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**These Poor Hands:
Constructing the Labouring Body in 1930s British Writing**

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If modernity, as it has been argued, commences with a process of “separation” or “differentiation”; if it *begins* with a radical division of ambits, regions and functions which collectively produce a new space of social intelligibility, then the body inherited from a pre-modern conceptuality – the total, spectacular body of the *ancien régime* (as described, for example, by Foucault in *Surveiller et Punir*) – comes across as an epistemological embarrassment, as an uncomfortable testimony for which the rational subject, the Cartesian *cogito*, has no excuse, alibi or justification.

The momentous divorce between body and mind, between rationality and corporeality facilitates a radical specialisation of social functions which directly affects the organisation of labour. In the process of “rationalization” which, according to Max Weber, characterises modernity, the body – and in this particular context, the working or labouring body – is *naturalised* as a functional object and enlisted as part of a series of tools and technical appurtenances of the rising capitalist economy.

Radical fiction and social polemic, both right and left, tended to warn, from very early on, against the risks and pitfalls of an impending commodification or reification of existence, in which the body of the producer would succumb to the instrumental discontinuities of the productive process. With the social division of labour comes the end of that unitary process of production in which the worker can directly relate to the outcome of her/his

work – and in which work itself displays the lineaments of an organic and total process requiring, so to speak, an integral productive intelligence, a craft, rather than a dictated gesture or isolated operation in an impersonal series. The contrast between a proletarianised working-class, physically degraded by the utilitarian exigencies and technocratic adjustments of the modern factory, and its artisanal predecessors – the early-nineteenth-century weavers of E. P. Thompson’s famous account in *The Making of the English Working Class*, for example – is glaring.

The combination of labour and leisure, or of strictly productive activity with the “natural” supplement of lived community – fleshed out in its traditional institutions, views and general preoccupations – secured an organic bedrock of subjective experience with which the mode of production was seamlessly articulated: “Every weaving district” – says Thompson – “had its weaver-poets, biologists, mathematicians, musicians, geologists, botanists” and there were even those “who taught themselves geometry by chalking on their flagstones, and who were eager to discuss the differential calculus”.¹ This primal image of an organic process constituted an extreme counterpoint and no doubt something of a utopian afterimage when retrospectively considered from the standpoint of modern factory life.

The 1930s are perhaps symptomatic in the way that capitalist modernity is scrutinised for its defining elements, if not for the first time, at least in the radically novel way dictated by unprecedented conditions of systemic crisis (the mass unemployment and poverty following 1929). In that sense, a good number of fictional and non-fictional accounts coincide in offering a stark frame, an untrimmed portrayal of the system and one which cannot but stress that most conspicuous feature of modern social organization: namely, the unrelenting fragmentation of the labour process and the subsequent inability to, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “grasp the meaningful totality” of labour *as* a social process and of the individual’s relation to it.²

The foundry! What a place.
Steel platforms from which you saw great muscular men
dwarfed to insignificance by the vastness of everything: men
the size of Ned Narkey who had charge of the gigantic crane.

Fascinated, he saw the cumbrous thing, driven by Ned, unseen, move slowly along its metals: leisurely, its great arm deposited an enormous ladle by the furnace. A pause; a hoarse shout; a startling glimpse of fire then a rushing, spitting river of flames that was molten metal running out of the furnace's channel into the ladle until it brimmed. The river of fire was damned, ceased as by magic. The crane's limp cable tautened; slowly the ladle swung, revolved, white-hot, a vivid, staring glare that stabbed the eyes; slowly it swung, twenty tons of molten metal to the moulds.

