

James Hanley's The Furies: The Modernist Subject Goes on Strike

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There was a time in the 1970s and 1980s when fierce cultural-political battles were fought over the terms modernism and realism; in retrospect, however, these turn out to have been a form of shadow-boxing, soon to be superseded by other categorical arguments over the multiple political allegiances of post-modernism.¹ Those debates were a rerun, in turn, of the cultural debates of the 1920s and 1930s, when in Germany and the Soviet Union they were certainly not a form of shadow-boxing: lives were lost because of the outcome of those arguments.² Matters were doubtless less serious in Britain, if by serious one means that the consequences that followed from being on the wrong side of the debate were less catastrophic; nevertheless in the thirties in Britain also there were arguments about the political allegiances of the various 'modernist' experiments in novel writing that had occurred in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. James Hanley's writing represents a peculiar inflection of these debates; he writes unequivocally in the 'modernist' manner, yet he does so from an undoubtedly 'proletarian' perspective. *The Furies* (1935), in particular, is a novel which raises and problematises the issues of subjectivism and the representation of collective life; but my discussion of these formal matters does not assume that they have direct political consequences. This is not to say that there was not a politics associated with these forms, but that it could not (and cannot) simply be deduced from one formal choice rather than another: the actual politics of any text is subject to constant negotiation over time. So I intend rather to consider the formal possibilities available to novelists in the thirties not in terms of the political meanings which have been inscribed

upon the large categories of ‘realism’ and ‘modernism’ (categories that have anyway been constructed *post hoc*), but rather, precisely, as *possibilities* – that is, as part of a formal or generic repertoire that enables some things and not others to be said.

My central question is this: how can the novel set about the business of representing collective life? Put this another way: what are the implications, for the representation of collective life, of the use of the various formal means available to the novel? – such matters as the relative visibility of a narrator, narration via a succession of differing subject positions, and the manipulation of point of view. These are relatively familiar questions, but Hanley’s fiction provides some idiosyncratic answers to them.

Each of these elements of the formal repertoire has its own history, of course; what presents itself to the novelist as a series of technical questions (first or third person? indication of wider narrative perspective here, elsewhere, or not at all? etc) depends upon a generic history which is itself rooted in a set of social-historical relationships. Thus the technical characteristics of classic realism, in which the knowledge of an omniscient narrator extends beyond what is known by the characters of the novel, bears an evident affinity to the hierarchy of knowledge in a class-stratified society. When Hanley was writing novels in the 1930s, he was the inheritor of an extraordinarily rich and complex generic history carrying these unavoidable implications of their social-historical past. Nevertheless, the novelist has a choice of means, and Hanley’s choice was certainly untypical for a working-class writer of his time. He eschewed classic realism for a version of modernism, and sought to represent collective life through that means.

An explanation for Hanley’s untypical choice of means can doubtless be sought in his remarkable life history, which took him from birth in Dublin in 1901, to a childhood in Liverpool and at sea, to intermittent life as a seaman in the 1920s, and eventually to prolific full-time novelist in the 1930s. Three features of this life are perhaps relevant in the context of his choice of a modernist idiom: his irregular self-education, which led him to Dostoevsky as much as to Dickens; his attempts to break into publishing in the late twenties and early thirties via small-scale and avant-garde publishers – some of his early stories, for example, were published with prefaces by Richard Aldington; and perhaps most crucially, the attraction of the fragmentary forms of modernism to a Liverpool sailor for whom the settled forms of traditional realism would not have spoken as they might to a working-class writer from a settled social-historical milieu.³ Nevertheless, his work still poses in an acute way the specifically formal problems of the relationship of means to object of representation. In one sense, it is not Hanley who speaks through the generic repertoire, but the generic repertoire that speaks through him.

These large questions can be presented in the form of a paradox or Möbius strip-like problem: the novelist seeks to represent collective life – ‘history’ – and is thus in some sense outside the history which he addresses. Yet his

choice of means is itself subject to some kind of historical explanation, and thus the literary falls back under the explanatory power of the historical. 'Change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?' Later in this essay I will seek to ask whether Hanley's distinctive formal decisions – the very way in which he chooses to write about collective life – can be given a historical explanation beyond the peculiarities of temperament or life-history. But first I wish to explore the implications of his choice of 'modernist' formal means.

