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## THE WORKING-CLASS AVANT-GARDE

# Mark E. Smith, Brexit Britain and the Aesthetics and Politics of the Working Class Weird

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This article develops my existing published work on The Fall, which seeks to examine the consequences of Mark E. Smith's classed, educational and regional formation on the band's aesthetics and politics. I think through these latter categories both as they unfolded during The Fall's post-punk peak and as they signify in the present, bridging this gap through the elaboration of the concept of 'the working class weird'. Over the past decade, the work of Mark Fisher has traced a fascinating, if speculative, formal and classed history to The Fall's 'pulp modernism'. Here, I respond to and build upon Fisher's work by situating The Fall more concretely within a postwar British history of working class experiments with avant-garde cultural form. I locate the band's output within the shifting class relations of the late 20th century and explore its conflicted ideological implications, arguing that although Smith and The Fall may appear to presage and articulate a particular variant of working class conservatism that has coalesced around Brexit, their work also retains elements of utopianism and intransigent oppositionality.

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## Introduction: 'Cushy EEC Euro-State Goals'

Asked for his views on Brexit in a 2017 interview, The Fall's Mark E. Smith responded: 'I thought it was great... still do' (Kinney, 2018). It is unclear whether he meant the result of the referendum, the upheaval that has resulted in its wake or the actual objective of Britain's exit from the European Union.

It may well be that the specifics are less important here than the impulse behind such a statement. Smith's attitudes have always been mercurial, difficult to definitively categorise or pin down, due to a combination of working class autodidacticism, punk contrarianism and his complex social positioning within the dynamics of post-punk. Like many within that formation, Smith was a voracious reader, thinker and believer in doing justice to the artistic and expressive possibilities opened up by punk. Unlike certain others, he was not formally educated beyond school leaving age and remained keenly if idiosyncratically conscious of his working class background. As I have argued before, this often set him at odds with the fraction of punk fall-out that initially sustained The Fall (Wilkinson, 2016: 116).

Similarly mercurial is the structure of feeling underpinning Brexit. Despite often successful ideological attempts to present the referendum result simply as the consequence of an essentialised working class racism or, more euphemistically, as the distress call of the 'left behind', it is clear and becoming clearer that the desires and frustrations invested both in and against Brexit are diverse, conflicted and changeable, a picture no less complex when considered in terms of class, age and other social variables.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, certain demographic tendencies of the Leave vote have been broadly acknowledged – and what does matter is that elements of Smith's background fit the

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of the assumption of working class racism, which also explores its prevalence amongst middle class liberal intellectuals, see Barry Hindess, 'Working class racism', *openDemocracy*, 12 February 2017, available online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/working-class-racism/>, last accessed 22 October 2019. On the 'left behind', see Rob Ford, 'Older "left behind" voters turned against a political class with values opposed to theirs', *The Guardian*, 25 June 2016, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/25/left-behind-eu-referendum-vote-ukip-revolt-brexit>, last accessed 22 October 2019.

profile of a key (though not decisive) element of this vote.<sup>2</sup> He was over 55, male, and as the son of a plumber Smith came from a skilled working class background despite his own unorthodox employment; he was also a lifelong resident of a constituency that voted Leave by a small margin, in a microcosm of the overall referendum result.<sup>3</sup> Prestwich, to the north of the city of Manchester, is part of a broader area with an atypical relationship to dominant myths of classed and regional political loyalties since the industrial revolution. Despite its mill town history, the historic and contemporary constituencies of this area have often returned Conservative MPs for over a hundred years, usually only voting Labour during national high points for the party (though even in 1945 the then Middleton and Prestwich constituency elected a Conservative representative by a narrow margin). Robert Peel, a key founder of the modern Conservative Party, with its aim of incorporating political support from across the social spectrum (Walsh, 2012: 30), was born and educated in nearby Bury and is commemorated with a statue in the town centre.

Smith has been routinely presented as an unclassifiable oddball by journalists, popular historians of The Fall and even in scholarly analyses of the band. Undoubtedly eccentric to the last – in his final interview he claimed ‘people still cross the road from me’ (Wray, 2018) – he has been acknowledged as such by those closest to him as well. Kay Carroll, who was Smith’s partner and band manager during the Fall’s post-punk years, recalls: ‘He was an enigma and I never really got to the bottom of him’ (Wray, 2019).

However, as I have argued before, this myth obscures Smith’s very real social and historical rootedness (Wilkinson, 2016: 115–116). One way this contention might productively be developed is to consider Smith as the representative voice of a particular variant of working class consciousness, both as those who shared it were

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<sup>2</sup> See Danny Dorling, ‘Brexit: The Decision of a Divided Country’, *The BMJ*, 354, July 2016, available online at <https://www.bmj.com/content/354/bmj.i3697.full?ijkey=Qzh0MvExCSL1BkA&keytype=ref>, last accessed 22 October 2019. Dorling notes that ‘the Leave voters among the middle class were crucial to the final result because the middle class constituted two thirds of all those who voted.’

