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**Modernism, Class and Colonialism in Robert Noonan's  
*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists***

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In his prison memoir, *Borstal Boy*, the Irish republican playwright, Brendan Behan, recalled the popularity of Robert Noonan's 1914 novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, among working-class Dubliners. Behan, who served a three-year sentence in England for participating in the IRA's 1939 bombing campaign, recalled Noonan's popularity in Dublin, where the ideas expressed within "the painter's bible" exercised considerable influence among decorators. It was, he remembered, "our book at home, too", occupying a prominent place among the revered works of Irish literary nationalism that were read by his family:

when my mother was done telling us of the children of Lir and my father about Fionn Mac Cumhaill they'd come back by way of nineteen sixteen to *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and on every job you'd hear painters using the names out of it for nicknames, calling their own apprentice 'The Walking Colour Shop' and, of course, every walking foreman was called Nimrod, even by painters who had never read the book, nor any other book, either.<sup>1</sup>

A son and grandson of painters, Behan was "born into the pot" and his testimony underlines the important cultural and political position that Noonan's militant socialist novel assumed within Irish working-class circles. Portraying capitalism as "the system which has made the world into a hell" (146)<sup>2</sup>, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was also a central text among organized workers in England and Scotland. In each of these countries, it served as both an instructional and an agitational text that mobilized popular demands for better wages, shorter working hours, universal health care and the provision of housing. Although it enjoyed a place in Behan's home alongside the mythological tales of the Irish Literary Revival, Noonan's insurgent work of socialist realism had already been eclipsed by the Celticist modernism of

William Butler Yeats, Augusta Gregory and other, more recognisably nationalist authors.

As a writer, worker and agitator, Robert Noonan posthumously exercised a significant influence over the Irish and British left but remained largely unrecognised outside these labour circles, particularly in Ireland, where left politics remained marginalized until the 1960s. It has also been overlooked because the novel was, until the emergence of the critical revolutions of the late 1960s, regarded as carrying less ideological freight than properly theorised political writing.<sup>3</sup> But like Behan, Raymond Williams has also emphasised the novel's appeal to communities and networks of proletarian readers. Citing the accuracy of its representation of the workplace as the key site of class repression, the novel's radical perspective, Williams argued, drew from Noonan's unique position among those who were on the receiving end of capitalism's systemic violence. Writing from a situation that was securely "inside the working class... and inside the experience of work", Williams believed that this standpoint allowed Noonan to expose existing practices of exploitation and the profound misery that they generated.<sup>4</sup>

A unique product of working-class culture, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* still occupies a marginal position within the literary field. As an underground text that was circulated among workers in cities including Belfast, Dublin, Liverpool and Glasgow, it performed an important, adversarial function that motivated and inspired labour organization. Amplified by its increasingly fragmented aesthetic and form (concentrating on the grinding misery of working-class existence, the tale absorbs much of the repetition and the fracturing energy of which it complains), the novel's troubled message about the relentlessness of class warfare ensured its unofficial transmission through subaltern labour networks centred on sites of work and through trade unions. Moving along these circuits, it assumed a central position as a foundational text of modern class struggle, and its journey toward alternative canonicity avoided contact with the conventional literary and critical spheres that have traditionally conferred works with classical status.<sup>5</sup>

Noonan's searing, ideologically-charged descriptions of poverty, hunger and deprivation, are accompanied by persistent criticisms of British colonialism: his narrative of working-class distress opens by subverting James Thomson's 1740 imperialist anthem, "Rule Britannia", declaring, ironically, that "Britons never shall be slaves."<sup>6</sup> Thoroughly politicized and influenced by Karl Marx's analyses of capital,<sup>7</sup> the novel foregrounds the crises and traumas experienced by Edwardian workers, and its subtitle, *Being the Story of Twelve Months in Hell, Told by One of the Damned*, underlines Noonan's preoccupation with the unremitting mobilisation of capital against the interests of the working poor. Its infliction of systemic physical, psychological and economic shocks is integrated into the text, repeatedly disrupting its narrative and exposing the relationship between these pressures, the novel's fictional protagonist and its author. Its

disrupted and disruptive aesthetic captures a desolate world that is “falling to pieces and crumbling away” around its working-class subjects.<sup>8</sup> Its significance lies in its uncompromising realism because, unlike earlier “condition of England” fictions (such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* [1855] and *Mary Barton* [1848], and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* [1854]), it rejects the formal and long-standing conventions of the nineteenth-century novel. As Gary Day has emphasized, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* does not rely on sentimentalism or romance, as Noonan denied the reassuring closures that bourgeois fiction demanded – conclusions that reflected these authors’ affiliation with liberal reformism. Instead, he deployed fiction as a means of confronting the economic violence lying beneath the surface of bourgeois normality.<sup>9</sup>

