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## 'The Rich Harmonics of Past Time': Memory and Montage in John Sommerfield's *May Day*

Elinor Taylor

**Abstract:** This article examines John Sommerfield's 1936 novel, *May Day*, a work that experiments with multiple perspectives, voices and modes. The article examines the formal experiments of the novel in order to bring into focus contemporary debates around the aesthetics of socialist realism, the politics of Popular Front anti-fascism and the relationship between writers on the left and the legacies of literary modernism. The article suggests that while leftist writers' appropriations of modernist techniques have been noted by critics, there has been a tendency to assume that such approaches were in contravention of the aesthetics of socialist realism. Socialist realism is shown to be more a fluid and disputed concept than such readings suppose, and Sommerfield's adaptations of modernist textual strategies are interpreted as key components of a political aesthetic directed towards the problems of alienation and social fragmentation.

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This article analyses the formal experiments of John Sommerfield's 1936 novel, *May Day*, and in so doing attempts to shed light on British Marxists' relationships with the heritage of literary modernism during the period of the Popular Front (1935–39). *May Day* has been compared to a modernist day book<sup>1</sup> and to a documentary novel of metropolitan working-class life,<sup>2</sup> while Ken Worpole has identified the influence of Soviet montage techniques in its dynamic shifts in perspective.<sup>3</sup> Although the modernist resonances of *May Day* have been noted, critics have tended to read this in terms of an assumed schematic opposition between realism (and especially the unclearly defined 'socialist realism') and modernism. Perhaps the most graphic example is Valentine Cunningham's assertion that in Britain, socialist realism 'helped to slow down literary experiment and to smash up modernism especially in the novel'.<sup>4</sup> The basis of such claims is the assumption that writers on the left were bound by anti-modernist orthodoxy, an orthodoxy usually taken to be exemplified by the Soviet critic Karl Radek's notorious denunciation of James Joyce at the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934. From this angle, Nick Hubble argues that *May Day*'s 'overt usage of modernist techniques has to be seen as a deliberate act of defiance',<sup>5</sup> while Cunningham reads James Barke's experimental novel of 1936, *Major Operation* (which has many affinities to *May*

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*Day*), as ‘staring down Karl Radek and his British supporters’ by experimenting with form.<sup>6</sup> I will argue here that these arguments are premised on an over-estimation of the impact that Radek’s address had on British literary leftists in the 1930s, and an under-estimation of the importance of the Popular Front context in shaping British Marxists’ relationships with modernism. From this perspective, I propose a reading of *May Day*’s innovative form not as a mark of aesthetic dissidence from realist orthodoxy, but instead as an attempt to identify and elaborate modernism’s radical and progressive potential, while critically isolating its perceived reactionary tendencies, an attempt fully compatible with the ethics and aesthetics of the Popular Front.

### I

The source of an assumed polarised opposition between socialist realism and modernism is Karl Radek’s contribution to the Soviet Writers’ Congress, and especially the part of his speech entitled ‘James Joyce or Socialist Realism’. Radek’s remarks include the claim that, ‘A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope – such is Joyce’s work’.<sup>7</sup> Although the texts of the Congress were published in English in 1935, there is little evidence that British writers took Radek’s polemic to heart. In the pages of *Left Review*, the main forum for leftist literary debate, the few references to Radek’s speech that appear are noticeably lukewarm: Montagu Slater half-heartedly praised ‘Radek’s shrewd survey of certain limited fields of prose literature’, while Amabel Williams-Ellis, the British delegate at the Congress, though describing Radek’s speech as ‘very able’, contended that his targets were waning in relevance and significance.<sup>8</sup> British Marxists were regularly critical of certain prominent modernists, but the source of this criticism should not be assumed to be Soviet texts; it must be understood as a partial attack expedited by the rightwards shift of some major Anglophone modernists (a factor more pronounced in Britain than elsewhere<sup>9</sup>), and motivated by anti-fascism. Chief among the modernists held up for criticism was T.S. Eliot, whose *After Strange Gods* was reviewed by Douglas Garman in the first issue of *Left Review* as the work of a writer whose ‘graph of development is closely parallel with that of Fascism’.<sup>10</sup> But what is striking in Garman’s attack – even before the Popular Front line had been formally adopted – is his broad acceptance of Eliot’s investment in tradition; indeed, ‘[Eliot’s] search for a system of thought which would, by again relating art to society, nourish the former and be of service to the latter’ is read as potentially Marxist.<sup>11</sup> This is indicative of the Marxist critique of major modernists that may be seen not as an outright attack, but rather as a resistance to a certain turn in their development, the turn that Jed

