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Textual Form and Communist Historiography
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‘The voice speaking, desired, awaited’: Jack Lindsay’s *1649*, Textual Form and Communist Historiography

Abstract

This article examines the 1938 historical novel *1649: A Novel of a Year* by the Anglo-Australian communist polymath Jack Lindsay in the context of the politics of the Popular Front, and identifies the aesthetic and historiographic debates questions that inform Lindsay’s inventive rendition of the historical novel. The novel may be considered in light of what Lindsay later called his desire ‘to use the novel to revive revolutionary traditions’,¹ as well as his ‘struggle to achieve an understanding of the Novel while writing novels’.² Lindsay’s novel figures a reality becoming prosaic: it reproduces contemporary textual sources – tracts, pamphlets, newspapers – as part of its meditation on a nascent print culture whose products circulate in processes that mirror the increasingly conspicuous flow of commodities. In this sense, the novel offers a marxist reflection on its own conditions of possibility in emergent bourgeois culture, as well as intervening in the vexed question of the Civil War as a ‘bourgeois revolution’. The novel however seeks to capture a dialectical method of representing the revolution that acknowledges defeat while rearticulating the utopian content of the defeated radicals, a practice integral to Lindsay’s vision of popular history as a transhistorical dialogue. That utopian content is transmitted through two forms: popular song, which acts to supplement political writing; and the heroic portrayal of the Leveller John Lilburne on trial, whose conduct exemplifies praxis conceived as a unity of word, thought and action.

Introduction

The Popular Front period in Britain witnessed an unprecedented engagement between intellectuals and leftist politics. The address delivered by the Comintern’s general secretary Georgi Dimitrov at the Seventh Congress articulated the key elements of the new Popular Front line: an analysis of fascism as the strategy of a section of the bourgeoisie (leaving open the possibility of alliance with other bourgeois elements), a demand for unity, and the assertion of the importance of working, as Kevin Morgan puts it, ‘with the grain of mass

¹ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*, London: Penguin, 1981, p781.

² Jack Lindsay, ‘Towards a marxist aesthetic’, *Decay and Renewal: Critical Essays on Twentieth Century Writing*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, p444.

culture' in communists' own countries.³ Isolating fascism as a sectional attack on the masses, Dimitrov stressed the central importance of national histories and cultural traditions, both as the stake in that struggle and as the site and means of resistance under conditions in which the fascists were 'rummaging through the entire history of every nation' so as to position themselves as 'heirs to the national past.'⁴ It fell therefore to the communists and their antifascist allies to formulate an ideological response, to 'link up the present struggle with the people's revolutionary traditions and past'.⁵ The neglect of this ideological task allowed fascists to control and manipulate deeply felt popular sentiments, posing as 'heirs and continuators of all that was exalted and heroic' in the national past.⁶ The nation thus became the framework for antifascist action, as communists were bidden to find a 'common language with the broadest masses' and class rhetoric was displaced by inclusive notions of the 'people' as national community.⁷ The detachment of the idea of the nation from the stigma of nationalism was, of course, bound up with Stalin's turn to 'socialism in one country', which deferred the possibility of world revolution and the dissolution of 'bourgeois' nation states; likewise, the recasting of fascism as an extreme and anomalous strain of capitalism underwrote Soviet foreign policy by enabling the matter of defending the Soviet Union against fascism to be treated as a separate issue to the question of how to end capitalism worldwide.⁸

For all the pragmatism that underpinned it, however, in Britain the Popular Front turn was met with an extraordinary flourishing of texts inspired by British (or more commonly, English) history in a wide variety of genres. No figure contributed more energetically to this leftist historical literature than the Australian polymath Jack Lindsay, who emigrated to Britain in 1926 and converted to marxism in the mid-1930s, and produced an outpouring of works on historical themes including poems, novels, anthologies, biographies, pamphlets, poems and translations. There is, however, a difficult historical question of what common ground could be delimited as the site of alliance for communists and antifascists in a British context. The argument that fascism was the last resort of the most reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie implied that other elements retained a progressive politics, and commonly

³ Kevin Morgan, 'The communist party and the *Daily Worker*, 1930-56', in Kevin Morgan, Nina Fishman and Geoff Andrews, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party*, London: Pluto, 1995, p142.

⁴ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class against Fascism*, London: Martin Lawrence, 1935, p69.

⁵ *ibid.*, p70.

⁶ *ibid.*, p69.

⁷ *ibid.*, p10.

⁸ Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941*, Manchester: MUP, 1989, p6.

appeals for alliance were premised on the notion that there were progressive resources within bourgeois culture that could be activated.⁹ In some national contexts, this progressive legacy could be extracted from a conception of bourgeois revolution. The French communist leader Maurice Thorez could respond to the Popular Front line with the assertion that ‘We claim for the working class the revolutionary heritage of the Jacobins and the Paris Commune. We do not hand over to the enemy the tri-colour flag and the “Marseillaise”.’¹⁰