Composed within the structural context of the uncertainty that marked working-class experience at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel is ideologically precise and politically assertive in its descriptions and analyses of class violence. Attempting to educate English workers who, Noonan found, were either thoroughly terrorized or desensitized by the combined violence and authority of capitalism and the state, his novel has traditionally been regarded as a specifically English expression of working-class identity rather than the product of an internationalist, anticolonial consciousness. In his introduction to the 1965 edition, Alan Sillitoe described it as “the first great English novel about the class war” and in 1969 the Marxist critic, Jack Mitchell, praised it as “one of the greatest tradition-breakers in the English novel”.<sup>10</sup> Its reputation as an English or British text was, doubtless, helped by Noonan’s own subjective instability: an Irish immigrant and republican whose identity underwent several stages of revision and amendment, his posthumous reputation as the author of the key didactic fictional text of the English left<sup>11</sup> was, ironically, secured by the marginalisation of socialist politics in Ireland. With the foundation of the Free State in 1922 and the disastrous Civil War that followed, Irish nationalism assumed an intensively conservative dynamic, and one that would ensure the inclusion of Behan’s memoir, first published in 1958, on the Irish state’s list of banned authors until 1970. Opposed from the outset by the new establishment, the left-wing republicanism that Behan grew up amid struggled against its marginalisation until its dissolution with the collapse of the short-lived but influential Republican Congress in 1934.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it was not until the radicalisation of the republican movement during the 1960s by Marxist figures, including Behan’s lifelong friend Cáthal Goulding, that leftist discourse again became central to the anticolonial politics of Irish separatism.<sup>13</sup> Along with the political writings of James Connolly, the naturalistic fiction of Peadar O’Donnell and the popular modernism of Liam O’Flaherty, Noonan’s work represents a strand of Irish socialist modernism that has been overlooked by their country’s broader nationalist narrative.<sup>14</sup>

The novel's illustrations of unstable living conditions, the catastrophic impact of poverty upon workers' mental health and their ceaseless struggles with the ever-present threat of starvation fill the silencing voids that erased working-class voices from many Irish and British novels of this period.<sup>15</sup> This led its first publisher, Grant Richards (who also published James Joyce's *Dubliners* in the same year), to describe it as a "damnably subversive" text, but one that was "extraordinarily real".<sup>16</sup> Despite this, Richards issued the novel in a very abridged form. The uncensored version, only published in 1955 (by Lawrence and Wishart, the publishing house of the Communist Party of Great Britain), should be regarded as an important work of delayed modernism. George Orwell, reviewing a new edition of the still-abridged work in 1946 (the novel had by then been reissued thirty-two times since its original publication<sup>17</sup>), praised its realism but also criticised what he regarded as its political naivety. The novel's relevance, he insisted, lay in the descriptive power of its compelling exploration of the proletariat's bleak and (for middle class readers, at least) unimaginable working conditions. Its importance, he believed, lay in its documentation of the "unhonoured" or forgotten radicals whose efforts finally crystallized in the popular British socialism of the 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