Esty has called the ‘Anglocentric revival’ marking modernism in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Ralph Fox, a key proponent of socialist realism, made a comparable point, rejecting what he felt to be the morbidity of Eliot’s attachment to tradition while expounding the importance of the writer’s relations with the cultural past.<sup>13</sup> Although Valentine Cunningham has noted the shared significance of tradition for Eliot and the Marxists, his argument ultimately reiterates the assumption that this was in defiance of Marxist aesthetic orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup> The affinity between Marxists and modernists on the question of tradition must be framed within the Communist movement’s turn towards the Popular Front strategy, codified in 1935, which encouraged Communists to form broad alliances against fascism.<sup>15</sup> In terms of the status of modernism, this had two crucial consequences: firstly, it encouraged writers to align themselves with their own national traditions at a moment when major modernists like Woolf and Eliot were also moving towards such reconsiderations.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, it isolated fascism as the strategy of the most reactionary section of the bourgeoisie, leaving open the possibility of a rapprochement with certain elements of bourgeois culture.<sup>17</sup>

In this light, the fact that *May Day* adopts an experimental form should not, therefore, necessarily be assumed to be in opposition to Sommerfield’s declared commitments. Rather, Sommerfield’s politics furnish a perspective from which to adapt certain aspects of the modernist heritage, while critically reflecting on others. The novel takes up a range of familiar modernist themes – exile, the work of memory, the significance of tradition and the experience of urban alienation – recasting them in materialist terms as symptoms of the dislocations and displacements wrought by capitalism. Modernist themes, but also modernist stylistics, are incorporated within an attempt to narrate social totality in a way that offers solutions to those subjective problems. This commitment to totality can be usefully elucidated in relation to Georg Lukács’s theorisation of realism during the 1930s but, crucially, Sommerfield expresses this commitment through the kind of form Lukács uncompromisingly rejected.

Sommerfield is a useful focal point for this discussion of Marxists’ relationships with modernism as his own trajectory of development moved from a modernist preoccupation with interiority evident in his debut novel to the socially-oriented *May Day*. Moreover, he was central to the cultural formation of the Popular Front. He joined the Communist Party in the mid-1930s, wrote for the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and *Left Review*.<sup>18</sup> He was active in Mass-Observation, conducting research and writing its 1943 publication *The Pub and the People*.<sup>19</sup> In autumn 1936, shortly after *May Day* was published, he travelled to Spain to fight with the International Brigade, and fought with the Martyr Battalion in the Defence of Madrid; his record of his experiences, *Volunteer in Spain*,

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is one of the earliest first-hand accounts of the conflict.<sup>20</sup> But Sommerfield was not formed as a writer by the Party, but rather had already developed his literary abilities in a quite different circle. Malcolm Lowry admired his first novel, *The Death of Christopher*, published in 1930, and Sommerfield became part of Lowry's bohemian circle that included Nina Hamnett, Elsa Lanchester and Dylan Thomas. Despite Lowry's lack of interest in politics, he regarded Sommerfield as 'approximately the best man I've ever met'.<sup>21</sup>

Sommerfield's debut, *The Death of Christopher*, announces a preoccupation with alienation and division that would recur throughout his literary career. In *The Death of Christopher*, described by a reviewer as a text hoping to 'attract the modernist hangers-on',<sup>22</sup> alienation is figured as a division *within*, as the protagonist vainly pursues 'that most ungetatable thing – his real self'.<sup>23</sup> The elusive integration that the novel's hero pursues is individualistic, or rather narcissistic, but is nonetheless congruent with the politicised version that is the core emotional drive in *May Day*. In *The Death of Christopher*, the narrator finds himself returning to the country he left behind:

