5 Versifying Politics
G. D. H. Cole and the Uses of Poetry

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The socialist intellectual G. D. H. Cole (1889–1959) was a remarkably prolific writer. He published biographies, popular histories, guides to the modern economy and overviews of contemporary politics, books about trade unionism, cooperation and the Labour party, expositions of guild socialism (the contribution for which he is perhaps best remembered today), editions of literary texts, a multi-volume history of socialist thought, many articles and reviews for the *New Statesman* and other magazines and newspapers, and even a string of detective novels. Over the course of his career, he contributed to many genres of political writing. When his widow, Margaret Cole, compiled a bibliography of her husband's work, this ran to three pages of text – and that was merely counting the books he had published. Margaret emphasised that she had not attempted to compile 'a complete list' of all his published writings 'which would take up many pages'.[1]

Within a vast word count that was focused predominantly on prose, Cole also published four books of poetry: *Poems* (1910), *New Beginnings* (1914), *The Bolo Book* (1921 – jointly with Margaret Cole) and *The Crooked World* (1933). He edited and contributed to *Oxford Poetry, 1910–1913* (1913), and he and his wife edited *The Ormond Poets*, a series of sixteen collections of poetry appearing between 1927 and 1928, with each volume offering a selection of a particular poet's work. Poetry was where G. D. H. Cole's life as a published author began. His *Poems* is the book that heads up that list of titles assembled by Margaret as an appendix to the biography she wrote of her late husband. As David Reisman has noted, although it was *The World of Work* (1913), Cole's survey of contemporary trade unionism, which seemed to announce him and his authorial ambitions, this was not strictly speaking his literary debut, but his second published book, 'sandwiched between *Poems* in

[1] Margaret Cole, *The Life of G. D. H. Cole* (London, 1971), p. 289.

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1910 and *New Beginnings*, a further volume of verse, in 1914'.[2] Margaret's assessment of both these early poetry collections was typically forthright: she described them as 'bad, though not abysmal'.[3]

Before their marriage, Margaret herself – then Margaret Postgate – was also a published poet, contributing to *Bits of Things by Five Girton Students* (1914) and producing a collection *Margaret Postgate's Poems* (1918). She later admitted to rather losing heart about her own poetry, given the muted reception it received. Yet, while G. D. H.'s poetic output has faded into obscurity, Margaret has begun to receive some posthumous recognition as a poet. Her verse has been included in anthologies of First World War poetry, while her poem 'The Fallen Leaves' became a set text in schools.[4] Her husband's poems meanwhile seem unlikely to achieve any retrospective recognition based on literary merit alone.

Literary merit, however, is not a prerequisite for making something interesting to historians. This chapter reflects on where poetry sits within Cole's career, and how verse could provide another way of writing about politics – and, indeed, sometimes singing about it too. What should we make of Cole's own poetry, and his interest in things poetic? Where does poetry fit within an analysis of his life and work? How, if at all, does it relate to the more dominant genres in which he wrote so prolifically: biography, social history, political philosophy, popular introductions to economics and politics, political journalism and reviewing? And how was poetry linked to Cole's political commitment and his contribution to the development of the Labour interest in the first half of the twentieth century, as a political thinker and teacher. Connections between poetry and politics are hardly novel – not least in thinking about the 1930s, when many poets, on the left especially, were vocal in their commitment to go beyond the self-conscious challenge of much Modernist writing in an 'art for art's sake', to produce a political verse which might address issues of class, economic depression and international tensions and conflicts.[5] Cole was not one of the 1930s 'poetry and the people' set[6]

[2] David Reisman (ed.), *Democratic Socialism in Britain, vol. 7* (Abingdon, 1996), p. viii.
[3] Cole, *Life of G. D. H. Cole*, p. 46.
[4] Compare Tim Kendall (ed.), *Poetry of the First World War. An Anthology* (Oxford, 2013), where Margaret Cole is represented by three poems.
[5] Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988); Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London, 1976); Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler* (Manchester, 2003).
[6] The monthly magazine *Poetry and the People* began in 1938, offering a mixture of poems and articles on politics and the arts. In practice, nonetheless, some of the parody forms and ironic commentaries that appeared in its pages adopt a rather similar form of address to poems in *The Crooked World*.

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and actually showed little interest in the poets of his own time. But his preferences in reading poetry – towards the work of William Morris and Walt Whitman, for instance – often reflected his sympathy with those writers' own political sensibilities.

