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JOHN FORDHAM

Working-class fiction across the century

Toward a theory of working-class fiction

Since Ian Watt's groundbreaking work on the development of the novel, there is overwhelming evidence that the form has been from its inception the preserve of the middle class, despite its being extended or qualified to include subgenres. However, this chapter argues that working-class fiction can be distinguished from a dominant tradition in the history of the novel. Working-class fiction will be defined here by the way that it responds, in a peculiarly local and vital way, to a *lived* experience that middle-class novels have only been able to *observe*. Working-class fiction thus sees beyond the limited horizon of bourgeois knowledge to articulate the actual experience and the felt consequences of industrialization. Shaped and determined by the processes of production itself, working-class writing is a product of a distinct form of consciousness.

As the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács has argued, such consciousness is able to perceive and hence disclose the true nature of a society which reduces all relations and values to those of the commodity, and insists that “the principle of rational mechanisation and calculability must embrace every aspect of life.”¹ Commodification integrates social being and commodities into a “specialized process . . . in which [the worker] is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanised and rationalised tool.” Working-class life-experience and consciousness embodies a dialectic – a consciousness of itself, the *subject*, as *object* – that comprehends the condition of “society as a whole” because the working class typically “reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation” (p. 92).

In Marx's original formulation of commodification, however, reification (the turning of a human subject into a thing) does not locate the worker within an indissoluble *system*, but discloses capitalism as a *process*, in which objects are “constituted out of flows, processes and relations.”² If the worker appears to him- or herself to be an “abstract quantity,” this is only an initial

stage in a developing consciousness, through which change becomes possible and eventually is realized. Nevertheless, in the articulation of working-class consciousness in written forms, such as in the novel, what is often of primary value is a sense of embeddedness in place and community, in those values of the lived experience which bind and sustain people through hardship and struggle. In this sense, it is the relative permanence or stability of the common life that becomes the source of working-class resistance to a capitalist world in which “all that is solid melts into air.”³

A dialectical interplay of permanence and change is central to the nature of working-class writing, since its narratives are constituted not only by an internal relationship of worker to community, but by individual and communal relationships to the outside world. The lived experience is represented not by means of fixed, once-and-for-all, categories of social relations, but through exchanges in which an affection for, and active affiliation with, a particular place are in conflict with a countervailing desire to break the bonds of otherwise restrictive customs and practices. Working-class writing, therefore, embodies a consciousness of process in which, to extend Lukács, and to borrow a phrase from E. P. Thompson, the working-class is “present at its own making,” and at its continual remaking.⁴

Furthermore, because production and process have been fundamental to the making and development of working-class consciousness, its cultural forms are similarly constituted: that is, actively made in response to, rather than passively received from, the culture of the middle class and the dominant realist mode of its fiction. In working-class writing, the bourgeois novel’s convention of internal focalization will be displaced by a figural representation of consciousness – the worker transformed into automaton or machine part – or realist conventions will shift into modes of romance or of music-hall performance. This is why the category of “realism” is not always an adequate means of analyzing the working-class novel: its formal properties often derive from models or traditions outside the literary mainstream. Such considerations will constitute the following analysis of representative works, organized into discrete historical periods, in order to demonstrate how, from its original formation, working-class fiction continues to be produced and re-envisioned.

Early twentieth-century political awakenings: MacGill and Tressell

It is no coincidence that the two most significant working-class literary voices of the early century were Irish – Patrick MacGill, born into the Donegal peasantry in 1890; Robert Tressell (Robert Noonan) into

