

THE CONCEPT OF WORK IN POST-WAR BRITISH EXPERIMENTAL FICTION

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DECLARATION

I, Christopher Webb, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

ABSTRACT

Despite the emergence of a wide gamut of British experimental writing from the late-1950s through to the mid-1970s, there was a consensus that this particular type of writing constituted a “useless” activity’. This was the conclusion not only amongst the various newspaper critics who frequently criticised the Arts Council for supporting ‘hippy art’, but amongst experimental writers themselves, such as Eva Figes (whose remark this was, used when she described her occupation as a novelist in the *Guardian* in 1968). The experimental writing of this period is fraught with an anxiety about its own uselessness. This thesis argues that this was symptomatic of a unique period in British literary history when traditional notions about work—and what ‘worked’ in terms of literature—were radically scrutinised and reassessed. *The Concept of Work in Post-war British Experimental Writing* proposes that only with an understanding of the British avant-garde’s engagement with the idea of work and its various corollaries can we fully appreciate the contribution to the development of the modern British novel during the mid-twentieth-century made by these writers, and to probe some of the reasons for their move away from realism. The thesis begins by examining the historical context in which these writers were working and the influence of Samuel Beckett’s work on the British avant-garde before moving on to analyse in detail the works of Alexander Trocchi, B. S. Johnson and Eva Figes, whose preoccupations with concepts related to work, such as leisure, public debt, and forms of neglected labour, allow us to think about late-modernism’s relation to realism in a new way and, more broadly, what they might tell us about avant-gardism in general.

IMPACT STATEMENT

As described in the preceding abstract, this thesis looks to benefit future scholarship and further knowledge in the field of literary studies, particularly within the sub-field of British modernist studies. It is unlikely to engage with public policy makers, public service delivery practitioners, influencing ministers, or, for that matter, many other individuals, communities or organisations outside the remit of academia. However, by drawing on recent historical controversies concerning the value and worth of minor forms of art and literature, it does have something to say about the production of work within the arts and humanities and hopes to go some way towards making a persuasive argument for the continued validity and importance of those subjects often considered “useless”.

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I INTRODUCTION

Work and play are words used to describe the same thing under differing conditions.

Mark Twain.¹

‘Work’, Herbert Applebaum writes in his monumental study on the subject, ‘is like the spine which structures the way people live’.² Most studies that focus on work, no matter the discipline, attempt to establish two facts about it right away: its cultural significance and the semantic difficulties it presents. ‘No definition is satisfactory because work relates to all human activities’, Applebaum observes, ‘one would have to exhaust all such activities to exhaust the provinces of work’.³ Raymond Williams gestures to the word’s diffuseness when he mentions that work, simply put, is the ‘most general word for doing something’.⁴ Yet, in spite of its capaciousness, everyone possesses their own understanding of the term, as Andrea Komlosy explains:

[w]ork is a familiar, everyday word; everyone knows what it means. Upon closer inspection, however, work proves to be quite the linguistic chameleon: everyone has their own, nuanced definitions, which themselves are in constant flux. Older ideas continue to resonate even as new concepts of work emerge, leading to coexisting, distinct concepts of, as well as attitudes towards, work.⁵

Might this, then, have something to do with the common suggestion that work is only ever rarely represented in fiction? Michael Denning points out that it has become a ‘commonplace to note our reluctance to represent work in our popular stories’, a commonplace, it should be added, he

¹ See the Mark Twain exhibition webpage of the Bancroft library (University of California, Berkeley): <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/mtatplay/workandplay.html>. Accessed on 14 June 2018.

² Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), ix.

³ *Ibid.*, x.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 330.

⁵ Andrea Komlosy, *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*, trans. Jacob K. Watson with Loren Balhorn (London: Verso, 2018), 7.

does little to dispute: in the same essay, he imagines that ‘a Martian who hijacked the stock of the average video store’ might ‘reasonably conclude humans spent far more of their time engaged in sex than in work.’⁶

Denning’s point is amusing because it seems to suggest something puzzling about western culture and its peculiar tendency to distort and misrepresent the realities of everyday life. After all, work is central to human life; for most of us, we work—and spend our lives working—in order to live. It is through gainful employment that we can continue to sustain ourselves and our families. So why does it seem to interest us so little? Writing for the *Guardian*, Judith Flanders poses a similar question, though one related specifically to literature: ‘[w]hy don’t novels “do” work?’⁷ She begins the article by praising Allegra Goodman’s novel *Intuition* (2006), which had been shortlisted for the 2009 Orange Prize:

[g]reat news, because it’s a good book; and great news, because it’s a good book about a rare subject: work. We spend most of our lives at work, talk about it when we’re not there, socialise with, date and even marry people we meet there. So why do so few novels deal with it?⁸

By her own admission, she finds it hard to answer but suggests it might have something to do with the division of labour most modern workplaces tend to impose, which in turn makes it a difficult subject for the novelist to manage:

[m]ost workplaces resemble a production line: each worker adds his or her little section of value to the product, whatever that might be, but it is a rare worker who sees a job all the way through from inception to finished product—and aesthetically, that’s not particularly satisfying. A falling in love with B over the photocopier is a

⁶ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 91-92.

⁷ Judith Flanders, ‘Why don’t novels “do” work?’, *Guardian*, 30 March 2009. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/mar/30/work-novels-fiction-flanders> on 14 October 2017. Flanders and Denning both write about the representation of work in popular culture. See, for instance, Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (London: HarperCollins, 2003). In her study, she references a range of Victorian writers who, in their descriptions of the Victorian household as a site of domestic labour, address the subject of work in great detail. Denning has written about the relationship between work and popular American culture in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987) and, more recently, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁸ Flanders, ‘Why don’t novels “do” work?’, *Guardian*.

tighter, more coherent story than B doing the photocopying for an entire department, without ever being aware of what he's copying, or how the documents are to be used.⁹

It emerges over the course of the article, however, that Flanders has in mind a distinct, and therefore fairly limited, conception not only of what work is (i.e. office work) but what the novel ought to be doing (i.e. telling tight, coherent stories).¹⁰ By suggesting that the novel does not “do” work, she draws attention to a number of issues surrounding it, including its definitional parameters and some of the dominant attitudes and assumptions involved when attempting to describe it. Contrary to the claims made by both Denning and Flanders, this thesis argues that there was in fact a time when many novels (and art more generally) did “do” work and that this very doing was central to a number of artists’ enterprises. It is proposed throughout this thesis that it is impossible to comprehend art without an understanding of artistic labour and that art and its production are, like a double helix, interwoven and inseparable from one another.

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During the mid-twentieth century, there was a broad international impulse across the arts to challenge and unsettle many of the traditional ideas associated with work at a time when the very nature of it appeared to be altering in a significant if not fundamental way. This thesis is concerned with three novelists whose works are representative of this impulse: Alexander Trocchi (1925-1984), B.S. Johnson (1933-1973), and Eva Figes (1932-2012), all of whom belonged to a relatively loose group of British experimental writers working in London throughout the mid-twentieth century, a group commonly referred to as the 1960s British avant-garde.

The fundamental proposition of this thesis is that each of these writers produced a substantial amount of experimental literature that took as its primary theme the subject of work

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joanna Biggs, for instance, provides a wide-ranging survey of the different types of jobs in Britain, many of which do not fit comfortably within Flanders’s parameters. See Joanna Biggs, *All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2015).

during a period in which their artistic labour practices were scrutinised by many: various reviewers, other writers unsympathetic to their experimentalism (Kingsley Amis, William Cooper, C.P. Snow, and John Wain, for instance) and certain parts of the media that remained suspicious of such “way out” art forms. The British avant-garde’s interest in work was bound up with their dissatisfaction with a form of British mainstream realist fiction, which they saw as the dominant mode of fiction at the time. While the neo-realist fiction written by the writers mentioned above was widely celebrated, experimental writing by contrast was derided as a form of non-work; it was understood that the “experimental” writer—a label most of them vociferously reacted against since they saw it as a synonym for ‘unsuccessful’ or having failed—was not only decadent but unconcerned with society and interested only in the craft of writing (a charge that had been laid upon their modernist forebears). As we will see, their alleged wilful obscurantism was seen to stand in opposition to other novelists’ attempt to speak faithfully about characters within society and their attempt to explore “real” social issues (while at the same time telling a coherent story). By contrast, experimental writers were accused of fetishising form over content and, in doing so, from turning away from the pressing social issues being addressed by neo-realist writers. This was deemed especially problematic during a period in which the Arts Council funded these writers with (what was often framed as) the taxpayers’ own money. And so, not only were these writers accused of not working but they were seen to be not working at the expense of the public (i.e. their new patrons). From the avant-garde’s point of view, however, it was the so-called realist writers who were not doing their jobs as realists; the ‘neo-Dickensian’ narratives they produced were, the experimental novelists claimed, anachronistic and incapable of “truthful” representation. As B. S. Johnson put it, these writers were not interested in solving ‘the writing problems [of their day]’.¹¹

¹¹ It was Johnson who referred to the ‘writing problems of today’ while explaining in his essay entitled ‘Holes, Syllabics and the Succussions of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles’ the importance to move away from what he described in his ‘Introduction’ to *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* as the ‘neo-Dickensian novel’. For both, see *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew, and Julia Jordan (eds.), (London: Picador,

Closely linked to this idea that realism no longer worked was the insistence that the most popular realist novels did not require the reader to work. In other words, these writers believed, it was only through working or labouring as a reader that one can learn or be rewarded intellectually, a notion predicated on the idea that “one must work in order to be rewarded”, which complicates the accusation routinely laid on them (i.e. that, ideologically, they were said to lack a work ethic).

The British experimental writers’ interest in work was part of a broader international impulse that saw other avant-garde artists across a wide spectrum of media frame work as their principal subject matter and, in doing so, often challenge and disrupt the conventions, codes, assumptions, and attitudes that underpinned broader cultural conceptions of work.¹² Why was work understood to be an appropriate site for resistance, though? Work for many (especially young) artists and writers represented the most obvious form of social hegemony and, therefore, the most

2013), 393 and 15, respectively. All references to the ‘Introduction’ and ‘Holes, Syllabics...’ are from *Well Done God!* and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY* and ‘Holes, Syllabics...’, respectively.

¹² The Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović (1947–2016) and the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939) are only two of the most striking examples of artists who focused on the subject of work and its relationship to art-making during this period. Stilinović’s *Artist at Work* (1978), a series of 8 photographs of him adopting various positions in bed, satirises the common perceptions of artistic labour, while Ukeles produced what she referred to as ‘Maintenance Art’, that is, the invisible labour that makes all other work (including artistic work) possible, in line with other feminist performance art. See a description of Ukeles’s work—and the work of many other artists—in curator Helen Molesworth’s *Work Ethic*, a collection of essays that was published in conjunction with her exhibition of the same name at the Baltimore Museum of Art, held during 12 October 2003–4 January 2004. The second part of *Work Ethic* contains the catalogue to the exhibition, which profiles many of the artists including Ukeles. See *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth (ed.), (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2003) 134–15. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *WE*. For Stilinović’s work and writing, see the anthology of essays *Work: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Friederike Sigler (ed.), (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 223–224. In terms of other writers, Samuel Beckett (who will be discussed at the end of this chapter) and Georges Perec spring to mind. Perec was interested in work as part of a broader project of documenting the everyday, as for instance in his works *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise* and *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*. He belonged to the OuLiPo group, whose compositional techniques employed various writing constraints (such as lipograms, palindromes, and mathematical problems). While the OuLiPo are most famous for their playfulness, their texts required a substantial amount of labour both to devise (from the author’s point of view) and sometimes to understand or decode (from the reader’s perspective).

fundamental constraining everyday force that impinged upon the individual's freedom, which was seen as the most important of all prerogatives. As the 1960s progressed, the assumption that work ought to remain the most privileged part of life was radically reassessed, along with many other assumptions, which Nancy Fraser neatly sums up:

[i]n the 1960s [...] the relative calm of [the] “Golden Age of Capitalism” was suddenly shattered. In an extraordinary international explosion, radical youth took to the streets—at first to oppose the Vietnam War and racial segregation in the US. Soon they began to question core features of capitalist modernity that social democracy had heretofore naturalized: materialism, consumerism, and “the achievement ethic”; bureaucracy, corporate culture, and “social control”; sexual repression, sexism, and heteronormativity. Breaking through the normalized political routines of the previous era, new social actors formed new social movements [...].¹³

While this is true, Fraser's account leaves out the fact that many of the older, traditional attitudes persisted and the values and views of ‘the previous era’ were in Britain at least still dominant, even as the new social actors she describes began to form new social movements. It was this confusing social tumult, this thesis will argue, that informed and shaped some of the most significant British writing produced during the 1960s and 70s. Trocchi, Johnson, and Figes were caught between two ages, between, on the one hand, a previous era that understood work as the most important, central aspect of life and, on the other, a period in which the conditions of labour under advanced capitalism began to change, allowing for the existence of supposedly more “creative” and “autonomous” jobs, which various critics suggest began to offer the worker a lifestyle more akin to that which was traditionally associated with the artist.¹⁴

These three writers each represent a pressing issue related to work and, more specifically, working as an artist during the 1960s. Chapter two ‘Alexander Trocchi: Man at Leisure’, for instance, examines the work of a writer whose absolute rejection of conventional societal views

¹³ Nancy Fraser, *The Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ “To make commitment to it worthwhile, to be attractive, capitalism must be capable of being presented to them in the form of activities which, by comparison with alternative opportunities, can be characterized as “stimulating”—that is to say, very generally, and albeit in different ways in different periods, as containing possibilities for self-realization and room for freedom of action’. See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2018), 16.

and morality surrounding work made him a radical—and threatening—public figure in 1960s London. Trocchi's outlook on work shaped his fiction in a fundamental way and a way that differentiates his writing from most other avant-garde fiction in this period. This is significant because if we understand Trocchi's preoccupation with work, leisure and play as something that runs throughout his entire oeuvre, then we might begin to see a synthesis of ideas throughout his output (or lack of output). It will be argued that we can trace a correlation between Trocchi's increasingly critical stance against work and the formal aspects of his writing. The more critical he became of the traditional ideas surrounding work, the more fragmented and broken his texts became. While terms such as 'incompletion,' 'redundancy,' and 'obsolescence' might normally be understood as pejoratives, Trocchi invites us to consider them differently. Furthermore, this is how his critique of work relates to fiction writing; Trocchi not only demands that we question the common assumptions surrounding the traditional ideology of work (i.e. the noun, the system of work), he also forces us to think about what *works*, and the categories and classifications we make when thinking about literature. The chapter begins by tracing Beckett's influence on Trocchi's work (the two worked closely together in Paris during the early- to mid-Fifties), before moving on to a close-reading of his first novel, *Young Adam* (1954). Following this, the chapter analyses Trocchi's second novel, *Cain's Book* (1960), and its peculiar piecemeal compositional process, before finally providing the first sustained critical analysis of his last, incomplete and unpublished work, *The Long Book*, based on material from the Alexander Trocchi Papers archive at Washington University, St. Louis.

Chapter three, 'B.S. Johnson: The Professional Viewpoint:', proposes a rereading of B. S. Johnson's work in light of the author's professionalism. Johnson is a unique figure in post-war British literary history inasmuch as his brand of literary avant-gardism was mediated and shaped by his belief that, as a professional writer, his work ought to appeal to a far wider audience than it did. The chapter argues that Johnson's professionalism inspired in him feelings of indebtedness towards the British taxpayer, an indebtedness historically specific to avant-garde writers working

in London throughout the sixties and early seventies—a period during which the Arts Council, for the first time in history, began to directly support them. The chapter begins by comparing Johnson’s and Trocchi’s contrasting attitudes towards work, a contrast exemplified by their differing reactions towards a 1970 *Daily Mail* article that attacked both writers for ‘mak[ing] it their life’s work to live off cash hand-outs from the Arts Council’.¹⁵ The chapter goes on to contest this claim (for Johnson, at least) by drawing attention to his interest in, and advocacy of, work. Each of his novels are deeply preoccupied with the concept of work and labour relations, especially his first and last novels (*Travelling People*, 1963; *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*, 1973), which are examined towards the end of the chapter along with his last work, the film *Fat Man on a Beach* (1973). Through a close analysis of Johnson’s third novel, *Trawl* (1966), the chapter looks at the ways in which Johnson’s own view on debt and being indebted manifests itself through language. This chapter also considers Johnson’s work as a series of hyperactive performances, in which the performer or narrator (often Johnson himself) overworks, which is closely related to one of the main criticisms of his work: that he produced “gimmicky” work.

The fourth chapter looks at Eva Figes’s early work and the strategies she employed to overcome the many institutional challenges that faced her as a female experimental writer. In line with 1960s and 70s feminist art-making that interrogates the overlap between art-making and service-economy labour, her first novel *Equinox*, which the chapter analyses in detail, manages to evoke something of the new post-industrial instability of jobs with its “playing” on roles and working many occupations (and presiding over a split, divided identity). Liz goes from housewife to worker to writer over the course of the narrative, which, through its broken, fragmented form, portrays a protagonist who is incessantly moving, doing, acting, and performing. Most of the roles she plays offer her little consolation of meaning; they are merely activities to do. Figes would later

¹⁵ Anonymous reporter, *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1970 from B.S. Johnson archive, MS89001/4/6/11, ‘Loose general publicity cuttings and ephemera (1962-1973)’, British Library, London.

disavow *Equinox* as unimportant and inconsequential but it will be argued here that it stands as an important document of early British second-wave feminism inasmuch as it is unconsciously caught between trying to do two things at once: that is, to be an experimental novel, which Figs herself described as politically ‘useless’, while raising important feminist issues to do with work, which was politically useful.¹⁶ This chapter argues that in order to understand female experimental writing practices during the 1960s in Britain, it is crucial to first gain an understanding of the patriarchal attitudes that shaped women’s labour at this time.

It is argued here that the 1960s was a period that, judged solely in terms of critical engagement with and wider public interest in the concept of work, resembles the present moment, a time marked by the destabilising effects of the 2008 global financial crisis and the doubts cast over the legitimacy of neo-liberalism as a viable economic idea and a time when, like today, major transformations in the economy have rendered the meaning of work unstable and open to contestation.¹⁷ This interest has not always been sustained; if Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello are to be believed, the gap between the current time of writing and the 1980s witnessed a major drop-off in the interest of dominant capitalist work practices and some of the associated social and economic corollaries.¹⁸ Before focusing on the British avant-garde’s influences and their literary environment, however, it will be useful to gain a closer understanding of some of the debates

¹⁶ Figs, ‘Consider the Anthep’ 11 March 1968 *Guardian* (London: England) 7.

¹⁷ It is no coincidence that there has been a number of studies and speculations about the future of labour and the prospect of a post-work society since the 2008 financial crisis. They have been for the most part strident critiques of neoliberalism or capitalism, often containing proposals for new modes of production. This could be viewed as a reiteration of the post-industrial society thinkers, such as David Riesman, whose work will be discussed further on. See, for example, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Reinventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁸ ‘[Q]uite simply [...] virtually no one, with the exception [of a few allegedly archaic Marxists (an “endangered species”), referred to capitalism any longer. The term was simply struck from the vocabulary of politicians, trade unionists, writers and journalists—not to mention social scientists, who had consigned it to historical oblivion]. They contrast this period with the ‘1960s and 1970s, [when] reference to capitalism was inspired, in various degrees of orthodoxy, by Marxism, which became—especially with the revival of Althusserianism—a dominant paradigm’. See Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, xxi.

surrounding work and leisure at the time these writers were writing. Two major debates will be examined here. The first revolved around the prediction that the fundamental nature of work would change dramatically in response to increasing automation and the rapid development of technology. The second is an economic theory developed by various political theorists to account for the structural changes within capitalism after the events of 1968, which coincided with a paradigm shift in most western economies from manufacturing (i.e. predominantly manual labour) to service and largely non-manual industries. The figure of the artist, and by extension the writer, was central to these public debates because artists were seen to occupy an ambiguous position in society, somewhere between working and playing, which was noted at the time by the sociologist David Riesman:

[a]t the present time, the closest thing we have to the traditional ideology of the leisure class is a group of artists and intellectuals who regard their work as play and their play as work. For such people, [...] work frequently provides the central focus of life without necessarily being compartmentalised from the rest of life either by its drudgery and severity or by its precariousness [...].¹⁹

This type of work, which resembles play, and which is not compartmentalised, is precisely the kind of labour that highlights the similarities between ‘artistic subjectivity and the subjectivity of contemporary capitalism’.²⁰ Indeed, following Boltanski and Chiapello, Bojana Kunst refers to how autonomy, self-realisation, creativity, and the disappearance of the ‘difference between work time and private time are characteristics of contemporary creative work’ under the new version of capitalism that evolved and was evolving as these writers were working. Kunst suggests that one of the reasons for the powerlessness of art after the 1960s was due to its ‘consent to and contentment’ with the changes that introduced ‘the management concepts of flexibility, mobile creativity, the open process and creative participation into the ways of working’.²¹

¹⁹ David Riesman, ‘Leisure and Work in Postindustrial Society’ in *Abundance for What? and Other Essays* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), pp. 162-184 (168).

²⁰ Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Work and leisure in the mid-twentieth century

During the mid-twentieth century, across the U.S.A. and western Europe, there were a number of critical attempts to re-examine the traditional ideas, assumptions, and attitudes associated with work and leisure. Broadly speaking, many countries in the political West, and especially the U.S., were enjoying post-war economic booms in which productivity had risen while unemployment had been reduced during what Eric Hobsbawm had famously referred to as the “Golden Age of Capitalism”.²² The rise of automation began to change the way the manufacturing industries functioned; machines were introduced in major areas of industry and proved to be more cost-effective and more efficient than the older methods that relied solely on manual labour. This provoked a variety of responses from the media, from trade unions, academic communities, and a number of radical artist groups. These responses varied: some were optimistic, others were anxious, some excited, while others fearful. A number of responses were enthusiastic about the prospect of less work, predicting that machines would all but eradicate the need for human toil, while many were far more concerned about the potential excess of leisure-time and how this might affect ‘the cultivation of the self’.²³ In the U.S., David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), followed by his equally important collection of essays *Abundance for What?* (1964), were significant and popular examples of a critical trend that saw an increasing number of academics and theorists critically engage with the concepts of work and leisure. Riesman became associated with what came to be known as the “post-industrial society” school of thought, which predicted that the rise of automation would not only result in the inevitable centrality of leisure in everyday life but also ‘the creation of new wants,’ leading to the ‘first step toward a better life and wider horizons of choice.’²⁴ While Riesman viewed the potential increase in leisure-time as a positive (and appealing)

²² See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Vintage, 1996).

²³ Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyerson, (eds.), ‘Introduction’ in *Mass Leisure* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), x.

²⁴ Riesman, ‘Leisure and Work in Postindustrial Society’, 166.

phenomenon, he had concerns about the ‘sudden onrush of leisure’ that he claimed was already underway in the U.S.. His concern lay in the idea that most people’s ‘education’ had ‘not prepared them for this sudden onrush: the ‘creation of new wants at their expense’ was moving ‘faster than their ability to order and assimilate these wants,’ echoing an idea John Kenneth Galbraith had postulated the same year in his study *The Affluent Society* (1958).²⁵

If the post-industrial society thinkers remained optimistic about what they saw as the inevitable rise in leisure, then it fast became an issue, if not a ‘problem’, and one that caused palpable ‘anxiety’ for many others who had concerns about lowered productivity or a rise in delinquency, as Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyerson commented at the time.²⁶ Still, there were others who were concerned about the sudden technological advances because they understood humans to be so obsessed with work. Foremost amongst these was Hannah Arendt, who stands as a prime example of a writer who wrote about the activity of work, in *The Human Condition* (1958) at least, in a cautious way, one that suggests a coming-to-terms with the major, rapid technological advancements of her day, which threatened to eradicate human toil. Arendt’s fascination is spurred by the launching of the Russian Sputnik 1 in October 1957, which she refers to as ‘second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom’: the launching of ‘an earth-bound object made by man [...] into the universe’ where for some weeks ‘it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation’ that ‘swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the stars’.²⁷ Yet, ‘equally as decisive’ and momentous for Arendt—not to mention ‘[c]loser at hand’—was:

the advent of automation, which in a few decades probably will empty the factories and liberate mankind from its older and most natural burden, the burden of labouring and the bondage to necessity. Here, too, a fundamental aspect of the human condition is at stake, but the rebellion against it, the wish to be liberated from labor’s “toil and trouble,” is not modern but as old as recorded history. Freedom from labor

²⁵ Ibid. For Galbraith’s work, see *The Affluent Society and Other Writings, 1952-1967* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

²⁶ Larrabee and Meyerson, ‘Introduction’, *Mass Leisure*, ix.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 1. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *HC*.

itself is not new; it once belonged among the most firmly established privileges of the few. In this instance, it seems as though scientific progress and technical developments had been only taken advantage of to achieve something about which all former ages dreamed but which none had been able to realize. (*HC*, 4)

She quickly dispenses with this tone of wonderment to remind her reader of the actual situation.

In spite of ‘scientific progress and technical developments,’ Arendt declares that the prospect of ‘freedom from labour’ remains a distant one because society is geared around work:

[t]he modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labour and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a labouring society. The fulfilment of the wish, therefore, like the fulfilment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating. It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labour, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won. Within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labour’s way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew. Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living. What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labour, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse (*HC*, 4-5).

Arendt illustrates how much of a concern the future of work and leisure was during this period of unprecedented technological advancement and yet, just as importantly, how work-bound and work-centric western societies remained in the face of these developments. Clement Greenberg expressed similar ideas in his essay ‘The Plight of Culture’ (1953). He writes that leisure has been reduced

to an occasion more exclusively of passivity, to a breathing spell and interlude; it has become something peripheral, and work has replaced it as the central as well as the positive aspect of life, and as the occasion for the realization of its highest ends. Thus leisure has become more purely leisure—nonactivity or aimless activity—as work has become more purely work, more purely purposeful activity.²⁸

He then denounces the modern obsession with efficiency, which he sees as the main justification for the glorification of work: ‘[o]nce efficiency is universally accepted as a rule, it becomes an inner

²⁸ Clement Greenberg, ‘The Plight of Culture’, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 31.

compulsion and weighs like a sense of sin, simply because no one can ever be efficient *enough*.²⁹

Greenberg finally concludes that not even an entirely different political system could change the attitudes and habits so engrained in the majority of western workers:

[n]othing in the perspective of socialism indicates that it will easily dissipate anxiety about efficiency and anxiety about work, no matter how much the working day is shortened or how much automation takes over. Nothing, in fact, in the whole perspective of an industrialized world—a perspective that contains the possibility of both good and bad alternatives to socialism—affords any clue as to how work under industrialism can be displaced from the central position in life it now holds.³⁰

Of course, such critiques of the western work ethic were not new, and they can be traced back to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905; first English translation 1930) at least—but these critiques had by the late 1950s reached a pitch like never before and, as we will see, not only in the United States but internationally, too.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s in the U.K., there had been a similar, though more Marxist-inflected, wave of writing on work and leisure by a number of influential British social and cultural historians such as Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams. France, too, had a number of critics who were challenging ideas surrounding work and leisure. Among the most significant of these, was the Situationist International (SI) led by Guy Debord, a group of Marxist writers, artists, and political theorists who were critical of advanced capitalism and who wrote trenchantly about the capitalist work ethic and capitalist conceptions of leisure time throughout the 60s. The S.I., founded in 1957, had its origins in the 1940s Parisian artistic movement Lettrisme, led by Isidore Isou, and was deeply influenced by the avant-garde groups of Dadaism and Surrealism. The group were an active force in the events that unfolded in May 1968 and a force that inspired one of the most famous slogans during the protests and riots in Paris: “Ne Travaillez Jamais!” (“Never Work!”). The members of the S.I. were intensely critical of the conventional ideas that surrounded work and leisure. As Sadie Plant writes, they believed that the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 32.

'leisures and luxuries gained from capitalism can only be consumed' and while 'there is more free time, choice, and opportunity,' the 'commodity form in which everything appears serves only to reproduce the alienated relations of capitalist production.'³¹ Although the S.I. were a group made up mostly of artists, they opposed making art that could be recuperated easily or made into a commodity by the art institution. In this way, they attempted to learn from the mistakes made by the avant-garde movements before them (since many artworks produced by members of those groups became incorporated, canonised, and venerated by the very art institution those members had once stood in fierce opposition against). As Tyrus Miller writes:

[c]ollective experience was the complex, distributed object of [the S.I.'s] artistry and hence their most signal artistic "work." However, one would have to immediately add the proviso that this entails a work that is not a "work" at all, but rather a playful process, a species of intransitive artistry no longer readily identifiable as "art," and thus only discernible in the limited traces of "iterated modes of group self-organization," as Astrid Vicas has described the Situationists' favoured medium of activity.³²

One of the earliest and longest serving members of the S.I.'s brief history was Alexander Trocchi. A close friend to Debord in Paris during the 1950s, the Scottish writer set up his own S.I.-inspired movement, project sigma, some years later in London.³³ It is not known when project sigma began precisely, although the first major text affiliated with the project, written by Trocchi himself, is the best indication. His essay 'A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds' was first published in 1962 in *New Saltire Review* before being published in the SI's own journal *Internationale Situationniste* a year later. In this essay and throughout his various writings related to project sigma, Trocchi echoes many of the sentiments, ideas, and anxieties concerning leisure and

³¹ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge), 2-3.

³² Tyrus Miller, 'Lettrism and Situationism', *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (eds.), (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 101-114 (101). Miller cites Astrid Vicas, 'Reusing Culture: The Importance of Détournement,' *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1998, 381-406.

³³ Trocchi chose to not capitalise project sigma. The name sigma, Trocchi wrote, was chosen 'to designate all, the sum, the whole' while being 'free from bothersome semantic accretions.' See 'Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint' in *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader* Andrew Murray Scott (ed.), (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 193 and 196.

automation that were being voiced by Arendt and Greenberg but, in similar vein to the post-industrial theorists, insisted on the importance of embracing leisure as the soon-to-be central part of everyday life.

Instead of more leisure-time being brought on by automation, however, something else happened entirely. As Chris Rojek points out, post-industrial predictions ‘inevitably appear to be wildly optimistic’ and, while ‘[s]tructural changes in the post-1960s economy have created an excess of capacity of free time’, this ‘has not translated into more leisure for all’.³⁴ ‘Instead,’ he writes:

two parallel and interrelated processes appear to have been triggered into motion. On the one hand, an underclass of part-time and unemployed workers has been created. They are rich in free time but they lack the economic resources to participate fully in the leisure opportunities offered by advanced consumer capitalism. On the other hand, those who remain in work are subject to more demands on their time.³⁵

More recently and referring specifically to the British economy, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell have written more precisely about the changes that technology has enacted and what these changes have meant for many workers:

[t]he rate of growth after the Second World War was roughly twice the rate of the first part of the century. This is widely explained by the coincidence of a large number of technological innovations that interacted to cause rapid productivity growth, especially in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1990s. These innovations caused a shift in labour demand to non-manual work within industries and a shift in employment from the production industries to services [...] The shift away from manufacturing to service employment happened mainly after 1965.³⁶

The service industries began to flourish in western economies in the latter half of the twentieth-century as the older, central industries started to decline in significance as a result of technological advancements. This shift in the economic paradigm drastically changed the traditional ways in which work was carried out with some critics such as Kunst (above) and Friederike Sigler

³⁴ Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory* (London: Sage, 1995), 76.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell, ‘Introduction’ in *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain*, eds. Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley, and Andrew Newell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 4-5.

suggesting that these new ways resembled the immaterial labour that artists had traditionally carried out (i.e. with a greater sense of freedom, greater flexibility, and more autonomy). Sigler writes that, following this shift, work for most people 'is primarily about turning in the perfect performance' and to do this:

requires the highest standard of communication skills, flexibility, autonomy and creativity and, alongside this, qualities that (and here many theorists agree) have suddenly catapulted the figure of the artist into debates about economic surplus, value production, and at the same time have chosen the artist to be the model of a new class of hyper-workers. As the creative subject par excellence, always alert and always creative, the artist is now considered the avant-garde of an entire society of workers—and even sometimes made responsible for the totalizing condition of work that has not only eliminated all the dividing lines between work and non-work, work and leisure, work and life, but at the same time allowed unemployment to become the major crisis of the twenty-first century.³⁷

Far from it ever disappearing, work merely changed in aspect. The imperative to perform became central to the occupation of more workers. As we shall see throughout the thesis (particularly chapters one and two), this shift would have major consequences for the writer, especially the publicly funded experimental writer who was expected to produce work and perform as an artist according to a specific set of criteria, which, in its insistence on quantifying the value of art, often ran counter to the immaterial or intellectual labour with which artists and writers traditionally engaged. This period in the twentieth century is a time when many began to foreground the link between art and the labour involved to produce those works, partly because critics demanded to know what artists and writers did with their time. There was a pervasive sense that anyone could become an artist or a writer, which resulted in a heightened critical suspicion often directed towards experiments or innovations in form.

³⁷ Sigler, 'Introduction', *Work: Documents of Contemporary Art*, 14.

What do *you* do?

Basil Bunting's short poem 'What the Chairman Told Tom' (1965) indexes succinctly the many anxieties that troubled the experimental writers of the 1960s. While the chairman refers explicitly to poetry, his misgivings about this 'hobby' are just as applicable to experimental fiction:

Poetry? It's a hobby.
I run model trains.
Mr Shaw there breeds pigeons.

The poem's irony lies in its form: the poem *is* precisely 'what' the chairman told Tom. The chairman's own words—which he most likely regards as wisdom—therefore become the very object of his contempt or, to quote him, 'rot'. It is this irony, along with the chairman's flagrant display of ignorance concerning a subject he seems to know little about, which makes the poem not only amusing but satisfying to read: we laugh at him because we know what Bunting is sardonically gesturing towards. The poem can only work if read with this knowingness in mind. (In fact, it is amusing to imagine trying to read the poem literally.) It is this point, however, that demands the most attention from the reader and which makes the text more than just a smug take on the chairman's philistinism or those who share the chairman's values (as a former accountant, Johnson might have found this poem particularly enjoyable). While Bunting is having fun at the expense of this chairman, the poem raises some serious questions about poetry and, by extension, other forms of minor literature such as experimental fiction, while at the same time, of course, registering many of the anxieties that these 'Reds, addicts [...] delinquents'—who never worked—generated in those around them.

The chairman's insistence on the importance of work was, as we will see in the following chapters, a familiar and widespread refrain throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. Work was not only understood as intrinsically valuable on an individual level but, perhaps just as importantly, on a broader, social level. To work was to do one's duty for your family and, equally significantly, society as a whole. Work was seen as the principal means with which to stimulate economic growth and therefore a way to sustain a prosperity for all.³⁸ 'Most of our people have never had it so good,' Harold Macmillan famously declared in 1957 and it was generally acknowledged that the post-war

³⁸ See Komlosy: '[w]ork was the source of growth, its connection to the national economy the key to growing the gross national product, and the more growth the better. Organizational, legal and technological measures were deployed to maximize the exploitation of labour. The virtuous dichotomy of toil and fulfilment in artisanry (i.e. the work process in conjunction with that work's final product) was replaced by an optimistic faith in growth and progress that continues to animate capitalism even today', *Work*, 13.

affluence in Britain was brought about by industry and hard work (the link between working, happiness, and economic growth is one that continues to persist, as David Frayne has identified).³⁹ You do not, the chairman intimates, get ‘three thousand and expenses,/a car, [and] vouchers’ without working hard, without ‘sweat[ing]’—either literally (as the bus conductor does) or figuratively (as he suggests he does)—without doing something that ‘[some]body pays for,’ which takes us to the crux of Bunting’s poem. The chairman does not denounce all writing—after all, he implies that Tom ‘*could* write copy (by ‘advertis[ing] soap’)—but merely what he considers to be a decadent, useless form of writing. This is made only more explicit by the form: in composing the poem, Bunting appears to have done very little apart from rearranging the Chairman’s words into stanzas, which anticipates a number of questions concerning literary authorship that would become increasingly prevalent at around this time. At any rate, Bunting is unlikely to have perspired.

‘What do *you* do?’ is the central refrain of the thesis; it is a question these writers repeatedly asked themselves.⁴⁰ In attempting to test the limits of fiction with the intention of making realism work, these experimental writers came under deep professional scrutiny as writers and, implicitly, as workers who were judged via a new criterion, one radically different to previous metrics imposed upon artists and writers, a criterion that measured artistic value with economic performance and use—a corollary from the new forms of public support they relied on. In other words, these avant-

³⁹ ‘Conventionally,’ Frayne writes, ‘governments have treated economic growth and life satisfaction as one and the same thing, measuring both of these via the metric of gross domestic product (or GDP) per capita. GDP is an indicator which quantifies a country’s overall economic activity. It accounts for the total amount of earning and spending that took place in a given year, and it is tacitly accepted that a rising level of GDP indicates an overall improvement in national prosperity.’ See David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 3.

⁴⁰ See for example in *Cain’s Book*: ‘What the hell am I doing here?’ which punctuates the text (see chapter two). See Johnson’s character Henry Henry asking how he can best ‘employ himself’ in *Travelling People*. One of Johnson’s dramatic works even refers to this fraught question in its title (*What is the Right Thing and Am I Doing it?*). Figs’s character in *Equinox*, Liz—as will be shown in fourth chapter—is continually asking herself what she is doing or what she should be doing. The question is asked throughout these writers’ respective letters and personal notes and ephemera (particularly throughout Trocchi’s *The Long Book*).

garde writers were beginning to be assessed in terms of the standard metrics used to measure the value of more typical forms of material labour, from which the artist until then had been traditionally excluded due to their ambiguous function and the often-private nature of their work. In a society obsessed with engineering full-employment (for the putative benefits that policy would reap), occupations were both a way to define oneself and a means to employ oneself for the greater good of society. And, once you were employed, particularly during the late-1950s and early-60s, there was the implicit and pervasive understanding one would not talk about work. It was for many an uncomfortable, even “off-limits”, topic for conversation within ‘polite company’, as the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukele remembered.⁴¹ One did not talk about how one survived or got by ‘from minute to minute.’⁴²

These writers all expressed major doubts about modes of literary realism in their works. This is the reason they claimed why they laboured and experimented with narrative form: in order to solve the problems presented to them by the constraints of traditional forms of realism, the proponents of which, they thought, were too concerned with story. All of them were convinced that life was fractured and unrepresentable in the fashion it was often presented but they consistently expressed themselves as wishing to describe or write “truth”, or at least attain a truthful approximation of what it was they happened to be writing about. What galvanised them to do so was the belief that most examples of mainstream realism no longer worked; for the post-war British

⁴¹ Mierle Laderman Ukeles in conversation with Tom Finkelppearl (2000) in *Work*, Sigler (ed.), 64-66 (64). Ukeles explains how her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* ‘proposed an exhibition, called ‘CARE’, where I would move into a museum with my husband and my baby, and I would do my family things, and also take care of the museum, maintain it, as well as taking care of servicing, the visitors who came to the museum. The museum would be home. And that would be the artwork. In other words, I would clean it, I would change the lightbulbs, whatever was necessary to keep this place operating. The museum’s life-processes would become visible. Second, the *Manifesto*’s exhibition proposed to ask all different kinds of people in society, “What do you have to do to keep alive? How do you get from minute to minute?” There would be many tables where people would be interviewed about what they did to stay alive. In Western culture, you’re not supposed to talk about this stuff in polite company. Certainly in 1969, there were very few ways to talk about ongoing sustenance’, 64.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64.

experimental writers, realism did not do its job. This could be interpreted as their own response to the many accusations they endured from the national media, who claimed neither they nor their novels worked, from literary critics who thought their works gimmicky (which Sianne Ngai has diagnosed as a peculiar display of ‘overworking/underworking’) and from other contemporary writers whose allegiances (sometimes though not always) lay firmly with the traditional realist mode of fiction.⁴³ In fact, the literary climate in which they worked was, according to Rubin Rabinovitz, distinctly anti-experimental. According to Julia Jordan, it was a time of ‘critical backlash’ directed towards:

formal innovation from a literary mainstream that was unquestionably biased towards realism; from the virulently anti-modernist C.P. Snow and Kingsley Amis to John Wain, whose dismissal of experimental literature as “motivated by faddishness or the irritable search for new gimmicks” was typical.⁴⁴

Yet it was another virulent anti-modernist, William Cooper, who made the explicit link between experimental fiction and work, or rather the tendency of experimental writers to underwork and thereby shirk all social responsibility. ‘The experimental novel, says Cooper, concentrated too much on “Man-alone”; he was more interested in social themes, “Man-in-Society”’, as Rubin Rabinovitz writes in his 1967 work, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960*.⁴⁵ In addition to this, he continues:

Cooper wanted to return character, plot, and traditional forms to the contemporary novel. These, he felt, had disappeared from the novels of the experimentalists and the novelists who followed them, the French *nouveau roman* writers. The experimentalists eliminated character, Cooper says, because “writing Experimental Novels is a retreat from writing about Man-in-Society by novelists who are unable to adjust or reconcile themselves to society; it is a retreat into writing about the sensations of Man-alone by people who cannot stomach present day industrialized

⁴³ Sianne Ngai, ‘Theory of the Gimmick’, *Critical Inquiry*, no. 43, Winter 2017, 481. See chapter three for further discussion on Johnson’s gimmicks.

⁴⁴ Julia Jordan, ‘Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde Renaissance’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 145-159 (147). Jordan cites John Wain, *Essays of Literature and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 49-50.

⁴⁵ William Cooper as quoted in Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 6-7.

society.” [...] At that time, “intelligent men in the world of affairs began to write off the literary world as an enclave given up to playing a private game.”⁴⁶

Cooper felt that experimental writing was ‘motivated by a decadent impulse’: “[t]he impulse behind much Experimental [sic] writing is an attack from the inside on intellect in general by intellectuals so decadent that they no longer mind if intellect persists”.⁴⁷ In fact, he writes, “some of [the experimental writers of the early to mid-twentieth century ‘sound as if they would be happier if it didn’t’”.⁴⁸ “In any part of intellectual society,” he went on, “the decadent are at the present moment of history immediately identifiable”; they are, he states, “plugging a theory that everybody really knows *won’t work* [Cooper’s italics]”.⁴⁹

It is one of the claims of this thesis that, in parallel with many other artists and writers working in the 1960s, the British avant-garde insisted their readers needed to work when reading their texts. Andy Warhol’s *Do it Yourself* paintings (1962) stand as just one series of visual reminders that a great deal of art was at this time asking the reader or audience to do what Trocchi, Johnson, and Figs were implicitly asking their readers to do: that is, to perform and participate in the making of the text, which Kaye Mitchell gestures to when writing about Johnson’s “book in a box”, *The Unfortunates* (1969):

[t]he frequent textual blanks suggest gaps in knowledge, imagination or inspiration, the mind’s own blanks; such gaps apparently wilfully diminish the authority of the author, inviting the reader to fill them in, they imply a necessary interactivity, communication as exchange, and the incompleteness of any text.⁵⁰

In his ‘Introduction’ to *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs*, Johnson asks his readers to ‘prove’ themselves, which perhaps signals towards his and others’ discontent of always having

⁴⁶ Cooper, quoted in Rabinovitz, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kaye Mitchell, ‘The *Unfortunates*: Hypertext, Linearity and the Act of Reading’ in *Re-reading B. S. Johnson*, eds. Philip Tew and Glyn White (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 51-64 (61).

to perform. Both he and Figes ask the reader to work in a certain way, as exemplified when she spoke about her novel *Konek Landing* (1969) in conversation with Alan Burns:

I felt the book wasn't actually difficult to read, but everyone tried to read it too fast. I'd adopted a style such that five hundred pages became two hundred pages with the same content. People should have taken notice of all those commas and read the pages slowly.⁵¹

There seems to be a faint irritation, here: Figes's readers (and reviewers) were not reading her novel in the right way. They refused to perform, in other words, the kind of work that Vladimir Nabokov referred to lovingly in his lectures on literature:

[w]hen we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation.⁵²

The 1960s, then, was a period in which the contiguous meanings of work began to collapse in on themselves: the work involved to produce an artwork (i.e. the novel) was seen to have a direct bearing on what could be said to "work" aesthetically (i.e. if that novel was successful in its artistic aims). Furthermore, increasing numbers of artists and writers began to acknowledge the intimate relationship between artistic appreciation and labour; many created artworks that demanded viewers and readers to work very hard. In other words, these artworks came with an implicit promise: the more time and energy spent on them, the more enjoyment and the greater chance for intellectual reward there was to be had.

Before moving on to the first chapter, however, it is worth attending to a writer whose fiction concerns very deeply the readerly labour that Nabokov outlines above and whose work was of principal importance to each of the writers this thesis will go on to analyse: Samuel Beckett. It is suggested here that, more than any other novelist of the twentieth century, Beckett's work

⁵¹ Figes, *Imagination on Trial: British and American Discuss Their Working Methods*, Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet (eds.), (London: Allison & Busby, 1981), 36. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *IT*.

⁵² Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 3.

demands a form of readerly labour that in turn challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions behind why we read and what we read for.

The influence of Samuel Beckett

All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten, to perform, before I can be done with speaking, done with listening, I invented it all, in the hope it would console me, help me to go on, allow me to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end, gaining ground, losing ground, getting lost, but somehow in the long run making headway. All lies. I have nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak.

Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*.⁵³

Beckett was both a friend of and an important source of inspiration for Trocchi, who published Beckett's work for the first time in English, which will be discussed in greater depth in chapter two. But, for now, it is worth pointing out that Irish writer and passages from his work feature throughout *Cain's Book* and the ephemera that make up *The Long Book* (the former contains several quotations from the Trilogy, while the latter usually refers to memories of or thoughts about Beckett). Similarly, Figes refers to Beckett and his works in some of her novels (in *Equinox* for instance) and their prose was often considered by critics to possess stylistic similarities. Although Figes did not appear to know Beckett personally, his work was clearly formative to her development as a novelist, as various interviews indicate.⁵⁴ The ending to her first novel ends with the protagonist telling herself that she will 'go on' in a peroration that echoes the famous last words

⁵³ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 25. Originally published in French as *L'Innommable* in 1953 and in English in 1958. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *TU*.

⁵⁴ In her 'note' to Giles Gordon's edited collection *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (1975), Figes's states that '[e]xperience is chaotic and each generation selects certain facets of reality from which to form a model of human experience which looks deceptively like a totality. It never is. This does not matter', chiming with Beckett's pronouncements on chaos, to which Johnson also alludes in his writing about the novel form. See *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 113.

of *The Unnamable*. The reviews of *Equinox* picked up on the links with Beckett and her second novel, *Winter Journey*, was not only compared to but actively marketed as similar to Beckett's writing. 'Beckett's influence on, and relation to, Johnson,' Julia Jordan writes, 'has so far remained opaque, and has been accompanied by a critical squeamishness'.⁵⁵ Most critics 'acknowledge Beckett's importance to Johnson, but only in passing, and often in order to quickly dismiss it'.⁵⁶ The reason for this, she remarks, is 'perhaps because it is seen as too obvious to need saying' since Johnson openly acknowledged his debt to Beckett in both his critical writing and his novels.⁵⁷ As with Trocchi and Figs, Beckett's words appear throughout Johnson's oeuvre. It was Johnson, amongst all three, who seemed most influenced by Beckett, though. On a personal level, Beckett often acted as a sponsor to Johnson's applications for Arts Council funding and he lent the younger writer money in times of financial distress. Johnson held Beckett in unusually high esteem, which is made explicit in his praiseworthy reviews of Beckett's fiction and drama. He even kept a personal 'Beckett Diary'. Both Johnson and Trocchi noted with disappointment Beckett's increasing popularity, especially after the mainstream success of *Waiting for Godot*, which is perhaps indicative of a slight over-protectiveness on their part. Samuel Beckett is an omnipresent figure throughout the works of Trocchi, Johnson, and Figs. When his name is not cited overtly in the novels (Trocchi's *Cain's Book*; Johnson's *Albert Angelo*; and Figs's *Equinox*), he is often alluded to in an oblique way.⁵⁸ But, while the biographical links and the stylistic debts are clear, what else was it that drew these writers to Beckett?

⁵⁵ Julia Jordan, 'Evacuating Samuel Beckett and B. S. Johnson', *B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature*, Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle (eds.), (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 136-152, (139).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁷ The epigraph to *Albert Angelo*, for instance, is a long passage from *The Unnamable*, which ultimately works as a justification for the violent aposiopesis ('Fuck all this lying!') at the end of the narrative, making it clear, as Jordan mentions, that he viewed Beckett as 'an important precedent for some of his most defining formal innovations and technical experiments.' See, Jordan, 'Evacuating...', 139.

⁵⁸ For instance, Trocchi named the protagonist-narrator's boat in *Cain's Book* the 'Samuel B. Mulroy'—a curious late addition to the galley proofs and perhaps a belated homage to the writer he knew so well in Paris during the early 1950s (see chapter two).

Beckett's work is populated with characters engaged in perpetual labour. Moreover, they are normally under severe pressure to speak about their toil, either from mysterious external forces, as in the beginning of *Molloy*, or mysterious internal ones, as we see above in the passage from *The Unnamable*. A common theme begins to emerge, however: their labour turns out to be related to, or directly concerned with, the inability to speak truthfully while continuing in their efforts to reach the semblance of truth they are convinced they are close to reaching. They profess ignorance and state the impossibility of ever getting anywhere (or if they ever get anywhere it is only a little further on from where they began, as above). But just as his characters labour, so too do Beckett's readers. Beckett's work spoke forcefully to the British avant-garde: its incessant and tortured urge to utter what cannot be said, of having strong bodily urges to communicate with another without knowing why or where this compulsion originates from. This urge is felt in all these writers' works, who on multiple occasions voice their own frustration when it comes to trying to attain a truthfulness in their novels. It is in fact this Beckettian notion of truth—partial, distant, unobtainable—which many of their characters or narrators, all of whom possess either the faulty epistemological apparatus or none at all, which brings about so much pain after the labour of trying to communicate it. There is the idea (modernist in complexion) that the reader ought to be challenged when reading their texts, made to do the 'hard work' that the British experimental writer Giles Gordon, was convinced was necessary for aesthetic reward, which mimics the typical labour-reward contract (see 'Coda' for Gordon's quotation). Reading Beckett and, to a lesser extent reading Trocchi, Johnson, and Figs, can feel like a "test". This was the term Trocchi used when he recounted reading the manuscript of *Watt* for the first time. Beckett gave Trocchi a particularly difficult and repetitive passage from *Watt* to publish, which Trocchi understood in this way. If he passed the test, then he would be allowed to see the rest of Beckett's material (see chapter two). Related to this, Figs, in an interview with Alan Burns, explicitly states that she wishes her readers to be 'challenged', while Johnson, in his 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, asks his readers to 'prove' their existence as readers. And yet, Beckett's writing can

also be read as a way of subverting the familiar work contract: this issueless labour is what defines his work, especially in *Watt* and the later prose.

