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B.S. Johnson and the Attack of the White-Collar Working Class

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The conventional wisdom around working-class writing often presupposes a realist aesthetic form, a hero employed in manual labour and, in the British context, a setting somewhere in its former industrial heartlands, certainly no further south than the Midlands (South Wales Valleys excluded). The writing of B.S. Johnson conforms to precisely none of these assumptions. As a result, it has consistently been overlooked within the field of working-class literary studies. This article attempts to address this absence, not just by noting Johnson's biographical claim to inclusion within the field, but also the ways in which his novels are firmly rooted in a form of class politics. Indeed, the class nature of Johnson's novels is in no way diminished through his depiction of white-collar characters, but instead allows us to read the essential nature of alienated labour and class antagonism to capitalist society, even within the context of Britain's postwar welfare state. Johnson's avant-garde aesthetics and recurring motif of white-collar employment, then, serve to mobilise the political themes in what must finally be understood as distinctly working-class novels.

Introduction

The 21st century has seen a much-deserved revival in interest around B.S. Johnson with almost all his novels returning to print and a new biography, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2004), written by acclaimed author Jonathan Coe. As a figure in Britain's postwar avant-garde often noted for both his working-class background – his father was a bookseller's stockkeeper; his mother variously a waitress, barmaid and between-maid (Baker, 2004) – and his vociferous, even dogmatic, espousal of aesthetic innovation. However, while Johnson is often understood as both working class and a writer, he is rarely considered a 'working-class writer' in the same vein as, for instance, Robert Tressell or Alan Sillitoe. This is due in significant part to issues of aesthetics and motifs: firstly, working-class writing has conventionally been thought of as, by definition, a realist endeavour and so, despite his background, Johnson's avant-gardism means his work falls outside of what is conventionally considered 'working-class writing'. Secondly, Johnson's protagonists are often white-collar workers, not the manual labourers commonly associated with working-class fiction. Johnson's works are therefore read as reflecting his philosophical or aesthetic interests, rather than explicit class concerns. One slight exception is his 1973 novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, yet this is still largely coded as a 'political' rather than 'class' novel. However, these class concerns—particularly around the theme of alienated labour—are present in a number of Johnson's novels, such as *Albert Angelo* (1964) and his infamous 'book-in-a-box', *The Unfortunates* (1969).

This article will discuss these novels: *Albert Angelo* will be read against the young Karl Marx's writings on estranged labour to show how the novel mobilises avant-gardism as part of its exposition of its eponymous protagonist's alienation from his employment as a supply teacher. The next section will build upon this application of Marx to show how Johnson similarly uses formal devices in *The Unfortunates* to highlight the inability of relatively well-remunerated white-collar work (in this case, journalism) to resolve the essentially alienating nature of waged labour. It will also draw on thinkers such as Betty Friedan and Guy Debord to show how *The Unfortunates*, while rooted in the experience of waged work, moves outward towards a broader conception of social antagonism that is inclusive of issues around gender and consumption. Finally, the section on *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* will show how white-collar waged work (and its refusal) is not only a major theme in the novel, but actually forms the bedrock of its social critique and points towards a positive class politics of its own.

While Johnson's other texts often deal with class-related themes – aspects of autobiography in *Trawl* (1966), elderly care in *House Mother Normal* (1971), and his mother's work in kitchens in *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) – the novels in this article have been chosen because of the centrality of white-collar waged work. Moreover,

alongside their avant-gardism, it is this type of waged work not traditionally associated with working-class writing that underpins the radical nature of these novels. As French ultra-leftist, Gilles Dauvé, writes; 'If one identifies *proletarian* with *factory worker* [...] one misses what is subversive in the proletarian condition' (2015: 47; original italics). Thus, reading Johnson's novels as radical reappraisals of that condition and its subversiveness allows us to broaden common sense notions of what 'working-class literature' looks like – and to situate Johnson firmly within it.

The Fiery Elephant in the Room

It is interesting to note just how frequently Johnson is overlooked in studies dedicated to working-class writing. Johnson does not appear in Jeremy Hawthorn's collection, *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1984), though this is perhaps understandable given it was published little more than a decade after Johnson's death. Similarly, Ian Haywood's excellent guidebook, *Working-Class Fiction from Chartism to Trainspotting* (1997), also arguably comes too early to benefit from the renewed 21st century interest in B.S. Johnson. However, Johnson is also curiously absent from more recent collections on working-class writing; despite being a working-class writer intensely engaged in theorising writing practice, none of the scholars in *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* mention Johnson (not even myself). Moreover, if we look in John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan's fantastic and extremely comprehensive anthology, *A History of British Working Class Literature* (2017), which in over 400 pages covers around 300 years of literary history, we will find that B.S. Johnson's name does not appear even once.

It should be noted that this tendency to 'overlook' formally innovative working-class writing—to simply 'not see' it either as formally innovative, as working class, or even see it at all—is not limited to B.S. Johnson. Valentine Cunningham, for instance, gives a significant amount of space to working-class authors in his study, *British Writers of the Thirties* (1989), and while he states that 'proletarian novelists' could differ in terms of 'their aims, ambitions, and the theory of proletarian or socialist realist fiction' (309), he ultimately concludes that their output was 'in form frequently very mouldy fig, cousins to Zola, as Zola was cousin to Balzac' (321). Even Fredric Jameson, usually so thorough in his analysis, reduces 'the proletarian novel' in his seminal work, *The Political Unconscious*, to 'a curious subform of realism' (2002: 181).[1] The elision of B.S.

