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# MODERNISM AND THE COMMON WRITER*

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ABSTRACT. *This article re-examines the resistance to literary modernism in interwar Britain from the angle of popular literary theory and practice. Drawing on the papers of some of the notable working-class writers of this period, it disputes Jonathan Rose's claim that a rejection of modernist 'obscurantism' was a response distinctive to working-class autodidacts. Moreover, many middle-class readers responded to modernism in the same terms that Rose takes to be peculiar to a working-class intelligentsia. Negative reactions to modernism are better explained as a response conditioned by a literary discourse in which plebeian autodidacts as well as middle-class readers participated. The article approaches this discourse via the aspiring authors who joined writing clubs in the interwar period. Because these people were at once fairly typical readers and writers, their ideas and practices disclose more about popular understandings of literature than debates in the national press or literary reviews do. Their ideas about what constituted good writing and their hostility to modernism were underpinned by a popular conception of literature that derived from English romanticism.*

## I

When an editor asked Richard Aldington for an article speculating about which young writers might make a name for themselves, Aldington 'made a choice which I modestly think wasn't bad for 1919: James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, H. D. and Marcel Proust'. His article was rejected on the grounds that these figures were obscure and would remain so. Recalling the episode in 1941, Aldington remarked tartly: 'If I had chosen such mediocrities as Jack Squire, Hugh Walpole, Frank Swinnerton, and others whose names I have forgotten, I should have received a cheque and a crown of wild parsley.'[1] Any list of canonical twentieth-century writers compiled today would include more names from Aldington's preferred selection than from his list of 'mediocrities'. The

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[1] Richard Aldington, *Life for life's sake: a book of reminiscences* (London, 1968), pp. 200–1. The book was written in 1941 and published posthumously. See also Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of hope: British middlebrow writers and the First World War, 1919–1939* (Providence, 1993), pp. 54–5.



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establishment of the modernist canon in Britain was, however, a protracted and convoluted process. Discussion in literary reviews and other periodicals was one aspect of that process; more important were the entrenchment of literary criticism in universities and the percolation of the precepts of the Cambridge school of English through the training colleges and grammar schools.[2] And the canonization of modernism never went unquestioned. How and why it was questioned in popular literary theory and practice is the subject of this article.

The challenges that modernist experimentation posed for many readers raised far-reaching questions about literature and its public. 'Difficult' and 'obscure' poetry and prose conjured up the spectre of an art estranged from ordinary life and ordinary readers. The bestselling novelists whom Q. D. Leavis surveyed in the early 1930s characterized modernist or 'highbrow' writing as aridly intellectual, out of touch with 'the fundamentals of life'.[3] One of Aldington's 'mediocrities', the novelist and publisher's reader Frank Swinnerton, was frank about his dislike of 'Bloomsbury' and its snobbery.[4] In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', Virginia Woolf had made Swinnerton's hero and mentor Arnold Bennett emblematic of an artistic failure to come to terms with modern consciousness; Swinnerton retorted that Woolf was 'unable to imagine, to create, a human being who is not exactly like herself … [H]er Mrs Brown is but a dream-jumble of odds and ends. She thinks she is pursuing the essential, but in fact she is too sensitive, highly intelligent, and playful in mind, to have the emotional depth of an imaginative person.'[5] Swinnerton's verdict on Eliot similarly coupled literary deficiencies with the character flaws attendant on intellectualism: 'Eliot, more than any other man, has been responsible for the justification of literary frigidity … Indeed I wonder whether, the lovely rhythm of his best poems apart, he has not done more harm than good by encouraging a tribe of arid sciolists to imagine themselves *esprits supérieurs*.'[6]

Writing in the 1930s, Swinnerton was fighting a rearguard action; in the 1950s, attacks on modernism were often by younger figures, usually men, who were widely taken as representing the direction that English writing was heading in. The authors grouped under the faulty label 'the Movement' typically had reservations about the 'obscurity' of modernist poetry and prose, and in some cases regarded modernism as putting many readers off literature.[7] As he grew into an elder statesman, Philip Larkin hedged his public statements about modernist poetry less,[8] remarking in 1971 that 'in this century English poetry went off on a

[2] See Frank Whitehead, 'F. R. Leavis and the schools', in Denys Thompson, ed., *The Leavises: recollections and impressions* (Cambridge, 1984); Carolyn Steedman, 'State-sponsored autobiography', in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of modernity: reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London, 1999), p. 48.

[3] Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public* (London, 1932), p. 68.

[4] Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian literary scene* (1935; rev. edn London, 1938), ch. 13.

[5] Ibid., pp. 281–2.

[6] Ibid., pp. 363–4.

[7] Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English poetry and fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford, 1980), p. 133.

[8] Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: a writer's life* (London, 1993), p. 344.

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loop-line that took it away from the general reader'. The 'culture-mongering activities' of Eliot and Pound, together with 'the emergence of English as an academic subject', which necessitated 'a kind of poetry that needed elucidation', had sundered 'the strong connection between poetry and the reading public that had been forged by Kipling, Housman, Brooke and *Omar Khayyám*'. One reason John Betjeman mattered was that he arguably 'was the writer who knocked over the "No Road Through to Real Life" signs that this new tradition had erected, and who restored direct intelligible communication to poetry'.[9] The idea that modernism deliberately excluded ordinary readers has been amplified more recently in John Carey's much-noticed polemic *The intellectuals and the masses*. The 'spread of literacy to the "masses"', Carey writes, 'impelled intellectuals in the early twentieth century to produce a mode of culture (modernism) that the masses could not enjoy'.[10]

The absent centre of all these polemics is the 'ordinary' reader. Carey positions himself on the side of ordinary people, declaring his cultural politics to be in tune with Arnold Bennett's, and his predecessors personified the ordinary reader relentlessly.[11] Storm Jameson framed her discussion of the 1920s novel around a fictional Mr Robinson, an instance of that species beloved of interwar commentators, the 'little man'.[12] Defending Dickens and disparaging 'the sterile obscurantism of Mr. James Joyce', Roger Dataller professed to speak for 'the plain man'; Terence Rattigan said that a playwright had to please the bourgeois 'Aunt Edna', who did not appreciate Kafka, Picasso, and William Walton.[13] The class and gender of the ordinary reader imagined in these examples varies considerably, a sign that the expression was as empty a vessel as its legal cousin, the 'reasonable man' on the Clapham omnibus. Jonathan Rose's recent book, *The intellectual life of the British working classes*, reprises anti-modernist arguments from Dataller to Carey, but endeavours to ground them in a study of what 'ordinary readers in history' have made of canonical and popular texts.[14] Rose claims that '[t]he modernists used difficulty to fence off and protect literary property'; working-class autodidacts rejected modernism as the cerebral conceit of a snobbish claque.[15] This portrait of autodidact hostility to modernism is not a rhetorical device like 'Mr Robinson' or 'Aunt Edna', but to some extent it too is the by-product of a polemic. Rose is engaged in a battle with contemporary American academic culture, and he transparently uses early twentieth-century

[9] Philip Larkin, 'It could only happen in England: a study of John Betjeman's poems for American readers', in Philip Larkin, *Required writing: miscellaneous pieces, 1955–1982* (London, 1983), pp. 216–17.