Some critics, however, have suggested it is Beckett's engagement with idleness and the refusal to work—the very opposite of labour, then—that makes his writing so powerful and, as argued here, so appealing to a younger generation of writers not only preoccupied with ideas to do with work but also with the moral accusations stemming from not working. While Beckett 'suffered anxiety attacks because of his own inability to work', various letters to his friends suggest that, at times, he experienced a more 'ambiguous' relationship with this state of being, as Gregory Dobbins notes.⁵⁹ In one letter to his childhood friend Mary Manning, he writes that 'I do nothing, with as little shame as satisfaction. It is the state that suits me best' before telling her that he 'lie[s] for days on the floor, or in the woods' in 'a coenaesthia of mind, a fullness of mental self-aesthesia that is entirely useless', explaining that he 'used to pretend to work. I do so no longer.'⁶⁰ While Dobbins frames Beckett's engagement with idleness within an explicitly Irish context, it was an engagement that Trocchi recognised almost immediately in Beckett's work when reading it for the first time, as we shall see in greater detail in chapter two. This resistance to the conventional work-logic, which Trocchi understood intuitively, would go on to influence the Scottish writer's work and leave an indelible trace, so much so that, in *Cain's Book*, we find Joe Necchi (the narrator-junky based on Trocchi) idling alone in a room in Paris with nothing to do and doing nothing other than thinking about Beckett—that is, another inveterate idler. (The image is almost comical in its regressive logic, inasmuch as it implies an ancestry of respectable writers qua loafers—perhaps the Beckett who occupies Trocchi's idle thoughts does little else other than idly think about James Joyce, which Dobbins's lineage of 'lazy, idle schemers' would suggest.) Accusations of idleness

⁵⁹ Gregory Dobbins, *Lazy Idle Schemers: Irish Modernism and the Cultural Politics of Idleness* (Dublin: Field Day, 2010), 177-78.

⁶⁰ Beckett, letter to Mary Manning, August 1937 as quoted in Dobbins, *Lazy Idle Schemers*, 177-78. Original quotation in *Letters 1*, 546.

caused considerable anxiety amongst the post-war British experimental writers but if they were accused of idleness in the form of not producing, or of producing gimmicky, faddish work, then they found in Beckett a kind of refuge: a writer whose works were preoccupied with redundancy, uselessness, works in which '[a]imless wandering' features as a 'central action'.⁶¹ As John Harrington observes, 'indolence, inertia, and, of course, waiting are conditions central to all of Beckett's work.'⁶²

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Returning to the question of what work is, perhaps it is Bertrand Russell who offers the most serviceable, if capacious, definition of work in his essay *In Praise of Idleness* (1932):

Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid. The second kind is capable of indefinite extension: there are not only those who give orders, but those who give advice as to what orders should be given. Usually two opposite kinds of advice are given simultaneously by two organized bodies of men; this is called politics.⁶³

Russell's definition of work draws attention to one of the more serious political issues at stake when attempting to describe or define work. Work is a site of politics: there are hierarchies in place and a system that defines who does what and when, dictating and instructing what the worker does with their time (or should do with their time), which in turn defines who that worker is. From this perspective, work systems are typological machines that sort people according to performance-based criteria. Work orders people, things, and relations, all according to rational logic. Yet, these official meanings the system of work produces are often at odds with the personal meanings and understandings of what the worker in fact does with their time, which is why the description of work is a political act. Twain's line at the beginning of this chapter gestures precisely to this issue: one person's idea of work might be another person's idea of play and vice versa. Slippages between

⁶¹ John P. Harrington, *The Irish Beckett* (Syracuse, 1991), 56. Quoted in Dobbins, 151.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 3.

jobs and the people who work those jobs result in judgments formed at the expense of the individual rather than the job itself. The reception history of the 1960s British avant-garde demonstrated how aesthetic judgments when framed in a public sphere become political: by being told that their work did not work (or did not work in the correct way), they themselves were condemned as hippies, drug addicts, Reds, delinquents, loafers, and spongers—or, in other words, all those characters in society who, as Bunting’s chairman felt, refused to ‘[g]o and find *work*.’

II

ALEXANDER TROCCHI: MAN AT LEISURE

*In London if you should (unwary)
call yourself a writer they mostly
say: Yes, but what do you really do?*

B.S. Johnson, 'Hafod a Hendref'.⁶⁴

I must have talked incessantly about myself, about how I didn't really want to do anything, about how, even if I still wrote, and used to think of myself as a writer, I didn't any longer, how I thought of myself as a man with nothing to do in the world ever, except to remain conscious, and that was what the writing was for, for my own use and the use of my friends. I told her that the great urgency for literature was that it should for once and for all accomplish its dying, that it wasn't that writing shouldn't be written, but that a man should annihilate prescriptions of all past form in his own soul, refuse to consider what he wrote in terms of literature, judge it solely in terms of his living.

Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book*.⁶⁵

On 16th March 1970, the *Daily Mail* accused the Arts Council of abusing public funds. The headline of the article addressed its readers: 'They're giving away YOUR money to spoonfeed hippy "art"'.⁶⁶ The report went on to claim that the Arts Council was 'established as a patron of the underworld-anarchist-drugs world'.⁶⁷ Certain artists and writers, the *Mail* continued, 'make it their life's work to live off cash hand-outs from the Arts Council. Each year familiar faces figure in the lists of award winners'.⁶⁸ Two 'sample beneficiaries' were pictured: B.S. Johnson and Alexander Trocchi.⁶⁹ Regarding Johnson, the *Mail* asked: 'What sort of books does he write? One contained blank pages in grey or black to signify unconsciousness and death; another had holes cut in pages so readers

⁶⁴ B. S. Johnson, 'Hafod a Hendref', *Planet*, no. 10 'Living in Wales 3' (February-March 1972) 47-54. This poem was written when Johnson was completing his novel *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*.

⁶⁵ Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (London: OneWorld Classics, 2011), 106-7. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *CB*.

⁶⁶ Anonymous reporter, *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1970 from B.S. Johnson archive, MS89001/4/6/11, 'Loose general publicity cuttings and ephemera (1962-1973)', British Library, London.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

could glimpse through to see what was going to happen'.⁷⁰ These aspersions upset Johnson, who prided himself on his professionalism and efficiency, and who was always quick to draw an analogy between the act of writing and manual labour (the latter framed as the epitome of hard work and physical exertion). In an article he wrote in 1965, he warns his readers that 'to become a writer is a long and hard task,' and that, for him, writing was a 'skill [he had] laboured [...] long to acquire.'⁷¹ He goes on to compare writing to pre-industrial craftsmanship, for which it is necessary to serve an 'apprenticeship' before 'mov[ing] on to the journeyman stage.'⁷² Writing was a labour-intensive craft for Johnson, to which he dedicated an enormous amount of time, as is evident in the graphs he meticulously kept, which tell us precisely which days and how many hours he worked when writing his novels. His favourite analogy when thinking about experimental fiction more broadly was one he borrowed from the French *nouveau romancier* Nathalie Sarraute, a running metaphor that compared avant-garde writers to relay racers.⁷³ Implicit within this analogy is the idea that, even if writers do not sweat, they ought to be compared to those who do. In this respect, then, the *Daily Mail* article was even more galling for him. Johnson's reaction indicates how seriously he felt: he threatened to sue the paper but, in the end, with the prospect of rising legal costs, he accepted a printed apology.⁷⁴

Trocchi, who received a £500 writing grant, was referred to as a 'former pornographer and self-confessed heroin addict'.⁷⁵ He was quoted in the article as saying:

It got me out of a hell of a predicament. I was very hard-up. What am I doing now?
A couple of books as well as cultural activities in a broader sense—a critical

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Johnson, 'Writing and Publishing; or Wickedness Reveal'd', *Well Done God!*, pp. 377-382 (378).

⁷² Ibid., 378.

⁷³ 'Nathalie Sarraute,' Johnson wrote, 'once described literature as a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another. The vast majority of British novelists has dropped the baton, stood still, turned back, or not even realised that there is a race'. See 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 30.

⁷⁴ Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004), 290. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. Abbreviated to *LFE*.

⁷⁵ Trocchi quoted in *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1970.

description of my own existence in this world. I'm an underground cultural entrepreneur.⁷⁶

Trocchi's self-description is revealing: he distances himself from the role of the professional writer in an almost cavalier way. By this point, he had not published a novel for a decade and his last, *Cain's Book* (1960), was highly critical of 'contemporary industrial writers,' who professionalised the art of writing (*CB*, 47). In 1962, he was interviewed by the *Guardian*, in which he told his interviewer, Alex Neish, that 'literature [...] is not what I'm interested in. It's merely one of the several disciplines I have specialised in'.⁷⁷ He went on to say:

To become a writer is to become a falsity. You get caught up in the straitjacket of meaningless classifications. I don't think of myself as a writer or a novelist or anything else so much as an intelligent man. I believe you've got to be artistic about everything, whether it's painting, love, homosexuality, or just living, and it's not success which is important so much as trying spontaneously to do something. Spontaneously—that's the crucial word there, meaning that at any particular moment in time it seems right for you to do something.⁷⁸

Trocchi's attitude towards the profession of writing contrasts sharply to Johnson's. But in spite of their difference in attitude, Trocchi and Johnson were both committed to many of the same literary and artistic ideals with the most important of these being the belief that writing should express truth or, as Trocchi put it in the same interview, 'the eternal values'.⁷⁹ This sentiment led both writers to react against the popular realist novel or what Johnson referred to as the 'neo-Dickensian' novel, as practised by a writer like Angus Wilson, who, as he claimed (slightly patronisingly), was a 'brilliant observer of contemporary *mores*, but whose style is directly comparable to Dickens—to Wilson's great loss, I believe'.⁸⁰ This type of novel, which concentrated on storytelling, was inimical to both Johnson's and Trocchi's artistic enterprises. As Trocchi continually reminds his reader in *Cain's Book*, '[A]here is no story to tell' (*CB*, 121).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Trocchi, 'BOLD TESTAMENT' (interview with Alex Neish), *Guardian*, 24 January, 1962, 9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁰ Johnson, 'Holes, syllabics...', 393.

It was Trocchi's absolute rejection of the conventional views and morality surrounding work that made him such a radical—and threatening—figure. His views on work and leisure were inextricably bound up with what he regarded as the virtues of drug-taking. 'If drugs have one undeniable virtue,' he wrote in 1970 some ten years after completing *Cain's Book*:

it is their setting a frame of mind in which it is possible for one to see the importance of *not* working. For more than a decade now my friends and i [sic] have been insisting upon the importance of confronting leisure. Only when men realize that leisure can be used creatively will we solve the problem of getting the hands out of the factories and the heads and their wonderful machines in. Tomorrow only creative work or a well-used leisure will be important. We cannot learn to live leisure intelligently if we are denied leisure because the old ones are afraid of it. This is the significance of a generation of young men who refuse to work.⁸¹

'Automation,' he wrote in the same article, 'is gradually and ineluctably dispensing with most of the necessity for work' and 'as near as dammit the freedom of the individual in relation to production is in sight'.⁸² Trocchi, in line with many post-industrial social theorists and thinkers at the time, insisted that the traditional way of organising society around labour would have to be restructured given the unprecedented pace at which technology was advancing (see 'Introduction'). He was part of a growing number of voices who predicted an oncoming leisure society and who claimed that the problem of production in advanced Western economies had been solved, which, they reasoned, meant less need for human labour and a fully-employed workforce; within a leisure society, people would have more free time to do what they wanted to do rather than having to work in order to gain that free time. Trocchi was adamant leisure would replace work as the dominant human activity. He had been advocating these ideas ever since he had moved to London and established project sigma (hence, '[f]or more than a decade now my friends and i have been insisting upon the importance of confronting leisure'). Echoing much of the literature he wrote and circulated throughout the 1960s for sigma, he writes about living 'experimentally', to:

⁸¹ Trocchi, 'The Hen's Convention or thoughts of bare-man Lao' in *Contact*, vol. 1, no. 2, August 1970, (26-27), 27. As seen in Edwin Morgan Archive, MS Morgan DT/9, file 6, Special Collections, University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 26.

get the feel of what i [sic] have variously called our “experimental laboratory”, our “community-as-art”, to begin exploring the possible functions of a society in which leisure is a dominant fact, in which the conventional assumptions about reality and the constraints which they imply are no longer operative, in which art and life are no longer divided.⁸³

For Trocchi, to think about work in moral terms (i.e. who works hard, who contributes the most, and which occupations are the most valuable) was to perpetuate a myth that assumes work’s inherent value and man’s natural status as *homo faber*. Instead, he insisted ‘[h]omo faber must become *homo ludens* in a way of life liberally constructed’.⁸⁴ Trocchi claims that work as a general activity—rather than this or that specific job—ought to be the object of our scrutiny. Unlike Johnson in this respect, he did not wish to prove that writing is any more valuable or any more taxing than other types of labour. In fact, these ideas were eventually what contributed to Trocchi’s abandonment of novel-writing to devote his time trying to realise this utopian vision, which is encapsulated in a note he wrote many years later in 1978, reflecting on what he described as his cultural entrepreneurship. ‘[D]uring the sixties,’ he wrote, ‘I wanted to move things, not to write them’.⁸⁵ It made no sense for him to think of his own artistic practice as separate from the way in which he lived; it was part of the same process. Art and life were braided together, as *Cain’s Book* intimated and as his final, unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) work *The Long Book* demonstrated most fully. Trocchi is frequently associated with failure and stretching out towards the impossible. Yet, as we shall see, he went some way towards achieving what he set out to do, which was to meld his art with his life.

To comprehend how Trocchi eventually arrived at this position, this chapter will start by considering Trocchi’s move from Glasgow to Paris before moving on to discuss his first novel, *Young Adam* (1954), which was written when he was in Paris and exposed to many contemporary and radical ideas about work and its correlatives (in the fiction of Samuel Beckett and from various

⁸³ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁵ Trocchi, ‘Uncle Hamlet, Quite Gone Into Middle Age...’ in *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader*, 220.

ideas put forward by Guy Debord and the Situationist International). *Young Adam* is Trocchi's first sustained critique of work. It is a text that launches an attack on the work ethic and its damaging effects on individual freedom within a conformist society. It is about waiting and drifting along and, more specifically, what it means to wait in a community with a legal system that relentlessly asks its members the unsettling question of 'what do you do?' to control and self-perpetuate the system that is generated by labour. In *Young Adam*, one must account exactly for one's own time, be able to provide an alibi or else risk being wrongfully convicted or judged by a society that is suspicious of those who do not devote themselves entirely to their work.

The chapter will then move on to discuss Trocchi's second novel *Cain's Book* (1960), which he began writing in Paris before moving to New York, where most the text was written. *Cain's Book* was deeply influenced by Beckett's fiction, and more explicitly plays with form to frustrate our readerly desire and to make us think about work and its relation to literary form. For Trocchi, there was an explicit link between work (and its correlative ideals including efficiency, success, rationality, delineation, passive participation) and the realist novel, which he viewed as (mere) entertainment and part of a capitalist culture industry. By contrast, Trocchi's work, especially *Cain's Book* and the unfinished and unpublished *The Long Book* (which will be discussed in the final part of the chapter), are examples of play-texts, designed to problematize traditional ideas about work as they extol the virtues of play, potentiality, and possibility. They are texts that encourage multiple readings and interpretations (though never wanting to be reduced to just one), texts that welcome errancy, chance, and incompleteness, and texts that play with narrative time and refuse to properly end, leaving the narrative suspended, in abeyance.

After *Cain's Book* (1960)—which was an immense struggle to complete—Trocchi never attempted to write another novel (at least not in the conventional understanding of the term). Much has been made of Trocchi's "failure" to do so. Many of his friends and contemporaries put it down to his heroin addiction, which began just before he started writing *Cain's Book* in Paris during the mid-1950s and lasted until his death in 1984. But, as this chapter questions, what if this

failure was in fact a refusal? What if Trocchi's addiction was itself only a symptom of a much deeper conviction he had, a conviction that had hardened long before he started using drugs? This conviction was directly related to ideas to do with work and leisure, two subjects Trocchi never ceased thinking and writing about throughout his career, two subjects—or issues—that were continually discussed across the media and amongst artists and writers throughout the 1960s and 70s. Trocchi's outlook on work shaped his fiction in a fundamental way, and in a way that differentiates his writing from other avant-garde fiction in this period.⁸⁶ This, it will be argued, is significant because if we understand that his preoccupation with work, leisure and play is something that runs throughout his entire oeuvre, then we might begin to see a synthesis throughout his output (or lack of output), and his choice to abandon fiction as part of a purposeful artistic trajectory, in which the novel was the starting point of his project. This chapter will argue that, with hindsight, we can trace a correlation between Trocchi's increasingly critical stance against work and the formal aspects of his writing. Trocchi not only demands that we question the common assumptions surrounding the traditional ideology of work (i.e. the noun, our occupation, jobs), he also forces us to think about what works (i.e. the verb) and the categories and classifications we make when thinking about literature. The more critical Trocchi became of the traditional ideas surrounding work, the more fragmented and broken his texts became ending with *The Long Book*, a group of texts and ephemera that has been considered—when considered at all—an embarrassment.⁸⁷ In this sense, then, novel writing was only the starting point within a much

⁸⁶ See the following chapter for a discussion on how Trocchi's and Johnson's work differs. While Trocchi, as we shall see, understood his work as one broad continuum, Johnson understood his novels to be a series of projects, which is indicated in the 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* when he states: '[...] just as I was beginning to think I knew something about how to write a novel it is no longer of any use to me in attempting the next one', 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 17. It will become increasingly clear over the course of the thesis how different Trocchi's and Johnson's attitudes towards work are and how this affected the production of their literature.

⁸⁷ As we shall see later on in this chapter, Trocchi's biographer Andrew Murray Scott is particularly embarrassed by *The Long Book*. Many of Trocchi's contemporaries remained coy about this work

larger personal project. Understanding him from this perspective is vital because it goes against the grain of the dominant narrative that has Trocchi's 'ability to write' simply 'paralysed' by drug abuse, which, it will be suggested, is part of a broader (and problematic) impulse to mythologise the Scottish artist as a failed "junky writer," whose life and works, when judged solely in terms of literature, become little more than a parable on the hazardous effects of drugs on creativity and natural literary talent.⁸⁸

Glasgow to Paris

After graduating from Glasgow University in 1950, Trocchi wasted little time leaving his native country. One of the major reasons he left Scotland was because of what he described as 'the cultural situation.'⁸⁹ For the twenty-five-year-old Trocchi, Scotland was a 'cultural desert with damn few oases.'⁹⁰ In an article written in 1963, he remembers feeling shocked that '[n]early nine million Scotsman [...] could not support one vital publishing house. And what was worse, hardly anyone seemed to care!'⁹¹ In the same piece, he recalls his 'chronic sense of constriction,' which had been with him since the moment he knew he would 'make [his] living as a writer.'⁹² He goes on to imply that while he was fully alert to Scotland's 'cultural plight,' those around him were living in a stupor:

I wanted desperately to communicate with the people round about me, but in a far more vital way than convention allowed, to make them aware of the extremity of our common cultural plight, to awaken them, to shake their very roots, to sing

in their various accounts, understanding it as an unfinished novel of derisory quality rather than what Trocchi himself regarded it to be: that is, a process and emphatically not a novel.

⁸⁸ Allan Campbell, 'Shooting Star', *Scotland on Sunday*, 28th January 1996. Campbell co-edited with Tim Niel *A Life in Pieces: Reflection on Alexander Trocchi*, in which you can find many interviews with Trocchi's contemporaries who express the same sentiment: Trocchi's writing career was ended earlier than it should have been due to his addiction. See *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi* (Edinburgh: Rebel, Inc., 1997).

⁸⁹ Trocchi, 'Don't Ask Your Grannie' [typescript] from Alexander Trocchi Papers, Folder 4, Box 13, MSS116, Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

dangerously, to shout obscenity from the rooftops. [...] I knew intuitively there was something rotten in the cultural situation.⁹³

Trocchi blames the ‘cultural situation’ on the ‘down-to-earth Scot,’ who regarded art ‘as something entirely peripheral, something to amuse or instruct at such times as a man wasn’t involved in the serious business of living.’⁹⁴ Trocchi pointedly uses terms that relate to commerce and industry when describing his countrymen. He claims that in Scotland the ‘appreciation of art, except by auctioneers, paid no obvious dividends’ and that he felt the effect of this when ‘[m]any kindly people laboured to make [him] understand that writing was something [he] should do in [his] “spare time.”’⁹⁵ Trocchi remembers that those same ‘kindly people’ warned him that a career as a writer was ‘an extremely hazardous one. Why not become a lawyer or a doctor first?’ The ‘down-to-earth Scot,’ Trocchi implies, was intensely preoccupied with work, about making an honest living, and leading a respectable life within a society that regarded labour as an intrinsically virtuous activity. The obsession with labour and the moral attitudes associated with the work ethic were the cause of the ‘rotten [...] cultural situation’ in Glasgow (and, by extension, Scotland) during the late Forties and early Fifties. The article echoes many of the critical comments and remarks that Trocchi had already included in his fiction. In *Cain’s Book*, Scotland is home to the ‘industrious Scot,’ where ‘[s]ermons on the sanctity of hard work’ are continuously recited much to the narrator’s disgust. But it is Trocchi’s first novel, *Young Adam*, which launches the most scathing attack on the industrious, down-to-earth Scot and, more specifically, on Glaswegian parochialism.

Trocchi left Glasgow for the continent and finally settled in Paris in 1952. Paris was in many ways the antithesis to Glasgow. Following the Occupation, Paris was cheap and was populated by many artists, writers and (mainly American and British) expatriates who were keen to contribute to the lively and vibrant art scenes around the Left Bank. The ‘cultural situation’ in Paris was very different to the one Trocchi had left behind. Paris, according to the young

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Scotsman, had ‘that kind of atmosphere, that kind of situation, full of diversities, of contrasts, of new possibilities, in which the creative intelligence can produce its works, in which the critical spirit can live.’⁹⁶ In other words, Paris was a city less geared towards industry and work, and was a place for new ideas, new thinking, where artists were not only able to make a living but, also, to be taken seriously. Before long, Trocchi became well-acquainted with other writers and thinkers, many of whom were to become the most important writers and thinkers of the twentieth-century. But the most important acquaintance Trocchi would make from a literary perspective was Samuel Beckett, whose work had a direct and profound impact on many of the writers associated with the 1960s British literary avant-garde (see ‘Introduction’). But more than any other self-consciously British experimental writer of the time, it was Trocchi who was most familiar with Beckett: not only had he known the Irishman in Paris, he played an instrumental role in the first English publications of *Watt* (1953) and, later, *Molloy* (1955).

Trocchi and Beckett met in Paris in 1952. At the time, Trocchi was editing the literary journal *Merlin* while overseeing the associated Olympia Press imprint (Collection Merlin), both of which were funded by Maurice Girodias. He was also attempting to complete his first “serious” novel, *Young Adam*, while writing erotic novellas for Girodias’ burgeoning press on the side, as a means to support his novel-writing. Some of the titles such as *Helen and Desire* (1953) proved to be immensely popular amongst the large expatriate community within Paris.⁹⁷ Beckett, on the other hand, had published *Molloy* and *Malone Meurt* with Les Éditions de Minuit (both in 1951), but his fiction was still relatively unknown to English-speaking audiences. This began to change, however, when Trocchi and the other *Merlin* editors read several passages of *Watt*. Trocchi then offered to

⁹⁶ Alexander Trocchi, *Merlin* editorial, Spring/Summer 1955: volume 2, number 4 in *A Life in Pieces*, 76.

⁹⁷ Trocchi’s other erotic novellas, included: *The Carnal Days of Helen Seferis* (1954), *Frank Harris: My Life and Loves, Volume 5* (1954), *School for Sin* (1955), *White Thighs* (1955), *Thongs* (1956), and *Saphho of Lesbos* (1960). *Young Adam* was also sold as an erotic thriller. Trocchi was unable to find a publisher for his first novel until Girodias offered to publish the work with one caveat: to make it more pornographic by inserting more erotic scenes.

publish the novel as a Collection Merlin publication (marketed under the Olympia Press). As James Knowlson points out, Beckett may have been ‘a little uncomfortable’ about this given that he had previously ‘declined to translate the Marquis de Sade for Maurice Girodias’s father [Jack Kahane] in the 1930s because he did not wish to be too closely associated with a predominantly pornographic publishing house.’⁹⁸ In the end, though, Beckett was happy to see *Watt* published since it had been turned down by a number of London publishers.⁹⁹ Although relations between Trocchi and Beckett became ‘strained’ when Beckett was not sent payment or proofs for his short story ‘The End’ (published in *Merlin* and riddled with multiple errors), Trocchi, it ought to be remembered, ‘was essentially responsible for introducing [Beckett’s] post-War novels to the English-language literary world.’¹⁰⁰

Knowlson’s claim that Beckett may have felt a little uncomfortable about the link with the Olympia Press seems to fit in with Trocchi’s own account of the agreement to publish *Watt*, which was aired on BBC Radio Scotland nearly a decade after the book was published:

When I first asked him for a manuscript he gave me [a] really extreme piece which included passages like “He walked from the door to the window, from the window to the door, from the door to the mantelpiece, from the mantelpiece to the wardrobe...” and this went on for pages. And I think it was a kind of test. If I published this, the treasure trove was open so, of course, I went ahead and...made no comment and published this kind of ridiculous piece, with the result that he, from there on, he opened his hoard of manuscripts to me and I could choose what I liked.¹⁰¹

It is almost certain that this ‘extreme piece’ was a highly repetitious passage that comes late on in the third part of the novel:

Here [Watt] stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; from the door to the fire,

⁹⁸ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 396.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹⁰⁰ George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume II: 1941-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 721.

¹⁰¹ Trocchi, ‘Interview with Leonard Maguire for Scope, BBC Radio Scotland’ in *A Life in Pieces*, 142-150 (142-3).

from the fire to the door; from the fire to the door, from the door to the fire; from the window to the bed, from the bed to the window, from the bed to the window [...]¹⁰²

This sequence continues for a considerable length of time (for almost four pages in the 2009 Faber edition). Just as Beckett was clearly testing Trocchi's and, by extension, the Olympia Press's resolve, this passage also deliberately tests the reader and draws attention to what we might like to think of as the hard work involved in reading fiction that refuses to elide any details (and, by not doing so, could be said to contain the greatest degree of verisimilitude). Beckett forces us to consider a question that we might not normally ask when reading fiction: namely, are these (microscopic and highly repetitious) details worth reading, given that this passage does not add any further meaning (in terms of plot progression, at least)? In the same interview, Trocchi suggested that it is certainly not: 'anyone with any intelligence anyway, wouldn't read it. One would see what he was at and jump four pages and go on'.¹⁰³ This is interesting because the repetition does, of course, have a point and a meaning. It creates a mood, it is affectively significant. Perhaps most significantly, though, it takes time to read it, which mimics the time of the actions being described. Therefore, the passage is about repetition, boredom, routine, mindlessness and the labour involved in all these things, which we tend (wrongly, Beckett implies) to associate with inactivity (or not working). And so, it is striking that Trocchi believes the time and the effort required to read (and to properly follow) this passage is simply not worth the trouble since, for him, it would only be a form of empty labour.

Despite the difficulties that *Watt* presents, Trocchi still published the novel. And this, this chapter will suggest, was not only because it would grant him access to the 'treasure trove' but also because he intuited various textual and political concerns that chimed with his own literary and

¹⁰² Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber, 2009), 176.

¹⁰³ Trocchi, 'Interview with Leonard Maguire', 143.

philosophical vision as suggested by a short piece on the fall-out between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which Trocchi wrote in the same year that *Watt* was published:

Beckett's characters (Molloy, Malone, Watt) are so inactive, so vegetable, that they are also in a queer and disquieting way in revolt, and the impact of the man-vegetable is perhaps even more powerful than that of [Jean Genet's] burglar-saint.¹⁰⁴

Trocchi found various key issues in Beckett's fiction that paralleled his own: issues that concern waiting, inactivity, utility, and issueless labour to name a few; in short, some of those correlatives of work already discussed in relation to Beckett's fiction (see previous chapter). Trocchi was finishing *Young Adam* at the time he wrote this statement, which is a text deeply preoccupied with the concepts of inactivity and utility, and so it seems likely that this was perhaps one reason why Trocchi showed so much enthusiasm for Beckett's writing, which clearly draws attention to these issues. What seems to fascinate Trocchi here is the idea of a figure being so inactive, so vegetable, to the point that it becomes unnerving or 'disquieting.' Inactivity, in moderation, is considered normal, suggestive of recuperation (sleeping as an inactive activity for instance). But to remain inactive for too long is often seen as a sign of something not quite right, a little 'queer,' as Trocchi puts it, a sign of illness or even death. Trocchi extends this enquiry into inactivity in his own fiction. In his second novel *Cain's Book* (1960), inactivity becomes a form of protest, a critical and subversive stance against the restless and unceasing activity of a capitalist society that unthinkingly busies itself, a society that irrationally privileges the idea of being and staying productive at whatever cost.

Trocchi's narrators' outlooks on work and the illusions behind the work-ethic resemble the outlook put forward in one of the seminal texts published by the Situationist International, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by Raoul Vaneigem. Vaneigem questioned why people continued to place such importance on productivity:

Is it because work ameliorates the human condition and saves the poor, at least illusorily, from eternal damnation? Very likely so, but today it seems that the carrot

¹⁰⁴ Trocchi, 'Interview with Leonard Maguire', 142.

of happier tomorrows has readily replaced the carrot of salvation in the next world. In both cases the *present* is always under the heel of oppression.¹⁰⁵

Vaneigem was a member of the SI, a European anti-capitalist contingent of writers, artists and thinkers led by Guy Debord. Once Trocchi had settled in Paris, he quickly became close friends with Debord and joined the SI, whose ideas around a decade later would come to inform Trocchi's own creation of a similar group movement, project sigma.¹⁰⁶ One of the SI's principal concerns was how capitalism colonizes time and insists on the natural order of work, which leads the individual to perceive leisure as a subordinate activity to work. They argued that capitalism normalises the idea that one must work hard in order to enjoy one's leisure, which is seen as a reward. Leisure, for the Situationists, is reduced to the consumption of products and thinking about how to literally spend one's time. Leisure becomes hysterical, rushed, constrained; that is, an activity that resembles work. It was these radical ideas that Trocchi was exposed to in Paris and, in fact, one of the most famous SI slogans, 'Ne Travaillez Jamais' ('Never Work'), was inscribed by Debord onto a wall on the Rue de Seine in 1953—only a matter of yards away from the *Merlin* office, where *Watt* was being prepared for publication, and where Trocchi was in the process of writing both *Young Adam* and *Helen and Desire*. The latter novella contains perhaps the earliest and most crystallized critique of work in all Trocchi's fiction. Towards the end of the text, there is a particularly withering assessment of 'stupid Westerners [...] geared towards industry.' The narrator, Helen, describes a dystopic western landscape, where '[m]ountains of industry [and] seas of commerce come into being,' and where '[e]verything' is nightmarishly 'computed in terms of time,' since time 'must not be "wasted."' She complains that 'in the west everybody is busy because his neighbour is,' that everybody is obsessed only by end results, causing them to lose sight of the present moment:

¹⁰⁵ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 'Chapter V: The Decline and Fall of Work', 37. Originally published as *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1967).

¹⁰⁶ Trocchi's "manifestos" for sigma were published by the SI.

Art, the aesthetic of the flesh, the cultivation of leisure, are despised, tolerated, perhaps but basically thought of as not quite respectable. [...] Geared for industry, those stupid westerners never pause to analyse the word ‘waste.’ Time is accepted without question as valuable; like money or land or food, it must not be ‘wasted’; at the end of one hour one must have something to show for it. The question for them is: What ‘excuse’ for passing the hour in such and such a way? If one can produce riches at the end of the hour, then time has not been ‘wasted.’ But if one has merely derived pleasure from living? If one considers living important—in itself?¹⁰⁷

As Joe Necchi in *Cain’s Book* says, a ‘man should be able to waste time without being seized with anxiety.’ (CB, 155) Trocchi frequently wrote about the significance of heroin’s effects on time, how it “fixes” time, allows for a certain timelessness, allows for the user to indulge in the moment, to experience time, and most importantly *the present*—gratuitously—without a purpose or aim, without having to rationalize time, and by rationalizing it, killing it. This is why, Trocchi implies, leisure does not really exist within a capitalist framework, where to wait is a synonym for killing time, and where leisure becomes exigent, becomes something to *do*, with a plan, as a kind of antidote to work (most clearly articulated in *Young Adam* where the narrator, Joe, is unable to be at leisure and is stuck working on the canal system). Leisure loses its freedom, its liberty, which is (as the etymology of the word hints at) what the concept of leisure is predicated on.¹⁰⁸ It is no coincidence that Joe Necchi in *Cain’s Book* decides to get a job on the scows, where work and life and leisure and writing are, for him, inextricably woven together in what resembles a pre-industrial way of life, when work and leisure were indistinguishable. If we think only in terms of getting things done, Trocchi suggests, then it is no wonder that we might begin to feel anxious about what one ‘*really* do[es].’ But before looking at the ways in which that *Cain’s Book* deals with these themes and issues surrounding work and labour, this chapter will consider Trocchi’s first novel, *Young Adam* (1954).

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Trocchi, *Helen and Desire* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), 117.

¹⁰⁸ Leisure comes from the Latin *licere*, “to be permitted”. See “leisure, n.”, OED Online, Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107171?rskey=ZNK6ow&result=1> (accessed December 11, 2018).

Young Adam and the virtue of work

The narrator of *Young Adam*, Joe, is ‘alone [...] an alien, an exile’ and ostensibly in revolt. While Joe is not quite the Beckettian ‘man-vegetable’ that Trocchi viewed as such a powerful symbol for the man-in-revolt, he is, like Molloy and Watt, a peripatetic wanderer who stands outside society, which in Joe’s case is a society mostly made up of ‘representative[s] of the industrious working classes’ (*YA*, 98), the ‘good people’, as he ironically describes them, of ‘the Presbyterian city of Glasgow’ (*YA*, 101) who he regards as his ‘enem[ies]’ (*YA*, 98).¹⁰⁹ The problem with such people, he tells us, is their tendency to make a virtue of work— ‘I dislike people who make a virtue of their work’ (*YA*, 98)—an attitude that goes hand in hand, as we shall see, with the impulse to conform, to accept a society or ‘impersonal machine,’ as he puts it, whose function is ‘to maintain order, to explain the presence of an ambiguous thing like a corpse, to see that, if foul play was deduced, someone atoned for it so that the moral structure of this system might be preserved—that was horrifying’ (*YA*, 99). He goes on to explain that there ‘was something nightmarish about it—my nightmare, for the machine might include me in its intricate pattern-making at any moment’ (*YA*, 99). Halfway through the narrative, Joe gloomily announces that there is ‘nothing to do but wait’ (*YA*, 97). Joe implies that his situation is like being in a novel: he is stuck in a pattern-making machine, whose pattern has already been determined, mapped out, already written, and—crucially—out of his control. The other characters, however, are unaware of this, as they continue to work without any complaints and tacitly accept a social system that keeps them working.

¹⁰⁹ This anti-working-class sentiment can be traced throughout Trocchi’s oeuvre, which as we shall see, is most pronounced in *Cain’s Book* and the poetry collection, *Man at Leisure*. It is also documented in Richard Neville’s *Play Power*; the working-class and the bohemia were at odds with each other, with the latter devoted to the importance of play, which also demonstrates how Trocchi and other anti-work writers and thinkers were not aligned politically with traditional Marxist thinkers.

The character Joe most frequently and scathingly criticizes is Leslie, who he sees as the archetypal industrious working-class man. Leslie is often portrayed as an animal, who thinks about little else other than the food in front of him and his beloved darts:

Leslie finished his food before me because he was anxious to get away to the pub. I have never known a man to hurry his meals so much. He gobbled, always, carrying gobbets of food to his mouth on knife and fork, not alternatively—it depended upon which instrument was nearest which piece of food and upon the shortest distance between plate and mouth. He was leaning forwards now to blow the steam from the surface of his tea (*YA*, 51-52).

Joe describes in detail Leslie's body and his involuntary bodily movements with explicit disgust: '[Leslie] was snorting into the bucket, washing behind his neck, behind his ears, which stood out like little red lamps on either side of his head, shiny and tufted with small sprouts of grey hair.' (*YA*, 34) Leslie is someone who "gets on with it", does not question his position or station and excitedly plays darts, thinking only of his immediate surroundings. 'If there was anything Leslie prided himself on it was his darts' (*YA*, 34). The implication here, of course, is that there are more meaningful things to do with one's time, that Leslie is unable and unwilling to deviate from the predictable course that will ultimately turn out to be his life. And as for Joe and his wife Ella's affair, Leslie has no suspicions or concerns. Joe seems to poke fun at this when he says:

Leslie looked peaceful too, thinking no doubt how he was going to show off at the dartboard in the little pub in Lairs. I could see him raise a pint of beer to his lips, drink deep, leaving a layer of scum-coloured froth round the side of his glass [...] Yes, everything was peaceful, like the man who was ploughing in the field over to the left and like two cows which were grazing slightly ahead, and there was the fresh air all round me, and everything quiet and a little numb feeling of excitement somewhere deep down in me (*YA*, 42).

The only reason why Joe feels this peace is because he is anticipating the destruction of this peace, the eventual affair that he will have with Ella, which is a chance for Joe to exert some form of control over his life. There is a hint of malevolence in Joe's description. Everything is a bit too peaceful, a bit too nice, as if too good to be true, evoking all the typical pastoral images of cows and honest work being done in the fields. In this description, Leslie appears as a slightly bovine character, dreaming about darts, and Joe's prediction of his thoughts is patently patronizing. '[N]o

doubt' Leslie was thinking about showing off at darts, which gives us the impression that Joe thinks this is small-minded and parochial. This is stressed even further when the description of the froth that clings to Leslie's glass is described in the same way the 'scum-laden' river is only a few paragraphs before, implying that the river and its sedentary way of life has intoxicated Leslie, and has taken away his senses. Perhaps the most telling of all distinctions between Leslie and Joe is demonstrated when Leslie is unable to comprehend why Joe chooses to read books (*YA*, 78), suggesting that Leslie is unwilling and uncomprehending when it comes to reading society. Leslie accepts that his life is part of a grander narrative that he knows little about and that it is not his job to question it. This is demonstrated when Leslie finds out about Joe and Ella's affair. Leslie simply takes his possessions and leaves, which, following Joe's descriptions of Leslie, reads like an image of an animal led to slaughter, obediently accepting its death. Leslie unthinkingly assents to situations he does not understand, as when, on one occasion, Joe says 'yes and [Leslie] shrugged his shoulders and said yes too' (*YA*, 38). Leslie's compliance angers Joe, who sees it as vital ingredient of the conformism that perpetuates the 'impersonal machine.'

In Joe's view, work is more to do with obediently performing a task devoid of meaning over and over again, such as the office job that his girlfriend Cathie once did:

For a few weeks after [spending the few hundred pounds inherited by Cathie] I did odd jobs about the neighbouring farms. But it couldn't last [...] So we moved to town and Cathie got a job. She came home tired and after a while there was an undercurrent of bitterness. "I wouldn't mind so much if I thought you were ever going to finish it," she said. "Do you think it's easy? Do you think all I have to do is to sit down and write the bloody thing? I don't have a plot. I don't have characters. I'm not interested in all the usual paraphernalia. Don't you understand? That's literature, false. I've got to start with the here and now. I..." "No, I don't understand," she replied. "I don't know why you can't write an ordinary book, one other people will understand. It's been eight months now. I get up early in the morning, sit in a lousy office all day, and when I come home you're either drunk or asleep! What have you done today, Joe, while I was out earning the money for us to eat with?" "I made some custard," [...] That morning when I found myself unable to work I looked round for something to do. I found an old recipe for custard. [...] I had been bored all day (*YA*, 129-30).

Joe and Cathie fail to read each other. Cathie is presented as someone who holds the belief that life makes sense and that if one works hard enough, and for long enough, one will inevitably reap

the benefits—a principle that is somehow at odds with what Joe has described as her day-to-day reality for the last eight months, sitting ‘in a lousy office’ each day, coming home tired. The absurdity of this kind of employment is in the disjuncture between, on the one hand, the reality of the work situation (which brings about tiredness, bitterness) and, on the other, the illusion of the future work-leisure situation (which promises that if one performs this task long enough then it will be worth the toil). Joe does not only view this self-perpetuating social structure as absurd, he also sees society and its willing members as hypocritical. This is attested to when Joe points out on numerous occasions the instances where those who appear to work are often not working at all. For instance, when: ‘[b]oth of us [Joe and Leslie] felt a bit uncomfortable there on deck and doing nothing because Ella never seemed to stop working. She had finished sweeping and now she was doing some vegetables in a wooden bucket’ (*YA*, 27). Later, we see that Leslie ‘was gazing idly at the landscape, spitting occasionally, lighting and relighting his pipe’ (*YA*, 42). And further on still, we hear Leslie tell Joe, “‘We’ll go down and make a cup of tea [...] There’s nothing much to do anyway’” (*YA*, 70). And just before this, Joe hints that even the work they do perform is arbitrary, meaningless and instantly forgettable: ‘Leslie thought of something for us to do, I forget what exactly, with a hammer and nails [...]’ (*YA*, 69). Another occasion early on sees Joe admit that he:

felt idle then for the first time in a long time because I felt she was watching me. Leslie felt the same thing for obvious reasons (“Are you going to stand there all day airin’ yourself?” she would scream) and he was anxious to be occupied at some job or other, but evidently he could think of nothing to do (*YA*, 27).

In contrast to the men, Ella is always:

cleaning things, dishes or shoes or the table, scouring pots and pans, polishing brasses, which she did with a special cloth, blowing her hot breath on to the metal and then making it squeak under the friction of the cloth, her big forearm moving backwards and forwards like a piston whose energy you could almost see being drained from the tensed stock of her body and from the rigid stance of her powerful haunches on which the apron string, idle and discoloured, always lay (*YA*, 107).

However, Ella’s labour is no more kindly looked upon than Leslie’s or Cathie’s. Her labour is almost exaggeratedly described, as if to suggest that Ella is working harder than she needs to, as a

form of overcompensation. The fact that Ella ‘screams’ at Leslie, and watches Joe reinforces the sense that Ella is anxious to make sure work, even if only for work’s sake, is getting done. Work, as Joe mentions, allows those who get on with it to become self-righteous, which perpetuates the moral structure of society. For Joe, it is all one big façade. The work they do on board is more often than not issueless labour, empty labour, labour that does not actually enhance or change anything. It only keeps everything in order, in stasis.

For all of Joe’s self-satisfied cynicism concerning other characters’ existences, we cannot help but feel his existence is also a miserable one. While Leslie has his darts and enjoys the outing to the local fair with his son, Joe cannot so much as approximate an idea of what leisure might constitute. Joe repeatedly tells us how ‘bored’ he is or how he is ‘not really interested’ (*YA*, 64; 65). He cuts a frustrated figure, who waits, restlessly, frantically. He tells us that ‘[o]ften when I woke up I had the feeling that I was in a coffin’ (*YA*, 67) and later he speaks of the ‘feeling of constriction’ that comes over him (*YA*, 109). Joe has no means of escape, no freedom in which to enjoy his leisure. The only event that bears some resemblance to a pastime or some form of leisure takes shape in the form of flirting with Ella. Even intercourse with Ella offers only a temporary respite and before long Joe wishes to move on, leave the barge, something that Joe himself picks up on at one point: ‘I am a rootless man. Often I find myself anxious to become involved with other people, but I am no sooner involved that I wish to be free again’ (*YA*, 110). Joe’s dissatisfaction shines through most clearly in the fairground scene, when he visits the fair with Leslie and Leslie’s son, Jim. Joe narrates this scene with characteristic detachment, as if to suggest that, again, he is ‘not really interested’:

The ring of coloured lights was turning. A man was speaking through a megaphone. The stalls opened like bright yellow mouths laughing. The hurdy-gurdy music formed a ceiling over the jutting squares of electric light bulbs. The timbers of the switchback were high over on the left. Leslie led the way, pushing through the crowd, turned, grinned back at me over Jim’s head and then moved on through the crowd (*YA*, 75).

The tone of the passage, in concert with the short, clinical sentences, suggests Joe’s lack of interest. Joe coolly watches Leslie losing more and more money. He picks up on almost every minute detail

around him and, by doing so, hints towards his detachment (like someone who is outside, commentating on the game, rather than playing it). He refuses to enjoy the atmosphere, choosing instead to observe those details that would perhaps otherwise go unnoticed to the happy fair-goer:

Above, above everything, the night was dark blue. The board at the upper rim of the stall read “Abbott Bros”. It was scored with mud and paint. A man on my left was pressing against me, a weight of shoulder, smelling of brilliantine and tobacco (*YA*, 75).

Joe then tells us ‘[i]t was raining. I had been aware of it for the last few minutes,’ the tone of which again suggests Joe’s dissatisfaction. Joe proceeds to tell Leslie this fact: “It’s raining, Les.” [...] It’s raining, Les. [...] It’s raining, Les” (*YA*, 75). And Leslie fails to respond each time, engrossed as he is on the penny landing on the counter. As the rain continues to fall, the fair shuts. At the moment in the narrative when there is a gesture towards the possibility of fun or play, this possibility is shut down. It is not so much that Joe is unable to play or refuses to do so, it is more that the city of Glasgow denies Joe any meaningful chance for play or leisure. The concept of play (and its vital importance) becomes a major theme in *Cain’s Book*. It offers the individual who is pressurised by society’s relentless demands an opportunity to lead an alternative, less work-oriented life. Joe insinuates throughout the text that this opportunity does not exist for him and becomes increasingly alienated, cut off.

Joe tells us that ‘[t]en years ago [he] walked out of a university one spring morning with a small overnight bag.’ He ‘never returned,’ he tells us:

Since then I have worked when I needed money, because I felt like moving, because I had to break out of a situation in which, though the necessities of life were provided for me, I felt myself being crushed. Now on the barge I was beginning to feel the familiar urge to break with the present. I couldn’t keep my eyes off the ships on the river, especially those which I knew would sail over the tropics into the southern hemisphere. (*YA*, 110)

For Joe, work is something to be done but done resentfully. It is, for him, a kind of necessary *waiting* before moving on elsewhere, and a kind of waiting that has little purpose, a specific kind of waiting that we might associate with drifting. The fact is Joe is all too aware of the conventional ideology of work and remains at a cynical distance from those who unquestioningly “get on with

it". He waits and waits, and having given up his ambition to write the book he wants to write he remains restless, shiftless, just another 'hired hand' (*YA*, 5) who drifts along, suspended. Joe is literally and figuratively drifting, along with the 'pockmarked cork' (*YA*, 41) and other debris, down the empty, 'scum laden' waters, between 'two masses of green-brown countryside' (*YA*, 42). There is something ominous about the bland, unchanging landscape and the canal that holds an 'ambiguous presence' (*YA*, 80). Everything around Joe is in a liminal state: the industry still functions but suggests its own decline, the countryside is neither green nor brown, and the canal manages to give off a presence that implies absence.

Joe is in many ways like Watt, Molloy, Vladimir, and Estragon—all of whom, in their various postures and for different reasons, are continually waiting. And just as Beckett's characters make us wait, Joe makes us wait to find out that it was in fact Cathie's body that he and Leslie hauled up from the river at the beginning of the narrative. But by delaying his narrative disclosure, Joe makes a deliberate and crucial point. It doesn't matter when he tells us this narrative detail because, by the end, it changes very little. Nothing changes. He might be in control of his narrative, how he tells his story, but he is not in control of his life, and, as he keeps reminding us, the fact of whether he goes on living or dies at the hands of others, of an unthinking and 'unintelligent' society (*YA*, 98). The whole point of Joe's delayed disclosure is to accentuate the fact that storytelling does not make sense—it does not make sense that Goon, the man falsely accused of murdering Cathie, is sentenced to death, and it does not make sense that Joe, who was involved in the murder (although not technically guilty, either), walks away. Significantly, he links this irrational, wrongful conviction back to the idea of work and the work-ethic:

I found it impossible to think of the plight of Goon out of relation to myself. Poor bastard, there was no point in my exaggerating my sympathy for him. I didn't even know him. As a representative of the industrious working classes he was in a sense my enemy. I dislike people who make a virtue of work. [...] And in a way he was a part, if an uncritical one, of the society which might condemn him in a sense in which I was not [...] His arrest too was no more absurd than the position which would be thrust upon me by an unintelligent society perennially bent on its moral purification [...] Poor Goon was bad. The newspapers implied it. If he was convicted the judge

would pronounce it. [...] [Both society and Goon] were simply unintelligent (*YA*, 98).

We are left at the end wondering why and how Goon was convicted, but Joe does not—and cannot—provide the answers. While we might think of *Young Adam* as a more formally conventional work than the relatively formless *Cain's Book*, it is still a text that rejects the conventional mode of narrative storytelling. The only story it tells is that storytelling is 'literature, false'. There is little catharsis at the end; Joe walks away free, and perhaps continues to drift, continues to work here and there, against his will, and continues to exist joylessly in a society that he cannot comprehend.

Cain's Book and abeyance

If *Young Adam* is about a writer who is always waiting, who is yet to find a meaningful form of employment as he continues to drift along as though direction were irrelevant, then *Cain's Book* might be viewed as a text about a writer who has accepted the fact that there is nothing to be found, that there is no such thing as direction, that the only thing he can do to escape, temporarily, this interminable pursuit is to wait, to remain inactive for as long as possible. *Cain's Book* at times reads like an anti-work treatise, a document not only about the virtues of drugs and their effects, but also the virtues and importance of play, a concept that becomes increasingly associated with the idea of leisure in Trocchi's later (and mostly unpublished) work. Waiting, writing and "fixing" (injecting heroin) in *Cain's Book* assumes a form of protest, a way of distancing oneself from the society that continually, relentlessly impinges on the individual and proselytizes the 'sanctity of hard work' (*CB*, 205). As the narrator says, '[i]t was a time of fixing and waiting and being and fixing and waiting' (*CB*, 125). *Cain's Book* contains in it many of the seeds of Trocchi's later non-literary activity and argues for a society where one can be alone and play, to enjoy leisure without having to work in the conventional sense. The text is obviously deeply preoccupied with drugs. However, I argue that the use of drugs, rather than being the principal concern of *Cain's Book* (as

many assume), is in fact a corollary of the narrator's intransigent will to not work. That is, injecting heroin, 'fixing,' becomes an important pastime and way of halting time as a result of not working. And this is where the real controversy lies. Taking drugs is often seen as a non-productive activity (like waiting) but to consciously use them as a form of protest, as a way of gratuitously wasting or killing time, becomes a more serious matter altogether. As Trocchi himself said in 1962, '[...] for some people, using narcotics comes to be a form of protest against their society, and there were times in New York when I just wouldn't trust any creative person who wasn't on them.'¹¹⁰ To retreat from society, from 'the city with its complicated relations, its plexus of outrageous purpose,' (CB, 5) is to become, as we have seen, a "man-vegetable," a dead-weight on society, which has no desire to support those who do not subscribe to the same values. This is especially pronounced in a welfare state (as the *Daily Mail* article that I discuss earlier demonstrates). Just one year before the UK publication of *Cain's Book*, Trocchi provocatively gestured to this idea of the state supporting his lifestyle, his leisure:

Narcotics bring about a state of mind so that automatically you find creative ways of using leisure. [...] I know that junk made it possible for me to approach a life in which I will never take a job, where I shall always do what I want to do, where I will never have to be entertained from the outside. [...] With junk I wish there were 96 hours in every day, and so long as I had enough wits to be able to experience, I would sign on for eternity right now.¹¹¹

Cain's Book created a great deal of controversy in the UK. The book was seized in a bookshop raid in Sheffield and was charged on account of being "obscene." The 1964 trial of Trocchi's text introduced a new precedent in UK law, as John Sutherland has pointed out. Lord Chief Justice Parker's decision, Sutherland writes 'was highly significant. It marked a new phase of obscenity-hunting in which the primary target would not be the work's text (for instance its incidence of four-

¹¹⁰ 'Bold Testament', Alexander Trocchi interview with Alex Neish, *The Guardian*, January 24, 1962, 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

letter words) but the *lifestyle* it advocated, or that was associated with its author or even its readership.¹¹²

Cain's Book is punctuated by a series of confrontations and discussions between characters who disagree about the issue of work and whose lifestyles clash (often resulting in estrangement). In a rare exchange with his ex-wife, for instance, the narrator asks her why she did not take the afternoon off work to spend more time with him. He has arrived into New York that day with the intention of living there and she is the only person he knows. 'It wasn't exactly anger I felt,' he tells us, 'it was a kind of frustration, almost disgust. I had travelled three thousand miles and Moira couldn't take the afternoon off' (CB, 183):

I looked at her now and said: "What made you go back to work this afternoon? It must have been nearly four by the time you got there."

