 1935), p. 125

⁸⁸ Arnold Rattenbury claims that Slater may have joined the Party as early as 1927, but was certainly a member by 1930: Rattenbury, introduction to 'Poems and a Play by Montagu Slater', in John Lucas, ed., *The Thirties: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), p. 182.

⁸⁹ Slater, 'Writers' International', *Left Review*, I: 4 (January 1935), p. 126.

⁹⁰ Raymond Williams, 'The Politics of the Avant-Garde', in *Politics of Modernism* (2007; London: Verso, 1989), p. 61.

⁹¹ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 16.

whose ‘graph of development is closely parallel with that of Fascism.’⁹² But what is striking in Garman’s attack is his broad acceptance of Eliot’s trajectory and his investment in tradition; indeed, he regards this as potentially Marxist. However, it is a miscarried and dangerous effort:

In a world which is hungry for some form of order and authority, there will be many who will grasp at the authority that is here so speciously offered them without much enquiry as to its value; and when they are ultimately forced into political alignment there is no doubt which it will be.⁹³

After Strange Gods has achieved a certain notoriety as enshrining Eliot’s conservatism, rechanneling his longstanding preoccupation with tradition into an ethnic conception of race and people.⁹⁴ That Garman finds himself broadly sympathetic to Eliot’s investment in nation and tradition – indeed, ‘his search for a system of thought which would, by again relating art to society, nourish the former and be of service to the latter’ is read as potentially Marxist – is indicative of the Marxist critique of major modernists that was not an outright attack, but rather a resistance to a certain turn in their development, locating Marxism as an alternative to what Jed Esty calls the ‘Anglocentric revival’ marking modernism in the thirties.⁹⁵ The contradictory potential of this was, however, demonstrated by the first English publication of *Ulysses* in Britain in 1936, which posed a challenge for a nascent Marxist criticism; Alick West’s review-essay, published in 1937, indicts Joyce for failing to perform an appropriately national turn that could integrate the fragmentation wrought by imperialism.⁹⁶ Contrary to Valentine Cunningham’s argument that hostility to Joyce was ‘normal’ on the left,⁹⁷ British Marxists did not join in with Radek’s

⁹² Douglas Garman, ‘What? ... The Devil?’ *Left Review*, I: 1 (October 1934), p. 36.

⁹³ Garman, ‘What? ... The Devil?’, p. 36.

⁹⁴ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), pp. 109-110.

⁹⁵ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p.12. Ralph Fox makes a similar point about Eliot, accepting the importance of tradition while rejecting what he feels to be a morbidity in Eliot’s attachment to it: *The Novel and the People*, p. 141. It is interesting, as in Garman’s case, how minor and even conciliatory Fox’s corrective of Eliot is.

⁹⁶ Alick West, ‘James Joyce: *Ulysses*’, *Crisis and Criticism* (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), pp. 107-8.

⁹⁷ Valentine Cunningham, ‘The Anxiety of Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents’, in Keith Williams & Stephen Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism & After* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), p.13.

denunciations; indeed, the few mentions of Radek's speech to be found in *Left Review* are noticeably lukewarm.⁹⁸

But Anglophone modernists – especially Eliot and Joyce – were subject to criticism, even if in less vituperative terms than those used in the Soviet debates. Furthermore, as in both the Soviet and European anti-fascist currents, the British critique of modernism was deeply implicated in questions of anti-fascism and the writer's political responsibilities. Edgell Rickword, a central figure in the establishment of the Writers' International and later editor of *Left Review*,⁹⁹ perceived affinities between modernism and fascism in the first issue of *Left Review*; characterising modernist writing as a literature of despair, and its authors helplessly attracted to 'those modes of thought which are hung about like fly-papers to catch the desperate – the immaterial, the spiritual, the idealistic.'¹⁰⁰ Such an implicit antithetical endorsement of materialism, realism and optimism was put in the service of two historical 'truths' that were for the most part taken to be inalienable: the crisis in bourgeois culture and the embodiment of the 'hopes of all mankind' in the Soviet Union.¹⁰¹ Stephen Spender's *The Destructive Element* (1935) exemplifies how this type of critique could not only justify repression of writers in the name of the Soviet Union, but also arrive at a position that rendered literature obsolete. For there was, of course, another historical truth: the repression of intellectuals in the Soviet Union, which British writers were increasingly forced to confront. The peculiarity of Spender's book is that Spender seems to work backwards from a rejection of contemporary modernists back through literary history, offering as a standard of judgement writers' relationships with 'reality'. The posited truth of the 'dying' of bourgeois culture, and the increasingly manifest reality of political violence are the central problems in Spender's appraisal of literary modernism, and was in part provoked by the publication in 1934 of Max Eastman's account of the situation Soviet writers faced, *Artists in Uniform*. The argument running through

⁹⁸ Slater half-heartedly praised 'Radek's shrewd survey of certain limited fields of prose literature' ('The Turning Point', p. 15); Amabel Williams-Ellis, while describing Radek's speech as 'very able', contended that his targets were waning in significance: 'Soviet Writers' Congress', *Left Review*, I: 2 (November 1934), p. 27.

⁹⁹ Hobday, Edgell Rickword, pp. 156-157.

¹⁰⁰ Edgell Rickword, 'Straws for the Weary: Antecedents to Fascism', *Left Review* I: 1 (October 1934), reprinted in Rickword, *Literature in Society* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), p. 40.

¹⁰¹ The characterisation of the Soviet Union as such was made by Bukharin at the Writers' Congress ('Poetry, Poetics and The Problems of Poetry in the USSR', p. 185), and repeated in *Left Review* by Slater, 'The Turning Point', p. 15.

Spender's book is that writers of the modernist period were aware of a 'destructive element', defined as a state of complete unbelief, and that they were forced to decide whether or not to 'immerse' themselves in it: 'experience of an all pervading Present, which is a world without belief.'¹⁰²

This is an enigmatic statement, and Spender's readings are very often opaque, but the tenor of his argument questions whether writers ought to actively participate in the destruction of the existing system and its cultural institutions. Henry James, whose work was to be the original focus of *The Destructive Element*, is characterised as a writer acutely aware of a morbidity in bourgeois culture, and who attempted to shore his work against that element by 'imposing on a decadent aristocracy the greater tradition of the past. His characters have the virtues of people who are living into the past.'¹⁰³ They are not 'real' people at all, but figments of an authorial resistance to history; a nostalgia for the past ascendancy of their class. Joyce, Yeats, Pound, Eliot and James all 'fortify' their works against reality.¹⁰⁴ The exemplary text is *The Waste Land*, 'a poem without a subject, in the sense that it is a poem without belief': 'instead of any statement about life or the universe having been made, a kind of historic order has been achieved when the author says, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins.'¹⁰⁵ One major difficulty with Spender's argument is that it seemingly deprives art of any role in the historical process; historical conditions are taken as immutably objective. The responsibility of the artist is apparently to simply adapt themselves to those conditions – or be destroyed. As such, it leads (or perhaps allows) Spender, like many others on the British left, to justify the persecution of the Soviet poets Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Yessenin on the grounds that, 'their faulty 'individualism' perhaps made it, in any case, impossible for them to adapt themselves to the revolution'.¹⁰⁶ Such an instrumental view of history's laws could give rise to the kind of 'unreal historical pastoral' that Keith Williams thinks characterised

¹⁰² Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 14.

¹⁰³ Spender, *The Destructive Element*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Spender, *The Destructive Element*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁵ Spender, *The Destructive Element*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ Spender, *The Destructive Element*, p. 231. Comparable arguments were made by Tom Wintringham ('Artists in Uniform', *Left Review*, I: 5, February 1935, pp. 152-160), Bert Marshall ('Yessenin & Mayakovsky', *Left Review*, III:11 (December 1937), pp. 561-565), and Christopher Caudwell (*Illusion and Reality*, 1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1946, p. 289).

British socialist realism.¹⁰⁷ The same year that Spender's book was published, the self-declared revolutionary writer Lewis Grassic Gibbon gave voice to this fetishisation of history through his ambiguous Communist character, Ewan Tavendale: '*You don't quarrel with History and its pace of change any more than you quarrel with the law of gravitations.*'¹⁰⁸

But there is a second problem with Spender's analysis here, one more typical of leftist readings of modernism, which is that it signally fails to attain any critical distance from Eliot's own descriptions of his literary practice. In Edgell Rickword's essay on literature and fascism, 'Straws for the Weary', Rickword at points does succeed in reading against modernists' own positions and relating them to the economic process; for example, he takes the isolation of the post-war writers not as a sign of an actual divorce from society, but of its opposite: the increasing enmeshing of aesthetic practice and commercial society.¹⁰⁹ But almost immediately this more dialectical reading is undercut by the endorsement of the narrative of cultural decline: these writers 'felt the death in the veins of the society they were condemned to live in,' thus pushing the argument back towards the ideology of modernism itself – towards a narrative of the decline of the West.¹¹⁰ Rickword's argument restates the notion that the Great War shook Enlightenment values and especially faith in reason, a loss whose remedy was 'belief'. It forecloses another reading of the War not in terms of rupture but in terms of continuity, as a fruition of Enlightenment values rather than their negation. Rickword's essay combines what might be the beginnings of a Marxist critique of modernism with positions from within modernism's own ideologies. Elsewhere, indeed, Rickword's indictments of capitalism for the 'vulgarity', 'anarchy' and 'cruelty' of the values it fostered have a noticeably Eliotic ring.¹¹¹ This inhabitation of certain modernist positions left little space for a critical examination of Enlightenment values themselves; this, indeed, is a recurring strain in

¹⁰⁷ Keith Williams, 'Joyce's "Chinese Alphabet": *Ulysses* and the Proletarians' in Paul Hyland, ed., *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1991), p. 187.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Grey Granite* (in *A Scots Quair*, London: Penguin, 1998), p. 414, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹ Edgell Rickword, 'Straws for the Weary', pp. 39-40.

¹¹⁰ Rickword, 'Straws for the Weary', p. 40.

¹¹¹ Edgell Rickword, 'Culture, Progress and English Tradition'. in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Frederick Muller: 1937), p. 250. The obvious echo is of Eliot's characterisation of twentieth-century history as an 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy', in 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' (1923): reprinted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al., eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), p. 373.

British Marxist thinking during this time, one that became more pronounced, more solid and more politically problematic as fascism advanced.

1.5 Popular Form

I have tried to suggest here that for British writers working within the ambit of *Left Review* and the ideals of the Popular Front, a number of constraints imposed themselves, and that these were not just the strictures of Soviet aesthetic orthodoxy. In so far as Marxists rejected modernism at a certain point in its development in Britain, they endorsed no clear and definitive alternative, but rather a series of values and concepts of shifting significance: realism, popularity and tradition. These three terms were fused in a preoccupation with the speaking voice and with pre-capitalist forms. Slater, criticising the Auden group, wrote that for the minority group of intellectuals, their only hope for survival was to ‘appeal from the monopolists to the mass of the people – the people from whom it derived its tradition, its rhythms, its language. It comes back to the old problem, How can the poet’s voice reach the people?’¹¹² The ‘monopolists’ Slater is referring to include the BBC, primarily, and other apparatus of the culture industries which, Slater implies, standardise and commodify poetry so that it is fatally detached from popular life. Indeed, an association between the culture industries and fascism was not uncommon: Edgell Rickword warned of the spectre of creeping fascism in the commercialisation of culture; a country could be ‘subtly *gleichgeschaltet*’ by anti-intellectualism and such infantilising forms as the detective novel, ‘that ‘other opium’ of the bourgeoisie.’¹¹³ Culture in this view drew its vitality from the social substance of popular life and language. Ralph Fox attributed the ‘paleness and anaemia of modern writing’ to ‘the fact that many intellectuals have deliberately cut themselves off from this spring of renewal’.¹¹⁴ This sentiment is echoed by Storm Jameson in her important discussion of socialist fiction, ‘Documents’ (1937), in which she prescribes a writing that speaks ‘for the people’.¹¹⁵ In this formulation, popularity is not a matter of ‘setting out to be a bestseller’, but rather a

¹¹² Slater, ‘The Turning Point’, p. 22.

¹¹³ Rickword, ‘Straws for the Weary’, pp. 41-2.

¹¹⁴ Fox, *The Novel and the People* (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 134.

¹¹⁵ Storm Jameson, ‘Documents’, *Fact* 4 (July 1937); reprinted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al., eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), p. 556.

question of quality, of writers ‘coming into relation with their fellow-men and women’.¹¹⁶ The idea of an utterance arising in the people and returning, in a transformed and transformative form, to address them, uniting speaker (intellectual) and audience, narrative and experience, is a recurring fantasy in leftist imaginative texts of this period. One might read this in terms of the pastoral, as Empson saw it, and which Tyrus Miller reads as a rhetorical attempt to ‘span the cultural gaps between the working-class and literary intellectuals.’¹¹⁷ That popular speech was in some sense inherently resistant to capitalism is suggested in Jack Lindsay’s English Civil War novel, *1649* (1938):

And then you hear that weak and rambling voice that's singing where a few poor men meet. And you hear something different. You hear this protest against the money-mongers that buy the bread of life and hide it in a private garner; against them that make such scarce of plenty; against them that make their dice of poor men's bones.¹¹⁸

The novel’s prefatory poem expresses a utopian belief in a kind of preordained relationship between speakers and listeners in a revolutionary discourse: ‘We go down/ but hear the shout of young men coming after, [...] For they will rise to hear this tale, they are part of it’.¹¹⁹ The figure of the speaker works to symbolically resolve several problems that preoccupy Popular Front cultural politics: the lone intellectual and the reality of a class-divided and alienated culture. This strain is at its strongest, most redemptive and utopian, in Lindsay’s ‘not english?’, a poem for mass declamation (arranged recitation by a group), in which the speaker addresses those individuals and movements who have resisted oppression and been excluded from authorised accounts of English history, ‘those who are not the english/ according to the definition of the ruling class’.¹²⁰ The poem gathers these moments of resistance, but also repeats into a new narrative and a new utterance, ‘the augural moment declared by frenetic guesses,/ come clear at last’ in a simultaneous articulation of nationhood and internationalism: ‘England, my England -/ the words are clear/ *Workers of the World, unite!*’¹²¹ Lindsay’s aesthetics retain what Raymond Williams identifies as ‘that element of the original avant-garde’ that had rejected established cultural

¹¹⁶ Jameson, ‘Documents’, p. 559.

¹¹⁷ Tyrus Miller, ‘The Strings are False: Bathos, Pastoral and Social Reflexivity in 1930s British Poetry’, in Peter Nicholls, ed., *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (London & New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 51.

¹¹⁸ Jack Lindsay, *1649: A Novel of a Year* (London: Methuen, 1938), p. 135.

¹¹⁹ Jack Lindsay, *1649*, p. v.

¹²⁰ Jack Lindsay, ‘not english? A Reminder for May Day’, *Left Review*, II:8 (May 1936), p. 356.

¹²¹ Lindsay, ‘not english?’ p. 357.

institutions and sought new popular audiences.¹²² In class struggle Lindsay thought that an epic unity of audience, speaker and text could be achieved:

The poet, while he feels that he is serving such a class, feels that he has an homogeneous audience. The unity *of* his audience and his unity *with* the audience, are necessary reflections of the inner unity of form and content in his art.¹²³

This vision of a mode of articulation that was collective, democratic and radical is perhaps a species of pastoral, but if so, it must be acknowledged that it was crucially a counter-pastoral to the rhetoric of the BBC; the BBC voice, constructed as authoritarian, synthetic and duplicitous, is a regular target of satire: in James Barke's *Major Operation*, for example, 'broadcasting the Geneva Lullaby', the fantasy of world peace represented by the League of Nations, in its synthetic language: 'Just a nice voice, you know: wethah fawcaust.'¹²⁴ Slater thought that 'BBC announcers' had to be pushed aside for a living language (understood as a *national* language) to flourish.¹²⁵ 'Cobbett used language to express life, the BBC uses it to conceal life', wrote Ralph Fox.¹²⁶ Charles Madge noted that the BBC's broadcasting monopoly meant 'the voice of authority can actually be heard in every home by turning a switch.'¹²⁷ Popular, in this sense, stands against the monologic BBC as well as against what Cornford called the 'super-subjectivity of the older writers'.¹²⁸

¹²² Williams, 'The Politics of the Avant-Garde', p. 61.

¹²³ Jack Lindsay, 'A Plea for Mass Declamation', *Left Review* III: 9 (October 1937), p. 514; emphasis in original.

¹²⁴ James Barke, *Major Operation* (London: Collins, 1936), p. 441 & p. 375.

¹²⁵ Slater, 'The Turning Point', p. 22. As Keith Williams argues, 'The pastoral myth that the essential identity of a highly industrialised, largely urban/suburban, multi-cultural society like Britain consisted in Southern English rurality was reinvented by the interwar media, but especially by broadcasting', *British Writers and the Media 1930-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 31.

¹²⁶ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 137.

¹²⁷ Madge, 'Press, Radio and Social Consciousness', in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains*, p. 148. A distrust of the BBC was, however, attended by an interest in the possibilities of radio in the thirties and, indeed, British Communists worked with the BBC, though not without tensions: see Ben Harker, 'The Trumpet of the Night': Interwar Communists on BBC Radio', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 75(1), 2013, pp. 81-100.

¹²⁸ John Cornford, 'Left?', *Cambridge Left*, Winter 1933-34, excerpt reprinted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al., eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), p. 550.

1.6 Ralph Fox and the Realist Novel

It is in this popular mode that that ‘realism’ and the realist novel become most crucial. Modernist writers, by removing themselves from popular life, caused a loss of ‘reality’ in their work. Concepts of the popular were elaborated and evocated as remedies for a cultural crisis symptomized by a loss of the real. In relation to the novel, the central account is Ralph Fox’s *The Novel and the People*, published posthumously in 1937. Although Hanna Behrend argues that British Marxists ‘subordinated imaginative writing to a reductive representation of reality’,¹²⁹ in fact realism as it is understood in these debates has little to do with representation; instead, it is perceived as an ethical mode relating to authorial position and, in Fox, to a declared set of social (and not aesthetic) principles. Fox explicitly sets out to vindicate socialist realism as the solution to the crisis in the novel.¹³⁰ That crisis is predicated on modernism’s supposed flight from reality. The paradigm, for Fox, is the epic storyteller: ‘it was the complete harmony between the rhapsodist and his audience which made the poetic epic, and clearly enough, if only some such similar harmony between writers and public could have been established, the novel would have developed rather than declined’.¹³¹ The realist novel, for Fox, could condense epic and popular functions in an inherently modern form, and through his work we see most clearly a novelistic aesthetic of the Popular Front. The above notions of writers’ responsibilities to reality, and the critique of modernism as a flight from the real, relied on a narrative of literary history that presented the realist novel of the nineteenth century as exhibiting a concrete relationship to its historical situation and its designation as an authentically popular art. Among British Marxist writers, Fox was perhaps best placed to absorb and mediate Soviet influences; a long-standing Party member, he had spent three years in Moscow as the English librarian of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, and translated works including Bukharin’s *Marxism and Modern Thought*.¹³² At this time the Institute was engaged in preparing previously unpublished correspondence and manuscripts, including

¹²⁹ Hanna Behrend, ‘An Intellectual Irrelevance? Marxist Literary Criticism in the 1930s’, in Andy Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 107.

¹³⁰ The ‘solution to the problems that vex the English novelist lies precisely in Marxism with its artistic formula of a “socialist realism” which shall unite and re-vitalize the forces of the left in literature’. Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 26.

¹³¹ Fox, *The Novel and the People* (1937; Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 70.

¹³² Jeremy Hawthorn, ‘Preface’, Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 6.

Engels' letter to Margaret Harkness which was given a prominent place in *International Literature's* documentation of the origins of Marxist criticism; the Institute provided an extensive commentary.¹³³

Although *The Novel and the People* explicitly sets out to vindicate socialist realism as the solution to the crisis in the novel, it bypasses Soviet criticism entirely. It is rooted in the documents published in *International Literature* designed to support the elaboration of socialist realism, but not in the Soviet theorisation of it. Indeed, Fox's account of the novel is also an account of European modernity, interspersed with moments of near-chauvinistic British insularity. The tendency, in particular, to elide humanism with a triumphalist account of Western civilisation is especially unsettling. In his attack on Joyce, Fox describes the novel's treatment of Bloom as a 'denial of humanism, of the whole Western tradition in literature', a tradition bound up with the 'heroic personality.'¹³⁴ Likewise Fox's defence of the 'unified outlook' that held sway 'from the Renaissance to Kant', and of '[o]ur civilization [which] began with Erasmus, Rabelais and Montaigne',¹³⁵ combined with his authoritarian conception of the author as a 'tyrant, but also one who loves and is loved by his people'¹³⁶ create an unavoidably imperialistic tone, compounded by a thoroughly patriarchal account of the transmission of cultural tradition.¹³⁷ Fox's arguments regularly draw on the idiom of disease and degeneration that was at best politically ambiguous: hope in crisis cannot be sought in 'the mad and the sick';¹³⁸ the aloof author suffers 'anaemia'; 'the living body of tradition' is somatically compromised.¹³⁹ Fox was far from alone in this tendency; there is clearly a comparable potential for chauvinistic normativity in Arthur Calder-Marshall's assertion that '[w]here the bourgeois novelists have been driven to the pursuit of the abnormal, the perverted or the minute, in order to find fresh material, the revolutionary is concerned with the normal and typical in his

¹³³ Friedrich Engels, 'Letters and Documents: Marx and Engels on Balzac', *International Literature*, 1933:3, pp. 113-124,

¹³⁴ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 90.

¹³⁵ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, pp. 96-7.

¹³⁶ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 139.

¹³⁷ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 147.

¹³⁸ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 156.

¹³⁹ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 141

portraiture of society as a whole.’¹⁴⁰ But such a commitment to social reality, even as it threatened to conspire against social transformation, is central to Fox’s Lukácsian endorsement of a version of realism in which transformative possibilities were written into everyday reality. The model he offers for a hypothetical socialist realist novel is the Dimitrov trial. Fox is anxious to argue against the ‘mass-produced intellectual life of our age’ as the corollary of Fordist production, which together perform complementary fascistic roles in dehumanising and de-individualising the workers. Dimitrov is the exemplar of what Fox considers the continuity between resistance to capitalism at the level of everyday work and resistance to fascism on the world stage, developing from trade unionist to Communist and anti-fascist, finally becoming ‘defender of all humanity and its culture against fascism barbarism’ in Leipzig.¹⁴¹ The intention is to typify Dimitrov; to show his courageous conduct as emerging organically from his development in concrete political struggles, echoing Lukács’s insistence that popular revolts should be portrayed not as acts of extraordinary heroism but as ‘necessary continuations and intensifications of normal popular life’.¹⁴² But more strongly than Lukács, and more strongly than the Soviet critics, Fox pictures the novelist as struggling against reality: the really great writer must be ‘engaged in terrible and revolutionary battle with reality, revolutionary because he must seek to change reality’.¹⁴³ In this account truth is produced in this ‘ardent battle with reality’.¹⁴⁴ Fox therefore moves well beyond Spender’s account of writers’ heroic or tragic encounters with an implacably objective history, and instead towards a sense of the text’s transformative possibilities, generated through the realist writer’s mediation of the subjective and objective. As a model for a lesson in the ‘lost art of prose’, Fox selects William Cobbett, radical reformer, whose condition-of-England travelogue, *Rural Rides*, spurred the repeal of the Corn Laws. Cobbett’s prose is exemplary for Fox for its resistance to a distanced and contemplative stance, never describing part of the English scene ‘without the consciousness that these things are part of man’s life.’¹⁴⁵ Moving back

¹⁴⁰ Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, in Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1937) p. 116. As we shall see in chapter three, however, Calder-Marshall’s own novelistic practice suggests he was in fact less than convinced by this argument.

¹⁴¹ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p.121.

¹⁴² Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 360

¹⁴³ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 38. Cf. Lukács’s account of the ‘labour of the realist’ in ‘Realism in the Balance’, pp. 38-40.

¹⁴⁴ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁵ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 136.

from his earlier, more strongly anti-capitalist and internationalist argument, Fox declares the struggle for realism and for the recovery of the art of prose to be a struggle for ‘national salvation.’¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

Ralph Fox died fighting for the Spanish Republic in December 1936, several months before *The Novel and the People* was published.¹⁴⁷ Montagu Slater’s review of the proceedings of the Soviet Writers’ Congress, published in early 1935, greeted the ‘turning point’ announced by Nikolai Bukharin (soon to become one of the most high-profile victims of the terror) as ‘a turning point in world politics at a moment when all men are holding their breath seeing mankind plunged into the latter phase of the crisis, the world tremors of the end of a system’.¹⁴⁸ But the ‘turning point’ did not mark a surge in the advance to a new world, and the tremors felt throughout Europe were not those of capitalism’s death throes. The war in Spain galvanised a mass, anti-fascist movement, but for Communists it also curtailed a discussion of the relationship between capitalism, fascism, and the ‘culture’ that was rhetorically positioned to be at stake. It is a striking irony that it was in the cause of Spain that this antinomy was most emphatically articulated, for Spain was in some senses the hinterland of European modernity; it embodied fractures and contradictions of modernity that had to be repressed in order for it function as a stage on which ‘culture’ confronted fascism.¹⁴⁹ Fox’s work is conflicted in its endorsement of the realist novel as a revolutionary form which could speak from and for popular experiences of struggle while aligning itself with a cultural tradition of dominance. These conflicts, as we shall see, take place within the Popular Front novel itself. The following two chapters discuss two novels in which realist and modernist impulses interplay. The incompleteness of the British Marxist reckoning with modernism contributes to a sometimes disturbing failure to examine with clarity the tradition they sought to defend. But this very incompleteness also, I would argue, mitigated an attack on

¹⁴⁶ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 138.

¹⁴⁷ Fox and John Cornford died on or around the same day in late December, the first high-profile British fatalities in the war. See Jeremy Hawthorn, ‘Preface’, *The Novel and the People*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴⁸ Montagu Slater, ‘The Turning Point’, p. 23.

¹⁴⁹ Spain’s problematic modernity is a thesis considered at length in Gayle Rogers’ *Modernism and the New Spain: Britain, Cosmopolitan Europe, and Literary History* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

modernist technique, leaving a space open for an assimilation and reorientation of certain modernist techniques that enabled the production of leftist texts that addressed themselves to the agenda Fox proposes in aesthetically innovative ways.

Chapter Two: John Sommerfield, *May Day* (1936)

Introduction

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which the currents of British leftist thinking on cultural and political questions identified in the previous chapter shed light on John Sommerfield's 1936 novel, *May Day*. In the slogans disseminated by the Communist characters, the novel clearly echoes the Communist Party's *For Soviet Britain* programme, adopted in February of 1935. However the novel also participates in the transition from the vanguardist strategy of Third Period towards the Popular Front emphasis on the creation of a progressive social formation that drew in a wide range of groups and individuals, an emphasis which rendered *For Soviet Britain* outmoded almost immediately.¹ The novel is characterised by its attempts to express the connections within urban society and the relationships between different modes of political action. A spontaneous workplace strike escalates in the run up to a May Day demonstration, drawing wider groups of people into an organic mass movement under the leadership of organised labour, against a section of the capitalist class turning fascist.² It enacts, therefore, Ralph Fox's formulation of anti-fascism as the continuation of every-day struggles against capitalism.³ Although Sommerfield's novel appeared before Fox's critical work, and I therefore do not claim a direct influential connection between the texts, there is nonetheless an important sense that Sommerfield takes up the same arguments and departs from the same principles within the novel as Fox does from the critical perspective. Arguments about the politics of the novel form were being rehearsed within literary texts themselves. *May Day* has been compared to a modernist day book,⁴ and to a documentary novel of metropolitan working-class life,⁵

¹ See Communist Party of Great Britain, *For Soviet Britain* (1935), especially section II: 'Workers' Dictatorship is Democracy for the Workers':

http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/congresses/XIII/soviet_britain.htm

² Eric Hobsbawm describes the essential political dynamic of the Popular Front in these terms in 'Fifty Years of People's Fronts', in Fyrth ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, p. 240.

³ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 121.

⁴ H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), p. 117.

⁵ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 221.

while Ken Worpole has noted the influence of Soviet montage techniques in its form.⁶ Jack Lindsay regarded it as an example of the type of ‘collective novel’ that was much discussed on the left at the time.⁷ It adopts an experimental form, a strategy that may be understood in terms of the partial rejection of modernism outlined in the previous chapter. Although George Orwell insisted that, ‘No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen-thirties,’ an assessment he attributed to an atmosphere of self-censorship in which writers were ‘conscience-stricken about their own unorthodoxy,’ I would suggest that while the novel’s politics may be exemplary in Popular Front terms, its form suggests that Sommerfield did not feel bound to a narrow and prescriptive interpretation of socialist realism.⁸ Through paying particular attention to the work of memory and the use of the montage form, I argue that *May Day* is distinguished by an acute sense of the problem of alienation, in both its political and personal guises, and the resulting text bears important epic resonances. But I also suggest that the novel appropriates and gives a materialist basis to a number of characteristically modernist themes, especially those of myth and tradition. In so doing the novel synthesises aspects of socialist realist aesthetics, such as a concern with integration, cohesion and tradition, with components of the modernist literary heritage. This synthesis may be understood in terms of Sommerfield’s own literary development, and also in terms of the partial and limited attack on modernism outlined in the previous chapter.

2.1 John Sommerfield: Literature and Activism

After several directionless years as a sailor and theatre carpenter, John Sommerfield came to Marxism in the early 1930s through the influence of his friend, the philosopher Maurice Cornforth, who, Andy Croft reports, lent him Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism*.⁹ This led him to join the CPGB, at the time less welcoming to writers than it

⁶ Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 89.

⁷ Jack Lindsay, ‘Three Novels’, *Left Review*, II:11 (January 1937), p. 915.

⁸ George Orwell, ‘Inside the Whale’, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. XII, ed. Peter Davidson (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), pp. 105-6.

⁹ Andy Croft, ‘Returned Volunteer: The Novels of John Sommerfield’, *The London Magazine*, April 1st, 1983, pp. 62-3. The influence of Lenin’s text on British novelists of the left has yet to be fully explored, though its influence can be felt in Calder-Marshall’s anti-idealist arguments in *Pie in the Sky*. For Maurice Cornforth, it represented an alternative to the traditional antinomies of British analytical philosophy: empiricism and idealism, with which Lenin sought to dispose and replace with materialism, both as a theory of knowledge and as a system of metaphysics (see Edwin Roberts, *The Anglo-Marxists* (Oxford: Rowman

was in the Popular Front period, and he turned his literary attentions to the depiction of the class struggle, becoming in the mid-thirties a key figure in Popular Front intellectual life. As well as writing for the *Daily Worker*, Sommerfield fought with the Marty Battalion of the International Brigade in Spain, and was twice reported killed.¹⁰ He wrote a critically maligned memoir of the conflict, *Volunteer in Spain*, among the earliest accounts by a combatant and dedicated to John Cornford, summarily dismissed by George Orwell as ‘sentimental tripe.’¹¹ In 1938, he wrote a novella, *Trouble in Porter Street*, at the behest of the Party, fictionalising a successful strike along the lines of similar actions taken by tenants in Bethnal Green and Stepney in the summer of that year.¹² He was a central participant in Mass Observation, doing most of the writing for its wartime publication, *The Pub and The People*.¹³ Sommerfield, however, was by no means a straightforwardly ‘Party’ writer, and he publicly complained about the dogmatic and simplistic criticism that appeared in the *Daily Worker*, which he felt exhibited the ‘tendency in Left-wing literary criticism that if carried to its logical conclusion leads to the worth of a book being estimated on the grounds of its author’s political life.’¹⁴ In *Left Review*, he objected to the assumption that only literature written from a ‘Party-Orthodox’ position was valuable, asserting that, ‘literature that deals with the struggle to free the mind from bourgeois standards without gravitating immediately to Marxism’ should also be welcomed.¹⁵ His earlier literary endeavours also brought him into contact with a wide social circle beyond the Party. Malcolm Lowry admired his first novel, published in 1930, so much that he tracked Sommerfield down to the carpenter’s shop where he was working, and Sommerfield became part of Lowry’s bohemian circle that included Nina Hamnett, Elsa

and Littlefield, 1997), p. 212). Excerpts of the text featured prominently in Party theoretician Emile Burns’s anthology, *The Handbook of Marxism*, published by Gollancz in 1935 and republished by the Left Book Club in 1937.

¹⁰ Croft, ‘Returned Volunteer’, pp. 62-3.

¹¹ *Volunteer in Spain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937); Orwell cited in Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 54.

¹² *Trouble in Porter Street* (London: Key Books, 1938). For East End rent strikes, see John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 230.

¹³ Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Survey* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943). Tom Harrisson confirms in his ‘Preface’ that the project was mostly Sommerfield’s work, p. 11. For a very useful discussion of Sommerfield’s activities in Mass-Observation, see Nick Hubble, ‘John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation’, *The Space Between*, Volume VIII: 1 (2012), pp. 131-151.

¹⁴ ‘John Summerfield (*sic*) Writes ...’ *Daily Worker*, 17 March, 1937, p. 7.

¹⁵ ‘Contributors’ Conference: John Sommerfield’, *Left Review* I: 9 (June 1935), p. 367.

Lanchester, and Dylan Thomas. In spite of Lowry's lack of interest in politics, he regarded Sommerfield as 'approximately the best man I've ever met'.¹⁶

His early, pre-communist novel, *The Death of Christopher* (1930)¹⁷ is a decidedly experimental, though rather directionless novel: Michael Redgrave had criticised it in *Granta* for its too self-conscious experimental devices, saying it was 'essentially Georgian in feeling' but sprinkled with modern phrases and typographical tricks, a text hoping to 'attract the modernist hangers-on as well as the conservative public'.¹⁸ Written in a stream-of-consciousness style with frequent passages of free indirect discourse, the novel plays with elements of fantasy and metafiction, as exemplified in the narrator's chance encounter with a character called John Sommerfield, whose conversation the protagonist feels to be oddly 'literary', and whose name registers in his memory - 'John Sommerfield ... he reflected. I seem to have heard that name somewhere'.¹⁹ Such self-reflexivity serves to indicate the disjunction between the narrator's subjective experience and any real world beyond it. In *May Day*, as this chapter will discuss, this modernist attentiveness to form is channelled not into sceptical introversion but into a politicised literary experiment that incorporates important elements of modernist practice and attempts to fuse them with an activist ethics.

The Death of Christopher and *May Day* echo each other continually, and these echoes serve as useful markers of Sommerfield's development in the thirties. In *The Death of Christopher*, the narrator finds himself returning to the country he left behind:

Now each turn of the screw that pushed so many feet of the ocean behind the *Halcyon* brought him so many feet nearer home. This long-cherished return of his, for which he had so much hoped and despaired, was actually going to happen: the remote and unbelievable would soon be near and actual.²⁰

Sommerfield begins this novel with a description of Christopher's death in a car crash, to which he is propelled by his belief that he cannot overcome the breach with the past. As he drives towards his death he feels that, '[s]wifter than light and thought he had freed

¹⁶ Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: The Life of Malcolm Lowry*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 141.

¹⁷ Published in Britain as *They Die Young* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).

¹⁸ Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 141.

¹⁹ John Sommerfield, *The Death of Christopher* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 291.

²⁰ Sommerfield, *The Death of Christopher*, p. 345.

himself from dimension and overtaken the trampling feet of time, so that the past yet lay in the future and he was once again the Christopher of two years ago'.²¹ In this early novel, history and its traumas can only be managed through fantasy and escaped from in death. *May Day*, conversely, proposes a different solution. In a passage that recalls the one above, the returning sailor in this novel feel that 'scenes, half-remembered, half-anticipated moved in his mind, of London in spring [...] memories and dreams that were about to become realities again for him'.²² Return has become possible, and in this fusion of past and present is the prospect of redemption. In the earlier text, the mixing of past and present is a sign of Christopher's delusions, already rendered ironic by the revelation of his death at outset. It is clear, then, that Sommerfield's style, methods and preoccupations were not simply produced by his engagement with Communism; equally, he clearly did not feel compelled to abandon his earlier preoccupations as a result of his move towards political commitment. Rather, and as this chapter will show, his work bears out an interaction between his modernist literary heritage and his political commitment. Both novels address themselves to the same subjective quandary: the physical and psychological dislocation of individuals from their own histories and world-historical realities. In *The Death of Christopher*, this is narrated through the futile and ultimately self-destructive pursuit of a sense of belonging, an attempt to find a way of re-integrating 'that most ungetatable thing – his real self' (30). In *May Day*, a comparable plot is ambitiously constructed both in terms of individual dislocation and return, and through the socially redeeming possibility of collective action. *May Day*'s key statement is its implication that these two plots are interdependent: that the divided self of the sailor James Seton, around whom the psychological concerns of the novel converge, can only be remade through the participation in the mass action of the May Day demonstration. In so doing, Sommerfield attempts to offer a socialist solution to a modernist problem.²³

²¹ Sommerfield, *The Death of Christopher*, p. 12.

²² John Sommerfield, *May Day* (1936; London: London Books, 2010), p. 30. Hereafter, references to this text are given in parentheses.

²³ These fundamental concerns are visible too in Sommerfield's much later work: his 1977 novel-memoir, *The Imprinted* (1977) is a text involved with the relationship between personal history and political history; with the question of whose narratives survive and whose are erased.

2.2 Politics of Articulation

The influence of Popular Front ideas, carrying an idiomatic emphasis on inclusivity, unity and connection with the past, those ideas given aesthetic definition in the doctrine of socialist realism, did have a definite effect on British writing. The movement Lukács called the turn towards the epic is suggested in the many panoramic, expansive realist texts produced by leftist authors between from 1934 onwards.²⁴ An inventory of such texts would include Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936), James Barke's *Major Operation* (1936), Arthur Calder-Marshall's *Pie in the Sky* (1937) and in the documentary work of Ashley Smith's *A City Stirs* (1939). These texts collectively demonstrate an attempt to move away from narrower forms and towards an effort to narrate social experience as relational, absorbing the influences of Soviet cinema and the emerging documentary film movement.²⁵ Such texts are characterised by a particular use of aerial perspective, detached from individual observers, utilised to make accessible the connections underlying urban life. Ashley Smith's *A City Stirs*, for example, is an ambitious text describing one London day. The text offers a bird's-eye view of a day in the life of London, which uses a depersonalised, omniscient narrative to reflect on the presence of history in urban life, and the relationship of individual lives to the past of the space they inhabit: 'You are an individual but here is the long sleep of centuries which you daily disturb. Mighty forces now are turning to greet the day. Ancient towers, buttressed monuments by the score, are emerging from the darkness'.²⁶ Smith's novel as a whole owes much to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), being largely a depersonalised yet lyrical reflection on the patterns and repetitions of city life across time: 'The philosophy of cities is the philosophy of the poor, the humble and the frail. Round all these the city spreads its sheltering arms. To these it tempers its winds'.²⁷

The aerial perspectives from which the narrative voices of these texts speak align them with the characteristically thirties' imagery of birds and airmen. The association of

²⁴ Georg Lukács, 'Essay on the Novel', *International Literature*, 1936:5, p. 73.

²⁵ The GPO film unit was established in 1933 and produced many important documentary films (such as *Night Mail*, 1936) under the auspices of John Grierson from 1933-37. Keith Williams's *British Writers and the Media 1930-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) discusses the relationship between writing and documentary extensively, particular in chapters one and three.

²⁶ Ashley Smith, *A City Stirs*, (London: Chapman Hall, 1939), p. 31.

²⁷ Smith, *A City Stirs*, p. 66.

these winged figures with authority and panoptic surveillance has been noted by Valentine Cunningham and Rod Mengham,²⁸ and, indeed, *May Day*'s opening pages exude confidence in its theoretical insight expressed through the device of the bird's-eye view. In spite of the Soviet critics' warnings against the direct application of Marxist theory to literary writing,²⁹ *May Day* begins with firm articulation of its theoretical premise: its epigraph is 'Men Make History, But Not As They Please'. The early pages feature a cinematic passage that zooms in, from the bird's eye to the worm's eye perspective: beginning with an example of what Mengham terms 'the rhetoric of apostrophe',³⁰ '*Let us take factory chimneys, cannons trained at dingy skies, pointing at the sun and stars*', the camera-eye moves through an emerging human perspective, '*It's rather hard to see where they come in, these quivering shreds of flesh amidst so much concrete and steel*', through to the assertion that '*These fragile shreds of flesh are protagonists of a battle, a battle where lives are wasted, territories destroyed and populations enslaved*' (25, emphasis in original). The voice-over quality and super-human perspective are, importantly, synthetic, drawn from the repertoire of technologized media; they hint at the belief that the apparatus of mass culture can be revolutionised.

But these aloof voices, articulating totalising perspectives from privileged and synthetic positions, are balanced in the novel by a concern with more organic modes of articulation. Sommerfield's description of the factory girls at Langfier's is unedifying, but '[w]hen their moment of deep discontent comes to them in a mass, taking form in the words of their class leaders, then there are revolutions' (50). The word 'form' here is important: the leaders merely give shape to popular feeling, a feeling which is a genuine response to class conditions. As I suggested in the previous chapter, there was a recurring fascination with the image of a voice speaking for the people, and a faith that such a mode of articulation would be transformative and redemptive. In *May Day*, this fantasy is enacted through the work of the Communist slogans: they help give definition to undefined and unrecognised discontent. There is, perhaps obviously, an idealised representation of

²⁸ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 155-6; Rod Mengham, 'The Thirties: Politics, Authority, Perspective', in Laura Marcus, ed., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 363-364.

²⁹ As in the commentary by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute published as a foreword to Friedrich Engels, 'Letters and Documents: Engels against Mechanicism and Vulgarisation of Marxism and Literary Criticism', *International Literature*, 1934:4, p. 81.

³⁰ Rod Mengham, 'The Thirties: Politics, Authority, Perspective', p. 373.

the function of the Leninist party in this. But Sommerfield's figuration of organic leadership as a transmitter of popular feeling is part of the novel's wider engagement with an emerging awareness of the role of different discourses in shaping perception and social reality, and the consequent impetus for Communists to construct a persuasive discourse of their own. Charles Madge's essay 'Press, Radio and Social Consciousness', published in 1937, is a key example of such an analysis. Madge - surrealist poet and Mass Observation founder - argues that, 'Speech, language, the written and spoken word - these, together with customs, ceremonies, laws and habits, are forms taken by social consciousness at all stages of human development.'³¹ In particular, writers on the left were increasingly aware of the role of the mass media – press and radio – in shaping a particular version of social reality. The statements made by these media were, Madge argues, a kind of 'poetic fact', and functioned to produce an effect of social homogeneity.³²

The Communists' slogans in the novel are presented as providing a counter-discourse to the channels of capitalist media. The recurring variations on 'Forward for a Soviet Britain' evoke the Communist Party's 1935 programme, *For Soviet Britain*, which reflected the sectarian politics of the earlier Third Period.³³ In the novel, however, the slogans work through the text to perform the function of connecting and transforming existing popular sentiments. Stuart Laing has noted the function of the Communist slogans in the novel is comparable to that of the newspaper headlines: '[t]hey are illustrating the fact that a situation common to all exists, but also they are the agency that effectively generates that situation by making knowledge of it commonly available.'³⁴ Such acts can serve to change perception of social reality, as the Communist's disruption of the channels of official culture shows: the interjection into the broadcast of a Mozart sonata: 'Workers, all out on May Day. Demonstrate for a free Soviet Britain', has the effect that '[e]yes remembered the chalked slogans on walls and pavements' (67). The Communist journalist, Pat Morgan, imagines this as the Communists 'hammering home the May Day slogans

³¹ Charles Madge, 'Press, Radio & Social Consciousness', in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1937), p. 147.

³² Madge, 'Press, Radio & Social Consciousness', p. 151.

³³ Communist Party of Great Britain, *For Soviet Britain* (1935); see especially section V, 'The Communist Party', which emphasises the superior insight and vanguard role of the Party:

http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/congresses/XIII/soviet_britain.htm

³⁴ Stuart Laing, 'Presenting "Things as They Are": John Sommerfield's *May Day* and Mass Observation', in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 147.

until their clangour sounded everywhere, until even the radio and the newspapers, the loudest instruments in the orchestra of suppression were forced to echo the undertone of a working-class motif' (67). Madge's essay, published the following year, provides a real life example of such an intervention: 'The man who interrupted a variety broadcast with a cry of 'Mrs Simpson' was voicing the desire of millions of listeners to break down official reticence.'³⁵ This action made public what had been officially repressed. Radicalisation in *May Day* tends to be catalysed by these types of articulation and clarification, as when one dockworker tells another 'There's a big change needed', realising immediately that '[h]e had never spoken to the mate like that before' (159). For all the naivety of such a faith in the transformative possibilities of public utterance, such interventions were central to the political imagination of Popular Front writers, and reflect a belief that a broad, progressive formation, alienated and ignored by mainstream representational forms, already existed in latent form, awaiting activation: in Jack Lindsay's novel of the English Civil War, *1649*, the radical Levellers pursue a popular consensus felt to be immanent: 'The voice was there, speaking, desired, awaited. But could it speak loud enough and soon enough?'³⁶

2.3 Memory & Montage

The possibility of such a formation being called to consciousness is explored through the montage form of the novel, which tracks a range of characters on the run-up to the May Day demonstration. The possibility of integration and the overcoming of alienation are central problems. The tone is set by the opening scene in which James Seton, a working-class Communist sailor returned to London from sea, awakens as his ship docks. This moment of return is figured as a fulfilment of something anticipated in a dream: 'An image floated in his drowsing mind, an image that he accompanied him to sleep, of a drifting constellation of lights seen across dark waters' (27). James's exile from London produces a temporal and geographic dislocation: 'They had been away too long; they had been too far' (27), and he contemplates the 'coming break as if it were a new, strange thing'; a rupture in which his workmates will find their hopes and fears 'no longer bound together' (28). This estrangement is mirrored in his brother John's state of displacement. He is re-

³⁵ Madge, 'Press, Radio & Social Consciousness', p. 159.

³⁶ Jack Lindsay, *1649: A Novel of a Year* (London: Methuen, 1938), p. 240.

entering work after a spell of unemployment, a change that he experiences as a decisive temporal break separating 'now' from 'then' (32). The security proffered by work secures his sense of identity against the alienation of unemployment, the 'shut faces' of the authorities to his plight. For James, the reverse is true: returning from sea he is now workless and placeless. Life on land is alienating: 'All these faces had been and were shut from him: he was a stranger who did not exist for them' (53). The echoing of 'shut' confirms the connection between the brothers and the analogy of their experiences. This return from exile is figured as offering James both personal and political redemption through his resolve to find his brother: 'it seemed to James as if that kind, honest solidity of his brother was a thing of which he had long been in need, a balm for the disquietude which he had suffered since he had left Spain, a fugitive from a revolt drowned in blood' (29). This announces the novel's preoccupation with the intricate intertwining of personal and political memory: James's involvement with a failed uprising (unspecified in the text, but suggestive of the Asturias revolt of 1934) can only be exorcised by a re-forging of a link to his past, a re-establishment of personal history. The interdependence of personal and political exile is expressed in humanist terms as an image of alienation from human fulfilment: 'Beauty, the token of his exile, flowered from bricks and pavements' (74). The novel takes up several modernist themes - exile, sympathetic connections between characters, and the work of time and memory - but recalibrates them in materialist terms, as symptoms of the dislocations and displacements wrought by capitalism.