The Furys was published in 1935, but was set during the period of the Liverpool Transport Strike of June to August 1911 – though references to the miners being out on strike have led many readers, both at the time of its publication and since, to presume that the novel is set during the General Strike of 1926. However, this description already begs a question – for the Liverpool Strike is never named in the book (nor are any dates provided); rather, something which is recognisably like it simply *occurs*. In a related way, it is not true either to say that the novel is set in Liverpool, for the port in which it is set is called Gelton, and though all its features match the geography of Liverpool, and the city has a large Irish population divided between Catholics and Protestants, it is not quite Liverpool – though the point of this particular fictional device is not immediately clear. These refusals to name or date the historical action which dominates the book, however, are only the most obvious indications of the novel's modernism; for it is written in a 'subjective' manner that is premised on the absence of any overarching narrator who could, in the manner urged by Lukacs, direct and control the story – *narrate* it, in that special significance given to the term – and thus name, place historically, or otherwise give general significance to the events with which the novel is concerned.⁴

Hanley is distinctive among working-class novelists of the 1930s in seeking to build seriously on the great modernist experiments in novel-writing, above all the experiment of Joyce; not far behind *The Furys* lies *Ulysses*. 'Modernism' is here understood in a very particular way, to denote the range of formal experiments in the novel in the 1910s and 1920s which took as their focus the attempt to represent consciousness, and which thus give narrative subjectivity priority over the objectivising claims of traditional realism. This is of course a very particular 'take' on modernism; *The Furys* can be fruitfully conceived in the light of another understanding of the term, in which the fragmentariness and discontinuities of modern life become the central focus.⁵ But the focus in this essay is on the implications of this 'subjectivist' aspect of modernist narration.

Thus the novel is focalised through a series of characters, and the story is told, almost without exception, through the perceptions of these diverse individuals.⁶ The timespan of the novel is relatively short (about three weeks), so while the book is concerned with momentous historical events, their long-term significance is never alluded to or suggested. Any effort at

historical location after the manner of the great nineteenth-century realists and their successors (or even after *The Rainbow*) is strictly avoided, with one notable exception as we shall see; as a result, any sense of the histories which precede this short period of time is subordinated to the present in which the novel is told. Dostoevsky can undoubtedly be traced behind the novel as much as Joyce – the characters are constantly being astonished by the manner in which other characters behave towards them, and indeed in the second novel of the series the young hero kills a physically unattractive money-lender in a clear echo of *Crime and Punishment*.⁷ But as an initial approximation we can say that the novel presents us with a series of subjectivities, and that the reader's sense of the collective life of these people is as an accumulation of subjectivities.

A whole series of questions then are raised. What happens to the techniques of modernist subjectivism when they are put to use in relation to working-class characters? (this question might be thought to bear more heavily upon the manner of Virginia Woolf than upon that of Joyce, for in the former case the class-premises of her technique are very much more transparent). How is it possible to write about collective life when your starting-point or basic narrative building-block is the individual consciousness? This question in turn can be resolved into two distinct questions. On the one hand, this can suggest the kind of problem posed by the nineteenth-century 'multi-plot novel' like *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House*, where the difficulty is to find ways of relating the various parts of the novel to suggest a totality: a provincial English town, or indeed London itself. On the other hand, this matter of the individual consciousness and its manner of representing collective life might itself be a false opposition, and the question should rather be posed as how to understand the sociality of individual consciousness. Finally, we can make the distinction between collective life in general, and collective action: *The Furys* is not just about a Liverpool-Irish ('Gelton-Irish') family called the Furys, or about working-class life more generally, but it is also about collective working-class action of an especially dramatic and far-reaching kind. What happens, in short, when the modernist subject goes on strike?

Some of these matters are tackled in other novels in the 1930s, of course. A remarkable representation of collective life, rooted in a particular history and carried through distinctive vernacular rhythms, can be found in Grassie Gibbon's *The Scots Quair* – a very interesting contrast to the collective subjectivities on display both in *The Furys* and, for that matter, in *The Waves* (1931). And Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939) obviously also attempt to write about collective life in an explicitly class-conscious way. So *The Furys* can be seen as one of a small number of attempts made in the 1930s to advance the novelistic accounts of working-class life beyond the formal possibilities made available by the dominant tradition of realism that descends from the nineteenth century through such writers as Gissing and Arnold Bennett – though Hanley could not have been aware of the work of