[1] For a more sustained investigation of aesthetic innovation and 1930s working-class writing, see Nick Hubble's *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), John Fordham's *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (Cardiff: University of WalesPress, 2002), and Matti Ron's 'An Uneasy Avant-Garde: The Politics of Modernism in 1930s Proletarian Fiction', *Key Words*, 18 (2020), pp. 56–74.

Johnson from the field of working-class writing, then, is (at least in part) symptomatic of a wider trend to elide from working-class writing the very existence of aesthetic innovation itself.

However, the other aspect of Johnson's omission from the canon of working-class literature is his approach to class. Indeed, class itself is a notoriously tricky subject with multiple, contradictory yet also overlapping definitions.[2] In his 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', Eric Hobsbawm describes what he calls the 'common style of proletarian life' (281) that dominated British working-class culture from the late-19th century until the 1950s. Hobsbawm cites not only the rise of socialism, the Labour Party, trade unionism and co-op membership, but also its 'non-political aspects': football, fish and chips, flat caps, council housing, the picture palace, and the *palais de danse* (282). These kinds of subjective, cultural features are certainly those which predominated literary representations of British working-class life during the two major periods of working-class literary production, the 1930s and 1950s, and which, in turn, defined common conceptions of what working-class writing (and the class contained therein) looks like.

Yet this approach to class yields little for readers of B.S. Johnson, whose depictions of class contain scant mention of flat caps or fish and chips (though, admittedly, a little football). An alternative theoretical entry point is to move away from a definition of working class as a positive identity, towards a negative one. Engels describes this in his footnote to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto when he defines the proletariat as 'the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live' (Marx and Engels, 1969: 48n). That is, an emphasis not on the *what is* that defines working-class life (often highly culturally specific and historically contingent), but on *what isn't*.

This negative definition opens up a number of more fruitful avenues for exploring Johnson's novels as class novels. Yet to properly pursue these avenues, it is necessary to go back to Paris in the summer of 1844 (yes, really) when the young Marx was working on a number of manuscripts which would not be published until long after his death. In a chapter on 'Estranged Labour', Marx argues that labour 'not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a *commodity*' (1977: 324; original italics). As such, 'the object that labour produces, the product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. [...] as *loss of and bondage to*

[2] These various definitions, the ways they intersect and the problematic ways in which they are sometimes substituted for one another is discussed in more detail in Matti Ron's 'Defining it is a Struggle: Working-Class Fiction in the 2010s' in *The 2010s: A Decade of Contemporary Fiction* (eds. Nick Bentley et al.). London: Bloomsbury, 2024, pp. 107–135.

the object' (324; original italics). Moreover, as Marx explains, it is not merely from the product of labour that the worker is alienated, but also 'within the *activity of production* itself' (326; original italics). This estrangement of the worker from their own activity sees that activity as 'directed against himself' and, ultimately, as '*Self-estrangement*' (326; original italics). Such estrangement, then, forms a part of Marx's theorisation of the proletarian experience as being informed by an irreducible antagonism which underpins the nature of work in capitalist society. The irreducibility of this antagonism is what allows Marx's theory to be such a valuable entry point into B.S. Johnson, despite a century of separation between them, and the development in that time of a welfare state to ameliorate the social conditions which would subsequently be described as 'Dickensian'. It allows us to re-read Johnson not just for his aesthetic or philosophical concerns, but as writing properly *class* novels that engage with the proletarian condition. In doing so, Johnson can be placed firmly within the canon of working-class literature (despite the lack of flat caps and fish and chips).

Albert Angelo

This concern with class antagonism is evident in Johnson's 1964 novel, *Albert Angelo*. The text's eponymous main character is an aspiring architect who makes his living as a supply teacher; all of which, it later transpires, are thinly-veiled surrogates for poetry and Johnson (who had worked as a supply teacher) himself. However, this is very much not an 'inspirational teacher' novel; indeed, he decries such a plot type in a not-so-oblique reference to ER Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love*, about which Albert exclaims, 'talk about sentiment and wish-fulfillment!' (2013: 130). Had *Albert Angelo* remained in the mould of Braithwaite's novel, it perhaps could be placed outside the framework of working-class writing: ultimately, Braithwaite's novel is a depiction of his struggles as a black teaching professional to inculcate his largely white working-class students with the standards of bourgeois society. By contrast, Johnson resists any such claims to professionalism; Johnson's focus is not on the teacher as professional, but rather the teacher as alienated proletarian.

