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“It’s the mass that counts”: Striking Energies in Working-Class Fiction

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Abstract: This article considers the way in which the political ecologies of coal and oil overdetermine the representation of labour struggles in Ellen Wilkinson’s *Clash* (1929) and Ralph de Boissière’s *Crown Jewel* (1952). The historical strikes around which these novels are organized were sparked by conflict over working conditions in, respectively, the coal industry in the UK and the oil industry in Trinidad. Analysing the relationship between the energies generated by mass strike action and the narrative energetics of fiction, the article explores how Wilkinson and de Boissière reshape the novel form in their efforts to represent working-class life.

Keywords: Ellen Wilkinson; *Clash*; Ralph de Boissière; *Crown Jewel*; World Literature; General Strike; coal; oil; comparative literary studies; working-class fiction

In his 1934 travel book, *English Journey*, J.B. Priestley records his visit to the coal-mining village of Shotton in East Durham. Writing in the shadow of the Great Depression, Priestley’s (1987) view of this impoverished community is understandably bleak. He is especially struck by the Shotton pit heap, the accumulated mass of waste materials removed during the mining process:

The “tip” itself towered to the sky and its vast dark bulk, steaming and smoking at various levels, blotted out all the landscape at the back of the village. [...] One seemed to be looking at a Gibraltar made of coal dust and slag. [...] The atmosphere was thickened with ashes and sulphuric fumes [...]. There must have been a lot of labour put into the ground and a lot of wealth taken out of it before that “tip” began to darken the sky and poison the air. I stared at the monster, my head tilted back, and thought of all the fine things that had been conjured out of it in its time, the country

houses and town houses, the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, the carriages and pairs, the trips to Paris, the silks and the jewels [...]; I thought I saw them all tumbling and streaming out, hurrying away from Shotton [...] as fast as they could go. (316-317)

Priestley's vision of the pit heap as a toxic monster from which commodities have been fantastically "conjured" speaks to the importance of the coal industry in powering the expansion of the world market, as well as to the degradation of land and labour entailed in the mining process. The codification of the heap as simultaneously monstrous and magical is typical of cultural narratives of coal capitalism. As Frederick Buell (2014) observes, such narratives tend to oscillate between motifs of "catastrophe and exuberance". In the nineteenth century, coal was depicted as a Promethean force, unleashing fantastic new powers of machine-based production. Writing on *The Coal Question* in 1865, Stanley Jevons declared: "Coal in truth stands not beside but entirely above all other commodities. [...] [It] can be no matter of surprise that year by year we make larger draughts upon a material of such myriad qualities – of such miraculous powers" (viii). At the same time, coal was invested with an array of stygian associations. As Buell (2014) argues, the "ancient fiery nether region" became the "polluted industrial district and city"; indeed, "coal capitalism developed (appropriately, given its mode of extraction) a sinister cultural geography of depths and instructive descents" (74). Priestley's visit to East Durham is just such an instructive descent, his encounter with the hellish pit heap awakening him to the suffering of the mining communities.

To understand Priestley's narrative in these terms, however, is to raise the question of representation in another sense too: that of Priestley's relationship to Shotton as a middle-class outsider writing for a primarily middle-class readership. In his 1979 essay "The Welsh

Industrial Novel”, Raymond Williams notes the tendency amongst middle-class novelists in the mid-nineteenth century to represent Britain’s newly industrialized areas as hellish panoramas. With Buell, we might adduce this as further evidence of the cultural geography of coal capitalism. Williams’s ([1979] 2005) point, however, is that such panoramic descriptions reflect the “external, representative and [...] highly class-conscious” perspective of writers approaching this new, turbulent reality from the outside (215). In this perspective, labourers tend not to appear, or do so only as figures attendant on the infernal landscape. Priestley’s (1987) account of Shotton as a nightmarish netherworld recalls those earlier representations of industrialism. Tellingly, his description of the pit heap makes no mention of miners; we see only a “dirty little boy” sledging down the tip and a “toothless mumbling old fellow” who Priestley cannot understand (316). This incomprehension emphasizes the distance between Shotton’s inhabitants and Priestley’s external, panoramic gaze. Williams argues that novelists such as Dickens and Disraeli ultimately succeeded in moving from a panoramic form of representation to one capable of peopling the industrial landscape with distinct individuals. However, it would not be until the early to mid-twentieth century that there would emerge a substantial body of novels written from *inside* the industrial districts by authors who had lived and worked in these communities.