<sup>3</sup> Smith has also had a tendency to identify with the older generation since his youth. Aged 23, for instance, he opined that ‘people go round and think they’re smart when they’re 21 but these old guys you see have been doing it for years.’ See Dave McCullough, ‘Totale Turnaround’, *Sounds*, 21 June 1980.

experiencing life at the dawn of neoliberalism in Britain and, four decades later, at what may be the protracted and messy end of that era. Smith's eventful, dissolute life was atypical, for sure – but as Lucien Goldmann has argued, it is possible for the collective consciousness of a social group to be conveyed in cultural production by 'an individual with very few relations with this group', someone who is 'precisely the exceptional individual who succeeds in creating... an imaginary... world, whose structure corresponds to that towards which the whole of the group is tending' (Goldmann, 1975: 9, 160).

That will be my argument here. In establishing it, I share Fredric Jameson's aim of understanding 'the secret affinities between... apparently autonomous and unrelated domains' (Jameson, 1991: 400), of aiming to cognitively map and critique a historical conjuncture that has only grown more chaotic, accelerated and confused in its mediated postmodern immediacy since Jameson first formulated such a project.

Raymond Williams has rightly observed that a homological approach risks perpetuating an idealist separation between the cultural and the social, and that it can include 'an extreme selectivity' of evidence in its establishment of correspondences between the two (Williams, 1977: 106). Here, I aim to avoid an understanding of culture as passive reflection by demonstrating how the post-punk work of Smith and The Fall may shed as much light on its conjuncture and our own as a grasp of those moments reveals about The Fall. I also work with a notion of The Fall's output and Smith's public persona not as closed and discrete cultural objects but as materially produced, reproduced and mediated, subject to continual and contested resignification. As for selective evidence, this is perhaps a more dangerous pitfall than usual in the case of Smith and The Fall. As will become clear, sense making can be a fraught affair in a body of work that is so extensive and frequently oblique – a court dispute over copyright between Smith and a former producer once left a High Court judge 'baffled [and] scratching her head while trying to decipher the lyrical rants of Fall frontman Mark E. Smith' (Brewster, 2015). As will also become clear, however, such apparent indecipherability has important homological resonances that require further investigation.

## The Working Class Weird

What is the variant of working class consciousness that Smith and The Fall articulate so compellingly? The title of 'Ludd Gang', from the 1983 LP *Perverted By Language*, offers clues to its historical roots. In his attempt to understand the ways in which British conservatism has historically incorporated working class support, David Walsh points to the early nineteenth century as a critical moment. Experiencing the immiserating effects of the encroaching factory system and the Napoleonic wars, artisanal workers and tradespeople were often predisposed to nostalgia for a pre-industrial 'social economy' within which they had at times been both materially better off and subject to less obvious coercion. At this moment, such a social formation was often still within living memory for many. Despite the radical and even revolutionary consciousness that E.P. Thompson argues this hardship produced in the form of the Luddite rebellion, for instance (Thompson, 1978: 647), Walsh notes that it could be tinged with 'aspects of a Tory tradition in terms of deferential attitudes to the elites and, importantly, respect for custom and prescriptive rights' (Walsh, 2012: 37).

Walsh goes on to quote the Radical activist Samuel Bamford reminiscing over a former bowling green in his native Middleton (an area of North Manchester which borders Smith's Prestwich locale). The green was 'much frequented by the idle fellows of the village who preferred ale-bibbing in the sun before confinement on the loom' (Walsh, 1967: 26). Such revelry was in time legally suppressed and the land converted into a burial ground. Walsh notes perceptively that the right of recreational activity on this land had first been bestowed by James I in response to Puritan opposition (Walsh, 2012: 40). This argument is later developed by the observation that nineteenth century Conservatives often adopted their Tory predecessors' latitude with regard to plebeian pleasures, mocking liberal attempts at regulation and reform (Walsh, 2012: 106, 217). Such attitudes, as Walsh notes, had by the mid nineteenth century helped win over sections of the working class to conservatism – no doubt assisted by instances such as some Conservatives' resistance to implementing the Whig government's Benthamite New Poor Law legislation of 1837 – including in Bury (Walsh, 2012: 217, 104). Meanwhile, long before the advent of working class

enfranchisement, attempts to embed conservative values at a hegemonic level were pursued through the work of local Conservative Associations, which traded on a patriotic, Burkean 'romantic atavism' with its roots in popular opposition to the French Revolution. This frequently entailed a 'rejection of economic and social rationalism associated with the proponents of progressive reason [and] a yearning for imagination as opposed to reality...' (Walsh, 2012: 88–89).