This emphasis on the teacher's sense of alienation is evident immediately upon the introduction of Albert's working life within the narrative. Abruptly interrupting a passage about a visit to his parents, Albert moves into what seems like an explanation of how supply teaching works: 'You have a phone call from them sometimes, but usually you have to go to the office and wait until someone wants you' (27). This shift to the second person, addressing the reader directly, feels almost conversational in its description of a generalised experience (all the more so for the fact it occurs in a chapter titled 'Exposition'). There is even the subtle suggestion of class antagonism

in the reference to 'them' for whom 'you' (which should properly be understood as 'we') are impelled to go to the office and wait until wanted. But the following sentence then shifts to a more specific temporal location: 'You have a phone call from them this first morning' (28). What previously seemed conversational and general is now closer to a detached internal monologue with Albert narrating his own actions in the second person as he carries them out ('you look it up in your *A to Z*', 'You catch the number 214 bus' etc). Immediately upon his individual activity being integrated into the service of alienated labour, Albert becomes estranged from it: his relationship to his own ordinarily innocuous actions is now as something 'alien [which] does not belong to him' (Marx, 1977: 327). The use here of the second person underlines precisely this self-estrangement.

Yet Albert's sense of his activity being 'directed against himself' is an outgrowth of his similar estrangement from the 'product' of his labour; that is, his estrangement from the function of education itself. This estrangement is glimpsed when Albert arrives at the school: 'You open a blackiron door into the playground, and go down a flight of steps. The wall you have just come through forms one side; the school forms another; and tall factory buildings, with heavy wire shields over their windows, complete the other two sides of the playground's quadrilateral' (29). There are suggestions here of school as prison with its 'blackiron door', the walling in of the 'playground's quadrilateral', even the 'heavy wire shields' of the adjoining factories, all reproducing the sense of captivity of the cell. Yet the fact that 'tall factory buildings' form two sides of this captivity is also significant: the literal looming of the factory over the pupils is figurative for the school's socialisation of children into the world of work.

While commonly understood in terms of its effects on the children being socialised, *Albert Angelo* primarily focuses on the teacher socialising them. In Albert's late-night outings with friend and fellow teacher, Terry, the two expound upon their dissatisfaction with the profession: how they are 'half-educating these kids' who 'know they're being cheated, that they're being treated as subhuman beings. And the school *is* a microcosm of society as a whole' (133; original italics). In 'Disintegration', the penultimate section of the novel, Johnson addresses the reader directly and explains his desire for the novel to be 'Didactic, too, social comment on teaching, to draw attention, too, to improve: but with less hope: for if the government wanted better education it could be provided easily enough, so I must conclude, again, that they specifically want the majority of children to be only partially educated' (176). As such, the social function of Albert's role as teacher creates precisely what Marx describes earlier as a power independent of the producer; whatever his desire to produce more than 'half-educated' pupils, school functions independently of the teacher to only partially educate. As Albert himself notes

in a moment of internal monologue, his role is limited to teaching pupils 'to take places in a society you do not believe in' (47). The socialising function of education, then, leads Albert to experience what the 1844 Manuscripts describe as the simultaneous bondage to and a loss of control over the (partial) education he produces.

It is this estrangement (from the product of his labour, the activity which produced it, and even his own 'self' in that activity) that underpins Johnson's depictions of Albert's white-collar working life. The second person in Albert's detached internal monologues during work is one aesthetic device to this end, as his now-infamous typographical strategy of splitting the text into two columns to depict the split between Albert's and his pupils' speech during a lesson, and Albert's internal thoughts. Johnson stresses his use of this strategy came from a desire to 'convey what a particular lesson is like' and demonstrate to the reader that these spoken and unspoken words 'are simultaneous and have enacted such simultaneity for himself' (1973: 23). Yet such simultaneity presupposes a separation, reaffirming Albert's estrangement from the activity of his labour; after all, as Albert notes in this typographical-split section, '*You don't have to believe in anything to teach it*?' (2013: 75; original italics).

Robert Bond describes Johnson's various textual strategies as part of a 'Modernist subjectivist technique' aimed at a 'foregrounding of Albert's resentment' to question 'the seeming fatedness of our capitalist experience' (2007: 45). Bond focuses primarily on Johnson's emphasis on fragmentariness in foregrounding Albert's resentment; yet as discussed above, Johnson's techniques also specifically express that resentment in the form of Albert's estrangement from his own labour. However, the 'seeming fatedness' of capitalist experience that Bond mentions – with reference to Adorno and how Johnson's anti-realism 'operates as social critique' (45) – can also be read in those moments of the novel when Johnson points towards a form of unalienated productive activity. When Albert awakes one morning during the school holidays, he enthuses 'a whole day free to work, to do real work, my work [...] the real satisfaction, even with success, whatever that means, would be in the work itself' (103). As Bond explains, here Albert expresses a sense that 'he knows the self-realisation achievable by free self-activity' (2007: 43). Furthermore, this knowledge of free self-activity is accompanied by the return of an 'unalienated' first-person singular to underscore Albert's non-estrangement from his own activity. For Albert, the white-collar proletarian alienated from his waged labour, the satisfaction of such unalienated labour comes from 'the work itself'. In a world where the labourer's activity is 'directed against himself', producing that which 'stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer', Albert tells the reader of his own self-directed activity: 'I do it for its own sake. You have to do something for its own sake' (13).