The title of this chapter, 'Versifying Politics', refers to the ways in which Cole came to adopt poetry as another way of writing about politics. On the whole he did not look to poetry as a way to explore different emotions or ideas from those he expressed elsewhere in his voluminous written output. In so far as the terms verse and poetry might carry slightly different resonances, it is most tempting to place Cole's efforts in the verse camp. Margaret glossed them all as 'verse' when listing them in her husband's bibliography – from the satirical doggerel of *The Bolo Book* to the lovelorn outpourings in that first collection *Poems*. Cole's recourse to writing verse over much of his career does suggest that we should pay attention to it, and to what it might mean as a complement to his other work. His first two volumes of poetry could be viewed simply as the work of a cultured and literate young person in those early years of the twentieth century, almost a rite of passage – and it is notable that Margaret too published a volume of poetry while in her early twenties. What is more interesting is that G. D. H. went on to publish *The Crooked World* when he was in his forties and well established as an author, researcher and political thinker. To write poetry for one's own satisfaction is one thing (and there are unpublished verses of his in the archive too), but to publish is something else. Cole chose to persist with verse as a form, even as he became well established as a public figure and a writer in prose.

The connections between socialism and poetry in Cole's work can be considered in relation to two more familiar histories: of socialist song and a popular poetic culture in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, on the one hand, and the development of an explicitly political poetry in left-wing circles in the 1930s, on the other. Poetry and song had fitted both the missionary character of fin-de-siècle socialism and its aesthetic sensibilities, with the publication of Clarion song books and 'Chants for Socialists', and the commonplace integration of poetry into the pages of socialist magazines and newspapers.[7] Verse in this context

[7] On socialism and poetry in the late nineteenth century, see Kirsten Harris, 'Poetry and Fin de Siècle Socialism', *Literary Compass*, 13, 11 (2016), 724–34; Ruth Livesey, 'Socialism and Victorian Poetry', *Literature Compass*, 1, 1 (2004), 1–6; Ruth Livesey, 'Morris, Carpenter, Wilde and the Political Aesthetics of Labor', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, 2 (2004), 601–16. On the broader context of socialist culture, see Chris Waters, *British Socialism and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1990), 601–16; Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 5–55.

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was a way of expressing political allegiance and promoting socialist ideas in ways that were popular and accessible. The left-wing political poetry of the 1930s in Britain also celebrated the potential for verse as a way to 'let the people sing'[8] and to mobilise and organise for socialism. Colin Draper wrote of how poets might be recognised as 'revolutionary skirmishers', and that this required them to write in particular ways, writing 'fiercely, simply, and directly', where 'lampoon, satire and ballad' might serve as the most appropriate genres. The uses of poetry as a response to the Spanish Civil War, in particular, defined a political poetry, which aimed to rally for the cause and adopt verse forms to articulate ideological positions and shared commitments.[9]

Cole's poetry had some affinities with both of these approaches, with the tradition in which singing provided a shared repertoire amongst political comrades, and with ideas about poetry as an appropriate form for expressing one's political convictions and speaking about political ideas. But his writing also provides a striking example of how the output of one author could encompass a range of very different types of verse, and how a commitment to writing and publishing poetry sat alongside the many other different genres in which Cole wrote over the course of his career. In exploring Cole's poetry in this chapter I begin by looking briefly at his attitude towards poetry in general, before going on to consider his early poetry, written while a student and young academic at Oxford, his use of verse as political entertainment, and finally *The Crooked World* and its take on discussing contemporary problems through the medium of verse.

I

In characterising her husband for posterity, Margaret Cole made a great deal of Douglas' aesthetic sensibilities. Poetry was a part of that. She cited his ability to quote long passages of English – and classical – literature, and told us that his three 'passionate' loves were Morris, Wordsworth and Whitman, while he had barely read anything written in the last half-century.[10] Ivor Brown also noted that admiration for Morris: writing in the Oxford University newspaper *Cherwell* in the mid 1930s, he remembered being introduced to socialism by Cole two decades earlier, when

[8] L. John Isserlis, 'A job for a poet', *Poetry and the People*, no. 16, January 1940, p. 2.
[9] William Abrahams and Peter Stansky, *Journey to the Frontier: Julian Bell and John Cornford: their lives and the 1930s* (London, 1966); Stan Smith, 'Missing Dates: From "Spain 1937" to "September 1, 1939"', *Literature and History*, 13, 1 (Spring 1987), 155–74.
[10] Cole, *Life of G. D. H. Cole*, p. 38.