Now each turn of the screw that pushed so many feet of the ocean behind the *Halcyon* brought him so many feet nearer home. This long-cherished return of his, for which he had so much hoped and despaired was actually going to happen: the remote and unbelievable would soon be near and actual.<sup>24</sup>

Sommerfield begins this novel with a description of Christopher's death in a car crash, to which he is propelled by his belief that he cannot overcome the breach with the past. As he drives towards his death he feels that '[s]wifter than light and thought he had freed himself from dimension and overtaken the trampling feet of time, so that the past yet lay in the future and he was once again the Christopher of two years ago'.<sup>25</sup> In this early novel, history and its traumas can only be managed through fantasy and escaped from in death. *May Day*, conversely, proposes a different solution. In a passage that strongly echoes the one above, the returning sailor in this novel feels that 'scenes, half-remembered, half-anticipated moved in his mind, of London in spring [...] memories and dreams that were about to become realities again for him'.<sup>26</sup> Return has become a material possibility, and in this fusion of past and present is the prospect of redemption. In the earlier text, the mixing of past and present is a sign of Christopher's delusions, already rendered ironic by the revelation of his death at outset. It is clear, then, that Sommerfield's style, methods and preoccupations were not simply produced by his engagement with Communism; equally, he clearly did not feel compelled to abandon his earlier concerns as a result of his move towards political commitment.

*May Day*'s montage form tracks a wide range of characters on the run-up to a May Day demonstration. The possibility of integration and the overcoming of alienation are central problems. The tone is set by the opening scene in which James Seton, a working-class Communist sailor returned to London from sea, awakens as his ship docks. This moment of return is figured as a fulfilment of something anticipated in a dream: '[a]n image floated in his drowsing mind [...] of a drifting constellation of lights seen across dark waters' (27). James's exile from London produces a temporal and geographic dislocation: '[t]hey had been away too long; they had been too far' (27), and he contemplates the 'coming break as if it were a new, strange thing' (28). This estrangement is mirrored in his brother John's state of displacement. He is re-entering work after a spell of unemployment, a change that he experiences as a decisive temporal break separating 'now' from 'then' (32). For James, this return from exile is figured as offering both personal and political redemption through his resolve to find his brother: 'it seemed to James as if that kind, honest solidity of his brother was a thing of which he had long been in need, a balm for the disquietude which he had suffered since he had left Spain, a fugitive from a revolt drowned in blood' (29). This announces the novel's preoccupation with the intricate intertwining of personal and political memory: James's involvement with a failed uprising (unspecified in the text, but suggestive of the Asturias revolt of 1934) can only be exorcised by a re-forging of a link to his past, a re-establishment of personal history. The interdependence of personal and political exile is expressed in humanist terms as an image of alienation from human fulfilment: '[b]eauty, the token of his exile, flowered from bricks and pavements' (74).

Sommerfield develops his earlier subjective preoccupations into a sustained, Marxist-informed exploration of alienation, and the politics of alienation are crucial to interpreting the novel's experimental form. Readings of the novel have tended to note that the structure privileges the reader, giving him or her a perspective to which characters do not have access within what Brian McKenna calls their own 'micro-stories'.<sup>27</sup> This is certainly suggested by the cinematic, voice-over-like narration of the early pages, '[L]et us take factory chimneys, cannons trained at dingy skies, pointing at the sun and stars' (25, emphasis in original), utilising what Rod Mengham terms 'the rhetoric of apostrophe', a language of power and privileged perspective Mengham associates with the Auden group.<sup>28</sup> But rather than ironically undercutting this synthetic panopticism with the limited perspectives of individuals, Sommerfield experiments with the ways that such a totalising perspective might in fact be achieved. This is chiefly done through his figurations of the connection-making process of memory. At the level of character, memory takes on what Walter Benjamin describes as the 'epic and rhapsodic' quality of 'genuine memory', which must 'yield an image of the person who remembers'.<sup>29</sup> James Seton returns to a city layered with memory,