"I have a job. I have to earn my living," Moira said in the voice an adult sometimes adopts to answer a child. [...]

"Fuck work," I said, bringing us to the edge of an old difference.

"You'll find New York different, Joe," Moira said, nervously lighting a cigarette (CB, 183).

The scene is one of many flashbacks within the frame narrative wherein Joe Necchi has already introduced himself as a 'scow captain' (CB, 3) working on the Hudson River and a heroin-addict whose principal occupation—besides 'cooking up' (CB, 6) and 'fixing' (CB, 58; 85; 125)—is writing and collating a 'document', provisionally entitled *Cain's Book* (CB, 33; 55; 147; 208). Although Joe knows the prospect of rekindling his relationship with Moira in America is an unlikely one, he still expects her to take time off work to see him. Joe and Moira are no longer lovers, but they still talk and still see each other from time to time. As implied in the dialogue, the 'old difference' between Joe and Moira relates to the issue of work. While Moira wants to work so that she can 'earn [a] living', Joe fundamentally opposes the idea of having to work in order to live. Throughout *Cain's Book*, this idea of "earning a living", accepted as convention, is deeply scrutinized. In her book *The*

¹¹² John Sutherland, *Offensive Literature: Decensorship in Britain, 1960-1982* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983) 46.

Problem of Work, Kathi Weeks identifies this acceptance as a type of ‘reification’: ‘the fact at present one must work to “earn a living” is taken as a part of the natural order rather than as a social convention,’ which leads to what she describes as ‘work’s privatization’.¹¹³ The privatization of work, for Weeks, is a function of the way the labour market individualizes work, which leads to more people focusing ‘more on the problems with this or that job, or on their absence, than on work as a requirement, work as a system, work as a way of life.’¹¹⁴

Like Joe Taylor in *Young Adam*, Necchi dislikes those people who make a virtue of their work. He views the acceptance of a work-orientated society as a form of dangerous conformism. This is most clearly articulated in a scene where Necchi encounters a ‘six foot four’ loader ‘standing in his white helmet, light-blue shirt and dungarees, his large red hands on his hips’ (CB, 149). Necchi is on his scow is relaxing in the sun, ‘wearing nothing but a pair of shorts [...] with a cigarette and a can of beer’ (CB, 149), technically doing his job:

I nod to him. His grimace is not particularly friendly.
 “You bastards sure get it easy!” he said.
 “Yeah, it’s a way of life.”
 I was wondering whether he was going to get over his resentment. [...]
 “You bums’s [sic] not supposed to drink on board, you know that?”
 “Fuck you,” I said.
 “What did you say?”
 “Ug mug tug dug,” I said.
 “You trying to be funny?”
 I drank some beer. “You want to start a war, is that it?”
 “Maybe I do,” he said. He hesitated, spat, turned away. “You bastards sure get it easy,” he said as he went.

The loader originally dislikes the scowman because the scowman doesn’t work. That makes the job unpleasant from time to time, finding oneself having suddenly to deal with the animosity of a man who makes a virtue of his work. It is difficult to explain to the underprivileged that play is more serious than work (CB, 149-150).

¹¹³ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. It is worth mentioning that Trocchi voiced similar concerns in 1970 when he wrote that ‘[t]he principal difficulty [to form a society less geared towards work, more geared towards leisure] is not an *economic* one. It is a moral one. The prejudice that “a man must work to eat” must be discarded. How to get money to people in a puritan heritage if they don’t work for it and “deserve” it: a kind of puritanical paralysis.’ See Trocchi, ‘The Hen’s Convention...’, 27.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

Necchi sees the loader's resentment and his tendency to make a 'virtue of his work' as a symptom of a society driven towards efficiency and productivity, one that, like the society in his native city Glasgow, proselytizes the 'sanctity of hard work' (CB, 205) and rationalises labour as an end. What is interesting here is how Necchi's shift in aggression ("“Fuck you”") coincides precisely with the point the loader tells him about the rules on board. Necchi understands immediately that this is another way of the loader asserting his moral superiority. Another character who champions the work-ethic to gain leverage over those who do not appear to work is Necchi's former brother-in-law:

My brother-in-law was a solicitor. He often found it helpful to make a gesture to his authorities, military or judiciary, when he was leading up to his point, presenting credentials. [...] He would not say he didn't find me difficult to understand sometimes. A man who didn't work, he meant. Oh, he knew I was supposed to be writing or something. But after all I wasn't a child any more. A man of my age. [...] If Moira didn't mind working while I sat at home that was her business. [...] He was sure I would see things his way. I was a reasonable man. He was willing to shake hands and say no more. What now, agreed? (CB, 42)

Cain's Book is an arrangement of specific memories, memories that have influenced Necchi's 'present'. He writes these memories down because they are significant, memorable. And, despite his 'inviolability', Necchi is clearly frustrated by those who belittle his occupation (whether that is as writer or scowman), see him as 'a man who didn't work,' or, more frustratingly, as a child (we might think back to Basil Bunting's poem, 'What the Chairman Told Tom' here, which ironically draws a parallel with childishness and writing). Throughout *Cain's Book*, Necchi's father treats him like the child he once was, partly because he knows his son holds no occupation (the irony, here, being that Necchi's father is ashamed of his own unemployment, to which his son frequently refers). Moira, as we have seen, addresses him in a 'voice an adult sometimes adopts to answer a child,' while his former brother-in-law patronizingly reminds him that he is not 'a child anymore'.

It is in his capacity as a writer that Necchi finds himself in the most strange and unsettling position, one that is explored in the following note: 'To lose my identity as a writer is to lose all social identity. I can choose no other any more than I can seriously sustain that' (CB, 180). Necchi

has come to seriously doubt his occupation and is caught between two impulses: he can try to continue being the writer everyone knows him to be, an identity he has no belief in any longer, or he can give up his role as writer but ‘lose all social identity’. He wants to write in the way he used to, but has little faith in novel-writing, so ends up writing to keep up appearances, so to speak: ‘I wrote for example: “If I write: it is important to keep writing, it is to keep me writing. It is as though I find myself on a new planet, without a map, and having everything to learn. I have unlearnt. I have become a stranger”’ (CB 94). Necchi is trapped in a cycle, reflected in the entirely circular logic of the first part of this line. He is stuck, suspended, in his position as a writer:

Day. The rain is off. I am alone, suspended between land and land, waiting to go with my load of grey stone to my destination, *Colonial Sand and Stone*, Newark, NJ. I watched dawn come near the open door of my little white cabin, looking across the water at the extinguished sign of *Isthmian Lines*, and I was wondering what I was doing, doing just that [...] (CB, 96)

This sense of being caught or stuck is also central to the formal organisation of the narrative: *Cain’s Book* refuses to “go” anywhere, it drifts and meanders, it never quite gets to the point, which again is something that Necchi himself points out when he says, ‘Reading what I have written, now, then, I have a familiar feeling that everything I say is somehow beside the point. I am of course incapable of sustaining a simple narrative...with no fixed valid categories...not so much a line of thought as an area of experience... [...] Moreover, what’s not beside the point is false’ (CB, 192). The narrative is, to use a word that is repeated throughout the novel, in ‘abeyance’ (CB, 5; 5; 6; 93; 94). This word, abeyance, ‘a state of temporary disuse or suspension’, perfectly encapsulates the twin impulses of both Necchi’s experience and text’s narrative direction. Abeyance, from Old French *abeyance*, meaning “aspiration, desire”, takes its root from *abeer*, meaning “to aspire” but derived from the Latin *batare*: “to yawn, gape”.¹¹⁵ We might sense a contradictory movement, here, in the etymology of the word, which at once “yawns” and stands still with its many images of boredom and inertia whilst also wanting, desiring to move forward, to “aspire” towards something.

¹¹⁵ “abeyance, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/view/Entry/268. Accessed 3 March 2017.

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Trocchi began *Cain's Book* while he was still in Paris. He left for New York in 1955 to get a job as a scowman on the Hudson River, essentially a live-in caretaker of a barge that carried materials up and down the water, tugged along by a tow-boat. By this stage Trocchi had started using heroin on a frequent basis and *Cain's Book* is a largely autobiographical document about his experiences on the scow. It is important however to remember that it is not entirely autobiographical, as Trocchi himself noted in the BBC Radio Scotland interview: '[*Cain's Book*] is not absolutely coincident with myself. But nevertheless, there is a great deal of me in it' (*ALP* 148). At the beginning, we might wonder why *Cain's Book* is so incongruous and uneven in its narrative disclosure. But we are soon told the reason for its peculiar form: the text is a compilation of notes consisting of old memories, past thoughts, and old inscriptions. Written by the narrator Joe Necchi, these notes continually take us out of the frame narrative, which is set in the present time of writing, onboard a scow on the Hudson River as Necchi attempts to finish writing a book about his experiences in New York as a junky, which is provisionally entitled 'Cain's Book.' From its very beginning, *Cain's Book* demonstrates its inclination or, rather, *intention* to meander, to segue fluidly from episode to episode without any pretension to more logical and perhaps more familiar modes of narrative progression. And if we forget that this is how *Cain's Book* works, or begin to wait with the vain hope that eventually there will be some kind of narrative "pay-off," then Joe seems ready to remind us at various points that this will not be the case, that '[*A*]here is no story to tell', and that he is 'unfortunately not concerned with the events which led up to this or that' (*CB*, 123). 'If I were,' he tells us later on, 'my task would be simpler' (*CB*, 123). He continues to explain his narrative principles in further detail:

Details would take their meaning from their relation to the end and could be expanded or contracted, chosen or rejected, in terms of how they contributed to it. In all this, there is no it, and there is no startling fact or sensational event to which the mass of detail in which I find myself from day to day wallowing can be related. Thus I must go on from day to day accumulating, blindly following this or that train

of thought, each in itself possessed of no more implication than a flower or a spring breeze or a molehill or a falling star or the cackle of geese. No beginning, no middle, no end. This is the impasse which a serious man must enter and from which only the simple-minded can retreat. Perhaps there is no harm in telling a few stories, dropping a few turds along the way, but they can only be tidbits to hook the unsuspecting with as I coax them into the endless tundra which is all there is to be explored (*CB*, 123).

Without a beginning, a middle, or an end, without details possessing any deliberate implication or, for that matter, relation to other details, we realise that this is a narrative of terminal waiting, in a kind of purgatory that resembles an ‘endless tundra’. ‘In all this, there is no it’ recalls the impulse towards total narrative effacement displayed in *The Unnamable*. We might think of the ‘T’ of *The Unnamable*, who also goes on day to day accumulating, blindly following this or that train of thought, who feels, like Joe, that they similarly ‘must’ go on speaking (‘I speak, speak, because I must’ [*TU*, 17]). in the knowledge that they cannot stop: ‘[o]ne starts things moving without a thought of how to stop them. In order to speak. One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will’ (*TU*, 10).

This was in fact how the text was written. Trocchi had amassed a number of notes over the years but evidently found it difficult—as the numerous typescripts of *Cain’s Book* suggest—to knit these disparate images and scenes together. At this incipient stage of the composition process, Trocchi was clearly uncertain about his direction. While in Paris, he had conceived of the idea of using the figure Cain as a metaphor for the outsider of society but most of the narrative was set in Glasgow. There was no mention of drug-taking either. Interestingly, the scenes that *did* exist in the text’s incipient form were those related to work and, specifically, those scenes whereby the narrator either directly or indirectly articulates his anxieties about being a writer (such as the confrontation with the brother-in-law and the many discussions concerning work that the narrator has with his unemployed father).¹¹⁶ In what sounds like one of the notes that has ‘a great deal of [Trocchi] in it,’ Necchi describes the faintly depressing environment he found himself in before he left for America:

¹¹⁶ Folders 2 -11, box 30, Alexander Trocchi Papers.

During the last year in Paris I had drifted away from my former acquaintances. I could no longer share a common purpose with them. I had spent most of that year in a small room in Montparnasse, going from it to play pinball or to distract myself with a woman. This room had three sides and one large studio window which looked out over the projecting roof of basement studios onto a high grey wall which cut off all view of the sky and of the summer sun. It was like living in the box in the kitchen in Glasgow when I was a child. I spent more and more time in the room. I can remember lying on my back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking of Beckett, and saying aloud for my own edification: “Why go out when you have a bed and a floor and a sink and a window and a table and a chair and many other things in this very room? After all, you’re not a collector...”

It was in that room I had begun to write *Cain’s Book*, the notes for which took up a disproportionate amount of space in my only suitcase, and which I was carrying to America with me (*CB*, 159).

One of the last amendments to the galley-proofs of *Cain’s Book* was the change in name of the scow that Necchi lives and works on. Trocchi crossed out the former name of the scow (the Edward J. Mulroy) in order to name it the ‘Samuel B. Mulroy.’¹¹⁷ And so, not only do we see Necchi ‘thinking of Beckett’ in the narrative, we know that Trocchi himself was thinking of Beckett right up until the last moment of submission. This passage is essentially about ‘drifting’, idling, waiting, not knowing what to do. (It features within a section of the novel that has as its epigraph a long quotation from *Malone Dies*, about playing.) Necchi is stuck, suspended, in abeyance on board the ‘Samuel B. Mulroy,’ a symbol that is highly significant given that Necchi tries to write but cannot write. He tells us at various points that he can only manage to write false starts, notes that are beside the point, titles, and ‘inventories.’ This is no longer literature so much as a log, the primary function of which is prove one still exists (an important reminder for Necchi, who continually asks himself the question of ‘what the hell am I doing here?’). It is as though Necchi also tells himself that he must go on, cannot go on, but will go on. Beckett’s presence is both comforting and debilitating. Where does one go now, after Beckett? *Cain’s Book* was deeply influenced by Beckett. Trocchi’s editor at Grove Press, Richard Seaver, tells us that even the very composition process of *Cain’s Book* paralleled an image found in one of Beckett’s texts:

Since money was Trocchi’s daily obsession, and he had spent twice over the advance the contract called for, we had reached an agreement—echoing the opening pages of

¹¹⁷ Folder 9, box 30, Alexander Trocchi Papers.

a novel both Trocchi and I admired perhaps above all others, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*—whereby Trocchi was given small advances only as he turned in fresh pages. (CB XVIII)

Trocchi in one sense wrote *Cain's Book* whilst performing the opening scene to *Molloy*. But what is worth drawing attention to here is what Molloy writes in this opening passage, which is oddly pertinent to Trocchi's situation. The specific passage Seaver had in mind is at the beginning of Beckett's text:

There's this man who comes every week [...] He gives me money and takes away the pages. So many pages, so much money. Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more. That doesn't matter apparently. What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying. They don't want that. Yes, there is more than one, apparently. But it's always the same one that comes. You'll do that later, he says. Good. The truth is I haven't much will left. When he comes for the fresh pages he brings back the previous week's. They are marked with signs I don't understand. Anyway I don't read them. When I've done nothing he gives me nothing, he scolds me.¹¹⁸

Molloy concludes this passage by pointing out that he does not 'work for money,' which prompts him to ask himself: '[f]or what then?' To which he replies: 'I don't know.'¹¹⁹

The Long Book

Shortly after Trocchi had written *Cain's Book*, he was arrested and charged with selling heroin to a minor. He was released on bail and managed to (illegally) cross the US border to Canada. From there, he eventually made it to London. Many critics and friends of Trocchi agree that, after *Cain's Book*, Trocchi's writing career was more or less over. He engaged himself in other non-literary activities, the most famous of which was the formation of project sigma, a group or movement very similar to Guy Debord's SI. sigma started to crystallise in Trocchi's mind as he was writing *Cain's Book* but its creation was formally announced when Trocchi published an essay entitled 'Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds' in 1964. The premise behind this essay-manifesto was

¹¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber, 2012), 3.

¹¹⁹ Beckett, *Molloy*, 3.

that approximately one million like-minded “creative” intellectuals and dissidents would instigate a ‘cultural revolt’.¹²⁰ It was an instance of ‘[p]rotest phenomena’ of the 1960s and 70s, which as Detlef Siegfried writes, did not aim to ‘achieve [an] impact just by contributing to a generalized mood of upheaval, but by focusing on the creation of new lifestyles and cultural norms with profound political implications.’¹²¹ Trocchi believed that, with the right people and the right amount of funding, sigma would provide the impetus to shatter the ossified and anachronistic social values, especially those surrounding work and leisure. One of the main premises that sigma was founded upon was that automation of the central industries would all but do away with the problem of production, the idea being that human labour would no longer be needed and that the time normally spent dedicated to working would open up and become free time. In just one of many similar statements Trocchi made at this time, he warned about the threat this posed:

I think leisure is going to be possibly our greatest problem. Right now we are sedulously training people not to be able to use it—give it to people now and they would either go insane or go back to work.¹²²

His ideas did not belong in a vacuum (see ‘Introduction’). Numerous writers, theorists, and sociologists were writing about what they saw as the almost inevitable outcome of a society in which the social need for work would be diminished. Leisure became an extremely popular topic for debate at this time. Without considering this context, Trocchi’s ideas come off as politically naïve (as do other post-industrial theory writers). It should be noted however that even today, at the time of writing, arguments and ideas concerning automation and an oncoming leisure society are still being discussed, with many theorists predicting similar utopian outcomes.¹²³ This ambitious

¹²⁰ Alexander Trocchi, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’ in *A Life in Pieces*, 164.

¹²¹ Detlef Siegfried, ‘Foreword’ in *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present*, Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton (eds.), (Oxford: Berghahn Book, 2011), ix.

¹²² ‘Bold Testament’ interview, 9.

¹²³ One recent and popular example of this is Alex Srnicek and Alex Williams’ *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015). Srnicek and Williams tell us to ‘demand’ Universal Basic Income, which, interestingly, Trocchi goes some way towards suggesting in his ideas for project sigma. See ‘Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint’ in Murray Scott’s *Invisible Insurrection*.

and wide-ranging project, which for a brief period drew much public support from intellectuals and artists across the UK and the US, has mostly been viewed as Trocchi's "excuse" for not writing another novel after *Cain's Book*. His publisher John Calder made this claim in the *Edinburgh Review* one year after Trocchi's death:

What Sigma [sic] was really about was unclear to all except a few devotees, but it gave Trocchi an excuse to avoid getting on with a sequel to *Cain's Book*. After 1962 his literary work consisted only of articles and translations together with a small collection of poems. He was an excellent translator and his ability to catch in English a French writer's style gave a good indication of the talent he had wasted. Although he drifted into relative obscurity in Britain and the United States, he has remained a literary hero to the dissident young men in many parts of Europe while *Cain's Book* remains the prime example of British Beat writing.¹²⁴

Calder published most of Trocchi's work in the UK and played a substantial role in Trocchi's career as a writer. While he is right to assert that Trocchi's output after *Cain's Book* consisted of only some articles, translations and a collection of poetry, this only takes into account Trocchi's *published* output. Trocchi, even during the composition of *Cain's Book*, became far more interested in merging literature and art with everyday existence. This was one of project sigma's main aims, to encourage a living art, to undo what Trocchi saw as the artificial categorisations and boundaries between art and everyday life, boundaries that he saw being perpetuated by publishing houses, museums, and galleries.

To bypass the traditional institutions that published or curated literature and art, Trocchi set up the sigma portfolio, which would collect all the contributions of those involved to then disseminate these works to every subscriber of the project. The sigma portfolio was set up and a number of articles, fiction, and essays were distributed but, in the end, the portfolio, like the project itself, lost its initial impetus and by the early Seventies was effectively over.¹²⁵ This might suggest

Trocchi advocates a 'PLAY-VALUE' instead but essentially argues that every member of society should be given credit rather than society giving "National Assistance" (as it was named in the 1960s) to those who asked for it.

¹²⁴ John Calder, 'Alexander Trocchi', *Edinburgh Review* (1985, vol. 70) 32-35 (34-5).

¹²⁵ Contributors included William Burroughs, Stan Brakhage, Michael McClure, R.D. Laing, and Trocchi himself. It is worth adding at this point that project sigma still continued to make an

that Calder's claims were justified. But if we consider Trocchi's unpublished writings during this period, we begin to see that Trocchi was very resistant to the idea of writing another novel—regardless of whether he could write another or not. As Trocchi mentions in one of the notes in

The Long Book:

Now, for the interest of our Readers, would you say that was going to be the name of your next novel? I didn't say anything of the kind. I didn't say anything about novels. I tried to make that clear in my last book. At least I thought I made it clear to myself. And if this book is written to kill, it is to kill me. Scourge, plague and fire is my business. I am a fireman, and like Pepys or Sir Thomas Browne, I keep a log.¹²⁶

This 'book is written to kill me' suggests Joe Necchi's assertion in *Cain's Book* that all literature should accomplish its own death. And by framing himself as both 'fireman' and 'Pepys,' Trocchi implies that *The Long Book* is for him and him alone, as creator of the fire (he can choose what to burn and destroy) and sole interpreter of it. *The Long Book* was conceived along with project sigma, as a 'log' about Trocchi's present circumstances (similar in the sense to Necchi's notes about "the here-and-now"), and as a work that would eventually be included in the sigma portfolio, as and when it was written. Much of the material related to *The Long Book* concerned sigma's ideas, such as '[s]ubversion' on a global scale, which would change public attitudes towards work and leisure:

Subversion. Of course, that is precisely what we are about...what we must inspire (and, on a global scale,) is a structural change in men's attitude towards, for example, "work". That old adage about the right to work, the correlative crap about the nobility of work, etc., all this is anachronism...the complex moral buffering of the economy of scarcity: "to eat you must work..." Such old prejudices get in the way of an intelligent exploitation of automation. The problem of today and tomorrow is that men should learn to cope creatively with leisure; we must think now of the nobility of non-employment.¹²⁷

impact elsewhere, outside the UK. In Amsterdam, for example, Trocchi's ideas were built on and were taken far more seriously than they were in the UK. For a detailed analysis of this, see Niek Pas' essay, 'In Pursuit of the Invisible Revolution: Sigma in the Netherlands, 1966-68' in *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present*, Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton (eds.), (31-43). It is worth mentioning that Trocchi also came up with plans for establishing a "leisuredrome" or "Fun Palace," designed by Joan Littlewood and Cecil Price (who were involved in Sigma) but, again, these plans were never realized in spite of much correspondence between Trocchi, Littlewood, and Price.

¹²⁶ Folder 4, Box 33, Alexander Trocchi Papers.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

The Long Book was a site for Trocchi to freely exercise his ideas without having to even think about what others, who he saw as external to the writing process, might demand from him. It was a way for Trocchi to write without the composition process feeling like work, and it was a means to refine his views on various topics, though mainly ideas related to work and leisure. As shown in the passage above, Trocchi wrote at length about an oncoming leisure society, in which automation would eradicate human labour.

While many of the sentiments expressed in *The Long Book* feature in *Cain's Book*, they are written in a far more explicit and spontaneous way, as if Trocchi was celebrating the fact that he was not writing for anyone other than himself. *The Long Book* feels like a text that Trocchi used to crystallise his ideas and rehearse his opinions on those matters that concerned him the most. In other words, it was a for Trocchi a text that had deliberate and various extra-literary functions. This is demonstrated most clearly when Trocchi writes about how he could use *The Long Book* to 'coax' money from his publishers. The only condition was that he told them it is a novel, which it clearly is not:

What this book is about is the making of itself as an integral part of a dialectical process. And it would probably never have occurred to me to call it "a novel" were it not for the fact that by doing so, and only by doing so, was i able to coax an advance royalty from my publishers, English & American, monies i had to have if the work was to be done at all. Here is a perfect example of the way in which the economic structure of the world within which we artists function to some extent determines the nature of the work to be done.¹²⁸

As Trocchi writes, *The Long Book* is about the 'making of itself.' In other words, it is an act of pure gratuitousness but one that, once in the process of being made, serves a financial purpose.¹²⁹ It is Trocchi's critique of those 'contemporary industrial writers' who write stories to make money. But *The Long Book* is only masquerading as a novel. In reality, it is a text made up of fragments, most

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Even the title of *The Long Book* gestures towards its own gratuitousness As Andrew Murray Scott, Trocchi's biographer, mentions: "The title was itself the result of a misunderstanding between author and publisher; asked what he was working on, Trocchi replied "a long book," and didn't bother to correct the assumption that this was the title.' See Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of a Monster* (Kilkerran: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012) 175.

of which are quite clearly written without any commercial consideration. It was a space for Trocchi to write about Necchi (who had long outlived his purpose) when he wanted, to write about the banning of *Cain's Book*, to write poetry, essays, and even to include and rework old material—old drafts of *Cain's Book*, for example—that is, all the commercially unviable material that contained personal significance to him. But perhaps most usefully, it was a means to write about his publisher in less-than-friendly terms, whilst using it as a kind of bait with which to ‘coax’ out, as he writes (and as John Calder has frequently noted), money from those anticipating another commercial novel.

There is something very beautiful about *The Long Book* as a material object. It consists of material housed in folders (loose sheets, typescripts) and books (which are literally long, about half the width of A4 but of longer length). *The Long Book* highlights its own fragmentary nature; The pieces appear to be deliberately partial. Sometimes there are duplicates or passages that are similar but not precisely the same. Many pages contain multiple errors, some revised, others not. Lots of the material, which would otherwise appear to be useless, is kept.¹³⁰ There are drawings in the books and the books themselves are painted. These physical attributes point to many of the hallmarks of Trocchi's earlier fiction (obsolescence, utility, incompleteness, etc.). As a physical object, *The Long Book* can claim thematic synthesis with the other (literary) works Trocchi produced (albeit in a different form). Critics have paid scant attention to *The Long Book* because it resembles an incomplete manuscript of the sequel to *Cain's Book* (parts of the text are titled ‘*Cain's Book pt. II*'). And yet, as this chapter argues, *The Long Book* just as closely resembles an object, a piece of visual art more in keeping with Trocchi's sculptures, or what he termed as “futiques.”¹³¹ It is the

¹³⁰ There is a great deal of material from an early draft of *Cain's Book* (when it was called ‘Cain’ or at least when the character was called Cain as opposed to Joe Necchi). There seems to be deliberate attempts to organise the text in the wrong order, to take bits from everywhere and paste them together. The logic behind this is that everything is important, and that there should be no hierarchy of value.

¹³¹ These were bits of driftwood that Trocchi collected, which he would paint over in an assortment of colours. The name is a portmanteau of ‘future’ and ‘antique,’ the reason being that Trocchi believed that they would gain value in the future in spite of their immediate worthlessness.

logical extension of *Cain's Book's* fragmentation and the refusal to call itself a novel. Trocchi's biographer Andrew Murray Scott is an example of a critic who is disappointed by *The Long Book*. However, the problem lies in the fact of Murray Scott's refusal to see *The Long Book* as anything other than a novel:

[Trocchi] claimed from the end of 1964 and for years thereafter, to be working on *The Long Book*, and perhaps he was, though this was never to emerge, (despite Calder announcing it for publication in November 1966), except in a small number of excerpts and never achieved cohesion as a unitary piece of writing. The small excerpts that have been published are of derisory quality, almost embarrassing—as if Trocchi no longer really cared—and the work seemed to encompass almost all the “casual” writing that he worked on from 1963 onwards. [...] It was intended to move beyond the self-absorption of *Cain's Book*—beyond “identity”—the third person narrator is “anyone” and “everyone”. As in Beckett (perhaps self-consciously), it is a move beyond personal identity, and parallel's [sic] Burroughs' [Science Fiction] fantasies with a subsidiary interest in “global paranoia”. He had abandoned the first-person narrative tense which he had used so well in his best books—rather as if Necchi/Trocchi had nothing further to say...¹³²

We can sense Murray Scott's disappointment in the fact that Trocchi did not produce anything else, or at least anything else that resembled *Cain's Book*. This is most apparent in his interpretation of the text; Murray Scott attempts to read *The Long Book* in a way one might read a conventional novel, while comparing it to the novels of Burroughs and Beckett. We can also infer in Murray Scott's words and the words of many other's (such as those interviewed in Allan Campbell's and Tim Niel's “biography,” *A Life in Pieces*) the assumed assertion that Trocchi “failed” by not continuing to do what he did ‘best’ (use of words like ‘cohesion’ and ‘unitary’ suggest that Trocchi aimed for such ideals but did not achieve them).¹³³ Trocchi's work was partly about failure but failure viewed from a very particular viewpoint, a viewpoint that has engrained within it those values that celebrate utility, production, and objects, and people working. The traditional notion

¹³² Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of a Monster*, 175.

¹³³ “Biography” because on the jacket sleeve of Campbell's and Niel's text, they state that “[a] traditional biography of such a man is not possible”. Campbell and Niel choose instead to include interviews with Trocchi and those who knew him and excerpts of Trocchi's fiction and non-fiction to give us an insight into Trocchi's life and work. No doubt this rationale was chosen to distinguish their book with Andrew Murray Scott's more “traditional” biography, which was originally published in 1991, six years beforehand.

of ‘work,’ treated as both a noun (the activity of work) and a verb (to describe whether something works or not), is deeply and deliberately problematized by many of the experimental writers at the time. Indeed, it is part of their very enterprise—as experimental writers—to question these notions surrounding work and what works, and equally, to test what works as writing. For many of them this translated into exposing the limits of storytelling, attempting to subvert or undo narrative, and to try to write or to represent experience truthfully. This was certainly the case with Trocchi’s *The Long Book*, as he began to conceive it, eventually, as something much grander, as a ‘multi-dimensional canvas’ of his life:

The Long Book, in so far as it was my own experience, began to be conscious of itself as coming to be written even before I had finished *Cain’s Book*, which I see now not as a beginning, or only the beginning of the act, but as a kind of semi-consciously ordered splotch somewhere in the middle of that multi-dimensional canvas which was my life [...] ¹³⁴

And scrawled in Trocchi’s hand on one of the folders part of *The Long Book* manuscript collection is a tentative plan:

Volume 1 up to 1950
Volume 2 1950 to Cain’s Book
Volume 3 Cain’s Book
Volume 4 New York (to supplement and continue Cain’s Book)
Volume 5 London ¹³⁵

This volume plan is significant because it shows Trocchi curating his life and works, arranging his life as one might edit or order a work of art. Trocchi’s life, this plan implies, is an unfinished text, a living art, which was exactly what Trocchi advocated in his essays related to project sigma. As Edwin Morgan has put it, Trocchi ‘himself wanted all his writing to be seen as a continuum of communication, of self-definition, of modes of consciousness, rather than as a sculpture part of “novels” or “short stories” or “poems” or “essays.”’ ¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Folder 4, box 33, Alexander Trocchi Papers.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Edwin Morgan, ‘Alexander Trocchi: A Survey’ in *Edinburgh Review* (48-58) 49.

The Long Book is an anti-work document, a work that refuses to finish, which refuses to conform to any kind of categorical definition. As mentioned earlier, the Necchi-Trocchi narrator-writer says it is about killing ('this book is written to kill, it is to kill me') and in a way it achieves just that, it does kill Necchi in the respect that this is the end of Trocchi's fictional apparatus. Trocchi's "Joes," like Beckett's 'brandips' (Murphy, Molloy, Malone, and Mahood), have been exhausted, have worked for long enough, and now in *The Long Book*, have been dispensed with. But from the perspective of the Joe Necchi in *Cain's Book*, this is a positive thing; Joe suggests that all literature should 'accomplish its dying' (*CB*, 106-7). While some may deride *The Long Book*, is it possible that this book was meant to be the way it is (i.e. a series of notes, the "anti-novel" par example)? *The Long Book* is a rude gesture towards those traditional and conventional values that Trocchi had opposed throughout the whole of his writing career, towards that value system that Trocchi criticized from the start of his career, and the novel form itself, which stood as a symbol for him, with its contingency upon outside factors (publishers, for instance), of 'literature, false,' and conventional work, as a 'plexus of outrageous purpose.' And in this respect, *The Long Book* could also be interpreted as something else: as a reaction to the marketplace and his various publishers (or 'the brokers,' as he refers to them in *Invisible Insurrection*, *ALP*, 172). Throughout Trocchi's career as a writer, he was bound, as most writers are, to certain procedures beyond his control. He hints at this in one of the notes in *The Long Book* (mentioned above) when he writes '[h]ere is a perfect example of the way in which the economic structure of the world within which we artists function to some extent determines the nature of the work to be done.' But Trocchi was bound more than most writers over the course of his career. This can be deduced from Calder's 'Preface' to Trocchi's 1972 poetry collection, *Man at Leisure*:

The book had been contracted, but Trocchi kept on avoiding delivery on various pretexts. As a result, I had to edit poems that the author had little looked at, and in some cases had to revise and finish them. Otherwise they would never have been published or perhaps would have been sold to another publisher, because Alex, always in desperate need of money, had no scruples about selling the same manuscript to as many different publishers as would sign contracts. [...] Abbreviations might have been extended, lines rewritten in other ways, orthography

changed, had the author been willing to find the time to rework his poems in my presence, but he accepted the *fait accompli* with good grace.¹³⁷

Calder's final line, here, concludes with a note of condescension; Trocchi has done his "bit," it seems to suggest. The anecdote is very revealing, not just in terms of Calder's relationship with Trocchi, but also how it illuminates certain implicit expectations that Calder had of Trocchi as a writer. First of all, there are a number of ironies involved in Calder's description of events, which imagines him as the dignified, "laboring writer", who is forced to 'edit...revise...finish' this collection of poems (entitled *Man at Leisure*) because, otherwise, we would never have had the opportunity to read them. But then Calder goes on to suggest that this work should have been the author's job—though, crucially, a particular kind of author, an author who was prepared to rework the poems 'in [Calder's] presence'. To which, we might ask: who was the author? Or, perhaps more pertinently, who wanted to be the author? From this description, it seems that Trocchi had no wish or desire to occupy that position. *Cain's Book* and *The Long Book* only serve as evidence to reinforce this claim; Trocchi throughout each text disavows his role as an author.¹³⁸

Trocchi, throughout his career, was seen as a kind of raw producer, a writer who, like Molloy, would write pages that would then be taken away, published, as a *fait accompli* act. He was expected by those he worked for—Girodias, Seaver, Calder—to keep on producing, writing, like, in the words of Joe in *Young Adam*, a pattern-making machine. Seaver's reference to *Molloy* was perhaps more profound than intended. For Girodias, Trocchi wrote erotic fiction and sometimes in a matter of days, as a means to live in Paris. And Girodias only published *Young Adam* with the caveat that it would contain more erotic scenes than it originally had (Trocchi obliged). Since Trocchi did not sign any contracts for his erotic fiction, he was "legally" pirated by a host of

¹³⁷ John Calder, 'Preface', *Man at Leisure* (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2009), v-vi.

¹³⁸ Yet the most amusing irony of all is Calder's insinuation that Trocchi would have no problem in selling the manuscript to other publishers (a form of theft inasmuch as the manuscripts would, legally, belong to Calder) since, as Calder admits in his 'Preface' to *Man at Leisure*, he only managed to acquire the poems after breaking into Trocchi's house. It 'was only by obtaining unauthorized entry to his flat and desk drawers that I got hold of the manuscript', 'Preface', v.

publishing houses in America (most notably, Brandon House), who reportedly made a great deal of money selling Trocchi's novellas (copied verbatim). For *Cain's Book*, Trocchi was paid piecemeal, on the condition he return with some more notes, which Seaver would then arrange to achieve some kind of cohesion, as we have seen. Calder collected his poems and published *Man at Leisure*. This chapter does not suggest that Trocchi was exploited as a writer (with perhaps the exception of Brandon House) but it does raise important questions about the amount of authority and control he was able or unable to exert. This is another reason why the triadic relationship between writing, work, and reading was especially important to him, and why he insisted in all his work to write about it and explicitly so. *The Long Book* was perhaps one of the few instances in which Trocchi could write at leisure, and write wastefully, gratuitously. We know that Joe Necchi, at least, enjoyed writing gratuitously at times when he compares his writing to "shitting":

...Alone on the scows for long periods of time I sometimes find myself searching for topics to think about, or round, for although I enjoy the certainty of many discoveries, when my thought is like an engraving of tablets, there are moments... and the present is always suspect... when it is entirely frivolous, when, in barely connected sentences and unresolved paragraphs, I shit idiocy and wisdom, turd by turd, thinking impressionistically, aware of no valid final order to impose. (CB, 56)

It is a line worth repeating: 'aware of no valid final order to impose.' This is precisely what defines Trocchi's fiction, a vigilance against any imposed order, any fixed category or set of values. And a real belief that there is no 'valid final order,' only a play-arena, where congeries of possibility slip and slide, shift and compete. Often against his will, his work was shaped, was given a final order, which is why *The Long Book* ought to be considered in a different light and understood in its own, disordered way.

Man at leisure

This chapter has focused on Trocchi's novels, *Young Adam* (1954) and *Cain's Book* (1960), as an attempt to show that Trocchi's interest in issues surrounding work and labour was a longstanding one, one tempered by the influence of Beckett and other acquaintances that he met in Paris, such as Guy Debord. Of course, Beckett was not the only writer to be interested in the concepts of

inactivity, waiting, and obsolescence but he was one of the foremost mid-twentieth century writers to forge an explicit link between labour and the work of the writer and reader, a link that Trocchi would also go on to explore in his fiction, so much so that he eventually lost faith in the novel as a valuable means for communication by the early sixties. The novel, for Trocchi, became merely another site for business-minded publishers to make profit, and an institutionalised art form that reinstated exactly the values concerning the work ethic he abhorred. And this is where Debord's influence comes in. Trocchi went on to promote an art of living and incorporate his writing and other artistic practises within his everyday life—the logical end to this being the Situationist-inspired project sigma and *The Long Book*, two projects that reacted against the publishing industry and the marketplace. As Stewart Home mentions in his 'Afterword' to *Man at Leisure*, Trocchi became more interested in "living" poetry than writing it¹³⁹ or, as Trocchi himself put it at the time, in experiencing a 'reality [...] in which art and life are no longer divided.'¹⁴⁰ If we understand Trocchi's career in this context, then his move away from working as a conventional 'industrial writer' begins to resemble a more studied artistic decision rather than simply a consequence of his heroin addiction. With each major text Trocchi wrote, the writing became more fragmented and less like a novel. Trocchi's final major work, *The Long Book*, is a book about texts not working, a book that is both a book and not a book, written by a novelist who no longer calls himself a novelist.

Trocchi's image is frequently associated with heroin, which ties in with his image as a "cultural entrepreneur" of the London Underground scene. Trocchi was of course interested in drugs and their effects but his interests in work and leisure were already present in his fiction and predate his heroin addiction. He also heavily involved himself with groups, such as the SI (who opposed the capitalist work ethic) before his heroin addiction. If we understand his clear attraction

¹³⁹ See Stewart Home, 'Afterword', *Man at Leisure*, 83-4.

¹⁴⁰ Alexander Trocchi, 'The Hen's Convention or thoughts of the bare-man Lao' in *Contact*, August 1970, 27.

to the new, radical ideas concerning work and leisure, we might begin to see more clearly why he was considered so dangerous, as such a threat to society and why his interests in drugs took such a hold over his work in the first place. For Trocchi, to use drugs was a form of protest, a way of subversively waiting for nothing, remaining in abeyance outside the work economy, and opposing the work ethic. It is worth repeating that Trocchi pointed out drugs were an active form of protest when he told the *Guardian*: ‘for some people, using narcotics comes to be a form of protest against their society, and there were times in New York when I just wouldn’t trust any creative person who wasn’t on them’.¹⁴¹ As the trial of *Cain’s Book* demonstrated, it was not simply an objection against the use of drugs that saw the book banned (making the case something of a cause célèbre); it was the entire lifestyle that was associated with this act, the main facet of which was the refusal of work (we can see this in the scene with the loader in *Cain’s Book*, as Necchi remarks, “[y]eah it’s a way of life”). This came at a time when youth culture began to exist and exert a powerful influence on the rest of society. If too many of the young, in the words of Timothy Leary, “turned on, tuned in, dropped out,” what would this mean for the future of society? It is important to see Trocchi’s work in light of this context, to understand why he was considered such a menacing figure.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ ‘Bold Testament’, Trocchi, 9.

¹⁴² The following report was published as ‘5 IDLE CHELSEA MEN HAD HEMP’ in *The Times*, April 24, 1962. It is perhaps an example of how this anti-work youth culture was treated at the time. And as Stewart Home in his ‘Afterword’ to *Man at Leisure* tells us, Trocchi was well-acquainted with one of the defendants, Malcolm Drake. The Trocchi archive confirms this; there is a great deal of correspondence between Drake and Trocchi. The article is quoted in full below: ‘Five young Chelsea men were put on probation for a year at West London Magistrates’ Court yesterday for being in possession of Indian hemp. The magistrate, Mr. Seymour Collins, said that they had slipped into an easy, idle life and the taking of drugs. Someone had been interested in selling it to them and perhaps interested in seeing them actually sink into perdition. The five were: Selwyn Paul Eva, aged 23, unemployed; John Beaumont, aged 22, messenger; Charles Terence Westwood, aged 21, unemployed; Robert Osborne Morgan, aged 17, unemployed; and Malcolm Drake, aged 22, unemployed, all of Finborough Road, Chelsea. Mr F. W. Langham, probation officer, said that Eva had aspirations that he might be able to write poetry which would be published. Eva felt that following normal employment in a conventional way would interfere with it. Reading a report about Beaumont, the magistrate said: “According to this your philosophy is that work has to be avoided at all costs. You have almost a religious faith in being able to exist

Trocchi's menace is detectable in an article he wrote in 1970 (the same year that the *Daily Mail* article was published), which was a direct appeal to '[y]oung men and women,' which speaks about unemployment, the importance of leisure, and the right to not work, all of which are further elaborations on statements he had already written for project sigma. 'If drugs have one undeniable virtue,' he writes, 'it is their setting a frame of mind in which it is possible for one to see the importance of *not* working.'¹⁴³ He goes on to suggest that for 'a decade' he and his 'friends' have insisted on the 'importance of confronting leisure,' which equates to substituting the human labour force for 'wonderful machines.'¹⁴⁴ 'Tomorrow,' he writes, 'only creative work or a well-used leisure will be important. We cannot learn to live intelligently if we are denied leisure because the old ones are afraid of it. This is the significance of a generation of young men who refuse to work.' He goes on:

It is assumed that one is on the verge of starvation because one is "unemployed". And the unemployed are always presented in the Press as something most unfortunate which of course they are not in any sense whatsoever save that they have their arms quite unnecessarily and irresponsibly twisted by the Authorities. It is pretended that the "unemployed" ... a large percentage of whom, particularly amongst the young[,] are concerning themselves with intuitive good sense only with the problems of tomorrow's leisure which they have decided to live experimentally *now*, concerned as they are with the world's real problem of tomorrow which shall after all be their inheritance... it is pretended that they are irresponsible. On the contrary [...] they are the only responsible ones. [...]¹⁴⁵

without earning any money. You seem to have adopted an attitude of contempt against all organized society as a defence against the contempt society possibly has for you."

JOB FOR SUNRISE

When Mr. Langham said that Drake also wanted to write a book of poetry, the magistrate replied: "That is a nice job for the evenings and getting up in the morning to see the sun rise." Turning to Eva, the magistrate said: "Do you honestly think anybody is going to employ you as you are now, with your hair hanging down over your face and down the back of your neck?" Westwood, whose hair was two inches below his ears at the back, said he was waiting for a vacancy in a training college for interviewers in market research, and had also looked for jobs in the hotel trade. The Magistrate said: "They would want you to smarten yourself up. They do not want long hairs in the soup in hotels." Published in *The Times*, April 24, 1962, 6.

¹⁴³ Trocchi, 'The Hen's Convention...' in *Contact*, 1970.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Trocchi ends by deliberately and provocatively addressing all '[y]oung men and women' reading the piece: 'insist on yr [sic] right *not* to work for any system, on the right of yr natural inheritance, social security within whatever system.'¹⁴⁶ Finally, he declares that 'there shld [sic] be not a "dole", not an "assistance" but a *credit*'¹⁴⁷ Trocchi demonstrated a serious commitment towards ridiculing the assumptions behind that question—'*What do you really do?*'—which troubled other avant-garde writers. For Trocchi, there was no distinction between what one does and what one '*really*' does. Rather than ascribe added value to his occupation as writer (what he was '*really*' known for), he saw equal significance or insignificance in all forms of work, at least in the traditional sense of the term. Writing for Trocchi was a way of noting the present, proving his own existence, taking stock of what he really did. And in this respect, the description he provided for *The Daily Mail* appears far more serious than perhaps it first seems: he was indeed writing 'a critical description of [his] own existence in this world.' If *The Long Book* is remarkable for one thing, then surely it was its ability to subvert the traditional transaction that takes place in a modern economic framework. It provided him a means of literal employment (writing), 'social security' and '*a credit*' to '*not* [...] work for any system' other than his own, which is another way of saying that he was paid to do exactly what he aimed to do—that is, to subvert the traditional notions concerning work and leisure (or play). His subversion of work recalls the post-industrial thinker David Riesman's observation (see introduction) in 1958 that 'the closest thing we have to the traditional ideology of the leisure class is a group of artists and intellectuals who regard their work as play and their play as work.'¹⁴⁸ For 'such people,' Riesman writes, 'work frequently provides the central focus of life without necessarily being compartmentalized from the rest of life either by its drudgery and severity or by its precariousness.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Riesman, 'Leisure and Work in Postindustrial Society', 168-9.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

As his career developed, Trocchi placed increasing value on the concept of play and the importance of leisure. His work—particularly his later prose—is in many ways defined by playfulness and its correlatives such as freedom, possibility, and a disregard for the exterior world. This is demonstrated not only in content (for example, Joe Necchi’s insatiable desire to play pinball, inject himself with heroin, and ‘be alone and play,’ *CB*, 56) but also in form: both *Cain’s Book* and *The Long Book* critique their respective formal statuses and stretch the limits of what we might usually call fiction. And yet, crucially, play in Trocchi’s work is always limited. There are always forces, rules, and systems to restrain fun and the possibility of leisure. We might think of Joe Necchi’s complaint that “[t]hat’s the trouble with the external world. It keeps impinging on you” (*CB*, 106). And later in the text, he speaks of the ‘impertinence of the external world with which [he] signed no contract when [he] was ejected bloodily from [his] mother’s womb.’ (*CB*, 152) Joe further elaborates on the external world’s ‘impertinence’:

I could feel nothing but outrage at a system in which, by virtue of my father’s name and fortune, I found myself underprivileged. What shocked me most as I grew up was not the fact that things were as they were, and with a tendency to petrify, but that others had the impertinence to assume that I would forbear to react violently against them. (*CB*, 152)

Joe’s shock recalls the disbelief of Joe Taylor experiences in *Young Adam*, a disbelief towards the ‘impersonal machine’ of a Glaswegian society that similarly assumes the compliance of those who happen to be a part of it. For both Joes, the idea that an individual should work in order to make a living represents the most malevolent side to the impersonal machine. For both of Trocchi’s narrators, the ideology of work demonstrates how little liberty the individual has in a society that promises (what Raoul Vaneigem termed) the ‘carrot of happier tomorrows.’

Trocchi himself vehemently opposed the western work ethic and believed that work ought to be a choice rather than an obligation. In an undated journal written sometime after the publication of *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi writes of his own ‘underprivileged’ status, suggesting that he was born into a society that refused him the liberty and freedom he desired. In the short piece, he

writes that he is constantly ‘run[ning]’ as he attempts to ‘board a train’ that promises to take him where he wants to go (his ‘personal play garden’):

Sometimes i [sic] scare myself. It is as though i am frantically trying to board a train which always goes just one mile an hour faster than i can run, stiffer in the knees now i am thirty-eight and not twenty-eight. i cannot live in the present because i am always anxious about the future because i tell myself i am. i am always going to do something—tomorrow. There are certain technical difficulties, of course. i want to be able to use this world as my personal play garden. All the time. Meanwhile, i am still nailed to the economic rack. That is the big game into which i was born underprivileged.¹⁵⁰

The passage evokes a restlessness, an attempt to get the ungettable, which characterises Trocchi’s entire oeuvre. From the early pornographic novellas to *The Long Book*, Trocchi’s writing contains characters and narrators who desire what they cannot have. Trocchi gestures to this in the passage above: the long, running sentences and the exaggerated use of the infantilised ‘i’s contribute to the sense of frantic restlessness, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (‘i cannot live in the present’) and knowing that one can never catch up. The combination of the simple language, the uneven pace, and the self-absorption suggests childishness but, more specifically, a self-conscious childishness, which recalls Joe Necchi’s anxiety in *Cain’s Book*, in which Joe desires to simply write, be alone, and play but knows that he will be accused of being childish for wanting this. In line with most of Trocchi’s work, this passage is primarily about being caught in between desperately wanting something and being unable to have it, which is made only more painful by the proximity of the desired object (in this case the train that runs only one mile an hour faster). In *The Long Book*, there are two lines that, upon close inspection, manage to capture this tantalising situation. ‘Over the years,’ Trocchi writes:

i have had sight of great continents of experience just beyond humanreach. I was up, down, here, there, back, through, round, high, & clear into what a generation now thinks of as inner space, and, when i could, i took notes all the way.¹⁵¹

Trocchi describes himself as constantly on-the-go; and, much like the narrators of *Young Adam* and *Cain’s Book* who are similarly always on the move, he is never content to remain still. While

¹⁵⁰ Alexander Trocchi, ‘How I Came to Want to Get Off’ in *Invisible Insurrection*, 218.

¹⁵¹ Folder 5, box 33, Alexander Trocchi Papers.

this anthropological impulse might allow one to go everywhere ('up, down, here, there [...] high & clear'), it also presents an unsettling proposition: one is unable to *be* anywhere. Each deictic reference (often used to indicate presence) only gestures to where Trocchi 'was' or has been—but no longer is. This incapacity to be present ('i cannot live in the present because i am always anxious about the future because i tell myself i am') is a hallmark of what constitutes leisure within an advanced capitalist society. Trocchi's work is a continual and dogged exploration of this grey zone of everyday life and rather than preoccupy himself with the question that irked Johnson ('*what do you really do?*'), Trocchi's work, so critical of work and so uncertain about what leisure really is, rephrases the question to: 'what can you really do?' Trocchi is a writer often perceived as a decadent product of 1960s hedonism. But, as this chapter has argued, his work interrogates some of the most fundamental and profound issues of his time, issues that continue to have relevance today: how to be and how to employ or unemploy oneself within a relentlessly restless society geared towards industry and productivity.