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Cole was 'at that time addicted to Morris and to writing portentous poetry in the Victorian manner'.[11] His contemporaries at Oxford recalled someone to whom poetry mattered, within a context in which many students felt the impetus to write poetry: Naomi Mitchison reminisced about her Oxford days before the First World War and admired the 'pale-faced, slender' G. D. H., 'to whom I wrote two of my worst poems'.[12]

Cole's sense of himself as a literary figure is clear from his decision to publish his work: the 68 pages of *Poems* were issued at a shilling by the Walter Scott Publishing Company in 1910, while he was still an undergraduate, and the 74 pages of *New Beginnings*, came out with B. H. Blackwell in 1914 under the name Douglas Cole, who is described there, a little grandly, as 'Author of "Poems, 1910,", "The World of Labour," etc.'[13] Cole had also had 'The Record' ('an occasional diary in verse, 1910–1912') published privately as a small volume in 1912. Even more interestingly, he assumed a form of artistic leadership, co-editing a volume of *Oxford Poetry* (1913), with a second impression in 1914, as an 'anthology of contemporary University poetry' – 'throwing together in a convenient form typical specimens of the various kinds of verse that are being written in Oxford and everywhere else, as poetry begins to wake up'.[14] Largely, this is a collection of work by writers who would become well known for other things: the historians G. N. Clark and Philip Guedalla, the novelist and bibliophile Michael T. H. Sadler, the politician and humorist A. P. Herbert and the detective novelist and Catholic priest Ronald Knox. Cole himself contributed five items, one of which was itself a set of eight poems, seeming to rather abuse his position as editor in including a disproportionate quantity of his own work.

This sense that Cole had of himself as a literary figure and impresario continued into his later career. We find him in the 1920s and 1930s producing editions of Daniel Defoe and William Cobbett, and – most relevant to the subject of this chapter – publishing the 'Ormond Poets', elegant cloth-bound editions on fine quality paper, of writers from Shakespeare and Robert Herrick to Keats and Shelley.[15] Robert

[11] Ivor Brown, 'All Very Sanguine', *Cherwell*, 9 February 1935. The line which Brown quoted in illustration of this point was 'Life is the anaesthetic of the soul', taken from Cole's poem 'Youth's Second-Sight', published in G. D. H. Cole, G. P. Dennis and Sherard Vines (eds.), *Oxford Poetry 1910–13* (Oxford, 1914).

[12] Naomi Mitchison, 'Oxford Then', *Good Housekeeping*, December 1938, p. 144. She continued: 'but at least I never showed them to him!'.

[13] Douglas Cole, *New Beginnings and The Record* (Oxford, 1914).

[14] Cole, Dennis and Vines, *Oxford Poetry 1910–13*, preface, p. v.

[15] Daniel Defoe, *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London, 1928); William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 3 volumes (London, 1931); *The Ormond Poets*, 16 volumes (London, 1927–28).

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Browning was the most recent writer represented in the choices for this series, with other volumes focusing on the work of William Blake, John Donne and excerpts from the Authorised Version of the Old Testament. The Ormond Poets was a joint project with Margaret, and she reminisces about the pleasure of making the selections together. The selection was the point: these are editions without any commentary or obvious editorial intervention in the text, and the volumes also need to be appreciated within Cole's interest in books as objects. The publisher 'Noel Douglas' was his own enterprise, committed to producing fine editions, the name Ormond being taken from the street where it was based.

This was the landscape of poetry within which Cole lived. Poetry was something he enjoyed reading, felt able to write to a standard that was publishable, and over which he assumed he could operate as an editor, selecting writings and making poetry available to a book-buying public. As part of that context, it is worth emphasising that he had a classical education and that he was interested in history and in the ways that literature formed a part of the historical narrative. He seems to have read little literature in other modern European languages, though, and his view of style and form essentially eschewed contemporary developments. This was reflected in the poetry he wrote, which for large stretches conformed to a ten-syllable line and rigid rhyming patterns.

Despite Cole's evident love of poetry, it is notable that in his wide-ranging body of work, poetry and prose rarely met. His *Life of William Cobbett* is one of the few books of his even to have a poetic epigraph, in this case from Ebenezer Elliott's 'Elegy on the Death of Cobbett'.[16] In the popular history *The Common People* that Cole co-wrote with his brother-in-law Raymond Postgate, there is some brief reference to the romantic poets responding to the French Revolution with 'some great and some fairly good poetry', and there is a short extract again from Ebenezer Elliott's work, remembering radicals transported for their advocacy for political reform in the 1790s.[17] But otherwise poetry features little in Cole's historical narratives or his expositions of political ideas.

This is in some ways surprising, since he had an interest in the links between literature and history, and indeed between politics and literature. He gave a Hogarth lecture on the subject in the 1920s, noting that 'I know of no book that is about political literature as literature – no book that studies the ideas of English political writers not only as ideas, but in relation to their literary form and flavour as well.' In writing about this

[16] G. D. H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (London, 1927), p. vii.
[17] G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People 1746–1938* (London, 1938), p. 158.

