



A University of Sussex DPhil thesis

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

MICHAEL HALLAM
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

AVANT-GARDE REALISM:
JAMES HANLEY, PATRICK HAMILTON AND THE LOST YEARS
OF THE 1940s

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APRIL 2011

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted either in whole or in part to any other University for the award of any other degree

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Peter Nicholls and Alistair Davies who supervised this thesis, and to the Arts and Humanities Research Council who funded the project. Many other people also helped with my research and I would like to thank Peter Boxall and Margaret Reynolds; Chris Gostick for his invaluable guidance on the biography of James Hanley; Geoff Gilbert and Philip Tew for sharing their thoughts on Patrick Hamilton, and William Baker and Pat Fox for helping me locate archive material at the libraries of Northern Illinois University and the Harry Ransom Centre for the Humanities. David Rush read drafts of chapters and made a huge number of helpful suggestions. I would also like to express my gratitude to Isheeta Mustafi, who has supported my research and writing in innumerable ways.

I would also like to thank the Patrick Hamilton Estate (managed by AM Heath) and the James Hanley Estate (managed by David Higham Associates) for their kind permission to quote from unpublished and archival material in this thesis. All other material used in this thesis is believed to be in the public domain.

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

MICHAEL HALLAM

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

AVANT-GARDE REALISM:

JAMES HANLEY, PATRICK HAMILTON AND THE LOST YEARS OF THE 1940s

This thesis examines the dynamic relationship between realism and experimentalism in the 1940s and mid-century fiction of James Hanley and Patrick Hamilton. It is argued that the work of both writers during this period, although it might utilise realist forms and techniques, is not characterised by reversion to a traditional and outmoded model of novel writing that predates modernism, but rather, is engaged in a productive and sometimes tense dialogue with the gestures, manners and experiments of the avant-garde. In so doing, Hanley and Hamilton are read as key exemplars of a varied and adventurous literary moment that has been frequently overlooked within the broad narrative of twentieth century British fiction.

It is argued that these works complicate the vocabulary of literary realism by suggesting the novel as a hybrid form: an aesthetic which privileges fidelity to a contemporary “real”, especially the conditions of wartime and post-war and the shifting configurations of social and economic relations, even as it simultaneously projects a deep estrangement or satirical detachment from a sense of unified reality. Whilst registering the manifest differences between the two writers, the thesis explores their fiction’s varying reactions towards and absorption of avant-garde idioms, such as the surrealist and expressionist, and analyses the affective qualities of that “heightening” of language in the construction of their realist narratives. All the novels discussed, in a series of close readings, possess a stylistic or tonal singularity that tangibly frames their narratives, a process of divergence that contests and reconceptualises the concept and aims of literary realism. In historicising this phase of literary change, the thesis draws on the work of various cultural theorists and historians and elaborates the interpretive framework in which the literary 40s and the fiction of Hanley and Hamilton can be recast.

CONTENTS

Introduction	p.2
<u>Section One: James Hanley</u>	
Chapter One: “Touchy About Style”: Perspectives on James Hanley	p.14
Chapter Two: “The Terror Language”: <i>No Directions</i> (1943)	p.31
Chapter Three: “Horizon’s Line A Blur”: <i>The Ocean</i> (1941) and <i>Sailor’s Song</i> (1946)	p.73
<u>Section Two: Patrick Hamilton</u>	
Chapter Four: “The Man on the Margin”: Perspectives on Patrick Hamilton	p.132
Chapter Five: “Eerie Days Followed”: <i>Hangover Square</i> (1941) and <i>Slaves of Solitude</i> (1948)	p.146
Chapter Six: “A ‘Black’ Social History”: <i>The Gorse Trilogy</i> (1951-55)	p.170
Conclusion	p.215
Bibliography	p.219

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: A photograph of James Hanley	p.16
Fig. 2: Firemen working during a Saturday night raid in 1941	p.61
Fig.3: An American poster from 1942	p.82
Fig. 4: The sole survivors of the shipwrecked <i>Lulworth Hill</i>	p.105
Fig. 5: A photograph of Hamilton in the 1930s	p.140
Fig. 6: A Moribundian “balloon”	p.143
Fig. 7: 35 and 36 Cromwell Road, Hove	p.178
Fig. 8: Brighton’s West Pier	p.180
Fig. 9: Brighton Railway Station from the early 1900s	p.180

Introduction

There is an event that occurs in James Hanley's novel *No Directions* (1943) that the narrative discloses in momentous terms. Clem, a reclusive painter, has become so overcome with emotion at the spectacular carnage that falling bombs are wreaking on London that he runs through the city's streets during a black-out. After scrambling to the top of a tall building he senses "A battering sound below, something white threshing in the black moving sea."¹ Getting closer Clem perceives that it is a horse: "A big white stallion loose, a maddened animal" (*ND* 137). He begins to cling to the "beast" as it runs through the streets: "all his life had been a single movement towards this, to hold fast with a hoofed creature, demented in a rocking city" (*ND* 137). Such a visually striking image encourages us to discern a symbolic meaning. Alan Munton reads it as a redemptive moment in a text specifically about war and apocalypse, something that can symbolise how "History does not come to an end. There must be a future, however diminished by loss."² In this thesis, I argue that such a narrative incident is expressive of a tendency that has a significant but hitherto little discussed life in a certain strain of fiction from the 1940s. This tendency is towards singular stylistic manoeuvres that have the potential to transform the tone of an entire novel; moments of seeming unreality (or perhaps sublimity) that push past or make self-conscious the "realist" narrative frames through which other parts of the fiction appear to be housed.

Through this act of categorising an aesthetic tendency, I argue that the British novel in this cultural moment was a highly permeable form receptive to many influences. Whilst images of expressionistic terror or acts of textual surrealistic

¹ James Hanley, *No Directions* (1943) (London: André Deutsch, 1990), p.136. Subsequent page references in text with abbreviation (*ND*).

² Alan Munton, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London, Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 43.

subversion are certainly modalities of avant-garde practice from the 1910s and 20s, the presence of such “moments” in British novels of the 40s and mid-century has not been fully accounted for. Indeed, such a presence seems anomalous to many chronologies of literary history which suggest that 40s writing emerges from a cultural moment when the energies of modernist activity in Britain were dissipating or had entirely died away.³ Cultural practice in the later inter-war years is often thought to be characterised by a large-scale reaction against the “elitist” nature of some modernisms and their supposed elevation of issues of subjectivity over wider social and public problems.⁴ This was a time when many writers – with George Orwell as an exemplar – turned to “documentary” forms of fiction in an effort to account for realities of British life (especially those of class, economic and regional difference) that modernist writers are presumed to have neglected. As Jed Esty explains, this conception of the novel “took as its premise the idea that English society was an unknown quantity.”⁵ There have been negative (if unintended) consequences of a characterisation of literary history that suggests modernism in Britain, with London as its epicentre, represents a cosmopolitan

³ Tyrus Miller suggests that the notion of dissipating artistic energy within avant-garde movements was widely recognised in the late 20s, a phase when a “central part of the avant-garde’s vocation was to profess its lack of vocation.” See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p.3. This project is much influenced by Miller’s thesis that a body of work emerged in the 30s and 40s that engaged in implicit dialogue with what it perceived as the failed or failing aesthetics of previous modernisms. Yet, whereas Miller’s study focuses on modernists who self-consciously broke with modernism (several of whom were iconic literary figures) my emphasis is on a set of writers who worked entirely outside of the social networks of modernism. I suggest that novelists situated outside of modernism - in terms of recognised social groupings - were no less engaged in the arguments it initiated or recognised its “afterlife” in the novel form. For discussion of whether modernism should be seen as an historical category with a finite time-span or as a “tendency that lives a rich and discontinuous life” across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see “introduction” to Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.3-4, at p.4.

⁴ See, for example, the discussion in Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp.36-46. On the rise of so-called “regional novelists”, see Glen Cavaliero, *Rural Tradition in the English Novel: 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.66-80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.43.

network of writers, works and philosophical arguments energised by European avant-gardes as well as non-Western traditions. This conception might be true, of course, but such a dominant image of modernism's vibrancy has consequentially meant that literatures that emerged after the suspected end of modernism – and which frequently took “smaller” aspects of British social life as their subject matter – can seem parochial and conservative by comparison.

Works from the 40s suffer especially from this type of problematic image. One explanation for this might be found in the way writers of the period attempted to address contemporary realities through fiction, insofar as the domineering historical context of the war as subject matter has tended to negate study of the individual characteristics of the works themselves, especially their radical elements. This is one of the arguments of Andrew Sinclair's important panegyric for 40s culture, *War Like A Wasp*: “Their provenance was their nemesis. Their significance was discounted as a mere product of the time, itself held to be of little value.”⁶ Another explanation for the low esteem in which 40s literature has previously been held is the prevailing atmosphere of doubt about the achievements of contemporary fiction that is discernible in the period itself, and that was often articulated through widespread debate about the supposed “death of the novel” – especially in the years immediately following the war. Whilst Cyril Connolly was perhaps the most vocal pessimist, a deflated sense of artistic self-confidence was widely perceived (in marked contrast to the swagger of many avant-garde movements earlier in the century).⁷ As the novelist David Pryce-Jones recalls: “it

⁶ Andrew Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp: The Lost Decade of the 'Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p.10.

⁷ For Connolly's most prolonged attack on contemporary literary trends, see his *Enemies of Promise* (1938) (London: Penguin, 1979). Connolly initially welcomed the war as “an opportunity for the artist to give us nothing but the best.” Cited in Robert Hewison, *Under Siege* (London: Quartet, 1979), p.11. Dan Davin expressed similar views, suggesting that “[though] it did not at once become clear, the end of the War was a

was generally considered that seven lean years were upon literature without the prospect of seven fat years anywhere. The fashionable questions took the form, ‘Can the novel survive?’”⁸

Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay suggest that mid-century British fiction was thus a period in which “the English literary ‘centre’ ceased to understand itself as central.”⁹ This thesis argues that it was also a moment when some writers, perhaps emerging from closer to the literary margins than the “centre”, made ambitious attempts to transgress against the atmosphere of deflation and revivify the novel form. In a series of close analytic readings, I suggest that James Hanley and Patrick Hamilton wrote some of the most compelling fiction of the period.¹⁰ As we shall see, both writers criticised what they saw as a “subjectivist” strain of modernist writing which they believed fetishized personal experience. Although their fictions are strikingly different in form, tone and subject, both Hanley and Hamilton wished to create a sense of “realism” in their fictions – both as an earnest commitment to expressing the contemporary “real” (as they perceived it) as well as a desire to speak to issues of “public” relevance. Frequently these issues are tied to depicting shifting configurations of class – or what Richard Godden has called “an economy of manners” – something

disaster for many writers.” Describing the work of his friend Julian Maclaren-Ross, Davin adds: “The War had given him raw recruits for raw material, and rubbed his nose in the stuff of humanity.” Dan Davin, *Closing Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 9. I expand on the war’s possible effects on artistic creativity in chapter two.

⁸ David Pryce-Jones, “Towards the Cocktail Party”, in Philip French and Michael Sissons, eds., *The Age of Austerity* (London: Hodder, 1963), p.219. For discussion on the “death of the novel” thesis in the post-war period, see Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp.6-8.

⁹ Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina Mackay, *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.4.

¹⁰ Although I focus on the work of Hanley and Hamilton, I take them to be exemplars of an adventurous literary milieu. Significant novels were also published in the 40s by the likes of Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen, Nigel Balchin, William Sansom, Graham Greene, Malcolm Lowry, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Durrell, Naomi Mitchison and Evelyn Waugh, amongst many others.

which both Hanley and Hamilton (who as young writers sympathised with socialist politics) seem acutely aware of and position as a determinant on even the most casual social interactions described in their work.¹¹ For both writers, too, concepts of realisms are shadowed by political and ethical questions of artistic integrity and representation. Yet, realist forms are only one part of the hybrid aesthetic visible in their novels: “traditional” types of narrative disclosure sit in dynamic tension with the formal and tonal singularity of their work.

This is not to suggest that realism connoted exactly the same thing to both writers, or that it can be viewed as a static or homogenous phenomenon, or indeed be straightforwardly considered as an opposite to experimental tendencies. In producing the terms I consider in this thesis, I am indebted to the analytic models proposed by Andrzej Gąsiorek’s study, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (1995). Here, Gąsiorek argues for a rehabilitation of realism as a conceptual term – against the “conventionalist assumptions” of some postmodernist critique.¹² He suggests that realism is heterogeneous and should be considered as multiple phenomena (i.e. realisms) which are expressed in writings that “share a certain cognitive attitude to the world.”¹³ Gąsiorek also argues that as we judge fidelity to realism in texts of this period, or more generally “how novelists respond to realism”, we must first gauge “their prior

¹¹ Richard Godden, *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.12.

¹² Gąsiorek, *Realism and After*, p.9. Gąsiorek criticises texts such as Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (1980) as part of a critical trend which “attributes a simple-mindedness to realist novelists that it’s hard to justify [...] operates with a crude conception of correspondence theory, which is already inapplicable to much nineteenth-century writing and still more so the contemporary period; its account of metalanguage is monolithic [and] it lacks historical specificity and thus offers a generalizing account of realism that portrays it in misleadingly homogenous fashion” (p.10).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.v.

conception of it, their politics and their literary aims.”¹⁴ It is this line of inquiry this thesis pursues to consider the work of Hanley and Hamilton.

The unusual term within my title – avant-garde realism – does have a specific critical currency with which I want to contextualise my argument about 40s fiction. In *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), Language poet Lyn Hejinian borrows the term “avant-garde realism” (from an article in *The New York Review of Books* reviewing an art exhibition) and considers how it might be used in relation to textual forms. Hejinian argues that, in avant-garde realist writing:

subject matter taken from the ordinary world retains its integrity and ordinariness and even banality in conjunction with a highly visible artistic means. The realism of the means – the materiality and palpability of the poetic language, for example – is a precise manifestation of the artist’s attention to the particularity of the subject matter. [...] Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, it is the autonomy of the writing – the high visibility of its devices and even its intrusive strangeness – that authenticates the accuracy of its portrayals and gives the work itself authority.¹⁵

I return to this formulation several times in the thesis as it encapsulates many of the tensions I identify in the work of Hanley and Hamilton. I argue that it is precisely through the “visibility of [...] devices” and the “intrusive strangeness” of their writing, alongside a sense of an intensely felt “attention to the particularity of the subject matter”, that both authors produce their version of “authenticating” realist writing. We might conclude that this amounts to an elevation of personal literary style, a self-conscious procedure through which an author can make a text indelibly his or her own, as in the existentialist characterisation that Fredric Jameson has provided for the concept of style: “the very element of individuality itself, that mode through which the individual consciousness seeks to distinguish itself, to affirm its incomparable

¹⁴ Ibid., p.5.

¹⁵ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.94.

originality.”¹⁶ Yet the “intrusive strangeness” also recalls Gilles Deleuze’s definition of style as “the foreign language within language.”¹⁷ It is partly the foreign and strange – or perhaps, in the manner of Brecht, consciously estranging – elements in the *sui generis* narrative textures of Hanley’s and Hamilton’s work that this thesis sets out to critique.

In literary studies, the language of “neglect” and “rescue” can often have dangerous implications. When a critic attempts to revive the apparently neglected work or fading reputation of an author, movement or period, it can have the undesired effect of redoubling its marginal status within an orthodox account of literary history that has been freshly emphasized by the process. Yet, maybe it is possible for critics to “double” or shadow such neglect in a way that productively engages with the indeterminate status of a writer or text, rather than attempting to straightforwardly rectify it. There is certainly a groundswell of contemporary critics attempting to repudiate ideas of the 40s’ cultural marginality. Whilst the particular emphases of my project are quite individual, I certainly see it as consonant with this larger shift in critical outlook. When Munton published his survey of WWII fiction in 1989 he could feasibly suggest that “This is a virtually untouched subject”.¹⁸ But since then provocative studies on writings of the war have emerged from critics such as Adam Piette, Mark Rawlinson, Patrick Deer and Marina Mackay. Other critics, such as Victoria Stewart, Rod Mengham and Kristin Bluemel, amongst many others, have recently written about the period’s literature beyond the framing of the war. This signals not just a periodic adjustment of academic focus, but a testimony to the richness (and, I would argue, enduringly unsettling qualities) of the period’s cultural products. Yet the protocols and emphases of academic

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Forms of Literature* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1971), p.334.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “He Stuttered” in Michael Greco and Daniel Smith, trans., *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p.113.

¹⁸ Munton, *English Fiction*, p.ix.

reading take a long time to shift and potential connections and differences between apparently “major” and “minor” writers are hard to reconceptualise against the sheer weight of critical history. For example, both Samuel Beckett and Hamilton wrote satiric fiction in the 40s in which obsessive-compulsive central characters struggle to negotiate the most basic social interactions, yet, whilst Beckett’s work has been considered in innumerable philosophical critiques examining the agency of characters in his narrative world not a single book-length critical study of Hamilton’s work has yet been published.

With this in mind, in the first and fourth chapters of this thesis I trace the careers of Hanley and Hamilton, respectively, mainly outside of their work in the 40s. These sections are intended as prefaces to the subsequent analytic readings of individual novels; pieces which can provide relevant biographical and critical contexts and a theoretical framing for their practice as experimental realists during the 40s.¹⁹

In the second chapter, I examine more closely Hanley’s novel about the Blitz, *No Directions*. As we shall see, the pressure to create a realistic depiction of events that many felt were genuinely cataclysmic was keenly felt by Hanley – he wished to write a novel, he wrote to a friend in the early 40s, that would “omit nothing” of the “tragic”

¹⁹ Hanley experienced gas attack fighting in northern France during the First World War, at a time when Hamilton attended school in Hove, and from where he observed, with horror, military manoeuvres practised at the nearby cricket ground. See Nigel Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* (1991) (London: Black Spring Press, 2008), p.39. Although Hamilton was the younger writer by seven years, his fiction emerged into the public eye much earlier than Hanley’s and sustained greater commercial success. The two chapters in the thesis titled “perspectives” do not aim to sketch out such manifest differences between writers who emerged from very different social milieus and had very different formative experiences, though such differences are interesting to note as evidence of the diversity and durability of the artistic generation that had to eventually emerge from the shadow of the “giant” literary figures that immediately preceded them (Woolf, Lewis, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence and so on). Nor do the pieces presume biographical explanations for significant elements in their fiction: they intend, rather, to stress how the elements of Hanley’s and Hamilton’s fiction in the 40s I take to be most interesting are part of wider narratives played out through their writing careers.

realities of the bombings.²⁰ Yet, there are discernible tensions in *No Directions* between such truth-telling impulses and the formal innovations through which the text stages its representation of such exceptional events. Hanley was not alone in struggling to find a mode of expression – a “terror language” – appropriate for capturing what he perceived as the “immensity” of the Blitz and this is illustrated by a contextualising reading of narratives of London under siege by William Sansom and Nigel Balchin.²¹ The chapter also discusses how the narrative strategies of Hanley (and indeed Sansom) can be related to significant moments in contemporary surrealist art. Alert to recent statements by W.G. Sebald on writings that have addressed the British and American bombing of German cities, the chapter concludes with a wider discussion on wartime literature and the ethics of representing such crises in literature.

The thesis then moves, in chapter three, to a discussion of Hanley’s intense stories of wartime shipwreck, *The Ocean* (1941) and *Sailor’s Song* (1943). Both novels express some of the characteristic emphases of Hanley’s sea novels, especially the depiction of ordinary sailors’ divided loyalties between home and family life and the elemental, magnetic pull of the sea. But, as we shall see, the novels house their very similar subjects and settings in quite divergent forms. I concentrate especially on the “imagistic” style of *The Ocean* (read in contrast to ideas of literary “impressionism” as projected by Conrad), and the subversive and sexually provocative qualities of the narration of *Sailor’s Song*, partly focalised through a delirious sailor clinging to a life-raft. In Hanley’s WWII fiction, terrains and meanings familiar from other examples of their genre (Blitz writing, the sea story tradition) are made to seem opaque and indeterminate. This contrasts with the overt and propagandist qualities of many popular films of the era. Those that addressed the current war – explicitly or in the more indirect

²⁰ See Letter to Norman Unger, May 20th, 1941 (Northern Illinois University Collection).

²¹ Ibid.

fashion of Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) – both shaped and reflected public opinion in ways that literature could not compete with.²² In chapter three, I also examine maritime-themed films by Noel Coward and Alfred Hitchcock. Although they are read as “texts” which specifically chime with the themes of the chapter, this commentary is also intended to reflect more widely on the thesis's aims, as the thematic “traffic” that flows between literary and cinematic forms is an important constituent of the cultural texture of the 40s.

Hamilton's fiction is “cinematic” in several ways and chapter five identifies some of the filmic and theatrical elements of *Hangover Square* (1941) and *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947). Linked by central characters struggling to escape enclosing social environments, the atmosphere of each novel is infused with the claustrophobic tensions of the boarding houses and saloon bars which are their primary settings. The dramas they narrate are pitched as disconcertingly intense psychological battles, yet there is a simultaneous trajectory in these fictions away from a sense of psychological “depth” or other protocols of realist fiction. “Personality” is often flattened out to a pattern of tics or recurring gestures of antisocial behaviour. Dialogue is an almost perpetual battleground between characters that exist in a social world without shared moral values. Indeed, the many rebarbative and conniving bullies who populate the Hamiltonian “world” are usually in thrall to Hitler and Mussolini (or more covert, specifically English manifestations of fascism), whereas sympathetic characters in his fictions are generally cast as naive about the world around them, yet somehow emotionally or even ontologically anti-fascist. Chapter five reads both *Hangover Square*

²² See Andy Medhurst, “Myths of Consensus and Fables of Escape: British Cinema 1945-51” in Jim Fyrth, ed., *Labour's Promised Land?: Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), p.290: “[Because of the] exigencies of war [...] British films were forced to democratise themselves rapidly and audiences responded accordingly. The cinema became a prime site of national cohesion”.

and *The Slaves of Solitude* as satiric “performances” enacted through these schematised and strange narrative landscapes.

In chapter six, the thesis considers Hamilton’s “Gorse Trilogy” (1951-55). Novels written in the early 50s and set in the interwar years seem a paradoxical subject with which to conclude a discussion of 40s fiction, yet in some ways they are summative of many of the tensions we have already discerned in this cultural moment (and also, I am seeking to move beyond purely chronological definitions of “40s writing”). The novels describe the various crimes of a conman, Ralph Ernest Gorse, who slowly gains the trust of victims peculiarly vulnerable to flattery and then, through convoluted larcenies, divests them of their savings. Set in the 20s and 30s, Gorse is scripted as a kind of Hitler figure, yet this narrative projection soon collapses under the weight of its own allegorical incompatibility. The chapter reads the Gorse novels as being, amongst many other things, a satirical and pessimistic critique of literature’s ability to illuminate or create histories.

This thesis is less pessimistic: all of the above novels participated in a knowing expansion of the novel form and the meanings of realism, through study of such diverse and often disconcerting texts we learn more about the complex literary moment from which they emerged.

SECTION ONE: JAMES HANLEY

CHAPTER ONE

“Touchy About Style”: Perspectives on James Hanley

The “autobiographical excursion” of James Hanley (1897-1985) – *Broken Water* (1937) – is one of the few texts to document the writer’s life. As the equivocal subtitle hints, it is not constructed as orthodox autobiography. Indeed, it reads like a first-person narrated novel (with long passages of dialogue) and subsequent research has revealed some of the ways in which it fictionalises aspects of Hanley’s early life.²³ Hanley was born in Liverpool in 1897 to Irish parents who had immigrated to the city at the beginning of the decade, yet the first scenes of *Broken Water* depict the Hanley family (with a young James) picnicking near Dublin. As Chris Gostick suggests, *Broken Water* seems “carefully crafted to suggest an Irish background”.²⁴ Hanley persistently made another self-mythologizing gesture: suggesting, especially in personal correspondence, that he was born in 1901 rather than 1897.²⁵ Gostick suggests that the lexicographer Eric Partridge, whose short-lived Scholartis Press published Hanley’s first novel, might have originated the new date of birth as a way of provoking interest in a then unknown writer by means of exaggerating the dramatic nature of Hanley’s leaving home and

²³ See, especially, the invaluable biographical sketch (which I draw on in this section): Chris Gostick, “Extra Material on James Hanley’s *Boy*” in James Hanley, *Boy* (1931) (London: Oneworld, 2007), pp.181-204. Quotations from this novel in text with the abbreviation (*B*). There is also information on Hanley’s life in Frank G. Harrington, *James Hanley: A Bold and Unique Solitary* (Fracestown: Typographeum, 1989) and John Fordham, *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2002).

²⁴ Gostick, “Extra Material”, p.181.

²⁵ In a letter to Henry Green from 1933, Hanley writes: “When I went away to sea at the age of 13 I in fact became a man” (cited in Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.24). Naturally, when some critics have discussed Hanley’s biography they have been guided by the author’s claims. See, for example, Patrick Williams, “No Struggle But The Home”, in Patrick Quinn, ed., *Recharting the Thirties* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), p. 134; and Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), p.80.

joining the Merchant Navy in 1915.²⁶ By the erroneous chronology Hanley promoted he would have only been thirteen or fourteen at that time (in a parallel to the narrative of probably his most famous novel, *Boy*, published in 1931) although in reality he first went to sea at seventeen. During the First World War Hanley worked aboard ships that transported troops or war-supplies, mainly across the Atlantic but also to Greece. In 1917 Hanley deserted a troopship in New Brunswick, Canada, and joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. After a period of training, Hanley was finally involved in fighting on the Western Front, seeing action at Amiens in May 1918, and by the war's end he was in a Lancashire hospital recuperating from what was probably "minor gas poisoning."²⁷

Through the 20s Hanley returned to Liverpool and worked in a variety of jobs, including as a railway porter. He wrote fiction in his spare time yet initially struggled to find publishers willing to accept his work. It is largely Hanley's formative experiences working in "blue-collar" jobs, as well as the working class *milieus* depicted in his early fiction, which has led to Hanley's work being discussed by critics in a wider context of so-called proletarian writing. Andy Croft's influential study of "socialist imaginative writing" in the 30s, for example, reads Hanley's early novels as part of "the culture of a period when the Left took its concerns, its enthusiasms and its literature into the mainstream of British life"; whilst Christopher Hilliard's recent study on the "democratization" of writing in Britain and the expansion of publishing opportunities (in the first half of the twentieth century), uses Hanley as a prominent example of a worker-writer who did not emerge from the type of social background that had

²⁶ Gostick, "Extra Material", p.186.

²⁷ Ibid., p.182.

previously dominated literary culture.²⁸ Hanley had consciously projected an image of himself as a worker-writer in his attempts to forge a writing career. In 1929, the year before his first novel, *Drift*, was finally published, Hanley writes to Edward Garnett (the editor and publisher's reader), in terms that vividly describe both his own compulsive attitude towards imaginative writing and the oppressive labour system and social environment that Hanley felt stifled such creative instincts:

I am a labouring man. At night I write... Am out working all the day on the railway – and trying to get my writing done... If I did not write – and live in that world of my own – I would just do what they all do down where I live. Roll up like a pig or louse and become dumb.²⁹

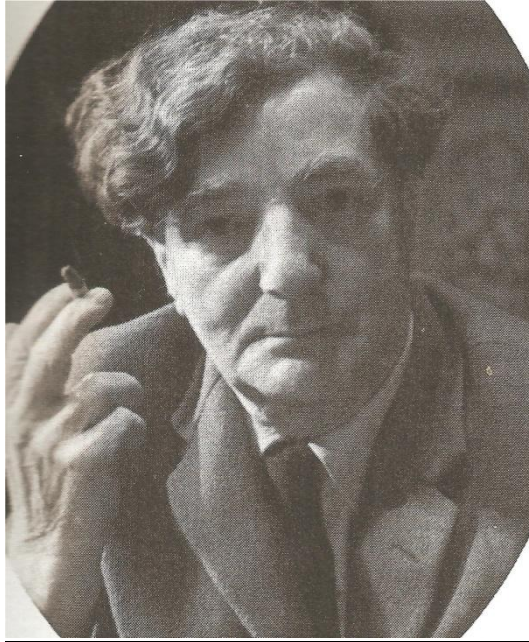


Fig. 1: James Hanley (date unknown).

Hanley did emerge from these inauspicious circumstances to become a full-time writer, “a professional [man] of letters” as Valentine Cunningham describes him.³⁰ Although he was never to achieve real commercial success (and often continued to struggle for a regular and substantive income) Hanley’s writing sustained a forty year

²⁸ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p.11; Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Cited in Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents*, p.127.

³⁰ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.307.

career in which he published over thirty novels, as well as plays, short stories and non-fiction works, such as short critiques of John Cowper Powys (*A Man in the Corner*, 1969) and Herman Melville (*A Man in the Customs House*, 1971). Yet, Hanley's experiences of an economically depressed and religiously divided working class Liverpool (and its vivid depiction in *Drift* and *The Furys* (1935), the first of five panoramic novels about a working-class family in "Gelton", a fictionalised version of Liverpool) has meant that the context of "proletarian" writing and the frequently concomitant problem of "commitment" to a working-class politics continue to shadow discussion of his work. Patrick Williams, for example, questions whether the "patronage of [Hanley] by literary and establishment figures such as John Lehmann and Nancy Cunard" that expedited his early career suggests a potential for "contradictions at the level of class location and affiliation."³¹ Williams cites Carole Snee, who has similarly questioned the tensions between "a working class person who writes in order to explore his world, and a person from the working class who seeks to become an 'Author' with all that implies of the dominant literary culture."³² In the early 30s, Hanley's burgeoning credentials as a writer of "literary" fictions were strongly reinforced by his connection to non-mainstream and avant-garde presses (such as Scholartis) and especially by eulogistic introductions appended to his works by other, much better known writers: Richard Aldington in the "privately printed" first edition of the graphic WWI story *The German Prisoner* (1930), John Cowper Powys in the short story collection *Men in*

³¹ Williams, "No Struggle but the Home", p.135. In fact, Hanley's work won support from many notable figures – both inside and outside the literary establishment – many of whom played an active role in establishing Hanley's reputation. Through Partridge, Hanley met Charles Lahr, the owner of the influential Progressive Bookshop, and stayed with him in his London home during 1930, when attempting to make his first break from Liverpool and become a full-time writer. During the 30s and 40s such figures as E.M. Forster, William Faulkner, T.E. Lawrence, Henry Green, Henry Miller and John Cowper Powys praised Hanley's work, several becoming committed advocates throughout his career. Powys, especially, was an influential friend (and close neighbour for certain periods when Hanley was living in north Wales).

³² Cited in Williams, "No Struggle but the Home", p.135.

Darkness (1931) and later Henry Miller in the Blitz novel *No Directions* (1943). This helped to afford Hanley a type of status which eluded some of the other so-called proletarian writers of the period, and his earnest and intriguing conception of imaginative writing as a form of socio-cultural resistance against material oppression and deprivation (that makes people “dumb”), suggests that his own progression to becoming a literary “Author” deserves to be scrutinized in the context of class and economic concerns. Yet there are evident definitional problems with a type of criticism that attempts to connect a working class political movement to both aesthetic and biographical perspectives. Cunningham has questioned whether “proletarian” is a term adequate to describe the divergent social backgrounds of those 30s writers who took working-class life as their subject matter.³³ This is definitely pertinent in Hanley’s case. As John Fordham argues, Hanley’s “social position” is made problematic by the “history of Irish settlement” in which the status of immigrant families like Hanley’s was “rudely challenged” by a British class system imbued with imperialism and racism: “In effect, the move to Liverpool produced an effect of ‘proletarianization’ on the migrant middle class.”³⁴ If the “received idea of [Hanley’s] ‘proletarian’ identity” has had some

³³ Cunningham, *British Writers*, pp.306-7. Cunningham discusses many writers in this context, including: Jim Phelan and George Garrett (two contemporaries of Hanley who also emerged from the Liverpool literary scene), B.L. Coombes, Walter Greenwood, Joe Corrie, A.P. Roley, Harold Heslop and Leslie Halward. As Hilliard’s study makes clear, many of the “proletarian” writers actively pursued private reading as self-education (as a young man Hanley went through irregular but voracious bouts of reading which took in many diverse authors) or participated in types of community learning – such as evening classes, reading groups or the “writers’ circles” that began to flourish in the 20s – that were quite different from the hegemonic British literary culture still dominated by authors educated at public schools and universities, especially Oxford and Cambridge. Cunningham asks whether the fact of writers undergoing such an educative process reveals an implicit intervention in more bourgeois cultural traditions which problematises the “proletarian” label at the outset (p.307): “if reading and writing had embourgeoisified you, as they tend to, did you still count [as a “proletarian” writer]?”

³⁴ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.12. Gostick also suggests that Hanley’s social position needs to be viewed in the context of the Hanley family’s status as Irish migrants: “although Hanley was clearly a *working man* – at least during his time at sea and immediately after the First [World] War - he was never *working class*. His family may have lived in a working class district of Liverpool, but although his father worked as a steamship firemen for much of his life his parents were essentially from middle class and professional Irish

critical currency, it has also meant that his work has often been too readily aligned with a realist tradition that many critics feel was manifest in 30s “proletarian” writing, or bracketed too closely with the prevailing cultural and social conditions from which his fictions first emerged.³⁵

Recently, Debra Rae Cohen (borrowing a phrase from Marina Mackay), has suggested that Hanley was one of several writers in the 30s who produced work that could be described as: ““plain-speaking itinerant political writing.””³⁶ Rae Cohen is discussing Rebecca West’s travelogue *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), so we might infer that the specific Hanley text she has in mind is his non-fiction study about unemployment in the mining villages of South Wales – *Grey Children* (1937).³⁷ This text does address contemporary politics, with Hanley especially questioning the direction of the British socialist movement (which he believes expends its energies on parochial power-struggles or theorising events in the Soviet Union rather than finding practical ways to ameliorate conditions for the poorest in society). It is also ostensibly

backgrounds, as were so many during the Irish diaspora, and although the family undoubtedly knew poverty, they remained highly cultured. There were regular visits to the Liverpool theatre, and probably to concerts too, and all the children were encouraged to read and use the local public libraries. So it is no accident that the three surviving children all became middle-class professionals in one way or another – and his two younger brothers were both officers in the Second World War” (Letter to the author, 2008).

³⁵ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.12. For a typical characterisation of this realist “tradition” within 30s writing, see Simon Dentith, “James Hanley’s *The Furies*: The Modernist Subject goes on Strike” in *Literature & History* 12/1 (2003), p. 45: “the predominant mode adopted by working-class novelists in the 1930s was that which descended from nineteenth-century realism and its descendants”. Dentith does contrast this mode with that of Hanley, however, whose work Dentith argues is essentially “modernist”.

³⁶ Debra Rae Cohen, “Rebecca West’s Palimpsestic Praxis” in Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.153.

³⁷ Published in the same year as George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* and also coterminous with the launch of Mass Observation, the social research organisation whose aims were to explore and record the “everyday” lives of British people, *Grey Children* shows that Hanley also participated, though much less famously, in the observational or ethnographic “turn” of 30s culture. Orwell wrote an approving review of *Grey Children* for *Time and Tide*, reprinted in Peter Davison, ed., *Orwell’s England* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.218-220. For analysis on this aspect of 30s culture, see Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2004).

“plain-speaking”, with much space given to transcribed interviews with unemployed miners and their families. Yet, Rae Cohen’s description is insufficient to account for the way Hanley connects the political to more philosophical questions of human agency, or to show how Hanley’s “ethnography” is rhetorically constructed (just as much, I would suggest, as those of West and Orwell). A prefatory chapter entitled “Many Voices”, for example, consists of short extracts from Hanley’s interviews, a series of quotes attributed to names like Ivor Thomas, Mrs Pritchard, or anonymous contributors such as a “Married miner, aged twenty-three. Seven years unemployed.” They make statements such as: *“I go to the social centre every day. There’s nothing else to do.”*³⁸ The device is apparently simple yet achieves powerful effects (“By its cumulative effect this is a terribly moving book”, Orwell notes in his review).³⁹ A series of quotes without authorial explication intimates a type of unmediated authenticity, yet in the selection and placement of the individual statements Hanley is constructing the framework from which generic meanings or conclusions might be drawn. The manifest similarities between the different quotations (both in language and content) tend to ironise the “Many Voices” title, and the disturbing “cumulative effect” of the chapter is to suggest the existence of a type of shared psychological depression, something which homogenises expression and limits individual personality. Here, as in much of his fiction, what appears to interest Hanley are the dehumanizing effects of brutal working conditions, deprivation or long-term unemployment: he argues that if the unemployed miners’ “feeling of not being wanted, of being useless” perpetuated a few more years, “they might forget what human beings are like.”⁴⁰

³⁸ James Hanley, *Grey Children: A Study in Humbug and Misery* (London: Methuen, 1937), p.11 [italics are Hanley’s].

³⁹ Orwell, “Review of *Grey Children*”, p.219.

⁴⁰ Hanley, *Grey Children*, p.viii. Hanley perhaps had special empathy for the plight of such individuals because of his own personal experience of the 20s depression: Hilliard suggests that

Registers of political or social critique can be discerned in much of Hanley's fiction, yet, as subsequent chapters will show, such critique often works more covertly or subtextually through his later narratives. In Hanley's earliest fiction, the desire to address "public" issues through the novel form is sometimes limned quite transparently, so that a character or narrator might explicitly interpret narrative events as part of a wider social situation, as happens in *Boy*: "Nobody seemed able to escape this huge machine that daily ground people's hopes beneath its wheel" (*B* 15). Such explicit political overtones are perhaps illustrative of a prominent paradigm of 30s writing, but Hanley's work (with adaptations to his style) continued to address changing class or social landscapes through subsequent decades, something which is neglected by critics who think of Hanley only in terms of 30s culture. *What Farrar Saw* (1946), for example, describes (in highly satirical terms) the rise of middle class consumerism and social mobility through the mass use of the car; the novel thus captures something of what Ken Hirschkop describes as the "distinctive rhythm and feel" of post-war social life.⁴¹ In the 50s and 60s Hanley produced many radio and television plays set in

Hanley himself "[was] said to have begun writing after two years' unemployment" (Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents*, p.107).

⁴¹ Ken Hirschkop, "Culture, Class and Education" in Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.455. Hirschkop characterises this 40s and 50s social world as one based on shared assumptions about "domestic consumerism and the relative absence of absolute poverty; an emphasis on individual attainment heavily dependent on educational achievement; and communications that, as Raymond Williams once pointed out, made more drama on screen each week than previous generations saw in a lifetime [...] a democratisation of progress and the advent of a mass media [that] suggested to some that class distinctions were disappearing" (pp.445-6). Personal correspondence suggests that, in the second half of the 40s, Hanley was dismayed about such shared assumptions of "progress". Hanley was one of a number of novelists (especially social conservatives like Evelyn Waugh) who criticised the "lukewarm doctrinaire socialism" of the Clement Atlee Labour Government of 1945-51. In a letter of 1946, Hanley writes: "The more stupid people grow the better they appear to like it. There is no sense of proportion, no sense of values, there is very little of anything except paper, and there is I admit plenty of that, to compose the millions and millions of forms, and directives, and permits [...] plenty of barking little voices telling you what to do, how to do it, why to do it [...] We are living under a dictatorship, which wears a soft velvet glove." Hanley also believed that bureaucratic priorities undermined the values of culture: "writers and artists generally are

contemporary domestic situations and his return to prose fiction in the 70s (after not publishing a novel for fourteen years) produced novels that continue to explore the material circumstances that (often negatively) shape modern social experience or help formulate the major apprehensions of an historical moment.⁴² *A Woman In The Sky* (1973), for example, explores the social isolation of elderly women who live in the confined spaces of a contemporary high-rise housing estate in a poor area of London.

Ken Worpole suggests that Hanley's style evolved towards a "very dense and highly elliptical" mode in his later work and away from "more realistic, 'dynastic', panoramic working-class settings" – and concludes that this should be seen as a "very conscious development from the novels and stories of the 1930s."⁴³ This view receives an implicit confirmation in Hanley texts that project an image of himself as a writer. In

counting for less and less." See letters to Norman Unger, November 17th, 1946 and December 2nd, 1947 (Northern Illinois University, Hanley Collection).

⁴² The relationship between Hanley's fiction and dramatic writing is made especially interesting by the fact that on several occasions his plays were later rewritten as prose fiction – *Another World* (1972), for example, was a novelistic retelling of the BBC play *The Inner World of Miss Vaughn* (1964). Both Hanley's short fiction and especially his theatrical pieces, although largely beyond the scope of discussion in this thesis, deserve critical attention. Several of Hanley's favourite writers were playwrights (including Ibsen and Strindberg), and Hanley used the dramatic form to produce works with a similar psychological intensity, and atmosphere of incipient doom, as those of contemporary plays by Samuel Beckett and especially Harold Pinter. Hanley's *The Inner Journey*, performed in 1966 and based on an earlier radio play transmitted by the BBC in 1959 (*Gobbett*), also strongly recalls the melodramatic situations and revelations of "horror" that are seen in Patrick Hamilton's more famous plays. Gostick describes it as a: "spine-chilling story of a dwarf used by his father as a ventriloquist's dummy in their joint stage show, in which their mutually dependent relationship gradually disintegrates and the dwarf is killed by the father in front of the spellbound audience" (Gostick, "Extra Material", p.202). Unlike Hamilton, who viewed his own plays as less weighty and important than his novels (see chapter four), Hanley appears to have placed equal literary merit on both modes of expression, and for periods of his career considered himself as primarily a dramatist. See Gostick, "Extra Material", p.191.

⁴³ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.91. Worpole believes that the difficulty of Hanley's "chosen style" in his late fiction has both "strengths and weaknesses". When it works successfully, such as in *A Woman In The Sky*: "it achieves insights and understandings of the lives that people are driven to negotiate under the pressures of class, material circumstances and emotional difficulty, which just doesn't find in the contemporary realistic novel [Worpole is writing in the early 80s]." However, Worpole argues that the writing in Hanley's very long novel *Dream Journey* (1976) – which features the same characters as *No Directions* (1943) (the subject of the following chapter) – is often "impenetrable" (pp.91-2): "The energy in his writing is amazing but is sometimes defeated by a failure to make any concessions to the needs of his readers for moments of recapitulation or exegesis."

a piece called “Anatomy of Llangyllwch” (1953) Hanley describes the different residents of a small Welsh town (in a manner that is “often said to be a forerunner of Dylan Thomas’s radio play *Under Milk Wood*, which was broadcast the following year”) with Hanley himself as one of the residents: “Hanley, chunky realist and flounderer in off-Dreiserian prose, naive, and touchy about style, thinks up another one.”⁴⁴ The sentence seems to indicate less Hanley’s desire to show writing as a type of *work* alongside that of the farmers and quarrymen (though he firmly believed it was), rather than to reveal his identification with the social rhythm of his adopted home, a place where people of all professions and social positions can possess a complex and intense imaginative life: “Vaughan, quarryman, poet, thinks war is stupid, carries close inside him like two unhealing wounds, fear of extinction, horror of immortality.”⁴⁵ A text such as “Anatomy of Llangyllwch” also seems to reinforce – by its form as well as its message – Worpole’s contention that Hanley consciously developed a stylistic repertoire that could effectively extend the scope of his early fictions and frame his “chunky” realism: “[a] greater range of styles and techniques for exploring the multifaceted and complex world of working-class experience.”⁴⁶ In “A Writer’s Day”, another

⁴⁴ Gostick, “Extra Material”, p.201; Hanley, “Anatomy of Llangyllwch” in *Don Quixote Drowned* (Macdonald: London, 1953), p.241.

⁴⁵ Hanley, “Anatomy of Llangyllwch”, p.241. Hanley set several novels in rural Wales, often figuring its lifestyle and landscape as a positive contrast to the industrial cities of England. In a letter from the 60s, Hanley writes: “I am determined to go back [to Wales], even though the whole country is loaded with memories, and [if] I am lucky then I shall see to it that it will be called Cartref [home, abode, domestic], in the full meaning of that word. Wales was my country and my home from the moment I stepped on its soil. Over the years I have preferred the hard working hill farmers of Wales as my neighbours” (Letter to Mr Stephens, date unclear, NIU collection). Wales probably represented, for Hanley, not just a domestic sanctuary but an appropriate location to facilitate his desire to remain outside of the metropolitan social networks that dominated cultural production in Britain: “the creative writer’s real home lies on the fringe of society. I can see far better, and more distant, looking in, rather than looking out” (cited in Harrington, *A Bold and Unique Solitary*, p.15). For discussion on the importance of Wales to Hanley’s aesthetics, see Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p. 160: Hanley believed Wales to be “an incorruptibly natural realm, where still resides the possibility of human redemption and ‘true community.’”

⁴⁶ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.93: Worpole also argues that these “styles” could not be “developed without reference to the achievements of the bourgeois literary tradition” and lists

semi-autobiographical and allusive piece from the collection *Don Quixote Drowned*, Hanley also makes apparent his desire to differentiate himself from the “proletarian” writing with which he had been, and often still is, bracketed:

Here they were, representatives of whining sailors, crucified miners, half-starved builders’ labourers [...] What a crew, indeed! A blind mass of feelings that seemed never under control. Well, if only they will step forward they would be shown the tricks, the technique. And what style! Quite horrible, and no self-criticism at all.⁴⁷

Hanley’s “touchiness” about style was not shared by many of contemporaries, Hanley suggests. Questions of aesthetics and formal control were neglected in favour of “blind” emotional responses, or fictions were reductively contrived to make political points: “Writing with the fist, apart from being painful and laborious is, after all, only exciting as spectacle. After a while you outlive your own curiosity.”⁴⁸ Continuing to retrospectively address the putatively epochal culture of the 30s – in which “Great stratas of life were in convulsion [...] would Literature stand it?” – Hanley also criticises the condescension of “Mass Observers” who were “standing astonished at factory benches” or “writing loud sonnets about the margarine queues”, as well as the desultory observational mode of Orwell, “a literary bogeyman standing on Wigan Pier, since duly canonised”, whose “telescope shifted” to the Spanish Civil War as soon as he realised that “the view from Wigan Pier [...] yielded up nothing but whales and pokey general shops carrying stale shag and *Peg’s Paper*.”⁴⁹ In the following chapters we will see how Hanley’s fictions of the early 40s, what might be characterised as the mid-phase of his

writers as diverse as “Ibsen, Strindberg, Synge, Joyce, Gorky, O’Neill, Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Jack London and Ben Traven” as potential influences on Hanley’s modes of writing.

⁴⁷ Hanley, “A Writer’s Day”, *Don Quixote Drowned*, pp.79-80.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.77. Cunningham shares Hanley’s animosity to the style of some of the “proletarian” novels of the 30s: “certain badness – and shared badnesses – that proletarian fictionists were heir to are readily discernible. Their going idea of what shaped a satisfying story greatly resembles the most routinated procedures of popular fiction. Tears were to be openly jerked with the energy of the most melodramatic Victorian fictions” (Cunningham, *British Writers*, p.309).

⁴⁹ Hanley, “A Writer’s Day”, pp.79, 81.

career, attempt to stage a sophisticated intercession between aesthetic and socio-political concerns. Yet, the discussion of these texts should be seen as part of the wider tensions visible through Hanley's long career, especially the prevailing context of Hanley's conscious self-positioning as a writer engaged with formal innovation yet committed to representing the "real"; a writer who observes from "the fringe of society", but not indulging in (as Hanley saw it) the privileged "author" position and compromised anthropologies of Orwell and M-O.

If Hanley's novelistic style did become "denser", the directness of some of the language of his 30s fictions should not disguise how much they also diverged from the conventions of mainstream realist fiction of the time.⁵⁰ Edward Stokes has argued that, as a first novel, *Drift* "recalls Joyce in several ways", especially the *bildungsroman* mode and religious themes of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1917).⁵¹ Joe Rourke, its central protagonist, is a young man who, as he reaches maturity, feels compelled to question the value systems of his parents' generation, especially the "values" of sectarian communities who persistently define themselves in opposition to another denomination. Joe defies his family's wishes by refusing to follow his father's career as a sailor, and then by falling in love with a local prostitute: "He ought to realise, in the first place, that he is a Catholic – and that our holy father the Pope does not sanction marriages between Catholics and Protestants, much less prostitutes."⁵² Joe's sexual desire is socially taboo and the pressures of this combine with his own sense of religious transgression to create a feeling of enormous personal crisis: "He wanted [...] to lose himself, to blot out all the terrible thoughts laying siege to his

⁵⁰ Sections of the discussion in this chapter were delivered as a paper, "A Fundamental Rottenness Therein': Rape, Torture and the Language of Violence in the Early Writing of James Hanley", at the Writings of Intimacy Conference held at the University of Loughborough, September 2010.

⁵¹ Edward Stokes, *The Novels of James Hanley* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1964), p.19.

⁵² Hanley, *Drift* (1930) (Lodon: Nicolson and Watson, 1944), p.101. Subsequent quotations in text with the abbreviation [D].

tortured soul. ‘Jesus, Jesus!’ he wailed, half aloud” (*D* 83). Yet, the freedom from consciousness that Joe longs for is achieved precisely by the sexual life which initiates the mental conflict: “The gulf of desire blotted out their thoughts. They did not exist. They were floating in the realms of nothingness. The hurricane of desire swept him off his feet” (*D* 95). One of the achievements of the novel is the explicitness and intensity with which it depicts working-class lives and desires, a subject that Hanley believed had received inadequate or stereotyped treatment throughout the recent history of the British novel.⁵³ Hanley’s early work is often marked with hyperbolic or poetic phrasing (“Swarming miraculous life. The human ambulance, a mighty phalanx sweeping down, down, down”), and it is through such powerful, heightened uses of language that Hanley locates a mode for expressing both personal and collective life, in the process creating a narrative world in which, as Worpole puts it, “Society is a deranged nightmare” (*D* 203).⁵⁴

Hanley’s second novel, *Boy*, also describes the confined and violent social world of a dockside community (unlike *Drift*, the setting is not specified as Liverpool) but it is also the first of several narratives in which Hanley would depict life aboard a ship. Like Joe, thirteen year-old Arthur Fearon does not want to be “a dock-hand all his life”, like his father, but dreams of staying in education to become a chemist or perhaps a schoolteacher (*B* 17). Instead, the narrative follows Arthur as he is beaten by his father, forced by parental pressure into a job clearing the bilges of a ship, tied up, covered in shale oil, locked in a boiler room and urinated on as an “initiation” from the other ship boys. Stowing away on a merchant vessel, Arthur is physically and verbally abused by

⁵³ In a letter Hanley writes to Geoffrey Faber in 1934, we see his attitude towards what he saw as the stereotyping of working class protagonists in fiction, “from Dickens down to D.H. Lawrence”. “Proletarian” characters had persistently been represented, according to Hanley, “as a sort of dullard, a kind of buffoon and low comedian of the lowest tastes. But that is all wrong” (cited in Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.59).

⁵⁴ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.81.

older sailors, raped, coaxed into a trip to a brothel, and, after he has contracted syphilis at the conclusion of the novel, smothered to death by the ship's captain.⁵⁵ Inequitable social conditions are explored, such as in scenes where Arthur, at the behest of his father, has to participate in the chaotic system in which labour is hired at the docks.⁵⁶ Yet, the manifest abuses portrayed in the novel are not projected as a narrative of the consequences of economic disenfranchisement as much as a conception of more endemic or profound human fallibility. Thus, the narrative is framed by an ominous interpretation offered by Arthur's headmaster: "It was not a question of authorities, he said to himself, of parents, or rule or convention, of economics. It was a question of human nature itself. There was a fundamental rottenness therein" (*B* 14). The language of the novel can be extremely powerful, especially its use of animal similes: "he commenced to punch his son, all the while breathing deeply like a horse"; or, as Arthur is raped: "for the boy the only sound was the incessant grunting of this man on top of him, like that of a well-filled sow" (*B* 17, 145). The power of the text to disturb its readers is also elevated by its expressionistic descriptions of the visceral horror of the boy's experience – "he imagined a horde of worms were creeping slimily about his face" – yet violence towards the vulnerable young is also shown to be depressingly routine, ignored or even implicitly sanctioned (*B* 145).