Such a sensibility, understood in its plebeian form, could be captured in the phrase *the working class weird*. Here, I am invoking Mark Fisher's use of the term, where the weird signifies something 'so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist... yet if [it] is here, then the categories we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid' (Fisher, 2016: 15). This seems an appropriate way of conceptualising a variant of class consciousness that contradicts two common assumptions concerning the working class: firstly, its romanticism and nostalgia are at odds with leftist perceptions of the proletariat as an agent of progress; and secondly, its attachment to leisure short circuits the hegemonic association of the *working* class with labour. Notably, in its explicitly conservative manifestations, this consciousness acted to fragment solidarity, often pursuing sectional interests along racist and xenophobic lines (Walsh, 2012: 113, 199).

In recent decades, this variant of class consciousness has experienced a resurgence that might be said to have come to a head with the result of the June 2016 EU Referendum, in which a large majority of older, often white, working class voters were amongst those who opted to leave the European Union. The determining factors of the result are multiple and are unlikely to be fully grasped without the aid of greater historical distance. Yet it seems credible to suppose that the sensibility that often motivated the working class Leave vote, which various research has suggested entails hostility and resentment towards liberal professionalism and immigration alongside fears concerning the loss of British sovereignty (Bulman, 2017; Carl, 2018; de Piero, 2019), has re-emerged congruently with a number of eminently nameable longer-term phenomena. These include: renewed conservative ideological claims on the working class dating back to the late 1960s in the forms of Powellism and Thatcherism as the welfare capitalist consensus began to break up (Hall, 1983);

the Thatcherite defeat in the 1980s of alternative, solidaristic forms of working class consciousness embodied in the trade union movement and symbolised by the 1984 miners' strike; relatedly, the well-documented realignment of the Labour Party's core vote around younger, often middle class metropolitan areas, sometimes at the expense of older, working class and non-metropolitan communities (Savage, 2018); the economic factors that underlie the former shift including Britain's neoliberal move away from an industrial base towards finance, services and property alongside the gentrification of metropolitan areas; and media manipulations around immigration in a context of declining public services (Tyler, 2013).

In both the post-war and contemporary period, the working class weird has often been distinguished by the nostalgic attempt to retain particular elements of working class cultural identity in spite or because of the absence of the material factors with which elements of that identity were once bound up. During the punk and post-punk period, as Eric Hobsbawm (1978) noted the increasing class fragmentation and sectionalism produced by postwar economic and technological developments, John Clarke of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies suggests that it was possible to interpret working class skinheads as 'the dispossessed inheritors of a disappearing culture', a 'magical' subcultural attempt to recover a lost sense of community and a particular kind of masculine pride (Clarke, 1977: 100). It is important to note, too, that since at least the early 1980s not only such a class consciousness but the working class itself has been ideologically perceived as 'anachronistic' and 'backward-looking' by disdainful metropolitan professionals involved in apparently modernised forms of production (Samuel, 1982: 265).

Smith's trajectory is inseparable from this conjuncture. Pressured to follow in both his grandfather's and father's footsteps and undertake a plumber's apprenticeship (Ford, 2012: 9), Smith came from a class fraction of skilled workers and tradespeople that has since voted disproportionately for Brexit and has recently begun an uneven and tentative electoral swing toward the Conservatives (Niven, 2017). His identification with an elite minority – Smith once declared 'I'm a firm believer in the 80% subsidising the 20%' (Gill, 1981) – correlates with working class weird attachments to traditional social hierarchies, while his vehement defence of

the Falklands War appeared motivated by patriotism and custom; both his father and grandfather had served in the army (Ford, 2003: 108). Smith's professed 'mistrust' of 'glossy magazines' like *The Face* 'that go on about equality and oppression and all that shit' (Ford, 2012: 105) is suggestive of the mutually reinforcing antagonism between his own class fraction and the left-liberal 'new middle class' expertly skewered by Raph Samuel (1982). Partly in response to this dynamic, Smith developed a nostalgic attachment to residual elements of working class culture. This sensibility was once summed up starkly by Smith's first wife Brix Smith Start, the daughter of a TV executive and a political economist from Los Angeles who did not adapt well to life in Prestwich: 'The first year... I remember vomiting every week because the diet was just disgusting – fish and chips, full of grease... He would drink beer and be in the pub all the time... It was just nasty old men with fags in their mouths' (Ford, 2012: 149). Like Samuel Bamford before him, Smith was hostile to statist regulation that impinged upon his everyday habits and pleasures and was prone to framing this in reactionary terms: 'My values are basically conservative. I don't want a fucking twat from the state telling me what to do...' (Brecker, 1986).

All this, especially in Smith's case, might suggest an essential connection between conservatism and the working class weird. Yet the picture is at times more complex than that. For a start, historic working class 'resistance through rituals' of pleasure, excess and nostalgic intransigence must be understood in part as a more ideologically diffuse resistance to the onset of liberal discipline and biopower, a historical development which has been mapped influentially in the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1997). This is unquestionably one origin of Smith's wayward libertarianism: he once claimed 'if someone wants to smoke themselves to death or drink themselves to death... or whatever then it's their basic right' (Martin, 1986).