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topic, he emphasised the need to consider form and content together, though he explained that content would still be prominent in his treatment of the subject, 'for the first aim of nearly all political literature is to get something said, and only the second aim to say it well'.[18] His comments on different types of poetry here are interesting, drawing a distinction between lyric poetry and other sorts (dramatic, epic, didactic, observational), and observing that in the former '[s]ense and sound have no life apart', whereas poems which told a story or offered observations of nature, for example, might be analysed for their content, independently of their form. Even while setting out the importance of the relationship between what was being communicated and how that was being expressed in words, Cole seemed to backtrack, acknowledging that 'the more purely intellectual the content of literature becomes, the more separable it is from its form' – and he was not himself particularly celebrated for the elegance of his prose style. But he argued that poetry was written in a different frame of mind from prose, reinforcing the importance of those connections between form and content: 'For men are most moved to write poetry when an emotional experience most completely fuses form and content in their minds. They turn to prose rather in their cooler moments, when they have something to say, and are seeking the means of saying it clearly and well.'[19]

That comment about the emotional impetus for poetry may say something about Cole's own inclinations, legible in some of his more introspective verse. Yet, he made a case elsewhere in the Hogarth lecture for the prominence of politics in English poetry, citing Milton, Pope, Byron and others. Burns, he wrote, 'redeems our literature from the reproach of having no great political songs'.[20] That relationship between lyric and song was especially relevant to much of Cole's published verse, not least, as we shall see, in *The Bolo Book*. The lecture ends with a critique of academic writing and the jargon of politics. 'Modern political literature is, for the most part, far less literature than its equivalent of a hundred years ago', he wrote, and that 'cannot be good for political thinking, any more than it is good for literature'.[21]

When it came to poetry as a mode for expressing political ideas, even Cole's hero William Morris came in for some criticism. Cole argued that Morris' prose had endured better than his verse, because Morris thought of literature as a decorative art: 'Morris, the poet, chose commonly to retreat into an unreal world whose men and women, as well as the scenery, came off tapestries, or out of illuminated manuscripts of the

[18] G. D. H. Cole, *Politics and Literature* (London, 1929), p. 13. [19] Ibid., p. 12.
[20] Ibid., p. 19. [21] Ibid., p. 160.

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Middle Ages,' while Morris the propagandist 'lived vigorously … in a real world he loved'.[22] Cole commented that Morris 'wrote verses so easily' and approached poetry as a 'craftsman and designer', rather than as 'an imaginative artist determined to get at the heart of the world's meanings'. He saw this as Morris' limitation as a poet: 'Good verse can be written so, but hardly the greatest poetry.'[23]

II

Cole's early published poems are his least obviously political. The language is often elevated and a little archaic – self-consciously 'poetic'. Rather surprisingly (given that he had cut ties with organised religion quite early on) there are a number of religious references and themes. The persona of the lovelorn young poet puts in regular appearances, and the frustrations of romantic attachment are the main point of 'The Record':

> …thank God again
> That memory lives of the love I have loved in vain.
> In vain? nay, not quite vainly, if this be so:
> For the image of thee is a precious thing to know,
> And the thought of thee shall be my paraclete,
> When again the fates deny some thing that is sweet.
> Then I will think of thee, and thy loss shall seem
> A little thing, 'betwixt a dream and a dream'.[24]

And so on, for forty lines in this section alone.

There is, perhaps understandably, a lot of reflection on being young, including 'Youth's Second Sight':

> Even now from my sight
> Youth's glorious vision, that was once so rife
> Is taking wings, and flies.
> Not long for me Truth's lantern shall burn bright,
> For eighteen years of age, and none of life.[25]

The tone in these early poems can seem more seventeenth century than twentieth, and even the title of the poem 'Love's Unity' evokes origins in a world of Donne and Marvell.[26] But, occasionally, more socially-conscious elements break through the young varsity man's introspection:

[22] Ibid., pp. 21–22. Elsewhere, Cole describes Morris as 'the great poet': *A Century of Co-operation* (London, 1944), p. 215.
[23] G. D. H. Cole (ed.), *William Morris. Stories in prose, stories in verse, shorter poems, lectures and essays. Centenary Edition* (London, 1934), pp. xii–xiii.
[24] G. D. H. Cole, *Poems* (London, 1910). [25] Ibid. [26] Ibid.

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Come then, good comrades, let us make anew
The world with better purpose, fashioning
Some mighty justice on the highest throne.
…
Grown brotherly with brothers. Up and hear
The silver trumpet of fraternity
That sounds for all good comrades.[27]

Cole had already undergone his conversion to Socialism before going up to Oxford, and the references to comrades and fraternity show that this was beginning to make itself felt in his poetry.