“middle-class” Dublin in 1869 – because it is their combination of class and diasporic consciousness that enables their texts to adopt a unique narrative position: one that observes the changing nature of labor from both within and beyond the laboring class. The formal implication for such writing is that, as distinct from classic English realism, it has no affirming tendency toward “settlement and stability,” but, as Terry Eagleton suggests, is characterized by strategies of irresolution that “cut against the grain of the fiction itself.”⁵ MacGill’s first novel *Children of the Dead End* (1914) purports to be an autobiography, a form that was, until the first decade of the century, the most accessible and readily available for worker-writers.⁶ However, a reader’s expectations of autobiographical form are disrupted in MacGill’s text by a dialectical relation between two parallel formations: that of worker and that of writer. The opening pages disclose an “I” who is both peasant and poet: the subject as a child hearing the voice of a mountain stream “crying out at night . . . lamenting over something it had lost.”⁷ The suggestion here of a Celtic twilight idealization of lost innocence is quickly dispelled. Such romanticism, MacGill indicates, has been nurtured in a quasi-feudal society of chronic poverty, cruelly parasitical priests, and intractable landowners. When his protagonist Dermod Flynn embarks on an itinerant life – from the ancient agricultural valleys of Donegal, through the new construction works of Kinlochleven, to the streets of modern London and the slums of Glasgow – “autobiography” shifts into chronicle, and a subjective narrative of geographical movement is objectified as historical process. Subject–object commodification is first realized in the text when Dermod observes that he is “not a human being” but “a ware purchased in the market-place . . . only an article of exchange” (p. 37). His reified condition is further confirmed when he eventually crosses the water to Scotland: first to dig potatoes and then, as a “navvy,” to become gripped by “the great industrial machine . . . a mere spoke in the car of progress” (p. 144).

Despite the navy’s consciousness of his own commodification, there is also in MacGill’s work a sense of the worker’s modernist collusion in the transformative power of modernity: lamenting the latter’s destructive capabilities and at the same time rejoicing in the sheer scale of industrial projects. Although navvies are outsiders “treated like swine in a sty all the years of our life” (p. 244), the narrative voice expresses, albeit with irony, a laborer’s pride in the skills of construction. Nature’s largest edifices, the mountains, are imbued with a “sinister strength, undefied and unconquered . . . until man, with puny hands and little tools of labour, came to break the spirit of their ancient mightiness” (p. 226). (Such a willingness to adapt to the “moods and tempers of my environment” is also evident in MacGill’s novel of World War I, in which relentless “destruction, decay,

degradation” is matched by moments when the “I” of the text is “at home in [the] thunder” of the artillery, “accommodat[ing him]self to the Olympian roar.”⁸) Arriving in the modern city, Dermod, learning now a writer’s trade, hovers on the threshold of social advancement, but realizes that he is in danger, as he says, of “betraying my own class” (*Children*, p. 285). In order to reestablish old allegiances, he goes in quest of his childhood love, Nora, at which moment the dialectic of textual form and class crystallizes. Dermod discovers that his “poetic ideal” (p. 268) has become a prostitute, and is now dying in a Glasgow garret: reduced to the ultimate human commodity, but at the same time sublimated as the icon of a class that should be “judged accordin’ to our sufferin’s.”⁹ The novel here visits the domain of romance, in a final vignette of sentimental solidarity; but MacGill’s working-class dialectic inheres in his text’s formal irresolution, divided as it is between the subject-narrative’s appeal to an Irish sublime and the object-narrative’s consciousness of “social ugliness.”¹⁰

Questions of form are paramount in considering Tressell’s *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), which, since its first publication, when it was closely compared with MacGill’s work, has achieved scriptural status among working-class readers. Its inspirational function is attributable to no straightforward prescriptions in it; rather, its impact emerges, as Raymond Williams argues, from a structural complexity that is indebted to Tressell’s unusual class status: as a journeyman craftsman and political activist, he came to his work in the painting and decorating trades of the southern coastal town of Hastings by way of Irish emigration to South Africa (*Writing*, p. 248). The itinerant’s oblique relationship to colonial Britain, as with MacGill’s, determines the critical position of the narrative.

Tressell’s form has been described as “proletarian socialist realism,” “collective *Bildungsroman*,” and “proletarian modernism.”¹¹ Although the third description appropriately represents Tressell’s formal experiments, the second one more aptly encapsulates the novel’s project “to explain . . . [in a “readable story”] how Socialists propose to abolish poverty.”¹² Accordingly, the reader of Tressell’s book experiences the maturation not of an individual, as in classic bourgeois novelistic form, but of a whole class. This is achieved on two simultaneous levels: on the level of discursive engagement with “philanthropists” of the working class – so named because of their unwitting benevolence towards their oppressors – and on the level of form. Formally, the text explores Socratic method, a tradition traceable from Plato, through Thomas More, to the revolutionary utopianism of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). In Morris’s novel the reader comes to political consciousness by means of a time-traveller’s dialogue, in question-and-answer form, between an advanced society of the future and a declining

