Mass Violence and the Crowd: The Perception of Proletarian Community in Working-Class Writers of the 1930s

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There have been two leading interpretations of the politics of the urban working-class crowd by political philosophers. One sees popular protest as occurring spontaneously, without prior organisation, as a reaction to immediate material deprivations such as food shortages or wage reductions. The other sees the crowd as an inchoate and unself-conscious mass that can be galvanised into activity, shown how to constitute itself as a potentially revolutionary class, only by an elite, usually of middle or upper class provenance, who may exploit its potential for violence for their own social and ideological agendas. Of one of the most accomplished scholars of mass protest, George Rudé (who published prolifically throughout the 1960s and seventies), Henry J. Kaye argues that his especial strength, along with his critique of the notion that crowds are always working-class movements, is that he demonstrates the link between political perspectives and the received views of violent protest:

The problem, Rudé observes, is that conservatives and “Republicans alike had projected their own political aspirations, fantasies and / or fears onto the crowd without having asked the basic historical questions”... law-and-order conservatives, he complains, see all protest as a “crime against established society”; liberal writers have tended to comprehend all crimes as a form of protest (Kaye in Rudé, 7-15).

The classic conservative images of proletarian anarchy are Edmund Burke’s depiction of the rioting mob as a “swinish multitude”, in Reflections on the Revolution in France, and Hippolyte Taine’s account of revolutionary action as the breeding-ground for the “dregs of society”, “bandits”, “thieves”, “savages”, “beggars” and “prostitutes” (Kaye in Rudé, 6).

The Leninist approach to this assumes that the revolutionary activities of the crowd must be directed by an elite, the Party, converting anarchic energy into effective political action. Rudé himself, in his earlier writings, tended towards Leninism, as in his conclusion that the sans-culottes “were on their own capable of nothing more than economic motivation” (“trade-union consciousness”); movement beyond that required the leadership and political ideas developed by bourgeois intellectuals” (Rudé, 20). Rudé later came to question this model, recognising that the lower classes had ideas and motivations of their own (Kaye, in Rudé, 24).

At the opposite extreme to Rudé’s original stance lies Georges Sorel, a philosopher of the preceding generation whose important works emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. His Reflections on Violence adopts a strongly anti-Leninist perspective, considering the French Revolution as Rudé does but using it as an example by which to illustrate how state-sponsored violence only replaces one corrupt authority with another. The real solution to exploitation and suffering lies, for Sorel, in violence carried out by the proletariat for the proletariat, free of the ideological constraints of bourgeois theorists, arguing that “The abuses of the revolutionary bourgeois force of ’93 should not be confused with the violence of our revolutionary syndicalists” (Sorel, vii).

Sorelian thought was widely influential on the early Communist movement, particularly in France, and his celebration of violent confrontation resonates with other writers on violent protest. Rudé’s assertion that “conflict is both a normal and a salutary means of achieving social progress” (Rudé, 58) testifies to this influence, while part of the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács’s critique of Zola stems from Lukács’s perception of violent struggle as a force
more valuable and productive, when guided, than the latter imagines it to be. Much of the tone of *Reflections on Violence* is due to its author’s refusal to consider the potential drawbacks and dangers inherent in his Classical model for violent insurrection. Sorel grudgingly admits that “It may be conceded to those in favour of mild methods that violence may hamper economic progress and even, when it goes beyond a certain limit, that it may be a danger to morality” (177-8); but he does not give any further thought to the limits and dangers to which he refers. This may be one of the reasons why *Reflections on Violence* was seized upon by the National Socialists just as readily as it was by the Left, and indeed formed a basis for those moments of social insurrection in which Left and Right collaborated against a Social Democratic centre. (On this, see Stan Smith’s discussion of “Red-Brown” collaboration in Germany before 1933.)

“Mass protest” and “mass violence” are concepts which appear repeatedly in the fiction of the working-class writers Jack Hilton, George Garrett, James Hanley and Jim Phelan. These writers may not have been directly familiar with *Reflections on Violence*, as no English language edition was available until T. E. Hulme’s translation was published in 1950, but Sorelian ideas were widely diffused in the Labour and Socialist movements throughout the early part of the century. Their fiction explores more fully than Sorel the threat to working-class interests represented by his ideas, and offers in part a critique of the Sorelian cult of violent insurrection.