[10] John Carey, *The intellectuals and the masses: pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London, 1992), p. 214.

[11] Ibid., p. 152.

[12] Storm Jameson, *The Georgian novel and Mr Robinson* (London, 1929), pp. 1, 4–5.

[13] Roger Dataller, *The plain man and the novel* (London, 1940), p. 170; Terence Rattigan, 'Preface' to *The collected plays of Terence Rattigan* (3 vols., London, 1953–64), II, pp. xi–xii.

[14] Jonathan Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (New Haven, 2001), p. 1.

[15] Ibid., chs. 12–13, esp. pp. 394–7, 426, 431, 435.

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modernism as a stunt double for his present-day opponents.[16] He consequently skews the relation of working-class readers to modernism.

This article argues that popular aversion to literary modernism in the period when it was most hotly debated, the 1920s and 1930s, is better explained as a response conditioned by a literary discourse in which both plebeian autodidacts and middle-class readers participated. This discourse – with its oppositions between story (or message) and artifice, vitality and frigidity, emotion and intellect – derived from the English romantics, especially Wordsworth, and was widely disseminated in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. As Frank Swinnerton's language suggests, the positive terms of these oppositions – story, vitality, emotion – were taken to support narrative realism and traditional poetic forms. Modernism was taken to stand for artifice, frigidity, intellectualism. Of course, what 'modernism' means is an inexhaustible question; here I am using the term capaciously to refer to the use of poetic forms and narrative structures not found in Victorian and Edwardian literature, so as to include not only Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf but also experimenters who are not now canonized as 'high modernists' – writers such as Edith Sitwell, who was an inescapable reference point in interwar discussions of new bearings in English literature.

The next section of this article uses several case studies to unpick Rose's claim that working-class intellectuals were especially predisposed against modernism. I then move on to an analysis of the popular romanticism that I argue provides a better explanation of bafflement or irritation with modernism. This account of popular romanticism draws on a variety of sources, but chiefly on the records of the amateur writers' clubs that sprang up in Britain in the 1920s and the magazines and guidebooks that promised to teach aspirants the secrets of writing. Because amateur writers were not members of the literary and journalistic establishments but at the same time were people actively concerned with writing fiction and poetry – at once 'ordinary readers' *and* writers – their practices disclose the workings of popular conceptions of writing and literature to a degree that books of literary criticism and exchanges in the national press cannot.

## II

The sources for Rose's claim that working-class intellectuals rejected modernism are autobiographies. In practice his 'common readers' are common writers as well. One might reasonably expect that recollections of literary tastes, especially concerning authors who were the subject of rancorous arguments, would be affected by the shaping processes of autobiography. Of the six people Rose quotes criticizing modernist writing for its formal qualities (as distinct from criticizing matters of content, such as Eliot's depiction of the journey to work in the City in

[16] Ibid., pp. 8–9, 12–13, 414, 436–7, 464, and esp. p. 438. Compare Carey, *Intellectuals and the masses*, pp. 214–15.

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'The waste land'),[17] three had at one point flirted with modernism or been published by Eliot; by the time they wrote their autobiographies – and, in Roger Dataller's case, polemical works – they had fallen out of sympathy with their earlier selves.[18] To rely so heavily on those volumes clearly loads the dice. Even where less tendentious autobiographies are involved, a lifetime's reading is a heterogeneous business that must often defy the powers of an autobiographer's memory. Contemporary sources such as correspondence, diaries, and imaginative works can expose more of the complexities of reading, reflecting on books, and trying to write one's own.

The case of the County Durham miner Sid Chaplin illustrates some of these complexities.[19] Chaplin meets Rose's criteria for a healthy autodidact: he was a socialist but not someone inspired by Marxism, and a keen participant in the institutions of adult education and mutual improvement. He attended Workers' Educational Association literature classes and was deeply involved in the Spennymoor Settlement, which organized drama productions and other activities.[20] He was a Wesleyan lay preacher, and met his future wife at Kirk Merrington Chapel, where a group of men and women from neighbouring chapels would meet and talk on Sunday evenings.[21] He was also a trade union secretary, and worked among miners committed to political change and self-improvement.[22] Chaplin won a scholarship to study economics and political theory at Fircroft Workingmen's College in Birmingham, which he took up in January 1939. He did poorly at economics, and sympathetic tutors allowed him to switch unofficially to English literature. The months he spent at Fircroft – the college closed with the outbreak of war – gave him an opportunity to write.[23] His papers include a number of poems that he worked on while a student at Fircroft,[24] and soon afterwards he began to be published as a poet and short story writer.

Like that of other working-class writers 'discovered' in the 1930s, Chaplin's writing was firmly anchored in the local plebeian culture he knew. One of his contemporaries, the Birmingham plasterer turned short story writer Leslie Halward, characterized his own literary ambition as wanting to write 'in my own language about my own people'.[25] Writing 'in my own language' interlocked

[17] Rose, *Intellectual life*, pp. 413–14.

[18] Ibid., pp. 416 (Richard Church), 421 (A. E. Coppard), 424–6 (Dataller).

[19] Rose mentions him a number of times, though not in connection with working-class responses to modernism. Ibid., pp. 180, 202–3, 354–5, 372–3.

[20] 'Oral history recording with Mrs. Rene Chaplin: recorded by Helen Arkwright, 18 May 1999', p. 4, Robinson Library, University of Newcastle (RLUN), Sid Chaplin papers, 8/8.

[21] Arkwright, 'Oral history recording', pp. 3, 6, RLUN, Chaplin papers, 8/8.

[22] Michael Pickering and Kevin Robins, 'The making of a working-class writer: an interview with Sid Chaplin', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British working-class novel in the twentieth century* (London, 1984), p. 141; notebook 'Given By Alex. Wylie to His Apprentice, Sid. Chaplin 1937', RLUN, Chaplin papers, 6/2/1.

[23] Pickering and Robins, 'Interview with Sid Chaplin', p. 144; L. Bruce Barr to Chaplin, 29 Oct. 1950, RLUN, Chaplin papers, 7/2/4.

[24] RLUN, Chaplin papers, 1/3.

[25] Leslie Halward, *Let me tell you* (London, 1938), p. 226.

