Ken Worpole

Expressionism and Working-Class Fiction

In his essay, 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin distinguishes between two generic traditions of story-telling, symbolized by two contrasting occupations: the peasant and the voyager.* 'If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives', he wrote, 'one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman.'[1] One told the stories of the village, its people and its history, whilst the other brought stories from lands where people lived different lives according to different customs. Both traditions complemented each other. Benjamin's distinction remains valuable in contemporary arguments about finding cultural forms and processes which enable the balancing of the local and particular with the national and international. This is one of the most pressing contemporary political and cultural problems and currently finds its most developed expression in the controversies surrounding the achievements—and also the limitations—of the recent and widespread growth of local peoples' history projects.[2] This distinction is also useful to employ when looking back at one of the most energetic

periods of working-class writing, the 1930s, because by doing so it becomes clear that most recent attention to the writing of that decade has been focused on just one of the traditions—the local—at the expense of understanding attempts to create a different aesthetic of working-class experience based not on place and continuity but on dislocation and transience.

For when we think of the working-class writers of the 1930s who made a permanent and popular impact, we think of the writers who took as their political and aesthetic ambition the project of describing the life of the communities they lived in, usually employing a literary technique most easily summarized as 'documentary realism'. The writers and books of that period whose names and titles are still recalled today would include for example, Walter Brierley with *Means Test Man*, B. L. Coombes with *These Poor Hands*, Willy Goldman with *East End My Cradle*, Walter Greenwood with *Love on the Dole*, Lewis Jones with *Cwmardy* and *We Live*, and John Summerfield with *May Day.* (Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scot's Quair* is, I personally feel, a quite singular and separate achievement in that decade.) All of these books were essentially literary documents rooted in the continuity of class and *place.* Not surprisingly they emanated from communities with strong local identities often occasioned by the predominance of a single local industry. Brierley was a Derbyshire miner, Coombes and Jones both worked in South Wales pits (though Coombes had experienced one dislocation of place in the move from Herefordshire to South Wales as a teenager in search for work); Greenwood wrote from the experience of life in industrial Salford; Goldman of life in the Jewish East End, and Sommerfield about the tightly-knit working-class districts of riverside London.

In such books the communities in which they are set are whole worlds in themselves and little reference is made to events, places and peoples beyond them. Continuity of employment, even in the same pit or factory as the father, is one kind of ambition either realized or thwarted by the recession and large-scale unemployment. Continuity also of family life along the old patterns is also often represented as an ideal, sometimes achieved but often disrupted as liaisons go amiss and become the major sources of drama in the novels. The desire to affirm the significance of the everyday life in the pit villages and industrial towns of what was still 'Unknown England' was encouraged by the developing oppositional aesthetics of that period. The poetry of Auden, Spender, C. Day-Lewis and MacNeice explored the imagery of the derelict industrial north. Literary and journalistic figures like Middleton-Murray, John Lehmann and George Orwell were always keen to commission documentary

---

* The catalyst for this essay was coming across a reprint of George Garrett's account of the Liverpool unemployment demonstrations in 1921–1922. Reading this pamphlet, which contained an excellent bibliography of all Garrett's writings, also made me connect Phelan with Hanley in a way I hadn't before. The Garrett pamphlet, produced by Alan O'Toole in Liverpool, is a good example of how much we need these local studies before we can begin to make the more general connections of movements and ideas.

[1] *Illuminations* London 1970, pp. 84–85. In this essay Benjamin also makes some highly pertinent comments about the decreasing value attributed to the category of personal 'experience' by modernizing social systems and ideologies.

[2] See *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by Raphael Samuel, London 1980, particularly the section on 'Local History'.

reporting by workers of their conditions; and, of course, Mass Observation developed the particularity of place and time to the extent that the degree of detail became self-parodying. (In his report on 'The Pub and The People', one Mass Observer spent an evening in a Bolton pub counting how many times the spittoon was used each hour by different customers smoking different cigarettes and drinking different drinks!) Family life, then, was portrayed as the natural cell of the working-class community, and the permanent continuity of place and employment were the buttresses needed to ensure that family life continued as it should.