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'liv[ing] again the memory-changed scenes of childhood, from whose actuality his memory had travelled so long a journey that he recollected them half-uncomprehendingly, half with an adult stranger's sight' (71). The images that memory yields suggest a utopian function:

And his mother gave him an orange. 'Share it with John', she said, and he did, amicably for once. Her worn face creased peacefully. This was the scene he now remembered, sweet with the overtones of remoteness, loaded with the rich harmonics of past time. The heavy blossom-scent and the evening's islanded quiet affected him now, not as if it was an image of a scene through which he had lived but the memory of some picture seen long ago. (72)

At one level Sommerfield is adapting a modernist emphasis on time and memory for different political ends. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, Septimus Smith is driven to suicide by the traumas of memory, by an inability to come to terms with the past as past, so that he feels the past and present blend into an unbearable synchronicity: '[t]he dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself.'<sup>30</sup> In Sommerfield's novel, however, memory maintains the vital link between past and present that is shown to be integral to political consciousness. Where in *Mrs Dalloway*, memory presages the break-up of identity, the fatal intrusion of the external into the integrity of Septimus's self, in *May Day* memory is integral to the recognition of the self as socially and historically constituted. The communist poet, historian and novelist Jack Lindsay described this narrative tendency, in a survey of socialist novels in *Left Review*, in terms of the classical dramatic principle of 'recognition':

*Now* Recognition appears as the point where the shell of the old self cracks and the new self is born, breaking into new spaces of activity and achieving fullness of social contact.<sup>31</sup>

The 'new self' in *May Day* is expressed in the self-recognition that James finds in the mass demonstration: 'the dear familiarity of these surroundings and the deep meaning of my own life for this scene' (213). Integration of past and future selves is continuous with social integration.

## II

*May Day*'s narrative moves between different individuals, but also between different styles and genres in a montage form. There is a documentary-style

section called 'The Movements of People in London on April 30th', and a passage called 'The Communist Leaflets', the rattling rhythm of which emulates the sound of typewriters and printing presses. In an essay in the leftist journal *Fact*, the novelist Arthur Calder-Marshall wrote in 1937 of the prospects for a new type of 'social' novel written through a 'composite method'.<sup>32</sup> Sommerfield's novel adopts such a 'composite' structure, and this montage principle is the means by which Sommerfield attempts an expression of the social totality. In asserting the interconnected nature of all individuals and world-historical reality, we may consider *May Day* as an experiment in the epic. The connection between epic and the montage form was made by Walter Benjamin in his review of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Benjamin argued that Döblin's montage technique, in which documents, incidents, songs and advertisements 'rain down' in the text, 'explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities'.<sup>33</sup> Like Döblin, Sommerfield constructs a text in which documents and fragments 'rain down': 'The slogans, the rain of leaflets, the shouts and songs of demonstrators echoed in a million minds' (67). For John, the sight of a Communist leaflet serves to temporarily focalise his entire situation, giving him access not to a depersonalised aerial perspective, but through a grasp of social connections: '[h]e saw it with a sense of recognition, he knew it was connected with a whole group of feelings, associations and events' (180).

In his deployment of montage, however, Sommerfield is at important variance with one of the major theorists of the epic and of literary form in the 1930s more widely, Georg Lukács. Lukács developed Hegel's central category of totality into a vision of the social totality marked by 'the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts'.<sup>34</sup> In such a structure, all parts are 'objectively interrelated'.<sup>35</sup> This objective interdependence, however, may be experienced as its opposite – as the apparent autonomy of the parts. Lukács rejected the technique of montage and other modernist forms on the grounds that they merely reproduced this superficial fragmentation. Remaining 'frozen in their own immediacy', they 'fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experience to the hidden social forces that produce them'.<sup>36</sup> The apparent incompatibility of Sommerfield's form with Lukács's version of realism has been noted by Gustav Klaus, but to argue as Klaus does that 'Sommerfield simply starts from different premises', so that Lukács's criticisms are 'irrelevant', is to overlook important points of correspondence.<sup>37</sup> In spite of Lukács's rejection of montage as fragmentary and incoherent formalism, Sommerfield's montage articulates a model of the relations between the parts and the whole that is



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essentially congruent with Lukács's version of totality. Sommerfield attempts to show both the appearance of reification and the actual 'objective' relations.