III

B. S. JOHNSON: THE PROFESSIONAL VIEWPOINT

About three minutes into *Fat Man on a Beach* (1973), B. S. Johnson sits down on a comically small portable chair, faces the camera, and asks, ‘[w]hy are we here?’¹⁵² We assume ‘here’ refers to Porth Ceiriad, on the Llŷn peninsula in Wales and we expect him to tell us why he has picked this location (or at least this beach) for the setting of his film. But, after repeating the question again, he tells us he is referring to one of the ‘old philosophical questions.’¹⁵³ We begin to realise Johnson is asking us a more fundamental question: why do we exist? It is a totally incongruous question but one in whose very incongruity should not surprise us. After all, *Fat Man on a Beach* is made up of accidents, contradictions, digressions, and parenthetical asides along with various visual and logical jumps in narrative. Bananas, toy cars, and other ostensibly random objects are scattered on the beach as Johnson reads poetry, relates multiple stories about his own connection to Porth Ceiriad, about a gruesome death involving a wire fence he witnessed many years before, for instance, about the Spanish Armada, while he cites Carl Jung, William Burroughs and many others, doing so in a wide range of attire—hooded raincoat, brown jumper, luminous shirts—which disrupts the flow and continuity of this overwhelmingly frantic film in which Johnson jumps about, runs around, and lambasts us, his audience, for not paying him the attention he deserves. Johnson’s last work is light-hearted and comic in spirit but there are moments when the pent-up, irrepressible energy of this manic film threatens to spill over into troubling violence (as when he pounds a bunch of bananas to pulp on the beachfront). We sense that *Fat Man on a Beach*—like Johnson’s last

¹⁵² Johnson, *Fat Man on a Beach*, 1974. [Film] Michael Bakewell, United Kingdom: Harlech Television. The film was broadcast in 1974 but was shot in October 1973. See *You're Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson*, 2013. [DVD] B. S. Johnson et al., United Kingdom: BFI Flipside.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

completed novel *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) before it—is a work simmering with frustration and a work that might at any moment erupt or explode into something more sinister.

Understanding *Fat Man on a Beach* and *Christie Malry's Own-Double Entry* as epitomising Johnson's 'poetics of frustration,' this chapter examines some of the social and historical reasons behind why this affect came to characterise the English novelist's oeuvre.¹⁵⁴ One of the reasons, it is suggested, was to do with Johnson's intransigent desire to be a popular avant-garde writer. As his biographer Jonathan Coe remarks:

[i]t was to become one of Johnson's recurring complaints that his work was not translated as often as he felt it should have been and that it generally did not reach a wide enough audience. At the same time, however, from [his second novel] *Albert Angelo* onwards he was set upon an aesthetic course which would give his books a narrower and narrower focus and make them progressively less attractive to a commercially driven international literary market (*LFE*, 145).

Johnson was conscious how difficult it would be to become a popular writer given his aesthetic credo. His natural response, therefore, was to professionalise his occupation as an experimental novelist. But to professionalise an activity or service for which few people are willing to pay is hard work in itself, although, as we shall see, Johnson went considerably far in managing to do so. His professionalism was entwined with a dogged belief that he was writing as though it 'mattered' and in a way that furthered the novel form (hence why he should be supported).¹⁵⁵ He saw it as his task to show readers how the novel worked, and, in this sense, his professionalism can be understood as an implicit critique of contemporary writers 'of the popular class' who, the narrator from his first novel *Travelling People* declares, practice 'shabby chicanery on their readers'.¹⁵⁶ In offering himself as an aesthetic compass for the novel, Johnson positioned himself as a novelist who could provide the much-needed service of guiding and orientating readers through a

¹⁵⁴ The phrase is Julia Jordan's. See 'Foreword', *Well Done God!*, xvii

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 29.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, *Travelling People* (London: Constable, 1963), 12. All references are to this edition and are parenthetically given in the body of the text. Abbreviated to *TP*.

contemporary culture that is constantly moving on, yet is seemingly dominated by conservative forms:

The *avant garde* [sic] of even ten years ago is now accepted in music and painting, is the establishment in these arts in some cases. But today the neo-Dickensian novel not only receives great praise, review space and sales but also acts as a qualification to elevate its authors to chairs at universities. On reflection, perhaps the latter is not so surprising; let the dead live with the dead.¹⁵⁷

An understanding of Johnson's professionalism is therefore vital when considering his novels; the majority of his narrators explicitly identify as professionals, which the narrator in his short prose piece 'Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?' alludes to in the closing passages (addressing the reader, he exclaims 'Madame, I am a professional!').¹⁵⁸ They serve and perform for the reader as they guide them through the narrative. A corollary of Johnson's professionalism was his belief that his labour was not only valuable and important but necessary for the development of the novel form. Johnson makes clear that he conceives of the novel as a historical project, in which it is his responsibility as a contemporary novelist to continue renovating and re-energizing it, to show that 'the novel is an evolving form, not a static one'.¹⁵⁹

As an Arts Council-funded experimental novelist, Johnson's brand of literary avant-gardism was mediated and shaped by his own professionalism and a 'feeling of indebtedness' to the British taxpayer (*TP*, 25). (The phrase is from *Travelling People*, which concerns a young student wracked with guilt for not knowing how to 'best use [him]self,' knowing the British taxpayer has subsidized his university education [*TP*, 24].) This feeling of indebtedness, the chapter argues, is historically specific to Johnson as an avant-garde writer working in London throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, a period when the Arts Council began to support individual writers directly for the first time in its history. This decision ignited various fierce debates, which focused on the Arts

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 15.

¹⁵⁸ This comes after the narrator defends their decision to let the reader 'provide [their] own surmises or even [their] own ending, as [they] are inclined'. Seen the short prose piece 'Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?', *Well Done God!*, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 13.

Council's distribution of public funds. Many of the national newspapers, literary magazines, and other (usually unfunded) writers were quick to criticise the Arts Council's choices. To add to this, the media generated an intense and highly-pressurised environment for state-subsidised writers who were expected to write often and to an unremittingly high quality. To accept a grant or a bursary, therefore, was to accept money with 'strings' attached, as Anthony Burgess put it.¹⁶⁰ Related to this, is the claim made here that Johnson's last two fully-completed novels, *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry*, were more fiction-based than his previous three, which might be interpreted as a deviation from his strict aesthetic principles regarding truth. This chapter asks whether this deviation might have something to do with the pressures and the 'strings' of both the marketplace and the state subsidies, the mandates of which required writers to write for a broader public. It is suggested these conditions exacerbated Johnson's growing frustration over his inability to reconcile mass appeal with his desire to remain an avant-garde or experimental novelist, which is figured in the texts and ends, as we will see, with *Fat Man on a Beach*.

Only moments after asking the question again—'why are we here?'—Johnson informs us that he is 'going to have to go away and think about it'.¹⁶¹ The shot then cuts to him pacing back and forth (from one side of the frame to the other), affecting deep meditation. As he restlessly paces back and forth across the screen, he wears out the ground beneath him and begins to disappear from view but, before doing so completely, trips and falls over into the ditch he has created. It is a short scene but one that could be read as a potent metaphor for Johnson's artistic career: here is a writer whose propensity to overwork ran him into the ground. As he wrote with a note of exhaustion to his friend Zulfikar Ghose on 16 April 1972, after having completed *Christie Malry*, 'I have a trilogy in mind [...] Then I suspect my contribution to the novel form will be at an end' (*LFE*, 329).

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Burgess, letter to the editor in the *Times Literary Supplement*, London, 3 November 1966.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, *Fat Man on a Beach*.

As we have seen in the *Daily Mail* article mentioned in chapter two (*‘They’re giving away YOUR money to spoonfeed hippy “art”*), the anonymous reporter asks: ‘[w]hat sort of books does [B. S. Johnson] write?’ before going on to describe the literary devices that had appeared in *Travelling People* (1963) and *Albert Angelo* (1964), respectively: ‘[o]ne contained blank pages in grey or black to signify unconsciousness and death’ while ‘another had holes cut in pages so readers could glimpse through to see what was going to happen.’ In other words, the reporter suggests, Johnson’s novels were characterised by literary gimmicks, which carried with it the implication that he could not write (that the gimmicks masked his inadequacies as a writer), a charge that had been laid on him before and one he was particularly sensitive about, as demonstrated most fully when, in the final passages to *Albert Angelo*, the narrator attacks those who ‘dismiss [his] techniques as gimmicks, or [...] refuse to take them seriously’.¹⁶² This upset Johnson, who prided himself on his professionalism and who always claimed that, when he did use a literary device, it was in order to solve a literary problem that could not have been solved in any other way.¹⁶³ As a proud member of the working-class, he was always quick to draw an analogy between the craft of writing and manual labour (the latter for Johnson was the epitome of hard work). In an article he wrote in 1965, he warns his readers that ‘to become a writer is a long and hard task,’ and that, for him, writing was a ‘skill [he had] laboured [...] long to acquire.’¹⁶⁴ He goes on to compare writing to pre-industrial craftsmanship, for which

¹⁶² Johnson, *Albert Angelo* in *Omnibus* (London: Picador, 2004), 176. All references are to this edition. See *Like a Fiery Elephant* for various references to publishers and reviewers describing Johnson’s work as ‘gimmicky’ or full of ‘gimmicks’ (*LFE*, 144; 145; 157; and 158).

¹⁶³ ‘Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for conveying what I have to say. The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives. So for every device I have used there is a literary rationale and a technical justification [...]’. See ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 19.

¹⁶⁴ B.S. Johnson, ‘Writing and Publishing; or Wickedness Reveal’d’, *Well Done God!*, pp. 377-382 (378).

it is necessary to serve an ‘apprenticeship’ before ‘mov[ing] on to the journeyman stage.’¹⁶⁵ Writing was a labour-intensive craft for Johnson, to which he dedicated an enormous amount of time; as is evident in the work-graphs he meticulously kept, which tell us precisely which days and how many hours he worked when writing his novels.¹⁶⁶ His favourite analogy when thinking about experimental fiction more broadly was one he borrowed from Nathalie Sarraute, a running metaphor that compared avant-garde writers to relay racers. Even if writers do not sweat (as the Chairman of Bunting’s poem also suggests), Johnson argues they ought to be compared to those who do. The *Daily Mail* article was hurtful because he was criticised for possessing the attitude he so despised—‘Me, a hippy!’ he wrote to his friend, Zulfikar Ghose, in shock (*LFE*, 291). Johnson’s reaction indicates how seriously he felt: he threatened to sue the paper but, in the end, with the prospect of rising legal costs, he accepted a printed apology, which read:

It has been represented to the Daily Mail that an article on March 16 linked Mr B. S. Johnson, the award-winning author, with drugtakers, pornographers, and hippies, and implied that his Arts Council grants were obtained corruptly. No such implications were intended and we apologise to Mr Johnson for any misunderstanding or embarrassment which the article may inadvertently have caused (*LFE*, 292).

Contrary to what the *Mail* article had insinuated about his work ethic, Johnson possessed an unequivocal, matter-of-fact attitude towards work: work was something to be done and done to the best of one’s ability, which is reflected not only in his own industriousness but the attitudes of his characters and narrators.¹⁶⁷ In contrast to other avant-garde writers such as Alexander Trocchi,

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

¹⁶⁶ These graphs show the exact number of hours Johnson worked on his novels. He names them his ‘Stuart-style graphs’ after his friend Stuart Crampin who inspired him to do so at university. As Coe relates, ‘throughout his working life, Johnson never lost the habit of drawing up ‘Stuart [Crampin]-style graphs’, with which he meticulously recorded the number of hours spent writing every day, and the number of words written’ (*LFE*, 193). The graphs can be found in the Johnson archive, British Library, London.

¹⁶⁷ This should be no surprise given that the majority of his narrators or principal characters are based on himself. But see, for instance, Albert’s pleasure when he is allowed to do ‘real work’: ‘Today I can spend at my board, working, how marvellous, a whole day free to work, to do real work, my work, real work, vocation [...] the real satisfaction, even with success, whatever that means would be in the work itself, as it is now, the real satisfaction, in the work’, *Albert Angelo*, 103.

Johnson might appear relatively uncritical in his assessment of work as a social activity. He was too invested in working-class politics to assent to Trocchi's utopian vision that predicted a fundamental restructuring of society around leisure and play, and which called for an end to economically productive labour. Johnson, however, was no less interested in ideas of work and labour than Trocchi; it was simply a case of differing viewpoints. Nowhere is this more representative than in their novels. While Trocchi's later prose is deeply sceptical about the various corollaries of work (such as the dignity of labour, the concept of utility, work-reward systems, productivism, and the culture of professionalism), almost all of Johnson's novels contain an implicit faith in the intrinsic value of work. And while Trocchi's texts are designed to frustrate the reader and disrupt assumptions about things working, Johnson's novels, with the possible exception of his final novel *Christie Malry*, shy away from deliberately frustrating the reader—his texts are supposed to 'work', as he points out in his 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young*, a text in which he talks explicitly about his novels either working or not working.¹⁶⁸ When they do deliberately fissure and break up (as in *The Unfortunates*), the idea is that the reader will make the text work (see Mitchell in Introduction).

Johnson's endorsement of work is manifest in his unwavering desire to formally innovate and experiment with every novel. Each novel for Johnson was a different kind of project.¹⁶⁹ To experiment in this way implies a predisposition to working—rather than living—as an avant-garde artist. Project-work privileges order, utility, and completion as guiding compositional principles. Johnson suggested as much when he wrote that 'certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful

¹⁶⁸ Johnson, 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 19 and 27. *Christie Malry* wants to very purposefully frustrate the reader, as Coe points out. In his notes to the novel, Johnson writes that '[o]ne is deliberately annoying the reader in order to punish him for daring to like rubbish! That's your rubbish, one is saying, what you like so much!' (*LFE*, 316)

¹⁶⁹ Adam Guy writes about Johnson's 'project-work' and compares this method of working to the one employed by French *nouveau romancier* Michel Butor, whose novels *L'Emploi du temps* (1957) and *Degrés* (1960) he views as 'self-justifying and self-limiting, attempting to document the totality of a chosen thing within an ordering form.' See 'Johnson and the *nouveau roman*: *Trawl* and other Butorian Projects' in *B. S. Johnson and Post-war Literature*, 35-53 (41).

ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful.¹⁷⁰ Those that were successful, he later mentioned, were ‘specific solutions to a specific set of [formal] problems.’¹⁷¹ Johnson’s productivist vocabulary (‘working,’ ‘ordering,’ ‘solving,’ ‘success’) is anathema to Trocchi’s novelistic enterprise. To further distinguish the two, there are few images of labouring bodies in the Scottish writer’s fiction, and, where there are, these images never celebrate labour.¹⁷² Yet, throughout Johnson’s work, descriptions of labour and labouring bodies are characterised by a tender respectfulness (as in *Trawl* when the narrator at various points observes the fishermen perform their gutting duties). When writing about writing as a form of labour—as both Trocchi and Johnson frequently do—Trocchi’s narrators and characters do not ever enjoy the compositional work inherent to the writing process (it is represented as either boring or painful), whereas in Johnson’s texts the writer-narrators appear either to have fun, as in *Travelling People* and *Christie Malry* or confidence in writing as a means to exorcise unwanted memories and ease pain, as in *Trawl* (1966) and *The Unfortunates* (1969). Indeed, for the narrators of *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, the trouble and the pain in getting it all down is confirmation that the act of writing is doing its job.

Work as an idea, and as a concept (texts, experiments, devices working) complements Johnson’s clear interest in working practices, professions, and occupations. The subject matter of his texts is unusually concerned with professional relations and jobs: in the novels, professions give purpose and meaning, and are a way for characters to account for their lives. But they can

¹⁷⁰ B. S. Johnson, ‘The Disintegrating Novel,’ *Books and Bookmen*, vol. 15, no. 12 (September 1970), 8.

¹⁷¹ B. S. Johnson, ‘Holes, Syllabics and the Succussions of the Intercostal and Abdominal Muscles’, which was originally written in August 1965 as lecture to students at Belfast University and later published in the *Northern Review*, vol.1, no. 2, 1966). See ‘Holes, Syllabics...’, *Well Done God!*, 393. In an interview in 1973, Johnson tells Burns that his novels are usually written according to the exigencies of ‘economics’ (i.e. the publisher’s deadline). Compare this professional, workmanlike attitude to the drawn-out and delayed composition of Trocchi’s *Cain’s Book* (see chapter two).

¹⁷² Even in his early erotic novellas, where bodies do work, the ultimate end lies in pleasure, and the labour that precedes this pleasure is subject to resentment. See the passage from *Helen and Desire* in chapter two, for example.

also be a source of guilt and anxiety, as displayed in *Travelling People* and *Trawl*. The narrative of *Travelling People* is set in motion when the idling, itinerant protagonist Henry Henry finds employment at the Stromboli Club in rural Wales. Henry does his best to ignore the question of his future but those he works alongside at the club persist in asking him about it, filling him with morbid dread each time they do. He does not know what ‘use’ to put himself to (an expression that is repeated continually throughout *Travelling People*). His uncertainty makes him feel even more guilty and indebted to a society that has paid for his university education. Johnson’s second novel, *Albert Angelo*, also focuses heavily on a protagonist’s concerns about what to do: the eponymous Albert is an architect manqué who resorts to supply teaching to make a living—a position he resents. The novel documents the frustration of an artist who is forced to divert his attentions away from more meaningful pursuits, which is also implied in *Travelling People*: Henry knows that his position of barman and general handyman is only a temporary one. Both novels concern highly-educated protagonists who believe they ought to be doing something more productive with their time. And both novels gesture to Johnson’s own anxieties about employment at the time of writing; like Albert, he went through a period of supply-teaching, which he also resented.

By the time Johnson wrote *Trawl* (1966), he was managing to sustain himself from writing alone (albeit mainly from journalism, another distraction that he began to resent).¹⁷³ Yet, writing as a full-time occupation ushered in new concerns and anxieties about his social status and these can be traced throughout the novel, in which the writer-narrator boards a trawler in order to trawl the memories of his past, away from London, in relative seclusion—as Johnson himself did. But this literary excursion prompts those working on board to label the narrator ‘the pleasuretripper’ (*T*, 28), which he resents: ‘I took Duff up again on calling me a pleasuretripper, I who am here to work as hard as anyone, at my own task’ (*T*, 129). This theme of writing as an irresponsible occupation is revisited briefly in both *Christie Mahy* and the posthumous *See the Old Lady Decently*

¹⁷³ He disliked writing what he considered to be “hack work” and, in particular, dismissed his football reporting as an irritating distraction.

(1975) but it is in *Trawl* where this uncertainty about writing-as-labour is most pronounced. The subsequent novels, *The Unfortunates* and *House Mother Normal* (1971), are less noticeably interested in working practices yet still address issues to do with work: the former details the “hackwork” of a sports journalist (the theme of which ties into the work issues outlined in Johnson’s first two novels), while the latter focuses on the actions of a sadistic House Mother in a geriatric ward. It is not until *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* that Johnson’s interest in work (and debt as a concept closely related to work) resurfaces as primary subject matter. *Christie Malry* draws from Johnson’s own experiences as an accounts clerk. The eponymous protagonist conceives of a ‘Great Idea,’ which is to create a moral double-entry system.¹⁷⁴ Each time Christie incurs what he perceives to be an injustice to himself, he debits “Them” (i.e. society). This results in Christie eventually resorting to terrorism in order to balance out the books. The comedy lies in Christie’s dubious reckonings: the “[g]eneral diminution of Christie’s life caused by advertising’ incurs £50 debit, whilst Christie’s Aldwych Theatre bomb hoax is put down as £3.81 credit (*CMODE*, 119). Most disconcerting, however, is the lack of psychological penetration we are given into Christie’s mind. The narrator-writer’s metafictional tricks lighten the tone of the novel and distract us from his destructive acts. Amidst the escalating violence, Christie remains a calm figure who continues to go to work and do his job. To those around him, he appears to be the consummate professional, an ‘Industrious Pilgrim’ (*CMODE*, 9), which is what makes him such an unsettling character—particularly when we consider Johnson’s other characters and narrators. While the readers are aware of Christie’s actions, nobody else in the novel is, besides the narrator, who is a version of Johnson himself.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (London: Picador, 2001), 21. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *CMODE*.

The Professional Viewpoint

In *Like a Fiery Elephant*, Jonathan Coe documents Johnson's professionalism in detail. Many of those interviewed by Coe speak about Johnson's work ethic and attitude towards work, with one interviewee, Alison Paice, remarking that Johnson 'liked professionalism in anybody and he couldn't be bothered with anybody who wasn't giving him something worthwhile to listen to' (*LFE*, 396). Barry Cole, one of Johnson's closest friends, tells Coe how he always noticed a natural rapport between Johnson and 'very highly professional people' (*LFE*, 404), which chimes with Coe's own observation that Johnson was known amongst those he worked with as 'very forgiving, provided that he was certain they were doing their professional best for him.' (*LFE*, 337). Fellow experimental writer Alan Burns, again in an interview with Coe, describes Johnson in a similar fashion: Johnson, according to Burns, was 'a real professional' (*LFE*, 389). Throughout the biography, Coe insists on this word himself. He tells us that Johnson 'always liked to [...] present himself as a highly professional writer' (*LFE*, 329); that Johnson 'prided himself so highly on his professionalism' (*LFE*, 235); and that Johnson would hand in his manuscripts to his publishers with 'usual consummate professionalism' (*LFE*, 324). Coe ascribes this 'professional pride and efficiency' to his 'early background in the business world' (*LFE*, 202), when Johnson worked as an accounts clerk before deciding on a literary career. Twenty years after Johnson's death, Giles Gordon would remember his friend and fellow novelist as 'the most professional of authors,' recounting how he was consistently and 'deeply involved' in dealing with various matters related to the profession of the novelist, such as 'the battle to achieve Public Lending Right [despite not living] to witness and benefit from its implementation.'¹⁷⁵

When Johnson was not attending to professional matters, he wrote extensively about the importance of professional standards and what it meant, in his view, to be a professional writer.

¹⁷⁵ Gordon, Giles. 'Diary,' *London Review of Books* 15 no. 19 (1993): 21, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n19/giles-gordon/diary>. Accessed 8 April 2017.

In these articles, such as ‘The Professional Viewpoint,’ he identified explicitly as an experienced, professional author. Johnson appears fiercely protective about his profession, especially in relation to the earnings and payments of writers or, more specifically, ‘the better writers, the serious writers, the professional as compared with the amateur’.¹⁷⁶ In the same article, ‘Writing and Publishing: or, Wickedness Reveal’d’, he writes about amateur writers producing a ‘thundering cataract of rubbish which is responsible for the situation at the moment’.¹⁷⁷ The ‘situation’ was the ‘depress[ion]’ in author’s wages and what he saw as the exploitation of writers by publishers, a subject he wrote extensively on throughout his career.¹⁷⁸ Johnson’s frustration with his various publishers stemmed from his view that he never earned his rightful share:

Of course, they say, you didn’t write it for money: of course, I didn’t, but since £2,000 has been paid for it, why should not my share at least equal what it cost me to write it? It seems obvious to point it out again, but it is necessary since the whole of publishing does not seem to acknowledge the fact: that £2,000 would not have been made at all without me, the basic producer. Some publishers even trot out that old myth about people writing best whilst starving in garrets, too: and they believe it, despite never having heard an author agree. And, though it almost passes belief, one person engaged in this “occupation for gentlemen” even assured me that I was lucky things were now somewhat better than in the eighteenth century, when writers had to fawn before patrons to get published!¹⁷⁹

Johnson wrote this in 1965 at precisely the same time that one of the most significant developments in his professional career occurred, which he would go on to write about in the same article:

I asked my publisher to pay me as much as he did his secretary (putting myself on no higher financial level, conceiving myself at least worth as much to him as she is) for the next five years, in which time I should write three novels. He refused to value me

¹⁷⁶ Johnson, ‘Writing and Publishing’, *Well Done God!*, 378.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 379. It should be added that £2,000 was a large sum. Johnson would agree a contract with Secker & Warburg for the living wage, of around £800. These sums would be the equivalent to £27,000 and £11,000, respectively. Again, it is worth stressing how vital the Arts Council grant was by doubling his annual wage for 1966/67. His finances were eased further when in March 1967 he was awarded a Somerset Maugham Award of £500. Johnson happily announced to his friends Roma and Stuart Crampin that this meant ‘I won’t have to do any journalism, which is a blessed relief.’ (*LFE*, 232). Based on figures supplied by the UK Office for National Statistics, see: http://www.moneysorter.co.uk/calculator_inflation.html, accessed 8 April 2017.

at even this level, did not value me enough to keep me alive to write these next three novels. Nor did several other publishers: but one, Secker & Warburg, has been enlightened enough to acknowledge in practical terms that this system is unfair, and has entered into such a contract for three years and two novels. The salary is still an advance against royalties, the proportion of which remains much the same, but the risk has been transferred from the writer, I shall no longer have to subsidise the publisher, and at least I shall be able to live during the next three years (albeit only at the level of a secretary) doing what I am best able to do.¹⁸⁰

For Gordon, the fact that Johnson was ‘in 1966, probably the first British novelist to be paid a monthly salary, by his publisher (Secker and Warburg), for three years, in return for two novels’ was a measurement of his professionalism.¹⁸¹ By negotiating a contract, Johnson sought to professionalise his occupation further, making writing a “proper” job, which, as he put it, was bound up in and decided by ‘economics’ anyway (*IT*, 88). It is a display of Johnson’s rational instincts to avoid financial risk and yet it introduces an unsettling idea: that one is measured in terms of what they do or produce. Johnson’s claim to a vocation (‘I shall be able to live [...] doing what I am best able to do’) is a means to justify his importance and his worth, which, he implies, is greater than the secretary’s. In terms of pure economics, this makes good sense (on the proviso his novels generate at least some money). Yet, as we shall see in the following chapter, this deal occurred at the same time that Figes was working at a publishing firm (which expected her to work harder for less pay than a male secretary). In order to be hired by the firm, she was required to work as a secretary first before “climbing up”. And so, as much as Johnson justified the deal, based on his self-evaluation, there are a number of intensely gendered (yet invisible) issues at play, here.

The coup for Johnson gestured towards another aspect of his consummate professionalism. As Coe writes: it ‘was to become a famous deal, the subject of newspaper stories and much comment within the trade’ despite ‘being nothing less, in Johnson’s opinion, than what he deserved and indeed any author deserved’ (*LFE*, 187). Johnson was, as Eva Figes put it, ‘a

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, ‘Writing and Publishing’, 380.

¹⁸¹ Gordon, ‘Diary’, 21.

propagandist for the avant-garde with a gift for drawing media attention [...] he was certainly a dab hand at catching public attention.¹⁸² The first time she saw him was on television:

explaining to a bewildered interviewer why his first novel had a hole in the pages. Later on *The Unfortunates* became famous to people who did not read that sort of thing as the “book in a box,” because it was made of unbound sections.¹⁸³

Johnson was adept at playing the role of public author, a performing role that illuminates a different side to him, and one that is at odds with some of his own statements about writing only for himself and refusing to know or think about who his audience was.¹⁸⁴ In fact, he seems to want to be a popular avant-garde writer—a point that Coe makes throughout his biography. His growing reputation and his welcoming of public attention throughout the late 1960s would mean he would go some way towards reaching that status. However, there is the impression that, as his career progresses, he no longer wished to perform the role of the ‘dab hand’, that he only wished to be read—and read more widely.

A ‘very bonny applicant’ and his ‘involuntary patrons’

Johnson was one of the first novelists in British history to be directly patronised by the state. In the section that follows, this chapter will look more closely into some of the issues and debates that surrounded public funding for literature in the late Sixties and early Seventies, to examine what it meant to be an Arts Council-funded writer during a period that has been widely acknowledged as the “golden age” of the British welfare state. Johnson’s career as a novelist developed coincidentally with the major increase in the Labour government’s funding of the arts. Moreover, he managed to fit the Literature Panel’s criteria: he was neither too young nor too old, he worked hard, was professional, and his work, while often critically successful, was never

¹⁸² Eva Figes, ‘B. S. Johnson,’ *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, B. S. Johnson/ Jean Rhys number, Summer, 1985. 70-71 (70).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸⁴ See, for instance, ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 28.

commercially viable enough to discourage further financial reward. Johnson was, as the Art Council's literary director at the time described him, a 'very bonny applicant'.¹⁸⁵ And so, in 1966, the Arts Council's newly-assembled Literature Panel awarded him a Maintenance Grant, the first grant of its kind, which entitled him to the large sum of £800—the first of several such grants he would be awarded.

Before the establishment of the Literature Panel in 1966, only 'small sums of money had been disbursed [...] to poets, or organizations connected with poetry.'¹⁸⁶ As Charles Osborne, Assistant Director of the Literature Department at the time Johnson was funded, explains in his memoir *Giving it Away*, the Arts Council for 'the first twenty years of its existence' did not officially subsidize literature because:

[p]rior to 1966 [...] it appeared not to be in need of subsidy. All the good novelists and poets, as well as far too many of the bad ones, were published commercially, and there simply was no group of people exerting any pressure on the Council to intervene in the commercial processes (*GA*, 154).

However, in 1964 the Publisher's Association persuaded the Arts Council to 'broaden its policy to cover literature in general' and by the 1965-66 financial year, the Poetry Panel expanded to become the Literature Panel (*GA*, 156). This Panel consisted of twenty-one members, including Cecil Day Lewis (as Chairman), Frank Kermode, Iris Murdoch, Stevie Smith, Ted Hughes, V. S. Pritchett, and Angus Wilson. For 1966-67, the Arts Council (presided over by the Labour Minister for the Arts Jennie Lee) saw a large increase in its funding from £3,910,000 to £5,700,000. The Literature Panel was allocated £63,000, and of this they spent £50,000 (*GA*, 153). A significant portion of this—£17,950—went on bursaries and grants, which provoked much debate (*GA*, 153).

In theory, every British taxpayer became a patron of the arts when the Arts Council was granted a Royal Charter in 1946. So, when the Arts Council's funding was bolstered in 1966-67,

¹⁸⁵ Eric White, quoted in *LFE*, 291.

¹⁸⁶ Charles Osborne, *Giving it Away: The Memoirs of an Uncivil Servant* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), 154. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *GA*.

this naturally generated media attention—and with it an added sense of accountability. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the formation of the Literature Panel was met with immediate opposition from a wide range of critics. In response to its 1966-67 awards ceremony (where it was announced Johnson had won the Maintenance Grant), the *Daily Telegraph* writer Colm Brogan reported that ‘the vast majority of the taxpayers who were [...] involuntary patrons’ knew little about the recipients of the ‘bounty’ and ‘even less about the Literature Panel,’ which not only suggested the Arts Council was distributing the awards to unknown and obscure writers but that it was silently expanding against the will of those who funded it (i.e. the public).¹⁸⁷ Brogan went on, writing that the Arts Council, wielding a budget that ‘would greatly interest the Government of Malta,’ had become an ideological tool for the Left or, as he referred to them, the ‘collectivist[s]’.¹⁸⁸ The Arts Council’s funding was for Brogan a serious political issue. He made an explicit connection between ‘ideological content’ and subsidised ‘*avant-garde*’ art which ranged from ‘extreme Left wing to the anarchical.’¹⁸⁹ Taxpayers’ money, he wrote, ‘subsidise[s] preaching and teaching of which the majority quite strongly disapprove’, which, as we have seen, was an opinion the *Mail* would second.¹⁹⁰ It was not just Brogan who believed that investment in the arts was a political issue. Peter Simple, also writing for the *Telegraph*, made the same point when he wrote about the connection between ‘Leftists’ and “‘experimental, subsidised’” art forms, and how the Arts Council was essentially sponsoring ‘propaganda.’¹⁹¹ In similar vein, the Conservative MP Harold Soref wrote to the Opinion and Editorial section of the *Telegraph* in 1971 to express his dismay about the Arts Council’s politicisation. But he went so far as to suggest ‘the Arts Council [was] accepting Soviet dictation,’ following the withdrawal of five watercolours at the Hayward

¹⁸⁷ Colm Brogan, ‘Art for Propaganda’s Sake,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, April 19, 1967, 16.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Peter Simple, ‘Way of the World,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, February 13, 1969, 20. Simple on this occasion was writing about theatrical experimentation, under the wearied section heading ‘More Experiments.’

Gallery (funded by the Arts Council) ‘out of deference to Soviet ideological sensitivity.’¹⁹² He concluded by observing that ‘Communist pollution is apparently conducive to the trendy environment.’¹⁹³ And again, this is framed as happening at the ‘British taxpayers’ expense,’ which, along with ‘British taxpayers’ money,’ was a typical collocation in many of the opinion pieces about the Arts Council during the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁹⁴

The criticism endorsed by the *Telegraph* was perhaps predictable in its political content, but it did raise several key issues regarding state patronage and the basic assumptions surrounding it. As Brogan made clear in his article, not everyone shared the view that the state should fund the arts. Protests concerning taxpayers’ money were ubiquitous. Most of the talk about taxpayers’ money was less about its literal value and more about what Brogan ironically referred to as the ‘alteration in the cash nexus.’¹⁹⁵ The problem with this unprecedented ‘alteration’ was that it forced many people for the first time to sponsor art they either had no interest in, could not access, disliked, or were ideologically opposed to. Older, aristocratic forms of patronage were private matters, he claimed. If the patron’s judgment was wrong, ‘at least it was his own [mistake].’¹⁹⁶ But the newly established form of state patronage was for Brogan a problem; artistic value was to be judged by a ‘collectivity [that had] no judgment of its own,’¹⁹⁷ inevitably leading to disagreements between those with different tastes or values or, as it was frequently framed, between those who lived in London and those who did not).¹⁹⁸ The most important issue, however, was the public’s

¹⁹² Harold Soref, ‘Art and Communism,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday, March 9, 1971, 12.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Brogan, ‘Art for Propaganda’s Sake,’ 16. Ironic because it is a Marxist phrase, one that within the Marxist tradition draws attention to the dehumanising power of money: human relations were reduced to a ‘cash nexus.’ The idea here, then, is that taxpayers—as ‘involuntary patrons’—have no relationship with the art they are funding.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Keith Nurse’s 1972 article ‘Arts for all the people’ alludes to the issue when it points out that ‘it still seems that the “metropolitan middleclass” have more than their fair share of the cultural cake,’ following a discussion in the House of Lords where Lord Eccles was reported to have asked the question, “Are we returning a fair share [to the majority of the taxpayers]?” See Keith Nurse,

‘modest right to read about what is being done with their money.’¹⁹⁹ This seems like a fair request. It was after all a sentiment widely held and regularly expressed in the media at the time; with such a large budget, the Arts Council needed to be transparent with the money. Along with his observation about the ‘alteration in the cash nexus’ creating ‘involuntary patrons,’ Brogan seems to have addressed several key issues in his attempt to demonstrate why the newly-introduced state patronage was problematic. Except that, upon closer inspection, his statements contain several insidious implications. By referring to the taxpayer’s money as ‘their’ money in the present continuous tense, Brogan’s seemingly ‘modest’ statement insinuates that the Arts Council’s funds still belong to the taxpayer and that the money is still there, in circulation, and retrievable.²⁰⁰ He also introduces the idea that the Arts Council’s money was *cash*, a common trope in the press at the time—writing grants and bursaries were continually referred to as ‘cash’ or ‘cash hand-outs’.²⁰¹ The materiality of cash (as opposed to credit) is a direct, deliberate appeal to the reader’s sense of entitlement—not to mention their sense of empowerment. It lends immediacy to the idea it can be physically, forcibly “got.” It is, of course, unrealistic to expect immediate returns on arts subsidies but this is what Brogan intimates when he writes about the ‘modest right to read about what is being done’ with the funds, reimagining the Arts Council as a type of stock market, where the taxpayer trades cash in the hope that it yields worthwhile art—and quickly. The state patronage of the arts, however, does not work like this. The production of art takes time and cannot be

‘Arts for all the people,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Saturday, April 8, 1972, 16. There had been complaints about the metropolitan-provincial divide for a long time. An example is the chairman of the Arts Council in the mining district of Rugeley in Staffordshire writing to the *Telegraph* in 1970 to ‘thank the *Daily Telegraph* for bringing to the notice of the public the way in which the Arts Council of Great Britain is being asked to allocate cash grants for “way out art forms” [...] I should like to protest most vigorously to the encouraging of such “way out” activities as mentioned. As a council we desperately need money to maintain an Arts Centre and to bring good artists to the town.’ See A. E. Fenn, ‘Arts Council grants,’ *The Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, March 18, 1970, 18.

¹⁹⁹ Brogan, ‘Art for Propaganda’s Sake,’ 16.

²⁰⁰ This type of formulation was a common way to appeal to the reader, it seems. The *Daily Mail*’s sensationalist headline springs to mind: ‘*They’re giving away your money to spoonfeed hippy “art.”*’

²⁰¹ See for example Brian Silk, ‘Arts Council doubts on cash hand-outs,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, March 12, 1970, 1.

reduced to any laws or rules or speculation; good faith is required. It worked like a credit system, where the taxpayer was represented as crediting the artist with the intention that this credit would be repaid in the future. If the artistic product failed to conform to the taxpayer's taste—Brogan, for example, was unhappy to support Arnold Wesker's drama—then subsidy suddenly appears more like permanent artistic bondage. Brogan sees the subsidy like an accountant using a ledger might—that is, rationally. For him, it is about the careful management of debt and credit, about dividends and the visibility of money in flow, which within this type of discourse translates into the more benign euphemism of “transparency” (with its connotations of professional honesty). Yet, as Johnson demonstrates in *Trawl* and satirises in *Christie Malry*, not everything can be subjected to rationalisation and any attempt to rationalise the un-rationalisable only leads to irrationality.

The so-called ‘alteration in the cash nexus’ created a phenomenon peculiar to late-1960s British literary culture: the indebted and indolent writer, whose unrepayable debt to the public was always due. Indolent because it was generally understood that the public funded the subsidised writer's leisure time, a claim maintained not only by the newspapers (often negatively) but also the Arts Council itself (in a more positive light without the connotations of self-indulgence). In his article for the *Telegraph*, ‘Grants will buy time for 15 writers,’ Sean Day-Lewis, son of Cecil (the chairman of the Literature Panel), stated that ‘[t]he object of the hand-out is to “buy a writer a period of time in which to study and practice his art, undistracted by other commitments.”’ He does not reference who he is citing but it seems likely the quotation came from the Arts Council. He goes on specifically to mention Johnson's “retirement” from teaching: “The first novel [of the Secker & Warburg contract], “The Trawl” [sic] was published early last month as he hopes to finish the second by next September. His arrangement with his publisher has enabled him to retire from teaching and concentrate on writing’.²⁰² Frank Kermode (a member of the Literature Panel)

²⁰² See Sean Day-Lewis, ‘Grants will buy time for 15 writers,’ *Daily Telegraph*, Friday, December 2, 1966, 19.

supported the idea of awarding the writer leisure time when he wrote that the grants and bursaries should be thought of in the same terms as a Guggenheim award: '[a] Guggenheim does not save your life, it gives you leisure for a limited period, and you go back to your normal occupation.'²⁰³ Yet, this type of assistance was widely resented for various reasons. One of these reasons was simple: writers had a bad reputation. Ever since the Arts Council had been given more funding, numerous reports surfaced about artists and writers squandering the "cash hand-outs." A good example of this occurred in 1967 when the poet and novelist Vernon Scannell was 'gaoled for three months [...] for driving while under the influence of drink.'²⁰⁴ The article, 'POET GAOLED ON DRINK-DRIVE CHARGE,' concluded with a pointed observation: 'Scannell was awarded £1,200 by the Arts Council in December so that he could "study and practice his art undisturbed by other commitments.'²⁰⁵ Perhaps in relation to the incident, Kermode commented in *Encounter* that same month that it was absurd that so many people 'have convinced themselves that an award of £800 guarantees the lucky applicant a prolonged period of riot or sloth.'²⁰⁶ Johnson would have been aware of the controversy surrounding Scannell since they were in the same cohort of writers to be awarded funding that year. Their names appeared side-by-side in much of the press that covered the awards.

Another, related reason for resentment over the subsidies came from the pervasive feeling that anyone could be a writer (and, therefore, stand a chance of enjoying a prolonged period of riot and sloth). John Calder's remark that a sudden influx of 'meretricious' art 'flourished' during this period—in part due to the increased levels of subsidy—belies this popular notion.²⁰⁷ So too does Kermode's slightly anxious defense of the Literature Panel's selection policy: '[i]t is true that,

²⁰³ Frank Kermode, 'Pathetic Maundy Money,' *Encounter*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1967, 56-9 (59).

²⁰⁴ Anonymous reporter, 'POET GAOLED ON DRINK-DRIVE CHARGE,' *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, March 2, 1967, 17.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Kermode, 'Pathetic Maundy Money,' 58.

²⁰⁷ Calder, 'Alexander Trocchi,' *Edinburgh Review*, 35.

assuming there ought to be grants and bursaries, the selection procedures can be improved. It is true that nobody should suppose he establishes a claim on public support merely by setting up as a writer.²⁰⁸ Ironically, only the year before, Johnson himself implied it was easy to set up as a writer. In a paper delivered at Belfast University, later published as an essay, he stated he needed nothing ‘other than a pencil and a paper’ to begin his career as a novelist.²⁰⁹ Four years later, the *Daily Mail*’s sharp attack would go on to dispute this claim as it drew attention to the ‘blank pages’ in *Travelling People* and the ‘holes cut in [the] pages’ of *Albert Angelo*. It was not a only a pencil and paper he needed, but rather, the article alleged, a greater sense of responsibility towards the public who were about to fund his Gregynog Arts Fellowship, which entitled him to a ‘rent-free house, £1,000 in cash and £100 expenses’.²¹⁰ Not for the first occasion, Johnson was accused of being a ‘pleasuretripper’, someone who did not have to work while those around him did (as we shall see in the next section).²¹¹

The *Mail* episode was not an isolated incident; the article was part of a wider assault on subsidised writers. The acceptance of public subsidy was also a tacit (or sometimes unwitting) acceptance of an enormous amount of media attention and, with it, intense pressure.²¹² Coe shows that Johnson was clearly upset by the *Mail*’s accusations (*LFE*, 290-3). His main reason for being upset, however, was related to the article’s misrepresentation of his image as a writer. Johnson bristled at the *Mail*’s suggestion he was a ‘hippy’. The hippy, of course, was a cultural stereotype widely understood as the antithesis to the image of the hard-working professional, towards which Johnson had throughout his career diligently aspired—and, in the eyes of many, achieved (as we will see in the following section). When the Arts Council money had been awarded in 1966/67,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Johnson, ‘Holes, Syllabics...’, 387.

²¹⁰ Anonymous reporter, *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1970, Johnson archive, MS89001/4/6/11.

²¹¹ Johnson, *Trawl* in *Omnibus*, 29. All editions are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *T*.

²¹² In a letter to his friend Zulfikar Ghose, Johnson explains that a *Daily Mail* journalist had rang him under false pretences (to speak to Johnson as a literary ‘innovator’) so that he could gain more information for the article. See *LFE*, 291-2.

there was an explosion of debate in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Writers, like Eva Figes, wrote in to express their views:

Sir,—I am one of the people to whom the Arts Council did not give a bursary. Secker paid me £150 for my first novel [*Equinox*], Faber are paying me £150 for my second. I have a job from 9.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. five days a week, and last year I spent most of my evenings translating books because my salary in a publishing office would not support two children. I do not know why the State should supplement my income. On the other hand I do not see why part of my P.A.Y.E. deductions should go to other writers, some of whom are apparently fortunate enough not to have to work.

EVA FIGES²¹³

But it seems unlikely that Figes—who not long afterwards accepted an Arts Council grant herself—was specifically targeting Johnson. It was more likely that she took issue with the several other writers on the awards list, some of whom had not published anything for twenty-seven years. In fact, as indicated by J. F. Turing’s letter to the editor, Johnson emerged with his professional image intact—and even some added credit—amongst the literary milieu:

Sir,—Panel Game III gives rise to the interesting question: what do authors do with their time? I should be enchanted to receive a grant from the Arts Council but I can well see that I am going about it the wrong way. My production is excessive. In the course of two years I have written four books—two published, a third to be published in January, and a fourth accepted for publication. As I have a full-time job, the only way I can write books is to compose them in the early hours—between 5 a.m. and 7.30 a.m. [...]

Congratulations to Mr. B. S. Johnson who has produced (*per* your leader) three novels, another in collaboration, a commentary and a volume of verse in the short space of three and a half years. But, for heaven’s sake, what are those others about who produce *nothing* in twenty-seven years or even eleven or “a book of verse, a long poem and a volume of critical essays, *all since 1952*”? If the quantity is so small, the quality must be intimidating. [...]

J. F. TURING²¹⁴

Yet, the comical nature of Turing’s complaint cannot disguise what was an obvious injunction, one endorsed by the Arts Council itself: work hard, work often, and work well. In the Arts Council’s Twenty-second Annual Report, it was announced that the funding body would no longer support art organisations or funded artists that produced ‘bad art’ or ‘publicly unacceptable art’,

²¹³ Eva Figes, letter to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 December 1966, 1171.

²¹⁴ J. F. Turing, letter to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 December 1966, 1171.

which was in response to the widespread criticism it had endured.²¹⁵ Ultimately, there was deep scrutiny over the grants and Johnson would have been attentive to, if not actively following, these debates, many of which were published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, which took it upon itself to do precisely what the Arts Council had promised to do in one of their annual reports: that is, ‘to satisfy tax-paying readers that their money was not being wasted’.²¹⁶ Anthony Burgess in a letter to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that he would feel too embarrassed to accept a writing subsidy, before claiming that he would rather win money from the pools or an eccentric millionaire fan than accept the cash from the state, stating: ‘I hate strings’.²¹⁷ It is revealing that several prominent writers were strongly opposed to the Arts Council’s support but it is Burgess’s comments that are most suggestive; they are indicative of the prevailing culture surrounding the grants, the morality that issued from this culture, and how some writers responded to this culture.²¹⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, in his work on the intersections between debt and culture, alludes to the ‘morality’ specific to debt and its relation to the concept of guilt, as posited by Friedrich Nietzsche:

Debt produces a specific “morality,” at once different from and complementary to that of “labour.” The couple “effort-reward” of the ideology of work is doubled by the morality of the *promise* (to honour one’s debt) and the *fault* (of having entered into it). As Nietzsche reminds us, the concept of “Schuld” (guilt), a concept central to morality, is derived from the very concrete notion of “Schulden” (debts). The

²¹⁵ Anonymous reporter, ‘Arts Council Will Not Subsidise Bad Work’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 12 November, 1967. It is unclear how these aesthetic judgments were measured or what was supposed to constitute good or bad art.

²¹⁶ Editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 November, 1966. The editor is referring here to the aims set out by the Arts Council’s Annual Twenty-first Report (1966) but this is also precisely what the *Times Literary Supplement* was doing itself. The debates it printed mostly concerned the ways in which the funding was allocated and, by extension, the ways in which that funding could be best spent.

²¹⁷ Anthony Burgess, letter to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 November 1966. It was these ‘strings’ that Basil Bunting resented when he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Telegraph* complaining that the Arts Council were forcing him to include the line, ‘this book was subsidised by the Arts Council’.

²¹⁸ Burgess essentially took the view that writers can and must work on the side to support and supplement their writing. Similar sentiments were expressed in the letters. This usually came down to the view that work, staying busy, and having to survive as a writer were important factors for a writer to remain productive.

“morality” of debt results in the moralization of the unemployed, the “assisted,” the users of public services, as well as of entire populations. [...] When it comes to talking about debt, the media, politicians, and economists have only one message to communicate: “You are at fault,” “You are guilty.”²¹⁹

At times, the subsidised writer’s public audience (as constructed by parts of the media) was an audience less interested in the work and more interested in the writer’s debt to society and the writer’s performance of repaying that debt. In light of Lazzarato’s point, it is interesting to think about Johnson’s novel *Trawl*, in which many socially-constructed affects, including guilt and embarrassment, are articulated in response to debt. After so much scrutiny laid on these writers, and with Johnson himself so ubiquitous in the press at this time, it is understandable that along with the grant money came an enormous amount of pressure to perform according to the vaguely-defined criteria (work hard, work often, and work well). Although *Trawl* was written before Johnson accepted any Arts Council funding, it provides an insight into the hyper-rational mind of a writer who was already sensitive to notions of debt and its repayment. As we will see, for both Johnson and his narrators, life is calculated as a succession of transactions.

The Transactions of *Trawl*

As mentioned before, Coe claims that Johnson’s literary work was fostered by his ‘early background in the business world’. ‘[W]riting,’ for Johnson, Coe tells us, ‘was like accountancy’ (*LFE*, 78). Julia Jordan picks up on this analogy when she notes that Johnson’s ‘characters mediate existential anxiety through their desire to account for their lives,’ adding that his ‘will-to-exactitude often produces a note of half-comic bathos: life, for Johnson, scrupulously accounted for, is usually a disappointment’.²²⁰ She argues that:

[t]he desire to count up the injustices, the pleasures, and the events that make up life is eventually just another version of the urge to represent the truth of existence. As

²¹⁹ Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2012), 30-31.

²²⁰ Jordan, ‘Foreword’, *Well Done God!*, xx.

Johnson writes in 'A Few Selected Sentences'—it is imperative to 'Accommodate that mess.' Because, eventually, 'someone has to keep the records.'²²¹

A large part of Johnson's novelistic enterprise is based on capturing and representing faithfully the truth, which always means 'return[ing] to the virtues of certainty: of counting, of reckoning, and of calculation'.²²² The recursive writing style in both *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* is testament to this, to his 'poetics of frustration', born out of language's imprecision and its incapacity to mimetically, truthfully represent what Johnson wishes to say.²²³ For him, numbers and figures have an advantage over words: they represent purely and precisely the concepts they stand in for: number one universally accounts for a single unit; numbers for him are therefore the most truthful form of communication, displaying his rational, professional impulse. As a metaphor, the number is tethered to its signified value. Words, however, take on nuances and multiple meanings, which causes problems for the writer or narrator, whose job it was, as Johnson continually stressed, to provide an accurate account. So, in the novels that deliberately set out to tell the truth and to recount truthful experiences, the prose style of the internal monologues reflects the narrator's frustrated attempts to catch meaning and truth. It repeats itself, doubles back on itself, tries to find the most accurate word, the *mot juste*, and nowhere else in Johnson's oeuvre is this more apparent than in *Trawl*. In this way, too, we see aspects of his professionalism emerge: it becomes Johnson's job to account for his experiences to the reader using the most accurate language.

The narrator of *Trawl* seems to derive satisfaction from words 'fitt[ing]'. For instance, when he describes his friend at the beginning of the narrative as 'suave,' he tells the reader that 'suave fitted him, suave, another word I do not use often but there are some words which fit some people exactly, better than any other words' (*T*, 8). Words that 'fit' give pleasure, unlike words of 'limited use' (*T*, 17), such as 'oaf' (*T*, 17), which the narrator uses to describe a former lover's partner. Here,

²²¹ Ibid. The quotations Jordan uses are from Johnson's short prose piece, 'A Few Selected Sentences,' in *Well Done God!*, 75-80 (80).

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., xvii.

as in many other places in Johnson's work, the narrator derives satisfaction from words working and doing their job as economically and efficiently as possible. We see this at the beginning of the novel when he recounts an exchange with his doctor:

[the seasickness pills] ought to work, the doctor said they would work, Best thing known for *mal de mer*, he said, pompously. Seasickness, same number of syllables, what does he save, or gain, calling it pompously? I shall upbraid him with his tablets' uselessness when I return (T, 8).