Elsewhere in Hanley's early fiction, violences and moments of sexual terror are shown as more extraordinary explosions of pent-up mental or spiritual turmoil. In the

⁵⁵ *Boy* was eventually prosecuted for obscenity in 1935, a case that became quite famous due to the public defence of the novel by E.M. Forster. For more information on these events, which Hanley believed had a serious impact on his career, see, James Armstrong, "The Publication, Prosecution, and Re-Publication of James Hanley's *Boy*" in *The Library* 6-19 (1997), pp.351-362.

⁵⁶ In this system, a large surplus of men and boys, desperate for a day's pay, had to shove their way to the front of queues or otherwise be noticed by a ship's foreman or "boss scaler". The few who were picked could be treated with hostility and suspicion, whilst the majority had to return home without prospect of employment for that day: "'Only twenty hands wanted. Half you blighters can beat it. I only want twenty'" (*B* 29). Hanley would revisit the desperation in such scenes in several of his stories.

story *A Passion Before Death* (1930), Carter, a war veteran with one leg amputated to the knee, has been condemned to death for killing the man who raped his wife. In a prison cell the night before his sentence is to be carried out, he becomes possessed by feelings of erotic terror and calls constantly for his wife to be brought to him so he can satisfy his “terrible hunger.”⁵⁷ In an extraordinary conclusion to the story, Carter begins to awkwardly embrace the bed and then, raising his “leg and stump”, attempts to receive sexual gratification by pressing his body against the door. A prison warder called Hope suddenly becomes so moved by the spectacle that he “stripped himself naked, and joined the man on the bed [...] like a mother suckling her child, he yielded himself.”⁵⁸ In another of Hanley’s early stories, *The German Prisoner*, two British soldiers (Elston and O’Garra) are seen stumbling around foggy and smoky fields somewhere on the Western Front during WWI. When they discover a good-looking young German soldier, his clothes shredded and his hands lifted in surrender, they suddenly become so enraged that they torture him to death, sticking a bayonet into his anus (with the words “I’d like to back-scuttle the bugger”) and a horse hair into his penis.⁵⁹ As the soldiers encourage each other to commit each misdemeanour, the vocabulary of “fundamental rottenness” expressed in *Boy* is again evoked: “There is a peculiar power about rottenness, in that it feeds on itself, borrows from itself, and its tendency is always downward.”⁶⁰ There is much more to these stories than the explicitness with which they investigate the dark limits of human behaviour, but such moments are important to register as an evident way in which Hanley’s early writing diverged from the paradigms and subject matter of conventional popular fiction. Although Hanley’s fictions set during the Second World War are perhaps better known, in his creation of a story, *The German Prisoner*, that

⁵⁷ Hanley, “A Passion Before Death” (1930) in *The Last Voyage and Other Stories* (London: Harvill, 1997), p.142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.143.

⁵⁹ Hanley, “The German Prisoner” (1930) in *The Last Voyage and Other Stories*, p.76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.72.

uniquely perceives the grave transgressions that a British “tommy” might commit when out of sight of authority, Hanley acquires the rare status of a fiction writer who substantially contributed to the literature of both global wars.⁶¹

After *Boy*, Hanley wrote several more novels specifically set aboard ships, both in the 30s (*Captain Bottell*, 1933, *Stoker Bush*, 1935, *Hollow Sea*, 1938) and the 40s (*The Ocean*, 1941, *Sailor’s Song*, 1943), as well as much fiction about ex-seamen who are fundamentally “lost” on land. As Hanley’s reputation has become linked to this maritime subject matter, his work has often been compared to the sea novels of Joseph Conrad.⁶² Yet, perhaps as a conscious effort to differentiate himself from the model reviewers frequently ascribed to his work, Hanley often articulated (sometimes allusively) an argument with Conrad’s approach. Hanley criticised what he viewed as Conrad’s inability to represent with any accuracy the world or viewpoint of ordinary sailors, whom Conrad kept, as Fordham puts it, “at a patrician distance.”⁶³ This was in contrast to Herman Melville, whom Hanley believed “understood simple sailor men, a thing Conrad never did, since he had little patience with them.”⁶⁴ Hanley believes that Conrad had insufficient empathy (the “cold, distant, almost planetary heart of the Polish writer”) to produce a realistic and panoramic account of life at sea, below and above

⁶¹ *The German Prisoner* has long been neglected by histories of WWI literature, but David Trotter discusses the story, and the scarcity of such violent representations, in his recent essay: “The British Novel and the War” in Vincent Sherry, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.31-57.

⁶² See, for example, Stokes, *James Hanley*, pp.86-9, and the impressive comparative discussion in Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, pp.46-56.

⁶³ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.41. Hanley attacks Conrad’s “patrician distance” in “A Writer’s Day”, p.78: “Conrad, a rather self-conscious man, who sometimes tripped over his own vanity, happened one day to trip over a stone in the for’ard quarters [...] he must get back on the bridge, have a chat with Marlow about it.”

⁶⁴ Hanley, “Introduction” to *Moby Dick* (London: Macdonald, 1952), p.xxiv. Also in the 50s, Hamilton criticises Conrad in intriguingly similar terms – a lack of class empathy and artistic self-consciousness – in an unpublished piece of prose he worked on near the end of his life: “His eye is only at rare moments (and this mainly occurs in *Nostramo*) upon the object at hand: instead it is upon himself, his choice of words, his style [...] he clearly considers himself above the common realm of men” (“Memoirs of a Heavy-Drinking Man”, unpublished manuscript, Harry Ransom Center, Patrick Hamilton Collection p.3).

deck, that would not indulge in what Stokes calls “picturesque heightening” of working-class experience.⁶⁵ Hanley’s divergence from Conrad is observed more closely in chapter three, but here we should note how his concerns about Conrad’s work emanated from an ethical conception of what literary representation should aim to achieve.

This ethics of representation is also addressed in “Oddfish” (1953), a short piece in which Hanley considers the furore that *Boy* caused: “[The novel] struck some Northerners [copies of the text were initially seized by Manchester police] as something less than normal and some critics as rather odd. I have, however, never been able to believe that a searchlight on a scab was anything less than normal, and anything one might call odd.”⁶⁶ Such stringent commitment to a concept of “realist” integrity also led Hanley to criticise what he judged to be the social elitism and privileging of subjective concerns in certain modernist writing: “The trouble with people living in ivory towers is that their horrors or terrors are merely private ones and do not count for much. Kafka is an instance, Joyce another.”⁶⁷ It is necessary, of course, to gauge the degree to which Hanley’s various criticisms of other writers are tendentious attempts to resolve or account for the tensions in his own work. What is clear, however, is that Hanley had a very specific idea of the truth-telling primacy of literature, one defined against the “subjectivism” of some modernisms, the aggrandising of experience found in Conrad, or the simplifying realisms of politicised authors “writing with the fist”. In the following chapters we will judge how successfully Hanley’s fiction of the early 40s mediated such competing demands on the novel.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.89.

⁶⁶ Hanley, “Oddfish” in *Don Quixote Drowned*, p.53.

⁶⁷ Letter to Norman Unger, May 20th, 1941 (NIU Collection).

CHAPTER TWO

“The terror language”: *No Directions*

Hanley wrote fiction throughout the first years of the Second World War. Three short novels were produced between 1940 and 1943: *The Ocean* (1941), *Sailor’s Song* (1943), and *No Directions* (1943). Each is set in times of war and, as has been touched on, are more experimental and oblique in tone and form than much of the fiction Hanley wrote in the previous decade. In this chapter I discuss *No Directions*, a novel that drew directly on Hanley’s experiences of the London Blitz. In early 1939 Hanley had moved from his isolated north Wales home (Glan Ceirw) to various temporary accommodations in England. This was partly an attempt by Hanley to foster links with BBC radio, to which he was frequently submitting fiction in the hope it would be adapted for broadcast.⁶⁸ Indeed, it was soon after the airing of his play *Atlantic Convoy*, with its “encouraging message about the bravery and stoicism of the ordinary soldier”, that Hanley was granted exemption from military service in 1941 to continue working for the BBC Radio Features Department.⁶⁹ From August 1940, Hanley lived in a flat in Chelsea and it was here that he observed the aerial bombardment of London at very close quarters. In May 1941, Hanley would write to American book collector Norman Unger:

I think I told you we were in London until the end of October, long enough to get used to the noises that falling bombs made. Hitler’s greatest mistake was in continuously [sic] plastering London, for people just got inured to it. Bad tactics.

⁶⁸ For more information on this aspect of Hanley’s career, see Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, pp. 161-164.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.162. Hanley’s powerful writing was clearly seen by the BBC as potentially propagandist. An internal BBC memo of the time suggests Hanley was “engaged on work of National Importance” (cited in Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.163).

Hanley concludes a little later “I lost a lot of my things, but so long as one is breathing that’s OK.”⁷⁰ Hanley and his wife (Dorothy, known as Timmy) returned to Wales in January 1941, but his personal experiences of the Blitz marked him deeply and are woven into *No Directions*, a novel he was already planning in the Spring of 1941: “some towns have taken a battering, and the suffering is immense, tragic, but I had better not go on for the censor might step in here. But I am going to write a book about it all, a sort of DEFOE like book, which will omit nothing.”⁷¹ *No Directions* has received more critical attention than any other Hanley novel. This is mainly because it is has formed part of a recent, wider discussion about how we should read Blitz and Second World War literature.⁷² It is also testament to Hanley’s ambition to produce an “uncensored” version of the Blitz that would set its face against the prevalent rhetoric and mainstream culture of the war. The novel has the enduring ability to intrigue, provoke and unsettle its readers. This is achieved, I argue in this chapter, by the text’s resistance to a purely “realist” staging of a civilian experience of the Blitz through a complex narrative style that winnows away the markers and hints that a reader of such a realist version would expect. The text’s own form of realism emanates from this sometimes bewildering style, an evocation itself of the chaos and confusion of air-raids, but also in the novel’s emphasis on the friction of new inter-class and inter-generational relations and the tentative, sometimes arduous interdependence the air-raids enforced; “Being alone don’t count any more, nobody can be alone any more, see?”, the novel

⁷⁰ Letter to Norman Unger, May 1st, 1941 (Northern Illinois University, Hanley Collection). For a little more detail on what work Hanley lost, see Harrington, *A Bold and Unique Solitary*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Letter to Norman Unger, May 20th, 1941 (NIU Collection).

⁷² See, for example, the excellent studies by Alan Munton, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London, Faber & Faber, 1989), pp. 41-3, Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.44-5, and Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 141-150. The other “canonical” texts of Blitz fiction which *No Directions* is frequently read alongside include Graham Greene’s *Ministry of Fear* (1943), Henry Green’s *Caught* (1943) and Elizabeth Bowen’s later *The Heat of the Day* (1948).

warns in its first pages.⁷³ Because of the spiky, reduced narrative style, the reader of *No Directions* is in as much of a “blackout” as the large Chelsea house, converted into flats, which is the setting of the novel. The characters strain against this claustrophobic “black sea” of darkness, and search for guiding cracks of light or snatches of sound, or hope, ultimately, for a moment of expansive enlightenment or liberation. This emphasis on colour, sound, smell and taste, make the novel unusually elemental and sensate, but the signification of these sensations and recurring tropes remains for the reader very remote; it is personal to the characters themselves, to their imaginative or subconscious assimilation of the trauma of the raids. As Rod Mengham suggests, the novel recognizes “the role of the subconscious in coming to grips with – or ‘taking in’ – the Blitz”.⁷⁴ I will consider how, in so doing, Hanley reached back to a surrealist mode and idiom that emerged (but never flourished) in 30s British art and fiction to inform and complicate his narrative. A sense of the transformative power of dreams (or hallucinations) and that of art, is held in tense conjunction with the demands of relating a realistic Blitz story that will “omit nothing” of the actual civilian experience of bombardment.

No Directions provides a claustrophobic Blitz narrative; time is highly condensed as the plot covers the span of just one evening and night-time raid. The novel begins, as with Hanley’s short story “The Lost Sailor” (1945), with a drunken sailor stumbling through a threshold, as an ARP (Air Raid Precautions) warden pulls him from the street into the hallway of a house.⁷⁵ The first sentence strikingly establishes the

⁷³ James Hanley, *No Directions* (1943) (London: André Deutsch, 1990), pp.9-10. Subsequent page references in text (ND).

⁷⁴ Rod Mengham, “Broken Glass” in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve, ed., *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 124-133, at p.132.

⁷⁵ This evidences one of the several ways that Hanley’s Blitz novel departs both stylistically and thematically from his preceding work. As Fordham observes, the drunken sailor is a: “new device into [Hanley’s] symbolic repertoire [...] Having established his heroic and even noble status in *The Ocean* and *Sailor’s Song*, the sailor is now being deployed as a violent intrusion into a genteel and complacent bourgeois domain.” See, Fordham, *Modernism and the Working-Class*, p.167.

unusual narrative tone and noun/adjective combinations that run through the prose: “After the deluge of sound ceased, after the wind passed, the sailor fell, was sick. They were in a desert of air” (*ND* 9). In his stupor, the sailor, Johns, believes the “sea of glass” the warden drags him across to be ice.⁷⁶ Johns’s “horror of ice” becomes a refrain in the opening scene (*ND* 10). The novel quickly plays with reader expectations, subverting the common currency of a “Blitz culture” whose dominating motif was frequently fire.⁷⁷ It also reveals the novel’s strategy of “recording” not just the actualities of the bombings or conventional psychological responses, but characters’ different imaginative reactions and transformations of those actualities. Glass and ice are related to the reader as two possible, competing explanations for what covers the street; even once the warden shines a torch on the shards (“See! Glass!”), the sailor “still dragged his way over ice-fields, saw glassy, transparent seas, watched bergs float by, heard great boulders falling” (*ND* 11). Several of the characters, not least the sailor, are in a sort of fugue or hallucinatory semi-trance, yet the narrative insists on representing their imaginative responses without explanatory verbs like “imagined” or “believed”, indeed sometimes without explanatory pronouns or even transitional words like “and” or “then”. This gives the prose a jagged, chopped-up rhythm and much of the characters’ speech and internal monologues are similarly staccato: “Hell, yes, blast, so much has happened, so much is happening, so quickly, breath-taking, can’t remember everything. Well –?” (*ND* 14). The sailor acts as an invader of this confined social space and his presence weaves through the narrative; at different moments his image suddenly intrudes, in parallel fashion to the bombers overhead, on the thoughts of the residents of the different flats. Richard Jones, another ARP warden who lives on the

⁷⁶ For an analysis of the recurring trope of broken or breaking glass in wartime fiction, see Mengham, “Broken Glass”, pp. 124-133.

⁷⁷ Ian Patterson lists some of the poetry, art and films which helped make fire “[come] to represent the Blitz”. See Patterson, *Guernica and Total War* (London: Profile, 2007), pp.154-5.

first floor, finds “his mind was suddenly full of the sailor. He thought of him in terms of physical gestures, bound to a mast, open-mouthed before a furnace door, flat on his back in an open boat, a face after the torpedo’s tear, all shock and smother” (ND 23).

The phrase, his or her “mind was full” recurs throughout the text, signalling the way sudden thoughts or images grip and overwhelm the characters. Richard feels responsible for the safety of all the residents in the building and shuttles up and down the stairs attempting to cajole them (often without effect) into the cellar once a raid begins.⁷⁸ Richard’s wife, Gwen, is similarly well-meaning and as the bombings intensify through the narrative the couple express their fear through a reciprocal desire to be near the “warmth” of each other. As Richard guides down an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Frazer, through dark stairways into the cellar, his

voice [was] seeming to say, ‘catch hold, make a strong grip, you are safe, you have a sure hold on all normality, which I am, now, always was, and will be, even touching Gwen’s warmth, even away from it, listening to cries in the Polar regions, and not to the beat of her heart, which circles mine and fastens there, throb by throb’ (ND 103).

⁷⁸ Many civilians would retreat to cellars and basements during raids as opposed to purpose-built private or public shelters. Patterson makes the obvious but important point that, “You couldn’t put up an Anderson shelter in a block of flats”, and indeed private shelters would rarely fit the architecture or budget of many of the more heavily populated dwellings of London (Patterson, *Guernica*, p.150). There were also social and other pressures that discouraged some people from using public shelters. Some of these pressures are recreated in *No Directions* in the phobic reluctance to retreat to the cellar exhibited by some of the characters. The historian Helen Jones describes these pressures, which include: feelings of shame (of having to leave the sick or elderly behind, for example) or boredom, concerns about the adequacy of shelters (a direct hit on a shelter could be as or even more lethal than a direct hit on a house) or about the disturbance to sleep and other routines. Some parents expressed concern about their children mixing with others from different social backgrounds or the potential for covert sexual exploration. Mass-Observation figures suggest that, for whatever reason, by the end of September 1940 almost three-quarters of people remained in their own homes during air-raids, taking cover on the ground floor, under stairs or, as in the narrative of *No Directions*, hunkering down in a cellar. See Helen Jones, *British Civilians in the Front Line: Air Raids, Productivity and wartime culture, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp-158-164.

Richard and Gwen represent in the novel not only the reactions of a young couple in love, but of one type of enduring human connection in circumstances of profound disconnection. The couple are Welsh; “before the great convulsion began”, Mrs Frazer remembers, “a hale and hearty Mr. Jones, travelling in chemicals, always happy, and, like the Welsh will, holding on hard to a Welshness which was the soft yell in his singing voice” (*ND* 98). Richard had been “brought to a great city from a little country of soft valleys, of little people, of golden mouths” and yet “now he was just a little different” and Mrs Frazer thinks of him “in terms of direct authority, like a stationmaster, like a prison-warder, a policeman.” (*ND* 98). Richard’s existence has become pinched and nervous, the raids and his warden responsibilities wear heavily on him: “Lord! One gets sick of the whole thing at times”, and the couple’s provincial, homespun type of happiness has become eroded by the war as well as the pressures of a new, metropolitan lifestyle (*ND* 85).

It is unsurprising that the couple are from Wales, the “country of soft valleys” which impresses itself deeply in Hanley’s imagination as a site of potential ethical regeneration. As Fordham observes, the north Wales “world” that Hanley inhabits for long periods of his life was, for him, “an incorruptibly natural realm, where still resides the possibility of human redemption and ‘true community.’”⁷⁹ Mrs Frazer’s sense that Richard has evolved from a carefree chemicals salesman in his “bowler hat” and “blue serge suit” into an authority figure reminiscent of a “prison-warden” signals the ambivalent feelings which ARP wardens frequently aroused (as well as the prison-like qualities of the block of flats) (*ND* 98).⁸⁰ This is most clearly seen in the reaction of Robinson, an airman spending his brief leave with his wife and baby, and most

⁷⁹ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p. 160.

⁸⁰ Jones suggests that an early ARP recruitment poster showing a “powerful male civilian image” of a large man protecting a mother and baby with an “ARP shield” was possibly produced “as a counter to the rather low esteem in which ARP wardens were initially held.” Jones, *British Civilians*, pp. 28, 29.

intensely with his “Philco” radio, the “miracle set” that Robinson neurotically keeps by his side to blare out music from a Bolivian station and drown out the sounds from above: “He made a mad dive at ‘volume control,’ they were all in Bolivia now, he turned it till he could go no further. You always felt like that when *they* were over” (*ND* 92, 91). When Richard comes to the Robinsons’ flat to order them down to the cellar, Robinson suddenly apprehends the ARP tin helmet, an ubiquitous symbol of the London Blitz, as a transformative tool for ordinary businessmen with delusions of importance: “Yes, who was he? With his tin helmet, a bowler hat originally, changed by magic overnight, a bowler-hatted man, *really*. ‘You get out of here’” (*ND* 94). In this dark, occluded social environment there is a desire for all the characters to get to grips with the real, underlying, essential nature of the other residents.

The most enigmatic of these is Clem Stephens, a reclusive painter, and his wife, Lena, who share a flat on the top floor of the house. Both are in their forties. At the beginning of the novel a working-class woman in her late twenties, Celia, has called on the flat hoping to see Clem. She claims she used to sit for him as a model many years previously, but she is turned away at the door by Lena who acts as Clem’s amanuensis, protecting him from the intrusions of the outside world: “‘How many times have I to tell you that he won’t see anybody [...] Not when’s he’s working, won’t see anybody’” (*ND* 20). Clem is in some ways the cliché of the remote artist totally absorbed in his work, removed from and unable to function in the “real” world: “‘I didn’t eat at all,’ he said, ‘I wasn’t very hungry.’ She took the bowl from him, thinking, ‘The way he handed me the bowl. Just like a child’” (*ND* 31). He wraps vinegar-soaked handkerchiefs around his head to cool the burning sensation of migraines and believes a recurring pain Lena suffers in her chest is “cancer of the heart”. Clem’s eccentricity and self-absorption would be comic except for the consequences for Lena, whose own wellbeing and

emotions seem secondary to the “work”. A visiting doctor, after a brief examination, suggests she needs to have “a breast removed”, but Lena refuses to go away for surgery because “He can’t be left, it’ll have to wait” (ND 31,30). For the other residents, however, Lena is more a target of puzzlement than sympathy because she is also a strangely distant figure whose single-minded protection of Clem mirrors his obsession with his work: “There was something ruthless, final in her attitude. ‘I could never leave him, *never*’” (ND 30). There are some echoes of Hanley’s own absolutist approach to work – as Welsh writer Tecwyn Lloyd describes: “When Mr Hanley was engaged in writing a book, you couldn’t get anything out of him... he was truly lost in his work. And he was a very moody gentleman at that time” – although these traits are made extreme in Clem, who for most of the second half of the novel is obsessed with the idea of getting the large canvas he is working on down many flights of stairs into the cellar, to protect it from damage if the house is hit in the raid.⁸¹ This remains inexplicable to the other residents. Airman Robinson, who has finally agreed to Richard’s request to “go down”, chunters about Clem:

He’s cracked. I think. Intelligent rat. Got a huge picture there, calls it Daylight or something [...] I offered to help them down, no bloody go, whole idea’s balmy, anyhow. Yes, that’s them coming down now. Now how the devil can they get the thing in here, it won’t fit in at all. Suppose they’ll get it in though (ND 120).

⁸¹ Cited in Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p. 141. *No Directions* was intended as one part of an unfinished trilogy of novels that would feature Clem and Lena and their “story” clearly still resonated in Hanley’s imagination as late as the mid-70s, when he composed *A Dream Journey* (1976), a novel which retraces some of the same material as *No Directions*. One extant, unpublished novel, titled *In That Time*, occupies the same narrative world. The original manuscript of the novel is now held as part of the James Hanley collection at the University of Northern Illinois. It is prefaced by an intriguing handwritten note by Hanley that again figures the war as a cause of lost work. A strong explanation, it would seem, for the creation of an artist character obsessed with preserving work at all costs: “The attached script is the only existing copy of my novel, *In That Time*, which I decided to abandon, and for which I substituted my novel *SAY NOTHING*, after which I gave up the novel altogether, and turned to theatre [...] My novel *NO DIRECTIONS*, of which *In That Time* was a sequel, was originally intended as a trilogy, about the last war. It is possible that the missing chapters vanished with others of my MSS. just after the war ended” (*In That Time* manuscript, NIU collection).

Richard Jones takes it more personally: “‘why, I forgot all about those two on the fifth floor. But why in heaven they will *bring-that-bloody-tearing-thing* everywhere they go, I don’t know, I just don’t know, I don’t KNOW’” (ND 88). As they finally get the canvas to the ground floor, Robinson realises that they are compelled by motivations he does not understand: “‘I suppose it isn’t funny to them, something drives them to do these things, queer crowd – all right, lift your end’”; and Lena informs Richard he will never persuade Clem to leave it behind: “‘he won’t let the picture go. He won’t leave it. There’s a reason, but you wouldn’t understand – yet’” (ND 130, 114). The “yet” seems mysterious, as though Richard was a potential sympathiser who might, through sudden revelation, divine the secret knowledge of their strange behaviour. But the “yet” more likely signals Lena’s unshakeable belief in Clem as a “genius”, who creates profound art, and that once the painting is finally recognised to be a masterpiece the idea that one would go to such strenuous lengths to preserve it would not seem so inexplicable. “‘But it’s good,’ she thought, ‘yes – yes, it’s good, I know it is, I know.’ She knew. It wasn’t silly, it could not be laughed at. They didn’t understand, they were kind, but they didn’t really understand” (ND 115). Lena’s self-reassurances do not convince the reader that this painting will be different from the other half-finished canvases gathering dust in Clem’s studio. These scenes, though, display the elasticity with which the text moves between satirising a misplaced, old-fashioned faith in the artist-as-genius to provide meaning – which all the characters stumble around in the darkness looking for – and an affirmation of the fundamental drive required of that solitary artist. At one earlier point, Clem, trance-like, does not even notice that Celia, after boozing with the sailor downstairs, has come back inside his flat to find a portrait he once painted of her. Celia asks him slurred questions, but he does not turn away from his work: “He did not answer, there was no time, he had got it, now. Got it. Depth” (ND

78). Henry Miller, writing a suitably rhapsodic introduction for a 1946 edition of the novel, suggests that the scenes of “magnificently obsessed” Clem and Lena struggling to move the canvas up and down stairs is an episode with which Hanley has made “an addition to the mythological images of ancient times. Clem symbolises the modern artist moving in a void under the pressure of his own steam.”⁸² Clem’s artistic “steam” and Sisyphean labours are derided by a drunken Celia once he finally reaches the cellar: ““Oh, Clem! Here you are! You and your bloody masterpiece [...] He’s been working on that for years, bloody years, but he never finishes anything, do you, Clem?”” (ND 131, 132).

Celia’s connection to Clem triangulates Lena’s relationship with the artist in ambiguous ways. Celia notes several times with surprise that Clem is “Working again after all these years” which Lena thinks is an ““insult!’ He had never stopped working” (ND 78, 35). When she sees her in the hallway with the sailor, this ghost from Clem’s past unnerves Lena in a very spectral way:

She was looking at her who knew Clem. She did not speak. She merely looked. Something you could see through something you could touch with your hand, you had only to put your hand out, something with a mass of red hair, a white blouse that appeared to have a tear in it, the sort of tear that the doll-like hands pressed against the door could never make, a sudden insane tear [...] Lena stiffened where she stood (ND 35, 36).

Lena is disturbed by a perceived, dark animality in the scene (the drunken sailor hovers behind Celia, enticing her into the flat) and there are subtle though disconcerting intimations of polarised sexualities, the dangerous, for Lena, otherness of a working-class physicality. Lena’s face is “strong”, “hard”, “almost masculine”; it has “an austerity there”; Robinson describes her: ““She’s ice. Oh yes, you can tell. Crack if she laughed””, so that Lena’s coldness abstractly echoes the ice-fear of Johns the sailor (ND

⁸² Henry Miller, “Introduction” to *No Directions* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1946), p.vi.

113, 120). In contrast, Celia has “that red hair, that face, the cheap finery, the powerful scent”; when she sat for Clem she was “nineteen and a half, a beauty from Shoreditch litter, this could happen sometimes” (*ND* 35, 81). The fact that Celia’s breasts are a symbol, for her, of a maintained, concrete sexual identity – “she liked her bust, touched what was real, it was still there, her bust” – and the repeated thought that Clem “Didn’t half like my bust”, seems a darkly ironic contrast to Lena, who due to illness requires a mastectomy, whilst Clem’s explanation that it is “cancer of the heart” seems abstract rather than corporeal (*ND* 80, 47). Celia also unnerves Lena because, unlike the residents in the flat, she has a connection to Clem’s art, one prior even to Lena’s own. The glimpses the reader gets of Clem’s paintings, through the other characters, reveal him as a figurative artist with an exuberant sense of colour. Celia leafs through the canvases in his cluttered flat: “taking up another one, looking at it, it blazed, yellow, blazing corn, a woman making stooks”, then, finally locating the portrait of herself, semi-nude, she thinks, ““Colour – thass it, knew what colour was – Clem did”” (*ND* 79). An ironic contrast to Clem’s work is a Picasso reproduction that hangs in the ground-floor flat of Miss Benson and Miss Cleate, an absent spinster couple with Bloomsbury inclinations who are away, in a pithily damning phrase “airing views in Somerset” (*ND* 41). Before the height of the raid, Johns breaks into their flat and begins exhausting their drinks cabinet, urging Celia to follow his lead: ““Come on, Cis. Hell’s fire, you’re not scared of a sailor-man, come in. You’re great [...] Come on, we’ll have a drink”” (*ND* 41). Celia notices how the decor of the room, the furniture and leather-bound books, is dominated by green, so much that its atmosphere seems infused with the colour: a “green dream” (*ND* 41). Far from disrupting the cosy aestheticism of the room, the “cheap Picasso reproduction over the mantelpiece [...] completed the pattern, made whole the green mood. She asked herself why Miss Benson and Miss Cleate were

so keen on green” (ND 48). Hanley casts working class Celia, dismissed by an antagonistic Robinson as a “tart” and a “cheap piece” as the adjudicator of the importance or value of art in the traumatically dissociating atmosphere of the Blitz (ND 77, 84). Unsophisticated but honest, she is more engaged with the possibilities of art than either the absent aesthetes whose flat she invades, or the other residents, for whom Clem remains simply an eccentric, or even perhaps the art “critics”, those who “always said it wasn’t right, this wasn’t, that, the other” (ND 78). In Celia’s “green dream”, the creator of *Guernica* (1937), the most famous artwork of aerial bombardment, has no power to provoke, becomes consigned to the world of interior design. Whereas Clem, an obscure artist who needs to invent a dealer, “Rupert”, to pretend he is selling work, with his paintings of mundane human subjects, still, he “knew what colour was” and has a ““geeny-wenius”” that resides, Celia decides, “in altitudes you could never see” (ND 69, 82). This, of course, might be ironic; Clem’s neglected genius is so obscure it is not really genius at all, but Celia appreciates the realism of Clem’s work, his ability to get a physical likeness. Clem is more pessimistic about his powers to represent the true qualities of his subject; Lena’s “earnest” facial expression could only be understood with the eye: “He knew he would never get this in any other way, no miracle, no magic hold it, he would never get it on canvas, never” (ND 63). Celia decides to steal the portrait of herself: “He would not miss this – miss *one* – besides she had always liked it, it *was* her, her head and shoulders, arms, her breasts, part of her belly. It *was* her” (ND 81). Celia feels a sense of ownership over the work due to this mimetic connection. As Fordham puts it, the stealing of the portrait “in the face of its reifying effect, reclaims art on behalf of its object”: “In a sort of way it *was* yours, you were on it, he couldn’t have put it there without you” (ND 80).⁸³ Clem’s concern about “depth” and veracity matters

⁸³ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.168.

less now art has become a joint venture between subject and object. When downstairs with the sailor, Celia thinks she can discern the distant rumble of the enemy bombers beginning to fly overhead. The novel persuasively suggests the new hyper-sensitivity to sound that seems an inevitable concomitant to being bombed. When Lena also hears the sounds of the bombers as she escapes the flat for a walk, she suddenly feels “as though she were a stranger here, as though this sea of darkness were wilderness, the feel, the sure touch of it going. Sound could do this” (*ND* 70). Celia’s reaction is just as physically disconcerting; she becomes “suddenly cold all over, they made her feel like that, a cosmic coldness, mysterious, terrifying” (*ND* 52). Celia’s transcendent, disembodied fear, the “cosmic coldness”, is held in contrast to her embodiment and authentication in Clem’s painting. As Alan Munton observes, *No Directions* is “untypical of war fiction in being about an artist”, and, although art is far from a panacea in this wartime novel, its gestures of sublimity are shown to help, however momentarily, to defray the “cosmic coldness” of potential apocalypse: “You were carried down, you felt this man’s strength, but what you thought of most lay under stairs. You would get this when the light came. You would get money for what he left against a dusty wall” (*ND* 83).⁸⁴

In a gesture characteristic of the novel’s style, Celia’s fixation on greenness makes the colour a metaphor for an intense emotion or set of emotions that, for both character and reader, remains intangible. “He was trembling. She wanted to jump up, she wanted to go, now, to fly, to forget him to forget Clem, to forget a green dream” (*ND* 45). The “green dream” is clearly something oppressive – perhaps a combination of the sailor’s cloying injunctions to drink and lumbering physical advances, the “Fuddle-headedness” of alcohol, the claustrophobic decor of the room and the constant fear of

⁸⁴ Munton, *English Fiction*, p.41.

the bombers coming over – yet all this remains in a region beyond verbalisation (*ND* 83). The text's widespread metonymies, images, colours and sensations standing for something profound but indefinable in any other way, both loosens the novel's realism yet also reifies it by gesturing towards the true "horror" of the situation which remains unspeakable in conventional terms. It also signals the way the "horror", the trauma, manifests itself uniquely to each person's psyche. Each character responds differently to the bombings, has an individual "complex" of symbols and tics. Johns, with his ice-fear and haunted memories of maritime disaster, is "feeling his way out of cross-currents. He looked at green things, but he would not see them her way"– the "green dream" is Celia's alone (*ND* 48). When Celia looks into Johns's eyes, in a moment of connecting intimacy, to "see right to the back of them", she suddenly apprehends his profound vulnerability: "She got up. She knew. She understood. She flung her arms around him, she kissed him, the words came out at last but she did not speak them. She just thought, 'he has a horror. He has a horror'" (*ND* 49, 50). Celia recognises the sailor's distress, but only abstractly, it might correlate to her own but its projection will take a different figurative shape. When she presses Johns to divulge his horror of the ice, and he finally succumbs by recalling a "black sod" of an Arctic storm that once left a shipmate frozen – "arms stretched out reaching for something" – Celia, lying on the floor in her growing "fuddle-headedness", simply restates, "Tell me about the ice [...] Tell me about the –" and then vomits (*ND* 55). The moment of sympathetic human connection seems gone.

It is not only Clem who is, recalling Miller's phrase, in a "void"; all the characters fear and struggle with a sense of absence. The image or, perhaps more correctly, non-image of "void", along with that of "darkness", whose literal existence in the blackout becomes laden with a diffuse set of metaphorical connotations, recur frequently in the novel. As Hanley writes in a letter, the experience of darkness had

been changed irrevocably by the Blitz: “Darkness will never be the same for millions, it will never be analogous with PROTECTION, only with HORROR, for believe well that night sweats horror as well as terror.”⁸⁵ The sounds of a ringing telephone “struck forth as into an abyss”; Lena notices echoing voices and suddenly believes the house is “Shell [...] hollow”; similarly, Richard becomes “enraged that nothing save echoes were coming back to him, of his own voice, falling from voids” (ND 13, 116, 87). When Richard switches on the light to help the Frazers down to the cellar, all three “blinked, they stood still, they were on the verge of abysses”, a sentence with echoes of one of Nietzsche’s more quoted aphorisms: “and if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you” (ND 102).⁸⁶

Deer suggests that “there is less horror in the novel than its critics imply, and most of its characters know exactly what they’re doing”.⁸⁷ This is true; the characters of the novel are often unnervingly single-minded, even to the point of monomania: Mrs. Frazer standing by her stuck open door all night, quietly imploring somebody to mend it (“she would stop dead, hold on to the door knob. She would hate to go to the cellar and leave it open, the door dominated, overwhelmed”), Johns’s unswerving desire to get drunk (“Getting drunk, that’s a gesture, too”), Clem’s fixation on sheltering his canvas, Celia on stealing “hers”, and so on (ND 100, 11). But what the novel explores is the “horror” of these compulsive, repetitive gestures for the other residents, inescapable when fate has flung them together, staring into the same “abyss”. Richard, for example, is so unnerved by Mrs Frazer’s murmured exhortations that he clings to the wall as he edges past her room (ND 24).

⁸⁵ Letter to Norman Unger, May 20th, 1941 (NIU collection).

⁸⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), Marion Faber, eds. and trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 74.

⁸⁷ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, p. 148.

Near the end of the novel, Mrs Frazer, who all evening has been disturbed by the sound of the airman's wireless and mirthless laughter, is desperate to escape the cellar after Robinson nervously drums his fingers on his ever-present Philco. In her hypnopompic state, this transports Mrs Frazer's mind to distant memories of time spent in South America: "She knew what drumming meant, danger. She must go out. A warning. She couldn't stay [...] She could never have sat there, not after that low drumming" (ND 122, 124). The threat of a bomb falling on the house is therefore just one element of the collective unease displayed by the characters. The other element is the pervasive fear of a different type of "invasion" of personal space, that of other people's private imaginative horrors impinging darkly on your own consciousness. In such frayed circumstances, disparate people forced together because, in the Blitz, "nobody can be alone no more", it is the threat of other people's anxiety, like a horror movie close-up of the petrified victim's face, that discloses the truly horrifying. The fear is, of course, that their "horror" will become yours too, yet this "uncensored" account of the Blitz runs against the rhetoric of rugged, collective responsibility with which the People's War is imbued, and which disavows the idea of liberating, people-escaping individual expression.⁸⁸ Lena's insistence on Clem as a "genius" that only she can apprehend, Clem's own maniacal desire to preserve a canvas from the destruction, his paranoia, all operate as mechanisms of individuation – a struggle against the collectivising of identity (and of fear) that the Blitz and the circumambient darkness initiate. As Munton argues of Home Front literature generally, this struggle to individualise in the surrounding chaos is also profoundly self-dramatising: "In a

⁸⁸ The term "the People's War", with its implication that all sectors of British life were uniquely and profoundly affected by the war, was used by some commentators during the conflict but became well-known after the publication of Angus Calder's *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* in 1969. Munton acknowledges that the term is freighted with historical meaning but sees it as a valid organising principle through which to critique fiction of the war. See Munton, *English Fiction*, p.7.

massive democratization of fear every threatened person could conceive his or her own life as a narrative, not quite completed. Everyone becomes a potential subject for fiction.”⁸⁹ This feeling is clearly expressed by Hanley. Each character in *No Directions* has their own “story” of their imagination that transforms their outward ordinariness, each has their own individual, dramatic compulsion, and occasionally experience moments of alterity in which they become aware of the newly performative quality of their lives: “You just sat and waited there, listening to people talking, the other actors and none of them knew the name of this play, what their parts would be. They just waited, play unknown, actors unseen” (*ND* 102).

The sense of claustrophobia, of people being compressed together (literally in small and overcrowded shelters and basements) is clearly a facet of the creepy sense of intrusive otherness in *No Directions*. In another vivid passage from his personal wartime letters, Hanley describes to his American correspondent how, in England

The Future is nebulous, one never thinks of the future here, though sometimes people have their private longings, they long for the coming of more spacious days, they dream about [sic] them, amidst all the amorphous mass of misery, disgust, shame, and rubble of our time.⁹⁰

That the future is “nebulous” or, as Lena thinks in the novel, has a “heavy mortgage” on it, affirms Munton’s persuasive argument that fiction written during the war had “difficulty conceiving endings” and required “a constant adjustment to the psychological space that still lay ahead” (*ND* 59).⁹¹ Yet, Hanley’s diction in this passage is intriguing for other reasons too, the focus, for example, on “shame” and “disgust” perhaps signals that the “official” rhetoric and exigencies of the war could generate a sense of inadequacy as much as self-pride. This war, with its unique Home Front, meant

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁰ Letter to Norman Unger, May 20th, 1941 (NIU collection).

⁹¹ Munton, *English Fiction*, pp. 2, 21.

the behaviour and contribution of everyone could be scrutinized, not just the “Daddy” of the famous First World War recruitment poster.

In the text, Richard remains amazed by Clem’s self-absorption: “How could he be so quiet, so cool, like this, as though nothing in the wide world mattered but that this picture should go down to a dark cellar? He could not answer that” (*ND* 112). The other unusual word use that stands out in Hanley’s letter is “spacious”, the desire for “spacious days” seemingly signals that the war “enclosed” civilians; both literally and metaphorically it formed a “world of suspended motion” (*ND* 61). During the raid, Robinson imagines himself, echoing the poetic trope of Yeats’ existentialist airman and his “lonely impulse of delight”, “flying” away from the claustrophobic cellar.⁹² His reaction is a startling moment of alterity that initiates, for the previously self-confident “blue man”, a visceral disgust at his own confinement: ““Christy you feel like a trussed fowl here and no mistake. When I think of it. Monday I’ll be up there, in the bloody skies. I’ll see myself sitting down here, squat, bloody rat, worm, I’ll say, ‘you stinking little rat of a man’”” (*ND* 129). As with the example of Johns the sailor, Hanley reveals the difficulties of British servicemen in integrating their military and civilian experiences.⁹³ Clearly, *No Directions* would not be suitable for adaption and broadcast by the Features Department of BBC radio for the purposes of national morale.

⁹² W.B. Yeats, “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” (1919) in Edward Larrissy, ed., *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.64.

⁹³ Another Hanley text that focuses on the problems of a soldier’s reintegration into the civilian and quotidian, as well as portraying another devastating air raid scene and the psychological traumas such raids can cause, is his novel *Emily* (1948). The principal character, John Lennor, is a soldier on leave in England but his trip home is shadowed by visions of his combat experience in the Far East. As with many of the mental transformations the characters of *No Directions* experience, Lennor’s hallucinations are, as Victoria Stewart notes, “not initially marked as such [in the narrative] but are simply presented as Lennor’s perceptions.” See, Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.148. *Emily* is set in the later part of the war, and, although initially written in the first months of 1945, was redrafted by Hanley several times before its publication. It has never been republished and copies of the novel remain extremely rare.

The couple that perhaps evoke the most pathos in the novel is Mr and Mrs (Emily) Frazer, whose neuroses due to the diminishment of “spacious days” seems sadly compounded by aging. Mr Frazer “knew he doddered, was old, all of a sudden old, surprise with the vice in it” (ND 97). Mrs Frazer’s fixation on her front door, which overnight has become stuck ajar, causes her to shake violently when she spoke (ND 15). Richard, promising to fix it “tomorrow”, climbs the stairs but sees:

Mr Frazer quite clear in his mind, saw him rattling at the knob, as though it held the very secret of the door’s stubbornness. Saw him pushing at it, pulling at it, hands finally falling to his sides, eyes staring helplessly at the door, and Emily’s dry, shrill voice shouting, ‘Shut it, shut it’ (ND 16).

When Richard senses that the door would leave them feeling vulnerable to somebody coming into the flat he asks, “‘The sailor, is that what she’s afraid of?’”, to which Mr Frazer simply replies, “‘It’s the door’” (ND 16). Later they become convinced that something has “invaded” their flat, but it is non-human: “something had got in, too, he realized that, a gust of wind, something *had* happened [...] they had slept all night with this door open, blown open by a *force*” (ND 97, 98). Perhaps this force might actually be a displacing effect of nearby explosions, but what morbidly disturbs the Frazers is not so much practical consequence, but that something that symbolizes their life in the flat is wrong, unnaturally, sinisterly out of place. “Door of a room that held all their lives, together lived, all in this room” (ND 100).

Also sinisterly wrong, even in a strict etymological sense, is that Mr Frazer, though “All his life he had been a right-handed man”, suddenly only uses his left: “And there were other things that made her afraid. Putting things back on shelves, drawing curtains, filling a kettle, turning a tap, you noticed these little things, why suddenly did he use his left hand?” (ND 97). This is one of the creepiest details in the novel. Mrs Frazer has the strange feeling that, somehow “the left hand usurped” the right: “it was a

funny idea for her to have, yet its funniness was not something she could laugh at. She could still think that overnight the right hand had become suddenly ashamed of all that it had done” (*ND* 98). The sense of things voided of their humorousness, an uncanny inversion of normality, actually seems fitting in the world of the novel, with its surreal juxtapositions, empty laughter and haunting images. As Miller writes in his introduction, “Isn’t everything topsy turyvy?”: if the mind can rebel, why not body parts too?”⁹⁴

The Frazers, though, seem even more disconnected than the other characters. This stems, we learn, from a generational incongruity that is rooted in language; the “doddering” Frazers have not quite moved with the times, a sense now acutely brought home by the startlingly contemporary grammar of the Blitz. In the cellar, as the bombs get closer, Richard urgently relays the details of nearby destruction to Gwen: ““Yes. Three! Outside. Good lord! You heard didn’t you? *must* have heard that explosion, yes, it’s gone. Reilly’s place blazing””. This urgent, fierce, broken-up speech is “a sort of language the Frazers didn’t comprehend” (*ND* 104). As the cellar shakes with the vibrations of falling bombs, Richard finds that, “He must sit down, he must hold her. He knew what this was, the terror language. Think of Gwen who knew the idiom, all the words of this language, think of her, not the Frazers, their labels said “lost”” (*ND* 104). Revealing again the novel’s emphasis on the sudden, unnerving influence of other people, Richard realises that these extreme experiences, and their expression, is outside the Frazers’ scope of understanding and that he must resist “sympathy” – considering their feelings now could draw him into the matrix of their uncomprehending terror. The novel’s “stream of consciousness” procedure has often been noted, but the text also allows for these “streams” to cross and interweave, to agglomerate into a web of

⁹⁴ Miller, “Introduction”, p.vi.

elemental images and gestures which exerts an uncanny, subterranean, even telepathic influence on all the characters. Earlier in the evening, during Lena's walk, she thinks of the "two who were old. Frazer the name was, you could hang a label around their necks, 'Lost'" and this image is somehow intuited and re-expressed by Richard (ND 58). After the raid, when Mrs Frazer abandons the cellar, she fumbles past Lena on the stairway and Lena thinks, as though in answer to her own earlier thought and Richard's mental concurrence: "'Yes, that's right. A label round their necks, 'Lost'" (ND 125). The Frazers's "lostness" is situated in and partly borne from language, which is for them another symbol of their own disconnection with the world around them: "Sitting in a cellar where people talked, but you didn't understand very much, the tempo of everything was new, even the language they used was new, you didn't seem to have the right key to it" (ND 101). This sense of nostalgia for an older time where the "tempo" was different and "things were normal and doors closed in a natural way, as they were meant to do" is shared by George Bowling, the lugubrious narrator of George Orwell's *Coming Up For Air* (1939): "I've got something else inside me, chiefly a hangover from the past" (ND 101).⁹⁵ Orwell's novel also links the incipient horrors of war – "*It's all going to happen*. All the things you've got at the back of your mind, the things you're terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries" – to a larger pattern of disconnecting modernity in which people no longer relate to one another, small businesses are driven out by larger corporations, country villages are gentrified by urbanites and real meat is replaced by ersatz synthetic sausages.⁹⁶ Bowling's atavistic projections are ironically disturbed, however, when he returns to his childhood home – "Lower Binfield" – and a bomb is accidentally dropped on the town during an RAF training mission:

⁹⁵ George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air* (1939) (London: Penguin, 2000), p.20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

I had time to think there's something grand about the bursting of a big projectile [...] the peculiar thing is the feeling it gives you of being shoved up against reality. It's like being woken up by somebody shying a bucket of water over you. You're suddenly dragged out of your dreams by a clang of bursting metal, and it's terrible, and it's real.⁹⁷

Clearly, Bowling also knows the “idiom” of the “terror language”. Mr and Mrs Frazer are marginalized precisely because, for them, the bombardment is always unreal, they are being “shoved up against reality” but that modern reality has already been divested of authenticity.

No Directions ends with Clem suddenly “dragged” from his “dreams” by “bursting metal” of the raid. It is a fantastic denouement, but does not feature a bomb wreaking havoc on the house, as the escalating tension and trajectory of the narrative would seem to promise. Instead, once Clem's canvas is finally secured in the cellar and he and Lena get ready to sit with the others, Clem's sulky, trance-like state (“he moved like a robot, he was automata”) is suddenly broken down by the proximity of the raid, as though he is only just awakened to what is really happening: “The noise died away. Clem turned from the wall and looked towards the door, suddenly shouted, ‘I must see this. I must see this’” (*ND* 32, 134). The scene has an epic quality. Clem has clearly been suffering from a form of agoraphobia: “‘If only he would come out,’ suddenly sad, thinking of him five floors up, refusing to move, it made her feel sometimes that he might never come out any more. Something had happened to him”, which makes his sudden mad dash resemble epiphany (*ND* 69). The Robinsons' baby, who has been gently making sucking noises, suddenly “sucked horror home” as “Clem ran out” (*ND* 135). Clem pauses only to look at the sailor who is prone by the door of the cellar, recently blown off its hinges by a nearby explosion. They think he is passed-out from the alcohol, but actually he is dying, either because he has had one too many drunk

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.233.

binges or because, as the door blows off, he is “flung into the air, the reeking air” (in an eerie echo of the Frazers’s flat, doors have become something to be feared) (*ND* 134). Clem steps over Johns’s “great shuddering arse” into the city and wherever he runs he is haunted by his image – “he saw the great shuddering sailor” (*ND* 135). Here, the prose changes gear, with the broken-up, dialogue-driven narrative supplanted by large blocks of fevered description, focalised through Clem’s painterly consciousness. This parallels Lena’s earlier walk into the streets, a scene which also contains long descriptive passages. These changes in narrative tone starkly highlight the disjunction between inside and outside the house, between the claustrophobic inside, with its dense criss-crossing streams of nervy consciousness, and the expansive outside, a deluge of expressionistic, urban chaos, “An ocean of floating trash” (*ND* 136). Clem feels his life was a journey towards this single moment: “a life lived to see this, a grey rocking city” (*ND* 136). Unlike the oppressive existence within the house, mediating, disturbing thought is no longer necessary, or even possible; Clem is in a realm of exhilarating perception: “you couldn’t even think, mind’s doors closed up. It was what you saw”, the “riot of colour” (from the burning buildings) amazes him: “‘God!’ he said, ‘It’s magnificent, it’s—’” (*ND* 135). He climbs to the top of a tall building to look down upon the “rocking city” and apprehends in the mechanized carnage something awesomely non-human: “Life had come to iron, steel, to stone” (*ND* 136). As Rawlinson describes, “Clem’s entrancement by destructive force which animates the merely mineral [is the] representational fiat by which wartime spectacle is dis-figured, evacuated of human content.”⁹⁸

This evacuation of the human reaches its apotheosis in Clem’s perception of “A battering sound below, something white threshing in the black moving sea” (*ND* 136).

⁹⁸ Rawlinson, *British Writing*, p. 78.

Compelled to see what it is, he scrambles back down the iron steps and “reached out his hand, something seemed to explode under it. A mad beast threshing, he knew it was a beast, he felt electric waves running across its back” (*ND* 136). The beast is a white horse and Clem clings to its reins as it canters through the streets: “all his life had been a single movement towards this, to hold fast with a hoofed creature, demented in a rocking city” (*ND* 137). Whilst the number of working horses had fallen steadily through the preceding decades, they were not an uncommon sight in early 40s London, still regularly used to pull brewery or milk carts, and of course by travelling communities. A horse becoming uncoupled from its carriage because of explosion, or bolting from the noise, was therefore entirely plausible, and yet any logical context fails to diminish the profound surrealism of the moment. Throughout the novel we see Clem failing to connect with his fellow residents and congealed in his work, yet, here, he is recuperated by a “hoofed creature” of seemingly near biblical symbolic power. The horse breaks Clem out of his entrancement to the dehumanizing petrification of life occurring around him; suddenly becalmed, “huge, shy and shambling”, the horse “obediently” follows him:

If you walked far enough you came to something green, older than steel or stone, where this beast belonged. He kept on patting its neck, he suddenly loved this beast, a giant trust lay between them, first demented and now calm, it would go where he went. He never once looked back, he walked on, horse shambled after him (*ND* 138-9).

Munton observes that the white horse symbolizes: “a positive force, perhaps England itself, certainly something valued among the destruction.”⁹⁹ Yet, in the narrative world of the novel, with its all-encompassing loosening of associations, I am not convinced the horse has “meaning” in the straightforward sense of a symbol. Borrowing from the grammar of surrealism, the horse is more an abrupt, incongruous and inexplicable

⁹⁹ Munton, *English Fiction*, p. 43.

image thrust onto the canvas of destruction that surrounds it; it is the horse's very intractability as a symbol that redeems Clem's too aestheticized and symbolical spectatorship of the falling bombs.