The Unfortunates

In contrast with *Albert Angelo*, Johnson's 1969 novel, *The Unfortunates*, is more overtly inflected by the heightening social tensions which developed during the sixties, eventually exploding in 1968. Johnson's unbound 'book in a box' (the first and last chapters are designated, the remaining 25 can be read in any order) follows the unnamed narrator, a sports journalist, as he arrives in a Midlands city, no doubt for Hobsbawm's benefit, to cover a football match. On arrival, he recalls his friendship with Tony, who the narrator had once visited while he was living and studying in the city, but since died of cancer, aged 29. The modernist subjectivism noted by Bond is again evident in *The Unfortunates*: its transcription of interiority, the use of memory to escape chronology, distending temporalities in a plot—insofar as one exists—which takes place within the space of a single day, not to mention the fragmentation and radical restructuring of the novel at its most fundamental level. Moreover, coming on the cusp of the 1970s, Tew's comment about writers from that decade ring even truer for *The Unfortunates*; that is, though it owes much to its modernist inheritances with regards the 'intensities of [its] inner, aesthetic struggles', *The Unfortunates* grapples 'more with an objective world of events, its moral and ideological struggles' (2014: 151) than is often credited.

The Unfortunates is often read, as Kaye Mitchell does, as part of Johnson's wider project to 'seek out new forms in order to "embody present day reality", a reality [...] characterised by "chaos"' (2007: 54). But another route into Johnson's text is its engagement not just with the metaphysical, but precisely the 'moral and ideological struggles' of the 'objective world of events' Tew mentions. Indeed, when Tew and White write in their introduction to *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson* (2007) that 'Johnson occupied a nexus of issues around class, politics, realism and aesthetic form' (6), this is certainly applicable to *The Unfortunates*, which produces a form of class politics that departs radically from conventional forms of working-class political and literary representation, particularly of the postwar period.

In her analysis on the metaphysical themes within *The Unfortunates*, Mitchell cogently describes the unbound nature of Johnson's novel as a 'tangible metaphor for randomness' (2007: 54), particularly of the mind, the book's unbound chapters forcing the reader to create an arbitrary semblance of 'order'. Such randomness and lack of order manifests in Johnson's transcription of the protagonist's inner consciousness, frequently embarking on aimless tangents and returning to earlier topics to emphasise a circularity of the mind, which the narrator himself notes, stating that 'the mind circles' (Johnson, 1999: 'First' 1). Similarly to the functioning of the mind, then, 'the shuffling of the sections takes the reader round and round in circles, rather than allowing us to progress neatly from the beginning of his friendship with Tony, to Tony's death and

to that death's aftermath' (Mitchell, 2007: 62). For Mitchell, Johnson is attempting to draw our attention to 'the dilatory space of the middle, the passing of time between birth and death, first and last' (62). Johnson's philosophical point is to underline the absurdity of the human condition with its directionless, circling narrative, while the narrator—and, via their participation, the reader—attempts 'to delay the inevitable; but the reordering of this middle (which is: life) matters little [...] given our knowledge of the start and end points' (62). Thus, through its unbound chapters and transcription of interior monologue, *The Unfortunates* underlines the fundamental absurdity of the human condition, of a life ultimately without predefined meaning and constituted instead by a chaos of choices made essentially at random.

Yet *The Unfortunates* is not simply a confirmation of what Lukács decried as the modernist exposition of a neurotic 'universal *condition humaine*' (1964: 20): while existentialist-inspired philosophical concerns are certainly prominent, an oft-overlooked aspect is how the text engages with a liberatory politics rooted in the everyday experience of postwar welfare capitalism. A useful contrast here can be made with that movement of postwar working-class writing which immediately preceded it, the Angry Young Men. These novels were frequently realist in form with linear plot-driven narratives and autodiegetic narrators monologically recounting what historian Selina Todd describes as the period's 'very modern dilemma' (2015: 236): to pursue social mobility/new opportunities for postwar affluence or remain loyal to more traditional (some might say romanticised) notions of working-class community.[3] By contrast, Johnson's unbound chapters and interior monologue emphasising the circling and unreliable nature of its narrator's consciousness, completely abjures the common formal strategies of Angry Young Men novels.

Johnson's radical departure from more conventional aesthetics of working-class fiction is central to *The Unfortunates*' radical class politics. For example, Mitchell outlines one of Johnson's devices for depicting the mind's chaotic functioning in which he makes use of 'frequent textual blanks [to] suggest gaps in knowledge, imagination or inspiration, the mind's own blanks', implying 'a necessary interactivity, communication as exchange [...] the limits of language in representing that truth that so concerned Johnson' (2007: 61). She then quotes the following passage in which the narrator decries the 'melodramatic idiotic moments in which life is completely ' (Johnson, 1999: 'His dog' 4). The interactivity of this passage is clear, the narrator's loss for words encouraging the reader to interject into the space vacated within the text as part of what Darlington calls Johnson's desire to

[3] John Braine's *Room at the Top* may be thought of as the archetypal text in this particular mode.

disrupt 'traditional reading patterns' (2019: 36). For Darlington, the unbound nature of Johnson's novel and frequent use of textual gaps 'draw explicit attention to the novel as a constructed object' (37–38) and 'open a dialogue with the active reader, to encourage them to challenge their immersion in the narrative and actively undertake interpretation of the object before them' (38).