It may say something about the literary networks of the time, that the *Times Literary Supplement* found space to note Cole's debut *Poems* of 1910 amongst a list of 'New Books', commenting that Cole 'writes with taste and finish as a grave moralist upon life' and offered some 'accomplished exercises' in the writing of sonnets, though the reviewer seemed less convinced about his abilities as a love poet.[28] *New Beginnings and the Record* also received some approving notice from the reviewers. 'Anybody who cares at all for literature should certainly spend one shilling to place this volume on his shelves', was the verdict from *Poetry Review*.[29]

III

Seven years on from *New Beginnings* – which ironically seems to have been an ending rather than a beginning for Cole's career as a poet in that vein – he and Margaret published a very different book of verse: *The Bolo Book* (1921). Authorship itself was treated as something much less precious in this volume. 'The Editors are not responsible for all of [the songs]', they wrote, 'nor are they even able in all cases rightly to apportion the responsibility'.[30] And these verses were presented explicitly as lyrics, 'meant to be sung as well as read'. The Coles envisaged them being taken up by 'Glee Clubs and other bodies which may desire to perform them', though reading them now they speak more of in-jokes and entertainment born of particular moments shared amongst political friends.[31] Gathering together an assembly of parodies and comic verses, digs at political opponents and lampoons of leading political figures, *The Bolo Book* was issued by the Labour Publishing Company as a pleasing little hardbound volume with an embossed cover illustration by Frank

[27] Ibid. [28] *TLS*, 427, 17 March 1910, p. 98. [29] *Poetry Review*, 6 (1915), p. 93.
[30] G. D. H. Cole and Margaret Cole (eds.), *The Bolo Book* (London, 1921), p. v. The editors note that some of the verses had already appeared in print, in *The Guildsman*, *The Communist*, and the *Daily Herald.*
[31] Ibid., p. v.

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Horrabin. The context was the aftermath of the First World War, Bolshevik scares, spies and scandals, political venality (notably the sales of honours) and the policies of Lloyd George's administration. Horrabin's image for the cover shows a cartoon plutocrat, with top hat and cane, and a big pound sign blazoned on his shirt front, frowning at what looks to be a cloud of bees buzzing at his back. On closer inspection, they reveal themselves as musical notes, troubling the capitalist's peace. The singing of songs from the book of *Bolo* promises to irritate the establishment in like manner.

The verses in *The Bolo Book* rest heavily on parody, adapting familiar lyrics, hymns and poems to ridicule and criticise the politics and politicians of the day. The Minister of Housing, Christopher Addison (still a Liberal at this point, before his conversion to Labour), is cast as Kubla Khan in a Coleridgean fantasy:

> In Bermondsey did Addison
> An Artisan's Abode foresee, …[32]

There were various takes on nursery rhymes, including 'Here we go round the vicious circle' and 'What are Cabinets made of?' (the answer being 'Wizards from Wales / And journalists' tales').[33] 'A Song of Shortage' reaches such a catchy conclusion that it almost overshadows the original words of the nursery rhyme about blackbirds and pies:

> All alike must suffer –
> Put the blame on Fritz –
> Four-and-twenty duchesses
> Starving at the Ritz.[34]

The Bolo Book commemorates a world of politics and sociability within the Labour Research Department, at Fabian summer schools and workers' education events, and records that still somewhat unlikely side to G. D. H. Cole, as librettist-in-chief for exuberant revues.[35] His most substantial contribution to this world of socialist light entertainment was *The Striker Stricken* from 1926, produced in the aftermath of the collapse of the General Strike. As a prologue to *The Striker Stricken* announced:

> This play's to show you how the strike began
> And how it ended – hopes and fears that ran

[32] Ibid., pp. 24–26. [33] Ibid., pp. 28 and 36. [34] Ibid., p. 38.

[35] The earliest of these, according to Margaret, was *The Homeland of Mystery*, some text for which survives in Cole's papers at Nuffield College: GDHC/A3/3/1-18. The characters included Marie Stopes, Stanley Baldwin, Lloyd George, Leon Trotsky and 'a Flapper'. Maurice Reckitt also contributed some songs for the show, and some of the verses were published in *The Bolo Book*.

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Their course and died – some censure, some laudation.
Some sense, some satire, some exaggeration
Went to its making …

Cole's operetta in the mode of Gilbert and Sullivan (and indeed adapting several songs from The Pirates of Penzance, Patience, the Gondoliers and the Mikado amongst its various parodies) was subtitled 'or the Thirty Sleepers of Eccleston Square being the Operatives' Opera in Three "Ops"'.[36] The show was written for a University of London tutorial classes summer school, supposedly in 48 hours flat, and parodies such as 'Onward, Christian peace-makers/Stop the floods of gore' give a flavour of the piece. The entertainment was not entirely in verse, and sections of dialogue alternate with songs and mock-Shakespearean blank verse soliloquy. Various hymn tunes and familiar pieces of popular and classical music were attached to the lines to be sung; the lyric 'Joynson Hicks would like a teeny/Weeny touch of Mussolini/Just to teach the workers what is what' was set to Dvorak's 'Humoresque', while the round 'London's Burning' was recast as 'London's striking, London's striking,/Bring blacklegs, bring blacklegs,/Scab, scab, scab, scab'.[37] One of the better Gilbert and Sullivan pastiches was given to the person playing Ernest Bevin: 'I am the very pattern of a boss for this imbroglio./In the coming Labour Government I'll take the Chief's portfolio.' The operetta was revived for various Labour gatherings over the following decades, though not published at the time.[38] When Asa Briggs and John Saville published the text with notes by Margaret Cole in 1977, they described how the piece had been 'talked about for many years, but very few have seen the script'.[39]