Although Nick Hubble has read *May Day* in terms of an extension of a modernist problem of intersubjectivity,³⁷ I would suggest Sommerfield develops his earlier subjective preoccupations into a sustained, Marxist-informed exploration of alienation, and that the politics of alienation are crucial to understanding the novel's experimental form. Readings of the novel have tended to note that the novel's structure privileges the reader, giving them a perspective to which the characters do not have access within what Brian McKenna calls their own 'micro-stories.'³⁸ Sommerfield does however work throughout the novel with solutions to the problem of alienation at the level of character. This is chiefly done through his figurations of the connection-making process of memory. At the level of

³⁷ Nick Hubble, 'John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation', p. 134.

³⁸ Brian McKenna, 'The British Communist Novel of the 1930s and 1940s: "A Party of Equals"? (And Does That Matter?)', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 47, No. 187 (August 1996), p. 376.

character, memory takes on what Walter Benjamin describes as the ‘epic and rhapsodic’ quality of ‘genuine memory’, which must ‘yield an image of the person who remembers’.³⁹ James Seton returns to a city layered with memory: ‘He must ‘live again the memory-changed scenes of childhood, from whose actuality his memory had travelled so long a journey that he recollected them half-uncomprehendingly, half with an adult stranger’s sight’ (71). The images that memory yields suggest a utopian function:

And his mother gave him an orange. ‘Share it with John’, she said, and he did, amicably for once. Her worn face creased peacefully. This was the scene he now remembered, sweet with the overtones of remoteness, loaded with the rich harmonics of past time. The heavy blossom-scent and the evening’s islanded quiet affected him now, not as if it was an image of a scene through which he had lived but the memory of some picture seen long ago (72).

At one level Sommerfield is adapting a modernist emphasis on time and memory for different political ends. In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, Septimus Smith is driven to suicide by the traumas of memory, by an inability to come to terms with the past as past, so that he feels the past and present blend into an unbearable synchronicity: ‘The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself-’⁴⁰ In Sommerfield’s novel, however, memory maintains the vital link between past and present that is shown to be integral to political consciousness. Where in *Mrs Dalloway*, memory presages the break-up of identity, the fatal intrusion of the external into the integrity of Septimus’s self, in *May Day* memory is integral to the recognition of the self as socially and historically constituted. The Communist poet, historian and novelist Jack Lindsay described this narrative tendency, in a survey of socialist novels in *Left Review*, in terms of ‘recognition’. In classical drama, Lindsay argued, recognition

lay in the sense of getting back to a contact with the fullness of life, of entering into a larger life, a more conscious relationship. Now Recognition appears as the point

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Excavation and Memory’, in *Selected Writings: Volume Two, Part 2, 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 576.

⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 69. Keith Williams offers a thorough account of *May Day*’s relationship with canonical modernist texts, especially Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in ‘Joyce’s “Chinese Alphabet”: *Ulysses* and the Proletarians’, in *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion*, ed. Paul Hyland (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1991), pp. 181-185.

where the shell of the old self cracks and the new self is born, breaking into new spaces of activity and achieving fullness of social contact.⁴¹

The ‘new self’ in *May Day* is expressed in the self-recognition that James finds in the mass demonstration: ‘the dear familiarity of these surroundings and the deep meaning of my own life for this scene’ (213). Integration of past and future selves is continuous with social integration.

May Day’s narrative technique moves between different individuals, but also between different styles and genres: it includes ‘factual’ and statistical sections that anticipate Sommerfield’s extensive work with Mass Observation. It is the type of ‘composite method’ that Arthur Calder-Marshall considered ‘the path by which a new social novel could be written.’⁴² There is also a confidence in parody: Sommerfield appropriates tones and styles associated with high modernism to describe the consciousness of his upper-class characters, particularly Pamela Allin and Peter Langfier. Pamela’s shopping trip is described in tones that recall Woolf: ‘In London my thoughts are by the clangour of the lives of millions of people [...] And here, where this harsh and dangerous atmosphere is shut out I am invaded and disturbed by other alienated atmospheres’ (161). *May Day*’s narrative moves between different individuals, but also between different styles and genres in a montage form. A section called ‘The Movements of People in London on April 30th’ emulates documentary-style voice-over: ‘Now, between five and seven, there is the greatest volume of movement’ (175). Another short section emulates the sound of typewriters and printing presses, ‘Dear Sir Madam Sir Dear Comrade Yours faithfully truly fraternally Thanking you in anticipation’, in an echo of Ruttmann.⁴³ Sommerfield’s novel adopts such a ‘composite’ structure, in which the relationships between the individual components are central to the work’s meaning, and this montage principle is the means by which Sommerfield attempts an expression of the social totality. In asserting the essentially interconnected nature of all individuals and world-historical reality, we may consider *May Day* as an experiment in the epic. The connection between epic and the montage form was made by Walter Benjamin in his review of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Benjamin argued that Döblin’s montage

⁴¹ Jack Lindsay, ‘Man in Society’, *Left Review*, II: 11 (January 1937), p. 840; emphasis in original.

⁴² Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, *Fact* 4 (July 1937), p. 42.

⁴³ In Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, the second ‘akt’ features a scene of office workers typing furiously which resolves into a swirling shot of typewriter keys (at 21:52-23.22).

technique, in which documents, incidents, songs and advertisements ‘rain down’ in the text, ‘explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities’.⁴⁴ Like Döblin, Sommerfield constructs a text in which documents and fragments ‘rain down’: ‘The slogans, the rain of leaflets, the shouts and songs of demonstrators echoed in a million minds’ (67). For John, the sight of a Communist leaflet serves to temporarily focalise his entire situation: ‘He saw it with a sense of recognition, he knew it was connected with a whole group of feelings, associations and events’ (180).

Sommerfield’s decision to compress the action of the novel into a short time frame enables the use of a montage method composed of short scenes taking place almost simultaneously. Recurring images and phrases provide much of the connecting framework between these scenes, rather than a direct narrative method.⁴⁵ In his deployment of montage, however, Sommerfield is at important variance with Georg Lukács, one of the major theorists of the epic. Lukács developed Hegel’s central category of totality into a vision of the social totality marked by ‘the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts.’⁴⁶ In such a structure, all parts are ‘objectively interrelated.’⁴⁷ This objective interdependence, however, may be experienced as its opposite - as the apparent autonomy of the parts. Lukács rejected the technique of montage and other modernist forms on the grounds that they merely reproduced this superficial fragmentation. Remaining ‘frozen in their own immediacy’, they ‘fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experience to the hidden social forces that produce them.’⁴⁸ The apparent incompatibility of Sommerfield’s form with Lukács’s version of realism has been noted by Gustav Klaus, but to argue as Klaus does that ‘Sommerfield simply starts from different premises’, so that Lukács’s criticisms are ‘irrelevant’, is to overlook important points of correspondence.⁴⁹ In spite of Lukács’s rejection of montage as fragmentary and incoherent formalism, Sommerfield’s montage articulates a model of

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Crisis in the Novel’, in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 301.

⁴⁵ Stuart Laing, ‘Presenting “Things as They Are”’, p. 149.

⁴⁶ Georg Lukács, ‘The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg’, in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 27.

⁴⁷ Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (1980; London: Verso, 2007), p. 32.

⁴⁸ Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, pp. 36-7.

⁴⁹ H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour*, p. 117.

the relations between the parts and the whole that is essentially congruent with Lukács's version of totality. Sommerfield attempts to show both the appearance of reification and the actual 'objective' relations.

In the reified world of the bourgeois characters in the novel, power is a mystery: doors are opened 'by men who moved as if they were trying to be invisible' (63). The façade is such that it can absorb inconvenient realities: had 'an elephant' appeared 'they would have managed to make him seemly and unobtrusive' (63). This is a world of illusion in which labour is thoroughly disguised, in which phenomena do appear as independent. Indeed, through Peter Langfier and Pamela Allin, Sommerfield seems to echo Lukács's account of the antinomies of reified bourgeois consciousness: Pamela's minutely descriptive perceptions make her a 'completely passive observer moving in obedience to laws which [her consciousness] can never control'; Peter, meanwhile, is paralysed by his freedom of choice and is thus unable to distinguish real life from fantasy, revealing a consciousness that 'regards itself as a power which is able of its own - subjective - volition to master the essentially meaningless motion of objects.'⁵⁰ But Sommerfield is anxious to acknowledge the progressive potential of bourgeois dissidence as part of the alliance-making ethos of the Popular Front. Peter's flights of fancy, his romantic attachment to 'the heroics of technology' (55), are abruptly terminated when, visiting his father's factory after an accident in which a factory girl is scalped by a machine, he sees the grotesque evidence of the realities of exploitation: a 'tangle of blood and hair [...] wedged between the belt and the pulley wheel' (228). This encounter with the reality of technologized production deflates his earlier heroic fantasies, but his romantic temperament is shown to have its positive effect, enabling him to recognise the victim as 'a young girl who may have been looking forward to seeing a lover that evening' (229). While typifying Peter as bearing the modernist sensibility characteristic of polarised bourgeois consciousness, Sommerfield is also anxious to identify recuperable tendencies. He therefore exploits a critique of modernism not simply to reject or denigrate it, but rather to integrate it as a moment of possible dissidence.

⁵⁰ Georg Lukács, 'Class Consciousness', in *History & Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1975), p. 77.

Through the recurring references to a single commodity, the artificial leather product produced by Langfrier's factory, Sommerfield links together the moments of the productive process, and thereby de-reifies the commodity, stripping it of its appearance of objective independence. If, in Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known formulation, 'all reification is a forgetting', Sommerfield's use of montage and juxtaposition engages the reader's memory to continually resituate the commodity in context, referring the product back to the productive process.⁵¹ The commodity in circulation is seen from a range of perspectives: the artificial leather features in John's wife Martine's dreams of a better domestic life (128), on the seats of taxis, and in the study of the reactionary union leader Raggett (141). Each scene bears the legible trace of the economic mode. In one short, isolated scene, a destitute old woman is seen 'grubbing in Soho dustbins for scraps of food', carrying 'a shabby bag made of squares of artificial leather' (192). The detail gives the commodity concrete social significance that serves to emphasise the isolation of the character, who does not reappear in the novel. The montage therefore restores the link between commodity and labour that Lukács assumed could only be lost by the fragmentation of aesthetic form. Yet such de-reification was essential to Lukács's sense of epic in the thirties.⁵² Once again, Sommerfield appears to be working towards the epic and totalising ambitions that define Lukács's programme – suggesting that those ambitions resonated for British novelists even if they were not fully theorised – but doing so without being committed to a traditionally realist form.

Sommerfield indeed appears at one point to deploy montage juxtapositions to dramatize thirties aesthetic debates over modernism and realism, and over the position of intellectuals in relation to mass culture. Sommerfield narrates a scene set in a music hall, where a strike threatens to disrupt the opening of the appositely titled *Backwards and Forwards*, 'the musical comedy that is going to be DIFFERENT', and follows it immediately with an antithetical scene featuring a lone man who 'looked like an intellectual' (146-9). In the theatre, a bustling scene featuring a vast list of characters involved in the production of the musical resolves into a demand for a strike. This suggests

⁵¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 191.

⁵² The connection is most explicit in Georg Lukács, 'Essay on the Novel', *International Literature*, 1936:5, p. 74.

that this collective – though commercial – form of art has affinity with collective forms of action (even if the musical’s title suggests that such action will not necessarily mean an advance). The succeeding scene concerns a lone intellectual who seems to stand for the inadequate response of many of the intelligentsia to the demands of anti-Fascism. Reluctantly and bitterly politicised, he regards the masses as to be ‘alternately pitied and despised’ (150). He loathes both mass culture, ‘people sitting in the warm darkness of the picture houses, lapped with the sickly disgusting tide of drugging, lying thought’, and a high culture in decay (151). His inability to meaningfully discriminate is encapsulated in a passage that presents images, theories and commodities as a jumbled, undifferentiated mass in a bookshop window: ‘Cover designs abounded with romantic photomontage and abstract representations of the Workers, red flags, hammers and sickles, fasces, swastikas, a chaotic jumble of baggage dropped in the great retreat of bourgeois thought’ (151). This is precisely the decadence Lukács identified in the bourgeoisie, an abdication of critical thought and discrimination, the ‘a sticking together of disconnected facts’.⁵³ What this character is unable to see is the strike being orchestrated behind the scenes in the music hall. He mistakes the product for the labour process that creates it, and thus is blind to the radical potential of popular culture. Sommerfield’s use of juxtaposition here reflects a Lukácsian critique of bourgeois intellectual culture while asserting the revolutionary potential of the collective aesthetic labour that produces the mass cultural form.

2.4 Myth & Tradition

Sommerfield therefore shows that the personal, political and aesthetic aspects of alienation are related. I will suggest that the novel attempts to solve these problems not just through the formal procedure of montage but also through the thematic and structural work of myth and tradition. These are terms closely associated with modernism, and especially the ‘mythic method’, which T.S. Eliot considered Joyce’s discovery in *Ulysses*.⁵⁴ But again we find them given materialist co-ordinates. The central myth in *May Day* is the General

⁵³ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Trans. Hannah & Stanley Mitchell; London: Penguin, 1976), p. 302.

⁵⁴ T.S. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order and Myth’ (1923), in reprinted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al., eds., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998), pp. 371-373.

Strike, encompassing both the historical strike of 1926 and an ideal form of it. Tradition – the May Day tradition that is both a festival of springtime and a moment of the labour movement – mediates between individual memory and the totality of history. The practices of tradition give graspable and intelligible form to historical processes: ‘A revolution is not a fight between those on one side of the line and those on the other. But today things are artificially simplified’ (203). While the Communist Party’s 1935 programme, *For Soviet Britain*, was strongly forward-looking in envisioning a ‘workers’ dictatorship’ with new, Soviet-style institutions, and rejecting existing institutions as inherently alien to the interests of the workers, this emphasis was reversed in the Popular Front era.⁵⁵ Tradition was central to the Popular Front’s most defining ambition of activating a progressive, popular consensus, drawing from the past the images of popular resistance from the Peasants’ Revolt through to the anti-fascist struggle. ‘Things aren’t the same in England’, the narrator of *May Day* tells us, identifying in the English May Day traditions a possible way of staging resistance to the increasingly invisible, decentred and denationalised forces of capitalism. The temporary massing of the workers overcomes that dislocation, just as, more widely, the labour movement is figured as the ‘home’ of the alienated sailor James Seton.

There is a fundamental ambiguity in this: May Day on the one hand stands for the modern, working-class, internationalist movement, and on the other as a folk festivity in which communities would celebrate the coming of summer. As in the work of Jack Lindsay, there is an attempt to align these two cultural practices in the cause of defining a resistant, alternative tradition in which all those opposed to capitalism could position themselves.⁵⁶ There is a recurring tension between the spontaneity of a workers’ uprising, provoked by specific material conditions in particular workplaces, and the highly organised, disciplined and non-spontaneous enactment of an annual tradition. The use of tradition in the novel may be read as corresponding to one of the emphases of socialist realism as expressed by both Gorky and Bukharin. Both writers envisage socialist realism

⁵⁵ Communist Party of Great Britain, ‘Workers’ Dictatorship is Democracy for the Workers’, *For Soviet Britain*, 1935, http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/congresses/XIII/soviet_britain.htm.

⁵⁶ Lindsay’s key statement of alternative traditionalism was his poem ‘not english?’ which appeared in the *Left Review* the same month *May Day* was published (II: 8, May 1936, pp. 353-8).

as aiming for the quality of myth, in Bukharin's phrase, 'extreme generality'⁵⁷. *May Day* opens with a statement of its generalising and typifying strategy: it claims to be set 'in an average year between 1930-40',⁵⁸ both distancing it from real events and claiming for itself the status of a document of general social forces and tendencies. Tradition is a key organising principle by which those tendencies are given shape in the novel. The May Day celebrations of 1935 and 1936 in particular gave Communists and socialists the occasion to attempt to define a unifying tradition. In 1935, the celebrations for May Day coincided with the Silver Jubilee of George V, and the literature promoting the May Day marches clearly positions May Day as part of a counter-tradition to the patriotic and monarchical one exemplified by the Jubilee. The Souvenir Programme for the London May Day rally was emphatic on the point: 'Let May Day in London be the prelude to new victories over the National Government, and be the means of extending and spreading working-class internationalism as a reply to the poisonous and false patriotic propaganda that will be spread during the Jubilee.'⁵⁹ The programme for the event, however, reveals the conflict within the labour movement over the definition and control of the May Day tradition. The London rally was staged not on the first of May but on Sunday the fifth, a decision that is regarded with some regret. The programmes for the 1935, 1936 and 1937 London rallies all feature the same passage by Engels written on the first of May, 1890:

as I write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilised for the first time, mobilised as *one* army, under *one* flag, for *one* immediate aim: the standard eight hour working day [...].⁶⁰

Engels' account of the London event is rather different, however, and records the quarrels arising from attempts to hold the event on the fourth.⁶¹ This dispute features in Sommerfield's *May Day*, too: the Langfrier's carpenters discuss their irritation at their union's decision to march on a Sunday: 'May Day's the first of May', they think, 'and

⁵⁷ Nikolai Bukharin, 'Poetry, Poetics and The Problems of Poetry in the USSR, *Problems of Soviet Literature*, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 256; Maxim Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', *Problems of Soviet Literature*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ Sommerfield, 'Note', *May Day*, p. 20.

⁵⁹ All-London First of May Demonstration Committee, *May Day 1935: Official Souvenir Programme*, May Day Collection, Working Class Movement Library, Salford, Box 1.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Engels, 'Preface to the German Edition of 1890', in Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 70; emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Engels, 'May 4th in London' *Arbeiter Zeitung*, May 23, 1890, trans. Kenneth Lapides, online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/05/23.htm>.

that's good enough for us.' 'May Day on *Sunday*', thinks Peter Lamont, who has had his own 'one-day strike on May Day for thirty-five years' (45). Sure enough, circumstances in the novel conspire with the work of the Communists to ensure that a mass strike does take place on the first of May, in spite of the best efforts of the reactionary union leader, Raggett. The novel therefore reiterates certain tensions within the movement about its own history.

The question of the legacy of the 1926 General Strike is a crucial point of tensions in the novel's work with tradition. The May Day celebrations of 1936, the month Sommerfield's novel was published, took up the tenth anniversary of the strike and attempted to incorporate its problematic legacy into the labour tradition. The *Daily Worker* ran the headline '1926 Inspires 1936',⁶² and the *Left Review* featured commemorative analyses such as Eva C. Reckitt's 'Ten Years Ago', in which Reckitt recalled that, 'The mosaic of the working-class movement, split up into a thousand fragments, was for those nine days welded into a real class unity, a spontaneous rallying of all working-class forces in a way which transcended all the barriers of divided industrial and political organisation'.⁶³ Perhaps most significantly, however, the souvenir programme of the London rally contained a piece in which Ben Lennard claimed that, 'Not yet, but certainly one day, we shall be able to look back to 1926 and say that it was our 1905 – the defeat that made possible and certain our final triumph.'⁶⁴ The need to reunify the labour movement after the divisive conclusion of the strike is a recurring theme in left writing during the decade that followed it; Jock MacKelvie, the working-class leader in James Barke's *Major Operation*, is at the start of the novel disengaged from political activity as a consequence of his belief that it 'finished' the labour movement.⁶⁵ In *May Day*, meanwhile, 1926 provides an important precedent for the actions of the Communist characters seeking to draw the particular grievances of isolated workplaces into a mass movement.

⁶² *Daily Worker*, 25 April, 1936, p. 1.

⁶³ Eve C. Reckitt, 'Ten Years Ago', *Left Review*, II: 8 (May 1936), p. 352.

⁶⁴ Ben Lennard, 'Ten Years Back on May Day 1926', in All London First of May Demonstration Committee, *May Day 1936: Souvenir Programme*, p. 3. May Day Collection, Working Class Movement Library, Salford, Box 1.

⁶⁵ James Barke, *Major Operation*, p. 66.

The General Strike that is imagined in *May Day* operates at two levels: at one level the actual historical legacy of the 1926 strike presents itself as a problematic legacy from which lessons can be learned, but which haunts the text as a failure (223). At a second level however one finds the General Strike presented in a manner consonant with Georges Sorel's analysis of it in terms of myth. The prospect of a mass strike presents itself as an outpouring of possibility: 'Everywhere the accumulated bitterness of weeks and months and years' is 'bursting forth' (160). These levels of history and myth, inglorious history and radical possibility, conflict in the characters' minds in order to recast the events of 1926 as a 'rehearsal', subsuming them to a greater, as yet unrealised event (204). The demonstration is therefore both production and reproduction: the reproduction of tradition and the production of a new situation, the 'new thoughts' in people's minds (211). James feels himself no longer a 'spectator', alienated from historical reality, but instead a participant and actor in a mass drama; the move from contemplation to activism, as prescribed by Fox as a necessary measure for the recovery of the 'lost art of prose', is clearly marked.⁶⁶

The power of the 'myth' of the General Strike is to augment the consciousness of a scheduled interruption of the labour process - the May Day holiday - with radical future possibilities. The strike, for Sorel, is a way of imaging to the proletariat its own history: 'appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness.'⁶⁷ Political consciousness arises *in* the strike, and the acquisition of such consciousness is described in epiphanic terms: 'We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness - and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously'.⁶⁸ In Sommerfield's novel, both these aspects are suggested in James Seton's sense of unity with the crowd. He finds in the demonstration the solution to his 'painful memories' of the failed revolt in Spain: 'I sink my identity into the calm quietness of this waiting crowd, I am part of it, sharer in its strength ... and the solution of my conflicts is bound up with the fate of this mass' (213). Although the violent outcome of the novel is suggestive of the limits of the possibility, Arthur Calder-Marshall made the case that this narrative tendency

⁶⁶ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 136.

⁶⁷ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999, ed., Jeremy Jennings), p. 118.

⁶⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 118.

in socialist fiction was in fact a way of managing and transforming the reality of political violence: 'Taken in its wider context, it becomes an incident in the political education of the group, not the end of protest, but the beginning of militancy.'⁶⁹

If this politicised commemoration is the expression of one of the two poles of the May Day tradition, that of political, rather than social, revolution, then Pat's feeling that there are 'new thoughts in people's minds' evokes the second possible meaning of the tradition: as a spontaneous community celebration of rebirth and renewal. This is a reading of the May Day tradition articulated in a *Left Review* editorial produced the following year by the poet Randall Swingler, which asked, 'What is the deepest concept in all art, the form on which our dramas and lyrics depend? It is the concept of struggle forged by men at work, by men and women joined in harmony in the struggle against Nature. It is the story of the death and re-birth of the Year.'⁷⁰ In *Left Review* in May 1938, Jack Lindsay argued that the May Day tradition was part of the deep structure of culture itself: it symbolises 'all that is joyous, vital, constructive in the tradition of human activity, cultural as well as productive.'⁷¹ It is a tradition of popular justice, the occasion when the people 'deposed or punished their governors, their barons or kings.'⁷² Lindsay stressed the unifying potential of this tradition, which he saw as a cultural expression of the fundamental relationship between man and nature, of 'his courageous attempts to merge dialectically with nature through work'.⁷³ The promises of spring in the novel produce hope and anticipation of the future in the minds of *May Day*'s characters, but the promise is interpreted in different ways. The frustration of the hopes represented by spring instils the sailor James Seton with a political sensibility: 'The spring had mocked his hungry mouth with splendour, had mocked the soiled parade of the pavements with delight' so that 'James had become a Communist [...] The trees had hung out flags of a foreign country to him, and he had got himself a new flag, the banner of a different spring, whose harvest would be plentiful – the spring of revolution' (74-5). On returning from sea, James reconnects with that tradition: 'Those rough chalked letters moved him strongly: they were

⁶⁹ Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction', p. 43.

⁷⁰ Randall Swingler, 'The Cultural Meaning of May Day' [Editorial], *Left Review*, III: 3, (April 1937), p. 130.

⁷¹ Jack Lindsay, 'The May Day Tradition', *Left Review*, III: 12 (May 1938), p. 963.

⁷² Lindsay, 'The May Day Tradition', p. 964.

⁷³ Lindsay, 'The May Day Tradition', p. 966.

the first visible signs of the revolutionary movement that he had encountered for so long' (54). This reconnection provides him with a renewed sense of historical orientation: he feels suddenly 'clear-headed, potent and full of purpose' (54).

The unifying potential of May Day comes, therefore, from its popular utopianism, from its augmentation of reality by 'the desired, the possible' that Maxim Gorky identified as the essential structure of socialist realism.⁷⁴ It thus seems to address an issue Lukács raises in his argument that writers with an 'incorrect' understanding of the relationship between the individual and society cannot narrate revolutionary moments: 'the problems of popular life take on an abstract sociological, merely descriptive, lifeless and falsely objective character. And this appears at its crudest when the subject is the revolutionary moment.'⁷⁵ Such writers may be able to characterise the leaders of these movements in a satisfactory way, but 'the popular movement appears as a homogeneously chaotic mass impelled by some mystical natural force.'⁷⁶ *May Day* can be seen working its way towards this aesthetic problem, even though it was not a developed part of theoretical debates in British Marxist criticism at this time. The novel suggests Lukács's interpretation of popular revolts not as acts of extraordinary heroism but as 'necessary continuations and intensifications of normal popular life'⁷⁷. *May Day*'s synchronised narrative, moving between different individuals and groups during a narrow time frame, dispenses with linear cause-and-effect to demonstrate how specific combinations of circumstances conspire to drive individuals towards a shared point of convergence. The arrangements for the May Day events were carefully orchestrated: maps were produced detailing different meeting points with the slogan 'All Roads Lead To Hyde Park.'⁷⁸ *May Day* is narrated from within this orchestrated movement. It critically rewrites the city against the conventions of alienation and the unknowable mass, a process Fredric Jameson envisages as 'the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and

⁷⁴ Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', p. 44.

⁷⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 360.

⁷⁶ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 360.

⁷⁷ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 360

⁷⁸ In the programmes for the London marches in 1935, 1936 and 1937; May Day Collection, Working Class Movement Library, Salford, Box 1.

remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories.⁷⁹ Perhaps the best counterpoint to *May Day*'s vision of the political possibilities of the modern city is Graham Greene's *It's A Battlefield* (1934), another novel concerned with the London working class and Communist politics. But Greene's London is a city of missed connections, in which characters fail to experience the solidarity in action that is the heart of Sommerfield's text. The novel's densely ironic mode reveals a world of arbitrary systems of exchange and murky, but always mundane, corruption.⁸⁰ Characters are shown to be without hope of grasping the connections between them and the networks of power surrounding them: 'Oh, the pattern. No-one can understand the pattern', one character bleakly acknowledges (referring, with typical irony, to a crochet pattern).⁸¹ In turn, Greene is rewriting the London of the classic detective novel, and especially of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, drawing instead a city that individual reason cannot penetrate and in which justice cannot be done. Against both these traditions, of the triumph of individual reason and of the despair of urban alienation, Sommerfield narrates a comprehensible, and hence transformable, city, aligning elements of resistant and emergent traditions, in Raymond Williams' terms, to suggest the beginnings of a new, popular organised politics.⁸²

Conclusion

Although on its publication the *Times Literary Supplement* considered *May Day* simply 'communist propaganda in the form of fiction',⁸³ I have tried to show here that the novel gives a politicised, materialist orientation to modernist themes and strategies not obviously compatible with the propagandist interpretation of socialist realism. By contrast, Nick Hubble has argued that, given Karl Radek's denunciation of Joyce at the Soviet Writers' Congress, *May Day*'s 'overt usage of modernist techniques has to be seen as a deliberate act of defiance',⁸⁴ but this, too, I would suggest, misrepresents British Marxists' relationships both with literary modernism and with Soviet-oriented socialist realism. As I

⁷⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 51.

⁸⁰ Graham Greene, *It's A Battlefield* (1934, London: Penguin: 1980).

⁸¹ Greene, *It's A Battlefield*, p. 120.

⁸² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, OUP, 1977), pp. 122-124.

⁸³ Cited in Stuart Laing, 'Presenting "Things as They Are"', p. 147.

⁸⁴ Nick Hubble, 'John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation', p. 140.

argued in the last chapter, the Marxist critique of modernism was limited in scope, poorly elaborated in respect of technique, and premised on much acknowledged common ground. In its quite nuanced understanding of a politics of modernist form, *May Day* may be said to articulate a deeper and more sophisticated critique of modernism than can be found in the work of Ralph Fox or Alick West, effecting the kind of absorption of modernism's critical power that I have suggested Fox's work, in particular, did not. This novel, then, may be seen as a site of important formal and critical debate, not merely a statement of defiance. This is a fact necessarily occluded by studies that have focused exclusively on critical writing in their considerations of British Marxists' literary politics.⁸⁵ *May Day* is, as its author admitted much later, idealistic to the point of naivety;⁸⁶ the idealism of its vision of the London working-class turning to Communism is evidenced by the huge exaggeration of Party membership figures in the text.⁸⁷ In this sense, it locates itself with the utopian valence of socialist realism's commitment to 'the desired, the possible'. On the other hand, on *May Day* the following year, unprecedented strike action did break out in London, led by Communist transport workers but spreading to a wider movement, given urgency and vitality by the symbolic force of the bombing of Guernica a few days before.⁸⁸ In this sense, the novel functions as kind of mythic model for energies and possibilities that did in fact exist, rather than as simple wishful thinking. In the next chapter, I will extend this discussion of the politics of form and of the ideal and the realistic to a novel very preoccupied with wishful thinking, Arthur Calder-Marshall's *Pie in the Sky*, a text much more marked by the anxieties of Stalinism and the repressive potential of realism.

⁸⁵ Philip Bounds' study is the best example of this view (*British Communism and the Politics of Literature, 1928-1939*; Pontypool: Merlin, 2012); while detailed in its examination of important Marxist critics (chiefly Fox, West and Caudwell), it does not extend its perspective to the wider literary culture.

⁸⁶ Sommerfield, 'Postscript: Author's Note for the 1984 Edition', *May Day*, p. 243.

⁸⁷ As Andy Croft points out, the statistical interlude in the novel (pp. 195-7) credits the Party with 7000 members in London; in fact, the Party had only about that number nationally. *Red Letter Days*, p. 261.

⁸⁸ For an account of these events, see John Saville, 'May Day 1937', in Asa Briggs and John Saville, ed., *Essays in Labour History: 1918-1939* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1977), pp. 232-237.

Chapter Three: Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Pie in the Sky* (1937)

In the previous chapter, the formal experiments in John Sommerfield's *May Day* were considered in terms of critical appropriations from the modernist repertoire, which sought to give materialist bearings to high modernist tropes as well as dramatizing aesthetic controversies. Sommerfield's novel is a product of the moment in which Communists were encouraged to mute vanguardist accents in order to emphasise the building of a mass movement; the collective narration and circulation of Communist language in the novel attempts to bind the city into a new, popular formation. The ability of the Communists' slogans to perform this connecting work exemplifies a faith in the existence of a radical, popular consensus that had only to be activated through language. *May Day* works to assert the capacity of traditional rites and practices to provide the ground for an overcoming of social fragmentation and the bridging of gaps between popular life and organised politics. In this chapter, I consider another novel published by a Communist, Arthur Calder-Marshall's *Pie in the Sky*, which appeared in January 1937. The novel provides a useful counter-point to Sommerfield's insofar as it explores comparable questions – questions of articulation and of how connections can be made – as well as adopting a collective form, moving through the perspectives of a variety of characters and adopting a range of modes, tones and formal devices. However, this novel is far more sceptical and conflicted than Sommerfield's about whether and how a unifying language could speak to a fragmented society and whether language can express the truth of a social situation in the unambiguous way *May Day* supposes.

The novel plots the intertwining stories of two families, the Yorkes and the Boltons, in a fictional industrial town. Carder Yorke has risen from working-class origins to become a factory owner, while his childhood friend, Henry Bolton, has remained a worker and been made unemployed by Carder during the Depression. The connection continues in the next generation, as Yorke's son Fenner, a journalist and writer, engages in a relationship with Bolton's Communist daughter, Caroline. Yorke's other son, Bernard, is a priggish bully who despises his father's relationships with women. These central figures are used to typify class and generational positions: Carder has benefited from the Great

War and become middle class, while Henry has borne the brunt of the Depression in long-term unemployment. Caroline and Fenner are representatives of the educated young people (like Calder-Marshall) who turned to Communism under the threat of fascism and the lingering effects of the Depression; while Bernard – as I discuss below – is a proto-fascist, representing the ‘most reactionary, most chauvinist’ elements of the bourgeoisie.¹ The key outcome of the novel is Fenner’s declaration of commitment to a new kind of writing, renouncing his earlier individualism. It is Fenner’s struggle to this point that is core of the text’s intervention in questions of political aesthetics, and should be seen within Calder-Marshall’s own developmental trajectory. In the introduction to this thesis, Calder-Marshall was described as something of an archetype of the fellow-travelling Communist of the thirties: educated at public school and Oxford, drawn to Communism before publicly breaking with it at the decade’s close. It is easy to assume from his subsequent recantation that his commitments were superficial; nonetheless, the considerable energy he poured into his literary-political activities should at least suggest that he himself took his political engagements seriously, for however short a time.² He was a regular contributor to left-wing periodicals including *Left Review* and *Fact*, contributing an essay on narrative to *Fact*’s influential ‘Writing in Revolt: Theory and Examples’ edition.³ He was closely connected with organisations such as the Left Book Club Writers Group, and a key part of Communist social life in London in the mid-thirties.⁴ Like Sommerfield, he was an important influence on the social and literary life of Malcolm Lowry; in a publication commemorating Lowry, he recalled an eventful visit to Lowry’s home in Mexico in 1937, shortly after *Pie in the Sky*’s publication, in which he describes himself as at that time ‘frightfully, boringly Communist’, and that Lowry used ‘all the boring bits’ for his Communist character, Hugh, in *Under the Volcano*.⁵

Calder-Marshall’s strongest statements on what he took to be the role of the novel in political struggle and the responsibilities of the Communist writer were published during 1937; these include his essay in *Fact* and his collection of essays on social topics,

¹ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 10.

² Calder-Marshall’s break with Communism was announced in ‘The Pink Decade’, *New Statesman and Nation*, 15 February, 1941, pp. 157-8.

³ Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’. *Fact*, 4 (July 1937), pp. 38-44.

⁴ Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler*, (Manchester: MUP, 2002), pp. 70-71.

⁵ Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘A Visit from the Calder-Marshalls’, in Gordon Bowker, ed., *Malcolm Lowry Remembered* (London: Ariel/ BBC, 1985), p. 113.

The Changing Scene, in which he closely echoes Ralph Fox and, to a certain extent, the programme of socialist realism more generally. These commitments were, however, relatively new for Calder-Marshall. I will suggest that *Pie in the Sky*, published in January 1937, is a text bearing out the transition of his thinking between his contribution to Geoffrey Grigson's symposium *The Arts To-Day* (published in September 1935) and his volume of essays on social and cultural topics, *The Changing Scene* (published in July 1937). In his contribution to Grigson's *The Arts To-Day*, Calder-Marshall is chiefly concerned with two related topics: the after-effects of the First World War and the collapse of religious belief. The collapse of faith in God, he thought, led to 'a disbelief in the goodness of the parent', which in turn leads to a 'union of the children to take over the task of self-preservation', a generational revolt he saw manifest in both communism and fascism.⁶ This generational conflict within British society was exacerbated by the stalled progress of post-war reconstruction. The 'uneventfulness' of the immediate years after the war, Calder-Marshall thought, had provided no outlet for the emotions the war had stirred; the 'problems of reconstruction, which might have provided a release of national feeling, if properly organised, were shelved.'⁷ Without 'the old neurotic outlet', either in war or in the peaceful rebuilding of the country, the British people were 'faced again with their own neuroses'.⁸ The crisis posed by the thirties provided an opportunity to divert those neuroses into social action: 'The war within the self can be postponed in face of objective war and the fear of it.'⁹ In the same essay, he identifies two tendencies within fiction that will secure the future of the novel against the threat of what he considers vapid and commercialised 'fictioneering', in which the 'desire to amuse, soothe or terrify has supplanted the ability to feel, sympathise and judge'.¹⁰ One tendency, represented by Joyce, Lawrence and Kafka, is towards the 'deepening of the novel'; the other, represented by Dos Passos's novels and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, is towards the 'broadening' of it.¹¹ Calder-Marshall suggests – but does not make explicit – that the novel has a role to play in the reversal of the inward turn provoked by the failure of post-war

⁶ Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', in Geoffrey Grigson, ed., *The Arts To-day* (London: John Lane, 1935), p. 119.

⁷ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 121.

⁸ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 121.

⁹ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 122.

¹⁰ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 124.

¹¹ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 146. Kafka's work began to be translated by the Scottish poet Edwin Muir in the early 1930s, beginning with *The Castle* (Martin Secker, 1930).

national reconstruction; literature must re-establish contact ‘with the centre of English life’ in order to overcome the ‘split between the artist and his public’, moving to an envisioned point beyond modernism.¹² The publication of this essay in 1935 coincided with the appearance of his novel *Dead Centre*, which forms something of a corollary of the argument. *Dead Centre* examines the collapsing of bourgeois culture through the lens of a fictional public school, Richbury; the ‘dead centre’ of the title refers to the school’s most brilliant public, who was killed in the war, and from whose death the school’s masters are unable to recover in an atmosphere of emotional repression.¹³ The climate is one of morbidity, expressed both in a curricular fixation with ‘dead languages and dead people’ (58) and the compulsive war games of the Officer Training Corps (164). The ‘dead centre’ is also, however, reflected in the novel’s structure, composed of seventy short first-person chapters providing limited perspectives that revolve around, without ever articulating, the great silences and traumas – war, sexual and emotional repression – at the novel’s core. *Dead Centre* sees no way of connecting these fragments of experience or of breaking out of the cycles of neurotic repetition.

The question of how to break out and ‘reconnect’ in his own work would be the central problem in Calder-Marshall’s work for the remainder of the decade. The problem of the relationship between individual neuroses and political action would be a particular preoccupation in *Pie in the Sky*. In his 1935 essay, Calder-Marshall privileges psychoanalysis as the means of traversing the impasse, arguing that there is ‘no part of life on which psycho-analysis [...] cannot throw light’ and that it provides superior insights to both Marxism and Fascism, encompassing ‘the whole mental life of man.’¹⁴ Furthermore, he seems in passing to express scepticism about Marxist criticism, noting in relation to Granville Hicks’s pioneering study of American fiction, *The Great Tradition*, that ‘it must be remembered that his measure is not literary but Marxist.’¹⁵ By 1937, in the essays published in *Fact* and *The Changing Scene*, a markedly different tone is in evidence. Though reiterating his earlier sense of bourgeois culture as in a state of paralysed morbidity, he now felt that writers were moving towards a new, invigorating situation.

¹² Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction To-Day’, pp. 147-8.

¹³ Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Dead Centre* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935). Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

¹⁴ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction To-Day’, p. 133.

¹⁵ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction To-Day’, p. 149.

They had divided themselves into three camps: those who advocated fascism, those who ‘hoped to maintain capitalism without resorting to fascism’; and ‘those who identified themselves with the working-class movement for international socialism.’¹⁶ This is a very characteristic analysis from the perspective of the Popular Front: it isolates fascism as the reaction of minority, and suggests that the second group might conceivably be won over by the third.¹⁷ The realignment of middle-class writers is partly a political matter, a realisation that their interests lie ‘ultimately nearer to the working than to the ruling class’, but it is also an aspiration to recapture the perspective that *Dead Centre* shows to be inaccessible to them, since ‘the only class in this country which sees these things realistically is the working-class.’¹⁸ These developments promised a way out of the over-specialisation and isolation he discussed in his 1935 essay through a broad, typifying approach: ‘[w]here the bourgeois novelists have been driven to the pursuit of the abnormal, the perverted or the minute, in order to find fresh material, the revolutionary is concerned with the normal and typical in his portraiture of society as a whole.’¹⁹ In the same essay, Calder-Marshall made the compressed and very Lukácsian claim that ‘[r]evolutionary literature is objective, is classical in its interest in the type rather than the exception, is epic in its direct approach to life.’²⁰ In the first of these statements in particular, there is certainly a troubling potential for the kind of normativity and conformism for which socialist realism, as state doctrine, was notorious.²¹ But it is fair to recognise that Calder-Marshall is attempting to solve problems he had posed in the 1935 essay; the need for characters to be ‘judged simply’ is proposed as a method of avoiding the potentially endless circularities of ‘infantile fixations’.²² Moreover, in *Pie in the Sky*, it is clear that Calder-Marshall’s idea of what constitutes ‘the normal and typical’ turns out to be the neurotic, traumatised, inarticulate, corrupt, mean and contradictory. The emphasis on the normality of neurotic cycles and routines, however, brings into question the validity of the claim that ‘the only class in this

¹⁶ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction To-Day’, p. 115.

¹⁷ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1937), p. 115.

¹⁸ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 241.

¹⁹ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 116.

²⁰ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 117. Among those Calder-Marshall considered ‘revolutionary writers’ were Sommerfield, Storm Jameson and Ralph Bates, as well as John Dos Passos, André Malraux and Ignacio Silone (p. 118).

²¹ Katerina Clark notes the socialist realist novel was a ‘parabolic’ form, the conformity of which to established patterns performed key functions in the ‘highly ritualized, intensely citational Stalinist society’; ‘Socialist Realism *with* Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero’; in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995), p. 28.

²² Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 117.

country which sees these things realistically is the working-class,' since working-class and middle-class characters alike are shown to be locked in emotional patterns that evade rather than confront reality.²³

This tension – between an acceptance of the people ‘as they are’, as Dimitrov proposed, and an assertion that individual particularism could be transcended in a newer, more realistic perspective – manifests itself in important ways in Calder-Marshall’s attitudes to language.²⁴ In his contribution to *Fact*, Calder-Marshall suggested the centrality of language to his vision of how revolutionary fiction should work. The language of the middle class, he thought, was replete with ‘abstract and Latinised substitutes for plain speech’.²⁵ Middle-class expression was stifled by ‘the desire for euphemism, false social dignity and class conformity.’²⁶ What was needed to revive it was ‘the alliance of writers with the working class and the recruitment of writers from that class.’²⁷ There is of course great naivety in this investment in the resistance of working-class language to conformism and conventionality, its apparently greater and more authentic expressive power. *Pie in the Sky* appears to work through this problem in its complex handling of language and its class implications. Indeed, I will suggest here that the novel may be considered to be the location of the arguments involved in the transition outlined above. The 1935 essay establishes important themes that recur in *Pie in the Sky*: society’s need to adjust to the end of religion; the displacement or sublimation of neuroses into political action; and the question of the writer’s relationship with the wider society. In the 1937 texts, the work of a by-then self-identified ‘revolutionary’ writer, we see firm articulations of positions that the novel is more hesitant and conflicted about. The critical texts of 1937 articulate two demands: the first, for a rejection of the conformism of middle-class language; the second, a demand for breadth and typicality, the depiction of the ‘normal’. The subplots involving the Communist characters in *Pie in the Sky*, on the one hand, and the proto-fascist Bernard Yorke, on the other, locate the main, ‘typical’ characters in the middle ground between these positions; implicitly, the novel stakes the

²³ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 241.

²⁴ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 21.

²⁵ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, p. 40.

²⁶ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, p. 40.

²⁷ Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, p. 40.

possibility of mass movement for socialism and against fascism on the fates of the unexceptional Fenner, Carder, Caroline and Henry.

3.1 Bathos and Narrative Convention

As I suggest above, Calder-Marshall's 1935 essay is preoccupied by the consequences of a loss of religious faith, and the question of where impulses once directed towards religious concerns should now be channelled. By 1937, he claimed that the bourgeois novelist is interested in what distinguishes his characters, the 'revolutionary in what unites them'.²⁸ The question, however, of what shared meanings and common interests exist in a modern, secular society is one the novel is hesitant to answer. In one key episode, the isolated writer, Fenner Yorke, goes on a Tube journey that brings into focus the preoccupation with the problems of secularised life. Fenner experiences the technology of the mass transportation system as consuming monster: 'Fenner put his left foot first on to smooth ribs, flowing between steel teeth, his whole weight on the growing stair', perceiving the escalator as 'heavy with hungry workers'.²⁹ This mass of individuals appears as 'two bands of human bodies travelling downwards like gliding angels.' Fenner's perspective is detached but not perceptive; what is conspicuously lacking are the authoritative, aerial perspectives of *May Day* which affirmed the novel's confidence in the clarity and compass of its vision - '*Let us take factory chimneys, cannons trained at dingy skies, pointing at the sun and stars*'.³⁰ There is a hint in Fenner's perspective of such a possibility in the 'gliding angels', since winged figures were often associated with such a view in the writing of the thirties.³¹ But the city Fenner encounters is divested of the possibility of such sublime detachment and privileged perspectives; he ironically reflects on the mass movement of people as an expression of the modern city as de-sacralised: 'This is our Canterbury Pilgrimage', he thought, 'everybody going down escalators, holding in their hands copies of the *Star*, *Standard* or *News*, looking for Low, news of Abyssinia, and who won the three-thirty. This being packed into trains [...] is our "homeward plods the ploughman"'

²⁸ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 117.

²⁹ Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Pie in the Sky*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 260. Hereafter, page references are given in parentheses in the text.

³⁰ Sommerfield, *May Day*, p. 25; emphasis in original.

³¹ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), pp. 155-6.

(260). Fenner misremembers the Thomas Gray line, as though to suggest that the omnivorous popular culture represented by the Tube in both its monstrous and technocratic aspects inevitably chews over or adapts the text of the past.³² Gray's 'Elegy' was posited by William Empson as an exemplar of a certain type of pastoral in which class difference is naturalised.³³ The suggestion here, however, is of shared rites that lack shared meanings. It is not class difference that is suppressed, but the recognition of individuality: he reflects that '[i]t was difficult to understand that beneath each hat a separate brain produced its rationalizations [...] It was difficult to realize from so many same-seeming faces going home to similar houses, each was an entity peculiar and important' (260). Adding to the already clichéd images, Fenner is 'slapped' in the eyes by adverts for a production of *Murder in the Cathedral* and scrap of a poster emblazoned with 'Dante's Inferno' (260), adopting the conventional image of the Tube as both an infernal monster and a central space for the dissemination of popular culture.³⁴ *Dante's Inferno* was the title of a 1935 film (directed by Harry Lachman) that recast Dante's epic in a modern, secularized setting, in which 'Dante's Inferno' is the name of a fairground attraction. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* was the subject of an early television broadcast in 1936.³⁵ Thus the literary texts to which these posters seem to refer have already been converted into the reproducible products of popular culture – detached, in Walter Benjamin's terms, from the domain of tradition.³⁶ The routine and banal expressions of a prosaic, de-mythologised modernity are attended by the crowd's failure to recognise and connect with one another.