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with writing 'about my own people'. Chaplin's work used not only dialect and local 'characters' (one story features a Geordie named Geordie),[26] but also 'indigenous' North-East working-class forms of narration. Chaplin recalled how common illiterate people were in the pit villages of his boyhood. A culture that was not wholly literate 'put a premium on good "crack" and story-telling'; 'folk memory' was strong. 'Listening to the crack at the corner-end, in the kitchen or out walking with the men one naturally just fell into the way of it.' Chaplin noticed

> the way a story shaped itself in repeated tellings, above all in favour of the economical[,] telling phase – the best oral story-tellers never used two words where one would do … I can remember chasing home from the pit one night to bang out a story I called 'The Leaping Lad' … The story is true but as told to me sixty or seventy years after the event scarcely bore any relation at all to what actually happened. It had been 'improved' as well as whittled down to the bone.[27]

As a poet, Chaplin made an effort to master traditional verse forms. In his notebooks he marked up drafts of poems to show how they scanned.[28] He made notes on verse forms, defining blank verse, anapests, falling feet, Spenserian stanzas, Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets. He bought or intended to buy instalments in a poetry course, and did exercises such as building a sonnet out of the opening line of an existing poem.[29] Some of his unpublished poems are thickly rhymed and have heavy, regular metres.[30] Yet he also enjoyed, and was influenced by, less traditional poetry. He discovered some of it through the journal *New Writing*, which published contemporary authors from continental Europe as well as younger British writers sympathetic to Popular Front ideals, including many of the working-class authors to emerge in the 1930s. 'Even in this little mining village', Chaplin wrote in 1941 to the magazine's editor, John Lehmann, whose support was vital to Chaplin in the early stages of his career as a published author in the 1940s, '"New Writing" is known and talked about'.[31] Later Chaplin recalled a time in

> the early thirties, when, sitting in the dirtiest kitchen I've ever seen, I picked up the Daily Worker and saw New Writing in the Lawrence & Wishart list. Then the first glorious thrill when I saw a copy in the Cou[n]ty Library, and stopped half-a-dozen times on the way home, dismounting from my bike and sitting in the long grass to skim it here and there.[32]

[26] Sid Chaplin, 'The pigeon-cree', in *The leaping lad and other stories* (London, 1946).

[27] Sid Chaplin, 'Living and writing', n.d., RLUN, Chaplin papers, 2/1/14.

[28] RLUN, Chaplin papers, 1/3.

[29] Undated sheet, 'Exercise[:] First line of "The lame"', RLUN, Chaplin papers, SC 1/3.

[30] For instance, 'Poems of an unprivileged poet' (n.d.): 'These are the songs & rhymes/That came to me unsought/~~The catching measure~~/The measure of our times/Unprivileged and unbought // The dark song of the pit,/The rhythm of the mine/Poor treasure of my wit,/~~Brimmed full~~ of poesy's wine/~~Leavened by~~ Sweetened by … [he gives up in humour] don't fit.' RLUN, Chaplin papers, SC 1/3.

[31] Chaplin to Lehmann, 30 Sept. 1941, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC), University of Texas, Austin, John Lehmann papers.

[32] Chaplin to Lehmann, 7 Oct., year not specified (mid-1940s), HRC, Lehmann papers.

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Early in 1944, Chaplin complimented Lehmann on the contents of a recent issue. 'Henry Reeds' [sic] critical essay is the most sensible piece about modern poetry I've seen for a long time.' Reed had written critically of the recent work of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, and the new generation snapping at their heels; the importance of '"the giants of the 'twenties"' – Woolf, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats – was taken as read.[33] Chaplin also appreciated Lehmann's inclusion of two poems by Louis Aragon, translated by MacNeice: 'there's a lot of controversy re. this gentlemans' [sic] political position, but one thing is certain, he can write good poetry'.[34] Admiring Aragon and accepting Reed's premises and conclusions are the kinds of response that Rose insists were out of bounds for autodidacts. And nothing in Chaplin's correspondence with Lehmann or his personal papers suggests that embracing 'new writing' struck him as an act of rebellion.

Chaplin also moved easily between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' in his own writing. Not very long after his efforts to master the sonnet, Chaplin was trying less conventionally disciplined verse forms:

> This was the man
> You made a Bookies [sic] bid:
> Frayed trousers
> And a cloth cap
> Slouched at a corner-end,
> Weed with a woodbine.[35]

At around the same time, he wrote a brace of poems in different registers. One was judged 'too consciously Day Lewis' by one of the friends who had read it.[36] Another was a prayer in dialect. For Chaplin, modernism was a stimulus but not an intellectual rupture.

If modernism was not always the enemy, 'middlebrow' fiction such as that of A. J. Cronin, J. B. Priestley, Winifred Holtby, Warwick Deeping, Mary Webb, and Hugh Walpole was not necessarily an ally. Rose claims that while interwar middlebrow literature was to a large extent 'middle-class', it was also 'the direct descendant of Victorian self-improvement, produced by and for thinking people with working-class roots'.[37] This contention goes against a substantial body of scholarship that views middlebrow as a literature addressed to the middle class, both in its concerns and in its anticipated audience.[38] Despite

[33] Henry Reed, 'The end of an impulse', *New Writing and Daylight* (summer 1943), pp. 111–23.
[34] Chaplin to Lehmann, 8 Feb. 1944, HRC, Lehmann papers.
[35] Sid Chaplin, 'This was the man', n.d., RLUN, Chaplin papers, SC 1/3.
[36] Anonymous annotation on the poem 'Toll up', RLUN, Chaplin papers, SC 1/3.
[37] Rose, *Intellectual life*, p. 431.
[38] Alison Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 484–5; Bracco, *Merchants of hope*, chs. 1, 4; Nicola Beauman, *A very great profession: the woman's novel, 1914–1939* (London, 1983), p. 3. See also Ross McKibbin's review of Rose in *Albion*, 34 (2002), pp. 685–8, at p. 687.

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the emphatic tone with which he writes off some of this historiography,[39] Rose does not argue his claim through. The papers of some of the notable working-class authors to emerge in the interwar period and the war years – Chaplin, Halward, Fred Urquhart, Jack Common, Joe Corrie, B. L. Coombes, James Hanley – disclose few debts to the prominent middlebrow novelists of the time.[40] And some working-class writers were actively hostile to major middlebrow authors.