The wicked, knock-about humour of Cole's lyrics for *The Striker Stricken*, which Margaret characterised as an 'angry operetta',[40] points to ways in which verse featured as an accessible and lively part of left-wing culture in the interwar years. Though *The Striker Stricken* seems to

[36] The text was printed with Margaret's preface and notes in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History 1918–1939*, vol. 3 (London, 1977), pp. 57–101. Jose Harris' verdict on reviewing the volume was that the publication of the operetta 'reveals that Cole was not Britain's lost answer to Bertolt Brecht' (*Journal of Social Policy*, 7, 1 (1978), p. 106).

[37] Elsewhere, Cole's source material even ranged into the great American songbook, with an unfinished manuscript version of 'Miss Otis Regrets', reconfigured as 'Major Attlee regrets he's unable to rule to-day': G. D. H. Cole papers, Nuffield College, Oxford, A3/5/43.

[38] Margaret Cole, in Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History*, p. 58. Indeed Margaret noted that it could scarcely have been published in 1926, given its potentially libellous content and its offences against the Emergency Power Act then in place.

[39] Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History*, p. 7.

[40] Ibid., p. 58.

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have been all Cole's own work, much of this kind of entertainment was more collaboratively produced – as the multiple authorship behind the *Bolo Book* itself demonstrates – arising out of the in-jokes and shared tastes, opinions and world views that ran through socialist and workers' education gatherings. At the end of one piece, the Coles note that 'Further stanzas can be devised *ad lib*', depending on where and by whom the song was being sung.[41] Taking easy shots at political opponents from the high moral ground of a politics of opposition, the sentiments of these verses could also exaggerate the rhetoric of the left to comic effect. In her biography of Cole, Margaret celebrated one of Douglas's more infamous lyrics in this vein: 'Wage the class-war slickly … Keep the "ell-fires burnin" for the bourgeoisie'.[42] She was amused to find that this had by the 1970s become detached entirely from any association with her husband, acquiring a status as a kind of left-wing folksong, and she observed that no one would suspect its actual authorship 'from the list of its author's published works as listed in *Who's Who*'.[43] The tone of this particular ditty seems entirely of a piece with the 1920s world of *The Bolo Book* and *The Striker Stricken*, but it was in fact published in what seemed, on the surface, to be a rather more serious book of verse: *The Crooked World*.

IV

The Crooked World (1933) was Cole's last published volume of poetry, issued by Gollancz and running to an impressive 135 pages – quite lengthy for a single-authored collection of poetry. It takes the form of a poetic sequence, assuming the voices of various characters – a charwoman, a Nazi, a chorus of farmers, someone on the dole – all linked by a series of 'arguments' and commentaries by the poet, which is, one assumes, intended to be the perspective of Cole himself, reflecting on what poetry should be about and might be for, and lamenting the state of the world. As with so much of Cole's poetry, and indeed his published prose, there is a prevalent sense of writing down first thoughts and sticking with them, so that the book suffers from a degree of padding and repetition. There are some uncomfortable moments, too, when Cole evokes the voices of Nazis and fascists and imperialists, alongside poems

[41] Coles, *The Bolo Book*, p. 41.
[42] The poem was published as 'Proletarian Ditty (Tune: Keep the Home Fires Burning)', in G. D. H. Cole, *The Crooked World* (London, 1933). 'Burnin' appears as 'burning' in this version.
[43] Cole, *Life of G. D. H. Cole*, p. 138.