The social rite of pilgrimage, the idea of an inherently meaningful journey, is bathetically (and pathetically) depreciated in the unemployed Henry's consciously futile tramp to Glasgow: 'Everybody knew there wasn't any work going [...] But everybody else

³² The 'Low' referred to is David Low, the cartoonist who created the satirical Colonel Blimp for the *Evening Standard*; the cartoon reflected the growing anti-establishment sentiment and a crucial part of a politically engaged popular culture in the thirties.

³³ William Empson, 'Proletarian Literature', in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935; London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), pp. 4-6.

³⁴ David Welsh attributes these two versions of the underground in the popular imagination to George Gissing and H.G. Wells respectively. *Underground Writing: The London Tube from George Gissing to Virginia Woolf*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 65-6 & pp. 144-5.

³⁵ Amilcare A. Iannucci, 'Dante and Film', in Richard Lansing, ed., *The Dante Encyclopedia* (2000; New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 248; David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 136.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 221.

went. It was a sort of Mecca' (341). Rather than a purposeful economic activity, the trek to Glasgow has become a desperate expression of how commonplace looking for work has become. In these depreciatory allusions to religious rites, Calder-Marshall is clearly working against a certain rhetorical tendency in thirties' literature – especially poetry – that adopted an aggrandising language of religion. In C. Day Lewis's 'The Magnetic Mountain' (1933), for example, the 'day excursionists' are clearly depicted as on a pilgrimage out of the 'cursed towns': 'Know you seek a new world, a saviour to establish/ Long-lost kinship and restore the blood's fulfilment.'³⁷ The poem anticipates revolutionary possibility in these newly-sacralised acts. *Pie in the Sky* features a comparable scene:

See now the clerks change the pen for the wheel, forge out from the suburb,
 freighted with wife and kiddies: see the athletic bachelor start up the low-slung
 roadster, picturing himself the young man of advertisement, hero of a joke in the
 Happy Mag; or poorer, see him leap on mo'bike, goggles to eyes and cuty on the
 pillion. Let her out, lad, give the gongsters run for you money; take chance of
 death, you whom a desk chained to safety five days and a half, only danger
 haemorrhoids. (274)

While Day Lewis's day-trippers 'go out alone, on tandem or on pillion' in search of 'a new world', the characters in Calder-Marshall's scene are in search of the glamour of the world of advertising. Rod Mengham has described these imperative-laden constructions, as exemplified in the early Auden, as a 'rhetoric of apostrophe' that rests on an assumption of 'exclusive, Masonic knowledge'.³⁸ In Jack Lindsay's poems for mass declamation, on the other hand, the same rhetoric is used with the intention of forging a connection to an account of history, a technique Michelle Weinroth has described as a form of the sublime.³⁹ But here, clearly, there is a fall into bathos (sublime's opposite, as Tyrus Miller notes⁴⁰). The narrative voice does not venture to augment everyday reality with the vestments of an inherently meaningful world; instead, the bathetic fall indicates a circumscribed, banal reality.

³⁷ C. Day Lewis, 'The Magnetic Mountain, 32' in Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties*, p. 50.

³⁸ Rod Mengham, 'The Thirties: Politics, Authority, Perspective', in Laura Marcus, ed., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 373-4.

³⁹ Michelle Weinroth, *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity, and the Rhetoric of Dissent* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1996), pp. 190-193.

⁴⁰ Tyrus Miller, 'The Strings are False: Bathos, Pastoral and Social Reflexivity in 1930s British Poetry', in Peter Nicholls, ed., *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (London & New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 54.

The concept of sacrifice is clearly demonstrated to be implicated in class oppression as the unemployed Henry Bolton prides himself on having worked and made sacrifices for his family and for his country in fighting in the First World War, while his childhood friend, Carder Yorke, father of Fenner, fought for his own interests and became a capitalist (31). Henry's realisation that, in fact, he has been exploited and oppressed all along, and that the emotional routines of duty and sacrifice have been merely defence mechanisms, is extremely painful. He consciously refuses to give up the sacrificial account of his life, even after he realises that '[i]t meant he'd been swindled, when he'd done anything he thought was good and when he went out to fight, it wasn't Carder Yorke was a coward and he brave, but Yorke wasn't a fool and he was. He didn't want to think that' (339). Here, the two themes of Calder-Marshall's 1935 essay intersect: the failure of post-war reconstruction, which entrenched division instead of channelling the emotions evoked into a project of national transformation (the unmade 'land fit for heroes' of popular mythology), and the lingering influence of sacralised modes of thought.⁴¹ But there is a tension between this account of the way that insight is forestalled by individual trauma, and Calder-Marshall's later, bluntly 'revolutionary' claim that 'the only class in this country which sees these things realistically is the working-class'.⁴² Such a perspective is not immediately available. Moreover, despite Calder-Marshall's suggestion in his *Fact* essay that working-class speech resisted the obfuscations and repressions of middle-class language, Henry is disarticulated by his experiences.⁴³ He experiences something of a political revelation while he is on the road looking for work, but his power of language is crippled by the shame of being complicit in his own exploitation. He imagines telling his wife what he has discovered about his exploitation, 'But he never completed any speech because the memory of his cringing and urselicking spurting up choked him for words to say what a dam' fool he'd been all these years' (346). The novel implies that the process of recovery of the power of articulation will be painful and possibly incomplete.

⁴¹ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 151.

⁴² Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 241.

⁴³ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction', p. 40.

3.2 Articulation and Division

Henry's resistance to the truth about his oppression raises questions of how such truths can be articulated successfully. Fenner, growing disillusioned with the Communism he begins the novel committed to, argues that one of the problems in persuading the mass of people to commit to a class politics is, in effect, that there is kind of security, an emotional routine, involved in being poor: 'There's sacrifice in the pinching and scraping. In being out of work there's a good reason for grumbling', so that it is possible that even if their material conditions were improved 'they would be faced with an inward lack' (73). There is an important contrast to be drawn with Sommerfield's *May Day*, in which, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the Communist slogans are figured as bringing to the surface repressed realities so as to activate a latent popular consensus. In such a process of activism, Sommerfield's novel posits the transformation and realisation of the self, as in Jimmy Seton's apprehension that 'the solution of my conflicts is bound up with the fate of this mass' (213). *Pie in the Sky* seems to actively satirise such a utopian vision of communication, as the messages of the Communist characters fail to make themselves heard:

No demonstrator shot revolutionary fire from his eyes. None was hawk or helmeted airman. Shabby drabby, lumpy and dumpy, straggly frumpy, they shuffled along, wearing dress-me-down macs and Woolworth socks and ordinary hats, like a poor funeral.
But there were the banners.
The Menace of Moscow
The Red Hand of Russia
FASCISM MEANS WAR (64)

Here the 'hawk and helmeted airman' is a reference to Auden's 'Consider this and in our time'; aerial perspectives – those of birds and airmen – were associated with authority and superior perspectives, as in Auden's early verse which, Keith Williams points out, combines the 'privileged perspectives of both camera-eyed airman and sovietised Marxist in its bid for a thirties sublime.'⁴⁴ A comparable use of such winged figures appears in Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase*, published a few months after *Pie in the Sky*. Warner's novel narrates his hero's pursuit of the wild geese which symbolise utopian possibility.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media 1930-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Rex Warner, *The Wild Goose Chase*, (1937; London: Merlin Press, 1990).

Ultimately the hero, George, rejects the idealistic promise of the geese as a quixotic endeavour – as the title suggests – and commits himself instead to working practically for revolution. Warner depreciates the possibility of a utopian unity of individual and society through bathos; the attempt by the questing protagonist, George, to deliver a lecture on the nobility of ‘fanaticism’ degenerates into inarticulacy as a consequence of the laughter of the audience. The message cannot be delivered.⁴⁶ The messages in the passage in *Pie in the Sky* quoted above likewise collapse bathetically into inarticulacy: the slogans declare ‘Workers Unite to Smash Fascism and War’ but what the audience hears is “‘... Wurble blahble flewble flurble,” the chairman continued. “Ooble Tooble Turlin”” (64). Calder-Marshall is working against the vision of perfect, immediately radicalising articulation envisioned in *May Day*, premised on the assumption that a slogan can span the gaps between speakers and listeners. Moreover, there is no sign here of the work of tradition and myth, which function in *May Day* to condition a certain context in which rhetorical success – rather than bathetic failure – might occur.

However, in its bathetic strategy, the novel is also reacting against a fictional mode of presentation in which marchers and demonstrators were depicted as signs not of specific social and economic problems, but of some metaphysical, transhistorical condition. In Dot Allan’s Glasgow novel, *Hunger March*, for example, published in 1934 at the height of popular demonstrations against Depression conditions, the march of the title appears as ‘a shuffling mob trailing half-heartedly at the heels of their leaders; a mob wasting its strength in shouts of imprecation, in paroxysms of passion as objectless as they are pitiful to behold’.⁴⁷ Allan’s characters look on and ask, wonderingly, ‘had they assembled here of their own free will with the object of displaying, as Eastern beggars do, their sores to the world?’⁴⁸ This kind of awed pity is dispelled by Calder-Marshall through the descent into farce. His handling of the mass demonstration might therefore be considered a form of representational moderation, resisting the more excessive and optimistic accents of leftist fiction while also seeking to subvert a passive, spectacular mode. If this is considered as an example of the ‘normal’ and ‘typical’ portrayal Calder-Marshall advocated in *The*

⁴⁶ Rex Warner, *The Wild Goose Chase*, p. 185.

⁴⁷ Dot Allan, *Hunger March*, in Allan, *Makeshift and Hunger March* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010), p. 203.

⁴⁸ Allan, *Hunger March*, p. 370.

Changing Scene, such a strategy may amount less to a valorisation of the conventional as to a refusal of more excessive modes.

The normalisation of rhetorical failure and disarticulation in novel has the result that characters' fantasies are frequently fantasies of articulation. Henry imagines himself coming before the Public Assistance Committee: 'I'll say you're all bastards and you're the biggest bastard, Carder Yorke' (33), but in reality says no such thing. Carder Yorke begins writing a revealing letter to his son, 'writing down things he had done, had thought, but hidden even from himself', but tears it up and sends a banal postcard instead (299). The significance of these language issues to Popular Front anti-fascism becomes clear in the characterisation of Carder's bullied and bullying son, Bernard, the character most afflicted by fantasies of articulation, whose stammering represents his conflicted desire to speak and not speak. The characterisation of Bernard demonstrates clearly the influence on the text of Calder-Marshall's interest in psychoanalysis during this period.⁴⁹ There is a clear echo in Bernard's relationship with his father that, as Calder-Marshall claims, distrust in the parent – a consequence of the breakdown of faith – would lead to a 'union of the children' taking either a fascist or a Communist form.⁵⁰ At his first appearance in the novel he is rehearsing to himself an admonishment of his father for his immorality – 'have you no regard for ethical considerations?' – but he is completely unable to articulate his outrage when actually speaking to Carder (11). Bernard, much more than his father and brother, relies on the stability of the class structure to provide him with a sense of identity, and he is tormented by sexual fantasies about one of the women at his father's mill, fantasies that elide sex and speech: 'He shut out the fantasy of the barriers broken and he took her to the shade of a wall and said, 'My angel, my heart's-ease, queen, queen of love, queen of all earth beauty', knowing all the time that she was trash' (251). In the figure of Bernard, inarticulacy and psychosexual wounding conspire to sow the seeds of fascism. His fantasies are those of barriers broken – barriers of class, sexual inhibition, and inarticulacy – that cannot be achieved because of a failure to construct an utterance that can span the gaps between classes. His failure to effectively construct discursive authority

⁴⁹ In an autobiographical piece published in 1939, Calder-Marshall described undergoing psychoanalysis in 1933. Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Pickle My Bones', in Michael Harrison, ed., *Ten Under Thirty* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1939), p. 100.

⁵⁰ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction To-Day', p. 119.

leads directly to authoritarianism: '[a]s it was, he was forced into being a disciplinarian, to avoid being a clown' (301). In a predictably Freudian manner, when he does speak his repressed aggression makes itself apparent: 'when he tried to crack a joke, for some reason there was always a second meaning to it [...] a meaning which was a slight, an insult or a gibe' (303). His behaviour creates a cycle of bullying, since the more disciplinarian he becomes, 'the more justified the antagonism which had been instinctive at first' comes to seem (302). Bernard's bullying and neurotic nature have real political consequences as he becomes a figure of incipient fascism and his management causes an intensification of class tensions in the mill, resulting in an alignment of skilled and unskilled workers: 'now the enemy was within: not the competitor or rival business, but the employer, the man at the top. Even Joynson, whose technical training had led him to identify his interests with Carder's, began to veer over to his subordinates' (302). The development described here (in a somewhat awkwardly direct manner) mirrors the Popular Front analysis of fascism as the strategy of the most reactionary of the capitalist class, producing an increase in class tensions that could be channelled into the formation of an anti-fascist front. Like Sommerfield, Calder-Marshall differentiates between his bourgeois characters to isolate the most reactionary, indicates a space for class alliance.

3.3 Politics and Repression

Given the entanglement of language in neuroses and delusion, the question of how truth can be articulated is a vexing one. One focus of this problem is the Communist characters, who, unlike Sommerfield's Communists, show no clearer insight into social problems than other characters, and are just as wrought by self-delusion and repressions. Indeed, at points the novel invokes and satirically dismisses already-clichéd socialist realist motifs: the young Communist Alexey 'stared before him - into the Future - thinking the girl's eyes shone before him like dark pools of mockery, thinking she was the girl to ride beside him on his tractor, driving a straight furrow towards the sunset' (64). The substance of Fenner's objection to Marxism is that it lacks 'psychological realism' (22), and he voices resistance to the emergent personality cult of Stalinism: 'The difference between us and the totalitarian states is not that we're more civilized, cultured or whatever, but we can't

believe in the divine inspiration of human beings' (21). Fenner rails against the cultish attachment to Russia and the dishonest writing that promotes it: 'Don't read Radek's panegyrics. Read Zoshenko. He writes of the real Russia: and by God, it's dreary' (72). This anxiety about Russia is not limited to Fenner, but finds expression in the description of that atmosphere at the Communist meeting:

Heads bent forward. Dialectical materialism. Surplus values. Imperial exploitation. Glasgow. India. The N.E.P. Rosie put sugar on the tables in cups that had lost their, Defence of Civil Liberties, handles for those who wanted it, while Comrade Deuteropopoff holding the coffee bottle, Ugh, Lansbury, Pacifism, in his hand, made more and more, If we can win over the Forces, at threepence a cup. There is no denying that the liberty of the individual is greater in Russia than ... The zinc bowl of the till grew heavy with warm pennies. Zinoviev. Zinoviev. Everything was going very well. Lenin's Tomb. And the Third International. And the Fourth, the permanent revolution. Tuesday was always the busiest night of the week. Though Caesarism, the worship of emperors by eastern peoples, is not the same as reverence for world heroes, fighters for liberty' (26).

The reference to Zinoviev attests to the growing disquiet over the increasingly conspicuous political violence in the Soviet Union, although this is not explicitly discussed in the text.⁵¹ While Sommerfield's novel is inspired with the optimism of the election of Popular Front governments, Calder-Marshall's is the product of a more troubling climate in which the war in Spain showed no signs of ending with a Republican victory, the violence and repression in the Soviet Union was undeniably escalating, and Mussolini had declared victory in Abyssinia. In the passage above, Calder-Marshall is clearly indicating that Communists were trying to effectively repress criticism of the Soviet Union, but that the repressed was continually and inevitably making its return. The tailing off into ellipsis of the sentence about liberty in Russia is another ironic acknowledgement of worries about the direction of the Soviet Union, as is the excusatory reference to 'Caesarism', which acknowledges the real nature of Stalin's leadership even as it tries to suppress it. The question of dictatorship in the Soviet Union was much discussed in the wake of the first Moscow Trial, and commentary from the Communist left often evoked the Soviet constitution of 1936 as assurance against claims of dictatorship. The Webbs' book reproduced the new constitution in full as evidence for the legality and constitutionalism of

⁵¹ Grigory Zinoviev was executed in August 1936 following a show trial at which he was found morally complicit in the murder of Sergei Kirov, the event which occasioned the start of the Great Purge. Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. 398-400.

the new phase in Soviet politics: 'It is clear that, in form, there is nothing in the constitution of the USSR at all resembling the Roman office of dictator; or, indeed, any kind of government by the will of a single person. On the contrary, the universal pattern shows even an exaggerated devotion to collegiate decision.'⁵²

Stephen Spender, meanwhile, declared that Article 131, condemning 'enemies of the people', was the foundation stone of political freedom. 'Above it, the whole structure may be repressive, but it will always be possible gradually to knock away the repressive laws and establish complete political freedom.'⁵³ It was for the credulity of their faith in the power of the document that Leon Trotsky attacked the Webbs' book, dismissing their belief that simply producing texts and blueprints will somehow bring into being the state of affairs those texts describe:

Instead of relating what has been achieved and in what direction the achieved is developing, the authors expound for twelve hundred pages what is contemplated, indicated in the bureaus, or expounded in the laws. Their conclusion is: When the projects, plans and laws are carried out, then communism will be realized in the Soviet Union.⁵⁴

What the Webbs and Spender had failed to recognise was that, as Katerina Clark argues, Soviet official language 'no longer sought to convey real information'; it was no longer constative but chiefly 'symbolic'.⁵⁵ Although the novel appeared before Spender's book, and before *The Revolution Betrayed* was translated, Calder-Marshall's comparable anxieties about what happened to language under Soviet Communism are nonetheless apparent. In this light, the frequent ellipses, silences and interruptions that characterise *Pie in the Sky* attest to a discomfort with the prospect of a totalising discourse, and a direct challenge to the assumption of a simple correspondence between world and word. Language in Calder-Marshall's novel is fluid and contingent; the bathetic effects of the Communist slogans are, as Miller puts it in relation to Auden's bathetic strategies, 'socially necessary', that is, they refuse to erase or repress the existence of a socially-

⁵² Beatrice & Sidney Webb, *Soviet Communism A New Civilization*, (1935; 2nd ed., London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), p. 428.

⁵³ Spender, *Forward From Liberalism* (London: Left Book Club, 1937), p. 260.

⁵⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, (1937; Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), p. 258.

⁵⁵ Clark, 'Socialist Realism with Shores', pp. 30-1.

complex context in which such messages cannot be immediately or unproblematically received.⁵⁶

3.4 Refitting the Novel

The question of how intellectuals can engage with such a disunited social context, and with a society in which political consciousness may be blocked by personal neuroses, is rehearsed through the figure of the journalist Fenner Yorke. At first, Fenner demands a purely rational politics free of neurotic undertones (22), and, when that is not available, retreats into isolation and passivity (73). Finally – though the novel is never fully clear about the catalyst for the transformation – he reconnects with society through a renunciation of privileged individuality: ‘Now he saw himself more clearly, as a person of great importance to himself, of lesser and lessening importance to friends and acquaintances, a useful enemy, a cipher to strangers, a foreigner to Frenchmen’ (459). Fenner’s realisation of the nature of identity provokes something of a literary epiphany and he begins writing a novel, one which would reflect his new self-image and confront the problems of representation *Pie in the Sky* itself rehearses:

Well, you know a wire cable is made of a lot of strands of wire twisted together. The novelist like Dickens picks out one strand and says, “Here’s this man’s life”. What I want to do is cut the cable and shew all the threads interrelated [...] A world full of purposes that cancel out: subject to rigid determinism yet always surprising: barbarous and yet noble: extravagant and yet limited (330).

He imagines writing short pieces, strung together: ‘That would get the effect I want, the large order of chaos, a mosaic of small conflicting pieces’ (330). This marks Fenner’s transition from being a journalist who, rather than voicing popular feeling, renders people inarticulate (Caroline tells him, ‘that’s why I couldn’t speak: you kept strangling me with your brain’ (44)) into a writer within society, perceiving a world that is prosaic and limited and yet which retains grandeur and extravagance. What is interesting about this vision of a fictive text is that it corresponds to Calder-Marshall’s critical writing in a way that *Pie in the Sky* does not. Fenner’s literary development in the final pages closely follows Calder-Marshall’s prescription for revolutionary writing published in *Fact*, in which he suggests that the novelist ‘has to realize that neither he himself nor any of his characters is at the

⁵⁶ Tyrus Miller, ‘The Strings are False’, p. 51.

centre of the universe' in order to adopt a 'composite method'.⁵⁷ Such a method would generate a total picture of society, and, echoing Fox, follow a typifying method of characterisation.⁵⁸ The novel seems to invoke such an aesthetic goal at its conclusion as a potential solution to the problems it has raised; but the solution is only given at the level of plot. Indeed, Fenner himself is sceptical about whether the envisioned text could successfully break out of the routines the novel has depicted: 'Everybody hates anybody who says anything new and quite rightly. It's one more thing to be learnt: another task set to suffering humanity with no holiday to do it in' (331). Although glimpsing the prospect of a popular literary form that can speak successfully to a disunited, confused and neurotic society, the novel itself maintains a distance from its realisation.

Conclusion

Jack Lindsay suggested in 1937 that it was only through an engagement with Marxism that writers could hope to overcome their alienation from popular life, and in so doing capture something of the significance of the realist novel at the height of its powers. It is Marxism, Lindsay argued, that 'restores to [the writer] his completeness, his objectivity'.⁵⁹ Calder-Marshall is a useful example of a writer who moves from a socially-engaged but consciously apolitical stance in 1935, in which he registered the need for cultural change without committing himself to it, to a self-declared 'revolutionary' position in 1937. *Pie in the Sky*, in its closing scene of an aesthetic revelation, is drawn to the potential of Marxism to furnish a complete picture of reality. This closing moment suggests that, for all its scepticism, the novel ultimately keeps faith with the possibility of a collective form: but its commitment is made on the level of plot, in the form of an imaginary text. This solution retains an ambiguity largely absent from Sommerfield's version of a collective novel; *Pie in the Sky* is cut by rhetorical failures and ironies, by an apprehension of the contingencies of language and identity that could not obviously be solved (only repressed) by the type of realism it envisages. Calder-Marshall wrote in 1937 of the middle class moving hesitantly towards the alignment of its interests with those of the working class, and declared that, '[i]t is to that section of the middle class and the working class that I, and a great many

⁵⁷ Calder-Marshall, 'Fiction', pp. 42-4.

⁵⁸ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 116.

⁵⁹ Jack Lindsay, 'Marxism and the Novel' [Review of Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, Philip Henderson, *The Novel Today* and Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine*], *Left Review*, III: 1 (February 1937), p. 51.

other writers, address ourselves.’⁶⁰ The form in which that bridging of classes and that mutuality of interests might be articulated remains, however, beyond the reach of the novel discussed here. As the next part of this thesis will suggest, Marxist interventions into the writing of history and the historical novel provide some of the most significant attempts at resolving the problem of how a divided society might be addressed in the name of collective action.

⁶⁰ Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene*, p. 119.

Part Two:

On English History

Chapter Four: History and the Historical Novel

Introduction

When Georgi Dimitrov expounded the need for ideological struggle against fascism at the Comintern's Seventh Congress, he stressed the central importance of national histories and traditions, both as the stake in that struggle and as the site and means of resistance. The fascists, Dimitrov argued, appropriated national cultural traditions, 'rummaging through the entire *history* of every nation' so as to position themselves as heirs to the national past.¹ It fell therefore to the Communists and their anti-fascist allies to formulate an ideological response, taking it upon themselves to 'enlighten the masses on the past of their people in a historically correct fashion' and to 'link up the present struggle with the people's revolutionary traditions and past'.² The neglect of this ideological task allowed fascism to control and manipulate deeply-felt popular sentiments, posing as 'heirs and continuators of all that was exalted and heroic' in the national past.³ From the point of view of the international Communist movement, this entailed the downplaying of internationalism in favour of what Kevin Morgan calls 'acclimatised internationalism'; situating themselves within national and sometimes nationalist cultural narratives.⁴ The French Communist leader Maurice Thorez, whose country had experienced a failed fascist coup in Paris in 1934, exemplified the new line in his declaration that, 'We claim for the working class the revolutionary heritage of the Jacobins and the Paris Commune. We do not hand over to the enemy the tri-colour flag and the "Marseillaise".'⁵

The sections that follow consider British Marxists' readings and writings of English history. They discuss how the turn towards national cultural resources and the principle of class alliance transformed the rhetoric and public face of Communism in Britain. The production of historical texts as totalising national stories served the crucial

¹ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1935), p. 69, emphasis in original.

² Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 70.

³ Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, p. 69.

⁴ Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-41* (Manchester: MUP, 1989), p. 42.

⁵ Remarks reported in W.G. Shepherd, 'The Fate of France and of Europe', *Daily Worker*, 8 August, 1935, p. 2.

ideological function of asserting that the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie and the working class had mutual interests in the defeat of fascism. These attempts have frequently been criticised in the strongest terms as legitimating bourgeois perspectives and suppressing the limits and contradictions inherent in them; Francis Mulhern, for example, sees the Popular Front advocacy of a common culture as essentially a regressive step, appealing in the end to ““culture” in its most familiar sense as the common spiritual inheritance of worker and bourgeois’, closing off vital critical channels,⁶ while John Coombes has argued it amounted to ‘functional accommodations of revolutionary theory to the cultural politics of the liberal bourgeoisie.’⁷ Coombes argues that it rendered unchallengeable bourgeois cultural authority, and placed few real demands on intellectuals, constructing an uncritical, undemanding defence of white, European, male-dominated bourgeois perspectives and voices. These tendencies were certainly real, and deeply problematic, often risking the ‘perpetuation of liberal elitism under the mask of “humanist” Marxism’.⁸ However, I wish to suggest that in the case of some British Marxists, especially Jack Lindsay, there is by no means blindness towards them. A reading of Lindsay’s trilogy of historical novels of English history, *1649: A Novel of a Year*, *Lost Birthright* and *Men of Forty-Eight*, set, respectively, in 1649, 1769 and 1848, reveals that Lindsay is deeply concerned with the nature of bourgeois culture, and through the recurring trope of bourgeois dissidence and radicalisation, he examines the contestation from within of the nature of bourgeois hegemony, while attempting to mobilise the form of the novel to embody a totalising perspective. Lindsay’s novels and writings in the period usefully bring together the importance of history to Popular Front aesthetics and Popular Front appraisals of the novel form, and the tensions within Popular Front appeals for class alliance against fascism.

⁶ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge New Critical Idiom, 2000), p. 47.

⁷ John Coombes, ‘British Intellectuals and the Popular Front’, in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change* (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), p. 72.

⁸ Coombes, ‘British Intellectuals and the Popular Front’, p. 80.

4.1 British Communists and English History

For Communists whose Party allegiance pre-dated the adoption of the Popular Front line, the change in attitude to British history and institutions was dramatic. While, especially in the ‘class against class’ period, Communists had been instructed to work towards ‘the creation of a distinct proletarian counter-culture anticipating life after the revolution’ the emphasis now fell on an assimilationist approach, accepting the validity and legitimacy of non-revolutionary traditions, and of popular nationalist sentiments not as symptoms of working-class incorporation but of deeply-felt and potentially radical collective sentiments.⁹ To this end, Communists attempted to construct and present through often innovative means a totalising national story organised around ‘the English people’ as a political agent, continually contesting oppression. Communist public demonstrations and marches incorporated historical imagery. The first major event to express this new-found sensibility was ‘The March of English History’, held in Hyde Park in September 1936. Looking ahead to the event, Party organiser Ted Bramley anticipated that ‘[w]hat will be new are the tableaux of English history’.¹⁰ A sequence of historical scenes was constructed to retell the ‘story of the English’, ‘from the signing of Magna Charta to the present day’, clearing the way for a ‘stronger and united Labour movement to lead England forward on the road to a Free and Merrie England’.¹¹ This event marked a key moment of development in the public presentation of Communism in Britain, which reflected the Party’s efforts to move from an oppositional position to one of active engagement in public life.¹² The Communist-led mass movement is thereby imagined as a force for national salvation and the fulfilment of a national destiny: the curiously archaic phrasing echoing the ‘antiquarian mythologization’ that inflected Popular Front rhetoric throughout Europe.¹³ Meanwhile the mass spectacles that were mounted near the end of the decade, such as *Heirs to the Charter* and *The Pageant of South Wales*, both produced in 1939,

⁹ Ben Harker, “‘Communism is English’: Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front”, *Literature and History*, Third Series 20/2 (2011), p. 17.

¹⁰ Ted Bramley, ‘Communism Grows from England’s Soil’, *Daily Worker*, 14 September, 1936, p. 4.

¹¹ Unsigned, ‘Pageant of Colour and Drama: London to See Communists March’, *Daily Worker*, 18 September, 1936, p. 5.

¹² See Mick Wallis, ‘Heirs to the Pageant: Mass Spectacle and the Popular Front’, in Andy Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1998), pp. 48-49.

¹³ John Coombes, *Writing from the Left: Socialism, Liberalism and the Popular Front* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989), p. 107.

provided a vital space in which the ideals of the Popular Front could be enacted.¹⁴ As Mick Wallis has shown in his ground-breaking working on the Communist pageants, audience participation was a key aesthetic principle in these events, which served to figure history as a mass, creative process, the property of the masses and making available to them a sense of their power in making it.¹⁵ Two weeks after ‘The March of English History’, on October 4th 1936, the British Union of Fascists were prevented from marching through the East End of London. To some Communists, the united resistance, Communist-led but ultimately popular and mass in character, displayed in the Battle of Cable Street was a vindication of the efficacy of the appeal to existing popular traditions.¹⁶

Beneath the more opportunist surfaces of the transformations in public rhetoric, however, were important currents of thought that considered the relationship between popular politics and political forms. In particular, the rethinking of liberal democracy not as the apparatus of bourgeois power but as the outcome of popular struggles, so that, as Andy Croft puts it, democratic gains became ‘a common ground on which anti-fascists could meet and band together’, marks a key change from earlier Communist positions.¹⁷ The Party’s 1935 programme, *For Soviet Britain*, inopportunistly adopted in February of that year and rendered outmoded only six months later, declared that ‘[w]hat the parliamentary system really is, as any worker may learn from his own experiences, is a form of political organisation which the capitalist class of Britain has worked out to serve its own needs’, and which has ‘not brought any real democracy to the overwhelming majority of the British people’.¹⁸ The programme insisted that ‘[i]t is quite impossible for the workers to take over this machine and use it for their own entirely different purposes’.¹⁹ By 1938, however, General Secretary Harry Pollitt was using his address to the Party’s congress to articulate a dramatically modified stance. Pollitt made two claims

¹⁴ Mick Wallis, ‘The Popular Front Pageant: Its Emergence and Decline’, *New Theatre Quarterly* vol.11, no. 41 (February 1995), pp. 28-9.

¹⁵ See Mick Wallis, ‘Pageantry and the Popular Front: Ideological Production in the Thirties’, *New Theatre Quarterly* vol.10, no. 38 (May 1994), pp. 132-156.

¹⁶ Prominent Party intellectual Robin Page Arnot made this argument explicitly in ‘The English Tradition’, *Labour Monthly*, November 1936, p. 693.

¹⁷ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 207.

¹⁸ Communist Party of Great Britain, ‘II: Workers’ Dictatorship is Democracy for the Workers’, *For Soviet Britain* (1935), online at: http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/congresses/XIII/soviet_britain.htm.

¹⁹ Communist Party of Great Britain, ‘II: Workers’ Dictatorship is Democracy for the Workers’, *For Soviet Britain*.

of particular relevance here: the first, a historical claim, to the effect that '[d]emocracy means the rights won in the factories and pits for trade-union and workshop organisation', and the second, a strategic claim, in which 'democracy, even under capitalist economy, offers the best field for the development of the class struggle.'²⁰ At a time when liberal democracy was undergoing an unprecedented existential crisis, Communists worked to revive a democratic spirit, in which democracy appeared as testament to the efficacy of popular political struggle and the means by which further advances might be secured.²¹ The fear of democracy deprived of that spirit, of democratic form without content, is manifested in a number of important leftist novels of the period. Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1937) plays out the consequences of the fascist appropriation of history evoked by Dimitrov in a near-future England; fascism is called to power in a 'bloodless revolution' expedited by fragmented resistance, apathy and nationalist demagoguery.²² 'The State' (rather than 'the nation' or 'England' or 'Britain') becomes an increasingly fetishized, mystical entity, detached from popular participation and consent. In a similar way, the fellow-travelling Communist Rex Warner's 1938 novel, *The Professor*, written in the wake of the Anschluss, is an unsettling allegory of the incapacities of the liberal state faced with authoritarianism: 'You refuse to arm them: you refuse to arm your own ideas,' the liberal professor of the title, who finds himself made head of state, is told by his revolutionary son.²³ But this novel sees no way of activating 'the people' against the atrophy of democracy; the *polis* has lost its ability to command consent against fascism's irrational appeal; it has no intellectual resources with which to combat its usurpation.

While both Warner's and Jameson's novels express a deep scepticism about the possibility of activating a popular and democratic revival against the abstraction and formalism felt to be paralysing the liberal state, Communists engaged in wide-ranging and

²⁰ Harry Pollitt, 'VII: Communists and Democracy', *For Peace and Plenty: Report of the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, September 1938. Online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pollitt/1938/09/congress-report.htm>.

²¹ For the crisis in democracy, see Tom Buchanan, 'Anti-fascism and Democracy in the 1930s', *European History Quarterly* 32 (2002), pp. 44-45.

²² Storm Jameson, *In The Second Year* (1937; Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004), p. 77. The kind of complacency Jameson's novel attacks was expressed by the Liberal Home Secretary, John Simon, in a 1936 speech on Britain's 'natural' resistance to authoritarianism, which argued that democracy was 'our own form of government: gradually developed over centuries by the genius of the British people, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, the embodiment of our national character'; unsigned, 'Speech to National Liberal Demonstration', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 September, 1936, p. 25.

²³ Rex Warner, *The Professor*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1938), p. 167.

creative efforts to that end. Although the work of Antonio Gramsci was not known to British Marxists at this time, it is nonetheless instructive to note the consonance between the ethos of this project and Gramsci's sense of the 'national-popular' as a historical bloc: 'Its underlying assumption will be that a collective will, already in existence, has become nerveless and dispersed, has suffered a collapse which is dangerous and threatening but not definitive and catastrophic, and that it is necessary to reconcentrate and reinforce it.'²⁴ Influential readings of Gramsci have also stressed his rejection of ideology as deriving essentially from class positions; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe derive from Gramsci instead an account of ideology as formed by the articulation of 'elements [which] considered in themselves, do not have a necessary class belonging'.²⁵ British Marxists' history-writing projects during the Popular Front era can be usefully considered in this light. Among the most enduring monuments of this enterprise is *A People's History of England*, published in 1938 by A.L. Morton, the son of a Suffolk farmer, who joined the Communist Party in 1928 and worked as a journalist on the *Daily Worker* from 1934. Morton's book is a crucial example of an attempt to produce a totalising national story from a Marxist point of view, in which 'the people' – whether peasants resisting feudalism, Levellers in the Civil War or nineteenth-century Chartists – were positioned as continually contesting exploitation and injustice. This required a sense of classes not as fixed social blocs but as formations continually being remade by the negotiation of interests. At the upper end of feudal society, for example, was not simply a concentration of power, but a site of continual contestation within the Norman legal framework.²⁶ This dynamic sense of class formation *as* class conflict enables popular movements to be recognised as political, always involving 'domination and subordination, struggle and accommodation'.²⁷ Such events as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 are read in terms of a complex of political, economic and cultural factors, a procedure that restores a definite political character to them, explaining them in terms of rights already won and rights

²⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 130. The *Daily Worker* reported Gramsci's death ('Italian Leader Dies in Prison: Gramsci Killed by Fascists', *Daily Worker*, 30 April, 1937, p. 5 & cont. p. 6), but there was no substantial engagement with his work in Britain before the late 1940s (see David Forgacs, 'Gramsci and Marxism in Britain', *New Left Review* I/176, July-August 1989, pp. 70-88).

²⁵ Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1995; London: Verso, 2001), p. 68.

²⁶ Morton, *A People's History of England* (1938; Lawrence & Wishart, 1992), p. 56.

²⁷ Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), p. 228.

aspired to, as well as existing organisational traditions.²⁸ Furthermore Morton asserts that defeated popular movements have lasting effects, in the case of the 1381 rising, the peasants gaining ‘a sense of their power and common interests as a class’.²⁹

A second important contribution Morton makes to the development of a perspective on history as a creative, mass process is a continued attention to the differentiation of form and content in popular politics. Morton stressed that such a developing consciousness found expression in the forms that were available to it. From this perspective, the popular movements of the past could not be dismissed for their failure to conform to models that were not at the time available, nor mystified as distant and esoteric. In the sixteenth-century Pilgrimage of Grace, though ‘in form’ a ‘reactionary, Catholic movement of the North’, Morton found the means of expression for a much wider range of grievances among the dispossessed that made up its rank and file.³⁰ Likewise, the Labourers’ Revolt of 1830 was not just a reaction against mechanisation, but the form of expression of a much more diverse range of dissenting positions.³¹ Morton’s English story, therefore, is a narrative of popular activism, of political knowledge gained in struggle and gradually articulated through available forms. The development of capitalism was continually contested; as against the theoretical elitism and vanguardism of the Third Period, Morton suggested that a fully developed theoretical critique of capitalism was not necessary for effective resistance. William Cobbett, he noted, lacked the ability to fully grasp the problems he decried, and his remedies took the form of a dream of ‘an impossible return’ to a ‘largely imaginary golden age’; he nonetheless used the resources available to him to articulate a political situation: his ‘clear, simple conception of politics gave his demand for democracy, for Parliamentary Reform, a directness and an application to the desires of the masses’.³²

While John Coombes has argued that Popular Front perspectives on history largely retained a narrative basis in a liberal, bourgeois account of ‘progress’ as gradual evolution culminating in the liberal state, much emphasis in Morton’s *A People’s History* is placed

²⁸ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 102.

²⁹ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 103.

³⁰ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 142.

³¹ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, pp. 319-320.

³² Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 318.

on the popular contestation of that narrative, even while asserting that such movements were, for historical reasons, necessarily defeated.³³ Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay's anthology of radical texts, *A Handbook of Freedom*, subtitled 'A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries', marks an ambitious attempt to document and anthologise this national popular culture of dissent that is not attached to one particular class.³⁴ The title of the anthology seems to have concerned the Party hierarchy as presenting a challenge to Emile Burns' *The Handbook of Marxism*, and thus to Burns' canonical selections from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.³⁵ Rickword's introductory essay announces the editors' intention to record not only the courage and energy of past radicals, but also their 'clear insight into, and articulation of, the conditions which at each stage in our history could bring nearer the life of freedom and good fellowship'.³⁶ At the core of the text's purpose is the need to demonstrate that victories have been won against vastly superior powers; as Rickword makes clear, this knowledge is intended to empower ordinary people to frustrate the march to war.³⁷ His 'On English Freedom' is a key statement of the recasting of democracy integral to the Popular Front. Rickword's argument is a radical one, figuring the struggle for political rights as analogous to the struggle to make the land of England inhabitable:

The freedom we possess had to be won by centuries of endeavour, as the land itself was wrested from forest and swamp; and just as the land without constant care will revert to waste, so the legal sanctions which support our freedom are effective only so long as we are energetic to maintain them not merely as principles but as fact.³⁸

The articulation of an ethics of activism as the founding principle of culture as well as of democracy is not, of course, unproblematic; it most certainly runs the risk of expressing the kind of repression of class difference that Nick Hubble names as the 'pastoral' content

³³ Coombes, *Writing from the Left*, pp. 72-74.

³⁴ *A Handbook of Freedom* was reissued during the war as *Spokesmen for Liberty*. References in this thesis are to the 1941, re-titled edition published by Lawrence & Wishart.

³⁵ Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 168.

³⁶ Rickword, 'Introduction: On English Freedom', *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. vii. Rickword and Lindsay's anthology, with its emphasis on the agency and political consciousness of ordinary people, and its implicit rejection of a perspective of class consciousness as an intellectual construct to be received from without, prefigures the seminal work of E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

³⁷ Rickword, 'On English Freedom', p. vii.

³⁸ Rickword, 'On English Freedom', p. xxi.

of Popular Front texts.³⁹ It elides intellectual and productive labour, on the one hand, risking legitimating economic labour as a necessary security for ‘freedom’ while simultaneously offering an undemanding valorisation of intellectual labour to the same ends.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the elision of the specific legal structure of the state at a particular moment with ‘freedom’ in the abstract, risks a pastoral turn. Rickword’s writing on culture is marked by an equivocation between a patrician rejection of mass culture and a populist figuring of ‘the people’ as the repository of values resistant to capitalism. Capitalism has ‘depressed the cultural level of the masses of the people’, excluding them from the making and appreciation of art, rendering them consumers rather than ‘partners in its production’.⁴¹ This cultural disenfranchisement leaves the masses ‘condemned’ to a ‘seat at a trashy film’, with its connotations of, at best, disempowered, impoverished passivity.⁴² But, at another point, the masses are differentiated from a minority fully incorporated into capitalism: ‘the competitive mentality infects only the fringe of the population which is in contact with the market’.⁴³ J.B. Priestley’s enamoured review of *A Handbook of Freedom*, published in the *Daily Worker*, is itself something of an object lesson in the depoliticising tendency of populism to reduce popular movements to minimal and consensually accepted demands: ‘Peasants who wanted something to eat [...] Fellows who would like some small say in the government of their own country [...] People who thought a bit of education wouldn’t do them any harm.’⁴⁴

The anthology, however, does attempt, through its selections and organisation, to avoid the implication that the purpose of economic labour is to create the conditions for ‘culture’ in its elite sense, and thereby to avoid pastoralizing the relationship between the

³⁹ Nick Hubble, ‘The Intermodern Assumption of the Future: William Empson, Charles Madge and Mass-Observation’, in Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), p. 184.

⁴⁰ Rickword’s contribution to *The Mind in Chains*, a text squarely aimed at an intellectual readership, certainly bears out the depoliticising work of the analogy between forms of labour, arguing that ‘It is not the possession of ample leisure that creates a flourishing culture, as the briefest visit to Mayfair will convince, but participation in the constructive work of society’; Rickword, ‘Culture, Progress and English Tradition’, in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains* (London: Frederick Muller, 1937), p. 247.

⁴¹ Edgell Rickword, *War and Culture: The Decline of Culture under Capitalism* (London: Peace Library Pamphlets, No.7, 1936), p. 1.

⁴² Rickword, ‘On English Freedom’, p. x. Although Philip Bounds reads this tendency to denigrate mass culture as ‘pandering to [their fellow intellectuals’] most virulent prejudices’, in Rickword it forms part of a wider argument about the alienation of labour and the narrowing of cultural production (Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2012), p. 99).

⁴³ Rickword, ‘On English Freedom’, p. xii.

⁴⁴ J.B. Priestley, ‘March of the People’, *Daily Worker*, 24 May, 1939, p. 7.

intellectuals and the working class. It positions literary figures alongside contemporary, often popular voices: Shakespeare alongside an anonymous poet; Marlowe alongside the evidence of an informer; John Locke next to popular song.⁴⁵ It remains a useful index of an important line of thought in the Popular Front formation: a wide-ranging conception of ‘culture’ as production, rather than in its narrower sense as accumulation of ‘great’ works and achievements. The anthology transmits a cultural heritage not only in terms of great works of art or the ‘rational’ evolution of a particular political form, but rather the variegated and conflicted processes in which those forms are produced. Although it has its limitations - particularly the way that the national frame tends to automatically exclude those who would call its validity into question - it figures history as an open, creative process and, in making dissent the heritage of ‘the people’ in a broad sense, articulated across class lines, it attempts to create the ground for individuals to willingly align themselves with the Popular Front formation.⁴⁶ The understated radicalism of Rickword and Lindsay’s method perhaps becomes clearest in their documentation of the English Civil War. With very minimal commentary or explanation, they reconstruct the complex discursive environment in the war, creating a sense of a much more open and indeterminate moment than Morton’s more firmly narrativised style allows. The anthology reproduces Diggers, Levellers, tracts, letters and pamphlets soldiers’ songs, court reports and contradictory accounts: what is lost by what Morton calls the ‘historical justification’ for the defeat of the radical forces.⁴⁷ This opening of the historical moment as a site of conflict and negotiation is crucial to Lindsay’s strategy in his historical novels.

⁴⁵ Rickword and Lindsay, eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 101; p. 95; p. 170.

⁴⁶ The exclusion of challenges to the privileging of English and European experience may be indicated by the fact that the national frame can encompass William Wordsworth’s ‘To Toussaint L’Ouvverture’, leader of the Haitian Revolution against slavery and French imperialism, quoted as part of Rickword and Lindsay’s documentation of the internationalism of the English Jacobins (p. 233), but not the writings of L’Ouvverture himself. The year before Lindsay and Rickword’s anthology appeared, C.L.R. James published *The Black Jacobins*, his study of L’Ouvverture and the Haitian Revolution, and a fierce exposition of the imperialist limits of the French Revolutionary values of liberty and equality (1938; London: Penguin, 2001).

⁴⁷ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 215.

4.2 The Historical Novel of the Popular Front

An important theoretical statement by a British Marxist on the role of the historical novel in the Popular Front is Lindsay's 1937 article, 'The Historical Novel', published in the American leftist cultural journal, *New Masses*. Lindsay explicitly links the 'great weapon' of the historical novel to Dimitrov's call to ideological struggle, endorsing the form as a means of bridging the gap between a popular readership and a national historical narrative: 'Now, with fascism raising everywhere demagogic cries of reactionary nationalism, there is no task more important for the Communists in each country than to make clear that they stand for the true completion of the national destiny.'⁴⁸ He goes so far as to argue that in Marxist hands the historical novel becomes 'the highest form of historical composition.'⁴⁹ Early in 1937, Lindsay approvingly reviewed Ralph Fox's *The Novel and the People*; he approved especially of Fox's account of the heyday of the realist novel, and cited the book as pointing the way to 'get back to seriousness, to resume the great tradition on the new level of conflict.'⁵⁰ Lindsay's comments on the novel, and especially on the historical novel, are very consonant with Georg Lukács's theorisation of the historical novel which appeared almost simultaneously. In 1938, a special issue of the Soviet journal *International Literature* appeared on the subject of historical fiction. The issue featured a long article by Lukács on Walter Scott – which, with a second part published a few issues later, made up a substantial part of the first chapter of *The Historical Novel* – in which Lukács describes the intertwined processes of the emergence of the historical novel and the 'qualitative' transformation by which history becomes mass experience, giving the people 'the opportunity to realize that their entire existence is historically conditioned'.⁵¹ The major factor in this transformation was the French Revolution, but the fact that the first great historical novels emerged in Britain is explained in terms of its post-revolutionary culture; Scott's distinctive contribution was that he could 'channel this newly-awoken

⁴⁸ Jack Lindsay, 'The Historical Novel', *New Masses*, vol. XXII no. 3 (January 12th 1937), p. 16.

⁴⁹ Lindsay, 'The Historical Novel', p. 15.

⁵⁰ Jack Lindsay, 'Marxism and the Novel', *Left Review*, III:1 (February 1937), p. 51.