one in the present. The dialogue enables Morris's traveller to *discover* the process whereby nineteenth-century capitalist society was materially and ideologically transformed. Tressell's novel also works by means of temporal comparisons, except that here a reader's perspective is from within a process, and not a result of mere hindsight. Tressell's utopianism thus is not "systematic," but functions to "form desire": working through "imaginative encouragement" rather than explicit didacticism.¹³

So Tressell's "socialist-realism," describing the degraded conditions of the "Mugsborough" working class, gives way at key moments to Socratic dialogue, in which Frank Owen, the socialist, explains to his fellow workers the origins of poverty. The responses of his fellow workers to his serial discourses on the political state of the nation, on "landlordism" and monopoly capitalism, and on the Marxist theory of surplus value are antagonistic and hostile; however, what mitigates Owen's hatred for workers who "deserve to suffer because they have supported and defended the system that robbed them" (p. 89) is the text's engagement with working-class popular culture. Owen's earnestness and frustration is offset – made engaging and palatable – by Tressell's framing of the political instruction within a carnivalesque admixture of comic heckling, slapstick humor, songs, mock debates, sermons, and protest marches. Dinner time in the workplace is by turns transformed into music hall, revivalist meeting, or lecture, Owen being "oot [ed]" into action by "howls, groans and catcalls . . . mingled with cries of 'Fraud!' 'Impostor!' 'Give us our money back!' 'Let's wreck the 'all!'" (p. 225) or his being invited to mount an improvised pulpit, when the "Professor's" discourse is interrupted by Easton's making "a pint of order" and Philpot's rising to "order a pint" (p. 284). The result for a reader is no overall "social-realist" conversion – no ideology of what Theodor Adorno derisively calls "affirmation" (p. 49) – but an *ironic* glimpse, by means of the philanthropists' mockery of democratic processes and their parodies of political clichés, into what would become, with the raising of political consciousness, an achieved emancipation.

Aesthetics and politics in the interwar years: Harold Heslop, Ellen Wilkinson, Ethel Mannin, Lewis Grassic Gibbon

Itinerancy or social discontinuity is a dominant theme in fiction of the interwar decades – in novels of the seagoing working class by James Hanley, George Garret, Jim Phelan; in novels of social mobility by Gibbon, Mannin, Wilkinson – but this is also a period when worker-writers from Britain's industrial heartlands produce fictional "documents rooted in the continuity of class and *place*," primarily in the locations of *heavy* industry, such as

mining and shipbuilding.¹⁴ The proliferation of such writing gave rise to the term “proletarian literature”¹⁵ and to a publishing vogue in which every major house would have its token working-class writer. In the documentary novels community strength forms a bedrock of resilience in the face of continual threats to any *stable* working life, above all to the chronic economic decline of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s. The result is a diverse yet collective response to economic and political crisis, in which the traditional virtues of living *within* a class are modified, challenged or reaffirmed by influences and pressures from “*beyond*.” In the interests of accurate documentation of conditions, this writing, although relying on established codes of realism, discloses the influences of European modernism, in which narrative movement is toward isolation, disintegration and crisis, rather than towards affirmative resolution. The former movement defines the novel of the mining industry, whose workers were chronically subject to “the hazards of unemployment, short-time working and low wages.” Walter Brierley’s *Means Test Man* (1935) is characteristic in that its “naturalistic surface” describing the daily life of an unemployed miner “is constantly fracturing to disclose . . . a strange otherworld of dark anxiety and existential terror.”¹⁶ This is already the case in the earliest work of Harold Heslop. While means-test man’s fears threaten to shatter the precarious “equilibrium” of the household, Heslop’s miners are haunted by the dark symbol of the mine’s dangers: the *goaf*. The “dreaded” space left “when all the coal has been extracted” is “the home of a tremendous darkness . . . soundless as the uttermost depths of the sea”;¹⁷ yet also underground the miner experiences pleasure in the “gleaming seam of silver coal,” the love of a “darkness [that] is so intimate, so much part of their lives” (*Goaf*, p. 113). The simultaneous aesthetic of labor and the expressionist horror of miners’ “engoafment” is echoed in sailors’ ambivalence towards the sea, in what the merchant-seaman James Hanley calls in his 1930s writing its “fury and magnificence”; a medium at once “terrible” and “beautiful.”¹⁸