A Different 'Proletarian' Fiction

But such experiences of class were by no means universal. For as many people brought up in single industry communities, with strong local traditions, there were as many for whom class was experienced as the dislocation of the generations, the rootlessness of city life, a succession of casual jobs and the constant search for employment—often involving moving from town to town. There was also often extreme psychological isolation. Such people, or at least the men among them, might have found some of their feelings and experiences represented in the work of three Liverpool-Irish writers of the 1920s and 1930s—George Garrett, James Hanley and Jim Phelan—who, with the exception of Hanley, have been largely forgotten. Yet for a time they were clearly developing a quite different tradition of working-class or 'proletarian' literature, not unconnected with the fact that they were all completely displaced from settled working-class communities. Like Benjamin's other archaic representative of a different story-telling tradition, Garrett, Hanley and Phelan were all seamen.

Phelan and Garrett certainly knew each other and met from time to time between voyages to have a drink and talk about books and writing. In his autobiography, *The Name's Phelan*, Jim Pheland recalled such meetings: 'One of the most enlivening experiences of those days was that I met Joe Jarrett (George Garrett) twice, in the intervals of his sea-going. He too had become a big, broad-shouldered fellow, was very certain of himself, and we behaved like two schoolboys when we met. To my surprise, he thought and spoke of himself as a writer, although nine-tenths of his time was spent in the stoke-holds. Some of his stories were published, and one or two long poems—we drank the money down Bootle dock road.'[3] Hanley knew of them but never met them, but they could hardly have been unaware of his writings since his first novels published in the first half of the 1930s were all set amongst Liverpool-Irish dockside families or featured the same kind of men at sea. They were also all at different times contributing stories and articles to magazines like *The Adelphi, New Writing* and *Left Review*, and so would have been aware of each other's work.

Now whilst the links between these three men were so tenuous that one cannot properly regard them as having formed a conscious 'school' of proletarian writing, one should neither try to understand their work only as the separate achievements of three different writers who happened to be at work in the same city during the same period. There are many

---

[3] *The Name's Phelan*, London 1948, p. 276.

similarities of theme, technical experimentation and acknowledgements of literary influences that make it possible to read their work together with greater insight than if read separately. Apart from the fact that all three had worked as seamen, they all shared a very deep interest in the expressionist drama of Ibsen, Strindberg and O'Neill which led them to explore non-realist forms of fictionalizing working-class life (which Hanley has continued to do up until the present day, sadly without the recognition his work deserves).

I. James Hanley

James Hanley was the first of these writers to be published. His first novel, *Drift*, came out in 1930. He was born in 1901 in a Merseyside Catholic family and went to sea at the age of 14. He remained at sea for nine years, an avid reader by his own account all the while, and when he returned to life on shore permanently he settled with the idea of becoming a writer. *Drift* explored many of the themes to which he—and Garrett and Phelan—returned to time and time again. The novel tells the story of a young boy, Joe, who refuses to follow his father into work as a seaman on leaving school, and is shown to be less than enthusiastic about any kind of work at all. Already this represents a break from the pervasive notions of continuity of experience which characterize the major tendency of working-class novels in the 1930s. Joe is determined to find a different way of life to that of his parents, relations and neighbours, whom he regards as permanently trapped in a fixed cycle of exploited labour as well as emotionally under-developed as a result of living under a terrible religious tyranny. Joe experiences Liverpool not as a free and easy seaport town where material poverty was compensated for by communal solidarity, but as an expressionistic nightmare: 'And always ascending towards the heavens the clouds of smoke and grease and steam. The city was heaving up its guts. There it lay like some huge beast. Meanwhile Joe was tramping along in the direction of the river. The pavements were aflood with life. And the cold tang of dawn—one saw it in the pinched blue faces. On they swept. Swarming miraculous life. The human ambulance, a mighty phalanx sweeping down, down, down.'

Joe is viewed with deep mistrust by the rest of his family for both spurning loyalty to the Catholic Church and for reading the 'disgusting and atheistical' works of Zola and Joyce. Worse still he is carrying on an affair with a young prostitute. Sexuality, particularly adolescent sexuality, looms ominously in many of Hanley's novels. Sexuality is 'an abyss of desire' which is likely to consume and devour. It stands in opposition to the declared values of proper family life and therefore can only be found away from the community in the twilight world of those who have rejected (or have been rejected by) the puritan certainties of those working-class communities where religion is a much more powerful ingredient of consciousness than are the material exigencies of class. Towards the end of the novel Joe is waiting in Lime Street hoping to catch sight of Jane, the prostitute he is infatuated with, and through his eyes the reader observes the relentless parade of misery and ugliness which is likely to finally overpower him: the bulls being driven down to the abattoir, the prostitutes with their intoxicated, blowzy charms, the drunks and vagrants, the ragged and hungry children, the hellfire soap-

box orators. Neither land nor sea offer anything of value or possibility to Joe as he thinks about his future life. Society is a deranged nightmare.