The flourishing of working-class literature in the early to mid-twentieth century was not confined only to the UK. Globally, the era was one of radical ferment. There were, as Michael Denning (2004) notes, “revolutions in Czarist Russia and Mexico, brief lived socialist republics in Germany, Hungary and Persia, uprisings against colonialism in Ireland, India, and China, and massive strikes in Japan, Italy, Spain, Chile, Brazil, and the United States” (57). Electrified by the proximity of social revolution, left-wing writers from across the world sought to give voice to working-class experience (57). In this article, I consider the representation of labour struggles in two novels that emerged in this context: Ellen

Wilkinson's *Clash* (1929) and Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel* (published in 1952, but first written in the 1930s). The historical strikes around which these novels are organized were sparked by conflict over working conditions in, respectively, the coal industry in the UK and the oil industry in Trinidad. My central contention is that the ecologies of these fossil fuels significantly overdetermine Wilkinson's and de Boissière's representations of political conflict.

Born into a working-class family in Ardwick, Manchester in 1891, Wilkinson was a founder member of the British Communist party and Labour MP for Middlesbrough East between 1924 and 1931. She was elected MP for Jarrow in 1935 and is perhaps best remembered for leading the famous hunger march from her constituency to London in 1936 (Haywood and Joannou 2004, viii-ix). *Clash* is set during the 1926 General Strike and its immediate aftermath. Moving between London and the coal-mining districts of the northeast, it follows the fortunes of a young, working-class trade union official, Joan Craig. Typically viewed as an autobiographical novel, it draws on Wilkinson's experience as an accredited Trades Union Congress (TUC) representative during the strike, as well as her time as chair of the Women's Committee for the Relief of Miners' Wives and Children during the six-month pit lockout that followed.

De Boissière was born in 1907 in Trinidad, the descendant "of the unofficial coloured line of a well-known French creole family" (Sander 1988, 115). By the mid-1920s he had been drawn into the group of intellectuals (including C.L.R. James and Alfred Mendes) associated with the radical literary magazine *The Beacon*. De Boissière's life and career were significantly impacted by the labour disturbances that gripped Trinidad in 1937. A keen observer of the industrial action by oilfield workers that precipitated a general strike on the island, he subsequently became involved in trade unionism. Reflecting this interest, *Crown Jewel* recreates the events of the 1937 strike; it has been described by Clifford Sealy as

Trinidad's "most important political novel . . . the fundamental work of fiction in our society" (quoted in Sander 1988, 119).

Framed by these two moments of epoch-making industrial action on opposite sides of the Atlantic, my study explores how Wilkinson and de Boissière wrestle with the novel form in their efforts to represent working-class life. The energies generated by mass strike action, I argue, fundamentally shape the narrative energetics of their fiction – the speed and temporality of its narrative presentation, the vectors and velocities of its formal logics, the trajectories of plot and character development and the forms of mobility through which this is vehicled. In analysing the way these energetics are in turn overdetermined by the ecologies of coal and oil, I highlight the degree to which *Clash* and *Crown Jewel* also respond to the wider social transformations associated with the development of the fossil fuel industry. Indeed, together the texts register a critical moment in the evolution of this industry: the transition from the global coal system to the global oil system as the dominant energy regime powering the world-economy.

***Clash*: Narrating the General Strike**

In the early twentieth century, Trinidad's petroleum industry expanded rapidly. By 1936 the island was producing 62.8% of the British Empire's oil (Craig-James 1987, 96). The proximate cause of this boom was the decision by the British government in 1910 to convert its Navy and Air Force to run on oil rather than coal. The military's new love affair with petroleum was symptomatic of the transition between global energy regimes then underway. In the late 1910s, the proportion of world energy provided by coal began to fall (even as the consumption of coal continued to grow in volume terms), while the proportion provided by oil increased rapidly (Podobnik 2006, 5-6). This shift was tied to an ongoing transformation of land and labour on a global scale, as capitalism sought to reorganize production in the

interests of reviving a crisis-hit world-economy (Moore 2011, 133-135). These transformations led to the emergence of a new “systemic cycle of accumulation” dominated by the US (Arrighi 2010, 221). Oil would be the lifeblood of this new phase of capitalism and the specific forms of mass production, consumption and transport it involved. These not only required the production of new kinds of space (suburbs and extended road networks, for example), but also fostered the emergence of an oil-soaked cultural apparatus and of new bodily investments and modes of affect that were “materialized in particular types of vehicles, homes, neighbourhoods, and cities” (Sheller 2004, 229; see also Huber 2013).