In parallel with formal complexity is the inherent dialectic of class relations. In Heslop’s novels the dialectic is revealed in an ambivalent attitude to region and place: a struggle between the virtues of *local* tradition and practice – the “steel frigidity” of the mine tempered by pride in a “warm and gentle” comradeship – and “the desire of a freer and better existence,” whether the latter be achieved by the “conservative effect” of trade unionism and parliamentary Labour, or by “the sanction of [Soviet] revolution” (*Goaf*, pp. 17, 20, 78; *Last Cage*, p. 44). Similarly, in the work of the Manchester writer Helen Wilkinson, who was to become the first female Labour MP, there is ambivalence in its descriptions of the effects of social mobility on working-class women. Wilkinson’s *Clash* (1929), like Heslop’s *Gate of a*

Strange Field (1929), focuses on the General Strike of 1926, and the ways in which, after its failure, class allegiances are actively remade. Besides concern with details of agitation and struggle, both writers represent subtle processes of workers' *embourgeoisement*: anxieties about "becoming sophisticated," "all the edges get[ting] blunted" by contact with the "fleshpots."¹⁹ Tensions are symbolically acted out in romantic relationships, through which the protagonists' sexual and class interests are eventually reconciled. Heslop's union official, Joe Tarrant, disdainful of Emily's longing for "industrial peace," relinquishes her intellectual companionship in favor of Molly, an idealized figure of class and sexuality (*Gate*, pp. 243, 285). Wilkinson's union organizer, Joan Craig, finally rejects the too easy "detachment" of sexually desirable Tony in favor of damaged war veteran Gerry, for whom always "the work comes first" (*Clash*, pp. 156, 310).

Ways in which the formal paradigm of romance can be deployed to express both personal longing and political aspiration are more extensively articulated in the novels of Ethel Mannin who, in conscious emulation of D. H. Lawrence, at first ranges far beyond the working-class domain of her South-East-London upbringing. From 1932, however, she returns from excursions into Lawrentian subjectivist modernism (culminating in *Ragged Banners*, 1931) to produce novels of "social consciousness," such as *Linda Shawn* (1932) and *Venetian Blinds* (1933), and thus to "identify [her]self" with her working-class roots.²⁰ She modifies the romance mode of her earlier works to create a form grounded in the *known* community, but which nevertheless stays focused on the *imagined* beyond: a possibility of a parochial and imperialist Britain being transformed by the formation of unofficial, international networks of affinity and solidarity. *Venetian Blinds* divides streets and families into subclasses – the "respectable" and the "common" – and the reader follows, in a process of discovery, the protagonist Stephen's struggle with the two kinds of identity. For the socially aspiring "labour aristocracy" "respectability" signifies the "domestic ideal,"²¹ but for those others defined as "common" what counts is the defiant domain of "the street," or the "secret life of alleyways, wasteground and river."²² Yet also discoverable at the "common end" are marginalized families like the Leiders, German émigrés through whom Stephen develops a political and social consciousness and begins "to think about the whole business of being common" (p. 113). Subsequently, Stephen's bourgeois progress is measured against the secretly "cherished" longings of his adolescence, when creative spirit and political aspiration were harmonized. It is only after revisiting his former home that he finally rediscovers "where he had dreamed, and groped for the ends of being, and where, innately, he belonged" (p. 450).

The dialectical process in Mannin is more systematically evident in Gibbon's trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, which structurally emulates MacGill's geographical/historical progressions. In *Sunset Song* (1931) Chris Guthrie's rural life of struggle is ended by World War I when her husband Ewan succumbs to "that madness beyond the hills."²³ Despite, however, an ostensible elegiac mode, lamenting the "last of the farming folk that wrung their living from the land with their bare hands" (p. 67), the narrative embarks on a quest for other forms of social existence: subsequently tracing Chris's progress to the "borough" in *Cloud Howe* (1932) – she marries a radical minister during the events of the General Strike – and finally, in *Grey Granite* (1934), to the city, as a widow, during the new industrial struggles and hunger marches of the 1930s.