Words are computed in financial terms, of savings and gains, and, as he gestures towards, we begin to discover that the narrator is deeply preoccupied with ideas to do with use and uselessness. The usefulness of the project itself is always under (self-) 'examination' (T, 82), and he continually presses himself to 'think harder!' (T, 88), calls for 'order' (T, 43; 75), and informs the reader at one point that his guiding principles of 'present enquiry' (T, 142) are '[d]iscipline, order, clarity, truth' (T, 24). Anything which fails to conform to these ideals ('all this useless history,' [T, 80], and whatever else he perceives as extraneous, besides the point, or devoid of function) is, so to speak, thrown overboard like the fish entrails, mimicking figuratively the crew's labour. He wants streamlined functionality, and admires those things that simply and economically work, things that bring profit, such as the very trawler he is on: the 'whole ship is dedication to the concept of function and that is what makes her so beautiful to me' (T, 137). His thoughts naturally and repeatedly return to utility, as when he asks himself after relentlessly trawling his memories, 'so where has all that taken me? . . . Nowhere' (T, 25), which is a question he frequently asks himself (and an answer he often arrives at) in his 'enquiry', as when he thinks:

I must have exhausted it by now, the pain must be exorcised, the tedium of interest, of making myself regurgitate all this: for what? . . . Think, then, analyse, then [...] What use are analyses, reasons, causes? (T, 94)

Lurking beneath this deeply utilitarian mode of thinking and reasoning, however, is a deep anxiety about his own superfluity, his own uselessness, which is underscored in typically numerical terms, as when he refers to himself as a 'supernumerary' (T, 91). It is a telling description of how excluded he feels, which is exacerbated by the crew's nickname for him. They refer to him as a

‘pleasuretripper,’ a phrase that elicits a defensive reaction and an anxious justification for his occupation as a writer: ‘I took Duff up again on calling me a pleasuretripper, I who am here to work as hard as anyone, at my own task’ (*T*, 29). Crucially, it is others people’s perceptions of his work that organises his emotions and cause him to reflect on both his occupation as a writer and his own use or, rather, uselessness. He feels particularly wounded after being ‘cursed for [his] idleness’, which was:

the first expressed resentment of my pleasuretripping. Just when I want to be, think of myself as being, one of them, up and around, there is no place for me, no place, I am replaced in my isolation yet again. At least my bunk is my own, I’ll go back there (*T*, 179).

On board, identity is constructed through visible labour, of doing the task that needs to be done, and so the narrator’s moping while they are ‘busy’ is a forceful reminder of his ‘out-of-placeness’ (*T*, 179).

The narrator questions the importance of his own ‘task’—of ‘trawl[ing] the delicate mesh of [his] mind over the snagged and broken floor of [his] past’ (*T*, 21)—when he observes the gruelling labour carried out by the crew, which he records with careful fidelity towards the end of the novel. There are several instances of the narrator praising the work of the skipper and his crew, as when he notices with a sense of admiration ‘[the] athletic dedication about Scouse’s gutting’ (*T*, 131). These descriptions contrast with the many memories he has of his own past failings at various workplaces and of times when he has laboured but for no reward or for little recompense, starting with the time when, as a child, he collected conkers for the War Effort, which were ‘rude[ly]’ rejected (*T*, 63). As he recalls soberly, ‘I still feel something of that disappointment [...] when we did [help the War Effort], our efforts were spurned’ (*T*, 63). These recollections about his own inadequacy as a worker, which continue into and throughout his adulthood, fatigue him: ‘I am now tired of remembering’ (*T*, 127). Mental fatigue is a persistent theme in Johnson’s work, but the narrator’s weariness in *Trawl* often reveals itself to be a self-conscious concern about boring the reader. He is apologetic when he tells the reader his narration is either ‘getting tedious’ (*T*, 123) or

‘so boring’ (*T*, 119). His anxiety about his job as a writer is continually made apparent. When asked why he wants to come on board by the caretaker of the trawler, he is relieved once the caretaker accepts his excuse; in other words, he was not required to state his real reasons, which he is aware might sound self-indulgent to others:

I want to give substantial yet symbolic form to an isolation I have felt most of my life by isolating myself in fact, by enacting the isolation in extreme form, by cutting myself off as far as possible from everything I have ever known before (*T*, 105).

Knowing his aims are self-indulgent only generates further ‘embarrassment, shame and humiliation’ (*T*, 118)—a recurring assortment of feelings. Of all these feelings, however, it is embarrassment which figures as the central affect in *Trawl*: it is mentioned a striking amount of times, usually in reference to the narrator’s past relationships with women (*T*, 67; 69; 69; 73; 79; 84; 85; 114; 120; 147). The recurrence of the word ‘embarrassment’ (and its inflections) is significant when we think how closely entwined the state of embarrassment or being embarrassed is with the concept of debt and the language of commerce. While one can be said to experience an “embarrassment of riches”, one can also be said to be ‘embarrassed’ when put in financial difficulty (specifically by a debt or a tax). There is an irony here: this feeling is invoked continuously by a man whose language is well-stocked in financial terminology and commercial metaphors, and whose mode of thinking and reasoning is almost exclusively transactional. It is as if, by stating his embarrassment and accounting for it, the narrator wishes to “write it off” so that he no longer feels it, which is in fact what *Trawl* was designed to do, as Johnson explains in one interview (*IT*, 85). Writing *Trawl* was a means for Johnson to exorcise his feelings, to work through them. The emotional labour involved in recounting these painfully embarrassing memories purges them from his mind. He no longer has to carry them around with him.

Trawl is a catalogue of disappointing love-affairs and relationships gone wrong. The narrator’s account begins with a series of recollection about Joan, who he recalls with greater fondness than he does with most of his past lovers. And, although it is not immediately apparent at this stage of the narrative, this greater fondness has everything to do with the fact the narrator

‘took from Joan, and gave little in return’ (*T*, 21). This mode of thinking—in terms of giving and taking in a relationship—appears innocuous at first; it is, after all, a common trope. As the narrative develops, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the narrator’s mind operates like a double-entry ledger (much like Christie Malry’s with his credit/debit-based moral-entry system): he is constantly sorting, calculating, and reckoning. In one particularly uncomfortable passage, the narrator describes himself ‘labouring’ over Joan’s body, searching for ‘purchase,’ before only satisfying himself (*T*, 18). Their relationship is always recounted near sites of exchange (unlike later memories of lovers): restaurants, cinemas, pubs—there are few descriptions of the two together in non-commercial spaces, where the narrator is not busy purchasing or consuming. Even in Joan’s home, he remembers and makes explicit reference to paying for the gas before the sentence slides effortlessly away from Joan and the shilling towards his own more important issue: ‘she took a shilling off me for the gas and we had the gasfire on and from the worn chintz sofa progressed on to the carpet and I got up to put the rubber on, and nearly tossed myself off doing it [...]’ (*T*, 12). And yet, for all his expenditure (of time, money, and semen), the narrator is rarely satisfied.

Before long, the narrator’s recollection of prices and costs—£25 for a student theatre tour, the shilling for the gas, the figures of each of his various salaries, the cost of Jelly Roll Morton’s record library, and even the exact amount of his pocket money—begins to seem over-scrupulous, as if he were overcompensating for something else. The narrator’s natural ability to remember prices and various figures contrasts with the inaccurate valuation of his emotional debts and costs. While he insists on counting the amount of times he has sex with his various partners (‘[t]he other times were eight, I counted them’ [*T*, 114]), or the amount of days left on the boat (‘[f]our days. Not counting today, which is already counted,’ [*T*, 168]), he is unable to tally up the cost of emotional investments, only acknowledging various instances of heartbreak as simple ‘loss[ses]’ (*T*, 142). This kind of emotional loss can only be described feebly, with words like ‘little’ or ‘great,’ which, when compared to his normal scrupulousness, sound even more imprecise than they already are:

As I am now tired of remembering the whole thing, which brought me so little in return for the great amount of emotional energy, time admittedly willingly filched from my degree, love, yes, love wasted (*T*, 127).

For the narrator of *Trawl*, the memories he recounts are a series of costly mistakes and voided transactions. They are, in other words, experiences that should have yielded a return, as something useful or functional, but only in fact resulted in anxiety, frustration and embarrassment. These disappointments are always framed as losses: like with Gwen, ‘taking what she needed from [him]’ (*T*, 119). It seems that no relationship is exempt from this examination of debt. At one point, he suspects his parents of attempting to buy his love and affection for the debt they had incurred:

Was the liberality of my parents—I remember having ten or fifteen shillings and sometimes as much as a pound a week pocketmoney [sic]. [...] was this in some way (for they had little money) an attempt to make up for sending me away during the war? A payment in acknowledgement of their debt for my neglect? (*T*, 94)

Everyone (and everything) is viewed through a financial lens, speculated on, and reduced to a commodity, as commerce is conflated with emotion, and as the narrator attempts to balance the books. This is reflected in even the most incidental details: as when he thinks back to a time as a child, when he found a shilling which ‘made up for one I lost down a drain grating, but that was later’ (*T*, 60). Or when thinking of himself as a tradeable commodity on board the ship—‘I have given little to [the crew] really’—as he reflects on his guilt for being a pleasuretripper before remembering that his company has allowed the crew to speak about themselves: ‘at least I am that much to them’ (*T*, 147). Yet, it is sex that affords him the most frustration and for which he reserves his most cynical and chauvinistic attempts to regain a sense of parity or evenness: ‘Eva would not let me have it [...] I was such a fool, an innocent, really, for standing for it: it taught me not to, later, though’ (*T*, 111), as he became ‘determined to learn by this experience, from which I had little else, that I would always take at least sexual satisfaction’ (*T*, 112). This ‘taking’ as loss, as a form of written-off debt, is articulated most explicitly when he recounts when Gwen left him: ‘[t]his hurt me, that she should take from me so, without what I needed in return, what I felt I had a right in all equity to receive in return!’ (*T*, 129) The loss that hurts him most, it appears, is the

loss that is accounted for in the most obviously financial terms. The pun on ‘equity’, meaning impartiality, fair judgment on the one hand, and, on the other, a value of a share in something, comes off as a weak attempt to marry up two vastly different lexical fields that have been in conflict throughout the novel: the emotional (which the narrator attempts to judge rationally and fairly, with order, discipline, truth) and the financial (as he attempts to speculate, calculate, and reckon in his favour). While the narrator is conscious that in the past he has been ‘too often calculated, too often been unnatural’ (*T*, 179); this exercise in calculation and recollection—a laborious and painful task for him—has paid a dividend, which is made explicit at the very end of the novel:

It is as though I have at last paid off some vast emotional debt that I had incurred through all my years: that I have earned enough to repay that debt, in these last three weeks [...] No, again, I feel as though I have repaid at usurious interest some debt, which has occupied all my thoughts, all my energy, impossible of limitation or definition: and worst of all, I can never remember having had benefit from the loan in the first place (*T*, 179).

While Johnson may have paid off his emotional debts, he was, after the publication of *Trawl*, about to become embroiled in a public imbroglio that demanded him as a professional writer to pay off an altogether different kind of debt that, for many of his creditors, would be impossible to repay. It was at this point in his career, when Johnson began thinking about supporting himself through his writing alone, that he made a series of concerted efforts to professionalise his occupation. The next time Johnson would write about similar themes (debt relations and the morality surrounding those relations), he would have been awarded several grants by the Arts Council and been at the centre of a scandal that saw him accused of defrauding the public. The novel *Christy Mahy*, although his ‘most accessible, exuberant, and despairing’, contains a great deal of ‘pain’ and ‘anger’, and it was precisely the rational impulse the narrator displays in *Trawl*—to count up, to measure all the injustices of one’s life—that it satirises.

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‘Professional’ is an appropriate term with which to describe Johnson once we consider its etymological relation to words like ‘profess’ and ‘confess,’ the meanings of which are

fundamentally bound up with notions of trust, honesty, and truth—concepts, of course, that resonate with Johnson’s artistic credo that “telling stories is telling lies.” To ‘profess’ means not only to ‘acknowledge,’ ‘to lay claim to,’ and ‘to state or declare openly’.²²⁴ It also means ‘to take a vow,’ as indicated and contained within its Latin root (*profitēri*).²²⁵ It is no coincidence, then, that the word ‘professional’ is so embedded within Johnson’s vocabulary. To profess is to speak of one’s own trade (which Johnson frequently did), to inform another (an audience; a reader) of one’s own specialism, and to engage in a very specific, professional relationship, in which one promises or vows to perform a task to the best of their ability. Johnson believed that the writer’s primary task was to acknowledge, lay claim to, and openly declare truth at all costs. At the beginning of his literary career, this revolved around exposing the ‘lies’ that he claimed most fiction perpetuated. That is, for Johnson, the ways in which realist fiction manipulates the reader, how it suspends disbelief, how it professes truth (“telling stories is telling lies”). To expose these lies, Johnson’s narrators seek to establish professional relations with the reader before proceeding to disrupt the fictional narrative.²²⁶ These self-conscious, disruptive narrators speak directly and “truthfully,” as they go on to instruct, direct, and inform the reader of their work over the course of the narrative. The first sustained instance of a narrator who serves the reader in this way is found in Johnson’s first novel, *Travelling People*. The novel opens with a ‘Prelude’ where the author-narrator tells us that he chose the novel form because it allows for the ‘closest contact with the greatest audience’ (*TP*, 11). In a style that parodies Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, the narrator explains that he is ‘determined not to lead [his] reader into believing that he was doing

²²⁴ See “profess, v.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 22 March 2017.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ This is the case in *Travelling People*, as the chapter will go on to explain, but the beginning of *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* also springs to mind, here. The narrator-writer figure provides the reader with ‘an Exposition without which You might have felt Unhappy’ (*CMODE*, 9). See also ‘Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?’ in *Well Done God*, 33-41. The narrator in this piece—which is all about readerly expectation and readerly desire—explicitly draws attention to his ‘professionalism,’ which he implies guarantees the truth. See *Well Done God!*, 41.

anything but reading a novel,' having already 'noted with abhorrence the shabby chicanery practised on their readers by many novelists, particularly of the popular class' (*TP*, 12).²²⁷ Instead, his aim is to 'expose the mechanism of a novel' and, by doing so, arrive 'nearer to reality and truth' (*TP*, 12). This, he tells us, applies 'especially to digression, where the reader is led, wilfully and wantonly, astray,' whereas '[his] novel would have clear notice, one way or another, of digressions, so that the reader might have complete freedom of choice in whether or not he would read them' (*TP*, 12). The idea here is that the narrator-writer in his professional capacity as a novelist is providing the reader a service, which he alludes to again later in the novel when he acknowledges that the 'capacity for tedium of my reader is already near to burstingpoint; and that I am most solicitous to avoid further fatal proximation' (*TP*, 155). The writer-narrator is figured as a professional entertainer whose job it is to provide the reader both pleasure and entertainment. Any proximity or 'proximation' to 'tedium' would prove 'fatal' to the relationship between reader and writer-narrator. But this deliberate archaism can be interpreted in an altogether different light: a 'proximation' is also an approximation of, in this case, 'reality and truth': the narrator has just apologised to the reader for 'depriving' his characters (or 'puppets') of 'their respective childhood and youths' (*TP*, 155). In other words, he apologises for not doing something that, from the beginning, he never intended to do—that is, to practise the 'shabby chicanery' of other 'popular novelists' who endow their stories with believable characters and convincing backgrounds. In this reading, the 'fatal proximation' is the fatal inability to tell the truth. The only character who approximates what Johnson defined as truthful representation is the protagonist Henry Henry (whose experiences bear similarities to Johnson's own). This 'fatal proximation' became an intractable issue, one that he negotiated throughout his career. He went on to claim

²²⁷ Johnson refers to this 'pastiche' and the debt he owed to Sterne in his 'Introduction' to *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?':* 'The [opening] passage quoted above was deliberately a pastiche of eighteenth-century English, for I had found it was necessary to return to the very beginnings of the novel in England in order to try to re-think it and re-justify it for myself. Most obvious of my debts [in *Travelling People*] was to the black pages of *Tristram Shandy* [...]'; see 'Introduction' to *AYRY*, 22.

that he wrote truth in the vehicle of fiction, which, he professed, set him apart from the ‘popular novelists who practised the ‘shabby chicanery’ of storytelling. Yet, when Johnson came to write *Travelling People*, *House Mother Normal*, and *Christie Malry*. It was fiction, not “truth”, that drove these novels forward.

Later in his career, Johnson described *Travelling People* as a ‘disaster’ and retracted the book.²²⁸ ‘Since *Travelling People* is part truth and part fiction,’ he wrote in 1973, ‘it now embarrasses me and I will not allow it to be reprinted; though I am still pleased that its devices work.’²²⁹ It is worth drawing attention to Johnson’s language here when he speaks of his texts, and more specifically the devices in those texts, as ‘work[ing]’. As this chapter will go on to argue, Johnson’s writing—not only in the novels but throughout his oeuvre—is suffused with metaphors of utility and labour. The problem was that *Travelling People* did not fit into Johnson’s formulation of truth: it was mostly fictional and, therefore, it was unable to communicate truth. This tension would remain an awkward problem for Johnson throughout his career as an avant-garde novelist who insisted on the absolute virtue of telling truth (i.e. recounting real-life experiences). Was it the novelist’s primary task to abandon conventional storytelling in order to tell the truth, as Johnson attempts in his autobiographical novels, *Albert Angelo* (1964), *Trawl* (1966), *The Unfortunates* (1969), and *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975)? Or should the novelist contrive stories, serve and provide the reader with the familiar pleasures of story, as in *Travelling People*, *House Mother Normal* (1971), and *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* (1973)? There is not, of course, a mutually exclusive relation

²²⁸ Johnson, ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 29.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22. Immediately after this, he tells the reader that does not entirely regret having written *Travelling People*: ‘I learnt a certain amount through it; not least that there was a lot of the writing I could do in my head without having to amass a pile of paper three feet high to see if something worked’, see ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 22. In other words, writing the novel was an instructive and useful exercise and, perhaps just as importantly, it saved him from the further labour of writing ‘piles of paper,’ making him more efficient as a writer (and labourer). Johnson’s texts are frequently concerned with questions of utility and exhibit signs of acceptance towards utilitarian modes of thinking—precisely what Alexander Trocchi, in contrast, rejected. Note, too, Johnson’s use of the word ‘embarrass.’

between truth and readerly pleasure *per se* (which is what this distinction implies). Yet, as Johnson mentions in an interview with Alan Burns, the novels that deal with the experiences and memories of the first-person narrator were written for himself and with the purpose of exorcising the painful memories the novels contained.²³⁰ In the interview, he states that the:

three autobiographical novels, *Albert Angelo*, *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates* forced their way in, demanded to be written out of sheer personal need, psychotherapy if you like, though I call it exorcism. I wrote those three books to get them out of my head. I wanted to unburden my mind. “It’s not in my mind: it’s over there, in a book.” Those books were written to relieve that kind of pressure (*IT*, 85).

Yet, Charles Sugnet, co-editor of *Imagination on Trial* (where the interview is published), is rightly suspicious of Johnson’s claims. While ‘[Johnson] says he writes for himself, to work things through, implying that such a private exercise would have value even if the work were not read,’ Sugnet writes, it is ‘hard to believe the B. S. Johnson who wrote passionately about class warfare, and insisted he would never desert his side in it, could be *content* to write only for himself’ (*IT*, 9-10). Johnson’s statements about only writing for himself are never totally convincing.²³¹ Even in

²³⁰ This claim was commonly made amongst the avant-garde. Trocchi insists that he only wanted to write for his friends in *Cain’s Book* and, to an extent, *The Long Book*, is the logical end to that claim. Figes also suggests she writes fiction only for herself (see following chapter).

²³¹ For example, see the following passages, which are juxtaposed in the ‘Introduction’ to *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, 28-9. Johnson appears to decisively reject the notion that he writes for anyone other than himself when he writes: ‘I am always sceptical about writers who claimed to be writing for an identifiable public. How many letters and phone calls do they receive from this public that they can know it so well as to write for it? Precious few, in my experience, when I have questioned them about it. I think I (after publishing some dozen books) have personally had about five letters from ‘ordinary readers,’ people I did not know already that is; and three of those upbraided me viciously because I had just published the book that they were going to have written.’ Johnson continues to make his point claiming that ‘apart from the disaster of *Travelling People*, I write perforce myself, and the satisfaction has to be almost all for myself; and I can only hope there are some few people like me who will see what I am doing, and understand what I am saying, and use it for their own devious purposes.’ Immediately after these claims, however, Johnson seems to concede that there is such a concept as an identifiable public or at least a public worth writing for. The problem is that such an audience did—and could—not exist in the ‘stultifying philistine’ literary climate he was writing in: ‘[y]et it should not have to be so. I think I do have a right to expect that most readers should be open to new work, that there should be an audience in this country willing to try to understand and be sympathetic to what those few writers not shackled by tradition are trying to do and are doing. Only when one has some contact with a continental European tradition of the *avant garde* [sic] does one realise just how stultifying philistine is the general book culture of this country. Compared with the writers of romances, thrillers, and

this instance, he tells Burns that the autobiographical novels ‘forced their way in, demanded to be written,’ which implies he never fully abandoned telling stories (and thereby fulfil his contractual position as a ‘real professional’ novelist, to use Burns’ phrase): the ‘autobiographical’ ones simply took precedence at the time. After publishing *Tram!* and accepting the Arts Council’s Maintenance Grant, however, his readership became a complicated matter. While he would maintain he wrote for nobody except himself, it seems unlikely that a writer so sensitive and attentive to debt relations and professional standards would not think about his readership, and those who enabled him to be the professional he was. In the space of one year, he went from ‘subsidis[ing] the publisher’ to being subsidised himself. And, as some parts of the media intimated, many of his new patrons would expect him to ‘fawn’, perhaps just as much as his eighteenth-century counterparts, if he wished to receive further funding.

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Johnson’s professionalism—and his employment of fastidiously professional narrators (or, in lieu of these, formal gimmicks designed to wow)—could be read as both an anxious eagerness to impress his readership and an insurance policy to “prove” his artistic immaterial labour, which he performs as a working-class artist who, deeply proud of his roots, remains ambivalent towards the type of labour he undertakes since it cannot be measured and thus legitimated in the same way that most manual labour typically is (i.e. the labour performed by those with whom he was culturally affiliated). His self-criticism and the attendant frustrations (it might, if his work cannot be accurately measured, be ‘completely worthless’) is picked up on by Coe who writes that:

self-doubt, and vulnerability: these were the things [...] that made B. S. Johnson the artist he was. The kind of self-certainty he affects in the introduction to *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* is in fact the enemy of art. On the contrary, it was because he *agonized* over those novels, hovered endlessly on the brink of thinking them completely worthless, that they quiver with nervous energy even now; pulse with doubts about their own legitimacy. There may be a quality of ‘QED’ to

the bent but so-called straight novel, there are not many who are writing as though it matters, as though they meant it, as they meant it to matter’.

his formal experiments but beneath that, at a much deeper level, there is a layer of insecurity which gives them an astonishing rawness, a self-questioning urgency that keeps them thrillingly alive (*LFE*, 452).

We might see Johnson, then, as an artist unconsciously mimicking the role of the maladapted worker who struggles to cope with the increasing rules of the newly-privileged, emerging labour market that demands not only more flexibility from the worker but sovereignty over their emotions. We might see Johnson's scrupulousness and will-to-exactitude coupled with his notorious belligerence as symptoms of his inflexibility and inability to soften his rigid aesthetic stance in order to appeal to the literary market, which is what his strikingly adaptable friend and fellow novelist Eva Figes seemed to suggest:

Bryan's stance was always aggressive, even belligerent, whether the cause was modernity in literature or money, his other great obsession. I remember him throwing paper darts into an audience to campaign for Public Lending Right. I remember sitting next to him at a very rowdy and enjoyable Annual General Meeting of the Society of Authors where he called for the instant resignation of the entire Committee of Management because of their ineffectual handling of the PLR issue. He was too much of a propagandist for his own good in the long term, as far as his development as a writer was concerned, but he was certainly a dab hand at catching public attention. [...] Apart from being a propagandist, Bryan was a purist, almost a puritan. For most of his writing life he did not invent, "tell lies," as he would have called it. Instead he created a literary text about real people, real experiences and events, with himself as undisguised narrator and main character. This could be witty and delightful, but at other times a bit ponderous. He had a tendency to take things to extremes, to take truth-telling too literally, but he was being consistent in his own way to a belief that Ann, Alan and I all shared with him: the belief that the seamless "realist" novel is not only not realistic, but a downright lie. [...] Bryan's way of coping with this problem was to avoid fictive invention, to try and stick to literal truth, and I think he worked himself into a cul-de-sac. It might have worked for him, both as a person and a writer, if he had been more in touch with his inner problems, and had really explored them in his writing. Instead he tried to seal off the seething cauldron, truth became a lie, and the result was destructive. By concentrating too much on form, on literal truth, I think Bryan lost touch with an essential, greater truth—that the only way to tell the truth is by lying, and *that* is the real starting point of meaningful fiction.²³²

The above is an indication of how effortlessly Figes adapted in her approach to writing. After informing us that she could not abide contemporary forms of realism for the same reasons as

²³² Eva Figes, 'B. S. Johnson', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 1985), 70-71 (71).

Johnson (its tendency to lie), she goes on to declare that ‘the real starting point of fiction’ is ‘lying’. She criticises Johnson for his lack of flexibility as a writer, for being too stiff with his convictions, and for being too ‘extreme’. For reasons that will be examined in the following chapter, Figs appears to privilege those attributes that were being increasingly valued as occupational virtues: adaptability, flexibility, and versatility. There is another view to consider, however. Johnson was obsessed with the idea of surplus value and the means to evaluate accurately the true value of his labours; as we have seen, he was critical of those publishers who he claimed took the lion’s share of what ought to have been the writer or ‘basic producer[’s]’ income. He was sensitive to the various and often invisible forms of capitalist exploitation in his capacity as a committed socialist—in *Christie Malry*, it is Christie’s conviction that ‘socialism [was never] given a chance’ that incurs the largest debt—at a time when the British working-class and the trade unions were anxious not to cede ground to Edward Heath’s government seemingly intent on rationalising them out of existence. Johnson’s films for the trade unions, *Unfair!* (1970), *March!* (1971)), and *Here Comes Everybody!* (1971), opposed the Conservative party’s Industrial Relations Act of 1971, the political rumblings of which were resounding as he wrote *Christie Malry*. His scrupulousness and his impulse to account for the many emotional and professional injustices he felt he had incurred were defensive measures that ought to be considered in light of this context. At around the same time, of course, the *Mail* accused him of producing hippy art and of not working, while the furor over Arts Council funding continued to rage on.

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The following section draws attention to a common emotional theme within the texts—the ‘feeling of indebtedness,’ as Henry Henry has it in *Travelling People*—and looks at how, and in which ways, these texts engage with this feeling, before suggesting that, by the time Johnson writes *Christie Malry*, this indebtedness had turned into frustration. This section aims to draw attention to the markedly different treatments of ‘the feeling of indebtedness’ (*TP*, 25) in *Travelling People* and

Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry. It is worth repeating that these texts were conceived at approximately the same time (the late Fifties) but were written ten years apart, meaning that *Travelling People* and *Christie Malry* mark respectively the beginning and end of Johnson's career as a novelist.²³³ In the time between, Johnson experienced first-hand the ramifications of being indebted to a public—which is what this chapter takes to be the main theme of both novels: public debt. The texts are similar in the respect that both are geared towards storytelling, both are metafictional, and both contain narrators who attempt to “professionally” engage with the reader. Yet, this professional relationship undergoes a radical transformation between the two novels: in *Christie Malry* there is a strong sense that the narrator wishes to sever ties and extricate himself from the debt relations storytelling entails.

Travelling People is loaded with anxieties about debt. The protagonist, Henry Henry, is desperate to impress those around him in an attempt to shake off his ‘feeling of indebtedness’ towards society. Henry’s indebtedness stems from his guilt about graduating from university, at the taxpayer’s expense, without any idea of his future, what job he will get, or, as he puts it at one point, how he will ‘best use [him]self’ (*TP*, 24). This guilt re-emerges throughout the narrative but is particularly intense at the beginning of the novel when Henry is hitchhiking in Wales. It is a useful set-piece, one that magnifies Henry’s indebtedness as he roams and wonders in search of a ride; hitchhiking, as Henry points out, relies on public ‘charity’ (*TP*, 19). Yet, the drivers that give him a lift out of ‘apparent charity’ were the ones ‘he had to give to most of all, since they sat at their wheels in a smug aura of donegoodness and made him feel most uncomfortable’ (*TP*, 19). (This anticipates Christie’s ledger: Henry draws attention to the odd morality surrounding debt: by giving you become morally vindicated in a way that allows you to act superior.) Even the most incidental remarks or character observations in *Travelling People* are encoded with certain affects

²³³ Johnson did, of course, embark on writing the first novel in his *Matrix* trilogy, *See the Old Lady Decently*—yet this was published posthumously (1975) and there is reason to suggest its final form would have changed had Johnson remained alive.

peculiar to indebtedness. In this case, it is the narrator's free indirect style that seems to illuminate most fully the absurdity behind Henry's compulsion to 'give most' to those, who in their smugness, make Henry feel 'most uncomfortable.' This is a prime example of how debt relations function under certain social conditions: why does Henry feel compelled to 'give' back the 'most' to such people? The quaintness of 'most,' here—slipped into the free indirect as a slightly pompous adverb—suggests an affectation (of injury) on Henry's part, Henry who, the reader soon discovers, identifies proudly with his supposedly 'workingclass' [sic] background (*TP*, 139). This middle-class affectation, however, gestures towards Henry's more immediate past of going to university at the state's expense (a typically upper or middle-class route to take before the introduction of the welfare state and Henry, like Johnson, would have been one of the first beneficiaries of this system), which exacerbates his feeling of indebtedness especially towards that generation before his, who missed the opportunity to attend in their youth themselves but who were paying for Henry's generation—the generation to which Trevor belongs, who, in the novel's sharpest irruption later on in the novel, asks:

“Do you mean to say [...] Taxpayers have been paying to keep you all these years at university and you still do not know what to do? What have we been wasting our money for? Don't you feel you owe a debt to the state?” (*TP*, 183)

And it is Trevor, ironically enough, who gives Henry a lift at the start, which sets the narrative in motion. Henry gives back most to those with a smug aura and who make him feel 'most uncomfortable' because they are precisely the people (the taxpayers) he owes the most to—not only for his immediate *physical* mobility but, more importantly, his *social* mobility (as indicated by the narrator's affected use of 'most' and the fact that Henry has the leisure to hitchhike to Ireland to rest and not think without any time or work constraints).

If the overriding feeling in *Trawl* is embarrassment, and in *Travelling People* guilt (both emotions, as we have seen, contain strong associations with debt and money), then *Christie Malry*—like *Fat Man on a Beach*—appears on the surface light and comic but, beneath this surface, it rankles with paranoia, frustration and an unbridled disgust towards the “masses”. In his notes to

Christie Malry, Johnson writes the following item on a long list: ‘one is deliberately annoying the reader in order to punish him for daring to like rubbish! That’s your rubbish, one is saying, what you like so much!’ (*LFE*, 316) The professional narrator-reader relationship—so convivial in *Travelling People*—is almost non-existent in *Christie Malry*. This is in other words a novel written by a novelist, as Coe remarks, who seems tired and exhausted by the form, who no longer has faith in it (see Coe, 329; 225; intro). There is a sense in *Christie Malry* that the novel can only do so much: ‘You shouldn’t be bloody writing novels about it, you should be out there, bloody doing something about it’ (*CMODE*, 180). It is, as we have seen, a sentiment that Trocchi increasingly believed in. There is the pervasive feeling amongst the literary avant-garde that writing is no longer a responsible (or even worthwhile) activity. Sugnet points to this when he claims that ‘[t]here is a good deal of unease among these writers about their proper place and status, about whether they are reaching the proper public, or indeed, whether they are reaching any public at all’ (*IT*, 10).

In the same year that *Christie Malry* was published, Johnson made a trenchant speech to the Society of Authors (it later became an article), which contains multiple references to ‘professionalism’ and the Society’s lack of professional standards. Johnson stated that those who presided over the society did not ‘do’ anything (again we see his insistence on what people do or do not do). His acerbic speech, replete with rhetorical questions, was in protest against the Society of Authors, who in Johnson’s view had done nothing about the fall in authors’ wages (which had dropped since the last Society of Author’s-commissioned survey on wages in 1965):

[W]ho is responsible for it, for not at least seeing that writer’s earnings kept up with inflation? What one can ask is: if the Society of Authors is not responsible, then who is? What other organisation is there which is supposed to protect the interests of book writers? [...] What have they done recently? [...] What else have they done recently? It’s easier to ask what they haven’t done. [...] There’s been the odd university professor on the Committee, for instance. He does write books, of course, but only part-time, by definition. If he were committed to full-time professional writing he would be defrauding his employers, the university. How then can he be committed to the cause of the professional writer? How, indeed, can he know anything of the problems and circumstances of the professional writer? Yet someone thought him a fit and proper person to be nominated for the Committee of Management, and to help make decisions which vitally affect professional writers (*LFE*, 348-9).

Johnson demanded those on the board to resign. This was not so long after the *Daily Mail* fiasco (see preceding chapter). Perhaps just as pertinently, Johnson at this point was finding it difficult to support himself through his writing while authors' pay was declining. To be on the one hand labelled as a 'hippy' artist who makes a living out of 'cash hand-outs', while perceiving what he saw as indolence and a breach of professional standards by the Society of Authors on the other, Johnson must have felt increasingly frustrated during this time in his capacity as a professional writer.

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As the camera sweeps over the rocky, craggy cliffs of Porth Ceiriad on the Llŷn peninsula in Wales, a small, distant figure comes into view. Gradually, the camera zooms in on the figure; what was a brown splotch turns out to be a man having trouble descending the path towards the beach. 'This is a film about a fat man on a beach,' the voiceover tells us as Scott Joplin's jaunty ragtime classic, 'The Entertainer' (1902), continues to play throughout the opening sequence. By the time *Fat Man on a Beach* (1973) was aired to the British public on ITV late in 1974, ragtime was undergoing a popular resurgence, aided in part by the Oscar-winning film *The Sting* (1973) starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman, which used Joplin's melody as its main theme. There is something both playful and wistful about the piece inasmuch as it captures a sense of levity while intimating towards something graver. It nearly cloy on the ear (especially its crescendos that double back down in pitch before inexhaustibly building back up again) and, in nearly doing so, it manages to evoke a desperation which we might say is central to the profession of the entertainer: that is, the desperation to entertain, to perform, and to retain the audience's attention (the prospect of losing their attention animates this desperation). Joplin's piece is in this respect the perfect musical accompaniment to Johnson's final work, a film deeply concerned with occupying the viewer's attention, a concern that is manifest throughout Johnson's oeuvre. As the figure descends the cliff

onto the beach, he stumbles towards the camera and appears to size it up. ‘This is a film about a fat man on a beach’: we realise that the ‘fat man’ is Johnson himself. ‘Did you hear what I said?’ the voiceover asks. ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ Already then, only seconds into the film, we are forced to acknowledge the dynamic between entertainer (Johnson) and audience (us). The voiceover suggests that we should not want to watch this film since, after all, it merely concerns a ‘fat man’, who is awkwardly shuffling into shot, ‘on a beach’. The onus, therefore, rests on Johnson to entertain us, to perform or else risk losing not only his audience but the very reason for being where he is and doing what he does. (Of course, the film is playing with the notion of this contract; the film has been filmed.) At the heart of this joke, there is an anxiety about the desire to be watched, to which Johnson makes explicit reference on multiple occasions. Before he reads his poem ‘Porth Ceiriad Bay’, for instance, he turns to the camera to say, ‘[i]t’s quite short, so don’t go away’ before adding later on: ‘I know what you masses are like: the mention of poetry and off you go’.²³⁴ (This follows another similar remark: ‘[w]hy all these explanations? Anyone would think we’re making a film for the mass audience’ before he raises, then lowers, his arms rapidly in his comically tight, hooded raincoat.) Around the half-hour mark, Johnson, who has changed his clothing several times, settles down to tell a story.²³⁵ While he recounts a story about a Spanish Armada shipwreck off the nearby coast, the camera wanders off to Johnson’s left, towards some nondescript pebbles, as if to mimic our wandering attention. ‘Can I have your attention please? [...] Come back... please?’ The joke here is that Johnson is boring, irrelevant. And less than a minute later, he acts as though he is offended by precisely this suggestion: ‘Do you mind? This is an interesting story I’m telling you! You keep wandering off?’ before again telling us that he is not ‘making a film for the masses where you have to be entertained every second.’ Of course, this is a

²³⁴ Johnson, *Fat Man on a Beach*.

²³⁵ This change of clothing not only draws attention to the lack of continuity and therefore (for Johnson) the truthful representation of how the film was made (i.e. not over one continuous period), it also signals a desire for attention, particularly the loud, almost luminous orange and pink shirts he wears.

reiteration of Johnson's theory about stories, and how the reader (or, in this case, viewer) should not be taken in by stories, that it should be the form or the way in which the story is told which ought to capture one's attention and interest. Here, Johnson seems to be mocking his own untenable position as a popular avant-garde artist or, rather, an avant-garde artist who desperately wants to be popular.

IV EVA FIGES

A ‘question of beginning again’

It is ironic that Eva Figes’s first novel, *Equinox* (1966), opens in a busy, bustling airport where there are ‘people everywhere,’ and where, the protagonist Liz tells us breathlessly, ‘things happen’ and unfold with a sense of ‘movement and magic’.²³⁶ After all, this is one of the rare glimpses of the external world, of ‘wide open spaces’ (*E*, 7) in a novel that takes as its dominant setting a claustrophobic suburban household that on several occasions Liz refers to as a prison.²³⁷ It is with a captive’s sense of wonder and fascination that she describes her surroundings, marvelling at the space that represents for her the stark antithesis of where she spends most of her time: at home, ‘tied to the kitchen sink’ (*E*, 50). While she waits for her husband Martin to arrive, it occurs to her that the space she is now in is one of endless opportunity and freedom. Her descriptions pulse with excitement and optimism: here, you can be transported to ‘wherever you want to be’—all you have to do is ‘name a place’ (*E*, 7). Here, ‘[e]verything is so simple [...] free as air [...] everything within sighting fighting breathing touching distance, Geneva Toronto Tokyo Frankfurt and Rome’ (*E*, 7-8). Yet, as Liz visualizes this vast global map, we begin to realise just how small her world is. With some smugness, she announces that ‘[t]oday’ she is ‘almost like a traveller, within touching distance anyway, not one of the common herd’ that has ‘come [to] stare at the monotonous traffic of seabirds’ (*E*, 8). Little repetitions and the haphazard construction of her

²³⁶ Eva Figes, *Equinox* (London: Panther, 1969), 7. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Originally published in 1966 by Secker & Warburg. Abbreviated to *E*.

²³⁷ Liz refers to herself as a ‘prisoner’ within her own home (*E*, 57) and later refers to her ‘imprisoned soul’ (*E*, 69). Towards the end of the novel, she describes a particularly evocative image of the house as a prison. She recalls how she once ‘stayed in the house and stood at the first floor window and watched the cars go by down there and wanted to shout: help, someone, somebody has bricked me up in here. One of you must know me, surely. And they drove on, heads still staring out of windscreens’ (*E*, 146).

interior monologue reflect an almost childish pomposity: 'I am here as a bona fide meeter-of-a-traveller, which means I am at least in touch at second hand with the wide, wide world of real people' (E, 8). It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for Liz who is only able to define herself through Martin, who she describes proudly as a 'successful cosmopolitan type' and whose cosmopolitanism, she hopes, will 'rub off on [her]' (E,8). However, really, she knows that this is unlikely; she reminds herself that lately she has become too 'scared to move [...] cowering over the grate, bolting the front door three times like the old woman [she is]' (E, 7). Far from ever exploring the 'great metropolises' (E, 7) of 'Geneva Toronto Tokyo Frankfurt [or] Rome', Liz locks herself away in her lonely suburban home with little to do other than reflect on her loveless marriage and the child she has recently lost. Despite the 'movement and magic' and its atmosphere of possibility, the opening to *Equinox* is in fact an introduction to a character trapped within a crushingly unhappy set of circumstances that many female readers in particular might have found depressingly familiar.²³⁸

²³⁸ For instance, Suzanne Gail, writing about her experiences as a housewife during the mid-1960s (many of which echo Liz's) wrote that the 'mornings are always my worst time—the day stretches ahead in dreary sameness, with no possibility of anything unexpected; I would rather listen to anything or nothing than *Housewives' Choice*. The thought of all those millions of women performing exactly the same gestures as me, enclosed in their little circular activities, and perhaps with no desire or possibility of ever escaping, depresses me more than I can say.' Gail's account will feature more prominently later in the chapter. See Suzanne Gail, 'The Housewife' in *Work: Twenty Personal Accounts*, Ranald Fraser, ed. (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), 140-155 (149). All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to SG. Regarding the novel itself: '[c]ourageous, honest and ultimately depressing' was the *Evening Standard's* assessment. See anonymous review, 25 January 1966, *Evening Standard* (London: England). Many reviews, even those which were mostly positive, remarked upon the negative affects the novel inspires—with only Elizabeth Burridge, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, suggesting that this might have something to do with Liz's miscarriage: '[p]art of Elizabeth's trouble, which no one in the book appears to be aware of, could be due to a severe post-natal depression. Certainly the moody introspection points this way.' See 'Putting the Self Before Family', 27 January 1966, *Daily Telegraph* (London: England) 21. These cuttings are collected under '*Equinox* reviews, press cuttings' in Eva Figes archive, British Library, London. MS 89050/7/4.

Yet, as the title suggests, *Equinox* is about change: how people change, how places change, and how relationships change.²³⁹ ‘There’s something unfinished about you’ (*E*, 55), Martin tells Liz who, as an example of what Hannah Gavron in 1966 described as the ‘captive wife’, has neither full possession of her time nor an appropriate environment in which to work on—or work out—who she is.²⁴⁰ It is this idea of “working” on the self to which the text frequently returns (and one that a number of autobiographical accounts concerning housework at this time discussed). By her own admission, Liz feels ‘at thirty, unbegun’ (*E*, 134) having not been able to cultivate herself as a writer in the way she had wished before marrying Martin. As a result, Liz is often seen to be frantically anxious about doing things or, as she sees it, not doing enough. Later, in what appears to be a decisive moment on her journey towards self-determination, she seems to respond to Martin’s earlier observation, that there is something unfinished about her (and its implication that she needs to become more independent and autonomous): ‘[h]e’s right, of course. I should plough my own furrow,’ she relates, invoking images of labour and toil, ‘paddle my own canoe; make my own bed and lie in it, alone’ (*E* 74). When Liz recognises that Martin ‘wants to be alone, [for her to] get off his back’ and ‘play the bachelor gay for a few months’ while he is away on an extended

²³⁹ The equinox represents the time of year when day and night are of equal length (around 22 September and 20 March each year). From *aequi-* ‘equal’ + *nox, noct* ‘night’.

²⁴⁰ Gavron’s study *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (1966) was published the same year as *Equinox* and later cited by Figes as an important and influential text for her research on her feminist polemic *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970). See *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). The edition used in this chapter is the 1977 Pelican reprint. All further references are to the Pelican edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *CW*. Gavron committed suicide in 1965; her death was compared to Sylvia Plath’s (who ended her life in the same way only two years before and one street away in North London). There are many overlaps between Gavron’s life and Liz’s (Liz is also a writer, for example). Andrew Wilson claims that both Plath and Gavron (and many others besides, which Liz as a fictional character stands to represent) ‘were women born on the edge of time: both a little too young to benefit from the changes that would be introduced with the onset of feminism.’ See Andrew Wilson’s review of Jeremy Gavron’s *A Woman on the Edge of Time* in *The Independent*, 12 November 2015. Accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-woman-on-the-edge-of-time-by-jeremy-gavron-book-review-voyage-of-discovery-for-a-son-40-years-on-a6732146.html>. Gavron’s research surveys were carried out in 1960-1 in North London, which happened to be where Figes was living in the last years of her marriage and where *Equinox* is set.

work trip to America, she decides to leave him, realising she is unhappy and ‘bored because [she is] sedentary’, ‘sedentary because [she is] bored’ (*E*, 74), and trapped in a routine cycle with little opportunity to change her life in any meaningful way beyond working at Morley’s, the publishing firm that published a collection of her poetry ten years before. She dreams of ‘[p]assports, traveller’s cheques,’ the thought of ‘pack[ing] only [her] better clothes,’ the ‘oceans’ and the ‘plane leaving on platform two’ (*E*, 74). And when she thinks back to September (the beginning of the novel), when she ‘fetched Martin’ from the airport, she concedes that she was only a ‘looker on, one of the day trippers’ after all (*E*, 74). No longer is she content to be ‘almost like a traveller.’ Instead, she wishes:

to be one of the passengers, travelling hopefully, leaving stale thoughts behind with last year’s shoes, not knowing quite what to expect at the other end, not caring that much either because you’re not going to stop for long. [...] I want to stop thinking about where to get a plumber when it thaws, where to go for three weeks in the summer and give your dates now, what to do in the evenings and the weekends and the long empty spaces between hours when nothing has to be done. I want to run, fast (*E*, 74-5).

The novel takes place over the course of one year and, by the time we approach September again, Liz finally leaves Martin to embark on a new life in a ‘land’ that, as a single, thirty-year-old woman, is ‘not quite strange, not quite virgin’ (*E*, 156). The visual metaphors that mount in the closing passages take their cues from the imagery at the start of the novel:

I’ve lost all the luggage I’ve been carrying around all these years and now I’m empty-handed in a land not quite strange, not quite virgin. [...] It took me thirty years to get this far because I’m crippled, and now I’m at the beginning or almost at the beginning without any crutches, which I lost on the way here. So If I’m going on at all into the winter I’ve got to learn to move without props (*E*, 156).

Now she is the traveller, no longer ‘crippled’ by her marriage to a husband (figured here as the ‘crutches’ and one of the ‘props’) who once promised her both stability and security yet ultimately only debilitated her further and prevented recovery, which, at the end of the narrative, is as much a recovery of Liz’s lost selfhood as her recovery from the mental and physical trauma she sustained after the loss of her child. Although she ‘want[s] to run, fast’, we only glimpse her ‘crawl[ing]’ in a final passage that seems to dispense with literal meaning:

I can crawl very slowly and painfully through mud and over suburban lawns, it doesn't matter what. Whatever happens to be there. I can feel a bit with my fingers, and perhaps with time my muscles will start working again, with use. And I can see. I hadn't realised it till now but I can see quite clearly. [...] Occasionally I can hear music which I can't explain but it's the one thing I don't really want to explain. [...] It may be the sound of my own blood singing through the arteries but the rhythm is more subtle than heartbeats. Sometimes it seems to have no rhythm at all. But it's always essentially the same though the tonal relationships remain elusive, and every time I hear it again I know I'm going on (*E*, 157).

The Beckettian reference of 'going on' is one that is invoked throughout the novel. (In fact, the novel was originally entitled *Going On* before Figes changed it to *Pebbles*, then *September*, before she finally decided on *Equinox*.) This rebirth is stirring to read because, until these final words, Liz has been little more than a walking corpse 'unable to escape the treadmill' (*E*, 118), as she admits herself at one stage: "I'm not really alive at all, you know. Sort of suspended animation" (*E*, 118). The final lines, however, indicate reanimation: her divorce from Martin enables her to split off and split away in order to contemplate properly the 'question of beginning again.'²⁴¹

For Figes, the publication of *Equinox* (1966) marked the beginning of a long and successful literary career, which spanned five decades and encompassed a wide range of literary forms,²⁴² some of which since have been labelled 'experimental,' a term that she, like her contemporary B.S.

²⁴¹ Figes, *Equinox* typescript, p. 137 in Eva Figes archive, MS89050/1/7. This line is not included in the published novel but bears out one of the text's main thematic concerns: female resilience in the face of an overwhelmingly oppressive and male-dominated society. Liz continues to entertain the 'question of beginning again' throughout the novel (even at her lowest, most dispirited ebb) and it is this ability to do so, which makes her such a resilient and, as we shall see, *flexible* character qua labourer.

²⁴² Figes's last published work, the biography *Journey to Nowhere: One Woman Looks for the Promised Land*, was published in 2008, four years before her death in 2012. In the period between *Equinox* and *Journey to Nowhere*, she wrote twelve novels: *Winter Journey* (1967), *Konek Landing* (1969), *B.*, (1972), *Days* (1974), *Nelly's Version* (1977), *Waking* (1981), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages* (1986), *Ghosts* (1988), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *The Tenancy* (1993), and *The Knot* (1996). She also wrote a number of non-fiction works, including the widely-acclaimed feminist polemic *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (1976), *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850* (1982), and the autobiographical *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978). She wrote short stories and children's fiction, edited collected essays and letters, and translated a number of French and German novels into English. She also produced a large body of journalism, consisting of articles, reviews, and essays for a wide range of publications including the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Spare Rib*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

Johnson, firmly rejected, believing it to be a pejorative or a mere synonym for ‘unsuccessful.’²⁴³ It was alongside Johnson (and Alan Burns and Ann Quin) that Figes began to experience a sense of ‘belong[ing]’ within a group of writers, all of whom reacted against the ‘so-called “Hampstead Novel”’ and were determined to ‘[break] up conventional narrative’ to “mak[e] it new” in [...] different ways.²⁴⁴ It was not only this community of avant-garde writers that Figes found herself increasingly associated with during this period. She rapidly became a major figure in the development of British second-wave feminism, especially after the publication of her polemic *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), which was published the same year as other groundbreaking feminist texts, including Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*. Figes became a spokesperson for a number of feminist issues in Britain during the late-1960s and 70s and was particularly vocal in her criticism of marriage. It was the gradual and painful disintegration of a marriage—which she herself had recently experienced—that *Equinox* took as its subject matter. This, too, was another kind of beginning for her, one that was formative to her writing career, as this chapter will outline. While she was writing the novel, Figes was adjusting to a new role: that of a single working mother who supported herself and her two children through her profession as a writer.

²⁴³ As Johnson wrote in his ‘Introduction’ to *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, “‘Experimental’ to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful”. I object to the word *experimental* being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the successful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems’, see ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 19. Compare this to what Figes wrote five years before: ‘A good writer does not do something “different” simply in order to be different. A good writer is not “experimental” either, because experiment implies failure. There are experimental stages, certainly, but you do not commit yourself to print until you know you have got where you wanted to get. A writer who does not know what he is aiming for, however intuitively, should be in another profession.’ See ‘The Interior Landscape’, *Running Man*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 1968), 56-59 (56).

²⁴⁴ Eva Figes, ‘B. S. Johnson’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 70.