The impact of this shift in energy regimes can be detected in Priestley’s *English Journey*. His nightmarish depiction of the mound of waste towering over Shotton suggests the exhaustion of Britain’s coal frontier and the hardships facing the country’s mining communities. But how did Priestley travel to Shotton in the first place? Significantly, he begins his journey from London in a motor coach. It is the first he has ever taken and he is “astonished at its speed and comfort”; noting the low fares charged for the coaches, he suggests that they offer “luxury to all but the most poverty-stricken” and have “annihilated the old distinction between rich and poor travellers” (Priestly 1987, 9). What Priestley does not say is that the coaches are petrol-driven machines, and in this regard his unwitting celebration of an emerging petromodernity can be usefully contrasted with his dystopian vision of coal-dependent Shotton. However, it can also be contrasted with accounts of the oil frontier in Trinidad, where Priestley’s unconscious association of petrolic life with more democratic forms of social existence was belied by the brutal exploitation of labour. In the oilfields of Fyzabad, Point Fortin and Palo Seco, wages were punishingly low and employment precarious. As the manager of Trinidad’s Labour Bureau put it in a report on working conditions on the island: the industries here are “out to suck the labour orange dry and to throw the rind on the dung heap” (quoted in Craig-James 1987, 96).

Such struggles between capital and labour over working conditions in the fossil fuel industries are crucial to understanding how oil came to supersede coal as the dominant global energy regime. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was by no means obvious that petroleum would outstrip its carboniferous cousin. As Bruce Podobnik (2006) observes, at the time “the internal combustion engine was developed, there was little need for additional energy resources in Western Europe or North America. Coal was abundant, and steam-based energy systems were able to meet established energy needs” (49). Moreover, throughout the interwar period oil prices were consistently higher than those of coal. Thus the problems confronting the global coal system – its relative exhaustion vis-à-vis oil – cannot be attributed merely to resource depletion and rising prices (at least in any absolute sense). The salient issue was rather one of profitability and of the breakdown of the specific configuration of human and extra-human natures that had underwritten coal’s dominance.

In his analysis of the end of the coal system’s expansionary cycle in the late-nineteenth century, Podobnik (2006) highlights the impact of increasing competition as companies from France, Prussia and the US entered the energy and metals markets (39). The downward pressure this exerted on profit rates encouraged mining companies to seek to reduce labour costs by cutting wages and intensifying the work process. In response, “modern union organizations were formed in coal mines and the first sustained waves of labour unrest occurred in the world’s leading mining centres” (39). In Britain, for example, efforts by coal operators in 1893 to cut wages by 25% were met by strike action of unprecedented scale and intensity, organized by the recently founded Miners’ Federation of Great Britain (Williams 1972, 15). Further large-scale stoppages followed in the 1910s and 1920s, culminating in the General Strike of 1926. A similar pattern was evident in France, Germany, Belgium, the US and Canada. The resulting disruption to the coal industry was all to the advantage of the oil sector, which increasingly appeared to investors as a more reliable, profitable proposition. In

Trinidad, the super-exploitation of oilfield workers – on the eve of the 1937 strikes, the lowest paid amongst them were receiving pay packets that “compared very unfavourably with wages paid to the ex-slaves on the sugar plantations after emancipation” (Millette 1999, 72) – meant that companies such as Apex oil could offer a 135% return on invested capital. In contrast, profit rates in the coal industry were low. The pressure exerted on wages by organized labour in Britain, for instance, reduced average coal company profits to single-digit levels after 1914 (Podobnik 2006, 80).