### **Colonialism and Class**

This popular socialist text was produced by the fusion of colonial and class dialectics that formed Noonan's political consciousness at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Born Robert Croker in Dublin in 1870, he adopted his mother's surname before becoming a transnational migrant: Noonan left Ireland for Liverpool in his late teens and, after serving six months in prison for theft in 1890,<sup>19</sup> emigrated to South Africa where he learned his trade as a decorator. Rising to foreman in Johannesburg, where he also began writing political pamphlets, Noonan became involved in trade unionism, joining the International Independent Labour Party in 1899. His socialist beliefs were aligned to his anticolonial politics and, as an Irish republican, he served on the Transvaal Executive of the Centennial of 1798 Committee, a front organization of the clandestine and revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). This body linked the Boers directly to militant Irish anti-imperialism, and Noonan sat on the committee alongside the future president of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, and the chemist and mineral assessor, John MacBride, who would be executed for his part in leading the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Upon the outbreak of the Boer War, the Transvaal 1798 Committee organized the Irish Transvaal Brigade, which Mac Bride led into battle against the British army. Noonan left the organisation after hostilities commenced and returned to England, but his literary writing remained framed by this experience of imperialism.<sup>20</sup>

Living in Hastings from 1902, he joined the Social Democratic Federation, writing pamphlets and election literature for his local branch, but his

daughter, Kathleen, recalled his increasing frustration with the conservatism of English workers. Five years later, in 1907, amid acute unemployment and deprivation in the city, he began writing *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in response to the Liberal government's application of conservative social policies.<sup>21</sup> The novel was completed in 1910; as his already ailing health was deteriorating in February, 1911, Noonan died in Liverpool from tuberculosis while preparing to emigrate, once more, to Canada.

His posthumous novel mediates the suffering endured by the marginalized working poor of England. Upon its publication, it articulated the modern proletarian experiences that, as Orwell noted, were ignored in mainstream English fiction, by the monied bohemians of the Bloomsbury set and by conservative, socially-disconnected avant-gardists such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound. Reversing the Vorticists' deployment of modernism as a form of right-wing propaganda,<sup>22</sup> *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* furthered socialist ideology by explaining to the reader how, in Britain, "the wolves have an easy prey."<sup>23</sup> By rendering these political ideas in fiction, it conveys the real, material consequences of life under capitalism, portraying working-class experience of modernity as a prolonged encounter with seemingly endless cycles of economic crisis and stagnation.<sup>24</sup>

*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is a subaltern novel that counters capitalist hegemony in truly Gramscian fashion; for this reason, its critique of capital and empire, along with its fractured aesthetic, can be read in terms of what Joe Cleary has identified as Irish modernism's dissolution of the bourgeois-imperial dynamic that is so thoroughly reflected in the stability of Victorian realism. As an emergent and consciously unstable "minority" literature, Irish modernism, with its decentering of British cultural authority, was at odds with the aesthetic and representational logics of the dominant literary mainstream, including those of capitalist-imperialist modernism.<sup>25</sup> In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, we find this anti-colonial literary destabilisation being combined with revolutionary socialism. Applying its themes in a ruptured, fragmented narrative, Noonan counters bourgeois hegemony and its assertion that such suffering, injustice and violence is normal, natural or inevitable. Rather than drawing on the leisured experiences of the inhabitants of Pimlico or Regent's Park that qualified Bloomsbury modernism,<sup>26</sup> Noonan, in his presentation of the chaotic experience of working-class life, highlights these crises by centring on the resistant consciousness of his protagonist, the alienated decorator and radical socialist, Frank Owen, who refuses to comply with the violence that surrounds him and his fellow workers and will not acquiesce in the structures and practices of power. The novel's structural disjointedness and lack of pattern reflects the chaos of working-class experience, working the structural pressures of capital into its disordered form. Its directness draws from its repetitiveness, which Allen excised from the

original edition; yet it is precisely this fragmentary aesthetic that repeats the author's (and his subjects') frustration, anger and desperation.

The novel opens with Owen explaining to his fellow-decorators that the denial of pleasure is key to the normalisation of repression:

What I call poverty is when people are not able to secure for themselves all the benefits of civilization; the necessaries, comforts, pleasures and refinements of life, leisure, books, theatres, pictures, music, holidays, travel, good and beautiful homes, good clothes, good and pleasant food.<sup>27</sup>