What sets Gibbon's fiction apart from its contemporaries is its embeddedness in the language of a particular location and culture, through which it realizes the immense expressive potential of Scots, conveying with an arresting poignancy the struggle of a community in "words to tell to *your* heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight" (p. 37, emphasis added). The direct second-person form of address shifts between two modes of working-class consciousness, the personal and the communal, where the "you" merges with the impersonal "folk" of local anecdote and gossip.

It is the latter that constantly registers and critically evaluates effects on the rural community of national and international events, creating a modernist tension between immutability and perpetual change. The developing historical-materialist discourse is constantly undercut by frequent recursions to a mythic mode: visionary episodes in which figures of the ancient past suddenly appear and vanish in formerly sacred places (p. 158). For Chris's second husband, Robert, some human or nationalistic ideal is evoked by the spatial and temporal remoteness of the Howe's stone circles, and beyond them by the mythic Golden Age of a "simple" humanity "living high in the race of the wind and the race of life, mating as simple as beasts or birds, dying with a like keen simpleness" (p. 300).

Any tendency here toward an edenic nostalgia is countered in the trilogy's second novel by its metaphorical construction: its sections named after different cloud formations suggest that any political aspiration grounded in the past will not be fulfilled, even when founded on the hope of a materialist redemption; i.e., that the coming general strike would mean "man splendid again" (p. 301). Chris's reservation is that the Howe's "stratus mists and pillars of spume" represent the ephemera of human ideals – including "christianity, socialism and nationalism" – which, after all, are "with men that took them for gods: just clouds, they

passed and finished. Nothing endured but the Seeker himself, him and the everlasting Hills” (p. 300).

In *Grey Granite* Chris’s son, Ewan the younger, devotes his early youth to an archaeological quest for meaning in the past, observing “how alike ourselves [were the ancients] in the things they believed, unessentials different – blood, bone, thought the same” (p. 386). Yet the coming of Ewan and Chris to a fictional “Dundairn” develops the dialectic of the deeply ancient and the radically modern in new directions. In a narrative structured on the taxonomy of granite, we discover that there are in modernity different glints and lustres, mineral streaks or facets which, just like Gibbon’s own Aberdeen, constitute “the *essential* . . . something lighted and shining with a fine flame, cold and amber and gold, the flinty cliffs of Union Street, the flinty cheekbones of the disharmonic faces that press about you in an Aberdeen tram.”²⁴

The implication is that the “geological stratum” has undermined – or broken through as an outcrop – Chris’s deep reverence for “the land” as the only enduring quality in existence: besides of course the central and perpetual human subject. Ewan’s eventual radicalization and his becoming a political organizer constitute a conscious refusal of any recourse to idealism and individualism. But the dialectics prevail. Granite is both the oldest known rock and the most durable material for building new foundations and thus is an exemplary metaphor for what new qualities are to be discovered in human beings. However, a final question remains about the function of destruction in Chris’s new vision of the perpetuity of “Change” as “Deliverer, Destroyer and Friend in one” (p. 496). The suggestion is that destruction rather than production is, like granite, perpetual and ineradicable.

Post-war prosperity? Jack Common, Alan Sillitoe, Jessie Kesson, Raymond Williams

A resolution of the privations and struggles of the 1930s in the election of the Labour government of 1945, and the establishment of the “welfare state,” suggest that “prosperity” is the signified of a new political dawn. But what is remarkable about the novels emerging in the postwar period is the sense of continuity between a pre- and postwar structure of feeling. If a perceived “renaissance” of working-class fiction sat uneasily with the claim that during the 1950s workers were growing more “middle-class,”²⁵ then it was because this misconceived claim failed to understand the long memory – individual or collective – of writers such as Jack Common from Tyneside, Alan Sillitoe from Nottingham, Jessie Kesson from Moray, and Raymond