However, the motif of a linguistic gap in the ability to express oneself recurs throughout Johnson's text, expressing more than just philosophical concerns. In one passage with echoes of Betty Friedan, the narrator expresses his desire to write about 'housewives on suburban housing estates [who] were being driven mad by tedium [...] there would be an explosion sooner or later [...] But I could never prove it, housewives I interviewed on new town estates said they were too busy to be bored' ('Then they had moved' 6–7). Friedan's infamous 'problem with no name' looms large in this passage, despite—or, indeed, because of—the housewives' inability or unwillingness to express their dissatisfaction; the claim to be 'too busy to be bored' seems intended to be read as an evasive non-sequitur believed neither by narrator nor reader, nor even the housewives themselves. Yet the non-expression of gendered grievances with such unconvincing deflection actually functions to reveal rather than conceal antagonism, albeit postponed to an unspecified 'sooner or later'.

This lack of language to express dissatisfaction reappears with Johnson's depiction of the relatively new consumer culture afforded by postwar affluence. Johnson's narrator describes couples looking over individual pieces of furniture, feeling that 'what they see does indeed represent all there is to choose from [...] Then they wonder at [...] the dissatisfaction they vaguely feel, the resentment at each instalment payment, for 30 months or more a weekly reminder of the moment of non-choice' ('Time!' 2). Echoes abound here with French Situationist Guy Debord's classic, *The Society of the Spectacle*, whereby the spectacle, that 'social relation between people that is mediated by images' (1994: 7), exists as 'the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have *already been made* in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production' (8). In the act of consumption, Johnson's couple feel affirmed by the array of choices on offer. Yet, as Debord explains, 'the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes mundane as soon as it is taken home by its consumer [...] Too late, it reveals its essential poverty, a poverty that inevitably reflects the poverty of its production' (34). As the essential poverty of the commodity is revealed, so is the 'moment of non-choice' previously affirmed by the spectacle.

Such is not to imply that Johnson was a keen reader of Guy Debord, though other 1960s avant-gardists (most notably Alexander Trocchi) certainly were. But Situationist ideas were certainly in the air at the time, particularly with the France 1968 uprising

when Situationist slogans filled the walls of Paris with cries of 'The more you consume, the less you live' and 'Are you a consumer or a participant?'. This tapped into a sentiment that, despite apparently never having it so good (to paraphrase Tory Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan), the acquisition of consumer products functioned merely as another moment of alienation in capitalist society. As with Johnson's new town estate housewives, this experience resists expression, being felt only 'vaguely'. Yet it remains felt, nonetheless, each instalment a 'weekly reminder' of 'dissatisfaction' and 'resentment', indicating affluence and consumerism as ultimately moments of 'non-choice' unable to adequately fulfil human desires.

Johnson's textual gaps also serve to highlight the estranged labour of white-collar workers, in this instance, his journalist narrator. Contemplating his next encounter with his employer, Johnson's narrator thinks to himself:

> No doubt he will say that I should not be in journalism if I do not accept these things, just as he does every time I complain about the butchery by the subs. And no doubt I should not, that I want it to be better than it is, to be more like writing. [...] the only satisfaction must be in the money, which is good for what it is, I suppose. ('Last' 3)

In this passage, the lack of control over the activity of labour and its end product is, like in *Albert Angelo*, depicted as an ineradicable aspect of wage labour itself, even for white-collar professionals. The higher price negotiated for the sale of that labour is fundamentally unable to overcome this estrangement: the 'only satisfaction' imaginable—the money—is undermined as appropriate compensation by the hedging terms 'must be' and 'I suppose'. The status of this lone 'satisfaction' is thus rendered highly precarious. The motif around the inexpressibility of social grievances also recurs, present in the huge textual gap preceding 'more like writing' to reflect the narrator's difficulty in identifying precisely the source of his discontent. The difficulty suggested by this large textual gap is then compounded by the imprecision of the conclusion he arrives at (that his work be 'more like writing'). Specifically, this alienating activity *is*, in fact, writing (though not quite the kind he means), an imprecision made ironic given its expression by someone who works with words. Yet that imprecision, the inability to recognise his own activity, is exactly what underlines the extent to which he has become estranged by—and from—it.

Interestingly, these textual blanks are deployed precisely at those points where the limits of postwar consensus politics are reached even while the grievances underpinning them struggle to be expressed. The housewives' 'problem with no name' (itself a problem of estranged labour, but of the unwaged domestic variety) sits in that space of postwar

social democratic politics which all too frequently 'defined women exclusively in their domestic capacity' (Black and Brooke, 1997: 441) and would soon 'explode' with the rise of women's liberation. Equally, relative affluence and increased access to consumer goods are ultimately unable to overcome the alienating nature of both consumerism's 'non-choice' and, indeed, waged labour itself (whatever its remuneration). With the Angry Young Men, relative affluence and white-collar employment signify social mobility and integration into the British class system, leaving behind antagonistic identities rooted in working-class community. By contrast, in *The Unfortunates*, such affluence and employment do not defuse class antagonism; they merely relocate it to new areas of social life.

The Unfortunates' radical departure from the politics and aesthetics of the Angry Young Men are therefore of a piece with its radical departure from postwar consensus politics. Mitchell is correct when she writes that Johnson's textual blanks highlight 'gaps in knowledge, imagination or inspiration', but that analysis can be extended into the political sphere whereby Johnson's blanks indicate gaps in knowledge or imagination within postwar social democracy (particularly with regard to estranged labour – waged and domestic – and its related alienation downstream in the sphere of consumption). In both form and content, then, *The Unfortunates* gestures towards a liberatory politics rooted in grievances which the postwar political framework was unable to resolve, and which found expression in the proliferation of antagonistic movements such as women's liberation and France 1968.