Part of the radicalism of *No Directions*, as Munton has perceptively argued in his influential reading, is in its "first defining the Blitz as an apocalyptic moment, but subsequently refusing to allow the narrative to be dominated by that concept. Apocalypse is overcome by the force of narrative, which insists upon its own persistence."¹⁰⁰ Here, it is Clem's acknowledgement of something "older than steel or stone", something pre-modern and "green" (recalling Celia's earlier fascination with the colour) where the horse would "belong", that suddenly turns apocalypse back onto itself – to beginnings rather than endings. Once Clem returns to the house, the raid is over and the prose gains a post-climax, elegiac quality. Lena, the "ice" of her austerity cracking, has been sitting quietly crying, but not because she is worried about Clem but because of "something else", she is caught in some reverie "back twenty years, back in bright days", and seems fearful that their whole claustrophobic lifestyle will soon restart: "they would climb back again, back to their shell, where hollowness was" (*ND* 139, 141). She thinks of a relative, Flo, who lives in "all that Essex green" and her dreams of escaping to there too. Johns, who for the entire evening had been wanting to get to Plaistow, lies dead in the room: "a great dividing sea" (*ND* 139). He is lifted out by Richard and, circularising the narrative, by the passing ARP warden who first shoves him through the front door. Completing the pattern of associations of safe, non-urban spaces, Clem walks in and explains to Lena's mystification that he has "'freed it [...] the horse, left it in a field'" (*ND* 142). Clem is then "suddenly staring towards the door", to the space where Johns had been in which "he only saw the sailor lying there again" (*ND* 142).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.41.

“‘That sailor’, she said, ‘he –’ and then she was thinking of stairs, counting them in her brain” (*ND* 142). The sailor’s spectral presence fleetingly hovers in their minds, but Lena is quickly consumed again by the edgy, neurotic existence of the house, mentally “counting” the stairs which she will have to slowly ascend, carrying the canvas back to the flat, only for the events to be repeated, we suspect, the next night. Something, though, does seem to have changed; perhaps Clem has been freed from his introversion as he freed the horse, at the least there is a sense of defiance in their final exchange, of narrative and characters that are deferring apocalypse and “insisting” upon their own “persistence”:

‘Sailor?’
 ‘Yes. Are you ready now?’
 ‘I’m ready now,’ she said (*ND* 142).

White Horses and Surrealism

The image of a white horse had some topical cultural currency. As Mengham observes, the scene in *No Directions* “resembles closely the strange appearance of a powerful white horse that erupts momentarily in Humphrey Jennings’s contemporaneous film about the Blitz, *Fires Were Started* (1943).” A white horse was also a common trope in some near-contemporary surrealist art. The second collection of surrealist poetry and prose put out by the “New Apocalypitics” group including J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece was entitled *The White Horseman* (1941). And for surrealist artist and writer Leonora Carrington, the white horse, indeed horses in general, was a trope that recurred in both her paintings and short fiction. In Carrington’s painting, *The Inn of the Dawn Horse (Self-Portrait)* (1936-37), two white horses are seen, one in the interior, in the form of a rocking-horse suspended strangely over the image of the artist’s head (and the hyena like creature at her feet) and one in the background, glimpsed through a window. Marina Warner observes that, as an image “The horse marks out stages in Leonora

Carrington's consciousness", and there seems in this painting some sort of psychical opposition or tension situated between the rocking-horse, of a domestic, internal, nursery world, and the animate horse, cantering with freedom in the fields behind.¹⁰¹

After the war, Salvador Dali produced *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1946), in which Saint Anthony is "tempted" by a huge, maddened white horse, as it rears up its hind legs are distortedly elongated, almost spider-like. This was exhibited in Brussels in 1947, alongside works by Carrington and her onetime-partner, Max Ernst. A horse with wild, contorted features is, of course, also placed in the very centre of Picasso's *Guernica*. An enlarged version of the *Guernica* horse's head illustrates the front cover of André Deutsch's 1990 edition of *No Directions*, a notable move by the publishers to link Hanley's novel with a canonical work of avant-garde art. Clearly, the white horse image was part of surrealism's visual and literary vocabulary and Hanley's use of the animal taps into, or at least reflects a contemporaneous artistic current. *No Directions* seems to illustrate that, in terms of fiction, the Blitz legitimised a type of surrealistic, edgy, overwrought writing that, when the British surrealists had attempted similar before the war, seemed seriously out of step with what Peter Nicholls describes as "the dominant tone in thirties English writing, that of the Auden circle, urbane, discursive, securely left-oriented".¹⁰² Evelyn Waugh makes the same point about the war and art, although rather satirically, in his novel *Put Out More Flags* (1942), as the egocentric and smugly detached Basil Seal says to his artist friend, Poppet: "'You know I should

¹⁰¹ Marina Warner, "Leonora Carrington's Spirit Bestiary; or the Art of Playing Make-Belief" in Andrea Schlieker, ed., *Leonora Carrington: paintings, drawings and sculptures, 1940-1990* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), p.14.

¹⁰² Peter Nicholls, "Surrealism in England", in *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, p.397.

have thought an air raid was just the thing for a surrealist; it ought to give you plenty of compositions – limbs and things lying about in odd places, you know.”¹⁰³

Other Blitz Narratives (i): William Sansom

Another author who reflected this new mood was William Sansom, whose short story collection *Fireman Flower* draws on his experiences of working as a fireman during the Blitz (he would also appear as a piano-playing fireman in the film *Fires Were Started*).¹⁰⁴ Sansom’s stories often have a dense symbolism and strange tone. “Fireman Flower”, for example, has long, unnervingly mannered and deliberative interior monologues. As he prepares to enter a blazing building the eponymous principal character thinks things like: ““As our uniforms depict us, so are we uniform. We start equally and end – wherever our selected tactics lead us.””¹⁰⁵ This is one element of what Deer calls Sansom’s “Englishing of Kafka”, which can also be discerned in the story’s Kafkaesque sense of fable – Fireman Flower has at one point to choose between three different doors and routes through the burning building, with two companions urging him to take different doors.¹⁰⁶ Other writers had “Kafkaesque resonance” in their work before the war, Edward Upward’s *Journey to the Border* (1938), for example, with its main protagonist left unnamed and which draws, as Nicholls describes, “a stark contrast

¹⁰³ Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (1942) (London: Penguin, 2000), p.31. Waugh also pokes fun at how that other trajectory of 30s writing exemplified by Auden is curtailed by the war, as “Parsnip” and “Pimpernel” (transmuted versions of Auden and Christopher Isherwood) emigrate to America and are reduced to being no more than the latest *cause célèbre* to be discussed by the chattering classes.

¹⁰⁴ Several prominent writers worked either as air-raid wardens, as did T.S. Eliot, or as firemen such as William Sansom and Henry Green did. All three of these men drew almost immediately on their experiences in their writing. Images of the Blitz, especially fire, reverberate through Eliot’s *Little Gidding* (1942) and Green’s novel *Caught* reflects, according to Jeremy Treglown, the inside knowledge of Green who, volunteering for the Auxiliary Fire Service and based at a station in the very centre of London, took on “among the most dangerous and valuable tasks available to anyone” See Jeremy Treglown, “Introduction” to *Caught* (1943) (London: Harvill Press, 2001), p. vii.

¹⁰⁵ William Sansom, “Fireman Flower” in *Fireman Flower and other Stories* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944), p.127.

¹⁰⁶ Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, p. 128.

between an illusory world of surreal desire and one of rational action”.¹⁰⁷ These narratives, however, would seem slightly drained of their prior power once the war (and especially the Blitz) began and pre-empted such nightmarish visions (a sense of real apocalypse superseding the previously imagined one). Nicholls suggests that “the war effectively disposed of Surrealism in England”, both in the disruption of the movement’s social connections, and, in the more abstract terms I have been discussing, the war’s pre-emption of some of Surrealism’s disturbing power.¹⁰⁸ If Surrealism was, however, disposed of in terms of formal movements, clearly aspects of its style had been absorbed into England’s literary imagination and surrealistic gestures, the historical context filling them with different depths and meanings, are provocatively woven through Blitz narratives like those of Hanley and Sansom.¹⁰⁹ The overwhelmingly urban character of the Blitz heightens the connection, as Cyril Connolly would observe in 1944: “Surrealism is a typical city-delirium movement, a violent explosion of urban claustrophobia; one cannot imagine Surrealists except in vast cities.”¹¹⁰ Clem’s “explosion of urban claustrophobia”, “demented in a rocking city”, is thus imbued with a very contemporary sense of the surreal. At the end of *Fireman Flower*, Flower’s eerie calmness is overtaken by a desire to reach the top of the building. He makes a desperate dash for the roof – ““Let me climb higher! This is not enough. Let me climb higher!”” – in a scene with striking echoes of Clem’s sudden

¹⁰⁷ Nicholls, “Surrealism in England”, p.408.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 415.

¹⁰⁹ See ibid. (pp 413-4) for discussion of the “New Apocalyptic” as the “last grouping of poets to have a tangential relation to Surrealism” but which was also “painfully marked by the misery of a new war”. Nicholls argues that their work offered “degraded surrealistic gestures” and reveals how, eventually, “The Surrealist influence [...] had actually turned English writing back on itself” towards more intrinsically traditional forms. I would argue that it is in individuals like Hanley and Sansom that Surrealism found an outlet in wartime writing that retained some of the power and verve of the original Surrealist style, even in combination with those more traditional forms.

¹¹⁰ Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave* (1944, rev. ed. 1945) (London: Arrow Books, 1961), p.35.

ascent to the top of a tall building.¹¹¹ “Round and up he ran, faster and faster, like a dreamer escaping his nightmare.”¹¹² Once Flower reaches the roof, he becomes overtaken by a sort of panoptic afflatus, and, “with a great quiet love he let himself grow aware” of the surrounding roofs and all the life that was contained beneath: “of distant beauties and the comfortably ugly, of all human affairs by different standards good and bad.” This final paragraph, one very long sentence, offers an extraordinarily vivid denouement: “he loved a single rusted nail as he loved the Gioconda smile, the factory’s timeclock as he loved the mould of autumn leaves, a mausoleum as he loved the crèche, a cat’s head in the gutter as he loved the breasts of Joan.”¹¹³ This passage is replete with “classically” surreal juxtapositions, placing in tension the familiar and extraordinary, the concrete with the abstract, as well as employing the surrealist tactic of using “the definite article to gesture toward something with which we appear to be familiar but in fact are not”.¹¹⁴ The final coupling, the breasts of Flower’s lover, Joan, imaginatively placed alongside a decapitated cat’s head, detritus of the bombings, is hauntingly veracious. Both Clem and Flower locate a sort of sublimity (an acknowledgement of a connecting love or beauty) in the Blitz experience, and this finds expression in these severe oppositions, such as the white horse cantering through the “ocean of floating trash”. Flower seems to project breasts, as Celia does in *No Directions*, as an image of positive sexuality (and perhaps motherliness) that somehow persists through the chaos. But the contrast in the two fictions between the fabular white horse – maddened, becalmed and finally led to safety – with the detached head of a pet cat, as though domesticity itself has been ripped apart, is a stark one.

¹¹¹ Sansom, “Fireman Flower”, p.161.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 162-3.

¹¹⁴ Nicholls, “Surrealism in England”, p. 400.



Fig. 2: Firemen working during a Saturday night raid in 1941.

Sansom's stories are perhaps closer to Hanley's vision in *No Directions* than any of the other many narratives set in and around the London Blitz; both have striking, estranging tonal effects and share some of the same techniques in achieving these.¹¹⁵ Both Sansom and Hanley, for example, employ apostrophes to demarcate internal thought, but in Hanley's text these are used inconsistently and the lines between thought, outward speech and focalised narrative can blur disconcertingly. Sansom's surrealistic juxtapositions can seem part of the internal "logic" or trajectory of the story's narrative, part of a larger symbolic code, whereas, in *No Directions*, such juxtapositions or imaginative transformations emerge as a result of seemingly irrational or phobic reactions to a character's perception of an outside event. Hearing Lena and Clem scuttle up and down the stairs, Robinson says: "'Listen to the bloody mice' [...]. They made creaking noises as they descended. To Mr. Robinson they were mice" (*ND* 116). Even more graphically, when on her walk, Lena spots a large balloon (presumably a "barrage balloon") slowly descending towards the street and, as "She looked at the mass, she thought of prodigious lice, white lice" (*ND* 62). Such seemingly aleatory sensory responses accumulate to give the narrative the feeling of a very estranged

¹¹⁵ Hanley researcher Chris Gostick suggests that: "Hanley was certainly aware of Sansom's work and probably shared a mutual friend in Henry Green, but I don't think they ever actually met" (Letter to the author, 2008).

version of reality, but Hanley's most disconcerting device is probably his sudden deployment, within what appear interior monologues, of the second-person pronoun. This small word has a disturbing effect in otherwise conventional passages, the intermittent use of "you" giving the sudden impression of implicating the reader in the text, drawing them into the chaos of blackout. When Richard Jones, for example, becomes exasperated at persuading a recalcitrant Clem and Lena to come with him to the cellar: "and then there was nothing more to say, nothing more. You were finished. You had emptied yourself" (ND 114). The reader is brought into the field of a character's psychology, however disturbed that psychology might be. It also highlights again the elastic nature of the narrative's perspectival changes, the baton of narrative passed rapidly between different subject positions, or, even, occasionally thrust into the hands of the reader.

Other Blitz Narratives (ii): Nigel Balchin

No Directions probably exemplifies an avant-garde realism more vivaciously than any other text discussed in this thesis, offering both an edgy, "uncensored" perspective on the novel's historical context whilst simultaneously providing a new critical "framing" of that reality informed by surrealist and other avant-garde techniques and narrative displacements.¹¹⁶ Another illustratively contrasting text that can culminate the discussion of style and theme in *No Directions*, is Nigel Balchin's novel *Darkness Falls From The Air* (1943).¹¹⁷ It is an evocative Blitz narrative, energised by contemporary

¹¹⁶ The uncensored aspect that differentiates Hanley's novel from many other wartime texts is clearly seen in Johns the sailor's interaction with Celia (characters whose meeting seems entirely contingent on the air-raids) which teeters precariously between cloying vulnerability and genuine sexual transgression.

¹¹⁷ Balchin's most well-known work is probably his novel *The Small Back Room* (1943), about war-time bomb disposal, which was adapted into a film by Powell and Pressburger in 1949. His fiction has often been neglected by critics, but there is analysis of *Darkness* in Sinclair, *War Like A Wasp*, pp. 63-4, and Mark Rawlinson, *British Fiction*, pp. 92-4. The title *Darkness Falls From The Air* is a corruption of Thomas Nashe's line, "Brightness falls from the air, / Queens

slang, which also utilizes a metaphor of darkness, as well as tackling the sense of inurement to the bombing – Hitler’s “bad tactics” – that Hanley describes in his letter but is little evidenced in the damaged psychologies of *No Directions*.¹¹⁸ *Darkness* describes well-to-do characters cocooning themselves away from the worst realities of the Blitz. Balchin’s novel, in both its more conventional, linear plot, and its conveyed sense of physical and psychological *separation* from the Blitz, of an outside looking in, provides a very pertinent contrast to the claustrophobic “insideness”, the febrile atmosphere and language of *No Directions*.¹¹⁹ The novel is set in the autumn of 1940; it offers the first-person narrative of Bill Sarratt, an industrialist who has been co-opted to work for the civil service at the outbreak of war, setting up a department designed to maximise war-time factory production. Bill despairs at the red tape and filibustering sub-committees that others in the Ministry use to delay and block his proposals about forcing the nation’s businesses to focus on the war effort rather than profit and self-interest. Meanwhile, Bill’s wife, Marcia, is having an affair with an effete, self-dramatising writer called Stephen, who keeps threatening to commit suicide if she leaves him. At the beginning of the novel, Bill considers that Stephen could not be a

have died young and fair”, from his poem “A Litany in Time of Plague” (1592), although, as Rawlinson notes, it might also allude to or be taken from Stephen Dedalus’s misremembering of Nashe’s line in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. See Rawlinson, *British Writing*, p.93.

¹¹⁸ Such inurement to the raids was also described by C.P. Snow: “it began to seem quite minor if there were bombs in your actual neighbourhood but not on your actual house.” Cited in Leonard Mosley, *Backs to The Wall: London Under Fire, 1940-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p.170. Mosley’s work offers a narrative history of the London Blitz that draws skilfully on M-O reports and accounts. Adam Phillips has written about the psychological effects of the Blitz in the context of prevailing 30s and 40s psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that for the Melanie Klein group of psychoanalysts the “War becomes, with the experience of the Blitz, that most paradoxical thing: the trauma that is apparently easy to incorporate.” This, of course, is not the version of “Blitz reality” that Hanley’s fiction depicts. See Adam Phillips, “Bombs Away” in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 57.

¹¹⁹ The claustrophobic quality found in many of the fictions of the Second World War has been identified and analysed by Piette in his work on the subject: “The private imagination,” Piette writes of the period of the war, “was [...] invaded, dismantled and displaced”. Piette, *Imagination at War*, p.7.

genuine target for Marcia's prolonged interest and affection and treats the affair rather insouciantly. In acquiescing to Marcia's requests to see him, Bill only warns: "Stephen's all right as farce, but he'd be poison as drama."¹²⁰ But gradually Stephen's egocentrism and emotional blackmailing of Marcia begins to wear on his patience: "If I'd known there was going to be all this flap I might have just waded in and stopped it good and early. But I told Marcia it was a thing where she must please herself and I must stick to it. It won't kill anything that was worth keeping alive anyhow" (*DFA* 75). Stephen, with smirking tones reminiscent of some of Hamilton's bullying characters, attempts to undermine Bill by portraying him as an example of cold rationality, mocking his "superman stuff" and "ridiculously exaggerated emotional control" (*DFA* 56) that contrasts markedly with the neuroses and frayed nerves displayed so publicly by most of the characters in *No Directions*.¹²¹

Balchin carefully juxtaposes Bill's growing disenchantment with his wife's attachment to Stephen to an escalating fear of the raids. Initially, Bill maintains a calm, devil-may-care attitude to the bombardment and generally sits through the noise in downstairs restaurant rooms of the fashionable West End. "I keep having the last dinner I'm going to have," says Marcia at the beginning of the novel, "Do you remember the first one? The night after the war started? You ate a whole lobster" (*DFA*

¹²⁰ Nigel Balchin, *Darkness Falls From The Air* (1942) (London: Cassell, 2002), p.61. Subsequent page references in text (*DFA*).

¹²¹ Bill even manages, the reader is told several times, a good night's sleep, even after severely interrupted or chaotic evenings. This provides a contrast to the seriousness of sleep deprivation portrayed in *No Directions*. Historian John Sweetman has suggested that "in London only 2 percent of psychological admissions to hospital were connected with air raids". Sweetman, "Strategic Bombing" in Richard Holmes ed., *The World Atlas of Warfare: Military Innovations that Changed the Course of History* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1988), p.241. Although statistics about mental health seem fallible – what about those who did not go to hospital or patients whose psychological distress was "referred" to another ailment? – Balchin's novel does represent a sense of psychological continuity and routine largely absent from much fiction of the Blitz.

10). After one walk during an early raid, Bill becomes, “annoyed to find that I was quite shaky, which was rather odd, because except when the window fell out in Regent Street I’d been quite happy” (*DFA* 34). In these early stages of the narrative, detached attitudes are exhibited by other characters too. A fatalist cabby works through the raids (“‘Goin’ to get you it will. Business as usual’”) whilst Bill’s seemingly affable acquaintance “old Percy” observes that he is “‘too old’” to mind the bombing: “‘Can only make a year or two’s difference. So what’s the good in worrying?’” (*DFA* 12, 29). Marcia likes to observe the raids, but initially just as a sort of exotic, distant spectacle: “‘I’m childish, of course [...] Afraid of missing something’” (*DFA* 98). Often they end up looking over to the skies above the East End, which of course was the most remorselessly targeted area for bombers in the first months: “‘It had looked exciting from Penn,’” suggests Bill, “‘It always did look exciting from just outside. I suppose it was seeing it end on’” (*DFA* 80).

The novel distinguishes the different geographies of wartime London, and conveys how these, and the related differences in material circumstances, affected people’s psychology and attitude towards the bombing. At one point, Bill’s friend Ted takes him to a lavish, decadent party in Hampstead, perhaps the last embers of the Bright Young Things generation. The host, Hubbard, brags about the security and plushness of his basement flat, sings a satiric “sort of war dodger’s anthem” and asks questions like: “‘Is this one of your homo or heterosexual phases, Ted dear? Ravishing girls or slinky little boys?’” (*DFA* 160, 161). Rawlinson suggests that the main couple “cast themselves as tourists in the Blitz”, yet the narrative makes clear that Bill and Marcia are uncomfortable tourists, frequently ambivalent about their own spectatorship of events.¹²² Marcia becomes increasingly restless at their lifestyle: “‘What we ought to

¹²² Rawlinson, *British Writing*, p. 93.

do is go down east where you can't just go thirty feet underground and have dinner'", and eventually gets a voluntary job looking after victims of the bombings at a rest centre on Commercial Road, at the heart of the East End (*DFA* 97). Conversely, Bill becomes increasingly agitated during the raids, especially by the thought that a stray fragment might drop on his head: "it was splinters I was chiefly afraid of. Bombs were an act of God" (*DFA* 98). The couple leave their flat temporarily to live in a large, multi-story pub as Bill begins to feel "'an urge towards something big made of steel and concrete to sleep in'" (*DFA* 94). Offering a counterpoint to *No Directions* sense of enforced communality, Bill feels isolated in the raids: "I wished to God Marcia were in, and it wasn't only for her sake. Air-raids are a game for two or more players" (*DFA* 35). The novel has the same trajectory towards apocalyptic climax as does *No Directions* and "Fireman Flower", and the momentum of the narrative is shaped by the increasing proximity of the falling bombs to the main protagonists.

With rather overplayed dramatic irony, as pessimistic Bill finally believes his work and home-life are improving, his schemes for greater regulation of factories are, through inside information and the connivance of his colleagues, sabotaged by "old Percy". That same evening a massive raid over the East End destroys the rest centre at which Marcia is working. When Bill reaches her, she is crushed underneath a girder: "I thought it was a lump of concrete at first and then I saw it was Marcia's head covered in white dust" (*DFA* 192). The dehumanizing petrification of the Blitz that Hanley projects – "Life had come to iron, steel, to stone" – is recast more literally here. Bill crawls into the wreckage, gives Marcia a syringe-full of morphine and holds her hand (which is all that he can reach) until he knows she is dead. Later that night, Bill informs an already suicidal Stephen she has been killed, and Stephen lashes out: "'You always kill everything. Nothing can live near you. You make it flat and grey and dead and sterile

like yourself” (*DFA* 200). The novel’s conclusion shows how a realist “tragedy” of the Blitz could allow for the sense of apocalypse to overcome and culminate the narrative trajectory in a way that is defiantly refused in Hanley’s text. Bill is an exemplar of self-possession; the reader is often shown glimpses of the logic and limpidity of his thinking – even in the time of absolute crisis, for example, he has the composure to wonder whether “pressure on her chest would stop the morphia from working” (*DFA* 194). Yet, it is Bill’s very logicity that is revealed to be useless in the face of the illogical enormity, as the thoughts of Robinson in *No Directions* articulate it, of the “terror cradle over your city” (*ND* 107). The apocalyptic episode makes Bill question the purchase he has on his own efficient personality:

I sat down on some sandbags and tried to think it out – what I should do tomorrow and so on. But there was too much of it, what with Marcia and the job and this and that. There didn’t seem to be anything to start from. I thought, ‘It’s all right as long as it stays dark and I go on sitting here. But in a few hours it’ll be light and I shall have to start again and I don’t exist any longer. You couldn’t define me now’ (*DFA* 203).

Darkness brings some sort of respite because it allows Bill’s fractured sense of self to go on existing without the scrutiny of the day. During Lena’s city walk in *No Directions*, she also finds some comfort in the “endless” quality of darkness: “I felt safer in the darkness, I was warm in that black sea” (*ND* 61). The final sentence of Balchin’s novel signals a sense of encroaching desolation by returning again to this darkness motif. Ever-resourceful Bill spills a sandbag over a small incendiary that lands by him on the street: “It went out, and then it was darker than ever” (*DFA* 204).

The text is elegantly written, spare and moving, and the potentially bureaucratic and expedient approach of democratic, capitalist government in wartime (there is something of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*’s twisted logic here) is keenly exposed. Balchin’s novel seems to represent the challenge to a traditionally robust, capable,

emotionally controlled version of masculinity that the exigencies of the Home Front war initiated. Bill, although far from “flat and grey and dead” as the narcissistic Stephen accuses, cannot “exist” or be “defined” any longer. An idealized, almost comic book form of robust masculinity is offered in the novel as a potential source of reassurance amongst the chaos. This takes the form of a passing character, a police inspector who arrests a drunk, off-duty army sergeant who is picking fights in a bar. “He was a lovely thing. I’ve never seen any human being that moved more beautifully or looked in better condition. He introduced himself as though he’d come to a party we’d been giving” (*DFA* 101). In a scene reminiscent of a 40s Dick Barton radio play, the inspector smilingly sidesteps the much larger man’s wild punches and then promptly knocks him down with his own. Responding to Bill’s praise, one of the “bobbies” accompanying the inspector says: ““Oh, he’s a lad, all right. He’d take on six like that. I’ve seen him do it.’ You could see they thought he was a good chap to have about. I thought so myself” (*DFA* 104-5). Tellingly, the idealized police inspector does not reappear in the rest of the narrative, and none of the other characters, including Bill, can efface or bring calm control to the widening “lawlessness” of the Blitz. Bill is not given access to the imaginative vocabulary which in *No Directions* allows the characters to psychologically transform events, and that reveals the potential multi-valency of each moment of the Blitz experience. This multi-valency can be detected in the different, interchanging perspectives of Hanley’s text, or indeed from within one, mutable perspective: “She wanted to laugh, it was funny. She wanted to cry, it was sad” (*ND* 50). In allowing the Blitz to be the ultimate arbiter of the novel’s chronology and narrative, *Darkness* evinces the overwhelming nature of the historical moment but it does not illuminate the contradictions, idiosyncrasies or possibility of resistance to the apocalyptic that Hanley’s more experimental style achieves.

Conclusion

The war, especially on the Home Front, gave new urgency to the questions that were commonplace in the late 30s and early 40s about the supposed death of the novel, about which Connolly, in a series of famous *Horizon* editorials and in his *Enemies of Promise* (1938), was perhaps the most vocal pessimist. The Blitz, and the very idea that explosive devices that could cause mass loss of civilian life and devastation could descend from the air, raised questions of how far literature, particularly realist literature, can or should attempt to represent the genuinely cataclysmic. W.G. Sebald gives his view on this issue in his essay “Air War and Literature”, which reflects on Germany’s seemingly willed national amnesia about the Allied bombing and destruction of German cities such as Cologne, Frankfurt and Hamburg.¹²³ In characteristic style, Sebald relates a series of records and statistics about the bombings – 6,865 corpses burnt on a funeral pyre by the S.S. in Dresden in February of 1945, fires in Hamburg spreading through the city at a “speed of over 150 kilometres an hour”, etc. – and relates much graphic, first-hand testimony, but, assessing both these personal accounts and more “literary” versions, he also expresses his discomfort about the ability to communicate the veracity of such bombardment and its consequences in certain types of language: “I do not doubt that there were and are memories of these nights of destruction; I simply do not

¹²³ W.G. Sebald, “Air War and Literature” in *On The Natural History of Destruction* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 1-107. Sebald’s essay provides a timely reminder in this discussion of the lethal reciprocity of “strategic bombing” that occurred during the Second World War, in which the action of attacking civilian targets was seen to be legitimatised as part of an escalating process of reprisal. For example, the R.A.F. Bomber Command’s decision to bomb the historic Hanseatic League towns of Lübeck and Rostock in 1942 was posited at the time as a response to the earlier bombing of Coventry; and the following ‘Baedeker’ raids by the Luftwaffe on Norwich, Bath, Exeter, Canterbury and York (so called because targets were, according to Nazi propagandist Baron von Sturm, picked with the help of Baedeker tourist guides) was part of a Nazi policy openly called *Vergeltungsangriffe* (“retaliatory raids”). The idea of *vergeltung* also provided the “V” in the naming of the V-1 (“doodlebug”) and V-2 weapons that were used by the Nazis in 1944 and 1945 to terrorise British civilians.

trust the form – including the literary form – in which they are expressed.”¹²⁴ Sebald also suggests that: “The construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist.”¹²⁵ William Sansom seems to take a similar view about the possibility for literary “truth” in writing about such destructive circumstances: “The experience is too violent for the arts to transcribe; there will never be an adequate reportage to convey to posterity a living idea of the truth of such experience.... The results of violence and its reflections may be written down – but never the core of the violent act itself. In the first place, language fails.”¹²⁶ In Balchin’s novel, Bill chides Stephen when he complains: ““You can’t write in the middle of this”: ““Oh come [...] The spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling and so on. Why, for the last ten years all you boys have been saying you couldn’t write good verse on the brink of a war because it didn’t mean anything. Hasn’t the start of the thing made it easier for you?”” (DFA 9).

Elizabeth Bowen was one writer who claimed, conversely, that the war was providing her stories with a new “authority that had nothing to do with [her]”, because they were “saturated” by a great and sudden unity of profound communal feeling: “during the war the overcharged sub-consciousnesses of everybody overflowed and submerged.”¹²⁷ Such a phenomenon is hinted at in the “overflowing” imaginations and telepathic connectivity of *No Directions*. The problem that Sebald raises about what can and should be representable in art perhaps remains unanswered (or unanswerable); as Patterson explains, it essentially “constitutes the permanent challenge to art and writing, to find a form equal to the material or the occasion”. In *No Directions*, however, we find a serious and original attempt by Hanley to overcome the problems of representability

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 98, 27, 81.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.53.

¹²⁶ Cited in Robert Hewison, *Under Siege* (London: Quartet, 1979), pp. 87-8.

¹²⁷ Cited in Patterson, *Guernica*, p. 154.

by embedding the sense of language failing itself (or failing the “core” of the violent occasion that Sansom describes) within the narrative of the novel itself, in the character’s surrealistic imaginative transformations or inability to understand events in purely linguistic terms. When Robinson attempts, in comical scenes, to describe the events above them – ““flying westwards now, I think”” – the others simply take it as “the bits and ends of some crazy geography” , and when Gwen talks with Mr and Mrs Frazer, it is in “a sort of mumble-jumble language which none understood” (ND 117). One of Hanley’s most enduring qualities is his ambition to fit form with content in a profound way; this is one reason why the language of his fiction can veer so markedly from the laboriously straightforward and realistic to the deeply symbolic, expressionistic or just unusual.

This is illustrated by the mode of one of Hanley’s later novels, *A Woman In The Sky* (1973), which is set in a tower block on a North London housing estate.¹²⁸ In a letter written from late 1971, Hanley comments on his ambition for this then work-in-progress: “I am writing a novel [...] about one of those appalling, towering, concrete masses of flats into which people are pushed by authority. I’m hoping to invent a special sky language to deal with it.”¹²⁹ This idea, of a “special sky language”, reveals a lot about Hanley’s attempts to find a “form equal to the material” and evolve a language appropriate to a fiction’s social movements, to different, slipping subject and class positions. The same approach is found in *No Directions*: a “terror language”, from inchoate mumblings to intimate whispers, to cries of surprise and anguish, italicization, hyphens, ellipses, all of which evoke the colour, cadence and urgency of language in the “rocking city”. These are clearly “aesthetic effects”, in Sebald’s terms, but they are also

¹²⁸ *A Woman In The Sky* (1973) relates the aftermath of an elderly woman’s suicide – she is consumed by guilt after being caught shop-lifting – the narrative is made up of much elliptical, tense and uncommunicative dialogue between the woman’s neighbours as they attempt to understand what has happened.

¹²⁹ Letter to Norman Ellison, December 16th 1971 (NIU collection).

designedly aiming for a deep level of realism and converging of form and content, perhaps even the more grandiose “ideal of truth” that Sebald also argues is “itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction.”¹³⁰ The novel’s “terror language” is evoked through hallucination and sensation as much as words. Here, Hanley reveals language as less a form of potentially inauthentic self-expression, than as one part of the imaginative assimilation of the indeterminacies of Blitz and blackout.

¹³⁰ Sebald, “On Air War”, p.53.

CHAPTER THREE

“Horizon’s Line a Blur”: *The Ocean* and *Sailor’s Song*

Previous sections of this thesis have alluded to Hanley’s emotional and artistic connection to the sea and his concern for the production of a specific maritime realism, one that rejects the high romanticism of the sea-writing tradition whilst addressing the portrayal of “common sailor men” in fictive terms (see chapter one). I expand on these themes in this chapter, as I examine the two ‘sea-novels’ Hanley produced during the Second World War: *The Ocean* (1941) and *Sailor’s Song* (1943).¹³¹ Although Hanley would write more fiction with sailors as the principal characters, notably in *The Closed Harbour* (1952) and *Levine* (1956), *The Ocean* and *Sailor’s Song* are considered his final two sea-novels proper.¹³² A brief plot sketch would suggest that the novels are similar; both narrate the story of a small group of men struggling for survival on an open boat (a lifeboat in the former and a raft in the latter) after the larger ship they were travelling in has been hit by a torpedo attack. Yet, in these novels the same essential plot situations are taken in radically different directions. This dissimilarity signals, I suggest, one of the more important ways in which Hanley’s fiction seeks to deviate from traditional realist imperatives, namely the requirement for a reliable mimetic connection; here, subject matter and plot are not treated consistently, as a direct correlate to or enclosure of the real, rather, they are used as a site of experiment, the origin of considerable aesthetic and thematic divergence.

The two novels are also important to consider within the wider context of Second World War fiction, principally because they do not seem to offer the promise of

¹³¹ James Hanley, *The Ocean* (1941) (London: Harvill, 1999); *Sailor’s Song* (1943) (London: William Kimber, 1977). Subsequent page references in text with the following abbreviations: *The Ocean* (TO) and *Sailor’s Song* (SS).

¹³² See, for example, Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.63, and Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.127.

paradigmatic resonance that texts like *No Directions* do. Blitz literature, with its disorientations and stark images of ruptured or invaded domestic space, is fertile ground for creating powerful literal and symbolic representations of the war. By comparison, other strains of WWII writing have faded a little from critical discussion, especially those with settings or images less immediate to the Home Front experience. Of Hanley's trio of novels produced during the war, only *No Directions* has become part of a commonly stressed WWII historiography.¹³³ The images that ripple through *The Ocean* and *Sailor's Song* – especially that of the ocean itself – might seem a little diffuse or oblique in a “war novel”, especially in comparison to the tropes of broken glass and fire that recur in Blitz narratives, but in so being they make an original contribution to the cultural vocabulary of the war.

Hanley's two novels offer a picture of people who do not strictly belong to any “front”, Merchant Navy sailors or simply those in transit, civilians travelling with convoys. As such, they are hard to ascribe to the People's War metanarrative, unlike many of the Blitz novels I discussed in the previous chapter, or indeed texts such as J.B. Priestley's *Daylight on Saturday: A Novel About An Aircraft Factory* (1943), a novel whose impeccably realist title promises the portrayal of an everyday, “real” world of work during the war years. And, even though *The Ocean* and *Sailor's Song* feature men stranded away from home after an enemy attack, resembling novels such as H.E. Bates's *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944) and Dan Billany's *The Trap* (1950) (in which a young officer is captured fighting in Africa and sent to an Italian P.O.W camp), neither do Hanley's novels fall easily into a category of contemporary novels that focus

¹³³ In his recent survey of WWII fiction, Rod Mengham highlights the preponderance of Blitz or other Home Front narratives, arguing that “the emphasis on the Home Front is one of the defining differences between the cultures of the two world wars [...] In the fiction of the Second World War the house itself is the principal object of attention.” See Mengham, “British Fiction of the War” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 40, 41.

specifically on combatant experience. Hanley's seaborne characters are in a sort of limbo, non-combatants suddenly trapped in a combatant world, and the uprooted personalities that inhabit both novels suggest a different version of the dissociating effects of the war than that provided by novels set purely "back home". This alternative version actually, in the main, displaces the immediate historical context of the war (in contrast to the methods employed by Hamilton in *Hangover Square*), largely stripping away or disallowing any prominent sense of a political or chronological background, or subtext, to the primary events being related. Hanley is depicting real-life events that were occurring during the time of the novels' writing (the torpedoing of passenger ships was, of course, a grave contemporary problem), yet both novels have a powerful, abstract quality that makes the desperate problems faced by the protagonists seem part of a more timeless pattern of human struggle.¹³⁴ Fordham argues convincingly that the war was a "contingent opportunity" for Hanley to further explore themes of "sublimation and emancipation" that had long occupied his work, yet however heterogeneous or remote they seem compared to the mainstream, we still cannot underplay these novels' connection to WWII literature, or to the psychological "taking in" of the war during the early 40s.¹³⁵ As usual, there is a tension here between the instinct towards a realistic depiction of often horrifying real-life events (and there is much to suggest that both novels offer a multitude of realistic detail), and the drive towards abstraction or other formal experiment.

Indeed, *Sailor's Song* is a bravura piece of experimental fiction, perhaps the most outwardly radical novel considered in this thesis. It is replete with almost Joycean language-play and sections of the text are dominated by what might be described as

¹³⁴ For a comprehensive history of the Merchant Navy during the war, see Richard Woodman, *The Arctic Convoys, 1941-1945* (London: John Murray, 1994), *Malta Convoys, 1940-1943* (London: John Murray, 2000) and *The Real Cruel Sea: The Merchant Navy in The Battle of the Atlantic 1939-1943* (London: John Murray, 2004).

¹³⁵ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.64.

“poetic euphemism”, with oceans, ships and sailors rendered (as we shall see) in provocatively sexual and sometimes homoerotic terms. The modes of narration employed are also unusual, with alternations between first and third person narratorial voices, shifts in timeframe and extended analeptic projections. Edward Stokes suggests that *The Ocean* is, by comparison, “in the main, straightforwardly realistic”, yet I would contend that this novel, with its realist trajectory complicated by a “polyphonic” structure and jumps in perspective, and its deeply unsettling moments of anguish and hallucination, is just as radical a contribution to the literary picture of the early 40s and to the “canon” of WWII literature.¹³⁶ Many films of the period also had a maritime focus; in a later section of the chapter I will discuss two of these – *In Which We Serve* (1942) and *Lifeboat* (1944) – to elaborate how 40s culture was more generally addressing the problem of wartime shipwreck, as well as to evolve a clearer picture of the particularity of what Hanley’s sea fiction achieved in the context of its wider cultural moment.

The Ocean

All three of Hanley’s wartime novels hit a similar pitch: linguistic experimentation has become heightened compared with much of his 30s writing and narrative techniques, as well as singular words and phrases, are repeated across the three texts.¹³⁷ As in *No Directions*, the reader of *The Ocean* finds a limited set of characters or *dramatis personae* (certainly one way in which Hanley’s fiction of this period is inflected by his experience of writing theatrical pieces); and again, this group of characters have been

¹³⁶ Stokes, *James Hanley*, p. 110.

¹³⁷ Gerard Barrett argues that the three novels should actually be considered a “distinctly modernist trilogy or sequence” and examines some of the texts’ “interconnecting narrative patterns and distortions” (especially their use of colour). See, Gerard Barrett, “James Hanley and the Colours of War” in *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-century* eds. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 77-87, at pp.79, 80.

thrown together by a moment of specific crisis. Unlike the drunken sailor stumbling through the door in *No Directions*, which takes place in the early evening before an air-raid begins yet seems eerily portentous of that raid, *The Ocean* opens in the eerily quiet aftermath of a tumultuous event: “When the light broke the sailor got up and looked about him. Clear sky, silent heaving masses of water. No other boats. Horizon’s line a blur” (*TO* 3). The stylistic and rhythmic similarity to the opening paragraph of *No Directions* is clear: “After the deluge of sound ceased, after the wind passed, the sailor fell, was sick. They were in a desert of air” (*ND* 9). Language is condensed in the manner of an Imagist poem, with routine explanatory words such as “there” or “was” frequently omitted. Articles are also used sparsely so that, in both novels’ openings, the definite article of “*the* sailor” lends him a striking, almost uncanny emphasis, helping to create the sense of one man being the only or primary object in an empty or elemental space, the “desert of air” or “masses of water”.¹³⁸ Introducing an edition of Hanley’s shorter fiction, the poet Alan Ross places great store in the universality of Hanley’s sailor characters, who are often “simply ‘the sailor’, the anonymous man sandwiched between the remorseless pressures of poverty and war”:

Hanley’s sea novels and stories can be viewed as one novel; they are component parts of a single experience, swept by a powerful searchlight that moves about in time as well as in space. The men, however different, are aspects of the same man and they are complementary to each other. Only the searchlight picks them up at moments that are decisive in a different way to each.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ The inconsistent use of the definite article had long been a feature of Hanley’s writing style. Reviewing Hanley’s *Stoker Bush* (1935), Edwin Muir complains that in Hanley’s prose “Sometimes the definite article is turned off, sometimes turned on; and the effect is as disconcerting as if one were reading the book by a bad electric light” (cited in Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.106).

¹³⁹ Alan Ross, “Introduction” to *The Last Voyage and Other Stories* (London: Harvill, 1997), pp. x,xiii. Ross worked himself on convoys during WWII, navigating the perilous Arctic route to Russia, and was part of the crew of HMS *Onslow*, a destroyer that saw action, and took heavy damage, during the Battle of the Barents Sea in 1942. He is one writer, in other words, well equipped to judge the verisimilitude of Hanley’s stories of torpedo attack. One of Ross’s own literary accounts of the Battle is found in the dramatic long poem “J.W.51B”, in Alan Ross, *Poems 1942-67* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), pp. 29-55.

Ross's suggestion, here, that each of Hanley's sailors is a different variation or iteration of an ultimately imperishable ur-character, seems perhaps a rather poetic interpretation of the inter-textual links or patterns that we can trace in Hanley's different fictions. Though clearly, as Ross suggests, "the sailor" figure is overlaid with many significations, some of which carry a mythic or "heroic" weight, what makes Hanley's recurring use of such a character model most interesting is its role in displacing narrative from the general to the specific, or vice-versa. More is occurring here than an appeal towards lyrical allegory or symbolism. The moments in Hanley's stories when "the sailor" becomes individuated with a name, personality and material history, or conversely, when that individuality is suddenly subsumed into a larger landscape of metaphor, serve to make narrative multi-dimensional, arresting its trajectory towards either the purely symbolic or straightforwardly realist.

Even though it is more persistently shaped by a sense of mysticism (and images familiar from his Catholic upbringing) than many of Hanley's other fictions, such narrative shifts are common in *The Ocean*. Joseph Curtain, the latest sailor to be located by Hanley's "searchlight", is referred to as "the sailor" often in the opening pages of the novel, even after he has been named, yet becomes more insistently "Curtain" in the middle and final parts of the text. This appears to emphasise the stark difference between Curtain and the four other men on the lifeboat, who are all civilians without maritime experience. "The ocean was big, the boat was small, he wished he had another sailor in the boat with him, it would make all the difference. He was a complete stranger amongst these men, he did not know them, they him. 'I soon will, though,' he reflected" (TO 15). Curtain's reflections mirror the threat apparent in *No Directions*, that in the war, in the contemporary moment, "nobody can be alone no more" (ND 10); but there is also Curtain's sense that shared professional lives, shaped by the sea, offer a form of

fraternal understanding that can overcome the contingency of being “strangers”: “Again he wished Jennings or Grimes [sailor friends whom Curtain was serving with before the attack] was with him. He did not know these men, worlds away from him” (*TO* 26).

The division between Curtain and the other men is of course rooted in profession and status, but it manifests itself more implacably in the extreme circumstances in which they have been brought together: “One saw strangers aboard the *Aurora*, but in this small boat men were stranger still. He thought how a sailor was faced with this sort of thing all the time” (*TO* 18). To Curtain’s mind, life has been strictly codified into sailors and non-sailors, each group always remaining “strangers” to the other. “‘I’m the only sailor in the boat. You’re all strangers to me’”, Curtain suggests, yet he neglects to remark that the four are strangers to each other too (*TO* 12-3). In other words, Curtain believes he is estranged from them by something more than the fact of not having met them before: the novel is clearly playing with ideas of class and professional knowledge, but the division goes beyond that of a typified social system to hint at something enigmatically special or “other” about men whose lives are indelibly shaped by the sea. There is snobbishness in Curtain’s attitude – looking at one of the four rowing he thinks “of a townee in the country trying to dig an acre in an afternoon” – but the sense of an inviolable difference between him and “them” is consistently reinforced by the narrative (*TO* 20). When Curtain attempts to ascertain whether his shipmates have been on a boat before, Benton, a young, shy man who has “in some miraculous way” managed to escape the *Aurora* passenger ship with his suit and overcoat intact, replies: “‘I’ve rowed a boat on the Thames’”, ironically occluding Curtain’s slight hopes that any of them might be hardened to life-at-sea, or adaptable to the present situation (*TO* 17). Curtain even hopes that Benton will imagine he is rowing on the

Thames now, as though the best hope for non-sailors to survive when adrift on the sea is naive self-delusion and constant projections back to a safe domestic space (*TO* 18).

As “the only sailor”, Curtain rapidly begins to feel a deep responsibility for the four men’s survival, which he sees as dependent not only on the maintenance of physical strength but of will-power. It is essential they do not lose nerve: ““So long as every man keeps cool, keeps a hold on himself, I’m satisfied”” (*TO* 12). Aside from Benton, the group is made up of Stone, a thirty-five year old teacher from the Midlands, en route to taking a new job in Canada; Gaunt, a middle-aged businessman who is disoriented after taking a blow to the head, and Father Michaels, an elderly, weak Irish priest who is suffering from severe seasickness. Also on the lifeboat is the dead body of Crilley, a sailor comrade of Curtain’s who was killed during the attack, machine-gunned as he stretched across the water keg, attempting to hide or possibly protecting the keg from enemy fire.

This leads to the most directly anti-German moment in the novel, as Curtain openly ponders whether the gunners knew whether Crilley was positioned there: ““It’s one of those things that makes a man think [...] These days they don’t kill you directly but if you plug a water keg with bullets then you kill everybody – in the best German manner”” (*TO* 12). Fordham argues that the opening to *The Ocean* “[resorts] to a vulgar complicity in the widespread belief that the German navy machine-gunned survivors of U-boat attacks”, and indeed, despite the confusion caused by the attack, characters later reflect again on mental images of “the bullets over the boat”, making it a rather insistent plot detail (*TO* 20).¹⁴⁰ Yet, stressing such moments suggests a propagandist strain that is actually quite elusive in the narrative generally. When, for example, Curtain asks himself: ““In the name of Jesus Christ, how could they know Crilley was on the water

¹⁴⁰ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p. 64.

keg?’”, the narrative ominously adds: “The devil could see in the dark” (TO 22). Even if we postulate this unusually rhetorical sentence to be the culmination of Curtain’s train of thought focalized in the narrative voice, the perpetrators of the attack on the *Aurora* and her passengers are clearly being rendered as mechanistically efficient, faceless, even inhuman.

This projection, though, seems to reflect the specific nature of submarine attack, which of course could kill remotely, by stealth rather than direct engagement, as much as it emblemises a sentiment that is straightforwardly anti-German. Hanley did allow his sea fiction to contain polemic. For example, his long novel about the disastrous attack on Gallipoli in the First World War, *Hollow Sea* (1938), is infused with heartfelt anger about the incompetence of the military establishment and “the reckless manipulation of serviceman’s lives.”¹⁴¹ But in *The Ocean* and *Sailor’s Song* the political is generally more submerged; here, Hanley seems more interested in the emotional response of individuals to the apparent crises, and in the creation of a spectrum of emotional perspectives within his narrative frames. This is, at least, the overriding formal context to Hanley’s use of “popular” stories of German brutality and Curtain’s “revulsion” towards the enemy.¹⁴² Nonetheless, it is true that with its story of Britons surviving

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴² On the question of whether German servicemen killed the survivors of U-boat attacks, Fordham refers readers to the research of historian Tony Lane, whose interviews with naval veterans “discovered no such incidents [of the machine-gunning of survivors], although it was the case that U-boat commanders generally did not pick up survivors” (Fordham, *Modernism and the Working-Class*, p.248, n.80). Also see Tony Lane, *The Merchant’s Seamen’s War* (Liverpool: The Bluecoat Press, 1990), pp.238-43. Woodman finds examples, in the early phases of the naval conflict, of German U-boat commanders adhering to the “Prize Regulations” of that time, taking British officers aboard their submarine or issuing flares to help survivors to be picked up. An Admiralty survey even found that “these encounters had engendered in the non-combatant British mercantile victims ‘a somewhat excessive enthusiasm’ for the conduct of the enemy.” There were exceptions, and the “callous and illegal” sinking of the *SS Athenia* in September 1939 (the first British passenger ship to be sunk in the war) was seized upon by Churchill as a way to “rouse international indignation [...] against the Germans” (Woodman, *The Real Cruel Sea*, p.35). Hanley’s novel is clearly inflected by these escalating fears about enemy conduct as well as, of course, from his personal experiences and observations as a sailor with merchant ships and as a soldier during WWI.

attack, a novel such as *The Ocean* would certainly fulfil the measure of “usefulness” that was then being set, by the Ministry of Supply, as a central requirement for the publication of new fiction.¹⁴³

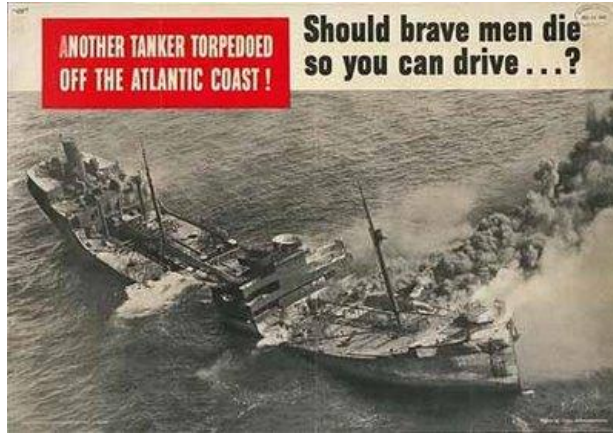


Fig. 3: An American poster from 1942 shows the devastating effect of torpedo attack on large, non-combat vessels (U.S. Government Printing Office).

The continuing presence of Crilley on the open boat causes Curtain psychological distress, not only because he was his “mate aboard the *Aurora*”, but because his corpse has the effect of an unnervingly reified *memento mori*, a lump under canvas that the others fear to speak about but whose presence sparks off poignant memories for Curtain: “He saw Mrs. Crilley. Her name was Jane [...] Curtain passed down a road of his life, and Crilley and Jane and he were together, all laughing at Buster Keaton. That was a long time ago” (*TO* 12, 22). Curtain decides that Crilley must be “buried” and enlists Stone to help him tie up the body properly and put it overboard, but the personal distance between the two men makes it hard to sanctify the gesture: “The momentary silence was awkward, Stone was thousands of miles from Crilley, Curtain near to him, thinking of Jane, of a road in their lives, thinking of Crilley laughing at Keaton, dead on the water keg, Jane waiting” (*TO* 25).

¹⁴³ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.63. For more information on the Ministry of Supply and government restrictions on publishing during the war, see Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945* (1977) (London: Quartet, 1979), pp. 76-81.

The burial of Crilley is an important moment in the early stages of the narrative. It gives Curtain some psychological “closure” from the invading images of Crilley’s body and his bereaved wife (which in turn set off thoughts of his own family waiting back home, of “Nell” and “Mum”): “Before he had talked of this burial, Crilley was still there, dead, but close to him. Now he was gone, clean from his mind. Gone with Jane down another road, shadows at the end” (*TO* 25). But this “closure” for Curtain also serves to unblock the narrative, allowing Curtain, the “backbone of the story”, as Stokes terms him, to truly initiate the plot of the five men’s struggle for survival, for the “now” of the story to begin in earnest.¹⁴⁴

Stone loses heart in the moments before the burial and pleads with Curtain that they wake the priest, Father Michaels, so that he can conduct a “proper ceremony” (*TO* 24). Curtain insists that they carry on alone, not wanting to expose Gaunt or Benton to such a mentally unsettling process, or the frail priest to the wind and rain: “personally I’m not in favour of another burial, and that’s what you’re asking for, Stone” (*TO* 34). Stone is dismayed at the thought that their actions lack a sense of propriety – “I don’t care [...] The priest’s there, he ought to be waked up” – but Curtain offers a response that is both pragmatic and touching, corroborating the sense that life-at-sea forces its own, humanistic set of values: “I could say a prayer over him [...] he was my mate. I know a prayer I could say” (*TO* 34). Moments later, feeling angered by Stone’s stubbornness, Curtain says, “I don’t want to lose my nerve [...] I’m no different to any of you”, but at the same time he seems to reinforce the separate status and code of “the sailor”: “This is none of your business [...]. Why argue about a dead sailor? What can he mean to you?” (*TO* 35) Crilley’s corpse was a potential

¹⁴⁴ Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.120.

catalyst for “losing nerve”, once removed from the boat the effect on Curtain is immediate:

“It’s all over,” he said. “Now you can go and sleep.”