Grassic Gibbon or Lewis Jones. Nevertheless, the predominant mode adopted by working-class novelists in the 1930s was that which descended from nineteenth-century realism and its successors. The insufficiency of that now-canonical distinction between 'realism' and 'modernism' is apparent if one pauses simply to note that Hanley's novels are certainly 'realist' even if their manner is not traditionally so; the same indeed could be said of the novels of Virginia Woolf. However, unlike the method of many other working-class novelists of his time whose model is indeed Gissing or Bennett, Hanley's method does not allow the generation of irony which is one of the characteristic effects of that realist tradition.⁸

So – what happens when the subjectivism of modernism is 'applied' to working-class characters? Perhaps there should not be a problem here; perhaps literary technique is blind to questions of class, and the various manners developed by May Sinclair or James Joyce or Virginia Woolf just happen to be used to represent the consciousnesses of middle-class people and can be unproblematically adopted to represent the consciousnesses of working-class people. Indeed, the danger of arguing otherwise is that it might suggest that working-class interior life is less rich and therefore less amenable to the stream-of-consciousness treatment than that of middle- or upper-middle-class people. Moreover, the objections to the use of such techniques for writing about working-class life mostly come from those who do not see how they can co-exist with the political demands that they place upon the novel – for example, to be class-conscious fiction, or to be written in the spirit of critical realism.⁹ Nevertheless, there is an historical association between the richly realised subjectivities of Woolf's fiction, for example, and the class-position of their characters. It is true that Hanley is not a working-class Virginia Woolf. But at the very least his fiction bears out Bakhtin's claim, partly in response to the more reductive versions of marxist criticism, that the authentically novelistic personality exceeds or spills over any socially typifying mode of characterisation.¹⁰

To read *The Furies* in this context, then, may require us to make an elementary humanist correction to socially-typifying forms of novel-writing or novel-criticism. However, the point of such a correction would not be to lead to a celebration of the irreducibly unique individual. The point of the Lukacsian conception of the socially typical characterisation was to allow the dialectical unity of individual and totality to be productively conceived.¹¹ Hanley's fiction can provoke us not to abandon that effort but to rethink that relationship in richer ways. I will return to the question of the sociality of consciousness; but the novel also require us to address the other dialectical pole, for there is evidently an effort in *The Furies* to represent collective life.

A good place to start here is with the title of the novel; unlike for example *Middlemarch* or for that matter *Cwmardy*, the collective in question – 'the Furies' – is a family and not a place or a whole community. So the novel is

focalised through a succession of Fury family members: parents, children, a sister. None of these is given priority, and so this is not the story of any one individual. At the very least, then, some sense of a collectivity will be built up as the novel moves from subject to subject; collective life can perhaps be perceived via the management of these transitions. In the event, *The Furys* passes from consciousness to consciousness without the intervention of any explicit narrative voice: here is a typical such moment:

Hearing somebody coming up the stairs, Peter closed the window and sat down again on the bed. At the top the climber paused. He knew then that it was Aunt Brigid. He sat listening. The door opened, Aunt Brigid had a parcel in her hand. 'Here, Peter,' she said. 'This is for you.' She flung the parcel to the bed. Peter, smiling, exclaimed, 'Oh, thank you, Aunt Brigid! Thank you!' The door closed again. When he opened the parcel he found a pair of pyjamas. 'Oh my!' he said. 'Oh my!' and immediately undressed. Just as he got one leg into the bright blue pyjamas, Mrs. Fury called up, 'Are you in bed, Peter?'

'Not yet, Mother,' called back Peter, at the same time pushing his other leg in.

'Then come down and help your father get Grand-dad to bed.'

'Coming, Mother,' shouted Peter. He stood for a moment on the landing. Aunt Brigid was saying her night prayers.

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'At last!', said Mr. Fury. 'At last!' he lay down on the sofa and covered himself up. Mrs. Fury had gone to bed. With Peter's help he had managed to get 'him' upstairs. He was still surprised at his sister-in-law's generosity. Peter had appeared in the kitchen like a sort of bright blue apparition. But she hadn't even thought of buying him, Mr. Fury, a pipeful of tobacco. 'The skinflint!' he thought. 'And she has money too. He stretched himself so that the legs came to rest on the arm of the sofa. He wasn't used to sleeping on sofas. Well, with the best of luck he would be back in his own bed tomorrow. . . .'¹²

As an initial point, this extract indicates the nature of the transitions made in the narrative from consciousness to consciousness. Some time is presumed to pass between the two sections separated by the divide – a common device in the novel, although at times we also get the same scene related from differing points of view. Yet while the novel eschews the opportunities for irony generated by traditional realism, it also avoids the relativism – the effects of playing with alternative perspectives – that can be produced by multiple narration or focalisation. So that in the extract, it is true that we do get Aunt Brigid as seen by Peter, and Peter as seen by Mr. Fury; but the effect is not to play off their perspectives against each other. The effect is rather a cumulative one; indeed at times an impossible object swims into view in the course of reading this novel, as it does still more in reading Joyce – the impossible novel that would tell everything as it occurred to the sum of all

possible participants, and which would therefore include all their conflicting viewpoints. However, there is some forward momentum in the novel and it does recount a recognisable series of events: the youngest Fury son, Peter, returns from a seminary in Ireland in disgrace; the Transport Strike happens; Peter ends by following his father and one of his brothers by going to sea.