This proliferation of social antagonism is depicted symbolically in an anecdote recounted by the narrator regarding the 'peculiar marriage' between 'he a rich factory owner, or son of one, and she a mere, ha, machine minder' who 'were always breaking up' (Johnson 1999: 'The estate' 7). Given the context of intensifying class antagonisms in Britain from the late-1960s onwards, Johnson's couple seem to suggest that the postwar 'marriage' between capital and labour embodied in the social democratic consensus was itself 'breaking up'. Furthermore, Johnson's desire to underline the peculiarity of the relationship to the reader is clear in his following the anecdote with 'to me peculiar, anyway, and I think so to Tony and June, as well, by the way they talked to me of it, thought it worth my attention, that it was a matter of some remark' ('The estate' 7). This commentary borders on meta-narrative, with the repeated subordinate clauses of Johnson's staccato sentence forcing attention onto the universal agreement regarding the relationship's peculiarity, echoing Todd's comments that, by the end of the '60s, it was becoming abundantly clear that 'the needs of big business and the needs of their workers were essentially incompatible' (2015: 296). Alongside its metaphysical themes and motifs, *The Unfortunates* can also be read as a novel which in

its form, content and even physical composition engages with the break up of political consensus as a result of its inability to eradicate the decidedly ineradicable antagonistic social contradictions of capitalist society. What Roberto del Valle Alcalá describes as the 'muffling effects of Keynesian macroeconomic policy and the Welfare State' (2016: 14) were rapidly eroding by the time of Johnson's novel. *The Unfortunates*, in its emphasis on estranged labour (paid and unpaid, at the points of production and consumption), thus begins to reassess and revitalise 'the fundamental lines of conflict' allowing 'the notion of class [...] to retain its revolutionary valences' (15).

Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry

This revitalisation of 'the fundamental lines of conflict' would emerge even more explicitly in B.S. Johnson's 1973 novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. Coe describes Johnson's consciousness of injustice as 'acute [...] The general shittiness of the world became just one more burdensome problem that he, as an individual, had to recognise and cope with' and it is in this novel—arguably his most overtly political and the last published before his 1973 death by suicide—in which he starts to confront injustice as 'both a social and personal phenomenon' (2004: 225).

Indeed, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* was written at a time when an acute sense of injustice was increasingly widespread in Britain. The years preceding its publication saw major strikes by miners, builders and dockers. The dockers' strike was the culmination of a movement by trade unions against the Industrial Relations Act, which attempted to curb the power of workers. Johnson helped make two agitprop films against the Act: *March!*, commissioned by the ACTT union, and *Unfair!*, which was projected onto makeshift screens on factory walls during tea and lunch breaks (Darlington, 2014: 91–92).

This period also saw a diffusion of left-wing urban guerrillas across Europe (and, indeed, the world). Britain was no exception with the formation of the Angry Brigade who carried out a series of attacks against banks, embassies, the 1970 Miss World competition, and a number of Conservative politicians. Darlington suggests that the Angry Brigade make a number of indirect appearances in Johnson's novel: namely, the comical anarchists in the 'Scotland Yard is Baffled' chapter, and in the name Christie Malry itself, a potential reference to Stuart Christie, an alleged member of the Angry Brigade later found not guilty at trial (94–95).

Darlington's broader point that the 'the failure to stop the Act, and the setbacks to organised labour that failure brought in its wake, involved great disappointment and disillusionment [for Johnson], prompting the fatalistic notion that in spite of every effort the forces of opposition were bound to lose' (95) perhaps requires further

qualification. For one, it is not clear that organised labour was unable to stop the Act; for instance, the successful strike movement which released the Pentonville 5 (the only workers ever imprisoned under the Act) demonstrated that the Act would ultimately remain unenforceable. However, Darlington is absolutely correct to note that the Angry Brigade actions and Johnson's experience of the anti-Industrial Relations Act campaign loom large in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*.

As with the central protagonists in *Albert Angelo* and *The Unfortunates*, the titular Christie Malry is employed in a similarly white-collar profession (a bookkeeper). Yet Johnson is clear in underlining the proletarian nature of this profession, describing Christie as someone who 'had not been born into money' (2001: 11) and so 'like almost all of us, had to think of earning a living' (12). The reflexive narrative form in these passages is consistent with Darlington's previous comments regarding Johnson's desire to 'open a dialogue with the active reader'. Johnson's reflexive narration sees the narrator discuss the plot's progress with both the reader and Christie. However, this reflexivity is also underpinned by a specific class content which fosters (in its underlying assumptions) a sense of commonality between reader, narrator and Christie himself—the 'us' which the narrator says Christie is like signifies those who must earn a living; that is, it matches almost exactly the negative definition of class outlined by Engels above. As Tew explains, Johnson depicts work as 'an embittering experience for the ordinary worker' (2014: 152), but just as importantly, it is an experience assumed to be shared by reader, narrator and protagonist alike.