Men, red in front, black behind and trailing long shadows after them; men with leather aprons, bare, sinewy arms and coloured goggles shading their eyes, ran about in obedience to shouted instructions: chains creaked on strain, unseen mechanism "clank-clanked", then, as with calculated deliberation, the glowing cauldron tipped forward as though held, jug-wise, by an invisible giant's hand. Harry held his breath as the metal brimmed the lip to fall, splashing off a teeming fountain of heavy, quick-drying sparks like a Catherine wheel, before the metal ran to earth forcing off hissing plumes of burning rainbow-coloured gases through the mould vents.³

Walter Greenwood's classic account of Depression England in his 1933 novel *Love on the Dole* offers, amongst a variety of iconic descriptions of the more evident effects of the crisis, a remarkable account of industrial rationalisation. The hellish picture painted by Greenwood retains none of the salutary or indeed self-satisfying qualities of the older, pre-industrial labour process. Bodies are subdued by clockwork routines and bereft of the latent power which their physical presence announces. Their every movement is planned out and dictated "with calculated deliberation". There is little room in the hyper-efficient universe of factory work for the wholesome expansiveness – for the transversality, as it were – of craftsmanship, and for the resulting intellectual roundedness of the weavers described by Thompson.

Taylorism and Fordism supplied the systematic theorisation, the ideological legitimation for a radical dismantling of the older productive forms, raising the banner of scientific rationalisation in their stead. As we know, one of immediate effects of this analytical approach was the separation of manual and intellectual labour, the dissolution of precisely the sort of organic totality which had characterised craftsmanship and the earlier forms of industrial or semi-industrial organisation. This entailed a form of social division that went beyond

the “technical” or strategic segmentation of tasks in an increasingly complex manufacturing process requiring a differential allotment of functions and specialisms. Rather, its implicit aim was to break down the consolidated unity and cohesion of the productive cycle, and to *socialise* – that is, to “naturalise” as a fact of social organisation – the divisions of techno-scientific specialisation.

As Harry Braverman has pointed out in his classic book on labour and capital, “the detailed division of labor destroys occupations considered in this sense, and renders the worker inadequate to carry through any complete production process.”⁴ The Cartesian dualism of body and mind is here replicated at the level of production, alienating what Braverman calls “the human unity of hand and brain” and reducing it to an extrinsic functionality of the economic apparatus, which not only re-organises the productive process itself, but effectively commands a radical re-composition of interpersonal relations.

The perceived loss of this organic or integral quality often transacted – in many a nineteenth-century critique of industrialism – as a loss of community, or indeed as a loss of that ontological density which German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies popularised in 1887 under the term *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to its conceptual counterpart of a (post-traditional) rationalised, specialised and ultimately individualised society, or *Gesellschaft*.

In this notion of natural community or under-rationalised association, D. H. Lawrence found the basis for his own critique of that – in his own words – “vile”, “man-made England”, which had consistently sullied the nation’s soul. His 1930 article, “Nottingham and the Mining Country”, is an exemplary instance of his oppositional reasoning, as well as an important re-enactment of a certain Victorian sensibility of anti-capitalist conservatism. Lawrence’s recollection of the native country is interlarded with ruminations about the precarious balance between a predatory new order of industrial expansion and financial speculation and the old ways of “instinctual” communality.

The loss of an organic idiom – of a totalising discourse – is automatically equated with the loss of social community as such. Lawrence’s peculiar inflection of *Gemeinschaft* characteristically opposes “instinct”, understood as

the radical expression of “nature”, to the brutalising dynamics of what Thomas Carlyle had termed, in his 1829 essay *Signs of the Times*, the “Machine Age”. In effect, Carlyle’s and Lawrence’s critiques of industrialism stem from a similar ideological outlook, based on the radical rejection of modernisation and what both regard as the defining horizon of this process, namely mechanisation. For Carlyle,

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its pre-established apparatus, it is not done by hand, but by machinery... Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, - for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.⁵

The threat of absolute mechanisation permeates through the textures of material production, reaching to the very core of social and political organisation. The outcome is a soulless passion for, according to Carlyle, “external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions”. A rationalistic commitment to calculation and sophistry is substituted for the wholesome integrity and natural resilience of British political institutions. Thus Democracy, Chartism and Socialism are, for Carlyle, sequential instances of a single “mechanical genius” deployed by modernity.