The problem for mine owners was that the coal industry was especially susceptible to industrial stoppages. As Timothy Mitchell (2011) has observed, the technicalities of “moving carbon stores from seam to surface created unusually autonomous places and methods of work” which provided miners with ample opportunity for disruptive action (20). The impact of such action tended to be felt widely across society since it interrupted “the flows of carbon that connected chambers beneath the ground to every factory, office, home or means of transportation that depended on steam or electric power” (21). An important factor in the rise of the global oil system was precisely capital’s concern to temper the power of miners and reduce the incidence of strikes. This was one reason, for example, behind US-funded initiatives to convert post-war Europe from a coal-dominated to an oil-dominated energy system (29). Mitchell explains that, as a result of differences with coal in the way petroleum is extracted and transported, oil energy networks were “less vulnerable to the political claims of those whose labour kept them running” (38-39). As Podobnik (2006) puts it, “oil production involves a wide variety of distinct tasks,” each of which “requires specific kinds of labourers and tends to result in distinct modes of labour control that reduce the capacity of workers to create unions” (47).

It is important not to reduce such arguments to crude resource determinism (coal is “good” for democracy, oil “bad”). The relationship between these fossil fuels and the

political economies they energize is enfolded in a complex weave of historical determinations implicating specific regimes of accumulation, modalities of power, and ways of organizing nature. To speak of the ecologies of coal and oil is to invoke not merely their biophysical properties, but the particular ways in which these properties have been combined with specific productive technologies, infrastructures, scientific knowledges, labour regimes, and so forth. On this view, strikes might be seen as an effort to transform such ecologies by seizing control of the flows of energy they generate.

Wilkinson's *Clash* ([1929] 2004) offers a striking illustration of this idea. In a scene that captures all the promise and excitement of the General Strike, Gerry Blain, a middle-class war veteran who has "wholeheartedly adopted" the working-class cause (92), enthusiastically describes the progress of the strike:

In most places the strike committees are really great. It just shows what a lot of organising ability is running to waste among the workers in this one-eyed country, when a man is called a "hand" and allowed to think. Crewe and Coventry, and a score of the towns I've visited, are being run by sheer soviets. The permit business is marvellous. Just to see the big employers of the town coming cap in hand to ask for permits to move cargo does one's heart good. (82)

On the back of the disruption to the coal supply, the strikers begin to substitute their own authority for that of the state, assuming command over the country's infrastructure and the energies that flow through it as these are embodied in the movement of people, vehicles, and goods. This struggle over energy flows, I would argue, is intimately related to the novel's organization of its narrative flow. On one level, of course, the struggle constitutes the very content of the text. The industrial stoppages and their effect on everyday life, as well as the

consequences for the mining communities of the subsequent pit lockout, motivate the plot and impel the actions of the characters. But in seeking to depict the strike and its galvanization of the “collective energy of ordinary people” (Paul 2013, 102), the novel has also to wrestle with the energetics of narrative form. Specifically, it confronts two generic models that, in analogy to the actions of the strikers, it must disrupt, re-route and reorganize.

The first of these is the *Bildungsroman* of the male working-class labour activist, which *Clash* both imitates and challenges in important ways. Most obviously, as Pamela Fox (1994) has argued, it substitutes a “female protagonist as the central trade union organizer who alternately makes spellbinding speeches and suffers disillusionment in the struggle to lead her people to victory” (169). And, according to Fox, by differently gendering the conventional narrative, Wilkinson is able “mark her text” with her “explicit feminist politics” and “ultimately reshape, as well as reinscribe, the masculine literary pattern” (170). This intervention is connected to her re-routing and re-energizing of the second generic model on which the novel draws: the cross-class romance. The story’s heroine must choose between two suitors, Gerry and Tony Dacre. The latter is described as “essentially middle class” (Wilkinson 2004, 92), and while he can “thrill” the working-class Joan in a way that Gerry cannot (137), he lacks Gerry’s political radicalism and commitment to the cause. Wilkinson uses this romance plot as a vehicle for uniting her feminist and class critiques. To choose Tony is to choose a life in London amidst the middle-class Bloomsbury set; it is to choose the path of political reformism, of being “sympathetic” to the labour struggle but “never *in* the fight,” as Gerry puts it (181; emphasis in original). It would also involve Joan giving up her career as an activist for a more domesticated existence. A relationship with Gerry, by contrast, would allow Joan to continue her career and to “stick” with her working-class “crowd” (189). This is the revolutionary path, as it were, and it is the one Joan chooses – a decision that defies not only social conventions, but those of genre too.