In the reified world of the bourgeois characters in the novel, power is a mystery: doors are opened 'by men who moved as if they were trying to be invisible' (63). This is a world of illusion in which labour is thoroughly disguised, in which phenomena do appear as independent. Indeed, through the wealthy young couple, Peter Langfier and Pamela Allen, Sommerfield seems to echo Lukács's account of the antinomies of bourgeois consciousness: Pamela's minutely descriptive perceptions make her a 'completely passive observer moving in obedience to laws which [her consciousness] can never control'; Peter, meanwhile, is paralysed by his freedom of choice and is thus unable to distinguish real life from fantasy.<sup>38</sup> But Sommerfield is anxious to acknowledge the progressive potential of bourgeois dissidence as part of the alliance-making of the Popular Front. Peter's flights of fancy, his romantic attachment to 'the heroics of technology' (55), are abruptly terminated when, visiting his father's factory after an accident in which a factory girl is scalped, he sees the grotesque evidence of the realities of exploitation: a 'tangle of blood and hair [...] wedged between the belt and the pulley wheel' (228). This encounter with the reality of technologised production deflates his earlier heroic fantasies, but his romantic temperament is shown to have its positive effect, enabling him to recognise the victim as 'a young girl who may have been looking forward to seeing a lover that evening' (229). While typifying Peter as bearing the modernist sensibility characteristic of polarised bourgeois consciousness, Sommerfield is also anxious to identify progressive tendencies; in this sense he exploits a critique of modernism not simply to reject or denigrate it, but rather to explore its political potential.

Through recurring references to a single commodity, the artificial leather product produced by Langfier's factory, Sommerfield links together the moments of the productive process, and thereby de-reifies the commodity, stripping it of its appearance of independence. If, in Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known formulation, 'all reification is a forgetting', Sommerfield's use of montage and juxtaposition engages the reader's memory to continually resituate the commodity in context, referring the product back to the productive process.<sup>39</sup> The commodity in circulation is seen from a range of perspectives: the artificial leather features in John's wife Martine's dreams of a better domestic life (128), on the seats of taxis, and in the study of the reactionary union leader Raggett (141). Each scene bears the legible trace of the economic mode. In one short, isolated scene, a destitute old woman is seen 'grubbing in Soho dustbins for scraps of food', carrying 'a shabby bag made of squares of artificial leather' (192). The detail gives the commodity concrete social significance that serves to emphasise the isolation of the character,

who does not reappear in the novel. The montage therefore restores the link between commodity and labour that Lukács assumed could only be lost by the fragmentation of modernist aesthetic form. Such de-reification was essential to Lukács's sense of epic in the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> Once again, Sommerfield appears to be working towards the epic and totalising ambitions that define Lukács's programme – suggesting that those ambitions resonated for British novelists even if they were not fully theorised – but doing so through a modernist textual strategy.