Lawrence’s combined rejection of democracy and capitalist expansion inherits the tone and tenor, not only of Carlyle, but also of Edmund Burke’s counter-revolutionary classic, his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lawrence’s sustained condemnation of democracy resonates with Burke’s late-eighteenth-century consideration of “inheritance” as the genealogical principle securing stability, accountability and what is most important, an uncontrived adjustment to nature’s laws of conservation. For Burke, “[o]ur political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a

permanent body composed of transitory parts".⁶

Lawrence reproduces Burke's and Carlyle's distrust of constructed social institutions – of the "virtual" body, to expand Burke's metaphor, of artificially assembled parts imposed upon the "real" body of the living community, and turns it into a bitter lament for an increasingly unobtainable mode of social integration whose ideal form he associates with the primordial community of affects of his childhood "mining country". "Instinct" and "spontaneity" are the buttresses of this discursive edifice:

The people lived almost entirely by instinct, men of my father's age could not really read. And the pit did not mechanize men. On the contrary. Under the butty system, the miners worked underground as a sort of intimate community, they knew each other practically naked, and with curious close intimacy, and the darkness and the underground remoteness of the pit "stall", and the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive, and intuitional contact between men very highly developed, a contact almost as close as touch, very real and very powerful. This physical awareness and intimate *togetherness* was at its strongest down pit. When the men came up into the light, they blinked. They had, in a measure, to change their flow. Nevertheless, they brought with them above ground the curious dark intimacy of the mine, the naked sort of contact...⁷

The physical permanency of this underground community of bodies is, according to Lawrence, indisputable. The somatic link is stressed as an indissoluble, and what is more important, a "natural", principle of *homosocial* continuity – a direct expression of what Burke calls "wisdom without reflection".⁸ The affective immanence of physicality and togetherness sets a strong counter-model for the cunning rationalities of modern political (and for that matter, economic) forms. The body of the miner offers a primary site of community-formation free from the base depredations of rational prospect and financial calculation. The organic status of this association is secured by an "instinctual" disposition carved out, as it were, in the mechanical body of industrial society: a bond of egalitarian loyalties which, far from *rationalising* their workers' "condition" through radical or democratic politics, falls back upon a well-nigh feudal sense of answerability – of fealty – sustained by physical proximity and shared destiny.

Lawrence's image of mutuality is indeed closer to Burke's depiction of the foregone "age of chivalry", of its *mores* and rules of social intercourse, than it is to the contemporary discourse of socialism or labourism. In effect, his miners' underground *Gemeinschaft* rehearses – in Burke's words – "that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom."⁹ "The colliers," writes Lawrence, "were deeply alive, instinctively. But they had no daytime ambition, and no daytime intellect. They avoided, really, the rational aspect of life. They preferred to take life instinctively and intuitively."¹⁰ The elemental immediacy of this existence harbours no discursive or (in Lawrence's words) "materialistic" concern – just the sheer immanence of homosocial affectivity, the sheer *life* of labouring and communing bodies. The bane or failure of modernity is not the creation of a new class-ridden society upon the embers of the old, but the replacement of affective social links with the "cash nexus".

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Romantic critique of modern utilitarianism often involved a turn to the past, a nostalgic look at Burke's "age of chivalry" in search, precisely, of a redemptive outlet against the philistinism and petty-mindedness of the bourgeois ethos. In his book on William Morris, E. P. Thompson observes that the radical mid-nineteenth-century attempts at a reconstruction of the medieval world, sought it "neither as a grotesque nor as a faery world, but as a real *community* of human beings – an organic pre-capitalist community with values and an art of its own, sharply contrasted with those of Victorian England."¹¹

The logic of acquisitiveness which sustained Victorian civilisation and engendered its "tragedy of ugliness" (as Lawrence calls it) is, by 1930, as strong and resilient as ever. The original sin of industrialism, the essentially contradictory context in which this pastoral image of coal miners is inserted preserves its iconic validity in the years of the Depression:

The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture,

ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers.¹²

This is the same obstinate ugliness recorded by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his 1937 account of poverty and unemployment in the North of England. Orwell's documentary journey begins with a grimy picture of crowded life in a Midlands lodging house, where he is first exposed to the moral and physical dereliction induced by the economic slump, and more generally, to the gulf underpinning class divisions in England.