Chapter 26 of Phelan’s novel *Ten-a-Penny People* (1938) contains a lengthy account of strike action at the local factory, leading to violent protest that rapidly degenerates into riots and intra-class conflict, in the form of picketing and attacks on blacklegs, and internal strife in the union itself and in clashes between workers from different unions and workplaces. Phelan emphasises in his scenes of mass protest that violence can occur when there is incomplete solidarity among the protesters or a lack of clear and universal understanding of political aims, and when it does it inevitably degenerates into counterproductive mob rule. Phelan saw such disturbances in Dublin from 1916 onwards, living through the Uprising, British repression and subsequent Civil War. Recurring images from his memories of that time appear in the novel’s strike scenes (particularly prominent is the image of strikers concealing iron bars in their sleeves), indicating his fear that proletarian violence in Britain would reproduce the mistakes of the Irish struggle. This sentiment is underscored by the fact that most of *Ten-a-Penny People’s* protagonists and more likeable characters are not fanatical Communists or socialists, but people who resist the call for violent uprising. The demonstration descending into widespread chaos at the end of Chapter 26, with the police accidentally clubbing the blacklegs they are meant to be protecting, is a particularly effective moment.

Jack Hilton’s *Laugh at Polonius; or, Yet There is Woman* (1942) contains a similar sequence in which the Sorelian idea of proletarian violence as “very fine and heroic” is put under scrutiny. Much of Hilton’s critique is assigned to the character of Harold Schofield, a “book-learned” socialist who expatiates on Julian Huxley and Tom Paine. Hilton seems to have little regard for Schofield, in many ways the spiritual descendant of the trade union agitator Slackbridge in Dickens’s *Hard Times*: socially irresponsible, vainglorious and a rabble-rouser, he “put revolutionary fervour” into the strikers at Leslie Stott’s mill and in so doing “made them cease to be people” (168). His willingness to let ten thousand workers die with him before accepting defeat is the most graphic indication of Hilton’s scorn for such agitators. One is reminded of the chapter entitled “They Call Themselves Comrades” at the end of his autobiography *Caliban Shrieks* (1935), in which Hilton voices his doubts on militant socialists who “lack human nature”, “merely book socialists”, “as useful...as a group of feminine sissies when playing caveman stuff” (a gender stereotype typical of Hilton). The left-wing Independent Labour Party, he says, is all talk, has no understanding of the workingman’s problems, and should be called the “Inflated Little Pawns”; socialist extremists are too radical and not trusting enough; the Parliamentary Labour Party is inept and prioritises appeasing the bosses above all else; and Trade Unions are only out to make money and are built on an “it's-who-you-know” mentality (125-7). Likewise the strike scenes in *Laugh at Polonius* reflect the growing cynicism Hilton felt towards socialist organisers and the effectiveness of the protests they instigated.
Phelan and Hilton had both been themselves directly involved in mob action and were writing from experience, rather than imposing abstract ideological perspectives on events they had not lived. They both knew the pitfalls and the ways in which mass protest could go awry when riven by internal dispute, dictated by the egotism of glory-hog organisers, or allowed to degenerate into an ugly free-for-all. In neither *Laugh at Polonius* nor *Ten-a-Penny People* is mass violence presented as any sort of solution to the problems of exploitation and hardship faced by the workers. Phelan is ambiguous about where, if anywhere, such a solution lies. Though Hilton had no time for any of the existing varieties of organised Left politics, the disastrous crowd violence in *Polonius*, contrasted with the positive account of a socialist candidate’s election to local government in his other novel, *Champion* (1938), reflects his sympathy for the kind of Leninist elitism, inflected towards parliamentarism, characteristic of the Communist Party of Great Britain, specifically in the rejection of anarchism and a vision of progress through State socialism introduced by an informed elite.

Both Hilton and Phelan see violence as the product of class exploitation, a symptom of oppression rather than its cure. A parallel can be found in Zola’s *Germinal*. Brian Nelson remarks that “Zola was deeply sceptical of mass class action, revolutionary idealists and professional social reformers”, and “portrays socialists and revolutionaries as either naïve utopian dreamers or cynical opportunists”. Nelson goes on to demonstrate how Zola, through the character of Etienne Lantier, illustrates that the idea of proletarian leadership cannot realistically work (21). It is for such reasons that Lukács took this novel as his text for challenging Zola’s status as a radical writer. Many of Lukács’s denunciations of Zola as conservative, non-revolutionary bourgeois are based on scenes of this nature in his fiction. Lukács contrasted Zola unfavourably with Sir Walter Scott, whose narratives demonstrated the need for the spontaneous action of the masses to be channelled and directed by the historically-informed consciousness of their leaders:

Scott portrays the great transformations of history as transformations of popular life. He always starts by showing how important historical changes affect everyday life, the effect of material and psychological changes upon people who react immediately and violently to them, without understanding their causes. Only by working up from this basis does he portray the complicated ideological, political and moral movements to which such changes inevitably give rise. The popular character of Scott’s art, therefore, does not consist in an exclusive portrayal of the oppressed and exploited classes. That would be a narrow interpretation. Like every great popular writer, Scott aims at portraying the totality of national life in its complex interaction between “above” and “below”; his vigorous popular character is expressed in the fact that “below” is seen as the material basis and artistic expression for what happens “above.” (48-9)