⁵¹ Georg Lukacz [sic], 'Walter Scott and the Historical Novel', *International Literature*, 1938: 4, p. 63.

The essay drew responses from British Marxists Sylvia Townsend Warner and T.A. Jackson, which were published in the journal's next issue, together with Lukács's response. The curious nature of their dialogue with Lukács, which is less concerned with the question of the genre of the historical novel than it is with Lukács's handling of Scott's nationality, is dealt with in the next chapter.

historical feeling artistically into a broad, objective, epic form'.⁵² Jack Lindsay gives the same account of the genesis of the form: 'It was as a product of the French Revolution that the historical novel arose; it came straight out of the new sense of history created by the social turmoil. Scott is the greatest figure'.⁵³ Lindsay claimed in a much later reflection on his development in respect of historical fiction, that 'Near the end of the 30s I read Lukács on Scott, and felt that his analysis clarified further what I was seeking to do.'⁵⁴ This is quite plausible given that Lindsay contributed to the English and Russian editions of *International Literature*, and his novel *1649* was reviewed in the Russian edition in 1938.⁵⁵ He may, indeed, have read Lukács's *Der historische Roman* on its publication in 1937; the date of publication of the *New Masses* article (early January 1937) suggests, however, that the congruence is a matter of coincidence, of comparable responses to intellectual and political challenges, rather than to direct influence. In what follows, I do not proceed from the assumption that Lukács's work directly influenced Lindsay's historical fiction; however, the symmetry between their respective conceptualisations of the form is significant, and Lukács's more developed and sustained analysis provides a useful framework for interpreting Lindsay's work.

4.3 Jack Lindsay's English Trilogy

While sharing important common ground with Lukács, Lindsay did begin to elaborate a system of political aesthetics during an intense period of intellectual activity from 1936, when he converted to Marxism, breaking with the modernism of his earlier phase.⁵⁶ The central premise of this system is a theory of alienation, and its determinants are a theory of culture as production, a politicised elaboration of the Aristotelian trope of Recognition, and an investment in the category of totality.

⁵² Lukacz [sic], 'Walter Scott and the Historical Novel', p. 73.

⁵³ Lindsay, 'The Historical Novel', p. 15.

⁵⁴ Jack Lindsay, 'A Note on My Dialectic', in *Culture and History: Essays Presented to Jack Lindsay*, edited by Bernard Smith (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984), p. 369.

⁵⁵ Lindsay's presence in the Russian edition is referred to by Leo Gruliow in 'The Russian Edition of "International Literature"', *International Literature*, 1939:1, pp. 123-4.

⁵⁶ Lindsay (1900-1990) was the son of the Australian artist and writer Norman Lindsay, who was for a time a major influence on him. He emigrated to Britain in 1926. The main source for biographical details is his autobiography, *Life Rarely Tells* (London: Penguin, 1982).

Lindsay prefaces *Lost Birthright*, the second novel in the English trilogy, with an epigraph from Hegel's *Aesthetics* on the relationship between art, history and the popular. Lindsay cites Hegel's assertion that 'art exists not only for the closed circle of the few who have the advantages of an education, but for the nation as a whole', and extends this claim into 'the outwards aspect of historical reality', which is necessary in order that 'we may feel ourselves at home'; so that '[the] historical becomes our own'.⁵⁷ This appeal to a totalised history as means of ending the homelessness of alienation usefully condenses his concerns in the trilogy. For Lindsay, this homelessness, this exile from a common home, originated in the break-up of the communal lands and the communities predicated on them. Lindsay's thinking turns on a politics of loss, of the appropriation of 'that which should have been held freely in common'.⁵⁸ History is the working out of this loss; the evolution of social, political and cultural forms was dynamised by enactments of lost commonality: 'All history is the tale of the efforts made by ruling classes to dominate and destroy the communal forms of living created by the workers.'⁵⁹ These communal forms, once detached from their social basis in the common lands, took on more abstracted forms, manifested, for example, in myth and religion.⁶⁰ As capitalism developed, more and more people experienced this dispossession, creating a mass group poised, eventually, to overthrow that system.⁶¹ Moreover, although he stressed the way that this loss pervades and plays a determining role in human culture, it assumes new forms with the evolution of society: '[a]bsolute loss', he wrote, will 'in every age bear on inspection the pattern of the age's social content. It is not loss in a void'.⁶² This is a unifying principle and the key dynamic in his writings on England first articulated in his poem for mass declamation, 'not english?' (1936) and his popular pamphlet, *England My England: A Pageant of the English People* (1939). The poem, 'not english?', enacts a logic of counter-formation, that dispossesses its listeners of their membership of the national group, before re-forming them as the oppositional constituency of the 'not english' through the figuration of the

⁵⁷ Lindsay, *Lost Birthright*, (1939; Bath: Portway Reprints, n.d.), p. v.

⁵⁸ Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths* (1937; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), p. 256.

⁵⁹ Lindsay, *England My England*, (London: Fore Publications, 1939), p. 6.

⁶⁰ Lindsay's study of John Bunyan (1937), for example, is a sustained exploration of the ways that the mythic and allegorical content of Bunyan's work relates to this process of primitive accumulation, and to the Civil War intellectual and political culture more generally. The writing of the Digger Gerard Winstanley gained its force from 'the perfect law of liberty (the common birthright) and the rule of imposed law' (*John Bunyan*, p. 74). This confrontation between conceptions of law is discussed in relation to 1649 below.

⁶¹ Lindsay, *John Bunyan*, p. 37.

⁶² Lindsay, *John Bunyan*, p. 87.

nation as appropriated creation of labour: ‘what little of it was ours in desperate toil/ was taken’.⁶³ Out of this point of recognition of loss emerges the solution of the text’s conflicts in the form of slogan, ‘Workers of the World’. England functions in the poem, as Ben Harker argues, as a ‘blurred, submerged and immanent counter nation conceived as synonymous with resistance to British capital’.⁶⁴ The poem attempts to illuminate a tradition of dispossession, in which the defeated achieve a type of immortality, their deaths transfigured through the continually reinvigorating practices of tradition. Likewise, the pamphlet *England My England* is rhetorically organised around a continuous struggle between property, conceived as originating in the theft of the common lands, and ‘the people’, ‘two Englands that lie starkly divided all through our history’.⁶⁵ Drawing on the trope of inheritance, but turning it away from its implication in the transmission of property, the text transmits responsibility: ‘for you inherit, not only their physical strain, but also their struggle, the world which they created, the rights for which they fought and died.’⁶⁶ The rhetorical effect of the short pageant-like scenes is a homogenisation, an emptying out of detail, so that popular movements become the story of ‘the countless unknown who rose in the great insurrections or died in small hopeless outbursts in the lean years of oppression’.⁶⁷ In both the pamphlet and the poem, the national frame serves as the mediating device through which this loss - this alienation from a common home - could be seen and conceptualised.

Bound up with this account of an original exile is Lindsay’s account of cultural form, and especially of ‘mass’ form. Concepts of ‘the mass’ and ‘the common’ are central to his historiography. In his *A Short History of Culture* (1939), he concluded that ‘always out of the productive group, the mass, has evolved the dynamic point of structure from which all cultural advance, in art or in science, is made.’⁶⁸ It is in production that man ‘objectifies’ himself, in all cultural production from tool creation onwards.⁶⁹ There is an advance, or attempted advance, here from Rickword’s pastoralized theory of culture as

⁶³ Jack Lindsay, ‘not english? a Reminder for May Day’, *Left Review*, II:8 (May 1936), p. 356.

⁶⁴ Harker, ‘Communism is English’: p. 25.

⁶⁵ Lindsay, *England My England*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Lindsay, *England My England*, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Lindsay, *England My England*, p. 26.

⁶⁸ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, (London: Gollancz, 1939), p. 376.

⁶⁹ Jack Lindsay, ‘Towards a Marxist Aesthetic’, in *Decay and Renewal: Critical Essays on Twentieth Century Writing* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), p. 430.

labour towards a productive theory of culture that actively dissolves the hierarchical distinction between base and superstructure, rather than compressing them by analogy. Past cultures, he argued in *Poetry and the People*, bore out two impulses: ‘A mass-impulse and the working out of that impulse among the leisured classes. The masses, chained down to the drudgery of unending toil, could never develop in detail the cultural impulses which they generated’.⁷⁰ This formulation decouples the origin of cultural productions from a particular economic situation, thus rejecting, for example, the notion that the culture of the dominant class reflects class relations in the economic base. The culture of the dominant class, therefore, does not merely articulate its dominance, but rather a more complex ideological content that includes revolutionary impulses emerging from different social levels. This is important for Lindsay’s reading of bourgeois culture, but it also marks an important attempt on Lindsay’s part to theorise the progressive content of bourgeois culture that other British Marxists, such as Ralph Fox, tended to take as given. However, although this formulation marks a significant innovation, it could, as we shall see, legitimise a prioritisation of bourgeois dissidence and an assumption of working-class passivity, denying to working-class movements a specific class content. This tendency arises from Lindsay’s central claims about the nature of the bourgeois epoch. The destruction of feudal society brought, for a time, the possibility of mass democracy: ‘Advancing from a thesis that society was a contract in which all authority was merely a delegation which could be called to order, the democratic spirit gradually challenged all the actual manifestations of the power-rule.’⁷¹ Crucially, however, that development was curtailed, in England, by the all-pervasive success of capitalism, so extreme as ‘to suppress to a large extent the creative forces rising out of the productive advance’.⁷² What was lost was a perspective of difference that residual feudalism has provided, but, once destroyed, left the masses in England without a way of recognising their conditions. The ‘creative centre’ passed over into countries where the success was more isolated, in which ‘the

⁷⁰ Jack Lindsay, ‘Neglected Aspects of Poetry (Part One)’, *Poetry and the People*, 1: July 1938, p. 14. Lindsay took up editorship of the journal at about the time of compiling *The Handbook of Freedom*: see *Life Rarely Tells* p. 782.

⁷¹ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture* (London: Gollancz, 1939), p. 305.

⁷² Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 438.

financial mechanism was sufficiently isolated from the general run of social life as to be something visible'.⁷³

In a late reflection on his political and aesthetic development, Lindsay recalled his turn to the historical novel in the early 1930s:

I saw the individual caught up in a complex pattern of social, economic, political mediations. (I did not yet use the term of Lukács, but it best explains what I was working to.) The mediations somehow came together in a dynamic moving unity [...] Never in quite the same way even in the same person at different moments, though there was an ultimate unity of the self. At moments the compacting or unifying element predominated, at other moments the contradictory or unbalancing elements asserted themselves and there was profound and lasting conflict, which carried on till a new balance emerged.⁷⁴

This passage demonstrates Lindsay's formulation of historical process and specifies an essentially Lukácsian model of totality as infinitely mediated and expressive - present in every moment of the process. But a critical difference of emphasis is also brought into view: Lindsay's intense stress on the imbalance of the moment of crisis, on those phases of 'profound and lasting conflict' is in some tension with the tenor of Lukács's arguments in the thirties, which emphasise continuity, the struggle in the everyday, so that popular movements are described as 'necessary continuations and intensifications of normal popular life'.⁷⁵ These are not mutually exclusive positions, but Lukács's emphasis reflects, more strongly than Lindsay's, a climate in international Communism that prioritised immediate defence over long-term transformation. Lindsay made this point in aesthetic terms in his late work *The Crisis in Marxism*, in which Lukács's position on realism is criticised on the grounds that it resists penetrating into 'the point where the effective unity of the system seems threatened by the intrusion of all sorts of imbalances and disruptions. This is the revolutionary moment when the result can only be a breakdown or the creation of the new centre of living, a new totality.'⁷⁶

In his autobiography, Lindsay describes his intellectual struggle during his period of conversion 'to hold true to the existential moment, in which the unexpurgated colour

⁷³ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 348.

⁷⁴ Jack Lindsay, 'A Note on my Dialectic', in Bernard Smith, ed., *Culture and History: Essays Presented to Jack Lindsay* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984), p. 368.

⁷⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937; London: Penguin, 1976), p. 361.

⁷⁶ Jack Lindsay, *The Crisis in Marxism* (Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1981), p. 46.

and richness of experience is alone preserved.’⁷⁷ This commitment to the specificity of the moment, carried over from his earlier engagements with Kierkegaard’s work especially, shapes the novels.⁷⁸ Much of the intensity of the novels derives from this stress on individual commitment, a drive to hold individuals to account to the demands of their historical moment. At the aesthetic level, Lindsay described this cognitive moment in which the individual gleaned the nature of the historical situation they faced in terms of an elaboration of the Aristotelian concept of Recognition that he found expressed, as noted in chapter two, in socialist novels like Sommerfield’s *May Day*. In that moment, a new, socialised subjectivity was achieved: ‘Recognition appears as the point where the shell of the old self cracks and the new self is born, breaking into new spaces of activity and achieving fullness of social contact.’⁷⁹ The crises in the novels – the English Revolution, the revolutionary period of the late eighteenth century, and the momentous year of 1848 – are configured not in terms of a mechanistic breakdown, but in terms of moments of choice, in which the acts of individuals combine to create social change, but also – equally importantly – as moments in which choices are not made and changes fail to occur, leading to the tragedy of 1848 and the ‘great divide of bourgeois triumph’.⁸⁰

What was lost in that divide was a critical standpoint from which to view society as a whole, a standpoint suppressed by the levelling and homogenising of capitalism.⁸¹ It was precisely this standpoint that, for Lindsay, the Popular Front promised to restore. He conceived of the thirties in terms of crisis that demanded active commitment: ‘Now, with the sharpening of conflict, the emergence of Fascism, choice is necessary unless the writer’s “objectivity” is to become a more and more feeble pretence of escape.’⁸² A complete history, a truly national narrative, was, Lindsay thought, available in the thirties in a new way as a result of the anti-fascist struggle and the advancement of the Soviet Union: a new conception of ‘the people’ as a homogenous audience; ‘a conquering class which can rightly arrogate to itself the terms of the “whole”’.⁸³ Lindsay’s sense of what was at stake in the Popular Front was, however, always Soviet-oriented, and that

⁷⁷ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 771.

⁷⁸ Lindsay describes his development in this regard in *Life Rarely Tells*, pp. 767-769.

⁷⁹ Jack Lindsay, ‘Man in Society’, *Left Review*, II:11 (January 1937), p. 837.

⁸⁰ Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956), p. 19.

⁸¹ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 348.

⁸² Lindsay, ‘Man in Society’, *Left Review*, p. 837.

⁸³ Lindsay, ‘A Plea for Mass Declamation’, *Left Review*, III:9 (October 1937), p. 516.

commitment became more pronounced as the decade progressed, so that, in *A Short History of Culture*, written at the time of the outbreak of war, Lindsay images the transformation of historical perspective less in terms of popular anti-fascism than in terms of the glorification of the Soviet Union: ‘we can bear to look back on that terrible past, to look into the terrible present, because of that voice, which is now the voice of the working classes and their allies all over the world, the confident voice of the millions of the Soviet Union.’⁸⁴

In reading Lindsay’s novels, I wish to bear in mind Lukács’s arguments in the final chapter of *The Historical Novel*, in which an argument is made for the Popular Front’s role in restoring to possibility the classical form of the historical novel, acquiring its objectivity, breadth and progressiveness from the ‘standpoint of popular life.’ ‘This perspective of the real and permanent liberation of the people alters the perspective which historical novels have of the future’, generating a new novel that can ‘discover entirely new tendencies and features in the past’.⁸⁵ But, equally, there is an important tension between this investment in the energies of popular life mobilised against fascism, and Lindsay’s reading of historical moments in terms of crisis and rupture. In his *New Masses* article, Lindsay articulates the function of the historical novel in terms of stability and continuity, asserting the ‘part it can play in bringing out the full content of human development, in sifting and absorbing all that is positive in past achievement, in establishing the continuity of tradition and stabilizing culture.’⁸⁶ His commitment to the form in these terms continually interplays with his account of the revolutionary moment as indeterminate and conflicted; that interplay is marked by intense political pressures as the drama of the thirties played out in the end of the Spanish Civil War, the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the outbreak of total war.

⁸⁴ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 388.

⁸⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 420.

⁸⁶ Lindsay, ‘The Historical Novel’, p. 16.

4.3.1 *1649: A Novel of a Year* (1938)

Lindsay's autobiography identifies as his motivation for the turn to novels of English history the desire 'to use the novel to revive revolutionary traditions.'⁸⁷ For Lindsay revolutions in history always have a dual aspect: they advance productive activity, intensifying the division of labour, while also creating the conditions for a new unity. In his study of John Bunyan, Lindsay argued that during the English Civil War there were two revolutionary forces: one that was individualist and which was 'to build bourgeois industrialism', but also another, 'the new coherence resulting from the productive advance.'⁸⁸ The relation between these two forces, and the increasing emergent antagonism between them, is the central dynamic of his Civil War novel. Lindsay's argument foreshadows Christopher Hill's later position, that there were two revolutions in seventeenth-century England: the 'bourgeois' revolution that succeeded in establishing the 'sacred' rights of property, as well as 'another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened.'⁸⁹ This second revolution, Hill argues, existed as a 'counter-culture'.⁹⁰ This counter-culture manifests itself in Lindsay's novel in the gestures of resistance made by the Levellers and the Diggers, and especially in the depiction of the trial of John Lilburne, and while ultimately the novel asserts the historical necessity of their defeat, it suggests that such acts of defiance were not simply tragic gestures, but the means of carrying the revolutionary content of the defeated side forward into the future through the structure of 'Recognition', revealing a tradition of resistance within. In this, however, Lindsay's thinking was in some tension with more orthodox readings of the English Revolution.

In the novel's opening scenes, the act of regicide which marks the end of a social order predicated on absolute monarchy appears to the uncertain, troubled crowd as by turns banal and intensely symbolic. The act marks not the onset of a new order but a hiatus, a breakdown, rather than, in Lukács's terms, an intensification of normal life: 'They waited, they accepted, they remained silent. They were neither eager nor depressed. They

⁸⁷ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*, p. 781.

⁸⁸ Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan*, p. 18.

⁸⁹ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (1972; London: Penguin, 1975), p. 15.

⁹⁰ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 341.

waited.’⁹¹ The king reads a speech, and yet, ‘the crowd couldn’t hear’ (13); he ‘kept making unintelligible gestures’ (14). This communicative breakdown indicates an end to Charles’s absolutist function as ‘the sole repository of national-social unity’⁹² and the beginning of a period of profound conflict; the fight, as Andy Croft puts it, ‘to determine the sort of victory the people had won’.⁹³ The import of the event cannot yet be enunciated: “‘Everything,” said Ralph in explanation, jerking his head round to indicate the whole scene. “Do you realize ... we, the People of England ...”’ (8). In Lindsay’s terms, the sudden rupture cannot yet be ‘objectified’ in word and narrative, and the plotline concerning the Leveller characters entails a quest for precisely this verbal objectification through the establishment of the *Agreement of the People*. Arising from the radical interruption of the communicative culture is a need for a new form of utterance.

Encountering the People

The novel is structured through multiple perspectives and short chapters, interspersed with original documents. The method creates an indeterminacy that brings into focus what is elided by the discourse of the victors. The question of what kind of narrative can be constructed from these fragments of experience is explored through the central plotline, in which the former New Model Army soldier Ralph Lydcot joins the Levellers in their pursuit of popular consent for *The Agreement of the People*. Christopher Hill described the importance of the concept of popular sovereignty - figured as the *vox populi* - during the period, and Lindsay examines the effect of the destruction of the commons on the coherence of the popular voice.⁹⁴ The ‘people’ as constructed by this text does not yet exist: the community in language that it designates is a hypothesis only. The yeoman Will Scamler, another Parliamentarian veteran, finds on his return from the war that his perception is changed: ‘when he now looked across the field, he saw England, not a private patch of the summer’ (116). Their involvement in the first conflict to function as a ‘mass experience’ makes available a new perspective on history. Will and Ralph try to narrate their wartime experiences, but the heroic register is only briefly introduced before being

⁹¹ Jack Lindsay, *1649: A Novel of a Year* (London: Methuen, 1938), p. 1. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

⁹² Lindsay, *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths*, p. 17

⁹³ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days*, p. 208.

⁹⁴ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 34-5.

interrupted by ellipsis and uncertainty: “Do you remember ...” the first good cause. “Godscods, Ralph ...” “I tell you, Will ...” “Do you remember...” (57). The heroic narrative of the War that might have served as a national story that could unify opposition to Cromwell’s dictatorship resolves into silence. The idea of the nation enters the characters’ conceptual vocabulary through their experiences and serves to inform a radical democratic ideal hypothesised in the Leveller declaration, transforming Ralph’s perception so that, ‘The voices he heard were not those of blackbirds rapturously whistling or diving with sharp scattered bell-notes of warning; they were the voices of peasants in the ale-house or under the hedge’ (239). But the disjunction between this and the Levellers’ rhetoric is apparent: ‘The voice was there, speaking, desired, awaited. But could it speak loud enough and soon enough?’ (240).

The coherence and audibility of that voice, and the national constituency it represents is vitiated by economic conditions. The *Agreement* would codify a new state of affairs while asserting the ‘rights’ of the English. The people have however been ruined by the financial crises following the War: ‘The ditches of England were filled with outcasts, yeomen driven off the land, disbanded soldiers who could find no work, bankrupt tradesmen and journeymen; yet these people seemed the least ready to rise in active revolt’ (238). This dispossession is central to Lindsay’s account of the failure of the English Revolution to restore the ‘birthright’ of the people: the inability of the radicals to make efficient challenge to the advancement of enclosure and the deflection of ‘natural’ rights onto the rights of property. The disappearance of the land held in common had destroyed the sense of ‘union’ as a basis from which such a challenge could be organised (238). This is Ralph’s insight as he rides into ‘the England of May’ (239). John Lilburne believes that *The Agreement of the People* will ‘bring into being the first free Parliament that England has seen since the Norman Conquest’ (132). Chidley however responds, ‘We must remember that there is no people in the sense in which you use the world’ (132). This dialogue evinces the process of ‘reference back and forward to actuality’ Lindsay described in his account of the relationship between concepts and social facts.⁹⁵ For the *Agreement* to pass from the hypothetical to the actual, to become an authentic collective and popular utterance expressing what has been won, but also what has been lost, requires

⁹⁵ Jack Lindsay, ‘Writer and Society’, *Left Review*, III:3, March 1937, p. 115.

the development of capitalism to transform the economic conditions so as to create a new unity in labour. In this, Lindsay reiterates Marxist readings of the Levellers as a historically premature force, foreshadowing later socialist and democratic positions. The interpretation of the Civil War is a crucial area of contestation among radical historians and the period Raphael Samuel identifies as the ‘gravitational centre’ of Marxist historical thinking in the thirties and forties, which principally turned on the question of the Levellers’ politics.⁹⁶ Morton writes that the Levellers’ role was essentially path-breaking, ‘to carry the movement to positions which could not be permanently held but whose temporary seizure safeguarded the main advance’.⁹⁷ Christopher Hill likewise argued that ‘the Levellers never represented a sufficiently homogeneous class to be able to achieve their aims’.⁹⁸ Ralph Lydcot’s turn to commerce is in this sense to be seen not as an abandonment of the revolution but a pursuit of the necessary conditions for its full realisation. The division of the text into multiple perspectives and incompatible accounts refuses to suppress this division, the solution to which only became possible, Lindsay felt, in ‘the new situation’ of the thirties.’⁹⁹

As the revolutionary momentum of the Levellers is broken, Ralph Lydcot withdraws from active politics, a measure that precipitates a loss of a critical perspective: the effect of the loss of hope is a contraction of his vision from the general – the national and popular – to the immediate and specific: he finds he can no longer face the phrase ‘a free England’ and ‘wanted to escape all generalisation and live in some immediate objective – the cornering of the tin supply’ (312). The apparent contraction of his vision is attended by a sharpening sense of international context through the lens of commodity

⁹⁶ Raphael Samuel, ‘The British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One’, *New Left Review*, I/120 (March-April 1980), p. 84. The politics of seventeenth-century England were a central concern of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, which grew out of a meeting at Marx House in 1938 called to discuss a new edition of Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (Bill Schwarz, ‘“The People” in History: the Communist Party Historians’ Group, 1946-56’, in Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (1982; London: Routledge, 2007), p. 44). The course of the Group’s debates on the English Revolution are beyond the scope of this study, but the key interventions and discussions (by Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, Maurice Dobb and others) are collected in David Parker, ed., *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the Communist Party Historians, 1940-56* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2008).

⁹⁷ Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 215.

⁹⁸ Hill, *The English Revolution 1640* (1940; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), p. 51. (Hill’s essay was originally published in a collection, edited by Hill, that also included Rickword’s ‘Milton: The Revolutionary Intellectual’; references here are to the republished, free-standing edition).

⁹⁹ Lindsay, ‘A Plea for Mass Declamation’, p. 516.

production: ‘Cotton, dye-galls, aniseeds, corodovans, wax, grogram, camlets, carpets, gems from India, indigo, spices from Arabia, mohair and raw silk. What did he know about the world from which these various things came, paid for by the exports and tin? [...] He wanted to travel’ (454-5). Ralph’s Levelling instincts are displaced into this other form of equivalence and equality. These ‘various things’ become the mediators of Ralph’s understanding of the world. The England of labour, briefly brought into view by his experience of the mass conflict of the war, is displaced by the world of things. The loss of the national scale in this scheme, which moves directly from the local to the international, suggests the Popular Front endorsement of the nation state as a form in which capitalism could be resisted. Ralph’s abandonment of the idea of a free English nation enables him to blindly facilitate the development of the commercial empire.

Levelling

In suggesting that the underlying cause for the Levellers’ failure was a lack of a developed social base, Lindsay at one level echoes other Marxists, such as Morton and Hill, who were during the thirties exploring the ‘bourgeois’ revolution of the 1640s. However, where the novel becomes more interesting, and more revealing of Lindsay’s distinctive emphases, is in its literary figuration of that failure and its legacies. The novel depicts a moment of early capitalist modernity in which modern cultural forms begin to circulate; the Levellers’ *Agreement* is implicitly figured as a unifying alternative to the fragmentation of narrative those forms entail. This current in the novel is most clearly seen in the figure of the Puritan apprentice, Roger Cotton, who experiences an intense crisis of faith, a search for the ‘absolute’ (44) that is no longer available after the execution of the monarch inaugurates a phase of radical contingency. Lindsay described the novel form in terms of a dialectical interaction between the earlier mode of the quest narrative and the condition of capitalist modernity, and Roger is shaped in this relationship.¹⁰⁰ His initial revolt is against his employer, Mr Bagshaw, who has ‘collected a pack of down-and-out authors who, for a glass of wine, a plateful of meat, and half a crown, would knock off a pamphlet, a ballad, or a hack-translation, even a treatise on history or science’(71). Most distressing to Roger is Bagshaw’s scheme of selling texts of popular sermons, ‘Paper obtained on credit; half

¹⁰⁰ Jack Lindsay, ‘Towards a Marxist Aesthetic’, pp. 441-2.

the book put out to a printer to save time' (70). Roger is repelled by the levelling process of capitalism that reduces all ideas and texts to equivalent commodities and empties them of their signifying power – a reality becoming prosaic. The breakdown between, on Roger's reading, Word and world emerges from, but also participates in, the advance of the capitalist mode of production. His appalled confrontation with the degradation of text induces a quest to objectify the contradictions manifested there, conditioning him as a listener so that, at the Lilburne trial, 'The words gripped Roger; they seemed aimed directly at him' (476).

Roger's commitment to the Diggers is an extension of his revolt against the corruption and abstraction of text: he is formed by nascent capitalism into an oppositional figure within it. His quest is for a sure gesture that might counteract the ambiguity of modernity: in the Digger Everard he finds, 'The words and the voice so eager and assured before the unmoved listeners; the eyes unfathomably burning. That was what he wanted; that certainty' (204). Likewise in Gerard Winstanley he finds the unity of word and gesture that overcomes the rupture he apprehends as the foundation of commerce: 'The penetrating gentleness of his voice, the quiet benediction of his hand, filled Roger with a balmy certitude' (209). But in both cases Roger is forced to confront the failure of the 'certainty' manifested in the Diggers to make contact with social reality. While his involvement in the Digger commune assuages his sense of alienation arising in commerce, this labour cannot overcome his alienation from his 'species-being', in Marx's sense, which makes itself felt in his relationship with his wife.¹⁰¹ He is tormented by his inability to subsume his sexual drive to his sense of a social body in which all are separate but equal: 'The desire to take the body of another, he said, was only part of the greedy spirit of discontent and hate' (309). This attempt to repress causes a disjuncture between word and gesture: 'She had on a light dress and he could feel the garters above her knees and the soft movement of her thighs as he knelt there; and the gesture which he had meant as one of simply brotherly

¹⁰¹ Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 88. Lindsay did not read the 1844 manuscripts until about 1941; however, he acknowledged the consonance with his own work in the thirties in a later reflection on his development: 'Though [in 1936] it was to be some five or more years before I learned of Marx's 1844 manuscripts and began to study them, to make some use of their idiom, I had on my own reached their positions': 'Towards a Marxist Aesthetic', p. 433.

affect ceased to be so easy, so unequivocal' (309). The 'certainty' seemingly embodied in the Diggers fails when confronted with Roger's divided being: his bad faith.

It is useful, at this point, to consider Georg Lukács's somewhat enigmatic comments about 'capitalist prose', a phrase that recurs in his thirties writing. This form, for Lukács, inscribes the bourgeois order as the natural way of things, and frames the victory and entrenchment of bourgeois power as inevitable. 'Capitalist prose', Lukács suggests, becomes dominant after the 'heroic' phase of bourgeois history, in which the bourgeoisie was still the objectively progressive force, in the sense that, as A.L. Morton put it, 'they could not fight for their own rights and liberties without also fighting for the rights and liberties of all Englishmen and of humanity as a whole.'¹⁰² For Communists working for a Popular Front, the 'progressive', indeed heroic, past of the bourgeoisie was a rhetorical lynchpin of the appeal to alliance: 'to call upon members of the middle class who are oppressed and frustrated by monopoly capitalism to-day to unite with the progressive class of to-day - the proletariat.'¹⁰³ 'Capitalist prose' is the product of the schism between bourgeois class interests and wider society: '[t]he rule of prose set in after the heroic period because objectively the only result of the people's colossal heroic efforts was the replacement of one form of exploitation by another.'¹⁰⁴ Capitalist prose in so far as Lukács defines it then is perspectival, and to some degree temporal: the vanishing of the revolutionary future from the bourgeois perspective ensured that revolutionary outbursts could only appear as aberrant and 'episodic'.¹⁰⁵ The posited supersession of that perspective by the perspective of the Popular Front, the 'standpoint of popular life', would, Lukács thought, spell an end to the epoch of 'capitalist prose'.¹⁰⁶ Lindsay's novel may be seen as writing back into the moment of bourgeois victory the contestation of that closure, not just from the forces of reaction without but from more radical positions within: to acknowledge, in literary terms that, as Lukács argued in 'Realism in the Balance', 'historical necessity neither implies justification of what actually exists (not even in the period when it exists), nor does it imply a fatalistic belief in the necessity of historical

¹⁰² A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, p. 194.

¹⁰³ Christopher Hill, 'Our England' [Review of Jack Lindsay, *England My England*], *Labour Monthly*, February 1939, p. 127.

¹⁰⁴ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 420.

¹⁰⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 420.

¹⁰⁶ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 419.

events.¹⁰⁷ In so doing, the novel may resist naturalising bourgeois dominance, a position Lukács felt as integral to the Popular Front strategy, but in so doing it also threatens to jeopardise the very idea of a ‘progressive’ bourgeoisie; this, I suggest, brings into view a central contradiction in the historical premises of the Popular Front.

Lindsay’s pamphlet, *England My England*, while accepting the principle of the necessity of the victory of the Cromwellian forces and the defeat of the Levellers, nonetheless clearly positions itself on the side of the ‘plain-spoken revolutionaries who stood up and told Cromwell to his face what the poor people of England expected and meant to have.’¹⁰⁸ Although the pamphlet was generally well received by Communists, it was this apparent refusal to valorise the Cromwellian victors that Party critics took issue with. Idris Cox, a major figure in the Party, criticised Lindsay for ‘so serious an underestimation of Cromwell’s objective role in unleashing the forces of revolt against caste and privilege’.¹⁰⁹ Hill, meanwhile, foreshadowing the argument he would make in his seminal essay the following year, suggested that Lindsay had not made due efforts to show that Cromwell and the parliamentary leaders ‘were members of a class that was then progressive leading a national struggle against intolerable economic and social and political conditions.’¹¹⁰ In 1649, the scepticism towards Cromwell as a progressive force is even more pronounced. The Leveller Ralph Lydcot’s turn away from the ‘good old cause’ is a response to Cromwell’s shooting of Leveller soldiers, who were mutinying over Cromwell’s planned invasion of Ireland and their unmet political demands, at Burford in May. Lindsay draws on a contemporary report to describe the act in terms of a unity of gesture and word: “‘Shoot me”, [the mutineer] said, “when I hold out my hand to you”. He held out his hand and they shot him’ (261). Christopher Hill argues that the shooting of the mutineers ‘made a restoration of monarchy and lords ultimately inevitable’.¹¹¹ But Lindsay’s use of the contemporary account, in a novel preoccupied with language and

¹⁰⁷ Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (1980; London: Verso, 2007), p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ Lindsay, *England My England* (London: Key Books, 1939), p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ Idris Cox, ‘Key Books Launch Out’, *Daily Worker*, 4 January, 1939, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Hill, ‘Our England’, *Labour Monthly*, February 1939, p. 127. In James Barke’s *Major Operation* (London: Collins, 1936), Cromwell is clearly associated with middle-class fascism, despite the novel’s ostensible commitment to class alliance (p. 377).

¹¹¹ Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, pp. 52-3.

gestures, restores a symbolic, even heroic, power to the soldiers' actions.¹¹² The soldiers' deaths are inevitable, but their conduct is chosen. The contemporary source, reproduced in *Spokesmen for Liberty*, describes the mutineers as 'looking [the soldiers] in the face till they gave fire, not showing the least kind of terror or fearfulness of spirit'.¹¹³ As against Morton and Hill's emphasis on the historical necessity of the Leveller failure, Lindsay stresses the violence with which Cromwell's forces suppressed them, making it clear that necessity manifested itself in action and not in the blindly impersonal rule of historical forces. This strange, haunting moment in the novel epitomises the violence of success while giving form to the minimal power and agency that is graspable even by the defeated: that which is elided by A.L. Morton's assertion of the historical justification of that suppression. The emphasis falls not on the heroic energies of the bourgeoisie in their development of the productive forces, but instead on the immediately repressive disavowal of its revolutionary ideology. But we might equally understand this moment, in the terms offered by Lukács, as figuring one of the privileged moments in which the 'inner poetry' of life interrupted and briefly transcended the levelling effects of capitalism as formalised in 'capitalist prose', a prose form intimated in Ralph's paratactic description of the world of commodities (454).¹¹⁴

The central dramatic episode of *1649* is the trial for treason of the Leveller John Lilburne, and Lindsay's handling of it is also exemplary of his use of the trope of Recognition. The Lilburne trial provides the occasion for realising the hypothesis of *The Agreement of the People* within available forms. Lilburne is a levelling agent who expresses the positive side of the 'levelling' Roger finds so degrading: 'He spoke against the king and the bishops and the Whore of Babylon. Where are they now? Gone with the dust on God's wind', his wife says (95). The depiction of his imprisonment suggests a national and popular leader in whom the fate of the people is concentrated: 'lifting his hand, saying aloud, "I shall not be ensnared," he felt the old strength flowing back, tingling

¹¹² The young Lukács wrote of gesture in terms of this kind of commitment: 'Perhaps the gesture - to use Kierkegaard's dialectic - is the paradox, the point at which reality and possibility intersect, matter and air, the finite and the infinite, life and form'; 'In a word, the gesture is that unique leap by which the absolute is transformed, in life, into the possible': 'The Foundering of Form Against Life', *Soul and Form* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1974), p. 29.

¹¹³ 'How the Levellers of Thomson's Force Died', in Rickword & Lindsay, eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 145.

¹¹⁴ Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?' in Arthur Kahn, trans. & ed., *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1970), p. 127.

at the roots of every hair on his head, tautening his muscles, till he stood up, up, all over England' (265). Lilburne's conscious merging of himself with the people of England gives rise to a moment of recognition of his situation, and the articulation of commitment:

The end was not yet. He said to the night, not in any vanity (for it was of himself as the voice of the surging struggle that he spoke; himself as England): Until Lilburne is broken, liberty is not lost. They may kill, but not break me (269).

If the emphasis on such gestures risks a valorisation of the extreme over the typical, Lindsay does attempt to typify Lilburne, showing at several points a conflicted inner life, carefully enclosed in parentheses, wrought by commonplace experiences of death and loss (e.g., 270). But Lilburne's defence takes the form of an appeal to the law and the constitution and eschews the extra-legal power he could invoke in gesture: he 'knew that if he so wished, with the raising of a hand he could smash the court and chase the learned judges out of it' (462). It is this choice – the choice to fight on the basis of the law – that is represented as heroic. The court attempts to prevent him from reading the text of the law (486) so that the act of enunciating the already existing rights of the English is itself both gesture and praxis. For Lindsay, the greatest evidence that radical gains could be made and freedoms defended within existing state and legal frameworks came from cases of trial by jury, in which the jury had acted as 'defender of liberty' against the misuse of the law.¹¹⁵ As in the report of the shootings of the Leveller soldiers, Lindsay draws closely on the contemporary report of the trial.¹¹⁶ While the regicide that opens the novel moved the revolution into unprecedented territory - Edgell Rickword noted that the execution was 'public and ceremonial', 'for it could not be called legal' - the Lilburne trial upholds the text of the law against its corruption.¹¹⁷

Lilburne stands metonymically for the people as yet unformed as political subject. Where the radical act of the regicide is severed from its origins in human agency - even the politically aware characters cannot explain it - Lilburne is shown making an active choice in full awareness of the limitations of the moment. The text of the law ceases at this moment to be an abstraction and comes into force as a concrete realisation: momentarily,

¹¹⁵ Lindsay, *England My England*, p. 47.

¹¹⁶ The proceedings of the trial are available at <http://constitution.org/trials/lilburne/lilburne1.htm>

¹¹⁷ Edgell Rickword, 'Milton: The Revolutionary Intellectual' (1940), reprinted in Rickword, *Literature in Society: Essays and Opinions (II): 1931-1978* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), p. 179.

there is a convergence of legality and legitimacy, and therefore an intimation of the abolition of the generative contradiction within capitalism. Recognition, in Lindsay's specialised sense, is the narrative outcome of the Lilburne trial. Roger finds that 'he had never before seen the whole struggle, the righteous man arrayed against the great ones of the world, in so stark and noble a form' (490). The 'heroic pattern' of the struggle 'came home to him with tremendous force, clarifying his personal conflicts' (490). Gesture, it is suggested here, can give form to the perception of totality occluded by the bourgeois perspective represented by Ralph's traumatised retreat into the immediacy of commerce. Roger is transformed by the end of the novel into a literary intellectual; in showing that the revolutionary promises of the Levellers are not destroyed but transformed, carried into the future in different forms (France appears on the horizon of the text, p. 559) Lindsay writes back into the history of the novel an account of its origins in resistance to the 'levelling' of commercial exchange. This device carries into the history of the form not only the bourgeois mode of 'capitalist prose', as Lukács calls it, but also its dialectical corollary: the heroic, ecstatic mode borne of religious revolt against the degradation of the world.

The significance of the trial to the form of *1649* has tended to be overlooked by critics reading the novel in terms of Lindsay's emphasis on the 'mediocre' heroes, Roger and Ralph. The *Daily Worker* saw in the Levellers the image of the modern Communist Party, and subsequent critics have tended to read the novel for political parallels.¹¹⁸ The trial of Georgi Dimitrov, in whose 'moral grandeur and courage' Ralph Fox saw a paradigm of the new literary hero, is certainly a presence in Lindsay's novel, as Jan Montefiore points out.¹¹⁹ However, within the wider system of Lindsay's thought, the trial combines symbolic gesture with political praxis. The paradox of the events of 1649 is the discharging into social life of two forms of levelling: the freeing of the forces of commodity capitalism and a legalistic principle of democracy. Once mobilised both forces generate their own momentum. In his re-writing of that history, Lindsay offers an account not just of the onward march of capitalism's cultural forms but also the formal possibilities

¹¹⁸ The *Daily Worker*'s reviewer, 'Martin Marprelate', wrote that the novel 'has for its hero a Party, the Levellers', and that readers 'see the Party in all its aspects'. 'A Novel in a Thousand', *Daily Worker*, 25 May, 1938, p. 7. Most of Lindsay's works in this period were favourably reviewed in the *Daily Worker*, even if his elaboration of a thesis of culture as production brought him into increasing conflict with the Party hierarchy, as reported in 'A Note on My Dialectic', p. 372.

¹¹⁹ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the Thirties: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 152. Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 121.

of resistances. By showing how past victories have been accomplished, the novel attempts the demarcation of what Tom Buchanan calls ‘the distinction between bourgeois democracy and the democratic spaces that existed within it’ that was integral to Communist thinking at this time.¹²⁰ Edgell Rickword argued that behind every secured political right is the promise of an eventual realisation of full democracy, ‘that ghost which haunts the capitalist democracies with the reminder of their youthful promises’.¹²¹ In light of *1649*’s evocation of that vision and its suppression, then, Gustav Klaus’s comment that Lindsay ‘democratised’ the genre of the historical novel might be radically extended.¹²²

4.3.2 *Lost Birthright* (1939)

1649 ends on New Year’s Day, 1650, with a letter from Oliver Cromwell in Ireland affirming his belief in the divine justice of the conquest (561-2). Near the end of the trilogy of English historical novels he wrote in the late thirties, one of Lindsay’s characters (a Chartist) makes explicit what is implicit in his earlier work:

The English revolution against Charles I went on mounting democratically until the point when Cromwell turned its forces into the subjugation of Ireland; then came the collapse of democracy. Ever since then we have been fighting to regain the British liberties that were lost by the conquest of Ireland.¹²³

The implication is that the catastrophe of the conquest of Ireland turned revolution into counter-revolution almost immediately, but Lindsay’s vision of the revolutionary year writes the contestation of that conclusion by the Levellers’ mutiny and John Lilburne’s defence of the law. However, the question of how to read this quotation is difficult; there is a notably ambiguity about whether it articulates a historical argument, or if it is instead to be taken as another rendering of the ‘lost birthright’ trope, another inflection of ‘absolute loss’. This problem comes into focus in *Lost Birthright*, the second instalment of the English trilogy. *Lost Birthright* is set in 1769, and the gestures of resistance that inscribe the Levellers’ defeat with power and agency are shown to be less available in the more

¹²⁰ Buchanan, ‘Anti-fascism and Democracy in the 1930s’, p. 48.

¹²¹ Edgell Rickword, ‘Culture, Progress and English Tradition’, p. 245.

¹²² Gustav Klaus, ‘Socialist Fiction in the 1930s: Some Preliminary Observations’, in John Lucas, ed., *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), p. 27.

¹²³ Jack Lindsay, *Men of Forty-Eight* (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 388.

mediated capitalist culture of the late eighteenth century; the spaces for critique of bourgeois society become narrower as new levels of alienation appear. Meanwhile, the novel form and its generic conventions - as well as other cultural hallmarks of bourgeois society - come into focus as intimately bound up with the production and mediation of subjectivity in capitalist society. The result is a novel preoccupied with questions of the figuration of capital, with the question of how a perspective of totality can be reached.

The idea of the 'lost birthright' occupied a privileged position in Lindsay's thought; it recurred through history as the mythic image of what had been unjustly taken, 'that which should have been held freely in common'.¹²⁴ Furthermore, as I suggested above, the cultural forms in which this loss manifested itself evolved with society. In *Lost Birthright*, the concept of the 'birthright' is invoked to dynamise several, interlinked plots. At the first level is the story of two middle-class brothers, Harry and Valentine Lydcott (the surname thus linking them to the Leveller Ralph in *1649*), who find that their inheritance has been misappropriated by an unscrupulous lawyer, and set out to restore their fortunes. For Valentine, accompanied by his friends Kit and Julian Fane, this quest takes the form of an attempt to unjustly secure wealth, initially by gambling and fraud and, when that fails, through the murder of an elderly distant relative in a bid to claim his estate. Simultaneously, the novel narrates the unravelling of the character of Julian Fane during his own pursuit of his origins. By contrast, for Valentine's brother, the disillusioned scholar Harry, a pursuit of security takes him through several failed marriage schemes before leading him into the radical political movement around John Wilkes. Through this activist position he is able to recognise the real nature of what has been lost in a way his brother cannot.

Figuring Capital

The section of Rickword and Lindsay's *Spokesmen for Liberty* that covers the period in which *Lost Birthright* is set takes its title from Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village': 'Wealth Accumulates and Men Decay'.¹²⁵ Central to the novel is the process of accumulation. Accumulation is shown to involve speculation and gambling, through which

¹²⁴ Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths*, p. 256.

¹²⁵ Rickword & Lindsay, eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 169.

Valentine and his friends are involved in trying to recover Valentine's lost birthright. As David Harvey describes, the process of speculation causes money to be withdrawn from circulation and hoarded as capital, and the physical presence of money is replaced by the hypothetical currency of credit and debt.¹²⁶ The connected dynamics of accumulation and the crisis in circulation are understood by Marx as integral to the founding of the national debt and the modern state. This debt is characteristic of the modern (bourgeois) state: 'Public debt becomes the *credo* of capital.'¹²⁷ This process is figured very directly in *Lost Birthright* in the figure of the libertine Lord Hawkins, who proposes an Enclosure Bill by which he intends to pay off his gambling debts through dispossessing the rural workers, and the scheme is presented as a gambling away of 'the ancient communal rights' of the rural people.¹²⁸ The insidious and pervasive nature of this process serves to undermine the perspective of difference necessary to successfully oppose it.

Lost Birthright represents a crisis in circulation in which the withdrawal of capital, its vanishing into private accumulation, leads to paranoia, distrust and a fetishisation of physical contact with the money form: Valentine and his friends obsessively and violently seek 'not the money in the banks' but 'the gold coins that you can touch and see' (326). Meanwhile their uncle, a formerly radical merchant, asks the middleman Mendoza to act as his agent in investment: 'I want to keep my hand in, to have the feel of the market' (193). The privileging of presence, sight and contact reflect the anxiety of alienation more generally, and may be read as an acknowledgement on Lindsay's part of the connection between the form of the novel and the rise of empirical epistemology, as theorised by Ian Watt.¹²⁹ In Watt's formulation the novel is linked to a confidence in the individual's ability to perceive the reality of the external world. Lindsay complicates this assumption as the 'truth' of that reality continually disappears into the networks of advancing capitalism, and the characters' pursuit of the present and tangible is shown to be a reflex response to a capitalist reality becoming increasingly intangible and decentred, revealing thereby the epistemological limits that constituted the novel in its early phase. In Lindsay's terms, the

¹²⁶ David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 111-112.

¹²⁷ Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (1976, London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 919.