Following the work of Herbert Marcuse, it is also worth thinking through 'romantic atavism' in dialectical terms as at times articulating utopian possibilities realisable only through an economy guided by human needs rather than profit, utilising technology not to maximise surplus value but to minimise alienated and unpleasurable labour. For Marcuse, the 'most advanced positions' of the Romantic continue 'to haunt the consciousness with the possibility of their rebirth in the

consummation of technical progress' (Marcuse, 1991: 62–63). In the early 1980s, Smith claimed 'I am a dreamer type person and I... resent being associated with realist bands', in opposition to those who would portray a burgeoning punk revival as the social realist sound of the street (Reynolds, 2005: 195). It is perhaps no surprise too that Smith once opined 'I always think the whole idea of civilisation is to get everybody on the dole, surely' (Stud Brothers, 1986), echoing recent calls from the left for a reduced working week and a universal income in response to the growing automation of labour (Rogers, 2019; Press Association, 2019). Thus the desired new 'structuration' (Goldmann, 1975: 156) of the world sought by the working class weird is often ideologically complex and politically inchoate; a fact that will eventually be key to the following analysis of Smith and The Fall's continuing significance.

### **Class and cultural form**

To understand representative voices such as those of Smith – in particular the complex ways in which they articulate particular social groups' 'deepest fantasies about the nature of social life' (Jameson, 1992) – it is essential to think further than the ideological content of their cultural production and their public statements. Goldmann notes in relation to literature that writers' representation of social reality 'is almost never... systematic' and much the same could be said of other forms of cultural production such as popular music (Goldmann, 1975: 159). This is especially so in Smith's case, given how changeable, contradictory and unreliable his views could be right up to the end of his life. Despite his libertarian conservative tendencies, for instance, Smith supported the Trotskyist Deputy Leader of Liverpool Council Derek Hatton in the 1980s (Ford, 2003: 155). Shortly before his death, he expressed approval for Rebecca Long-Bailey, Labour MP for Salford and Eccles and a close ally of Jeremy Corbyn (Wray, 2018).

Instead, it is worth considering the question of cultural form in some detail too. At this level, there is often a deeper correspondence to be found between what might seem discontinuous phenomena – the gnomic output of a cult post-punk band and the seismic eruption of a long and complicated series of interrelated conflicts produced by shifting class relations and a changing economy that, via Brexit, have

become ideologically polarised in frequently oversimplified and misleading ways. There has been no more suggestive analysis of cultural form in The Fall than the work of Mark Fisher. Fisher has traced a fascinating, if speculative, formal history to what he variously calls The Fall's 'pulp' or 'popular' modernism. Though Fisher sometimes stops short of fully examining the political and ideological implications of these formal experiments, class is nevertheless central to his analysis. This makes it a useful place to begin for any materialist consideration of The Fall and cultural form. By focusing and contextualising Fisher's genealogy, it becomes possible to understand how The Fall's vibrations live on in all sorts of cryptic yet pertinent ways. Doing so requires both some consideration of working class encounters with, and developments of, modernist and avant-garde cultural production in the post-war period – and further reflection upon the implications of this process, then and now.

### **Popular Modernism**

It is on *Grotesque* (1980), *Slates* (1981) and *Hex Enduction Hour* (1982) where the group reached a pitch of sustained abstract invention that they – and few others – are unlikely to surpass. In its ambition, its linguistic inventiveness and its formal innovation, this triptych bears comparison with the great works of twentieth century high literary modernism (Joyce, Eliot, Lewis). (Fisher, 2006)

From the outset, Fisher's freewheeling analysis of The Fall's work connects it formally to British and Irish high modernism. In biographical terms, this is an entirely plausible reading; for instance, Smith had a long term interest in the work of Wyndham Lewis that lasted up until the former's death (Kinney, 2018). In more historical and representative terms, we can view Smith's interest as one amongst many examples of similar aesthetic strategies pursued in the postwar period. A large body of scholarship has documented the way in which postwar trends of expanded state education, the growth of mass media and the increasing commodification of culture acted to partly democratise aesthetic practices and knowledges that previously had largely been the preserve of the leisure class and the dissident bourgeoisie. The canonical example in

popular music studies is Simon Frith and Howard Horne's *Art into Pop* (1987). Frith and Horne focus their attention on the institution of the British art school, though it is important to note too the residual survival of working class autodidact culture. This is especially so in the case of a figure like Smith, who did not attend art school or university and frequently expressed contempt for those that had: 'I said hey student, hey student, hey student/You're gonna get it through the head' (The Fall, 1994).