Commenting in 1935 on the kinds of romance narratives she set out to subvert, Wilkinson inveighs against “simpering serials by a middle-class lady with romantic ideals, who saw in every pretty girl worker the illegitimate child of a noble-man, to be provided therefore with a handsome, young labour leader as a husband, also of mysterious, and usually aristocratic, extraction” (quoted in Ferrall and McNeill 2015, 159). *Clash* re-routes the narrative energies of such plotlines: far from representing the reconciliation of opposing classes, the slum-born Joan’s relationship with distinguished former RAF captain Gerry signals both her ultimate disavowal of a reformist politics based on cross-class compromise, as well as the final confirmation of Gerry’s transformation from middle-class war hero to socialist radical. This transformation begins with Gerry’s disgust at the waste and brutality of the First World War. Horribly injured during the conflict, his body has had to be reassembled: his “inside is in bits – all silver tubes – and he is strapped together outside” (Wilkinson 2004, 32). If the war unmade the middle-class Gerry, therefore, his reconstructed body stands for his re-composition as a working-class activist. But as such it also becomes a figure for the text itself, which is tasked with remaking a historically bourgeois form – the novel – into something capable of expressing working-class experience. The challenges facing Wilkinson and other proletarian novelists in this period are neatly summarized by Denning (2004): to “represent working-class life in a genre that had developed as the quintessential narrator of bourgeois or middle-class manners, kin structures, and social circles”; and to “represent a collective subject in a form built around the interior life of the individual” (59). Wilkinson’s response to such challenges is contained precisely in her transformation of the *Bildungsroman* and romance genres.

In a splendid analysis of *Clash*, Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill (2015) argue that Wilkinson’s novel involves the “education of desire” in that it “requires readers to *feel* in determinate ways about the Strike” (144). Fusing “the intellectual and the emotional”, the

text “aims to appeal to working class readers on affective grounds in order to promote class consciousness” (146). The “education” of Joan’s desire serves to educate the desire of the reader by way of his or her identification with the protagonist. It is precisely this individualizing identification that the novel seeks to transform, however, by converting it into an identification with the collective energies of the masses. This is achieved via the presentation of Joan, who becomes a conduit for such energies. Take the following scene in which she is speaking at a union meeting: “Her thick, wiry black hair made a setting for her small thin face. Against the packed mass of men of the platform behind her, she stood like a living red flag, the spirit of revolution” (Wilkinson 2004, 48). As Ferrall and McNeill (2015) observe of this passage, “the excitement of a General Strike leading to areas being ‘run by sheer soviets’ expresses itself here as a conflation of mass action with personal appeal – Joan is a flag, a rallying point, a source of energy and action” (160). Joan emerges as the embodiment of her own understanding of the situation inaugurated by the strike. “Individuals are helpless at a time like this,” she declares: “It’s the mass that counts” (Wilkinson 2004, 13). It is in this regard that the novel’s reworking of the romantic paradigm is crucial. The individualized erotic energies of romance are fused with Joan’s political energies such that they become collectivized. Joan’s erotic appeal becomes expressive of a revolutionary social desire, which is then exemplified by Gerry’s falling in love with her as a result of her political capabilities, while her own erotic attachments are socialized, as it were. Hence her choice of Gerry over Tony: of the energetic and energizing “crowd” over domesticated, individualizing privacy.

Telling here is the shift in significance of the word “thrill” over the course of the narrative. Although strongly associated with Joan’s erotic attachment to Tony and the life of middle-class luxury he represents, this association is gradually overwhelmed by its connection to “descriptions of political engagement and female independence” (Ferrall and

McNeill 2015, 161). Thus, Joan discovers “the thrill of leadership” (Wilkinson 2004, 183); more pointedly, she is “thrilled” by Gerry’s ability to organize the strikers (88), while in the “shabby little office” where he is producing a new, left-wing newspaper, “she got a real thrill” (178). This fusion of the political and the erotic seals the reconstruction of the novel’s generic templates: from expressive vehicles for the affective intensities of the individual, they become conduits for the energies of the collective.