¹²⁸ Jack Lindsay, *Lost Birthright* (1939; Bath: Portway Reprints, n.d.), p. 247. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

¹²⁹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 7.

financial mechanisms become so embedded in social life that there is no longer any way to make them visible.¹³⁰ The novelistic tropes of ‘fate’ and ‘luck’ are shown to happily conspire in this obfuscation. Following the discovery of Mr Lydcott’s murder, a farcical quest for his will ensues, in which his various distant relatives imagine themselves in a Gothic novel: ‘It feels like the Mysteries of Udolfo’ (492 [*sic*]). Another relative is thrilled by its prosaic narrative potential: ‘What could be more dazzling than the discovery of a miser’s treasure on the scene of his midnight murder? The newspapers would be full of it’ (486). The satiric use of Gothic and adventure conventions lays bare their function in mediating his bourgeois characters’ perception of their activity: they perceive the quest not in terms of the realistic ambition of advancing their control of capital but instead as part of a romantic, individualist adventure.¹³¹ The novel’s conventions legitimate greed and obfuscate the origins of capital in accumulation: in the loss of what should be held in common. The novel of eighteenth-century capitalism, then, is positioned as the working out of the ‘mass impulse’ among the leisured classes; but while, in *1649* it is still possible for the intellectuals to recognise the nature of that impulse, here it is based on a profound misrecognition.¹³²

Lindsay’s perception of the connection between novelistic form and the processes of capitalism is demonstrated most acutely in the figuration of Valentine’s friend, Julian Fane. In Julian, Lindsay coordinates a quest for origins with an account of capital’s origins in primitive accumulation, merging two forms of illegitimacy. In his *A Short History of Culture*, Lindsay considered the origin-quest, whether directed inwards (as in *Tristram Shandy*) or outwards (as in *Tom Jones*), to be an inflection of the ‘wandering theme’ that was the central dynamic in all narrative literature, and which arose in the break-up of the communal settlement and the privatisation of property.¹³³ Julian is psychologically traumatised by his abandonment as a child, which he understands in terms of disinheritance and exile from his true self, driven by the blind force of ‘accumulative anguish’ (327). His sense of having been stripped of his ‘birthright’ is a feeling of being

¹³⁰ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 348.

¹³¹ Lindsay’s use of this technique is not dissimilar to Arthur Calder-Marshall’s satirical portraits of Communist characters imagining themselves in stylised socialist realist scenes in *Pie in the Sky*, but Lindsay felt that the portrayal of the Communists as ‘intellectual figments’ was one of the weaknesses in Calder-Marshall’s work. Lindsay, ‘Socialists in Fiction’, *Left Review*, III:2 (March 1937), p. 107.

¹³² Jack Lindsay, ‘Neglected Aspects of Poetry (Part One)’, *Poetry and the People*, p. 14.

¹³³ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, pp. 444-5.

stripped of identity; ‘what I have lost is not money, it is my real self’ (329), and the documents that might have proved his claim to both have been burnt. Like Valentine, he fetishizes the physical commodity of money in circulation, seeking ‘not the money in the banks’ but ‘the gold coins that you can touch and see’ (326). This fixation with the physical presence and immediate encounter with the money form is one strand of the novel’s critique of empiricism as an inflection of commodity fetishism; the quintessential mode of eighteenth-century bourgeois philosophy is explicitly linked to the disorientating experiential conditions of burgeoning capitalism: a valuation of presence and direct contact at the very moment when they themselves become scarce commodities. In Lindsay’s taxonomy of symbols, the circle and the line are the principles of movement; Julian’s circulation is however a sign of the disconnection between the principles of advancement and the principles of renewal.¹³⁴ He feels himself in circulation around a centre that is both feared and desired: ‘like a slow whirlpool he was caught in the tide of this confession’, the momentum of which would ‘swing him into the crushing foam-fury at the heart of the circling’ (203). For Julian, the miser and his hoard represent the birthright from which he has been dispossessed - the irretrievable truth about himself. Part of Julian’s trauma is his belief that his mother was raped, and he displaces his traumatic belief about his origins on to the hoarding Mr Lydcott. This trauma presents itself in the figure of ‘A hairy hand, say, when you’re asleep, coming in through the window’ (326). This is a terror of seeing with sudden clarity the body as a whole: ‘a touch, yes, you understand, coming out clear and terrible’ (326). This ‘hand’, which represents the coercion from which Julian originates, as well as the illegitimacy of capitalism itself, may be read as the double of the central metaphor of political economy, the invisible hand that (supposedly) directs the forces of individual greed into the general interest of the social body. Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* is a product of the period in which the novel is set, and the metaphors Smith carried over from physiocratic models of the social and economic body suggest themselves.¹³⁵ As Susan Buck-Morss has shown, the development of capitalism in the late eighteenth century necessitated the development of conceptual means of ‘envisioning’

¹³⁴ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 79.

¹³⁵ See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; Petersfield: Harriman House, 2007), pp. 293-296.

capital as the system became impossible to visualise except by means of representation as a consequence of the crisis in circulation *Lost Birthright* depicts.¹³⁶

In the figurative system of political economy, the ‘social body’ is the organising metaphor, and ‘the public finances are the blood that is discharged by a wise *economy*, performing the functions of the heart’.¹³⁷ Julian’s obsession with circulating money echoes this image: ‘It’s movement, swung in the star-net, flowing like blood. There’s the heart pounding away, out of sight, locked up, but the blood flows’ (326). In the murder scene Julian conflates Mr Lydcott with this heart, and money with blood, ‘As if gold, not blood, would pour from the wound in the old man’s flesh’ (331). He comes to believe that Mr Lydcott raped his mother, concentrating his trauma of being dispossessed and identity-less into the killing of the hoarder. His fear of the ‘hidden hand’ suggests a repressed knowledge that, as Smith’s schema cannot admit, the body for which the hand stands is not a ‘civilised’ one.¹³⁸ Furthermore Julian’s own function in the text is that of a malevolent version of the ‘invisible hand’: lacking a sense of self or a fortune of his own, he controls through indirection. He contrives the murder of Mr Lydcott, deciding that ‘the other two must do the killing. Then his power would be complete’ (330). As a malevolent manager he merges with the increasingly invisible operations of capital to the extent Valentine eventually realises ‘I don’t know a thing about you’; ‘I’ve just taken you on credit. The bill’s overdue. What the devil are you?’ (521). His self-identification with money, the ‘radical leveller’ that ‘extinguishes all distinctions’, leads inexorably to the dissolution of the self.¹³⁹ In this concluding image, Lindsay demonstrates the non-fulfilment of the trope of Recognition, as Julian becomes identity-less and unrecognisable through identification with the form whose origins cannot be revealed. Although Val experiences a partial revelation, it leads only to a scuffle with Julian in which they pull each other to their deaths in the Thames (527). The characters die accidentally and inconsequently in pointless struggle, starkly contrasting with the images of elective heroism in *1649*. That elective heroism was above read in terms of a moment of commitment or

¹³⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 2. (Winter 1995), p. 445.

¹³⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Discourse on Political Economy’, qtd. Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital’, p. 445, emphasis in Buck-Morss.

¹³⁸ Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital’, p. 450.

¹³⁹ Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, p. 229.

acknowledgement, in which the defeated are able to recognise the minimal power available to them. Here, however, the mediations of capitalism occlude a perspective of totality which could reveal such a possibility. Julian's filiation to the allegiance-less, endlessly mobile commodity leaves no point of stability, no perspective of difference from which such a gesture could be made.

'Wilkes and Liberty'

In one sense, the plot-line involving Julian, in which he is destroyed by the radical uncertainties and indeterminacy of capitalist society, provides a counter-point to Roger's partially successful quest for a sure unity of word and gesture in *1649*. As in that novel, *Lost Birthright* features an overtly political plot in which a bourgeois figure leads a popular movement whose demands transcend the interests of the bourgeoisie. It is through the political activism of the emerging capitalist, John Butlin, and the dispossessed scholar, Harry Lydcott, that Lindsay explores the ways in which the democratic struggle might supply that insight. Butlin is drawn to industry because it appeals to his empirical sensibilities: it is 'solid and understandable' (400); he has a 'horror of abstract ideas' (399) - ideas like those that terrorise Julian Fane, originating in primitive accumulation, and which Butlin finds reassuringly excluded from the world of trade. Once again Lindsay is using the form of the novel to expose the bases of bourgeois authority, rather than to reinscribe them. The prospects for the liberalisation of trade push Butlin into the movement gathering around John Wilkes agitating for reform. A central tension in the novel is over the complexity of the Wilkite movement, which at one level was adopted by the rising middle class as a way of curtailing the power of parliament in order to liberalise trade and, at another level, by newly organised groups of the working class in pursuit of a range of more radical aims. While in *1649*, however, the courtroom scene suggested that such radical demands could be acknowledged before the law, and gains made within the existing legal system, despite its predication on illegitimate property, in this novel such a possibility recedes as a consequence of what Marx describes as the 'alienation' of the state through the specialisation of its legislative bodies. Butlin feels the political conflict dwindling 'when compared with the scientific and economic movement' (442). Politics becomes a question of 'the application of technique' divorced from history (especially the bourgeoisie's revolutionary history), from 'memories of the Roman Republic and of

ancient Tyrannicide' (442), expressing how, in Marx's terms, the political revolution 'abolished the political character of civil society.'¹⁴⁰ Through this process of amnesia and naturalisation the market comes to appear as autonomous; and suggests the ways that, as Lukács argues, the bourgeoisie became blind to the totality of society, which he calls the 'tragic dialectics' of the bourgeoisie – that with each specialisation it became less able to see the whole.¹⁴¹

Lindsay clearly wants the plebeian, rather than the capitalist, element of the Wilkite agitation to stand against the limited, class-interested epistemology suggested by Butlin. But the popular movement – and Lindsay's handling of it – is ambiguous, and brings to light a central tension. In *England My England*, which Lindsay interrupted *Lost Birthright* to write, he acknowledges that the specifics of Wilkes' campaign had little to do with the working class: their involvement was 'essentially an emotional movement without as yet any very clear political aims', but also that, '[o]n the lower levels it gave a powerful impetus to revolutionary emotions among the workers.'¹⁴² In *Spokesmen for Liberty*, Rickword and Lindsay reproduce a range of texts from the period including extracts from Wilkes' articles in *The North Briton*. Wilkes appealed in Parliament for a 'more just and equal representation' to 'speak the free, unbiased sense of the body of the English people'.¹⁴³ But the state form, shown to rationalise bourgeois perspectives, could not be expected to deliver that representation. The unifying rhetoric of the Wilkite campaign, invoking the figure of the 'Freeborn Englishman', is at best politically ambiguous, and reveals the severe problems inherent in a politics of unity addressing itself to a national character. E.P. Thompson describes how Wilkes and his supporters understood the concepts of national liberties primarily in relation to property rights, but the campaigns elicited a much wider range of issues, and the language was exceptionally malleable: 'Even Old Corruption extolled British liberties; not national honour, or power, but freedom was the coinage of patrician, demagogue and radical alike'.¹⁴⁴ Thompson however points out that the persistence of the concept in popular ideology lay in part in its appeal to

¹⁴⁰ Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *Selected Writings*, p. 55.

¹⁴¹ Lukács, 'Class Consciousness', in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (trans. Rodney Livingstone; London: Merlin, 1971), p. 65.

¹⁴² Lindsay, *England My England* (London: Key Books, 1939), p. 42. Lindsay refers to breaking off the writing of *Lost Birthright* to write the pamphlet in *Life Rarely Tells*, p. 786.

¹⁴³ Rickword & Lindsay, *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 201.

¹⁴⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 83.

xenophobia.¹⁴⁵ George Rudé argues likewise that xenophobia regularly presented itself in ‘the frequent proclamation of the free-born Englishman’s “liberties” and hostility to “slavery” and “Popery and wooden shoes”’.¹⁴⁶ This undertone is unavoidable in the *Spokesmen for Liberty* documents, in which the recurring references to ‘corruption’, ‘blood’ and the rights of Englishmen to not be ‘slaves’ are clearly ambiguous. In *Lost Birthright*, this accent is not suppressed: Harry reads of a strike at the East India Company at which the agitators compared the actions of the Crown to a ‘pack of aliens [...] coming either as a stockjobber to make his fortune by our distresses or as a smuggler, to ruin our manufactures’; an ‘insult to the common sense of free British merchants’ (179). To read this rhetoric, as Lindsay seems to want, as another variation on theme of the ‘absolute loss’ of ‘that which should have been held freely in common’ risks hollowing it out of specificity; real losses and gains, different levels of oppression, become blurred.¹⁴⁷

But Lindsay also wants to argue that the wider popular movement transcended the narrowness of the expansion of trade, provoking ‘a crisis in defence of the general freedom’ (258). The voices of demonstrators at the St George’s Fields Massacre are called up in the manner of the oral style of *England My England*: ‘Stand out, Dick Nicholl, rope-maker, and have your say’ (264). This convocation exudes a pageant-like quality in which the voices of the demonstrators, drawing very closely on original sources, describe their occupation of the spaces of London and their carnivalesque humiliation of authority: ‘We struck the Austrian ambassador [...] took him very courteously out of his coach and chalked 45 [the Wilkite sign] on the soles of his shoes’ (262). Coupled with this extra-legal gesture of popular power is, however, a cool statement of democratic defiance: ‘Then they expelled J.W. from Parliament for telling the truth about the shootings at St George’s Fields, and we keep on re-electing him’ (268).¹⁴⁸ But this section is in the past tense, recalling the voices of the previous year; in the novel’s present moment, Lindsay’s

¹⁴⁵ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁶ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (1964; London: Serif, 1995), p. 55.

¹⁴⁷ Lindsay, *John Bunyan*, p. 256.

¹⁴⁸ The accounts Lindsay draws on for this section were probably those published by Edmund Burke in *The Annual Register: or a View of the History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1768* (6th Ed., London: 1800), pp. 227-234. Another likely source is Horace Walpole’s *Memoirs of the Reign of King George III, Volume 2* (1845), pp. 190-191, which recounts the treatment of the Austrian ambassador much as Lindsay describes – though from the point of view of the mortified Walpole.

handling of his plebeian characters is more uncertain, and is characterised by the strong intervention of the omniscient narrative voice.

This is marked in one short and enclosed scene describing the fate of the peripheral rural characters, Rose and Will, who ‘play no further part in our tale, but we can spare their small lives a glance’ (413). These characters, ‘who had lost the land and the village-community, and yet had found no other bond of toil’ (413), are presented as merging with the urban working class and its politics: ‘Their voices sound among the other voices. *Wilkes and Liberty!* Give them a thought before they drift down Holborn-way, trickles in the great tide surging on’ (431). The implication is that the loss experienced by workers in the eighteenth century could find no immediate outlet, no form in which to be articulated. As the novel shows, the Wilkite campaign, entangled with the needs of expanding capitalism, cannot provide it. Lindsay made this point clearly in his study of Bunyan, arguing that, ‘No revolutionary action was possible in England in the eighteenth century. England was not France, where the bourgeois revolution had yet to come’, while the working class as yet lacked industrial organisation.¹⁴⁹ The result was a situation in which the bourgeoisie could continue performing its progressive function of destroying feudalism without needing to transform society as a whole. In this enclosed scene, Lindsay describes this constriction of possibility, but, in Lukács’ terms, he does not narrate it as he does with the Levellers’ defeat in *1649*. There is an unwillingness or inability to give form to these characters’ perspectives; they disappear into the highly aestheticized undergrowth of history. Although Lindsay affirms their entry into the radical oral tradition configured in ‘not english?’ - ‘Their voice comes back into the other voices. They are not lost (413) – a kind of pastoral silencing takes place, leaving their perspectives inaccessible.

By contrast, as these characters dissolve into background of ‘the tale’, the bourgeois Harry Lydcott becomes more solid, and the narrative more clearly one of bourgeois political radicalisation. Harry, as a disinherited and dispossessed bourgeois, is able to acquire through contact with working-class politics the perspective of difference, the understanding of loss, that Lindsay saw as essential for opposition to capitalism, and which the working-class characters, having lost not just the land but the residual feudal relations that depended on it, seem to be no longer able to access (413). Reading a

¹⁴⁹ Lindsay, *John Bunyan*, p. 246.

newspaper report of a wage dispute, Harry wonders how it is ‘that these kinds of things, the stuff of history when all is said, go on about one and one never sees anything of them’ (178), but his switch in perspective is largely an elective one that valorises middle-class identification with working-class causes based on a questionable analogy between individual privation and class injustice. His ‘suffering sense of desertion and injury made him particularly susceptible to the tale of mass-deprivations which [the radical weaver] Eastman told’ (426). This locates individual experience as the privileged locus of radical politics; the ruined bourgeois is better able to understand class injustice than those who routinely suffer it. The metaphor of the ‘lost birthright’ of the novel’s title is intended to act as the ground by which these different deprivations can be mediated by figuring them as elements of a common inheritance of humanity. Harry’s yearning for his birthright transforms itself from an image of property into that of the misappropriated ‘common inheritance of the Land’ (531):

Strangely, he felt it was the earth, this thing of birdsong and of furrowed fields of labour, that he had lost; his inheritance which he had never owned yet which now smelt so agonizingly in his nostrils with the tang of loss. (410).

But this fulfilment of the Recognition trope overshadows, and seems to trivialise, the resolutions of other plotlines. The weaver Eastman, Harry’s guide in the struggle, is, like the other working-class characters, dissolved into the undergrowth of history as he is sentenced to be hanged. This fact is disclosed prosaically as the ‘one darkness on the scene’ amidst Harry’s rapture of political revelation (530). For Harry’s wife, Eastman’s death is of little significance: ‘It isn’t one act, or year of acts. It’s the going on and on with things that matters’ (530). Harry concludes the novel with a feeling of commitment to ‘the innermost spirit of life, human life’ (533), but unlike in *1649* this feeling, articulated through interior monologue rather than through a gesture of commitment, seems disconnected from any real promise of justice for the working-class characters, who face an increasingly bureaucratised state and for whom the loss of the land appears to deprive them indefinitely of any way of objectifying their conditions. The popular element tends to appear as an ahistorical counter-culture continually waiting to be discovered by the

disenfranchised bourgeois character.¹⁵⁰ From one (Lukácsian) point of view, Lindsay's narrative therefore privileges and exaggerates the significance of the atypical bourgeois intellectual over characters more directly conditioned by the central historical forces of the age.¹⁵¹

Some of these tensions were detected in an otherwise favourable *Daily Worker* review of the novel, which noted the 'structural difficulties' and a tendency for the writing to 'sink into banality' or 'over-wrought effects'.¹⁵² But it is worth recognising how Lindsay's overall approach in this novel relates to the Popular Front context: the attempt to ground the text in a sense of universal alienation, in an assertion of the way that alienation under capitalism is operative at all levels of the society, is legible as an attempt to give political weight to the broad rhetoric of the Popular Front, to see class difference as originating in a common injustice. The trope of bourgeois dissidence risks divesting working-class characters of agency while over-rating the role of individual bourgeois radicals in historical change. More particularly, however, the novel's moment of writing, in which the historical tragedy of the thirties approached its climax, as the war in Spain drew to its bleak conclusion, cancelling the optimism that had been evoked by the popular resistance to Franco, and the world war loomed, may be a reality the novel is resisting in the curiously optimistic manner of its conclusion: 'How good life was' is its final note (532). Lindsay's closing off of Eastman's perspective, so that he makes no gesture of defiance in the manner of the Levellers of 1649, also refuses him heroic power. In 1939 such glorifications of sacrifice may have seemed outmoded.

4.3.3 *Men of Forty-Eight* (1948)

Men of Forty-Eight, written during the early months of the Second World War, but not published until 1948, completes the English trilogy. Lindsay's description of the writing process in his autobiography conveys something of the immense strain under which he was working: 'In those bitter days of the phoney war, with the feeling that at any moment hell

¹⁵⁰ Gustav Klaus has noted this tendency in socialist fiction more widely in *The Literature of Labour* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), p. 123.

¹⁵¹ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁵² 'R.K', 'Here History Lives', *Daily Worker*, 21 June, 1939, p. 7

would be let loose, I strove to let myself go and to pack my deepest emotions about alienation and the class-world into the novel'.¹⁵³ The tensions within this formulation ('strove to let myself go') suggest the imperatives imposed by the intensity of the moment. The moment of 1848 and that of 1939/40 threaten to collapse into one another as the plot tracks the increasingly hopeless wave of uprisings across the continent. 1848, the 'year of revolutions', and of the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, is repeatedly and notoriously evoked in Marxist discourse as a turning point in the bourgeoisie's historical trajectory and in the conditioning of the novel form. For Georg Lukács, 'during these days the bourgeoisie for the first time fights for the naked continuance of its economic and political rule'.¹⁵⁴ This crystallisation of class interests occluded the perspective of totality that characterised realism and generated instead the antinomies of literary naturalism and expression.¹⁵⁵ Ralph Fox likewise argued that, '[a]fter 1848 you could not observe and express life in its development because that development was too painful, the contradictions were too glaring'.¹⁵⁶ The bourgeoisie's progressive vocation was terminated: 'one could resign oneself to the long process of social decay and destruction of civilization by this stupid and miserly bourgeoisie, with its wars, its narrow nationalism and its bestial greed'.¹⁵⁷ The final chapter of Lukács's *The Historical Novel* is organised around the claim that the Popular Front provided writers with a perspective from which to recuperate the classic form of the historical novel – to restore what had been lost in 1848.¹⁵⁸ The historical novel of 'democratic humanism', written from the 'perspective of the real and permanent liberation of the people alters the perspective which historical novels have of the future', from which a perspective of totality could be reclaimed at some future point, thus ending the genre's retrograde, post-1848 phase.¹⁵⁹ It is the moment of 1848 that the Popular Front novel, as Lukács envisions it, must redeem. Lindsay's Popular Front novel of 1848, then, is of particular interest as something of a test case for the

¹⁵³ Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*, p. 789.

¹⁵⁴ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 202.

¹⁵⁵ Note, however, Raymond Williams's discussion of the inadequacy of this summary account in relation to English novels: 'Forms of English Fiction in 1848', *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 150-165. Tony Pinkney points out, furthermore, that in Britain the upheavals of 1848 led to a reaffirmation of classical principles rather than an emergent modernism; 'Editor's Introduction: Modernism and Cultural Theory', in Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁷ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁸ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 315.

¹⁵⁹ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 420.

relationship between Marxist theory and literary practice during the years of anti-fascist cultural organisation; but it is also marked by its intensely difficult historical moment, in which that perspective proffered by the Popular Front in 1935, and seemingly made reality by the governments elected in France and Spain, was becoming fraught with contradictions.

1848, Eric Hobsbawm argues, ‘appears as the one revolution in the modern history of Europe which combines the greatest promise, the widest scope, and the most immediate initial success, with the most unqualified and rapid failure’.¹⁶⁰ Lindsay’s novel ambitiously attempts to encompass the grand drama and tragedy of the year, focusing on one English bourgeois character, Richard Boon (the surname linking him to Arthur Boon, a minor character in *1649*), who somewhat improbably becomes involved in the February and June Revolutions in France, the Chartist movement in England and, finally, the Vienna Uprising, the last stand against the entrenchment of empire. The chronotope of the single year creates a certain symmetry with *1649*: in both novels the revolutionary advance of the year’s early months is tempered by reaction by the year’s end. As in *1649*, the novel begins with the contestation of the narrative of historical events; this contestation is dramatized in the clash of voices describing the February Revolution. A collective voice is constructed, designed to challenge the objectivity of authorised accounts of history and to displace them with a polemical call to responsibility. This voice sets itself in competition with ‘those discreet gentlemen, the Liberal historians’; the revolution and the reality of class struggle it reveals cannot be countenanced by that mode of apprehending history, forcing it into the subjunctive: if ‘the moment of lightning’ had not happened, ‘how nicely and amicably’ things would have worked out.¹⁶¹ Instead, the collective voice of ‘the People’ asserts the authority of experience - ‘you weren’t on the streets’ – in order to insist on a unification of theory and practice that refuses objectivity: ‘The hell with you, gentlemen of the Liberal Opposition. You can’t sneak away like the old king with the sawdust trailing out of the belly of his punctured dignity. We’re not going to give you the breathing-space for your intrigues, your evasion of responsibility (41). Contrary to John Coombes’ assumption that Popular Front writing is grounded in essentially liberal and

¹⁶⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital 1848-1875* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 27-8.

¹⁶¹ Jack Lindsay, *Men of Forty-Eight* (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 38. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

progressive co-ordinates, the liberal view of history is here cited as directly implicated in the repression and disavowal of the events of February, its conception of progress annulled in that moment.¹⁶² The account of the events in February draws directly on Marx's 'The Class Struggles in France', but the rendering of the voice as one of collectivity and partisanship asserts the possibility of a kind of engaged, factually-grounded historical writing that avoids the antinomies of subjectivity and objectivity.¹⁶³ This voice, however, only briefly re-emerges in the June Days and disappears with the prospect of revolution, projecting its potential into the future. The question of what narrative might be excavated from the ruins of 1848 is a central problem in the text.

Bourgeois Dissidence

The novel as a whole is focalised through one bourgeois English character, Richard Boon, and its experiments in collective form are more restricted than in *1649* in the sense that fewer perspectives seem to be introduced. David Smith deems the novel a failure, 'a left-wing history textbook, with large chunks of unassimilated material'; a failure largely consequent on the inappropriateness of Boon as a focal point for the subject matter. The upper middle-class Boon is for Smith not a believable part of the largely proletarian Chartist movement.¹⁶⁴ In *England My England* Lindsay acknowledges that Chartism was a working-class movement, and was therefore not unaware of the anomalous position of his middle-class characters within it.¹⁶⁵ This narrative decision is therefore of central importance. Although the positioning of Boon as the centre of the text does at points produce a diminishment of the agency of the working-class characters, the novel reveals the limits of Boon's (bourgeois) individual agency in respect of class injustice more strongly than *Lost Birthright*. Faced with the reality of crisis, his dilemma is, in Lukács's terms, the choice to either recognise a new period or sink into apologies for declining capitalism.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² John Coombes, 'British Intellectuals and the Popular Front', pp. 72-4.

¹⁶³ See Karl Marx, 'The Class Struggles in France', in Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings Volume II*, ed., David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 42-43.

¹⁶⁴ David Smith, *Socialist Propaganda in the Twentieth-Century British Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 110.

¹⁶⁵ Lindsay, *England My England*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁶ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 28.

This choice, however, is shown to be fraught, and while refusing the latter option he struggles to credibly generate an alternative. Initially, these efforts take the form of individualised exercises of power, for example, when Boon beats an agricultural contractor who employs gangs of children to work in the fields (87). In James Barke's *The Land of the Leal*, it is the young worker Jean Ramsey who does exactly this, an act of revolt, in her case, against gender and class power.¹⁶⁷ But Lindsay uses this moment to disempower the middle-class protagonist *as* a member of that class: what is demonstrated is Boon's inability to bring about justice through the disciplining exercise of his own class power. His father immediately stops his allowance, containing Boon's revolt by indicating the limits of his independence (89). The attempt to exercise political power through the nexus of personal relationships is shown to be misguided for the working-class characters too; having witnessed the Chartists being misled by O'Connor at Kennington Common, Boon attempts to foment a rising among the rural workers in his home village (239). This effort fails on account of residually feudal ties that lead the rural workers to see their predicament in terms of their personal relationships with individual members of the landed gentry, and to fail to read in class terms.

Boon's attachment to the working class shifts uncertainly from romanticisation to commitment as he comes to terms with these limits. These shifts are indicated in the series of gestures Boon feels impelled to make. Echoing the gothic imagery of the *Communist Manifesto*, he makes a denunciatory speech at a village fête on the subject of 'Modern Ghosts and Suburban Spectres', telling the audience that 'you are surrounded by the emaciated shapes, the men and women on whom you feed day and night', and that 'you're all covered head to foot with blood' (405), revealing at last the 'secret' at the heart of the 'interminable family anecdote' that is England (71). These acts of defiance, however, arise from no personal hardship: that is, he undergoes no great *loss* – that most crucial experience in Lindsay's thought. In this, he can be usefully contrasted with the protagonist of another Popular Front-era Communist novel set in 1848, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*. In that novel, the central character, Sophia Willoughby, a wealthy English woman, is set on the path to Marxism in the ferment of the June Days by her experience of the loss of her husband (to his mistress, a Jewish storyteller) and her children

¹⁶⁷ James Barke, *The Land of the Leal* (1939; London: Collins, 1950), pp. 58-59.

(to smallpox). Sophia pursues her husband and mistress in Paris during the Revolutions with the aim of becoming pregnant. She initially pursues such a solution to loss in a sexual liaison with an estate worker, the 'lime-kiln man', but, after he rejects her on class grounds, is forced instead to pursue a path she regards as more 'prosaic'.¹⁶⁸ While Sophia's revolutionary development is figured as naturally arising from her English grasp of political economy and her unromantic temperament, Boon is motivated in *Men of Forty-Eight* by a feeling of an inner significance, a convergence of existence and meaning: in the February Revolution, he feels a sense of grandeur, that 'the least gesture of common life was as richly suggestive as the hieratic ceremonials into which thousands of years of dream-terror, dream-release, had imprinted their pattern' (110). What he finds in the reports of the spring uprisings is the possibility of actualising that prospect, in which life appears imbued with heroic potential.

Equally, however, Boon feels, obscurely, a distance from production that expresses itself in a longing for the land: 'he wanted to regain the close sense of it, the ceaseless scrutiny of earth and animals for the immediate details that needed tending' (229). This dream is expressed in direct, unmediated language: 'Have a look at the barleyfield, wheat's rather thin, but finest colour in the world' (230). But his sense of the vitality of production is never displaced from this pastoral feeling onto the labour movement: he is unable to fully connect these two intimations of loss. His rendition of the trope of bourgeois dissidence results not in solidity, as in *Lost Birthright*, but in dissolution. He is quite aware he is no 'demonic hero' capable of revolt against the levelling process of capitalism: he 'gained a vicious pleasure in anatomising himself and proving that he had no original talents at all' (378). His eventual death is preceded by a self-erasure experienced while reading *The Communist Manifesto*: 'He read impatiently, skipping and coming back, forcing himself to pick up the thread of argument, drifting into moments of sheer blankness when it seemed that some obstinate force inside himself simply took a sponge and wiped his mind empty' (361). All that is solid melts into air: 'The result is that I am not human at all; I am approaching the stage where I will fade off in a whiff of marshgas, leaving only my clothes and boots for the dustmen to remove' (361). Lindsay wrote later that there was a 'cultural break' in mid-nineteenth century England that occurred as a

¹⁶⁸ Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (1936; London: Virago, 1987), p. 99. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

consequence of the extreme success of industrial capitalism.¹⁶⁹ In *Boon*, one sees this closure of possibility; he toys with writing a book, giving the ‘concrete picture of the year’, but only ‘when I can feel the responsibility is over’ (425); his death in another failed rising forecloses the prospect and suggests the abolition of the bourgeois as subject of history. Yet this only announces what has been written into the text all along: the very instability and lack of solidity of *Boon*’s character, such that his own voice and his own perspective can never be unambiguously identified.

Irony and Insight

Men of Forty-Eight depicts the hardening of the bourgeois state in a manner that contrasts with the earlier novels’ explorations of the efficacy of popular resistance within the state apparatus. 1848, Marx argued, was the moment in which the bourgeois state came into being. For Marx, the establishment of the bourgeois state was a loss of innocence: ‘The fruit fell into its lap, but it fell from the tree of knowledge, not from the tree of life.’¹⁷⁰ The kind of bitter knowledge Marx invokes here pervades the text. *Boon* and his political educator, the Chartist Scamler, attain an apparently unflinching lucidity in their readings of the events unfolding. The lack of struggle in the acquisition of these insights does strain the credibility of the characterisation; but in another way, a lack of ironic distance is part of a refusal to exculpate the characters. Up until April, an ironic distance imposes itself between readers and characters; but the failure in April bestows on characters an apparently unflinching clairvoyance of what is to come. Failure makes itself felt as a saturation of knowledge attributed to the characters themselves. Scamler often seems to proleptically address readers facing another crisis: ‘Our failure – the working-class failure this year – has doomed the world to colossal wars of empire rivalry’ (388). David Smith criticises the ‘intellectual abstractions’ used by *Boon*,¹⁷¹ but what is also apparent is the inability of those concepts to support effective action.¹⁷² Lukács writes of the bourgeoisie of 1848 experiencing a kind of last flowering of insight, ‘a last brief, irretrievable prime of

¹⁶⁹ Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956), p. 19.

¹⁷⁰ Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Surveys from Exile*, p. 158.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *Socialist Propaganda*, p. 110.

¹⁷² It should also be pointed out that many of the abstractions deployed by *Boon* and Scamler are drawn more or less verbatim from *The Communist Manifesto*, a text circulated in the novel. The question of the credibility of the dialogue as dialogue is therefore separate from the issue of whether the analyses deployed in it were actually available.

humanity', like Hegel's 'Owl of Minerva'; it is possible to read Lindsay's ascription of seemingly excessive clarity to his central characters in these terms.¹⁷³

Irony is the dominant mode of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*, as Sophia's stern, empirical respect for money and 'pious respect for property' (177) are continually undercut by the unfolding of history, and her gestures of defiance resolve into powerlessness.¹⁷⁴ But Sophia, unlike the 'romantic' revolutionaries with whom she aligns, survives the revolt to end the novel reading the *Communist Manifesto* in a state of confirmation and clarity (406). In Lindsay's version of bourgeois dissidence in 1848, however, this certainty precedes Boon's revolutionary action, and its value is thereby brought into question as part of a wider questioning of the limits of the possibility of crossing class lines. Boon experiences 'a sustaining certainty' at the novel's outset that precedes his efforts to rationalise it, and which he takes to coincide with his vision of a unity of intention and act, an end to the ambiguity so troubling to Roger in *1649* (39). The key ironic moment of *Men of Forty-Eight* is the revelation of circumstances of Boon's participation in the February Revolution. The novel opens with Boon's leaving France on a ship bound for England in March, before moving backwards to his activities in the February Revolution. It is only late in the novel that the story of Boon's time in France before the February Revolution is revealed. This revelation comes in the form of a 'confession' made in a letter to his lover Mary that he sends from Paris on the eve of the June Days. The letter reveals Boon's own evasion of responsibility, having driven his lover to attempt suicide. These two chronological scales - that of the calendar year and the longer frame of Boon's own life - interact in Boon's attempt to relate his own past to the rhythm of history.

The confession forces a re-reading of his participation in the Revolution. Boon's merging with the crowd is reframed as an attempted absolution, an evasion of 'responsibility' consequent on his loss of innocence and ethical awareness of his actions. Boon's revolutionary perspectives are suddenly reshaped by being connected back to this moment. The 'confession' stages a confrontation with Boon's past at the very moment that

¹⁷³ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 28.

¹⁷⁴ Her lover Minna is shot dead by Caspar, the illegitimate son of her uncle, whom her husband has enrolled in the Gardes Mobiles arraigned against the revolutionary forces (p. 383). It is Sophia's own status as a 'lady' that saves her from execution (pp. 380-1).

his class breaks with its own, and commits the 'crime' it will be forced to evade. Boon's working through of his own past injustice enables, at a personal level, the acceptance of responsibility that the bourgeoisie cannot take on at the political level. This substitution articulates a humanist and ethical symmetry. But the price that is paid is a destruction of the self: Boon's pursuit across Europe of the revolutionary storm he equates with absolutism results in the overwriting of his temporality by the temporality of history. At the barricades in Vienna, 'The whole world was dissolving [...] How long was it since he had left London? He tried to remember exactly, to recall each day in succession, but the events wouldn't fall into the right order; he found himself forcing them into arrangements that worked for a while then fell to pieces' (438). The temporalities of individual experience and history no longer coincide.

It is the failure of the (working-class) Chartist movement that makes Boon's death inevitable, and the ironies that constitute the realist novel begin to dissolve. After his experiences in France he is unable to reconcile himself with an England from which the perspective of revolution has vanished, and a complete alienation interposes itself: 'A vast sense of homelessness had descended on him ever since he had landed'; he blames this on a return to the 'class-world' after the revolutionary days 'which had as their aim the ending of all class forms' (359). Boon feels this condition of exile is a consequence of his position as an outsider-revolutionary, in contrast to the proletariat for whom, Boon thinks, 'the enclosing pressure, by giving them both an immediate goal and a basic resistance, obliterates, at least in part, the bewilderment of failure and sets them steadily, however imperceptibly at first, on the road to the next burst of open conflict with the evil thing' (359). There is an echo in this of the 'standpoint of popular life', the perspective of universal, rather than *class* liberation, yet the qualifiers in this sentence undercut his statement of faith. Where, in the optimism of the spring he had felt a connection with the people in terms of romantic excess, 'an irrepressible overflowing of united energy' (133), here that hope is tempered and restrained by the experience of revolutionary failure. The resulting phrasing brings together the images of revolutionary outpouring with a prosaic syntax of realist restraint.

This shift in language appears at the level of plot in Boon's renewed quest for adequate gesture. The moving back and forth between England and the Continent means

that Boon cannot return to stability: he is faced with the ‘everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ of the bourgeois epoch.¹⁷⁵

There are moments, he thought, when the gesture must be made [...] The English working class had failed the world, bitter as the realisation was. Well, at least the Chartist core would make a gesture, would die tonight for the honour of their class. He strode along in time with the joiner. Life was good (393).

The gesture referred to is the doomed Orange Tree conspiracy, after which leading Chartists were tried and transported.¹⁷⁶ The problematic politics of gesture discussed above return, therefore, in *Men of Forty-Eight*. Several pressures generate this type of narrative moment. At one level Lindsay simply remains true to the historical material in presenting this last stand of the Chartists as bound to end in defeat. In left-wing histories produced in the thirties it is routine to ascribe the collapse of the movement in terms of misguided leadership and immature forms of organisation.¹⁷⁷ Lindsay’s stress on the idea that the Chartists ‘had failed the world’ is however distinctive, and part of his insistence on responsibility. If the phrasing attributed to Boon seems glib, and the Chartists’ deaths too readily accepted as necessary acts of penitence, this is a sign of the difficult convergence of ethical and political currents in the novel. Lindsay’s over-arching Hegelian view of history is that of an unfolding of class struggle, about which a narrative can be constructed that immortalises the dead as participants in a unified struggle for human community: a story in which ‘[a]ll the fights of the people are defeats but the last fight’ (330). But this sense of history’s shape is tempered by an existentialist emphasis on individual choice, and the moments of ‘recognition’ in the novels all involve a negotiation of these two currents. Where, especially in *1649*, the radical gesture was framed in terms of a recognition of limits – of what action was available in full view of historical realities – the excess of knowledge in *Men of Forty-Eight* means that no delimitation, no realistic confrontation with possibility, occurs.

¹⁷⁵ Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, (1848; London: Penguin Classics, 1988), p. 83.

¹⁷⁶ See Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), pp. 326-330.

¹⁷⁷ See, e.g., Morton, *A People’s History of England*, p. 377. In a piece for the *Daily Worker* commemorating the centenary of Chartism, Ness Edwards described the movement in more ambiguous terms as ‘a blind, unsuccessful attempt to perform in Britain what, at a similar juncture of political development, was successfully performed by the working class movement in Russia’. ‘Rehearsal for Social Revolution: Chartism’, *Daily Worker*, 8 November, 1939, p. 2.

The excessive knowledge granted to Boon and Scamler threatens to destroy the irony constitutive of realist characterisation. There is, frequently, no apparent tension between Boon's interiority and the external world; his perspective on his historical moment is totalising.¹⁷⁸ However, where, in the earlier novels, especially *1649*, the limits of individual knowledge and agency constituted the possibility of radical acts, the very lack of this dialectical tension here seem to underpin Boon's inability to meaningfully act in the world. What Boon is not is Frédéric Moreau, anti-hero of Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale*, whose life, as Jay Bernstein argues, is meaningless because it is conditioned by the failures of 1848.¹⁷⁹ Lindsay described Flaubert's method as that of satirically enforcing the theme of frustration through the 'fool-humours' concentrated in Frédéric.¹⁸⁰ Among Lukács's criticisms of the novel, he argued that Frédéric's 'interiority possesses no lyrical power of scorn or pathos that might set it against the pettiness of reality'.¹⁸¹ Lindsay's own hero of 1848, however, not so much lacks interiority as depends entirely on the external world to infuse his inner life with 'lyrical power'. Stylistically, the dominant mode for most of the novel is one of excess, the prose being saturated with an inner quality of rhapsody, 'an irrepressible overflowing of united energy' (133), that fails to be formalised by an adequate act and resolves in the pathos of Boon's death in Vienna. Boon functions as form in which to disclose that lyricism and excess that are located elsewhere in the 'class-world'. The disappearance of revolutionary spirit in historical conditions empties Boon's interior life to the point of non-existence. This is, clearly, only a partial resolution to the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity. For Boon, no retreat from failure is possible: 'There is no return', he thinks (438); 'There was to be no leaving-alone' (423). Boon's subjectivity, formed in the February Revolution and promising new content for the bourgeois subject, cannot withstand the closing down of possibility announced by the June counter-revolution.

¹⁷⁸ As Jay Bernstein argues, reading Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*, irony may be the 'master-practice' of the novel form; a 'constitutive, form-giving structure' that avers the division between man and world in modernity: Bernstein: *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 185-6.

¹⁷⁹ Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁸⁰ Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, p. 367.

¹⁸¹ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 125.

‘Here and Now’

Boon’s campaign in Vienna links him with the anti-fascists of the thirties, a parallel made explicit in Lindsay’s prefatory ‘Note’, which quotes a German politician in 1848 denouncing Polish national rights, and notes the consonance with Nazi policy.¹⁸² The Vienna Uprising entailed a mutiny by Viennese troops ordered to put down a nationalist movement in Hungary. In 1937, Philip Ormond wrote in the *Daily Worker* of the parallels between this incident and the anti-fascist struggle.¹⁸³ There are resonances too with the brutal suppression of popular and socialist resistance to incipient fascism in Vienna in February 1934.¹⁸⁴ In another strong echo of the anti-fascist struggle, Boon is haunted, on his journey to the doomed Vienna revolt, by ‘scraps of memories about Munich’ (424).¹⁸⁵ Boon’s death in the suppression of the Vienna Uprising asserts the importance of national liberties and commemorates internationalist participation in the struggles for self-determination. The shifting of attention in *Men of Forty-Eight* onto central Europe and the question of the fate of the Germanic countries has obvious contemporary significance: ‘The unity of Germany would be achieved on a truly democratic basis, so that the underlying groups of different nationalities, Czechs and Hungarians and Croats, could link up with the federation of equal republics’ (428). This ‘dream’ is also the dream of a different Europe – of a whole different way that history might have moved.

The vision here, as elsewhere in the novel, is uncomfortably clear and prescient. The historical distance between 1848 and the moment of reading is therefore not a safe distance – indeed, it feels like no distance at all. A sense of pathos arises from the fact that Boon and his comrades are discovered in hiding because Boon ‘forgot to bolt the door’ (440). Yet even this banal but fatal detail places Boon in a position of responsibility: there is a careful tension between accident and agency, between meaning created in free action and meaninglessness threatened by uncontrollable historical forces. The novel’s historical

¹⁸² Jack Lindsay, ‘Note’, *Men of Forty-Eight*, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁸³ Philip Ormond, ‘When London Workers Beat Up a Butcher General’, *Daily Worker*, 11 March, 1937, p. 4.

¹⁸⁴ Stephen Spender’s long poem *Vienna* commemorates these events (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

¹⁸⁵ As Eric Hobsbawm writes, ‘The Munich agreement of 1938 perfectly demonstrated [the] combination of confident aggression on one side, fear and concession on the other, which is why for generations the very word ‘Munich’ became a synonym, in Western political discourse, for craven retreat.’ *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 146.

situation, a moment in which Lindsay found ‘paralysing contradictions’ as the CPGB negotiated a dilemma over the respective demands of anti-fascism, defence of the Soviet Union, and the pursuit of socialism at home, must be addressed.¹⁸⁶ In the early phase of the war, Lindsay felt himself to be ‘odd man out’ as he disputed the Moscow-imposed line that the war was an ‘imperialist’ conflict that Communists should not support, arguing instead that ‘the situation would develop the war along anti-fascist lines’ and should therefore be supported.¹⁸⁷ In the literary sphere he felt that writers at this point abandoned political engagement as the anti-fascist front failed, and therefore many of the advances made were lost. That moment, which Lindsay would later scathingly describe as a ‘renunciation by so many writers of an active creed of humanism’, is invoked through a stress on responsibility and commitment even against necessary defeat.¹⁸⁸ Yet Lindsay acknowledged the intense difficulty of maintaining faith after the end of the war in Spain, and his realisation that the working class were not going to defend the Soviet Union during the ‘phoney war’.¹⁸⁹ Boon is not innocent and is fully aware of the imminence of death, a courageous stance that partially cancels out, but is also itself partially cancelled by, the banality of death when it occurs. The ambivalence Boon feels over whether it is better to ‘live as a slave’ than accept ‘this murdering, this will to death’ (438) reflects the more morally troubled environment of the incipient Second World War.¹⁹⁰ The ending for Boon is prosaic; the historical reality seems to require it. The lyrical description of a Victorian Christmas that follows and the final note of a resumed romance between Scamler and Prue enclose Boon’s act, leaving it, and the possibility of revolution, simultaneously enclosed in the past and projected into the future.

¹⁸⁶ Lindsay, *After the Thirties*, p. 59. For a detailed account of the conflicts and developments in CP thinking at this time, see Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, pp. 105-133.

¹⁸⁷ Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*, p. 791.

¹⁸⁸ Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties*, p. 44. It must, however, be noted that this book appeared in 1956, the year in which the world Communist movement was fractured by the revelations of the ‘Secret Speech’ and by the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. Lindsay, who unlike many remained loyal to the Party, may be as much referring to the perceived betrayal of those who left the Party during that year as to the ostensible subject of 1939/40.

¹⁸⁹ Lindsay, *After the Thirties*, pp. 64-5.

¹⁹⁰ The link with Spain is evident in the fact that Boon’s phrasing inverts the well-known declaration of Dolores Ibárruri (‘La Pasionaria’), ‘Better to die on your feet than live on your knees’ (see Mary Ann Dellinger, ‘The Mythopoeia of Dolores Ibárruri, *Pasionaria*’, in Aurora G. Morcillo, ed., *Memory and Cultural History of the Spanish Civil War* (Leiden, Brill, 2013), pp. 285-315).