Key to the containment of the proletariat is capitalism's refusal to allow the working class any access to leisure and culture. The prevention of these enjoyments produces the constant tension upon which the novel hinges, ensuring that "the system which produces luxury, refinement and culture for a few... condemns the majority to a lifelong struggle with adversity, and many thousands to hunger and rags". This reality for the majority, Noonan repeats throughout the novel, "has made the world into a hell,"<sup>28</sup> and the challenge that he saw facing the left was its responsibility to radicalize the working class and convince it of the artificiality of capitalism's "fair outward appearance."<sup>29</sup> This was an issue that he addressed a decade before Leon Trotsky identified British labour's addiction to the bourgeoisie's fake "formulae of democracy".<sup>30</sup> This problem is directly confronted in his documentation of life in Mugsborough, the fictional town modelled on Hastings, in which the novel is set. In a novel in which the naming of characters, places and newspapers consistently satirises authority, the town's place name nods to the establishment's duping of the working class, a feat that is achieved with the help of local papers entitled *The Obscurer* and the *Daily Chloroform*. The novel's self-reflexivity is conveyed in its engagement with the conservative press, through which Noonan relays the truth of poverty, despair, deprivation and hunger that these publications deny. In doing so he explained, in real terms, the operation of the capitalist system and its effects upon those who are on the receiving end of "the great money trick."<sup>31</sup> Countering Fabian-liberal calls for gradualism with a grim series of tableaux, Noonan documents the direct violence of capitalism and the intensity of the misery that it instils in its victims – a violence from which not even children are spared.

Noonan's principal aim in writing *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was to alert workers to the practices and ideological connections that bound the imperial state to the interests of capital, the very issues that Trotsky found himself having to confront during the ongoing Russian conflict, as his own book addressed the alliance of the "class egoism of the bourgeoisie" with the brutal, mechanised "imperialist slaughter" of the First World War.<sup>32</sup> Reformist, left-leaning liberal politics had been popularized in contemporary English literary writing – H.G. Wells' fictions, for example, exploited class antagonism, and

enjoyed huge market popularity, while his pamphlets criticized “the intellectual confusion and vagueness” of contemporary socialist theory and urged readers to adhere to “the simple essential idea of socialism”.<sup>33</sup> *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is unique in that it accentuated socialism’s revolutionary tendencies, theorizing Marxist political doctrine on a popular level through its documentation of class violence. Its uneven structure reflects the instability of capital: shaped by the economic and material tensions that Noonan experienced throughout his working life, its intensely polemical aesthetic draws on what Williams identified as his engagement with “his own real material”,<sup>34</sup> laying the basis for what Fredric Jameson has, more recently, termed, the “vitality” of the text’s engagement with the circumstances surrounding its composition.<sup>35</sup>

### ***The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and the Question of Modernism**

In the novel’s preface, Noonan explained why he decided to use fiction as a means of conveying the realities of poverty, suffering and class violence in early twentieth-century England:

I designed to show the conditions relating from poverty and unemployment: to expose the futility of the measures taken to deal with them and to indicate what I believe to be the only real remedy, namely – Socialism. I intended to explain what Socialists understand by the word ‘poverty’: to define the Socialist theory of the causes of poverty, and to explain how Socialists propose to abolish poverty.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Noonan distinguishes his novel from the didacticism that characterized much socialist writing: “‘The Philanthropists’ is not a treatise or essay, but a novel. My main object was to write a readable story full of human interest and based on the happenings of everyday life, the subject of Socialism being treated incidentally.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, this separation is not achieved by the end of the novel, and instead we are presented with an ever-intensifying fusion of literary realism with polemical socialism which, according to one of its early leftist readers, was “pitched in a wholly aggressive key”.<sup>38</sup> Noonan’s fractured and increasingly fragmented narrative engages with the problems of bourgeois representation by subverting the traditional plotting and texture of the realist text, along with its origins in the conservative ideologies that identify with these structures. His novel, in its increasingly unstable form, resists the practices and formations upon which such literature and its identification with the ideology and practices of capital rested,<sup>39</sup> exposing what Mitchell described as “the abnormality of the normal”.<sup>40</sup> Subsisting on the low and ever-decreasing wages that drag workers toward dispossession, alienation and despair, Noonan’s working-class characters exist within an endless cycle of degradation, physical danger and psychic harm.