He left Stone standing there, went and picked up the oars, rowed alone. Stone did not move, but kept his eyes on the swift running waters, until feeling a little dizzy he sat down.

“How calm he is,” he thought, “how calm” (*TO* 35).

With renewed energy, Curtain now assumes absolute control of the boat, chivvying the others along, deciding who should row and who should sleep, and husbanding the dwindling drinking water which he has a “horror” of being wasted, spilt, or stolen by someone whose nerve is breaking (*TO* 37). Curtain has a seemingly preternatural energy and will-to-survive. He is a distilled version of Hanley’s more positive projections of the sailor *mythos* (pragmatism, courage, hard-work), but his unremarkable personal appearance (he is stocky and hirsute), and more importantly the hints of a febrile or conflicted state of mind below the cool exterior, wary of others losing nerve because in reality he too is at risk of breakdown, mean that the character resists becoming an idealization. Indeed, Curtain freely admits that his desire to assuage the others’ fears is rooted in self-preservation, at least at first: “I don’t want to be left in a boat with people who lose their nerve. It’s too dangerous” (*TO* 35). Curtain knows that to hold the group together he must present himself as a potential saviour, strong, decisive, and unwavering in his faith that they can be rescued. Negotiating the tensions between personal doubt and a public presentation of confidence, Curtain is an appropriately Churchillian leader, and the “heroism” Hanley allows him would evidently speak to the tenor of the war’s cultural and political geography.

Curtain’s force of personality impresses itself deeply on the other men, yet we cannot be sure whether Curtain’s aura of belief and endurance are an act of self-fashioning initiated purely for the benefit of the others, or the incarnation of a less

tangible, more mystical “othering” of his ordinary self. Properly observing Curtain close at hand for the first time, Benton watches him rowing, focusing closely on his “large hands, browned, hairy, with short stub fingers. Looking at them he thought of iron, granite”. The “iron” hands become a synecdoche of Curtain-as-panacea: “now he could see them serving out rations, sitting Gaunt up, holding on to Father Michaels’ shoulder [...] With what certainty he rowed, as though there was always a ship hovering near the horizon. He thought then, ‘We depend on him’” (*TO* 21). The passage is indicative of how adeptly Hanley achieves his realism, which appears not as a totality already arrived at but something tentatively in process through the movement of the writing. In this case, the spontaneous, largely unmediated impressions of one subjectivity augment each other incrementally until something definite has been stated, or has occurred in the process of its stating.

Curtain wiping slobber from the old priest’s mouth, giving him a drink of water from the baler. Curtain was the plan working. He was the cause and the effect, the order and the hope, the plan and its achievement. Not hurried, not confused, believing, certain. All this was crystal clear to Benton as he sat there looking at Curtain’s hands, and at his face, darker by a day’s growth of beard, but behind it the same feeling of granite, rocks (*TO* 21).

Curtain is the “plan working”, but he is also the story working. As referent to the network of analogies set off by Benton’s imagination he seems to provide the only logic to the traumatising situation. In so doing, the trajectory of the novel resists being shaped by overtly Christian images or stories, as would be the case if Father Michaels emerged as the central character and the main arbiter or interpreter of meaning for the other characters. Michaels does have religious visions, though these seem to emerge from his exhaustion and dehydration, when his “mind was like a cradle, rocking gently in the sea” and “Dream and actuality were separate only by a hair’s breadth” (*TO* 43). In chapter three, a long descriptive passage describes his almost disembodied state, in which he contemplates the stars, and is then lost in a deep reverie of his church in

Ireland; the section finishes: “Once his mind was Christ filled, he saw Him walk these waters” (*TO* 44). “Once” reads very enigmatically here, we are not sure if it refers to a point in the past, a single occurrence, or more idiomatically to the present moment, i.e. once his mind *had become* Christ filled.

As we shall see, Christ-like images recur at important junctures through the text. Though such moments haunt the story, it is arguable whether they are privileged above the others’ imaginative responses to the precarious situation. I would argue that, here, Hanley is opening the text up to an ambiguous suggestion of how faith can institute itself in an individual consciousness, especially one that has been previously influenced by religious imagery, one used to being “Christ filled”. The narrative leaves the nature of Michaels’s “vision” unresolved, to be read as hallucination, irruption of the transcendental, or as a metaphor for the tenor of the priest’s train of thoughts in his exhausted, meditative state: “he left his inert body in the boat, and went wandering away, half buried thoughts sluggishly stirring” (*TO* 44). Indeed, in this lengthy passage, which is opened by the phrase “Time sank”, it is not the “vision” that most charges the scene with emotion but the brief description of Curtain tenderly making the priest “comfortable for the night”: “He would say, ‘Thank you, Mr. Curtain,’ making the sailor smile, for no other man addressed him thus. He would not see Curtain, nor feel his body being moved, nor the canvas wrapped around his feet, he heard only the voice saying, ‘Are you alright now?’” (*TO* 42, 44).

Curtain’s earthly pragmatism and care for others offer more “order” and “hope” than Father Michaels’s disconnected thoughts. As Alan Munton suggests, “Almost without exception war novels celebrate action of some kind”, and *The Ocean* is no different, with Curtain’s work-ethic and energy persistently valorised within the

narrative.¹⁴⁵ When Benton's feet swell up after a day standing in salt water, Curtain vigorously massages them to arrest the possibility of trench foot. The moment clearly chimes with the story of Christ washing the feet of the disciples, but here, again, it is Curtain's defiant, no-nonsense rationalism, "the sailor" attempting to keep alive the foolish men who do not understand the sea, which is most affirmed in the narrative: "'I'll tell you, you're a stupid young swine. Give me that foot, come on, give it here' [...] he grabbed at Benton's foot, threw him off balance. He began pulling at it. Picking at the wet laces he broke a finger nail, swore under his breath" (*TO* 54). In contrast to the sinking time experienced by Michaels, Curtain offers the practical solution of volubility, insisting that everyone talks for the sake of talking because, "With words one could build walls, shut out the ocean" (*TO* 20).

Gaunt, the businessman "in a big way [with] a concern in Scotland", who has taken a "bang on his head", arouses Curtain's suspicions precisely because he refuses to talk with and integrate into the group: "'he's hardly spoken three words to me since he came into this bloody boat'" (*TO* 28, 65). Gaunt has something "a bit queer about him", and when not rowing or sleeping sits only "for'ard" of the boat talking secretively with Michaels, as though, we might think, at an *ad hoc* confession (*TO* 18). When Curtain first attempts to engage with him, the morning after the attack, Gaunt is feeling woozy from his wound and several times utters only the word "Kay" (*TO* 9-10). This is one of several neat instances of delayed decoding by Hanley in this novel. What we might initially guess are mumbled half affirmations are subsequently revealed to be the name of Gaunt's wife, whom he was separated from in the confusion of the attack: "Slowly he was remembering [...] 'Where are you, Kay? Where am I?' hands to his head, standing

¹⁴⁵ Alan Munton, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p.50.

dead still upon the deck. Everything was running amok” (TO 30-1).¹⁴⁶ As Mr and Mrs Frazer in *No Directions* fail to grasp the new idioms of the war – “you didn’t seem to have the right key to it” – and consequently seem disconcertingly adrift from the rest of the residents, so Curtain feels Gaunt’s silence is “a link missing in the chain that would bind them closer together” (ND 101; TO 38). When Curtain confronts him about his taciturn behaviour, the group realise that Gaunt is worrying about his lost wife and feels a collective sympathy: “Something rose in them together, went out to Gaunt” (TO 39). This sympathy soon subsides, however, and is replaced by frustration towards Gaunt’s preoccupied attitude, animosity which is heightened when the others learn that the marriage was “broken” and maintained only for the sake of appearance. ““If only he’d sit with us and talk a bit, instead of thinking about that bitch of a woman he had; she must have been a bitch considering what I heard. A shock, but we all get bloody shocks. Wants taking out of himself, mind’s too much on one thing”” (TO 73). The implication of Curtain’s speech is that Gaunt is preoccupied with the trauma of losing his wife at the expense of being preoccupied by the here and now of the boat, and the group of men in it.

By refusing to submit to the chatter, positive thinking and bravado Curtain encourages, Gaunt is also upsetting Curtain’s hopes to galvanise the group through assertions of a specifically male solidarity. Gaunt creates suspicion precisely because he is brooding about a “bitch” of a wife, something we must presume “real men” do not indulge in. Alternatively, when Curtain thinks of the women in his life – “Mum’s hand on [his]”, or “of his home, Nell laughing” – the boat “shoots forward under a fresh spurt of energy”, so that the sense of his masculinity is enhanced rather than compromised

¹⁴⁶ I borrow the term “Delayed decoding” from Cedric Watts, who recognised and analysed the technique most especially in Joseph Conrad’s fiction. See Watts, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

(TO 40). Curtain recalls “how Stone had laughed” when Curtain suggests Kay “must have been a thorough bitch”, and when Gaunt complains to Michaels that his wife “led him on [...] money wasted like water”, that even on their final night together he was “Tricked to the hilt”, Curtain overhears the priest replying: ““Your fault, Gaunt. You were a weak creature, you had no will”” (TO 65). It is only when the group later sight a whale, in the most transformative moment of the novel, that Gaunt is finally taken “out of himself”: “his face was so calm, his voice so quiet that Curtain told himself that Kay was worlds away, forgotten. Gaunt was coming back to normal; Gaunt was becoming himself, something he must have been long ago. Gaunt was really better now” (TO 110). Whilst we could argue that Curtain uses “Kay” in this context as shorthand to mean the traumatic event of Gaunt losing Kay aboard the *Aurora*, there is clearly misogyny here: Gaunt only becomes his “real” self once his wife, the “thorough bitch”, is “worlds away” psychologically.

We might even be able to draw a link to scenes in Hamilton’s *Hangover Square*, when George attends a party in Brighton and gains a type of homosocial acceptance, with a collective rallying-cry of “that bitch”, that he believes finally releases him from his psychologically damaging obsession with Netta: “They made him welcome, these strong and powerful ones with whom she had schemed to insinuate herself: they made him welcome, and gave him brandy and liked him, and thought she was a bitch!”¹⁴⁷ Here, the mesmerising effect on the group of the whale sighting could be similarly interpreted as a moment of “purifying” male bonding, Gaunt no longer the “missing link” in the group’s communal spirit as the cloying thoughts of Kay are finally dislodged by a spectacle that collectively transfixes.

¹⁴⁷ Patrick Hamilton, *Hangover Square* (1941) (London, Penguin, 2001), p.256.

At one point the narrative suggests that Gaunt's stifling presence "was the sea swamping them" (*TO* 64). As we have already seen, the superimposing of sea images onto objects, people or emotions, features frequently in Hanley's writing; Gaunt's money is wasted "like water", a decision breaks "like wave on rock" and so on (*TO* 135). Yet this novel is also concerned more literally with the nature of the ocean, and its psychological effects, so that here Hanley's usual style works more reflexively. The sea remains the provider of tropes but also becomes itself animated by a range of shifting figurations and projections. In a phrase that would reappear almost exactly in *No Directions*, we learn, naturally, that "the sailor" is the only person acculturated to the ocean's ambiguities: "The language of the ocean was alien to them, Curtain had the key to this" (*TO* 59). With the passing days and weeks the incessant panorama of the surrounding water, without the merest hint of land, grows larger and more unsettling in the mind of the "crew". "I don't feel hungry," Stone says at one point, "'only my eyes ache looking at the damned sea'" (*TO* 108). The ocean's wide horizons induce agoraphobia, as though sinisterly voided of objects its very emptiness is a challenge to the senses. "You had to make pictures and fill your mind with them, you had to shut the ocean out", Curtain tells himself, suggesting that the coping strategies of sailors are rooted in powers of imagination (*TO* 78). Yet, perhaps paradoxically, the wide open spaces are also claustrophobic; they press in on the men, deadening their senses. "At times a feeling of weariness would seize him [Stone], leaving him limp, helpless. It was the immensity of the ocean, to which there seemed no end, no beginning" (*TO* 40-1). This is escalated by the constriction of the boat itself, an extreme embodiment of the "nobody can be alone no more" formula found in *No Directions*: "You looked this way and one was looking at you; you coughed and an eye was on you [...] you breathed, they heard it. The boat was full of eyes, waiting, watching" (*TO* 109).

The setting thus provides the narrative with a sense of enclosure similar to that created in *No Directions*; as we have already seen, such claustrophobic effects operate in other fictions of the war, in what Adam Piette describes as the “invasion” of the imagination which was concomitant to most of the war’s private stories.¹⁴⁸ Even if, thematically, the war is kept mainly at a distance in *The Ocean*, as Fordham has argued, there is no doubting that it does haunt from the margins, in the invaded imaginations and psychologically suffocating atmospheres that pervade all of Hanley’s war-time texts, and indeed which illustrate that his 40s work is very much of the literary “moment” Piette is describing.¹⁴⁹

“The ocean expanded in their minds, the ocean was the world, it squeezed them in” (*TO* 116). The space is constricting to the men precisely because it is all encompassing, all the rigours of their experience – isolation, hunger, dehydration, exposure – are framed by this unreal “world”, a surreally blank *mise en scène* that is inescapable, even as the more concrete realities of the “real” world feel tantalisingly close: considering the callow Benton, Curtain believes that “kidding yourself up. Thinking the world was just beyond the horizon line,” was the true “danger” of the situation (*TO* 77). But as the depiction of Curtain teeters between idealized projection and flawed everyman, so Hanley allows the ocean to also be modulated by competing perspectives: it is often remote and elemental – “The sea had been mountains in the darkness” (*TO* 63) – yet it can be considered in more ironically prosaic terms, for example by Curtain, still thinking of the dangers of idealizing the seascape: “thinking the ocean was flat and solid, and ‘beautiful’, you read about it sometimes, ‘But it’s just wet to me’” (*TO* 77). Stone had just commented that the sea was “beautiful”, but the

¹⁴⁸ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.5, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Fordham suggests that *The Ocean* and *Sailor’s Song* “are only incidentally concerned with the war” (Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p. 64).

second quoted phrase, although perhaps Curtain's unromantic view of the sea, is intriguingly placed without clear reference.

There is a complexity of tone and register in the novel that is characteristic of Hanley's interest in both literary experiment and in the way individuals describe the world to themselves and each other. This does not prevent an overall picture of "nature" emerging through the text, yet this picture is often so pared down to the fundamentals that it operates almost as an abstraction, in a fashion comparable to the more abstractly rendered seascapes of Romantic painters like Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner; or, perhaps, Eric Ravilious, an artist contemporary to Hanley who also blended realist and experimental sensibilities. From the 20s to the early 40s, Ravilious made paintings and engravings of country and coastal scenes (sometimes featuring faceless figures tackling labour-intensive rural tasks) that experiment with the human "framing" of the natural world in unexpected ways. His atmospheric scenes often hint at something uncanny or numinous, often by simply altering or displacing the viewer's expected perspective on what is being depicted.

As with much of Ravilious's work, Hanley offers in *The Ocean* a version of nature and a central image that seemingly has the potential to connote, for the reader, something mythological or mystical beyond material realities. The explicit interventions in the narrative by a character viewpoint often frame or reinforce this larger symbolic potential of their circumstances – a single ship moving without course or destination in an expanse of sea – as well as connecting more deeply the image of Curtain as the paradigmatic "sailor" with that of the "endless" ocean. For example, when Gaunt realises that, whilst he and the others have been distracted by the whale Curtain has quietly got back to the work of rowing, he suddenly makes explicit a cosmic image that the entire trajectory of the larger narrative has hinted at evoking: "And it seemed to

Gaunt as he watched that Curtain had been sat like that since ever he could remember, rowing, rowing, an everlasting man rowing over sea that had no end and no beginning”.

The passage continues:

“He has been rowing all this time,” Gaunt said.

“Course he has; Christ, we have to move haven’t we?” cried Benton.

“That’s it, we have to move. I forgot. I was thinking of that whale. Just imagine it swimming, swimming all the time, never stopping, in the daylight, in the darkness...” (TO 103).

There is the feeling, here, of a type of restless existentialism close to that which Thom Gunn would later sum up in the aphoristic line, “One is always nearer by not keeping still”; with Benton’s and Gaunt’s desperation to keep moving perhaps signalling an uncritical belief in the *sensation* of going forward, of making “progress”, because that is now the only reality left available to them.¹⁵⁰ If Gaunt’s realisation of what Curtain appears to constitute can be read as sudden epiphany, this newfound faith in the mechanical act of rowing (as a means to enlarge the possibility of rescue or hitting land, or somehow as the end in itself) is of course what Curtain attempts to foster throughout, so that even here, when they are at their most determined, there remains the sense that an “everlasting” Curtain sets the parameters of the others’ own sense of progress.

Whilst the whale is seen to lift the mood of the group – “They watched, so friction melted” – the narrative still implies that Curtain’s pragmatism and knowhow offers more “hope” and “order” than the aesthetic solution of the whale sighting (TO 96). Curtain acknowledges that the whale will be a positive distraction from the tedium and discontent of the group’s existence: “They forgot they were in the boat [...] as though doors in their minds had suddenly shut down” (TO 102); yet, the whale also sparks more personal hopes for Curtain, namely, that this sudden irruption of the animal kingdom will bring with it a less spectacular, but more significant sighting: “The whale

¹⁵⁰ Thom Gunn, “On the Move” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1993), pp. 39-41, at p.41.

was not in Curtain's mind. There was a single bird there, wings fluttering, waiting to be free [...] It made the smell of earth come into his nostrils, touch of known things already in his hands" (*TO* 98). Curtain later admits this hope to Stone:

"Look at this bloody ocean, just water, rolling along, humming along, going anywhere, going nowhere. Think of a bird, and then everything's different. Things have shape, meaning. Understand? You're moving towards land" (*TO* 105).

If Curtain's statement highlights the disturbing quality of the novel's scenery, in which all the supposed "action" of the novel is somehow undercut or modulated by the hauntingly perpetual background of the shapeless ocean (which even the whale only fleetingly disturbs), it also, again, projects Curtain as the arbiter of what can create meaning in the world they are forced to inhabit.

In fact, perhaps precisely because he is the only one to understand the "language" of the ocean, Curtain represents all authority and law on the small boat. Late in the novel, soon after the appearance of the whale and with the group increasingly racked by physical and mental exhaustion, Gaunt, Stone and Benton try to steal the ever diminishing drinking water whilst Curtain is lost in a heavy, fatigued sleep. With Father Michaels pleading with them to stop, they fight over the keg until it is knocked to the ground, spilling almost all of the remaining contents. In such moments of internecine conflict, the novel is reminiscent of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), sharing that work's palette of mystical and religious significations blended with more directly presented social critique. Both novels feature threatened social groups isolated and "squeezed in" by surrounding ocean (Golding's "littluns" fear a monster might hide in there), yet whilst the children of Golding's island become gleefully barbaric without adult supervision, the group on Hanley's open boat have an "utter emptiness" when Curtain can no longer provide order to their existence. "Curtain was there, always. One shut one's eyes, one opened them, he was there. One was sick, he was there. And now

he slept, deeply, and they had not thought of that. Terror linked Terror” (*TO* 117). In Curtain’s fearful “absence” Stone tempts Gaunt and Benton to have “Just a drop each” of the water (*TO* 118). When Curtain discovers what has happened he is firstly dumbfounded – “how long was I asleep?” – then takes the transgression as validation of his longstanding belief that “strangers”, non-sailors, were untrustworthy: “You trusted your own self, nothing more”. Even Michaels, whose age and status has compelled Curtain to take special consideration of him, is “no priest now, only a man” (*TO* 125). Like an archetypal chiding parent, he declares that the water is almost entirely gone, and that the group only have themselves to blame: ““You see what happens when you don’t keep cool. Well, there it is”” (*TO* 127). Finally, here, Curtain also loses his cool, “great veins” stand out on his head as he “glared like an animal” (*TO* 127).

Describing Curtain’s rage, Hanley creates a strikingly hyperbolic pitch of emotion. This is unsettling precisely because it disturbs our expectations of the stoical heroism Curtain has come to represent. When Curtain angrily snaps, ““Christ! Don’t stare at me. I’m not the prophet,”” the potentially casual phrasing seems pointed, as though a specific rebuff to any messianic projections the group of men, and the reader, might attempt to make (*TO* 127). When the perpetrators come to Curtain to announce their *mea culpas* (and hope still to be given a ration of water): “A torrent of words blew up at Curtain; he could not understand. He thought of three Chinamen talking, a troop of monkeys chattering” (*TO* 126). This passage offers echoes of the hallucinations of John Lennor as he takes a bus ride in Hanley’s later novel *Emily* (1948), visions in which a conductor is transmuted into a Japanese soldier and passengers become monkeys. Hanley seems to reemploy similar constellations of “exotic” images to relate these two characters feeling confounded or becoming overcome by a sense of miasma. The scenes do not correspond exactly, of course. Lennor has been serving in the jungles of Burma

and so his visions of Japanese soldiers and monkeys seem to be part of the haunting effects of that experience, whereas Curtain's thoughts are more suggestive of a fevered imagination instinctively grasping for the alien or exotic, even if the image of "Chinamen talking", seemingly used as shorthand for a confused babble, obviously plays to rather idiomatic conceptions of "the Orient".

As the vivid passage continues, an emotional intensity is depicted that complicates or displaces the naturalistic psychology that a more conventional realist mode would demand. When Curtain breaks the news that all the drinking water is now gone, save a drop for the priest in the morning, the men look at him "stupid", and Curtain thinks "of faces under pipes, grinning in a stall, a box of coconuts standing in a ring, he taking aim at these faces in a row, smashing them to pulp. Five hits and a miss" (*TO* 127). The short sentence clauses here create a rhythm that builds the intensity of the image until we reach the quirky pay-off – "Five hits and a miss" – as though a specific reminiscence of the fairground is eliding with his destructive daydream. The description of emerging mental violence is here quite formally patterned, despite the deceptively simple and pared-down language and syntax. Hanley utilizes, in a quite specific sense, what Mikhail Bakhtin famously categorised as the mode of "carnavalesque", with the disturbed state of Curtain's consciousness linked to lurid details all, in their way, recognisable as the language of carnival: chattering monkeys, grinning faces, coconut shies, even exotic foreigners (the talking "Chinamen").¹⁵¹ Through this, Hanley initiates a tension between the grotesquery of the imagery, on the one hand, and a tangible sense of an organising principle to that imagery on the other, between a kind of thematic "excess" and its formal stylization. As I have previously argued, such a dialectical tension is at the heart of avant-garde realist works, in which

¹⁵¹ See M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965) (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1993).

realism is both subverted and deepened by the palpability of the style and techniques evident in the writing. This sense of tangible style is what, we might recall from my previous theorising of avant-garde realism, Lyn Hejinian characterises as the “autonomy of the writing – the high visibility of its devices and even its intrusive strangeness”, and it is this which, “Somewhat paradoxically perhaps [...] authenticates the accuracy of its portrayals and gives the work itself authority.”¹⁵² And the description of Curtain’s rage is indeed typical of Hanley’s highly individual style, in which a narrative moment is particularised by hyperbole that operates both as excess and commensuration, simultaneously “intrusively strange” yet entirely fitting.

Curtain has been outwardly imperturbable, but there have been many narrative hints (such as his almost obsessive preoccupation with keeping one’s cool) to reveal the internal instability which is now suddenly breaking free: “‘You bloody crawling lot of swine’ [he] shouted in their faces”; in a moment of profanation that perpetuates the spirit of carnivalesque, he even turns on Michaels, “‘That goes for you, slobbering old fool’” (*TO* 127). There is a real sense of pathos here, as Curtain mocks the infirmity he had once intimately attended to: “making him comfortable, stripping him, massaging him, cleaning his face, his dirty, trembling mouth” (*TO* 84). Curtain’s shouting causes him to “[retch] violently as it seemed to close his gullet altogether”, and a scene imbued by expressionistic intensities throughout concludes with an image of a yowl or ejaculation that has echoes of an iconic trope from Expressionist art: “The shock of Curtain’s shout in the sea silence numbed them as men are numbed by the cataclysmic event” (*TO* 128).

As has been previously noted, Ken Worpole was the first critic to give this strain of Hanley’s writing due prominence, recognising that Hanley used gestures of

¹⁵² Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), p.94.

Expressionist writing to stimulate or productively complicate his social realism, rather than to occlude it. According to Worpole, Hanley recognized that:

a new literary aesthetic could not be developed without reference to the achievements of the bourgeois literary tradition which, if critically read and absorbed, could only provide a greater range of styles and techniques for exploring the multi-faceted and complex world of working-class experience.¹⁵³

As we have seen previously with the examples of seemingly idiomatic surrealist tropes and techniques in *No Directions*, Hanley used and adapted different subsets of avant-gardism for his own ends, to broaden his stylistic palette and his experiments with literary representation. Hanley once admitted to being “‘drenched in Strindberg, Synge and Ibsen’”, and also “‘admired’” (suggests Worpole) Eugene O’Neill’s expressionist play, *The Hairy Ape* (1922), about a brutish stoker called Yank.¹⁵⁴ Removed from their chronologically defined “ism” and blended into Hanley’s new, hybrid aesthetic, the differences between these different subsets of modernism become harder, and perhaps less necessary to categorise. In the act of adaptation Hanley has made of these techniques something original and individual. From Expressionism, Hanley takes the intense and reflexive interest in the multiplicity of human life, an instinct that allows the dynamic relationship between different perspectives and voices to be placed at the heart of his narratives, especially his more “polyphonic” texts like *The Ocean*.

These are the type of values that Ernst Bloch had emphasised in the debates about the lasting significance of Expressionism that took place through the 30s, mainly in literary journals such as *Das Wort* [*The Word*]. When Marxist theoretician Georg Lukács criticised the “self-trumpeting emotionalism” of the Expressionist mode, and the “objective”, hard-edged aesthetic sensibility prevalent in that decade was characterising

¹⁵³ Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), pp.92-3.

¹⁵⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, pp.83,87. Stokes suggests that a certain “unusually rhetorical” passage of *The Ocean* is “uncomfortably reminiscent” of O’Neill’s play (See Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.122). In a letter written in the early 70s, Hanley actually labels O’Neill “the great ‘shouter’” and “vastly over-rated”. Hanley to Unger, 9th Jan 1972 (NIU collection).

Expressionist techniques as uncontrolled and overwrought, Bloch countered that the misunderstood “importance” of Expressionism lay in the fact that: “Instead of eternal ‘formal analyses’ of the work of art, it directed attention to human beings and their substance, in their quest for the most authentic expression possible.”¹⁵⁵ In its attempts to authentically represent “inner meaning”, the “human expressions of the incognito, the mystery of man”, Bloch is proposing a “humane”, utopian quality to Expressionism, the profound focus on individual consciousness which could, in consequence, bring about a new understanding of human connection, of the communal.¹⁵⁶ Likewise, Hanley’s most expressionistic moments, reproducing the modes of anguished, “deep” subjectivity he admired in Expressionist theatre, are usually part of a more complex pattern of social inter-dependency and inter-subjectivity; we have seen this in the way, for example, that the characters in *The Ocean*, dependent on Curtain for their survival, share and respond to the psychic oppression of the circumambient water. In this fashion, the political or anthropocentric dimensions of some avant-garde gestures actually help fulfil Hanley’s widely cited social realism, with vulnerable class relations often an implicit, if subtly rendered factor in the production of such psychic connections. For example, the idea that Gaunt is a snob, that his wealthy, bourgeois lifestyle, with its constant cruises and a house called “Kimberley”, causes him to look down on the others (“He’s not very civil to people”), is a fear that contagiously feeds the communal understanding of him as “bloody queer” (*TO* 29).

In Hanley’s fiction of the 30s, class angst can make transparent interventions in narrative, such as in the opening scenes of *Boy*, in which the brown leather shoes of Arthur Fearon’s teacher are figured as a symbol of unattainable professional and

¹⁵⁵ Georg Lukács, “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline” (1934), in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), pp.76-114, at p.110; Ernst Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism” (1937), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor, et al (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 16-27, at p.23.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

financial status. In Hanley's work of the 40s and 50s, the mid-phase of his career, the problems and attitudes generated by class are still a prominent theme, but tend to operate less transparently, even aporetically, as part of the ongoing nuancing of character and narrative perspective that are often the texts' central drama. In the crises that shape much of Hanley's fiction in this period – the ruptures of war and post-war, and the pressures of modernity itself – the bonds of sociality are severely challenged, but never extinguished, often reconstituting themselves in unexpected and ephemeral ways; the sudden, communally expressed empathy towards Gaunt, for example, or Johns and Celia, in *No Directions*, strangers getting drunk together for a solitary evening in a broken into flat. This, as I shall pursue in following chapters, is one of the essential differences between the narrative worlds of Hanley and those produced by Hamilton's more negative aesthetic. Hamilton's fiction of the period projects social relations as being, from the outset, hollowed out of their potential intimacy, leaving only empty gestures, literal and metaphorical hangovers, and fundamentally disconnected characters. In the Hanley texts we have been discussing, however, the potential for some version of community, however strained, shadows the sense of dissociation, even when that is borne from the most extreme and adverse circumstances.

As we have seen in our reading, this potential for community is exactly what appears scuppered by Curtain's utter disgust at the actions of the others, a moment in which all trust has lapsed. Yet, when Curtain's fit of temper subsides, signalled by the sonorous phrase, "The day was over, the darkness was complete", there is soon a form of *rapprochement* achieved through mutual exhaustion (*TO* 130). Anger would take strength, which none of the men now possess. Curtain, though his thoughts are scrambled, instinctively returns to his automatic mode of exemplary survivalist, whilst the others, inanimate or totally unconscious, now present themselves to Curtain's mind

as just “things” (*TO* 132). These scenes that make up the latter part of the novel elaborate the excruciation each movement, and even thought, now causes.

His head was heavy; he wanted to let it lie on the seat. He knelt in the water he had spilled, he felt a murderous burning in his mouth. Very slowly he reached down one hand and picked up the baler. With great effort he leaned over the side of the boat again, half filled the baler, raised it clumsily, tilting it, large drops splashed, he lowered it again, poured the water over Benton’s head. The thing did not move. Curtain rested (*TO* 132).

The punctuated, iterative quality of the writing emphasises the painful laboriousness of every move of the limbs. This repetitive and deliberate tone evokes exhaustion in such an eerie fashion that Stokes suggests the prose reproduces the “nightmarish quality of a slowed-down film.”¹⁵⁷ Curtain moves “like a crab” as he goes to check whether the priest is still alive, falling onto the other man’s body, “He rested there, not seeing, not hearing, not feeling anything but rest” (*TO* 132,133). The slowing down of the action also magnifies it, as though it was a theatrical tableau. In this awkward assembly of materialised “thing” bodies heaped across the boat and each other, and in the slow deconstruction of physical decrepitude, Hanley gestures towards the prostrated individuals and serial writing style found in some of Beckett’s fiction, especially the novel “trilogy” he would write in the second half of the 40s. Curtain “did not know how far he had travelled, whether it were mountains to be climbed or spiral staircase winding into dark, he did not know he was looking at the keg. He did not know how long he was sitting there” (*TO* 134); what apparently lies behind this serial negation of sense and memory is absolute exhaustion. It compromises the possibility of creating meaning, what Gilles Deleuze, in his account of Beckett’s work, would sum up as: “The tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.127.

¹⁵⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel Smith and Michael Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp.152-174, at p.152.

Yet, whereas Beckett's characters are often inescapably circumscribed by their physical frailty, the narrative of *The Ocean* resolves itself in more liberating terms. In the novel's penultimate chapter, after discovering Michaels is still hanging on to some life, Curtain spots an "object move" in the distance and the revelation of seeing a ship endows some sudden, frantic energy. "'Ship!' Curtain cried, and his mind cried, 'Ship, ship, ship, ship, ship'" (TO 138,140). This repetition is quite characteristic of Hanley, the word "Fog", we might recall, is used similarly in O'Garra's wild speech in "The German Prisoner". Hanley allows the moment of a character's mind becoming "full" of something to be expressed by one re-stated word, a monad so commensurate to the moment it does not need, or permit, any modification or abstraction. The repetition device thus pulls in two directions: it both simplifies and stylizes Curtain's interiority, giving the appearance of transcribing an unmediated emotional response but in syntactic terms more familiar to poetry or song.

The other men do not share in Curtain's excitement; now they are almost entirely lifeless, congealed in their own exhausted thoughts, he is reduced to slapping and punching them in the face to try to get a response. Only Gaunt finally reacts: "He watched the thing approach, his mind returned to him from wanderings over hell" (TO 140). Once the ship has floated near enough for the characters to perceive it properly, however, the narrative reveals it is in fact a small rubber boat. "A rounded ship, a great dead fish, a head, a bugaboo. It floated slowly towards them. And then he saw a rubber boat and in it was a man" (TO 140). It is the unconscious body of a Nazi airman, whom Curtain tries to resuscitate with the very final drops of drinking water. The moment seems to reawaken Curtain's essentially humanitarian instincts, his desperation to preserve life at all costs – "'Alive! He's living [...] You'll live, you sod, you'll live'" – instincts that had been briefly compromised by his fit of temper. "The baler was the

Host and he was carrying it, the priestly eye looked on, then quietly closed” (*TO* 146). The scene has obvious connotations of the Christian ethic to “love your enemies”, even if the specific Baler-Host connection is a focalisation of the priest’s thoughts as he looks on. When Curtain realises the airman has already expired, he suddenly sees “Crilley there”, and says, ““You may have killed my bloody mate’ [...] gave the body a light push, it flopped over, lay still. A dead fish in the boat” (*TO* 146). Yet, even if the moment of charity is tempered by this morbid realisation – with the strange, dehumanized body of the airman reasserting the otherness of the German enemy that was apparent at the beginning of the novel – it still provides Curtain with a “moral” renewal. At the end of the scene, after Michaels has fallen down with a “curious tiny cry”, Curtain half-carries him to “where he belonged, a nest beneath the bow”, reassuring him with the words, ““You’re all right, all right”” (*TO* 147). The strength of Curtain’s character and refreshed compassion is now shown to outlast his sense of trust betrayed.

In the final chapter, Curtain has finally slumped into unconsciousness, and the narrative is focalised through Michaels, who abstractly thinks of the stolen water, “of Curtain in a rage, Gaunt flat on his back [...] ‘Too much belief, too much belief in others,’ his mind said” (*TO* 149). Gaunt spies a rock – the repetition of the word through the passage gives it a biblical cadence – with possibly the shape of a figure standing on it, though it merges with his thoughts and dreams as he comes in and out of consciousness (such symbolic images of a lone man on a rock also echo through the ending of *Sailor’s Song*, as well as Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956)). The narrative then describes a bird that “wheeled and swooped” high above the boat (*TO* 150). This, of course, signals concretely to the reader that the boat must have drifted close to land, as Curtain, the only one who understands the “language” of the ocean, has already

elucidated its importance. With echoes again of *Lord of the Flies*, in which the appearance of a naval officer confirms the closure of the narrative, *The Ocean* concludes with the appearance of prototypical normality, in the form of a fisherman wearing a “reefer coat” and with a “pipe in his mouth”.

Father Michaels raised himself up, and saw the man grow larger still; this man come out of mist, of nothing, of emptiness, and then he saw him close and heard him shout, “Ahoy there! Ahoy there!”

The priest looked out at him, and in his eyes, his was the shape of Christ (*TO* 152).

The present tense “come” lends the phrasing a quality of myth or fable, yet the figure, emerging from “nothing”, utters only the homely, unpretentious “Ahoy there!” These final scenes resolve somewhat ironically due to Curtain’s “absence”. The figure who has revived the group, and at times made them believe in the possibility of a happy ending, is now “dead to sound”, unable to verify the resolution (*TO* 151). Curtain has resisted being decoded as a Christ-like figure, the narrative always complicating or extenuating that projection whenever it seems close. Now, the fisherman appears to Michaels “in the shape of Christ”, and the figure does of course symbolise the group’s rescue from their circumstances, their material salvation; and yet, the “redemption” of values has already taken place through the very human figure and story of Curtain, “a vision,” as Stokes put it, “of the human spirit that refuses to be broken – a vision of meanness and selfishness and weakness redeemed by charity and humility and strength.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.127. The ending of *The Ocean* contrasts interestingly with Hanley’s first story of a torpedoed ship, “Narrative”, which was published in the early collection entitled *Men in Darkness* (1931). Although it contains situations and themes reused by Hanley in *The Ocean* (and indeed in *Hollow Sea* and *Sailor’s Song*), especially the problem of frayed nerves and potential insanity, “Narrative” concludes with an emphatic bleakness resisted by the later novel; in this story, men lose their cool, are affected by the drinking of sea water, feud and fall overboard, until finally the open boat springs a leak and sinks, drowning the remaining survivors: “The two bodies bobbed up and down in the water like well-manipulated marionettes. Morgan gripped Maugham tightly around the waist. The bodies sank. The waters murmured and

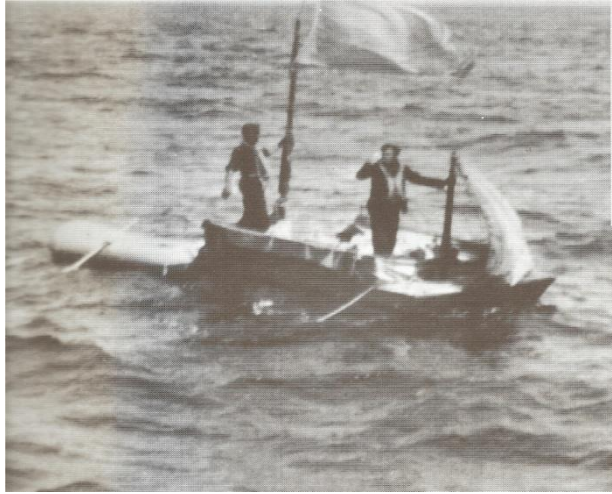


Fig. 4: The sole survivors of the *Lulworth Hill*, a tramp merchant ship sunk by an Italian submarine in the South Atlantic Ocean in 1942. The photograph shows them at their point of rescue by a British destroyer, fifty days after the attack (Imperial War Museum).

Hanley's "Imagism"

The scene in which Curtain mistakes the German airman for a ship constitutes more delayed decoding (comparable to, if different from the mode of Conrad), with the reader's knowledge limited to Curtain's misleading sense of impression with only hints (it being referred to as "object" or "thing") suggesting that all is not what it seems. The technique has run through the text. Earlier, Benton, waking with a start from disturbed dreams, cries out in horror that he has seen a submarine, only for Curtain to paternalistically assure him it is a whale: "a good sign" (*TO* 96). But in this instance of the man in the rubber dinghy, the "balloon-like figure" of a German airman, various "codings" contest the revealing moment of signification, so that Curtain's voice does not carry quite the same meaning-making authority (*TO* 144). When Curtain exclaims, "'You see. A man! Help me, Gaunt'", the simple disbelieving reply comes back, "A fish" (*TO* 140). We are not even sure which consciousness is encoding the nightmarishly bloated figure as a "bugaboo".

the fog was clearing. Wilderness of water." See, "Narrative" (1931), in *The Last Voyage and Other Stories*, p. 271.

As we have already discovered, Hanley persistently criticised Conrad's work on the basis of its class representation, yet here there is also differentiation on more formal terms. In his Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1898), a text widely interpreted as a founding statement of literary "impressionism", Conrad emphasised that fiction must register itself as art by appealing to "temperament" in the form of "an impression conveyed through the senses." Moreover, it must isolate this significant impression as a "rescued fragment" because in the process of disclosing "its movement, its form, and its colour" it will "reveal the substance of its truth", which will, in turn, arouse in its readers a "feeling of unavoidable solidarity [...] which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world."¹⁶⁰ Michael North argues that Conrad's fiction is itself less utopian, that it presents many "obstacles to perfect solidarity", mainly due to scepticism on Conrad's part about the power of words alone to "awake sensations", so that ultimately the "solidarity" is something he "longs to achieve rather than what he actually believes in."¹⁶¹ Even so, Conrad's projection of "impressionism" in the Preface is deeply influential to the trajectory of modernism and literature more generally; Fredric Jameson calls it Conrad's "aestheticizing strategy", that which "seeks to recode or rewrite the world and its own data in terms of perception as a semi-autonomous activity."¹⁶² And it is clearly a strategy that Hanley also leans on, with his narrative disclosure frequently inextricable from the sensory perception of his characters. Yet, Hanley also challenges this mode of writing, in part by making perception even more aesthetically autonomous, always capable of making the ordinary seem alien or "intrusively strange", even at the point when the reader expects a more comfortable

¹⁶⁰ Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp.145-148, at pp. 146, 147.

¹⁶¹ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.38.

¹⁶² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) (London: Routledge, 1989), p.230.

decoding of what is apparently at hand. “Gaunt put his hands on an arm, began to pull. This was the ship, the whale, the bugaboo. This deep-sea diver swelling out with air. This balloon-like figure, a pile of rags upon his back, Gaunt thought them rags” (*TO* 144). Here, the fallibility of Gaunt’s perception is only one part of the indeterminacy the writing enacts: a “whale” is added to the list of possible denotations, displacing the earlier sighting to the current moment; then the visually haunting images of “deep-sea diver” and “balloon”, suggestively incompatible but linked by the gruesome detail of “swelling air”; finally, a “pile of rags”, with the proviso “Gaunt thought them”, allowing for the possibility that the rest of the passage has somehow not been infused by his perceptions. Such multivalency clearly undermines the “potential sense of kinship” between the writer and his audience for which Conrad’s Preface seems to make an appeal.¹⁶³ Whereas Conrad calls for the representation of sense impressions to have a “sincerity” behind them which will evoke some unified “truth”, “the stress and passion within the core of each moment” that will be recognizable by the reader as ineluctably true, Hanley’s realism is produced by an accumulation of emotionally charged images that might form or reform in different patterns of possible recognition.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, Hanley’s fiction seems more aligned to the starker Imagist aesthetic than the literary impressionism of Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. As Peter Nicholls explains, the “juxtaposition” of images in Imagist texts allows for a “formal hiatus or pause” which operates as a “space in which the reader might construe relationship.” This is very different to what Pound perceived as the “intellectual passivity” of impressionism which projects the mind as only a “plastic substance *receiving* impressions.”¹⁶⁵ Hanley’s own remarkable juxtapositions – “a great dead fish, a head, a bugaboo” –

¹⁶³ North, *Dialect of Modernism*, p.38.

¹⁶⁴ Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, p.147.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995) (London: Macmillan, 2009), p.167.

induce the same formal gaps as Nicholls describes, allowing a space for readerly interpretation that is more than just mimetic recognition of one's own sensory experience.

Sometimes Hanley's unusual juxtapositions of images are not part of a compact sentence or paragraph, as they might operate in a poem, but reveal themselves in the flow of a longer scene. The most significant and memorable juxtaposition of this type in *The Ocean* is found in chapter seven, when the whale-sighting is preceded and framed by a long description of Benton having a vivid nightmare about a childhood phobia of cockroaches – “as soon as I see one I can feel it on my face” (TO 91). His dream-memories evoke himself as a child lying in his bed in Somerset, staring at the comforting “whiteness” of the ceiling but fearing that he would see a beetle or cockroach crawl along it: “A beetle there would be a mark, like a boot covered with mud, smearing it”, whilst his father, tucking him into bed, fails to reassure by asserting that “A cockroach is only a thing” (TO 91). The vivid description of Benton's terror is intensified by a sort of doubling or *mise en abyme* effect created by the suggestion that he is experiencing a nightmare that is an actual reliving of previous nightmares, a reliving that evokes acute childhood anxieties such as that of parental neglect: “Count ten quickly, it will go. Count ten slowly, it will fall.’ His bed was not there, he couldn’t see it. The cockroach moved towards the window – he was on its back, clinging, shouting, ‘Dad, Dad, Mother!’” At this climactic moment, Hanley evokes Benton's hypnopompic state and the sudden merging of dream and waking worlds in powerfully economical prose: “The cockroach fell, and water sprouted up. The oar struck Benton clean in the mouth. The cockroach was moving in the sea. He screamed out, ‘A submarine, a submarine’”. Curtain rushes to Benton to tell him what is happening:

‘Easy there, son! Easy there! You have been dreaming. That’s no submarine, it’s a whale, I’ve just caught sight of it myself.’ He threw an arm around Benton’s neck and held him to him. Benton was shaking against him now. ‘Got a shock I bet. They do have that look. ‘But just look,’ he said, ‘just look,’ his finger pointing abeam. ‘Lovely,’ he said. ‘Whales are lovely to look at – like children. It’s playing, see! Look how that water spouts up from his snout, high into the air [...] That’s no submarine. A submarine wouldn’t know how to play’ (TO 95).

Curtain’s comforting of Benton, with its warm physicality, fatherly expression of “son” and affection towards children and playing, is clearly meant to be seen as a contrast to Benton’s dream-memories of his cold parents, who ““chaff and torment”” Benton about his fear of cockroaches, laughingly call him “a silly boy” and kiss him with mouths that feel “like ice” (TO 93, 99). Curtain’s rhapsodic appraisal of the whale makes an affirmation of the natural world as something beyond the purely material that also stands against Benton’s father’s dismissal of a cockroach as ““just a thing””. This objective world of “things”, of paternal condescension and, perhaps, the cold logic of “plug[ging] the water keg with bullets”, is subverted by Curtain’s surrealistic but touching assertion that ““a submarine wouldn’t know how to play””.

The scene feels pivotal within the trajectory of the novel. Stokes argues that it transforms the text into a “minor masterpiece”, elevating the “unflinching, but monotonous realism” of the totality.¹⁶⁶ This conclusion makes a rather formalistic distinction between Hanley’s narrative modes: as our reading of *The Ocean* has shown, Hanley’s “realist” mode already resists, in various ways, the currents of a hierarchical, linear narrative, or the emphasis on “monotonous” verisimilitude that we might expect in a more conventional realist novel. Yet, it is clear that the striking passage does allow for a “formal hiatus” (as well as an “intrusive strangeness”) to illuminate and potentially complicate thematic aspects of the text that are already in the process of becoming apparent. A contemporary review by Edwin Muir, poet and translator of Kafka and

¹⁶⁶ Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.126.

Thomas Mann, was alive to the transfigurative potential of the scene in the context of the novel as a whole:

The deep horror of the dream and its transformation into pure delight [the joy of the whale-sighting] is a wonderful stroke and has the effect of expanding the situation of the five men into an unguessed-at dimension. Mr Hanley has never written anything to surpass this strange poetic vision starting in the darkness of the mind and emerging transfigured on the surface of the ocean.¹⁶⁷

The sudden multiplication of images in this chapter – from the whiteness of Benton’s ceiling to the linkages made between cockroach, submarine and whale – pressurises the interpretive strategies of a reader grown accustomed to the linguistically “quieter” style of earlier sections of the novel and to its rigidly emplaced backdrop of endless ocean. Hanley’s introduction of a previously “unguessed-at dimension”, or dimensions, is an amplification of content as well as style, however. It expands the emotional register of the text, revealing an intimacy between characters newly connected not just by the appearance of a playful whale – “They forgot, care went, water smiled at them – they were quiet, watching. The whale plunged, rose, danced on smiling water” – but also by the nightmare vision that is aligned to it (*TO* 96). Hanley allows the connection to be understated by Curtain: ““See how it plays in the sea, Father [...] Just like happy children. And that fellow Benton gave me quite a shock shouting submarine, submarine. Guess he’d been dreaming or something”” (*TO* 96). In this way, the mediation between conscious and unconscious worlds is very subtly relayed, akin to what, in the late 20s, E.M. Forster famously characterised as the “prophetic” quality of Dostoyevsky’s fiction, in which the experience of a dream might not only change the psychology of a character but the metaphysical tenor of the entire narrative (Forster discusses *The Brothers Karamazov* especially in this regard).¹⁶⁸ Hanley’s narrative “experiment”,

¹⁶⁷ Cited in *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ See E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 86-101. Forster’s stimulating and original, if opinionated argument (“Most of us will be eclectics to this side or that according to our temperament”) also discusses at length the

which so impresses Muir, is cohesive with the relationships and social textures of the novel, even as the stylistic novelty alters those textures in profound and hard to predict ways. Here, formal experimentalism, the very strangeness of the “strange poetic vision”, is not merely linguistic effusiveness, the playful proliferation of potential signs and meanings fetishized by much postmodern culture, but something that sits in dynamic and productive relation to the realism of the novel.

Lifeboats on Film

With such striking images, small set of characters and intensely displayed emotions, *The Ocean* is a text with filmic qualities, and it is unsurprisingly reminiscent of aspects of several films of the period. It was certainly cinema, rather than literature, that more consistently (and famously) attempted to address the problem of wartime shipwrecking.¹⁶⁹ The most popular of these films was undoubtedly *In We Which Serve* (1942). Written, starring and co-directed by Noel Coward, it possessed, suggests Roger Manvell, a “national stature” and a “propaganda value [that] was incalculable.”¹⁷⁰ Coward plays Captain Kinross, a paternalistic figure who watchfully guides the behaviour and attitudes of the robustly working-class men under his command to ensure that his ship, the *HMS Torrin*, will always be “happy and efficient”. Coward drew on first-hand accounts of the perilous life of sailors at war (the initial idea for the film came

“prophetic” qualities of another favourite author of Hanley’s, Melville, whilst dismissing the claims of writers such as Hardy, Joyce and Conrad to attain this type of lyrical, metaphysical register in their work. Forster suggests that D.H. Lawrence is the only “prophet” extant amongst contemporary novelists with the rest being either “fantasists or preachers” (p.99).

¹⁶⁹ In his account of the popular literature of WWII, Ken Worpole notes the relative lack of fictions about the Merchant Navy and war at sea, especially in comparison with those focusing on the “heroism” of RAF pilots: “it seems strange in retrospect that such heroism was attributed to the crews of high-altitude bombers, as against the men and women, for example, who either directly risked their lives in the maintenance of service and civilian services, as foot soldiers and tank crews in the Western Desert, and as sailors on the North Atlantic convoys. Such men and women were performing equally brave tasks but without being involved in the moral ambiguity of what at times was the necessarily indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets” (Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.56).

¹⁷⁰ Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: Dent, 1974), p.108.

from reports of the sinking of Lord Mountbatten's ship, *HMS Kelly*, in the 1941 Battle of Crete) and the film does recall moments and themes from Hanley's sea fiction. When, for example, one character regains consciousness he calls for his wife, Kath, in a manner very close to that of Gaunt and his plaintive cries of "Kay!" In one of the film's more intriguing scenes, Kinross's wife makes an impassioned speech about the problems of marrying a sailor – "there is always in her life a permanent and undefeated rival – her husband's ship". There are echoes here of the unhappy females "losing" a husband or son to a life-at-sea that we find in several Hanley texts. It is a theme that especially recurs in *Sailor's Song*, where the principal character, Manion, feels irrevocably drawn towards the sea even as a young boy, whilst his mother sadly (and unsuccessfully) attempts to keep him with her: "She knew, oh, that strain on me, pulling, pulling, and all her strain against mine" whilst in adult life, each trip to sea and fresh parting is shown to have a great emotional impact on Manion's wife, Sheila (SS 14).