Writings on the Civil War bring to the fore a tension between two positions: one which sought to emphasise the revolutionary legacy of the English bourgeoisie that had waged war on feudal social relations in the 1640s; and the other, which emphasised popular radicalism and the legacies of the defeated parliamentary left. The first of these – the problem of the nature the war itself – would become a central historiographic question among Communist Party intellectuals following the seminal publication of Christopher Hill’s ‘The English Revolution 1640’ in 1940.¹¹ Hill’s essay asserted that the ‘Civil War was a class war’ in which ‘cultural’ factors such as religion simply masked economic motivations, so that the apparent absence of revolutionary ideology could not be taken to imply that no revolution occurred.¹² Communist writings on the Civil War in the 1930s and 1940s tend to reflect an ‘economistic’ view of history as defined by a succession of modes of production, in which the progressive elements were those which liberated the forces of production, directing history towards an eventual and inevitable socialism.¹³ A L Morton’s key intervention in his influential *A People’s History of England* (1938) was the claim that ‘the civil war was a class struggle, was revolutionary and was progressive’; ‘progressive’, Morton argued, not in the sense that the bourgeoisie consciously saw themselves as fighting for progress, but in the sense that the immaturity and social weakness of their class meant that ‘they could not fight for their own rights and liberties without also fighting for the rights and liberties of all Englishmen and of humanity as a whole.’¹⁴

⁹ See, for example, Edgell Rickword, ‘Culture, progress and English tradition’, in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, London: Frederick Muller: 1937, pp253-6.

¹⁰ Remarks reported in W G Shepherd, ‘The fate of France and of Europe’, *Daily Worker*, 8 August 1935, p2.

¹¹ See David Parker, ‘Introduction’, *Ideology and Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the Communist Party Historians, 1940-1956*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2008, pp31-9.

¹² Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, 1940; Lawrence and Wishart, 1955, pp50-1.

¹³ Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997, p25.

¹⁴ A L Morton, *A People’s History of England*, 1938, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992, pp193-4, emphasis in original.

These claims suggest a view of history as a ‘blind’ process in which classes and social groups perform particular functions not of their own making. The possibility that Britain’s experience had been a distinctive historical process under no obligation to conform to any abstract model – as E P Thompson would later argue – was unavailable to those close to the party; when an argument of this kind was raised in the *Labour Monthly* during discussions of Christopher Hill’s ‘The English Revolution’ in 1940, the critic Douglas Garman was quick to assert that such an interpretation ‘would lead to reformism’, since it implied the possibility of a transfer of state power without a revolution.¹⁵ The groups of the ‘left’ of the English Revolution – Diggers, Levellers, Ranters – that would become so prominent in the dramatically changed perspective on the Civil War that Hill would later develop, were at this point bracketed as something of an irrelevance.¹⁶ For Hill in 1940, the failure of the radical factions could be attributed to their unstable social base that ensured that they ‘never represented a sufficiently homogeneous class to be able to achieve their aims’.¹⁷ For Morton, they were ‘the movement of a doomed class, the independent farmers’, destined to be crushed by the advance of capitalist agriculture.¹⁸ As much as one may admire those visionaries, the ‘historical justification’ lay elsewhere.¹⁹

‘A shout across the centuries’

In 1939, Jack Lindsay published a popular pamphlet, *England My England*, that sought to chart a ‘solidly persisting communist tradition’ across the centuries.²⁰ While accepting the principle of the necessity of the victory of the Cromwellian forces and the defeat of the Levellers, the pamphlet nonetheless clearly positions itself on the side of the ‘plain-spoken revolutionaries who stood up and told Cromwell to his face what the poor people of England expected and meant to have.’²¹ Although the pamphlet was generally well received by communists, party critics did take issue with Lindsay’s apparent lack of interest in valorising the Cromwellian victors, and these criticisms point to a significant tension between Lindsay’s emphasis on cultural dissent and his fellow communists’ emphasis on political and economic transition. Idris Cox, a prominent party figure, criticised Lindsay for ‘so serious an

¹⁵ E P Thompson, ‘Peculiarities of the English’, *The Poverty of Theory*, London: Merlin, 1978; see particularly pp245-266. Douglas Garman, ‘A reply to P F’ in *Labour Monthly*, December 1940, p653.

¹⁶ Hill’s key reappraisal is *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, 1972, London: Penguin 1975.

¹⁷ Hill, *The English Revolution*, p51.

¹⁸ Morton, *People’s History*, p215.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Lindsay, *England My England*, London, Fore Publications, 1939, p64.

²¹ *ibid.*, p31.

underestimation of Cromwell's objective role in unleashing the forces of revolt against caste and privilege'.²² Hill, meanwhile, foreshadowing the argument he would make in his essay the following year, suggested that Lindsay had not made due efforts to show that Cromwell and the parliamentary leaders 'were members of a class that was then progressive leading a national struggle against intolerable economic and social and political conditions just as much as John Ball or Wat Tyler.'²³ Appraisals of history and historiography in the Communist Party have tended to suggest a sharp division between the 'economist' concern with modes of production and transition that dominated through to the 1950s, and a later 'culturalist' emphasis that emerged to assert the vital role of ideas, cultural practices and human agency in the 'battle against Stalinist politics and the moral insensitivity of orthodox communism', an endeavour exemplified by E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.²⁴ Jack Lindsay's writing, however, complicates the plotting of this historical shift by clearly prefiguring the culturalist turn in quite different historical conditions.²⁵ With his close collaborator, the poet and critic Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay engaged in an ambitious attempt to archive a national popular culture of dissent in their 1939 anthology of radical texts, *A Handbook of Freedom*, subtitled 'A record of English democracy through twelve centuries'.²⁶ Collecting texts from a wide range of sources – from both written and oral traditions – the anthology attests to a cultural history in which historical experience is articulated in multiple registers and genres, and in which the same concerns register at different cultural levels. It positions canonical figures alongside contemporary, often popular voices: Shakespeare alongside an anonymous poet; Marlowe alongside the evidence of an informer; John Locke next to popular song.²⁷ The understated radicalism of this method asserts that the exploited classes could speak and bear witness to injustice, demonstrating, as Rickword put it, 'clear insight into, and articulation of, the conditions which at each stage in

²² Idris Cox, 'Key books launch out', *Daily Worker*, 4 January 1939, p7.