In this connection, the question of the relationship between narrative flow and the ecology of the coal frontier directly reasserts itself. This ecology, I would argue, overdetermines the narrative’s political-erotic investments. As previously suggested, Joan is a politically energizing force who becomes the embodiment of revolutionary social energies. The point is underlined by repeated references in the text to her “excessive” (Wilkinson 2004, 5) or “superfluous energy” (58). However, these go hand in hand with scenes in which she appears dirty and exhausted. Her work and travel often leave her “fatigue[d]”, “soiled” and covered in “grime” (74). Added to this is her frequent association with the idea of waste. Time and again, fears are expressed that Joan’s energy and talents might be “wasted” (57, 96); it is imperative, a number of characters observe, not to “waste a woman like Joan” (51). Such imagery is directly related to the representation of the coal frontier. This too generates surpluses of energy (and value), but also wastefully exhausts labour and raw materials through overexploitation and the cut-throat competition of a capitalist system that refuses, in Joan’s words, “to allow resources to be organized except on a basis that would yield excess profits to someone” (30). Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Joan picks up a lump of coal and muses on all “the hidden possibilities, the light and power and heat and scent and healing” contained within it, to which her union colleague, Royd, replies: “And wasted, as though the sole use of it was to grub it out of the ground as quick as possible and chuck it at any price to anyone who’ll have the stuff” (6).

In this emphasis on energy and exhaustion, on coal's "miraculous powers" (as Jevons had it) but also its association with waste and exploitation, we re-encounter the "cultural geography" of coal identified by Buell: the oscillation between exuberance and catastrophe, Promethean highs and stygian depths. This movement indelibly marks Wilkinson's novel. It is manifested not only in Joan's alternation between energetic highs and the lows of earthy exhaustion ("soiled" [74]), but also in the depiction of the political struggle: from the exuberance of towns run by "sheer soviets" to the depths of the strike's collapse and the subsequent hardships of the lockout (Wilkinson 2004, 82). The related motif of the instructive descent into a carboniferous netherworld is present here too. Sent to a "small neglected mining area" in the northeast on relief work, Joan is stunned:

[She] was accustomed to poverty, but she thought she had never seen such sheer ugliness as in these little mining towns. Coal dust and the mud of the mines saturated the whole place. The coal pit was the only thing in each village that mattered, the only part of life on which capital and care and brains were expended. Human beings were usually fed into its mouth at eight-hourly intervals, and just as regularly coughed up again. [...] On the refuse-heaps men, women, and children grubbed like maggots trying to find precious bits of coal to sell for bread. (146)

This hellish environment helps clarify Joan's understanding of the class struggle and steels her resolve to resist the temptations of middle-class domesticity. Just as importantly, however, the nightmarish vista she encounters is swiftly humanized and revealed to be a site of transformative collective energies. Unlike Priestley and many of those nineteenth-century novelists Williams identified, Wilkinson not only peoples her coal-mining district, but also narrates it from the inside. Through Joan's work with the miners and their wives, we are

introduced to the warp and weft of their everyday experience. The representation of the community's capacity to resist and survive in the face of poverty and oppression exemplifies the ultimate thrust of the novel, the trajectory of which can be understood in terms of the recoding of the cultural geography of coal. The Promethean powers of carbon are to be associated not with the surplus-generating dynamism of capitalist industry, but with the creative potential of the radicalized working classes, who must seize control of the energies unleashed by the coal frontier and marshal them in service to a new form of economic organization.

“Stop the oil!”: Energy, Modernism and the Masses

If *Clash* is patterned in significant ways by the logic of the coal frontier, this is not the only energy source to exert an influence on the novel. While the struggles over the coal industry dominate the narrative, oil surreptitiously permeates the levers of the plot – most notably via the motor car, the momentum of which will turn out to be indivisible from the momentum of the story. With the rail network suspended during the strike, the only means of transport available is the automobile. Much of the sense of excitement over the strike is conveyed through descriptions of characters jumping in cars and racing off across the country to deliver supplies and news to far-flung strike committees. Both of Joan's suitors join the strike as drivers. Indeed, many of the pivotal moments in the developing romance plot occur during road trips: Tony first declares his love for Joan during a drive to the countryside, for example. In this regard, *Clash* offers an early iteration of what would become the conventional association between petrolic life and a particular “spatial experience of freedom” (Huber 2013, 157). Joan even emphasizes the escapist and sensory temptations of London by exclaiming: “I do love London [...]. I adore the very smell of its taxis” (Wilkinson 2004, 173). The central action of the novel may turn on industries other than oil, therefore, but it is

petroleum that emerges as critical to the way its narrative components are connected. The context here, of course, is the transition from the global coal system to the global oil system as the dominant energy regime powering the world-economy. Thus, even as it seeks to affirm the power of organized labour in the coal industry, Wilkinson's narrative symbolically enacts, at the level of its ecological unconscious, the historical transformation which will undermine that same power.