Williams from the Welsh borderlands. The writers' struggle continues to be waged in ways that are effectively countercultural. Jack Common, who began writing in the 1930s, and his successor, Sid Chaplin, adapt the occasionally sardonic tone of their predecessor, Heslop, and sharpen it into a sustained vaudevillean routine, a comic self-consciousness which both acknowledges and denies its own literariness. For instance, Common in 1951 disrupts the expectations of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman* by imagining an ante-natal incident that "spoilt my autobiography in advance," a genetic blunder when "me and my genes . . . hanging about on the other side of Time . . . made a mess of things": that is, eschewed the places "where the wealthy, talented and beautiful lay coupled" and undertook a "working-class" life of obscurity and "no novelty."²⁶

Despite the mocking irony of such novels, a critical orthodoxy emerged, fueled by the British "New Wave" cinema's adaptations during the 1960s, inextricably equating working-class novels and "realism."²⁷ Any such simple equation, however, is denied by the writers' continuing commitment to narrative innovation. Sillitoe, for instance, often deploys the symbolic vocabulary of his *local* predecessor, D. H. Lawrence, but there is a studied departure from the Lawrentian legacy in his first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), which, although constructed through a subjectively focalized narrative, evokes a consciousness that is always collective and inclusive. Nevertheless, there is also a movement from within the working class to a more distanced or critical outside, achieved through a dialectic of narrative perspective: that is, in shifts from a third-person position that tells of how "Arthur worked on his lathe like a model of industry" to Arthur's own second-person narrative advising that "if you had any brains at all," you would work neither fast nor slow but "do everything deliberately yet with a crafty show of speed."²⁸ The rehearsed cunning of the factory worker is mirrored in the lad's everyday practice of deception, proclaimed in Arthur's reiterated claim that he "allus was a liar . . . a good 'un an' all" (p. 18). Yet such boasting is also revealed to be self-deceptive, since what confers on Arthur the legitimacy of the liar and the braggart is the authority of "popular reading." He is as insidiously persuasive as the popular newspapers that he consistently claims to be the verifiable source of his storytelling: his narrative must be true because he "read it in the *Post* last week" or "in the Sunday papers" (pp. 23, 78). It is the authority of the popular press, to which everybody pays admiring attention but never gives credence, that bolsters the self-delusion of the working-class hero. Sillitoe's text self-referentially discloses the myth of the "lad": the lad's reading is what constructs him and, at the same time, reveals the precariousness of the construct.

Self-conscious critique of working-class masculinity has its complement in writing by women, notable among whom is Jessie Kesson. What distinguishes her contribution in *The White Bird Passes* (1958) is a narrative method that, like Gibbon's, displays no hierarchy of verbal register. Her writing takes characteristic pleasure in the sounds of words: pleasure equally in discovering the poetic strangeness of the exotic "Muskoday" and in uttering the native Scots "ootlins" or outsiders.²⁹ At the same time, Kesson's narrative expresses, as does Mannin's, a preference for the "common" in the face of an ideology of "respectability." In contrast with Gibbon, however, the progression in her two loosely autobiographical novels is from urban to rural poverty. In *The White Bird Passes* the child Janie's movement from "Lady's Lane" to a rural orphanage is entirely circumscribed by the community of women, conspiratorially "in league against the man" (p. 31). The women's constant struggle against poverty, although sometimes alleviated by part-time prostitution, is aggravated by their everyday fears of masculine authority: of being arrested or "inspected" by the Cruelty Man (childcare), the School Board Man (education) or the Sanitary Man (health). Yet there is no voice of moral sanction or condemnation, since as with Kesson's contemporary Catherine Cookson – whose formal domain in *Kate Hannigan* (1950) is a fantasy of idealized class relations – personal movement outwards towards educational or marital achievement does not diminish the sense of class solidarity and belonging: for Kesson, to the protective "world of song and colour, and whirling petticoats and warm, dark women . . ." (p. 12); for Cookson, to "her people . . . good, bad and indifferent, they were her kindred."³⁰