Socialist politics enter the novel only briefly, represented by the least convincing of any of the characters in *Drift.* The socialists are portrayed as middle and upper-class aesthetes who lounge about in each other's flats listening to Beethoven and talking about Tolstoy and modern sculpture. Such a portrait was clearly a deliberate misrepresentation by Hanley, for there certainly was a strong working-class socialist tradition in Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s; Hanley obviously wanted to emphasize Joe's helpless position for which the expressionistic style was the most suitable. And expressionism is a way of portraying the process of crisis, not a way of formulating possible solutions. Joyce's Stephen Daedalus is very much a prototype for Hanley's Joe, but Hanley was remarkably successful in creating a convincing Liverpool dockland milieu for his character, and the twin daemonologies of religion and sexuality are portrayed with great power and authenticity. It must have been a shocking and disturbing book to have published in 1930. And for a first novel a forceful achievement.

The *Boy* and *The Furys*

Even more shocking, however, was Hanley's next novel, *Boy*, published in 1931, and which remains the work by which Hanley is best known. It went through three very rapid reprints and then was banned for obscenity in 1932, since when it has never been re-published. It is dedicated to Nancy Cunard, the shipping heiress who became very involved in the world of avant-garde art in the 1920s and, later, left-wing cultural politics in the 1930s. It was Nancy Cunard who organised the famous edition of *Left Review* in 1937 which was called 'Authors Take Sides' and published the results of a widely distributed questionnaire on well-known writers' attitudes to the Spanish Civil War. The dedication also suggests something of the way in which relatively unknown working-class writers were able to get published in that period. It happened mostly by political patronage from left-wing people active in metropolitan literary life. Hanley was certainly encouraged and supported by Cunard and John Lehmann; Garrett by Middleton-Murray, Lehmann and Orwell; Phelan by H. G. Wells.

Boy is a truly disturbing novel. It opens in the classroom of a slum school where a young boy is about to tell the headmaster that his parents have decided that he must leave school to go to work. The boy himself would like to stay on (like the main character in *Drift* he is positively terrified of having to join the treadmill of slum life and toil on which his parents have wasted their lives), but he is completely at the mercy of his tyrannical parents. The headmaster sees education as offering no hope to the working class compared to the demands of the economic system, 'this huge machine that daily ground people's hopes beneath its wheels'. Any resistance at home to his father's decision to get him a job at the docks is met by being beaten into senselessness while his mother looks on indifferently, her mind on the additional income which the boy's wages will bring into the house. Working-class male self-assertion and violence are portrayed by Hanley with great disgust and bitterness.

The novel, very simply written, gains a powerful allegorical weight by being quite unspecific about its geographical location. It is simply set in a 'dockside community' of unmediated bleakness and despair. The young boy is placed in work by his father, and his first day's work inside the docks is spent baling out the bilges of a ship, standing up to his armpits in fouled water passing up buckets to another young boy at the top of the ladder. Later in the day he is put to work scaling out the inside of the ship's boilers with another team of boys, chipping away in darkness and oppressive heat at the coke deposits left on the boiler walls. As it is his first day the other boys decide he will have to be 'initiated', a process of being tied up, covered in paint and locked in one of the boilers. Overhearing these plans he runs away and decides on the spot to stow away on another ship about to leave that night. All the other young boys are shown by Hanley to have been rapidly brutalized by the conditions of work and trapped in a very callous and aggressive working-class masculinity.

So the boy hides in the coke-hold of the ship where he quickly becomes very ill and feverish through lack of food, general ill-health and sheer moral terror. He is discovered by one of the seamen who takes him to his cabin, puts the boy to bed and then rapes him. This scene is made all the more powerful by the fact that in the original edition about every third word for the duration of this scene is represented by a series of asterisks. In the morning the captain is notified of the boy's presence and it is agreed that he be allowed to work his passage until the ship returns to England. As the voyage progresses he is bullied and sexually assaulted by a number of members of the crew and his mind becomes increasingly suffused with an enormous horror of life. They arrive at a port in the Middle East for a short stay and the boy is taken by an older sailor to a brothel where the boy becomes infatuated with the young prostitute he is offered. In these novels only prostitutes represent female sexuality. The terrors of adolescent sexuality are again portrayed with power: the rigidities of a particular kind of religious character formation make sexuality, or 'lust' as it is described, a very self-destructive process. The boy contracts syphilis and falls into a violent fever back on board and his mind becomes completely deranged. The captain in a moment of pity goes to him one evening, lays his greatcoat over the boy's face and smothers him to death. The whole action of the novel, from schoolroom to death-bed, takes place within perhaps ten days; and the pace of the novel accelerates as it goes along so that the shock of the boy's death at the end is very powerful indeed. Such a novel could only have been written by a person who knew life on board ships in all its squalid tyranny and oppressiveness, and by someone who was, as Hanley described himself, 'drenched in Strindberg, Synge and Ibsen'. One might be more direct and say that *Boy* has many structural and thematic similarities to Ibsen's *Ghosts.*