Yet, despite these thematic connections, *In Which We Serve* possesses a quite different aesthetic to Hanley's work. It transplants onto the big screen the familiar atmosphere and language of traditional schoolboy tales, with Kinross at one point describing the flow of the battle with the rather mannered phrasing: "Well done! We've got him but I'm afraid he's got us too". The Coward character is thus placed in the role of benevolent headmaster to his crew, occasionally mixing with the "boys" but more frequently reminding everyone (in solemn pieces of oratory for which Coward markedly slows down his usual delivery) of the common values that apparently connect each individual to his fellow men; it is this aspect of the film that Manvell would describe as

its “Achilles heel [...] the incorrigibly middle-class way in which it bound all classes together through the uniformed figure of the Captain.”¹⁷¹

The film’s story is told largely through flashback, complete with fade-out effects and incidental harp music. The narrative technique – as with the documentary style montages of ship construction in the opening sequences – seems unusually stylised for a film designedly populist in its outlook and aims. As the surviving members of the *Torrin*’s crew cling to a life-raft after their ship is sunk, the camera pans between the wet and bloodied faces, shots which initiate a series of memories of times before the war, of the day the ship was commissioned or trips home on leave. Such extended analepses exaggerate the differences in home life between Kinross, who exchanges snappy dialogue with his stylish wife and teases his well-mannered children, and that of his crew, such as Chief Petty Officer Hardy, a Welshman with broad accent, loyal but dowdy spouse and nagging mother-in-law (both of whom we later see killed in the Blitz). As we have seen, such class condescension was precisely the cultural orthodoxy that Hanley was attempting to kick against in his own writing, creating fiction in which working class characters have as varied and significant inner life as other protagonists, and social and economic subplots sit in more complex relation to character development.

The stereotyping evident in *In Which We Serve* might be partly explained by the necessities of a wartime culture whose primary aim was to create a sense of audience recognition with the central characters that would evoke sympathy for and pride in British servicemen (the voiceover peroration at the film’s conclusion makes this aim abundantly clear), or even, on a more simple level, inform viewers of the dangers

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

certain members of their own communities were having to confront by going to sea.¹⁷²

Drawing on popular cliché allows the film to emphasise the sailors as being individuals from apparently ordinary backgrounds and recognisable domestic situations. The flashback structure also helps this process by initiating a sort of dramatic irony between the mundane but happy “then” and the “now” of the shipwreck.

In very different forms, both this film and *The Ocean* contextualise their moments of crisis with images of the domestic, Curtain “laughing at Buster Keaton” with his mate Crilley, for example, or the recalled Christmas meals which form a section of *In Which We Serve*. Disclosing details of the social history of characters now removed from their home-life would appear a pertinent narrative strategy in such circumstances, as it clearly brings sharper relief and poignancy to the ordeals that are being evoked. The references to “back home” in *The Ocean* are subtle – memory is used not as an attempt to sustain a mythology of Britain *before* the war, as Worpole argues was the main projection of much popular fiction of the time, but as part of an exploration into the psychology of individuals who suddenly find themselves in crisis, confronted by desperate and inhospitable conditions. Conversely, Worpole suggests that much contemporaneous writing, especially novels about the heroic exploits of the RAF, promoted a version of Britain that was one-sided and possibly atavistic, based around images of rural life, “the country house, village pubs, public schools, Oxbridge and

¹⁷² Even though naval victories and culture were widely valorised in Britain, as *In Which We Serve* testifies to, much less information was disseminated in the early part of the war about the problems the Merchant Navy was encountering. For this reason, the plot of *The Ocean* would have seemed compellingly relevant and fresh to its first readers in 1941, the same year that losses of merchant tonnage were so great that Churchill stopped the publication of weekly figures by the Ministry of Information. As Woodman describes, at this time “The public in Britain remained largely ignorant of both the contribution being made by the lowly merchant seafarer and the losses he was suffering.” It was only later that “the dogged and steadfast image of the men who delivered bread and butter to the nation’s breakfast tables was deemed to have a propaganda value [and] merchant seamen were issued with small metal lapel badges showing a knotted rope surrounding the initials ‘M.N.’ and topped with the naval crown” (Woodman, *The Real Cruel Sea*, p.223).

expensive sports cars.” “None of the writers,” Worpole continues, “registered that there were many versions of Britain, of which theirs was only one,” or acknowledged the “manifestations of a deeply divided class society” that were undeniably part of British life in the late 30s and early 40s.¹⁷³ The Britain of *In Which We Serve*, whilst not entirely monochrome, is certainly closer to the tendentiously positive versions Worpole is describing than to the more variegated social relations Hanley allows to emerge, if sometimes only as glimpses, in his wartime fiction. It is hard to imagine a character such as Gaunt, an egocentric brooding about a wife that does not love him, or Curtain, the sailor who rages at his civilian shipmates, being part of the “united ‘family’ image” Coward projects for the *HMS Torrin*.¹⁷⁴

If comparison to *In Which We Serve* shows how Hanley’s work both anticipates yet significantly diverges from a cultural statement that possessed “national stature”, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat* (1944) reveals that some of the claustrophobic intensity of *The Ocean* could be echoed in cinematic form.¹⁷⁵ *Lifeboat* was adapted from an unpublished story by John Steinbeck, who was originally tasked with writing the script but “reportedly felt too restricted by the film’s single set.”¹⁷⁶ As with *The Ocean*, this “single set” is a lifeboat floating in the mid-Atlantic after a ship has been torpedoed; again, there are thematic similarities between the two works (one character complains,

¹⁷³ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, pp.58-9. Worpole lists examples of such “manifestations” of class division as: “mass unemployment, large urban slums, rickets, TB, Relieving Officers, tied cottages, game-keepers”.

¹⁷⁴ Manvell, *Films and the Second World War*, p.108. *In Which We Serve* does have one errant character, a young stoker (played by Richard Attenborough, in his first film role) who fearfully abandons his post during an earlier attack. In fatherly fashion, Kinross decides not to take action against the boy, or even name him, but instead makes a speech (heavy with allegory) of the importance of co-operation and everybody sticking to their respective task.

¹⁷⁵ A final comparison between *In Which We Serve* and *The Ocean* should be made with regards to the contentious issue of propaganda and the representation of German combatant behaviour: the film suggests with far less ambiguity than Hanley that unarmed survivors of naval battles were targeted, explicitly depicting enemy planes making repeated efforts to strafe the crew of the *Torrin* floating with the life raft.

¹⁷⁶ *The Virgin Film Guide* eds. Ken Fox and Maitland McDonagh (London: Virgin, 2000), p.455. Hitchcock’s most famous other “single set” film is of course his adaptation of Hamilton’s *Rope* (1948).

in a very Hanleyan moment, that the more people's nerves fray and quarrels begin, "the bigger the ocean gets"). Produced by an American studio (Twentieth Century Fox) and with a mix of American and British characters – and a solitary and pivotal German – *Lifeboat* signals allegorical registers about international relations mostly absent from the work we have been discussing. The boat carries a fashion journalist (Connie Porter, played by a waspish Tallulah Bankhead) who actually relishes the situation because of the opportunities it will provide to write a first-hand account for the popular magazines (the character initially films the floating bodies and debris but, to her huge consternation, her camera gets knocked into the water as others attempt to effect more rescues). Whilst such a characterisation of cynical documentary journalism might now appear a little clichéd, Connie's self-involvement is clearly aberrant to the community and People's War ethos that was portrayed in innumerable other British and American films, evidencing an important way in which, as Manvell concludes, *Lifeboat* was "one of the rare 'nonconformist' films of the period".¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the unusually dark tone of the film is set in early scenes depicting a mother cradling her baby, and then, upon realisation that the baby has recently died, eluding the "suicide watch" of the others and throwing herself into the water.

The men and women on the boat appear ciphers for different contemporary social positions and attitudes. The American contingent include an intense and earnestly left-wing seaman, a kind-hearted but rather dull-witted stoker (with a badly injured leg), a quiet black steward and a sinisterly affable millionaire businessman who later flies into a rage when he loses an improvised game of cards. The British are represented by a dependable but reserved radio operator and his eventual love interest, a rather insipid nurse. These survivors are soon joined by a large and curly haired figure they also pull

¹⁷⁷ Manvell, *Films and the Second World War*, p. 201.

from the water: the commander of the submarine that sank the boat in which they had been travelling. The group initially squabble about whether to allow him to stay on the boat or put him overboard and then on how to treat him as a prisoner, but gradually and cunningly he inveigles his way into their confidence. Communicating with Connie in German, although he later reveals he can speak English, the U-boat commander suggests they are headed in the wrong direction (they have decided to sail towards Bermuda) and then convinces the group he must amputate the injured man's gangrenous leg. In reality, he is directing the boat towards a rendezvous point with another German ship and pushes the crippled man into the water when the others are in an exhausted sleep. When the group discover this, and the Nazi's real intentions, they beat and drown him in a frenzied attack.

Hitchcock was criticised by some contemporary critics for producing a film in which the Nazi enemy is clearly the cleverest and most tenacious character, able to expose the others' credulity as well as retain his physical energy.¹⁷⁸ "“He is made of iron and the rest of us are just flesh and blood”", Connie says as she watches him row the boat without rest, in a comparable fashion, perhaps, to Curtin. Interviewed by François Truffaut in the early 60s, Hitchcock argued that the film should have been read as an allegory of the international situation at the outset of the war, the film's implicit message being that for the Allies to be victorious they needed to “put their differences aside” and respond collectively and decisively to an enemy given drive and self-belief by indoctrination: “a common enemy, whose strength was precisely derived from a spirit of unity and of determination.”¹⁷⁹ Responding to the Nazi's absolutism (he is confused that the group do not simply kill him) one of the baffled seamen asks simply: ““what do you do with somebody like that?”” Yet, *Lifeboat* has an emphasis on

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, pp.201-2.

character and psychological intensity that resists it being viewed purely as an allegorical narrative about the differences between supposed fascist and democratic mentalities; it allows the enemy – who remains resolutely occluded, “off-screen” in *In Which We Serve* – to not only have a voice but to actively register his presence in the story as someone dangerously superior to the putative “heroes”. This is subversive not just because the enemy is given a role as potential anti-hero but because it permits the object of bewilderment, that which is so frequently “other” in 40s culture, to broach the small and highly enclosed narrative world of the boat. This contrasts, of course, with the explicit moment of enemy contact in *The Ocean*, in which the “bugaboo” appears as an uncannily distended and recently dead body which Curtain attempts to revive and then which floats away. In both these culturally “nonconformist” or dissenting works, acts signifying moral kindness or forgiveness towards the enemy “other” are expressed but potentially undermined in different ways: by the Nazi’s deceit and the “vengefully violent [...] uncoordinated savagery of the retribution” depicted in *Lifeboat*, and by the estranged appearance and death of the German airman in *The Ocean*.¹⁸⁰

Sailor’s Song

Comparison between a “literary” film and a powerfully visual novel has placed *The Ocean* in a broad but very relevant cultural spectrum, as well as revealing how the production of realism in this period was often modulated by a correspondence, even a fluid relationship, between cinematic and literary forms.¹⁸¹ In *Sailor’s Song*, however, Hanley uses an unusual oscillation of narrative voices and an emphasis on linguistic

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p.202.

¹⁸¹ The relationship between cinema and literature is emphasised by the multiple references to contemporary, popular films in several of Hamilton’s works, and indeed other major novels of the 40s, such as Malcolm Lowry’s *Under The Volcano* (1947), use films or cinema-going as concrete aspects of plot, as well as being “cinematic” in more abstract ways.

diffuseness that is not only harder to compare to non-literary culture, but also differs greatly with most of Hanley's other work.

Sailor's Song does, in fact, resemble an aspect of *In Which We Serve*: like the film, Hanley's novel presents a narrative that alternates between two temporalities. The "present", suggested by the opening chapter, reveals another ship sunk in the war, and a small group of men struggling to survive on a life raft. Seaman John Manion, the central character, is injured, slipping in and out of consciousness as shipmates take turns to lie on his body to protect him from the wind, rain and cold: "'Cover my face up,' I said. 'I said cover my face up. Don't want to see any more sea'" (SS 7). This experience, and Manion's confused, "delirious" state, initiates sequences of narrative about various aspects of Manion's previous life: how as a boy he believed himself destined to become a sailor; how he falls in love with and marries a "country girl" called Sheila and they have a son; how he worked as a coal-trimmer on ships in the First World War (where he first experiences being shipwrecked), and how he suffers long periods of unemployment and poverty once the war ends (SS 12). This is much more than the memories and shadows of home-life that are interspersed through *The Ocean*; almost the entire of *Sailor's Song* is set in the past, except for the first, penultimate and last chapters, and two other brief interludes depicting continuing events on the raft.

This historical range allows the text to pursue a type of social critique quite different from the intense character observation and slowed-down chronology of *The Ocean*. Manion is another of Hanley's "typical" sailor characters but his typicality is emphasised in unusually visible ways. Stokes notices, for example, how Manion is "almost an anagram of 'one man' or 'any man'", yet even more demonstrable, perhaps, is the employment of different contextualising narrative voices for the different

temporalities.¹⁸² The five chapters set in present-day, on the raft, are narrated in the third person, whereas the sections relating Manion's past are generally narrated in the first person, though the distinction between these is made more unstable by the "Manion" voice frequently referring to himself as "you" or "the sailor". There are also important exceptions to this alternating pattern, and it is in short passages of third person narration embedded into the narrative of Manion's past that we most see the effect of transposing what had appeared as individual reminiscences, or focalised analepses, onto a much larger historical canvas.¹⁸³

One significant section (chapter XXIV) breaks the logic of Manion's supposed recollections, as "I" becomes "Manion" even though the character is present in the action described. Here, Manion is depicted as one small part of a much larger entity – the dole queue: "One long, undulating, pressing, and always weaving snake-line of grey men, moving, always moving towards a green door, green blaze to this grey" (SS 181). Hanley's desire to depict the plight of Britain's unemployed in much of his work in the 30s (especially the first *Fury* volumes and non-fiction study, *Grey Children*) was clearly maintained here, and the desperation, anguish and resilience of Manion and the rest of the out of work men is brought out with great pathos. Yet, like Hamilton's "Gorse" novels (discussed in chapter five), the act of projecting back to a setting that encompasses the turbulent years following the First World War, in which both authors were young men, means that a sort of critical and historical "distance" or framing is tangibly felt in these scenes, providing a set of symbolic resonances to the material and

¹⁸² Stokes, *James Hanley*, p.128.

¹⁸³ These exceptions also disturb the symmetry of the novels' narrative frame, complicating the sense that Manion is a straightforward first-person narrator of the story within the larger story. The novel's conclusion suggests that Manion has been, in a semi-delusional state, "gabb[ing]" about his past to his fellow sailors on the raft, but the narratorial framing is never overtly determined in the way that Marlow's story is in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for example (SS 210).

social analysis. After a helmeted man hectors the assembled to keep the line moving, the chapter concludes with one of the many prescriptive sentences that makes clear that Manion's story is to be taken as representative of an entire social group, even an entire way of life: "Keep on moving sailor, keep moving, accelerate mercilessly" (SS 191).

As we have seen, this sailor's "way of life" is critically assessed, even as the frequently poetic, almost incantatory prose appears to project an aesthetic too exalted for the traditionally quotidian subject-matter of social realism. In other third person narrated sections, we learn about Sheila's everyday life, and her feelings of disorientation in the periods when Manion is away working: "'Somehow I can't settle down inside myself'" (SS 73). There are descriptions of Sheila's visit to the shipping office in an attempt to collect overdue wages owed to her husband, and of her interaction with the elderly Mrs Bryant, whose husband died at sea many years earlier but who had become so accustomed to the sense of absence and deferral that she often thinks he is just away with a berth on a ship. These scenes function as much more than descriptive vignettes that digress from the main narrative arc: they are the counterpoint to the novel's "love song" of the sailor, showing the repercussions, especially for others, of Manion's compulsion to keep going back to sea, his constant desire to find "the very ship a man might have been dreaming about", when Sheila knows simply that "It's always the next ship that will be the best one that ever was" (SS 119, 121). Manion does grasp the pain his absence causes Sheila, and in moments of domestic intimacy resolves to stay with her: "And the *grind* of going away, and *being* away, I could now feel all the whole lot of it, just looking at her sitting there, just finished feeding that kid. I caught hold of her in my arms and I didn't want ever to let go that hold" (SS 123). Earlier, the narrative recalls a first hug between the lovers being: "the first time anything ever came true for me in my *whole* life", and on their wedding day, as Manion laughs and drinks,

he can also “give a damn to the sea” (SS 62). Manion’s restless thoughts about the next voyage always re-establish themselves, however; he has to “keep on moving” because each yearning for the “next ship” is also a yearning for the absolute, something utopian, imagined since childhood but ultimately unrealisable.

This is figured in the text, especially the last chapters describing the men’s rescue, as a permanent element of the human condition, but of course, as we have seen, a gendered dichotomy is also operating here, and this important social context leavens the overtly symbolic and mythopoetic “story.” Like Manion, Sheila is restless, but she is also shown to be satisfied, even elated, by moments of simple family activity, such as when they take a trip to the countryside on a wintry afternoon and she suddenly runs down a lane: “Just take a look and you can see she’s a girl yet, see how for a minute or two she was thinking of a place as green as green, and being free, and running anywhere green was” (SS 134). Even on this walk, Manion is day-dreaming of the “spanking ship” he has been offered work on: “Stop thinking of this blasted old ship [...] This is no ship and she’s in no sea. Wake up! Stop Dreaming. You’re taking your missus out for a walk in the country, because for a single day she wanted to forget all that brick and stone” (SS 133). Both Sheila and Manion want to escape the urban to attain the feeling of “being free” in nature, but whilst Sheila is deeply touched by the colour of a dandelion (“‘it’s so yellow, I must get it’”), and the shining of the dew on a spider’s web, Manion is largely oblivious to the landscape (“‘This is the country, but I don’t see much green about’”) and an invasive and apparently permanent *wanderlust* distracts his consciousness (SS 131,132). So the desire for freedom – symbolised by the sea and the “dream ship” – as something which is ultimately insatiable, actually suggests itself in the novel as a peculiarly masculine form of obsessiveness. Indeed, it is passed down the male line of the family, almost as an infectious disease: “Never grew too big, never

remained too small, and then I got it quick, and then I had it. Got it off my father, his smell all over me. Held me in, hung on hard, my father's smell, sea breathing all over me" (SS 14).¹⁸⁴

As Manion decides whether to take his first ever job on a ship, the paternalistic voice of an older sailor warns him about the inescapability of the lifestyle once that choice is made – “No road this way and no road that [...] measure these things well” – but the mysterious feelings of longing have already taken a vice-like grip on the adolescent: “Take a look at what you wanted, all this sea [...] Look at it, you're on it, you're in it. Break anything, break steel, anything harder than steel, break bone or heart, you can't break that, the hold there, you can't break that” (SS 16, 17). A “husband's ship” might be the “permanent and undefeated rival” of a sailor's wife, as is asserted in *In Which We Serve*, but here the relationship between sailor and sea is stated in more intense terms. In the repetition of “break”, and especially the descriptions of being “on it” and “in it” and “sea breathing all over me”, we find an imagery and syntax evocative of an erotic love poem. The insistently heightened and sensuous language of the novel, with subjectivity recurrently expressed through images of the body, imbues its subject matter and descriptions with a kind of equivocal intimacy, exerting linguistic or stylistic pressure on both the “mythic” and realist trajectories of the text. The novel's unusual language, highly impassioned but also characterised by circularity and repetition of phrase (“Sing a song, sailor, cried sea, sing a song” is reused throughout the opening

¹⁸⁴ There are also clear links, as described in *Broken Water*, to Hanley's childhood fascination with the sea, and female resistance to this in his own family. Hanley also felt intermittent pangs of regret about abandoning his life as a sailor, even as late as 1947 he complains, in one letter, of the “terrifying” life of a writer and suggests that “Lately I have been telling myself I would have been far happier if I had stayed at sea.” See Hanley to Norman Unger, 2nd Dec. 1947 (NIU collection).

chapter), was attacked by some contemporary critics.¹⁸⁵ But one way of accounting for the divergent qualities of *Sailor's Song* might be to suggest that it enacts a sort of textual *jouissance*, a stylistic energy that locates types of ardency latent within apparently “ordinary” social interactions and expresses it in forms that exceed figurative expectations, challenging the normal procedures by which prose fiction attempts to denote the real.

In contrast with *The Ocean*, which contains direct or “constative” description as one strand of its coding of events, *Sailor's Song* contains extended passages in which elusive language and dense metaphors refuse to yield meaning with any sort of transparency. Chapter VII, for example, describes Manion's ship being sunk in WWI without stating the words “submarine” or “torpedo”; indeed, the entire sequence is placed in the elliptical, near erotic terms that have become familiar as the text's dominant tone:

Sort of fish [...] It had a date with us. This thing was mouthless, was dumb, it made no noise as it swam, you couldn't hear, wouldn't know if she was about. But she knew if you were, her bright eye shine and fasten on smell of a ship, see it a long way off, feel all sailormen aboard her (SS 55).

If a submarine can “smell” a ship (strangely, perhaps, with its periscope “eye”) and “feel” sailors, the novel also alludes to sexual relations between the sailors themselves, or uses sexualised (but equivocal) language to describe some of their interactions. Hanley's first-hand knowledge of the risks of the obscenity laws, following the prosecution of *Boy*, suggests a possible explanation for the oblique descriptions he uses here, although naturally the obliqueness of the language actually amplifies its suggestiveness.

¹⁸⁵ See Stokes, *James Hanley*, pp.135-6: reviews complained of “darkly symbolic phrases of a curiously flat and commonplace texture” (*Times Literary Supplement*) and “a repetitive 2-4 beat, a dull pendulum tick-tock” quality to the sentence structure (*Time and Tide*).

Aboard a grey ship that had been left to rust but was re-commissioned for the war effort, and that is eventually sunk by the “sort of fish”, Manion is drafted to “trim” the coal alongside a sailor called Scruff with whom he is also forced to room: “I chose a bunk, and sure enough he was under me not over me” (SS 40). Scruff disturbs Manion by talking of men ““with all authority on ship and sea””: ““if a sailorman could watch that mind doing its thinking, then he’d have a fair warning of that ship’s surrender, and a fair warning to his right hand, and then a fair warning to a hungry time”” (SS 38, 39). We might conjecture that Scruff, here, is describing the way in which shipping companies decide, without sufficient warning to the workers, to close a trade route or retire a ship, forcing seamen into unemployment and a “hungry time”. Scruff continues: ““Know the way a sailor walks, looks in his eye, when his right hand’s powerless, that’s a taste in the sailor’s mouth [...] All right, I said to myself, all right, get it in your mouth, feel it there hard, and I did. Multiply me by the first number you think of”” (SS 39). References to the “right hand” and the “taste in the sailor’s mouth” could have specific, idiomatic resonances that have faded with time, but there is an evident sexual suggestiveness, alongside a simultaneous sense of definitive meaning being held under by the opaque connections between phrases. Discourses of sexuality and economics appear to collide, here, so that challenges to economic self-hood are being linked to or expressed as a loss of sexual vitality or identity.

In *Boy*, the predatory sexual advances of different sailors are described in both euphemistic and explicit ways, and the young Arthur is frequently and aggressively teased about masturbation, with “arms” or “hands” routinely employed as a synecdoche: ““Been using two hands, have you? Shake yourself together.””¹⁸⁶ In *Sailor’s Song*, however, the innuendoes of “powerless right hand[s]”, and so on, do not operate

¹⁸⁶ James Hanley, *Boy* (1931), (London: Oneworld Classics, 2007), p.91.

conventionally, as a way of implying or exaggerating a risqué meaning through a consciously pretended disguise, but rather have the effect of pushing the text, and reader, into a world of unsettling indeterminacies. This feeling is increased by the way in which the strange narrative tone is shadowed by the dialogue of the sailors, which is comparably allusive. A few pages later, whilst they work together, “stripped to the waist” in front of the ship’s blazing furnace, Scruff seems to give Manion attention that is overtly salacious as he admires, ““how your skin glistened, that power of a shoulder, that clean and straight look, and that fine back, oh, and brightness of eye. Once I’d one like you,’ he was saying, ‘but that’s long ago”” (SS 42). Is Scruff suggesting he once had a “fine back”, himself, or that “long ago” he once had a sexual partner who was like Manion? He recommends that they drink from a water-can because it ““keeps the heat down in a man”” (SS 42). The play of meanings appears less abstruse than earlier examples, with “heat” evidently signifying sexual desire as well as temperature, but at this point the narrative takes an intriguing turn that again becomes resistant to easy understanding. Scruff, the Manion narrative voice suggests, began to “cry and howl” in a haunting way (SS 42, 43). As Manion shovels coal in almost total darkness he hears Scruff swearing – ““Goddam and Goddam”” – and “Then a blob of something white came near me, hell, he’d followed the tail of his cries. How I hated that man, how I hated him then” (SS 43). This mysterious “blob of white” is not clarified in any further description – perhaps it alludes to a stray spark or hot ash from the furnace, with Manion angered by Scruff’s brusque manner and slapdash work, what another sailor describes, in not very reassuring terms, as Scruff’s “hasty” behaviour: ““Take no notice of him. Just like us all, like all sailormen, once chewed on a bone”” (hinting back, perhaps, to Scruff’s speech about “feel[ing] it hard” in his mouth) (SS 44). But, with the accumulated effects of this persistently sexualised language, the text provokes another

implication: Scruff, howling and swearing with frustration, has ejaculated and the “blob of white” is semen. As Scruff demands more coal, Manion thinks that there “‘is not enough in a mine for this hungry fire’”, and wants to “‘smother [...] blind and bind him with all this black coal’”, so that a symbolic “blackness” is potentially figured as the thing that could “smother” and obliterate the “blob of white”.

Sperm features more explicitly, and famously, in the “Squeeze of the Hand” chapter of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, where the sailors of the *Pequod* communally manipulate some whale sperm, turning “concreted lumps” back into liquid. As the narrator, Ishmael, squeezes the sperm in the large vat, he finds that he is also “unwittingly squeezing my co-labourers’ hands in it.” This produces an “abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling,” so that “at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally.”¹⁸⁷ Robert K. Martin argues that “The subject of the chapter is masturbation,” and that the scene offers “affectionate, comradely sexuality at its most evocative”, even though the feeling “cannot be sustained, for it rests upon a momentary suspension of the real” which elapses with the soon restated “realities of economics and labor”.¹⁸⁸ Melville’s positive version of communal male sexuality, in this moment, contrasts with the angst-ridden and invasive interaction between Scruff and Manion, but other parts of Hanley’s narrative echo strongly Melville’s linking of an idealized interdependency with the physical matter of the sea, as for example when, in freezing temperatures, a sailor warms Manion by rubbing him down with fish oil (SS 23). Yet, the individual arbitration between the social and the aesthetic enacted in the two novels does issue different results, with a suspension or challenging of the real more insistently invoked by the dense language of

¹⁸⁷ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), ed. Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003), p.456.

¹⁸⁸ Robert K. Martin, “Melville and Sexuality” in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.194,195.

Sailor's Song. Unlike the Ishmael narrative, or some third person narrated sequences of *Sailor's Song*, the delirious "voice" of Manion does not offer explicit description of concrete events. Hanley employs it, rather, to present a variety of powerful and allusive phrases and images that evoke, but rarely explain, the affective repercussions of the intensely physical lifestyle and claustrophobic community the novel portrays.

The inescapable proximity of other bodies can yield a touching intimacy such as the "fish oil" image, and at the conclusion of the novel when Donnelly, one of the other seamen on the raft, describes to a now conscious Manion how they "'took turns at lying on you, it was that windy and rough'", whilst another sailor adds, "'it was the only thing a man could do'" (SS 208, 213). Although they had not known Manion beforehand, the two younger sailors have become impressed by the force of his personality they observed on the raft – they now act "'Like a couple of faithful dogs'" – and connected by the shared shipwreck experience exhibit a genuine physical warmth towards the older sailor: "He put his big hand on the man's grey head, and stroked back the thinning hair" (SS 209). All of the intimacies and transgressed intimacies that punctuate Manion's experience at sea emphasise the gender dichotomy that the novel suggests is an inevitable consequence of the social world it observes. Wives like Sheila are left behind, isolated, cleaning the house until there is "nothing more you could do [...] She knew then that she was alone", whilst what is signalled as the masculine obsession to "keep moving" initiates a struggle between two lifestyles, the conventionally domestic and the enforced social and physical interaction of an enclosed homosocial community (SS 72). Whilst Manion's "song" does constitute a dramatic evocation of the powerful calling of the sea, the text simultaneously scrutinises the social and economic pressures on the Romantic vision it embodies, consistently asking: "What's home to a sailor?" (SS 35).

Conclusion

At the end of *Sailor's Song*, Donnelly accuses Manion's jumbled-up recollections of having little contemporary relevancy:

‘Such talk, sailor, bits and ends of things, names, old ships, old times, old wars, worn-out stuff, grey times, but it don’t mean anything sailor, it don’t mean anything to us. Rubbish, old, done with, over, finished. That was an old war you gabbled about, and this is a brand new war [...] not a grey day in it’ (SS 210).

Sailor's Song's unusual narrative structure allows it to cover the terrain of two wars, tracking changes to English society through time and allowing a tension to emerge between different historical perspectives and different generations. In almost the final sentence of the novel one character asks, in response to Donnelly restating his views about the irrelevance of Manion's talk, “‘I say, shipmate, is that all a man tosses about on a raft for, just to make history?’” (SS 224). Yet, Manion's recollections are more than an elegy for times passed. In his continuing visions of a “million waves and a million rafts on them, and on each raft there was a man” we are presented with a mythic representation of human endurance that is transhistorical, as Fordham vividly describes: “Threatened by the destructive and relativizing power of the new technological age, human beings cling to the rafts and rocks of their ideological origins” (SS 216).¹⁸⁹ Historicising impulses are explored in far greater depth in *Sailor's Song* than they are in *The Ocean*. This might be explained by the two years of war that separate the novels' writing, in which it would have become apparent that the second conflict would match or surpass the duration of the first, and a pervasive sense of belatedness or secondariness might have encouraged Hanley to create a text that could simultaneously conceive of both temporalities.

¹⁸⁹ Fordham, *Modernism and the Working Class*, p.69.

As we have seen, the two Hanley wartime novels of the sea discussed here diverge from conventional realism in quite different ways, yet both can be linked to a branch of fiction that has borrowed from and played with the conventions of historical sea-writing, and the oral traditions of the yarn and shanty, to experiment with narrative.¹⁹⁰ There are, naturally, thematic correspondences with several Conrad stories, such as “Typhoon” (1902), but even stronger resonances, perhaps, with the already mentioned works by O’Neill, Melville and also Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” (1897). Worpole argues that “British novelists [...] have for the most part resisted the modernizing developments in narration and style developed in other countries”.¹⁹¹ *Sailor’s Song* and *The Ocean* evidence how Hanley bucked the trend of this insularity, rerouting his version of the novel through some of these developments so that his hybrid aesthetic was productively enlarged by fiction that thematically and literally traversed the Atlantic. As these readings of his novels have shown, the manifest and latent radicalism of Hanley’s realism derives its energy from many sources.

¹⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp.65-6, for Fordham’s comparison of the “rhythmic pattern” of *Sailor’s Song* to a “foundational” nautical text, the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Seafarer”.

¹⁹¹ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.36. Worpole also makes the important contention that “many working class readers” have historically found “American writing so much more accessible in style and subject matter in comparison to the classical formalism of the English novel of suburban manners” (p.37).

SECTION TWO: PATRICK HAMILTON

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Man on the Margin”: Perspectives on Patrick Hamilton

Patrick Hamilton (1904-1962) was born into a literary family. Bruce Hamilton, who was also a novelist, wrote a biography of his brother in 1972, and Hamilton’s life has been further documented by Nigel Jones and Sean French.¹⁹² Hamilton and his brother corresponded regularly, and the letters between the two men inform much of this biographical material.¹⁹³ Both of Hamilton’s parents (Bernard and Ellen) wrote novels, as did his second wife, though both women writers published under pseudonyms. As French suggests, it is hard not to consider the Hamiltons “like a family of books, mingling and conversing.”¹⁹⁴ Hamilton was the only member of the family who achieved any real commercial success, however, and his work often satirises the literary pretensions of characters who consider themselves potential writers, such as Mr Sounder in *The Midnight Bell* (1929). Both Hamilton sons felt distaste for their father’s political attitudes (he was an admirer of Mussolini) and critics have traced how aspects of Bernard Hamilton’s bombastic personality and style of writing might be parodied in Hamilton’s fiction.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Bruce Hamilton, *The Light Went Out: A Biography of Patrick Hamilton* (London: Constable, 1972); Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*; Sean French, *Patrick Hamilton: A Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993). Hanley’s younger brother, Gerald Hanley, was also a novelist.

¹⁹³ Arnold Rattenbury has criticised the role of the “Hamilton Archive”, made up of Bruce Hamilton’s papers – “a sick, inverted, sometimes jealous, often taunting correspondence, filled with palpable dishonesties on both sides” – as a determinant in the understanding of Hamilton’s work. See, Arnold Rattenbury, “Literature, Lying and Sober Truth: Attitudes to the work of Patrick Hamilton and Sylvia Townsend Warner” in John Lucas ed., *Writing and Radicalism* (London: Longman, 1996), pp.209-10.

¹⁹⁴ French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.207.

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, pp.104-5; and John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 1997), p.223. More on this subject is also considered in chapter six of this thesis.

Hamilton's family were part of the Edwardian leisured classes; he grew up in large houses in London and Hove and was educated, with intermittent breaks, at public schools. However, although never in genuine financial hardship, the adolescent Hamilton did experience a retrenchment during the post-WWI recession years, largely due to Bernard Hamilton squandering a huge family inheritance. This common déclassé experience did not mean that Hamilton, although living an "impecunious" existence when writing his first novel, was ever genuinely financially vulnerable in the way that, for example, Hanley was – he had a "safety net" of family money or a "City job" if his books did not sell.¹⁹⁶ Nonetheless, it was during this period that Hamilton regularly took rooms in boarding houses and observed a largely middle-class social world – of saloon bars, Lyons tea rooms and cinemas – that he would frequently recreate in his fiction. The slow but inexorable exhaustion of savings would also become a persistent theme, charting the fortunes of Bob in the *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* trilogy (1935) and George Harvey Bone in *Hangover Square* (1941).

Hamilton's first three novels, written in his early twenties, all feature locations and character types – the sympathetic but fallible male protagonist, manipulative and flirtatious young women, tyrannical domestic bullies etc. – that would reappear more iconically in his later work. Hamilton's first novel, *Monday Morning* (1925), is about an eighteen year-old man with ambitions to be a great novelist. Every Monday morning he resolves to begin a writer's life, but his energies are soon distracted by a French girl who stays in the same boarding house. Bruce Hamilton called the novel a "joyous miscellany of scraps of autobiography shaped to the needs of a novel", whilst French remarks on "how much of the Hamilton world is already there in embryonic form",

¹⁹⁶ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.105.

most strikingly the “bleakness of its portrayal of the relationship between the sexes.”¹⁹⁷ *Craven House* (1926), Hamilton’s second novel, is the only one of his early period to have remained in print. Like Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*, published a year later, the narrative is divided into pre and post war sections. Shadowed by both the war and the General Strike of 1926, the novel describes a world of collapsing privilege, in which England’s “genteel” or rentier class are oblivious to or bemused by social and economic changes which mean that servants might even “Answer Back”. “For one moment it seems that Miss Hatt will not recover. But she gets the better of herself, stays erect for a moment, and then swings into the drawing room with the white, tense face of a lady likely to drop at any moment.”¹⁹⁸ Contemporary reviews of *Craven House* discerned a heavy Dickensian influence, one describing the characters as “drawn in that vein of heightened risibility beloved of Dickens.”¹⁹⁹ Such sentiments show how Hamilton’s early status as an author was forged by comparisons to a very English tradition of the novel as social comedy. Yet, as Arnold Rattenbury has argued, “the general tendency from [J.B.] Priestley onwards to describe [Hamilton] as Dickensian because of his habit of hitting off character by catch-phrase [is] quite inadequate to describe what else he does, what he *invents*.”²⁰⁰ *Craven House* is indeed far from a traditional novel. It experiments with dialogue and typography, for example, in what Priestley would criticise as “Komic Kapitals” – the unusual capitalisation of certain words or phrases to emphasize their hackneyed qualities or apparently totemic status.²⁰¹ It also projects characters as grotesques for detached, comic commentary on social issues (much like the first novels of Evelyn Waugh published later in the decade), yet at

¹⁹⁷ Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.45; French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.56; Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.135.

¹⁹⁸ Patrick Hamilton, *Craven House* (1926) (London: Black Spring Press, 2008), p.156.

¹⁹⁹ Cited in French, p.62.

²⁰⁰ Rattenbury, “Literature, Lying and Sober Truth”, p.223.

²⁰¹ See J.B. Priestley, “Introduction” to *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (London: Constable, 1935), p.vi.

the same time creates a sense of genuine threat in the different domestic and political violences it depicts. The novel is one of the first to identify latent fascist attitudes in English society in the inter-war years and the “atmosphere” of this period strates even his 40s work; as Peter Widdowson puts it: “the timbre of his writing is indelibly of the inter-war years.”²⁰² John Lucas has argued that Hamilton’s early fiction is radical in both its social critique and its playing with form, with *Craven House* evidencing how Hamilton “took over the seemingly safe form of the domestic novel and exploited its comic possibilities so as to subvert its reassuring and known qualities.”²⁰³

Hamilton’s next novel, *Twopence Coloured* (1928), is about an aspiring actress and again he drew from real-life models: his sister was a professional actress and Hamilton himself both acted and worked in a theatre as an adolescent. The theatrical world fascinated Hamilton (as did the still relatively new medium of cinema) and it provides the locale for many events in his fiction, as a site, for example, of revelatory “purification” for Mr Prest in *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947). Perhaps theatre informs Hamilton’s fiction most clearly as an emphasis on the “performative” parts of people’s personalities. The fact that Netta Longdon, the *femme fatale* of *Hangover Square* (1941), wants to make it big on stage is frequently connected to her playing a “role” in the everyday connivance of her objectives. Hamilton’s interest in the theatre is seen most concretely, of course, in the creation of his most famous work, the play *Rope* (1929), which Alfred Hitchcock adapted into a film in the late 40s. The play is a taut thriller about two young men murdering a fellow student, Ronald Kentley, purely for the thrill of getting away with it. The body is placed in a chest that the victim’s family

²⁰² Peter Widdowson, “The Saloon Bar Society: Patrick Hamilton’s Fiction in the 1930s” in John Lucas ed., *The 1930’s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p.117. As we shall observe in chapter five, Hamilton would explicitly and subtextually project back to this 20s “world” of bigots, special constables and violent strike-breakers in his post-WWII “Gorse trilogy”.

²⁰³ Lucas, *The Radical Twenties*, p.227.

and friends, unaware yet that Ronald is dead, are then invited to take tea on. As Jones suggests, the play is clearly connected (despite Hamilton's protestations otherwise) to the famous Leopold and Loeb murder case of 1924, in which two American students attempted to enact Nietzsche's "Superman" concept by committing the proverbial perfect murder.²⁰⁴ The importance of Hamilton's experiences as a playwright to the writing of his fiction cannot be underestimated. The success of *Rope*, and later *Gaslight* (1939), provided Hamilton with a literary status and a large and steady income that removed some of the commercial pressures from his novel-writing. Bruce Hamilton suggests that his brother always felt the fiction to have more "intrinsic value" even though he appreciated how his plays (especially ones written for radio) could reach a mass audience in a way that his novels did not.²⁰⁵ Moreover, Hamilton's fiction also plays with theatrical modes. In the narration of *Craven House*, for example, the action is often described in present tense in a style that reads like stage directions: "Miss Hatt charges out of the door, is heard spilling the umbrella stand in the hall outside, and returns with her own umbrella in her hand."²⁰⁶ In Hamilton's later fiction, as subsequent chapters will show, theatrical concepts such as melodrama, farce, dialogue-driven plots and even *Grand Guignol*-style horror all inflect Hamilton's version of the realist novel.

Hamilton's next fiction project was three novels (*The Midnight Bell*, 1929, *The Siege of Pleasure*, 1932, and *The Plains of Cement*, 1934) which were to be collected in one volume as *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky: A London Trilogy* (1935). In what can perhaps be described as Hamilton's middle phase, these novels show a stylistic shift away from "heightened risibility" to what French, interpreting Hamilton's own comments on the subject, characterises as a "pessimistic theology", something

²⁰⁴ See Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.164. Jones also suggests that Hamilton also read Nietzsche in the late 20s and "was attracted by a simplified conception of the philosopher's idea of the 'Superman'" (p.129).

²⁰⁵ Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.57.

²⁰⁶ Hamilton, *Craven House*, p.223.

which “doesn’t require to be argued but can hang over the story like a fog.”²⁰⁷ The three novels are therefore stripped of some of the more flamboyant linguistic flourishes of *Craven House*. Unorthodox capitalisation was still present, for example in Mr Eccles’s awkward attempts to woo Ella in the third novel (“he was [...] Letting her Know. And that meant Advances again”) but are used in a more economical and less exuberantly comic way.²⁰⁸ The nuances of dialogue are still central, with words stressed by italics or scare quotes, and the narratorial voice still interprets the events it describes.²⁰⁹ In 1929, Hamilton would write a letter to his brother disclosing his “new theories about writing and style,” including a recently acquired “weird penchant for short sentences”: “I never now try to get effects, except in comic writing. My maxim is to *see*, relate what you see and your effects will come. Vision and imagination are the things, and they come from stored observation.”²¹⁰

From this self-proclaimed “observational” style emerges a narrative that focuses on the seamier aspects of London life. Bob, a young barman who lives and works at The Midnight Bell, becomes infatuated with a prostitute called Jenny, one of the “women of the town [whose] poisonous horror of their bearing yet bore the glamour and beauty of the macabre” to the men who walk past the Soho doorways.²¹¹ Bob’s obsession with Jenny’s enticements and evasions prevents him from realising that a barmaid at the pub, Ella, is in love with him. The narrative of *The Siege of Pleasure* is set a few years earlier, and recounts the social pressures, unfortunate coincidences and exploitative men who expedite Jenny’s move from domestic servant to prostitution. Bob and Ella do not feature in the novel at all. *The Plains of Cement* moves back to “present day”, focusing

²⁰⁷ French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p. 92.

²⁰⁸ Patrick Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (1935) (London: Vintage, 2004), p.335.

²⁰⁹ Widdowson criticises the “modes of narration” employed in the trilogy. See, Widdowson, “The Saloon Bar Society”, p.123.

²¹⁰ Cited in French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.93.

²¹¹ Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets*, p.49.

on Ella's attempts to deal with the "Advances" of Mr Eccles, a middle-aged regular at the pub, whilst she looks on with sadness at Bob's increasingly desperate behaviour. The three novels are "disparate stories", but the unusual triangulating of perspective enacted when they are read together as a trilogy amplifies the atmosphere of gloom, the pervasive sense that all the characters will inevitably suffer.²¹² The momentum of "fate" works here in a comparable way to Thomas Hardy's darker fiction, something which Hamilton then recognised as the "one theme of the HardycumConrad [*sic*] great novel [...] that this is a bloody awful life, that we are none of us responsible for our own lives and actions, but merely in the hands of the gods."²¹³ In fact, Hamilton himself claimed to be much more optimistic in 1929, concluding in the same letter that actually "it's a first rate existence if only one or two things go right", and that the pessimism of his current writing was him working through the "seductive and consoling idea" that the "poet's business [is] to put into words the universal wail of humanity at not being able to get everything it wants exactly when it wants it."²¹⁴

Three details of Hamilton's life in this period are frequently highlighted as altering his attitudes, and the effects of these on his artistic aesthetic have been debated by critics. In 1932 he was involved in a serious accident: walking along Earl's Court Road (the later setting for much of *Hangover Square*) he was hit by a car and, after being carried several metres, thrown off onto the pavement. Priestley suggested that "Few novelists can have had a more bitter stroke of luck" because the accident incapacitated Hamilton when in a "fine creative vein".²¹⁵ More important were the lasting psychological effects of a trauma which had left him with a withered left arm, obvious facial scars and a nose that needed to be reconstructed by plastic surgery.

²¹² French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.134.

²¹³ Cited in *ibid.*, p.93.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Priestley, "Introduction", p.x.

Hamilton sometimes referred to the accident as “when I was killed” and concerns about his appearance left him, in the words of Jones, “no longer the extrovert, but the man on the margin, silently glowering and acutely self-conscious.”²¹⁶ Jones concludes, however, that the dark tone of Hamilton’s subsequent work might have been amplified by the accident but was not caused by it: “the accident played a part in bringing the seeds of his bleaker vision into full flower, but we know that those seeds had been planted earlier.”²¹⁷ Shadows of the accident and car-phobia are seen on a thematic level, however. A hit-and-run scene was almost immediately inserted by Hamilton into the *Siege of Pleasure*, for example. The fascist Peter once killed a man by drink-driving in *Hangover Square*, a crime which is also the central subject of Hamilton’s moralistic radio play *To the Public Danger* (1939). Later, Hamilton’s conman creation Ernest Ralph Gorse belongs to a world of second-hand car salesmen and uses tricks with expensive cars to deceive his victims. At the conclusion of *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse* (1953), the trajectory of the novel is disrupted by an extraordinary section – entitled “coleoptera” [beetles] – which suddenly projects forward from description of Gorse’s latest misdemeanours to envision the future of an English landscape choked by multitudes of beetle-like cars: “they changed their shape and greedily clung closer to the earth which they were at first merely to infest but at last completely overrun.”²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.191.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.192.

²¹⁸ Hamilton, *The Gorse Trilogy* (London: Black Spring Press, 2007), p.505. Whilst such a dystopic vision seems to gesture towards the threats of mechanisation explored in the 60s and 70s work of an author like J.G.Ballard, concerns over the irresistible spread of automobiles (and its effects on rural Britain) were clearly felt in the 40s. Hanley’s unusual “fantasy” novel *What Farrar Saw* (1946), for example, describes the first bank holiday since the war has ended: as holidaymakers attempt to go for a relaxing drive in the country or visit the seaside, a traffic jam develops that eventually envelopes every car and road in the country.



Fig. 5: Hamilton in the 1930s, with visible scarring from his 1932 car accident.

The other biographical aspects frequently considered as determinants on Hamilton's career are his problems with alcoholism and his early 30s "conversion" to Marxism. Hamilton would write about physiological alcoholism as a possible element of George's afflictions in *Hangover Square*, but more persistently he examines the dependencies on the *culture* of drinking: the saloon bars, the buying of rounds, the shared hangovers, indeed all the rituals of the pub that for many Hamilton characters serve as a substitute for a secure family environment. Geoff Ward has argued that *Hangover Square* is emblematic of the way 40s fiction was dominated by "tropes of circularity", in which "Addiction, be it to alcohol, heroin, or forms of repetitive behaviour, is a crucial factor in the staggering recurrence of these tropes of staggering home."²¹⁹ Yet, if Hamilton's work can be productively examined through the subject of addiction – or indeed obsession – his popular reputation as an alcoholic writer, someone who has, in Leo Mellor's phrase, "long been incorporated into English Bohemian

²¹⁹ Geoff Ward, "The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk: Lowry, Hamilton, Kavan and the Addictions of 1940s Fiction" in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve eds., *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp.26-7: Ward argues that the literary "paradigm would change from linear movement [in the 30s] to homecoming and return [in the 40s]".

mythology”, can obscure some of the radical meanings of his fiction.²²⁰ As Mellor concludes, “the very process that preserves Hamilton as a supporting character in the grand story of literary life [...] stresses the man before the books; for the biography is so compelling [...] as to render the works themselves unread or half remembered.”²²¹ This seems especially true of the Gorse novels, their reputation seemingly based on their being written in a phase of Hamilton’s life when, as D.J. Taylor puts it, “crack-up lay just around the corner.”²²²

Brian McKenna suggests that Hamilton’s addiction to alcohol can be read alongside his “addiction” to Marxism; both of these addictions (alongside that of his writing) serving to fill a sort of “symptomatic lacuna programmed into his psychological formation.”²²³ Bruce Hamilton also describes Hamilton’s voracious reading of Marx and newfound belief in Stalinism and “the Russian Experiment”, at the beginning of the 30s, as “really a religious conversion”, something which evidenced his deep “need for absolute dogma.”²²⁴ This version of events has meant that Hamilton’s political convictions as a “bourgeois Marxist” have often been characterized as jejune, even delusional, and his most overtly political work, *Impromptu in Moribundia* (1939),

²²⁰ Leo Mellor, “Getting Dark Now”, www.buzzwords.ndo.co.uk/mellor/slavesofsolitude.html (2004). Brian McKenna also addresses the “propagation of the [Hamilton] myth” which he suggests is “consonant with a banal literary ideology which insists on feeling for the authorial pulse of a text.” See Brian McKenna, “Confessions of A Heavy-Drinking Marxist: Addiction in the Work of Patrick Hamilton” in Sue Vice, Matthew Campbell and Tim Armstrong eds., *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p.232. In Hamilton’s abandoned memoirs, which he attempted to write, at the suggestion of some medical students, as a way to productively “work through” and articulate the problems of his alcoholism, he recognizes obsessive and compulsive behavioural traits were rooted in childhood experiences (he felt compelled to check – “as much as half a dozen times in half an hour” – that the nursery door was locked etc). “Here were the beginnings of the malady of doubt – the desire for the insurance on insurance of insurance indefinitely.” See “Memoirs of a Heavy-Drinking Man”, unpublished manuscript (Harry Ransom Center, Patrick Hamilton Collection), p.24.

²²¹ Mellor, “Getting Dark Now”.

²²² D.J. Taylor, “Introduction” to *The Gorse Trilogy* (London:Black Spring Press, 2007), p.ix. The Gorse novels would remain Hamilton’s final published works before his death (from cirrhosis of the liver and kidney failure) in 1962.

²²³ McKenna, “Confessions of A Heavy-Drinking Marxist”, p.234.

²²⁴ Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.81.

has been criticized under those terms.²²⁵ *Impromptu* is a satirical fable or science fiction story, markedly diverging from the rest of Hamilton's *oeuvre*. The narrator – in the only first-person narration Hamilton produced – describes how he travels in his “Asteradio” (a Wellsian time machine) to a planet called Moribundia, which turns out to be a very thinly coded version of England between the wars. This format allows Hamilton to satirise many aspects of capitalist culture and what he saw as the conformist nature of middle-class thinking. This is clearly seen in the novel's opening, in which the narrator arrives to find Moribundians playing the same game of cricket that is the symbolic setting of Henry Newbolt's iconic poem of stoical soldiering, “*Vitaī Lampada*” (1892). As Jones suggests, the implicit message of this scene is that the “values of Imperial Edwardian England still inform society in the 1930s and are leading it, as Edwardian England was led, to the disaster of war.”²²⁶ The text also continued Hamilton's experiments with typography. As Moribundians can only talk in the hackneyed language of advertising and popular journalism, the narrator discovers that their conversations are sometimes conducted with “balloons” – a speech bubble physically forms above their heads with the latest clichéd or inane message, something which is graphically represented in the text in a similar fashion to a comic book.

²²⁵ French, for example, calls *Impromptu* Hamilton's “only political novel [...] so misconceived, in general and in detail, as to be almost beyond criticism” and a “dismal Stalinist tract”. See French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.154. Several critics have attempted to rehabilitate the work. See, for example, Peter Widdowson, “Introduction” to *Impromptu in Moribundia* (1939) (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1999), pp.vii-xv; and Neil Maycroft, “Satirising the bourgeois worldview: Patrick Hamilton's *Impromptu in Moribundia*” in *Capital and Class* no.84 (October 2004), pp.77-84.

²²⁶ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.225.

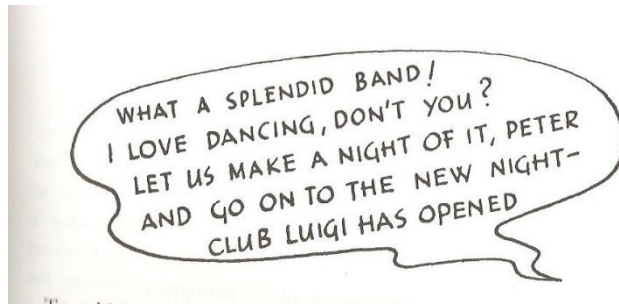


Fig. 6: A Moribundian “balloon” (p.77).