Lukács finds Zola guilty of a “narrow interpretation” because, although he presents the hardships of the working-class with sensitivity and sympathy, he concentrates on engendering pity and does not believe the violence they become involved in has any potential to transform their situation. Elliott M. Grant, in his discussion of the clash in *Germinal* between miners and the authorities, concludes: “The struggle forecast in the initial chapter comes to a great climax here. With it come compassion and pity for these human beings caught in a conflict which they seem powerless to avoid” (115). Hilton and Phelan both recall Zola in their own presentations of violent struggle, with their focus not on the revolutionary power of those confrontations, but on how the working-class is swept up by the tide of bloodshed to be left, finally, with only increased suffering in its wake.

Jack Hilton’s autobiography, *Caliban Shrieks* (1935) is uneven. *English Ways* (1940) and *English Ribbon* (1950) on the other hand, are informative and significant accounts of working-class life during the 1930s and 1940s, superior in many ways to Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), while *Laugh at Polonius* and Hilton’s contribution to Jack Common’s essay collection *Seven Shifts* (1938) are also strong. His first novel, *Champion* (1938), demonstrates by contrast the failings of attempting a socialist realist fiction. Nevertheless, *Champion* remains of considerable historical interest as an instance of 1930s proletarian fiction. A Bildungsroman, it follows the interconnected stories of its two working-class protagonists from childhood to adulthood, roughly between 1914 and 1928, from the Great War and Armistice, through the widespread unemployment of the 1920s, and in particular the National Union of Unemployed Workers’ protest marches on London beginning in 1922. The economic deterioration of the
early 1920s finds Jimmy Watkins out of work, while his friend Charlie Smith has become the leader of a local unemployed workers’ movement. Jimmy is initially unconvinced by Charlie’s belief that socialist politics can better the lot of the workers, choosing instead to escape his poverty by becoming a professional boxer. Charlie has had to watch his organised protests degenerate into riots when the movement’s demands were not met, and for his part in them he is sent to prison. On his release, disillusioned, contemplating suicide and close to madness, he becomes a tramp and spends some time aimlessly wandering the country.

During the period of the Popular Front, the Leninist approach to the proletariat was represented in literary-critical discourse by the relentless orthodoxy of A. A. Zhdanov. Hilton was not a Communist Party member, but Champion nonetheless demonstrates many of the features of the socialist realist novel in the Zhdanovite mode, but not without departures from the form. There are some aesthetic digressions in Chapters 7 and 9, where Hilton dabbles with ideas of modern dance and nature-worship and pays tribute to the poetry of Francis Thompson, and the political debate of Chapter 23 would have been different if Hilton had been a committed Communist. Instead, he indicates, through the conversation between Jimmy and Charlie, that all the established left-wing parties have their faults, and argues in favour of a completely new interpretation of socialism. “They Call Themselves Comrades” in Caliban Shrieks is cognate to this, and in neither text does Hilton give a particularly clear picture of what this new interpretation might be. In Caliban he speaks approvingly of the Co-Op Movement and seems to hold it as his model for a successful socialist organisation; perhaps demonstrating a certain degree of local pride as he was born in Rochdale, where that movement originated, and he clearly takes pleasure in announcing that pioneers from his hometown spearheaded a national enterprise. However, generally speaking Hilton prefers to criticise existing movements than posit his own solutions.

Champion remains a novel in which literature and history are intertwined, optimism about the future of socialism prevails despite its considerable scepticism about the efficacy of mass protest and violence, and everyday characters discover and realise their potential for heroism in true Zhdanovite mode. All this makes it, in the end, an unconvincing didactic exercise rather than a convincing novel. Yvonne Cloud argued in Left Review that the novel’s “false lyricism…laboured poetical effects…loose construction, stilted and over-decorated prose” were “signs that proletarian fiction must learn to stand on its own feet and speak with its own voice, neither clinging to the worst of D. H. Lawrence nor thinly echoing its own bourgeois ancestry” (1017). Certainly, its linking of personal events to an externalised politics produces several extraneous disquisitions on socialism, in the manner of Lawrence’s philosophical excursions, which seem grafted on to the narrative. The conversation between Charlie and Jimmy in Chapter 23, consists of Charlie exhaustively expositing Hilton’s own views about the Left, with Jimmy interjecting the necessary questions to move the sermon along, and is glaringly unconvincing as dialogue. The novel’s unremitting optimism becomes wearisome. Hilton seeks to demonstrate, with heavy-handed insistence, that the traditional working-class values of standing by one’s family, striving hard and being fair and upright in all things will always triumph over vice, slovenliness and underhandedness. Consequently when the characters find themselves in difficult times, as during the trade depression or the episode of Charlie’s arrest and breakdown, the change of tone enlivens the narration, though even then the reader is never in any real doubt that these troubles will pass. By the middle of the book it is clear Jimmy will win all his fights and Charlie’s socialist politics will prevail. The “proletkult” urge to forge political optimism from unpromising circumstances weakens the narrative, substituting an uninspiring predictability for such plot essentials as tension and suspense.