In 1935 Hanley published *The Furys,* a very long and panoramic novel of working-class family life in Liverpool centred around the Fury family, hence the title. Once again this family, or 'workers' dynasty' as Soviet critics have come to call this kind of novel, is centred around the whims and wishes of the father, Denny Fury. Denny had been a sailor for most of his life, but had been encouraged to stay at home and oversee the family as they grew into adulthood. Denny feels trapped on land, and, like many

other characters in the novels and stories of Hanley, Garrett and Phelan, dreams of taking a ship as a way of escaping the responsibilities and oppressive relationships of everyday social life. Here these writers are looking at certain possibilities of escape from the exigencies of class oppression which the working-class writers of locality and place did not recognize. In *Boy* the young main character had sought escape—unsuccessfully in his case—by taking a boat. In *The Furies* Denny is shown early in the novel 'floating about the city like a cork upon water, waiting and hoping for some release. Only a ship could deliver him.'

Once again the novel focuses on the young son—Peter—who has returned home after a period of some years in Ireland training for the priesthood. He had failed to take Orders, to the enormous disappointment of his mother, who had greater hopes of her favourite son becoming a priest, a powerful sentiment in many working-class Catholic families. Peter returns to Liverpool dissatisfied with his life and determined not to get trapped in the way of life of his parents and other brothers and sisters. Peter is the uncommitted observer in the novel, wandering through the bleak and loveless city and through other people's lives as the young Stephen D wanders through Joyce's *Ulysses*. He witnesses the large demonstrations of the Liverpool unemployed and their brutal suppression by the police (described at length by George Garrett in *Liverpool 1921–1922* and later by Jim Phelan in *Ten-A-Penny-People*). He is also picked up by the Mephistophelean Professor Titmouse, an ominous and homosexual figure of terrifying visions. He inveigles himself into becoming the lover of his sister-in-law, an attractive woman estranged from her husband Desmond, an active socialist and railway worker, always out at meetings or at work. Peter inevitably becomes morally corrupted and at the end of the novel runs away to sea to escape the bitter antagonism of the rest of his family whose lives he has betrayed.

The lot of the women in the novel is many times worse than that of the men. Mrs. Fury is worn out with waiting on the men in the household, including her very aged and senile father who from the beginning of the novel up to the end is always found sitting in the kitchen, strapped to a chair to avoid falling off, spoon-fed and speaking gibberish. The kitchen in which the reader always finds Mrs. Fury is described in great detail like the dark interior of one of Gorky's peasant homes—a small alter with a candle burning that has been kept alight for seventeen years, casting a dim, flickering light onto the features of the senile old man. At the end Mrs. Fury almost gives up eating in order to accelerate the process of her own dying, a woman destroyed by class and sexual oppression. Her last act in the novel is to attack Peter when she finds him about to board ship. She tries to pulp his face which stands for the face of all the men who 'had cheated and insulted her'.

II. George Garrett

By the mid-1930s Hanley was getting regularly published in those two important outlets for new writers, particularly those from working-class backgrounds: *Left Review* and John Lehmann's *New Writing*. This was also true of George Garrett. Garrett, like Hanley, was born at the turn of the century into a Liverpool-Irish Catholic family. He went to sea on

leaving school, was back in Liverpool to join the 1922 Hunger March to London, went to sea again, travelled around the United States, joined the Wobblies, and finally returned to active working-class politics in Liverpool where he remained until his death in 1966. He had a number of stories published in *Left Review* and *New Writing* in 1935–37.