Sommerfield indeed appears at one point to deploy the juxtaposition of montage to dramatise 1930s aesthetic debates over modernism and realism. Sommerfield narrates a scene set in a music hall, where a strike threatens to disrupt the opening of the oppositely titled *Backwards and Forwards*, 'the musical comedy that is going to be DIFFERENT', and follows it immediately with an antithetical scene featuring a lone man who 'looked like an intellectual' (146–9). In the theatre, a bustling scene featuring a vast list of characters involved in the production of the musical resolves into a demand for a strike. This suggests that this collective – though commercial – form of art has affinity with collective forms of action. The succeeding scene concerns a lone intellectual who stands for the inadequate response of many of the intelligentsia to the demands of anti-fascism. Reluctantly and bitterly politicised, he regards the masses as to be 'alternately pitied and despised' (150). He loathes both mass culture, 'people sitting in the warm darkness of the picture houses, lapped with the sickly disgusting tide of drugging, lying thought', and a high culture in decay (151). His inability to meaningfully discriminate is encapsulated in a passage that presents images, theories and commodities as a jumbled, undifferentiated mass in a bookshop window: '[c]over designs abounded with romantic photomontage and abstract representations of the Workers, red flags, hammers and sickles, fascies, swastikas, a chaotic jumble of baggage dropped in the great retreat of bourgeois thought' (151). This is precisely the decadence Lukács identified in the bourgeoisie, an abdication of critical thought and discrimination, 'a sticking together of disconnected facts'.<sup>41</sup> What this character is unable to see is the strike being orchestrated behind the scenes in the music hall. He mistakes the product for the labour process that creates it, and thus is blind to the radical potential of popular culture. Sommerfield's use of juxtaposition here reflects a Lukácsian critique of bourgeois intellectual culture while asserting the revolutionary potential of the collective aesthetic labour that produces the mass cultural form. The innovative montage form is appropriated to isolate and critically examine a politically reactionary modernist tendency.

### III

Sommerfield therefore shows that the personal, political and aesthetic aspects of alienation are related. I will suggest that the novel attempts to solve these problems not just through the formal procedure of montage but also through the thematic and structural work of myth and tradition. These are terms closely associated with modernism, and especially the ‘mythic method’, which T.S. Eliot considered Joyce’s discovery in *Ulysses*.<sup>42</sup> But again we find them given materialist coordinates. The central myth in *May Day* is the General Strike, encompassing both the historical strike of 1926 and an ideal form of it. Tradition – the May Day tradition that is both a festival of springtime and a monument to the labour movement – mediates between individual memory and the totality of history. The practices of tradition give graspable and intelligible form to historical processes: ‘[a] revolution is not a fight between those on one side of the line and those on the other. But today things are artificially simplified’ (203). Tradition was central to the Popular Front’s most defining ambition of activating a progressive, popular consensus, drawing from the past the images of popular resistance from the Peasants’ Revolt through to the anti-fascist struggle.<sup>43</sup> ‘[T]hings aren’t the same in England’, the narrator of *May Day* tells us, identifying in the English May Day traditions a possible way of staging resistance to the increasingly invisible, decentred and denationalised forces of capitalism. The temporary massing of the workers overcomes that dislocation, just as, more widely, the labour movement is figured as the ‘home’ of the alienated sailor James Seton.

Part Three, covering the May Day demonstration itself, is organised by a sustained performative metaphor that attempts to deal with the traumatic memory of the 1926 General Strike. The May Day celebrations of 1936, the month Sommerfield’s novel was published, took up the tenth anniversary of the strike and attempted to incorporate its problematic legacy into the labour tradition. The General Strike that is imagined in *May Day* operates at two levels: at one level the actual historical legacy of the 1926 strike presents itself as a problematic legacy from which lessons can be learned, but which haunts the text as a failure (223). At a second level, however, one finds a myth of the General Strike in line with Georges Sorel’s analysis of it in terms of myth. The prospect of a mass strike presents itself as an outpouring of possibility: ‘[e]verywhere the accumulated bitterness of weeks and months and years’ is ‘bursting forth’ (160). These levels of history and myth, inglorious history and radical possibility, conflict in the characters’ minds in order to recast the events of 1926 as a ‘rehearsal’, subsuming them to a greater, as yet unrealised event (204). The demonstration is therefore both production and reproduction: the reproduction of tradition and the production of a new situation, the ‘new

thoughts' in people's minds (211). James feels himself no longer a 'spectator', alienated from historical reality, but instead a participant and actor in a mass drama.