If *Impromptu in Moribundia* feels quite anomalous in the wider context of Hamilton’s other work, Rattenbury is dismayed by French’s suggestion that it is Hamilton’s “only political novel.” Rattenbury, who had some contact with Hamilton in the early 40s, argues that the “notion that Hamilton suddenly became Marxist because of hospitalised reading in 1932 is clearly preposterous”. Rattenbury then traces a “journey” of political critique through all of Hamilton’s early fiction, suggesting a movement from

a clear perception that class-warring capitalism would self-destruct after some final fling with a specifically fascist violence, to an increasing concern with the behaviours and humanities possible to working people who would be active in this process.²²⁷

By 1939, Hamilton perhaps felt the possibilities for such political transformation had become as moribund as the mirror world he creates in *Impromptu in Moribundia*. Moribundia is a place where the middle-classes – “the Little Men” – are guided by the rules of “Unchange”. As the narrator is hounded from the planet by a mob of “Little Men” (they poke him with their umbrellas after he fails to remove his hat during their national anthem), he sees: “the shrewd and despicable cash basis underlying that idiotic

²²⁷ Rattenbury, “Literature, Lying and Sober Truth”, p.209.

patriotism, and a deathly fear and hatred of innovation, of an overturning of their system, behind all their nauseatingly idealistic postures and utterances”.²²⁸

By showing how Moribundians’ lives are scripted by an adherence to stagnant forms of culture, Hamilton also uses the text to make his most public attack on literary modernism.²²⁹ Employing reversed names (in the mode of Samuel Butler) Hamilton describes how Moribundia’s “Toile S.T.”, as well as “border-line cases” like “Ecoyj”, “Ecnerwal”, “Yelxuh” and “Sevarg”:

are for the most part hopelessly and morbidly turned in upon themselves, and sterile in consequence [...] For these reasons art, literature, and poetry in Moribundia take on a more and more painfully subjective aspect, more and more the character of meaningless masturbation, there being no future which they can fertilize.²³⁰

Social conformism thus both feeds and is fed by a “painfully” subjectivist art which neglects the potentialities of political change.²³¹ “There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, poets and writers who flatly deny the whole Moribundian teaching with regard to change and development: but they are, naturally, either ignored or regarded as eccentrics or *poseurs*.”²³² Hamilton presumably saw himself as just such an “exception.” The unusual form of the novel itself seems to provide evidence, as Widdowson asserts, that Hamilton was trying to “explore public issues fictionally rather

²²⁸ Hamilton, *Impromptu in Moribundia*, p. 182.

²²⁹ Hamilton’s dislike of certain contemporary writers and styles was long-standing. Bruce Hamilton reports that when he was just fifteen Hamilton completed a long poem called *Modernism* that was an “indictment of all those trends, chiefly in poetry but also in the whole field of contemporary creation, that seemed to him to be leading away from simplicity and sincerity.” See Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.30.

²³⁰ Hamilton, *Impromptu in Moribundia*, pp.162-3.

²³¹ As we have already observed (see chapter one) Hanley makes much the same complaints about the “subjective” nature of some modernism: “The trouble with people living in ivory towers is that their horrors or terrors are merely private ones and do not count for much. Kafka is an instance, Joyce another.”

²³² *Ibid.*, p.163.

than as direct polemic” in a way that was beyond the “inward-turned” nature of modernism.²³³

The tension between the subjective and the political which runs through Hamilton’s work is perhaps most striking in *Hangover Square* (1941), where the story of George’s deracinated consciousness is set against the backdrop of a country on the verge of war. In the next chapters we will see whether Hamilton’s late fiction eludes what he perceived as the inert modalities of modernism, and, if so, in what singular directions this work would take the realist novel.

²³³ Widdowson, “Introduction”, p.xiii.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Eerie Days Followed”: *Hangover Square* and *Slaves of Solitude*

The depiction of a restless desire for travel amongst certain working class men that we have observed in James Hanley’s fiction reflects a social situation that appears quite alien to the scenarios that are enacted in Hamilton’s novels. George Harvey Bone and Miss (Enid) Roach, the central protagonists in *Hangover Square* (1941) and *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947), do fantasise of escape from insulated environments, but they exist in a narrative world in which a weekend by the sea is figured as almost an exotic dream: “To go to Brighton with Netta...The old dream of dreams [...] That had been his idea of paradise once”²³⁴ (*HS* 114). As we have observed in the previous section, Hamilton’s fiction rarely moves from the highly particularised environment which his novels have come to emblemise. Apart from the fabular *Impromptu in Moribundia* and the historical play, *The Duke in Darkness* (1943) (set in late sixteenth century France), all his work is set in the south-east of England: in areas of London, its suburbs or satellite towns, or sometimes Brighton and Hove. Moreover, within these tight geographical confines the Hamiltonian “world” is made up of a network of enclosed spaces: it is “composed,” as Widdowson suggests, “mainly of interiors: of guest-houses, boarding houses, Lyons Cafes, cheap hotel rooms and, pre-eminently, of pubs.”²³⁵

Hamilton’s novels of the 40s chronicle the way two individuals are mentally suffocated by these enclosed environments. George, a heavy drinker who suffers from a schizophrenic type condition, cannot escape the small bleak quadrant of Earl’s Court in

²³⁴ Patrick Hamilton, *Hangover Square: A Story of Darkest Earl’s Court* (1941) (London: Penguin, 2001); *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007). Subsequent references in text with the following abbreviations *Hangover Square* (*HS*) and *Slaves of Solitude* (*SOS*). According to Nigel Jones, Hamilton himself “rarely ventured abroad” generally considering it, “a horrible place”. See Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, pp.vii,4.

²³⁵ Widdowson, “The Saloon Bar Society”, p.117.

the late 30s, a place, the narration tells us, for the unloved: “To those whom God has forsaken, is given a gas-fire in Earl’s Court” (*HS* 38). In a moment characteristic of the novel’s comic but sympathetic ironising of George’s perspective, when he resolves to leave the neighbourhood that has helped foster his mental disintegration he considers all of the “exotic” places he might relocate to: “Where was he going? [...] Anywhere, Notting Hill, Bayswater, South Ken, Shepherd’s Bush, Knightsbridge” (*HS* 214).

Miss Roach, a meek, unmarried woman of thirty-nine, does live outside of London: forced from the capital by the Blitz, she stays at the Rosamund Tea Rooms in Thames Lockdon, a fictionalized version, an author’s note tells us, of Henley-on-Thames. The place Miss Roach is compelled to consider “home” is perhaps even more stultifying than the “bleak scenery of [George’s] long disgrace and disaster”, a city which at least has forms of energy, however terrifying: “life again, electric London, electric terrors” (*HS* 32, 214). Miss Roach commutes to London for work, but stays in a cloistered boarding-house, spending her evenings in a provincial town that should be “a place to pass through, above all” (*SOS* 3). If the texts describe the divergent but comparably claustrophobic experiences of urban alienation and suburban boredom, both are also mapped against tightly defined and equally enclosing temporalities. *Hangover Square* begins in 1938, in the days of Munich and appeasement, and ends on the day that Britain declares war on Germany. *The Slaves of Solitude* describes the war “late in 1943”, in the flat hiatus between the first Blitz and the V-rocket attacks (*SOS* 3). For “slaves” like Miss Roach and Mr Prest, another boarding-house misfit, wartime feels like an interminable condition. As Sean French suggests, the two novels seem to depict, respectively: “pre-apocalypse [and] the bathetic post-apocalypse period.”²³⁶ The tension we have observed between the subjective and the political in Hamilton’s earlier fiction

²³⁶ French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.186.

is thus staged in formal terms in these two novels, with the war used as a frame for very personal types of crises. In this chapter I argue that, in *Hangover Square* and *The Slaves of Solitude*, history is used to intrude on (or invade) the narratives of these enclosed personal worlds in highly visible and estranging ways. In *Hangover Square*, George's increasingly desperate state is conspicuously tied to the gradual build-up to war; in *The Slaves of Solitude*, the war is so insistently personified that, as Claud Cockburn argues, "it assumes [an] active and malign role, something rather more than human, yet affecting human life like the devil in a morality play."²³⁷ As these supranatural forces of "history" close around and shape the individual crises portrayed in the novels so, in turn, are these historical forces expressionistically suffused by the internal perceptions of the characters, or dramatised by the unusually stylised or emphasised aspects of the narrative mode.²³⁸ It is through the anomalous nature and ironic tonal play of such narrative frames that *Hangover Square* and *The Slaves of Solitude* reveal themselves as an endemically 40s version of avant-garde realism.

Hangover Square

George Harvey Bone and Miss Roach are two of Hamilton's most consistently sympathetic characters, or rather, the characters whose motivations are most consistently sympathised with in the narration of his novels. All of George's mental frailties and even physical characteristics designedly evince pathos. He is a shambling,

²³⁷ Cited in Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.287.

²³⁸ By "history", here, I am thinking in similar terms to what Paul Ricoeur calls "monumental time" (extrapolating Nietzsche's term "monumental history") in his reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). See, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.2, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.108. In his stimulating analyses of the issues of narrative time, Mark Currie describes Ricoeur's phrase "monumental time" as representing something that can account for the "complex apparatus of public history, collective experience and authority that constitutes the backdrop against which the private thoughts and actions are staged [within a narrative]." Mark Currie, *About Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.129.

thirty-four year-old man with a “tall, strong, beefy, ungainly figure” and eyes that are “big and blue and sad and slightly bloodshot with beer and smoke” (*HS* 16). He is unemployed, but, at the novel’s opening has just received a £10 gift from his aunt. He has been living off an inheritance (“He had still got a bit of his mother’s money left”) and a “War Loan”, and intimations are made throughout the novel that George suffered some large family loss or trauma as a child, presumably related to WWI. Apart from his aunt, all George’s other family seem to be dead or irreparably out of touch: he especially mourns for his sister Ellen (“he just couldn’t bear to think about [her], nowadays”) who was one of the few people in his life George believes “actively liked him” (*HS* 56). They had spent a childhood holiday together in Maidenhead, before she had “died a fortnight later”, and the town gains a totemic, almost magical significance as a symbol of traumatically lost innocence: “he must get to Maidenhead and be peaceful and contented again [...] He would go on the river again, and be at peace” (*HS* 18).²³⁹

Money is also a central aspect of plot. For “over a year now”, George has been socialising with an Earl’s Court “gang” of “improvident” drinkers, a “Drunken, lazy, impecunious, neurotic, arrogant, pub-crawling lot of swine” (*HS* 29, 30). They show “scorn and dislike” towards George (often in a coded language of idiomatic banter) but suffer his presence simply so he can buy the next round of drinks, as George realises: “You put up with a hanger-on, an interloper, if he is paying” (*HS* 36, 53). At the centre

²³⁹ There might be links here between *Hangover Square* and Orwell’s *Coming up for Air* (1939) as contemporary condition of England novels. There is, of course, the similarity of names of the central protagonists: the insurance seller George Bowling, like George Bone, could possibly be meant to signify (G)reat (B)ritain. Both novels also portray the irony of a coming war that seems to threaten an England (based on childhood projections of rural idylls) that is already under threat or entirely eliminated by forms of socially homogenising modernity. Of course, as we have seen, Hanley’s work also addresses the issue of disappearing rural “authenticity”, with characters who dream of escaping urban spaces for an elusive bit of “green”. For more on the connections between Orwell and Hamilton, see Peter Widdowson, “English Fiction in the 30s” in Jon Clark et al, eds., *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), pp. 117-137.

of this gang is Netta Longdon, a beautiful, callous and manipulative aspiring actress, “devoid of amiability and generosity”, who is always “touching” George for cash (*HS* 44). He knows she is doing this but acquiesces because he is obsessively in love with her, or, “You might say [...] he was ‘in hate’ with her. It was the same thing – just looking at his obsession from the other side” (*HS* 29). George feels that Netta’s mere physical presence has a powerful, even sinister effect on him: “a halo, a field of physical and magnetic influence” (*HS* 41). He has to keep “out of range” of about two feet from her body or become “choked by the mist of his sensuous anguish” (*HS* 41). Furthermore, this field of influence “gave forth another halo” that stretches to include “any point [...] from which the house in which she lived might be espied by her lover”:

This second halo was infinitely weaker, of course, than the inner one which gave it birth, if only because it was more spread out and in the fresh air, but nevertheless it pervaded the whole, trembling atmosphere amidst the roar of passing traffic, and cast its enthralling, uncanny influence upon every fixed object or passing person in the neighbourhood (*HS* 57).

We can see, here, how effectively Hamilton creates his pervasive sense of claustrophobia: intangible “energies” are shown to enclose characters as much as physical spaces and the potentially diluting effects of “fresh air” hints at the heavy and airless atmosphere of the interiors.

The phrase “espied by her lover” is also more suggestive than it might first appear. Casual sightings do not occur much in the text: the viewing of others from afar is almost always given the unsettling context of voyeurism, or even stalking. George makes a “daily walk after breakfast past her house” in the hope that he “might see her ‘by accident’” – Netta, both indolent and usually hung-over, does not permit George to phone before eleven o’clock, so that her “early morning life” was an unknown world that he wants to traverse “Columbus-like” (*HS* 57-8). When George becomes convinced, much later in the narrative, that Netta has snubbed his proposed trip to

Maidenhead (where she has coquettishly promised to “be nice to [him]”) and instead used his money to secretly travel to Brighton and seduce and exploit the theatrical connections of his only real friend – Johnnie Littlejohn – he decides he must also travel there “to catch them at it” (*HS* 231, 244). He thinks at first, “that would be spying – undignified”, but when he resolves to go “a sort of elation came over him [...] the arrogant elation, even, of the eavesdropper or spy” (*HS* 245). George has no intention of stopping Netta, only watching from a distance and then leaving. When, viewing from the circle of a theatre, George does see Netta, Johnnie and wealthy showbiz impresario Eddie Carstairs walking together up the gangway, the pain of the moment seems alleviated not just by the palliating removal of his uncertainty, but by the climactic, voyeuristic act itself: “Yes, there they were... He was glad to have seen them. It was what he’d come down for” (*HS* 248). George’s self-pity explains such events by his (skewed) perception of social status: “He could hardly blame her for shaking him off. He wouldn’t look well with people like that.” They were “people of the smart world, of the theatre, he was a battered boozier from Earl’s Court – now a lonely eavesdropper, a spy...” (*HS* 249). George’s voyeurism is thus self-reflexive: he imagines himself as a ghostly lacuna in the scene that he is watching, a social or sexual misfit, or, as he often refers to himself, a “nonentity” (*HS* 248).

How others view George is also part of the insistently rendered pathos of the novel. George’s insecurities about his own life, his social and sexual status, even his “enormous” physical size, are made manifest through the focalised narration, but then comically and cruelly reinforced by the observations of others. When in her “ironical” mood Netta teasingly highlights the causes of George’s insecurities in a way he considers flirting: “‘I suppose’, said Netta, still looking into the fire, ‘that it’s because he’s so big that he is so silly’” (*HS* 40). This delights George because “In his very few

successes with women in the past, the thing had always begun with a humorous disparagement of his bigness” (*HS* 40). The aspect of George that most interests the others, however, is the content of what George calls his “‘dead’ moods”, what unfathomable things are “‘going on in his head’” when, as Netta puts it, with characteristic brusqueness: “‘you go all dumb, and don’t talk, and look all vague and automatic’” (*HS* 39). The “gang” treat George as a slightly odd but ultimately harmless “stooge” to their group. But, they do not realise that in his “‘dead’ moods”, in which George acts like an “automaton” or “somnambulist” and which he cannot recall later (“what was he *thinking* about all that time – what was he *doing*?”), he has one compulsion: “To kill Netta Longdon [...] He was going to kill her, and then he was going to Maidenhead, where he would be happy.” (*HS* 18, 19, 39).²⁴⁰

George’s “schizophrenia” operates as a highly unusual and darkly comic plot device. A pronounced “*Click!*” in George’s brain declares the moment of transfer between the two halves of his split personality.²⁴¹ The sound is compared to that of a camera shutter, in keeping with many filmic references through the text. Yet, with the lethal intentions of his “‘dead’ moods”, and in a novel so imbued with imagery of violence and war, the quiet word also seems onomatopoeically reminiscent of the cocking of a gun. The narrative plays on the difficulty of denoting a self-consciously fictional medical condition: “would the word ‘*snap*’ or ‘*crack*’ describe it better? It was a noise inside his head, and yet it was not a noise” (*HS* 15). Steven Earnshaw has criticised the “overdetermining” effects of the plot device, which operates in addition to

²⁴⁰ Hamilton’s later fiction is replete with references to somnambulism and automatons, phenomena Tyrus Miller suggests are important to the preoccupations of the period. See Miller, *Late Modernism*, p.24: “these [late modernist] writers perceived as a general state of affairs a kind of all-pervasive, collective, and incurable shell-shock from which all suffer and which need not have trench experience as its precondition [...] Everyone, they suggest, has a bit of the automaton about him or her; it follows from the conditions of history within which we must make our selves, our lives, our cities.”

²⁴¹ The novel’s opening sentence – “*Click!...* Here it was again!” – is, alongside the surreal opening of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), one of the most iconic openings lines in 40s fiction.

George's heavy drinking: "Aesthetically, the novel could probably have worked just as well without the added weight of a mental illness: the schizophrenia functions within the novel as a more extreme version of drunkenness."²⁴² Yet, this seems to underestimate the satirical potential of positioning George's alterity as something at least two frames from reality, an "extreme version" of the self in which he becomes: "a dead person, another person, a person who wasn't you" (*HS* 25). George is an alcoholic who uses drink as one small way of gaining purchase on his life – "you could still get drunk; you could still enjoy drink" – but its production of moments of self-pitying recognition can seem clichéd: "He ought always to have known he wasn't in her class. He began to tremble violently, and he ordered another whisky. He caught sight of himself in the glass" (*HS* 245, 249). The "'dead' moods", in which people and objects "had no colour, vivacity, meaning", and George's life suddenly resembles "A silent film without music", might contain aspects of an exaggerated form of "normal" intoxication (rather than depiction of a real mental condition), but it functions in the novel as a more self-conscious, radical and surrealistic subversion of norms of perception than "realistic" drunkenness (or even *delirium tremens*) could achieve (*HS* 16,17).²⁴³

George is signalled as more self-aware and sensitive than the dissolute Netta and her cronies Peter and Mickey; as Earnshaw suggests, "the circle of idle tipplers *wants* to drink", whereas George in fact hates his own observance of a drinking culture that means he has "a life in common" with them: "'Drinking. *I'd* cut it out if I could only get my life straight – if only things made sense" (*HS* 29, 76).²⁴⁴ But things don't make sense, partly because George's personality is more profoundly split than the two poles

²⁴² Steven Earnshaw, *The Pub in Literature: England's Altered State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.250.

²⁴³ For a reading that compares the principal characters of *Hangover Square* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under The Volcano* (1947) (an alcoholic consul who experiences drink-related hallucinations), see Ward, "The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk", pp.28-30.

²⁴⁴ Earnshaw, *The Pub in Literature*, p.251.

of drunk and sober would suggest. He is, as the original subtitle of the novel had it, “the man with two minds”. This element of fantasy, even gothic horror, is a tangible “intrusion” on other more realist aspects of the novel, but it allows the text to comically subvert (and critique) mundane, everyday social interactions. Travelling in a taxi with Netta, she turns and asks George for cigarette, but he cannot respond because of a sudden submerging into a “‘dead’ mood”:

She was *like* somebody... Who was it? She was the *image* of somebody... Good God – he saw it all! She was like *Netta Longdon*. She *was* Netta Longdon! This actually was the Netta Longdon he was going to kill before he went to Maidenhead (*HS* 86).

As mentioned in the discussion of surrealist techniques in *No Directions*, Peter Nicholls has described how certain British fiction of the 30s and 40s (such as some of Edward Upward’s stories) seem to be “indebted” to the influence of European Surrealism and draw a “stark contrast between an illusory world of surreal desire and one of rational action.”²⁴⁵ Nicholls suggests that such a “dichotomy” can also be discerned in other “explorations of madness in the period”; this includes *Hangover Square* in which a “premonitory ‘Click!’ [...] announces either George Harvey Bone’s punctual descent into madness or his equally sudden emergence from it.”²⁴⁶ Nicholls is right to highlight the strange punctuality of George’s moods, the regularity of which gives a formal patterning to the plot that belies the apparently aleatory qualities associated with Surrealism proper.²⁴⁷ Yet, the truly disturbing quality of Hamilton’s

²⁴⁵ Nicholls, “Surrealism in England”, p.408.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ As we are discussing the influence of surrealism on a novel about drinking, it might be pertinent to recall Walter Benjamin’s famous account of European Surrealism and its use of intoxication. Benjamin criticises the “undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication” used to penetrate the “mysterious”. He argues that the “histrionic stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious” is something which can “penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.” In its place, Benjamin recommends the “profane illumination” of things like “telepathic phenomena” or the “hashish trance” by other observers:

novel is not that it creates a delineated dichotomy between “illusory [...] surreal desire” and “rational action”, but that George’s “‘dead’ moods” are in fact a shadow or heightened double of a “normal” consciousness which is itself already consumed by paranoia, obsession and irrational flights of fancy. When he compulsively travels to Brighton at the novel’s conclusion (in his “normal” state) he realises “for the first time, that he had forgotten to bring any luggage. He had never thought of that. Never mind. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered now” – George’s increasing desperation means that the automaton version of himself has almost entirely eclipsed the “real” one (*HS* 246).

George’s “‘dead’ moods” observe a pattern of their own perverse logic, as though his dark and frustrated sexual desires can finally be sublimated on this extraordinary and socially isolated psychological plane. As his “normal” self, George’s desire for Netta (and what she could symbolise) operates on different levels. On the one hand, he wants to be in love with her and have her love him – “‘You must be human somewhere,’” he asks her, “‘Don’t you want to be in love?’” – and sees this as the final piece to an idealized domestic jigsaw that he feels would “make sense”: “The chicken farm at Haywards Heath, or something like it. Something with a shape to it. Something which makes sense. I’ve got to think that. I’ve got to hope it anyway” (*HS* 77). On the other hand, his desire is figured as a lust for sexual *possession*, a moment of conquest that will finally confirm his virility and release his social fears. When Netta condescends to be kissed by George (an act which she never returns, naturally), he becomes convinced, with a few needling doubts, that he finally “possesses” her:

He was no longer an outsider, a hanger-on, a stooge. He was a man, a man of the world at last, and he had got her. He might never get her again, he might pay in

“The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic.” See Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929) in Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.1094.

money, disaster, and misery for getting her, but he had got her, got her, *got her!* (HS 233).

The exclamation marks, italics and frequent ellipses used throughout the novel signal the febrile and disconnected state of George's conscious thoughts. Whilst the passages of the text that describe George's "dead" persona can be punctuated just as exuberantly, they also ascribe to him a calm confidence that is humorously ironic when compared to his usual timorousness. When considering how he is actually going to proceed with killing Netta, George thinks that: "Fantastically, incredibly, absurdly easy as it all was, it still had to be planned" (HS 86). He is worried about the police "meddling", but is reassured by the absolute knowledge that, "[they] could not touch him when he got to Maidenhead" (HS 86). The comic potential of George's condition is exploited mainly as a way of exposing the reader to his altered perception of mundane locations or aspects of British life: this permits places such as Maidenhead or Haywards Heath a fleeting but comically incompatible luminosity. Some of the most memorable sequences in the novels depict George experiencing a "'dead' mood" after tortured trips to Brighton with Netta and his attempts to walk from the coast to London – it is part of his plan to kill Netta and therefore entirely sensible: "He couldn't remember quite why it was that he had to walk to London instead of taking the train, but he was sure that was how the thing stood" (HS 267). At an earlier point he had walked – like a sleepwalker – westward along Brighton beachfront and when he wakes up, with a "*Crack!*", he has no idea what nondescript town he is in. An errand boy, frightened by George's appearance, tells him the place is Portslade and George thinks:

Port Slade... Slade... Where was Slade? He had never heard of Slade. The Slade School of art, but not port. Port Slade. No...
And yet there was something familiar about it... Port Said! That was it – it was like Port Said? But he couldn't be in Port Said – you wouldn't have women with shopping bags, and errand boys and tobacconists-shops like that, in Port Said... (HS 172).

In his “‘dead’ moods”, George is separated from the world by being insensate, something which adds yet another layer to his claustrophobic isolation: when he comes out of his mood it is like “bursting up into fresh air after swimming gravely for a long time in silent, green depths” (*HS* 21). As Geoff Gilbert argues, George’s schizophrenia acts as a “radical inclosure which separates him from the very grammars by which people interact”; something which is “finally and totally confirmed” by the climactic scene of theatre voyeurism, “confirmed, that is, as a social rather than an heuristic or a psychological fact.”²⁴⁸ George’s outsideness is rooted in language: his anomalous status in the Earl’s Court gang is marked by a very Hanleyan phrase: “He didn’t even know their language, their idiom” (*HS* 53). The discourse of the group is characterised by a mix of slang and mannered 40s idioms; they have a “game of calling people by their surnames” and Netta pronounces his name “*Bone*” as if to bring out the “latent absurdity” of the word (*HS* 36).

George’s own method of conversation is markedly direct and non-slangy by comparison, but his fevered consciousness, when thinking of Netta, enters into its own idiosyncratic word games:

Netta. The tangled net of her hair – the dark net – the brunette. The net in which he was caught – netted. Nettles. The wicked poison-nettles from which had been brewed the poison that was in his blood. Stinging nettles. She stung and wounded him with words from her red mouth. Nets. Fishing-nets. Mermaid’s nets. Bewitchment. Syrens – the unearthly beauty of the sea. Nets. Nest. To nestle. To nestle against her. Rest. Breast. In her net. Netta. You could go on like that for ever – all the way back to London (*HS* 27).

The striking, staccato style of this passage, which comes just as the reader is first introduced to the character of Netta – is not really replicated in other parts of the novel, but this serves to emphasise its significance. It emblemises how George’s schizophrenia

²⁴⁸ Geoff Gilbert, “Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics” in *Core: International Journal of the Humanities* no. 1.2 (Fall 2001), p.4.

is used as a way of stylising the form of the text. The sequence reads less like the free and spontaneous associations of a (disturbed) mind than as a formally controlled series of linked images and concepts. The captivating “nets” which entrap George in the endless production of language turn out to be “the awful associative power of physical love” rather than a signifier of psychosis: “it was only because you were crazy about her that you went on like this” (*HS* 24, 27). The pun on “brunette”, the run-on (a few lines later) to the more comically prosaic “Net profit? Nestlé’s Milk Chocolate?” and of course the interjectory “You could go on like that for ever”, provide a deeply bathetic edge to a sequence that could have disclosed itself as an affirmation of rhapsodic, modernist-styled prose (*HS* 27). Thesaurus entries also serve as epigraphs to many of the chapters in the text, but, again, they read more as carefully selected and edited analogues to the themes of the chapter rather than the employment of a more “organic” play of signifiers. Unpublished notebooks attest to Hamilton’s attempts to compose his own, personal book of synonyms – suggestive of his genuine fascination with both the associative and controlling impulses of a thesaurus.²⁴⁹ At the end of the novel, the net image is “literalized”, as Brian McKenna puts it, by George tying together with thread the fixtures and fittings of the rooms in which lie the two dead bodies of Netta and Peter, whom he has just murdered.²⁵⁰ He makes an elaborate pattern with the thread, winding it around legs of an upset table, the taps of the bath and light switches on the wall, so that the bodies are enmeshed in an intricate criss-crossing network: “A real net. Netta. Poor Netta – don’t worry – nothing should be disturbed: nothing should be disturbed until the police came” (*HS* 275). It is only in this moment, when George’s need to locate a sense of order and control – to “thread everything together” –

²⁴⁹ For more on Hamilton’s “book on words” project, see Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.165.

²⁵⁰ McKenna, “Confessions of a Heavy-Drinking Marxist”, p.238.

graphically actualises his condition, that the previously ironised linguistic play about nets gains a genuinely disturbing significance (*HS* 275).

George is separated from the others in the Netta circle by his “dumb moods” and by the processes of language – but also by politics. George loathes the recent appeasement strategy which he sees as both morally dubious and inevitably leading to war: he “knew that Munich was a phoney business”, whereas the others use it as an excuse for a party and “weren’t sober for a week [afterwards]” (*HS* 31). This is because, in fact, they are all at heart fascists or fascist-sympathisers: “They *liked* Hitler, really. They didn’t hate him, anyway. They liked Musso, too” (*HS* 31). Many characters in Hamilton novels are given undertones of cryptofascism, but here the narrative is insistent: “Peter, of course, was a fascist, or had been at one time – used to go about Chelsea in a uniform” (*HS* 32). To reassure us this is not just the distorted prism of George’s perception, the repellent nature of Peter is then confirmed by the thoughts of George’s friend, Johnnie: “He did not like [Peter’s] general carriage, his fair, cruel face, his fair guardsman’s moustache, his eccentricity of dress, his hatlessness, his check trousers and light grey sweater with polo neck” (*HS* 104). Johnnie decides that Peter’s dress is one of an “ultra-masculine man who desired to single himself out from the herd and wear a ‘uniform’ while others made do with a plain shirt and collar” (*HS* 104). Peter’s fascism is thus linked to his social status and manner: the “saloon-bar nonchalance” and indolence of Peter and the others operates as a symbol of the larger negligence of appeasement, whilst the affected ways of talking and dressing stand for the self-aggrandisement and vanity of the bourgeois fascist in general (*HS* 29). The fact that Peter has “been in jail” (he killed someone drink-driving) has a “subtle appeal” for Netta, and she’s similarly turned on by the taboo cultures of fascism:

She was supposed to dislike fascism, to laugh at it, but actually she liked it enormously. In secret she liked pictures of marching, regimented men, in secret

she was physically attracted by Hitler [...] She liked the uniforms, the guns, the breeches, the boots, the swastikas, the shirts. She was, probably, sexually stimulated by these things in the same way as she might have been... a bull-fight (*HS* 114).

There is an irony, of course, that whilst Netta is “stimulated” by images of violence and fascistic “virility” and nonchalantly dismisses George’s needy, desperate attempts to “make love” – it is eventually “big and silly” George who produces the violence that kills her.

In the narrative, George’s story corresponds to a chronology of political events in a very overt way. When old friend Johnnie re-enters George’s life – “one of the non-snubbers, the non-sneerers” – and seems to offer him an affirming type of male companionship, the scene is played out to a “fine” summer’s day of “Blue and sunshine” when “You couldn’t believe it would ever break, that the bombs had to fall” (*HS* 57,101). An index of contemporary events, relayed in an especially lyrical paragraph, ties the moment even more strongly to a point of historically specific optimism (“Fine for the salvaging of the *Thetis*... Fine for the West Indian cricket team...” (*HS* 101)). At the point of the narrative when George fears Netta has “got his only friend”, and despairs that she “Annexed him without an effort!”, we soon discover that Germany has invaded Poland (*HS* 43). At the end of the novel, in the final “‘dead’ mood” which has caused him to drown Netta in her bath and kill Peter with a blow from a golf club, his macabre wrapping up of the room in thread is accompanied by Chamberlain’s announcement of war on the radio: “‘*You can imagine what a bitter blow this is to me...*’ He had exhausted two reels and had done all he could here – now he must go into the bathroom” (*HS* 274). George then walks to Maidenhead to complete his plan, but of course finds that it is not the idyll of preserved innocence that he expected but “just a town with shops, and newsagents, and pubs and cinemas. It wasn’t,

and never could be, the peace, Ellen, the river, the quiet glass of beer, the white flannels [...] It ought to have been, but it wasn't" (*HS* 279). Within the logic of his "'dead' mood", this means that he must "get rid of himself" (*HS* 279). After leaving a suicide note declaring that he "feel[s] in a dream", was wrong about Maidenhead, and would like it if people look after the cat he befriended in his Earl's Court hotel, he gasses himself, an event which, "because of the interest in the prevailing war, was given very little publicity by the press" (*HS* 281-82). In a suitably bathetic denouement, we learn that only one newspaper has headlined with the news of George Harvey Bone:

SLAYS TWO
FOUND GASSED
THINKS OF CAT (*HS* 281).

Several commentators have criticised the way the political subtext unfolds in *Hangover Square*. Gilbert, for example, remarks on the "creaking allegorical machineries" in operation, whilst Geoff Ward suggests Hamilton is "heavy-handed in his use of politics and current events."²⁵¹ These criticisms are valid, but I suggest that the "creaking machineries" and "overdetermination" of the novel – self-consciously disclosed to the reader – are part of the fundamentally de-realized narrative "world" the text enacts. It is not a traditional realist novel, with "rounded" characters and sophisticated "covert plots", but something closer to what Christopher Tayler calls, in his overview of Hamilton's work, "ritualised performance."²⁵² As George discloses, in a moment that seems to frame his narrative: "It was funny that, on this night of all nights, he should be watching a farce..." (*HS* 248). Netta and Peter are pantomimic villains and the narrative of George's murders reads like childish fantasy. As a sign of his perpetual outsider status, George had earlier played a round of golf, alone, and scored a "68" (a

²⁵¹ Gilbert, "Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics", p.3; Ward, "The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk", p.30.

²⁵² Christopher Tayler, "Passing-Out Time" in *London Review of Books* 31.2 (January 2009), p.26.

fact he clings to when most in need to affirmation) – that George then dispatches his nemesis, Peter, with a golf club, is suggestive of the kind of unreal wish-fulfilment that plays across the text. The novel’s recurrent misogyny – in which sexual woman (as opposed to the virginal Ellen) is persistently figured as dangerous to male virility – is a genuinely problematic aspect of the text. It is also part of the larger pattern of cryptic psycho-sexual immaturity that the novel privileges. The epiphanic moment for George comes when he realises that Netta has not, after all, “annexed” Johnnie or rich Eddie Carstairs. Instead, he is invited to join the male drinking group at the theatre bar and here he discovers that they all “thought [Netta] was a bitch!” and that he, “a battered Earl’s Court boozier [was] good enough for them” (*HS* 256). That they belong to the glamorous and potentially transformative world of the theatre is primary: “They were the high-ups, they were the stars (whom Netta and Peter envied and schemed to meet) and they were *kind!*” (*HS* 261). At the end of the night, Eddie drives George back to his apartment in his phallic “bloody great Rolls” whilst giving him crude sexual advice about how to treat women (*HS* 260). The misogyny is manifest, but also unsettling is the way it is tied to psychoanalytic gestures of traumatised childhood – George is so overcome by the men’s acceptance that he is on the verge of tears: “All the years and sorrow seemed to slip away from those eyes, and there was the little boy again, the little boy who had been hurt, and was being given a treat” (*HS* 259).

Such jumps in perspective – when the focalisation of the narration changes and the reader sees George from the “outside” – consistently evoke pathos for the character, often showing him as a sort of naïf, unable to cope with the modern world. John Halliwell, an eighteen year-old from a Sussex town who has just moved to London – who appears in a solitary, but crucial chapter – sits alone in pubs furtively watching others, an external eye onto the Earl’s Court “gang”: the “enormous, blue-eyed, tired

looking man [...] had also a more simple, kindly expression than the others, with whom, indeed, he seemed at times to be slightly out of the picture” (*HS* 207). John is in George’s normal position: the outsider looking in, the voyeur. But George engages the young man in warm conversation (about golf and Dickens), making him feel “flattered” and “gratified” (*HS* 208). It is one of the rare moments in Hamilton fiction when a conversation does not denote a psychological battleground but rather provides fleeting moments of (slightly embarrassed) connection. Upon leaving, John “had a feeling of having talked to a ghost” (*HS* 211). The most startling “externalised” perspective on George, however, is his own ghostly or deadened interpretation of Netta’s response to him as he approaches her in the bath: “He saw her staring at him, first in surprise, then in terror: he saw that she was trying to speak, but that nothing would come from her throat: he saw that she was trying to scream, but that nothing would come out” (*HS* 273). George, for so long the “stooge” in a farce, is now the perpetrator of a filmic horror that releases the pervasive claustrophobia of the novel and allows it to close.

The Slaves of Solitude

The Slaves of Solitude, with its marginalised suburban setting, appears like the photographic negative of chaotic Blitz fiction like Hanley’s *No Directions*. “Thames Lockdon was, after all, a mere village right off the map”, and even when the planes fly over, they are heading somewhere else: “Our planes, going out ... Or coming back, she didn’t know which...” (*SOS* 107, 133). *The Slaves of Solitude* is a “war novel” but, like *Hangover Square*, it enacts the war through individual battles of wills that take place in an environment and atmosphere created by the “monumental time” they are living through: “The war, which had begun by making dramatic and drastic demands, which

had held up the public in style like a highwayman, had now developed into a petty pilferer, incessantly pilfering” (*SOS* 101).

Miss Roach, a spinster in her late 30s, is living in constant fear: “fear of life, of herself, of Mr Thwaites, of the times and things into which she had been born, and which boomed about her and encircled her everywhere” (*SOS* 27). Mr Thwaites is another of Hamilton’s thinly veiled cryptofascists, a sixty-something reactionary who is “secretly [...] a hot disciple” of Hitler and paranoid about the young, change and leftism in any form (*SOS* 13). “He could not mention [Russians] save gloweringly, defensively, almost savagely”, and, because Miss Roach sometimes “brought back literary political weeklies from London [which] was in itself a diseased and obscurely Russian thing to do”, he now permanently associates Miss Roach with Sovietism in its worst forms (*SOS* 14, 13). It is, however, not Thwaites’s twisted logic that makes him “president in hell” for Miss Roach, but rather the conglomeration of painfully theatrical idioms he employs in his persistent and bullying chatter (*SOS* 8). For example, he was “particularly fond of [...] facetious substitution of the third in place of the first person in the verb” (“Ah – I Happens to Know the Law”); unremittingly bad parodies of accents (“I Hay ma Doots, as the Scotchman said – of Yore...”) and absurd archaisms (“and what of my Lady of the Roach? How doth *she* disport herself this morning?”) (*SOS* 12, 17, 66). His objectionable verbal diarrhoea is frequently aimed at Miss Roach, with strange references to “*your* friends” (meaning the Russians) and then later a certain “dame of Teutonic origin” (*SOS* 13, 66).

This “dame” is Vicki Kugelmann, a thirty-eight year-old German émigré who moves into the boarding-house, first befriending Miss Roach, then later joining in an alarming pact with Thwaites, seemingly designed to undermine and embarrass Miss Roach. Vicki adds her own fixation with outmoded English slang to Thwaites’s

contortions of language: her speech gives her the “faintly grotesque stamp of 1925” (*SOS* 54). Most of Vicki’s anachronisms, or their articulation, seem to Miss Roach – never Enid – to have some sort of sexual suggestiveness that disturbs her prim middle-class conservatism (she knows that some girls in the local pub “were not, as one’s mother would have said, ‘in her class’”) (*SOS* 30). “*Wizard*”, “Oh, *Sporty*”, “Abso-blooming-lutely. No? What?”, “Good for you, big boy!”: Vicki’s “fearfully outmoded idiomatic virtuosity” is disturbing not because of the putative meanings of the apparently anachronistic or moribund phrases (in fact their insistent repetition suggests an evacuation of meaning) but because of their exaggerated tonal inflection, because they seem to betoken a very un-English demonstrativeness (*SOS* 116-7, 54). The two women socialise with American G.I.s based in the town. Miss Roach wants to apologise for Vicki’s gaucheness but a lieutenant hurtfully tells her: “I’m glad you brought her along. She kind of lightens things up” (*SOS* 116). Vicki flirts with one of the Americans with a to-and-fro exchange about cocktails: “Can I make a cocktail?”; “Oh, boy, can I make a cocktail!”; “you can make a cocktail!” – to which Miss Roach can only shudder at the “mere mention of ‘cocktails’ in 1943” (*SOS* 115).

Miss Roach finally decides that it is the merest trace of an accent, of a foreign inflection when pronouncing these outdated English terms, that makes Vicki’s use of them so uncanny. If Vicki has an ersatz quality, Miss Roach thinks, was she, as they had all assumed, actually an “anti-Nazi”? “Was she not, on the other hand, when you came to think of it, exquisitely Nazi, exquisitely Hitler, exquisitely everything of that sort?” (*SOS* 132). Vicki’s unpleasantness – just as with Netta and Peter – is extrapolated into a symbolic politics, and the Rosamund Tea Rooms becomes a figurative stage on which the war can be played out. As Alan Munton argues, Vicki becomes a representation of

“the state of mind the British were fighting” yet “[infiltrated] into a characteristic English institution.”²⁵³

Yet, maybe this does not fully account for the strange procedures which first makes the neat symbolic code come to fruition. Vicki is not finally confirmed in the narrative as a Nazi because of her cruelty, even though Miss Roach attempts to link “the odours of Vicki’s spirit” with the “spiritual odours which had prevailed in Germany since 1933” (*SOS* 133). Rather, it is her uncanny mode of talking in the narratives of flirting and sex (which Miss Roach cannot participate in, because, like George, she does not understand its language), her interference with Miss Roach’s relationship with one of the American soldiers (Pike, an affable but feckless lieutenant who talks constantly of his family’s laundry business and insinuates proposals of marriage to most women he meets), and her accusation that Miss Roach is an “English Miss” (with its intimations of frigidity) that truly concretises the idea that Vicki might be a Nazi. As Gilbert suggests, there is a “consonance of the psycho-sexual struggle with the political background [that] recalls and mirrors the annexing of Johnnie by Netta.”²⁵⁴

Even though he is in his sixties, Thwaites is alarmingly part of this psycho-sexual drama; exuding a “steady health and virility” he acts as though he would more than willingly be “annexed” by Vicki (“I don’t know whether to give her a jolly good kiss [...] or put her across my knee and spank her”) and frequently makes cruel innuendoes about Miss Roach’s failure to find a husband (*SOS* 11, 172). His looming presence in the boarding-house and preternatural vitality means that “There was not even any hope for Miss Roach that Mr Thwaites would ever die” (*SOS* 65). That is, of course, unless she kills him. When Thwaites suggests (after Vicki has made devious allusions) that Miss Roach has been having an affair with a local youth of seventeen,

²⁵³ Munton, *English Fiction*, p.53.

²⁵⁴ Gilbert, “Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics”, p.6.

whom she has in fact been looking after: “The filth of the suggestion seemed like filth reeling around in her head and blinding her” and she “pushed out her hand” to send Thwaites tumbling down the stairs (*SOS* 200). Thwaites dies the next day of peritonitis, hamming it up till the last: “Yea. Verily [...] Dame Roach?” being his final words (*SOS* 216).

If *Hangover Square* resolves itself through filmic horror, *The Slaves of Solitude* concludes with a pantomimic resolution. Thwaites, the grotesque villain, is disposed of in a semi-comical fashion; at the same time, Miss Roach hears news she is to receive a large family inheritance, so finally leaves liminal Thames Lockdon to return to London, and a luxurious hotel: “She was glad to be back in spite of the danger of bombs. You had to square up to the war. The horror and despondence of the Rosamund Tea Rooms resided in just the fact that it was not squaring up to it” (*SOS* 225). A doctor tells her Thwaites’s death was definitely not caused by his fall, only to think later it was arguably “some sort of a secondary cause [...] of course he would never have told the miserable woman that” (*SOS* 222). Miss Roach is also ignorant “of the February Blitz shortly to descend on London”, or any other future trauma (*SOS* 241). She has won her war, decisively defeating Thwaites and Vicki and escaping from the “horror” of provincialism.

The pantomimic resolution is literalized by Mr Prest, an elderly out of work actor who is almost “beyond the pale” to the other residents of the Rosamund Tea Rooms because he speaks with a “common” accent (*SOS* 75). Although a lonely man too shy to even interrupt conversations between friends, he is also granted a type of redemption at the end of the novel, as he has been approached to play a part in a Christmas pantomime (the war having taken away younger actors). He decides to offer Miss Roach a ticket to the performance:

There was an extraordinary look of purification about the man – a suggestion of reciprocal purification – as if he had just at that moment with his humour purified the excited children, and they, all as one, had purified him [...] And, observing the purification of Mr Prest, Miss Roach herself felt purified (*SOS* 233).

The final move away from the squalid innuendoes and provincial insinuations of Thwaites and Vicki towards (insistently) purifying symbols of innocence and childish pleasure (in a bright, metropolitan sphere of non-sexual spectatorship) seems to finally resolve Miss Roach's prim middle-class fantasy.

Conclusion

Hangover Square and *The Slaves of Solitude* suffuse the ordinary with intimations of the numinous. As Tayler notes, a raft of images (mostly of the everyday) gain an almost "occult significance" through their repetition in Hamilton's fiction: "alcohol, prostitution, the theatre, cheap accommodation, Fascism, golf, motor-vehicles, moustaches, out-of-date slang", and any Hamilton reader could add to this list.²⁵⁵ This quality of Hamilton's work has the disturbing power of surrealism, comparable to the Benjamin defined dialectic of perceiving "the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday".²⁵⁶ Yet, Hamilton's adaptation of surrealism tends to work quite differently from that of other writers of the period, and indeed Hanley is an illustrative contrast. As we have seen, Hanley often creates moments of surreal juxtaposition by allowing images of deep mythic or symbolic significance (a white horse, a whale and so on) to physically enter his narratives, awe his characters and transfigure the tone of the work. Hamilton, alternatively, creates fictions in which meaning and uncanniness become attached to the objective world through the

²⁵⁵ Tayler, "Passing-Out Time", p.26.

²⁵⁶ See footnote 247.

concentrated repetition of everyday symbols in narrative, and by the melodramatic interpretation of these symbols by drunk, agitated or neurotic characters. For George, Netta having a “fresh look, or attitude or way of doing her hair” is considered a “fresh ‘horror’” to wound him with, whilst simultaneously it is suggested that an objectively inconsequential home counties town represents George’s elusive feeling of absolute “peace” with the world (*HS* 36). What divides Hanley and Hamilton is essentially the different tonal registers of their hyperbole, and how that signifies a different sort of relationship with the avant-garde. Hanley, as we have observed, develops a sort of hybrid aesthetic in which modernist techniques are seriously engaged with and utilised. Hamilton’s rejection of modernism, mainly on temperamental grounds, is much more absolute; comparable, perhaps, to that dramatised in the theory and fiction of Wyndham Lewis through the 20s and 30s. Lewis’s contemporary “externalist” fictions, like *The Revenge For Love* (1937) and *The Vulgar Streak* (1941), use a mode of “satiric fantasy” to represent reality as fundamentally deauthenticated, almost akin to pantomime. Lewis’s “satiric fantasy” could, as Tyrus Miller puts it, “[portray] the simulated reality of spectacle more truly than a more conventional ‘realism’ could do.”²⁵⁷ Whilst their representation of gender or social class might be productively compared, Hamilton’s interest in different types of consciousness and subjectivity, his aesthetic practice of “globalising” the self-pitying perspective of one character and his unique, agitated, compulsive narrative tone makes him a writer of very different fictions than those of Lewis. Nonetheless, Hamilton also produces works that read like “ritualised performances” and experiments with models of satiric fantasy, melodrama and farce in his search to represent the theatrical nature of modernity.

²⁵⁷ Miller, *Late Modernism*, p.97.

CHAPTER SIX

“A ‘Black’ Social History”: *The Gorse Trilogy*

In this chapter I discuss the three “Gorse novels” that Hamilton wrote in the late 40s and early 50s.²⁵⁸ This was Hamilton’s most ambitious project, a sequence of historical novels that attempt to describe not only details of British society through time (roughly from 1910-30), but also offer a prolonged exploration of human interaction and, ultimately, their capacity for evil. The central character, Ernest Ralph Gorse, is supposedly of a “type” from which “the most serious criminals emerge” (*TWP* 4). Biographer Nigel Jones argues that “few English writers have attempted such an examination [of evil]” and “even fewer have succeeded”, so that Hamilton’s attempt is “courageous at the least.”²⁵⁹ A contemporary review by Isabel Quigly suggested that *The West Pier* could “almost [give] a new meaning to fictional realism” due to its unusual ambition and approach to its subjects.²⁶⁰ Yet, the novels drew serious criticism too, including from within Hamilton’s small but trusted circle of confidants: principally his brother Bruce and career-spanning editor, Michael Sadleir, who initially liked *The West Pier* but reconsidered after a negative reader’s report by J.B. Priestley.²⁶¹ This damaged Hamilton’s confidence in the work as an ongoing project, conclusively undermining, as Philip Tew argues, Hamilton’s “aesthetic self-esteem.”²⁶² I suggest that

²⁵⁸ The three novels are *The West Pier* (London: Constable, 1951), *Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse* (London: Constable, 1953) and *Unknown Assailant* (London: Constable, 1955); although quotations are taken from *The Gorse Trilogy* (London: Black Spring, 2007), for clarity, and to retain a sense of their individuality, I use the following abbreviations in text to differentiate between the novels: *The West Pier* (*TWP*), *Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse* (*MSMG*) and *Unknown Assailant* (*UA*).

²⁵⁹ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.322.

²⁶⁰ Cited in French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p. 244.

²⁶¹ See D.J. Taylor, “Introduction” to *The Gorse Trilogy* (London: Black Spring, 2007), pp vii-xiv, at p.x; and Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, pp.326-7.

²⁶² Philip Tew, “A Phenomenology of the Suffering of Others: the Case of Ernest Ralph Gorse” in *Critical Engagements 1.1* (2007), p.293. French argues that the criticism of the Gorse novels

an increasing sense of artistic marginalisation, and belatedness, became inscribed in the content of the novels themselves, especially *Unknown Assailant*, which would become the final instalment of the Gorse series and the last of Hamilton's published novels.

Once asked about the intentions behind the Gorse novels, Hamilton said:

'People often wonder that about me [...] but what I was trying to present was a 'black' social history of my times. There were so many 'white' portraits of the twenties and thirties that I wanted to show the other side of the picture. After all, those were the decades in which Hitler rose to power. No one that I read was writing anything about him and the evil he represented.'²⁶³

This seems a very unusual claim by Hamilton, as the surface plots of the Gorse novels do not address Nazism even in a tangential way. Yet, I shall argue in this chapter that Hamilton's "'black' social history" expands the normal remit of realist historical fiction: satirising the ways by which we account for hidden or repressed narratives in cultural memory. Through the persistent and comical aggrandisement of Gorse within the narratives, petty frauds of provincial England are "encoded" as a type of Hitlerian evil. This allows for the novels to exploit a variety of comic and satiric possibilities as they operate in the strange, seemingly incommensurable narrative space between "Gorse the conman" and "Hitler". Sometimes more direct satirical commentaries are enacted: the gullibility and self-deception of his bourgeois victims in the second novel, for example, is more overtly suggestive of middle-class complicity with or acquiescence to a fascist mentality.

Hamilton's desire to write a "'black' social history" was an attempt to explode the comforting, communal myths of English history that were prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. Worpole argues that the re-election of a Conservative Government in 1951 signalled that the "political atmosphere was in retreat, beginning to look back

was also a significant cause of Hamilton's deteriorating health at the end of his life. See French, *Patrick Hamilton*, pp.235-244.

²⁶³ Angus Hall, "After The Hangover", *Books and Bookmen* (July, 1968), pp. 11-12.

again”, and that the popular literature of the early 50s was attempting to rewrite recent history along conservative lines. WWII, especially, was “already in the process of being constructed as a war to preserve the old order.”²⁶⁴ Hamilton’s Gorse novels were also attempting to reconceptualise recent English history, but along radically different lines. The Gorse figure plays on fears about money, class, status and popular mythologizing by the press – he operates, then, partly as a satirical device to expose the mechanisms by which the “old order” perpetuated itself.

Hamilton’s late fiction has often been characterised as intriguing but essentially “minor” work.²⁶⁵ Alternatively, I will argue that the Gorse novels are both a significant coda to Hamilton’s previous thematic preoccupations and something quite new, with Ralph Ernest Gorse, as we shall see, constituting a highly unusual character in the history of the realist novel. I argue that it is through the persistent employment of disjunctive timeframes, anachrony and even the proleptic undermining of its own dramatic effects that the Gorse trilogy radically recasts the conventional aims of historical fiction.