A significant amount of *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, then, revolves around the issue of estranged labour. Early in the novel, the narrator notes the 'curious distancing effect' felt by Christie in his role as 'the money he saw in piles and sacks was virtually a different thing from those notes and coins that he had in his own pockets' (2001: 15–16). This loss of and bondage to the object is precisely what Marx describes in his 1844 Manuscripts: the familiar object that Christie handles as part of his work becomes something alien. Yet, in contrast to earlier Johnson protagonists, Christie acts upon the awareness of his alienation; he repurposes the double-entry bookkeeping system used at work to track the injustices done to him and ascertain the correct response: 'Every Debit must have its Credit' (24), Christie thinks to himself, subsequently opening an account with 'THEM' (47). As Crews argues, when Christie 'discovers double-entry, he is able to turn the basis of capitalism against itself' (2010: 225). However, Johnson problematises this application of capitalist accounting methods to the cause of anti-capitalist struggle, specifically with regards to whether his grievances can truly be reduced to the quantitative double-entry bookkeeping system. Christie ponders precisely this problem, asking 'I am entitled to exact payment, of course. [...] But

payment in what form?' (Johnson, 2001: 24). Johnson's use of 'exact' here is playfully ambiguous: as a verb, Christie is declaring his right *to exact* payment upon the society that has wronged him. But as an adjective, Christie also desires *exact* recompense for these wrongs, raising the question of what form 'exact payment' could possibly take – or, even, if it could exist at all.

This theme is returned to throughout the novel, underlying the increasingly extreme actions Christie takes and their efficacy at compensating him for the injustices of class society. Having bombed a tax office, Christie mulls over the deaths he has caused, justifying it in entirely capitalist terms: 'human life was the easiest to replace. A machine would be difficult, costly: but the man who drove or worked or manipulated it could be replaced at very short notice by any one of millions of other men [...] all equally replaceable' (115). This symmetry with the logic of capital is explicit in his conclusion that 'if they are so callous about human life, then so shall I be' (116), eventually culminating in the murder of over '20,000 innocent west Londoners' (151) according to Christie's account entry. Though Johnson, via his creation of class solidarity between reader and protagonist, certainly encourages sympathy with Christie's grievances, such sympathy is not extended to his methods. As much is suggested in an epigraph quoting Luca Pacioli, the Franciscan friar who invented double-entry bookkeeping, immediately before Christie's entry regarding the killing of 20,000 people. According to the Pacioli quote, 'not being a good accountant in your affairs, you will have to feel your way forward like a blind person, and much loss can arise therefrom' (149). Christie's arbitrary calculation of each death at £1.30, 'an allowance for the commercial value of the chemicals contained therein' (119), as well as his attempts to shoehorn qualitative issues such as 'Socialism not given a chance' (151) into the quantitative double-entry bookkeeping system, necessarily make him a 'bad accountant'. Pacioli's statement that 'much loss can arise therefrom' is thus given grim new meaning by the huge loss of life arising from Christie's actions. Christie, the 'bad accountant', however, continues to move forward blindly, unaware of the significant losses arising therefrom.

This inability to adequately address qualitative issues with the quantitative bookkeeping system is fundamentally an issue of Christie's failed attempt to apply the means of his estrangement to the cause of his emancipation. Yet Johnson also indicates another mode of politics in his novel, rooted in the collective experience—and refusal—of estranged labour. During a trip with his colleague, Headlam, around the Tapper's confectionary factory (whose accounts they manage), Christie observes various aspects of the production process, describing the experience as 'a guided tour of the enemy defences' (64). On the Moulders and Enrobers Department assembly line, he notices 'girls on either side of the belt [...] it looked highly skilled [...] but

mindlessly monotonous for those doing it' (66). Antagonism here is not around the proper remuneration of labour—feasibly mediated within the framework of postwar social democracy and industrial relations—but the mindless monotony of estranged wage labour itself. Similarly, when Christie and Headlam meet the Icing Foreman during their rounds, the Icing Foreman—in a lie the narrator describes as being told 'ritually' (Johnson, 2001: 74)—tells Stegginson, the factory manager, that Christie and Headlam are yet to arrive thus allowing more time for non-work-related conversation (and Martinis). When Stegginson eventually demands their presence, Headlam shouts down the phone at him: 'If you want the Bakery Round done quicker, you old goat, you order yourself to do it!' (75). Headlam's 'order yourself to do it' is obviously a typically 'Johnsonian' comic turn of phrase; at the risk of ruining the joke, its comic effect lies in its acknowledgement of the relationship of command inherent in estranged labour (as activity that is compelled from without). Headlam, in contrast to the central protagonists of *Albert Angelo* and *The Unfortunates*, therefore, acts in open defiance of those processes which would direct his own activity against himself.

As with the school in *Albert Angelo*, the 'thought that Tapper's might be a microcosm crosses [Christie's] mind' (Johnson, 2001: 75), highlighting the potential for understanding capitalist social relations and how workers are impelled to refuse them. This motif returns when Christie phones in a bomb hoax at Pork Pie Purveyors Ltd, where he enjoys 'seeing the workpeople spill tumultuously out of the gates! They were clearly delighted at having an excuse not to work' (123). Johnson's novel, then, emphasises the working-class refusal of work, particularly around the ineradicable and unquantifiable experience of estranged labour which, despite the 'muffling effects of Keynesianism' described by del Valle Alcalá, ultimately confirms that 'labour is still clearly recognised as struggle between capital and worker' (2016: 14). The irreducibility of working-class grievances to the double-entry bookkeeping system is thus itself symbolic of the inability of the labour-capital antagonism to be resolved within capitalism.