At this point, then, I want to turn to de Boissière's *Crown Jewel* and to the oilfields of Trinidad, which, as noted, were a significant source of petroleum for Britain in the early twentieth century. Just as the coal frontier writes itself all over the narrative energetics of *Clash*, so the same is true of oil in *Crown Jewel*. Exemplifying the "representational problem" petroleum is commonly said to pose to novelistic discourse, explicit references to the process of oil extraction are largely absent from the text (LeMenager 2012, 73). Nonetheless, its presence is felt throughout the various individual and collective struggles depicted in the book, all of which are inflected by the labour uprisings that began in the oilfields in 1937. The narrative underscores the central importance of the oil industry to the reproduction of the highly stratified social life of the colony. "Uninterrupted production," writes de Boissière ([1952] 1981), "was essential for Trinidad's economy" (311). The strike is an attempt to disrupt this flow of energy, not only in the interests of securing an improvement in employment conditions, but also as part of a growing anti-imperialist campaign to reorganize society. If this struggle over energy flows operates as a kind of gravitational field around which the plot orbits, it is also, as in *Clash*, restaged at the level of form as a struggle over competing kinds of narrative modalities.

Inspired by the likes of Tolstoy and Turgenev, de Boissière's novel offers a sweeping portrait of Trinidad, from the barrack-yards to the halls of government. Drawing on elements of the *Bildungsroman* and the comedy of manners, it depicts the lives and loves of the

colony's white and "coloured" bourgeoisie and satirizes the rivalry between its political and commercial elites. Yet the novel represents, too, a version of the kind of "subaltern modernism" practiced by proletarian writers in this period as they sought to give voice to working-class experience (Denning 2004, 67). Like *Clash, Crown Jewel* politicizes the romantic plotlines it sets in motion. The relationships between the middle-class André de Coudray and the working-class Elena Henriques, and between the labour leaders Cassie and Ben Le Maître, serve to emphasize that any transformation in class relations must necessarily involve a transformation in gender relations. But they also become fused with the political context in such a way as to perform a similar kind of "education of desire" to that undertaken in Wilkinson's novel. The subjective intensities of the romance are generalized, emerging as a vehicle for fostering a form of affective investment – on the part of both the characters and the reader – in collective action.

In this regard, it is no coincidence that de Boissière's (1981) text is at its most thrilling at those moments during the strike when the masses discover their own power:

The workers were masters of Fyzabad, conscious of their power both as individuals and as a mass. It was a power they had never tasted. [...] [T]hey were caught up in something far larger than any one man or group of men – the fate of a class, even, they felt, the fate of a nation, hung on their words and deeds, and no one could tell what this surging torrent of life would ask of him. [...]

Cassie was striding swiftly, leading the crowd [...]. When they reached High Street steel doors were hastily rolled down in face of the menacing power of that uncoiling spring. [...] A woman seized a stone from a man and flung it with all her might at a white woman running to hide in a side street. The stone hit her on the buttock. A mocking yell went up. [...]

A pale, irate grey-haired Englishman was insisting on driving his car against the oncoming flood of people [...]. The crowd flowed around it. A dozen arms quickly, without fuss, overturned the car. The crowd moved on with accelerated step. (337-340)