There is much, therefore, in the conclusion of Lindsay's English trilogy that is consonant with the tone of valediction, regret and ambivalence that characterises the literary responses of thirties writers to the outbreak of the war. After Boon's death, the final pages of the novel can only look forwards to what Ralph Fox called the 'vulgarity of Empire', and to the wars accurately prophesied by Scamler.¹⁹¹ The motif of the cyclical year resumes to affirm an eventual spring, but the novel's 'perspective of the future,' as Lukács calls it, is much weaker than that of its forerunners.¹⁹² While Boon's death is a banal accident, reflecting none of the calculated minimal agency of the Levellers in *1649*, he announces the significance of his dissidence as a defection from his class, he is 'not English'; '[n]ot in that sense' (429). In this qualified manner, Lindsay admits the bourgeois radicals of 1848 into his narrative of English radical tradition encoded in his poem for mass declamation, the work intended, in 1936, to speak to the new mass audience that would rise against fascism.¹⁹³ By 1940, that popular movement had failed, and its failure is echoed throughout *Men of Forty-Eight* in its expressions of guilt. If that audience had not asserted itself in 1940, the novels nonetheless attempt to recover, in their complexity, the course of development of capitalism in England, and the crucial moments in which the outcomes – both of 1848 and of the 1930s – were contested. The novel's perspective is ultimately not that of universal liberation, 'After the failure of the anti-fascist united front the intellectuals in 1939-40, the sense of doom settled down on the minds of those who had succumbed'.¹⁹⁴ In one sense, however, Lindsay's faith in the future he saw instantiated in the Soviet Union was rewarded: while *Men of Forty-Eight* received little critical notice in Britain, the success of the Russian translation resulted in an invitation to visit the Soviet Union for the first time as part of the Pushkin jubilee in 1949.¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate the centrality of history to the Popular Front formation, both for the coherence of its political strategy and to its aesthetics. The difficult relationship between the need to construct a coherent national story, and the realities and

¹⁹¹ Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 81.

¹⁹² Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 418.

¹⁹³ Lindsay, 'not english?', pp. 357-357; and 'A Plea for Mass Declamation', pp. 511-517.

¹⁹⁴ Lindsay, *After the Thirties*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁵ Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*, p. 801.

specificities of struggles, generated tensions, especially over the 'progressive' role of the bourgeoisie, but also important interventions in the historiography of 'history from below'. Lindsay's novels examine under what conditions and with what results members of the bourgeois could align themselves with the politics of the working class. Rather than narrating the 'triumph' of the bourgeoisie and its cultural forms, they consider dissidence within, reviving moments in which, even in defeat, individuals grasped the totality of their situation, acting in the interests of common humanity. The generalising tendency inherent in such a humanist reading and writing of history - its tendency to reduce specific demands to a generalised goal of the ending of alienation - sometimes represses the importance of class difference. But these novels are nonetheless among the most significant attempts to explore the challenges posed by the politics of the Popular Front.

Part Three:
Class, Nation, People

Chapter Five: James Barke and the National Turn

In the last chapter, Jack Lindsay's novels were read as thematically unified by a sense of the 'loss' of what should be held in common, and the mutating forms that deprivation took. As I suggested, however, Lindsay tends to posit bourgeois dissidence (radicalism from within the dominant class) as a privileged trope that risks marginalising and excluding working-class experience, and thereby reinforcing the normative position of middle-class voices and perspectives in the form of the novel. The English inflection of the Communist national turn proposed in 1935 could, as we saw in chapter one in relation to Ralph Fox, sanction a brushing aside of anti-imperialism and a reinstatement of triumphalist, Eurocentric humanism. The following two chapters consider the Popular Front engagements of two writers who fall outside the normative position of this perspective: James Barke, a Glasgow shipyard engineer and novelist, and Lewis Jones, a working-class Communist activist from the Rhondda Valley. Both draw on the historical experiences of the working class in their communities in order to produce texts that examine the relation between the particularity of that experience and the world-historical events of the thirties. In both writers, we find a valorisation of community resources of resistance as weapons in the struggle against fascism. The questions of the meanings of 'the nation' and 'the people' and of the viability of a national story as a means of mobilising elements without definite 'class belonging', in Laclau and Mouffe's terms, come into focus.¹ This chapter considers the 'national turn' outside England, and examines Barke's *Major Operation* (1936) and *The Land of the Leal* (1939).

5.1 The National Turn (I): British Questions

The national turn among English writers could produce a certain troubling indifference to or deferral of the problem of imperialism, as well as a generally unquestioned elision of 'England' with 'Britain'. But for writers who were not English, who brought different national traditions, and for whom the claims of a national culture could not be

¹ Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1995; London: Verso, 2001), p. 68.

unproblematically separated from the claims of political independence, the national turn presented problems. There was considerable ambiguity in Dimitrov's Seventh Congress address about precisely what constituted the distinction between 'bourgeois nationalism' and the newly endorsed proletarian nationalism.² Developments in Europe after 1933 meant that questions of the right of nations to self-determination and sovereignty had to be addressed in however pragmatic a fashion. One such pragmatic response can be seen in Rajani Palme Dutt's argument, made before the adoption of the Popular Front strategy in January 1935: 'We do not for a moment exclude military defence against Fascism - *on one condition*, and one condition only, namely, that we have country to defend. We shall defend Workers' Britain, as an integral part of the World Workers' Republic, of the future World Soviet Union.'³

Although the 'national' turn resonated most strongly in terms of cultural and historical, rather than more narrowly political, terms, the Communist Party of Great Britain did engage with questions of the status of Wales and Scotland within Britain.⁴ Morgan, Cohen and Flinn suggest that this engagement predated the Popular Front line, and that as early as 1934 a preliminary draft of the CPGB programme *For Soviet Britain* included the proposal for 'a federal republic of Soviet Britain', but this phrase was removed as a result of Moscow's objections.⁵ The Party did, however, attempt to mobilise Scottish and Welsh national cultures against fascism, but attempted to do so in cultural terms without addressing questions of national autonomy. Communists in Scotland were encouraged to make alliances with nationalists – but, as the chapter discusses below, Scottish Communists themselves expressed hostility to the idea,⁶ while in Wales nationalist support for the Franco regime in Spain would certainly have prevented any such alliance being contemplated.⁷ The Party's increasing interest in Welsh culture during the late thirties may seem opportunistic, but to some extent the Party was in fact taking the initiative in terms of marking out a place of Welsh culture within the global anti-fascist struggle. A brief

² Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 70-71.

³ Rajani Palme Dutt, 'Notes of the Month', *Labour Monthly*, January 1935, p. 17; emphasis in original.

⁴ Kevin Morgan, Gideon Cohen & Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007), p. 205.

⁵ Kevin Morgan, Gideon Cohen & Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 205.

⁶ Morgan, Cohen & Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 209.

⁷ For Plaid Cymru's attitude to Spain, see Robert Stradling, *Wales and the Spanish Civil War: The Dragon's Dearest Cause?* (Cardigan: University of Wales Press, 2004), p. 34, also Hywel Francis, *Miners against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), p. 97.

comparative glance at the *Daily Worker*'s coverage of the Welsh National Eisteddfod in 1932 and 1938 brings this shift into view. In 1932, Idris Cox, probably the most prominent Welsh Communist in the thirties, condemned the event for its elitism and lack of popular appeal: 'All the songs, choral tests, poems, and dramas are divorced from the real life of the people', and that '[u]nderneath the glamour and ceremonial of the National Eisteddfod are the vicious claws of grasping profit-mongers who suck the lifeblood of the working class.'⁸ By 1938, however, the event could be figured as 'a symbol of the devotion of the "common" people to the finer products of the mind at the price of great material sacrifice.'⁹ In 1938, shortly before the Munich Crisis, a bilingual pamphlet on Welsh culture, *The Lore of the People*, co-authored by Arthur Horner (the President of the South Wales Miners' Federation, who encouraged Lewis Jones to write fiction), Will Paynter and Glyn Jones, representing the South, and Jennie Hughes, T.E. Nicholas and J. Roose Williams representing the North, appeared.¹⁰ In this atmosphere, the defence of the culture and freedom of Europe's minority nationalities had acquired a new urgency. The pamphlet argued that the Eisteddfod was 'a truly national and democratic institution'; national in 'the widest sense', because at the event 'national elements of all kinds intermix, and Welshmen of all parties and sects gather together in friendly emulation to enrich the national culture'; and democratic, 'for it owes nothing to State encouragement, and little to the patronage of the wealthy, and has been built up by the efforts and sacrifices of the common people of Wales'.¹¹ The rhetorical move here in many ways echoes the reframing of democracy outlined in the previous chapter, marking a shift from the condemnation of the repressive tendencies of the form to the valorisation of its popular credentials. This is part of the broader move, distinctive to the Popular Front formation, to work within existing forms – often forms, like the pageant, closely associated with the reproduction of dominant ideology – and to consider how elements within dominant discourse could be articulated differently.

⁸ Idris Cox, 'The Welsh National Eisteddfod: "Peace" and Comfort In A Mythical World Of Music & Drama: Hiding The Class Struggle's Reality', *Daily Worker*, 6 August, 1932, p. 2.

⁹ Iolo Wyn, 'The Meaning of the Eisteddfod: The People's University', *Daily Worker*, 1 August, 1938, p. 2.

¹⁰ Communist Party of Great Britain (South Wales District) & Communist Party of Great Britain (North Wales District), *The Lore of the People* (Cardiff: CPGB, 1938).

¹¹ Communist Party of Great Britain, *The Lore of the People*, p. 3.

5.2 The National Turn (II): Critical Voices

Although, as discussed below, there are problematic attitudes to Scottish and Welsh national questions expressed by some English writers, it is not the case that Communists in those countries were necessarily keen to involve themselves in questions of the national status in their home nations, or that Communist engagement with national questions was merely opportunistic. The idea that national traditions of struggle and national cultural forms could be turned towards the objectives of the Popular Front without addressing political questions of national autonomy was inevitably fraught with problems. In November 1936, the *Left Review*'s 'Scotland' issue provided something of a case in point. The contributions by Scottish writers themselves are discussed in detail below, but here it is worth assessing Edgell Rickword's contribution, 'Stalin and the National Question'. Responding to the recent Welsh Nationalist arson attack on a British Government bombing school on the Llŷn peninsula,¹² Rickword wrote that,

A recent case of alleged arson in Wales must have opened many people's eyes to the existence of national problems not only in the colonial dependencies of the British Crown, but actually within the boundaries of the Mother Country herself.¹³

This apparent 'discovery' of national tensions within Britain led Rickword to look to the model of the Russia, in view of 'the successful solution of the minorities problem in the Soviet Union', for guidance.¹⁴ Rickword quoted at some length both from Stalin's 'Marxism and the National Question' and his 'Report to the 16th Congress of the CPSU', but the line of argument only draws attention to the problems with Stalin's definition of a nation: 'A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture'.¹⁵ This is of course to evade the issue of political self-determination entirely. While affirming the positive action of the Spanish Popular Front in granting autonomy to the Basque and Catalan peoples, Rickword's purpose appears to be to deflect the question of any similar

¹² Nationalist sentiment was ignited by the Government decision to locate the school on the site of Penyberth, a farmhouse associated with patrons of the arts in Wales. Thus opposition was mobilised on the grounds that the decision represented an outright attack on Welsh culture. David Powell, *Nationhood and Identity: The British State* (New York: IB Tauris, 2002), pp. 159-160.

¹³ Edgell Rickword, 'Stalin and the National Question', *Left Review*, II:13 (November 1936), p. 746.

¹⁴ Rickword, 'Stalin and the National Question', p. 746.

¹⁵ Joseph Stalin, qtd. in Edgell Rickword, 'Stalin and the National Question', p. 746.

strategy in Britain, which Rickword considered would represent a 'deviation to the Left'.¹⁶ That nationalisms within Britain were a distraction from the greater project of anti-fascist action, and that Scottish (and Welsh, and Irish) cultural traditions could be celebrated without any reference at all to questions of political constitutions, brings to the fore the difficulty of separating what Fox called the 'truly national' from the 'merely nationalistic'.¹⁷ At root is the issue of whether the idea of the nation can be detached from its imperial and chauvinist connotations and rearticulated in such a way as to provide a base for class alliance.

An example of this problem, which has bearings on the theorisation of the novel, can be found in *International Literature* in an exchange between Georg Lukács, Sylvia Townsend Warner and T.A. Jackson in 1938. As noted in the previous chapter, Lukács published a two-part essay on Walter Scott adapted from the first chapter of *The Historical Novel*. Lukács's essay fails to bestow any relevance to Scott's national identity. He uses 'England' and 'Scotland' interchangeably, or as presenting no important political differences:

As a typical English gentleman, by tradition and mode of life closely connected with the gentry and the bourgeoisie, Scott has a deep sympathy for the independent and self-respecting medieval English and Scotch burghers and for the independent and free peasants.¹⁸

To the first part of the article, Sylvia Townsend Warner responded with the complaint that Scott's relationship to national questions had been misrepresented by Lukács, and that furthermore he had overlooked their relevance to the national question both in Britain and the Soviet Union:

Strongly conscious of his nationality, proud of his country's history, Scott was yet quite comfortable, so to speak, in the United Kingdom. He is the most important example that a minor nationality can be blended into a compound state, without either servility or the chauvinism of racial theories; and as such, Scott is relevant to the question of national minorities.¹⁹

¹⁶ Rickword, 'Stalin and the National Question', p. 749.

¹⁷ Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (1937; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 23.

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, 'Walter Scott and the Historical Novel' [Part II], *International Literature* 1938: 8, p. 61.

¹⁹ Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Walter Scott', *International Literature*, 1938:9, p. 100.

Lukács's subsequent response to Warner brushes off the question as beyond the concerns of his article. Jackson however intervenes in Lukács's defence, though admitting that he had misunderstood Scott's national status – but, just as Soviet constitutional politics are impenetrable to the British critic, so to the Soviet writer, 'in all but exceptional cases the specific distinctions between English, Scottish and Welsh are of negligible moment.'²⁰ In response to the tension between these two positions – being neither able to admit the importance of Scott's nationality nor to dismiss it as entirely irrelevant – Jackson takes the extraordinary step of amending a passage from Lukács in the following manner:

Through historical research in the entire past of England [and Scotland] he tried to discover the 'middle' road, to find the 'mean' between the two contending extremes, English [and Scottish] history furnished him with comforting examples; the most embittered [national and] class battles, where sometimes one and sometimes the other came out victorious, resolved, in the long run, in some 'mean' spacious enough to enclose and reconcile both hostile elements.²¹ [All parentheses Jackson's]

This episode is to be understood as a literary debate between three writers, none of whom can be assumed to be voicing an official Party line, but which nonetheless brings into focus the difficulty posed by the national turn. Jackson is attempting the type of mediation so central to Lukács's work, a process by which immediately incommensurable forms of social relations (such as national or class divisions) are shown to be in fact elements of the social totality. The fact that Jackson's amendment does serious damage to the coherence of the passage – so that the duality of class struggle becomes conflated with an undefined 'national' struggle – underscores the point that it is not possible to simply impute national content in the manner Jackson supposes. He describes it as a 'quantitative' addition that makes a 'qualitative' enhancement – but this is already to suppose that 'nation' and 'class' express analogous forms of division. Lukács's theory of mediation does not suppose that all types of societal relation are in fact identical or analogous, rather that they can be understood as parts in a whole complex of relations.

A second useful example of the difficulties presented by a tendency to assume that national cultures can be unproblematically assumed into a general 'front' of struggle is to be found in Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword's anthology, *Spokesmen for Liberty*. The

²⁰ T.A. Jackson, 'Walter Scott and his Historical Significance', *International Literature*, 1939:8-9, p. 69.

²¹ T.A. Jackson, 'Walter Scott and his Historical Significance', *International Literature*, 1939:8-9, p. 72.

editors include a number of texts by nationalist writers while seeking to evade specific questions of national autonomy: John McLean, James Connolly, and Cunningham Graham all feature, but the introduction relegates questions of Scottish, Irish and Welsh national movements to a footnote:

No single volume could adequately show the heroic resistance of Welsh, Scots and Irish to the encroachments of the English Crown, of the many nations of Asia and Africa to that of the capitalists; but we have proved that the English people are not guilty of all the blood shed by their rulers [...] The surnames under our later extracts: Jones and O'Connor, McLean and Connolly, reveal the co-operation in a single aim which is building the basis for the free communities of to-morrow.²²

This comment is obviously aiming to mediate the specifics of national struggles so that they are read as part of a universal project of emancipation from capitalism. The effect however is rather closer to Jackson's mediation of Lukács, in the sense that the need to assert that national struggles are part of a total project is emphasised in a way that ends up denying any specificity to those struggles. Lindsay and Rickword's handling of the Connolly text they present suggests that their evasion of national autonomy is deliberate – and, furthermore, that the 'single aim' can only be brought about through coercion. Although they present their selection, titled 'The Only Enemy', as drawn from an article in *Forward*, 22nd August, 1914, the text is in fact spliced together from two different pieces: one published on the date given, and the other published on August 15th 1914. The created text seems to argue for a 'patriotism' that is not 'the patriotism of capitalism'; echoing the ideal of an alternative form of nationality and national loyalty at the heart of Rickword and Lindsay's project.²³ But to make Connolly's voice consonant with that ideal it is necessary to omit the clear call to national struggle in the texts appropriated. The text reads, '[t]hat which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic', but the full sentence in Connolly's article is, 'That which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic, but that party or movement is the most perfect embodiment of patriotism which most successfully works

²² Edgell Rickword, 'Introduction: On English Freedom', *Spokesmen for Liberty* (1939; London: Lawrence & Wishart: 1941), FN, p. xvi.

²³ James Connolly, qtd. Rickword and Lindsay, *Spokesmen for Liberty* (1939; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941), p. 386.

for the conquest by the working class of the control of the destinies of the land wherein they labour.²⁴

5.3 'There is no Scottish National Question'

The *Left Review* 'Scotland' issue referred to above featured a debate between the novelists James Barke and Neil M. Gunn. Although lifelong friends and correspondents, Gunn was stung by an earlier article by Barke, commemorating their mutual friend Lewis Grassie Gibbon, in which he argued that 'Scottish nationalism is largely inspired by the superior race-theory of the Gael and the current demagoguery of Major Douglas. The identity of [Neil M.] Gunn's nationalist ideology is with that of Aryan theoreticians of Hitler fascism'.²⁵ Gunn responded to Barke's criticism from an anti-imperial position, with the argument that a Scotland that does not have autonomy cannot participate in the international struggle.²⁶ In a manner comparable to the organic and primitive communist imaginings of Rickword and Lindsay, Gunn believed that the culture of the Gaelic speakers had been originally a primitive communist one. For Gunn, that precedent was a central part of the imaginative struggle for a better Scotland.²⁷ Barke, however, had no time for this idea, and positioned the nationalist cause as a distraction from the real issue, about which he is emphatic:

It was Capitalism that enclosed the common lands of England. It was the self-same Capitalism that destroyed the Highlands as the land of the Gael, broke the Lowland peasantry and drove them into the factories and mines. It is capitalism that's destroying beyond all hope of resurrection An Gaidhealtachd.²⁸

Where for Gunn national culture is something ideally embodied in the national past, for Barke it is a site of constant struggle, something continually being made and remade: 'Struggle follows struggles throughout the pages of Scotland's troubled history'.²⁹ There is no point of harmony in the distant past. 'Every worth-while national characteristic has been the work and the inheritance of the Scottish people - even when they have been

²⁴ James Connolly, 'A Continental Revolution', *Forward*, 15 August 1914; online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/08/contrev.htm>. Compare Rickword and Lindsay, *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 386.

²⁵ James Barke, 'Lewis Grassie Gibbon'. *Left Review*, I:5 (February 1936), p. 221.

²⁶ Neil M. Gunn, 'Scotland a Nation', *Left Review* II:13 (November 1936), p. 736.

²⁷ Gunn, 'Scotland a Nation', p. 737.

²⁸ James Barke, 'The Scottish National Question', *Left Review* II:13 (November 1936), p. 744.

²⁹ Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 742.

bedevilled in denial and (temporary) repudiation'.³⁰ Where Gunn's Gaelic culture represents a static otherness, an unchanging counterpoint to the modern world, Barke's model of culture is a dialectical one, with Scottish writers and thinkers in continually reciprocal relationships with other cultures.³¹ Barke's article, however, balances a rejection of nationalist politics as middle-class affectation with an articulation of a national and popular perspective consonant with Dimitrov's conception of ideological struggle. Thus 'the nation' and 'the people' both become synonymous with resistance to capitalism; in William Wallace, Barke argues, 'the concept of the nation reached its (then) highest expression', since '[a]gainst the warring and mutually antagonistic feudal overlords whose one guiding principle was their own aggrandisement he set the republican commonality of "the people"'.³² This conception of 'the people' is the locus of the culture in need of defence: 'All that is truly national, all that is best and worthy of preservation in the various national cultures is the heritage of the workers and peasants concerned, of the class in whose hands the future lies'.³³ Barke concludes on an impeccably Popular Frontist demand for intellectuals to ally with the workers if they are 'genuine humanitarians', 'real lovers of their country's best traditions' and haters of 'Fascist barbarism'.³⁴ The article is perhaps the best example of a non-English British Marxist negotiating the national turn by emphasising national traditions as a weapon against fascism and de-nationalised capital, marking out a common ground on which members of different classes could align.

5.4 James Barke, *Major Operation* (1936)

The *Left Review* debate articulates a position on national cultural questions that Barke had been working out for some years, and which is being worked through without being fully resolved in *Major Operation*, published, after a series of delays, two months before the *Left Review* article appeared.³⁵ The writing, however, spanned the transition to the Popular Front, and though the novel has been read by Gustav Klaus as a symbolic enactment of the

³⁰ Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 743.

³¹ Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 741.

³² Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 742.

³³ Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 744.

³⁴ Barke, 'Scottish National Question', p. 744.

³⁵ Barke's papers suggest the delay was caused by his publisher's worries that an obscenity suit could be brought as a result of the 'Erotic Nocturne over the Second City' section: see F.T. Smith to Barke, 25 April, 1936, TS, James Barke Papers, Mitchell Library, Glasgow, Box 6A.

Popular Front, I argue here that the novel demonstrates Barke's struggle to reconcile himself with the new line.³⁶ The central plotline of the novel is a variation on the theme of middle-class radicalisation; a ruined businessman, George Anderson, finds himself sharing a hospital ward with a leader of the unemployed, Jock MacKelvie, and this extended encounter provides a political education that sees Anderson enter the labour movement before, rather like James Seton in *May Day*, being killed in a clash between demonstrators and police. I will suggest here that the novel shifts between a mode of 'subaltern modernism' and a more realist narrative of radicalisation; the novel may be understood as rehearsing Barke's conflicted attitudes to the principle of class alliance and to the national turn, and his effort to identify a conception of 'the people' and 'the nation'.

Known in later years primarily as a scholar of Robert Burns, Barke's cultural influences were nonetheless extremely wide and international in range. Barke at least in private expressed antipathy towards the *Left Review* in particular, and a number of central Popular Front figures besides. In a revealing exchange written as he was working on *Major Operation*, Barke declares the *Left Review* a pale imitation of the work of Soviet cultural theorists:

I think my next effort [i.e. *Major Operation*] will be the goods. There is no question it will be translated. The LR [*Left Review*] is tripe – and pretty awful at that. We have nobody who can formulate literary theory (say) like Averbakh, Bezimensky, Radek, Libedinsky, Frichte, Brik, P.C. Kogan, Gorbachev, Shkolovsky, Polonsky. Or Pilnak, Fedin, or the very sensible Gladkov. But we have such hoodlums as [Ralph] Fox and Mrs [Amabel] Williams-Ellis. On the other hand West and Garman are good. And of course there's myself!³⁷

Barke's very un-Scottish and un-British list of enthusiasms did not sit easily with the cultural formation around the *Left Review*. Barke's difficulty in reconciling himself to non-sectarian politics did not go unnoticed by Popular Front intellectuals. *Major Operation* was praised in the *Labour Monthly* for its vividness of description, Aitken Ferguson declaring that 'it is a book which will appeal, and ought to be on the library shelf of every

³⁶ Gustav Klaus, 'James Barke: A Great-Hearted Writer, A Hater of Oppression, A True Scot', in Andy Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 19.

³⁷ Barke to 'Arthur', 21 November, 1935, TS, Barke Papers, Box 4B.

Labour man in Britain'.³⁸ Others, however, found it a cause for concern. In a letter to Barke, John Strachey said he liked the hospital scenes, and though he considered the first part of the book first rate, he didn't like the rest of it so much: 'It seemed to me decidedly sectarian.'³⁹ Strachey does not elaborate on precisely what he found sectarian in the novel, but Barke's technique of narrating his middle-class character's progression to Communism through an overwhelmingly traumatic physical and mental collapse was perhaps not in keeping with an ethic of inclusivity rather than coercion.

Barke's difficulties with a non-sectarian politics should be seen in the context of his paradoxical status as a non-Party member, who nonetheless played the role of, and was treated as, an orthodox Party Communist by his fellow writers.⁴⁰ His correspondence with Lewis Grassic Gibbon particularly bears out this self-characterisation. In September 1933 he was writing to Grassic Gibbon in an uncompromising mood:

No doubt you'll have formed the opinion that I am a hopelessly intolerant doctrinaire. And I believe I am. Toleration belongs to the period of toothless liberalism. The class struggle takes on ever more brutal aspects. To stand aside from the conflict is no longer possible – either you stand by the working class and its heroic vanguard the Communist Party or you take your stand (directly, indirectly or benevolently neutral – it doesn't matter which) with Fascism [...].⁴¹

In early 1934 Grassic Gibbon was playfully deriding Barke's political orthodoxy, enthusing about *The Free Man* journal,

which is going to be revived into an 18-page sheet where all kinds of innovators – communists, douglasites, anarchists – are going to raise hell. Not orthodox from your point of view, but great fun... An idea: write the editor and ask him for a column a week to be headed "From the Communist Point of View" or under some

³⁸ Aitken Ferguson, 'A Marcher's Novel', *Labour Monthly*, October 1936, p. 643. Ferguson's admission of the novel's political significance reflects his own movement from the 1920s, when under the pen-name 'Clydebank Riveter' he wrote regularly to the *Weekly Worker* to attack its cultural coverage, which he saw as an indulgence of fellow travellers (Croft, *Red Letter Days*, p. 36, and Morgan, et al., *Communists and British Society*, p. 206). Barke's reference in the *Left Review* to 'a Clydeside engineer' who understands national questions better than a university graduate could be an allusion to Ferguson's persona ('Scottish National Question', 741).

³⁹ Strachey, letter to Barke, 16 October, 1936, TS, Barke Papers, Box 4B.

⁴⁰ John Manson's thorough investigation into the formality of Barke's Communist commitment appears in 'Did James Barke Join the Communist Party?', *Communist History Network Newsletter*, No. 19 (Spring 2006), pp. 5-11. Manson concludes Barke never formally joined, and my own research on Barke's papers has revealed nothing to contradict this.

⁴¹ Barke to Lewis Grassic Gibbon, 5 September, 1933, Barke Papers, Box 4B.

such title. Say I asked you to. He'll probably be delighted, and you can do agitprop through a boorjoy [*sic*] sheet.⁴²

This dynamic, in which Barke articulates an unyielding line against Grassic Gibbon's more eclectic and continually shifting positions, while Grassic Gibbon cheerfully mocked Barke's intransigence, characterised the relationship between Barke and Grassic Gibbon until the latter's untimely death, aged 34, in February 1935. This dialogue continued, however, after Grassic Gibbon's death in Barke's novels, which revisit and revise aspects of Grassic Gibbon's work. *Major Operation* in particular is a novel in dialogue with Grassic Gibbon's *Grey Granite*, published in 1935.

Grassic Gibbon's major work, the trilogy *A Scots Quair*, published between 1932 and 1935, was a source of inspiration and frustration for Barke. Barke had expressed his displeasure with *Cloud Howe*, the second part of the *Scots Quair* trilogy:

It was a disappointment to me. For me, the grave and fundamental weakness in *Cloud Howe* is your attitude to the Seggert spinners, symbol of the industrial proletariat. Herein your attitude (and it certainly can't be your 'real' attitude) is that of the semi-socialist-cum-half-spewed-Fabian-intellectual. I find it very trying.⁴³

He repeated this argument in an unpublished extended version of his *Left Review* appreciation of Grassic Gibbon, intended for a tribute volume which was never published: 'Certainly his sympathies are with the spinners. But it is the sympathy given and felt from above the battle.'⁴⁴ His attitude to *Grey Granite*, the final part of the trilogy and the least critically acclaimed, was more mixed. Although claiming in a letter to Gunn that, 'Its "line" is right – or very nearly so. It showed the way out – not a way but the way',⁴⁵ he elsewhere suggested that Grassic Gibbon lacked the 'essential and vital knowledge' to carry off the novel.⁴⁶ But he nonetheless commended the trilogy in Communist terms: 'A *Scots Quair* is a worthy forerunner of the novel that will dominate the coming literary

⁴² Lewis Grassic Gibbon to Barke, Letter, TS. 18 February, 1934, Barke Papers, Box 4B.

⁴³ Barke to Lewis Grassic Gibbon, 5 September, 1933, Barke Papers, Box 4B.

⁴⁴ Barke, undated TS: 'A Critical Appreciation of A Scots Quair By James Barke', Barke Papers, Box 9B, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Barke to Gunn, 20 November, 1934, MS, Barke Papers, Box 4B, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Barke, 'A Critical Appreciation of A Scots Quair', p. 18.

scene: the novel that will be written by workers, for workers, expressing the hopes, ideals and aspirations of workers.’⁴⁷

Critical readings of *Grey Granite* have tended to focus on the connotations of the novel’s title and link them to the representation of younger Ewan Tavendale’s Communist commitment, which appears as unshakeable and ruthless. Angus Calder links the granite of the title to the certainties of Presbyterianism,⁴⁸ but it refers equally to the creed ‘clear and sharp as a knife’ that Ewan finds in Communism.⁴⁹ The grey granite that appears in Grassic Gibbon’s essay ‘Aberdeen’ represents austere stoicism: ‘a grey glimmer like a morning North Sea, a cold steeliness that chills the heart.’⁵⁰ John Lehmann’s review of *Grey Granite* criticised Grassic Gibbon’s portrayal of Ewan as ‘too humourless, and at times even priggish.’⁵¹ Lehmann’s concerns were echoed in the *Daily Worker* when the trilogy was published as a single volume in 1937: ‘This indicates the possible danger of the book: the suggestion that Communists are not as other men, but figures of unbending steel which never smile, regarding the rest of mankind contemptuously ascetic and completely ruthless, which is the old idea of a Communist.’⁵² This ‘old idea’ of the Communist is implicitly contrasted with the Popular Front conception of the Communist as an ordinary participant in popular life.

Barke’s novel takes up these images of steely necessity, but it tries to detach them from their association with austere, ruthless and elitist Communism, as represented by Ewan Tavendale, in which the ends always justify the means. Barke appropriates from Grassic Gibbon a metaphor of the city of Glasgow as a moribund monster in need of active and radical intervention, drawing on Grassic Gibbon’s essay, ‘Glasgow’ (1934):

⁴⁷ Barke, ‘A Critical Appreciation of A Scots Quair’, p. 16. This passage also appears in Barke, ‘Lewis Grassic Gibbon’, *Left Review*, II:5 (February 1936), pp. 220-1.

⁴⁸ Angus Calder, ‘A Mania for Self-Reliance: Grassic Gibbon’s *Scots Quair*’, in Douglas Jefferson and Graham Martin, Eds., *The Uses of Fiction: Essays on the Modern Novel in Honour of Arnold Kettle* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982), p. 104.

⁴⁹ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 495.

⁵⁰ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, ‘Aberdeen’, *Smeddum* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), p. 111.

⁵¹ John Lehmann, ‘Grey Granite’, *Left Review*, I:5 (February 1935), p. 90.

⁵² Unsigned, ‘A Scots Quair’, *Daily Worker*, 21 March, 1937, p. 7.

But there (as elsewhere) the physicians disagree - multitudes of physicians, surrounded by anxious groups of the ailing patient's dependents. A brief round of the various physicians convinces the investigator of one thing: the unpopularity of surgery. The single surgeon orating is, of course, the Communist.⁵³

The knife; the affliction of the body politic; the heroic surgeon: these are organising metaphors in *Major Operation*, and have shifting significance in the context of 1936. Barke's title resumes Grassic Gibbon's use of the figuration of the Communist as surgeon, making a necessary, thoroughgoing intervention rather than, like Ramsay MacDonald in a searing essay by Grassic Gibbon, placidly waiting for the 'beast' of capitalism to evolve.⁵⁴ Among these connotations, Barke may also have had in mind C. Day Lewis's *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933), 'It is now or never, the hour of the knife,/ The break with the past, the major operation.'⁵⁵ It is likely, too, that Barke had in mind William Bolitho's lurid 1924 account of conditions in Glasgow, *Cancer of Empire*, which warned that revolution would break out on the Clyde if living conditions did not improve. Together, these associations point firmly towards revolution as the only solution to an ailing social system at a moment in mid-1936 when such rhetoric was being muted in favour of the immediate defence against fascism.

Major Operation is, at its outset, militantly urban and civic in its focus, accepting Glasgow's status as an imperial city, 'The Second City of the Empire'. The city appears separated off from its national context, formed by the dynamics of international capitalism and the global exercise of power. Its inhabitants are always 'citizens' - 'Mr No-Mean-Citizen of No-Mean-City', in an ironic nod to another Glasgow slum novel.⁵⁶ In keeping with its urban and metropolitan compass, the novel is stridently modern and, indeed, deliberately modernist in its frame of reference: it may indeed be considered an example of

⁵³ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, 'Glasgow', in *Smeddum*, p. 105. John Manson offers a suggestive account of the way that the metaphors of surgery, the knife, and the personification of 'History' that are prevalent in Grassic Gibbon's writing on Communism also recur in writing from the left across Europe in the thirties and forties. In the '30s, it signifies auspiciousness and opportunity, but later it comes to mean the ways that people are annihilated en masse by impersonal historical forces. Manson's argument as to the significance of these elements is unclear, however. 'Grassic Gibbon's Internationale', *Communist History Network Newsletter*, 22 (Spring 2008), pp. 44-50.

⁵⁴ See Lewis Grassic Gibbon's essay, 'The Wrecker: James Ramsay MacDonald'. In this piece, Grassic Gibbon attacks MacDonald's 'hazy inability to grasp at the flinty actualities of existence', a failure which manifests itself in an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary, understanding of historical change; MacDonald waits for the ailing dinosaur of capitalism to evolve. *Smeddum*, pp. 150-151.

⁵⁵ C. Day Lewis, 'The Magnetic Mountain: 25', in Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 62.

⁵⁶ Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long's *No Mean City*, published in 1935.

what Michael Denning calls the ‘subaltern modernism’ that emerged around the world among working-class writers after 1917.⁵⁷ The most memorable passages in the novel construct a collective voice of the street, a playful, politically-charged urban mode that revels in the promiscuity of popular culture and the unstoppable creativity of history: ‘Sure hadn’t she a form like Venus! Who was Venus anyway? Oh yeah! The world moves on. Time’s a certain-sure go-getter’.⁵⁸ The many Joycean echoes and allusions in *Major Operation* have been noted elsewhere,⁵⁹ and Barke himself saw the connection with Joyce as a potential selling point, once again complicating the assumption that writers on the left were uniformly anti-modernist.⁶⁰ I will suggest here, however, that the novel is conscious of the limits of modernism and ultimately seeks to move beyond them. An indicator of the motivation for this shift can be found in Denning’s claim that the texts of ‘subaltern modernism’ tended to be ‘curiously ahistorical, and rarely produced the temporal and spatial sweep of grand historical fiction or generational epics.’⁶¹ *Major Operation* is not ‘ahistorical’, but it is quite conscious of modernism’s ahistorical tendencies. It may seem to be toying with that tendency, articulating a scepticism towards the narrative of history nonetheless interlocked with a deep preoccupation with it. The first half of the book in particular regularly evokes the passage of time, countering nostalgic attempts to grasp the receding past:

There aren’t enough brain cells in the human mind to store all the lumber of the past. The machine vibrates so terrifically that the cells can hardly keep anything in. Name of a footballer: name of a film star: name of a Derby winner. Lost a couple of bob- or won ten! But 1066 and all that ... The world moves on. My cutie’s due at two-to-two ... TO-DAY (109).

In this fast-paced, forward-moving modernity, the meaning of older cultural forms comes into question: ‘Mass productions, mass culture, mass gutter journalism – what could Loch Lomond mean?’ (108). A narrative voice warns that, ‘The bonnie banks had had their day

⁵⁷ Michael Denning, ‘The Novelists’ International’, in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel: Vol. 1, History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), p. 720.

⁵⁸ James Barke, *Major Operation* (1936; London: Collins, 1955), p. 108. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

⁵⁹ Valentine Cunningham, ‘The Anxiety of Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents’, in Keith Williams & Stephen Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), p. 13.

⁶⁰ Writing to his publisher to defend the novel prior to publication, he wrote that, ‘If James Joyce is mentioned, many of the critics will be careful to point out that James Barke can’t hold a contraceptive to James Joyce. But on the other hand a large section of the reading public will be interested in the link up. Ditto for Zola’. Barke to FT Smith at Collins, 28 April, 1936, Barke Papers, Box 6A.

⁶¹ Denning, ‘The Novelists’ International’, p. 721.

in the consciousness of drawing-room ballad writers. The world isn't a drawing-room any more for the Gentlemen of Culture' (108). The novel critically represents two positions in relation to Scottish history: at one pole, what Tom Nairn calls the 'cultural sub-nationalism' of Scotland is conspicuously satirised in the 'city folks' with their 'kilts and their bastard Gaelic', who have bought a version of Scottish history as 'a superficially attractive semi-Celtic tartan ragstore twilight' (81).⁶² The characterisation of cultural nationalism as 'superficial' positions it, in terms of the novel's metaphors, as failing to deal with the deeper problems that require the 'major operation'. In the Eastern Infirmary, representatives of Scotland's past are shown to be dying away: the old crofter, William MacDonald, is 'dazed, lost and isolated' by being uprooted from his farm (160). His presence in the hospital is the result of the intervention of a Marchioness who has taken a historical interest in him since he conforms to her romanticised notion of Gaelic culture (162). This doomed attempt at preserving a dying culture reiterates Barke's argument in his note on Gaelic culture: 'The death rattle of Gaelic culture may be amplified by all sorts of bodies and committees. They delude themselves, however, in thinking that by doing so they are performing an act of resurrection.'⁶³ These notes were written in response to a request from Grassic Gibbon, who quoted from them at length – describing Barke as 'a remarkable Anglo-Gael' – in his essay 'Literary Lights', part of *Scottish Scene*, a collaboration with Hugh MacDiarmid and an important meditation on Scottish modernity.⁶⁴ Resurrection of the dead and the preservation of the dying are impossible in the scheme of the novel. Another patient, Peter MacGeechan, is likewise lost, both in the hospital and in the modern world: 'He was a survival from the past: a patriarch of the Scottish peasantry: a Scottish Hebrew' (170). He and the other patients 'might have belonged to different countries, divided by mountains and a waste of seas' (169). The figuring of these histories as mutually incomprehensible brings into question the existence of a common culture and the possibility of a national narrative. At the other pole, the quintessentially middlebrow playwright Fred Rowatt represents the abandonment of history altogether: 'For Rowatt and his friends, history had no significance [...] they were not even interested in the superficial pageant of Scotland's historical effects' (81), seeing

⁶² Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 156.

⁶³ Barke, 'Note on Gaelic Culture', Barke Papers, Box 4B, undated, but mentioned in letter to Lewis Grassic Gibbon dated 4 November, 1933 (Box 4B).

⁶⁴ Lewis Grassic Gibbon, 'Literary Lights', in *Smeddum*, pp. 135-136.

themselves as the ‘fruit and cream of a great Empire’ (62). Rowatt’s aversion to history eventually becomes an aversion to life itself: ‘Reality: that’s what we must get away from: reality is what makes life unbearable’ (153). Rowatt’s plays are ‘nothing very deep and nothing very clever’ (61); a shallow contemporaneity that, like nationalist kitsch, fails to get to the root cause of the crisis.

The implicit problem the novel poses is how to establish a relationship with history that is neither a fetishized attachment to the past nor an amnesiac modernism in the context of the emerging Popular Front emphasis on national cultures and class alliance. It is with this central problem in mind that the novel’s modernist elements must be read, rather than in the context of an assumed schematic opposition between modernism and realism. Valentine Cunningham in particular has focused on one section of the novel, ‘Red Music in the Second City’, to argue for a Bakhtinian reading of the novel as rejecting Stalinist ‘puritanism’ in favour of the officially forbidden jouissance of modernism.⁶⁵ As we have seen in earlier chapters, it is an over-estimation of the clarity of the official Communist line during this period to assume, as Cunningham does, that there was any particularly clear proscription of literary experiment. Cunningham’s reading is nonetheless instructive for the way it fails to apprehend the relationship between this experimental section and the novel as a whole. ‘Red Music in the Second City’ toys with modernist images and stylistics to represent the street life of the city: ‘I’m only trying to find my street in the flux of time: paddle my own canoe in the stream of consciousness: make ends meet: solve the jig-saw: earn an honest livelihood’, one of the many voices, echoing, as Keith Williams notes, Joyce’s ‘Dooleysprudence’ (123).⁶⁶ Another voice toys with the overturning of boundaries of high and popular art: ‘Wonder what Mrs. Bloom would have thought about Mae West? Or Mae West about Marion Bloom?’ (122). The section represents a heteroglossic rendering of the speech of the city; demonstrating a plurality of discourses and dialects, each suggesting its own limits and obfuscations in order to de-authorise normative language. These playful reversals of authorised distinctions lead Cunningham to suggest the section presents us with a ‘classic carnival on the Bakhtinian model’.⁶⁷ This,

⁶⁵ Cunningham, ‘Anxiety of Influence’, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Keith Williams, ‘Joyce’s “Chinese Alphabet”’: *Ulysses* and the Proletarians’, in Paul Hyland, ed., *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1991), p. 184.

⁶⁷ Cunningham, ‘The Anxiety of Influence’, p. 16.

however, overlooks the fact that 'Red Music' marks a turning point in the novel, and the shift in tone at the end, which Cunningham seems to overlook, marks the onset of crisis and a halting of the dynamic, carnivalesque energy. Earlier in the novel, the streets are shown to be sites of class co-existence, of civic identity: 'Over the entire City the object of the patrol was the same: there was an identity of interests between the middle-class and the working-class: the desire to be in the stream of life' (85). 'Red Music' opens the second 'book' of the novel, set eight years after the first – in the mid-thirties – and shows that illusion of identity breaking down as the crisis causes the stagnation of the 'stream of life.' The title of the second book is 'The Wheel of the Wagon is Broken', and 'Red Music' represents the transition from movement to stasis. Spectres of unemployment and fascism can be clearly felt: 'Father's got the sack from the water works, the brick works, the rivet, bolt and nut works' (125), while the chorus of middle-class voices drifts towards authoritarianism: 'What we need is a strong hand at the helm. (Chorus: We need a strong hand at the helm!)' (125). The street carnival, pulled along by the consoling and relatively levelling effects of consumerism, becomes something else, a claustrophobic and fractious mass.

In 'Red Music in the Second City', Cunningham argues, 'the people [...] is speaking'; however, the collective voice is shown to be a surface phenomenon which is fractured by the crisis at the section's conclusion.⁶⁸ The novel must therefore look elsewhere for its means of popular representation, for another way of articulating popular fears and desires. The crisis causes another form of social mixing to emerge as the somatic effects of the downturn on the collective and individual bodies of the city gather the principle characters together in the Eastern Infirmary. In contrast to the novel's earlier, celebratory evocations of the passage of time – 'Forward O Time: on wheels and foot. Pause, and the century flashes past: for the century hasn't got There – yet' (50)⁶⁹ – for George Anderson and Jock MacKelvie, the temporary vitality of work (for Jock) and prosperity (for Anderson) gives way to the longeurs of illness and extended convalescence: 'Never had time dragged past so slowly, with such tedium' (292). The

⁶⁸ Cunningham, 'Anxiety of Influence', p. 7.

⁶⁹ *Forward O Time!* was the title of a popular socialist realist novel by Valentin Katayev, published in English by Victor Gollancz in 1933, the title of which had in turn been appropriated from Mayakovsky's *The Bath House*.

slowing down of time (or, in Bakhtinian terms, the switch from the chronotope of the street to that of the infirmary), stretches out what has previously been presented synchronically. George Anderson's Leopold Bloom-like stream of consciousness, with its digressions and non-sequiturs, identified him with the aforementioned voice in 'Red Music': 'I'm only trying to find my street in the flux of time: paddle my own canoe in the stream of consciousness: make ends meet: solve the jig-saw: earn an honest livelihood' (125). He finds, however, that that solution is not possible: 'His mind process had been jig-sawed: scattered'; he had 'lost his bearings completely' (148-9). The stream of consciousness is no longer a mark of the novel's modernist bearings but rather a symptom arising in economic conditions; the central subject of the remainder of the novel is the long process of the recomposition and rehabilitation of Anderson's thought processes. The agent of this process is Jock MacKelvie, and his techniques in the 'major operation' are a linguistic overpowering of Anderson and an enforced lesson in history. Against Anderson's 'state of agitated confusion' (292) in which he finds himself quite unable to 'discipline [his thoughts] in any way' (290), is ranged the stabilising and disciplining force of MacKelvie's 'ordered and controlled' mind (292).

MacKelvie's function in stabilising language and providing an authoritative discourse is again overlooked by critics anxious to emphasise the novel's modernist credentials. While Keith Williams has noted Barke's 'Joycean delight in puns', as in Jock MacKelvie's transition from 'red leader' to 'Red leader', the novel is not wholeheartedly engaging in such linguistic play.⁷⁰ It is keen to de-authorise certain kinds of monologic speech, particularly the voice of the BBC, which is defamiliarised as a synthetic dialect, 'broadcasting the Geneva Lullaby' in its artificial language: 'Just a nice voice, you know: wethah fawcaust' (375). Working-class speech too is shown to be fraught with obfuscation: in the infirmary, the working-class patients are just as adept at obscuring unpleasant realities (through such euphemisms as 'Shanghai Express', meaning operating table; 'domino', meaning death) as the medical professionals whose official language is intentionally unintelligible to the patients ('duodenal carcinoma'). This serves the important function of distancing the novel from the more naïve endorsements of working-class language found in the early *Left Review* as characteristically immediate, honest and

⁷⁰ Williams, 'Joyce's "Chinese Alphabet"', p. 183.

authentic.⁷¹ Crucially, though, Jock MacKelvie is able to switch linguistic codes and mediate between these variously incomplete discourses, able to speak authoritatively to the doctors and translate the language of the surgeons for the other patients (202; 300). This ability ensures that MacKelvie's discourse is apparently total and without fractures: Anderson realises that if MacKelvie's political discourse is true, 'and there didn't seem to be any loopholes, then it was going to be difficult not to be a Red' (316). Ideology becomes common sense; Anderson finds that 'the phrases were beginning to trip off his tongue' (317).