²³ Hill, 'Our England', *Labour Monthly*, February 1939, p127.

²⁴ Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan and Bill Schwartz, 'Economy, culture and concept: Three approaches to marxist history', in Ann Gray et al., eds., *CCCS Selected Working Papers Vol. 2*, London: Routledge, 2007, p791.

²⁵ John T. Connor has persuasively argued that Lindsay's historical fiction complicates the plotting of British communist intellectual history, and the shifts between old and new 'lefts', much more generally: see 'Jack Lindsay, socialist humanism and the communist historical novel', in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 66, No. 274,

²⁶ *A Handbook of Freedom* was reissued during the war as *Spokesmen for Liberty*. References in this article are to the 1941 re-titled edition published by Lawrence and Wishart. For a detailed discussion of Lindsay and Rickword's work in this regard, see Ben Harker, "'Communism is English": Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay, and the cultural politics of the popular front', *Literature and History*, 20/2, 2011, pp16-34.

²⁷ Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941, p101; p95; p170.

our history could bring nearer the life of freedom and good fellowship'.²⁸ This humanist outlook, in which individuals are active participants rather than passive instruments in the historical process, join, in Lindsay's thought, with a strong emphasis on the *continuity* of history that generally precluded a more 'orthodox' focus on shifts in mode of production. The motive force of history is not production as such but expropriation: Lindsay's thinking turns on a politics of loss, of the appropriation of 'that which should have been held freely in common', and social, cultural and political forms evolve as displaced enactments of a lost commonality.²⁹ The dialectical movement of history is, therefore, the creation of a new prospect of communal life out of advancing forms of dispossession. Thus, in his 1937 study of John Bunyan, Lindsay argued that during the Civil War there were two revolutionary forces: one that was individualist and which was 'to build bourgeois industrialism', but also another, 'the new coherence resulting from the productive advance.'³⁰

The archive of dissenting literature spoke against property and for the utopian prospect of a restored communality so that the 'tradition of English communism flowed down the centuries, taking new forms with the needs of each period.'³¹ Lindsay saw the transmission of this archive as an ideological endeavour that would generate transhistorical solidarities through practices of citation and recitation, performance and representation across a range of forms: such works would amount to a 'shout across the centuries', as he put it in *England My England*, binding together historically distant voices in a polyphonic utterance.³² This current of thought is at its strongest, most redemptive and utopian, in his 'not english?', a 1936 poem for mass declamation (arranged recitation by a group), in which the speaker addresses those individuals and movements who have resisted oppression and been excluded from authorised accounts of English history, calling on those 'who are not the english/ according to the definition of the ruling class'.³³ The poem gathers these moments of resistance, but also repeats them into a new narrative and a new utterance, 'the augural moment declared by frenetic guesses,/ come clear at last' in a simultaneous articulation of nationhood and internationalism: 'England, my England -/ the words are clear/ *Workers of the World, unite!*'³⁴ England is subverted and inverted to become a propertyless nation that

²⁸ Edgell Rickword, 'Introduction: on English freedom', *Spokesmen for Liberty*, pvii. Significantly, this text was an important influence on E P Thompson: See E P Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', *PN Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, September-October 1979.

²⁹ Lindsay, *England My England*, p6.

³⁰ Jack Lindsay, *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths*, 1937; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969, p256.

³¹ Lindsay, *England My England*, p37.

³² *ibid*, p19.

³³ Jack Lindsay, 'not english? A reminder for May Day', *Left Review*, II:8, May 1936, p356.

³⁴ *ibid*, p357.

prefigures a communist world. In Lindsay's work, the prospect of radical solidarity among the dispossessed is figured repeatedly in terms of imaginative relationships between speakers and listeners. The prefatory poem of *1649* envisages just such a sustaining and endless dialogue between past and future: 'We go down/ but hear the shout of young men coming after, / and are content', 'For they will rise to hear this tale, they are part of it.'³⁵ In this imagined dialogue between speakers and listeners scattered through time can be discerned 'echoes of the future' (v).

Lindsay's sense of communism is thus inherently polyphonic: it is a concept transmitted not through the official rhetoric of the Communist Party but through myriad popular voices, idioms and genres, all speaking in their own way of a world beyond division. In part, the imaginative appeal of the Leveller programme for communist writers might lie in the congruence in these movements' attitudes to language. Discussing the Auden group in *Left Review*, for example, Montagu Slater wrote that the material of poetry – its language – came from 'the people', and thus the only hope for modern poetry was to 'appeal from the monopolists to the mass of the people □ the people from whom it derived its tradition, its rhythms, its language.'³⁶ Nigel Smith suggests that the ownership of language was a central point of dispute in the English revolution, and that the question of linguistic 'monopoly' was a revolutionary element of the Leveller programme.³⁷ The historical John Lilburne was a vehement opponent of the proprietorial organisation of language: in *England's Birth-Right Justified* (1645), which Lindsay called the 'key-book to the advancing wave of democratic emotion that threatened to go entirely beyond the bourgeois objective and to demand real freedom for all',³⁸ Lilburne attacked 'the Patent of ingrossing the Preaching of the Word only to such men as weare Black and rough garments'.³⁹ Richard Overton in the same year declared the 'ingrossing' of interpretation to the clergy as 'a meere monopole of the Spirit, worse than the Monopole of Soap'.⁴⁰ The Leveller programme sought to liberate the popular voice from property – to destroy, that is, the propertied franchise. In a passage included by Rickword and Lindsay in *The Handbook of Freedom*, Thomas Rainborough declared that, 'I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own

³⁵ Jack Lindsay, *1649: A Novel of a Year*, London: Methuen, 1938, pv. Page references are hereafter given in parentheses in the text.