Orwell's descriptions of working-class life are bounded by a sensorial reaction to physicality, by a conditioned reflex to cringe at the "dreadful" or "disgusting" conditions he sets out to experience and reflect upon. The living standards, routines and existential parameters he encounters at Mr and Mrs Brooker's lodging house at the opening of the book set the mood for his ideological rejection of a degraded working-class condition – a bastard product of the systemic and systematic ugliness detected by Lawrence in Victorian civilisation, and one inherently antithetical to the logic of *Gemeinschaft* or organic community. Orwell's dash against the crudity of an abased existence and an impoverished subjective (as well as objective) condition, confirms his urge to secure a counter-image of working-class life free from the terrible scars of the age: an ideal image, in other words, redolent of Lawrence's masculinist and homosocial archetype of the natural or instinctual community.

Orwell's construction of a negative paradigm of working-class life encompasses a joint representation of material ruin (a catalogue of stinking bodies, unventilated rooms, dirty hands and crippled bodies) and moral decay. The Brookers' household, a documentary charting of which opens the book, is symptomatic in this regard:

On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me. It was not only the dirt, the smells and the vile food, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like black beetles, in an endless muddle of slovened jobs and mean grievances. The most dreadful thing about people like the Brookers is the way they say the same things over and over again. It gives you the

feeling that they are not real people at all, but a kind of ghost for ever rehearsing the same futile rigmarole... But it is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You cannot disregard them if you accept the civilisation which produced them. For this is part at least of what industrialism has done for us.¹³

In Orwell's account, material penury is inseparable from the "civilising project" of Western modernity; there is an inescapable consubstantiality or continuity between capitalistic rationality – between the ostensive logic of production and accumulation as rehearsed by proficient industrialism – and the embodied negation of its principles, i.e. the system's personified "other" as encountered at its structural outskirts. This makes the acknowledgement of poverty, its close analysis and experiencing, not only requisite for the doctrinal observer – for the Socialist in the making – as part of a process of ideological development, but rather, a general ethical mandate with pedagogical effects. "It is a kind of duty" – says Orwell – "to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist".¹⁴

The bid for an organic reconstitution of social life away from the bracing dereliction of modern industrial "civilisation", which is a central element of both Orwell's and, as we have seen, Lawrence's, programmes, is predicated on an assumed conception of working-class corporeality as archetypically masculine, vigorous and unmediated. Once again, coal-mining furnishes the emblem; for, as Beatrix Campbell has observed "[t]he socialist movement in Britain – and we could add: the broad range of anti-industrialist discourses, not only on the left – has been swept off its feet by the magic of masculinity, muscle and machinery. And in its star system, the accolades go to the miners."¹⁵

The miner stands out, in the loaded iconography of labouring figures and working-class idols, as a structural pivot commanding symbolic authority and attracting the unflinching adherence of a fetishistic discourse made by and for men. Orwell's characteristic definition of the coal miner as "a sort of grimy caryatid upon whose shoulders nearly everything that is *not* grimy is supported"¹⁶ encapsulates this fundamental equation between an idealised

incarnation of Work – as the real sustenance upon which the capitalist machine is propped – and an essential notion of masculinity. In other words, by promoting a notion of coal-mining as industrialism’s internal limit – as a vertebral yet extreme function of the productive process – Orwell (but also Lawrence) effectively reverses the valences of capitalistic productivity: the real force upon which the whole system rests is one which somatically, that is, immediately, negates the logic of rationalisation – the very logic which animates it.

The discursive matrix into which Orwell buys (one which, in Beatrix Campbell’s words “constructs the worker, the miner, as earth-man”)¹⁷ tends to eroticise its object and therefore to extricate it from the logic of the market and its imperative principle of universal exchange.