Ernest Ralph Gorse

Hamilton’s last three published novels relate the fortunes of one conman: Ernest Ralph Gorse (the repetition of Gorse’s three names at different moments in the trilogy echoes the rather grandiloquent tone of some contemporary British trial reporting in the popular press).²⁶⁶ Each novel focuses on a different, specific phase of his early criminal career,

²⁶⁴ Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, p.72.

²⁶⁵ See, for example, J.B. Priestley, “Introduction” to *Hangover Square* (London: Constable, 1972), p.7: “[Gorse] was a bad idea anyhow, and Hamilton no longer had the creative energy to bamboozle us into thinking it was a good idea.” John Mepham also suggests that *Unknown Assailant* is a novel “without admirers”. See Mepham, “Hamilton, Patrick (1904-1962)” in *Literary Encyclopedia*, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1959> (2001).

²⁶⁶ Neville George Clevely Heath, one of the most famous murderers of the 1940s and one of the real-life “sources” for Gorse was also, in the press, frequently referred to by all four of his

the setting (and the principal victim) changes for each novel, but Gorse, as a character and as an idea, remains central. D.J. Taylor suggests that, “Whether or not Hamilton intended to produce this effect, each novel is a minor variation on the existing theme.”²⁶⁷ The novels were first published together in one volume as *The Gorse Trilogy* in 1992, though it is clear Hamilton initially intended the series to be longer than three novels. He writes a prefatory note to *The West Pier* which aims to “assure” the reader that, although the book will be the “first of a series of novels dealing with the character of Ernest Ralph Gorse [...] it is a complete story in itself” (*TWP* 2).²⁶⁸ After completion of this first novel, Hamilton writes to Sadleir about what he saw as the potential of his novel sequence, albeit with an optimism tempered by the long gap (of four years) since the eulogising reviews granted *The Slaves of Solitude* and worries about his ability to reproduce the qualities of that novel: “I feel that I have really got on to something with Gorse – that it might turn out to be my wretched little *Comédie Humaine*.”²⁶⁹ Of course, Hamilton had always been concerned with the idea of a “human comedy”, social interaction often providing the central tension of his fiction. Clearly, though, Hamilton conceived the Gorse fiction as something different and newly ambitious in his own body of work. He hoped that a series of novels whose narrative timeframe gradually moves through an era yet which were connected by a recurring central protagonist, could both anatomise a certain type of criminal psychology (creating in the process a character of deep moral significance), but could also recreate, in a larger sense, the

names. Jones draws a link between Gorse and Heath (noting their horticultural names) and describes how Heath’s crimes, “luridly reported by the popular press, made a deep impression on Patrick” (See Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.320). Hamilton clearly drew from several famous 40s cases, however, not least (John) George Haigh, the “acid-bath murderer”, who like Gorse pretended to be an aristocratic gentleman and who operated, also as Gorse does, in the towns of the Sussex Weald (for an account of Haigh’s crimes, see W.H. Johnson, *Sussex Murders* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), pp. 33-45).

²⁶⁷ D.J. Taylor, “Introduction”, p.x.

²⁶⁸ Jones suggests that Hamilton quickly regretted the pressure of expectation he had created with this statement. See Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.326.

²⁶⁹ Cited in French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.217.

sociological tone and scope of Balzac's work. Hamilton would thus provide his own (admittedly "wretched") version of a history of manners (*moeurs* in Balzac's schema); Hamilton doing for inter-war England what Balzac had done for nineteenth-century France.²⁷⁰

Hamilton was perhaps not alone in this ambition. As Malcolm Bradbury describes, the closing of the 30s and start of the 40s saw a significant trend towards the beginning of novel sequences or *romans fleuves* "that suggested that some significant line of connection and development linked the inter-war, the wartime and the post-war world".²⁷¹ Steven Connor has called novel sequences "an exercise in world-making" and, whilst the Gorse novels are very different from the contemporary generational sequences of C.P. Snow and Anthony Powell (there is only one recurring character, for example) it is clear Hamilton intended the series to have a level of local, geographical and historical detail that would concretely link his novelistic world to a sense of historical reality, to be, as Connor terms it, a "parallel universe or working simulacrum of the real."²⁷²

The West Pier achieves a sense of historical veracity partly because many of its aspects draw directly on Hamilton's childhood memories of Brighton and Hove. Indeed, the Gorse books initiate an uncanny sense of doubling between the author figure, as suggested by Hamilton's biography, and the "psychopathic" Gorse. As Walter Allen explains:

The West Pier [...] is a novel of place, and its author was writing about the locations he loved best; his old home in First Avenue, his old school, the County

²⁷⁰ See Honoré de Balzac, "Avant-Propos" in *La Comédie humaine vol.1* ed. P. Citron (Paris: Seuil, 1965), for Balzac's explanation of the sociological impetus of his work.

²⁷¹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), p.258. In this category Bradbury places C.P. Snow's "Strangers and Brothers" sequence (1940-70), Joyce Cary's "Gulley Jimson" trilogy (1941-44) and Anthony Powell's "Dance to the Music of Time" sequence (1951-75). Hanley's "Fury" pentalogy (1935-58), and novel sequences by Lawrence Durrell, Olivia Manning and Evelyn Waugh are other notable examples.

²⁷² Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 136.

Cricket Ground, the two piers, the Metropole hotel, Brighton station: ‘Funny,’ as he put it to Bruce, ‘how one always comes back to Brighton.’²⁷³

The first section of the novel, “The Boy Gorse”, describes incidents from Gorse’s life at Rodney House preparatory school, a thinly veiled version of Hamilton’s own prep school, Holland House (they share the same location a few minutes’ walk from Hove cricket ground).²⁷⁴ The novel acutely describes the social as well local cartography of 1900s Brighton and Hove. The boys of Rodney House, for example, come from

many different classes of parents in the town. What may be roughly called an aristocracy of five or six boys came from the Squares and Avenues – Brunswick Square, Grand Avenue, First Avenue and the like: what may be roughly called a bourgeoisie (the sons of merchants, dentists, estate agents, doctors, clergymen, retired officers and well-to-do local tradesmen) came from the roads – Wilbury Road, Holland Road, Tisbury Road, Norton Road: while the rest came from the Villas – Hova Villas, Ventnor Villas, Denmark Villas – or from obscure crescents and streets at the back of Hove or of Brighton, or from humble western regions verging upon Portslade (*TWP* 5).

Hamilton achieves the effect, here, of a kind of hierarchical Ordnance Survey Map, the area delineated, with exact detail, by a register of professional status. This exemplifies one aspect of the narrative voice of the novel, the pretensions towards a sociological objectivity from a detached, Balzacian narrator. Hamilton also reveals something about how “adult” ideas of social status and money register with children, whose sense of their own enclosed world follows the social patterning they perceive in their parents’ lives. This textual “map” of the immediate area around the school feels like the narrator

²⁷³ Walter Allen, *Tradition and Dream: The English and American Novel from the Twenties to Our Time* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 309-10. Bruce Hamilton did also “come back to Brighton” in his fiction, and also focused on the town as a potential site of transgression and, towards the Hove end at least, of incipient fascism: “As was to be expected in an area where a great part of the population lived by ministering to the luxuries of well-to-do rentiers and holiday-makers with money to burn, the ground was ripe for Fascism of the purest and most uncompromising type.” See Bruce Hamilton, *Brighton Murder Trial: Rex Vs Rhodes* (London: Boriswood, 1937) p.19. The novel is a dystopic account of Britain under dictatorship, in which a young Brighton communist is tried for the murder of a local fascist group leader.

²⁷⁴ For a brief account of Holland House’s history (it existed under that name between 1913-1930) including a mention of Hamilton’s time there, see Judy Middleton, *Tales of the Old Hove Schools* (Portslade: J. Middleton, 1991), pp.16-18.

echoing the social projection of the children: “A few of this third class,” the paragraph tellingly finishes, “approximated to the *sansculottes*: at any rate their clothes were laughed at, and they were known to be ‘common’” (*TWP* 5). Gorse, we soon learn, lives in the “third class” Denmark Villas with his widowed stepmother and took “even at this early age, a dislike to his social beginnings” (*TWP* 25). He also “already knew that it was inadvisable to ask his friends to tea” due to the risk of embarrassment, presumably, that could derive not just from the fact he lives in a poorer part of the neighbourhood, but also because of a home-life that was unlike the secure nuclear family most of the other boys would experience (*TWP* 26). (Gorse, of course, attends Rodney House a few years prior to the serious disturbances to the dominant patterns of family home-life that would be caused by The First World War). Gorse’s stepmother recognises, but cannot articulate, a preternaturally strange quality about the young Ernest:

And, although an extremely fine judge of character, as such a type of ex-barmaid always is, she was unable to quite name to herself what it was which she found so distasteful, if not almost detestable, in her stepson. She contented herself with telling herself (and her intimate friends) that he was a ‘funny’ one, an ‘odd’ one, a ‘rum’ one, and she predicted that his future would be curious. She said that she never knew ‘what he was thinking’ (*TWP* 26).

Mentions of Gorse’s particular, inarticulable strangeness recur throughout the trilogy, as does his habit of looking like he has a “slightly nasty smell under the nose” (*TWP* 27). That Hamilton constructs the novel so that the reader can learn how Gorse’s strangeness is already, and rather uncannily present in his childhood years, gives an anti-*bildungsroman* effect in which Gorse’s character *fails* to develop: a sort of intractable malevolence pre-exists and does not (or cannot) change. Offering a psychologically static principal character is one of the clearest ways in which the trilogy challenges the orthodox trajectory of a realist novel sequence, with its traditional promise of characters changing with and responding to historical pressures.

We discover an early example of the young Gorse's seminal malevolence when he "sets up" a fellow pupil, a Jewish boy called Rosen. Gorse plants the much envied torch of another boy, Ryan, into Rosen's schoolbag and then coolly instigates both its finding and the consequent communal bullying. Hamilton's description of the language, value system and even metaphysics of adolescent boys is convincingly excessive: "During the whole week it had been the making of Ryan: Ryan's being was the torch and the torch was Ryan's being. Ryan was a torch. If, then, the torch was lost, was not Ryan utterly lost, suddenly a nothing?" (*TWP* 11). Finally, Gorse concludes that Ryan, as the apparently wronged party, should take retribution on Rosen by tying him up (*TWP* 23).²⁷⁵ As the trilogy progresses, the reader learns that tying up victims is one of the principal distinguishing features of Gorse's crimes, so that Gorse's desire for Rosen to be treated in this way, considered slightly odd by the other boys, is recast as

²⁷⁵ Hamilton's acute ear for the phrasing and intonation of schoolboy squabbling and bullying also drew on first-hand experience. As Jones accounts, Hamilton suffered bullying at Colet Court, a Hammersmith prep school he began attending in the summer of 1915, just after he had turned eleven. The main cause for this bullying appears to be Hamilton's disinclination to join in with activities of mass, dorm-room masturbation organized by older boys. When Hamilton's mother heard of the problem, she quickly withdrew him from the school and Hamilton completed his education, with the occasional intermission, back in Hove at Holland House (See Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly*, pp.48-51). The subject of school bullying having a deep and prolonged effect on its victims features in Hamilton's first radio play, *Money With Menaces* (produced by Val Gielgud and broadcast in 1937). The play is about a successful businessman called Carruthers who receives an anonymous telephone call from a man claiming to have kidnapped his daughter. Carruthers is taunted by the voice and forced, by the threat of violence towards his daughter, to travel around London to raise a ransom and then carry out increasingly bizarre instructions, concluding with him winning a child-sized cricket bat at an amusement park. At the conclusion of the play, the caller reveals himself to be a former schoolmate whom Carruthers once bullied and who has pretended to kidnap his daughter as an act of revenge for the school-time transgressions. There is probably a hint of personal wish-fulfilment in Hamilton's revenge plot, as well as the idea, seen elsewhere in his work, that wanton acts of cruelty, considered meaningless and quickly forgotten by the perpetrator, can have a profound after-life in the psyche of the victim: "I have done something which has never been done before. I have not forgotten: I have remembered. I have not only revenged myself personally on you, for making me suffer cruelties and indignities which it is not seemly, in the name of humanity, that one being should suffer at another's hands: I have also, just for once, symbolically taken revenge for all those like me against all those who were like you" (*Money With Menaces*, London: Constable, 1939), unpaginated.

something much more sinister when the narrative discloses how the proclivity manifests itself in the adult Gorse.



Fig. 7: 35 and 36 Cromwell Road, Hove, where the prep school Holland House was based until about 1930. Like its *West Pier* counterpart, Holland House had forty pupils and was “within six minutes walk” of the Sussex County Ground (TWP 6).

Once Gorse is shown to have prototypically antisocial beginnings through these sequences at school, the main part of the novel shifts forward in time and is set “three years after the First World War” (TWP 54). It describes Gorse’s first “serious” (at least his first adult) crime, in which he swindles Esther Downes, a working-class local Brighton girl, out of her assiduously earned £68 15s. savings (suggested to be “enormous ones for a girl of her class”) (TWP 40; *MSMG* 252). They meet on a “sex-battleship”, Brighton’s West Pier, which is figured as a sort of liminal space in the town’s topography, a place that allows young men and women to go through the awkward motions of flirting (or in 20s vernacular, “get off”): “The pier was at once the object and arena of ‘getting off’, and usually the first subtle excuse made by the male for having been so bold as to ‘get off’ was his saying that he thought it would be ‘nice’ to go on the pier” (TWP 53,42). Esther initially prefers the handsome Ryan (the unfortunate owner of the torch earlier), perceiving him to be more authentically a “gentleman”. But Gorse gradually inveigles his way into Esther’s imagination as a potential suitor, in the main by convincing her he is also a “gentleman” who regularly

drinks in the opulent Metropole hotel opposite the pier, drives expensive cars and who is already interested in her as a wife (*TWP* 71). The last detail piques Esther's interest because it apparently symbolises the seriousness of her admirer's intentions as well as, most importantly, the almost dreamlike possibility of financial security, something which, we learn, has persistently eluded the Downes family. Gorse's charades convince his victims enough, but never entirely. Esther initially possesses small but persistent doubts about the authenticity of his personality and Gorse is often seen attempting to fool or dull this intuitive, "better" judgement of his character. Through descriptions of subtle alternations of affirmative and negative thoughts, the novels evoke the internal tension, or oscillation of opinion, that Gorse repeatedly initiates: "still there was just something wrong which made her suspect and *not* altogether like him" (*TWP* 94). This "something wrong" about his appearance, manner or language is consistently reinforced in the trilogy's narratives, the cumulative effect of which encourages readers to engage with an implicitly snobbish critique of Gorse's ersatz qualities. Yet, whilst there is definitely some authorial pleasure discernible in the precision with which Gorse's *faux pas* are catalogued, there is also a deeper experiment with fictionality being enacted. As we shall see, any critique of Gorse is itself undermined by the intransigent nature of the "something wrong". With each new example of how Gorse cannot quite perfect his chosen impersonation, there is the reemphasizing of Gorse as an aberrant character within the usual conventions of realist fiction, not a unified "person" with characterological depth but an accumulation of antisocial tics and inauthentic "surface" performances.



Fig. 8: Brighton's West Pier in its late 20s heyday. "An invitation to go on the Pier was like an invitation to dance; it almost conferred upon 'getting off' an air of respectability" (TWP 42).

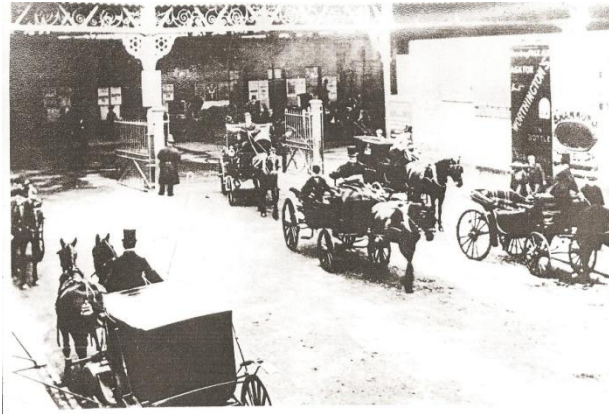


Fig. 9: Brighton Railway Station from the early 1900s. Hamilton recreates this scene in his description of Esther's consumptive grandfather who "hung about the horse-cabs outside the station" (TWP 67).

After successfully robbing Esther at the conclusion of *The West Pier*, Gorse, driving in a car that had facilitated his fraud, "sped ahead to London, and to his very curious destination in life" (TWP 244). For a while this curious destination appears to be Reading, which is the setting of *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse*, the second novel in the series. The sense of place so strongly evoked in *The West Pier* is also present here, as Hamilton, in what is an acerbically funnier novel than the first, delights in lampooning bourgeois tastes, especially the trappings of home county, mock-Tudor residences: "Multitudinously sprayed pebbles outside a house nearly always indicate multitudinous

pieces of brass inside” (*MSMG* 274). Jones reports, however, that the author was “unaccountably fond” of the town. When staying there for a period in the late 40s to observe the local ambience whilst working on *Mr Stimpson*, Hamilton was “in his element and almost ecstatically happy.”²⁷⁶ Angus Hall is also surprised to find, in 1961, Hamilton living in “just one of the derided ‘Rossmores’ or ‘Glen Adams.’”²⁷⁷ Considering the amount of comedic material Hamilton could mine from Reading and its inhabitants – and indeed Hamilton’s ambivalent attitudes towards the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle – perhaps his liking for the town is not so unaccountable. It might also be pertinent to recall George Bone’s obsessive desire to return to what he considers the Elysian Maidenhead and how apparently rooted, secure and domestic spaces are frequently, and tantalisingly, beyond the ambit of most Hamilton characters. Reading does not offer the sense of economic and cultural contrast Hamilton locates in Brighton and Hove, where, as one historian puts it, “Behind the fashionable, elegant facade of Brighton there were appalling streets and homes which afforded only very rudimentary, unhealthy shelter for their residents.”²⁷⁸ Hamilton’s Reading, though, does possess its own anomalous aspects, such as the bogus historicalness of The Friar public house, where the decor “had only recently been ye-olded” (*MSMG* 256).

The novel is set seven years on from the Esther Downes affair (in 1928) and relates the story of Gorse’s second serious crime, which, we soon learn, is much like his first. The victim in this iteration is Joan Plumleigh-Bruce, a middle-aged widow who

²⁷⁶ Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly*, p.52.

²⁷⁷ Angus Hall, “After The Hangover”, *Books and Bookmen* (July, 1968), p 12. In conversation with Hall, Hamilton implies that living in such a residence was a natural consequence of a comfortable income (one which he was afforded by the frequent performances of *Rope* and *Gaslight*).

²⁷⁸ Kevin Fossey, “Slums and Tenements 1840-1900” in *The Growth of Brighton and Hove 1840-1939*, eds. S. Farrant, K. Fossey and A. Peasgood (Brighton: University of Sussex, Centre for Continuing Education, 1981), p. 57. Fossey continues: “Even at the very end of the nineteenth century much of the working class housing in Brighton was known to be more overcrowded than in the industrial cities of the North and Midlands.” It is just such a tenement building that the Downes family are shown to reside in.

“hardly missed a single characteristic appertaining to the worst sort of a Colonel’s wife” and who Gorse quickly suspects would be susceptible to flattery and psychological manipulation (*MSMG* 248). Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce “spoke in a thick, drawling, fruity, affectedly indolent way” and “looked upon herself as the eminent ‘Lady’ of Reading” (*MSMG* 249, 251). She partly enjoys and partly endures evening drinks at The Friar, where local estate agent Mr Stimpson, who is middle-aged and middle-class (“vehemently, formidably, almost dangerously ‘middle’ in every way”), fawns over her in the attempt to effect an awkward and protracted proposal of marriage (*MSMG* 263). The novel has a slightly different orientation from *The West Pier* as the much elaborated flaws of Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce and Stimpson make them less obvious as targets for sympathy than the naive but essentially well-meaning Esther. This is perhaps most obvious in the exposure of Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce’s self-regarding and faintly absurd diary, an “exceedingly embarrassing document” which the narrator condescends, in the fashion of Victorian novels, to give extracts from to “throw [...] true light” on her feelings (*MSMG* 434). This alternating of perspective creates a fairly obvious but still pleasurable dramatic irony in which the full suggestibility of Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce to Gorse’s manoeuvrings can be observed: “Nay – out o’ the thought! I am, at least, something of what he thinks I am. ‘Steel true and blade straight’ he called me the other night. For all his worldly wisdom my ‘boy’ has strange ‘flashes’ of poetry” (*MSMG* 437).

The awkward and mannered nature of Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce’s language, replete with clichés and archaisms, is reminiscent of the unintentionally *kitsch* historical novels that were written by Hamilton’s father, Bernard. It seems likely that Bernard Hamilton’s attempts at becoming a recognised author – he “took his own literary pretensions very seriously” – helped develop his son’s ear for cliché or humorously maladroit uses of

language.²⁷⁹ Jones also suggests that a variety of “bizarre pidgin-French” Bernard Hamilton would occasionally use is an “obvious model for the convoluted ‘Oirish’ spoken by Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce”, used when speaking with Mary, her Irish maid.²⁸⁰ Aspects of Hamilton senior’s personality are perhaps detectable, too, in the characterisation of Mr Stimpson and Major Parry, another regular at The Friar. In a textual interlude similar to that of the diary device, we observe Parry’s stuttering attempts to compose a war poem – “‘They are fallen, they are fallen, they are fallen, / It really was most, *most*, most, *most* appalin’” – an activity which also briefly preoccupied Bernard Hamilton (*MSMG* 288).²⁸¹ There is a similar scene in *The Midnight Bell*, when Mr Sounder awkwardly attempts to write a sonnet, but the version here is enlarged and exaggerated.

The overt satire of middle-class pretensions that we find in *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse* is thus frequently situated in concepts of the literary, in the collision of different but equally bombastic styles of writing.²⁸² This use of “cut-away” scenes of genre writing is comparable to the early novels of B.S. Johnson (the insertion of schoolchildren’s letters into *Albert Angelo* (1964), for example), though in Johnson’s work the different writing styles are often discordant with each other. Hamilton’s novel has an unusual texture precisely because what we assume to be the vernacular language of its characters is disclosed to be almost uniformly contaminated with aspirations of literariness (so that even personal diaries are not immune). *Gorse* too, is not immune, and his “bad” use of language is one of his most reiterated characteristics, although

²⁷⁹ Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly*, p.16. An illustrative example of the style of Bernard Hamilton’s historical novels can be found in his *Coronation* (1902) (London: Hutchinson, 1927), p.22: “‘Grace à Dieu!’” cried he, ‘thou art here then, Messire Clynton? Yet thy Nation hath used me somewhat roughly as I came hither from my privie lodging.’”

²⁸⁰ Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly*, p.80.

²⁸¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

²⁸² For the sonnet episode of *The Midnight Bell*, see *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky*, pp.67-8.

perhaps it partially emanates from a conscious effort to assimilate the mannerisms of others:

he was in the habit of employing, in speech as well as in writing, a style which was a hideous, wretchedly imitative mixture between those of Jeffery Farnol [a prolific writer of Regency romance novels] and P.G. Wodehouse [...] He also employed, at times, the ridiculous pseudo-Elizabethan or 'historical' style of speech which the Mr Stimpsons and Major Parrys of life so often employed (*MSMG* 298).

As we shall see, the third Gorse novel, *Unknown Assailant*, has a very different linguistic emphasis. The plot is mainly, as Jones points out, a "reworking" of some material in *The West Pier*.²⁸³ Ivy Barton, a barmaid, and her boorish ex-gamekeeper father are Gorse's targets in this instance, although, with another temporal jump, he is now in his thirtieth year (1933) and posing as "The Right Honourable Gerald Claridge." The setting is principally Chelsea and Fulham; although the novel's most striking aspect is in fact its waning sense of place and history. This was noted in a contemporary review by Julian Maclaren-Ross:

despite the year in which the story takes place, there is no allusion (as the Kaiser's war is mentioned in *The Pier* or *The General Strike* in *Mr Stimpson*) to the encroaching Nazi menace or the world situation generally, to which one would have expected Gorse, with his incipient feeling for evil, to be well attuned.²⁸⁴

In each novel of the series, Gorse's inveigling plays on the different social class and expectations of his victims, though his techniques of persuasion are invariably the same. As Maclaren-Ross articulates, these methods involve:

Intuitive knowledge of feminine psychology, copious libations of gin and Italian; the gradual inspiring of confidence by alternate injections of anxiety and relief, motorcars ostensibly belonging to Gorse offered as security to his credulous victims; and nonchalantly cryptic proposals of marriage (which are finally accepted with enthusiasm).²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Ibid., p.351.

²⁸⁴ Julian Maclaren-Ross, "Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse" (1956) in *Bitten by The Tarantula and Other Writings* (London: Black Spring Press, 2005), p.368.

²⁸⁵ Julian Maclaren-Ross, "Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse", p.368.

Gorse is clearly, as the reader of six hundred pages of the Gorse trilogy will surmise, a nasty piece of work. He is without, the narrator portentously suggests, “any good in him” (*MSMG* 253), and his methods and desire to cheat, his evil, are unrelenting. He is in a sense monomaniacal, with no interests or preoccupations outside of his criminal schemes (even the lamentable George Bone has the occasional consolation of a round of golf or visit to the cinema).²⁸⁶ As Maclaren-Ross perceptively notes, Hamilton

refuse[es] resolutely to endow his chief character with any redeeming or romantic qualities, denying even the legend of his Hypnotic Eyes (also attributed to Haigh and Weidmann in their day) [see *UA* 554], and emphasis[es] constantly Gorse’s vulgarity, lack of taste and fundamental caddishness.²⁸⁷

This persistent sense of negation makes Gorse highly unusual in the larger patterns of British culture; the novels parody the traditions of the “lovable rogue” (a highly visible figure, of course, within British comedic writing) by subverting the expectations we possess of a traditional picaresque narrative. By precluding Gorse from having any redeeming or attractive qualities, Hamilton challenges the psychological and moral “depth” that familiar conceptions of the anti-hero demand. Hamilton does allow, mainly through exaggeration and repetition of his failings, the possibility for the reader to find Gorse funny. Yet, the humour does not have the sort of empathetic inflection that could humanise Gorse. The narration insistently reiterates, often just at the climax of a potentially comedic moment, the mean and petty-minded impulses that are so dominant in Gorse that they negate any potential expansiveness or flair in his character. I suggest that Gorse’s irredeemably negative character is a symbol of Hamilton’s bleak characterisation of the inter-war years from his “belated” perspective of two to three decades later. This characterisation has an unsettlingly anachronistic tone which

²⁸⁶ Gorse has intense interests, in motorcars and military paraphernalia, for example, but only insofar as such specialist knowledge provides weight to his phony identities (“car-buying, car-selling and car-trickey”) or as part of the matrix of his deep-seated misanthropic and fascistic instincts (his obsession with militarism is “almost pathological”, so that eventually “he will masquerade in uniform in the West End of London and elsewhere”) (*TWP* 78; *UA* 532).

²⁸⁷ Maclaren-Ross, “Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse”, p.367.

exposes the deceptive nature of the historical period, and its representative character, that the novels so richly evoke.

Anachrony

“A dimly recognisable but estranged world,” writes Leo Mellor, “confronts any reader who now starts *Hamilton*.”²⁸⁸ This is especially true of readers of the Gorse novels, which self-consciously describe the nuances of social relations that now seem forgotten, or inadequately remembered. Yet, late *Hamilton* fiction is at a double remove for the contemporary reader as there is a temporal gap firstly from the historical setting of the novels, but also from their later time of composition. Contemporary readers need to recover different registers of meaning (especially of class and the residing of class relations within language) to decode the realism of a specific, and different, historical moment: both the 20s and 30s on the one hand, and the narrative “framing” of that period in the late 40s and early 50s on the other. At least, and this is key, the narrator suggests we need to decode these apparently alien social behaviours of a type “the youthful gentle reader will not be able to believe” (*TWP* 66). The Gorse novels establish interplay between different social hierarchies, so that former social interactions or class manifestations, in the slums of 1920s Brighton or the detached mock-Tudor houses of Reading, are satirised by a historically and textually privileged narrator.

There are three temporal strands in the Gorse books: firstly, the different, chronologically placed settings of the novels as described in the previous synopses; secondly, what Mark Currie has labelled the “time of narration”, the “now” in which the narrator is providing his narrative and which, although in the future from the events being described, is not explicitly chronologically placed; and thirdly, the undetermined

²⁸⁸ Leo Mellor, “Getting Dark Now”.

stretch of time between these two points that occasionally, and strangely, irrupts into the narrative frame, for example when the narrator discusses the descriptions “future biographers” give to Gorse that are supposedly written after Gorse’s death but before the time of narration.²⁸⁹ For the reader, a sense of anticipation, prolepses, hindsight and anachrony – operating both forwards and backwards between these timeframes – becomes embedded into every sentence of the narration. This type of strategy provides considerable narratological interest of course, but it is more than a technical device; it addresses, I suggest, Hamilton’s wider concerns about the “construction” of history and the possibilities for narrative in post-WWII novels. Anachrony in the novels tends to take the form of subverting or displacing the historical “situatedness” (of characters, events, places) by inconsistent adherence to apparently realist disclosure or by, often with very funny effects, adopting the language of a traditional, “outmoded” narratorial voice who formally addresses the reader and makes disjunctive jumps across historical eras. The Gorse novels thus problematise notions of historical fiction somehow “inhabiting” the past, or of making the past straightforwardly commensurable with the present.

Raymond Williams’s well-known terms – “dominant”, “residual” and “emergent” – can help to schematise this argument about Hamilton’s use of anachrony playing across both narrative and social structures.²⁹⁰ Anachrony both appears a narrative technique and something that is particular to the historical moments Hamilton is describing. The 20s and 30s are signalled as, in Maclaren-Ross’s phrase, the “anomalous period between the two world wars”: they have prefigurings of things to come, traces of the emergent, epitomised, perhaps, by the “modernity” of Gorse’s

²⁸⁹ Currie, *About Time*, *passim* (see UA 566 for a description of one such “future biographer”).

²⁹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-28.

fascist, anti-humanism.²⁹¹ But, simultaneously they possess inert class and social structures and mannerisms, hangovers from the Victorian and Edwardian eras.²⁹² These operate as “residual”: “effectively formed in the past, but [...] still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.”²⁹³ Many of these mannerisms are still residual in the culture and idiom of the late 40s and early 50s in which Hamilton is writing. Thus the novels’ contemporary readers would sense the deep irony in the narrator’s suggestion that the reader “will not be able to believe” that such things occur or that such phrases are uttered.

Gorse, for example, with his love of the motor-trade and eye for quick money is clearly something of a “spiv”: the figure who emerges, in David Kynaston’s words, as “a well-known type” in the first twelve months following the cessation of the Second World War, within the “overriding context of rationing, price controls and production controls.” The spiv seems, then, a natural concomitant of the mid-40s black-market which the middle class “simultaneously condemned *and* used.”²⁹⁴ David Hughes, finding a link between the general culture of the late 40s spiv and one of the iconic criminals of the era, suggests of Neville Heath that: “All his attitudes obeyed the first rule of spivvery: pretending to be something other than he was”, something which of course can be claimed of Gorse’s fraudulence.²⁹⁵ This apparently 40s paradigm, however, is traced by Hughes to an earlier time: “A few detectives, keeping their ears to the ground at race meetings, had picked up the word spiv as early as the twenties.”²⁹⁶ Spivvery, perhaps, was then in a period of what Williams might call “pre-

²⁹¹ Maclaren-Ross, “Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse”, p.367.

²⁹² Maclaren-Ross, “Mr Hamilton”, p.367.

²⁹³ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. p. 122.

²⁹⁴ Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 111.

²⁹⁵ David Hughes, “The Spiv” in *The Age of Austerity*, p.88.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

emergence”.²⁹⁷ This is what Hamilton, in a very lambent manner, manages to achieve with the his “‘black’ social history”, revealing the underlying spiv (and other social phenomena) that already resided in a previous moment, and thus exposing what appears a symbol of contemporaneity to already be outmoded, to already possess a residue of anachronism. Indeed, Hamilton had already recognised something of the emerging spiv in *Craven House* (1926) with the “bully-boy fascism and moral stupidity”, as John Lucas puts it, of the violent Jock Nixon.²⁹⁸

Both Nixon and Gorse are active, presumably as part of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), in helping to undermine the strikers of the 1926 Great Strike. Gorse prudently drops this into conversation knowing it will impress Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce – “the old Bolshie certainly got what was coming to him, for once”, Gorse says, to which she agrees enthusiastically (*MSMG* 261). There is, then, a strange interchange of perspective as Hamilton fictively conceives of the same event as an issue of current affairs, and then as a symbol of a seminal political moment. If Hamilton’s earlier novels offer up what seem paradigms of the 40s *avant la lettre*, the Gorse fiction recasts and ironises the historical texture of the 20s and 30s. With the narrator’s recurrent “in those days” phrasing and the constant emphasis on what is “outmoded”, the “thisness” of the historical moment in the Gorse novels is always slightly out of grasp of the reader. There is an intangible quality to its temporality: the reader can never feel in the correct narrative frame, is never fully occupied with the “present” of the narration. To recall Mellor’s phrase, the reader is deeply “estranged” by this Hamiltonian world.

²⁹⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 122.

²⁹⁸ John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties*, p.227

Unknown Assailant and (self)pastiche

The trilogy met with some hostility from Hamilton's friends, such as Michael Sadleir, but it did garner some positive responses.²⁹⁹ For Maclaren-Ross, parody seems to be the sincerest form of flattery. His affectionate spoof of the Gorse novels (published in *Punch* at the end of 1955) is an extraordinary piece – all the conventions, tonal changes, quirks, structures, allusions, signifying practices and defining features of the Gorse novels are mimicked. It attests to the essential *visibility* of Hamilton's late style. The literary parody, an extended in-joke, naturally depends for its effects on the recognizable correspondence between original and imitation. Maclaren-Ross's piece "works"; the reader gets the joke. The Hamilton voice is anatomised.

The premise of the short piece spoofs the metafictionality of some of the Gorse novels' constructions. Here, Miss Elizabeth Boote, the putative posthumous biographer of Gorse, becomes one of his credulous victims; this "might also have been true of Gorse's other biographer, G. Hadlow-Browne, had Gorse been able to get hold of him too." Maclaren-Ross's telescoping and disturbing of the novels' chronology pokes fun at Hamilton's temporally privileged, omniscient narration. It exposes the constructed nature of the conceit of the "future biographer" – which Hamilton utilizes to lend the Gorse construction a semblance of the "status of a real figure in the calendar of crime"³⁰⁰ (Maclaren-Ross's book review). On a linguistic level, Maclaren-Ross's aping is astute: Hamiltonian adjectival (and repetitive) list-making ("this vain, foolish, greedy, avaricious, affected, utterly unlovable woman"); unorthodox use of capitals (the "capital-letter-studded coinage of his private thoughts"); use of hyphens to separate clauses, use of italics for emphasis, relish of word play ("Put the Boote in"); dialogue studded with mixed vernaculars, especially archaic language and schoolboy French

²⁹⁹ For a fuller account of this criticism, see Tew, "A Phenomenology", p.293.

³⁰⁰ Maclaren-Ross, "Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse", p.365.

(“‘Ye say well, and worshipfully, fair maiden – *je trow*’”); use of inverted commas to make regular phrases and words equivocal (“Having made the acquaintance of Miss Boote in a neighbouring ‘coffee house’, to which she often ‘repaired’ for a ‘strong brew’ at the end of her ‘day’s labours’”). There are also parodies of the recurrent prolepses the Gorse novels employ, or of the narrator disclosing vital information with solemn hindsight (Gorse the “potential ‘slayer’”); and of the sense of small conversational indiscretions or slips having fateful consequences (“had Miss Boote not made that last remark about hanging, he might have let her off more lightly than in fact he did”). The parody ends in sudden and hilarious summation (“Miss Boote was made to repeat ‘Good Old Gorse’ three more times, after which Gorse gagged her with adhesive tape and drove away in his car, leaving her for the daily woman to find next morning”), lampooning the truncated nature of the *Unknown Assailant*. The bathetic ending of that final instalment leads to Maclaren-Ross’s most direct quip: “Gorse – who, it will be remarked, had *still* not murdered anyone – drove on towards the next phase of his criminal career, the Haywards Heath Dentist: and to that ‘ultimate fate’ which will be revealed when the author has finally decided what it is in fact to be.”³⁰¹

Maclaren-Ross’s jovial poking fun at the grandiose narratorial tone of *The Unknown Assailant* now reads somewhat poignantly. Gorse is reintroduced into the third novel as “a very serious criminal” (UA 512) and he is recurrently compared to the famous murderers Neill Cream, George Smith, Neville Heath and George Haigh. There is a disjunction between the inflated narration of Gorse as a criminal of celebrity, an embodiment of evil, indeed, and the “reality” of his crimes, small frauds and malicious note writing, which take place in the time span of the novels. In *Unknown Assailant*,

³⁰¹ Julian Maclaren-Ross, “Of Gorse: An Incomplete Story”, *Bitten by the Tarantula*, pp. 471, 472, 472, 475, 473, 476, 475, 477, 477.

Gorse takes Ivy Barton, barmaid and daughter of a former gamekeeper, to a small wood and ties her wrists together with a sash cord. This is the first time in which Gorse reveals his duplicity, his criminal identity, face to face with one of his victims. “Then Gorse did a weird and yet perhaps very characteristic thing. He felt in his breast pocket for his wallet, and produced from it a cutting from a newspaper.” (UA 582). This cutting, from the *News of the World*, detailed one of Gorse’s recent crimes, he had tied a girl to a tractor in King’s Lynn and robbed her of £20. *Unknown Assailant* begins with Ivy skim reading the same article during a Sunday morning lie-in. Here, in the wood, Gorse makes Ivy read it aloud: “He did this largely to frighten her into obedience after he had left her, but mainly to appease his great vanity. He was fantastically proud of this reference to himself (as ‘the unknown assailant’) in the famous newspaper, and at last he was able to show it to someone to whom he could identify himself as the unknown assailant” (UA 582). This entire scene seems, to follow one of Tew’s possible explanations of the novel, to be a self-parodying of Hamilton’s Gorse project. Gorse is still unknown; in the “world” of the novels he barely scratches public consciousness. The reader of the trilogy might also feel the tempo of the chronology is somehow awry: Gorse should surely be, after two and a half novels, the *known* assailant. Is Hamilton, then, subverting the original Gorse novels’ aim to anatomise evil by, in actuality, anatomising banality?

The scene, between Gorse and Ivy in the wood, is studiously “small”. Any sense of dramatic dénouement, or indeed genuine violence, is diluted by Gorse’s puppyish need for reassurance through the reading of the newspaper cutting and the bumbling, almost embarrassed way in which he carries out the “assault”. He makes vague threats that Ivy would “suffer in a sort of way he did not care to mention. Perhaps she would understand. Ivy did not understand. Nor, really, did he” (UA 582). Gorse wonders

whether she is “so unutterably silly” that she might not be able to release herself “by the process of simple unwinding”. “He certainly did not want a dead body on his hands,” the narrator adds, making Gorse, as French wryly puts it, “a curious rival to sadistic murderers like Neville Heath and George Smith” (UA 583).³⁰² This inconsistency is played upon within the novel too: any sense of Gorse as calculatingly malevolent is entirely undercut by the following sentence: “Also he was so delighted by her having previously read his piece in the *News of the World* that he now quite liked her again, and was almost anxious to help her” (UA 583). At several points in the narrative of the trilogy Gorse vacillates between antipodal attitudes towards his victims. Ivy had been too straightforwardly suggestible: Gorse’s jocular warning to Ivy not to run away with his briefcase (which he had left with her as “insurance” of his fidelity) was a ruse that backfired:

To a woman just a little less foolish it might have inspired a sort of serene confidence (as he intended that it should) that he was not likely to run away himself.

With Ivy it merely brought up a picture of one person running away from another (UA 571).

Thus Ivy foiled Gorse’s plans to drive away and nonchalantly abandon her, as he had done to Esther Downes. Suddenly he feels “uncontrollable fury” towards her: “She was silly and hideous – idiotic and *repulsive!* *Repulsive!* (His fury rose as he repeated this word to himself)” (UA 576). This might be seen as a rather hackneyed rendering of a social bipolarity, phobic fury alternating with equanimity and strange (in the context) feelings of goodwill: but the episode is also an example of narrative bipolarity, a disjunction between the dark prolepses and estimations of Gorse’s “evil” and the actuality of his behaviour, sinister and cold-blooded but peculiarly empty of violent threat. In *The West Pier*, the schoolboy Gorse ties an eleven-year-old girl to a roller in a

³⁰² French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.242.

shed at Hove cricket ground. This pubescent, seemingly psychosexual experimentation (made comical by the exaggeratedly bourgeois quality of the setting) results in Mr Codrington, Gorse's headmaster, being interviewed by a constable and becoming the "first individual to protect Ernest Ralph Gorse from the results of a serious misdemeanour [and] the first faintly to suspect that the boy had a remarkable future" (*TWP* 39). This sensed "future" might have appeared less "remarkable" had Mr Codrington known it would be replete with Gorse tying up females, relieving them of small amounts of money and otherwise leaving them unmolested, as though forever cryptically re-enacting the formative cricket shed experience.

The narrator does suggest there is an element of sexual motive in Gorse physically trussing his victims. Gorse, who is

normally rather sexless, had bouts of great physical passion, and when these came upon him he was mostly stimulated by what is (on the whole foolishly) known as a perversion [...] He liked to tie women up in order to get the impression that they were at his mercy, and he also liked to be tied up by women and to feel that he was theirs. (*UA* 577).

This section is glossed by both Jones and French as Hamilton "choosing a moment to exculpate his own sexual preferred sexual practices", in other words, to explain or justify Hamilton's own preferences for sadomasochistic sex that he mainly pursued (according to his friend, the firebrand socialist journalist Claude Cockburn) with London prostitutes.³⁰³ "Cockburn also averred," suggests Jones, "that one reason for Patrick's low output during the 1950s was his second wife's [Lady Ursula Stewart, known as La] fear that he was giving away too many secrets in his books, regarding his own sexual tastes and proclivities."³⁰⁴ Crucial in this passage of *Unknown Assailant* is

³⁰³ French, *Patrick Hamilton*, p.242; Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, pp.352, 271.

³⁰⁴ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p. 272.

the suggestion that sadomasochism is not a perversion because it reflects the embedded dynamic of domination and submission present in everyday relationships:

It is foolish to call this a perversion because, as every serious student of the general psychology of sex (who would be supported by any prostitute, or keeper or frequenter of brothels) knows, it is merely a rather emphasised form of the sadistic or masochistic element underlying every physical relationship between man and woman, or, if it comes to that, man and man, or woman and woman (*UA* 577).

Gorse's motivation, then, is to feel that he *dominates* (for which, we are told, he should not be "blamed") but the actual lack of sexual impetus in his observed actions operates as another discomforting aporia in the texts. Were Gorse to rape Ivy in the woods, the light, ironic effects Hamilton is playing with would of course collapse, but so would the sense of intractability in Gorse's psychology.³⁰⁵ A sexual or indeed violent motive would provide a much stronger dramatic drive, whereas Gorse's actions are sinister precisely because they are rendered anti-climatic, bathetic or somehow uncannily underplayed. This gives Hamilton's investigation into criminal pathology its strange power not only because it hints at some diffuse truths about human motivation, but because it subverts the orthodoxies of crime fiction³⁰⁶. Gorse seems condemned to re-enact the primal scene of his first transgression at Hove cricket ground as a sort of

³⁰⁵ At one point Gorse is indeed suggested to be a "raper" (*MSMG* 338).

³⁰⁶ It is not only the tone of contemporary popular fiction that Hamilton plays with in the Gorse novels but also the emerging genre of "true crime". An intriguing inter-text for the Gorse series, I would suggest, is the popular journalistic account of Bernard Spilsbury, Britain's most famous pathologist in the inter-war years who gave evidence in almost all of the most sensational murder trials of the era: Douglas G. Browne and E.V. Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases* (London: Penguin, 1951). Published in the same year as *The West Pier*, in places the tone of the two texts is remarkably similar. For example the sentence: "[...] the three first-named at least, though legally and medically sane, belonged to the abnormal type whose lust impels them to murder women" (p.370), with its rather sonorous categorising of a criminal "type", would fit comfortably in Hamilton's trilogy, as would the prescriptive tone employed when Browne and Tullett describe criminal methodology: "A manual for murderers would include two strongly worded sections on the dangers of being too greedy, and of antagonizing the victim's family and friends" (p.59). Although there is no direct link between the texts, these correlations suggest Hamilton was very aware of the modes of writing employed by contemporary crime journalists, and, indeed, it seems possible that Hamilton's naming of one of Gorse's future biographers - G. Hadlow-Browne - was a reference to the Douglas G. Browne who co-wrote the Spilsbury book.

psychological paradigm, but the obsession is an empty one, emptied of easily explicable meaning. This ritual obsession to repeat his crimes is strikingly *non-narrative*, no straightforward crime thriller would feature such a sense of lame, monotonous wrongdoing.

Indeed, in perhaps another form of pastiche, the 1987 LWT television series *The Charmer* (based on *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse*) does introduce a strong sexual and class motive. This version of Gorse is explicitly sexualised and indulges in tying-up games with an upper-class lover called, clearly as an attempt to echo the Hamiltonian surnames of the original, Clarice Manners. The series roughly follows the plot of the novel in its first episodes, with Gorse swindling Joan Plumleigh-Bruce of her savings with the same subtle intimations of marriage and appeals to her snobbishness and vanity that occurs in the novel. Some of the dialogue in these scenes is also from the Hamilton text. The major changes lie in the introduction of the Clarice character, whom Gorse is desperate to gain acceptance from, and in the fact that this Gorse *does* commit murder, killing an R.A.F officer and stealing his identity (and thus heightening to the full both the lethality and fakery of the textual Gorse). Most importantly, the first episode of the series is set in 1938, ten years on from the original, perhaps illustrating that Hamilton's text does offer the type of uncanny modernity that I have been suggesting, a modernity the adaptation felt was more commensurable with the era of *Anschluss* than the late 20s. Gorse's motivations in *The Charmer* are rationalised from that of the original because he needs money to fit into Clarice's expensive lifestyle; thus a sexual motive becomes commingled with a desire for social status.

The adaptation is an interesting meta-text because it makes the original Hamilton story more rounded and "televisual", more narrative-driven, with characters who are centred, recognizable, perhaps even a touch clichéd; but also in the fact that the

adapting and rationalising process draws out and makes explicit aspects – the class charading of Gorse, the ideas of sexual and psychological dominance – that were already present, if sometimes latent, in the original text. Tew makes a similar point in his comparison of the two versions, suggesting that the plot changes made for the television series “diminish[es] the book’s sense of pathological marginality” and, by helping to explain Gorse, changes Hamilton’s intention of withholding “[clues] to Gorse’s inner nature, leaving him as a cold and inwardly inexpressive individual.”³⁰⁷

The “fraying” of language

Hamilton’s Gorse is an unnervingly cold character; his victims often think him a strange, “cold fish” before he has ingratiated himself into their affections and “eradicated that slight feeling of hostility” he seems to arouse on first meeting (*MSMG* 262). There is a discomfoting feeling of *déjà vu* that runs through the trilogy, not only at the level of word and phrase, but in the repetition of Gorse’s neurotically habitual crimes, the constant need to defraud women using the same techniques, as Maclaren-Ross spots, “[Gorse’s] methods are, though suitably adapted in each case, basically identical”.³⁰⁸ Gorse is an obsessive-compulsive criminal:

Gorse loved trickery and evil for their own sakes, and, even if fabulously rich, would have indulged in both had he been taken by the whim to do so.

The motives of such a criminal as Ernest Ralph Gorse are only partially commercial, and their criminal behaviour comes and goes in waves – waves which, nearly always, increase in volume and power.

[...] He had not any sort of good in him. He might have been, just conceivably, and in a manner, insane – but evilly [*sic*] so – not pitiable. In spite of his worldly astuteness, he may have lived, perhaps, like so many out-standing criminals, a sort of dream-life. But, even if this was so, the dream was evil (*MSMG* 253).

³⁰⁷ Tew, “A Phenomenology”, pp.303, 306.

³⁰⁸ Maclaren-Ross, “Mr Hamilton and Mr Gorse”, p.368.

The criminal pattern seems inescapable for Gorse, only increasing in its frequency as he gets older. Even Gorse's slips are seen as a recursive personality trait: "Gorse had made yet another of those strange, sudden, appalling blunders which he was always to make in spite of his astuteness generally" (*TWP* 185). Gorse's psychopathology is partly generated by, or at least observable through, the narrative suggests, his anti-social experiences as a child: "He had the habit, for instance, when returning home from school on winter nights, of sticking pins into the tyres of any bicycles he could find in dark places" (*TWP* 252). Yet as the attempts to locate explanations for Gorse's behaviour accumulate, as the trilogy progresses, the more the narrative strains against the anti-dramatic qualities of its own repetition. Taken as a whole, the Gorse texts reveal that the attempt to dramatize a neurotic condition (or to reveal the self-dramatisation of the neurotic) tends to make narrative circular: each example of Gorse's crimes becomes the same because the same compulsion needs to be worked through each time. If Gorse's version of evil remains, for Hamilton, unknowable, it is also irresolvable.

As the Ivy-Gorse interaction in the wood draws to an awkward conclusion, it becomes touched with a surreal politeness, as though neither can believe, and are therefore pleased to find, they are playing so effectively their respective roles of "criminal" and "victim" in this strange transaction. Tew correctly argues that Gorse exploits Esther through the expectation and habituation of social class as it is represented in the novel: "Esther is not only immiserated in class terms, losing her chance to transcend, but it is the very habitual deferral to others underlying such immiseration that allows Gorse to operate in the fashion he does."³⁰⁹ Ivy also regularly defers to Gorse: even here, in the wood, she thanks him politely several times and feels "genuine gratitude" at his concern that she might not, once he has left, be able to get

³⁰⁹ Tew, "A Phenomenology", p.298.

free of the knots. Within the atmosphere of the novels Ivy's courtesy, though surreal, is not perverse. Richard Godden describes manners as one part of an "extended social economy": "Manners [...] are a defensive demonstration of economic standing: they have to be practised and take considerable muscle from their practitioners' sense of the inevitability of their infringement."³¹⁰ Ivy's thank yous are also part of this economy, a dynamic between formal rules of conduct and their expected, eventual transgression. To borrow Godden's phrasing, however, Ivy's manners, issued genuinely, exert a certain muscularity, they subvert the power-dynamics between herself and Gorse, but also subvert the dynamics of the scene within the narrative arc of the novel, making it seem a parody of a genuine, threatening, criminal transaction. Bathos and deflation are embedded into the logic of the novels; Ivy's gratitude therefore makes the scene both parodic and a reinforcement of this logic, it is both ironic and, in the Gorsian world, entirely "straight".

Geoff Gilbert has made the arguable, though interesting assertion that "the things that are possibly bad" in Hamilton's writing are "the things which are most interesting and valuable in his work."³¹¹ Gilbert, like many critics, only makes passing reference to Gorse but it would be easy to estimate his antipathy to elements of late Hamilton work which amplifies the repetitious and circular conversations, the "noisy idiom[s]" that Gilbert suggests are so distracting in *Hangover Square* and *The Slaves of Solitude*.³¹² By some measures, *Unknown Assailant* might be the "weakest piece that [Hamilton] published", but, echoing Gilbert's thesis, its "bad" elements also make it one of the most intriguing and unsettling of his novels.³¹³ It heightens the sense of incipient ending that seems manifest in all Hamilton's work. As Arnold Rattenbury describes,

³¹⁰ Godden, *Fictions of Capital*, p.2.

³¹¹ Gilbert, 'Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics', p.1.

³¹² Ibid., p.15.

³¹³ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.351.

