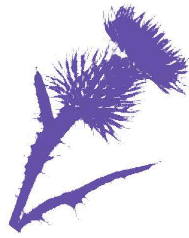

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Using 'the thousand voices' of the working class to re-negotiate normative notions of culture

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A 'Surging burst of northern singing' (Carnie Holdsworth)

The assumption that culture is an extraordinary experience of venerated artefacts only accessible to an educated elite is something that Patrick MacGill, Robert Tressell and Ethel Carnie Holdsworth do not take for granted in their texts. Instead, these authors present culture as collective, accessible and mutable. In this essay, I will work on the assertion that the cultural veneration of the written word is exclusionary. Despite record numbers in literacy rates among the working class in the early twentieth century, an elitist culture has endeavoured to maintain a 'discerning appreciation of art and literature' among its own ranks, thus constructing a binary that frames the working class as antithetical to culture (Carey 16). In opposition to this purposeful inaccessibility, working-class texts frame the mouth as an alternative site of cultural production. Their emphasis on the spoken word lends *This Slavery*, *Children of the Dead End*, and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* to a reading informed by Raymond Williams' conception of culture as 'ordinary'. In his 1958 essay, Williams posits that culture consists of 'common meanings' that are 'the product of a whole people' and are continually 'made and remade' (Williams 96). When the spoken word is imbued with cultural value, the distinction between a 'discerning' elite and an uncultured working class is dismantled. These texts contest the normative notion of culture as exclusionary by framing songs, chants and speech as new, accessible modes of cultural production.

In Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, it is the form of the text itself that poses a challenge to the cultural value placed on the written word. Normative conceptions of culture posit the textual form as culturally valuable, but Tressell provides a 'faithful picture of working class life' (5) that transcends the written word. The novel was intended to be read aloud in working-class communities – in the army, at work, in prisons. Wim Neetens points to the 'popular tradition of interpersonal … dissemination' (81) that firmly grounds the novel in working-class communities. With over ten thousand copies of the novel sold in 1927, over a decade after original publication, the didactic voice of Frank Owen, the primary articulator

of the novel's politics, would have had a profound resonance across working-class communities in the early twentieth century (Wilson 40). An awareness of a listening audience is implicit in a text that contains moments written for performance.In the satirical chapter on the crooked 'Organised Benevolence Society,' (349) Tressell articulates the charity's corrupt 'appeal to the charitable public for more funds,' (353) despite paying large sums of money to the aptly named members 'Mrs M. B. Sile' and 'Mrs M. T. Head' (352). This humorous attack on the ignorant upper class is brought to life when vocalised, and the reactions of the listening audience are written into the text in parenthesis: 'applause' and 'hear, hear' (353). By continually centring the spoken voice, not only does Tressell characterise the cultural process of forming 'common meanings' as a communal process, but he also shows that this process can be accessed through comedy. The persistent humour of the text fosters a sense of camaraderie in working-class culture that poses an antithesis to the hostility towards the working class that normative culture sustains.

The voice appears as a symbol of an inclusive working-class culture throughout Tressell's novel. Owen's political lectures to his fellow labourers act as a microcosm for the communities in which the text would have been read aloud. However, some academics have voiced criticism of the hierarchical distribution of intellect among the workers in the novel, with Pamela Fox describing Owen's superior intellect as 'deeply embedding [the novel] in class shame' (75). This top-down structure is present in Chapter 25, with Owen's lecture on 'The Money Trick' prompting the workers to 'do a little thinking on their own account, and it was a process to which they were unaccustomed' (287). On the one hand, Tressell's depiction of the confused labourers seems to conform to a normative conception of an uncultured working class. On the other, it is important to frame this chapter within the whole narrative. Tressell's novel calls on its listeners to consider a better future, with the final page illuminated with the 'rays of the risen sun of Socialism' (611). Importantly, this mobilisation towards

socialist change is brought about by the voices of the workers themselves. Owen's political speeches throughout the novel that explain the 'dreadful struggle' (281) of the working class under capitalism takes the monopoly of access to political thought out of the mouth of the elite. Instead, the voice of a working-class labourer can mobilise change.

A lack of political representation for the working classes provides the backdrop for Tressell's narrative. The realisation of class consciousness arises from disenfranchisement, and change is therefore rooted in, and stems from, working class communities. The workers may be 'puzzled' (287) in this chapter, but Tressell's final chapter is marked by optimism for a changing future. The role of Owen's speeches in aiding this progress calls to mind Williams' view of culture as being 'made and remade,' (96) ultimately presenting working-class culture to be rooted in communal mobilisation: a mode of cultural production alien to the elite minority.

In *This Slavery*, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth uses moments of protest to challenge a normative notion of culture that excludes the voices of the masses. The novel, published in 1925, follows a community that is forced to protest after a fire at Barstock's mill triggers a period of intensified poverty. The songs and chants used in the protests challenge the assumption of an 'uncultured' working-class (150). In their reactions to the chants, the mill owners vocalise a divide between the 'inartistic, crude mind' that voices the chants, and the mind from 'inside our own ranks' that they assume has written the chants (150). John Carey's 'The Intellectuals and the Masses,' charts this growing fear of cultural denigration among the upper class in the twentieth century. A decade prior to *This Slavery*'s publication, Europe's population exploded to 460 million, resulting in physical overcrowding that augmented the fear of an intrusion of elite culture (10). Alongside a growing literacy rate, this population surge catalysed an intensified veneration of the 'cultured' literary elite, that defined 'what is truly meritous in art … as the prerogative of a minority' (23). The dualism between the

'illustrious and the vulgar' (22) that resulted meant that the definition of culture hinged upon the exclusion of the ordinary masses.