In his discussion of workers and Marxism, Rose includes a substantial quotation from Jack Hilton's *Caliban shrieks* (1935) that lampoons lifeless, rigid, and 'high-brow'-looking 'book socialists' such as might be found in National Council of Labour Colleges classes.[41] Hilton, a Rochdale plasterer, was also irritated by the 'silver-spoon, progressive editors' (such as Lehmann) with whom he dealt in the late 1930s: 'these pups of University boys with a flairy flare [sic] for LIT, in the worst form are too dictatorially important'.[42] Yet these attitudes were not matched by an approval of contemporary middlebrows. In 1937, Hilton was published in a collection of sketches of working life edited by his friend Jack Common, a Newcastle native who had carved out a position for himself as a critic and commentator with the help of the eccentric socialist and later pacifist editor John Middleton Murry and others associated with the *Adelphi*. The following year, Hilton and Common planned a second symposium, a book in which a group of working-class 'lads' would smash the plaster saints of contemporary taste. Common seems to have deliberately gone after more or less contemporary authors – 'small lit' [sic] men', as Hilton put it – rather than 'the immortal geniouses [sic]'.[43] Each contributor would choose two authors to deal with or deal to. The procedure, Hilton said, would be easy: 'pick two men, read their bio's [sic] in [the journal] Life and letters, read an anthrology [sic], reverse the standard values'.[44] Among the writers selected for this treatment were Priestley and Beverley Nichols. The latter had made his name with novels that capitalized on his experience of Oxford and public schools. As a journalist and essayist, he had, as a critic in the *London Mercury* memorably put it, 'an extraordinary flair for determining the correct moment at which to muscle in on whatever racket popular feeling makes it most profitable to exploit. During the last few years he has been an infallible barometer of public taste in registering successively the thoughts of the unthinking about America, gardening, pacificism, God.'[45] Priestley's famous radio 'Postscripts' still lay ahead of him, but he

[39] Rose, *Intellectual life*, pp. 431, 514–15 n. 117.

[40] Compare Chaplin's comment on A. J. Cronin in Pickering and Robins, 'Interview with Sid Chaplin', p. 145.

[41] Rose, *Intellectual life*, p. 304; Jack Hilton, *Caliban shrieks* (London, 1935), pp. 125–6.

[42] Jack Hilton to Jack Common, 1 Aug. 1937, 3 Nov. 1937, RLUN, Common papers, packet 65.

[43] Hilton to Common, 30 Mar. 1938, RLUN, Common papers, packet 65. [44] Ibid.

[45] Derek Verschoyle, 'At the end of the garden path', *London Mercury*, 38, no. 223 (May 1938), pp. 78–9. See also Beverley Nichols, *The unforgiving minute: some confessions from childhood to the outbreak of the Second World War* (London, 1978), chs. 8, 16, 17.

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was already a very popular novelist and playwright, and a significant cultural critic.[46]

At the same time as Hilton and Common were planning their literary guerrilla operation, Common was in direct contact with Priestley. Common's collection of polemics on contemporary Britain, *The freedom of the streets*, was in press with Secker & Warburg. The publishers elicited an endorsement from John Middleton Murry, and more surprisingly sought one from Priestley. Priestley thought the book was 'slapdash', a waste of 'a magnificent subject by a brief and hasty treatment of it', but he gave Secker & Warburg permission to quote him as saying: 'though disagreeing with a great deal in *The Freedom of the Streets* I hope it has the large sale it deserves because it is original, shrewd and stimulating'. Priestley grumbled: 'I am always being expected to give authors of this kind a good word, why don't they give me one now and then? Point out to Mr. Common that *I* have written about the working class as they actually are.'[47] He telephoned Fredric Warburg to clarify that last comment: he had meant that he had given a realistic picture of a worker in *The good companions*, and objected to Common's sweeping condemnation of intellectuals as unable to understand workers.[48] Priestley then wrote to Common to rebut some of the latter's aspersions: 'If my theatrical work began and ended with the West End, I would agree with you that I am wasting myself … I do not try to cut my dramatic cloth to the pattern of the West End audience and I am certainly not going to cut it just to please a working-class audience.'[49]

James Hanley was adamant about not cutting his cloth to suit any kind of audience, including the modernist and middlebrow patrons whose support he received and sometimes courted. Hanley grew up in Dublin and Liverpool and spent his teens working as a merchant seaman. Throughout the 1920s – and his own twenties – he wrote prolifically while working in a variety of manual jobs.[50] From the end of the 1920s his fiction began to be published privately in limited editions, usually by booksellers with radical politics or avant-garde aesthetics, or both, who dabbled in publishing.[51] Fiction published in this format obviously had a small circulation, but these limited editions nevertheless brought Hanley to the attention of some authors with impressive avant-garde credentials. Richard Aldington wrote prefaces to his work; Nancy Cunard bought him the typewriter on which he wrote the novel *Boy*; and Henry Yorke ('Henry Green') attempted to

[46] D. L. LeMahieu, *A culture for democracy: mass communication and the cultivated mind in Britain between the wars* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 317–33.

[47] Fredric Warburg to Common, 25 May 1938, RLUN, Common papers, packet 48; J. B. Priestley to Common, 31 May 1938, RLUN, Common papers, packet 38.

[48] Warburg to Common, 26 May 1938, RLUN, Common papers, packet 48.

[49] Priestley to Common, 31 May 1938, RLUN, Common papers, packet 38.

[50] John Fordham, *James Hanley: modernism and the working class* (Cardiff, 2002), p. ix; James Hanley to Edward Garnett, 21 Mar. 1929, HRC, Garnett papers.

[51] David Goodway, 'Charles Lahr: anarchist, bookseller, publisher', *London Magazine*, n.s., 17, no. 2 (July 1977), pp. 46–55; see also Hanley's correspondence with Lahr, HRC, Hanley papers.

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introduce him to pillars of the literary world such as Lady Ottoline Morrell and the influential publisher's reader Edward Garnett. 'I have a genius here, a man called James Hanley', Yorke told Garnett. 'He was until a short time ago a docker & has since written books … about working men & [he] has got everyone else cold[,] the language he uses is so magnificent.'[52] Garnett read two of Hanley's books but was not convinced of his talent.[53] Morrell appears not to have made such an effort, perhaps because in his luncheon invitation Yorke undercut his declaration that Hanley 'to my mind has a greater & more natural power in his use of words than anyone writing today' by adding, 'I warn you he is … extremely uncouth. The last time he came here he ate his fish bones and all.'[54]

That Henry Yorke – Old Etonian, Oxford alumnus, wealthy industrialist, and 'difficult' modern novelist – should be so captivated by Hanley's writing and take such an interest in his career makes it clear that some qualification is needed for the Rose–Carey claim that privileged modernists sought to keep the workers out of the temple of literature. Not that Hanley was without ambivalence about his patrons and the class divide between him and them, however:

> I see my own father, who has slaved forty years of his life, for a steamship company[,] flung out like a dog and in contrast I see Nancy Cunard, who must I am sure have some kinship with the Cunard Line for which my father worked throwing money away on drink, or foolish things … These people with their presses and their bank balances, are ill-using their lives … And the likes of my father kept their ships sailing, and now they just fling him out.[55]