One such story, 'Redcap',[4] tells of a ship in a French port during the First World War. The sailors have been forbidden to go ashore and a military policeman stands on watch to ensure that this order is kept. The hatred of the sailors for this bullying and arrogant figure of authority, keeping them imprisoned on the ship for no real reason, is intense. An older sailor and a younger colleague manage to give the M.P. the slip one afternoon and get into town to buy some new boots and have a drink. They learn from some British rank and file soldiers in town how particularly vicious this M.P. is. On their return to the boat they are unluckily spotted by the guard who speaks to them with contempt and announces that they will be severely punished. The older man, a veteran of the Boer War and conscious of the way in which working-class people are pushed around in the services and in civilian life, edges the M.P. towards the wharf edge where he stumbled over a rope and falls into the water. Shouting for help, the M.P. struggles in the water trying to swim to safety. As if to help him the older man jumps into the water landing deliberately on the M.P.s head stunning him and then allowing him to drown. It is a story of terrible frustration and hatred in which the ending, callous though it seems, also seems inevitable and just. Garrett, like Hanley, is concerned with extreme emotions of people trapped in extreme circumstances. Thus they write with vivid intensity of people whose consciousness is frequently at fever pitch. Psychological portraiture is of great importance to them.

Another story, 'Fishmeal',[5] shows Garrett at his most expressionist. This is yet another examination of the terrors of the stoke-hold. In the sailor's quarters the men are grumbling about watch duties. Costain, very much an isolated figure, although ill decides to report for his next shift in the stoke-hold. At work, in the heat of the stoking ovens he becomes feverish and mentally deranged. His mind is filled with fantasies of fire and thirst as his body is racked by fever. Suddenly he rushes from the stoke-hold up to the deck screaming and hurls himself into the freezing sea in order to assuage his physical thirst and mental turmoil. A small dinghy is lowered overboard to try to rescue Costain, but he is dead when they finally reach him. In the process of this rescue another sailor loses the use of both his arms as they crushed while bringing the small boat back to the side of the larger ship. As the body of Costain is winched aboard, Garrett describes it as hanging like Christ at the Crucifiction. In both the stoke-hold and in the wild night sea Garrett paints a picture of utter human desolation and extremity.

Garrett also wrote (in *The Adelphi*) in June 1936 a particularly 'incisive' essay on Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus.* As an experienced seaman he was in a good position to take Conrad to task for a certain 'artistic' loading of the dice against the character Donkin—Conrad's miserable

---

[4] *Left Review*, October 1935.
[5] *New Writing*, Autumn 1936.

scapegoat at the centre of that famous story. Garrett brings to his criticism a very real understanding of the pressures and material circumstances which force Donkin into the role as an argumentative 'sea-lawyer' so despised by Conrad. At a number of key points in the story Garrett challenges Conrad's plausability in the actual details of seafaring practice. Whereas Conrad invites the reader to identify with the Captain and the pride of the shipowners at the expense of the poorly fed, over-worked and miserably paid seamen, Garrett in his critical essay suggests that the reader attempt for a change to identify with the sailors who actually do the work that creates the circumstances for Conrad to write his moral tale. Looked at in this new light, Conrad's selectivity of material appears artistically quite damaging. Conrad's final assessment of Donkin is thus: 'Donkin, who never did a decent day's work in his life, no doubt earns his living by discoursing with filthy eloquence upon the right of labour to live.' Garrett, on the other hand, supports the attitude and character of Donkin on the basis of real experience of the difficulties and tribulations of such a sailor's life. At the end of his essay Garrett looks forward to the day when, 'the Donkins might write the story of the sea. Let's hope it will be to better a world in which shipowners can still send out heavily insured coffin ships and their helpless crews.'

It is salutary to be reminded that Conrad—much of whose reputation was based on the 'authenticity' of his seaboard settings should be regarded as quite ignorant of many seafaring matters by sailors themselves. Garrett was not alone amongst these three writers in being critical of Conrad. The narrator in one of Hanley's stories, 'Jacob', says that 'Conrad was not a sailor, but a writer who happened to go to sea.' If there was one fictional creation of sea-going life they all admired, then it was Big Yank, the hero of Eugene O'Neill's expressionist play, *The Hairy Ape.* Big Yank was the obsessed and frenetic stoker in extremis. Garrett's first performance as an actor was in O'Neill's play. Garrett also wrote some autobiographical reminiscences and descriptions of important political movements in Liverpool in an unpublished work, 'Ten Years on the Parish', although the pieces on 'The First Hunger March' and *Liverpool 1921–22* were published separately. For some reason he seems to have given up writing at the end of the 1930s, an event which lead John Lehmann to write in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Whispering Gallery*, published in 1955: 'If George Garrett, Liverpool seaman and heroic battler against impossible odds, should by any chance read these works, I should like him to know how much I have always regretted that he found it impossible to go on with what he had so vigorously begun; and I should like him to tell me what happened to him.'[6]