As much as this popularisation of the avant-garde may be viewed as part of a more general postmodern collapsing of 'high' and 'low' in the wake of 'an immense dilation of [the cultural] sphere' by way of the market (Jameson, 1991: x), it is important to think this process through further in class terms. The postwar appropriation of modernist and avant-garde forms by working class cultural producers often looks like an attempt to work through the tensions and dislocations arising from the phenomena of class recomposition, social mobility and the decline of older forms of belonging in a rapidly modernising society. There is thus a kind of nostalgia dialectically built in to this otherwise progressive encounter that chimes strongly with the working class weird. It is no surprise to discover that Smith was a fan of the 1968 film *Charlie Bubbles* (Ford, 2012: 99). In large part the film was the work of two Salfordian working class grammar school alumni: the playwright Shelagh Delaney, who wrote the script, and the actor Albert Finney, who directed and starred in the film. Finney's eponymous character, a critically and commercially successful but dissolute writer, flees London for his proletarian Mancunian roots in a vain attempt at reconnection. It is a plot that it is dealt with formally through the juxtaposition of a social realist aesthetic then associated with the authentic representation of working class life alongside a psychedelic surreality that sees Charlie step onto an enormous orange hot air balloon at the conclusion of the film, floating away over the Peak District in an imaginary resolution of real social contradictions.

### **Undilutable Slang Truth?**

Having situated 'popular modernism' historically, it is worth asking in what ways it articulates the working class weird in The Fall's work and with what potential implications. Fisher's analysis on this score is animated by a residual enthusiasm

for his early post-structuralist influences, sharing that intellectual formation's tendency to reject realism and valorise modernist form on the basis of its apparent affinities with the theoretical tenets of post-structuralism (Milner, 2002: 140–141). Though suggestive, this can mean that the more concrete ideological resonances of cultural form and its relationship to class occasionally take a back seat or remain tantalisingly undeveloped.

One example of this occurs in Fisher's discussion of the modernist utilisation of working class language. He begins by arguing that 'The Fall extend and performatively critique that mode of high modernism by reversing the impersonation of working class accent, dialect and diction that, for example, Eliot performed in *The Waste Land*' (Fisher, 2006). For Fisher, The Fall's combination of working class signifiers like accent alongside 'arcane literary practices' has radical implications, short-circuiting the association of intelligence and education with middle class culture and formal institutions. I have argued something similar elsewhere, pointing to Smith's desire for popular appeal alongside his refusal to capitulate to the banal musical conventions and economic servitude of the mainstream music industry (Wilkinson, 2016). In the terms of the working class weird, it is possible to construe this as an opposition to intellectual sophistication as the exclusive preserve of bourgeois liberal modernity as expressed in the work of thinkers such as John Maynard Keynes, who once contrasted 'the boorish proletariat' to 'the bourgeois and the intelligentsia who, with whatever faults, are the quality in life and surely carry the seeds of all human advancement' (Keynes, 1931: 300).

It is such resonances that remain unexplored in Fisher's work, as it moves on for instance to approvingly characterise Smith's use of scrawled working class slang on the cover of *Hex Enduction Hour* – 'have a bleedin' guess' – in post-structuralist terms as uncontainable paratext and, following Roland Barthes, as writerly rather than readerly. Yet the ideological and political implications of such claims are unclear – and there is surely more to tease out here. If, as Fisher claims, Smith re-inhabits the ironic and parodic use of working class language in modernism from a working class perspective, then formally this is a complex and tense move. On the one hand,

it parodies the original parody and appears to 'reclaim' such language. On the other, its ironic detachment denies the social rootedness that might make such a parody politically effective, suggesting the tendency of the working class weird to accompany the absence or breakup of working class solidarity.

This breakup is captured in typically concise and witty terms in 'English Scheme', with its cynical evocations of venality, social mobility and displacement at a critical moment for British working class culture, caught between the choice of a briefly left-leaning Labour Party under the leadership of Michael Foot and the aspirational rhetoric of Thatcherism. As a jaunty, major key melody plays on a keyboard, its cheerful tones are rendered ironic both by the obvious cheapness of the instrument and by Smith's caustic delivery:

The lower-class, want brass, bad chests, scrounge fags  
The clever ones tend to emigrate  
Like your psychotic big brother, who left home  
For jobs in Holland, Munich, Rome  
He's thick but he struck it rich. (The Fall, 1980)

Notably, the 'clever ones' are also portrayed as 'psychotic' and 'thick' – a seeming paradox until Smith's hostility to the liberal bourgeoisie and its associated rationalism are considered. On the same LP Smith would develop this metaphor of wayward working class mobility, hymning 'The Container Drivers' of the Port of Manchester, where he had worked briefly as a clerk after leaving school. The song tropes their amphetamine-fuelled libertarianism against the dull, regulated 'grey ports with customs bastards' whilst evoking a deep scepticism towards organised labour: 'Communists are just part-time workers/and there's no thanks from the loading bay ranks'.