³⁶ Montagu Slater, 'The turning point', *Left Review*, II, 1, October 1935, p22.

³⁷ Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p6.

³⁸ Lindsay, *Bunyan*, p73.

³⁹ Lilburne qtd. Meiling Hazelton, "'Mony Choaks'": The Quaker critique of the seventeenth-century public sphere', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 8, No. 2, November 2000, p257.

⁴⁰ Overton qtd. Hazelton, "'Mony Choaks'", p257.

consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under'.⁴¹ The anthology reproduces Diggers' and Levellers' tracts, letters and pamphlets, soldiers' songs, court reports and contradictory accounts: what is lost by what Morton calls the 'historical justification' for the defeat of the radical forces.⁴² Despite this generic pluralism, the selection implicitly endorses that Leveller programme of the democratisation of language by affirming the rights and abilities of ordinary people to articulate their experiences, ensuring that the Leveller voices are only the clearest among a diverse chorus of demands for civil liberties.

For Morton in 1938, the Leveller defeat was indicative of the 'tragedy of all bourgeois revolutions': that the defenders of property are victorious over 'the vision of those whom the revolution had aroused to contend for human liberty and the rights of the exploited'.⁴³ In focusing on the defeated radicals, Lindsay seems to foreshadow Christopher Hill's later position that there were two revolutions in seventeenth-century England: the 'bourgeois' revolution that succeeded in establishing the 'sacred' rights of property, as well as 'another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened.'⁴⁴ This second revolution, Hill argues, existed only as a 'counter-culture'.⁴⁵ What is distinctive in Lindsay's thinking, however, is that the Levellers – like the many figures in the dissenting tradition – are posited to articulate a utopian vision that *would* eventually be realised, and the novel locates the traces of that utopian potential in moments where language and action converge. The Leveller Ralph Lydcot's turn away from the 'good old cause' is a response to Cromwell's shooting at Burford of the Leveller soldiers mutinying over the planned invasion of Ireland and their unmet political demands. Lindsay draws on a contemporary report to describe the act in terms of a unity of gesture and word: "'Shoot me", [the mutineer] said, "when I hold out my hand to you". He held out his hand and they shot him' (261). Christopher Hill argues that the shooting of the mutineers 'made a restoration of monarchy and lords ultimately inevitable'.⁴⁶ But Lindsay's use of the contemporary account, in a novel preoccupied with language and gestures, restores a symbolic, even heroic, power to the

⁴¹ 'Rights for All', Rickword and Lindsay, eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p135.

⁴² Morton, *People's History*, p215.

⁴³ *ibid*, p213.

⁴⁴ Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p15.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p341.

⁴⁶ Hill, *English Revolution 1640*, pp52-3.

soldiers' actions. The soldiers' deaths are inevitable, but their conduct is chosen.⁴⁷ As against Morton and Hill's emphasis on the historical necessity of the Levellers' failure, Lindsay stresses the violence with which Cromwell's forces suppressed them, making it clear that necessity manifested itself in action and not in the blindly impersonal rule of historical forces. This strange, haunting moment in the novel epitomises the violence of success while giving form to the minimal power and agency that is graspable even by the defeated: that which is elided by Morton's assertion of the historical justification of that suppression.

Agreements of the people

During the Civil War, Nigel Smith suggests, different language communities, only partly mutually intelligible, proliferated, so that 'what was understood as enormity or anarchy was really the capturing in words of the same events.'⁴⁸ The opening pages that imagine, from 'below', the execution of the king from the perspective of the waiting crowd, are marked by inaudibility and interruption. The act marks not the onset of a new order but a hiatus, a breakdown: 'They waited, they accepted, they remained silent. They were neither eager nor depressed. They waited' (1). The king reads a speech, and yet, 'the crowd couldn't hear' (13); he 'kept making unintelligible gestures' (14). This communicative breakdown indicates an end to Charles's absolutist function as 'the sole repository of national-social unity'⁴⁹ and the beginning of a period of profound conflict; the fight, as Andy Croft puts it, 'to determine the sort of victory the people had won'.⁵⁰ The import of the event cannot yet be enunciated: "Everything," said Ralph in explanation, jerking his head round to indicate the whole scene. "Do you realize ... we, the People of England ..." (8). In Lindsay's terms, the sudden rupture cannot yet be 'objectified' in word and narrative, and the plotline concerning the Leveller characters entails a quest for precisely this verbal objectification through the establishment of the *Agreement of the People*. Arising from the radical interruption of the communicative culture is a need for a new form of utterance.

Meanwhile, competing accounts of the event begin to circulate even before the act is complete: *The Only True Account of His Majesty's Last Words* attests to the new role for writing in the production of social reality (15). The novel is structured through multiple

⁴⁷ The contemporary source, reproduced in *Spokesmen for Liberty*, describes the mutineers as 'looking [the soldiers] in the face till they gave fire, not showing the least kind of terror or fearfulness of spirit' 'How Levellers of Thomson's force died', in Rickword and Lindsay eds., *Spokesmen for Liberty*, p145.

⁴⁸ Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution*, p25.