Hanley's sense of himself owed little to his eligibility for membership of the 'modernist' club.[56] For Hanley, modernism and symbolism were traditions to be quarried, not badges of identification. He invested so little in the idea of being a card-carrying modernist that he repeatedly sought one of the glittering prizes of middlebrow esteem. It was an unlikely ambition for an author with a record as a peddler of violence, immorality, and horror, but Hanley very much wanted to have one of his books selected as the month's 'choice' by the Book Society.[57] He came close several times, and received the consolation prize of 'first recommendation' for *Captain Bottell* in 1933.[58] There was further consolation, and the possibility of increased sales, when *The Furys*, having been passed over by the Book Society, was 'chosen by the Book Guild for February' 1935.[59]

As Hanley himself recognized, obstructing the path to the Book Society's approval was its president, Hugh Walpole. Famous for his novels of Regency

[52] Henry Yorke to Edward Garnett, 28 Aug. 1931, HRC, Garnett papers.
[53] Yorke to Garnett, 9 Sept. 1931, 15 Sept. 1931, HRC, Garnett papers; Yorke to Ottoline Morrell, 22 Feb. 1933, HRC, Morrell papers, 8/3.
[54] Yorke to Morrell, 22 Feb. 1933, HRC, Morrell papers, 8/3.
[55] Hanley to Hugh Walpole, 15 Nov., year not specified (1931?), HRC, Walpole papers.
[56] Compare Rose, *Intellectual life*, p. 430.
[57] Hanley to Lahr, n.d., HRC, Hanley papers.
[58] Hanley to Tom Jones, 5 May 1933, HRC, Hanley papers.
[59] Hanley to Jones, 15 Jan. 1935, HRC, Hanley papers.

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England, Walpole was a tremendously popular author, one of the 'gods of the lending libraries', in George Orwell's phrase.[60] Though pleased with his success, Walpole was worried by how 'verbose', 'overemphasised', and 'very dull' his books could be, and he harboured a defensive envy of modernists, including Virginia Woolf, with whom he was friendly. He made these remarks to his diary on Christmas Eve 1931. Without discernible irony, he told himself: 'My only trouble in my writing is that, wriggle as I may, I'm definitely old-fashioned. Now I'd *like* to be modern. I'd rather be a male Hugh Walpole to a female Virginia Woolf than anything else on earth.'[61] Several weeks before Walpole made that rueful audit of his career, he had launched an assault on the formal and sexual pathologies of modern fiction, taking Hanley, rather than anyone with any literary clout, as his example. Walpole ritually tore up a copy of *Boy* in a London bookshop.[62] Hanley wrote to him rejecting Walpole's efforts to tar him with Bloomsbury associations, and emphasizing the importance of working-class experiences of suffering and vulnerability to his own authorial vision. 'I cannot and will not say I am sorry I wrote "BOY" I am only sorry that I have been coupled with those whom I will call – "the half crippled bastard of appreciation and simulation who swarm in Bloomsbury and do neither themselves or anybody else any good["]. ' In another part of the letter he insisted: 'I belong to no school, clique, have never lived in Bloomsbury and don't know anything at all about the Latin Quarter. I am not sophisticated, not highbrow in any sense of the term. ' He had not, as Walpole had claimed, 'written to out do the Lawrentians or Joyceans', and had not even read Joyce.[63]

To some extent Hanley was telling Walpole what he thought Walpole wanted to hear, and he may have been protesting too much.[64] Perhaps in 1931 he had not read Joyce, but a year or two later he definitely owned a copy of the banned *Ulysses*.[65] And if association with the always imprecise term 'Bloomsbury' was an accusation that Hanley could plausibly refute, he and his work did have debts to the modernist enterprise for which 'Bloomsbury' was made to serve as a metonym. Hanley swung both ways, benefiting from modernism and courting the apparatus of middlebrow culture. In the modernist–traditionalist conflict, Hanley did not play the part that Walpole had scripted for him – nor the one that Rose has.

The broader point is not that the handful of working-class writers discussed here was necessarily more typical than the handful of anti-modernist ones that Rose presents, but that the existence of people like Chaplin is enough to erode Rose's claims that hostility was the default autodidact response to modernism. Towards the end of his book, Rose makes an aside that goes further toward

[60] George Orwell, 'Inside the whale', in *Inside the whale and other essays* (London, 1940), p. 153.
[61] Rupert Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole: a biography* (New York, 1952), p. 328.
[62] Anthony Burgess, 'Introduction' to James Hanley, *Boy* (1931; London, 1992), pp. ix–x.
[63] Hanley to Walpole, 15 Nov., year not specified (1931?), HRC, Walpole papers.
[64] Fordham, *James Hanley*, p. 118. [65] Hanley to Jones, n.d. (c. 1932–4), HRC, Hanley papers.

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explaining anti-modernism than does his main class-based argument (and indeed sits uneasily with that argument). Rose quotes the playwright Bernard Kops, who was born in Stepney Green in 1926, the son of a pattern cutter in the leather industry. Kops recalled that reading Eliot 'changed my life … I had no pre-conceived ideas about poetry and read "The Wasteland" and "Prufrock" as if they were the most acceptable and common forms in existence … The poems spoke to me directly.'[66] Rose comments, 'Most working-class readers found it more difficult to leap into modernism, but because Kops had not yet become accustomed to more traditional poetry, he was not locked into an old frame.'[67] In an explanation of common readers' and writers' responses to modernism, that 'old frame' matters more than do feelings of exclusion. Popular anti-modernism was not the distinctive expression of the mentality of an autodidact intelligentsia, but the response of those people who had been schooled in an understanding of literature orthodox in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who had not moved outside its borders, as Chaplin had. This was an aggregate that included some working-class intellectuals but also a good many members of the middle class. The rest of this article attempts to make sense of that conventional understanding of literature.

## III

In 1941 W. F. Alexander wrote to a young literary critic whose first book he had just read. The critic had been a research student at Cambridge, where he had been influenced by F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. If his book did not have the Leavisite severity of the thesis that preceded it, it was still unforgiving in its judgement of pre-modernist poetry. In his letter, Alexander politely deplored 'that conviction of the whole younger generation that any savour of that older romanticism wh.[ich] filled music & painting as well as poetry for a century, giving us Keats & Scott & Coleridge &, with a last spurt, Rossetti and Swinburne' was to be regretted '& that, by implication, the only natural way to write poetry was in the style of … "I grow old, I grow old,/I must wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled."'[68] This view of Eliot's 'Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' would fit neatly into Rose's litany of anti-modernist opinions expressed by British people born into the working class. But Alexander was a New Zealander, the son of a small businessman; he became a journalist, and co-edited the first anthology of New Zealand poetry in English.