When speaking about her writing practice, Figes would frequently invoke the analogy of “splitting” herself either in half or into several bits. Since her novels were rarely lucrative enough to provide her with a regular income, she began writing non-fiction and contributing regularly to a wide range of newspapers, journals, and magazines. This of course was quite common amongst the British avant-garde since most of these writers were unable to rely on the money their novels produced. While many of them viewed it as an unwelcome (yet financially necessary) distraction from novel writing, Figes welcomed this ‘split’ between writing fiction on the one hand and non-fiction on the other and regarded it to be a ‘solution.’²⁴⁵ To ‘split’ herself was an effective way to remain a dutiful citizen and feminist while writing experimental novels that did not necessarily contain a political or social agenda.²⁴⁶ It will be argued that this analogy is vital if we are to gain a proper understanding of the attitudes and expectations surrounding certain forms of female labour during the 1960s and 70s, and, specifically, those related to the housewife, whose domestic labour was widely regarded as ‘*non-work* – or its opposition to “real”, i.e. economically productive work,’ as Figes’s contemporary Ann Oakley put it.²⁴⁷ The analogy of being split, divided, and torn is one that reverberates throughout many studies and first-hand accounts of housewives at this time. The status of housework as non-work not only invites comparisons with other types of immaterial labour, such as writing, it also forces us to consider on a broader level the ways in which labour practices under advanced capitalism began to alter in accordance with what Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello identify as the ‘new spirit of capitalism’.²⁴⁸ The chapter understands the central character of *Equinox* (a young, educated housewife who quickly transforms into an elastic worker within a

²⁴⁵ See chapter two for a discussion of Johnson’s resentment towards various “hackwork”.

²⁴⁶ The metaphor of the split self was a common one at around this time. See, for instance, R.D. Laing’s seminal work *The Divided Self*, which a number of British avant-garde writers were reading. Trocchi and Laing became close friends throughout the 1960s.

²⁴⁷ Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Pelican, 1976), 1. Originally published by Allen Lane in 1974.

²⁴⁸ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2018). Original translation (Gregory Elliott) published by Verso in 2005. Originally published as *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999). All further references are to the 2018 translation and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *NSC*.

patriarchal labour market) as both a symptom of advanced capitalism and as a prototypical labourer of the kind capitalism begins to privilege from the late-1960s onwards for their flexibility, versatility and willingness to work multiple roles.

The performance element to work would become an increasingly important constituent of modern labour under capitalism from the late 1960s onwards. The service sector (i.e. the industries that “sold” immaterial labour and traded off affects and emotions) began to flourish in many western economies in the latter half of the twentieth-century, while the older, central industries based around production started to decline in significance as a result of technological advancements. Indeed, some critics locate ‘the origin of “immaterial labour” in the artistic practice of the 1960s’, a time to which the rise of women’s participation in the labour market can be traced.²⁴⁹ The type of labour that many women had intuitively practiced (as housewives, mothers, wives, and, typically, a combination of all three) assumed far greater significance within an economy that began to privilege traits such as flexibility and versatility, and workers capable of efficiently carrying out affective labour. In this respect, then, the housewife might be better understood as a prototype of the dominant labourer of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century, that is: as a service worker *avant la lettre*. Two questions to bear in mind throughout this chapter are: how might this relate, if at all, to Eva Figs’s own endurance and versatility as a writer (particularly when compared to the relatively short writing careers of both B.S. Johnson and Alexander Trocchi)? And, furthermore, what does this tell us about avant-garde writing practises of writers working through the 1960s in Britain more broadly? Each text written by these writers was a new project that required a substantial amount of emotional energy and labour to fulfil. If

²⁴⁹ Sigler, ‘Introduction’, *Work*, 17. See also Gazeley and Newell: ‘The rate of growth after the Second World War was roughly twice the rate of the first part of the century. This is widely explained by the coincidence of a large number of technological innovations that interacted to cause rapid productivity growth, especially in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1990s. These innovations caused a shift in labour demand to non-manual work within industries and a shift in employment from the production industries to services [...] the shift away from manufacturing to service employment happened mainly after 1965.’ From ‘Introduction’ in *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain*, 4-5.

we see each text as part of ‘a series of adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another’ (Ngai, 174), then we might begin to interpret the British avant-garde writer of the 1960s as a hyper-labourer in an art economy that becomes less distinguishable from the developing service economy but, crucially, a hyper-labourer who is maladjusted to this structural transformation, a hyper-labourer-writer who—for Johnson and Trocchi at least—comes a little too late, paralleling their lateness as modernist writers.

With reference to a wide range of archival material, the chapter looks to cast light on Eva Figes’s position as a major British feminist writer whose work played a significant role in combatting gender oppression in Britain throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.²⁵⁰ Despite her prominence in the media at the time, she is often forgotten in surveys and histories which cover the development of British feminism.²⁵¹ The chapter will end with a discussion on how her early

²⁵⁰ This shift in relations, brought about by the “second wave” of feminism, had an immense cultural impact, in a way that distinguished it from previous feminist activism (i.e. the first wave).

²⁵¹ If Figes is forgotten in several popular social histories, then perhaps it is in part due to her own ambivalence towards other feminist thinkers (she claimed not to have read Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* for example, which was published the same year as *Patriarchal Attitudes*) and a reluctance to affiliate herself with any one movement or women’s group (despite appearing as a representative for the women’s liberation movement in the national newspapers at various times). For instance, in a 1971 article called ‘The Women’s Women’ by Valerie Wade, Figes was introduced as one of four women who made ‘constructive arguments’ about female inequality (and who, by implication, were attractive and not ‘confused’ when it came to matters of sex). The article lead stated: ‘An unkind observer of the Women’s Liberation Movement commented: “Don’t bother with an article, just print their photographs”, suggesting that they were a group of unattractive, sexually confused women. These four disprove it. They don’t like being called leaders, but have all contributed constructive arguments to make women more conscious of their inequality.’ In the article, Figes is described as ‘the author of *Patriarchal Attitudes*, [who] is 39, [...] divorced, and lives with her two children’. Her account appears to be an edited or truncated version of a longer interview; it seems oddly staccato and the sentences jump around at times: ‘I don’t think that one’s success or failure should depend on looks. I want to be judged on my ability. I think all this bra-burning business is getting away from the real issue. I wear one so will my daughter. I think that the more natural a person looks the better, but there is nothing wrong with a little make-up. If I want to look nice it’s up to me, after all men wear flowered shirts and use deodorants. If I like to be clean and neat I do resent it if the chap I am with has filthy nails and hasn’t washed his hair for months. I don’t find that sexually attractive at all. Sometimes I remove body hair, sometimes I don’t. There are occasions when I don’t wear a bra, if it’s very hot—my daughter is very shocked. I don’t use perfume or deodorant. In a funny kind of way I think perfume is out of fashion; it’s not a principle, it’s just a funny thing to spend money on. I never go to the hairdressers because I hate them. I don’t disapprove of fashion magazines. But I am too serious

writing might be understood as a valuable contribution to more recent debates concerning feminist literature and its fraught relationship with literary aesthetics. It will be argued that *Equinox* and the many articles and essays Figes produced during the late 60s and early 70s might be usefully read together and as instructive examples of how her experimental practice as a female author came to inform her non-fiction work and vice-versa. The chapter interpolates a number of contemporary women's voices to contextualise Figes's work as a key component of the wider continuum of women's writing during this period in Britain. The chapter also looks at how her fiction and non-fiction might be interpreted together in terms of its 'social function as constituted in the context of reception' rather than in the ways various French feminism-influenced critics have suggested in the past.²⁵² In this respect, the chapter takes its cue from Kaye Mitchell, who asserts that:

[...] there is a need a for a new, more nuanced critical language to talk about women's experimental writing—one that moves on from the French feminism-influenced criticism of Ellen Friedman (reiterated in Friedman and Fuchs' landmark *Breaking the Sequence*), with its assumption that, when women experimentalists '[subvert] the forms of conventional narrative, they subvert the patriarchal structure these forms reflect.'²⁵³

Mitchell believes it is 'possible to contest this too-facile analogy' that Friedman makes, while also 'insisting on the value of revisiting and re-evaluating the experimental practices of women authors in the period of 1945-75', which is what this chapter aims to do.²⁵⁴

for most women's magazines. I have biological, not moral objections to the Pill. I've never had an abortion. I use a cap as a form of contraception, but as I get older I tend to get bored with the whole sex subject. I think that masturbation is a very good thing for young girls; it's better than sex at 15. It differentiates between sexual pleasure and falling in love. The whole idea of doing without men is very bad. I hope that by the time my daughter is 16 she will realise that it is rather silly to get married, and that it provides no security.' See Valeria Wade, 'The Women's Women' *The Sunday Times* (London: England) 12 September 1971, (20-21) 21.

²⁵² Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 157. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *BFA*.

²⁵³ Kaye Mitchell, 'Post-War Fiction: Realism and Experimentalism' in Claire Hanson and Susan Watkins, eds., *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945–1975* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 19-36 (33).

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.



The act of beginning again and starting anew was a recurring motif throughout Figes's life. She was born in 1932 to prosperous German Jewish parents, Emil and Irma Unger, who lived in an affluent neighbourhood in the west of Berlin. In 1938, Emil was arrested during *Kristallnacht* and sent to Dachau, an experience he refused to talk about for the rest of his life. He managed to escape and return to Berlin but, after they realised their lives were under immediate threat, the family fled to London in 1939. Unsurprisingly, these events left an indelible mark on Figes and she would go on to write at various points throughout her career about the traumatic memories associated with this period in her life.²⁵⁵ One such memory, she recalled in *Little Eden: A Child at War* (1978), concerned a 'man in military uniform with a swastika armband' at a passport office who 'frightened' Figes and her brother 'into round-eyed silence when he shouted at [them] to keep quiet and glared down at [them] from his desk while he examined the passports.'²⁵⁶ By the age of six, Figes recounted, she:

had learned that officialdom was to be feared, understood that bureaucrats exercised powers of life and death over people and, judging by the Nazi at the passport office, they could exercise it arbitrarily, depending on their mood and how you behaved.²⁵⁷

Her (and her family's) encounter with the uncompromising and brutal Nazi bureaucracy would have a significant and lasting impact on Figes's thinking. The society she grew up in as a child would serve as a reminder of the injustice and irrationality present at the heart of many supposedly "rational" systems or institutions, including those she would later confront in her polemical work

²⁵⁵ Figes would later discover that her maternal grandparents, who waved goodbye to the family at Templehof airport, were not long after their departure sent to a concentration camp in Poland where they were executed. The memory of this final farewell recurs throughout her work. See for instance *Little Eden: A Child at War* (New York: Persea Books, 1978), 16. Two years before her death, in an interview with Sarah O'Reilly, Figes would recall the scene in great detail. In the same interview she said that 'there's something about... losing relatives you care about in the Holocaust that never goes away, never.' From Track 2 [30:52], "Eva Figes interviewed by Sarah O'Reilly" (26 May 2010), British Library Sound and Moving Image Catalogue.

²⁵⁶ Figes, *Little Eden*, 15.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

as a feminist writer. Following Nancy Fraser, Rita Felski points out that ‘the administrative logic of the bureaucracy can be seen as ultimately antithetical to feminist interests in its quantification and decontextualization of human needs’ (*BFA*, 172).²⁵⁸ It was precisely the quantification and decontextualization of her needs that would go on to further inspire Figes’s feminist activity during the late 1960s and 1970s. As a second-generation holocaust survivor who was displaced by a tyrannical—yet nonetheless “official”—system, she had experienced first-hand and at an early age the ways in which large repressive institutions worked to oppress and marginalize those whose interests lay in ‘getting the system changed,’ as she would later put it.²⁵⁹

Figes also wrote at length about the sudden change in material circumstances her family endured and the alienation she felt as a German Jewish child growing up in Britain—despite not knowing that she was Jewish: “I came [to London] just before my seventh birthday, I did not know why, my parents did not tell me, I did not know that we were Jewish. We were secular Jews.”²⁶⁰ Her peers, however, did:

[f]rom the day I was introduced into a classroom of forty staring children in my odd foreign clothes, only able to speak a few words, writing a peculiar script which my teacher dismissed as scribble, I was branded.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ Felski cites Nancy Fraser as the author of this idea and references Fraser’s “Social Movements vs. Disciplinary Bureaucracies: The Discourses of Social Needs (University of Minnesota: Center for Humanistic Studies, Occasional Papers no. 8, 1987).

²⁵⁹ Figes, ‘The White Road to Blackmail’ in *Woman on Woman*, ed. Margaret Laing (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), 113-129 (129). All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to WRB. The essay is a later version of the manuscript ‘Left Holding the Baby’ in the Eva Figes archive, MS89050/1/8.

²⁶⁰ Eva Figes, quoted in Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, *Eva Figes’s Writings: A Journey Through Trauma* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 56-57. Original quoted from Pellicer-Ortín, “Interview with Eva Figes” (unpublished, 2009). Figes also mentions in *Little Eden* that as a child, she ‘could not have told you what the word [Jewish] meant.’ See Figes, *Little Eden*, 13. She also mentions in the O’Reilly interview that, until the age of eighteen, she believed in Christianity. She tells O’Reilly that her father was staunchly atheist, while her mother “bought” into the idea of German Christianity and its various rituals. From Track 6 [48:00], “Eva Figes interviewed by Sarah O’Reilly” (6 September 2010), British Library Sound and Moving Image Catalogue.

²⁶¹ Figes, *Little Eden*, 17. The script Figes refers to was *Sütterlin*, the last widely practised form of the *Kurrent* handwriting script. *Sütterlin* was taught in German schools between 1915 and 1941. The Nazi party banned it in 1941.

It was not until she left London for Cirencester as an evacuee that she felt a ‘welcome respite from the private war in which [she] found herself involved for so many years [...]’.²⁶² In her 1971 essay ‘The White Road to Blackmail’, Figs remarked that, while she might have had a ‘natural tendency to be introspective and withdrawn,’ it was ‘certainly enforced by [her] refugee childhood in an alien land’ (WRB, 118). Despite these disruptions, she quickly learned English and began to excel at school. Her precociousness, however, presented a problem for her family, one that she would later argue was related to a far greater, deep-rooted issue: the latent yet systematised discouragement of women’s education. The sexual discrimination she felt even as a child was exacerbated by the traditional attitudes held by those around her (most notably, her father), who made it clear that finding a job, and then a husband, was of principal importance, and that any other pathway would be considered an upsetting deviation from what was expected of her:

I [...] felt that I was being discriminated against because of my sex when it came to schooling. The argument that I was too clever to need a specially good school failed to convince me [in contrast to her brother who was sent to a better school]; when the time came to talk about further education, nobody ever said outright that it would be a waste of time and money, yet the comment ‘But you might get married’ came up with disturbing frequency. When I succeeded in winning the only State Scholarship in my coeducational school it seemed almost as though the basic laws of nature had been upset: my mother was proud and delighted but my father found it difficult to adjust to the situation, not least because he thought me arrogant and self-willed and considered it would be good for my character to take a job, any job. Of course, if I had been a boy he would never have dreamed of sacrificing my whole future like that. I know he thought he was acting for my own good, but a girl’s future is in marriage, and docile women make better wives (WRB, 117-8).

Figs contends that she might have been ‘forgiven for being intellectual’ had she wanted to be ‘a teacher or a doctor. But no,’ she explained, ‘I actually wanted to be a writer, and proposed to waste three years reading a useless subject like English’ (WRB, 118). As with many other British experimental writers of her generation, she felt guilty pursuing a literary career, which manifested itself when she attempted to justify the use of novel-writing (rather than her non-fiction work, which she did deem useful). In one article, she wrote that

²⁶² Ibid., 16.

[t]he oddest part is doing it for life, professionally. “I’m getting paid for something I would do for nothing” I heard a professional footballer say on television. I know how he feels, though I don’t get paid much and most of the time it is a problem to make ends meet. But in the eyes of the world I am now a professional [novelist], and one wonders how one can really justify it.²⁶³

In another essay written the same year, she claimed that:

writing, on the surface the most absurd activity of all, the maddest, does make some kind of private sense. Other people find it difficult to understand and I sometimes find it hard to justify: that one should project so much time and effort into a “useless” activity [...].²⁶⁴

Her perception of novel-writing as a useless activity had important implications for her writing practice, which will be discussed in further detail later on. Yet, it is worth mentioning here to draw attention to the perceived uselessness of many career options presented to women at this time (the ‘private sense’ was a means to navigate this gendered work landscape in which most jobs reserved for women were low-paid and menial).

In the final chapter of *Patriarchal Attitudes*, Figes has in mind her own childhood when she includes a selection of writing from a ‘batch of school essays’ that had been written in 1968 ‘by girls of fourteen and fifteen attending a London grammar school,’ which had been given to her by a child psychologist.²⁶⁵ The ‘set theme’ of the essays, Figes explains, was “‘Today is my eightieth birthday and I look back to the time when I left High School’” (*PA*, 169). Most of the girls predicted they would be married by the age of twenty—with twenty-three being the upper age limit for settling down (*PA*, 169). ‘Just as marriage and honeymoon figured disproportionately large in the description of the early years,’ she noticed, ‘so the marriage of children and the arrival of grandchildren seemed the only reality in later years’ rather than ‘what they themselves could actually be doing’ (*PA*, 169)—a phenomenon that Hannah Gavron also drew attention to in her

²⁶³ Figes, ‘Playing Games’, *Vogue*, June 1968, 5.

²⁶⁴ Figes, ‘Consider the Anthep’, 11 March, 1968, *Guardian*, in MS89050/6/2 (Articles and Reviews 1965-69), Eva Figes Archive, British Library, London.

²⁶⁵ Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (London: Virago, 1977), 169. Originally published by Faber and Faber in 1970. All further references are to the Virago edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *PA*.

1966 sociological study *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers*.²⁶⁶ The ‘total aggregate of years worked,’ Figes noted, was ‘at most only about ten years between the ages of fifteen and eighty’ even ‘after specialized training’ (PA, 169) and ‘none of these girls,’ she was saddened to read, ‘doubted that they would be doing housework’ (PA, 170). She discovered that a:

basic assumption in all these essays, and one that is still made by our society as a whole, is that housework and the care of a man and of children is a woman’s work and duty, that marriage is the most important factor in a woman’s life, and that any other interests she may have must be curtailed by the demands that these duties make on her (PA, 171).

Figes noticed that the prevailing attitudes towards both a woman’s education and her career prospects had remained the same in Britain since she had been a young adolescent herself in the 1940s.²⁶⁷ While she had never been ‘anxious to conform to the social concept of femininity,’ she had foreseen at a young age the ‘dangers’ that lay ahead for her, which were ‘inalienably connected with the fact of being a woman’ (WRB, 118). The main danger, she wrote, ‘was the conflict between marriage and career, the moment of choice which, according to every sociological or psychological tract, must come to every woman with only one possible outcome [...]’ (WRB, 118). And in 1970, she insisted that most women’s lives were still structured around this moment of choice, which

²⁶⁶ Gavron expresses many of the same sentiments that Figes would later go on to express in *Patriarchal Attitudes*. In the conclusion to *The Captive Wife* for instance, she writes that for some women ‘marriage had, as an institution, proved a kind of trap’ with many girls regarding ‘the build-up to marriage as a golden period’ and seeing ‘marriage itself as a marvellous event’ without ‘really think[ing] beyond this. Probably the whole problem is aggravated by the tendency to oversell marriage as a kind of unending affair, in which the partners are expected to remain at the high point of infatuation for the rest of their lives; and in this romantic picture there is no clear definition of what the roles and functions of the partners will be.’ See *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Pelican, 1977). The original edition was published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1966.

²⁶⁷ Figes quoted Sir John Newsome who wrote in 1964 that ‘[t]he influence of women on events is exerted primarily in their role as wives and mothers, to say nothing of aunts and grandmothers. Even in employment outside the home, with the exception of schools and hospitals, this influence usually works by sustaining or inspiring the male. The most superficial knowledge of the way in which the affairs of Government, industry and commerce are conducted makes this quite plain. What infuriates a rather esoteric group of women is that they want to exert power both through men and also in their own right, and that this is almost impossible.’ (PA, 30) ‘These,’ Figes added, ‘are the words of an authority on education today, of a man who is helping to guide the paths of future men and women’ to emphasise just how conservative certain education policymakers were at this time (PA, 30).

the schoolgirls' essays had confirmed: '[n]o one doubts that at some stage a woman has to make a choice between her own ambition and her marriage,' and 'in the eyes of society there is in fact only one choice to be made' (*PA*, 171). For Figes, the essays proved that life for most women resembled an itinerary, which recalls a line in *Equinox*. 'The trouble,' Liz reflects, is that women, unlike men, are forced to live as though their lives are a 'well-organised fugue or a game of chess. Birth, marriage and death, all preordained and made in heaven [...]' (*E*, 101). It was a sentiment Figes herself felt in 1953, not long after she graduated with a degree in English from Queen Mary College, London. While she prepared to make her living as a writer, she still had a nagging sense of what she felt she inevitably must do: 'I thought I would opt for marriage when the time came, and I did' (*WRB*, 119).

'Career v. marriage'

Figes was aware that writing would present a 'more subtle, and also more dangerous' set of 'conflicting demands' between 'work and marriage' than a more regular, less precarious job might but she was determined to reconcile the seemingly insoluble problem of 'career v. marriage' (*WRB*, 119). In 1954, she married John Figes, with whom she would have two children, Kate (born 1957) and Orlando (born 1959). But over the course of the next eight years, she found that the demands of the household increasingly impinged on her time to write, even though '[her] husband was all in favour of [her] writing in [her] spare time' (*WRB*, 120). Yet:

[f]inding the spare time was the problem. First, I did a job, shopping for food in the lunch hour, cooking at night. Weekends, of course, were for togetherness. Later there were small babies, and when I actually did shut myself away in a small room which I had turned into a study for an hour or two a day, my husband was rather less than appreciative: where on earth was his dinner? (*WRB*, 120)

Figes mentions that 'by this time there were other problems,' too (*WRB*, 120). Most of these stemmed from the domestic labour she was expected to carry out. She speaks of having felt 'very lonely, trapped in the house with a young child' with any attempt to discuss the situation of her husband 'stay[ing] out all night' only resulting in 'an argument, followed by another lonely evening' (*WRB*, 120). Certain moments she describes—'keeping up appearances and at the same time

hid[ing] [her] growing distress' (WRB, 120); 'lay[ing] awake for hours' (WRB, 120); 'ask[ing] friends for dinner' in her husband's absence (WRB, 120)—echo descriptions in *Equinox*, which would be formed from her experiences as a 'wife trapped in the house,' while the 'husband goes off to work and finds plenty of distraction outside the home' (WRB, 120).²⁶⁸ It was the double standards and the hypocrisy that surrounded work, which *Equinox* would dramatise so intensely and *Patriarchal Attitudes* would go on to criticize so forcibly some years later. As Figes wrote, a 'woman's career, particularly if it is successful, is often blamed for the break-up of a marriage but never a man's' because 'the man is regarded as the natural breadwinner' (*PA*, 171). Of course, Figes was not 'successful' at this early stage in her writing career but the injustice of her situation, as she saw it, lay in the fact that—due to her sex—she could not even try to be.

Figes's experience of having to choose between 'career v. marriage' was a dilemma common to many (particularly middle-class and university-educated) women of her generation, and one that many began speaking and writing about at approximately the same time, as shown, for instance, in Randal Fraser's 1968 edited collection *Work*.²⁶⁹ The text, initially published in *New Left Review* in 1965 through to 1967, consisted of twenty personal accounts concerning the titular subject, and included Suzanne Gail's account, 'The Housewife', which describes in detail the nature of housework and the experience of being a housewife in the mid-1960s. It addresses a number of similar issues and problems to those explored in both *Equinox* and 'The White Road to Blackmail'.

²⁶⁸ One scene in *Equinox* is particularly reminiscent of the details Figes describes in 'The White Road to Blackmail'. Roger, a mutual friend, calls to speak to Martin, who has yet to return home: 'She put the receiver down. Damn Roger and Phyllis, always so smug and integrated. Everybody knows when to expect their partners, I never know these days. The must all take you for a fool, could almost hear it in Roger's voice' (*E*, 57). Liz then proceeds to think of all the ways in which she could start 'behaving in the same way.' (*E*, 57). The scene ends with her reflecting on how Martin would not care about her absence but 'might mind about his dinners' (*E*, 57).

²⁶⁹ Margaret Laing's edited collection *Woman on Woman* (1971), which Figes's 'The White Road to Blackmail' was included in, was another book in which women wrote about career and marriage issues. Gavron's work, and later Ann Oakley's, also circulated a cross-section of women's opinions and thoughts on these matters. The foundation of the Housebound Housewives Register in 1960 by Maureen Nicol represented another forum for women at this time to discuss and articulate issues related to career and marriage more publicly.

There are number of parallels between Gail's and Figes's lives: like Figes, Gail had intended on a writing career. 'I married as soon as I graduated,' Gail writes:

explicitly anti-domestic, and bent on proving to myself that it was possible to combine marriage (an intense personal relationship mainly, but also a family much later) with unprejudiced exploration of literary values often remote from healthy-mindedness, hygiene and a stable society focused on the family. (SG, 140-1)

Gail writes that her mother had wanted her to be a “nice quiet person who wouldn't be noticed in the crowd”, and it was feared [by her family] that university education [would result] in ingratitude' or, as she added parenthetically, '(independence)' (SG, 141). Gail eventually began a PhD but, before long, a similar set of concerns to Figes's begin to emerge in her account: her husband Joe, who, at first, 'regarded [her] non-domestication with complete tolerance' began to find 'the dirt and untidiness depressing, and begat status yearnings' (SG, 141). She goes on to imply that her husband's growing desire for a domesticated wife stemmed from him wanting to perform his role as the male breadwinner, after having obtained the accoutrements of a wife, a son, and a salary. 'As a man with a wife, a son and a salary for the uncongenial job foisted on him by [their son] Carl's appearance,' Gail writes, 'he wanted a clean shirt every day, not just as something practical, but as his *right*' (SG, 141).

The problems Gail catalogues convey powerfully why 'career v. marriage' was an intractable issue for so many women of hers and Figes's generation. Conventional attitudes surrounding both marriage and female labour made it difficult to combine the two, resulting in women “naturally” attending to the home—and mostly out of the notion that the man's work ought to be privileged: 'Joe's work is much more necessary,' Gail writes because 'we all live on it. Housework is housework, whoever does it' (SG, 148). The housewife—a symptom of late capitalism, as Figes herself would go on to note in *Patriarchal Attitudes*—was beginning to attract a substantial amount of criticism and attention as a topic for research at this time.²⁷⁰ The American

²⁷⁰ Oakley argues that '[t]he question, "What is a housewife?" is specifically a question about industrialized society' (HW, 9). As Figes and Oakley would relate in *Patriarchal Attitudes* and *Housewife*

feminist Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was particularly influential and anticipated a number of similar sociological studies that focused specifically on the experience of the housewife, which in Britain included Gavron's *The Captive Wife* (1966) and, later, Anne Oakley's *Housewife* (1974) and *The Sociology of Housework* (1974).²⁷¹ Ideas concerning the housewife and housework were being discussed elsewhere, too. In 1972, for example, the Wages for Housework campaign was formed by the International Feminist Collective in Padua, with Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, Mariarose Dalla Costa, and Silvia Federici involved in its formation. Federici's pamphlet, *Wages Against Housework* (1975), provides some of the most succinct and vigorous arguments for the significance of housework. The campaign wished to draw attention to the fact that, despite the vital social importance of reproductive labour (such as housework, and the bearing of and attending to children), it was not accorded an appropriate status within most capitalist economies. Federici argued that the campaign was less about financial reward (which is symbolic) and more about the much-needed change in perspective, one that did not assume that it was women's natural duty to carry out this kind of labour—an assumption that was deeply embedded within Western culture (and one that Figs had examined in close detail throughout *Patriarchal Attitudes*).

The assumption that housework fell solely under women's jurisdiction bred resentment in Gail, who wrote that '[t]here is something so negative about this role that society heaps entirely on to the shoulders of the women' (SG, 150). She viewed housework as an 'outright attack on femininity' (SG, 151) and made her 'often wish that [she] had not had such confidence in [her] ability to ignore the established meaning of marriage,' and instead had 'waited a few years longer before marrying.' (SG, 150). Figs felt much the same, as she highlighted in 'The White Road to

respectively, women's oppression in modern times was tied up inextricably with the development of capitalism. In their respective studies they argued that early capitalism enforced a gendered division of labour, which could be traced through to the time of their writing.

²⁷¹ It was still an under-researched topic, as Oakley observes: 'The social trivialization of housework and women has meant that the behaviour and feelings of women as housewives (rather than as wives and mothers) is an unresearched area. Housework is not a respectable subject for study.' (HW, 91)

Blackmail'. She too pointed to the social system she found herself entrapped in: '[i]f I spit bitterness,' she wrote, 'it is because you, society, has made me this way' (WRB, 126). Gail, too, writes about feeling a profound bitterness, one that derived specifically from the insultingly obvious double standards at play within marriage, which the conventional family structure (and, by extension, society in general) normalised:

I feel bitter to be his equal in [some] respects, yet spending my days on work which to him would be a revolting waste of time. The way the family is structured leads inevitably to tyranny, against all one's clear-sightedness [sic] and efforts to avoid it. (SG, 151).

Figs refers to this same domestic tyranny in *Patriarchal Attitudes*, noting that it was born mainly out of habit, as Gail implies above. 'Habits are perpetuated in that bastion of social conservatism, the family' (PA, 169), reiterating, to be sure, that it is the 'very structure of family life' and the 'the institution of marriage' which remain 'the main hindrances to a really fundamental change of attitude' towards women's status in society (PA, 175).

One of the central paradoxes of this domestic tyranny was the putative freedom the housewife was said to enjoy. Despite regarding housework as a 'revolting waste of time', it was still accepted by many (men and women) as preferable to and less onerous than formal forms of employment. As Oakley put it, while:

the woman's liberationist maintains that housewifery is domestic servitude—labour exploitation—the defenders of traditional femininity argue that the housewife role is a freely chosen occupation offering scope for individual creative skill. While one says that housewives are oppressed, the other says that housewives are free from the oppression of most workers—restrictions of personality and freedom consequent on the imposition of repetitive industrial work routines and work rhythms (HW, 92).

Oakley concluded from her research that housewives did in fact 'value the theoretical autonomy the role offers' (HW, 92). 'Of the forty housewives I interviewed in suburban London in 1971,' she wrote, 'twenty-eight said that the "best thing" about being a housewife is that you're your own boss, you don't need to go to work and you have free time' (HW, 92), before going on to quote one of the anonymous respondents, an 'ex-hotel chambermaid married to a painter decorator', who felt that, as a housewife, 'you have your own time, there's nobody behind you with a punch

card. You're your own boss' (*HW*, 92). While that might have been the case, Gail referred precisely to this point when she wrote:

Joe tells me I am freer than he is—I can do things in my own time without pressure from anybody. But that seems to me poor compensation for the sameness of jobs that require perhaps less than a quarter of one's mental awareness, while leaving the rest incapable of being occupied elsewhere (*SG*, 144).

Oakley drew attention to this point, stating that the 'autonomy conferred by the housewife role has a tendency to be fictional rather than real' (*HW*, 92). 'Being one's own boss', she wrote, 'implies the necessity to supervise one's own work to see that housework gets done' (*HW*, 92), citing an 'ex-computer programmer married to an advertising manager', who told her that the:

worst thing is I suppose that you've got to do the work because you *are* at home. Even though I've got the option of not doing it, I don't really feel I *could* not do it, because I feel I *ought* to do it (*HW*, 92).

This led Oakley to conclude that 'the housewife is "free from" rather "free to"; the absence of external supervision is not balanced by the liberty to use time for one's own ends' and that the 'taking of leisure is self-defeating', summarized by another respondent who said that: '[i]t's not that anyone's going to whip me if I don't do it—but I know there's going to be double the quantity tomorrow, so really I'm just beating my own brow' (*HW*, 92). Although not speaking specifically within the context of housework, Boltanski and Chiapello observe how occupational autonomy under late capitalism is rarely what it purports to be. They argue that autonomy—widely understood as an inherently positive part of an occupation—is usually bound up with greater responsibility, resulting in workers becoming '*simultaneously* more autonomous and more constrained' (*NSC*, 430-1).²⁷² Oakley implies as much when she points out that the:

physical isolation of housework—each housewife in her own home—ensures that it is totally self-defined. There are no public rules dictating what the housewife should do, or how and when she should do it. Beyond basic specifications—the provision of meals, the laundering of clothes, the care of the interior of the home—the

²⁷² Boltanski and Chiapello elaborate that they 'cannot ignore those features of current forms of capitalism that tend to restrict and to a certain extent, recuperate autonomy, which is not only presented as a possibility or right, but is as it were *demand*ed of people, whose status is increasingly assessed according to their capacity for self-fulfilment, elevated to the status of an evaluative criterion.' (*NSC*, 429)

housewife, in theory at least, defines the job as she likes. Meals can be cooked or cold; clothes can be washed when they have been worn for a few hours or a few weeks; the home can be cleaned once a month or twice a day. Who is to establish the rules, who is to set the limits of normality, if it is not the housewife herself? (*HW*, 8)

The amorphousness of this type of labour, of supposedly having the liberty of working when one likes (but on the condition that one must do it nevertheless) creates a double-bind: one is freer—but not really.

Housework is self-defined, repetitive, and fragmented; many respondents in Oakley's study found their work to be a 'series of unconnected tasks, none of which require the worker's full attention.' (*HW*, 100). For Gail, this was the 'most undermining' part: 'housework is anathema to concentration and intensity' (SG, 144). She recalled that when 'the housework was still new' she used to 'take pleasure in finding ways of doing the jobs quicker and better' (SG, 149). In other words, she would gamify her labour in an attempt to make it more meaningful and more fun. Yet, before long, she realised she was 'an incurably bad houseworker' because she could not 'pretend it [was] an essential, personalized task' (SG, 148). She grew frustrated 'doing jobs that require so little valuable effort' and jobs that:

are mainly concerned with simply keeping level with natural processes—cleaning jobs, whether of objects or people, which once done are not done for good, and will have to be done all over again, just as if I have not already made the effort, the next day, or even within a few hours (SG, 150).

It is the circular, never-ending nature of this reproductive labour and its full possession of the mind that characterises housework (and especially, during the 60s, in those households that did not yet contain labour-saving devices). As Gail explains, it was for her a possession of the mind that was in no way desirable, one that demands you to empty out all 'thought' while still maintaining an awareness to your surroundings, to remain "on call" at all times:

[a]nother factor that undermines my interest [in housework] is having to keep my mind on two things at once [...] I have overcome that by freeing the surface of my mind from thoughts altogether, leaving it swimming aimlessly so that it can be called into action by an alarming sound. This is a further loosening of concentration, and one that has to be practised for a distressingly large part of the day, often leaving me too empty for real concentration when the chance comes (SG, 149).

Her description intimates that the housewife, when engaged in housework, is absent: she is always everywhere yet never anywhere. Soon, she records, she became ‘simply bent on eliminating as many tasks as possible’ in the shortest amount of time (SG, 149). Many of the personal accounts in both Gavron’s and Oakley’s surveys identified the same issues. Gavron’s samples cited ‘Emotional and Intellectual satisfaction’ as being the prime reason why women wanted to leave the home and find paid employment (CW, 117). “‘I need to feel I am using my brain, and putting my mind to serious problems,’” one respondent told Gavron (CW, 118). In one spirited opinion piece, written for the *Daily Telegraph* in June 1968, Figes also confronted this concern but spoke from a macroeconomic perspective, which emphasised the sheer waste of the majority of women’s labour: ‘[w]e worry about the brain drain,’ she wrote, ‘but the biggest drain in this country is down the kitchen sink’.²⁷³

The image of the housewife that builds up throughout Gail’s account and throughout Gavron’s and Oakley’s respective studies is one of a worker whose labour is isolated, menial, psychologically sapping, and, perhaps most significantly, ambiguous. ‘Everybody in a sense knows what being a housewife is like; but in another sense, nobody knows’, as Oakley put it (HW, 91). Part of the reason why housework was ignored and not credited as an economically productive activity was to do with the perplexing social status of the housewife. Oakley claimed that in ‘current social imagery “housewife” is a term often used casually to mean “woman”, “wife”, or even “mother”’ (HW, ix), which illustrates the ambiguity and confusion that surrounded her social status (and function) at the time. She elaborates later in her study that this is a direct result of the several roles that housewives are expected to perform:

So infinitely variable and personal a role as the housewife’s might well seem to contravene accepted definitions of what a ‘role’ is. [...] In the social image of a woman, the roles of wife and mother are not distinct from the role of housewife. Reflections of this image in advertising, and in the media generally, portray women as some kind of statistical mean of all three roles combined. A particularly clear

²⁷³ Figes, ‘OPINION’ [typescript], (11 June 1968) in MS89050/6/2 (Articles and Reviews 1965-69), Figes archive, London.

presentation of this image appears in women's magazines, which show women how to dress, eat, housekeep, have their babies and even make love all at the same time. In psychological terms they [women's magazines] enable the harassed mother, the overburdened housewife, to make contact with her ideal self: that self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient home maker. 'Housewife' can be an umbrella term for 'wife' and 'mother'. Women's expected role in society is to strive after perfection in all three roles (*HW*, 9).

The idea that housewives—and, by extension, women in general—performed and acted a number of roles in accordance to various ideal images is one that Oakley reiterates later on in *Housewife*: 'The modern housewife', she writes 'has a dual personality' (*HW*, 91). '[S]he is both acting out a feminine role and she is a worker', which for Oakley was a contradiction in terms (*HW*, 91). The feminine role she was told to perform through 'advertising, and in the media generally' was one that demanded women to erase all signs of visible labour, which Gavron insinuated when she commented that '[t]oday a woman is expected to run the house efficiently' and 'higher standards of hygiene must be observed,' she wrote, 'but she must not be submerged by domesticity, which has definitely lost its sex appeal' (*CW*, 131). Figs in fact argued in *Patriarchal Attitudes* that this performative role was more deep-rooted and applicable to women more generally—not just the housewife:

Woman, presented with an image in a mirror, has danced to that image in a hypnotic trance. And because she thought that the image was herself, it became just that. [...] The first thing that strikes one about the image in the mirror in which we dance is the fact that it was created by man; not by men and women jointly for common ends, not by women themselves, but by men. One could say that this is the real difficulty: the fact that the mirror is distorted. Man's vision of woman is not objective, but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be, and it is to this mirror image that woman has had to comply (*PA*, 16-17).

It could be argued, however, that it was the housewife who was expected to dance most vigorously and most faithfully before the image presented to her. She is a figure who—in all her many various roles and guises, and for all her 'incessant doing' (*OAC*, 181)—represents for Sianne Ngai the encapsulation of an archetypal zany character, a character that is a cultural product of a 'capitalist

mode of production,' which 'privileges ever more elastic relations to work and personality.'²⁷⁴ Ngai begins her analysis of zaniness by reading the performance of the American housewife Lucy Ricardo (played by Lucille Ball) in the long-standing hit show *I Love Lucy* (1951-present). For Ngai, the zany is 'an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes' (*OAC*, 185), which the housewife embodies. Zaniness, she claims, is an aesthetic that occupies the 'intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring' (*OAC*, 182), which the housewife oscillates between as she juggles the many roles that are subsumed under her one role of being a housewife. This kind of labour is both 'intensely affective and physical' (*OAC*, 182). While *Equinox* does not map entirely neatly onto Ngai's aesthetic grid (Liz is too serious as a character to be described as 'zany'), the text does foreground and articulate in its fragmented form some of the same destabilising effects that zaniness produces, as we shall see.

Liz's anxiety about what she ought to do is manifested in the very form and structure of *Equinox*: the fragments that make up the text resemble snapshots or vignettes, each of which represent Liz in a different place and time. Our work as readers is to stitch these moments together. One moment, Liz walks along Regents Street. The next, she is lying down or at work. During another moment, she is lying 'still, staring at the wall' in bed (*E*, 71), while only a few lines later, we are transported to the middle of the city (*E*, 71-2). Before this, she is on the phone at home (*E*, 70). While many of the fragments depict slow or still moments of introspection (which is why, again, the text resists the diagnosis of being 'zany'), they are often short and quick to read. With this continuous shifting and changing of the scene and activity, Liz is made to look like a hyperactive character (or immaterial labourer) even when she is not. The novel depicts a furious, relentless, and 'incessant doing', in which quite often very little gets done. It is as though she runs

²⁷⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 174. Even though Ngai's analysis is rooted firmly in American culture, the majority of her observations can be applied more universally (zany, however, does have something of an American inflection to it, which is perhaps not so prevalent in British culture). All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *OAC*.

on a 'treadmill' (Liz admits to being 'unable to escape the treadmill' herself at one point, [E, 118]), as a hyperactive character stuck dancing in fast-forward, on loop.

Doing and not doing in *Equinox*

Equinox is Figes's most directly autobiographical and one of her least formally experimental novels. When interviewed by Alan Burns some years later, she claimed to be 'thoroughly ashamed of [it],' citing that she was not 'really in control of what [she] was doing' (IT, 34). In spite of these claims, the chapter argues that *Equinox* is an important text in British feminist literary history as it anticipates and dramatises a number of fundamental feminist issues that Figes would later address in *Patriarchal Attitudes*. For this reason, it contains substantial cultural and literary import as one of the many consciousness-raising novels published throughout the early- to mid-1960s. The title, *Equinox*, gestures towards a shift in time—the time of year when day and night are of equal length—which indicates both in-between-ness and a moment before change or renewal. It is therefore a prescient title, suggestive as it is of its place in British feminist history, just before second-wave feminism had reached its crescendo. During the early and mid-1960s, certain issues and problems that, as Betty Friedan famously put it, 'ha[d] no name' were gradually being articulated and illuminated (thanks in part to her popular 1963 study, *The Feminine Mystique*, which Figes said was the only text that provided a 'few rough guidelines' for writing *Patriarchal Attitudes*).²⁷⁵ And yet, in Britain in 1966, there were still a number of fundamental changes to be made before women began to experience any semblance of equality: abortion was still illegal, the pill was not available for unmarried women, and the 1970 Equal Pay Act would not be enforced for another

²⁷⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010), 5. Originally published in 1963. In the 1978 introduction to *Patriarchal Attitudes*, she wrote that: 'I worked in isolation, against the stream (as I thought), with no literary models to guide me. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* had been published a generation earlier, but when I re-read it the book seemed inadequate and oddly uncertain [...] With hindsight I realised that my entry into womanhood had been influenced for the worse by reading it. Only Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* provided a few rough guidelines' (PA, 7).

ten years (on 29 December 1975). Of course, one of most contentious issues of gender inequality at this time concerned labour. While writing *Equinox*, Figs was well-placed to write about the topic, having experienced both ‘years at the kitchen sink’ as a housewife (WRB, 121) and time in an office as a junior editor at a publishing firm. It is therefore unsurprising that the novel takes women’s labour as one of its primary themes, as it tracks Liz’s journey through a labour market that promises to offer independence and autonomy (while at home she is still expected to play the ancillary role of the housewife). While the text is unmistakably critical of both housewifery and the common assumption that held women’s natural role as a domestic one, it appears to be no less critical of the male-dominated, misogynistic world of work that Liz is eventually assimilated into. Rather than treating her transformation from housewife to an editor of a publishing firm as a positive and liberating experience, the text at various points questions the rationality (and rationalisation) of work as both an activity and an institution.

Following the loss of her child at birth, Liz finds herself marooned in an unhappy marriage with her unfaithful and casually chauvinistic husband Martin. In terms of plot, *Equinox* is spare; very little happens. Liz mostly stays at home after the death of her child but soon finds her existence as a housewife intolerable, so, with Martin’s encouragement, she finds a job at a publishing house—the same one that published her collection of poetry ten years before. She suddenly becomes seriously ill. She then recovers. Her and Martin travel to the Oxfordshire countryside to visit their family friends, John and Frances. Martin travels to America for work, leaving her more isolated than before. In the time Martin is away, Liz conducts an affair with John. By the end, Martin and Liz finally separate after her infidelity is uncovered (despite Martin’s obvious philandering throughout the narrative). Most of the plot elements are already in motion: Liz has lost the child by the time the narrative begins, and it is clear that her marriage is disintegrating, and that the reason for this disintegration is related directly to issues surrounding work.

Figes abandoned her first novel *Lights* to begin writing *Equinox*, using her experience as a housewife to write the novel. ‘I used the same fragmented form [as *Lights*],’ she told Burns, ‘[e]ach chapter was one month, and there were paragraphs in between: things [Liz had] seen, or things she thought, or little actions’ (*IT*, 33), which, as an anonymous reader report of the novel pointed out, makes for a kind of ‘kaleidoscope [...] [t]he effect is of a piling up of relevant images and facts that become denser with each page’—an ‘effect [...] of continual development, a building—as in a Bartok [sic] for example.’²⁷⁶ Only towards the end (the section titled ‘June, July, August’), as the narrative approaches September and Liz confronts the ‘question of beginning again’ do we witness a change in form. The text becomes less fragmented as Liz prepares herself for a new life following her divorce, one in which she can begin again as a single woman and one in which, crucially, she can begin again as a writer—a career that had been curtailed by her marriage. The fractured, scattered form of *Equinox* is significant: it not only manages to produce something like the hyperactive, zany effect mentioned above, it also seems to reflect Liz’s ruptured or “split” state of mind throughout the narrative. It often creates a disorientating effect and is an effective means to conjure narrative confusion, which Liz experiences herself, first as a housewife and later as an editor at Morley’s publishing house. She is unable to narrativize her life or endow it with any meaning or purpose; she understands her life to be an ephemeral series of fragments of experience and impossible to reconcile as parts of a meaningful narrative (a conception of reality that Figes spoke about experiencing herself in various interviews).²⁷⁷ The fragments of text vary in length and

²⁷⁶ Anonymous reader report, MS89050/1/8, ‘Equinox, working papers’, Figes archive. The reference to the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók is a perceptive one given that classical compositions later provided inspiration for Figes’s writing. Her second novel, *Winter Journey*, for instance, was inspired by Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise* cycle.

²⁷⁷ ‘I discovered that life was not continuous’ Figes said in the interview with Burns. She went on to say that this experience of life informed her views on the novel, claiming that ‘the novels of the past were portraying a false reality,’ she mentioned in the interview with Burns (33). In *Beyond the Words*, she wrote that she wished to find ‘some way of expressing the peculiarities, awfulness and seemingly ungraspable qualities of life itself [...] I began with the realization that personal experience, unlike all the fiction I had ever read, did not tell a story. Now I would say that all fiction imposes a grid on reality, and that I am imposing a different grid. Experience is chaotic and

are juxtaposed in a way that throws into relief the many contradictory and demanding roles Liz is expected to perform as a woman whose social position and function remain frustratingly ambiguous. One moment Martin orders her to rest and treats her like a child—“Out of the question. You’re going to have a rest, take things easy” (*E*, 98)—before he criticises her for brooding and “sitting around” less than a page later (*E*, 99). At times he states his affection, while at other times he ignores her and ‘take[s] no notice or go[es] off somewhere, slamming the door’ behind him (*E*, 41). In other words, Liz is always caught between what she is doing and what Martin wants her to do. She is never able to perform to Martin’s liking. The situation is exacerbated by his claims that it is Liz who is difficult to read: he tells her he does not ‘understand’ her (*E*, 11) before declaring in bed: “[t]he trouble with you is, I never know what you want.” (*E*, 41) His incomprehension, we suspect, is not only feigned but malicious; it is a way of suggesting that Liz’s feelings are irrationally, erratically mutable and always susceptible to change. He implies (in spite of his own uneven behaviour) that the onus is on her to behave differently so that she might become more transparent and easier to read. In other words, his incomprehension masks what Liz feels is the real ‘trouble’ at hand: “Martin never has time for things” (*E*, 14) as she tells her mother. She informs her that “[h]e’s very busy getting back into the swing of things at the moment,” to which her mother replies sympathetically, “[h]e must be” (*E*, 14), thus subtly endorsing the image of Martin as the hard-working breadwinner. Their exchange, however, follows a parenthetical conversation in which Martin and Liz argue about having to visit her parents; it transpires that his absence has nothing to do with work: he merely wishes not to see them. It becomes clear over the course of the narrative that Martin uses work as a means to justify his behaviour and increasing absence; if he does not wish to do something with Liz, then his work (complicated and abstruse)

each generation selects certain facets of reality from which to form a model of human experience which looks deceptively like a totality. It never is. It does not matter.’ (113) Her remarks are similar to Johnson’s and Trocchi’s, both of whom claimed that experience is chaotic and difficult to represent in the novel.

provides a guaranteed means to excuse himself from any situation. As a housewife, Liz has no such freedom: it is her job to remain in the house, to attend to it even when Martin is absent.

Figes's own description of her novel is illuminating. In the precis she wrote for her publisher, Liz has 'reached a point when she feels that everything in her life is meaningless, lacking direction, and that all her convictions are based on false premises.'²⁷⁸ The novel, she continues, is an 'analytical study of a woman's mind through a year of crisis in her life.'²⁷⁹ She foregrounds the experience of the housewife as a primary theme, stating that '*Equinox* enables us to see how a woman copes with the universal problem of coming to grips with the dilemmas of living an ordinary domestic life.'²⁸⁰ By referring to the 'universal [...] dilemmas,' Figes implies that a fundamental part of what it means to be a woman living in the 'ordinary domestic sphere' is to experience the feeling of being divided, torn, split (a dilemma of course is 'a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, especially ones that are equally undesirable'). This "split" experience was one that a number of feminist thinkers at the time remarked upon, as we shall see. Gavron, for instance, observed that women in the early to mid-1960s Britain felt obliged to fulfil a 'dual role,' which stemmed specifically from the 'dual pull of home versus work' (*CW*, 41)—an analogy that suggests an eventual splitting. (The phrasing here echoes Figes's dilemma of 'career v. marriage.')

Gavron posited that the 'dual role' had developed over many years: '[u]ntil very recently, a popular male view was to conceive of two types of women, virtuous and vicious' (*CW*, 130) and women, she argued, were 'required [more recently] to play both roles,' to 'show restraint premaritally' while being 'expected to be ardent and uninhibited' after marriage (*CW*, 130), which, again draws on the idea of the housewife as a virtuoso performer, whose performance is assessed and rated, and nowhere is this made more explicit in *Equinox* than in the bedroom. Early on, for instance, Liz receives a present from Martin, a 'white and gold scarf',

²⁷⁸ MS89050/1/8, 'Equinox, working papers', Figes archive,

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

which she tries on in ‘front of the long mirror’ while Martin watches her from the bed (E, 12).

‘This is one way of having a life, she thought, wrapped in an aura of narcissistic euphoria,’ (E, 12)

before pausing:

[o]f course a mirror is just a liar really, but why should that bother you? The one thing I never see is what other people see. I strike poses, pull flattering expressions, and I have never seen myself from the back, walking somewhere, doing anything. (E, 12)

Liz’s admission that she has never seen herself ‘doing anything’ might suggest that whenever she does do something, she does it self-consciously, aware of someone else looking at her. Martin orders her to “[come to the bed], to stop admiring [her]self” because she “look[s] smashing.” (E, 12) ‘She smiled an acted smile, wistful and over-sweet at Martin’s reduced image in the glass’ while ‘watching herself perform’ and ‘him watching her from the bed through a haze of smoke’ (E, 12). With Martin all but hidden (‘reduced image [...] through a haze of smoke’), the scene contains a shade of seediness, which is only accentuated by Liz’s visibility: this is clearly a performance *for* Martin, which he not only instigated but, perhaps just as significantly, concludes with an approval: “‘you look smashing.’”

This scene can be understood as a dramatic anticipation of the dominant trope to figure throughout Figes’s early work: the mirror analogy. Figes would invoke it in *Patriarchal Attitudes* some years later (as recorded above) and again on national television when she appeared on John Berger’s documentary *Ways of Seeing* (1972). ‘I know, as I suppose I’ve always known, but I became aware of it in this film,’ Figes said, ‘[that] I have never consciously looked at myself in the mirror and seen myself as I am.’²⁸¹ She continued: ‘I always see the image that I want. I know, and my children notice it, that if I make up my face I put on a certain expression.’²⁸² Ever since ‘adolescence,’ she said, ‘if I’ve seen myself naked in the mirror I have not thought of myself as

²⁸¹ Eva Figes, interviewed by John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, [film], as seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta-s_vzxWn8. Accessed at 11 March 2018. Broadcast on BBC Two, 15 January 1972. Figes speaks towards the end from 25:01-26:37.