⁴⁹ Lindsay, *Bunyan*, p17.

⁵⁰ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, p208.

perspectives and short chapters, interspersed with original documents. The method creates an indeterminacy that brings into focus what is elided by the discourse of the victors. The narrative voice in these opening pages is ambiguous in its level of audibility and location, at some points seeming to voice characters' immediate thoughts – 'No need to fret [...] Soon there will be a different moment, of girls' voices and sweet smell of warm wine and your friend smiling across the table. It will pass; it will come' (10) – while at others shifting into the future to act as the voice of memory – 'You couldn't see their faces nor hear their voices' (10). At still other points, the narrative voice steps forward to explicitly supplement the narrative with what the characters themselves cannot narrate: 'The one story which neither told, though it lay close to their memories, was the story of how Scamler had saved Ralph's life at Sherborne' (56), while the characters' own efforts to narrate their experiences are interrupted by ellipsis and uncertainty: "'Do you remember ...' the first good cause. "Godscods, Ralph ..." "I tell you, Will ..." "Do you remember..." (57).

The question of what kind of narrative can be constructed from these fragments of is explored through the central plotline, in which the former New Model Army soldier Ralph Lydcot joins the Levellers in their pursuit of their political aims either by armed uprising or by a mass articulation of popular consent for the *Agreement of the People*. While the Leveller leader John Lilburne believes that *The Agreement of the People* will 'bring into being the first free Parliament that England has seen since the Norman Conquest' (132), Chidley warns that, 'We must remember that there is no people in the sense in which you use the world' (132). For the Leveller characters, popular song is a continuing source of hope that the political formation of the people is indeed possible, despite the ways the people have been rendered confused and inarticulate by the falsehoods they have been told, 'So that all words become fouled and abominate; even the noblest of them, such as liberty or love' (132). For Overton, nonetheless, 'The people know what they want [...]. It's in their songs' (134). Popular song functions through the novel as a source of political hope as well as a reserve of effective language:

And then you hear that weak and rambling voice that's singing where a few poor men meet. And you hear something different. You hear this protest against the money-mongers that by the bread of life and hide it in a private garner; against them that make such scarce of plenty; against them that make their dice of poor men's bones [...] But that unimportant voice is singing where poor men meet. And some day it will speak out louder and louder. (135)

The devastation of the war, however, means that the national-popular *Agreement* proposed by the Levellers cannot find its audience, cannot become a popular utterance, and the popular voice must sound in other ways: ‘The ditches of England were filled with outcasts [...] yet these people seemed the least ready to rise in active revolt’ (238). This dispossession is central to Lindsay’s account of the failure of the English revolution to restore the ‘birthright’ of the people: the inability of the radicals to make efficient challenge to the advancement of enclosure and the deflection of ‘natural’ rights onto the rights of property.⁵¹ Ralph at this point recognises that the Diggers and journeymen were both ‘striving to get once more that basis on which resistance would be possible’ (238) and that the Leveller challenge – in insurrection or popular revolution – would secure both by means of a historical ‘short cut’ by which ‘what the Diggers and the journeymen were in different ways fighting for could be brought immediately into realization (238). Significantly, at this point Ralph begins to *hear* England differently: ‘The voices he heard were not those of blackbirds rapturously whistling or diving with sharp scattered bell-notes of warning; they were the voices of peasants in the ale-house or under the hedge’ (239): ‘The voice was there, speaking, desired, awaited. But could it speak loud enough and soon enough?’ (240). In the end, the voice cannot speak up for the *Agreement*, and the prospect of a ‘short cut’ by armed insurrection is crushed. For the *Agreement* to pass from the hypothetical to the actual, to become an authentic collective and popular utterance expressing what has been won, but also what has been lost, requires the development of capitalism to transform the economic conditions so as to create a new unity in labour. Ralph Lydcot’s turn to commerce is in this sense to be seen not as an abandonment of the revolution but a pursuit of the necessary conditions for its full realisation. The structuring of the text through multiple perspectives and incompatible accounts refuses to suppress the social divisions the war gave rise to, the solution to which only became possible, Lindsay felt, in ‘the new situation’ of the 1930s.’⁵²

Paths for the novel

The consequences of the Levellers’ failure to make the historical ‘short cut’ to immediate economic and social reform are tracked through the novel in the paths of Ralph, the Puritan apprentice Roger Cotton, and the Leveller leader John Lilburne. These paths not only mark

⁵¹ For Leveller discussions of natural, civil and divine right in relation to questions of property and franchise, see Geoffrey Robertson and Philip Baker, eds., *The Levellers: The Putney Debates*, London: Verso, 2007, pp68-72.

⁵² Jack Lindsay, ‘A plea for mass declamation’, *Left Review*, III:9, October 1937, p516.

Lindsay's view of the consequences of the war, but also in certain ways act out a number of arguments about the novel form itself. In *A Short History of Culture* (1939), Lindsay described the novel form in terms of a dialectical interaction between the earlier mode of the quest narrative and the condition of capitalist modernity. He considered the origin-quest plot, whether directed inwards (as in *Tristram Shandy*) or outwards (as in *Tom Jones*), to be an inflection of the 'wandering theme' that was the central dynamic in all narrative literature, and which arose in the break-up of the communal settlement and the privatisation of property.⁵³ Later, however, he posited a tripartite genealogy of the novel:

The Novel as a particular artform developed out of a fusion of medieval romance (it is still *roman* in French), pastoral, and picaresque or lowlife satire. Thus it brings together the theme of the high quest (for some deep meaning in life), the criterion of a happy life on earth without money-values, and the realism which sees how at every point the cash-nexus is distorting life.⁵⁴

It is possible to find in *1649* Lindsay's attempt to give shape to these traditions: Ralph Lydcot suggests the realist and picaresque possibilities exemplified by Fielding; Roger, the romantic and psychological introversion given comic form by Sterne; and Lilburne, the pastoral prospect of an end to all divisions, most crucially, I shall argue, the division between language and world.