This can be read as part of a broader sentiment among the political left from the late-1960s onwards that 'the democratic process had failed British socialists, and that alternative – not necessarily peaceful – forms of protest would have to be tried' (Coe, 2004: 313). In particular, Christie's aforementioned note, 'Socialism not given a chance', expresses the disappointment felt by many with the previous Wilson Labour government and subsequent Conservative Heath administration. However, issues exist with Coe's claim that the sense of political injustice in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* is 'an impossibly extreme one [...] which presented [Christie] with unenviable alternatives: terrorism or madness' (225). Specifically, no such binary between

terrorism and madness seems to exist within the narrative: eventually, Christie becomes both 'mad' *and* a 'terrorist'.

Instead, Johnson's novel seems more informed by an opposition between the modes of political action that can be broadly thought to map onto those which made up the novel's immediate context: that is, clandestine armed actions (à la the Angry Brigade) versus the collective refusal of work (of the sort that freed the Pentonville 5 and nullified the Industrial Relations Act). While undoubtedly sympathetic to the urban guerrilla activity of both Christies – that is, Malry and Stuart (allegedly) – Johnson's narrative shows that Christie's attempts to address his grievances through terrorism are an abject failure. Like his use of double-entry bookkeeping in pursuit of emancipation, terrorism is an impediment rather than an aid to allowing Christie to understand his situation or resolve his problems. Instructively, he is only able to glimpse the social nature of his grievances via his personal relationships with other working-class people: thinking about his girlfriend, known only as 'The Shrike', Christie realises that she 'was not by nature a butcher's assistant [...] it was society that forced her to be so [...] She was a pearl in her own right, and it was a reflection on society that it could find only inappropriate use for that wit' (Johnson, 2001: 138). Like his thought that Tapper's may be a 'microcosm' for society as a whole, Christie's romantic relationship allows him to apprehend the social nature of a world underpinned by estranged labour: unlike the bird to which her name is a comic reference (shrikes are also known as butcherbirds), Christie's girlfriend does not perform her labour 'by nature', but (like the assembly line girls) is forced into activity directed against herself by society, a compulsion which for Christie is fundamentally an indictment of society itself. And yet, while it is in his contact with others that Christie is most able to grasp social relations, his terrorism serves only to isolate him, causing him to ultimately decide to remain in his actions 'responsible for and to no one but himself' (Johnson, 2001: 100).

Conclusion

What becomes evident reading across Johnson's novels is not just the extent to which themes of class and work are ever present within them, but also how they broaden and radicalise over time. In *Albert Angelo*, we follow the embittering estrangement of a precariously employed supply teacher from every aspect of his work. In *The Unfortunates*, this estrangement encompasses not merely the white-collar waged work of the narrator, but also unpaid domestic labour and the manifestation of alienated production processes in the field of consumption. By the time we arrive at *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, Johnson produces a text in which estranged labour is fundamental to the narrative and the workplace is overtly depicted as a battleground

for the antagonistic social relation between workers and capital. While understandably framed as a novel about a lone urban guerrilla, it must also be understood as a novel of ephemeral glimpses of commonality vis-à-vis alienation among working people: whether Christie's direct associates (like Headlam or the Shrike), or more broadly with the factory workers he observes, or even with the narrator and reader who are understood, like Christie, to share the proletarian experience of having to earn a living.

Johnson's engagement with the subject of alienated labour clearly extends beyond the strict confines of waged work. The alienated housewives in *The Unfortunates* is but one mention of unpaid domestic labour in the novel, bringing into view questions of socialised care and reproduction of the workforce. An exploration of this topic unfortunately exceeded the scope of this paper, but it suggests there is ample space for productive readings of Johnson's texts (including *House Mother Normal*, perhaps) against the framework of social reproduction theory. Similarly, reading Johnson's novels as specifically *class* novels allows for his work to be put into dialogue with other novels from that tradition. While passing comparisons were made with the Angry Young Men, there is an extremely fruitful area here for discussion about literary form and working-class fiction as well as differing conceptions of class, class identity, and utopian imagination (that is, what would it mean for socialism to be 'given a chance'?).

Johnson's focus on white-collar workers, on top of his well-known and documented commitment to avant-gardism, have often concealed from critics the class nature of his novels. In form and style, Johnson's texts do not conform to expectations of a 'straightforward' or 'gritty' realism (as problematic and assumption laden as those words are), while his protagonists look more like those characters from postwar novels who had just left their working-class backgrounds. Yet it is precisely the white-collar nature of Johnson's protagonists that makes his texts such powerful examples of working-class writing in that the estrangement of labour is not merely a function of low pay or poor conditions but of an a priori antagonism which underpins waged labour itself. It underlines B.S. Johnson's status not only as a writer from a working-class background, but a working-class writer whose novels consistently and continuously engage with the working-class experience of the 'general shittiness of the world'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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