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that read awkwardly for different reasons, as Cole ventriloquises members of the working classes picking up their dole, or wondering why the economy is in such desperate straits:

> But what I don't understand, and I wish you'd explain it,
> You being a clever gentleman out of Oxford,
> Is why things are what they are. You'd have thought – I mean
> I should,
> Not knowing about the causes of things, like you do,
> We'd all have plenty to eat, and be living in clover,
> Now the men are all back from the war, and there's plenty willing to
> work. —from 'What the charwoman said to her employer'[44]

Some parts of the collection are more obviously in the mode of *The Bolo Book*, like 'The Song of the Press', with its determined commitment to ingenious rhyme, and specification of the tune to which it was set:

> *What* shall we put in the daily paper,
> Early in the morning?
> Workers on the dole who guzzle,
> Communists who need a muzzle,
> All the winners and a cross-word puzzle …[45]

There are also some pleasingly clever pieces like 'A Political Alphabet':

> A for the Anarchist, apt to abolish
> Authority absolute, arms and the State.
> B for the Banker we burn to demolish,
> Blinkered believers in bonds and Bank Rate …[46]

Yet the mood of *The Crooked World* can be difficult to pin down. Parts of the sequence are overt commentaries on contemporary problems and the need for a shift in policy. 'The Master Builder' lambasts the building of 'a thousand Londons / In England's pleasant land', while other poems highlight the crisis in wheat farming, the impact of the means test, and the failures of Versailles and post-war international relations.[47] There are exercises in different poetic forms: a random set of quatrains; a sonnet in praise of William Cobbett.[48] Meanwhile, 'Dirge at a meeting' is little more than doggerel, driven by repetitive rhythm and insistent rhyme:

[44] Cole, *The Crooked World*, p. 67.
[45] 'The Song of the Press (Tune: What shall we do with a drunken sailor)', *The Crooked World*, p. 35
[46] 'A Political Alphabet', *The Crooked World*, pp. 54–55.
[47] 'The Master Builder', *The Crooked World*, p. 37; 'The Song of the Farmers', pp. 70–71; 'Means Test', pp. 22–23; 'XVII, Second Argument', pp. 62–64.
[48] 'Quatrains', *The Crooked World*, pp. 83–84; 'XXII', p. 86.

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Civilisation
Is vexation.
Barbarism's worse.
Yet, I wonder,
Isn't Peace a curse? …[49]

Twenty-three years on from noticing his debut slim volume, the *Times Literary Supplement* was less warm in its reception of Cole's *The Crooked World*. A review by the poet and critic Hugh L'Anson Fausset picked up on Cole's own reference to 'ragged rhyme', and observed that this 'well describes the quality of much of his versifying'. One of the problems may have been about raising expectations. The presentation of *The Crooked World* made this collection appear as a conventional book of poetry, when Cole was really using verse here as an alternative way to speak about politics. Fausset observed perceptively that, in essence, 'these verses constitute another "Intelligent Socialist's survey"[50] of the modern world' commenting on 'the more obvious follies and inhumanities apparent in the world to-day'. He concluded that 'Verse … is for [Cole] not so much an art as an instrument':

> Yet even as an instrument his verse would, we think, have served more effectively his purposes if it had been more disciplined. Both the strength and the weakness of his poems spring from the fact that they are inspired only by humanitarian sentiment. His commentary is full, in fact of lively feeling and intelligence, of generosity and a sense of decency and justice, which many readers will share. But, lacking a spiritual centre, it has little more essential order in it than the world which it laments.[51]

Did Cole think that poetry had to be devoted to such ends, given the times he was living in? He suggests a revision of 'notions of things poetic' in one of the first poems within the sequence:

Old poets wrote sonnets to their ladies' eyebrows,
Or so I'm told – in truth, I never read one –
But in these days the proper work for highbrows
Is to build a new age, not to ape a dead one.
So here we revise our notions of things poetic, …[52]

[49] 'Dirge at a meeting', p. 124. This also appeared in *The Clare Market Review* (the London School of Economics magazine) with the punning title 'Coled Comfort', and a different ending: 'Handicraft's a bore. Yet, why worry?/Gilbert Murray/Bores us even more.' (cutting, n.d., G. D. H. Cole papers, Nuffield College, Oxford, GDHC/A3/4/1).

[50] The reference is to Cole's recent publication of *The Intelligent Man's Guide Through World Chaos* (London, 1932); and *The Intelligent Man's Review of Europe To-day* (London, 1933).

[51] *TLS*, 1671, 8 February 1934, p. 88. Fausset (1895–1965) was a regular reviewer for the *TLS*, and his reviews for the paper around this time included works by Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden (John Gross, introduction to *The Modern Movement: A TLS Companion* (Chicago, 1993), p. xx).

[52] Cole, *The Crooked World*, 'I', p. 11.