“Hamilton is dealing with a language at the end of its tether to *any* reality. *These* characters in *this* (fictional) reality are coming to an end themselves. A frayed language becomes them.”³¹⁴ This fraying of language is both within the characters’ speech and in Hamilton’s prose itself; the “constant joyless excess of noisy and disappointed prose energies” that Gilbert finds “extremely irritating.”³¹⁵ The language of *Unknown Assailant* is, in places, increasingly febrile, as though the recognisable Hamiltonian idiom and narrative has become so frayed that this truncated and disjunctive novel represents its last rites. It is marked by repetitiousness and frequently a sort of syntactic contortedness, as though the prose is tripping itself up. “Gorse [...] had a formidably difficult task on his hands – that of taking a young woman of twenty-eight, with whom he was fictionally in love, and to whom he fictionally believed himself to be engaged, to stay with a fictional aunt in a fictional house in a fictional part of the countryside” (*UA* 575). The use of repetition, a persistent element of Hamilton’s style, seems particularly “joyless” and “disappointed” here. Both Gorse and Hamilton deal in the business of fictions: another metafictional and important joke is the suggestion that Gorse, with his ability to “invent detail”, his acute attention to people (and, perhaps, his social alienation) “had he not been what he was, might have been a highly successful novelist” (*TWP* 215).

Part of the strange atmosphere of *Assailant* derives exactly from the repetition of words and phrases that explicitly denote fictionality. In the space of a few paragraphs, for example, we find Ivy pondering a “total unreality as an unforeseen reality which she had to face”, whilst the narrative adds: “she never, in her entire dealings with Gorse, fully lost her sense of their basic unreality,” and, for good measure, Gorse’s alleged family connections are “all beyond her understanding and part of the general unreality

³¹⁴ Rattenbury, “Literature, Lying and Sober Truth”, p.205.

³¹⁵ Gilbert, ‘Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics’, p.15.

of the situation” (UA 542-3). This repetitive use of words or phrases is reminiscent of some of the linguistic banalities we find employed by Hamilton’s more bullying characters. Yet, embedded as it is here it suggests a new kind of atonality in the narrative voice, perhaps suggestive of what Bruce Hamilton would call the Gorse texts’ “plains of deadpan flatness”.³¹⁶ This pared-down or “evacuated” style is unique in Hamilton’s published work. His interest in the individual characteristics of words, their semantic fecundity and “colour”, was always an evident element of Hamilton’s previous aesthetic.³¹⁷ As has been noted, one of his final, unfinished projects was the creation of a personal dictionary of synonyms, a process that allowed him the “enormous fun [of] floating about in the oceans, seas, channels, rivers, and small rivulets of words.”³¹⁸ *Unknown Assailant* is not “enormous fun” in this way. The insistent reiteration of words like “unreality”, “uncanny” and “authenticity” show Hamilton conclusively departing from the thesaurus-like method of substitutive terms whose influence could be tangibly felt in works like *Hangover Square*. There is no linguistic play in *Unknown Assailant* in the mode of *Hangover Square* (“Netta. Nets” etc.) nor of the earlier Gorse books, with their satirising of (amateur) literary composition.

As a counterpoint to the “unreality” that Gorse creates, Lord Lyddon and Mr Kayne appear to Ivy’s father as possessing more concrete, irrefutable personalities: “the manifest authenticity of the one as a peer and of the other as a shrewd and prosperous businessmen” (UA 557). Barton’s feeling is augmented by a newspaper article advertising a play in which Barton, as part of a Gorse ruse, is to invest money. Gorse’s scrap from the *News of the World* evolves a totemic value: “The paragraph in the newspaper added further reality, and also further grandiosity, excitement and romance

³¹⁶ Cited in Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p. 338.

³¹⁷ This is exemplified by the multiple quotations that preface the chapters of *Hangover Square*.

³¹⁸ Hamilton, *The Light Went Out*, p.165.

to the project [...] He read it again and again" (UA 557). Gorse dupes Barton, not by entirely convincing him of his own credentials but by introducing him to the "glamour of Lord Lyddon, and the solidity of Mr Kayne" (UA 557). Barton is awed by what he estimates as genuine signifiers of social class: the commonsense substance of the Northern businessman made big and the insouciance of the peer, drinking "'behind scenes'" at the theatre (UA 521).

The novel reveals the operations of social phenomenology with which Barton attempts to make his judgements to be essentially unstable. The sociologist Alfred Schutz has suggested that there are blockages to understanding groups of people that are not "anchored" by the same "spatiotemporal community." These different groups, whom Schutz labels "contemporaries" (as opposed to the chummier "my fellow men"), are not experienced directly: "even though living *with* it, I do not live through it as a matter of direct experience." This means that "while living among them, I do not directly and immediately grasp their subjective experiences but instead infer, on the basis of indirect evidence, the typical subjective experiences they must be having."³¹⁹ Gorse plays on this assumption in his manipulative tactics, prompting his victims to estimate his thoughts and desires through indirect evidence, in other words through prefigured class expectations and assumptions. One of these assumptions is that, within the British social economy, the upper echelons inevitably exploit the lower. In this way, Gorse wins the confidence of Esther by seemingly offering her an escape from the lifestyle of her father: "the amount of money Mr Downes earned, and the amount of hours of the day and night which Mr Downes spent in carrying, waiting about, and being virtually spat upon, would, if revealed and believed, make [...] a reader's hair stand on end" (TWP 66). Hamilton would appreciate Marx's observation, distilled by

³¹⁹ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.142-3.

Godden, that the labour class “achieve self-knowledge as a class via the recognition that the damage done to them is shared by some and inflicted by others.”³²⁰ Esther, in hope for self-preservation rather than aggrandisement, now wants to join the category of the “others”. Gorse’s real trick relies on the victims’ experience of a “‘real gentleman’” only being second-hand or based on received wisdom. Gorse, therefore, can calculatingly provide the “indirect evidence” that helps their opinion to form. “Ivy often boasted that she could ‘tell a real gentleman the moment she saw him’”, and she knew, “‘from the first’”, that Gorse fell into this category (*UA* 512).

One of the best-conveyed elements within the trilogy is the inexorable way in which Esther and Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce’s interest in Gorse (as a route to “bettering” themselves) is piqued. As has been noted, on first meetings Gorse seems strange, indeed strangely unlikable. This is one way in which *Unknown Assailant* offers a disconcerting simplification of the more multilayered realism of the previous texts. Ivy is won over by Gorse so quickly and easily that the narrative tension regarding how or whether he will succeed lapses entirely. Previously, Esther had found that

Gorse, somehow, was a new type of problem. She now believed that he was a ‘gentleman’. His blue suit, his hat, his manner and success at the Metropole, his old school-tie – all these had practically convinced her. Also she thought she ‘liked’ him. He had dash, and she laughed a good deal at his ‘Silly Ass’ act. But still there was just something wrong which made her suspect and *not* altogether like him (*TWP* 94).

Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce also finds Gorse a “new type of problem.” Before they have even spoken she attempts to size up the stranger in her Reading local: “Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce, watching him, could not make him out at all – could find no ‘drawer’ to put him into” (*MSMG* 257). Gorse eludes easy social categorisation. Through his slippery, mutable status, Gorse disrupts his victims’ achievement of self-knowledge, their socially

³²⁰ Godden, *Fictions of Capital*, p.6.

conditioned recognition of their own class position and aspirations in *relation* to him – can he be a real gentleman? Does he have money and connections? If so, what does he want from me? and so on. Gorse, of course, “cuts out” the more sympathetic and good-looking boy, Ryan, with the device of (comically worded and typographically represented) malicious notes; but it is only once the details, the “indirect evidence” of Gorse’s “real gentleman” status have accumulated and become concretised in Esther’s perception that Gorse slowly (and uncannily, against her better judgement) wins her confidence. This manipulated evidence takes the form of the innumerable and oft repeated surface details of Gorse’s pretended self: the reddish toothbrush moustache (worn for its militaristic overtones), the monocle, the “silly ass” routine, the sham cygnet ring, the assumed upper class idioms, the allusions to money, family estates, uncles who are generals in the Army, and so on. Throughout we have learned that Gorse, with his upbringing in the modest “Denmark Villas”, is also outside of the directly experienced realm of upper class “contemporaries” (to use Schutz’s term). The version of upper classness Gorse represents is therefore vague and shifting, based on his own set of estimations of what he thinks is the behaviour of a “real gentleman” and what he believes the *others* perceive as behaviour of a “real gentleman.”

The privileged narrative voice satirises the misguided conceptions of both victim and perpetrator. Gorse is, as Maclaren-Ross reminds us, less motivated by money or sex than “a ruling passion [of] social snobbery.”³²¹ He relies, therefore, on his social phenomenology being more accurate than that of his victims. He occasionally gets caught out: Barton asks him, for example, whether he is a “country gentleman”, and Gorse quickly realises that “talking to an ex-gamekeeper [...] it would be fatal to pose as one with knowledge of the country” (UA 520). Gorse exploits the fact that class, as a

³²¹ Maclaren-Ross, “Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse”, p.366.

decodable system for phenomenological apprehension of personality and intention, is shown to be fallible. Lord Lyddon struggles, for example, with the key social signifier of clothes:

He could not make out what sort of people the Bartons were. Barton, who was neatly dressed in a dark blue suit with an unbecoming stripe and of poor material, reminded him of a gardener at a wedding. If Mr Barton had worn a sprig of heather in his buttonhole the resemblance would have been perfect. Instead of this Mr Barton wore the metal badge of some obscure, parochial, and, one might be sure, abominably reactionary organisation (UA 526).

Barton is a reactionary, “a bitter and unyielding advocate of everyone knowing and keeping their places”, and he is also a former gamekeeper: “To all trespassers, guilty or innocent, gamekeepers always seem to be brusque or harsh [...] But Mr Barton had always been gratuitously savage to those trespassers who had been momentarily within the scope of his authority” (UA 527, 512). “Trespassers” (with its solemn allusion, of course, to the Lord’s Prayer) are quickly chastised; indeed the role of gamekeeper, with its momentary authority, its insight into the lifestyle of the landed class (which makes Barton jealous and “grasping” for money), has filled Barton with hauteur (UA 512). To Lyddon – the reader is naturally meant to sense the irony here – Barton resembles simply “a gardener at a wedding”, uncomfortably out of place ““behind scenes””. Comic and dramatic capital is made, as in much cultural production of the 40s and 50s, from the dislocation of people from their supposedly natural social stratum and environment into a different and unnatural one.³²²

³²² This is certainly true of British cinema in the ten years after the war, especially the series of famous Ealing comedies, of which *Passport To Pimlico* (1949) is perhaps the best example. British-made films of the immediate post-war often reflected, through such comic or dramatic incompatibilities, the changing class dynamics of 40s Britain, or questioned how the country (and Empire) would cope with the changed global and domestic landscape. Andy Medhurst suggests that in the five years following the conclusion of the war “almost no films set during the war had been made, the focus being on questions of post-war adjustment,” of which new social relations were a significant element. See Medhurst, “Myths of Consensus and Fables of Escape: British Cinema 1945-51”, p.289. *The Guinea Pig* (1948) is an illustrative film in this respect. It features Richard Attenborough (a year after playing a wide-eyed Pinkie in *Brighton*

Hamilton, however, suggests that faulty recognition of “otherness” (for some of the rebarbative characters that inhabit the Gorse world, at least) can occur even within one’s most immediate “spatiotemporal community”:

Mr Barton here looked intently at his daughter, trying, not for the first time, accurately to appraise her potentialities in the way of attracting men. As usual, he failed. He knew that Ivy, without being pretty, had in the past had one or two admirers, of whom he had not approved, and who had all finally disappeared: but this was all he knew. And looking at her was never any assistance to him (*UA* 515).

The only character with real perception (except, perhaps, the preternatural teenage force of Stan Bullitt who finally rescues Ivy after her ordeal in the woods) is Gorse, who judges most social situations he finds himself in with acuity. As Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce watched but “could not make out” Gorse on the night of their first meeting in *The Friar*, Gorse surreptitiously observes her in the mirror, gauging immediately that she “did not quite belong to Reading [...] he surmised that she had been married but was no longer so. He quickly took in her wonderful complacency as a being generally, and he was sure that she was, because of this, gloriously susceptible to flattery” (*MSMG* 257).

Declining Narratives of Murder

The notion of the narrative of crimes having the ability to be “authentic” or “inauthentic” and enjoyable to consume for the tabloid reading public (satirised by Hamilton as people who “think in terms of ‘blood-drinking monsters’”), that we have detected in the Gorse novels, also appears in a near contemporaneous essay by Orwell – “The Decline of the English Murder” (1946) (*UA* 566). This essay could easily have

Rock) as a tobacconist’s son given a scholarship to an exclusive public school. Despite the traumas of assimilation (including Attenborough’s character becoming the first person in a British film to say the word “arse”) the film ends on an upbeat note, with the snobbish housemaster gradually convinced of the merits of widening education opportunities and thinly veiled allegories identifying the school’s new progressivism with that of post-war Britain.

been read by Hamilton, who had, Jones reports, a career-long “fascination with the criminal mentality” and collected newspaper clippings about infamous crimes.³²³ In the essay, Orwell imagines a scene in which a typical member of the British public, “preferably before the war”, sated by a roast dinner and sitting down with a cup of tea and a pipe, reaches for the *News of the World* because he wants, “Naturally,” suggests Orwell, to read “about a murder.” Murders have given much “pleasure to the British public.” The most well known cases, which are “rehashed over and over again by the Sunday papers”, often share a “strong family resemblance.”³²⁴ The rehashing and resemblance are presumably important for the murders to be enjoyable and consumable – they satisfy, like any genre tale, a set of narrative desires. Orwell provides, just as Hamilton does, a roll call of infamy: “Neill Cream, Mrs. Maybrick, Dr. Crippen, Seddon, Joseph Smith.”³²⁵ The essay adopts a diagnostic tone, similar to much of the Gorse narration, of popular psychology. The resemblances are genially identified and, just as Hamilton locates, in the opening pages of *The West Pier*, a rarefied criminal “type”, so Orwell locates a “‘perfect’ murder” for the *News of the World* reader, a composite of all the known common elements: the small-town intrigue, the domestic setting, the salacious aspect. These commonalities are known, expected, and therefore enjoyed: “a crime can have dramatic and even tragic qualities which make it memorable and excite pity for both victim and murderer.” Orwell proceeds by contrasting this ideal criminal narrative with the 1944 “Cleft Chin Murder”, in which a young “American army deserter” (Karl Hulten) and a Welsh waitress (Elizabeth Jones) commit a series of random murders. It has, Orwell bemoans, “no depth of feeling in it.” “The background was not domesticity, but the anonymous life of the dance-halls and the false values of

³²³ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.317.

³²⁴ George Orwell, “The Decline of the English Murder” in John Carey ed. *Essays* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002), p. 1029.

³²⁵ Ibid.

the American film.”³²⁶ Though its relativizing of the “morality” of murder has ironic undertones, Orwell’s conclusion that Americanisation (or “Hollywoodisation”) of British cultural and social life has led directly to a new, distinctly un-British sort of nihilism, is a striking one. Gorse, who “loved evil and trickery for their own sakes” and who existed in “a sort of dream-life” is clearly comparable (*MSMG* 253). Hamilton once admitted that, for all the sociological narrative touches, Gorse’s motivation remained, for the author, essentially unformed:

I will *never* get into his skin and have told the reader as much [...] It is impossible to tell (it is for me at any rate) what really goes on in the head of the criminal-maniac [...] They are, I think, sort of *somnambulists*. They live in a sort of dream – an evil dream.³²⁷

As we have seen, somnambulism is a common trope in Hamilton’s fiction, with George Bone especially described as having the automatism of a sleepwalker. Gorse’s dream-life is impossible to decode, this is both the central problematic of the Gorse novels and one of its enduring achievements. Hamilton is not interested in representing the stable narrative of supposedly explicable “evil”, of Orwell’s “‘perfect’ murder”, but the strange and *contemporary* problem of evil with “no depth of feeling” in it. Thus the Gorse novels offer scenes – such as Gorse and Ivy in the woods – whose absence of feeling, of genuine violent or sexual motive, make them seem artificial, almost farcical. These elements of the novels subvert the narrative desire of those “true crime” stories “rehashed over and over” in the British tabloids by revealing how those crimes, by dint of being repeatedly consumed by the public, have become detached from real feeling. Once the narratives of crime have become so commodified, the crimes themselves lose their ethical meaning – this “evil” without motive is what so disturbs Orwell on the aesthetic as well as moral level. But it is also what makes Hamilton’s texts so

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 1031.

³²⁷ Jones, *Through A Glass Darkly*, p.326.

interesting because, like Orwell, he locates the sense of “evil” without motive as primarily an aspect of the modern whilst simultaneously illustrating how the tabloid mechanism of “rehashing” these narratives actually works to neutralize the effects of wrongdoing – is a way of culturally “containing” what we should recognise as the potentially evil within different aspects of society. Gorse’s criminal gestures, such as the act of tying-up, have “no depth of feeling” in them and are “rehashed over and over.” Hamilton’s cultural and social critique thus operates on several different levels, simultaneously satirising the class vanities and desires that produce Gorse, and that he in turn exploits, but also the way those social weaknesses are disguised by a culturally entrenched, grandiose version of crime and evil. Through the narratorial “inflation” that pastiches the tabloid form, Gorse’s “evil” is satirically unreal.

Hamilton places Gorse within the setting, in Maclaren-Ross’s words, of the “anomalous period between the world wars.” Orwell, alternatively, figures the pre-war as a prelapsarian time in which a “stable society” and its concomitant “all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them.”³²⁸ Orwell suggests modernity has projected a new type of evil as a new type of narrative: a “meaningless story.” The war is located firmly as the site of narrative rupture: *The Cleft Chin Murder*’s “atmosphere of dance-halls, movie-palaces, cheap perfume, false names and stolen cars, belongs essentially to a war period.”³²⁹ This is also the atmosphere of the Gorse world. Again, we might be reminded of the disturbing effects of anachrony in the disjunction between the two “histories” of the Gorse novels, the mainly 1920s setting and the contemporaneity of its atmosphere. There is both a transposing of different historical eras onto each other and a

³²⁸ Orwell, “The Decline of the English Murder”, p.1032.

³²⁹ Ibid.

simultaneous, ironical sense of historical remoteness: “In those distant days, of course, it was permissible (for the rich at any rate) to indulge in disdain, irritability, excitability, and savagery to a degree in which the youthful gentle reader will not be able to believe” (*TWP* 66); “It may be assumed that the material for thought for boys of his age in those days was very different from what it is in these; but such was not, really, the case” (*TWP* 29).

Conclusion: “The Evil Hitler Represented”

D.J. Taylor suggests Hamilton’s ambition was flawed; the Gorse texts show the “futility of thinking that you can go against the grain of your literary nature – in this case, to imagine that your forte is epic villainy when what you really excel at is small-scale deceit.”³³⁰ Yet, as I have argued, I think it is possible for *Unknown Assailant* to be read as a parody of the *genre* of epic villainy. This parodic potential embedded in the prose is of course what Maclaren-Ross picks up on, his piece, in other words, seeming to spoof a spoof in the manner that the *Austin Powers* films spoof a *James Bond* franchise that was already ironically detached from the spy thriller genre.³³¹ The Gorse novels also offer something more important than parody for the purposes of light comedy. I suggest that the disparity between the narratorial projection of Gorse as an extraordinary and prolific criminal and the seeming tameness of his transgressions as they are directly shown to the reader can be read as a metonymic way for Hamilton to refer to the central problem of recognising and explaining evil in the inter-war period. What, in other words, is the

³³⁰ D.J. Taylor, “Introduction” to *The Gorse Trilogy* p.x.

³³¹ This idea of Hamilton’s late style being so characteristic, so close to pastiching itself that it enables or indeed encourages pastiche, is reinforced by Keith Waterhouse’s recent novel, *Palace Pier* (2003). In Waterhouse’s circular, *mise en abyme* text, an older writer who is failing to live up to past successes (reminiscent, then, of both Hamilton and Waterhouse himself), finds an unpublished manuscript apparently by Hamilton, which the character then attempts to pass off as his own. Waterhouse provides direct “quotes” from the ostensible Hamilton novel, which of course are his own imitations of Hamilton’s tone and style.

“evil that Hitler represented”, and that Hamilton felt no other writer was addressing? Is Hitler (the image and idea of Hitler as well as the historical person) an absurd figure, the little fool caricatured in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940)? Or did Hitler constitute and represent something inhuman, demonic, a paradigm of that rare type of person from which “the most atrocious criminals emerge”? This sort of dialectic seems to be held in tension throughout the novels through the strange (and for the reader, disorientating) duality of the Gorse character, the disjunction between the observable reality of Gorse in the time of narrated events and the frequent proleptic projections interjected by the narrator. Hamilton, from the vantage point of the late 40s and early 50s, is attempting to probe exactly how British people in the 20s and 30s experienced themselves within the turbulent events of public history. Margaret Scanlan has suggested that

the contemporary novelist tends to put his or her characters in contact with less well-known, marginal events; or to display the lives of people who live through a great historical event in virtual ignorance of its significance to their lives; or to leave out the event altogether, substituting for it a symbolic, even caricatural or parodic event.³³²

The characters of the Gorse novels appear to live in “virtual ignorance” of the wider political and social problems of their historical moment. Unlike the Earls Court gang of *Hangover Square* who “*liked* Hitler, really [...] Liked Musso too”, the reader is not alerted to whether Fascist statesmen are a subject of conversation in The Friar pub in Reading, although they seem unlikely to feature in Major Parry’s and Mr Stimpson’s competitive bouts of laborious anecdote-telling – “The very law of the their being compels them to find someone upon whom they can unload their funny stories” (*HS*, 31;

³³² Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 10.

MSMG 29).³³³ In the texts, though, there is some clear caricatural and symbolic playing with images of Nazism. For example, Gorse sports “quite a powerful moustache [...] of a ‘toothbrush’ kind” (*MSMG* 256). Gorse’s military pretensions – he is “anxious to cultivate” an “‘Army’ appearance” as a way of enticing people impressed by that social status – is reminiscent of Roderick Spode, the leader of the “Black Shorts” movement in P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves and Wooster novels – there are sinister undertones to what ostensibly appears laughable in both characters (*MSMG* 256). It is possible to read the novels and the Gorse characterisation as a partially coded exposure of a fascist mentality, but the narrative and ethical issues Hamilton is exploring are perhaps more complicated than what can be accounted for by straightforward allegory. Allegory would work on two levels, the surface level of narrative representation and the symbolic meaningfulness that allegedly lies behind that representation. Key to the Gorse novels, though, is the incommensurability of its different narrative levels. There is the already touched upon disjunction between timeframes (between the ultimately unfindable “now” of the narration and the “then” of the narrated events), but also what seems crucially and self-reflexively at issue in these texts is the disparity of different types of appropriate language: how can one describe the *evil* of Hitler, or of Gorse?

Gorse is certainly not a pastiche “little Hitler”: that would miss Hamilton’s crucial satirical point. It is not the allegorical correspondence that is important but the suggestion that Gorse’s “small-scale deceits”, his apparently tame or little transgressions, encode a type of evil that the general public fail to see or misunderstand because it is looking – in a tabloidized way – for a titanic figure of evil, for “epic

³³³ *The Charmer*, interestingly, does have Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce approvingly mentioning Hitler. This perhaps suggests that the adapter, Allan Prior, sensed this was implicit in the original text and needed registering in a more explicit way in the new version: “One just can’t get good servants these days,” Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce says, “with four million unemployed you would think one could, but no, I sometimes think this Hitler has some very good ideas, and he makes people work.” This, of course, seems both less subtle and less realistic than Gorse and Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce “siding” with the strike-breakers of 1926 in the novel version.

villainy” in the mode of Hitler. Gorse actually exploits these fears himself. The note he anonymously sends Esther to disturb her feelings about Ryan – “DO NOT GO OUT WITH HIM ON CYCLE, DANGEROUS, TAKE WARNING, A WELL WISHER” – begins Esther thinking: “And dangerous in what way? If she went out into the country with him, would he attempt to assault her? Or kill her? Or both? Esther was a reader of the *News of the World*” (TWP 105, 107). Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce worries about Gorse with the same phrase:

she asked herself ‘In what way dangerous?’ Then it crossed her mind that she might be entertaining a thief, a raper, a swindler. Or even a potential slayer! She then dismissed, or tried to dismiss, these thoughts as absurd. She had, she decided, been reading the sensational newspapers too much recently (MSMG 338).

Of course, it is suggested that Gorse himself does *become* an epic villain beyond the narrated time of the trilogy: despite Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce’s sudden sense of reassurance when Gorse enters the room she was “shaking hands with one who [...] was to be, in reality, a slayer” (MSMG 338).

There are other allusions to the tabloid sensationalism of crime and the effect it has on readers. The narrator of *Unknown Assailant* describes how Miss Elizabeth Boote, a “well-known novelist and student of crime”, gets into “trouble with the press” by suggesting that: “compared with the odious Gorse, George Haigh and Neville Heath had exhibited ‘a certain charm, kindliness, generosity and dash’ [...] Naturally this did not appeal to those whose pleasure it was to think in terms of ‘blood-drinking monsters’, ‘human vampires’ etc.” (UA 565, 566). Gorse is clearly not likened to the iconic Hitler figure emblemised, for example, by the Nuremberg rallies, but his nihilistic meanness, his deceptions and his sense of social inferiority are signalled as Hitlerian. Indeed, Boote decides Gorse is in the “upper-class” of “purely repulsive, sustained and

thorough-going evil” mainly because of his “habit of writing filthy anonymous letters and of abandoning women with entirely gratuitous cruelty” (UA 556). Is this comparable, the reader might question, to the killing and mutilating of women as conducted by Haigh and Heath? The radical achievement of the trilogy is that Hamilton probes the difficulty of understanding and describing different versions of “evil”: the Gorse evil, the Heath evil, the Hitler evil. Hamilton seems to be satirizing middle England’s hypocritical failure to recognise the abuses within its own culture by showing how its projections of “epic villainy” serve to dull or neutralise the effects of the genuine wrong-doing that takes place every day in the mean, petty and “non-narrative” sense that Gorse exemplifies. Hamilton thus writes an alternative to institutionalised or “official” versions of history (which include the myth-making of literature as well as history, the “white” social histories of the inter-war years) by focusing on what Scanlan describes as the “repressed” or the “signifying absences in our discourses”. Hamilton plays throughout on the “reader’s knowledge of the outcome” and “sense of irony” to highlight and subvert the complacency of our historical understanding.³³⁴

³³⁴ Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time*, p.12.

Conclusion

At one point during Lena's evening walk in *No Directions* she spies a barrage balloon in the distance and suddenly thinks of "prodigious lice" (ND 62). There is a similar moment in *Hangover Square* when George, after finally aborting his attempts to walk from Brighton, returns to London by train: "when he came out at Victoria Station he thought he was having a liver attack because the sky was full of distant gnats. These were barrage balloons" (HS 269). A recurrent aspect of Hamilton's novel, we might recall, is the narration's linking of George's mental state to the escalating political tensions of 1939; thus the balloons, erected in the capital during George's short absence, appear to symbolise that violence is about to erupt on both a global front and in George's personal life. Set during the depths of the first phase of the Blitz on London, the explanatory phrase "These were barrage balloons" does not seem to be required in Hanley's story: they are already a familiar part of the changed landscape of London. In fact, Lena's unusual, possibly phobic mental reaction when seeing the balloon – her thoughts consumed by "prodigious lice" – suggests that their presence in the city might have an uncanny quality: the balloons are familiar but still fundamentally strange. Though clearly still part of the very different narrative landscapes and strategies of the two novels, it seems noteworthy that two evidently divergent texts should employ similar entomological images – lice and gnats – as a way of registering their characters' reaction to one specific symbol of London "under siege".

Yet, this thesis has attempted to show that some of the most striking fiction of the 40s offers narrative "worlds" in which the sort of heightened perceptual intensity such images suggest is a recognisable part of the novels' defining texture. All the Hanley and Hamilton fiction considered in the thesis contain moments of expressionistic terror or other types of acute sensitivity to the "outside", phenomenal

world. Even the Gorse novels – which initiate a very different narrative tone to the earlier fictions considered – contain striking passages in which the usual mode of narration is “overtaken” by what I have previously described as transformative or transfigurative textual moments of “altered” perception.³³⁵ In the Introduction I suggested the term “avant-garde realism” as a way of describing these moments and as a conceptual apparatus to explore their presence in a literary period which itself continues to have an anomalous status in conventional literary histories.³³⁶ Throughout the thesis I have discussed how the “intrusive strangeness” of such moments serves to critically frame or make self-conscious the realist style which other parts of the fiction appear to initiate. This might also suggest one way in which contemporary readers and critics can account for the emergence of an avant-garde realist approach – a hybrid aesthetic in which traditional realism is privileged but simultaneously complicated by subversive techniques more associated with the modernist avant-garde – during the 40s. I would argue that, in this period, the immediate social context (in other words, the “natural” subject matter of a realist novel) was *itself* intrusively strange. The barrage balloons are an excellent example; but all of the inconsistencies, disruptions and privations of the war and its immediate aftermath exert a ghostly influence, indelibly colouring the psychology of the period’s cultural products. What I have earlier described as the “monumental time” of the period challenged the realist novelist to push the representational boundaries of the form. Hanley and Hamilton both reveal that the traditional subject matter of realism – the everyday – has become, in the 40s, a site of profound instability. Their experiments with modalities of realism, although for the most part taking very different forms, show that a sort of shared vocabulary of fictional

³³⁵ Perhaps the most notable of these in the Gorse novels is another insect related image – the extraordinary “Coleoptera” chapter of *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse* (which I discuss in chapter four).

³³⁶ See Introduction, especially pp. 2-5.

expression – a new way of looking at and framing “reality” – took root, albeit briefly, in 40s and mid-century fiction.

In this sense, I view avant-garde realism as an extension of aesthetic tendencies already emergent in the inter-war period. It is a heightened version of “late modernism”, the cultural stance that, as Tyrus Miller puts it, “[served] as an index of a new dispensation, a growing skepticism about modernist sensibility and craft as means of managing the turbulent forces of the day.”³³⁷ As we have seen, both Hanley’s and Hamilton’s avant-garde realism is animated by a shared distaste for what they viewed as a “subjectivist” (and politically quietist) strain in high modernist writing. This is perhaps best exemplified by the striking phrase Hanley uses in his defence of *Boy*: “I have [...] never been able to believe that a searchlight on a scab was anything less than normal, and anything one might call odd.”³³⁸ Both writers believed that fiction should satirise social injustices and both ambitiously attempted political critique within their work. There is, however, an intended paradoxical edge to Hanley’s artistic manifesto: using a “searchlight” to examine “a scab” is clearly not proportionate in a conventional sense. But this is why the phrase is idiomatic of an avant-garde realism; a distinctive literary mode in which all sorts of magnifications, framings and distortions are required to successfully address the “turbulent forces” of the historical moment; a type of realism whose perceptual processes necessarily have to be heightened to achieve the type of veracity that justifies the examination of an “intrusively strange” historical reality through literature.³³⁹

The “moment” of avant-garde realist writing might be viewed as relatively fleeting – if we take the bathetic or deflated tone of some of *The Gorse Trilogy* as

³³⁷ Miller, *Late Modernism*, p.20.

³³⁸ Hanley, “Oddfish” in *Don Quixote Drowned*, p.53; (also see chapter one, p.29).

³³⁹ For more discussion on the ethics of representation and 40s writing, see conclusion to chapter two.

emblematic of a wider shift in British fiction then the early 50s was already heralding a new kind of postmodern “flatness”. But in terms of both the subject matter of the novels discussed in this thesis (especially historically remote class relations of a type, to quote the narrator of *The West Pier*, “the youthful gentle reader will not be able to believe”) and in terms of their tonal and stylistic singularity, there is a sense in which the work of Hanley and Hamilton and the literary phase of the 40s issues a kind of resistance to contemporary reading (*TWP* 66). The realist and satirical focus of Hanley’s and Hamilton’s fiction encourages us to read them partly with the eye of a social historian, attempting to decode the social behaviours (aboard ships or rafts, in pubs or boarding houses) that their novels of this period almost relentlessly depict. But this reading desire is simultaneously subverted by the variety of “frames” (comic bathos, surrealistic dreaming, expressionistic terror) through which their texts document the “intrusive strangeness” of their chosen social worlds. One standard method of summarising a critical work about fictions from the past is to suggest ways in which that writing has a special communicative power that “speaks” to our contemporary moment; yet I would argue that what remains most interesting in the work of Hanley and Hamilton is that their experiments with realism – their uniquely rendered analogues of reality – suggest meanings that in many ways remain mysterious and opaque. The aporetic nature of the 40s as a period in conventional literary histories and the compelling and unique qualities of its best fiction lend both a kind of critical “energy” – a sense of being unfinished or unresolved. I hope that this thesis encourages others to explore the productive contradictions and tensions of both the literary 40s and its avant-garde realist writing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Works by James Hanley

Drift (1930) (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1944).

“The German Prisoner” (1930) in *The Last Voyage and Other Stories* (London: Harvill, 1997).

“A Passion Before Death” (1930) in *The Last Voyage and Other Stories*.

Boy (1931), (London: Oneworld Classics, 2007).

Men in Darkness: Five Stories (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1931).

Ebb and Flood (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1932).

Captain Bottell (London: Boriswood, 1933).

Resurrexit Dominus (Privately printed, 1934).

The Furys (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935).

Stoker Bush (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935).

The Secret Journey (1936) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1938).

Broken Water: An Autobiographical Excursion (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937).

Grey Children: A Study in Humbug and Misery (London: Methuen, 1937).

Half an Eye (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1937).

Hollow Sea (1938) (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1950).

People Are Curious (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1938).

Between the Tides (London: Methuen, 1939).

Our Time is Gone (1940) (London: Phoenix House, 1949).

The Ocean (1941) (London: Harvill, 1999).

No Directions (1943) (London: André Deutsch, 1990).

Sailor’s Song (1943) (London: William Kimber, 1977).

At Bay and other Stories (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).

Crilley and Other Stories (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1945).

What Farrar Saw and Other Stories (1946) (London: André Deutsch, 1984).

Selected Stories (Dublin: Maurice Friedberg, 1947).

Emily (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1948).

A Walk in the Wilderness (London: Phoenix House, 1950).

Winter Song (London: Phoenix House, 1950).

Against the Stream (originally published as *The House in the Valley* under the pseudonym Patric Shone, 1951) (London: André Deutsch, 1981).

The Closed Harbour (1952) (London: Oneworld Classics, 2009).

Don Quixote Drowned (London: Macdonald, 1953).

The Welsh Sonata: Variations on a Theme (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1954).

Levine (London: Macdonald, 1956).

An End and a Beginning (London: Macdonald, 1958).

Say Nothing (London: Macdonald, 1962).

The Inner Journey: A Play in Three Acts (London: Black Raven Press, 1965).

Plays One (London: Kaye & Ward, 1968).

John Cowper Powys: A Man in the Corner (Loughton: K.A.Ward, 1969).

Herman Melville: a Man in the Customs House (Loughton: Dud Norman Press, 1971).

Another World (London: André Deutsch, 1972).

A Woman in the Sky (London: André Deutsch, 1973).

A Dream Journey (London: André Deutsch, 1976).

A Kingdom (London: André Deutsch, 1978).

Works by Patrick Hamilton

Monday Morning (London: Constable, 1925).

Craven House (1926) (London: Black Spring Press, 2008).

Twopence Coloured (London: Constable, 1928).

Rope (London: Constable, 1929).

Twenty Thousand streets Under the Sky: A London Trilogy (1935) (London: Vintage, 2004); including:

—*The Midnight Bell* (1929).

—*The Siege of Pleasure* (1932).

—*The Plains of Cement* (1934).

Gaslight (London: Constable, 1939).

Impromptu in Moribundia (1939) (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1999).

Money With Menaces (London: Constable, 1939).

Hangover Square (1941) (London: Penguin, 2001).

This is Impossible (London: Samuel French, 1942).

The Duke in Darkness (London: Constable, 1943).

Slaves of Solitude (1947) (New York: New York review of Books, 2007).

The Gorse Trilogy (1992) (London: Black Spring Press, 2007); including:

—*The West Pier* (1951).

—*Mr. Stimpson and Mr. Gorse* (1953).

—*Unknown Assailant* (1955).

The Man Upstairs (London: Constable, 1954).

Secondary Sources

Published works

Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1981) (Australia; London: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005).

Atlee, C.R., “Each Must Make His Contribution”, broadcast on 22 May 1940, quoted from the transcript published in *The Listener* 23 (Jan-June 1940).

Alexander, Michael (trans. and intro.), *The Earliest English Poems* (London: Harmondsworth, 1975).

Allen, Walter, *Tradition and Dream: The English and American Novel from the Twenties to Our Time* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986).

Anderson, Perry, “Components of the National Culture” (1968) in *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992).

Balchin, Nigel, *Darkness Falls from the Air* (1942) (London: Cassell, 2002).

—*The Small Back Room* (1943) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Balzac, Honoré de, *La Comédie humaine vol. I* ed. P. Citron (Paris: Seuil, 1965).

Baker, Stephen, *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

Bakhtin, M.M., *Rabelais and His World* (1965) (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1993).

Barrett, Gerard, “James Hanley and the Colours of War” in Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge eds., *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Barthes, Roland, *Writing Degree Zero* (1967) (London: Cape, 1984).

Bates, H.E., *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944) (Bath: Chivers, 1983).

Beckett, Samuel, *First Love and Other Novellas* ed. Gerry Dukes (1977) (London: Penguin, 2000).

Beckett, Samuel, *Company* (London: John Calder Publisher, 1980).

Belsey, Catherine, *Critical Practice* (1980) (London: Routledge, 2002).

- Bergonzi, Bernard, *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- Benjamin, Walter, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929) in Lawrence Rainey (ed.) *Modernism: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
- Billany, Dan, *The Trap* (1950) (Bath: Chivers, 1974).
- Bloch, Ernst, "Discussing Expressionism" (1937) in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor, et al (London: NLB, 1977).
- Bowen, Elizabeth, *The Heat of the Day* (1948) (London: Vintage, 1998).
- Bradbury, Malcolm, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).
- Browne, Douglas G. and Tullett, E.V., *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases* (London: Penguin, 1951).
- Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- Calder, Angus, *The People's War* (1969) (London: Pimlico, 1997).
- Cary, Joyce, *Herself Surprised* (1941) (New York: New York Review of Books, 1999).
 — *To Be a Pilgrim* (1942) (London: Michael Joseph, 1961).
 — *The Horse's Mouth* (1944) (London: Joseph, 1985).
- Cavaliero, Glen, *Rural Tradition in the English Novel: 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977).
- Cohen, Debra Rae, "Rebecca West's Palimpsestic Praxis" in Kristin Bluemel, ed., *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).
- Connolly, Cyril, *Enemies of Promise* (1938) (London: Penguin, 1961).
 — *The Unquiet Grave* (1944; rev. ed. 1945) (London: Arrow Books, 1961).
- Connor, Steven, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Conrad, Joseph, Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (New York: Norton, 1979).
 — *Heart of Darkness* (1902) (London: Penguin, 2000).
 — *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1902) (London: Penguin, 2007).
- Crane, Stephen, *The Open Boat and Other Stories* (1897) (London: Constable, 1994).
- Croft, Andy, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).
- Culler, Jonathan, *Barthes* (1983) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

- Currie, Mark, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
- Cunningham, Valentine, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Davin, Dan, *Closing Times* (1975) (Auckland; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- Deer, Patrick, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- Deleuze, Gilles, "He Stuttered" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel Smith and Michael Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997).
- Dentith, Simon, "James Hanley's *The Furys*: The Modernist Subject goes on Strike" in *Literature & History* 12/1 (2003).
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) (London: Penguin, 2003).
- Earnshaw, Stephen, *The Pub in Literature England's Altered State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
- Eliot, T.S., *Four Quartets* (1942) (London: Faber, 1979).
- Ellis, Steve, *The English Eliot: Dream, Language and Landscape in Four Quartets* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- Esty, Jed, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, N.J; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- Fordham, John, *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002).
- Forster, E.M., *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Fossey, Kevin, "Slums and Tenements 1840-1900" in S. Farrant, K. Fossey and A. Peasgood, eds. *The Growth of Brighton and Hove 1840-1939* (Brighton: University of Sussex, Centre for Continuing Education, 1981).
- Fox, Ken and McDonagh, Maitland, *Virgin Film Guide* (London: Virgin, 2000).
- Frye, Northrop, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (1963) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).
- French, Sean, *Patrick Hamilton: A Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).
- Gąsiorek, Andrzej, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995).
- Gilbert, Geoff, 'Patrick Hamilton and the Sound of Politics' in *Core: International Journal of the Humanities* 1.2 (Fall 2001).

- Golding, William, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
 — *Pincher Martin* (1956) (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
- Godden, Richard, *Fictions of Capital: the American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- Gostick, Chris, “Extra Material on James Hanley’s *Boy*” in *Boy* (2007).
- Green, Henry, *Caught* (1943) (London: Harvill, 2001).
- Greene, Graham, *Ministry of Fear* (1943) (London: Vintage, 2001).
- Gunn, Thom, “On the Move” in *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber, 1993).
- Guy, Josephine, *The British Avant-Garde* (New York; London: Harvester; Wheatsheaf, 1991).
- Hall, Angus. “After The Hangover”, *Books and Bookmen* (July, 1968).
- Hamilton, Bernard, *Coronation: A Romance of Oxford and Agincourt* (1902) (London: Hutchinson, 1927).
- Hamilton, Bruce, *The Light Went Out: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* (London: Constable, 1972).
 — *Brighton Murder Trial: Rex Vs Rhodes* (London: Boriswood, 1937).
- Harrington, Frank G., *James Hanley: A Bold and Unique Solitary* (Francestown: Typographeum Press, 1989).
- Hilliard, Christopher, *To Exercise our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- Hirschkop, Ken, “Culture, Class and Education” in Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004),
- Hejinian, Lyn, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, 2000).
- Heller, Joseph, *Catch-22* (1955) (London: Vintage, 1994).
- Hendry, J. F. and Treece, Henry, (eds.), *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse* (Lodon: Routledge, 1941).
- Hewison, Robert, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945* (1977) (London: Quartet, 1979).
- Hughes, David, “The Spiv” in Michael Sissons and Phillip French (eds.), *The Age of Austerity* (1963) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- Jarvis, Simon, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

- Jameson, Fredric, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986*, V.2, *The Syntax of History* (1988) (London; New York: Verso 2008).
- Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).
- The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). (London: Routledge, 1989).
- Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1981).
- Johnson, B.S., *Albert Angelo* (1964) in *B.S. Johnson Omnibus* (London: Picador, 2004).
- Johnson, W.H., *Sussex Murders* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005).
- Jones, Helen, *British Civilians in the Front Line: Air Raids, Productivity and Wartime Culture, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
- Jones, Nigel, *Through a Glass Darkly* (1991) (London: Black Spring, 2008).
- Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Richard Ellman (1916) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968).
- Kandinsky, Wassily, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914) (London: Tate, 2006).
- Klein, Holger (ed.), *The Second World War in Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984).
- Kynaston, David, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
- Labica, Thierry, “War, Conversation, and Context in Patrick Hamilton’s *The Slaves of Solitude*”, *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003).
- Lane, Tony, *The Merchant’s Seamen’s War* (Liverpool: The Bluecoat Press, 1990).
- Lee, Alison, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge: 1990).
- Lewis, Wyndham, *Apes of God* (1930) (Santa Rosa, California, Black Sparrow Press, 1981).
- Blast* ed. Paul Edwards (1914) (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).
- “Is Satire Real?” in *Men without Art* (1934) (Santa Rosa, California, Black Sparrow Press, 1987).
- Lodge, David, *Working With Structuralism* (Boston, Massachusetts, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
- Lovell, Terry, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure* (London: BFI, 1980).
- Lowry, Malcolm, *Under the Volcano* (1947) (London: Picador, 1993).
- Lucas, John, “From Realism to Radicalism: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Patrick Hamilton and Henry Green in the 1920s” in Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton eds.,

- Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).
- *The Radical Twenties: Aspects of writing, Politics and Culture*, (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 1997).
- “The Sixties: Realism and Experiment” in Peter Nicholls and Laura Marcus eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Lukács, Georg, “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline” (1934) in Rodney Livingstone ed., *Essays on Realism*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).
- *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962).
- *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Maunder (London: Merlin, 1963).
- Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- Maclaren-Ross, Julian, “Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gorse” in *Bitten by The Tarantula and Other Writings* (London: Black Spring Press, 2005).
- “Of Gorse: An Incomplete Story” in *Bitten by the Tarantula and Other Writings* (2005).
- Manvell, Roger, *Films and the Second World War* (London: Dent, 1974).
- Martin, Robert K., “Melville and Sexuality” in Robert S. Levine ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- McKenna, Brian, “Confessions of A Heavy-Drinking Marxist: Addiction in the Work of Patrick Hamilton” in Sue Vice, Matthew Campbell and Tim Armstrong eds., *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).
- Medhurst, Andy “Myths of Consensus and Fables of Escape: British Cinema 1945-51” in Jim Fyrth ed., *Labour’s Promised Land?: Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995).
- Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), ed. Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003).

- “Bartleby The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” in *Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, Benito Cereno, Bartleby the Scrivener and other tales* ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987).
- Mellor, Leo “Getting Dark Now”,
(<http://www.buzzwords.ndo.co.uk/mellor/slavesofsolitude.html>).
- Mengham, Rod, “Broken Glass” in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve eds., *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
- “British Fiction of the War” in Marina Mackay ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Mephram, John, “Hamilton, Patrick (1904-1962)” *Literary Encyclopedia*,
(<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1959>).
- Middleton, Judy, *Tales of the Old Hove Schools* (Portslade: J. Middleton, 1991).
- Miller, Henry, “Introduction” to *No Directions* (1990).
- Miller, Kristine, *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People’s War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- Miller, Tyrus, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, 1999).
- Mosley, Leonard, *Backs to The Wall: London Under Fire, 1940-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971).
- Munton, Alan, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London, Faber & Faber, 1989).
- Murphy, Richard, *Theorizing the Avant-garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- Nicholls, Peter, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995) (London: Macmillan, 2009).
- “Surrealism in England” in Nicholls and Marcus eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2004).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, eds. and trans. Marion Faber (1886) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- North, Michael, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- “World War II: The City in Ruins” in Nicholls and Marcus eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2004).

- O'Neill, Eugene, "The Hairy Ape" (1922), *The Hairy Ape and Other Plays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1923).
- Orwell, George, *The Road To Wigan Pier* (1937) (London: The Folio Society, 1998).
 — *Coming Up For Air* (1939) (London: Penguin, 2000).
 — *1984* (1949) (London: Penguin, 2008).
 — *Orwell's England* ed. Peter Davidson (London: Penguin, 2001).
 — "The Decline of the English Murder" in John Carey ed. *Essays* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002).
- Parrinder, Patrick, *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987).
- Patterson, Ian, *Guernica and Total War* (London: Profile, 2007).
- Phillips, Adam, "Bombs Away" in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).
- Piette, Adam, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- Powell, Anthony, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (sequence, 1951-75) (London: Minerva, 1991).
- Priestley, J.B., *An English Journey* (1934) (London: Mandarin, 1994).
 — *Daylight on Saturday: A Novel About An Aircraft Factory* (London, Toronto: William Heinemann, 1943).
 — "Introduction" to Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (2004).
- Pryce-Jones, David, "Towards the Cocktail party" in Sissons and French eds., *The Age of Austerity* (1986).
- Rattenbury, Arnold, "Literature, Lying and Sober Truth: Attitudes to the work of Patrick Hamilton and Sylvia Townsend Warner" in. John Lucas ed., *Writing and Radicalism* (London: Longman, 1996).
 — "Total Attainder and the Helots" in. John Lucas ed., *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978).
- Rawlinson, Mark, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).
- Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.2, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
- Ross, Alan, "Introduction" to James Hanley, *The Last Voyage and Other Stories*.
 — *Poems 1942-67* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967).

- Rubinstein, William D., *Twentieth Century Britain: A Political History*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003).
- Royle, Nicholas, and Bennett, Andrew, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).
- Sadler, Michael, *Fanny By Gaslight* (1940) (London: Hutchinson, 1986).
- Sansom, William, "Fireman Flower" in *Fireman Flower and other Stories* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, *What is Literature? and other essays* (1965) (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1988).
- Scanlan, Margaret, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- Schutz, Alfred, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (1967) (London: Heinemann Educational, 1972).
- Sebald, W.G., "Air War and Literature", *On The Natural History of Destruction* (London: Penguin, 2004).
- Sinclair, Andrew, *War Like A Wasp: the Lost Decade of the 'Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).
- Sinfield, Alan, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1989) (London: Continuum, 2004).
- Snow, C.P., *Strangers and Brothers* vol.1,2 and 3 (1972) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).
- Stewart, Victoria, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- Stokes, Edward, *The Novels of James Hanley* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1964).
- Stonebridge, Lyndsey and Mackay, Marina (eds.), *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (2007).
- Sweetman, John, "Strategic Bombing" in Richard Holmes ed., *The World Atlas of Warfare: Military Innovations that Changed the Course of History* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1988).
- Taylor, D.J., "Introduction" to *The Gorse Trilogy* (2007).
- Taylor, Christopher, "Passing-Out Time" in *London Review of Books* 1.2 (January 2009).
- Tew, Philip, "A Phenomenology of the Suffering of Others: the Case of Ernest Ralph Gorse", *Critical Engagements* 1.1 (2007).

- Thomas, Dylan, *Under Milk Wood* (1954) (London: Dent, 1995).
- Treglown, Jeremy, "Introduction" to Green, *Caught* (1943).
- Trotter, David, "The British Novel and the War" in Vincent Sherry, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Upward, Edward, *Journey to the Border* (1938) (London: Enitharmon, 1994).
- Wade, Stephen, "James Hanley: A Case for Reassessment", *Contemporary Review* (July, 1999).
- Ward, Geoff, "The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk: Lowry, Hamilton, Kavan and the Addictions of 1940s Fiction" in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve eds., *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (2001).
- Warner, Marina "Leonora Carrington's Spirit Bestiary; or the Art of Playing Make-Belief" in Andrea Schlieker ed., *Leonora Carrington: paintings, drawings and sculptures, 1940-1990* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991).
- Waterhouse, Keith, *Palace Pier* (London: Sceptre, 2003).
- Watts, Cedric, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).
- Waugh, Evelyn, *Put Out More Flags* (1942) (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Weinstein, Philip, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University, 2005).
- West, Rebecca, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (London: Macmillan, 1941).
- Widdowson, Peter, "The Saloon Bar Society: Patrick Hamilton's Fiction in the 1930s" in John Lucas ed., *The 1930's: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (1978).
- "English Fiction in the 30s" in Jon Clark et al (eds.) *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979).
- "Introduction" to Hamilton, *Impromptu in Moribundia* (1999).
- Wiener, Martin J., *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850 – 1980* (1981) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Williams, Patrick, "'No Struggle but The Home': James Hanley's *The Furys*" in Patrick Quinn, ed., *Recharting the Thirties* (London: Associated University Press, 1996).
- Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- Woodman, Richard, *The Arctic Convoys, 1941-1945* (London: John Murray, 1994).
- *Malta Convoys, 1940-1943* (London: John Murray, 2000).

— *The Real Cruel Sea: The Merchant Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic 1939-1943* (London: John Murray, 2004).

Wollaeger, Mark, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945*, (Princeton, N.J; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Woolf, Virginia, *Between the Acts* (1941) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

— *To the Lighthouse* (1927) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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

Yeats, W.B., “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” (1919) in Edward Larrissy ed., *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Film and Television

Fires Were Started, Directed by Humphrey Jennings (London: Crown Film Unit, 1943).

The Guinea Pig, Directed by Roy Boulting (London: Pilgrim Pictures, 1948).

In Which Serve, Directed by Noel Coward and David Lean (London: Two Cities, 1942).

Lifeboat, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Los Angeles: Fox, 1944).

Passport to Pimlico, Directed by Henry Cornelius (London: Ealing Studios, 1949).

Rope, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock (Los Angeles: Transatlantic, 1948).

The Charmer, Written by Alan Prior (London: London Weekend Television, 18-22 November, 1987).

Henry V, Directed by Laurence Olivier (London: Criterion, 1944).