III. Jim Phelan

As mentioned before, Garrett and Phelan knew each other and from time to time met when their very circuitous paths crossed. Phelan was born in a small village outside Dublin in 1895 and first ran away from home when he was three. He ran away from home for good around the age of eleven and settled for a while in Dublin, working as a postboy and living in the anonymity of the slum area called 'The Liberties'. He quite soon decided

[6] John Lehmann in *The Whispering Gallery*, London 1955.

to go to sea and eventually, like Garrett, tramped across the United States. In one of his stories, 'Happy Ending,' the narrator describes a life of a man never at rest: working various passages as a sailor, occasionally meeting up with old friends on different ships, or on casual jobs like grape-picking in France, or living rough in seaports like Marseilles (a city which also fascinated Hanley and provided the setting for his novel *The Closed Harbour*). In his autobiography, *The Name's Phelan*, Phelan writes of his lifelong obsession with flight: 'Always, in any danger or difficulty, my immediate impulse is to turn round and head for the horizon.' The chronology of Phelan's life is difficult to reconstruct since he never gave any dates in his autobiographical writings. We do know, however, that Phelan had been a member of the Irish Republican Army and was convicted in 1923 for the murder of a man in the course of a post office robbery in Liverpool. Condemned to death, he vividly describes in his autobiography the days he spent in Strangeways prison waiting to be hung. The death sentence was commuted at the last minute, but he remained in jail until 1937—a period which is the subject of many reminiscences in *Jail Journey* and *Tramp at Anchor.*

One novel, though, *Ten-A-Penny-People* (1938), perhaps his most sustained work, falls into place quite readily next to the themes and pre-occupations of Garrett and Hanley. Published by Gollancz in 1938, it begins in Liverpool with a young boy about to be persuaded by his father to start work on the boats. The opening scene is very similar to those of Hanley's novels and equally as powerful. Joe Jarrow (not a very careful disguising of the Joe Jarrett alias George Garrett of the later autobiography) is the young man who refuses his father's place as a trainee stoker on board a ship about to sail, takes on his father in physical combat, and after a brutal slugging match is finally beaten into unconsciousness. Standing over his supine son the father unbuttons his fly and 'watered the face of the unconscious boy'. Phelan is very much in the same horrendous territory as Hanley. The young boy is taken on board ship where he is immediately befriended by an older sailor known as 'Soshie' (the socialist) who gives him a volume of Jack London stories. The novel then quickly moves to a completely different setting with different characters which sets the structure for the rest of the book. For this is a discontinuous succession of scenes and plots, sometimes overlapping and related, sometimes not, as Phelan tries—for the most part successfully—to break away from the determinations of the continuous narrative to present a patchwork of parallel sequences which can be made to represent simultaneity of working-class life and struggle in various places at the same time. So Joe Jarrow turns up in the novel some years later in another sequence as a tramp.

It is likely that Phelan was very much influenced in his choice of style for this novel by the success of John Sommerfield's *May Day* published two years earlier in 1936. Sommerfield's novel itself owed much to the imagery and construction of the documentary film movement of the late 1920s and early 1930s—films like those of Eisenstein and Dovchenko with their dramatic crowd scenes, non-naturalistic lighting, images of individual anguish as well as processions, funerals, work in fields and factories, and villanous kulaks and capitalists. Novels like those of Sommerfield and Phelan owed even more to those documentary films

whose aim was to capture the multi-faceted reality of city life, of which Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of A City* was the most seminal. When the British documentary film-maker John Grierson was describing the imagery of that particular genre of film, the 'symphony of the city', he could as well have been describing the techniques of the working-class expressionist writers like Sommerfield, Phelan, Hanley and Garrett: 'The day began with a processional of workers, the factories got under way, the streets filled: the city's forenoon became a hurly-burly of tangled pedestrians and street cars. There was a respite for food: a various respite with contrast of rich and poor. The city started work again, and a shower of rain in the afternoon became a considerable event. The city stopped work and, in furthermore hectic processional of pubs and cabarets and dancing legs and illuminated sky-signs, finished its day.'[7]

Phelan's *Ten-A-Penny-People* is built around a number of different incidents which happen at roughly the same time. The opening sections give the formative incidents in the early lives of some of the characters who assume much more important roles later on. Some chapters are prefaced by parts of folk songs or political songs, some by ironic Brechtian interventions. Other sections of the novel are simply snatches of 'representative' kinds of conversations, juxtaposing bits of talk around tea in a working-class household with the voices of businessmen choosing from the menu in an expensive restaurant. There are central incidents which touch in different ways all of the characters lives: a strike, a case of arson with murder at the same factory, a failed attempt at suicide by a woman which results in the death of one of her children and a murder charge against her. Some characters know about these things because they are directly involved, others only hear of them as news items.