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The poem concludes that writers must apply their 'lyrical measures' to 'modern themes':

> And, where our masters sang of rustic glories,
> Shepherds and nymphs and sunlit vales and downs,
> We, visiting the same spots, must set our stories
> Mid the gaunt chimneys of industrial towns [53]

Years earlier, by contrast, Margaret had written, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, about rejecting realism in favour of being explicitly 'poetic'. Modern poets might write about 'a tin-opener, or wet mackintoshes, or an uncovered drain', she complained: 'Well, I don't like them, and I won't!' Instead, her poem vows to celebrate things she likes: 'Roses and lovers in lanes and honeysuckle and green woods'.[54]

That attraction of poetry as something occupying a world set apart, in subject matter and language, retained a certain appeal for both the Coles, even as they deployed verse in more knock-about, satirical and instrumental ways, and used it to address the ideas and issues that exercised them for so much of their working lives. In the final piece in *The Crooked World*, G. D. H. Cole seemingly longed to escape the exigencies of political obligation, in both life and literature, those frustrations set out in a poem which oscillates between lyrical romantic moments and statements of commitment to making a better world:

> Do you think I never get sick of talking,
> Writing, exhorting, making speeches,
> When so little seems to come of it all?
> Do you think I wouldn't rather be walking
> In springtime, now, amid Chiltern beeches …[55]

V

Writing and publishing were central to Cole's life and work. His journalism and reviewing, histories and biographies, studies of the economy and political thought made those authorial initials 'G. D. H.' familiar to generations of readers in the early and mid twentieth century, when his writings became some of the most prominent sources of information and education for those on the progressive and left wings in Britain. Alongside his tracts on guild socialism, his labour histories and studies

[53] Ibid.
[54] Margaret Postgate, 'To Any Modern (in the best manner)', in *Margaret Postgate's Poems* (London, 1918), p. 1.
[55] Cole, *The Crooked World*, 'XXX', p. 135.

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of socialist thought, the poetry may seem a mere curiosity, difficult to reconcile with the other genres of political writing that made up this exceptionally productive literary career. However, that is to underestimate two important contexts. Firstly, it downplays the presence of poetry in the period in which Cole came of age. The prominence of reading and reciting poetry in school, at home, on stage and at social gatherings, and the exposure to versifying in comic forms and lyrics, meant that poetry was a familiar part of everyday culture, and something that many people in all sorts of walks of life not only read, but often wrote themselves.[56] In that sense, it should not be surprising that poetry was a common feature and point of reference in the lives of many political figures too. Secondly, it neglects an aspect of political sociability and community that was part of the political culture of the period. Cole made an obvious contribution to shaping the development of Labour organisations through his educational work and the writings which informed and engaged a readership of trade unionists, co-operators, socialists, politicians and party members. But less tangible than the many editions of publications such as *The Common People* is Cole's place in that more elusive world of revues, parody and socialist entertainments, the events and comradeship of the summer schools and labour gatherings. *The Bolo Book* and the belated publication of *The Striker Stricken* offer us a glimpse of that culture, where a shared political outlook intersected with fun and sociability, here drawing very clearly on a common treasury of rhyme and song, readily adaptable as vehicles for parody and the satirising of one's opponents.

The published collections tell part of the story about Cole and poetry, but much of what he wrote never made it into print. Even after the appearance of *The Crooked World* marked the last of his published volumes, he clearly continued to write, and many poems and attempts at poems survive in the archive, often written on the back of typescripts for other projects: index pages for other genres of book, notepaper from visits to Naomi and Dick Mitchison at Carradale House, a duplicated text about the League of Nations. Some of these manuscripts suggest satirical entertainments that may well have been intended for, or indeed made it into comic revues at socialist conferences and summer schools. Others present a stream of consciousness, or an attempt to work through policy positions and principles in lines of verse. 'If I could make a world,' he muses, before drifting into reflections on equality and freedom. There

[56] As discussed, for example, in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975); Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents. The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

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are poems, too, about love, gardens, even London nightlife; about historical scenes, and an Ozymandias-esque reflection on the passing of empires and the ruins of a city in the desert. He addressed poems to 'Dear Mr Eliot', and 'Dear Mr Auden' – though the latter got no further than the idea of the title itself: 'Dear Mr Auden, (Wystan to real friends)'.[57]

Poetry, then, was a common recourse for G. D. H. Cole throughout his life, a form in which to work out thoughts and ideas, but also to be playful, punning, and often political. As an influence on him in terms of what he read and as something he valued, poetry formed a significant part of his intellectual make-up, and needs to be considered alongside the various other philosophical, historical and social scientific contributions that shaped him as a thinker and communicator. And his assumption within his own writing that poetry could offer a complementary approach to expressing political commentary and commitments speaks to a certain fluidity between the uses of poetry and prose at the time, and to Cole's aspiration towards a life of letters in the broadest sense. The seriousness with which he took his writing in verse is made clear by his keenness to see it in print, placed alongside his work in other genres as yet another way of communicating his ideas about contemporary politics, economic challenges, the importance of socialism and even the possibilities and limitations of writing itself.

[57] Drafts and fragments of poetry by Cole (most of them undated) in manuscripts at Nuffield College Oxford, GDHC/A3/3-7.

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