A loyalty to 'that older romanticism' and a concomitant hostility to modernism could be found in a variety of social settings, within Britain as well as in the empire. One of Britain's principal bastions of resistance against modernism in

[66] Bernard Kops, *The world is a wedding* (London, 1963), p. 104. [67] Rose, *Intellectual life*, p. 458.
[68] W. F. Alexander to E. H. McCormick, 23 Feb. 1941, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, McCormick papers, 166/14; E. H. McCormick, 'Literature in New Zealand: an essay in cultural criticism' (M.Litt. thesis, Cambridge, 1935); idem, *Letters and art in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1940).

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literature was the Poetry Society, whose active membership was largely middle or upper middle class.[69] Well into the 1940s, members were still 'railing against the moderns'.[70] A 1946 review in the society's *Poetry Review* grudgingly praised a new book by Geoffrey Grigson for moving away from the 'attitude towards poetry' manifest in his earlier books, an attitude 'which can become so heretical and subversive'.[71] It was not the only accusation of heresy that year. An anthology by young poets was judged lacking in 'sound loyalty' to 'classical forms': instead it manifested a 'loyalty to heresy' that was 'only too pronounced in the rhythmless prosiness of all too many of the poems which are here given'.[72] When Muriel Spark became the society's secretary and the editor of *Poetry Review* in 1947, sentiments such as these were challenged. Spark was evidently appointed in the erroneous belief that, as a young woman, she could easily be manipulated by the society's grandees.[73] Some of the ructions that followed concerned Spark's management style and objectives; others arose from her more ecumenical tastes. 'Irregular rhythms, strange ideas, free modes of expression were what enraged quite a lot of former readers' of *Poetry Review*.[74] Some of the members who supported Spark, such as the barrister Christmas Humphreys, did so despite disagreements about what made for good poetry. Several years after Spark left the society in 1949, Humphreys resigned too; there had not been a sufficient restoration of the poetic status quo ante, and the poetry then published in the *Review* had 'ceased to appeal' to him. In a lecture to the society in 1943, Humphreys had set out his criteria for poetry: 'verse usually has metre, rhythm, rhyme (unless blank, which has laws of its own), uses poetic words, has a definite form however tenuous, and at least some meaning to the heart or mind'. Humphreys commented in his 1978 autobiography: 'I cannot criticise "modern" poetry for I do not admit that it is poetry. … Let me be dubbed a classical-romantic diehard.'[75]

As Humphreys's comments suggest, what was at stake in disagreements about modernism was not just taste but a theory of literature. This theory was a corollary of the literary history that Stefan Collini has called 'the Whig interpretation of English literature'. The outlines of this version of literary history were traced and retraced in the late nineteenth century's numerous primers in 'English

[69] On Poetry Society members' backgrounds, see Derek Stanford, *Inside the forties: literary memoirs, 1937–1957* (London, 1977), pp. 152–3; Muriel Spark, *Curriculum vitae: autobiography* (London, 1992), pp. 175–7. 'Naturally', the poet Sydney Tremayne remembered in 1969, the leader of the 'established cohorts' against Spark's liberalization of the society 'was a general'. Tremayne to Robert Garioch [Sutherland], 20 Feb. 1969, National Library of Scotland, Tremayne papers, MS 26568.

[70] Spark, *Curriculum vitae*, p. 169.

[71] Anon., 'Poets and pretenders', *Poetry Review*, 37 (1946), pp. 213–20, at p. 219.

[72] Anon., 'Poets and pretenders: a faithful axiomatic survey of new books', *Poetry Review*, 37 (1946), pp. 287–301, at p. 291. See also Gay S. Taylor, 'Editor: *Poetry Review*', Oct. 1944, Tom Harrisson Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, TC 73/1/C.

[73] Spark, *Curriculum vitae*, p. 169; Stanford, *Inside the forties*, p. 153.

[74] Spark, *Curriculum vitae*, p. 174.

[75] Christmas Humphreys, *Both sides of the circle: the autobiography of Christmas Humphreys* (London, 1978), p. 152.

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literature' and its series on 'men of letters'. Collini's focus is on the ideas about English culture and history that these texts propounded and reinforced: the centrality of the purported English values of freedom and 'character' rather than formal artifice, and a bias against systematization.[76] (Shakespeare, for instance, seldom observed the unities of time, place and action.) My concern here is with the theory of literature manifested in these texts rather than their implication in the discourse of the national character. A cornerstone of this theory of literature was Francis Turner Palgrave's *Golden treasury*, which has been called 'the most influential anthology in English literary history'.[77] In the *Golden treasury*, the values of 'simplicity of narrative', love of nature, and 'reverence for human Passion and Character' reigned supreme. Unsurprisingly, Palgrave found these qualities most in evidence in the poets from whose poetics these values in part derived, including Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Scott.[78] The eighteenth-century section of the *Golden treasury* was correspondingly brief, and little from the metaphysical poets was included: Palgrave found their work 'often deformed by verbal fancies and conceits of thought'.[79] Donne was omitted altogether.

The Reverend Stopford Brooke was another influential conduit between the values of the English romantics and popular interpretations of literature in the late nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. Brooke was a devoted Wordsworthian who played an essential part in recruiting subscribers for the 1890 purchase of Dove Cottage as a permanent memorial to the poet.[80] Wordsworth's influence as a literary theorist is stamped firmly on Brooke's primer *English literature*. In *Lyrical ballads*, Wordsworth wrote: 'The earliest poets … generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men; feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and figurative.' But such precedents allowed later poets to mimic the formal strategies of the greats 'mechanical[ly]', 'without being animated by the same passion'.[81] Adding to them a jab at intellectualism, Brooke reprised the terms of Wordsworth's arguments when he claimed that the poets of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries other than Milton 'set aside natural feeling, and wrote according to frigid rules of art. Their style lost life and fire; and losing these, lost art, which has its roots in emotion, and gained artifice, which has its roots in intellectual analysis.'[82]

[76] Stefan Collini, *Public moralists: political thought and intellectual life in England, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), p. 357.

[77] Christopher Clausen, 'The Palgrave version', *Georgia Review*, 34 (1980), pp. 273–89, at p. 275.

[78] Ibid., pp. 285–6.

[79] Francis Turner Palgrave, ed., *The golden treasury of the best songs and lyrical poems in the English language*, updated by John Press (6th edn, Oxford, 1994), p. 644 ('Summary of book second'); Clausen, 'Palgrave version', pp. 285–6.

[80] Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 244–6.