But the extract is also interesting in pointing to the peculiar quality of Hanley's prose: the short sentences, and the repetitious and uncomplicated grammar, with scarcely a subordinate clause. If this is stream-of-consciousness, it is altogether unlike that of Virginia Woolf, with its complex circular sentences in which all the multiple factors bearing upon a single moment of consciousness are held in suspension; or unlike that of Joyce in parts of *Ulysses* at least, where the individual consciousness is constructed out of the multifarious scraps of discourse that assault it in the course of the day. In strong contrast to both of these styles, in Hanley's novel consciousness is represented as sheer succession, the brute facticity of small-scale events which succeed one another. Judging from this extract, which is not at all untypical of the novel as a whole, the accumulation of subjectivities appears to be indeed an accumulation without other principle than the slow passage of time.

But other ways of understanding the material do propose themselves to the reader, not least certain thematic concerns which might help us in understanding the Furys – for I am still exploring the implications of the title as a way into the collective life represented in the novel. Though the book never proposes itself in any way as a sociological or anthropological account of a 'whole way of life', we can nevertheless trace certain characteristic concerns in the novel: the characters' Catholicism, their ability to persist despite enormous difficulties, their victimisation by a series of authorities. These latter two aspects make it an acutely materialist novel; but it is in the representation of working-class Catholicism, which is so insistent in the book, that we are confronted by something which we might describe as a 'mentality'. Perhaps this is a way to see the link between the subjectivism of the narrative mode and the collective life that the title proposes.

If this is the case, then we need to abandon the notion that an understanding of collective life can only inhabit the consciousness of the reader via the mediating presence of the narrator, where it is initially located. In Chapter 40 of *Middlemarch*, when the narrative moves from one sub-plot to another, the narrator compares herself to a scientist who is observing an experiment, observing, that is, the operations of cause and effect: in the previous chapter was the cause, now we need to change perspective to another part of *Middlemarch* to witness the effect. Only thanks to this intervening consciousness, which is where knowledge of the totality resides, can the reader begin to get a sense of *Middlemarch* as a whole, tied together by a myriad connections of cause and effect of the kind that the narrator has here made explicit.¹³ *The Furys* is not like that; though readers can certainly

observe certain patterns of behaviour or attitude on the part of its characters, this is always a matter of inference on the reader's part and the novel provides no perspectival vanishing-point from which all of its parts cohere to give a sense of the totality of Gelton. At the level of the management of the plot, therefore, understood as the sum total of all that happens in it, Hanley's novel suggests no other principle than sheer facticity for explaining the inter-connections of collective life.

At the other dialectical pole, that of individual subjectivity, *The Furies*, in common with other modernist fictions, requires us to rethink the very opposition between individual and collective life. Certainly the Joyce of *Ulysses* gives us a minutely realised individual consciousness that is simultaneously social; to understand this Vološinov is a better guide than Freud. Vološinov, indeed, arrives at a socialised conception of consciousness precisely via a critique of Freud. In his account, consciousness is liminal; it exists in the inter-subjective relations between people, and its mode of existence is the social word.¹⁴ Thus the ways in which Bloom's consciousness in *Ulysses* is constituted out of the discursive scraps and fragments that accost him as he makes his way around Dublin is precisely analogous to the way that Vološinov conceives of the sociality of consciousness. For *this* modernist fiction at least, it makes no sense to juxtapose the individual to the collective.

Yet if Hanley is no Virginia Woolf, neither does he simply seek to reproduce Joyce. To understand the sociality of consciousness in Hanley's writing, the less explicitly Marxist work of Bakhtin himself is more useful than that of his colleague Vološinov. In *The Furies*, one's sense of the sociality of individual consciousness emerges from this: each such consciousness is constituted from the unceasing process by which it responds to and anticipates the word of the other. Dostoevsky is a better analogue here than Joyce; *Notes from Underground* provides a pathological instance of a universal case.¹⁵ While the characters in Hanley's novel in general avoid pathology, they are nevertheless engaged in obsessive mental arguments with each other.