The idea of belonging also preoccupies the Marxist intellectual Raymond Williams in *Border Country* (1960), in which he discovers a means, through a redefined realism, of representing both "the internally seen working-class community" (particularly in the remembered events of the National Strike) and the "movement of people still feeling their family and political connections out of it."³¹ Williams's protagonist crosses and recrosses the borderlands between two emblematic territories: metropolitan London, where as a lecturer he has adopted his father's preferred name, Matthew, and the Welsh rural/industrial borderlands, where he is still known by his birth name, Will. The border becomes an exploratory metaphor, in which Matthew/Will constructs a new form of social consciousness, recognizing the value of rootedness in labor and place and at the same time realizing that "settlement" can lead to complacency: "satisfaction is all very well but change comes from dissatisfaction, we can settle and lose."³²

Post-industrial: Pat Barker, James Kelman

While Kesson's poetical regionalism, Cookson's working-class romances, and Williams's new realism rely on class as a secure or unified marker of social identity, their successors in the later decades begin to register its disintegration. The clearly drawn lines of conflict of a firmly established modernist culture – whether of class, gender, or political conviction – were now becoming blurred, or atomized, into multiple nodes of “difference,” “plurality,” “fragmentation”³³: characteristics that define post-modern or “post-industrial society.”³⁴ Such atomization is evident in the irony of Pat Barker's title for *Union Street* (1982), a novel which, by its division into separate, semi-autonomous stories, signifies the breakdown of working-class social cohesion in Barker's native Teesside. Here the dependable chorus of gossips or community of women or extended family is displaced by women in isolation, the female subject captured in images of disintegration: a broken mirror reflecting “[l]ines and cracks radiat[ing] out, trapping at the centre of the web, her shattered face”; or a mother's “hard exterior [which] had cracked to reveal an inner corruption.”³⁵ The only common factor is reification: women as tools of household work, vessels of progeny, or objects of sexual gratification. Yet there are also signs of resistance: as when Jo works against the “impersonal machine-like passion” of Ken by “imposing upon him the rhythm of the train” passing overhead, making the act “abruptly ridiculous” and causing the loss of “his erection” (p. 101). More vivid still are other accumulating incidents: unexpected “moments of vision,” when a symbolic light – of the moon or a transfigured tree – produces an epiphany, a sudden revelation of an alternative consciousness, a differently gendered world (pp. 176, 264–5). In such ways Barker endorses a refusal to lament the passing of the traditional male-dominated communities, revealing instead how women are actively “changing themselves and changing the character of their class.”³⁶

The stories of *Union Street* form the basis upon which Barker establishes her reputation, maintaining her working-class allegiance, but developing her incisive analyses of class and gender, masculinity, and violence in *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1991–5), and *Another World* (1998). However, it is again from Scotland that the more innovative writing of the final decades emerges, extending the range of linguistic experiment by taking the reader not only to hitherto unvisited locations of working-class life, but to the borderlands of new kinds of class encounter. Notable are Irvine Welsh's narratives of a drug-taking underclass, written mostly in a Leith dialect, but slipping effortlessly into other registers that include parodies of courtroom legal speech, or of educated, literary modes of expression. The uneasy

relationship between a working-class consciousness or culture and the one that supposedly must be adopted in order to write characterizes the work of both Alan Warner from Oban (*Morvern Callar*, 1995) and James Kelman of Glasgow; but it is the latter who most consistently surprises the reader with an expressive range of Glaswegian working-class thought and speech. Kelman's novels work by means of negative apprehension, stripping away the barriers of bourgeois abstraction to express the tangible reality of working-class existence. This entails relinquishing the habit of being "off with the concepts,"³⁷ and getting down instead to "the primaries," a process of what his protagonist in *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) calls "the substractives," a feat of thinking that combines the creative energies of the artist and the footballer:

The magenta the yellow the cyan. The black. It has to be the black. To fuck with the white it's no good. The items to be being produced
Take it calmly. Send over a cross. Up go the heads. Bang.³⁸

Undeterred by the voice in his head of communal censure – "Naw son, naw; fucking rubbish. I'm sorry" – Hines persists, and eventually arrives at the goal of transparency:

the world has become distinct, the black transforming into the most clear, the pure, it is purity . . . spewing out in terms of whatever the fuck it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter; it does not matter, fuck them all, just straight in, straight in to clear it all out. (p. 104).