[81] William Wordsworth, 'Appendix' to *Lyrical ballads* (1802), in *Selected prose*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth, 1988), pp. 302–3.

[82] Stopford Brooke, *English literature* (London, 1880), p. 161.

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Brooke's *English literature* was highly praised and had sold nearly half a million copies by 1916.[83] The *Golden treasury* too sold prodigiously, and Palgrave and Brooke's versions of English literary history became embedded in popular thinking about literature. In a lecture at the Manchester Literary Club in 1911 the Reverend T. M. Phillips echoed them both. When Pope came of age as a poet, Phillips argued, '[a]n intellectual poetry, uninfluenced by feeling … banished the great passions of which Shakespeare and Milton had sung'. The eighteenth century was an 'age of cold understanding' that was incompatible with 'the growth of the nobler poetry of passion, imagination, and true appreciation of life and nature'. From Cowper onwards, and reaching a climax with the romantics, nature and ultimately passion returned to English poetry.[84]

As well as being widely disseminated, these romantic-derived ideas about literature were given practical application in twentieth-century writers' clubs. Given its almost complete absence from the historiography of twentieth-century Britain, a brief sketch of this aspiring writers' movement is in order. In the late nineteenth century, the growth of the reading public and the transformation of newspaper and magazine publishing opened up a new horizon of opportunities for freelance writers. This in turn opened up a space for an industry of how-to-write manuals and correspondence courses in journalism and creative writing. Magazines catering to the audience of aspiring writers followed – *Writer's Monthly*, the *Writer's Own Magazine*, the *Writer's Journal*, *Writing News*, *Popular Writing*, and many more. The most durable such magazine, the *Writer*, helped co-ordinate the most common type of formally organized writers' group, the 'writers' circle'. Drawing a membership of women as well as men, most of them from the middle or lower middle class, writers' circles were founded in a number of English and Scottish cities in the interwar period. A majority of writers' circle members aimed to write for commercial publication; an older movement, 'amateur journalism', whose members eschewed commercial publication and instead wrote for privately printed or lovingly handwritten 'magazines', declined as the writers' circles prospered.[85]

Culturally, the writers' circles and the 'amateur journalists' occupied what Harry Hopkins, noting its passing in the 1950s, called 'that comfortable old *John O' London's Weekly*–Robert Lynd–J. B. Priestley middle ground'.[86] A miscellany chiefly concerned with writers past and present, *John o' London's* was an important feature of the aspirant writer's landscape. Writers' circles discussed articles and

[83] The figure comes from the editorial notes on Matthew Arnold's review of the book in R. H. Super, ed., *The complete prose works of Matthew Arnold* (11 vols., Ann Arbor, 1960–77), VIII, p. 441. I owe the reference to Collini, *Public moralists*, p. 354.

[84] Manchester Literary Club minutes, 9 Jan. 1911, Manchester Archives and Local Studies, M524/1/2/13.

[85] See Christopher Hilliard, 'A writer's capital: aspiring authors and the uses of creativity in Britain, 1920–1960' (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard, 2003), chs. 1–2.

[86] Harry Hopkins, *The new look: a social history of the forties and fifties in Britain* (London, 1963), pp. 245–6.

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short stories published in it, and its editors and contributors assisted writing clubs.[87] *John o' London's* was firmly middlebrow in its outlook. Its attitude to modernism – exemplified by Robert Lynd's regular front-page articles in the 1930s – was unenthusiastic, but not stridently hostile in the manner of the *Poetry Review*: *John o' London's* was, as Hopkins put it, 'easily confident in its possession of cultural title-deeds'. The more utilitarian literary criticism in magazines such as the *Writer* or *Popular Writing* derived practically no lessons for would-be writers from the texts of modernists, and tended to be belligerent or defensive about 'highbrow' literature. The kinds of literature the amateur writers' magazines approved of, however, were much the same as those valued by *John o' London's*. The writers' club members whom the *Writer* addressed shared these tastes. They admired nineteenth-century poetry, the Victorian and Edwardian novel, and contemporary authors who claimed an affiliation with this tradition. Arnold Bennett was a particular favourite; a member of one 'amateur journalism' group lived in a house named after Bennett's 1910 novel *Clayhanger*.[88]

Yet these aspiring writers also enjoyed – and imitated – the popular short stories that originated with O. Henry, Guy de Maupassant, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and which filled out magazines such as the *Strand* and *John Bull*, 'the weekly review, the family "general" magazine and the fiction magazine' that catered to middle-class readers from the 1890s to the 1940s.[89] Despite their esteem for the romantics, these would-be authors were comfortable with the 'mass-produced' fiction whose earlier incarnations Wordsworth had railed against. Bennett himself had noted the ironic convergence of high-minded poetics and mass-market literature. At the beginning of his book *Fame and fiction* (1901), Bennett discussed the propensity of the 'average reader' of novels in a circulating library to subordinate form to content. He quoted Matthew Arnold's declaration (in the preface to his 1853 *Poems*) that writers should learn 'the all-importance of the choice of a subject … and the subordinate character of expression'. Bennett exclaimed: 'Thus Matthew Arnold reinforcing the subscriber to Mudie's!'[90]

What makes the romantic–Victorian tradition so important in explaining popular responses to modernism is not so much the fact that Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson were favourite poets – though they were – but the way the *poetics* of that tradition governed conventional wisdom about the nature of writing. For these 'common writers' it was axiomatic that the best writing was the product of personal experience. Genuine knowledge of and concern for one's 'material' were held to be prerequisites of an effective piece of writing. Imaginative fancy or indirect knowledge was rarely enough. The sincerity and acuity of a writer's engagement with his or her material had a bearing on the *formal* qualities of a

[87] Newcastle Writers' Club minutes, 18 Nov. 1947, Tyne and Wear Archive Service, SX88/1/2; L. Harkness, 'The club', in West Country Essay Club, *Literary adventures, 1921–1922* (n.p., n.d.), p. 1.

[88] 'New members', *Literary Amateur*, 5 (Nov.–Dec. 1925).

[89] Richard Findlater, *What are writers worth?* (London, 1963), p. 23; Reginald Pound, *Mirror of the century: the Strand magazine, 1891–1950* (South Brunswick, NJ, 1966), pp. 7, 57, 139–40, 150, 190–4.

[90] E. A. Bennett, *Fame and fiction: an enquiry into certain popularities* (London, 1901), pp. 11–12.