Here, for example, is a typical extract from the novel, in which the daughter Maureen is considering the hard life that her parents have led:

Maureen stood by the bed in her room. 'Yes,' she thought, 'what does he know? What does anybody know? But I know! I know!' She had not lived at Hatfields all those years for nothing. She was neither blind nor dumb. She loved her father. All his life her mother had tormented him with his mistake. *His* mistake. And what was that? Dennis Fury at a most impressionable age had run away from home. He had left behind him security, comfort, money, a good home, and a chance of education. He had taken to the sea. And now her mother did nothing but taunt him with the errors he had made. She was in no way blind to her mother's struggles. She had seen them. In fact, she sometimes felt proud that she had a mother like Fanny Fury. But her actions, her ideas, her ambitions. Where had they taken root? What was this

maddening thing that ringed her mother's life? Frustration? Suddenly she went across to the window and looked out. There was nothing to be seen but Price Street, dark and gloomy, a sort of black pit, over which there hung a cloud of smoke, of grease and steam. A sort of blessed trinity, the very essence of the world in which she lived. The thing was, her mother was not content. Well, why wasn't she content? What did she want to do? Maureen asked herself the questions. But there was no answer to them. (pp. 209–10)

This starts with Maureen asking herself what her husband can know of her parents' lives, and continues with her account of those lives. But this is to put the matter too blandly. It is not merely that Maureen's consciousness is filled by thoughts of her parents, but that she is engaged in a never-ending argument with them; in this extract, especially with her mother. What she is, what her subjectivity consists of, is that argument with others, to which there can in principle be no conclusion. The questions that she puts to herself in this passage are in effect questions to her mother; consciousness is constituted out of such incessant dialogues.

The passage also adds yet another perspective to the reader's sense of the relationship between the elder Furies. Perhaps there is no possible end to such 'further perspectives'; this is what I mean by the book verging on the bounds of some impossible object, for in the absence of any delimiting or objectifying narrator there can in principle be no limit to the accumulation of additional views. Despite this vertiginous possibility, we can recognise in the constant consciousness of the other that consciousness itself can never be self-created but is itself constituted in inter-subjective relationships.

This is an argument conducted at the level of 'content': *The Furies* represents consciousness in a way that demonstrates its preoccupation with, or its constitution out of, the word of the other. Bakhtin's notion of 'double-voiced discourse' suggests a comparable argument at the level of form. In a manner which is typical of free indirect speech, it is not always clear in this passage, for example, whether we are hearing the character's own thoughts, or those of some 'narrator', or something which partakes of both: exactly the characteristics of 'double-voiced discourse'.¹⁶ This in itself is the fullest indication of the sociality of novelistic prose, for the dialogic relationships that are implied by double voicing are inherently social, at the most fundamental level of implying the existence of a self-other relationship.

However, in this passage we do appear to approach some sense of a wider narrative perspective that comes from elsewhere than from Maureen herself. When, in the passage, the smoke, grease and steam are referred to as 'a sort of blessed trinity, the very essence of the world in which she lived', we are invited to step back from the immediacy of Maureen's perceptual world and consider it in a briefly indicated summarising way. By virtue of the free indirect speech of the passage, it is impossible to know whether, ultimately, this is Maureen's language or – crudely – Hanley's. But it is characteristic of a

small number of moments in the novel when the succession of strictly subjectivist frames is broken to permit some fragment at least of a summarising language to illuminate the scene. While this language is not permitted to have any monologic authority beyond the consciousness of the characters, we do need to consider their presence in the novel.

Such moments are intermittent and unsystematic. In addition to the passing instances of the kind that we have just noticed, there are nevertheless a couple of more developed interruptions to the otherwise strictly sustained presentness of the narration via individual consciousness. The first occurs about a third of the way into the book, and it gives us the perspective of Mrs Fury's father, Mr Mangan, usually referred to by the other characters simply as 'him'. He spends the whole of the rest of the book in a demented state, either in bed or strapped to a chair, fed with pap, and dragged to the Post Office once a week so that his daughter can claim his allowance. His moment of lucidity is typographically distinct (it appears in italics), and it wholly concerns his childhood memory of the Irish famine. It is a very powerful piece of writing, evoking the death of his mother by starvation, and his father sending him away to avoid a similar fate for him. It is the only moment in the book when any sense of a history preceding the events that we witness is provided in the novel. So while it in no sense allows the reader to place the events of the novel into any wider historical narrative, this extended historical memory does open up a sense of a world inhabited not only by mutually interacting subjectivities but also by simultaneously existing shards of historical memory.¹⁷