The power of the 'myth' of the General Strike is to augment the consciousness of a scheduled interruption of the labour process – the May Day holiday – with radical future possibilities. The strike, for Sorel, is a way of imaging to the proletariat its own history: 'appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness'.<sup>44</sup> Political consciousness arises *in* the strike, and the acquisition of such consciousness is described in epiphanic terms: '[w]e thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness – and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously'.<sup>45</sup> In Sommerfield's novel, both these aspects are suggested in James Seton's sense of unity with the crowd. He finds in the demonstration the solution to his 'painful memories' of the failed revolt in Spain: 'I sink my identity into the calm quietness of this waiting crowd, I am part of it, sharer in its strength ... and the solution of my conflicts is bound up with the fate of this mass' (213). Although the violent outcome of the novel delimits possibility, Arthur Calder-Marshall made the case that this narrative tendency in socialist fiction was in fact a way of managing and transforming the reality of political violence: '[t]aken in its wider context, it becomes an incident in the political education of the group, not the end of protest, but the beginning of militancy'.<sup>46</sup>

If this politicised commemoration is the expression of one of the two poles of the May Day tradition, that of political, rather than social, revolution, then Pat's feeling that there are 'new thoughts in people's minds' evokes the second possible meaning of the tradition: as a spontaneous community celebration of rebirth and renewal. This is a reading of the May Day tradition articulated in a *Left Review* editorial the following year: the deepest concept in art 'is the concept of struggle forged by men at work, by men and women joined in harmony in the struggle against Nature. It is the story of the death and re-birth of the Year'.<sup>47</sup> In May 1938, Jack Lindsay argued that the May Day tradition was part of the deep structure of culture itself, celebrating 'all that is joyous, vital, constructive in the tradition of human activity, cultural as well as productive'.<sup>48</sup> The redemptive and revitalising qualities of the tradition give a kind of mythic underpinning to the novel's political plot, but it is a myth that is both available and useful to the characters. In James Seton, the frustrated desire for rebirth and renewal, reminiscent, especially, of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, is explicitly redirected to a political goal: '[t]he trees had hung out flags of a foreign country to him, and he had got himself a new flag, the banner of

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a different spring, whose harvest would be plentiful – the spring of revolution’ (74–5).

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I have tried to show here that there is no reason to suppose that Sommerfield felt bound by an opposition between realism and modernism. He was clearly aware of the relationship between certain modernist techniques and a problematic politics, but the novel is dynamised by a confidence in the possibility of taking over and transforming those techniques, and the perspectives that underpin them. The warm reception of the novel by leftist critics suggests it was not viewed as the kind of formalist deviation condemned by Radek; Jack Lindsay, for example, regarded it as ‘the best collective novel that we yet have produced in England’.<sup>49</sup> There are certainly moments when *May Day*’s confidence in its political messages drowns out its more subtle effects, but to read this, as Frank Kermode does, as a sign that Sommerfield was uncomfortable with his ‘bourgeois’ literary gifts and felt compelled to use them in the production of a kind of ‘anti-bourgeois bourgeois novel’, is to over-state the demands placed on writers during the Popular Front period in relation to the ‘bourgeois’ heritage.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as Peter Marks argues, the ‘spectre’ of socialist realism never fully materialised in Britain in the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> Instead, significant spaces and possibilities for experiment were available to writers like Sommerfield, and indeed we might identify comparable Marxist inhabitations of modernist positions and strategies in the work of James Barke in his *Major Operation* (1936) and Arthur Calder-Marshall in his *Pie in the Sky* (1937).<sup>52</sup>

## Notes

- 1 H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), 117.
- 2 Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 221.
- 3 Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), 89.
- 4 Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 299.
- 5 Nick Hubble, ‘John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation’, *The Space Between* 8, no. 1 (2012): 131–52, 140.
- 6 Valentine Cunningham, ‘The Anxiety of Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents’, in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Keith Williams and Stephen Matthews (Harlow: Longman, 1997), 17.
- 7 Karl Radek, ‘Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art’, in A.A. Zhdanov et al., *Problems of Soviet Literature* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), 153.
- 8 Montagu Slater, ‘The Turning Point’, *Left Review* 2, no. 2 (October 1935): 15; Amabel Williams-Ellis, ‘Soviet Writers’ Congress’, *Left Review* 1, no. 2 (November 1934): 27.

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