In some ways Phelan is more successful than Sommerfield in creating believable characters, since Sommerfield as an active Communist was more concerned in creating representative 'types' of people who exemplified general psychologies of time and circumstance. Phelan, an anarchist by temperament and self-description, only dealt in generalities of character when he portrayed bosses or Party members. In fact there is a strong dislike in the novel for the politically rigid as in his portrayal of one Communist couple who can only ever speak in truncated phrases like modern Gradgrinds: '"Interested," explained Dick. "Marvellous reflex-conditioning. Child knows factory really responsible. Works, poverty, tragedy. Marvellous reflexing. Agree?" he inquired, turning to Joan. "Agree," confirmed Joan. "Wages, want, woe-associated. Expressed as 'Poor Ma. The works.' Very striking." "Oh, go to hell, you cold-blooded pair of swine," shouted Kitty, as she dashed from the room.'

IV. The Postwar Period

After the Second World War, Phelan mainly published books of autobiographical reminiscence, either about tramping or prison life, and occasionally short stories. Garrett, meanwhile, seems to have had nothing published after the war though he remained politically active in Liverpool. It was Hanley who carried on exploring the possibilities of fiction in

[7] *Grierson on Documentary*, London 1979, pp. 39–40.

a remarkably intense and prolific way. Amongst those with a very close interest in contemporary fiction, Hanley has become a writer who is from time to time described as 'the greatest living English language novelist'; yet outside such a circle of reviewers Hanley remains relatively unknown. This is a pity, for he has continued to take as the subjects of his novels the very real personal dilemmas of 'ordinary' people and treated these dilemmas and the lives which encompass them with an extraordinary sympathy and insight.

There are several reasons which may explain why Hanley's work has eluded popular attention. Firstly, his novels usually take as their major pre-occupation the psychological states of a very small number of characters locked in a very closed world of material circumstances. Little attention is ever played to the wider society in which these characters live, although their lives are clearly deeply affected by social circumstances. Thus an early postwar novel, *The Closed Harbour* (1952), tells the story of a sea-captain, Marius, stranded with his wife and daughter in Marseilles, as he tries to get another engagement with a shipping company. We learn that something untoward happened on a previous voyage which makes his chances of another situation quite remote, but we never learn what really happened. The main emphasis of the novel is on exploring the obsessive desire of Marius to try to break free of the trap into which he has led himself and his family. His wife and grown daughter, both devout Catholics, regard him with increasing contempt as he wanders each day down to the harbour to try to secure another ship. Marseilles is an overcrowded and corrupt city which breaks its inhabitants either on the wheel of a completely self-denying religion or through the 'corruption of the flesh' and desire for power.

The style of writing is very intense and highly metaphorical. Faulkner is an acknowledged mentor in Hanley's own development as a writer after 1945. Marius' mind begins to lose touch with reality as the realization that his life at sea has finished becomes confused with a metaphorical understanding of the decline of shipping. Looking at his old maps and charts, a sympathetic colleague tries to tell Marius that his experience already belongs to a past era, pointing to, '. . . the seas that had dried up, the ships that lay rotting, the rivers carrying nothing, the lighthouses without lights'. At the end Marius finds sanctuary in a hospital for the mentally ill run by a religious order, where everything is peaceful and quiet, but where in such featureless and institutional surroundings, life had been 'levelled flat'.

Coming to terms with Hanley's style is not easy. Yet it has to be seen as a very conscious development from the novels and stories of the 1930s in which he usually set his characters in much more realistic, 'dynastic' and panoramic working-class settings. Some of his recent novels, published in the 1970s, exemplify both the strengths and weaknesses of Hanley's chosen style. *A Woman in the Sky* (1973) is a small masterpiece of expressionist stream-of-consciousness writing. It concerns a handful of characters living in a tower block on a North London housing estate, especially two elderly women who live together in one flat and their neighbours, an elderly couple next door. Such plot as there is, is precipitated by the suicide of one of the elderly women, a working-class

alcoholic, deeply ashamed of having been caught and charged for a shoplifting offence. Hanley uses the incident to explore the inner lives of the remaining woman and her neighbours as they have to cope with this 'minor' tragedy. Much of the novel is in speech; either the internal speech of the characters as they shuffle from flat to pub or shopping parade, or between them as they talk about the incident. This speech is often very dense and highly elliptical, but it achieves insights and understandings of the lives which people are driven to negotiate under the pressures of class, material circumstances and emotional difficulty, which one just doesn't find in the contemporary realistic novel.