This rhetorical overpowering is effected through lessons in the violence of history; both the violence of the past – 'How do you think the Highlands of Scotland were laid bare? By the bloodiest terror' (340) – and of the present – 'Mass murder, mass sadism, mass torture' (406). Anderson is disabused of his illusions about Scottish history: 'There was no need to go out of Scotland to trace the bloody human pulp of history' (422). At one point, an inconsistency in the text suggests that Barke intended to pursue this further; MacKelvie teaches a historical lesson on the grounds that Anderson 'profess[es] an admiration for Scottish Nationalism' (340). In fact, Anderson never states a position on this issue, which suggests some uncertainty on Barke's part about his line of attack. In any case, the intervention is to ensure he is 'inoculated against the virus of Fascism' (292), to which the collective middle-class voices from which he has been isolated are drifting (376-7). Even when Anderson is converted, however, he fails to attain the linguistic authority of MacKelvie: 'All night I have been thinking of the speech I would make to you in the morning ... It's gone now, the form of it' (363). At a demonstration, he finds he 'could not bring himself to shout a slogan' (401). Anderson is, in the course of MacKelvie's rhetorical assault, left with nothing, and struggles to assimilate MacKelvie's own values. In this sense, MacKelvie's discourse is poised between authoritative and internally persuasive, in Bakhtin's terms, and this equivocation might be said to reflect the unresolved tensions in Barke's attitude to class alliance.⁷² Anderson's commits himself to

⁷¹ Exemplified by Alec Brown in 'Controversy, *Left Review* I:3 (December 1934), pp. 76-7; but also echoed in Montagu Slater's argument, 'The speech of the men "at the hidden foci of production", workers and technologists, craftsmen and peasants, is the air a live literature must breathe': 'Writers International', *Left Review*, I:4, January 1935, p. 127.

⁷² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 345-346

Marxism because all his other values are destroyed; the internally persuasive force is ambiguous in its sheer destructiveness. Although Anderson insists that his conversion is a rational choice – ‘I have deliberately chosen to align myself with the working-class, the class to which I now belong’ (393) – there is little deliberation afforded. The novel itself seems conscious of this issue, which is, at root, a question of under what conditions the middle class can commit themselves to working-class politics: ‘He had been in the mood to listen to MacKelvie. But would he have listened to him had he not been forced to listen?’ (365).

This ambiguity over the nature of Anderson’s conversion is integral to the novel’s problematic resolutions, and to its wider political tensions. Anderson’s trajectory is one of abject personal loss. Gustav Klaus rightly points out that, ‘[o]ne objection is that if it takes an ordeal such as Anderson goes through to make sections of the middle class susceptible to the idea of the popular front, it seems pretty hopeless from the start.’⁷³ The novel has little time for the notion that there were progressive resources within bourgeois culture waiting to be activated: Anderson’s ‘major operation’ is twice described in terms of a ‘liquidation’ of his past (365; 491). In both cases, it is clearly implied that such a procedure is both the aim of radicalisation and a commendable achievement. Having surrendered every aspect of himself to MacKelvie’s rhetorical intervention, Anderson’s commitment fails to produce a new political subjectivity, so that he remains an outsider to the movement he wishes to belong to, concluding the novel, with rather grim predictability, dying to save MacKelvie from the violence of the police (490). What is not offered, at least within this narrative that drives the novel, is a conception of ideology that detaches it from a particular class, a move that would appear necessary if the aspirations of the Popular Front were to be successfully extended through wider society. Ideology is shown to be naturalised to the point of embodiment: as in the case of Bessie, ‘rebellion had been bred into her bones’ (282). This essentialism, which is to a significant extent written into the novel through its central corporeal metaphors, suggests that Anderson’s conversion could never be fully complete; his ‘constitution’ remains essentially bourgeois (458). This constitutional discourse could equally, however, work in the opposite direction, asserting that the body, capable of suffering and vulnerable to violence, is the common

⁷³ Gustav Klaus, *Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), p. 123.

ground that transcends class difference; intermittently, the novel points this way, as when Anderson is physically sickened by the thought of the suffering afflicted on ‘the helpless bodies of the German workers’ (406). Although it is the essentialist valence that is more commonly emphasised in *Major Operation*, the ambiguity nonetheless leaves space for another position to begin to emerge near the novel’s conclusion. This other possibility is given clear articulation by MacKelvie:

The armed forces – apart from the brass hats of all ranks... We are the armed forces. We are the army, the navy, the big guns, the aeroplanes, the munitions. We are the Nation. If we take our power, openly and firmly, realising clearly what we are doing and what we want, who the hell’s to gainsay us? We can win the day, win the future for peace, right, justice, equality, for... all fundamental human decency, without shedding a drop of blood (343).

Here, a quite different mode of political activism and subjectivity is suggested, not attached to a particular class position, but rather suggestive of that ‘republican commonality’ evoked in Barke’s *Left Review* article.⁷⁴ There would, in this formulation, be no obvious need for a ‘liquidation’ of the past, or for the kind of conversion ordeal that Barke/MacKelvie inflicts on Anderson, or, indeed, for the bloody narrative conclusion of the novel as a whole. In place of rhetorical domination, MacKelvie offers here a language of persuasion; even the ellipses and semi-rhetorical question suggest a more open, negotiable discourse. A more Popular Front-oriented discourse is suggested in the descriptions of the final mass demonstrations, in which the various contingents from the regions of Scotland draw on their own local traditions, giving the event ‘a national character’ (483). There is a suggestion that the popular, mobile, urban mode of the ‘Red Music’ section, broken up by the Depression, might be renewed by the invigoration of mass activism: ‘Here was movement, activity. An end of passivity, wrangling and sectarian dispute’ (477). Significantly, it is also at the novel’s close that the previously unfailing lucidity of Jock MacKelvie is shown to meet a limit: at Anderson’s graveside, he wonders, ‘What had Anderson thought as he stood over his body with that banner? MacKelvie would never know’ (494). Together, these concluding moments suggest a softening of the novel’s politics, and the possibility of another mode of writing, in which authority is not concentrated in the single, idealised ‘surgeon’, and in which past histories

⁷⁴ Barke, ‘Scottish National Question’, p. 724.

might not need to be 'liquidated'. The novel is awkwardly poised, however, between indicating these possibilities and committing to them.

5.5 James Barke, *The Land of the Leal* (1939)

Major Operation, therefore, may be read as imprinted with the difficulties Barke found in the transition to the Popular Front. The history that is revealed to Anderson is not articulated as a tradition of resistance with which to align, but rather a history of barbarism and injustice of which he can hope only to absolve himself. Barke's next novel, published in May 1939, a few months before the outbreak of war, represents a marked departure from *Major Operation*. Charting the history of one working-class family over a century, the novel narrates a long process of class formation from rural Galloway to the Glasgow of the thirties, restoring to view those histories of rural labour and struggle that *Major Operation* jettisons as inaccessible to the urban working class, articulating them within an anti-fascist discourse. Michael Denning has identified an important shift in proletarian writing worldwide during the thirties and forties away from the 'curiously ahistorical' tendency of 'subaltern modernism' towards a 'larger historical sensibility' that emerged within 'the resistance narratives of antifascist and anticolonial wars' and which became fully developed through the 'recognition that the new proletarians of the century were not simply factory workers and tenement dwellers, but were migrants from the countryside'.⁷⁵ *The Land of the Leal* bears out this tendency through its emplotment of one family's history of dispossession, migration and labour; a process of class formation and of developing class consciousness: the process, that is, by which a peasantry becomes a proletariat. In its closing chapters, the family saga becomes an anti-fascist fiction, and the projection of a continuum of struggle through which the family's tradition of resistance eventually opens out into the world historical struggle against fascism gives the novel recognisable epic resonances, conforming, in some ways, to the type of novel imaged in the final chapter of Lukács's *The Historical Novel*, which would inherit in some degree the unity, breadth and popular significance of earlier epic texts.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Michael Denning, 'The Novelists' International', p. 721.

⁷⁶ Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937; London: Penguin, 1976), p. 419.

The anxieties and delays that dogged the publication of *Major Operation* meant that when it appeared it was out of step with novels like *May Day* which had absorbed the Popular Front line more clearly. Although his publisher was concerned about *The Land of the Leal* proving ‘redder’ than its predecessor, the novel instead demonstrates a shift to a less sectarian position, especially in its final chapters.⁷⁷ The transitions in Barke’s thinking during the period in which he was working on *The Land of the Leal*, which he completed in December 1938, are evident in both his public and private writing. His *Left Review* article clearly signalled that he now considered Scottish identity – conceived as a body of popular tradition – to be deployable against fascism. This element strengthened after the Munich Crisis of September 1938; late that year he wrote to Neil Gunn:

But whatever happens, the next ten years in Europe are going to be Hell. But one immediate result of Munich has been for me a terrific strengthening of my never weak Scottish sentiment. The Scottish people must cleanse themselves of the shame, the bitter, humiliating shame of Chamberlain and Munich.⁷⁸

This rhetoric of national shame and national humiliation also characterised Barke’s public responses to the Spanish Civil War. On several occasions, Barke declared that the war made particular claims on Scottish writers as heirs to a tradition of struggle. In a speech written for Scottish PEN in March 1938, Barke exhorted Scottish writers to continue their tradition of fighting for intellectual liberty by fighting fascism:

The Scots have a great and noble tradition in the fight for liberty and freedom. We must not sully that tradition now in our keeping. The traditions of Wallace, or Barbour and Blind Harry, aye, even of the good Lord James, of Ramsay, Ferguson and Robert Burns: of men like Cunninghame Graham and Keir Hardie and the great and glorious John MacLean, are our traditions: our noblest and best traditions.

Are we Scottish writers – we whom [illegible word] Stalin has designated “Engineers of the human soul” – to lag behind the hundreds of brave and courageous Scots from the mines, the factories, the universities and the derelict areas – and all Scotland is almost that – who are fighting for the people of Spain?⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Barke wrote to his agent, David Higham, on 24 January, 1937: ‘But you can see how nervous [FT] Smith is, how thoroughly English the delicately worded hint that they don’t want a political autobiography: the fear that the Land of the Leal may turn out to be even ‘Redder’ than Major Operation’. Barke Papers, Box 6A.

⁷⁸ Barke to Neil Gunn, 28 November, 1938, Barke Papers, Box 4A.

⁷⁹ Barke, Draft Speech, ‘The PEN and World Affairs’, dated 19 March, 1938, Barke Papers, Box 2A. See also ‘The Refugees in Spain’, a letter co-signed by Barke, J. Lennox Kerr, Eric Linklater, Hugh MacDiarmid,

Barke here adopts a rhetoric that first uses pride in national prestige to rouse his listeners to a positive sense of their own history, and then attempts to shame his readers through the example of working-class participation in the conflict. *The Land of the Leal* may be considered Barke's own response to the call he issues here; the novel is concerned with the question of what Scotland's 'noblest and best traditions' are, and seeks to identify them as arising in the historical experience of the Scottish people from the break-up of the peasant communities with the coming of capitalism to the modern traditions of the labour movement.

There is much in Barke's *The Land of the Leal* that recalls Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*; both are concerned with a long history of dispossession and evolving modes of resistance. Grassie Gibbon's essay 'The Land' celebrated the rural workers as

the masters who feed the world!... And it came on me that all over Great Britain, all over Europe this morning, the mean fields of France and the fat pastures of Saxony and the rolling lands of Roumania those rulers of the earth were out and about, bent-backed to plodding toil, the world's great Green International awaiting the coming of its Spartacus.⁸⁰

While Grassie Gibbon seems in this text to position these workers as a kind of unchanging moral authority, Barke's novel, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and recounting the experiences of three generations as they are displaced first by the collapse of the crofting economy, then by the agricultural depression in the Borders, before finally ending up in the Glasgow of 1938, narrates the development of a historical and national consciousness, and the ultimate transposition of the 'Green International' into a 'Red' one. In his 'Note' to the novel, Barke commented that, 'The spiritual validity alone remains historically accurate'.⁸¹ Raymond Williams has noted the centrality of this sense of a spiritual history of resistance and defiance to Grassie Gibbon's trilogy; where, however, *A Scots Quair* suggests that tradition is finally ending, as Chris Guthrie dies and Ewan Tavendale – a more troubling and ambiguous character than Williams admits – leaves Scotland for Communist Party work in London, *The Land of the Leal* finds it continued, on a new level,

Naomi Mitchison, and other prominent Scottish authors, published in the *Manchester Guardian*, 13 July, 1938, p. 18.

⁸⁰ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'The Land', *Smeddum*, p. 87.

⁸¹ Barke, 'Note', *The Land of the Leal* (1939; London: Collins, 1950), p. 10. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text. The 'Note' is dated 19th December, 1938, two months after the Munich Agreement.

in Spain.⁸² The hopes and dreams of the old peasant community do not die away irrecoverably as they do in *Major Operation*, but are rather translated into new objectives, given material dimensions, with the coming of urban modernity. This is in one sense the process by which the novel's memorialising function enables the transformation of the past, so that 'by a strange and melancholy paradox, the moment of failure is the moment of value; the comprehending and experiencing'.⁸³ But Barke is determined too to continually reassert the tragedy of waste and frustration that those moments of failure signify, producing, in the end, an ambiguity about the death of one of the family's sons in Spain.

The peasant community is characterised by a biblical sense of timelessness and of the uninterrupted cycle of labour: 'Always the earth had called for human hands. Always it would be so' (17). This notion of labour as a fundamental condition of existence is the foundation of the 'faith' of the giant-like and tyrannical patriarchal, Tom Gibson. But at the horizon of his consciousness is 'The Dragon of Capitalism [that] devoured in a decade a generation' (17). Tom 'had heard of the dragon – but from afar [...] the Lord would deal with it' (17). But Tom's faith is rooted in his belief in the right to work the land, enabling him to feel a kind of belonging outside the property relation of capitalism: 'He belonged to the land and the land belonged to the Lord' (17). Tom's labour is presented at the level of his consciousness as supplying a 'deep and elemental satisfaction', and as un-estranged: 'He worked on the land as a Beethoven or a Michelangelo worked at his art' (70). This vision of a kind of ideal, virtuosic labour is ironically undercut by the novel's narration of the coming of capitalism; Tom Gibson may think that 'the land' is his, but his conception of this type of spiritual ownership must necessarily confront and be overcome by the reality of expropriation that makes the land neither his nor the Lord's. But the evolution of that sense of a natural right to the land, and of the 'absolute loss' that Jack Lindsay posited as a such a central factor and dynamic in human culture, is a unifying theme.⁸⁴ The traditional song, 'Bonnie Galloway', recurs throughout the novel and is described as giving form to the agricultural workers' sense of right to their land:

⁸² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; St Albans: Paladin, 1975), pp. 323-4.

⁸³ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (trans. Anna Bostock; London: Merlin 1978), p. 126.

⁸⁴ Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths* (1937; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), p. 87.

Bonnie Galloway, indeed! Little did they see of its splendour and beauty. They knew its confined and restricted and much-husbanded acres. But the excess of their toil on its individual fields made the land dearer to them. Despite all the landlords and petty farmers it was *their* land: it was *their* home. No one had more right to sing its beauty and praise. If there was sadness in their song, that was the way of all songs of a land that was toiled and worked over in blood and tears (109; emphasis in original).

The loss of the homeland suggested here, and the moral right to the land, is the novel's central theme as well as the motivating force of Barke's central characters' economic migrations. The theme of the exile from and return to a homeland is a traditionally epic theme; the novel, for Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel*, emerged in the condition of 'transcendental homelessness', the impossibility of return.⁸⁵ The severed connection between work and home, labour and property, is felt as an outrage by Tom's daughter Jean: 'the sweat and blood o' the Gibsons are in they fields – they should be ours ten times ower – aye, a hunner times!' (510). The next generation, Jean and David are continually portrayed as fanatically, even heroically, hard workers (179), a commitment that initially seems to be rewarded with the stability of a home: 'This is the first home I've ever had', David thinks, 'it's a grand thing to have your own fireside and the house to yourself' (185-5). But the stability is illusory; Jean and David's exceptionality is figured as out of step with history as 'People were being forced off the land with their mechanised inventions and devices' (192).

Thus the settlement is broken up, a process that generates a sense of loss and longing down the generations, but which is also a historical process, the means by which a specifically class consciousness can be achieved. This is the passage from the knowable to what Benedict Anderson describes as the 'imagined community', the 'imaginary' aspect of which is the means by which individuals perceive themselves to be linked to members of the community they never meet in person.⁸⁶ What links the various episodes in the novel and gives the text its coherence is Barke's figuration of the way the same desires and longings occur across history in transposed forms. For Anderson, the 'idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving

⁸⁵ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 41

⁸⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983; London: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

steadily down (or up) history'.⁸⁷ In *The Land of the Leal*, the movement from the face-to-face community of the crofters to the modern and urban society of Glasgow is marked by precisely this movement from homogenous to calendar- and clock-time and, moreover, by an emerging sense of the national and global context often transmitted to characters through newspapers.⁸⁸ But Barke is keen to stress that this imagining is by no means an easy process, but a struggle. David Ramsay's father realises that, 'Folks are beginning to get their eyes opened. I see in the *Mail* that the jail's packed out in Greenock because the sailors refuse to sail in their coffin ships. That spirit will spread' (51). But the relentless demands of labour frustrate that spirit: 'What wit they might have had had been dulled and blunted by their labour on the Achgammie fields' (54). In the early sections, the repetitive nature of rural labour was tied to a sense of cyclical time, and to a sense of an immanently meaningful world: 'From every thorn bush the song went forth, a paean of praise, that the earth had been born yet again' (72). But this cyclical, enclosed world is also resistant to historical perspective: 'For the overwhelming urgency of calving obliterated any pleasant thought of the morrow' (72). The demands of labour mean that repetition, rather than the passage of time, dominates the characters' experiences during the rural sections of the novel.

Barke's ironic narrative style, continually foreshadowing characters' fates, partly provides that historical sense that is unavailable to them. It is also a key point of difference with Grassic Gibbon's *A Scot's Quair*, perhaps the major innovation of which was the construction of a narrative voice that spoke convincingly from within the community, emulating the rhythms and patterns of popular speech.⁸⁹ Barke's narrative voice, however, distances itself from characters at important dramatic moments, reframing them in perspectives the characters themselves cannot access. When the young Jean Ramsay is sent on an errand at night, the narrative voice intervenes to reveal that, '[e]ven at the end of her days that were to be long and arduous, Jean remembered that night', though she was not

⁸⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 26.

⁸⁸ Anderson notes the function of newspapers as a form of 'imagined linkage' forging such communities; *Imagined Communities*, p. 34. Barke makes the same argument in his *Left Review* article, suggesting that the Scottish identity promoted by the nationalists is a creation of 'the English dailies' ('Scottish National Question', p. 741).

⁸⁹ For an insightful and politically engaged account of Grassic Gibbon's style in *A Scots Quair* that situates the trilogy in contemporary debates around language, realism and nation, see Ramon Lopez Ortega, 'Language and Point of View in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 16:1 (1981), pp. 148-159.

afraid, 'Fear was to come later in life when her world was to become populated with irrational, if traditional, terrors' (39-40). The narrative continually glances ahead, warning of greater hardships to come and in this sense privileging the relationship between reader and narrative voice, defusing suspense by positioning readers and narrator in a position of superior knowledge. But irony more widely also performs the important political function of indicating the limits of characters' consciousness and acknowledging the hidden forces shaping their lives. The peasant farmers perceive the events they read about as 'movements and events far removed from their influence. The Civil War in America – or the latest speech of William Ewart Gladstone – or the Mayor of Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain' (83). These references are ironic, since all have important implications for the characters' lives, but they are unable to recognise them. The Civil War in America was linked to Scotland through its trading ports and through the shipbuilding industry in Glasgow, where around forty percent of the ships involved in the conflict were built.⁹⁰ William Gladstone's introduction of Home Rule for Ireland invigorated political agitation for Scottish independence, and Joseph Chamberlain mobilised Scottish Unionists to defeat the Second Home Rule Bill. In *The Land of the Leal*, these connections cannot be made by the characters until much later on. History is not a violent intrusion, as it is in Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*, rather it is a network of connections to which only the younger, urban generation of characters gain access.⁹¹

This ironic mode, however, becomes less pronounced as the novel progresses, and the direct authorial interventions are limited to the first two generations of the family. The narrative voice positions itself therefore in a position of totalised understanding, beyond the uncertainties of modernity, the 'everlasting uncertainty and agitation' that Marx describes as inherent in the bourgeois epoch,⁹² and which appear in the idiom of Barke's novel as the 'cauld' and 'care' to which his title alludes. It falls to each subsequent generation to retell and reframe the experiences of their parents and grandparents, and this discursive process is crucial, in the novel, to the development of class consciousness. In adulthood, David Ramsay recalls his father's drowning in a fishing accident and, suffering

⁹⁰ RJM Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State UP, 2002), p. 92.

⁹¹ For the sudden, violent intrusion of the First World War into Grassie Gibbon's Kinraddie community, see *A Scots Quair*, pp. 148-151.

⁹² Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 83.

from his own hardships and frustrations, he is suddenly able to articulate the class content of the tragedy: 'He saw his father revolting against the hardness and cruelty of life and yet being beaten in the end. Yes: the farmers had killed his father long before he had been drowned' (212). This apprehension of the injustice of his father's death motivates a quest for revenge, recognising in his father abilities that he could not fulfil:

His was a different courage – the courage of the mind and the spirit – the kind o' courage that Rabbie Burns had – only he hadna Rabbie's gifts – and that's what hurts: when you have the vision but havena the gifts – when you know a thing should be, but just canna do it. I know ... I've had my visions [...] Men will no' stand to be worked like slaves forever [...] There's money and plenty in Glasgow. There's enough for a'boday in Glasgow – and it's the men and women o' Glasgow that'll lead Scotland yet (244).

David's feeling is that his father lacked the 'gifts' by which to effect a change, but suggests too that his own visionary sense is linked to the possibilities embodied by the industrial city. David himself, a member of the second of the three generations, is continually figured as a visionary who is limited by his situation. His struggle to understand reality is 'an unequal, unfruitful struggle: he was no Isaiah, no Hegel' (292), he is a 'problematic' individual in Lukács's sense: 'The simple fact of seeking implies that neither the goals nor the way leading to them can be directly given'.⁹³ David's profound uncertainty contrasts with Tom Gibson's rock-like faith. David is engaged in a fundamentally human struggle, but as a problematic individual he cannot resolve the tensions; like Scott's heroes, in Lukács's analysis, he 'possesses a certain, though never outstanding degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion, is never the enraptured devotion to a great cause.'⁹⁴ Lukács attributes the mediocrity of Scott's central characters to his conservatism that led him to resist the Romantic construction of the exceptional 'demonic' hero.⁹⁵ Certainly, in focusing on David and, later in the novel, his son Andy, Barke moves away from the focus in *Major Operation* on the exceptionally virtuous figure of Jock MacKelvie and the exceptionally unfortunate George Anderson (as well as Grassic Gibbon's exceptionally ruthless Ewan Tavendale), and towards an examination of 'the constant and typical manifestations of

⁹³ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, p. 60.

⁹⁴ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 32.

⁹⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 33.

human life' that, for Lukács, were crucial to the 'great progressive reverberation' of realism.⁹⁶ A crucial formal moment in the novel comes with the frustration of an epiphanic experience:

He felt alone, isolated. There was no one who knew him or understood him – in relation to his deepest need for knowledge and understanding. He could not plead, he did not know for what to plead: he was inarticulate. His fiddle had been broken long ago and there had never been money to buy another. He wanted, he longed for human expression – for companionship – for communion of spirit and heart and mind (293).

David's economic position ensures that he can become neither a liberating hero of his class nor the chronicler of its struggles. The moment, reflecting on the futility and anguish of life, could lead David into either a political or a spiritual epiphany (like the political epiphanies in *May Day*), but it does not do so. He finds Glasgow incomprehensible, and his disarticulation leaves him vulnerable to uncritically assimilating the reactionary rhetoric of the press: a worker himself, he experiences a self-estrangement from his own economic position and from his fellow workers: 'The workers were ignorant, devoid of education and essential book learning. They were at the mercy of agitators and malcontents, financed by Russian gold. But Russia was breaking up, disintegrating' (471). Here Barke marks the point past which David's class consciousness will not advance: 'He was to remain a stranger to political and election meetings' (471). Barke deploys the technique of foreshadowing at this point, telling the reader that David could not know 'through what grey hell of suffering and torment the path of duty was to lead him' (471). David succeeds in understanding his father's experiences in politicised terms that were not available to his father himself; however, it falls to David's own sons to identify, articulate, and attempt to finally redress, the frustration, disarticulation and sheer overwork that have marred their father's life. This devolution through the generations of narrative responsibility constructs class consciousness in discursive terms, giving it the structure of an unfolding family story.

The book's final geographical shift to Glasgow marks the supersession of the sons over their parents as the main focus of narrative attention and provides the setting for their re-narration of their parents' experiences. The move 'inside the city walls' means much

⁹⁶ Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', p. 56.

more precise detail of location: ‘MacDougal Drive off the Crow Road in Jordanhill’ (441), rather than the broader topographical descriptors of the early sections, ‘The Rhinns of Galloway’ (18). The Glasgow section moves the novel into the territory of *Major Operation*, and begins in a similar style with a ‘Shipyard Symphony’: ‘the rivet hammers beat like crazed woodpeckers; a plate slammed on the deck with a roar of protest’ (456). The sound is punctuated by the whistles and horns that divide the time of the industrial working day, announcing the final end of the cyclical time of the novel’s beginning. Countering this increase of detail and specialisation, reflecting greater alienation, is the radicalisation narrative of the family’s son, Andy (named, like his brother Tom, after one of the novel’s first generation, thus suggesting the importance of repetition and commemoration). Andy’s conversion to Communism, through long experience of unemployment, prompts him to reconsider his family’s history and to recognise its claim on him: ‘If they didn’t understand the nature and significance of the system that had driven them like beasts for the greater part of their lives, he did’ (543). As fascism in Europe comes into view, Andrew’s politics are reoriented towards Communism and the Popular Front; Jock MacKelvie reappears, having fought on the Jarama Front in Spain, to perform, as he does in *Major Operation*, the donor-like function of supplying political purpose to the bewildered Andy.⁹⁷ Echoing closely Barke’s own public statements on the claims Spain made on the people of Scotland, MacKelvie makes a speech about the international volunteers, speaking

of Austrians and Frenchman and Italians (how the Garibaldi battalion had routed the Italian Fascists at Guadalahara) – of Americans, Canadians, Poles, Norwegians – and Scots. It was a deathless record of how the best and bravest elements of the common people of the old world and the new world had, together with writers and scientists and intellectuals, gone to the defence of the heroic Spanish people and had led the counter offensive against the Fascist hordes (593).⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Denning notes this function in the fiction of his ‘Novelists’ International’, noting that ‘militants and organizers’, rather than being central characters, tend to ‘provid[e] guidance like the donor in folktales’: ‘The Novelists’ International’, p. 719.

⁹⁸ John Manson suggests that the model for Jock MacKelvie was the Glasgow Communist Party organiser, Peter Kerrigan; ‘Did James Barke Join the Communist Party?’, p. 7. In Ian MacDougall’s collection of reminiscences of Scottish volunteers, Kerrigan is mentioned by one as the catalyst for his decision, Kerrigan’s arguments appearing to him, as an unemployed man, as ‘just plain common sense’: David Anderson, qtd. Ian MacDougall, *Voices from the Spanish Civil War: Personal Recollections of Scottish Volunteers in Republican Spain, 1936-39* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), p. 89. Kerrigan reported from Spain for the *Daily Worker*; for an example of his hyperbolic reporting of the Battle of Jarama as an ‘epic of

This articulates, in ideal form, the Popular Front as popular internationalism, connecting the national traditions and identities of all classes and orienting them towards anti-fascism. At this point, as James K. Hopkins puts it, ‘Spain in the 1930s became for Andrew and others like him what France had been to the English Jacobins in the 1790s’.⁹⁹ The argument that the war was the front of struggle for fundamental values seems to have been felt as genuinely compelling by volunteers themselves. One volunteer, interviewed by Ian MacDougall in the 1980s, expressed the feeling that, ‘I saw the War in Spain as part and parcel of the general offensive by the Fascist Powers against working class rights and liberties all over the world, including in our own country.’¹⁰⁰ However, where for George Anderson MacKelvie’s rhetorical operations enforced a repudiation of his past, the effect of MacKelvie’s Popular Frontist intervention on Andy is a radical reframing of his sense of his own and his family’s history:

He felt that all his life had moved towards the making of this momentous decision. Only now was his life having point and significance. But not only his own life. Now the life of his father than his mother might be fulfilled. They had toiled and laboured from the Galloway fields to the city itself – from one century into another. How often had he thought of the senselessness and futility of their days! They had been the victims of the greed and brutality, the passionless indifference of British Capitalism (596).

This is a crucial passage, in which Andy both restates and answers his father’s earlier cry of frustration, when David had ‘thought how generation upon generation had come and gone, toiling and struggling and dying, knowing much pain and little pleasure. There was no end to it: it would go on – for the world was without end ... But how could it go on – for ever? (292). There is a shift from the novel’s great stress on the hardship, resilience and struggle for self-definition of a family – all of which could combine to form what Williams calls the ‘characteristic nationalist emphasis’ of such texts as *A Scots Quair* – to an

valour unequalled in all history’, see Peter Kerrigan, ‘Epic of Anglo-Irish Battalion in Madrid’s Greatest Battle’, *Daily Worker*, March 6, 1937, p. 1.

⁹⁹ James Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 112.

¹⁰⁰ Donald Renton, qtd. in MacDougall, ed., *Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, p. 21. Other volunteers saw the war more clearly in the terms of class war: ‘The reason I went to Spain was in the Hungry Thirties I was navying at a bob an hour and if you straightened your back you were off the job. Finally, I got a job wi’ a contractor. The gaffer was a pig. [...] I says, “Look, gie’s the books. I’d rather go to Spain and shoot bastards like you”’; Tommy Bloomfield, qtd. in MacDougall, p. 47.

internationalist politics, and back again, with a renewed sense of clarity.¹⁰¹ The difference between these two statements is one of perspective: instead of his father's perception of endless, unchanging struggle, Andy perceives the possibility of fulfilment and meaning to be realised through his actions. This move might mark the acquisition of the perspective Lukács thought the Popular Front novel might attain: 'This perspective, that the heroism of the struggle does not have to be an episode [...] in the triumphal march of capitalist prose, also changes our attitude to the past'.¹⁰² In projecting a continuum of struggle across history, Barke also moves the novel towards fulfilling Ralph Fox's imagining of a 'new picture of life', in which the 'daily resistance to the horrors of the mass-production regime' becomes 'resistance to war, to Fascism', and in so doing 'creates heroes, new types of men and women'.¹⁰³ A perspective is implied from which an entire history becomes meaningful, and the struggles of the past no longer appear as isolated episodes but as meaningfully linked moments in an unfolding narrative. Although MacKelvie here appears to perform a Leninist function of bringing consciousness 'from without', suggesting that, unlike in previous generations, the family's evolving story can no longer develop in a self-contained way, it is nonetheless Andy's working over of his experience and his family's experience that makes the discourse of anti-fascism persuasive. Once that persuasion has been assented to, Andy's consciousness requires the 'criterion of practice' if it is to continue to develop, and that he must leave his nation and community in pursuit of that 'fulfilment'.¹⁰⁴ In such a narrative, Andy's commitment to the International Brigade may be considered approximate to the 'epic action' that Lukács in 1936 wrote might re-enter the novel when a mass movement for socialism awakens 'the latent, previously suppressed, deformed or misapplied energies of the millions, brings out the best of them and leads them to accomplish deeds which reveal capabilities they themselves had never been aware of'.¹⁰⁵ Andy's immersion in practice is, in this sense, is something of a mirror image of George Anderson's, which is predicated on the cancellation of the past, and leads inevitably to self-sacrifice. Spain, by contrast, seems to offer a genuinely transformative

¹⁰¹ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 322.

¹⁰² Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 417.

¹⁰³ Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁴ In *Major Operation*, George Anderson reaches this point on being discharged from hospital, when the theoretical lessons of MacKelvie must be furthered in practice; accordingly, the final book of the novel, which begins after the patients' discharge, is subtitled 'The Criterion of Practice', the phrase taken from Lenin's *Marxism and Empirio-Criticism: Major Operation*, p. 370.

¹⁰⁵ Georg Lukács, 'Essay on the Novel', *International Literature*, 1936:5, pp. 73-74.

political subjectivity, changing not only Andy's sense of himself and the injustices he has suffered, but also the historical determinants of that injustice. It suggests the way that the 'shame' that Barke felt had settled on the people of Scotland as a result of appeasement might be overcome.¹⁰⁶

But Andy also dies, as did many international volunteers; and moreover by the time Barke completed the novel the Republic was all but defeated.¹⁰⁷ It is tempting to read this deeply troubling historical reality into the recurring references to 'faith' that appear in the final chapters and the attendant blurring of a political discourse of revolution with a religious discourse of Apocalypse. MacKelvie restores Andy's 'faith' in politics after the General Strike (595); Andy's wife has 'faith' in his survival (600). Andy envisages a coming revolution that is also a day of judgement, 'when vengeance would be meted out to those who had ground the faces of the poor' (596). Most of all, following Andy's departure for Spain, the narrative's dual focus on the Christian Socialist minister, Tom, and the elderly Jean Ramsay offers, in the end, a vision of justice in a religious rather than a political mode. One important function that the turn to a religious register performs is a weaving together of the family at the moment when it is most fragmented: David has died, the daughters have left Scotland for marriages abroad, Tom has moved away to a country parish and Andy has left for Spain. The shared discourse of faith, and of the future that it promises, in heaven if not on earth, attests to a common history even under these conditions of dispersal. It is useful to note the contrast with Lewis Grassie Gibbon's characterisation of religion in *Scottish Scene*, echoed by Barke in *Major Operation*; described in typically corporeal terms as an institution '[a]s fantastically irrelevant to contemporary Scottish affairs as the appendix is to the human body', in need of excision in the name of 'social hygiene', and which furthermore conspired in the advance of fascism through its fostering of 'little parish tyrannies'.¹⁰⁸ In a differentiating gesture characteristic of Popular Front cultural politics, Barke implies a distinction between the popular content

¹⁰⁶ 'The Scottish people must cleanse themselves of the shame, the bitter, humiliating shame of Chamberlain and Munich': Barke to Gunn, 28 November, 1938, Barke Papers, Box 4A.

¹⁰⁷ According to James K. Hopkins, of 437 Scottish volunteers, 64 from Glasgow died. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire*, p. 112. The withdrawal of the International Brigades began in October 1938, shortly before Barke completed the novel, marking 'the Republic's failure [...] to transform the Spanish Civil War into a global crusade against fascism': Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), pp. 347-8.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Religion', *Smeddum*, pp. 165-6. For Barke's rehearsal of the same association between Christianity and fascism, see *Major Operation*, pp. 308-9.

of Christianity, as a form for popular expression, and the politics of its institutional forms. But there is nonetheless a profound ambiguity to Tom's declaration that 'I feel that in working for Socialism [...] I am working for something that justifies their whole existence – justifies all the suffering and hardship they have undergone' (635). It is ambiguous in that it retrospectively recasts the events of the novel as somehow legitimised, cancelling out the important moments when characters show themselves to be aware, however dimly, that their situation was not necessary or justified. Tom's final sermon, his declaration of commitment, does, however, temper the sense that a preordained pattern, external to human agency, is reaching a culmination by stressing that even in such circumstances, individuals must still choose to act: Jesus's crucifixion, he tells his congregation, did not occur merely 'that it might be fulfilled that which was written by this or that prophet', but that it was 'the love [for] all mankind' that enabled him to endure it (626). As one of the novel's survivors, Tom's narrative role is to rearticulate his brother's death not within the confines of family history, but in a narrative of human destiny: 'I refuse to believe that mankind has struggled through the ages, across the plains of time, in order to fulfil a destiny that would shame the most ferocious beasts of brute creation' (631).

Barke's choice of Jean as medium for his closing representation of the war concludes her story at one level by connecting her with the historical narrative to which she has always been indifferent, but it also returns the text to the mythic register in which it began. She imagines in Galloway, '[m]ilk: gallons and gallons of rich frothing milk – but no honey in all the land', a land of labour without respite that blurs into Spain, another country of exploited peasantry, the imagery suggestive of the bombing of Guernica: 'Some of them moaned in terror and some of them kneeled in the dust and made the sign of the Cross: for the heavens were darkened with the wings of death' (637-8). In Jean's last dream, the Galloway of her childhood and the land of Spain merge and become identical: the 'land if the leal' she feels herself approaching is therefore a homeland for her class, theirs by right of 'sweat and blood' (510). But in the scheme of the novel, historical and political knowledge is passed through generations so that when Jean hears the phrase, 'Blessed are the barren', taken from *Luke*, the implication is of a coming end of history. It is useful to compare this figurative return to the homeland with the more literal return that ends *A Scots Quair*. The concluding book, *Grey Granite*, ends with the breaking up of the

family and of the household; Chris Guthrie closes up her boarding house in the city as her son leaves for London on the Hunger March and returns to the farm where she was born, ‘finding the last road she wanted’; this return seems to end the conflicts she has survived but not resolved, leaving ‘only the land, enduring, encompassing’.¹⁰⁹ There is no consoling return for Jean Ramsay; she dies in the city that, as Gustav Klaus notes, has never been a true home to the family, and the land she dreams of is a land at war.¹¹⁰ Barke offers a mythic return to complete the novel’s cyclical, epic-like structure which is both a completion and a reminder of the crushed revolutionary hopes of the 1938. Signs of the future are nonetheless present, though fragile; Andy’s wife discovers she is pregnant (621); Tom considers returning to ministry in the city (623). Thus the novel’s storytelling narrative might continue; epics, Michael Denning suggests, ‘may have sacrificial and redemptive deaths, but someone [...] is left to tell the tale’¹¹¹ But the final sequence, and the novel’s closing moments, locate Jean’s folk beliefs and peasant values as the moral touchstone of the novel; it is these that it finally seeks to vindicate.

Conclusion

The novel, Fox argued, was ‘the great folk art of our civilization’, and in *The Land of the Leal* in particular, Barke strives to write a novel of the struggle across history of the Scottish folk.¹¹² Much more than in *Major Operation*, the past is invoked as the source of resilience and defiance; full political subjectivity emerges not in breaking with the past but in understanding and articulating it. The use of the Spanish conflict to give a sense of unity to a history of loss, displacement and frustration places, inevitably, a huge strain on that event. Moreover, by the time the novel was completed, any possibility that the popular militancy of the war could stave off the threat of a global conflict had been crushed. That prospect of coming catastrophe is clearly felt in the novel’s final pages. However, Barke’s novel gives an important grounding in working-class historical experience to the ambitions of the Popular Front, which in other texts can feel distanced from those realities, and, as this thesis has suggested, predicated on a universalising, bourgeois perspective. In

¹⁰⁹ Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, p. 496.

¹¹⁰ Klaus, ‘James Barke’, p. 18.

¹¹¹ Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London & NY: Verso, 1997), p. 199. Denning’s argument is that Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy is not an epic since it ‘glimpses no future’ (p. 199).

¹¹² Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 19.

Rickword and Lindsay's work, the universalising rhetoric sometimes blurs the details of experience in uncomfortable ways: 'But though we can hardly experience even in imagination the abjectness of that state, yet we are heirs to the fierce protest which swept it from our soil whenever our blood rages at some infamy of abused authority'.¹¹³ The theme of inheritance and tradition is given concrete form in *The Land of the Leal* through the passing of memory and experience through the generations, identifying a living tradition of struggle that owed nothing to the nationalists' fetishization of an irrecoverable past. For Barke, *The Land of the Leal* inevitably fell short of encompassing the history and the struggle that is its theme: 'the events of our generation', he wrote in his prefatory note, 'are on too vast a scale to come within the scope of our literary artists', but nonetheless the writer cannot simply await 'a more leisured age' in which the 'future Tolstoy will then (and only then) be in a position to complete the sequel to *War and Peace*.'¹¹⁴ Spain offered a cause and an occasion in which to articulate, in novelistic form, a class history in new terms: the terms of the popular and progressive 'republican commonality' Barke identified in his *Left Review* article, offering a synoptic vision of the people in history, acting and being acted upon, that perhaps comes closest of any novel discussed here to the elusive 'standpoint of popular life' Lukács proposed.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Edgell Rickword, 'Introduction: On English Freedom', *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p. 123.

¹¹⁴ James Barke, 'Note', *The Land of the Leal* (1939; London: Collins, 1950), p. iv.

¹¹⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 344.

Chapter Six: Lewis Jones's Fiction

In the last chapter, I suggested that, in *The Land of the Leal* especially, James Barke attempted to write a novel in which the history of the Scottish working class and the anti-fascist struggle were inextricably connected. This chapter considers Lewis Jones's novels, *Cwmardy* (1937) and its sequel *We Live* (1939), which bear a number of important similarities to *The Land of Leal*. Like Barke, Jones charts the development of class consciousness within a particular class and national fraction: in his case, the workers of the fictional Rhondda mining community of Cwmardy. Like Barke, too, Jones adopts a generational structure for this development: the novels trace the development of Len Roberts from childhood through to adulthood and political maturity; like Barke's Andy Ramsay, Len's course of development ends in death on the battlefield in Spain. In Jones's work, there is a similar deep investment in the popular life of a provincial, proletarian community both as the symbol of what was at stake in the struggle against fascism and as a reserve of strength and resistance. A central distinction between the texts, however, is that in Jones's work the historical experience of migration is largely – though not completely – marginalised in favour of a portrayal of the central community as a relatively stable social entity continually attempting to resist or absorb pressures originating from without. The central family in Barke's *The Land of the Leal* experience alienation as an unresolved sense of homelessness stemming from dispossession. In Jones's more settled topography, 'home' is felt to be actually and symbolically embodied in Cwmardy; as the community faces and endures the historical crises of the early twentieth century - the Cambrian Combine dispute of 1910/11, the First World War, the General Strike, the Depression and the rise of fascism - it is over the definition of 'home', over where the interests of the community really lie, and to what authority it is answerable, that its conflicts are played out. I will suggest here that the community's practices and discourses, arising in resistance and drawing on residual folk memories, are mediated so as to coalesce into a powerful discourse of anti-fascist and internationalist solidarity.

Lewis Jones (1897-1939) actively strove to be seen as a representative of his class and community, and this position underwrites his novels' attempts to represent the radical

popular consciousness of the community in which he lived, worked and fought.¹ Jones regularly contributed journalism to the *Daily Worker* through the thirties detailing the desperate conditions in the Rhondda, demonstrating a flair for the effective combination of documentary evidence and telling anecdote.² When, in 1937, he was tried for threatening to bring a demonstration to an unemployment office, the *Daily Worker* covered the trial under the headline, ‘A Whole People in the Dock’, quoting Jones’s lawyer as saying that, ‘[i]t is not Lewis Jones, an individual, who is in the dock, but a whole people and their constitutional rights’.³ The project of writing novels was, Jones reported, inspired by the Communist miners’ leader Arthur Horner, who suggested that ‘the full meaning of life in the Welsh mining areas could be expressed for the general reader more truthfully and vividly if treated imaginatively.’⁴ Jones attended the Comintern’s Seventh Congress at which Dimitrov announced the national, popular and historical emphases of Popular Front ideological struggle; in this light, the relationships between Jones’s popular prestige and the novel-writing project he began late in 1935 is of particular, even unique interest.⁵ Jones’s sense of the relationship between his personal prestige and his novels’ significance is clear in his letters to Douglas Garman, who worked extensively with him on the manuscript of *Cwmardy*, to the extent that Jones told Garman that, ‘[i]n the circumstances that have developed since the first draft it is misleading to name myself as the author because yourself and the other comrade have at least as much responsibility as I for it.’⁶

¹ Some of Jones’s notable activities included industrial activism in South Wales and Nottinghamshire during the 1920s, resulting in three months’ imprisonment during the General Strike; leading hunger marches from South Wales in 1932, 1934 and 1936; winning a seat on Glamorgan council as a Communist candidate in 1936; and energetic leadership of the unemployed through the thirties. The most detailed available account of his short but intense career is Dai Smith’s *Lewis Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press on behalf of the Welsh Arts Council, 1992).

² See for example, Lewis Jones, ‘75 Per Cent. of People Workless: Mighty Steel Works and Mines Now Derelict’, *Daily Worker*, 11 May, 1934, p. 4; and Lewis Jones, ‘The Rhondda in 1934’, *Daily Worker*, 19 May, 1934, p. 1.

³ Unsigned, ‘A Whole People in the Dock’, *Daily Worker*, 30 November, 1937, p. 5. Jones includes in *We Live* an incident in which the women of the valley invade the unemployment office at the conclusion of the mass demonstration, pp. 756-7.

⁴ Qtd. Hywel Francis, ‘Foreword’, Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy & We Live* (1937 & 1939; Cardigan: Parthian Library of Wales, 2006), p. xii. Horner was President of the South Wales Miners’ Federation, the origins of which are central to the plot of *Cwmardy*.

⁵ Jones’s attendance at the Seventh Congress is referred to by Hywel Francis, ‘Foreword’, *Cwmardy & We Live*, p. x, and by Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days*, p. 86. Dai Smith dates the beginning of Jones’s work on *Cwmardy* to late 1935; *Lewis Jones*, p. 35.

⁶ Lewis Jones, letter to Douglas Garman, undated facsimile, p. 6. Douglas Garman Papers, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham. No date, but the same section refers to Harry Pollitt’s review of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in the *Daily Worker* on 17 March, 1937.

Garman suggested that it was Jones's connection to popular life that gave the novel its 'epic quality', and which set him apart from most writers.⁷ Lawrence & Wishart's advert for *Cwmardy* in the *Daily Worker* certainly sold it on the terms Jones proposes here: the advert sought to convince readers the novel showed the way forward to a 'creation of a new literature, written of the people and by the people - for the people of Britain.'⁸

The reception of *Cwmardy* was, however, rather more muted in the left-wing press. Ralph Wright in the *Daily Worker* felt the need to reassure readers who might expect 'a certain narrowness, a certain lack of proportion, an inability to see the wood for the trees, and above all a certain weakness in the creation of individual characters' that the story in fact 'carries you along because you are interested in and, indeed, deeply moved by the characters who live it'.⁹ Wright praised the 'reality of living, turbulent, warm-hearted humanity'.¹⁰ W.H. Williams in the *Left Review*, meanwhile, under the title 'A Working Class Epic', praised the way Jones 'writes of an intimate experience, that is part of the fibre of his very being', in contrast to Orwell's account of mining in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.¹¹ Jones however professed himself disappointed with the reception of the novel:

Even now I can't understand why so many really good comrades have missed the underlying political motive of the first book. Some of the genuine appreciations are really discouraging and sometimes I wonder if we haven't failed in what we set out to do with *Cwmardy*.¹²

Jones is no more specific about what the 'underlying political motive' actually was, but a later letter expressing his concerns over the possible reception of *We Live* sheds some light on his ambition for the novels. He was worried that 'bourgeois' critics would not understand, or would not 'be permitted to explain' that it was 'definitely a class book in the fullest sense of the word.'¹³ My readings of Jones's novels explore what this categorisation means, and, although I do not wish to suggest Jones was writing with a

Garman refers briefly to his work on the first novel in his notes for a talk on Jones: Garman, 'A Working Class Writer. Lewis Jones', T.S. dated 24th February, 1939, Douglas Garman Papers.

⁷ Douglas Garman, 'A Working Class Writer. Lewis Jones', T.S. dated 24 February, 1939, p. 7. Douglas Garman Papers.