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poem or story. 'It is only through close observation [that] you can avoid clichés', insisted Margaret Lees, a writer of serials and romances who belonged to the Halifax Authors' Circle.[91] A correspondence teacher and editor of the *Writer* put the case in terms close to Wordsworth's:

> It is because inexpert writers describe characters wholly out of their imagination that they drop into stock phrases, clots of words that other people have formed and which have become musty and lifeless. Surely we should find fewer heroines with hair 'the colour of ripe corn' if authors went more often to life instead of to memories of other writers for their delineations.[92]

Diligent observation of reality would generate more vivid images because form was secondary to content and 'life'. Plot and character were the 'life' of a novel.[93] The 'life' of a poem was a noble sentiment or a sincere experience. A poem could therefore exist in some way even before it had form. In the 1920s, Flora Thompson, who would become famous with her autobiographical volume *Lark Rise*, ran a literary corresponding society that offered tuition in poetry. Thompson defined poetry as a heightened awareness that could be incarnated in verse; it was 'a spirit rather than an embodiment'. 'Not until a poem is definitely shaping itself are the rules of metre and rh[y]thm to be called in.'[94] A knowledgeable observer thought that this belief that the content or soul of a poem had logical and indeed chronological priority over form was a popular orthodoxy.[95] The idea had been confidently set down in Brooke's primer: 'The history of English literature is the story of what English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose or beautiful poetry in the English language.' Matthew Arnold quoted this passage approvingly in his review in the *Nineteenth Century*.[96]

Twentieth-century aspirants and their advisers frequently used metaphors of 'embodiment' to describe the relation between form and content, or called form a 'vehicle' for content. The correspondence instructor Kenneth MacNichol used both metaphors, saying that '[t]he "technique of fiction writing" serves … as a vehicle for the author who has a story to tell … It provides a body for the soul of the story, that being the part of the story which the author's own life must add to the unenlivened form.'[97] Given this way of thinking about form and content, it is not surprising that one of the doyens of the literary advice business should reach for a biblical quotation to underscore his point that personality was important

[91] Halifax Authors' Circle minutes, 21 Oct. 1952, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS) Calderdale, Soc. 10/2. [92] Kennedy Williamson, *Can you write short stories?* (London, n.d.), p. 114.
[93] See the letters and questionnaires quoted in Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, pp. 58–61.
[94] 'The Peverel Literary Society verse-writing course', lesson 1: 'Subject and form' (c. 1925–7), pp. 1, 7, HRC, Flora Thompson papers, 3/5.
[95] Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'The popular conception of a poet' (1894), in *Adventures in criticism* (Cambridge, 1926), p. 125.
[96] Matthew Arnold, 'A guide to English literature' (1877), in Super, ed., *Complete prose works*, VIII, pp. 239–40.
[97] Kenneth MacNichol, *Twelve lectures on the technique of fiction writing* (London, n.d. [based on a course given in winter 1925–6]), pp. 4–5.

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and that '[l]iterary style' would not compensate for its absence: '"The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."'[98] This is a theory of writing quite incompatible with Ezra Pound's dictum 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.'[99]

While aspiring writers and their guides believed that the 'spirit' and the 'letter' could be meaningfully separated, and that it was the spirit or 'life' that made a story or poem a good one, in practice form mattered a great deal in their assessments of literary texts. It was deviation from regular versification into 'free verse' that, more than anything else, enabled traditionalists to identify soulless and 'artificial' poetry.[100] They were also alienated by modernism's distance from Victorian or Georgian kinds of 'beauty'. For many people, beauty was the essence of poetry. When a guest speaker addressed the Halifax Authors' Circle 'on the achievements of modern poets' in 1940,

> in discussion it appeared that members were unanimously of the opinion that modern poets did *not* successfully portray or interpret the spirit of the age … Mr Buchanan certainly opened our eyes to the work of some poets hitherto unknown to us; but it seemed that however diligently we searched their pages we should not necessarily be rewarded by the discovery of beauty – surely the poet's inspiration throughout the ages – now neglected in favour of 'stark realities' in this age of flux and shifting values.[101]

Flora Thompson told her students:

> This quest for newness of subject has led modern verse into strange paths. One manifestation is the daring and ugliness of a certain school of modern verse. The work of these writers is often original in the sense that they deal with subjects never before exploited: the drawback is that there is often little poetry in it.[102]

Poetry without established sorts of loftiness or beauty, and without formal staples such as rhyme and familiar prosody, could seem like no poetry at all.[103] This is why the couplet from 'The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' seemed so unpoetic to W. F. Alexander, and to Arthur Waugh when he reviewed an anthology containing the poem for the *Quarterly Review*.[104] By the same token, people whose tastes had not been decisively shaped by the Whig interpretation of

[98] Cecil Hunt, *Living by the pen: a practical guide to all forms of journalism and fiction writing* (rev. edn London, 1951), p. 136. Compare S. W. Powell, 'Modern poetry', *Poetry Review*, 26 (1935), pp. 265–70, at pp. 265–6.

[99] Ezra Pound, *A B C of reading* (New Haven, 1934), p. 14.

[100] A. H. Brazier, 'Poetry and versification', *Popular Writing*, 1, 1 (July 1929), pp. 7–9, at pp. 7–8.

[101] Halifax Authors' Circle minutes, 27 Jan. 1940, WYAS Calderdale, Soc. 10/2 (emphasis in original). See also H.R.M., letter, *Writer*, 1, 5 (Aug. 1939), p. 56.

[102] 'The Peverel Literary Society verse-writing course', lesson 1, p. 5, HRC, Thompson papers, 3/5.

[103] Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London, 1984), p. 79; Reginald Pound, *A. P. Herbert: a biography* (London, 1976), p. 95; Humphreys, *Both sides of the circle*, p. 152; Dallas Kenmare, 'The modern spirit in poetry', *Poetry Review*, 26 (1935), pp. 345–50, at p. 347.

[104] Arthur Waugh, 'The new poetry' (1916), in Michael Grant, ed., *T. S. Eliot: the critical heritage* (2 vols., London, 1982), 1, p. 69. See also the review (unsigned, as was customary) of *Prufrock and other observations* in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 21 June 1917, reproduced ibid., p. 74.

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English literature had less trouble with that poem. Because Bernard Kops 'had no preconceived ideas about poetry', he could find that Eliot's poem 'spoke to me directly'.

The popular literary theory associated with the Whig interpretation of English literary history was not as class-specific as the Season or pigeon-fancying. Some of its adherents were middle-class, and others were working-class autodidacts. There is a parallel with the autodidact tradition itself, which was a cluster of 'working-class' mechanisms of appropriating and venerating cultural materials that were not, for the most part, 'working class' in their provenance. When working-class readers and writers decried Eliot or Edith Sitwell in terms similar to middle-class members of the Poetry Society, it was because, against the odds, they had gained a purchase on a literary tradition and an understanding of literature that people from more privileged backgrounds acquired much more easily. Class and privilege saturate the social history of literature, but it is unhelpful to interpret the reception of modernism as class conflict continued by other means.

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