The other indication of any kind of explanatory or summarising language is indicated in a very different way. During one of the large and confusing public meetings and police actions that accompany the strike, Peter Fury gets taken up by the menacing figure of Professor Titmouse, who articulates an extreme misanthropic disgust at the passing human show:

'Have you ever noticed – the almost pestiferous odour that crowds exhale? Ha! Something is happening over there. Stand up, my boy. Look! There, stand erect. I shall hold your legs.'

'I am not interested', said Peter. 'It is late. I must go now. I have a long way to go.' He tried to free his leg from the professor's grip, but the man's fingers were like steel.

'Come,' said the professor. 'Stand up and look into the seething abyss. Behold those who have risen from ten thousand stinking mattresses, who have emerged from their rat-holes. Look at them! Bury your nose in that stinking heap . . .' (p. 341).

This powerfully expressed but simple class-based misanthropy is reinforced by the Professor announcing to Peter that he has a purely 'anthropological' or sometimes 'sociological' interest in people and their behaviour – just the

kind of interest that I earlier claimed that the book as a whole eschewed. His mocking and cynical voice remains in Peter's head for the remainder of the novel, ready to belittle or spoil all his subsequent experiences (it is also strongly suggested that the Professor has a predatory sexual interest in Peter, which contributes to the extreme ambivalence that accompanies all Peter's reminiscences of his attitude). Professor Titmouse, then, in a manner which pushes the novel's realist credentials to the limits, provides a reductive and cynical chorus to the novel's action – the only generalising perspective that the novel contains.

The physical perspective which invites Titmouse's misanthropy is relevant in this context also. He has induced Peter to force his way to the top of a large equestrian statue which overlooks one of 'Gelton's' public squares, filled by the swirling masses mobilised by the strike. That precarious situation allows Titmouse and Peter literally to oversee the collective action that is unfolding in front of them. Realist fiction has a long history of such catascopic writing, whether the aerial view be imaginatively occupied by the narrator (the opening of *Bleak House*) or more literally imagined as being present within the terms of the fiction itself. One especially relevant analogue to this moment in *The Furys* is provided by the fiction of George Gissing, whose class-based misanthropy is often articulated via an aerial survey of a crowded public space. In the chapter of *The Nether World* (1889) called 'Io Saturnalia', for example, the reader is asked to share a 'review' of the people made possible by ascending the seating which overlooks a Bank Holiday crowd as it passes back and forth in the grounds of the Crystal Palace. This is the occasion for the expression of the most unbalanced display of misanthropy and class repugnance to be found in Gissing's fiction.¹⁸ In Gissing's novel this perspective has much more authority than that permitted to Titmouse's views in the later book. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that Hanley has recourse to a familiar realist trope when providing an overarching perspective on his predominantly subjectivist novel. This perspective is not the final one in the book; but it has a different status also than the intermittent moments of double-voiced summary of the kind found in that earlier passage

So far we have been considering how *The Furys* deals with collective life, and how it provides any kind of overarching perspective on that life given its method of cumulative subjective experiences. But we need to make the obvious distinction between collective *life* and collective *action* – which brings us to the main action of the novel, the general transport strike against which all its events are played out. The fact is that only one of the Fury family plays any active role in the strike, namely Peter's brother Dennis – and he does so for cynical motives, being disenchanted with his class and using the strike for careerist reasons. For the other characters in the novel, the strike takes place elsewhere – Dennis's father never believes it will happen, is surprised when it does, and always just misses the meeting or the demonstration that

will determine its course. In short the individual experience of the strike is overwhelmingly one of confusion and random violence: the Furys' neighbour gets beaten by a policeman's truncheon almost by accident. Which is not to say that the novel does not provide a vivid sense of a city entirely paralysed by the strike, and of the intransigent power and violence of the forces of the state brought to bear upon the strikers. But this is absolutely not a heroic version of these events; rather, the novel suggests that they are yet another factor – a powerful and unusual one, to be sure – in the range of forces bearing down on the Furys.