⁸ Advertisement, 'Cwmardy by Lewis Jones', *Daily Worker*, 2 July, 1937, p. 5.

⁹ Ralph Wright, 'Reality of Living', *Daily Worker*, 23 June, 1937, p. 7.

¹⁰ Ralph Wright, 'Reality of Living', p. 7.

¹¹ W.H. Williams, 'A Working Class Epic', *Left Review*, III:7, August 1937, pp. 428-9.

¹² Lewis Jones, letter to Douglas Garman, undated, p. 3. Douglas Garman Papers.

¹³ Lewis Jones, letter to Douglas Garman, undated, p. 6. Douglas Garman Papers, emphasis in original.

conscious theoretical sense of the novel's formal or ideological problems, I nonetheless argue that the task did require engagement with the relationship between politics and form.

A further complaint of Jones's is also significant:

The book also helps to prove that communists are essentially regenerative and creative. It gives our Party in S.W. a new intellectual status in the eyes of the masses here, precisely because I have been regarded as a leader of the party, a good chap and all that, but necessarily limited. We have not taught the workers that communists are concerned with and understand every phase of human existence, and all its 'cultural' aspects as well as the political. In other words we have not shown that communism is not a creed but that it is a life.¹⁴

The association between Communism and 'life' is a fundamental one in the scheme of both novels. The ambition to represent a whole way of life from a Communist point of view did seem to resonate with Randall Swingler, who reviewed *We Live* for the *Daily Worker* in 1939. Swingler suggested that Jones's first novel 'fitted more obviously perhaps than any other novel published in our time into what Ralph Fox called the epical tradition' and that the two novels should be read together as 'a sort of parable of the whole development of the working-class in England'.¹⁵ Aside from Swingler's elision of 'England' and 'Britain', which misses the importance of the historical specificity of the novels' setting, Swingler nonetheless usefully identifies the novel's epic tendency in its investment in popular life; but also, more saliently, an ability to recognise what is 'characteristic' in order to create 'a glorious affirmation of the people who made this book'.¹⁶ The quality of affirmation inheres in Jones's shaping of his historical material in order to show that even at moments of internal conflict and defeat, the utopian possibilities inherent in the class community's way of life are preserved.

As Hywel Francis has argued, the intensity of the pressures faced by the coalfield societies in industrial Wales was acute and distinctive, to the extent that poverty and unemployment alienated large sections of the working class not just from wider society but 'to some extent from the traditional form of political activity of seeking greater working-class parliamentary representation'.¹⁷ Instead, energy was regularly channelled into 'extra-

¹⁴ Jones to Garman, no date, p. 6, emphasis in original. Douglas Garman Papers.

¹⁵ Randall Swingler, 'An Epic of the Rhondda', *Daily Worker*, 19 April, 1939, p. 7.

¹⁶ Swingler, 'Epic of the Rhondda', p. 7.

¹⁷ Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), p. 199.

parliamentary and extra-legal actions', generating an image, from within and from without, of an 'alternative society'.¹⁸ The development of this alternative society, characterised by exercises of popular justice and direct action, is at the heart of Jones's novels. Central to his depiction of coalfield society is resistance to external authority and commodification. Francis notes that this culture of 'collective direct action' made it 'seemingly inevitable' that some would volunteer for Spain.¹⁹ Over the course of the novels, the community's close-knit, defensive culture transforms into a powerful anti-fascist front. Jones, indeed, was keen even before the official instantiation of the Popular Front line to project the Rhondda as a model of mass, united action: 'Sceptics regarding the possibilities of developing an all-embracing mass action on the basis of the united front', he wrote on the eve of the mass demonstration in 1935, 'should come to Red Rhondda to have their delusions shattered'.²⁰ 'Red Rhondda', he concluded, 'has laid a basis for the development of a Red Britain in the period confronting us.'²¹ That the Valleys' communities, with their distinctive culture of unofficial, popular political action, which, Hywel Francis reports, 'tended to transcend political parties', could exemplify the emerging Communist vision of a culture of popular activism is a central message of Jones's work and the principle underlying his strategy of typification.²² The alternative society of Cwmardy is characterised by a discursive formation that is continually opposed to official discourses of power. The discursive formation that might be described as 'proletarian', associated with Len and his family, is marked by the routine linking of a series of associations: light, cleanliness, vision, honour, collectivity, change and the comic are frequently evoked together in varying combinations. This associative group is set against an oppositional complex of associations, which includes darkness, dirt, shame, blindness, objectification, stasis, fascism and death. For example, cleanliness is associated with Len's sister Jane before her ultimately tragic sexual exploitation by the son of an official, but also with the strikes that attempt to 'clean' the pits of blackleg labour.²³ During the 1910/11 strike scenes, Len burns the mine's powerhouse in order to illuminate the symbolic communal

¹⁸ Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, pp. 199-200.

¹⁹ Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, p. 200.

²⁰ Jones, qtd. Ben Francis, 'Red Rhondda's Might Protest', *Daily Worker*, 23 February, 1935, p. 5.

²¹ Jones, qtd. Francis, 'Red Rhondda's Might Protest', p. 5.

²² Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, p. 200.

²³ Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy & We Live* (1937 & 1939; Cardigan: Library of Wales, 2006), pp. 220-1. Page references to this combined edition of the novels are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

space of the village square, enabling the strikers to reclaim their collective space from the police (238). These oppositions seem, of course, conventionally encoded, but their meaning is not fixed, and much of the political development in the novels turns on the modification or mediation of these elements, wresting them away from damaging significations and inserting them into the discourse of anti-fascism that is articulated by the end of *We Live*. The central example of this mediation is the term ‘home’; a mediation needs to take place between the operative concepts of ‘home’ as what is immediately experienced, on one side, and the ‘foreign’ as the unseen or unexperienced on the other. The completion of this process is announced when Len addresses a foreign country – Spain – as ‘home’ (876), articulating the co-extension of the class struggle in Cwmardy and the struggle against fascism in Spain.

6.1 Vision & Alienation

At the centre of the community’s struggle against capitalism is a struggle over ways of seeing that plays out through the negotiation of concepts of shame and objectification. Jones’s handling of these themes suggests a quite complex sense of the relationship between capitalism and subjectivity and reveals the novels’ critique of alienation. Commodity, vision and shame powerfully coalesce and recur as a series of key images in both *Cwmardy* and *We Live*. In *Cwmardy*, for example, Len’s mother Siân uses commodification as an insult to her husband, rhetorically reducing him to a cheap commodity: ‘Call yourself a man! Why, I could buy your sort for ten a penny’ (95-6), a description Len’s father, Jim, bitterly repeats after a pit explosion: ‘What do hundred men count for ‘longside a hundred trams of coal? Men be cheap ‘nough these days, and will soon be dear at ten a penny’ (132), and at an earlier point, resignedly, ‘What do us men count? We be cheaper than chickens’ (116).²⁴ The episode describing Jane’s death in childbirth after she has been disowned by the manager’s son links together the figures of dirtiness, shame and objectification and is a key moment in Jones’s use of sight in relation to the commodity form. The macabre scene in which Len views his sister’s body makes clear the link between the optical trope and the critique of the commodity: on each of her

²⁴ A comic and ironic subversion of this figure of speech occurs when Jim evades justice by hiding in Will Smallbeer’s chicken hutch during the 1910/11 strike, p. 235.

eyes is ‘a blackened penny’ (81). The image of blackened pennies signifies Jane’s status as a corrupted commodity; the displaced human potential represented in money, ‘the alienated *ability of mankind*’, is here figured as a corruption of the organs of sight.²⁵ Jane’s eyeless baby represents the same corruption: its face ‘a blob of paste’ (79), carrying both the connotations of something incompletely or defectively produced, and, from ‘paste’, the connotation of the cheaply mass-produced commodity. When Len sees Jane’s coffin, the commodity is figured as the site of displaced subjectivity: ‘The shining shield near its top stared at him like a lonely, glaring eye’ (79). The tragedy of Jane’s death is announced by the description of her as blinded: ‘In her eyes grew the dull glazed look of a hunted animal that, even as it runs, knows there is no escape’ (71). The connection between this displacement of the privileged sense of sight onto the commodity and the perpetuation of class violence is restated during the 1910/11 strike, when the gun brought by the officials to break the strike ‘seemed to leer through its bore at each of them in turn’ (217). While Graham Holderness has described Jones’s novels as ‘naturalistic’, this is to underrate the political significance of Jones’s compulsive depiction of the ways that subjectivity and the commodity interplay, so that the apparently objective world cannot be taken in the form in which it appears.²⁶

Becoming visionless entails objectification, and blindness is central to the tragic plotlines of the novels: tragic in the sense that their outcomes are foreclosed and inevitable. The death of Len’s childhood friend Ron’s shopkeeper parents in *We Live* is a crucial point of coalescence for the concepts of commodity and tragedy. His father’s assertion, ‘Better for us to die here now than face that disgrace’ (617 – i.e., of the poverty wrought by the collapse of their business) receives no challenge; they stare with ‘an intensity that made them alone in the world’ (616).²⁷ Escaping the tragedy of blindness takes a number of

²⁵ Karl Marx, ‘The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society’, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus, 1988), p. 138, emphasis in original.

²⁶ Graham Holderness, ‘Miners and the Novel: From Bourgeois to Proletarian Fiction’, in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 27-8.

²⁷ The suicide of Ron’s parents is no doubt ‘gruesome’ and ‘melodramatic’ as Valentine Cunningham suggests (*British Writers of the Thirties*, p. 310). It does, however, work within the narrative scheme outlined above. It is worth noting too that the plight of shopkeepers in the distressed areas was well reported at the time. Philip Massey’s *Fact* monograph, *Portrait of a Mining Town* (1937), records the conditions in Nantyglo, Rhondda, and includes interviews with a number of shopkeepers outlining the collapse in their income consequent on unemployment, one of whom reports their distress at being ‘cruel’ when refusing to

forms. Jones uses a technique of near-repetition to illustrate the vital difference between Len and Mary's relationship and that of Jane and Evan the Overman's son. The near-repetition of the events of the chapel day out on which Jane became pregnant is clearly suggested in the description of Len as 'like a thief before a newly-opened safe' (323). But the repetition is stalled by Mary's assertion that, 'As long as my father lives, I belong to him and he belongs to the people' (323). The two notions of property in play – the objectification of Mary by the 'thief' and the less concrete form of 'belonging' to a person and a people – form an important opposition through the texts. It is 'belonging' in the second sense, eventually recognisable as class consciousness and solidarity, that is positioned to win out by the end of *We Live*, at which point Mary's 'enthusiasm impregnated the people' so that 'they came to regard her as their own, belonging to them as surely and solidly as the Square where they had fought so many battles' (867). The blocking at this early point of the development of the sexual plot therefore frustrates a narrative already shown to end in the closure of death and diverts it instead towards a different outcome.

There are in Jones's novels none of the 'privileged distances' that Raymond Williams describes as suggesting that it is possible to live 'beyond the pressures and interruptions and accidents of society'.²⁸ In Len and Mary's story, however, this refusal to separate the personal from the social prevents a repetition of a tragedy. The refusal of the 'trivial fantasy' that it is possible to live outside society leads not into a constriction of possibility but towards survival.²⁹ Jones's handling of sexual and family relations is attuned to the implication of those relations in the development of a class consciousness, and the novels at points approximate to and at other points annul or disavow the form of the family saga. The family, as Williams points out, is the most accessible fictional centre for the working class novelist, but one that is limited by the way that the family is threatened with disintegration by the wider system.³⁰ The family would, of course, provide Jones with an obvious structure in which to formalise his alignment of Communism with

give credit (p. 25). Massey comments that '[t]here is no doubt that the net incomes of some shop-keepers are lower than their unemployment allowances would be' (p. 26).

²⁸ Raymond Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', in *Culture and Materialism* (1980; London: Verso, 2005), p. 222.

²⁹ Williams, 'Welsh Industrial Novel', p. 222.

³⁰ Raymond Williams: 'Working-Class, Proletarian, Socialist: Problems in some Welsh Novels', in Gustav Klaus, ed., *The Socialist Novel in Britain* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 116-7.

life and creation. But Jones is clearly conscious at some level of the problematic Williams identifies, and tackles it by making no categorical distinction between the structure of the family and that of the wider system, with the result that the progression and satisfactory resolution of family plots is determined by family members' relations in the whole. The family of Evan the Overman is fated to fail as a structure through which life can be reproduced as a consequence of Evan's implication in practices of exploitation: Evan's son is another man's child – 'see if you can find the likeness', Siân tells him (66) – and Jane and her baby both die. It is not just Jane whose narrative is closed off during the episode, but Evan's too, as foreshadowed when, 'The room became cold as a vault of resurrected corpses' (67). The patrilineal structure is shown to be dependent on and liable to debasement by the economic system Evan exploits.

6.2 Tonypandy

The episodes dealing with the 1910/11 strike demonstrate the political significance of the clash of conceptions of 'belonging' in Jones's work, as well as offering a vivid depiction of the alternative society of Cwmardy in action to enforce its values against alien authority. A number of critics have pointed out that Jones revises the historical facts of the period, especially in relation to the role of the union, and the internal disputes over organisation that culminated in the publication in 1912 of the celebrated pamphlet, *The Miners' Next Step*.³¹ The events of 1910-11 in the Rhondda were distinctive, as Dai Smith argues, because the events raised questions about the development of communities like Tonypandy, and about who 'controlled them', that could only be read as political questions, requiring answers that countenanced the possibility of a different social order.³² *The Miners' Next Step* itself proposed a strikingly new politics that sought to end the Liberal hegemony in industrial Wales; its principal proposal was that '[t]he old policy of identity of interest between employers and ourselves be abolished, and a policy of open hostility installed'.³³ The way Jones deals with his historical material in the episode

³¹ See for example, Carole Snee, 'Working-Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?' in Jon Clark et al., eds., *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 184; and Dai Smith, *Lewis Jones*, p. 40.

³² Dai Smith, *Wales! Wales?* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 96.

³³ Unofficial Reform Committee, *The Miners' Next Step* (Tonypandy: 1912), p. 25. For a discussion of the programme's politics in relation to the tradition and development of syndicalism more widely, see David

illuminates his strategy of typification in relation to the community of Cwmardy, and his revision of detail can be referred to this aim. Jones uses the episode to develop his account of how the community's values and principles emerge from their class position and how those values form a resistant tradition. (It should however be noted that a section of the 'Strikers are sent into the valley' chapter appeared in *Left Review* under the title 'Tonypandy', which suggests Jones was willing for the episodes to be interpreted as representations of that historical event.³⁴)

At the centre of the conflict as Jones represents it is the looting of shops and the destruction of private property. It was this aspect of the events in Tonypandy that most disturbed and incensed the authorities at the time, and was used as evidence of the 'lawlessness' of the Rhondda.³⁵ This does take place in *Cwmardy*, as announced by the newspaper headline, 'Strikers loot shops' (229), but is framed by a confrontation of conceptions of rights and property. The conflict with the police is figured as a fight for the community's integrity as represented in the Square, which 'as always on important occasions, became the centre of attraction' (224). It is a matter of 'honour to the people of the valley that the Square belonged to them and that no one could turn them from it' (236). While in Barke's *The Land of the Leal*, the dispossession of the Scottish peasantry deprives them of the land which they nonetheless feel should be theirs by natural right, in Jones's novel the public square acts as a vital space in which authority can be contested.³⁶ The battle becomes one for this public property, 'belonging' to the people in a way they consider legitimate, against the incursion of an authority they have 'never seen' (268) and against the perceived shame of relinquishing the Square to capitalist power. The attack on property and commodification as a matter of vision is encapsulated in the uncanny image of shop windows that, 'covered with corrugated iron sheets, looked like bandaged eyes' (265).

Egan, "'A Cult of their Own': Syndicalism and *The Miners' Next Step*", in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell, eds., *Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-1947* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), pp. 13-33.

³⁴ Lewis Jones, 'Tonypandy', *Left Review*, III: 3, April 1937, pp. 157-159.

³⁵ See, for example, unsigned, 'Welsh Strike Outrages: The Lawlessness of the Rhondda Valley', *The Times*, 22 November, 1910, p. 12.

³⁶ As Jean Ramsay puts it: 'the sweat and blood o' the Gibsons are in they fields – they should be ours ten times ower'; Barke, *The Land of the Leal* (1939; London: Collins, 1950), p. 510.

The matter of ‘alien’ and ‘unseen’ power is developed in a way that prefigures the construction of the anti-fascist struggle in *We Live*. The commander of the police treats the situation as an imperialist war, and is clearly based on Lionel Lindsay, chief constable of Glamorganshire police, whom Will Paynter – prominent Welsh Communist and volunteer in Spain – described in his autobiography as ‘part of the Coalmasters’ army of occupation in South Wales’.³⁷ Honour and belonging form the affective basis of resistance against this ‘occupation’: ‘Gradually the police were driven from the Square, which was left in the possession of the strikers’ (240). The victory is expedited by Len’s burning of the power-house, producing ‘a flame showed up everything in crimson relief’, making visible the advancing police (238), providing the desperately needed ‘[l]ight to see the enemy’ (237). It seems likely that Jones based this moment on a historical incident that occurred in his home village in November 1910: ‘At the Cambrian Colliery in Clydach Vale officials were stoned out of the electric power-house built in 1905 at a cost of £25,000’.³⁸ His manipulation of the details of the incident underscores Len’s function in enlightening the community. The treatment of property through the episode in *Cwmardy* is consistent with the novel’s suggestion that the possibility of another society is to be found in the commonplace values and practices of the working-class community. The compromise proposed by the miners’ leader, Ezra, restates the relationship between shame and exploitation. Ezra’s assertion that ‘[h]alf a loaf is better than nothing’ (267) is a phrase attributed to the Lib-Lab trade unionist William Abraham, known as ‘Mabon’, whose authority was challenged by the authors of *The Miners’ Next Step*.³⁹ Len voices his opposition to the compromise in terms of a complex of ideas of seeing, belonging and shame: he tells the miners that their wives would not accept such a cheapening of their labour and would scorn the men’s fear of ‘a Home Secretary we have never seen’ and who ‘don’t belong to us’ (268). Jones does seem to reach something of an impasse in his attempt to co-ordinate the historical material into his organising scheme, however, so that the final victory is achieved, rather anti-climactically, by Len and Jim’s persistent raids on the houses of officials, consistent with the tradition of vigilante action Jones is keen to

³⁷ Will Paynter, *My Generation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 38.

³⁸ Dai Smith, *Wales! Wales?* p. 66.

³⁹ Chris Williams, ‘“The Hope of the British Proletariat”: The South Wales Miners, 1910-1947,’ in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell, eds., *Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-1947* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), p. 125.

valorise, but which represses the uncomfortable historical reality that the miners returned to work on much the same terms as before the strike.⁴⁰ What is however established by the end of the episode is Cwmardy's self-identification as a community under attack, indeed, in armed struggle, whose most basic principles and interests were fundamentally opposed to those of the government. This is the process Chris Williams describes as a 'societary redefinition' beginning in 1910, the outcome of which was that, by 1926, the 'Lib-Lab *gwerin* had now taken the form of a proletariat'.⁴¹

6.3 Forms & Modes

Dai Smith describes the coalfield during the period as '[a] place addicted to the escapism of theatricality' in which 'the art of gesture could invade the streets,' and the carnivalesque moments in *Cwmardy* bear out this assessment.⁴² Jones suggests the ways that the residual folk practices and popular culture of the valley not only belie its alleged 'lawlessness' but also provide vital ways of redressing injustice and exploitation. Siân's humiliation of Evan the Overman in retaliation for his slandering of her daughter and his refusal to accept responsibility for her death is a central example. At this point the forces of shame, belonging, and objectification powerfully coalesce. The class community shames Evan as a 'scab' (220), that is, one complicit in exploitation. Siân however, having 'grasped the possibilities in the situation immediately' (256) claims the right to enact justice on him, a right expressed through her objectification of him: 'Don't anybody touch him [...] He do belong to me' (256). The 'shame-faced figure' of Evan is associated with the exploited body of Jane as Siân dresses him in her daughter's nightgown: 'Let your eyes see it' (256). The objectifier becomes objectified, in a carnivalesque public reversal.

The version of 'belonging' evoked by Siân here is central to both of Jones's novels and informs the texts' account of how the class community can resist the dehumanisation of commodification and instead affirm the possibility of a different society. The question of legitimacy and legitimation is explored in the several legal sub-plots in the novels which demonstrate the predication of the law on the inviolability of property, but which also

⁴⁰ Dai Smith, *Lewis Jones*, p. 61.

⁴¹ Chris Williams, 'The Hope of the British Proletariat', p. 127.

⁴² Dai Smith, *Wales! Wales?*, p. 79.

show that working-class knowledge and experience are excluded by legal epistemology. At the inquest following a fatal explosion in the mine in *Cwmardy*, Jim describes how ‘it was awful, mun, to see your butties lying cold like that’ (126), to which the lawyer defending the mine owners responds, ‘we want to know what you saw, not what you felt’ (126). Jim’s insistence that the dead miner’s lamp has been tampered with is based on his practical knowledge that ‘the first thing a miner will do whenever he get a lamp in his hand is to twist the pot [...] It do come natural to us’ (128). Jim’s evidence, based on knowledge gained in practice rather than the acceptance of the object in its immediate appearance is inadmissible in the court.⁴³ A second, more curious, example of this procedure occurs in the seemingly self-contained ‘Night on the Mountain’ episode in *We Live*, in which a young miner is found dying by Len and Mary, and which develops like a murder mystery, complete with a crucial clue, a ‘button shining’ (560), and an incomplete deathbed accusation, ‘it was a b—’ (571). Jones again uses a courtroom scene to illustrate the way that the construction of evidence in law blocks the achievement of justice and masks class violence. Mary is told, ‘We want to know what you saw, not what you think’ (575). She is not permitted to make the association between the silver button and the policemen who appear with increasing frequency in *We Live*. The lack of a solution to this murder plot replicates the inaccessibility of justice to the boy’s class, so that the conventions of the detective fiction plot are unmasked as, in Jameson’s terms, a ‘strategy of containment’ that fails when situated in the wider system of class oppression.⁴⁴ The convention is deployed so that the truth to which the clue refers is obvious, but the fulfilment at this level is not matched by the establishment of guilt or the restoration of the social order. One might

⁴³ These scenes would undoubtedly have resonance for contemporary readers as a result of the widely reported and widely condemned enquiry into the Gresford Colliery disaster, which killed 266 North Wales miners in September 1934. The enquiry criticised managers and inspectors but ultimately absolved them of direct responsibility, and allegations were made that (as in *Cwmardy*) evidence had been tampered with and records destroyed. See, among many examples of the *Daily Worker*’s coverage, ‘Perjury Allegations at Gresford Pit Inquiry’, 9 June, 1936, p. 1; and Fred Pateman’s reflection on the inquiry’s report, ‘Human Life Must be Put Before Profit’, *Daily Worker*, 23 February, 1937, p. 4. In his contribution to the *Fact* issue on documentary, Arthur Calder-Marshall cited the testimony of one miner at the inquiry, John Edward Samuel, as exemplifying the type of language that documentary fiction should aspire to, ‘a command of language and vividness of description, similar to Hemingway or Dos Passos’, Calder-Marshall, ‘Fiction’, *Fact* 4 (July 1937), p. 39.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; London: Verso, 2002), p. 37.

therefore attribute to Jones more sensitivity to the politics of form than he is normally afforded.⁴⁵

Within the novel, an ideal cultural form is suggested in the regular images of the class community singing. At the meeting before the 1910 strike, the singing ‘floated over the crowd like a shawl encircling a child’ (200). At these moments of community cohesion, ‘[t]he people lost their individual identities in the vibrating rhythm of the tune, which impelled their emotions into expression through bonds of vocal unity’ (200). This image of collective cultural activity appears to harmonise the two vocations of form as Raymond Williams describes them: ‘a visible or outward shape, and an inherent shaping impulse’.⁴⁶ Jones’s figuration of the moment indicates the absence of contradiction between content and form. But these moments are short-lived, and elsewhere frustration and incompleteness are the rule. Such incompleteness is not, however, necessarily allied to defeat. The shift between the mock-heroic and the heroic modes that describe Jim and Len’s respective war exploits is a useful example. Jim, like Siân, is a comic centre in the novel and his bragging about his own heroic feats in the wars he has fought is a source of humour (10; 241). Jones resists the potential for a tragic narrative to be motivated by Jim’s drunken enlistment for the Great War and instead resolves the subplot in an almost bathetic manner, with Jim returning home apparently unscathed (388-9). This move keeps Jim within the associative grouping of comedy and survival in the narrative. In his earliest published piece of fiction, ‘Young Dai’, published in 1932, Jones’ plot moves at a tangent to that of *Cwmardy*, telling the story of a miner who, unlike Len, did catch ‘the germ’ and enlist in 1914.⁴⁷ The piece is told in an anecdotal, laconic manner by a collective working-class voice that comments with indifference on Young Dai’s decision: ‘It was obvious to all of us that he had caught the germ’.⁴⁸ Dai’s misfortunes in the ensuing years are recounted, before Jones states the thematic development elaborated in *Cwmardy*: ‘His nephew has also caught the germ 18 years after Old Dai had it. He wants to fight now. But

⁴⁵ Frank Kermode, for example, implies that Jones was not, in effect, in control of the modes he was using, as evidenced by what Kermode considers a tendency towards ‘posh overwriting’ and ‘fancy creative-writing-course prose’ (‘Value at a Distance’, in *History and Value*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1988, p. 89). Kermode’s wider point is a more nuanced one about working-class fiction’s relationship with bourgeois standards of value, but it nonetheless depends on an assumption that Jones’s own relationships with those standards were largely unconscious.

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 189.

⁴⁷ Lewis Jones, ‘Young Dai’, *Daily Worker*, 1 July, 1932, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Jones, ‘Young Dai’, p. 6.

he knows his enemy.’⁴⁹ In *Cwmardy* and *We Live* this movement of transition is narrated from within the relationship between father and son, but unlike Dai, Big Jim is not harmed by his experiences. This gesture keeps open a necessary hope, allowing even the experience of war to be assimilated in the comic and vital structure of proletarian feeling in the novel.

6.4 Spain & Home

The resolution of *We Live* depends on the mediation of the ideas of ‘belonging’ and ‘home’ so that they become the grounds of class consciousness. The pressures on the community intensify in *We Live*, which begins in 1924, six years after the end of the war that concluded *Cwmardy*. The novel charts the increasingly acute tensions between the politics of the older generation, characterised by a prioritisation of immediate struggles and a rejection of what is considered to be outside the community, and a newer militant politics oriented towards wider alliances and solidarities. Len’s developing insight is always tempered by uncertainty, and this quality distinguishes him from Ezra whose vision becomes, dialectically, a form of blindness as his power recedes and the demands of history outpace him: ‘I know the struggle from A to Z [...] What I have done I have done with my eyes open and the people have listened to me’ (522). Ezra’s decline is hastened by his misrecognition of Communism as a foreign theory, predicated on his misunderstanding of ‘home’ as what is immediately experienced (674). The final confrontation between Len and Ezra occurs in the shadow of the rise of fascism; Len looks over the valley at the point ‘when the whole world was centred on Leipzig’ with his ‘thoughts fixed on Dimitrov’, and from this vantage point – a position of superior insight both literally and figuratively – he watches Ezra entering the house of the mine owner (671). The revelation of Ezra’s betrayal announces that the community can no longer distinguish simply between what does and does not belong in *Cwmardy*.

During the First World War, the community’s defensive investment in what was immediately experienced played a role in challenging and mitigating imperial ideology, as exemplified by Siân’s dismissal of the entire enterprise: ‘For King and country indeed! I have never seen no king, and the only country I know is inside the four walls of this house

⁴⁹ Jones, ‘Young Dai’, p. 6.

and between the three mountains of our valley' (330). In *We Live*, Siân's vision has to give way to the realisation that the 'home' is not independent of the wider totality, and that its interests cannot be defended within the limits she indicates. On hearing of Len's plan to join the International Brigade, she is similarly dismissive of its relevance to her family: 'Huh! Spaniards indeed! I have never seened one of them and don't owe them a single penny' (849). Siân's conflation of experience ('never seened') and economic relations ('single penny') is no longer adequate as a way of delineating class interests. Len's commitment to the war in Spain occurs within the complex of associations that has developed through both novels. His response to the Communist leader Harry Morgan's speech on Spain focuses on the claim that '[t]he national leaders of Labour are dragging the honour of British people in the mud, and it is only the Party and the working class can redeem it in the eyes of the world' (839). The dirt and dishonour so frequently evoked in the novels in connection with the exploitation of labour is now transferred to the complicity of the labour leaders in non-intervention, and the consequence is public shame, thus politically reorienting a trope that has been at points damaging to the community (as it is when Len is given white feathers during the First World War, p. 374).

Len's letter from Spain, received after his death, announces the completion of a process in which the immediate experience and struggle of the community is kept in view, understood not in isolation but within a wider context:

Yes, my comrade, this is not a foreign land on which we are fighting. It is home. Those are not strangers who are dying. They are our butties. It is not a war only of nation against nation, but of progress against reaction, and I glory in the fact that Cwmardy has its sons upon the battle-field, fighting here as they used to fight on the Square, the only difference being that we now have guns instead of sticks (876).

This passage echoes a letter from Will Paynter to Arthur Horner, President of the South Wales Miners' Federation, published in 1937:

From it all emerges one thing at least, and that is that the International Brigade and the British Battalion as part of it, is not some noble and gallant band of crusaders come to succour a helpless people from an injustice, it is the logical expression of the conscious urge of democratic peoples for self-preservation.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Published in *Miners' Monthly*, June 1937; qtd. Will Paynter, *My Generation*, pp. 69-70.

While both statements seem sentimental, Paynter's in particular is significant for its insistence on the conflict as a 'logical' next phase in a tradition of struggle. Len's final letter, read in the context of the novel's negotiations of key terms, makes the same argument. In this peroration, 'Home' and 'the Square' have become not just geographical designators but intensely political, even utopian, ideas, the integrity of which have been fought for throughout the preceding episodes in the novels. As the novel constructs it, the war is a class war in which the false differentiation of nationhood ('strangers') gives way to class solidarity ('butties'). In *We Live*, the closing note restates the association of Communism with life through Len's death: 'Fascism may kill us, Mary, but it can never kill what we die for. No never! Our very death is creation, our destruction new life and energy and action' (877). At one level this preserves the openness of revolutionary optimism: it suggests a forward movement beyond Len's death, even though the circumstances of the text's appearance, after its author's death and after the defeat of the Republic, inevitably mute the effect.

Conclusion

Jones died suddenly in January 1939, in the week that Barcelona fell to Franco's forces. Dai Smith and Hywel Francis both suggest that Jones had intended, after *We Live*, to write a third work in which the volunteers returned, victorious, to lead a socialist revolution in the Valley.⁵¹ Jones's novels resist the assumption made by other Welsh writers that the industrialisation of South Wales and the subsequent economic collapse had been an unmitigated tragedy that was entering its final stages during the late thirties. Idris Davies's 1938 poem *Gwalia Deserta* imagines Wales ('Gwalia', the archaism making clear Davies's elegiac intent) as a land ruined by an unspecified and alien 'they', who 'slunk away and purchased/ The medals of the State', leaving 'the landscape of Gwalia stained for all time/ By the bloody hands of progress'.⁵² T.S. Eliot described Davies's works of this period as 'the best poetic document I know about a particular epoch in a particular

⁵¹ Dai Smith, *Lewis Jones*, p. 76; and Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, p. 103.

⁵² Idris Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, in Dafydd Johnston, ed., *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), p. 11. There is, however, more to this poem than simple nostalgia, and an interesting study could be made of its conflicted attitudes to popular culture, the various angles from which it recalls the defeat of 1926, and its connections with better-known poetry of the decade (with Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, for example). At its more anecdotal narrative moments (e.g., VIII) the tone is not dissimilar to Jones's.

place'.⁵³ The Nationalist poet and politician Saunders Lewis, meanwhile, ruminating on the decade's many failures on the eve of war, saw in the 'human wreckage' of the crisis-stricken Valleys a culture-less and de-nationalised wasteland that 'once was Wales'.⁵⁴ Jones's novels stand counter to these projections of catastrophe, asserting instead that the working-class community's resources of survival and self-definition placed it at the heart of the struggle for the survival of civilisation and for the possibility of a new society. The fragility of that community must be stressed; the crisis in South Wales was so severe that serious proposals were made to clear the industrial valleys of much of their population.⁵⁵ Jones saw the unruly, creative culture of collective direct action that emerged under the extreme pressures of industrialisation as offering a living example of the type of culture projected by the Popular Front, and his novels both celebrate the integrity of that community and reflect the optimism and despair of thirties.

Barke's *The Land of the Leal* and Jones's *We Live* were published almost simultaneously in 1939, and at least one critic made the connection between them. Frank Swinnerton, writing in the *Observer*, praised the sincerity of *We Live* in spite of its being 'crudely written', and the pastoral elements of *The Land of the Leal*, though appeared puzzled by the connection between the urban and rural sections of Barke's text. He concluded, however, that if Barke, like Jones, 'has to use the Spanish War as a useful mechanism he has the excuse that it is part of the history of our time and a fitting landmark in such a chronicle'.⁵⁶ But the novels do more than appropriate the war as a plot mechanism. In his study of the British volunteers in Spain, James K. Hopkins has suggested that

there was a logical, sequential development of issues in the lives of many British militants: first, looking for explanations for the unemployment and repression they experienced; second, seeing the rise of fascism on the continent as an issue that

⁵³ Qtd. in 'Davies, Idris (1905-1953)', unsigned entry in Jenny Stringer, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* (Oxford, OUP, 1996), p. 157.

⁵⁴ Saunders Lewis, 'Y Dilyw 1939'/'The Deluge 1939', trans. Anthony Conran, in Conran, ed., *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 246.

⁵⁵ Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 252.

⁵⁶ Frank Swinnerton, 'New Novels: Mr. LAG Strong and others', *The Observer*, May 7th 1939, p. 6.

concerned them; and third, seizing the opportunity to strike back at oppression, if not in Great Britain, then in Spain.⁵⁷

Barke's and Jones's novels do not simply reflect but actively participate in the cultural production of that sequence, giving emotional weight and life to those connections – a more difficult and conflicted process than such a summary allows. Both writers' interventions in the cultural life of the volunteers extended beyond their depiction in fiction: Barke, Gustav Klaus reports, wrote a bagpipe march for the Scottish Ambulance Unit in Spain, while the Welsh Brigaders enthusiastically read *Cwmardy*.⁵⁸ What might be written out in the production of such a narrative are, as Williams suggests, 'the *disconnections* of a wide cultural and political life'.⁵⁹ The novels nonetheless represent key examples of writers' efforts to articulate the relationship between the values, traditions and distinctive culture of communities marginalised in regional and class terms and the most urgent global historical realities of the decade.

⁵⁷ James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 107.

⁵⁸ Gustav Klaus, 'James Barke: A Great-Hearted Writer, A Hater of Oppression, A True Scot', in Andy Croft, ed., *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 8; Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire*, p. 383.

⁵⁹ Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', p. 225, emphasis in original.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to frame a group of authors and texts within the cultural formation of the Popular Front in Britain, as well as to shed light on that formation as a particular conjuncture of pressures and imperatives. It has offered readings of critically neglected texts through more detailed contextualisation and through greater attention to the particular forms that leftist politics took in the late 1930s than previous studies. The work has also sought to re-engage Georg Lukács's work in the thirties with its original political and cultural context by bringing Lukács's theorisation of the relationship between the novel and the Popular Front into dialogue with texts produced within that formation.

Disparities in available material relating to individual authors produce different possibilities and limitations. I have tried to discern and take seriously these novelists' views on the novel and its functions. In the cases of some authors, such as Arthur Calder-Marshall and Jack Lindsay, there is a relatively accessible body of information in the form of published reviews and writings on culture and fiction. In other cases, such as those of James Barke and Lewis Jones, the published material is thinner, and I have attempted through available archival material to reconstruct a sense of how these authors viewed novelistic practice from more ephemeral sources. Only in Barke's case is there a large-scale, accessible collection of papers, held by the Mitchell Library, Glasgow. (Lindsay's papers remain largely unexplored in the National Library of Australia, and were not available for this study.) In the case of Barke, I have been able to situate his sporadic published contributions within wider and longer conversations traced in his correspondence, contributing to a more detailed sense of his development than was possible with other subjects.

These novels, I have suggested, display recurring thematic emphases on ideas of the people and the nation, and examine national and popular histories to identify progressive elements that might be repositioned for anti-fascist ends. The most compelling criticisms of the cultural productions of the Popular Front are those, discussed in preceding chapters, of John Coombes and Nick Hubble. Hubble characterises Popular Front aesthetics as Stalinised pastoral, entailing a suppression of difference in the name of

solidarity.¹ Coombes, in a similar vein, finds little that was genuinely socially transformative in the Popular Front; instead, he considers that its co-ordinates were liberal, not Marxist: it affirmed a valorisation of bourgeois culture ‘under the mask of “humanist” Marxism’², and required commitment to only the most minimal demands.³ These are important criticisms in so far as they help identify real sites of tension in the novels (tensions that might indeed be unavoidable in any populist politics). What I have tried to suggest, however, is that rather than passively reflecting the counter-revolutionary positions of Stalinism, these novels actively work through questions of class difference, of common interests and shared traditions. While a reconciliation with the institutions of democracy might seem to Coombes to be ‘bourgeois’, the articulation of parliamentary democracy as an element in a history of popular struggles performed crucial ideological work in identifying the common investments of wide sections of the population necessary for a mass movement to be built, and in this sense Coombes mistakes ends for means. Within the Popular Front formation, activism was mobilised towards a range of issues and causes, some with identifiable class bearings and some without; these included intellectual freedom and civil liberties, the militarisation of scientific research, unemployment, rent strikes, poverty, workplace safety and the means test, as well as anti-fascism at home and abroad.⁴ The relative claims of a politics based in specific class interests and those of the need for a national anti-fascist front had to be continually negotiated; the priority of the latter over the former was not, as Coombes and Hubble imply, taken as given. These negotiations can be found in the novels; in, for example, Jack Lindsay’s examinations of bourgeois dissidence in history and in James Barke’s and Lewis Jones’s positioning of regionally-specific working-class experience as a factor in a particular historical conjuncture.

The thesis contributes in its own way to scholarly traditions that seek to recover and critically re-evaluate works suffering critical neglect. In seeking to restore to view some of the components of this still fragmented and incomplete history, there are,

¹ Nick Hubble, ‘The Intermodern Assumption of the Future: William Empson, Charles Madge and Mass-Observation’, in Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2009), p. 184.

² John Coombes, ‘British Intellectuals and the Popular Front’, in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change* (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), p. 80.

³ Coombes, ‘British Intellectuals and the Popular Front’, p. 75.

⁴ See Harry Pollitt’s article, ‘Building the People’s Front’ (*Left Review* II:15 (December 1936), pp. 797-803), which raises a variety of these issues as part of an appeal to intellectuals.

inevitably, many omissions that could be addressed in future work. The most obvious of these is the lack of discussion of the contributions of women writers. The themes and analytic categories deployed here could certainly be extended to discussions of the thirties novels of Virginia Woolf, Storm Jameson, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Katharine Burdekin, among others. Productive work could certainly be done too on questions of the relationships between gender and political subjectivity in leftist fiction more generally. Lewis Grassie Gibbon is widely praised for his female protagonist Chris Guthrie in *A Scots Quair*, but even this resolves, in *Grey Granite*, into a reinvestment in the figure of the male militant, Ewan Tavendale, in whom the novel's apprehensive and ambivalent vision of the political future is concentrated.⁵ Political activism, particularly Communist activism, tends to be a masculine mode in these novels. However, one of the symmetries between Jones's *We Live* and Barke's *The Land of the Leal* is the investment of political responsibility in the widows of the International Brigaders, pointing to a future in which women's political experience is central. A study from this angle could also usefully contribute to the currently under-researched area of women's relationships with Communism in Britain.

It has perhaps become commonplace to evoke, on the subject of 'recovered' fiction, Raymond Williams's memorable image of 'the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century'.⁶ Williams's more salient point, however, is less about the inclusion and exclusion of particular texts in the critical field, or of their relative statuses, but rather of how those procedures of selection relate to the construction of twentieth-century history. For Williams, the reduction of the cultural history of the early-twentieth century to a narrowly selective and 'exploitable' modernist repertoire amounts to historical closure, a plotting of the century as defined by the transition from modernism to a post-modernism understood as, in some sense, post-historical.⁷ The mid-century transition between those phases coincides with, and may be seen as a corollary of, another sequence of positions that E.P. Thompson calls the 'declension from disenchantment to acquiescent quietism' that defined the intellectual retreat of many intellectuals from Communism in particular

⁵ The seminal intervention is Deirdre Burton, 'A Feminist Reading of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 35-46.

⁶ Raymond Williams, 'When Was Modernism?' in *Politics of Modernism* (1989; London: Verso, 2007), p. 35.

⁷ Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', p. 34.

and political commitment in general.⁸ For Thompson, it was this ‘default of the disenchanted which gave to Natopolitan ideology its form’; that is, a depoliticising, de-historicising conformism.⁹ With these problems of history in mind, it is worth briefly pursuing the main threads of this study beyond its limits in 1940 to consider the tributaries into which the energies of the Popular Front flowed. Of the writers focused on here – Jones excepting – all would continue to be active in the political culture of the war years, though only Lindsay would stay the course with the Communist Party until the end of his life. John Sommerfield served with the RAF and channelled his literary energies into short fiction and documentary, contributing several pieces dealing with military experience to John Lehmann’s *New Writing*.¹⁰ Arthur Calder-Marshall worked as a script-writer and editor for the Ministry of Information, collaborating on documentary and propaganda films.¹¹ James Barke continued to work in the Clydeholm Shipyard through the war, becoming a central figure in Glasgow Unity Theatre, for which he wrote plays about the wartime experiences of the Glasgow citizenry such as *The Night of the Big Blitz* and *When the Boys Come Home*, the latter both hoping and warning that a return to pre-war conditions would not be tolerated.¹² Between 1944 and 1947, Edgell Rickword edited the leftist cultural journal, *Our Time*.¹³ Jack Lindsay, with characteristic intensity, continued his prodigious output after he was called up, first writing novels and poetry while serving with the Signal Corps, then working as a script-writer for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs.¹⁴ For Lindsay, the cultural front of the war effort in some senses vindicated the aspirations of the Popular Front; it ‘supplied the situation with the element lacking in the 1930s – a broadly based popular movement turning to the national classics and attempting to find its own means of expression.’¹⁵ Communists were active participants in state-sponsored initiatives such as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art, which sought to break down the barriers between mass audiences and traditionally elite cultural

⁸ E.P. Thompson, ‘Outside the Whale’, in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 231.

⁹ Thompson, ‘Outside the Whale’, p. 231.

¹⁰ See, especially, Sommerfield, ‘The Worm’s Eye View’, *The Penguin New Writing*, 17 (1943), pp. 15-34. Sommerfield’s wartime short stories were collected in *The Survivors* (Letchworth: John Lehmann, 1947).

¹¹ Writing the script for *Night Shift* (1942), for example, a short documentary about armaments workers directed by J.D. Chambers and produced by Paul Rotha (*Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement 1930-1950*, Disc Two, BFI DVD, 2013).

¹² John Manson, ‘Did James Barke Join the Communist Party?’, *CHNN*, 19 (Spring 2006), p. 9.

¹³ Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 230-2.

¹⁴ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 797-799.

¹⁵ Jack Lindsay, *After the Thirties* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956), p. 61.

forms.¹⁶ In varying ways, directly and indirectly, these figures were active presences in the making of post-war social democracy.

But after 1939, when the Party, acrimoniously, asserted its prior loyalty to Moscow and denounced the war as ‘imperialist’ in its early phase, the status of intellectuals allied with it would be bound to the modulations of Soviet political relations.¹⁷ As the Cold War developed, the openness to ideological and cultural struggle that the Party had fostered in the Popular Front period and the war years gave way to increasing bureaucratic pressure.¹⁸ Lindsay and Rickword were both victims of an incipient climate of destructive anti-intellectualism; Lindsay’s work was denounced and Rickword was bullied into resigning the editorship of *Our Time*.¹⁹ Realism, still felt in the texts discussed here to be an open form, supple enough to speak to a mass readership, ossified into Socialist Realism codified as a kind of aesthetic negation. The writers, including Lindsay, who contributed to a symposium on Socialist Realism held by the Party’s National Cultural Committee offered a collective self-criticism by way of a preface to the published proceedings, outlining their failure to assert the priority of political struggle and their distraction by such ‘bourgeois’ concerns as ‘abstractionism, formalism, atonalism, existentialism, etc.’²⁰ But the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of the Popular Front years left a lasting impression on the generation of socialists who would flourish in the post-war years: for Thompson and Williams, the need to envisage a socialism not bound to the abstractions of Stalinism would generate many echoes of the thirties Popular Front emphases on national histories and popular traditions.²¹ Like the ‘Natopolitan’ orthodoxy, the narrative of twentieth-century literary history as one of the inevitable supersession of apolitical and ahistorical postmodernism over a modernism rigidly temporalised in the pre-1945 period relies for its coherence in part on the suppression of the memory and history of the Popular Front and of the possibilities it suggested for a productive encounter between intellectuals, popular

¹⁶ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days* (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1990), pp. 337-8; John Callaghan & Ben Harker, *British Communism: A Documentary History* (Manchester: MUP, 2011), pp. 165-7.

¹⁷ The complexities of this moment are summarised in Callaghan & Harker, *British Communism*, pp. 145-8.

¹⁸ E.P. Thompson, ‘Edgell Rickword’, *PN Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (September-October 1979), p. xxvi.

¹⁹ Thompson, ‘Edgell Rickword’, p. xxvi; Hobday, *Edgell Rickword*, pp. 242-3.

²⁰ Rodney Hilton et al., ‘Foreword’, *Essays on Socialist Realism and the British Cultural Tradition* (London: Arena Publications, 1952), p. 3.

²¹ For Thompson and Williams’s formative experiences in the thirties, see Stephen Woodhams, *History in the Making: Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson and Radical Intellectuals 1936-1956* (London: Merlin, 2001), pp. 23-42.

culture and socialist politics. The central aim of this thesis has been to elucidate a particular formation in which, with some success, that engagement was fostered and which resists the narrative of the mid-century as a point of retreat and failure. Further studies could trace the longer evolution of that formation through the cultural making of the post-war settlement and the development of the New Left.

The contradictions between an internationalist, humanist outlook and a political practice rooted in the realities of class, nation and community (which may always be haunted by exclusivity, essentialism, racism and fascism) remain unresolved, though nonetheless urgent. Even fifty years on, another intellectual formed in the atmosphere of the Popular Front, Eric Hobsbawm, could claim that ‘the people’s front remains the socialist strategy that most frightens the enemy.’²² The validity of that claim will not be considered here; nonetheless, this thesis has sought to raise the possibilities and challenges that such a strategy presents for the relationship between culture and politics.

²² Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Fifty Years of People’s Fronts’, in Jim Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), p. 249.

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