As the revolutionary momentum of the Levellers is broken, Ralph Lydcot withdraws from active politics, a measure that precipitates a loss of a critical perspective: the effect of the loss of revolutionary hope is a contraction of his vision from the general – the national and popular – to the immediate and specific: he finds he can no longer face the phrase 'a free England' and 'wanted to escape all generalisation and live in some immediate objective – the cornering of the tin supply' (312). The apparent contraction of his vision is attended by a sharpening sense of international context through the lens of commodity production: 'Cotton, dye-galls, aniseeds, corodovans, wax, grogram, camlets, carpets, gems from India, indigo, spices from Arabia, mohair and raw silk. What did he know about the world from which these various things came, paid for by the exports and tin? [...] He wanted to travel' (454-5). Ralph's Levelling instincts are displaced into this other form of equivalence and equality, and these 'various things' become the mediators of his understanding of the world. The England

⁵³ Jack Lindsay, *A Short History of Culture*, London: Gollancz, 1939a, pp444-5.

⁵⁴ Lindsay, 'Towards a marxist aesthetic', p441. An illuminating discussion of the origins of Lindsay's theory of pastoral and its influence on his work on and in the novel, see Connor, 'Jack Lindsay', pp358-363.

of labour, briefly brought into view by his experience of the mass conflict of the war, is displaced by the world of things. The loss of the national scale in this scheme, which moves directly from the local to the international, echoes the Popular Front endorsement of the nation state as a form in which capitalism could be resisted. Ralph's abandonment of the idea of a free English nation causes him to facilitate the development of the commercial empires 'a new hardness appear[ed] in his attitude to men and things (314). This hard practicality, combined with his attraction to travel and adventure in a world opening through trade paths, means that Ralph stands as something of a forebear of the hero of the picaresque novel that would come to fruition in the next century. Crucially, this transition is figured in terms of a changing internal language. As he turns outwards towards commerce and empire, the Leveller language, bearer of revolutionary hope, ceases to have power over him: 'What after all were the words for which he had been ready to die? They had suddenly ceased to have meaning' (287). He comes to be governed instead by another language, that of his uncle, an evangelist for the free market, a 'chuckling ghost' whose voice Ralph 'hears' telling him that, 'This is the real world, and it is the world I am building; the future lies in this extension of the market. But, answered Ralph, what is the use of this extension unless at the same time our protest, the voice of the Levellers, is heard and understood?' (347). The answer, which Ralph cannot supply for himself, is found in a popular ballad (348). The popular oral form thus supplements written culture by articulating the revolutionary ideals excluded by the written forms the increasingly prosaic Ralph represents.

If Ralph's turn to commerce entails an abandonment of revolutionary language, an acceptance that the gap between the Leveller language and the condition of England is too wide to be bridged by any historical shortcut, it is in the figure of Roger Cotton that the refusal to accept this defeat is concentrated. While near the novel's end Ralph appears to agree to burn his Leveller texts to placate his wife (515), Roger throughout the novel appears as a custodian of the written word. Indeed, he identifies himself with textuality so that, in the Puritan manner, he imagines his soul as a text: 'The problems that tormented him night and day were hieroglyphs written by an unseen hand on the scroll of his being' (74).⁵⁵ But the contradiction between inner language and outer world is unbearable: 'The moment I reach out my hand and touch the world, I am lost' (73). Roger experiences an intense crisis of faith, a search for the 'absolute' (44) that is no longer available after the execution of the monarch

⁵⁵ For the soul-text allegory in Puritan culture, see Deborah L. Madsen, 'American Allegory to 1900', in Rita Copeland and Peter L. Struck, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010, pp229-40.

inaugurates a phase of radical contingency, played out through his desire to find a unity of language and world. His initial revolt is against his employer, Mr Bagshaw, who has ‘collected a pack of down-and-out authors who, for a glass of wine, a plateful of meat, and half a crown, would knock off a pamphlet, a ballad, or a hack-translation, even a treatise on history or science’ (71). Most distressing to Roger is Bagshaw’s scheme of selling texts of popular sermons, ‘Paper obtained on credit; half the book put out to a printer to save time’ (70). Roger is repelled by the levelling process of capitalism that – via the new proliferation of print commodities – reduces all ideas and texts to equivalent commodities and empties them of their signifying power, an early sign of what Edgell Rickword called ‘the long antagonism between literature and life’ that the Popular Front might finally abolish.⁵⁶ The breakdown between, on Roger’s reading, Word and world emerges from, but also participates in, the advance of the capitalist mode of production. Roger’s commitment to the Diggers is an extension of his revolt against the corruption and abstraction of text: he finds solace in the pastoral, uncontradictory relationship between the Diggers’ songs and their communal labour (330-1). It is this lack of contradiction that Roger pursues through the novel. His quest is for a sure gesture that might counteract the ambiguity of modernity: in the Digger Everard he finds, ‘The words and the voice so eager and assured before the unmoved listeners; the eyes unfathomably burning. That was what he wanted; that certainty’ (204). Likewise in Gerard Winstanley he finds the unity of word and gesture that overcomes the rupture he apprehends as the foundation of commerce: ‘The penetrating gentleness of his voice, the quiet benediction of his hand, filled Roger with a balmy certitude’ (209). But in both cases Roger is forced to confront the failure of the ‘certainty’ manifested in the Diggers to make contact with social reality. While his involvement in the Digger commune assuages his sense of alienation arising in commerce, this labour cannot overcome his alienation from his ‘species-being’, in Marx’s sense, which makes itself felt in his relationship with his wife.⁵⁷ He is tormented by his inability to subsume his sexual drive to his sense of a social body in which all are separate but equal: ‘The desire to take the body of another, he said, was only part of the greedy spirit of discontent and hate’ (309). This attempt to repress causes a disjuncture between intention and act: ‘She had on a light dress and he could feel the garters above her knees and the soft movement of her thighs as he knelt there; and the gesture which he had