Carnie Holdsworth seeks to undermine this distinction. 'The voices of the starving' are unified, 'singing in bass, treble and contralto' (150). Carnie appeals to a choral image, with the voices of the protestors harmonising with symphonic resonance. By invoking a metaphor that connotes cultural splendour, Carnie rejects the label of vulgarity and instead brands working-class culture as harmoniously accessible. 'The thousand voices' assert repeatedly 'here we are again' (227) and the 'iron chorus' (222) of their 'feet beating through the rain' provides a rhythm to the chants. This synchronisation of bodies, asserting a communal identity, highlights the necessity of mobilisation in forming a working-class culture that insists on commonality. The mobilisation of the working class in the scene does not conform to a conception of the masses as unable to understand culture; their voices command recognition.

The mass mobilisation of the voices in *This Slavery* displaces a normative conception of a preserved culture with Williams' view of culture as continually forward-facing. The mass avowal that 'we are picketing – to-night' (150) reflects the 'creative effort' (96) described by Williams that fashions a new way of learning – the working class in Carnie's text have become aware of their position and demand change. Williams' conception of culture is underpinned by the simultaneous acts of maintaining meaning and discovering new ones. The chants and songs present in Carnie Holdsworth's novel provide a useful framework in which Williams' conception of culture is embodied. The chants used by the protestors consist of 'old tunes' (150) with new words written for the protest. By fashioning new lyrics for the 'picketing,' (151) the working-class community in Carnie Holdsworth's text exhibit a re-negotiating of culture. In this moment of chanting, a working-class culture is being produced through a process of redefinition: the 'voices of the starving' (150) give new

meaning to the 'old tunes'. This redefinition, powered by voices, is the root of cultural change. The metaphor of a 'surging burst of northern singing' (151) encapsulates a swelling anger that burgeons and erupts when sung aloud. The verb 'surging' calls to mind a wave, which crashes 'into the room' of the mill owners, forcing them to stay 'sat listening' (150). The 'old tunes' which would have been kept within working-class communities have been refashioned to be heard by the elite. The voice has an immediate and unavoidable presence that defines the working-class community as a mobilised and unified force.

By presenting the spoken word as a new way to access culture, the class-based hierarchy of cultural production is unsettled. Placing emphasis on the mouth as a site of cultural production forces the monopoly of cultural production out of the hands of the elite. This assertion of cultural agency is embodied in Patrick MacGill's novel *Children of the Dead End,* through Macgill's subversive use of epigraphs. Conventionally used, an epigraph can maintain a normative literary order, by upholding the prominence of culturally influential writers. For example, in *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell's epigraphs quote Byron (352), Burns, and Shakespeare (316), connecting her text to a conventional literary canon. The nature of epigraphs to reference significant writers aids in the veneration of an exclusive cultural order.

In contrast, MacGill's epigraphs reference the voices of characters in the text, and words significant to the communities in which the text is situated. Chapter XIII opens with the Glenmornan saying,

Do that? I would as soon think of robbing a corpse. (48)

The epigraph of chapter XXVIII provides an extract of 'the song that follows' (217) in the chapter, and chapter XXV opens with a quote from the character Moleskin Joe, saying,

He could fight like a red, roaring bull. (182)

These epigraphs reveal a self-referential nature to MacGill's text. He subverts the expectation of a literary allusion beyond the text, which keeps the culture of the masses embedded within the working-class communities that define it. By remaining self-contained, MacGill's text rejects a hierarchical cultural structure. The dualism of a culturally refined elite and an uneducated working class that maintains a hegemonic cultural order is disbanded: MacGill proudly asserts that the voices of the working class have cultural value too. A challenge to the 'literary/cultural establishment' that Kirk describes to inherently exclude the working-class text from dominant literary institutions is posed by MacGill (Kirk 142). MacGill invites us to reconsider the literary canon, with his epigraphs displacing the written work of literary greats with the spoken word of the working-class people in his life. MacGill's novel is underpinned by his own experiences, and this autobiographical dimension highlights the value of the commonality that is inherent to working class culture. The epigraphs are recognisable to the working-class reader who shares the vocabulary of the text, and imbues the working-class voice with cultural value.

To conclude, the means of producing culture is not the written word of the elite. The normative veneration of the written word reveals an attempt to exclude the masses from cultural production. A culture that is concentrated in the hands of the elite is a culture that endeavours to alienate. Representations of the voice and the spoken word presented by Tressell, Carnie Holdsworth and MacGill break down the barriers that prevent the masses from accessing culture. Culture is reframed as an evolving force, made continually relevant by a communal access that moulds culture to the communities that contribute. Culture is

expanded when the working-class voice is valorised, and the humanity of the working class is asserted.

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