By 1942 Hilton’s novel-writing had matured considerably. Laugh at Polonius, another “socialist realist” Bildungsroman, focuses on the life of a single working-class individual and his wife Sheila. The over-insistent manliness of Champion’s Jimmy gives way to a more credible, insecure and vulnerable hero in Leslie Stott. Leslie’s character develops convincingly from childhood through adolescence into early manhood, journeying from a sheltered, repressive Methodist background into the world of work, where he discovers love and music, wrestles with
his deeply-ingrained inhibitions, faces political disillusionment, and struggles to overcome the dogma of authority (hence the novel’s title).

Zhdanovite elements are downplayed in *Polonius*, which does not require socialist conversion and political victory to ensure a triumphal conclusion. Its critiques of organised socialism are more strenuous, and the requisite socialist happy ending gives way to a more downbeat conclusion, with Stott’s death during the Dunkirk retreat. This fate is prefigured in a symbolic moment at the end of the second chapter, which instils from the outset doubt about the novel’s outcome. Looking at the sky from the backyard one night, Leslie’s mother is reminded by the full moon of an expensive gold watch her son earlier expressed a liking for, and which she promised to buy for him on his twenty-first birthday. “She was a believer in signs,” writes Hilton; “The future was going to be better. Her Leslie would have his gold watch some day. She smiled at the moon, and it smiled back, and lit up the street.” Meanwhile two stray cats are courting in the nearby alley, and a neighbour, disturbed by the noise, abruptly pours a tub of water out of an upstairs window:

The mewing ceased, the cats vanished, the moon became hidden by some clouds. Mrs. Stott felt chilled, and, shuddering, she backed into her house, went upstairs, and was soon close up to her son Leslie. (33)

The ironic point of this scene is that Mrs. Stott is quite right to believe in signs—but the moon and the gold watch-face are not the ones she should observe. Leslie will not live to be twenty-one and receive his gift; his life will be cut short like the feline tryst. Hence Sheila’s reaction when she hears of her husband’s death, and is unable to believe she didn’t sense his passing when it happened: “Love had premonitions! It had! It had!” (253). The reader knows how easy it is to miss them.

Nevertheless, despite its hero’s death, *Laugh at Polonius* ends positively with the prospect of collective survival. Though the narrative subscribes at times to the idea of unchangeable forces dictating human fate characteristic of naturalistic fiction (“Life was like that. Daughters took over from mothers the populating of the earth”, 255), this is offset by faith in future renewal. Sheila’s father reflects on the sorrow of Leslie’s bereaved mother, but “Then he thought of the baby. She was its grandmother. Her son’s flesh and blood was there living” (249). Sheila likewise observes that “I’ve some part of you still here, Leslie!” (253). The individual death is taken up in a collective transcendence of individual suffering in the closing paragraph:

Space may have been something which has always existed. Pain may be the only purpose of life. Defunctus may be the happy exodus. But in space, prior to pain, prior to exodus, the love of woman exists. It exists and manifests itself as beautifully as the white clouds flowing across the silver of the Milky Way. It has been so, it must be so. In the beauty of the womanly heart is the creative power which germinates the love-stream, making possible that temporal, momentary, yet continuous experience known as living. Its wholesome purity has the odour of the rose, its lips are as warm as a summer’s night, it has the temperament that is of the humour of the heavens.

The pendulum of time swings right, swings left. A babe is born, its father dies. Yet woman is there. She is the force of life; a beautiful, lovely functionary to compel love. She is ever moving ahead of that ghoulish, pursuing thing, death, trying to recreate before defunctus. (256)

The influence of Lawrence, particularly the conclusion of *The Rainbow* (1915), is evident here, but the passage also recalls the ending of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *Grey Granite*, considered by Chris Baldick to be one of the few “outstanding” socialist realist novels (270). The absence of modernist techniques for distancing the narration means that it cannot look at working-class experience in any detached or objective way. Hilton’s account of Leslie walking his mother home from her charring job is symptomatic:

Most of the people were elated, some to such an extent that they lurched or staggered a little as they moved along. Here and there, as a pub was reached, they passed groups of people standing about outside. It was because of this that Mrs. Stott had had Leslie meeting her on Saturday nights ever since he was twelve years old. Drunken men always seemed to be filled with the insistence to get a woman of some sort on Saturday nights. But she found that such men were not thoroughly bad, and by having Leslie with her she was immune from the leers and pesterings.
Saturday nights were the nights when the working folk of the town let themselves go. They would have let themselves go oftener had they been able to afford it. The tripe shops and the chip shops were all at their busiest. Tripe and chips are good on top of a few glasses of ale. (29)