The novel's intensively class-focused realism is key to conveying this reality, and the conditions of working class poverty and desperation that it describes were strikingly familiar to contemporary and subsequent generations of readers.<sup>41</sup> Its exposure of these systemic forms of violence and the conditions endured by those who are subjected to them counters the bourgeois novel's defusion or normalization of class tensions. Noonan's critique of capitalism and the false consciousness that it instils situates his working-class realism within a proletarian form of modernism, whereby its aesthetic is characterized by a militant sensibility of class. As with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the relationship between the formal aspects of literary modernism and the question of class violence is made manifest. The fictional text works to convey characters' experiences of the economic despoliation of communities among which life had been stable, "always one thing... whole and clear."<sup>42</sup> This uneasy text, ruptured and apparently uncertain of its own aesthetic status, conveys, through its shifting, episodic plot, the precariousness of a working-class existence permanently poised "on the brink of destitution".<sup>43</sup> Discontinuous and constantly hovering between literary and more straightforwardly political writing (as the novel proceeds it drifts into a polemicizing mode with increasing regularity), Noonan exposes the vulnerability of the dislocated working-class culture that he both drew on and criticized. The strangeness of his prose (Jonathan Rose stresses its bitterness<sup>44</sup>) is supplemented by this formal ambiguity, which constitutes the alterity of a text so thoroughly qualified by the working class's collective experience of estrangement and alienation.

The novel's disordered structure, then, is symptomatic of its disassociation from the bourgeois concerns and ideological motivations of the nineteenth-century novel and much of Edwardian literature. Its very disarrangement conveys Noonan's opposition to the contemporary capitalist dispensation, itself the key ideological feature of these works. By countering this restrictive "reality" with this tale of economic and subjective dissolution, Noonan undermines what Bernard Sharratt described as the oppressive relationship between "truth and control" that is concealed by conservative fiction. This is amplified by Noonan's own lack of control over the text:<sup>45</sup> for example, after repeatedly predicting the liquidation of those struggling on the margins of the working class and informing the reader of Owen's belief that "there was no hope of better times," it concludes with a rousing vision of the establishment of a "glorious ... Co-operative Commonwealth", illuminated by "the risen sun of Socialism."<sup>46</sup> These contradictions, marking the straining tension of Noonan's own despair and hope, are, in themselves, results of the crisis-generating nature of capitalism. Reflecting the increasingly displaced and abused workers' experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, they capture what Fredric Jameson has termed the revealing formal deformations that are "the exact equivalent of the economic alienation in the social world outside."<sup>47</sup>

Dislocated and disordered, this literary “tradition-breaker”, as Mitchell has described it,<sup>48</sup> reflects on these formal levels the pressures exerted on the dispossessed working-class imagination by the violent dialectics of class struggle and exploitation. Noonan explores the state of virtual warfare imposed on early twentieth-century workers by the managers, owners and speculators, whom he describes as “devils” and “brigands”. Under their authority, which he describes as a form of outright “terror”, the daily round of work becomes a prolonged and repetitive round of “torture”.<sup>49</sup> Noonan’s novel explores how these routinized forms of violence are concealed by their integration into the structures of capitalist modernity, proposing that “the present system has made the earth into a sort of hell” in which neglect, mental illness and suicide are regular outcomes of economic distress.<sup>50</sup>

As Williams argued, Noonan’s persistent identification of the depoliticisation of the poor as the most significant structural problem facing socialism was, in itself, a key step toward defining the key theoretical and practical challenges being faced by the Left.<sup>51</sup> The marginalized and politically unorganized section of the working class that is the subject of the novel – the contemporary, socially disintegrating artisanal community of skilled and unskilled decorators (Owen recalls how its status has slipped considerably since he was himself apprenticed) – is portrayed as being in a state of terminal decline. Their position is so fluid and precarious that the reader is repeatedly reminded that this entire class is on the verge of extinction. This very marginality informs the bleak tone and structural instability of the novel which, through its disjointedness and repetition of the misery of its subjects, conveys Noonan’s own sense of the extremity of their experiences on the economic outside of pre-war capitalism. To borrow from Slavoj Žižek’s diagnosis of late capitalism, his working-class modernism can be read as a report from these Edwardian “end times”, during which, as now, “history assumes the character of a trauma.”<sup>52</sup>