If the act of parodying a usage of working class language already suffused with ironic distance tends to preclude working class solidarity, then conversely what it might make possible is a conflicted identification with that frequently reactionary strand of upper middle class modernism from which the technique originated. A

tragic position in class terms – the ironic concluding line of ‘English Scheme’ is ‘if we was smart we’d emigrate’ – it grounds Fisher’s observation that Smith’s patriotic attachment to a conservative vision of England was one of ‘weariest addiction’ to ‘a blighted... class-ridden homeland’ (Fisher, 2010: 104). Even as Smith wished to escape from an ‘inoffensive cap-touching attitude’ (Ford, 2012: 43) in accord with the postwar breakdown of social deference, positioning The Fall as ‘Northern white crap that talks back’ (The Fall, 1979a), so he confessed to ‘vot[ing] Tory for a while’ in 1983, the year of Margaret Thatcher’s second election victory. ‘There’s a sort of strangeness about the Tories which I think is really fascinating’, Smith noted. Only a biopolitical, regulatory ‘middle-class’ budget dissuaded him from this perverse allegiance: ‘I thought it was horrific the way they put VAT on take-away food’ (Snow, 1984).

Thus, too, the distinctive aggression that is as characteristic of The Fall’s work as it is of a writer like Wyndham Lewis. Fredric Jameson notes of Lewis’s formal aggression that it is not ‘a private characteristic of the novelist’ but a structural formal feature of an outlook that features ‘a reification of struggle arrested and transmuted into static structural dependency.’ Such aggression is ‘the rage and frustration of the fragmented subject at the chains that implacably bind it to its other’ (Jameson, 1979: 60–61). If this was the case for the upper middle class outcast Lewis, it is even more so for the working class weird in its conservative incarnation. The fury of Fall songs often seems directed against the liberal-leaning musical and media infrastructures upon which the band were dependent for their visibility and commercial viability: ‘Printhead’ lambasts a ‘horror-face’ music journalist (1979b), ‘Who Makes the Nazis?’ targets cultural commentators portrayed as ‘balding smug faggots/intellectual half-wits’ (1982), and ‘Deerpark’ makes short work of ‘fat Captain Beefheart imitators with zits’ (1982). Yet such fury may also be read as the displaced frustration of a particular working class consciousness that has sought solace in a contradictory allegiance with its pre-modern oppressors in the face of liberal capitalist advance.

### **White Crap That Talks Back**

Such a ‘reification of struggle’ into ‘static structural dependency’ takes on further depressing resonances in a context of renewed conservative claims on the working

class. Nowadays, the slogan 'white crap that talks back' may be more likely to signify what Alberto Toscano has called 'the sociologically spectral figure of the "forgotten" white working class' (Toscano, 2017). As Joe Kennedy has noted, this has become a dominant narrative amongst the media and political establishment, 'a one-dimensional portrait of "provincials" grounded in a simplistic, badly modelled opposition between them and the "elites of Islington" or wherever'. For such an establishment, this 'badly modelled opposition' serves as an alibi, allowing the Right to imply that recent social friction is the result not of free market generated inequality, poverty and uneven economic development but of neglecting the supposed 'innate social conservatism' of the regional working class in favour of cosmopolitan liberal values (Kennedy, 2018: 11–12). Kennedy's convincing contention is that the 'authentocrats' who peddle such a dubious alibi often do so formally by means of displacement. This includes the 'mass obviation' of 'prole-whispering' journalistic features that purport to have discovered and heeded authentic working class conservative anxieties, despite showing little genuine interest in the demographic, ethnic and political complexities of the communities they report on (Kennedy, 2018: 80–86).

It is worth situating another of Fisher's arguments concerning The Fall's popular modernism in this context. Fisher astutely proposes of 1982's *Hex Enduction Hour* that:

...[Its] textual expectorations were nothing so genteel as stream of consciousness: they seemed to be gobbets of linguistic detritus ejected direct from the mediatised unconscious, unfiltered by any sort of reflexive subjectivity. Advertising, tabloid headlines, slogans, pre-conscious chatter, overheard speech were masticated into dense schizoglossic tangles... *Hex* converts any linguistic content, whether it be polemic, internal dialogue, poetic insight into the hectoring form of advertising copy or the screaming ellipsis of headline-speak. The titles of 'Hip Priest' and 'Mere Pseud Mag Ed', as urgent as fresh newsprint, bark out from some Vorticist front page of the mind... Intent was unreadable. Everything sounded like a citation, embedded discourse, mention rather than use. (Fisher, 2007)

Elsewhere, Fisher refers to Jean Baudrillard's 'The Ecstasy of Communication' and 'the schizophrenia of media systems which overwhelm all interiority' (Fisher, 2006). Though Fisher does not acknowledge it, we seem to be somewhat beyond 'popular modernism' here and into the territory of the postmodern. If Smith was indeed the archetypal 'schizo' who could 'no longer produce the limits of his own being' and was 'only a pure screen, a switching center for networks of influence' as Baudrillard has it (1983: 133), this does not bode well in terms of the potential of working class weird resistance to the kinds of 'authentocratic' manipulations theorised by Kennedy. In fact, the absence of 'reflexive subjectivity' in The Fall's 'dense schizoglossic tangles' is directly comparable to the effacement of actual working class voices in current conservative discourse; as Kennedy notes, the 'rhetoric of "listening" [is], in reality, a way of talking over people's heads' (Kennedy, 2018: 86).