²⁸² Ibid.

naked, I have thought of myself as a *nude*.²⁸³ She proceeded to explain this split between the ideal, often eroticised self and the real self ‘you don’t see’ in greater detail:

[n]ow, this business of always posing in a mirror, I think one does absolutely automatically and the result is that if you actually catch yourself in a mirror by chance—that’s not deliberately because you’re getting dressed or had a bath but because there’s one in the street where you catch yourself in a shop window... It’s a tremendous shock because you suddenly see yourself as you are: windblown, untidy, badly dressed, tired, and so on... You don’t see the pose at all and I think this is what happens to women, that they’re always trying to measure up to this erotic image that is projected.²⁸⁴

Being ‘measure[d] up’ is a familiar feeling for Liz. At one point, she tells Martin that she overheard a man talking on the telephone, describing in detail his night with a ‘pick up’ (*E*, 69), which leads her to ask her husband:

‘Do men often talk that way about women?’[...]
‘A lot of men are rather juvenile when it comes to sex.’
‘I have noticed. Do you talk about your wives like that at work?’
‘Not quite like that, but we do, yes.’
‘Including me?’
‘Of course.’
‘What have you said?’
‘Oh... that you’re pretty good.’
‘Thanks very much. I suppose I should be flattered. Like the performance of a new sportscar. How can you? Don’t you think that it’s private, that there should be some privacy?’ (*E*, 69-70)

Critics have suggested that the idea of performance-rating (and its corollary of optimisation through a series of tests and experiments) became an instinctive way to think about almost everything during the Cold War period: from new consumer products to humans, performance became the most accurate criterion through which to test an object’s or person’s usefulness.²⁸⁵ Liz, then, appears to draw an instructive parallel: as a housewife, she is measured precisely on account of her sexual performance and, as Figs would suggest in ‘The White Road to Blackmail’, her

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ See Ngai: ‘As Jon McKenzie argues [...] the experience of “being challenged” central to Cold War American culture in which “performance” designates not just the performance of artists but also that of washing machines, shampoo, and cars, and thus something to be “optimized” through various “experiments” and “tests”’ (*OAC*, 184).

culinary performance. '[A] man,' Figes wrote, 'tends to think marriage essential in order to provide the right environment—regular sex and hot meals—so that he can work undisturbed' (WRB, 119).

Liz has been ordered to rest after the death of her child but becomes increasingly unhappy and restless. At one point, she recalls that she:

can't remember feeling quite like this before, pulled in no direction, impelled by nothing outside or inside to do anything. Not involved. Invalid. I'm a stranger to my own life, none of it means anything to me. I might have lost my memory (but I remember, the way I remember that Napoleon went to Waterloo in 1815) or walked into the wrong house by mistake. And maybe stayed there until it was too late to extricate myself (95, *E*).

Here, the homonym '[i]nvalid' disrupts the flow of reading since it is difficult to know whether it should be read as a noun or an adjective. Liz has been recently debilitated by her illness and so it is plausible that she refers to herself as an invalid (literally, *in-* 'not' + *validus-* 'strong'). Yet, we also know how guilty she feels for not doing anything during her convalescence, for not being productive enough, and for not being a "valid," contributing member of society, a feeling that is only exacerbated after the loss of her child; 'I'm not equipped for anything, except apparently for having babies that don't live,' she tells Martin (*E*, 11).²⁸⁶ Ultimately, however, the text suggests there is no difference between either meaning. To be an invalid (or "not strong" in the way an intensely productivist society privileges) is also to be socially invalid—a generally accepted formulation in 1960s Britain which inspired an enormous amount of guilt and anxiety in many women whose housework was not recognised as economically productive, as the many responses in Gavron's survey underlined in particular.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ With this in mind, *Equinox* can be interpreted more bleakly as a narrative about the ostracization of a woman who is unable to reproduce (and whose refusal to try again is understood as a form of protest against the patriarchal system she becomes increasingly aware of over the course of the narrative). Gavron's remarks recall the attitudes surrounding childlessness: 'the opinion is widely held,' she wrote, 'that to remain childless is for a woman to offend against her basic nature, and thus to do herself harm. However, we do not know to what extent being childless causes a woman harm, though obviously in a society which equates being a woman with motherhood there must be some effect.' (*CW*, 129)

²⁸⁷ 'Nothing,' Gavron noted, 'has prepared young wives for the relentless boredom of scrubbing floors and ironing shirts, but on the other hand there is the feeling that being at home, is not as

Throughout the narrative, Liz worries continually about wasting time: she sees herself ‘wasted [at] thirty’ (*E*, 134), and at one point in clear frustration repeats, ‘I waste, waste, waste, time and emotions and good intentions’ (*E*, 57), echoing statements made by the housewives Gavron and Oakley interviewed.²⁸⁸ Wasted time for Liz seems to correlate directly with usefulness, a correlation she half-ironically gestures towards at the end of one conversation with Martin when she says ‘[she]’d better think about being useful’ (*E*, 56), rather than recover from the severe physical and psychological toll she has recently incurred (it comes as no surprise that she suffers a major breakdown not long after this statement). And it is a guilt she harbours from the beginning of the narrative. Early on, we see her reprimand herself: ‘[i]t’s time you started doing something, stopped mooning around, waiting [...]’ (*E*, 28). For a novel in which very little happens—at least outside of Liz’s mind—*Equinox* appears obsessed with what people do. At one point, Liz wonders recursively: ‘[w]hat do we do here, why do we do it?’ (*E*, 93) Later we see her stress the word, as if to wring out its meaning, ‘[w]hat are we going to *do*, anyway?’ (*E*, 135) The answer, Liz realises, is work, even if that means performing labour in order either to stave off the guilt of not visibly doing any or to distract oneself from precisely the question that haunts the works of B.S. Johnson and Alexander Trocchi: ‘*what do you really do?*’

important as being at work’ (*CW*, 132). And furthermore she reports: ‘[a]gain as a correspondent said to [the broadcaster] Elaine Grande, “Being at home all day is terribly boring, frustrating, and to my mind very *inferior*.” A correspondent in *The Times* (1961) complained in an article entitled ‘Happy Though Married’, that “measured by the values of a society like ours where the real business of life is held to be what people do during their working hours, I’m standing still. I don’t exist.” For her, the non-existence which involved her saying, “I keep house, look after a husband and children, shop, cook, clean (well in moderation), potter, read, write letters...” was exceedingly pleasant, for many it was torture. “I’m haunted by a sense of wasted time,” said another of Elaine Grande’s correspondents. “Bored, I’m just fed up,” said another, and another said, “A housewife does not merit the same respect as a woman who goes out to work, not even from her husband.” As has been seen in this survey the young wife’s answer to coping with housework was in many cases to make her husband share it. But as one middle-class wife said, “he can share the housework as much as one likes, but he still walks out into a different world at half past nine every day.” (*CW*, 132)

²⁸⁸ See previous footnote, specifically the remark, “I’m haunted by a sense of wasted time” (*CW*, 132).

When Liz begins work at Morley's, a job that 'Martin more or less pushed [her] into' (*E*, 125), she seems pleased to be doing something, however arbitrary the activity is, ('[t]his, she thought, looking at the pile of manuscripts, the sample translations, estimates and jacket pulls, is something I can *do* [...] [*E*, 124]). She explicitly gestures towards this desire to 'do' something—anything—when she tells her husband, 'I feel I ought to be ringing up the office [...] [a]t least I could do something at home' (*E*, 98). It does not matter what Liz does, so long as she gets to 'do something'; she cannot bear 'sitting at home doing nothing' (*E*, 125), a guilt which we suspect is induced by Martin's frequent and insidious rhetorical questioning: 'what can you possibly hope to achieve by sitting around like this? Ever heard of a clock that mended itself?' (*E*, 99) Martin's incessant questions about Liz's activity and whereabouts—about what she has already done, is currently doing or is eventually going to do—punctuate the text and, it is suggested, her very consciousness, given that the majority of the text is a transcription of her mind at work. 'Well,' Martin asks Liz in the kitchen shortly after returning home, 'what have you been doing with yourself?' (*E*, 10). By asking her what she has been 'doing with [her]self', Martin insinuates Liz is in some way split, divided, or comprised of two distinct parts at odds with one another (that is, the overactive mind and the inactive body), which subtly vindicates his own unsympathetic diagnosis that Liz, following her miscarriage, thinks too much and does too little (he is continuously accusing her of 'brooding'). The use of 'well,' which precedes the question, might go unnoticed but it is oddly commanding: the word ends up transforming the question into a demand. Martin has been waiting for, and expecting, an account of Liz's time while he has been away (however absentmindedly he asks), which is perverse for two reasons. Firstly, his own account of what he has been doing in Rome is mysteriously impressionistic and only casts more doubt into Liz's mind about his suspected infidelity. He speaks casually about having gone "down to the coast" on the Sunday with his friend "Guido and his girl-friend, the unofficial one, and a friend she brought along" (*E*, 9), which incites Liz to ask "[w]as [the friend she brought along] attractive?" to which Martin snaps abruptly: "Yes, she was, and I didn't go to bed with her if

that's what you mean, or anyone else for that matter'" (E, 9). Martin, it seems, expects an account of Liz's time—even when she has told him she has 'not [done] a thing' (E, 10)—yet he is exasperated when she asks him to provide her an account of his.

Martin's demands on his wife are unreasonable for another reason: he knows Liz has no work to do, or at least nothing either of them consider meaningful or—note the slippage—economically productive, which she highlights when she responds to him that “I don't have a nice logical job that justifies itself [...]. I'm in a vacuum, I don't have a life, apart from being your wife” (E, 11). “I live in your house,” she continues, “I pick your mail off the mat and if it is for me it says Mrs Martin Winter, and when the lights fuse or the larder door jams I wonder what the hell I'm going to do till you get home” (E, 11). While Martin is busily preoccupied with his work, Liz is forced to endure the textureless, daily round of the mid-1960s North London housewife—a demographic Gavron identified as ‘the captive wife’ in her study published the same year as *Equinox*. Gavron's term is an instructive one: *Equinox* belongs to a long tradition of female captivity narratives. As in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), we witness in microscopic detail the mind of a woman who is confined to one space and the damaging effects this confinement has on the mind. While Liz obviously enjoys more freedom than the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she still feels trapped and isolated, and throughout the narrative identifies as a ‘prisoner’ (E, 57). In fact, the text appears to gesture towards *The Yellow Wallpaper* at various points, including when Liz visits a friend, who, it is insinuated, also finds the claustrophobic role of the housewife a ‘mad[dening]’ one:

‘I like your wallpaper.’
‘You've taken that fireplace out haven't you?’
‘Yes, I'm still working two mornings a week, I'd go mad otherwise, cooped up with the kids all day.’
‘Have some more soufflé.’
‘It's very good.’ (E, 30)

This five-line fragment suggests there are women like Liz, who are in a similar position to her, yet remain isolated because they refuse to admit or communicate properly the extent of their

unhappiness, either to themselves or others (note the shift in conversation from madness from ‘being cooped up with the kids all day’ to ‘soufflé’, a far more comfortable subject). Liz’s confinement and loneliness are both exacerbated by the unfriendly environment she finds herself in:

The streets in the suburbs had a new hard ringing quality, frost on the fences and the last leaves swept away. House fronts hard and square without leaves to break up the outlines, unknown neighbours exposed and blind-eyed; no one ever came to stare out of the window (*E*, 57).

Apart from Liz, that is:

I stayed in the house and stood at the first floor window and watched the cars go by down there and wanted to shout: help, someone, somebody has bricked me up in here. One of you must know me, surely. And they drove on, heads still staring out of windscreens (*E*, 146).

The description of the ‘unknown neighbours’ and the drivers, who are unable to see Liz, let alone pay her any attention, evokes a ghostliness. From the window, Liz is all but invisible, which is reflective of her position in society: she operates under another’s name (Mrs. Martin Winter), barely leaves the house, and performs an invisible form of labour that is unrecognised by both Martin and society more broadly. It is no wonder, then, that formal employment begins to strike Liz as an attractive opportunity—as it did for a number of women belonging to the demographic she represented.²⁸⁹ At first, she is resistant to the idea (again: she feels ‘[un]equipped for anything, except apparently for having babies that don’t live’ [*E*, 11]) but Martin manages to persuade her using various coercive tactics. He attempts to convince her that she ‘won’t be so gloomy and over-sensitive when [she’s] working’ (*E*, 54) before resorting to superficial flattery, which does little to bolster Liz’s spirits:

‘You wait and see,’ he said, ‘in three months’ time you’ll be so involved and busy you won’t even remember what it was like before. You’ll be the most brilliant, successful woman in the business, not to say glamorous.’

²⁸⁹ Gavron’s survey reports the enthusiasm with which women reentered the working world: “‘I shall be back like a shot,’” said the wife of an accountant. “‘I can’t stand housework, I loathe being tied down, it will be a pleasure!” “‘Oh yes, I shall certainly work full-time again,” said a laboratory technician’s wife, “when the children are older.” “‘I shall go back to teaching as soon as my youngest child is at school full-time,” said the wife of a teacher’ (*CW*, 117).

‘But I don’t want to be that sort of person.’
‘You’ll see.’ Martin waved a prophetic finger at her.

She supposed that it was a contagion that, being exposed to, might infect her. An unfair way of looking at it, anyone might be justified in saying that it was better than sitting on your backside and doing nothing.’ (*E*, 65)

Martin remains unconscious that much of what he says manages to drain all meaning out from his wife’s prospective job, for example, when he asks her: “[y]ou’ll take the job? The money’s neither here nor there” (*E*, 44). ‘Martin always assumes that having a regular job is a *raison d’être* in itself,’ Liz remarks at one point, before emphatically adding, ‘and I don’t.’ (*E*, 110). Yet not long after their conversation, her perception of work undergoes a drastic change. From originally understanding work as a ‘contagion’, Liz begins to relish the prospect of work but only in order to avoid madness: having a job gives you a routine, an aim, and a sense of responsibility. It works like an ‘anaesthetic’:

She was beginning to accept work as the natural order of things, the confines of the office as the confines of her universe. Five-thirty no longer loomed on the distant horizon, it overtook her before she was ready for it. She often stayed late to finish something, and sometimes walking under the night sky to the station misery seeped back in like a pain when the anaesthetic begins to wear off (*E*, 70).

Work, we realise, is good for Liz; and it turns out Martin was in fact correct—but only because work serves as distraction from the ‘misery’ she endures outside the confines of the office. For Liz, work becomes something to do, something for a body—or thing—to perform over and over again, like an automaton might. Liz’s epiphany about work comes in the following passage, which is constructed in staccato sentences to match the monotony of the work described, a monotony that reaches an almost unbearable tenor:

Of course work helps [the feeling of going mad]: you get up in the morning, brush your teeth and hair and fingernails, the dead matter, put on a garment that current taste dictates. Step out, having remembered the key. At the office there are always things to be done, and this comes as a perennial surprise, because last night in bed you couldn’t imagine just what there was to be done or any reason for doing it (but then you were tired after a long day’s work), and the sight of the full in-tray when you get there is rather like the surprise of the sun rising to small children. Why should the sun rise? Why should those people in the States with their saturated markets want proofs of a book that should never have been written, let alone published? On the other hand, it’s as good a way of passing the time as any other. In fact, it’s a very good way of passing the time. You get sucked in: in no time at all you are writing

back that proofs will be dispatched by air within the week and that everyone is very pleased. You are very pleased, they are very pleased, Morley is very pleased, because he has just made another eight hundred pounds. The day passes, collecting a few creases, wrinkles, stains, otherwise much the same. A minor detail suddenly becomes enormous because it goes wrong, and the relief it is all sorted out is disproportionate too. You feel you have come out on top once more, if only for today. The in-tray is empty except for two letters that have been there so long that no one can answer them now. Or needs to. Letters left unanswered eventually answer themselves in some mysterious way. It is only on the way to the underground station that the vacuum becomes apparent, the air outside pressing in on the walls, which threaten to collapse under the pressure (149, *E*).

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When not at work, we see Liz shop for groceries, think about domestic tasks, which appear to her as trivial and dull, indicated by her almost listless listing as on one occasion when she visits Regent's

Street:

Shops full of Edwardian twin vases, silver clumsy-headed spoons, bits of wood and brass and ivory, their uses obscured by time. Old diamond tiaras, dewdrops trembling on their platinum stalks; winegold topazes in opulent gold settings glowing like tiger eyes. Things. If you earn ten shillings an hour a bow-fronted chest could cost you maybe sixty hours of your life (*E*, 44).

The final, deadpan observation suggests the fundamental absurdity behind consumerism. Liz's impulse to quantify and equate in purely economic terms the '[t]hings' before her with human labour time reveals a profoundly unsettling truth: that, according to market logic, human life is reducible to mere '[t]hings' or these objects in front of Liz, which are patently useless. The '[t]hings' themselves contain traces of their use (and by extension the traces of the people who once used them) with the implication that these mere things outlast and outlive both their function and the people who used them. They entice the leisurely onlooker, such as the housewife whose time is ultimately worthless and who, as Figes would go on to argue in an article for *The Guardian*, operates within a peculiar and distorted economy:

Vacant hours and a partially vacant mind has something to do with it. The women's magazines which aim to reassure the woman who stays at home that she is doing the right thing (financed by advertisers who manufacture the sort of stuff that only housebound wives will buy) argue that a woman who is careful with the housekeeping money can do as much for the household finances as a full-time breadwinner, that the careful housekeeper is being as "productive" as her husband. Undoubtedly the

satisfaction afforded by making trivial economies can be a kind of frustrated and misguided creativity, no doubt we have all experienced such irrational pleasures, but the assumption that a penny saved is a pound earned is not merely misleading—that way madness lies.²⁹⁰

And, yet, for all the pennies women are encouraged to save, Figes says, there is almost no guilt associated with spending a guinea on, say, a ‘new hair-do’ or ‘new, unnecessary dress.’²⁹¹ It is just another example of the housewife—with ‘vacant hours and a partially vacant mind’—being controlled in a system she never agreed to join and, crucially, being told that she can be ‘productive’ while at the same time denying her status as an economically productive member of society. ‘There is nothing like being bored to make one want to buy things,’ Figes asserted in *Patriarchal Attitudes*:

as anyone with an hour to spare in the centre of town must know, and nothing like being at home all day for making one notice that the curtains look drab and the carpet is fraying. The woman who is out at work not only has preoccupations which prevent her from fussing about appearances, except perhaps her own, but she actually has no use for many of the consumer goods that our industries dream up (*PA*, 89).

The housewife, Figes would insist, was tugged up and down by a system that is maintained by various male ‘puppetmaster[s]’ (*E*, 125) and in the same way that those women who worked in offices and other workplaces were being tugged. In fact, the repeated image of the ‘puppet’ (*E*, 94, 120) anticipates an image of suspended animation found in *Patriarchal Attitudes*, when Figes speaks about ‘the price being paid for marital stability’, a price that was often ‘far too high’ (*PA*, 151):

²⁹⁰ Figes, ‘Penny Foolish’, *The Guardian*, 15 January 1969, ‘Articles and reviews (1965-69) MS89050/6/2, Figes archive. In *Patriarchal Attitudes*, Figes would write in great detail about the housewife’s relationship to consumerism. A ‘free capitalist society is one that is largely employed in the production of consumer goods, and industry and big business need people with enough leisure to buy. The domesticated woman therefore becomes the main consumer [...]. Today we live in a capitalist society in which a very large proportion of the total production is devoted to consumer goods, goods which are mainly purchased by women’ (*PA*, 88). She argued that it is ‘the woman who is preoccupied with the purchase of furniture and fittings, bedding and curtains and carpets, interior decorating and saucepans, china and glass, a new refrigerator, cooker, washing machine, dishwashing machine, spin drier, perambulator, food mixer, television set, ironing board, this year’s fashions and cosmetics—and probably small second car as well. If an economy is booming enough for a significant number of families to afford these things at all, it is necessary for the woman of the household to have a good deal of leisure, not just to have the time to go out and choose all these articles, but to want them in the first place’ (*PA*, 88-9).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

We may become aware of it when there is unhappiness, neurosis and breakdown, but none of us will ever really know just how many corpses are walking about, people who are spiritually dead and defeated, people whose lives are one big might-have-been (*PA*, 151).

Throughout the first half of *Equinox* at least, Liz is one such corpse, following the trauma of losing her child. And the reason she goes on at first is to maintain stability in her marriage. Liz's narrative ends on a seemingly optimistic note as she listens to the 'blood singing through [her] arteries' and 'every time I hear it,' she declares, 'I know I'm going on.' (*E*, 157). But while this suggests reanimation, if not revivification, it is only stirring to read because, until these final words, Liz has rarely been much more than a walking corpse that is 'unable to escape the treadmill' (*E*, 118), admitting herself that: "I'm not really alive at all, you know. Sort of suspended animation" (*E*, 118).²⁹² At one point, she searches for an appropriate analogy for this feeling:

She felt like a puppet strung up to his mechanism, mind and muscle geared to his movements, and when he walked out of the door and she could not guess exactly what he was doing, she ceased to function (*E*, 94).

Equinox is replete with moments like this, when Liz 'cease[s] to function' and by foregrounding them the text makes a harrowing point: work is figured as a prominently masculine activity, which has developed into an institution capable of exerting control over women like Liz. She enters a male-dominated labour market that seemingly trades off women's appearances rather than labour power, as insinuated by John, with whom she is having an affair: "Most women don't even have a sensible occupation,' he said. 'And it suits you. You look marvellous.'" (*E*, 124-5) The irony to John's statement here, of course, is that it implies women who do have a 'sensible occupation' are those who look 'marvellous' within the male-dominated workplace. In other words, she has become the woman she resented earlier in the novel (i.e. the woman who is desired by men at work, the woman who is capable of tempting men, like Martin, away from their wives and homes), reinforcing the notion that the workplace is a site where male control is effectively maintained to

²⁹² This "dead" affect is evoked on the cover of the 1969 Panther paperback edition, which shows a prone woman with a glazed expression looking into the distance; it is implied visually this is a post-coital scene.

an unnervingly efficient degree, where gender is codified, performed and reinforced according to patriarchal norms.

In an early manuscript of *Equinox*, the moment in which Liz ‘cease[s] to function’ leads to a sudden, unexpected nadir, at which Liz appears to experience an almost complete loss of identity after watching Martin ‘move about’ (the text continually focuses on the close observation of people either moving about or doing nothing, symbolically mirrored in the games of chess that Martin and Liz play): ‘How did I get here?’ she asks, ‘[w]ho, for that matter, am I?’²⁹³ Figes might have felt that these questions overemphasised her protagonist’s tendency to ‘brood’—as Martin puts it—and might encourage readers to sympathise more with Martin than what—with the addition of these questions—might be considered his increasingly self-involved wife. Perhaps this excision can be read as an example of writerly hesitation, of Figes checking herself to think about the potential readership (and the likely attitudes her readers held). As it turned out, many reviewers of the novel did in fact object to Liz’s brooding nature and found her ‘neurotic’ and ‘self-willed’.²⁹⁴ Both terms employed suggest irritation, which King confirmed when he remarked that at various points *Equinox* became ‘too voluble and too intense’.²⁹⁵ Richard Mayne’s review for the *New Statesman*, however, perhaps best illuminates the conservative literary culture in which Figes was writing, one in which she could be forgiven for hesitating or carefully thinking about whether the addition of those two questions might be considered provocative or “a bit much”:

In *Equinox* [Figes] tells the story of a married woman’s growing [sic] disillusion in her marriage and growing acceptance of human limitations. But to make this work, I think, one has to externalise it and avoid the appearance of self-pity. As it is, confronted with Miss Figes’s extremely glum heroine, this swinish male reviewer feels like asking: ‘what the hell are you moaning about *now*?’²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Typescript of *Equinox*, 136 in MS89050/1/7, ‘Equinox, working papers’, Figes archive.

²⁹⁴ Frances King, the *Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 1966, missing page number, MS 89050/7/4, ‘Reviews for *Equinox*, cuttings’, Figes archive.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ Richard Mayne, *New Statesman*, 4 February 1966, 169, *Ibid.*

Mayne's comments sound uncannily like Martin's perennial complaints, for instance when Martin tells Liz he cannot 'understand' her. The typical (sexist) male response, Figes implies in *Equinox*, is miscomprehension. If we take *Equinox* to be a text preoccupied mainly with work, then we might detect in Mayne's review a frustration to do with Liz's resistance to work or, in other words, "getting on with it" (which Martin vocalises throughout). His choice of certain words ('disillusion'; 'acceptance of human limitations'; 'self-pity'; 'extremely glum'; and 'moaning') suggests that he too takes issue with Liz's 'brooding', a brooding that the text contrasts sharply with Martin's will-to-work and incessant desire to be productive, to keep doing without reflecting on this relentless work ethic. Mayne even links what he sees clearly to be a kind of negative moping back to literary aesthetics: the text, in his view, does not 'work' as a result, which stands as another example of how interrelated and entangled the concept of work was with literary aesthetics and what "worked" in terms of the experimental fiction being produced throughout the 1960s.

'I split myself into several bits': the division of labour

Despite claiming around the time of publication that her protagonist and the events in *Equinox* were not coincidental with her own character or life,²⁹⁷ Figes later confessed in an interview with Alan Burns that '[i]n the book, her [protagonist's] marriage is breaking up, as mine was' and that the book was concerned with the 'self-awareness of a woman at a certain stage in her life, when her first youth was over' (*II*, 33). It is the end of this 'first youth', which forces Liz to face up to the 'question of beginning again' after her life splits apart:

[s]omehow you are going to have to begin again. Work, play. Only how? Since it really is a question of beginning again, 'picking up the threads,' as they say, surely this is the time for serious reappraisal, to begin *somewhere*.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ See Figes's more demur response soon after the book's publication: "[o]f course you use events from your own life in a novel, but they are very much rearranged [...] *Equinox* took me quite a long time to think about and a year to write.' Figes, quoted in 'Heathman's Diary', *Express and News*, 28 January 1966, 8. From MS 89050/7/4, Figes archive.

²⁹⁸ Figes, *Equinox*. Typescript, p. 137 in Eva Figes archive, MS89050/1/7. This passage is not included in the published novel.

Held together by an idiom that ironically has its roots in sewing (an activity traditionally associated with domesticity and women in the home),²⁹⁹ these groping, directionless thoughts ('somehow [...] *somewhere*') demonstrate how lost Liz is and, Figes implies, how difficult it was for women in a similar position to '[begin] again'. Liz is so reliant on Martin that she is moved at one point to tell him: 'when the lights fuse or the larder door jams I wonder what the hell I'm going to do till you get home' (*E*, 11). Burns then asks if the protagonist Liz is, in fact, her? 'Yes,' she replies, 'I suppose I was cheating by giving [the book] a story-line, though very thinly disguised. The house was one I'd lived in' (*IT*, 33-4). 'But,' Figes goes on to say,

I suppose I'd already started splitting myself off, because the husband was not my husband really, though he had certain characteristics of my husband; he was me. I split myself into several bits: the husband was German-Jewish like me, and the woman herself was another aspect of me (*IT*, 34).

While she uses it here instinctively to speak about her relation to her characters, this idea of the "split self" might be a constructive way to think about womanhood in 1960s Britain more generally, a time in which greater numbers of domestically overworked and overburdened women attempted to enter a male-dominated (and often misogynistic) workplace. This phenomenon disrupted the freshly reconsolidated gendered division of labour that had established itself in many western societies during the 1950s. While women were increasingly granted the opportunity to work, it also forced them into a period of adjustment: many women were still expected to perform the traditional feminine role at home (an amalgamation of housewife, wife, mother, cleaner, carer) while adjusting to the new, unfamiliar role of the "liberated" woman, which carried with it new standards and responsibilities. As Margaret Laing commented in her 'Introduction' to *Woman on Woman* (which contained Figes's 'The White Road to Blackmail'):

Women's Lib now faces a far more complex and dangerous task: how to train women to feel new satisfactions without old guilts, and how to satisfy their

²⁹⁹ Gordon Jarvie, *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Idioms* (London: A&C Black Publishers, 2009) 196.

increasingly varied interests without defeating or draining themselves in the process.³⁰⁰

Laing's instruction points to the deeper issue of women being caught between two impulses, two shifting cultures, which Gavron also talks about at length towards the end of *The Captive Wife*. During this period of adjustment, it seems reasonable to suggest that many women would have felt as though they were always working. Conventional attitudes surrounding the home and the family meant women were in large part still tethered to their domestic responsibilities while at the same time many were attempting to break into the world of work, which, as Figes mentioned, was not easy: indeed, she felt that women only stood a chance of securing the kind of jobs men did not want (i.e. those which were poorly paid or menial). And even when women did manage to secure a form of employment, there was, as Liz implies, a lurking sense that work was an altogether different experience depending on one's sex:

I sit in the office, galleys sliding all over the place, and suddenly I have been studying the fire escape for—how long? I'd be a first-class editor if I wasn't a woman. Perhaps [Martin is] staring out the window too. No, men don't. Their work comes first. What's so special about work? Something to do, action, I am in command, pay packet, projects aired, decision already taken. Teach them to think for themselves. Yes. It's worth doing (*E*, 133-4).

For Liz, the workplace is a site in which traditional gender norms and codes are reinforced and, significantly, to such an extent that the space itself appears to influence *how* women work.

To split oneself, to be split apart (or from), or to be in some way divided was for many women of Figes's generation a compelling metaphor with which to describe themselves and their situations. Suzanne Gail wrote of her 'split function' as both housewife and PhD student, while Ann Oakley commented on the 'dual personalit[ies]' of her respondents who she viewed as performers of an exhausting form of immaterial labour. Similarly, Hannah Gavron remarked on the 'dual pull of home versus work', a metaphor that implies rupture and tearing. 'The roots of this problem,' she suggested lay 'partly in the fact that two views of women emerged in the

³⁰⁰ Margaret Laing, 'Introduction' in *Woman on Woman* (London: Sidgewick & Johnson, 1971), 1-7, (3).

nineteenth century.’ On the one hand, there was the ideal of ‘the lady of leisure for the middle classes,’ and ‘the hard-working wife for the working classes, and today every woman is expected to combine the two’ (*CW*, 144). Figs herself wrote about the various ‘dilemmas’ that defined her—the ‘writer’s dilemma’ for instance or the broader, more ‘universal dilemmas’ of being a housewife as explored in *Equinox* and, later, *Patriarchal Attitudes*—one of which, as we have seen, provoked considerable anxiety in her and many other women: the dilemma of ‘career v. marriage’.

Splitting oneself seems like an appropriate metaphor for Figs’s situation around the time of her divorce, a time defined by rupture and a time when, like Liz, she was attempting to ‘[begin] again’ after her ‘first youth’ but found herself increasingly divided or “split” by the many demands made on her and the multiple roles she was forced to adopt (e.g. mother, editor, writer). As Figs euphemistically put it, the divorce ‘shook [her] up badly for a few hours, since this time the initiative had not come from [her]’ but soon she was ‘too overwhelmed by practical problems to think about [her] feelings’ (WRB, 121).³⁰¹ ‘Emotions,’ she declared, ‘are the privilege of the rich’ (WRB, 121); she, on the other hand, had several more pressing issues to devote herself to:

[t]he house, which was in my husband’s name, had been put up for sale; there was an unpaid electricity bill (final demand) and several feet of snow outside the door. The baby had measles, and small children need to be kept warm. The bailiff appeared several times with instructions to remove the furniture. Sometimes I was able to pay him off, sometimes a frantic telephone call to my husband’s office would produce results. Situations that are taken in one’s stride within marriage become alarming when things have just come to an end and everything is uncertain (WRB, 121).

Alongside these domestic and legal matters (which again are echoed in *Equinox*), Figs was attempting to write her first (unpublished) novel, *Lights*, during the evenings, on the weekend, and any spare time she could find, which, by this point, had become severely limited after taking on a ‘very badly paid’ job (WRB, 121) as a junior editor at a publishing firm (as Liz does). She records

³⁰¹ She put it more forcefully in an article published in 1971 in the *Observer*: ‘[w]hen my marriage came to an end I spent 24 hours in a state of emotional collapse. After that I had so many practical difficulties to face that my feelings inevitably took second place. I was in my late twenties, with no money in the bank, no regular job, and two small children. I had no home either.’ See Eva Figs, ‘Woman Alone’, *Observer*, 24 October 1971.

that she was grateful for the opportunity at the time—despite knowing that the company was exploiting her because of her sex (WRB, 121). Figes was well-aware that the work opportunity she was given was in fact a double bind, one which countless women experienced at this time. On the one hand, entering the workforce allowed for autonomy and independence yet, on the other, it was a tacit acceptance of the prevailing conditions, which meant preserving a system that heavily discriminated against women.³⁰² She found herself regularly provoked into writing about the exploitation of women's labour throughout the late 1960s and 1970s and argued in *Patriarchal Attitudes* that the traditional attitudes surrounding women's work were one of the central reasons behind their second-class citizenry in industrial societies.³⁰³ However, it is vital to stress, as Figes and a number of other significant British feminist thinkers did at this time, just how deeply entangled and *interdependent* the exploitation of women's labour was with the many other social issues women faced at the time.³⁰⁴ One of the main reasons why women were exploited in the

³⁰² It was this same kind of argument that, for many feminists during the 1970s, rendered the 1972 Wages for Housework campaign problematic. While many believed it would award women some overdue recognition of their domestic labours, others felt it would only reinforce the idea that housework was a woman's natural duty.

³⁰³ In 1968, when 850 women machinists at the Ford factory in Dagenham went on strike, Figes wrote an article for the *Guardian* called 'The Half-Hearted Revolution' (5 August 1968), which criticised the women machinists for choosing to settle for a concession. Ford offered to match their pay to 92% of men's pay, which they accepted. Figes wrote that it was a 'disappointing but predictable outcome to the strike at Ford, since even with an effective woman in the right ministerial chair [the newly appointed Barbara Castle as First Secretary of State], staggered change is liable to peter out, and the seven years drag out to seventy; disappointing but predictable because female industrial workers could undoubtedly have brought the whole country to a standstill and got equal pay immediately, if that is what they wanted. But women workers are half-hearted too, they just wanted a bit more money, nothing like equal pay for everybody, and of course equal pay means equal responsibility on all fronts.' See the typescript 'The Half-Hearted Revolution' in 'Articles and Reviews 1965-69', MS89050/6/2, Figes archive. It is worth adding that Figes's presumably rhetorically exaggerated estimation (that it would take 'seventy years' to narrow the gender pay gap) turned out to be an underestimation based on a 2016 Deloitte report, which predicted that the gender pay gap would take until 2069 to be closed—99 years after the Equal Pay Act in 1970 was passed. See 'Gender pay gap won't close until 2069, says Deloitte', *Guardian*, 24 September 2016. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/24/gender-pay-gap-wont-close-until-2069-says-deloitte> (8 May 2017).

³⁰⁴ Commenting on Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Juliet Mitchell pointed out that it was vital to confront the 'complex interconnections' that allows patriarchy to function, rather than isolate the 'mechanisms' that constitute it. She wrote that '[f]rom the apparently undifferentiated mass (or

labour market was related to the conventional expectations surrounding marriage (as Figes's father's and Gail's mother's attitude towards marriage both demonstrated). It followed that, if a woman was married, then they would automatically assume the role of housewife and be provided for by their husbands. In other words, women did not need to be paid the same amount of money as men, who were regarded as the "breadwinners" within the nuclear family, as Figes stressed repeatedly. Women were judged very clearly to be *ancillary* workers. As Ann Oakley stated:

the status of housework is interwoven specifically with the status of married women. As a member of the British Government explained in 1970: 'The role of housewife is an extremely honourable profession, but the normal responsibility for looking after her welfare falls to her husband.' In other words, however honourable the housewife's role, hers is, and must be, a situation of economic dependence, which marriage, by definition, involved. Feminists might well ask what kind of honour this is, and what other profession places its (unpaid) workers in the precarious situation of depending for economic survival on the beneficence of those with whom they share their beds (5, *HW*).

The persistence of the idea that women would be supported by husbands had ramifications for all women—single, married, and divorced. Yet, obviously, the consequences of significantly lower pay proved most devastating for single or divorced women who, like Figes, had children to look after.³⁰⁵

mess) of our experience we have to separate the mechanisms that make it function as such, but then we have to decipher the complex interconnections of the complex mechanisms (or contradictions) that make up the complex whole. For me, one of the weaknesses of Millet's study is that, although it *isolates* different mechanisms, it doesn't confront their relationships; so we are left with a sense of the random and chaotic and *equal* contribution of each and all to the maintenance of patriarchy; one could add to the list or shuffle it around. It is unstructured. This does not seem to me to be accidental but inherent in the notion of patriarchy as a political system in itself. For one thing there can be no such thing as *a general system*. Patriarchy may seem universal, but [...] this universality is part of the ideology by which it maintains itself [...] See Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 83.

³⁰⁵ Figes argued that this social "norm" developed as a result of the rise of the industrial capitalist state. 'Once the process of industrialization had made man the sole breadwinner, given him the economic control of wealth,' Figes wrote in *Patriarchal Attitudes*, 'one sees over and over again that he regards this wealth as solely his—his wife has not "earned" it, therefore she has no right to enjoy it' (*PA*, 77). The male right to property (and the corollary of the wife as a form of male property) was a legitimate idea for the majority of the twentieth century, and one that was legally written into British law. In 1964, between Figes's divorce and the publication of *Equinox*, the Married Women's Property Act was revised to legally grant married women to keep half of any savings they had made from the allowance their husbands provided. Originally, the Act was

In a 1970 interview with Philip Oakes one month before *Patriarchal Attitudes* was published, Figes looked back on her job as a junior editor and cited it not only as proof of sexual discrimination but as an illustration of the broader, persistent ‘ghetto mentality’ in job recruitment in Britain:

“Just look at job recruiting,” she says. “There’s real sex discrimination there. Years ago, when I wanted to go into publishing I found that publishing houses ran training schemes for men, but not for women. So, I had to break in as a shorthand typist. Women politicians—with the exception of Barbara Castle—are always being shunted off on to specialised women’s lines. In medicine, there are thousands of women doctors, but few women consultants. There’s a ghetto mentality everywhere. In all areas of business and the professions you’ll find that women get into jobs only when they’re too badly paid for men to want them”.³⁰⁶

Two years prior to the Oakes interview, she wrote an opinion piece for the *Daily Telegraph* and wondered dispiritedly ‘whether total revolution is not the only way to bring about real change for the female sex.’ She cited the fact that on average women earned nearly 40% less than men, noting that ‘[i]f a woman cannot hope to get her boss’s job she opts out by marrying him,’ before lamenting how economically unviable it is to keep ‘an enormous percentage of adults semi-employed or virtually unemployed under the illusory notion that a woman’s place is in the home.’ She goes on to intimate it is a problem built into a capitalist mode of production: that ‘women can and do play a full part in a social set-up that allows them scope is borne out in Russia’.³⁰⁷ This recalls Gavron’s demand for a re-analysis of women’s roles and capacities as workers, which for her meant ‘recognition by employers of the multiplicity of roles that women are called upon to play at various stages in their lives. It means on the one hand an acknowledgement that married

introduced in 1870 to allow women to be the legal owners of the money they earned, and to inherit property. Before it was introduced, all property and wealth owned by women was passed over to their husband after marriage. While the 1964 revision was designed to give women more financial dependence, it only highlighted their subordinate status and how reliant they were on their husbands.

³⁰⁶ Eva Figes quoted in Philip Oakes, ‘Male Order’ in *Sunday Times*, 31 May 1970, 28.

³⁰⁷ Figes wrote in *Patriarchal Attitudes* that ‘a free capitalist society is one that is largely employed in the production of consumer goods, and industry and big business need people with enough leisure to buy. The domesticated woman therefore becomes the main consumer [...] Today we live in a capitalist society in which a very large proportion of the total production is devoted to consumer goods, goods which are mainly purchased by women’ (*PA*, 88).

women workers are a permanent part of our labour force, not just a temporary aberration. On the other hand, it means making use of the full potential of women workers, and not regarding them as second-class men' (CW, 148). She would sum up her position in one urgent, stressed line: '*[w]hat is needed above all is some deliberate attempt to re-integrate women in all their many roles with the central activities of society*' (CW, 146). Her point here is that 1960s British society contained a predisposition towards exclusionary employment practices in its attempt to remain as efficient and productive as possible. 'The government does nothing to change the situation,' Figes wrote, 'because, it says, it would cost too much' and yet, at the same time, the government forgot that:

having now given women the chance of equal education (which they usually take) it then allows up to half the education it had paid for to go to waste. Because without the kind of incentives and the national planning that are necessary to make equality a reality and not an abstract idea women are going to drop out. Wage discrimination, no hope of promotion beyond a certain level, a total lack of state nurseries and taxation which discriminates heavily against the married woman and almost as heavily as against the divorced one with dependent children, are not incentives.³⁰⁸

For Figes, this was an instance of the hyper-rational patriarchal system behaving in a wildly irrational way and against its own (economic) interests, which she highlighted in another article at around the same time in which she labelled women as 'not cheap labour but expensively wasteful labour'.³⁰⁹ She compares the situation to the renovation of an old house:

[w]e keep trying to adapt Victorian ideas instead of scrapping them – it is like trying to modernise a large, old-fashioned house, putting in central heating when draughts

³⁰⁸ Figes, 'OPINION', MS89050/6/2, Figes archive, 3.

³⁰⁹ 'The government,' she wrote, 'keeps talking about the cost of implementing equal pay, as though women were a form of cheap slave labour without which the whole economy would collapse. Granted that women (together with coloured immigrants) provide most of the cheap labour in this country, but the actual wage bill is not the whole story. Do not forget that this despised section of the labour market accounts for half our education bill, in fact for half of the whole welfare state bill. From a national point of view women are not cheap labour but expensively wasteful labour, because by and large they are being allowed the same living standards as men, and the same educational facilities. To really exploit women, we would have to start an apartheid system, with women illiterate and living in shanty towns. But at the moment we have the worst of all worlds from an economic point of view, since 50% of the educated adult population is failing to work it its full potential [...]'. Figes, 'The Half-Hearted Revolution' [typescript], published 5 August 1968, *Guardian*, in MS 89050/6/2, Figes archive.

blow through windows and down stone passages and all the heat gets lost in the high ceilings.³¹⁰

And yet—even if it was possible to raze the house entirely—the problem would lie in knowing where to begin, as she mentions to Oakes: ‘I feel myself that the attack should be on all fronts,’ recalling the type of revolutionary rhetoric Trocchi employed in project sigma.³¹¹ To which Oakes appends, ‘[b]ut it’s rather like waging war on a complete society whose blindness to its own faults is also its defence’.³¹²

Having to attack on all fronts, not knowing where to begin renders one powerless, which is why this idea of splitting oneself up is an interesting one: ‘She’s published three highly-praised novels, and just completed a fourth’ Oakes wrote.³¹³ ‘Next she wants to write a play, but suspects that woman’s liberation is likely to claim a good deal of the coming time. “I think of myself as a creative writer, but I am also a social human being, and when there are some things so glaringly unjust one has to do something about them”’.³¹⁴ Oakes stresses to the reader that Figes is ‘not just bewailing the situation: it makes her very angry. What makes her angrier is that her concern threatens to disrupt her life as a writer’.³¹⁵ Feminist female writers, as Figes saw it, were dutybound to divide their attentions in the same way as the housewife at this time did (i.e. the female labourer *par exemple*). In fact, there were many similarities between housework and writing as a form of labour: indeed, both might be said to be characterised by the following criteria Oakley defines for housework: ‘Housework differs from most other work in three significant ways: it is private, it is self-defined and its outlines are blurred by its integration in a whole complex of domestic, family-based roles which define the situation of women as well as the situation of the housewife’ (*HW*, 6-7). As Figes reported in ‘The White Road to Blackmail’ (and at various other points throughout

³¹⁰ Figes, ‘OPINION’, MS89050/6/2, Figes archive, 1.

³¹¹ Eva Figes, ‘Male Order’, 28.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Oakes, *ibid.*

³¹⁴ Figes, *ibid.*

³¹⁵ Ibid.

her journalism), her writing practice as a woman was affected profoundly by her domestic situation (both during and after her marriage).

In an article called 'The Writer's Dilemma', Figes states that she is part of the 'camp', which holds:

that a writer's first duty *as a writer* is to his own vision of truth and to his craft. If this sounds like art for art's sake, I suppose it is true, though I do not consider myself a sort of gutless aesthete. I think it is because I am basically so very pessimistic that I hold to this view: taking a detached Olympian view, which as a writer I feel I must take (though still passionate), I cannot see any political changes as more than waves on a vast, fundamental ocean.³¹⁶

She appears here to subscribe to an Adornian advocacy of modernist writing that as Rita Felski points out, 'springs from a social pessimism which is unable to identify any contemporary agent of political change' (*BFA*, 162). For Felski, Adorno:

does not assign such art any direct social function or political effect; rather it embodies a form of critical negativity whose autonomy is guaranteed by its esoteric and difficult character. Modernist art, in other words, possesses a redemptive function as the sole authentic site of critical resistance in a reified social world in which any notion of collective action has become problematic (*BFA*, 163).

In the same article, Figes wrote that '[n]othing will ever change the basic conditions of life which, as a writer, interest me'.³¹⁷ 'To devote the whole of one's life to the idea of active change, to dedicate the most important part of that life, one's work, to bringing it about,' as she felt Jean-Paul Sartre had done, seemed to 'imply an optimism' she '[could not] share'.³¹⁸ 'But of course,' she wrote, seemingly caught between two impulses, 'nothing is simple': 'even if one feels that the situation is hopeless, one has a moral responsibility to try and improve it. I cannot wash my hands of life by saying it is all too dreadful'.³¹⁹ She proceeded to offer a 'solution':

My own somewhat uneasy solution of the dilemma is to split myself in half. As an artist the most fundamental part of me remains aloof; for a few hours a day I think only of what I see as truth, and it takes more effort than I possess to find the necessary words in the true order. The rest of me is a social animal, mother, friend,

³¹⁶ Figes, 'The Writer's Dilemma', 17 June 1968, *Guardian*.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

voter, easily inflamed to anger and sometimes actually spurred into direct action. I have done my share of protesting when I thought it would serve some useful purpose, and quite often when I knew it would not. I am also prepared for political ends when I see fit.³²⁰

In response to the various ‘disrupt[ions]’ to ‘her life as a writer’ (as mentioned in the Oakes article above), Figes drew again on the analogy of “splitting” herself. Years later in an interview with Michèle Wandor, she would reiterate this idea of a split writing practice, making explicit that her non-fiction work had a social function or political effect (as opposed to her fiction, which she wrote for herself, as she explains elsewhere):

I find that non-fiction writing is a great release because it’s so easy for me; once you’ve done your homework and got your facts right, it’s like putting a knife through butter. [...] I think that in the non-fiction I was fulfilling a role more as a citizen and in the novels as an artist [...].³²¹

Not only does this suggest how natural it was for Figes to think about herself in many different roles and capacities, it demonstrates that in her mind there was—or should be—a distinction between the artist and the citizen. In one respect, she shares Adorno’s pessimism; she shows little faith in the novel’s capacity to enact political or social change, which is captured best in *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (1976), in which she wrote that:

[t]he novel tends to be a private act, both in the writing and the reading. As a result (provided always that a financial backer can be found) it allows for more diversity of expression, but the impact or “success” of a novel is also more difficult to measure. Not only does the reading of a novel take place in private, it can tend to become associated with the privacy of the individual self, whether it be intimate thoughts or secret fantasies, and therefore become dissociated from what is apprehended as the “real” world. In so far as the nineteenth-century woman of good family lived in a world of romantic make-believe which compensated for the boring restrictions of her real life, the reading of romantic novels fed those fantasies; in so far as twentieth-century man feels alienated, reading Kafka or Beckett will confirm his sense of alienation. But these readings belong to a private world, to our private thoughts. Once the book is closed we go back to our conventional behaviour and no one is any the wiser: the young girl put on her corset and made a sensible marriage; alienated man arrives at the office on time and answers his correspondence.³²²

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Figes, ‘Michèle Wandor interview’ (1983: 152-55), as quoted in Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, *Eva Figes’s Writings: A Journey Through Trauma* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) 88.

³²² Figes, *Tragedy and Social Evolution* (London: Calder, 1976), 8-9.

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Splitting oneself off is a clear symptom of (and perhaps powerful reaction against) being used to *always working* (as say, a housewife). It is a strategy to delineate one's life, of drawing attention to the boundaries, a way of saying "I will work but on my conditions" and not accepting an insidious mandate that tells one to work all the time (by insisting that the work one does is more pleasurable than work). The split self might then be interpreted as a protective strategy to insulate oneself from the increasing demands across a wide spectrum of spheres that the female artist is forced to engage in (domestic, legal, economic, artistic spheres). The insulating boundaries that artists might erect (by splitting oneself, by dividing one's time) are at risk from, following Boltanski and Chiapello, the 'new spirit of capitalism', which attempts to collapse and dismantle these delineating boundaries at every turn. Indeed, 'autonomous, self-realization, creativity and the disappearance of the difference between work time and private time are characteristics of contemporary creative work at the core of the new spirit of capitalism', which Boltanski and Chiapello identify as occurring from the late 1960s onwards.³²³ The attempt to split oneself—either in half or into multiple bits—is a means to cordon off and compartmentalise the departments of one's life that are threatened by the insidious "new spirit" that demands one should *always* be working—something that the housewife (and then later the writer) was obviously familiar with.

Splitting oneself into parts, delineating the boundaries between work and life (we often hear about the "work-life balance") does two things at once, however. On the one hand, it refuses to conform to capitalism's demands (especially those demands forced upon the housewife) since it is a way of protesting against the ethos that work should be your life. (By splitting oneself, one does work at a set time for one or two hours a day, as Figes recorded). On the other hand, it accepts that the labourer is indeed split, divided, has many constituent parts. And this strategy relates precisely to 'the Writer's dilemma' as she put it. The split self is important to bear in mind:

³²³ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 139.

it tells us a lot about Figes's own conception of her labour but also a lot about the Figes's own situation, about Figes's own ideas about what she should be doing, which is precisely what *Equinox* is all about, a text fraught with anxiety about what one should really do. To be split, then, is to accept the fragmentary nature of work and, perhaps, a split working identity that requires one to inhabit several different personas and accept the emotional labour that this involves.