On the other hand, *A Dream Journey* (1976), about a couple living in London during the war, is tortuously long and much of the writing impenetrable. Hanley makes no concessions to conventional narrative structure and one gets the impression that he never rises from his desk from the first page of each novel until the concluding line. The energy in his writing is amazing but is sometimes defeated by a failure to make any concessions to the need of his readers for moments of re-capitulation or exegesis. Most recently, *A Kingdom* (1978) is more simple and, though not as accomplished as 'A Woman in the Sky', remains a very powerful portrait of two sisters, long estranged, meeting on the death of their father. Again, these are not members of the kind of class which most modern fiction assumes to be the most important—the class to which most writers themselves belong—but people (like Cadi and Lucy in this novel) who work in shops or look after elderly parents on small-holdings in Welsh villages. Hanley has said that he is fascinated by the supposedly 'inarticulate', whose inner minds are actually like 'great forests or endless seas'.

The Expressionist Mode Today

As there is once again a growing worker-writers movement in Britain—which re-emerged significantly with the setting up of the Scotland Road Writers' Workshop in dockside Liverpool in 1972, demonstrating how resilient some apparently broken traditions can be—the achievements of these three novelists are of more than academic interest. For they were writing in a period when experimentation in cultural forms often went hand in hand with revolutionary ideas in politics. Modernism was more than just an aesthetic movement, it also had political implications. That connection has since the Cold War been completely broken: revolutionary politics has come to be associated with the most dull and unimaginative expectations of what is possible in literature, usually pedestrian verse and prose only distinguished from its 'bourgeois' counterparts by the worthiness of its morality.

Garrett, Hanley and Phelan did not try to develop a 'proletarian' aesthetic completely independent from the achievements of writers who had emerged—often antagonistically—from more bourgeois cultural traditions. Eclectic in their reading, they were excited and inspired by writers as various as Ibsen, Strindberg, Synge, Joyce, Gorki, O'Neill, Dostoievski, Faulkner, Jack London and Ben Traven. I believe they were right to think that a new literary aesthetic could not be developed without reference to the achievements of the bourgeois literary tradition which, if

critically read and absorbed, could only provide a greater range of styles and techniques for exploring the multi-faceted and complex world of working-class experience. The material circumstances of their early lives as seamen and itinerants naturally influenced their choice of literary influences and iconography. The era of the great steel transatlantic passenger and cargo ships provided a number of political and experimental writers with the metaphorical images they needed: Ben Traven's *Death Ship*, Jack London's *Sea-Wolf*, Conrad Aiken's *Blue Voyage*, Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine*, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and the transatlantic voyage in Kafka's *America.* Before them, both Melville and Conrad had explored this world of harrowing sea voyages in equally allegorical ways. The Liverpool-Irish writers were fully steeped in this literary tradition. And they also, like many of the writers, together with Gorki, were acquainted with and fascinated by the extraordinary characters found in the most poverty-stricken districts of the world's major cities and seaports. In the various criminal underworlds, in the cafes and bars of the red-light districts, in the sailors' missions and dockside lodging-houses, they saw how many people had tried to find some form of escape or retreat or alternative way of life to that of the factory system. They did not necessarily like or condone what they saw, but they realized it had to be explored.

Since we live in a new era of cultural displacement and migration (both within and between countries) we shall have to find the appropriate literary forms and styles which can explore and reflect these shifts and changes in people's lives and their material circumstances. As 'de-industrialization' and the movement of capital disrupts settled industrial communities, we shall need to make the break from the traditional working-class novel with its emphasis on the continuity of the diurnal family life. Displacement, fragmentariness, cosmopolitanism, the life on the streets rather than in the homes, cultural multiplicity are likely to be the new conditions of experience for the next generation of working-class people. Significantly it has been the new Black writers and feminist writers who have responded more quickly to these changing material conditions and have tried to find new literary forms able to reflect and explore the complexities of the new 'structures of feeling' now emerging. Yet there is an expressionist tradition within working-class writing as I have attempted to show, and it is one that is worth re-connecting to and developing. Garrett, Hanley and Phelan really accomplished quite a lot in a matter of years with very little support or recognition. It is an appropriate time to rediscover them.