⁵⁶ Edgell Rickword, ‘André Malraux: action and humanism’, 1937, in *Literature in Society: Essays and Opinions (II): 1931-1978*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1978, p122.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844’, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, Oxford: OUP, 1977, p88.

meant as one of simply brotherly affect ceased to be so easy, so unequivocal' (309). The 'certainty' seemingly embodied in the Diggers fails when confronted with Roger's divided being: his bad faith. By the novel's conclusion, however, Roger has accepted the impossibility of realising the Digger programme and is poised, instead, to become a literary intellectual, carrying over his revolutionary morality into a new cultural movement that points, at the horizon of the text, to France. Roger's introspective character makes him the double of the outgoing, worldly Ralph, a signifier of the 'internalisation of conscience' in Puritan culture that was so central to the emergence of the novel form.⁵⁸

Levelling the land

If Roger and Ralph, then, represent twin responses to rising capitalism that would in due course find their form in the novel, I wish to suggest that, via John Lilburne, Lindsay also attempts to project the possibility of another form altogether, a form that might mediate the antinomies of bourgeois realism suggested by the inward and outward quest narratives of Roger and Ralph. In Lilburne, Lindsay figures the prospect of an end to all division through convergences of language, act and gesture that, in Lindsay's system of thought, prefigure the integration of social life under communism, and uphold the pastoral 'criterion of a happy life on earth without money-values'.⁵⁹ Through this formal procedure Lindsay seeks to assert that such acts of defiance were not simply tragic gestures, but the means of carrying the revolutionary content of the defeated side forward into the future. The central dramatic episode of *1649* is Lilburne's trial for treason. Lilburne is a levelling agent who expresses the positive side of the 'levelling' Roger finds so degrading: 'He spoke against the king and the bishops and the Whore of Babylon. Where are they now? Gone with the dust on God's wind', his wife says (95). The depiction of his imprisonment suggests a national and popular leader in whom the fate of the people is concentrated: 'lifting his hand, saying aloud, "I shall not be ensnared," he felt the old strength flowing back, tingling at the roots of every hair on his head, tautening his muscles, till he stood up, up, all over England' (265). Lilburne's conscious merging of himself with the people of England gives rise to an articulation of commitment figured as a convergence of voices – inner conscience, individual speech and narrative voice:

⁵⁸ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957, p75.

⁵⁹ Lindsay, 'Towards a marxist aesthetic', p441.

The end was not yet. He said to the night, not in any vanity (for it was of himself as the voice of the surging struggle that he spoke; himself as England): Until Lilburne is broken, liberty is not lost. They may kill, but not break me. (269)

The linguistic unity of this passage, and the absence of contradiction that it suggests, must however be tested in practice, since, as the novel's Richard Overton suggests, 'the final truth lies in active achievement, wherein all spoken and written truths are tested' (558). That test is Lilburne's defence, in which he uses the court as a 'sounding-board to send his voice all over England' (466) and appeals to the law and the constitution, eschewing the extra-legal power he could invoke in gesture: he 'knew that if he so wished, with the raising of a hand he could smash the court and chase the learned judges out of it' (462). It is this choice – the choice to fight on the basis of the law – that is represented as heroic. The court attempts to prevent him from reading the text of the law (486) so that the act of enunciating the already existing rights of the English is itself a form of praxis that appears to combine Roger's faith in language with Ralph's commitment to action. Indeed, it is here that Roger finds the sure unity of language and act that he has sought, and now feels conditioned as a listener so that, 'The words gripped [him]; they seemed aimed directly at him' (476). For Lindsay, the greatest evidence that radical gains could be made and freedoms defended within existing state and legal frameworks came from cases of trial by jury, in which the jury had acted as 'defender of liberty' against the misuse of the law.⁶⁰ As in the report of the shootings of the Leveller soldiers, Lindsay draws closely on the contemporary report of the trial.⁶¹ While the regicide that opens the novel moved the revolution into unprecedented territory – Rickword noted that it was 'public and ceremonial', 'for it could not be called legal' – the Lilburne trial upholds the text of the law against its corruption.⁶² The text of the law ceases at this moment to be an abstraction and comes into force as a concrete realisation: momentarily, there is a convergence of legality and legitimacy, and therefore an intimation of the abolition of the generative contradiction within capitalism – that is, the illegitimate appropriation of 'that which should have been held freely in common'.⁶³ The narrative outcome of the Lilburne trial is a moment of recognition for Roger, in which finds that 'he had never before seen the whole struggle, the righteous man arrayed against the great ones of the world, in so stark and

⁶⁰ Lindsay, *England My England*, p47.