Hilton’s perception of the working-class crowd here emphasises its unruliness and potential for disorder and random violence directed at fellow workers. The reiterated “let themselves go” is symptomatic. This is a crowd which is seen as alien and intimidating even as the central characters are shown to be inescapably part of the same social nexus. By contrast, the modernist techniques of James Hanley’s first novel, Drift (1930), establish a critical distance in depicting Joe Rourke loitering despondently on Liverpool’s Lime Street:

More people coming into the street. The picture palaces have opened. See the sheik carrying off the maiden! Ha! Ha! Line up! Man playing a fiddle in the doorway of a public house. An old man playing on two spoons for accompaniment. Much laughter from the crowd when the old man starts to sing. A big man going into the pub. A nice young woman after him. He stares at the young woman. She smiles. She has a pretty face. “Hello, Nelly.”

“Hello.”

They disappear into the house. Policeman holding up his hands and dropping them again. Man shouting out at the top of his voice—

“This way for the big winner. Threepence each.”

Boy standing at the edge of the parapet watching men who have dirty faces. Only dirty faces. That means they are coming from work.

“Any bread left, sir?”

On walks the dirty face. (72)

What is missing from Hilton’s description is the expressionist impact Hanley’s writing conveys. Ken Worpole observes of the latter novel that “Hanley obviously wanted to emphasize Joe’s helpless position for which the expressionistic style was most suitable. And expressionism is a way of portraying the process of crisis, not a way of formulating possible solutions”. This ability to let a character see his milieu as a “parade of misery and ugliness” where “society is a deranged nightmare” would invite Zhdanovite contempt for the “mood of despondency, boredom and loneliness” it evinces (81). Both of Hilton’s novels present an unchallenged, claustrophobic view of working-class community which belies the revolutionary break they gesture towards. Hanley’s modernist technique, by contrast, pace Zhdanov, allows us to see the actual limits, and hence the possibilities for transformation, of this world.

Hanley’s 1935 novel The Furys (part one of The Furys Chronicle) contains two symptomatic accounts of mass violence. The second of these, which describes a night-time disturbance in which rioting and looting break out during a demonstration against police brutality, is one of his most memorable scenes. The young hero, Peter Fury, is on his way home when he is caught up in the riot. Amid the confusion he is taken under the wing of a man who is probably Hanley’s most bizarre creation: R. H. Titmouse, self-proclaimed professor of anthropology, who, half-nightmare figure and half-pantomime villain, is ludicrously out of place in a novel cycle that otherwise sets out realistically to portray everyday workers and real historical events. Hanley informs us the Professor “stood over six feet in height and was almost as broad as he was long” (237), so that he would be noticeable in a crowd even if he were not bizarrely clad in a tailcoat and deerstalker cap. Titmouse, a monstrous predatory homosexual typical of the villains in Hanley’s early works, is quite mad, carries a shred of black satin torn from a woman’s blouse to use as a handkerchief, wears a solid gold fob-watch tied to a piece of string, has a duelling scar on his cheek, and speaks in ranting dialogue that seems to belong to the melodrama of an earlier age (““Ha ha!” Professor Titmouse laughed. “Did you think I was going to eat you?””, 246). Even John Fordham’s description of Titmouse as a “Dickensian grotesque” (132) does not quite do justice to the alienness of this figure. The scene where he leads Peter to the top of a stone lion in the Town Square and shows him the unquiet crowd spread out below them, with its strange suggestion of the final temptation of Christ in the wilderness, implies that the character is invested with a supernatural significance that no other character in the novel possesses.

It is in this scene that Professor Titmouse holds forth on his own responses to the mass violence taking place, and, as Edward Stokes observes, “through his lunatic rhetoric is somewhat equivocally conveyed what one assumes to be Hanley’s own view” (47). Quite why
Hanley chose to voice his own views through a creature like Titmouse is not clear, but it is to be assumed that his larger-than-life status is intended to provide impact and authority, turning his mad oratory into the conclusive verdict of a being who is, both figuratively and literally, above the rest of the cast. When Peter contends that the crowd are there “to protest against the brutality of the authorities”, Titmouse responds:

“Fiddlesticks! To protest? That is wrong, my boy. They do not know why they are here. Understand me. They are a lot of sheep. Look!” he said. “Would you say that action constitutes a protest against brutality? Brutality. They do not know what the word means. Look!” he repeated, “just below you. There is brutality. Real brutality. Wicked. Look at the child! She is crying. She is being crushed. Her mother holds her to her breast, but she is being crushed by the crowd. What right has that woman to bring her child here? To stew for hours, suffocated by sheer weight, by the smell of sweating bodies, of mouldy clothes. Does that constitute a protest against brutality? No, my boy.” (243-4).