Hanley's method of telling this story contrasts vividly with Lewis Jones's way of narrating the events of the General Strike in *We Live*. This latter novel also attempts to represent a collective social experience, that of the village of Cwmardy, and like *The Furys* weaves together multiple individual experiences. But the Welsh novel includes a confident strategic sense of the progress of the strike, and of the multiple economic and political factors which bear upon its outcome. In Lukacsian terms, the novel is confidently *narrated*; all the multiple details of the novel are subservient to the central narrative, whose overall trajectory and significance becomes cumulatively apparent. The contrast with Hanley's novel could not be more telling, where the overwhelming sense is one of confusion and mismatch between individual perception and collective action.

It is perhaps too easy to explain these differences in solely political terms: Jones's Marxism and prominent position in the Communist Party naturally led him to a particular understanding of the meaningfulness of the events of the General Strike (and of working-class struggle more generally) denied to Hanley. Such an explanation would extend to include the element of 'chance' in the novels; not the matter of the merely accidental, but the profounder sense in *We Live* that the events narrated are subject to rational explanation, and are explicable in terms of causes whose effects can be traced. By contrast the events of the strike in *The Furys* present themselves to the characters and to the reader as sheer event behind which we are not invited to examine for underlying causes.

A political explanation of these contrasts has its obvious force, but also needs supplementing by a sense of comparative social history. Briefly, the contrast between the mining village of Cwmardy (Clydach Vale in the Rhondda) and the great port of Gelton (Liverpool) goes a long way to explaining the relative transparency of events as narrated in Jones's novel. To this should be added the explanation of Ken Worpole in *Dockers and Detectives* – that the particular appeal of modernist forms to the Liverpool working-class writers was that they fitted better the fragmentary social experience of seamen and casual workers characteristic of a sea-port; the more homogeneous social experience of factory workers or miners led them more naturally to realist forms.¹⁹ On the other hand, the cumulative method of *The Furys* does not lead ultimately to an experience of modernist fragmentariness or

disconnection, suggesting the complexity both of modernist forms and the social worlds from which they emerge and to which they speak.²⁰

We seem to have emerged on to a stretch of the Möbius strip where a historical explanation of Hanley's literary choices is required. This is the problem: one of many working-class writers in the thirties, Hanley writes about working-class life in a manner which is quite distinct from the manner of his contemporaries. Many of these, of whom perhaps the most famous is Walter Greenwood, effectively draw on the generic inheritance of the realist novel, and exploit the possibilities for irony which the form provides – and indeed the contrast with Greenwood is instructive, since *Love on the Dole* too deals with a single working-class family, yet does so in a way which, typically for realism, reserves a profounder knowledge of the truth of their situation to a narrator (or his surrogates) way beyond the ken of the characters themselves. A smaller group of writers, which includes Lewis Jones and Grassic Gibbon, use experimental techniques, but in ways which are especially suited to the particularities of the social situations out of which they emerge – highly distinctive social formations in the South Wales valleys and the Mearns respectively. Is any kind of historical explanation possible for these various choices, beyond the multiple *ad hoc* accounts that each of these writers requires?

To ask the question is to find oneself further along the strip but in the inverse position. What kind of explanation could there be which did not explain the source of these writers' visions of collective life in the collective life from which they themselves emerged? So we have to be content with an explanation which suggests that the nature of working-class life in Liverpool predisposed Hanley to a view of the world best expressed in the modernist forms which he adopted. But this can never be an exhaustive kind of explanation, for genres 'hail' apparently similar individuals in strikingly diverse ways. It is however the case that the uncertain publishing history of *The Furys* suggests that there is a pattern in the wider discursive formations of a culture which privilege certain kinds of generic choices over others – so that *Love on the Dole* now seems the characteristic thirties working-class novel rather than *The Furys* or *Cumardy*.

These explanations need not have the force of allowances made on behalf of Hanley's novel, as though we had to choose at this late date between his writing and that of Lewis Jones, between narration and description, between 'realism' and 'modernism'. At all events, any sense of a meaningful relationship between a working-class political movement and an aesthetics that might connect with it has irretrievably disappeared, so any such choice would be nugatory. Rather, we can acknowledge the remarkable impact of Hanley's way of telling the story of the Liverpool strike: the overwhelming sense of the strike itself on individuals who only partially understand it – and the still more powerful sense of the power of the forces of the state whose reimposition of order has nothing to do with political justice. When

modernist subjects go on strike the very restriction of their vision lends a particular bleakness to the resulting melee.