That final paring away to an ultimately concrete yet transparent clarity is achieved in *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) in Kelman's ex-con, Sammy, suddenly made blind by a beating from "the sodjers": the generic name for all uniformed authority. The narrative strategy of reducing all experience to a brutalized sensory bewilderment and disorientation enables paradoxically a sharpened focus on the processes of consciousness. Here the subtle modulations of "fuck" and its derivatives become the medium of a clarity that only a working-class consciousness is able to achieve:

Folk take a battering but, they do; they get born and they get brought up and they get fuckt. That's the story; the cot to the fucking funeral pyre.³⁹

The words of the solitary but "bold Sammy" echo Beckett's modernist reductionism, but he is no figure of a reduced human condition, since his concrete utterances have no universal validity: the folk are not all folk, but his folk. The blinded Sammy is a *working-class* survivor engaged in strategies of resistance, struggling against the determining forces of a society in which "most of the time ye get fuckt." Yet it is that same chronic state that

also enables the “small victories”: “the wee times you don’t, and it’s the wee times ye look for. This was one of them. It made ye feel good . . . when ye fucking know it man when ye know it . . . the sodjers thought they had him figured man but they didnay” (p. 323).

The figure of Kelman is an appropriate one for concluding a survey of twentieth-century working-class writing. In the face of the steady erosion of class as a valid political and cultural category he points to the ways that a working-class consciousness and a distinctively working-class writing can be actively remade.

NOTES

- 1 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 91.
- 2 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 50.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 83.
- 4 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 8.
- 5 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 147.
- 6 Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 241.
- 7 Patrick MacGill, *Children of the Dead End. The autobiography of a navy* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1914), p. 2.
- 8 Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push. An episode of the Great War* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1916), pp. 251, 161.
- 9 Uttered in MacGill’s companion volume, *The Rat-Pit* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1915), p. 296.
- 10 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hulot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 49.
- 11 Jack Mitchell, *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), p. 69; Ian Haywood, *Working-Class Fiction: from Chartism to ‘Trainspotting’* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997) p. 23; Ian Birchall, “Proletarian Modernism? Form and Content in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*,” *Notebooks 1* (1994), 48.
- 12 Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), pp. 11–12.
- 13 Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), p. 13.
- 14 Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives: Popular Reading, Popular Writing* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 78.
- 15 See George Orwell “The Proletarian Writer” (1940) in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol II, My Country Right or Left*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), pp. 38–46; William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 11–25.

- 16 Graham Holderness, "Miners and the Novel," *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 27.
- 17 Harold Heslop, *Last Cage Down* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), p. 8; *Goaf* (London: The Fortune Press, 1934), p. 124.
- 18 James Hanley, *Boy* (London: André Deutsch, 1990), p. 74; *Men in Darkness* (London: The Bodley Head, 1931), p. 213.
- 19 Harold Heslop, *The Gate of a Strange Field* (New York: D. Appleton, 1929), p. 189; Helen Wilkinson, *Clash* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 232.
- 20 Ethel Mannin, *Privileged Spectator* (London: Jarrolds, 1939), pp. 23, 319.
- 21 Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 46.
- 22 Ethel Mannin, *Venetian Blinds* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), p. 93.
- 23 Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 176
- 24 Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Hairst* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), p. 107, emphasis added.
- 25 The *Times Literary Supplement*, quoted in Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life, 1957–1964* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 1.
- 26 Jack Common, *Kiddar's Luck* (London: Turnstile Press, 1951), p. 7.
- 27 Tony Davies, "Realism and Working-Class Writing," *Working-Class Novel*, ed. Hawthorn, pp. 125–6.
- 28 Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: W. H. Allen, 1978), p. 30.
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- 31 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 272.
- 32 Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 288.
- 33 See Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 58; Harvey, p. 59
- 34 Daniel Bell, "The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society," *The Postmodern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973), p. 262.
- 35 Pat Barker, *Union Street* (London: Virago Press, 1982), pp. 54, 59.
- 36 See Bea Campbell, *Wigan Pier Re-visited* (London: Virago Press, 1984), p. 230.
- 37 James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 10.
- 38 James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995), p. 104.
- 39 James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 16.