In this scene, as in many others throughout his 1930s writing, Hanley demonstrates that although his portrayals of the lives of his own class place him in accord with the conventions of proletarian writing, he had little faith in organised socialism and felt increasingly distant from left-wing politics. The Furys' other protest scene does, however, shift the responsibility for disorder and suffering to the ruling class and away from the protesting masses. This may have much to do with the fact that the episode, which portrays a Sunday afternoon protest descending into carnage when mounted police become involved, is based on a true event. It's difficult to work out when exactly the five books of The Furys Chronicle are set, as they contain a number of contradictory historical markers, but Stokes’s conclusion that The Furys takes place in 1911 makes sense (43), certainly more so than the back-cover blurb on the 1983 Penguin reprint, which claims the action takes place “during the General Strike”, when the third installment of the sequence is set in the middle of World War I. If Stokes’s dating is correct, and given that The Furys has a Liverpool setting, it’s fair to assume that the first of its two mass violence scenes is based on the “Liverpool Peterloo”, the day the 1911 Transport Workers’ Strike was crushed after growing to national proportions and giving Parliament substantial cause for alarm. This episode in Merseyside’s history of working-class struggle is fully described in Harold Hikins’s book, Strike: The Liverpool General Transport Strike 1911. There are too many similarities between Hanley’s scene in The Furys and the real event for this to be coincidence. The Liverpool Peterloo also took place on a Sunday (13 August 1911); it came about following a mass gathering of strike supporters in a prominent city square (St. George’s Plateau in Liverpool, which Hanley renames “Powell Square”); the crowd was ordered to disperse by local authorities, and then, with no more warning, mounted police charged the crowd and turned a peaceful protest into a bloodbath, all details replicated in Hanley’s novel.

George Garrett was directly involved in the Liverpool Peterloo, attending the demonstration on his fifteenth birthday to show his solidarity with the strikers, and dealt a broken nose and several lost teeth by a police baton. Born in 1896, Garrett as a young man went to sea in the merchant navy and then travelled in the USA, joining the Industrial Workers of the World (“the Wobblies”), and not returning to Liverpool until 1926, the year of the General Strike, where he became politically active in the Unemployed Workers Movement, writing short stories during bouts of unemployment. His Liverpool 1921-1922, first published in 1949, is of huge documentary importance, probably the most comprehensive eye-witness description of working-class struggles on Merseyside during those two eventful years. Both Millie Toole and Jack and Bessie Braddock call upon it extensively in their own histories of the period, though Toole does not always cite Garrett as her source. But while Liverpool 1921-1922 is first and foremost reportage, it is framed by the conventions of fictional narrative both in its construction — Garrett deliberately pares away extraneous details and focuses on dialogue and action that moves the plot along, recounting events in a fictive manner that is faster-paced and more coherent than those events would have been in reality — and also in its substitution of individual names by character “types”, “The Spiritualist”, “The Old Police Striker”, “The Woman Organiser”, “The Young Seaman and “The Syndicalist”, the latter two being characters based on Garrett himself. This device, a commonplace of writing by members of the Industrial Workers of the World, reveals the influence of the Wobblies on Garrett personally and on Merseyside syndicalism generally. Liverpool 1921-1922 is perhaps best understood as fulfilling Storm
Jameson’s requirement in “Documents” that “socialist writing” should refuse to be “emotionally dishonest” (12), an essay first published in the Communist journal Fact in 1936. Garrett fictionalises reality only in so far as he imposes structure on it to bring intelligibility and impact to his account. This is close to the type of writing Jameson demands when she writes that:

The narrative must be sharp, compressed, concrete. Dialogue must be short—a seizing of the significant, the revealing word. The emotion should spring directly from the fact. It must not be squeezed from it by the writer, running forward with a “When I saw this, I felt, I suffered, I rejoiced…” His job is not to tell us what he felt, but to be coldly and industriously presenting, arranging, selecting, discarding from the mass of his material to get the significant detail, which leaves no more to be said, and implies everything. (15-16).

Garrett’s account of Liverpool from 1921 to 1922 calls upon his own experience of institutionalised violence ten years previously. The report begins by describing the gradual development of a Merseyside division of W.Hannington’s National Unemployed Workers’ Movement, of which Garrett, along with many other prominent names from Liverpool’s Labour history, was a member. He goes on to relate their attempt to lobby the city authorities with the pressing need for “work or full maintenance” for the working-class, their subsequent use of peaceful demonstrations and nuisance marches (intended to block traffic and disrupt local services) when their demands were ignored, and follows with an account of the savage unprovoked attack by police in the Walker Art Gallery on September 12 1921, which led to widespread injury, arrests and the suppression of the movement.