Within months of the publication of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, this domestic trauma was isolated and concealed as public attention was diverted by the British government and its allies and antagonists across Europe into the unprecedented mass slaughter of the First World War. Noonan himself moved fairly amorphously through this world, and the transience of his own identity, which he repeatedly cloaked, mirrored his characters’ lack of class status and stability. Fearing that this insecurity also eroded the political consciousness of workers, he often portrayed them as being beyond the influence of socialism, as when one of Owen’s early attempts to politicise his workmates is met with the defensive accusation, “you don’t know nothin’.”<sup>53</sup> There is no possibility of reforming this landscape, no evidence at all of official compassion within its destructive machinery of exploitation and desensitization, and Noonan’s anger is at its sharpest in his representations of the most tragic of capitalism’s injustices – the denial of pleasure to the children

of the poor and their exclusion from the wealth generated by their parents' labour. Bound like "captive animals", the socialist agitator, Barrington (himself the son of wealthy parents) finds them "naked of joy and all that makes life dear",<sup>54</sup> forcing him to reflect on their seemingly predetermined fate to become its next generation of intellectually stunted and economically exploited producers.

### **Capital, Empire and Propaganda**

By addressing the normalization of dispossession, Noonan warns that capitalism, and its most logical outcome, imperialism, are highly organised and synchronised phenomena that are presented, conveyed and "ordered in accordance with orthodox opinions."<sup>55</sup> By inhibiting working-class discourse, Noonan warned, the modern capitalist and imperialist state attempts to control the entire outlook of its subject population by limiting workers' imaginations. This is revealed when one of the decorators reads the *Daily Obscurer*:

Easton was still reading the *Obscurer*: he was not about to understand exactly what the compiler of the figures was driving at – probably the latter never intended that anyone should understand – but he was conscious of a growing feeling of indignation and hatred against foreigners of every description, who were ruining this country, and he began to think that it was about time we did something to protect ourselves. Still, it was a very difficult question: to tell the truth, he himself could not make head or tail of it.<sup>56</sup>

An immigrant himself, Noonan was deeply aware of xenophobia's divisive role in the management and control of public discourse. In an argument with his co-worker, Crass, during one of his attempts to radicalize his workplace, Owen complains about racism's role as an instrument of capitalism, pointing out that immigrants have been driven to England by economic desperation. Willing, like the English workers with whom they find themselves competing for work, to accept "starvation wages",<sup>57</sup> they are, equally, victims of the seemingly chaotic but carefully managed circumstances that have been cultivated by the bourgeoisie. Noonan insists, however, that capital recognises no borders unless it is going to war over markets and that its excesses know no limits. Emphasizing how workers in England are being encouraged to regard foreigners like him as threats to their livelihoods, Noonan warns here that the conservative press is inciting these negative perceptions of immigrant labour. The ultimate objective of newspapers like the *Obscurer* is the intensification of the workers' ignorance of their shared exploitation and the erosion of any consciousness of their shared class interests. Entertained by this mass mediated "imbecile system"<sup>58</sup> of class propaganda, the individual worker is also easily diverted by the petty distractions offered by "a smutty story ... something concerning

football or cricket, horse-racing of the doings of some Royal personage or aristocrat”<sup>59</sup> which, in turn, distorts his or her entire class’s perception of reality. Distracted from the material causes of their poverty and prevented from recognising the actual sources of the class antagonisms that blight their existence, the energy and attention of working-class people is methodically diverted by the proliferation of false news and the spectacle of advertisements promoting “things ... of no utility whatever”.<sup>60</sup>

Owen also dismisses assumption that the working class is feckless and wasteful, describing it as a lie designed to disguise the reality of exploitation:

The theories that drunkenness, laziness or inefficiency are the causes of poverty are so many devices invented and fostered by those who are selfishly interested in maintaining the present states of affairs, for the purpose of preventing us from discovering the real causes of our present condition.<sup>61</sup>

Cultivating uncertainty among the poor with these “degrading lessons” in “self-contempt”,<sup>62</sup> this additional layer of false consciousness compounds the workers’ confusion about their condition and circumstances. This propaganda is consumed by the workers to the extent that they, in turn, have no real means of self-identification: “Some of them were under the delusion that they were Conservatives: similarly, others imagined themselves to be Liberals. As a matter of fact, most of them were nothing.”<sup>63</sup> Within this ideological void, fear of immigrants, along with imported commodities, takes hold, as French and Italian workers are blamed for destroying the domestic labour market: “It was not necessary to think or study or investigate anything”, the narrator notes. “It was all as clear as daylight. The foreigner was the enemy, and the cause of poverty and bad trade.”<sup>64</sup>