A crack in the mirror

In 1989, Christine Brooke-Rose was reflecting on her own experience and career as a female experimental writer when she wrote that:

[it] does seem [...] not only more difficult for a woman *experimental* writer to be accepted than for a woman writer (which corresponds to the male situation of experimental writer vs. writer), but also peculiarly more difficult for a *woman* experimental writer to be accepted than for a *male* experimental writer.³²⁴

She advises the female writer to 'slip through all the labels, including that of "woman writer"³²⁵ rather than 'get[ting] caught up in a "movement,"' in which she would end up being defined by her relationship with one of the men in the movement (as, say, mistress) or 'never be[ing] quite as seriously considered as the men in the group.'³²⁶ Brooke-Rose uses extensive halieutic imagery to illustrate her point: the woman writer must 'evade'³²⁷ and navigate 'the sea between the two continents'³²⁸ so that she does not 'get caught.'³²⁹ This constant evasion comes at a cost, however; she will eventually 'belong nowhere.'³³⁰ To be a 'woman *experimental* writer,' for Brooke-Rose, is to accept vulnerability, a sentiment that Figes had expressed after *Equinox* was published nearly two

³²⁴ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Illiterations' in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), (55-71) 65.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

and a half decades before. ‘Publishing a first novel,’ she said to *London Life*, ‘makes you feel like a baby put out in a storm without any clothes on’ before adding: ‘[a]nd why is the attitude still “Good Heavens, a woman has written a book”?’—half the population are women.³³¹

In a storm, on a sea, between two continents, and belonging nowhere: it was not until the 1970s that many British female writers of Brooke-Rose’s and Figes’s generation began to feel a greater sense of belonging in a literary world hitherto dominated by men. The gathering momentum of the women’s liberation movement throughout the U.S.A. and western Europe began to make both male and female readers, according to Felski, more ‘sensitive to the question of gender [...] through the political critique of representations of women in the texts of male authors’ (*BFA*, 23-4). Three controversial texts, all published in the same year, stand out and are frequently mentioned together: Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and Figes’s *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970). These consciousness-raising works were part of a major attempt to draw attention to the (latent, where not explicit) misogyny that was bound up in the very fabric of Western culture. These texts were published within environments that were still resistant, if not outright hostile, to many of the claims they made about gender relations. For instance, Norman Mailer, who was of course a key figure in the American literary establishment at the time, wrote *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), a riposte to what he regarded to be the unfair, negative criticism Millett had made about his work in *Sexual Politics* the year before. One of the most remarkable aspects of the feminist counter-public sphere, which Felski defines as ‘an oppositional public arena for the articulation of women’s needs in critical opposition to the values of a male-defined society’ (*BFA*, 166), was its ability to forge a dynamic and international network of support, which Figes contributed towards herself when she wrote a scathing review of *The Prisoner of Sex*.³³²

³³¹ Eva Figes, ‘What People Are Thinking’, *London Life*, 5 Feb 1966, 15, MS89050/6/2, Figes archive.

³³² In her review of Mailer’s *The Prisoner of Sex* (*The Times*, 25th August 1971), Figes claimed that ‘Mailer sees himself as the last bastion of the natural order, where men were men and women were women, and phallic aggression an act of courage because it was always war [...] Mailer cannot even

Following the publication of these consciousness-raising texts, the ‘next task for feminist criticism,’ Felski observes, ‘was to rediscover a lost tradition of women’s literature,’ (*BFA*, 24) which resulted in the appearance of such works as Patricia Meyer Spack’s *The Female Imagination* (1975), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women* (1979), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Such ‘ground-breaking texts,’ Felski holds, were able ‘to delineate a female counter-tradition within literature, an enormous body of women’s writing which had been forgotten or repressed,’ while ‘reveal[ing] significant patterns of continuity in its themes and preoccupations’ (*BFA*, 24). Many of these works argued that the assumptions of a male-dominated culture had influenced the reception and literary judgment of women’s writing throughout history, and that a serious reappraisal was needed (*BFA*, 24).³³³ This project in turn saw many feminist critics devote themselves to exploring the relationship between ‘aesthetic theory and feminist ideology as an important issue in feminist literary theory’ (*BFA*, 24). Due to the clear evidence of gender bias in aesthetic judgment, many feminist critics were ‘increasingly provoked [...] to question the possibility of gender-neutral aesthetic values’ (*BFA*, 24), which prompted a number of questions:

begin to answer [Kate Millett’s] critique of [Henry] Miller, which is both lucid and fair. Miller, he tells us, has a special kind of male humour. Well, yes. That’s the whole point.[...] He begins by telling us that he has a healthy respect for women because he has been “four times beaten at wedlock”. Masturbation is a vice because it is “bombing oneself”, presumably as opposed to bombing a woman. Contraception has made women lose their proper respect for men, because they are no longer afraid of dying in pregnancy. Abortion, if practised at all, should be the old-fashioned kind, “when the fingernails of the surgeon were filthy and the heart of a woman went screaming through a cave as steel scraped at the place when she touched the beyond”. Punishment for wasting male seed, which is why masturbation is also evil. Mailer’s arrogance will not even allow him to concede that Millett might know a bit more about what it feels like to possess a womb. When it comes to reproduction his “sexistentialism”, derived from idealist philosophy, verges on dangerous lunacy.’

³³³ It should be added that Figs contributed to this recuperative project herself although no other text she published was as popular (or polemical) as *Patriarchal Attitudes*. In 1976, she wrote *Tragedy and Social Evolution*, which dedicated a section towards exploring the genre of tragedy, female dramatists, and questions of gender. It was praised by Ann Oakley, who was by this time an active figure in the development of British feminism. Later, and with the help of the Arts Council, Figs published *Sex and Subterfuge* (1982), which focused exclusively on the works of female writers, including Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Frances Burney, Ann Davys, Maria Edgeworth, Eliza Haywood, Harriet Martineau and Jane West.

Given the fact of a male-defined cultural history, did it therefore follow that all existing aesthetic judgments were reducible to gender interests? And if so, what would an alternative feminist aesthetic look like? Could autonomous criteria be developed for judging women's writing, and on what basis? (*BFA*, 24)

One popular and ongoing response to these questions has been an attempt to 'ground a feminist aesthetic in women's experience' either as a result of 'inherent biological and psychological characteristics, or as the consequence of female socialization under patriarchy' (*BFA*, 25). This experience, as Felski points out, is 'believed to embody the legitimating source of a gynocritical theory of women's writing' and, thus, the existence of a feminist aesthetic (*BFA*, 25).

The main point of contention in Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989) is that such an aesthetic cannot be said to exist. She regards the idea of the feminist aesthetic—or any theoretical position that argues 'a necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary structure, style, or form' (*BFA*, 19)—as a 'chimera' that has:

tended to hinder any adequate assessment of both the value and limitations of contemporary feminist writing by measuring it against an abstract conception of a "feminine" writing practice, which in recent years has been most frequently derived from an antirealist aesthetics of textuality (*BFA*, 2).

In the same year that Felski's work was published, an 'archaeological and compensatory' collection of essays edited by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs set out to 'introduce and explore the rich tradition of women's experimental fiction.'³³⁴ In their 'Introduction' to *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989), they clearly endorse an 'abstract conception of a "feminine" writing practice' when they speak of 'the textual practice of breaking patriarchal forms,'³³⁵ as seen in the work of writers from Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf to Christine Brooke-Rose, Eva Figes, and Kathy Acker. For Friedman and Fuchs, women experimental writers 'explod[e]' patriarchal, dominant forms when they adopt 'radical forms—nonlinear,

³³⁴ Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Preface' in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), xi.

³³⁵ Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Introduction' in *Breaking the Sequence*, 3.

nonhierarchical, and decentering—[which] are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine.³³⁶ Patriarchal forms, they assert, possess a ‘single, authoritative storyteller,’ ‘well motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns,’ ‘the crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from the ultimate goal,’ and ‘the movement to closure’—all these elements tend to constitute ‘fiction [that] represents patriarchal mastery in Western culture.’³³⁷ Women’s experimental writing, on the other hand, is intrinsically subversive because it rejects this dominant mode of storytelling:

women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed. Thus, the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act, and the feminine narrative resulting from such rupture is allied with the feminist project.³³⁸

But what are we to make of an experimental writer who, by her own admission, had little, if any, faith in the political power of the novel?

In February 1975, Christopher Ricks wrote an article for the *Sunday Times* entitled ‘What Happens Next?’ The article was comprised mainly of a review of Giles Gordon’s edited collection of experimental fiction, *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, which included writing by B.S. Johnson (to whom the collection was dedicated, following his death), Elspeth Davie, Anthony Burgess, and Figs amongst other writers belonging to an “‘experimental tradition’” that Ricks argued, by its very definition, could not be said to exist. He denounces these writers who he instead claimed were part of the ‘cult of surprise’, which, ultimately, ‘always leads to heartlessness and to predictability.’ While he praises Figs’s excerpt of a play as ‘deep’ and ‘subtle’, he criticises her theoretical position towards writing by first of all remarking on her ‘programmatically hostile to “reassurance”’—Figs continually spoke about her wish to ‘challenge’ rather than reassure her readers—and, secondly, by bringing up her use of a word that would, as we have seen, have a bearing on literary aesthetic debates some years later. ‘Most of the

³³⁶ Ibid., 3.

³³⁷ Ibid., 4.

³³⁸ Ibid., 4.

experimentation,' he wrote, 'is fatiguedly and placidly "subversive," to use a word which Mr. Gordon and Ms Figes mutter with routine awe.' For all of Ricks' reasonable, sober criticism, he seems unaware that there were more pressing issues at this time for female writers (experimental or otherwise), which might well have tempted Figes to employ this word. In 1966, the same year *Equinox* was published, and a time when she was looking to establish herself as an avant-garde writer, Figes wrote a letter entitled 'Male Novelist's Retreat' to the *Sunday Times*. Figes battled on many fronts ('I feel myself that the attack should be on all fronts,' as she said to Oakes), as her letter makes clear.³³⁹ For her, there were literary skirmishes to be involved in, but at the same time there was a far greater 'war' unfolding:

Sir,—With so much critical notice afforded to women novelists in your columns, I wonder that no one has yet turned his attention to the phenomenon of the male novelist. As a direct result of the sex war the male novelist has been forced to retreat into an entrenched position where he acts out his private fantasies, intimidated by the modern female Amazon, derided by Spark, stripped by Lessing. Bereft of his traditional authority and almost emasculated, the male novelist has retreated into sexual fantasy of the most exaggerated and patently improbable variety (i.e. Miller), as a form of boastful compensation.

Other male novelists have retreated from heterosexuality altogether, frightened by dominating females, and found compensation in drugs (Burroughs, Trocchi), while many have been perverted into homosexual channels (too many to mention) or have even attempted to propound a third, hermaphrodite sex (Colin Spencer) as a way out. Some have tried to take literary vengeance by kidnapping or murdering females (Fowles, Mailer). Other forms of compensation, familiar to the analyst have taken shape in fantasies of power, whether it be the corridors of power (note the sexual symbolism) in which the male novelist imagines himself in control of a whole nation (typical of the ageing male novelist, this) or in terms of violence and danger, combined with sexual prowess of the James Bond variety.

One thing emerges very clearly from all this—the male novelist is in retreat, both from his female counterpart and from reality, which has become too painful for him.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Ann Oakley drew on the image of conflict, too, when she wrote the last paragraph in *Housewife* a rousing peroration: 'And, finally, women must change themselves *now*. Women must fight the standards set up by their conditioning: standards which insist that anything less than domestic perfection is a crime against their own natures. Since they have no inherent natures, that crime is of their own imagining. It is on their conditioning that destruction needs to be inflicted, for these standards and ways of doing housework go back into the unconscious. They must be made conscious before the battle can be won.' (*HW*, 241)

³⁴⁰ Figes, letter titled 'Male Novelist's Retreat', *Sunday Times* (London: England) 13 March, 1966. 15.

As a result of this letter, Trocchi lost his job at Central Saint Martins. The “sex wars”, as they were commonly referred to, were deeply concerned with the subject of labour. As Figes’s letter evidences, a major part of what feminist writers set out to do was to redefine the parameters of literature, to counterbalance the ‘traditional authority’ of those male writers who were deemed either misogynistic or anti-feminist. The task was interminable; it provided an almost endless supply of work for feminist writers and critics.

This chapter argues that *Equinox*, if taken together with Figes’s non-fiction and read alongside other feminist accounts around the time, does in fact stand as a subversive experimental novel—not for the reasons that Friedman and Fuchs outline—but because it was written by a woman who was consciously experimenting with form (as her own disavowal of the novel implies: ‘I was not really in control of what I was doing’) and a woman who was writing against the grain, who was beginning a new life in much the same way her protagonist was (but with the added burden of two children to look after). It was written in a chauvinistic literary environment, which, as we have seen, was hostile to feminist causes. The text’s scattered form was one that might have made a lot more sense to women in a similar position to Liz, whose scattered, split, and divided experience was given formal expression in the text. In spite of Figes’s claim of splitting her practice into two parts, between her useless fiction and useful non-fiction, *Equinox* is intimately bound up in and woven with the very ideas that Figes articulated in her journalism, essays, and *Patriarchal Attitudes*. Her work is a continuum that was to have a major effect and impact on British feminism and, following Felski, its ‘coalition of overlapping subcommunities.’ Years later, Figes was recorded saying:

I think with hindsight that my rational, non-fiction writing has in fact reconditioned me at the intuitive level; I was brought up to accept certain things about my own gender, or at least to take them in and only protest at a very subliminal level, but this process of writing polemical stuff—which after all is an education to oneself as well as to everyone else—has affected the way I write about women in my fiction, and I see that now.³⁴¹

³⁴¹ Figes, ‘Kenyon interview’ (1988: 76), as quoted in Pellicer-Ortín, *Eva Figes’s Writings*, 88-9.

To echo Johnson, ‘subversive’, like ‘experimental’ is a dirty word, one that (like ‘radical’) is best administered with caution. But if we consider for one moment the word’s etymological origin and meaning, it begins to emerge as an accurate descriptor for Figs’s work and, by extension, the work of many feminists at this specific time in British history. From the classical Latin *subvertere*, it means to:

overturn, to cause the downfall of, ruin, to overthrow, destroy, to undermine, to upset [...] SUB-*prefix* [as in ‘situated existing, or occurring under, below, or at the bottom of’] + *vetere* to turn [‘to turn in a particular direction; to turn or twist out of the normal position’].³⁴²

The adjective ‘subversive’, however, carries an important, modified meaning; for a text to be subversive, it *intends* or *tries* or *seeks* to ‘overturn, to cause the downfall of, ruin [...]’. It does not seem contentious therefore to claim that this is precisely what many consciousness-raising feminist texts intended, tried, and sought to do. That is, to subvert or to overturn a set a of prevailing, patriarchal attitudes, to undermine a set of social norms that were constrictive and oppressive, or, in the very least, to upset the supposedly natural order from a position of little or no power, as second-class citizens. Another, older meaning of subvert is to ‘raze (a building, town, etc.) to the ground, to destroy completely.’ In an article for the *Daily Telegraph*, Figs tells her readers that many ‘women often live in the houses they would have to set alight’, a destruction that brings to mind a passage from Suzanne Gail’s account: ‘[s]ometimes,’ she wrote, ‘I want to stretch out my arms to bring the whole imprisoning structure of home and family crashing around me, annihilating me with the rest’ (SG, 150). She goes on to say that ‘[t]his is the only possibility, unreal as it is, that presents itself vividly to me. To walk out is never a real, live image.’ (SG, 151) ‘This, all round me, is my only creation so far,’ she adds. ‘however incomplete and shoddily achieved; my split function goes too deep to be resolved by such a gesture.’ (SG, 151). *Patriarchal Attitudes* was formed in large

³⁴² “subvert, v.” OED online, Oxford University Press, June 2018 www.oed.com/View/Entry/193263. Accessed 29 June 2018.

part from *Equinox* and from Figes's own experiences as a housewife and, later, as a worker whose odds of success were stacked against her, owing to a system that ruthlessly discriminated against her.³⁴³

It is difficult to measure subversion. But it is possible to judge whether or not attitudes have changed over time. In her 1986 'Introduction' to *Patriarchal Attitudes*, Figes pointed out that the 'intellectual atmosphere in which the book was produced is a measure of the progress its ideas have made since then,' remembering that 'any mention of the work [...] would lead to stormy arguments between husbands and wives round the dinner table'.³⁴⁴ 'Men,' she wrote, 'told me I was making a mistake, a publisher suggested I had a "chip on my shoulder,"' while 'someone else warned me that I would never change men's minds' to which she responded that she 'did not need to: it was enough to change women[s] minds' (PA86, 6). 'It turned out that I was right,' she asserted, 'and I count myself lucky to have written the right book at the right moment' (PA86, 6). She mentioned that others, including 'distinguished men,' had said 'much the same thing as [she] was saying, but in 1970 it became clear that feminism was an idea whose moment had come' (PA86, 6). And, so, within months the publisher who had accused her of having a chip on her shoulder 'announced himself proud to be publishing the book, and to be "associated with the movement"' (PA86, 6). She related what in 1986 felt like other tangible changes. 'All men of good will and reasonable education paid lip service, at least, to the new philosophy of sexual equality,' while 'male authority'—and here we might think back to Peter Carvell's and Richard Mayne's articles—'embarked on a process of back-tracking [...], theories of male aggression as a form of creativity quietly disappeared from bookshelves' (PA86, 6). However, Figes was still cautious, as she was in a previous introduction to the 1978 edition, and conceded that, while there had been

³⁴³ The formation of Figes's text in this way recalls Ann Oakley's dedication in *Housewife*: she thanks her family 'for the experience of my own oppression as a housewife. Without this, I would never have wanted to write the book in the first place' (HW, x).

³⁴⁴ Figes, 'Introduction', *Patriarchal Attitudes* (London: Palgrave, 1986), 6. This edition is abbreviated to PA86.

change, it had ‘proved much easier to change public opinion than to change the inequalities built into the fabric of society’ (PA86, 8). The main concrete instances of change, however, were, first of all, the changes concerning marriage—‘no longer the economic trap (nor the cosy meal ticket) that it once was for women (PA86, 8)—and the fact that society had ‘got used to the working wife, the house husband, the single parent, and even the couple who do not marry at all’ (PA86, 8). She also mentioned the increasing acceptance of abortion in ‘countries where state religion once made it an impossibility’ and divorce settlements, which began to take into account the ‘contribution made by woman who stays at home to raise children’ (PA86, 8). From the vantage point of 1986, Figes rightfully felt that her contribution had instigated real change, especially against the very attitudes she criticised—and with all the force of someone who had lived through and experienced the stigmas borne out from those attitudes. Elsewhere, in another introduction she wrote for *Patriarchal Attitudes*, Figes recalls the amount of support and praise she received after the publication of the book, which constituted for her a material reminder of the work done and what she had achieved:

[...] in the months after publication a massive postbag from all over the country told me that thousands, perhaps millions of women appeared to have the same chip: that for years women had been nursing a secret rage which society required them to repress for fear of ostracism and ridicule. As much as anything, the letters expressed relief that someone had spoken out, and that the taboo of silence had been broken (PA, 7).

While she counted herself ‘lucky to have written the right book at the right time’, it still of course needed to be written by someone, a principle that applied to all feminist literature at the time: in order for change to happen, all manner of things needed to be ‘done’ (and written). Here we might recall Figes’s statement that, when she was writing *Patriarchal Attitudes*, she was under the impression that she was writing alone, which made the act of writing it more difficult (PA, 7). It is no coincidence that *Equinox* is a text deeply preoccupied with the act of doing and things appearing to get done. Even if the novel was by Figes’s own standards ‘useless’ (as all fiction writing was to some degree), it still managed to anticipate what precisely so many feminist interests, and by

extension feminism more generally, relied upon: that is, the question of doing. Having throughout her ‘first youth’ confronted the ‘question of beginning again’—after leaving Nazi Germany, after her divorce, and after writing her unpublished novel *Lights*—Figes turned her divided, split attention to the question of doing and the accusative corollary that so troubled the wider avant-garde: *what do you really do?* ‘My own somewhat uneasy solution’, Figes wrote ‘is to split myself in half.’ ‘Radical’ is an overused word in the context of describing the British avant-garde of the 1960s but Figes did do something genuinely radical: she drew attention to just how intensely gendered the question of ‘what do you really do?’ is, especially when asked in the context of the society she lived in. According to that society’s logic, around sixteen million women did nothing, as “proved” by their economically ‘inactive’ status.³⁴⁵ At the time, Figes’s answer to the question seemed heartening in its message: not only had women done more than what society had attributed to them, the very criterion with which they had been judged had been a faulty, man-made one, a mirror, as she described in *Patriarchal Attitudes*, to which women had danced—but a mirror that, around the time of the book’s publication, was dealt a blow, which caused the crack.

³⁴⁵ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 136.

V
CODA: A WORKING DEFINITION OF THE
BRITISH AVANT-GARDE

I

This thesis has shown that the works of Eva Figes, B. S. Johnson, and Alexander Trocchi display a serious and sustained interest in the concept of work and its corollaries, such as leisure, and professional and invisible forms of labour. The thesis has argued that their common interest was tempered by both the broader socio-political issues that played out internationally during the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (such as the mounting critique of capitalism, the shift in economic production, and the rise of feminism) and the specific concerns local to the London literary scene (such as the controversy surrounding Arts Council funding). The first part of the coda will attend to some of the artistic and literary developments occurring at this time via the lens of work to grasp more fully why these writers continued to reflect on the question the Chairman thrusts so vigorously upon Tom in Bunting's poem (see Introduction), a question that reverberates throughout their works: 'what do *you* do?', before asking in the second part whether the preoccupation with this question might have something to do with their statuses as specifically self-identifying avant-garde writers.

In her study *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth argues that the 'one unifying principle of the extraordinarily heterogenous field of post-World War II avant-garde art'—she goes on to cite a wide range of movements such as Minimalism, Conceptual art, Fluxus, Performance, Process, Feminist art, and happenings—is the 'concern with the problematic of artistic labour' (*WE*, 25).

This concern manifested itself

in implicit and explicit ways as much of the advanced art of the period managed, staged, mimicked, ridiculed, and challenged the cultural and societal anxieties around the shifting terrain and definitions of work (*WE*, 25).

One of the more ‘curious attributes of [this field]’, she notes, ‘was the increasing disregard for traditional artistic skills such as drawing, painting, and sculpting’ (*WE*, 25). Although she claims only to account for American artists (and mostly visual, performance, or conceptual artists rather than writers), her observations concerning the intersection of art and work prove just as applicable to the British context during the same period and, specifically, to the works of the British avant-garde. As we will see, there were significant overlapping concerns across the artistic avant-garde movements throughout the U.S., France, and Britain, and much of the work and theory produced in Europe, for example, made a powerful impact across the Atlantic. The ‘historical convergence’ she grounds her essay upon, for instance, is the same trans-national phenomenon outlined briefly in the Introduction, one that occurred throughout the political west, including Britain (*WE*, 25):

[j]ust as artists relinquished traditional artistic skills and the production of discrete art objects, the status of labour and the production of goods in the culture at large were also changing profoundly as the American industrial economy, based in manufacturing, shifted to a post-industrial economy rooted in managerial and service labour (*WE*, 25).

For Molesworth, the correlation between art production and economic production is a profound one: these ‘sociohistorical forces placed extraordinary pressures on artists to redefine themselves and their work’, and often they did so by ‘thinking through and acting out the profound transformations of late-twentieth-century labour in their work’ (*WE*, 27).

Figes, Johnson, and Trocchi all ‘act[ed] out’ the new transformations of late-twentieth-century labour in their own ways. The piecemeal writing process behind *Cain’s Book* is a perfect example: it is a performance of labour, a formal articulation of Trocchi’s resistance to work. Years later, his poetry collection *Man at Leisure* would be constructed in a similar fashion. Trocchi did little work to organise either text: he merely provided his editors with the raw material. He “did” the writing that needed to be done, churning out prose in order to earn a small amount of cash, much like Molloy does at the beginning of Beckett’s trilogy. These words were then processed, reordered, and edited according to various editors’ tastes (Richard Seaver for *Cain’s Book*; John Calder for *Man at Leisure*). If we consider his later infatuation with his own version of spontaneous

prose (as seen in *The Long Book*), which privileged a type of free writing with little concern for punctuation, a tendency to abbreviate longer words (for, presumably, the sake of volume since they would have taken less time to type), and a penchant for repetition, we begin to see Trocchi's writing practice resemble an automated machine or 'robot', an image he captures in one of the notes in *Cain's Book*:

– It is as though I watched a robot living myself, watching, waiting, smiling, gesticulating, for as I prepare this document I watch myself preparing it. I have stopped at this moment, ten seconds? five? and the robot goes on writing, recording, unmasking himself, and there are two of us, the one who enters into the experience and the one who, watching, assures his defeat. To look into oneself endlessly is to be aware of what is discontinuous and null; it is to sever the I who is aware from the I of whom he is aware... and who is he? What is I doing in the third person? Identities, like the successive skins of onions, are shed, each as soon as it is contemplated; caught in the act of pretending to be conscious, they are seen, the confidence men. I had that familiar feeling of regarding my whole life as leading up to that present moment before which I halted as before a kind of cosmic interrogation mark. At that moment I was at the mercy of whatever distraction, voices outside, the sound of footsteps, a hooting tug, the sense of my own shadow there in the cabin. It didn't seem to matter. [...] I was unable to return directly to my thoughts, whatever they were, and my former identity paled and disintegrated like the reflection of a receding face on the broken surface of water. If I had looked in a mirror and seen no reflection there I feel I wouldn't have been unduly startled. The invisible man... (CB, 69-70)

Not long after writing this, Trocchi began to herald automation as means for man to escape the drudgery of work. This passage, then, anticipates his utopian wishes and, rather than appearing at all distressed or concerned about the prospect of total self-effacement as Johnson does throughout this period, Trocchi seems to welcome it. There is a tone of fascination to the passage above and perhaps even an enjoyment that something else is doing the 'writing, recording, unmasking', allowing him, in his oddly luxurious redundancy to consider the many identities he assumes before 'shed[ding]' off. The writing that Trocchi dreams about (an outsourced and automated form of writing that requires the writer to simply write) is the type of writing that, by contrast, horrifies Johnson. In two of the stories in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* ('These Count as Fictions' and 'Everybody Knows Somebody Who's Dead') he satirises the *XCLR Mechanical Plot-Finding Formula*, a handbook for aspiring commercial writers, which provides the writer with a

set of rules and a loose formula in order to achieve ‘popular acclaim’.³⁴⁶ Johnson in ‘Everybody Knows Somebody Who’s Dead’ deliberately draws attention to the limits of such writing methods by scornfully drawing attention to the points where he is told to ‘start at the *Beginning*’, ‘engage my reader in a *Conflict*’, and so forth.³⁴⁷ At the end of the short piece which concerns the suicide of the narrator’s friend, he writes ‘There. I have fully satisfied the XLCR rules, I think. Popular acclaim must surely follow’. While Johnson mocks the handbook (and those who would consider using it), it seems likely that his mockery originates from a deeper disturbance: that is, the horror that anyone (and perhaps with the advent of automation in mind, anything) could technically become a writer, rendering him even more useless than he already felt.

These compositional processes and techniques anticipate much of the literary theory that would come out of France during the late-1960s. Roland Barthes’s famous ‘Death of the Author’ (1967), for instance, conjures an image, similar in process to Trocchi’s, of the depersonalised ‘modern scriptor’ (pointedly oppose to an ‘author’) whose only job is to perform the physical task of writing, the product of which is then taken away (again, like Molloy’s process) in order to be ‘disentangle[d]’ (rather than ‘decipher[ed]’) by the reader, whose position within the traditional writer-reader relationship was now elevated as a result of this literary paradigm shift (‘the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author’).³⁴⁸ This sentiment was already in circulation (Pierre Macherey’s *The Production of Literature* [1966] proposed similar ideas about the generation of meaning only a year before) and had been expressed implicitly by Marcel Duchamp: ‘the creative act’, he stated, ‘is not performed by the artist alone’ (*WE*, 28). If we understand these emerging theoretical statements in terms of labour, we begin to see an unprecedented development in the history literary reception: the onus to generate meaning begins to lie squarely on the reader. With poststructuralism, the reader was more readily understood as an intellectual labourer, which

³⁴⁶ Johnson, ‘Everybody Knows Somebody Who’s Dead’, *Well Done God!*, 140.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

³⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 146-147.

many artists and writers, including the British avant-garde, were only too happy to acknowledge (both Johnson and Figes wanted their readers to prove themselves and to be challenged). Texts—and many other forms of art—might have become more difficult, more seemingly esoteric but they were there to be “mined”. Yet, as Molesworth points out, ‘when artists challenged the role of the author, they also wittingly or not, questioned the status and even value of their labour’ (*WE*, 30). All this came at a risk, however:

Were artists still required, in any subjective or authorial specificity? (Anyone can follow through a serial system, click the shutter on a camera, throw a pair of dice.) If not, what exactly was their role? What was to constitute their labour? (*WE*, 31)

While these writers were of course anxious about their roles, these questions—framed in this way, at least—remain superficial. For all the theories that maintained the author was dead or dying, and for all the pressure to which the authorial figure was apparently subjected, novels that were being commercially sold needed the legitimating signature of an author to be recognised. A good example is, again, *Cain’s Book*: it was marketed as having been written by Alexander Trocchi, whose controversial ‘cultural entrepreneur[ship]’ (as he put it to the *Mail*), was a definite selling point, as Calder has variously noted.³⁴⁹

Perhaps, then, it was another (similar) theory to Barthes’s, posited by the American novelist John Barth in the same year, which more accurately describes the authorial position of the writer during this period. In his essay, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, Barth remarks on what he believes to be a new kind of literature, comprising of ‘novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an

³⁴⁹ See, for instance, *Garden of Eros*, 283. As chapter two relates, it was Trocchi’s remarkable ability to “sell” or receive large advances for work that was never going to be completed (or started), which allowed the Scottish writer to continue living as a supposedly avant-garde artist, in similar vein to Duchamp, who, it should be added, made it very clear that his fortune in remaining an artist was made possible by not having to work at any point throughout his life. When asked by Pierre Cabanne what had brought him most pleasure in life, Duchamp replied, ‘First, having been lucky. Because basically I’ve never worked for a living. I consider working for a living slightly imbecilic from an economic point of view. I hope that some day we’ll be able to live without being obliged to work. Thanks to my luck, I was able to manage without getting wet.’ Duchamp quoted in ‘In Praise of Laziness’, Mladen Stilinović, in *Work*, Sigler (ed.), 223.

author who imitates the role of the Author'.³⁵⁰ Barth's theory is instructive because it conveys something of the performativity involved in the novelist's new job description: he frames them as a worker who, heading towards retirement (rather than, necessarily, death), experiences major doubts not just about their social value but also the very trade they are engaged in. This was certainly the case for all three avant-garde writers who found telling stories to be a form of inauthenticity (or "lying", as Johnson was inclined to say), which relates to Molesworth's claim that artists began making art that eschewed 'artifice and illusion' and instead 'presented itself to the world as it was: [...] an object [or novel] insistent upon the labour of its maker' (*WE*, 25). Johnson's notorious disavowal of fiction ("telling stories is telling lies") is predicated upon the 'shabby chicanery' (or artifice) that most neo-Dickensian novels used. His labour, by contrast, was "honest" and contained devices (or, as some critics suggested, gimmicks) that, for him at least, only proved his professionalism as a novelist charged with the responsibility of developing the novel form.

Some of the new art produced at this time was 'extremely difficult for lay viewers to understand or interpret', Molesworth notes (*WE*, 29). 'Its difficulty lay', she writes:

in its double rejection: as artists stopped employing traditional artistic skills, they also stopped making works of art that imagined the museum or the collector's home as their final destination. Instead, artists attempted to make works of art that would actively resist easy assimilation into the realm of the art market, where art was seen to be one luxury commodity among many (*WE*, 29).

Trocchi springs to minds immediately, here. After *Cain's Book*, he dedicated most of his time writing in a way that resisted commercial publication, while hosting various happenings across London. The documents associated with sigma routinely criticise the art market and institutions (such as the National Gallery). Furthermore, in various interviews throughout the 1960s he would refute his identity as an artist: he was, as he put it, simply an intelligent man (see chapter two). This posture is at odds, however, with the artists Molesworth mentions who readily displayed their

³⁵⁰ John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: John Hopkins University, 1984), 62-76 (72).

“deskilled” practices yet, paradoxically, produced ‘extremely difficult’ art. While this artistic impulse occurred in Britain, it was not a practice the British avant-garde displayed (while at times they produced difficult texts, it was rarely accompanied by an obvious “deskilled” aesthetic—although the *Mail* article mentioned in chapters two and three might suggest otherwise). At any rate, the perceptions of new art being difficult or esoteric (while being produced by the unskilled or untrained) led to an ambience of critical suspicion, which was intensified in Britain by the fact that public money was usually at stake. Experimental or “way out” art forms were attacked for being decadent, impenetrable, and meretricious. The increasing calls for the rationalisation of experimental art went hand in hand with false or unfair accusations that might, at first, have been directed as aesthetic judgments but, ultimately, led to judgments about that artist’s or writer’s character (as ‘Reds’, ‘delinquents’, etc.).

As a result of the transformations she mentions, Molesworth claims that during the mid-twentieth century there was a marked shift not only in how art was described by various critics (like Leo Steinberg and Harold Rosenberg) but also in how certain artists spoke about their artistic practices; during the 1950s and 60s, a great deal of ‘art [became increasingly] content to be described in the language of *work* as opposed to that of art’ (*WE*, 25). In the following section, a certain amount of critical pressure will be applied to the language traditionally used to describe innovative art practices and, in doing so, will attempt to show why this language is so preoccupied with work.

II

A contemporary aesthetic can no more neglect the incisive changes that the historical avant-garde movements effected in the realm of art than it can ignore that art has long since entered a post-avantgardiste phase.

Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.³⁵¹

The second part of this coda contemplates the three aesthetic categories most commonly deployed amongst critics to index the works of Alexander Trocchi, B.S. Johnson, Eva Figes, and other writers of their milieu: the ‘experimental’, the ‘avant-garde’, and the ‘(late) modernist’.³⁵² These terms, particularly ‘experimental’ and ‘avant-garde’, are often used interchangeably, as editors Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale outline in their ‘Introduction’ to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, a compendium in which ‘the modifier *experimental* is used more or less interchangeably with *avant-garde*’.³⁵³ Though they claim that ‘the terms function roughly synonymously’, there are ‘important nuances of difference in connotation’.³⁵⁴ The term ‘avant-garde’:

begins its career in the military context, but then migrates to the political sphere, where the avant-garde is the faction that takes the lead ahead of the rest of a political movement [...] Consequently, aesthetic avant-gardism continues to be allied with political radicalism in a number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic and literary movements.³⁵⁵

The connotations of ‘experimental’, by contrast, are ‘scientific’:

Experiment promises to extend the boundaries of knowledge, or in this case, of artistic practice. Strongly associated with modernity, it implies rejection of hide-bound traditions, values and forms. To call literature *experimental* is in some sense to

³⁵¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 56. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the body of the essay. Abbreviated to *TAG*.

³⁵² Each of these writers have been described variously as ‘experimental’, ‘avant-garde’ or ‘modernist’ writers. Even a perfunctory glance over the recent criticism concerning their works makes this clear.

³⁵³ Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, ‘Introduction’, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, (1-18) 1.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2. For their understanding of the term, Bray, Gibbons and McHale cite Matei Calinescu, ‘The Idea of the Avant-Garde’, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 95-148.

aspire to compete with science—challenging science’s privileged status in modernity and reclaiming some of the prestige ceded by literature to science since the nineteenth century.³⁵⁶

Recent literary criticism has displayed a preference towards classifying this disparate group of post-war British writers as an ‘avant-garde’, which makes sense for multiple reasons.³⁵⁷ First of all, it manages to designate a group of writers, many of whom responded consciously to an establishment or, as some of them were keen to point out, a ‘rear guard’ resistant to their supposedly avant-garde aims.³⁵⁸ Secondly, many of these writers identified as explicitly avant-gardiste rather than experimental. As mentioned previously, both Figs and Johnson made clear their disapproval of the term ‘experimental,’ but it was their friend and fellow practitioner Giles Gordon who most forcefully denied the category when he looked back on the 1960s and 70s literary scene some years later:

It has sometimes seemed to me that at the time of experiencing it much great art is boring. The resonances, reverberations and waves of pleasure, the illumination come later. The difficulty with so much (I wince as I write this) non-experimental fiction is that, as a reader, you don’t have to work at it; there is little to work *to*. Thus the experience of reading is too often shallow, superficial. You read as you do an intelligent newspaper. The trouble, if we are honest (note that I slip from singular to plural), with so much English ‘experimental’ writing in the Sixties and Seventies was that it was boring to read yet didn’t subsequently reverberate. Ultimately, it didn’t provide a sufficiently rich aesthetic experience. Probably the most successful ‘experimental’ novelist of the period was Nicholas Mosley – but he wasn’t labelled as experimental. Which is something else: whenever I was described as an ‘experimental novelist’ I cringed. An ‘experimental novel’ has to be a failed novel. If it worked, no one would invoke the adjective.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

³⁵⁷ See, for instance, Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle (eds.), *B. S. Johnson and Post-war Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde* and Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams (eds.), *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming [2019]).

³⁵⁸ The phrase was used by Clement Greenberg in his essay ‘The Avant-garde and Kitsch’ (1939). Also see David Lehman: ‘[t]he avant-garde is dead, we’re told, because there is no longer any significant resistance to artistic innovation.’ He goes on to quote Michael Kimmelman who reviewed a pair of exhibitions for the *New York Times* (30 January 1998): ‘Together, the shows underscore just how anachronistic the idea of an avant-garde has become. Courbet needed Bouguereau, after all, because there is no avant-garde without a rear-guard, an academy to scandalize. Today everyone is simply on guard.’ See Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York Poets*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 287.

³⁵⁹ Giles Gordon, ‘Diary’ in *London Review of Books*, 7 October, 1993.

For Gordon, the term ‘experimental’ causes him visceral discomfort (‘I wince... I cringed’). The problem for all these writers is that ‘experimental’ implies failure; it is an accusation that both the writer and their novels do not work, recalling Figes’s statement that experimental writers, in contrast to ‘good writers’, ‘do not know what [they are] aiming for’ and ‘should be in another profession’.³⁶⁰ Gordon claims that good fiction—and it seems he is referring to modernist literature, here (often framed as hard or laborious yet ultimately rewarding)—makes the reader work. The problem with the experimental fiction produced during the 60s and 70s, he insinuates, is that it made the reader work but ultimately denied them any pay-off (‘the resonances, reverberations and waves of pleasure, the illumination’). Yet, it is precisely this anxiety about work and failure, coupled with an understanding of artistic value informed by a distinctly capitalist ethos (i.e. the notion that one labours in order to reap reward) that problematizes these writers’ statuses as authentically avant-garde writers (as opposed to the less contentious and less loaded of labels ‘experimental’, ‘modernist’ or ‘late modernist’, none of which necessarily presuppose a willingness to react against the market in the way the avant-garde did). Put another way, it is these writers’ reaction against the term ‘experimental’ that, as we will go on to see, precludes them from being avant-garde writers (according to Peter Bürger’s persuasive definition of avant-gardism), which, in turn, should warn us against using the terms ‘experimental’ and ‘avant-garde’ synonymously.

What will be suggested here is that a more nuanced, historicized comprehension of the term ‘avant-garde’ will help us recognize what kind of avant-garde these experimental writers formed (in a way that the term ‘experimental’ is unable to). This coda will remain provisional and open in spirit as it attempts to draw on and play with the connections between work, with its many contiguous meanings, and a British avant-garde working in a ‘post-avant-gardiste’ phase in order to go some way towards constructing a definition of this peculiar iteration of avant-gardism, which,

³⁶⁰ Figes, *Running Man*, 56.

following Julia Jordan, might be most helpfully categorised as a ‘generation defined by its straining at the boundaries of literary categorisation’.³⁶¹

A theory of the avant-garde

As Peter Bürger’s quotation (above) indicates, there is a consensus that, following the ‘historical avant-garde’—which he identifies as the Futurists, the Surrealists, and Dadaists—and the failure of their respective artistic projects, it is no longer possible for an authentic avant-garde to exist.³⁶² What follows is a post-avant-garde era, in which ‘[e]verything,’ David Lehman writes, ‘is instantly accepted, absorbed, glorified, bought, sold, copied, recycled, trashed.’³⁶³ According to Bürger, the historical avant-garde’s primary objective was to restore art as a socially-integrated praxis after it had been divorced from life and kept separate within its own ‘institution of art’, which he maintains, began with aestheticism’s privileging of ‘autonomous’ artworks—that is, artistic objects or works in dialogue either with themselves or other artworks for the sake of art (which the slogan ‘l’art pour l’art’ belies).³⁶⁴ Aestheticism and, later, modernism (as a development of aestheticism) were content to perpetuate this division, which, for Bürger, arrived when form became content, thus signaling art’s inward turn, away from life: ‘[t]he apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works’ (*TAG*, 27).³⁶⁵

³⁶¹ Jordan, ‘Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde Renaissance’, *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, 145.

³⁶² Both Rita Felski and Sianne Ngai refer to and discuss in detail the notion of the post-avant-garde era. See Felski’s *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (158-60) and Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories* (“The zany”). Another postulation of the post-avant-garde can be found in David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde* (see footnote 306 above). Lehman, however, understands the New York School of Poetry as the last iteration of the avant-garde, which chronologically figures much later than Bürger’s conception of the first and last historical avant-garde.

³⁶³ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 288.

³⁶⁴ The term ‘autonomy’ is notoriously complex. It is used by a number of Marxist critics throughout the twentieth-century (Gyorgy Lukacs, T. W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin) who often used it in dialogue with each other but, broadly speaking, Bürger takes it to mean ‘art’s independence from society’ (*TAG*, 35).

³⁶⁵ This is articulated perhaps most purely in the early Beckett’s pronouncements concerning Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’ (what would later become *Finnegan’s Wake*): ‘Here form *is* content,

Bürger distinguishes avant-gardism from modernism on the grounds that the former is primarily political. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it his foreword to Bürger's analysis:

Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art. The social roles of the modernist and the avant-garde artist are, thus, radically different (*TAG*, xv).

In other words, as Schulte-Sasse remarks, the development and intensification of art's separation from bourgeois society throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in autonomous art, on the one hand (such as the kind Beckett describes) and, on the other, the formation of the avant-garde as a response to such art (*TAG*, xiii). Schulte-Sasse explains that the avant-gardes of the early twentieth-century were 'the first movement in history that turned against the institution "art" and the mode in which autonomy functions' and it was this which made them differ from 'all previous art movements whose mode of existence' up until that point had been 'determined precisely by an acceptance of autonomy' (*TAG*, xiv).

The historical avant-garde's aim to reintegrate art with everyday life (by disrupting the institution of art) failed. Before long, the avant-garde, its strategies, its shocking critiques, and its mode of existence were venerated by the very institutions it attempted to abolish. The most obvious example is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, an example of an *objet trouvé*, which Bürger argues is

totally unlike the result of an individual production process but a chance find, in which the avant-gardiste intention of uniting art and the praxis of life took shape, is recognized today as a "work of art." The *objet trouvé* thus loses its character as antiart and becomes, in the museum, an autonomous work among others (*TAG*, 57).

Not only did the institution of art survive but, precisely because of its survival, it became clear that art as a political resource had lost its subversive power, which, Lionel Trilling writes, was due to its increasingly close proximity to the marketplace:

content *is* form [...] His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*? See Beckett, 'Dante... Bruno... Vico... Joyce' in *Modernism: An Anthology*, Lawrence Rainey (ed.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1067.

[a]lmost in the degree that art expresses its contempt of all that is established and official, it is sought and paid for—which is to say: taken into camp and deprived of its antagonistic force. The readiness of capitalist society to accept the art that avows its antagonism to capitalist society is therefore anything but the evidence of art's power; it is exactly the means by which art is made impotent. The expectation that art will supply the principle by which society can be redeemed is little more than self-congratulatory fantasy. No redemption has occurred; all that has happened is that the highest achievement of the free subversive spirit has been co-opted to lend the color of spirituality to the capitalist enterprise.³⁶⁶

And yet, Bürger points out, the avant-garde attack was not entirely without consequence: it made 'art recognizable as an institution and also revealed its (relative) inefficacy in bourgeois society as its principle' (*TAG*, 57). This has resulted in one welcome outcome, he suggests. Since art no longer has a 'direct effect' on society, it no longer has to 'pretend' it does (*TAG*, 57).

What, then, are we left with? Bürger argues that, after the historical avant-garde, we can now only witness inauthentic reiterations of the historical avant-garde's practice either by groups or individuals he defines as 'neo-avant-garde,' who produce artworks that are autonomous and therefore always already co-opted by the market (he cites Andy Warhol as an example). The proposal of this coda holds that the use of the term 'avant-garde' is a reasonable one when categorizing the 1960s post-war British experimental writers but only if used as a working definition that accounts for the uselessness, redundancy, and fear of production that necessarily characterizes any avant-garde (or, what Bürger would refer to as, a 'neo-avant-garde') working in a post-avant-garde epoch.³⁶⁷ This coda posits a definition of the 1960s avant-garde that stands somewhere between Bürger's neo-avant-garde (a politically-neutered iteration of the original) and the hollowed-out version of the word that is used more or less interchangeably with 'experimental', 'modernist', or 'innovative'. In this regard, the thesis urges a re-orientation of thinking: rather than

³⁶⁶ Lionel Trilling, 'Art, Will, and Necessity' (1973), *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, Leon Wieseltier (ed.), (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 506.

³⁶⁷ The pun is of course intended to draw attention to both the provisional nature of the term (a working definition is, after all, an alternate or new definition of a previously defined concept)—as a kind of useful placeholder that works to categorise these writers—and the way in which this avant-garde is associated inseparably with the concept of work and the production of artworks, which, according to Bürger at least, would preclude them from being authentically avant-garde (i.e. they are part of the marketplace).

thinking about these artists as late modernists (which, given their literary preoccupations with form and the alacrity with which they publicly identified themselves with an older generation of modernists, such as Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, is not unreasonable), the thesis wishes to think less about chronology or lateness and insist on their position of being caught, in two minds, experiencing a specifically post-avant-gardiste dilemma, a common experience for all three writers: Trocchi in abeyance, Johnson attempting to be a professional avant-gardiste, and Figs as a ‘split’ subject. This dilemma is a typically post-avant-garde position in that it often translates into performing two roles at once: that of the supposedly avant-gardiste artist and that of the more popular author.

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The coda understands the London literary environment in which these writers produced their work as a Bourdieusian ‘field’ like any other:

The literary field (one may also speak of the artistic field, the philosophical field, etc.) is an independent social universe with its own laws of force, its dominants and dominated, and so forth. Put another way, to speak of the “field” is to recall that literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws.³⁶⁸

Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of the field draws attention to the idea that the British avant-garde was merely a group of writers performing avant-gardism, which was to some degree accepted by those other forces working in the field, as a means to perpetuate this ‘social universe’. Frank Kermode touches upon this idea in his essay, ‘The Modern’. Writing in 1971, he understands that many of the practitioners of supposedly avant-garde art are only described as such because of the context that legitimates their false, inauthentic position. This kind of art seems to be ‘whatever you provide when the place in which you provide it is associated with the idea and contains people who

³⁶⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 163

are prepared to accept this and perhaps other assumptions'.³⁶⁹ Kermode goes on to dispute that this makes one avant-gardiste or modern, but he makes clear that this was the pervasive mood (especially within the performance and conceptual art fields): that anything at this time could be considered art and anyone could claim to be an artist provided the relevant legitimating forces were present to confer such status upon whatever or whoever made the claim. It is an observation that Calder remembers when he writes, '[i]t was a time when anything called "Art" was treated as art, [...] a time when you could get away with such things without protest'.³⁷⁰ Highlighting this is not to suggest that the British avant-garde writers were working in bad faith or only wishing, say, to "brand" themselves as avant-gardiste in order to be different or to stake a claim in the literary economy. But, as Bürger points out, many artists (mis)understood themselves as genuinely avant-gardiste:

To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions. This is true independently of the consciousness artists have of their activity, a consciousness that may perfectly well be avant-gardiste. (*TAG*, 58)

And so, Bürger's theory makes abundantly clear, self-identifying as avant-gardiste in a post-avant-garde era is only to emphasise one's own redundancy and uselessness, which, as this thesis has shown, is precisely what these writers were writing about while remaining conscious of their relative inefficacy as avant-garde writers. Essentially, they are an avant-garde that belongs to a literary economy or field that functions like any other field within a capitalist market. The British avant-garde's perceived uselessness is only another iteration of artistic frustration concerning an inability to enact change or do anything that might have significant social impact. Bürger argues that this frustration (over art's autonomy and apartness from society) was the reason the historical avant-garde was formed in the first place. This, it becomes clear, is where their collective anxiety about work and their own uselessness as writers stems from.

³⁶⁹ Frank Kermode, "The Modern" (1965-6) in *Modern Essays* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1990) [originally published 1971] 54.

³⁷⁰ Calder, *Garden of Eros*, 282.

Part of the reason why the final part of this coda has interrogated the meaning of avant-gardism (specifically, within a post-avant-gardiste context) is because ‘avant-garde’ is a term that is too often readily accepted as a way of designating politically or socially subversive art (as Molesworth does in her account, for instance). Yet, it is fundamental to this study that these writers are understood as neo-avant-gardiste writers (while, crucially, they and those around them refer to them to as “avant-garde”) since it is this very tension that animates their work and highlights the central theme of their writing. They are conscious of their apparent ‘useless[ness]’ as novelists (Figs) but still profess to write ‘as though it matters’ (Johnson).³⁷¹ Johnson’s ‘as though’, here, is rarely remarked upon: it perfectly encapsulates the anxiety surrounding this form of writing in Britain at this time. ‘As though’: it signals a slight hesitation, a small stumble as it implies that, actually, it matters very little. To quote Johnson again, though this time from towards the end of *Christie Malry*, in which he appears to ventriloquise some of his own feelings towards the novel form, the importance of which, at the time of writing, he felt dubious about:

...I need not have bothered, need I, it seems, if it all ends like this: but if not like this for others it still ends. A mockery of hope, of thinking of the next day. So I need not have bothered all is useless, pointless, waste
all, all pointless (CMODE, 178)

As this thesis has shown, it was not only Johnson who articulated these sorts of sentiments. Figs openly acknowledged a few years before Johnson wrote these lines that her novel-writing was ‘useless’, which is why she ‘split’ her practice into two: between the useless (fiction) and the useful (non-fiction). Trocchi’s oeuvre might be best understood as a project *about* the uselessness and pointlessness of literature, which, he writes in *Cain’s Book*, ought to accomplish its dying.

What difference does a name or a label, such as ‘avant-garde’, make? It is a way of performing one’s identity as an artist and a means to distinguish and define oneself. And so, to be known as an avant-garde artist without ever doing much as a supposedly avant-garde artist leaves one exposed. Trocchi continued by some measure to live like a member of one of the historical

³⁷¹ Johnson’s phrase is from the ‘Introduction’ to *AYRY*, 28.

avant-garde (there was, after all, direct lineage from Dada to sigma); he was able to integrate his art with his life for a period. For Johnson, though, this label was cause for much anxiety and his political ineffectiveness led to a serious re-evaluation of his artistic practice. For Figes, the ‘most important of the writers outside the fictional mainstream’, according to Calder, the situation was different. She adapted and refused to lay any importance on either avant-gardism or the novel’s capacity to effect change. For all the political power avant-garde art was said to harness, which is why of course it was understood as something worth aspiring towards, for all its utopian thinking and for all its subversiveness, the incontrovertible fact of work remained. For, as Ukeles put it: ‘[a]fter the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?’ (*WE*, 71) Some of the most valuable and instructive artistic work realised in the 1960s and 1970s—such as Ukeles’ and Figes’s—was the art that demonstrated there was still much more work to be done if ever there was to be a world without work.³⁷²

³⁷² The literal meaning here should not be ignored: the twentieth-century was the century in which (in Britain, at least) the national workforce became predominantly female.

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