Garrett was a syndicalist and I.W.W. member, and as such displays two political influences that informed much of the development of Liverpool’s Labour movements. Bob Holton observes that “British syndicalists... shared common feelings with the I.W.W.” (123) and shows how the regular sea traffic from Liverpool to the United States was used to convey messages to Wobblies in America, and sometimes to smuggle members to England when they were wanted by the police at home. Jack Braddock and his brother Wilf set up a Merseyside branch of the I.W.W. during the First World War (126), and Wobbly leader “Big” Bill Haywood spoke in Liverpool in Autumn 1910 and Spring 1911, suggesting a direct influence on the Transport Workers’ Strike of the latter year (136). The term “syndicalism”, Holton observes, “carries revolutionary overtones in the English use. Syndicalist groups in Britain shared in common a belief in revolutionary industrial organisation and action as the central means for the overthrow of capitalism. They stressed direct action rather than State-sponsored legislation as the main agency of social emancipation.” Syndicalists “used the sympathetic strike and the general strike as weapons of class conflict”, and rejected the idea of social reform through parliament as they “felt that the Parliamentary atmosphere only emasculated the drive of Labour’s elected representatives” (122). The influence of Sorel, who considered his own philosophy of insurrectionary violence a form of syndicalism, is apparent here. Holton also illustrates the close alignment of syndicalism on Merseyside with the anarchism opposed by Leninist cadres, especially during the slow beginnings in the years leading up to 1910, even though, after the foundation of the Communist International, this undeniably grassroots working-class movement was appropriated by the newly-formed Communist Party. Holton asserts that an anarcho-syndicalist network was visible in Liverpool as early as 1907, and its influences remained detectable as syndicalist movements grew rapidly during the years of “industrial and political unrest” between 1910 and 1914 (128). Syndicalism is best understood as a mode of thought and action rather than a single exclusive movement, and its influences were visible in a number of clubs and unions of the time. Holton lists seven of these, many of which were brought together by the Independent Syndicalist Education League (I.S.E.L.) of Tom Mann, one of the most famous syndicalist leaders (135). After the War years these influences were still detectable in a number of Merseyside workers’ movements such as the N.U.W.M and the Seamen’s Vigilance Committee, both of which Garrett belonged to, and carried through into the working-class upheavals of the 1930s.

Because of Syndicalism’s common ground with Sorelian ideas and its links to anarchism, one might expect Liverpool 1921-1922 to be vehemently anti-Leninist, arguing against state socialism and lauding working-class violence as the one route to revolution and emancipation.
Certainly it’s possible to discern such elements in Garrett’s work. The betrayal of the unemployed, let down by the local authorities, seems to suggest that the time has come for the workers to take matters into their own hands. Garrett seems to affirm this interpretation in responding to the result of the N.U.W.M.’s first appeal to City Hall: “Apart from the stock promise, “We’ll do what we can,” the deputation had gained nothing of value” (192). But it is there already in the narrative’s memorable opening:

> It is noteworthy that during a period of mass-hunger some top-ranking figure will utter a remark as remote from reality as the notorious “no bread; let them eat cake.” In Britain in the post-war years 1920-21, with the “Homes for Heroes” illusion already exploded; two million brooding unemployed; second-hand shops glutted with furniture surrendered cheaply for rent and bread; and the pawnshop windows piled with medals, now so much worthless junk; Sir Alfred Mond, Minister of Health, posed the fatuous question: “Is anyone starving?” (183)

This argument is further borne out by the story’s depiction of a non-violent working-class demonstration met by ruthless violence on the part of the authorities at the Walker Art Gallery, echoing the events of 1911. What place can peaceful protest have in a world where the ruling bodies resort to atrocious methods time and again, Garrett asks. Surely the only solution is to meet them on their own terms? It is possible to see such a call for violence conveyed by the horrific bloodshed of the Art Gallery scene, where men who had committed no wrong and held principles of peace were mercilessly batoned and bundled off to gaol. Readers could interpret this as an outright denunciation of the effectiveness of non-violent protest methods and a declaration that there is nothing left to do but go on the offensive.

But the call for violence is not really there in Liverpool 1921-1922; either explicitly or, if one engages properly with the text, implicitly. In his N.U.W.M. membership, his co-organising of Liverpool’s 1922 contribution to the First National March on London, his work with the Seamen’s Vigilance Committee and Merseyside Unity Theatre, and all his other battles for workers’ rights up to the part he played in the seamen’s strikes of 1966, the year of his death, George Garrett was, as Michael Murphy’s Introduction to the Collected Garrett puts it, “an advocate—a militant advocate—of tolerance” (Garrett, xxii). But this position also reflects the extent to which syndicalist militancy had been co-opted, over the decades, to the tactics and assumptions of the mainstream labour movement, where “Marxist-Leninist” scenarios had gradually been converted to the Communist Party’s official commitment to a “parliamentary road to socialism”. The syndicalist legacy would also explain, however, why in the 1970s and 1980s the Trotskyist “Militant Tendency”, with its policies of direct action, mass strikes and pickets and workers’ control, could come to dominate the Liverpool Labour Party, and for a time actually run the City Council.