Noonan also highlights Britain’s incubation of similar crises as a long-standing matter of imperial policy. When Owen’s colleagues, Harlow and Philpott, cite overpopulation as the fundamental cause of poverty in England, he dismisses it with an example close to Noonan’s own heart:

“Over-population!” cried Owen, “when there’s thousands of acres of uncultivated land in England without a house or human being to be seen. Is over-population the cause of poverty in France? Is over-population the cause of poverty in Ireland? Within the last fifty years the population of Ireland has been reduced by more than half. Four millions of people have been exterminated by famine or got rid of by emigration, but they haven’t got rid of poverty. P’raps you think half of this country ought to be exterminated as well.”<sup>65</sup>

Drawing on the memory of what Joe Cleary has described as Britain's "early Victorian holocaust",<sup>66</sup> Noonan, through Owen's rejection of colonial Malthusianism, demands that his colleagues accept the historical reality of imperialist violence and recognise its inevitable direction of travel. Its trajectory, he warns, is very clear: the extermination of surplus populations in colonies like Ireland will lead, inevitably, to the application of similar tactics at home. Like other Irish modernists such as George Russell, Noonan was conscious of the ongoing consequences of this trauma and how it underlined the vulnerability of the Irish peasantry and urban working class, already on the edge of starvation, to the return of British economic policies resulting in artificial food shortages and mass death.<sup>67</sup> The state of permanent crisis enveloping the English poor ensures that, for them, as for the colonized, "the story of the future was to be much the same as the story of the past",<sup>68</sup> predating by eight years Stephen Dedalus's claim that "[history] ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake".<sup>69</sup>

Owen is outraged by his co-workers' lack of awareness of very recent colonial history: angered by their ignorance of its ongoing consequences in nearby Ireland, imperialist violence, he warns them, always travels home. Noonan revered the work of Jonathan Swift,<sup>70</sup> whose satirical pamphlet of 1729, "A Modest Proposal", famously recommended that the rich should consume the children of the poor. Swift's influence is very evident throughout the novel and, during another one of Owen's lectures, he predicts a bleak future for humanity, which, he foresees, will be organized and managed by capitalism's "exterminating machines".<sup>71</sup>

In the near future ... it is probable that horses will be almost entirely superseded by motor cars and electric trams. As the services of horses will no longer be required, all but a few those animals will be caused to die out: they will no longer be bred to the same extent as formerly. We can't blame the horses for allowing themselves to be exterminated. They have not sufficient intelligence to understand what's being done. Therefore they will submit tamely to the extinction of the greater number of their kind.<sup>72</sup>

Owen predicts that similar levels of attrition will soon be experienced by the English working class. Already facing an equally bleak prospect with the relentless advance of mechanization, Owen anticipates that they will endure the ruthless selection processes being applied to working animals and that are now models for near-future exercises in human depopulation:

As we have seen, a great deal of work which was formerly done by human beings is now being done by machinery. This machinery belongs to a few people: it is being worked for the benefit of those few, just as were the human beings it displaced. These few have no longer any need

of the services of so many human workers, so they propose to exterminate them! The unnecessary human beings are to be allowed to starve to death! And they are also to be taught that it is wrong to marry and breed children, because the Sacred Few do not require so many people to work for them as before!<sup>73</sup>

Noonan's application of Swiftian irony is clear in this discussion of the false problem of surplus population. Both animal and human labour will be replaced by machines and the subjects that now generate it will be liquidated, but like his eighteenth-century role model, whose fantastic novel, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), displaced the injustices of its time into a remote and alternative world populated by Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans, Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, Noonan saw little distinction between the nightmarish future that Owen predicts and the hellish present portrayed in the text. In the already-existing hell that is capitalism, expendable workers are locked in downward spirals of competition and consumption in which "only those who are aggressive, cunning, selfish and mean are fitted to survive".<sup>74</sup> Existing "on the very verge of starvation" and their children abandoned, as unhindered growth centred on monopoly capitalism and its drive for "cheapness and profit" devalues their labour, Mugsborough's demoralized workers are frightened, and "oppressed with ... terror."<sup>75</sup> The extent of this trauma is manifested in Owen's despair in Chapter 6, in which, suffering from depression, he fantasizes about killing his son, Frankie, rather than allowing him to starve to death.