[T]he fillers look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron – hammered iron statues – under the smooth coat of coal dust which clings to them from head to foot. It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realise what splendid men they are. Most of them are small (big men are at a disadvantage in that job) but nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs, with no one ounce of waste flesh anywhere.”¹⁸

This eroticisation of the labour-force, taken or cast at its most primary or elemental – as sheer corporeality –, paradoxically overturns the symbolic position initially assigned to the worker within the social organisation of labour. By hypostatising and fetishising the sterling physicality of these Nietzschean *Übermenschen* of modern industrialism, their enforced position in the system (their objective “nature” as cogs in a complex machinery) is undercut and ultimately replaced by a figure of immanence and self-referentiality for which no external – mechanistic, functional or systemic– use can be prescribed.

Orwell’s libidinal investment in these primal images of capitalist “civilization” negates their explicit, their nominal, value in market terms by stressing or overstressing their implicit value as pre-existing or indeed elemental components of the system to which they are now subservient.

There is no question that this hyper-masculine discursive matrix of

resistance ultimately turns on an active exclusion of women from the community – among other reasons, as Beatrix Campbell points out “because women’s presence would dissolve the symmetry between men’s work and masculinity”¹⁹– but it is similarly evident that this anti-utilitarian and eminently utopian formulation constructs a radical counterpoint to the prevalent image – and even to the prevalent “phenomenology”, as it were – of interwar capitalism.

In this context, I think, it is unsurprising that the coal industry should supply some of the most enduring instances of radical writing in the 1930s, as well as some of the most obstinate cases of concrete radical politics. The list is extensive. In addition to the exceptional account of mining life in B. L. Coombes’ 1939 autobiography – from which I borrow the title of my paper, *These Poor Hands* –, one should mention Lewis Jones’ great epic novels *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939), Harold Heslop’s *The Gate of A Strange Field* (1929) and *Last Cage Down* (1935), among others. In these, the body is recurrently thematised as the incontestable site of a bio-political struggle. Given its idiosyncratic coordinates – which the radical-conservative discourse of anti-industrialism emphasised once and again, as we have seen – the figure of the miner is offered as industrial capitalism’s wildest contradiction. Begotten at the very entrails of the system – but also positioned liminally at the outer border of machine-civilisation, in perpetual contact with nature at its fiercest, the miner is, in a way, the system’s native offer of utopian redemption: it is the product and the internal limit of a logic we have termed of “separation”, “differentiation” or “rationalization” (both in the productive process and in society at large), which begins and concludes with the body as an inherently modern domain of exclusive investment.²⁰

NOTES

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 322.

² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*. London and New York: Verso, 2002, p. 85.

³ Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, p. 48-49.

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- ⁴ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth-Century*. New York and London: The Monthly Review Press, 1974, p. 73.
- ⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Selected Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p. 65.
- ⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, p. 120.
- ⁷ D. H. Lawrence, "Nottingham and the Mining Country", in *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950, p. 117.
- ⁸ Lawrence, *ibid.*, p. 119.
- ⁹ Burke, *Reflections.*, p. 170.
- ¹⁰ Lawrence, "Nottingham and the Mining Country", p. 118.
- ¹¹ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: The Merlin Press, 1977, p. 28.
- ¹² Lawrence, "Nottingham and the Mining Country", p. 120.
- ¹³ George Orwell, "The Road to Wigan Pier", in *Orwell's England*. London: Penguin, 2001, p. 66.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*.
- ¹⁵ Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s*. London: Virago, 1984.
- ¹⁶ Orwell, "The Road to Wigan Pier", p. 68.
- ¹⁷ "... and earth man is true man", Campbell, *Wigan Pier, Revisited*, p. 98.
- ¹⁸ Orwell, "The Road to Wigan Pier", p. 69.
- ¹⁹ Campbell, *Wigan Pier, Revisited*, p. 98.
- ²⁰ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1995, esp. p; 58-63.