Yet this is a problematic reading in a number of ways. To begin with, an understanding of The Fall's work through a Baudrillardian prism suffers from an issue common to much postmodernist and post-structuralist theory, which attempts to declare an end to centred subjectivity and agency. Yet it often continues to acknowledge ideology and thus, indirectly, materiality, power relations and the associated agencies and interests of social subjects (in Baudrillard's terms, 'influence'). Even if we were to treat The Fall's work as subjectless, a position Jameson at times entertains regarding Wyndham Lewis, it may yet retain a redemptive quality. For Jameson, following the anti-humanist Marxism of Louis Althusser and Pierre Macharey, the explicit and 'obsessive' reactionary features of Lewis's work make of it an 'impersonal registering apparatus' for the 'ugliness' that continues to lurk beneath 'liberal revisionism'. Lewis's writing is thus valuable in the sense that it involuntarily exposes 'protofascism' for what it is in no uncertain terms (Lewis, 1979: 21–22). We could construe the 'schizoglossic tangles' of Fall lyrics similarly. The same ironic formal distance which acts to cast doubt on Smith as working class spokesperson here allows those lyrics to highlight the obscene reality of the bigotry and misanthropy implicitly laid at the door of an ill-defined and racially homogenised working class – and by extension the obscenity and crassness of this ideological alibi

on the part of the establishment: 'The Classical' contains the lines 'where are the obligatory niggers?'... 'there are twelve people in the world/the rest are paste'... whilst the narrator of 'Fortress/Deerpark' complains 'I had to go round the gay graduates in the toilets' (1982).

Still, though, the question of agency remains. The consciousness of social groups, their allegiances and antagonisms, may be materially and systemically determined – but people make their own history, even if it is not in circumstances of their own choosing. Thus the intent of Fall songs may not always be as 'unreadable' as Fisher makes out. This is so even on the same LP that he characterises as a 'teeming... expansive' culmination of the band's paratextual, intertextual output, apparently devoid of an author-God.

'Hip Priest', for instance, is as popular modernist as the rest of *Hex Enduction Hour*: oblique, fragmented and featuring disorienting perspectival shifts in narration reinforced by the occasional doubling of Smith's vocal line. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to attribute a biographical significance to the mantric repetition of the line 'he is not appreciated', accompanied as it is by the singer's identification of himself as the eponymous hip priest – not to mention Smith's extratextual public reputation as a truculent outsider, which he had already established by the time of the song's release. 'He's gonna make an appearance', Smith declares performatively, before intimating the purpose of this appearance. Drinking 'from small brown bottles since I was so long', getting his 'last clean dirty shirt out of the wardrobe', the hip priest may be read as the retort of the working class weird to the attempts of 'the good people', liberal and conservative alike, to contain, exploit, corral and speak for it. Revelling in excess, disarray and grime, the phrase 'since I was so long' rather than the more familiar 'so high' implying a base horizontality in opposition to bourgeois uprightness, the hip priest is the atavistic avatar of working class weird revolt.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986) for a still captivating critical historical account of the grotesque and carnivalesque and their relationship to enduring cultural designations of high and low.

## Conclusion

Smith's death in January 2018 was greeted by a flurry of coverage across a huge range of media – all the way from the News Corp-owned tabloid *The Sun* to the leftist academic journal *Radical Philosophy* and encompassing much in-between, including the international broadsheet press. Such prolific and diverse coverage of Smith's passing indicates that his legacy is broadly considered to *matter* at some level. I noted earlier that Smith's persona and the work of The Fall are not fixed entities, rather they are subject to continual and contested resignification. In what contested ways might this legacy matter in the current conjuncture, then? David Walsh discusses the way that from the 1830s, 'an important factor drawing sections of industrial workers and traditionally inclined Conservatives together was their common resentment of middle-class Liberal progressives.' Traditional Conservatives were angered by the seeming ebb of landed influence in the face of a rising industrial bourgeoisie, whilst workers perceived a disjunction between liberal rhetoric of social progress and rational political economy on the one hand and the chaotic, poverty-stricken urban squalor in which they lived on the other (Walsh, 2012: 119).