This moment of collective release and kineticism is conveyed through a litany of terms evoking energy and motion: “surging”, “torrent”, “striding”, “hastily”, “uncoiling”, “seized”, “flung”, “running”, “driving”, “flowed”, “accelerated”. The attempt to capture the structure of feeling aroused by the strike – to limn the affective intensities of the crowd – pushes the narrative towards a form of scenic elaboration, or what Fredric Jameson (2013) calls a “scenic present” (11). For Jameson, realism is characterized by a tendency to develop towards such scenic elaboration, this being an expression of its drive to dissolve reified generic conventions – a “drive that will eventually reveal itself as one of the sources of modernism” (144). Seeking to adequately register some freshly perceptible area of experience – in the case of *Crown Jewel*, mass industrial action – realism focuses renewed attention on scene and the present, probing its textures and intensities in a manner that will come increasingly to resemble modernist description. This tendency contrasts with the other governing impulse of realism: namely, storytelling and the linear chronology of the tale, or récit, which Jameson (2013) calls its “tripartite temporal system of past-present-future” (10). Thus, if the strike in de Boissière’s novel disrupts the flow of “uninterrupted production” (“Stop the merchants’ profits! Stop the oil”, Cassie exclaims to the crowd [337]), this has as its formal correlative the tendency for the description of the energies and sensations of the masses to assume a form of scenic elaboration, which interrupts and contrasts with the narrative temporalities of those other generic models on which *Crown Jewel* draws.

To understand this contrast more precisely it is necessary to examine the distinctly episodic structure of the novel. Take, for example, the sequence describing the large hunger march from the oilfields to Port-of-Spain, which climaxes with Le Maître confronting the governor of the colony. The enthralling description of the march, during which the relationship between Cassie and Le Maître grows more intense, exemplifies the narrative fusion of the affective intensities of mass action with the erotic energies of romance. But this sequence is immediately followed by a shifting of the narrative gears. The next chapter begins with a jump forward in time to the meeting of the colonial government's minimum wage committee. Narrated with a detached irony, this episode satirizes the ignorance of the living conditions of the masses shown by the committee members. Interviewing various nervous workers, the committee doggedly (and absurdly) pursues such questions as how many pairs of underwear a woman uses per year. "I've had a talk to my cook about this, you know," pontificates one member: "She informs me that some people don't wear pants in the daytime" (de Boissière 1981, 267). Resembling a bourgeois comedy of manners, this scene has a narrative rhythm that is analogous to and inflected by the economic logic of "uninterrupted production". The temporality here is that of the interminable grind of colonial bureaucracy. We confront the slow but steady narrative unfolding of the workings of a reformist wage commission, the purpose of which is to ensure a sliver of the colony's oil money is used to ameliorate living conditions just enough to contain the rebellious energies of the masses and maintain social continuity. Against this stands the description of the hunger march (and later, the strike), with its exhilarating sense of a break with the status quo and its scenic exploration of the affective intensities of the masses.

Such narrative juxtapositions, then, figure the struggle over the organization and future direction of Trinidadian society. But for all that they speak to the need to seize control of the flows of petro-energy that sustain the economy, they might also be said to be deeply

imprinted with the logic of the oil frontier. The narrative movement between the explosive energies of the masses and those more restrained scenes of social comedy or bourgeois angst recall the seesaw momentum of the oil economy, its tendency to swing from boom to bust. Just as oil functions as a surreptitious narrative organizer in *Clash*, therefore, so it would seem to permeate the very structure of de Boissière's novel. However, in the same way that the political impetus behind *Crown Jewel* is towards the revolutionary overthrow of the ruling order, so its narrative logic is governed by an impulse towards the abolition of this oscillating (or boom-bust) narrative rhythm. Throwing the textual energetics of the descriptions of the hunger march or the strike against the narrative modalities of classical bourgeois realism, the text holds out the possibility that it may overwhelm such modalities by fashioning a form capable of articulating working-class subjectivity and the exigencies of collective action. Something similar is true of Wilkinson's novel, which figures this possibility through Joan's rejection of Tony (himself a critically renowned author) and of the Bloomsbury set to which he belongs. This rejection underscores the novel's own turn away from the kind of Bloomsbury Group modernism that would later be consecrated and canonized as modernism as such. Contained within Joan's affirmation of her commitment to her northern working-class "crowd" is therefore an affirmation of the need for an alternative form of modernism: what the Warwick Research Collective (2015) calls a "peripheral modernism" (120) which (unlike Priestley) could narrate working-class life on the coal frontier from a perspective in which its unevenly exhaustive everyday realities are not merely "observed" but "experienced" and "internalized", such that any response to the "crisis" constituted by these realities (Williams 2005, 215) might be socialized. In both novels, then, the struggle to re-route the narrative energetics of received literary forms stands as the abstract signification of the struggle to reorganize energy relations in the pursuit of an emancipatory social order.

Notes on Contributor

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