It may seem rather late in the day to be arguing with Lukacs, whose critical appeal has been exploded both by 'postmodernism' and the collapse of actually existing socialism.²¹ But *The Furies* suggests that it is both possible for a novel to do without the services of a directing narrative voice, and to provide a sense of a totality – albeit a provisional and in-principle uncompletable one. The novel ends with Mrs Fury spitting on the child for whom she and her family have sacrificed so much and who has betrayed her – but already in my synopsis I am shaping material whose significance Hanley leaves implicit. Moreover, since *The Furies* is but the first in a series of novels – a trilogy was completed in 1940, and then a further two novels were added in the 1950s – the sense of an ending that concludes it can only be illusory.

Some of the most distinctive features of the novel do not persist in the subsequent volumes of the series. The very fact, for example, that the characters reappear in later volumes means that they have a density absent from the first book; it is this very absence of a dense allusive network of connection that makes *The Furies* so challenging. Hanley however does sustain that ambiguity about the precise historical location of the novels; the third in the series, *Our Time is Gone*, was published in 1940 and begins with a scene at the beginning of a war in which Captain Fury makes a patriotic speech – with sentiments that could apply as much to 1914 as to 1939. War, like strikes and other large historical forces, appears generic rather than specific in this fiction.

The pre-war trilogy, and *The Furies* especially, put some of the characteristic features of modernist fiction to work in an account of working-class lives – such matters as implicitness, 'allowing readers to draw their own conclusions', the unexplicated epiphany. These lives are seen as subject to the most brutal and direct forms of material oppression and deprivation, yet – as a result of the modernist narration – are not subject to the knowing irony of one tradition of realism which casts them too readily as ignorant or as victims. In this Hanley's writing in the mid thirties strikes me as both distinctive and remarkable; *The Furies* in particular offers an alternative inflection of the realism/modernism opposition which simultaneously moves beyond the ahistorical nature of modernist subjectivism and suggests glimpses of a social totality which is not made explicit to us via the presence of a directive narrator.

Notes

1 For a fierce rejoinder to these debates, see Raymond Williams's posthumous *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney (London, 1989).

2 Ernst Bloch *et al.*, *Aesthetics and Politics*, with an Afterword by Fredric Jameson.

son (London, 1980), provides a convenient selection of some of the relevant essays and polemics.

3 This last is the suggestion of Ken Worpole, in *Dockers and Detectives* (London, 1983). I return to it later.

4 See 'Narrate or Describe', in Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, edited and translated by Arthur Kahn (London, 1978), pp. 110–48.

5 For an impressive account of the novel in these terms, see John Fordham, 'James Hanley's *The Furys*: Modernism and the Working Class', in *British Industrial Fictions*, edited by H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 112–23.

6 'Focalised': the term is Gerard Genette's, in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford, 1982). It alludes to the way in which narrative point of view can be directed through a particular character even though the narrative is in the third person.

7 *The Furys* was the first of a series of five novels: *The Furys* (1935); *The Secret Journey* (1936); *Our Time is Gone* (1940); *Winter Song* (1950); *An End and a Beginning* (1958).

8 See Simon Dentith, 'Tone of Voice in Industrial Writing in the 1930s', in H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (eds), *British Industrial Fictions* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 99–111, for an account of the characteristic ironic mode of narration in working-class realist fiction of the 1930s.

9 See Lukacs in particular for this canonic rejection of the techniques of expressionism.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas, 1981), p. 37.

11 Lukacs's view on the notion of the 'type' is clearly stated in *Studies in European Realism* (London, 1972), p. 6.

12 James Hanley, *The Furys* (London, 1935), p. 231. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers supplied in brackets.

13 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by David Carroll (Oxford, 1988), p. 326.

14 See V. N. Vološinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, translated by I. R. Titunik (New York, 1976).

15 Bakhtin's account of *Notes from Underground* can be found in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, with an introduction by Wayne C. Booth (Manchester, 1984), pp. 227–37.

16 For the fullest account of 'double-voiced discourse' in Bakhtin's writing, see *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 199–203.

17 For a fuller account of the novel in these terms, in which Liverpool is compared to other non-contemporaneous modern cities such as the Paris of Balzac or the St Petersburg of Dostoevsky, see John Fordham, *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class*, PhD Dissertation, Middlesex University, 1997.

18 George Gissing, *The Nether World*, edited by John Goode (Brighton, 1974), pp. 109–10.

19 Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London, 1983).

20 This is one of the principal contentions of Raymond Williams in *The Politics of Modernism*.

21 For a recent and relatively positive engagement with Lukacs, see Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford, 2000).

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