Liverpool 1921-1922 articulates Garrett’s sorrow at his home city’s history of peaceful protest disrupted by state violence, but does not argue that workers must take their cue from this to justify a reciprocal violence from below. During the scene in which the ill-fated nuisance march to the Walker Art Gallery is discussed by the N.U.W.M., Garrett describes a debate in which several committee men voice their fears over the response of the police to their recent protests: “It was very suspicious. They seemed to be acting too quiet; acting as if they were waiting for the first opportunity to run amok and baton down as many unemployed as possible” (196). This leads many to recommend stronger tactics, but the movement’s leader Robert Tisseyan remains steadfastly on the side of registering their protest without provoking disorder. Tisseyan announces earlier in the account that “I’ll not be a party to any violence” (195), and when warned again at the end of the scene that the consequence of his approach will be that strikers’ “heads will get bashed in all the sooner” the next day, he replies encouragingly: “It won’t happen. You take my word” (197).

Tisseyan is wrong in this, as we learn soon afterwards, but Garrett’s sympathy and respect lie squarely with him. The ex-police officer earned Garrett’s admiration with the sacrifices he made for the unemployed, having resigned from the force just months before retirement, forsaking his pension in the process, in order to show his support (187), and his belief in progress through non-violent means closely paralleled Garrett’s own. It is the younger and more militant firebrands of the N.U.W.M. over whom Garrett casts a warier eye,
highlighting their dangerous, smouldering resentment of authority and their prejudice and mistrust towards their tireless and principled leader: "In the opinion of the young men listeners, he was deliberately keeping the crowd in order, and confirming the suspicions about him: once a policeman, always a policeman" (188). When Garrett describes how certain elements of the movement had to be dissuaded from turning to more extreme tactics during the nuisance marches that would only have given the impression that “the unemployed were an organised band of thieves” (197), it’s clear he is referring to these dissenters. If Liverpool 1921-1922 can be said to convey any message or meaning at all, then it has to do with the importance of standing firm and upholding one’s principles in the face of hardship, rather than allowing oneself to be lowered to the same level as the oppressors.

In this piece of writing Garrett shows himself to be primarily a Lukácsian realist, with his use of character “types” and Lukácsian “mediocre” heroes, his decision to foreground human drama in preference to the historical events he also narrates, and his insistence on showing all sides of the dialectical struggle. For Lukács, the strength of the great realist writers lay in their ability to engage with the forces of history and describe them in a comprehensive and balanced way, rather than falling back on external description and apolitical recounting in the manner of naturalists like Zola. When Lukács illustrates how the classic realist writers were able to portray human lives “plastically and poetically, because in their work all social forces still took the form of human relationships”, and goes on to say how inferior a literary form is that of the naturalists who “seize upon the prose and place it at the centre of literature, but they only fix and perpetuate its withered features, limiting their picture to a description of the “thing-like” milieu” (205), he defines the approach to writing adopted by Garrett’s Liverpool 1921-1922. Here too, social forces and the human condition are inextricably linked, and no resolution arrives to bring harmony between the characters and their social world. Garrett expressed through his entire body of work the limitations and dangers of any form of totalising closure, and used Liverpool 1921-1922 to discuss dilemmas that he himself could not resolve, and which remained unresolved when he produced the work.

All four of the writers concentrated on in this paper saw the literary presentation of violence as a central means by which to articulate their political views, and, crucially, their views on the social class to which they belonged. As their various responses to socialist ideologies both in the individual and collective spheres should illustrate, it is impossible to tie down or categorise their work in terms of any specific political agenda. Terms such as “proletarian realism”, “socialist realism”, “proletarian naturalism”, “proletarian novel” and their equivalents limit and impede our full understanding of the complexities of working-class writing shaped in and by the 1930s for two reasons: firstly, because they can imply that all working-class writing was produced with the aim of fulfilling an homogenised “socialist” agenda that does not acknowledge the diversity of left-wing political movements; and secondly, because even when the variety of socialist theory and practice is recognised, it remains a damaging assumption that any piece of working-class literature can be comfortably situated at a single place on the political spectrum. As this essay has endeavoured to illustrate, the strength and uniqueness of Garrett, Hanley, Hilton and Phelan’s work lie in their ability to resist the siren calls of political orthodoxies and allegiance, to provide a sense of uniquely working-class voices that stand apart from prescribed ideologies and agendas.¹

Works Cited


¹. I am immensely grateful to Stan Smith for his help with the final version of this essay.


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