⁶¹ The proceedings of the trial are available at <http://constitution.org/trials/lilburne/lilburne1.htm>

⁶² Edgell Rickword, 'Milton: the revolutionary intellectual', 1940, in *Literature in Society: Essays and Opinions (II): 1931-1978*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1978, p179.

⁶³ Lindsay, *Bunyan*, p256.

noble a form' (490). The 'heroic pattern' of the struggle 'came home to him with tremendous force, clarifying his personal conflicts' (490). Moments where word and act are unified, it is suggested here, can give form to the revolutionary perspective occluded by Ralph's traumatised retreat into the immediacy of commerce. In showing that the revolutionary promises of the Levellers are not destroyed but transformed, carried into the future in different forms and different countries (France and America), Lindsay writes back into the history of the novel a speculative account of its origins in resistance to the 'levelling' of commercial exchange. But Lindsay also, in a certain way, writes *forward*, through the pastoral figure of Lilburne, into an envisioned future in which the antinomies that structure the novel form – world and word; action and inner life – may be unified. The novel's conclusion, however, makes clear that that prospect is a distant one; the final voices that sound are those of Gerard Winstanley and Oliver Cromwell, voices of impossible freedom and imminent tyranny.

The significance of the trial to the form of *1649* has tended to be overlooked by critics reading the novel in terms of Lindsay's emphasis on the 'mediocre' heroes, Roger and Ralph. The *Daily Worker* saw in the Levellers the image of the modern communist party, and subsequent critics have tended to read the novel for political parallels.⁶⁴ The trial of Georgi Dimitrov, in whose 'moral grandeur and courage' the communist writer Ralph Fox saw a paradigm of the new literary hero, is certainly a presence in Lindsay's novel, as Janet Montefiore points out.⁶⁵ However, within the wider system of Lindsay's thought, the trial offers a utopian image. The paradox of the events of 1649 is the discharging into social life of two forms of levelling: the freeing of the forces of commodity capitalism and a legalistic principle of democracy. Once mobilised both forces generate their own momentum that together direct history towards the achievement of a renewed wholeness and communality. Rather than narrating the 'triumph' of the bourgeoisie and its cultural forms, Lindsay's novel considers dissidence within, reviving moments in which, even in defeat, individuals contested that outcome. Edgell Rickword argued that behind every secured political right is the promise of an eventual realisation of full democracy, 'that ghost which haunts the capitalist democracies with the reminder of their youthful promises'.⁶⁶ In light of *1649*'s evocation of

⁶⁴ The *Daily Worker*'s reviewer, 'Martin Marprelate', wrote that the novel 'has for its hero a Party, the Levellers', and that readers 'see the Party in all its aspects'. 'A novel in a thousand', *Daily Worker*, 25 May 1938, p7.

⁶⁵ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the Thirties: The Dangerous Flood of History*, London: Routledge, 1996, p152. Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p121.

⁶⁶ Rickword, 'Culture, progress and English tradition', p245.

that vision, its suppression and survival in different realms of literary culture, then, Gustav Klaus's comment that Lindsay 'democratised' the genre of the historical novel might be radically extended.⁶⁷

Conclusion

In a 1937 article in the American journal *New Masses*, Lindsay explicitly links the 'great weapon' of the historical novel to Dimitrov's call to ideological struggle, endorsing the form as a means of bridging the gap between a popular readership and a national historical narrative: 'Now, with fascism raising everywhere demagogic cries of reactionary nationalism, there is no task more important for the Communists in each country than to make clear that they stand for the true completion of the national destiny.'⁶⁸ In marxist hands, indeed, the historical novel might in fact be 'the highest form of historical composition', able to depict past conflicts 'with the maximum of roundness and richness'.⁶⁹ I have tried to suggest here that *1649* may be read as seeking to formalise a narrative of English history that both recognised the bourgeoisie's progressive role in history and acknowledged the significance of defeated radical movements. Working against the grain of more schematic readings of the Civil War as a class war in which cultural issues were of secondary importance, Lindsay uses the historical novel to examine how forms of expression shaped and were shaped by the conflict. The inseparability of questions of language from questions of historical interpretation implied that no history could bracket such matters as merely 'cultural'. Like the anthology *The Handbook of Freedom*, the novel emphasises the integrity of historical voices in a range of genres; Lindsay's refusal to use a consistent or stable narrative voice in *1649* mirrors his and Rickword's editorial practice which insists on a minimal need for commentary. Lindsay is furthermore deeply concerned with the question of how revolutionary traditions can be revived and advanced rather than simply commemorated, how the transhistorical dialogue figured in such texts as *England My England* can go on. In *1649*, the key to this problem is the twofold endorsement of popular culture, that 'weak and rambling voice', on the one hand, and, on the other, the representation of Lilburne as a heroic pastoral agent whose conduct suggests an eventual abolition of the basic contradictions in capitalist social life. The historical Lilburne affirmed that Leveller ideas had taken root in

⁶⁷ Gustav Klaus, 'Socialist fiction in the 1930s: some preliminary observations', in John Lucas, ed., *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, Sussex: Harvester, 1978, p27.

⁶⁸ Jack Lindsay, 'The historical novel' in *New Masses*, 12:3, 12 January 1937, p16.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

popular culture despite their political failure, 'so that though we fail, our truths prosper', and Lindsay's Popular Front historical texts may be said to examine the forms in which the radical truths that he found in English tradition might prosper.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Lilburne, *England's New Chains Discovered* (1649), in Robertson and Baker, eds., *The Levellers*, p114.