Nearly two centuries later, the brief 'end of history' hegemony enjoyed by the socially progressive, technocratic neoliberal inheritors of nineteenth century free market economics is at an end. In their place a succession of provocative radical right political leaders have emerged across the globe, as oligarchic sections of the economic elite have shifted their weight behind what George Monbiot has memorably described as the rise of the 'killer clowns' (Monbiot, 2019). In many respects this new right has little in common with the feudal nostalgia of 19<sup>th</sup> century Toryism; ironically, it is liberal-inclined 'tech giants' like Facebook and Google whose operations have been characterised as 'a hyper-modern form of feudalism' (Morozov, 2016). Yet the new right has proven highly adept at reactivating the ideological methods of reactionary conservatism in enlisting popular, including working class, support. Take Boris Johnson's speech as he launched the Vote Leave campaign in 2016: '[It's] absolutely crazy that the EU is telling us... what shape our bananas have got to be, and all that kind of thing' (Henley, 2016) – or Michael Gove's now infamous claim that 'people

in this country have had enough of experts' (Islam, 2016). At an economic level, this is an entirely historically recognisable rhetoric of hostility to liberal economic rationality and educated reason – whilst at a cultural and social level, a censorious residual Puritanism is invoked as a threat in the war against 'political correctness'.

In 1837 the *Manchester Guardian* 'was particularly disgusted at the short-sightedness of sections of the working class in allowing Whig policy to shape their actions' [i.e. support for the Conservatives] (Walsh, 2012: 122). On the 1980 single 'How I Wrote "Elastic Man"', Smith used the contemporary *Guardian's* sister paper as a metonym for such patronising sentiment on the part of the liberal bourgeoisie: '*The Observer Magazine* just about sums him up/e.g. self-satisfied, smug'. Today's caricatured 'liberal elite' is not far from what Smith presumably had in mind – and a reactionary 'popular modernism' proved to be an effective form with which to articulate *ressentiment* against it.<sup>5</sup> Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* had targeted 'the specialist "professional" ... art-pimp journalist', pulping together political and cultural reaction and radical form. The manifesto declared 'violent boredom with that feeble Europeanism, abasement of the miserable "intellectual" before anything coming from Paris, cosmopolitan sentimentality, which prevails in so many quarters.' Smith would similarly mock a 'Mere Pseud Mag Ed.' with 'a brain... in his arse' who fancied himself a 'sophisticate' (Smith, 1982). In a list of dislikes drawn up for the *NME* in 1987, Smith included 'France (permanent)' and 'all Dutch groups' (Wright, 2019).

It may not be a stretch, either, to observe a potential homology between the barbed logorrhea of reactionary modernist form and the rise of a so-called 'post-truth' era in media and politics – in Fisher's terms, 'the hectoring form of advertising copy or the screaming ellipsis of headline-speak... a Vorticist front page of the mind'. As Monbiot has observed, the seemingly chaotic and contradictory public pronouncements of

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance James Bartholomew, 'What explains the idiocy of the liberal elite? It's their education', *The Spectator*, 26 December 2017, available online at <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/12/what-explains-the-idiocy-of-the-liberal-elite-its-their-education/>, last accessed 22 October 2019. Bartholomew's article is an especially effective example of the way such rhetoric bewilderingly elides liberalism with socialism in order to present itself as the only viable alternative.

the 'killer clowns' fit with their deliberate recklessness concerning the established conventions of liberal democracy and the functioning of the state. This is a calculated strategy, serving both a distracting purpose at an ideological level whilst maintaining a climate of uncertainty in which 'oligarchs extend their wealth and power at our expense' (Monbiot, 2019). It is a strategy that extends rather than curtails neoliberal 'accumulation by dispossession', including the 'management and manipulation of crises' and 'state redistribution' of public wealth into private hands (Harvey, 2007).

Yet the association between current working class *ressentiment* and this new right is neither total nor inevitable. In 'Just Step S'ways', Smith memorably advises all those disenchanted with the contemporary world to 'just step sideways... don't let it beat ya' (1982), suggesting the submerged utopian potentialities of the working class weird. Notably, the song advocates neither a reactionary fantasy of return nor a progressive and collective advance forwards. As Fredric Jameson has observed, at a moment of historical defeat for the left – which we might add with hindsight is still some way from being overturned despite the recent resurgence of popular socialist movements in the West – in which it has become increasingly difficult even to conceive of what a more just future may look like, utopia 'serves a vital political function... a rattling of the bars and an intense... concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived' (Jameson, 2007: 233). As the Hip Priest observes, 'people only need me when they're down and gone to seed.'

## Dedication

Throughout the writing of this article I have constantly felt what Mark Fisher would no doubt have characterised as an eerie affect – 'nothing where there should be something' – as I have once more engaged with his profoundly insightful work on *The Fall*, all the while knowing that Mark is no longer around to bounce this off. As far as I'm concerned, Fisher's work does better justice to Smith and *The Fall* than any other treatment out there. In no small part this is due to the way Fisher's writing mirrors Smith's own fragmentary, grotesque and provocative aesthetic whilst simultaneously maintaining analytical distance. By doing so it avoids the trap of fan writing that is a constant risk in popular musical and subcultural studies. I should

point out that the differences I have with Fisher's readings here ought to be taken as a sign of utmost respect, in the sense that I believe his work has a pressing cultural and political significance that demands engagement through such critical response and development. He is and will remain a sorely missed comrade.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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