### **"The Reign of Terror"**

Organizing the workers is, in Owen's view, a difficult task, and he is aware that resistance requires discipline. He often wants to fight back, and at one point considers beating up his foreman, Hunter, or "Nimrod", after whom the Dublin site managers remembered by Brendan Behan were nicknamed:

Everyone was afraid. They knew that it was impossible to get a job for any other firm. They knew that this man had the power to deprive them of the means of earning a living; that he possessed the power to deprive their children of bread.

Owen, listening to Hunter over the banisters upstairs, felt that he would like to take him by the throat with one hand and smash his face in with the other.

And then?

Why then he would be sent to gaol, or at the best he would lose his employment: his food and that of his family would be taken away. That was why he only ground his teeth and cursed and beat the wall with his clenched fist. So! and so! and so!

If it were not for them!

Owen's imagination ran riot.

First he would seize him by the collar with his left hand, dig his knuckles into his throat, force him up against the wall and then, with his right fist, smash! smash! smash! until Hunter's face was all cut and covered with blood.

But then, what about those at home? Was it not braver and more manly to endure in silence?<sup>76</sup>

Owen is prevented from striking back by his awareness that individualized resistance is always met with the overwhelming violence of the state, which, in imprisoning rebellious workers, also collectively punishes their families. It also responds with another indiscriminate form of class violence – the employers' blacklist: by preventing workers from earning a wage, this is another sanction that also starves their families.<sup>77</sup> It is through Owen's containment of his own outrage and desire to confront Hunter directly that Noonan highlights capitalism's most effective disciplinary methods. The threat of being struck off saturates every aspect of the decorators' lives, from workplace to home, infiltrating every dimension of their consciousness. Resourced by the local boss's "Council of War,"<sup>78</sup> these deeply structural forms of violence are portrayed as the means of enforcing wage slavery as the weight of capitalist power is shown to rest upon the workers' fear of being imprisoned or denounced, isolated, sacked and starved. Just below the surface of capitalist normality, these coercive measures force the ragged-trousered philanthropists to exist on the very periphery of society, where they are permanently confronted with the possibility of complete dispossession. The abyss that they face here is total, revealing how, as Noonan explained in the novel's preface, "workers are circumstanced at all periods of their lives, from the cradle to the grave."<sup>79</sup>

Noonan addresses these issues in a more compressed manner in Chapter 21. Entitled "The Reign of Terror", or "The Great Money Trick", the twinned phenomena of class violence and state repression are shown here as being managed and policed by the clergy, police and military, along with local and national politicians and the landlord class. Explaining socialist theory to his co-workers, Owen addresses the problems posed by these systemic forms of violence, along with the intimidation that accompanies them. The chapter opens by describing "the usual reign of terror" under which the decorators work, labouring under a permanent state of "vigilant surveillance."<sup>80</sup> This atmosphere is briefly interrupted by Owen, who explains how the capitalists' "'Battle of Life' system" undermines the workers' estimation of their own value to society. This distortion is achieved through claiming authority and ownership over goods and shelter, and possession of the means of production and capital; meanwhile, owning nothing, the workers are exposed to the demands of the market. Using slices of bread and a few coins, Owen explains capitalism's methods of exploitation and appropriation through a game in which he

illustrates the reduction of the real value of labour through the suppression of wages and the manipulation and inflation of prices. When the decorators realize that they have been tricked out of their labour, income and prospects, Owen reminds them that any complaint will ultimately be met with force:

The unemployed looked blankly at each other, but the rest of the crowd only laughed; and then the three unemployed began to abuse the kind-hearted Capitalist, demanding that he should give them some of the necessaries of life that he had piled up in his warehouses, or to be allowed to work and produce some more for their own needs; and even threatened to take some of the things by force if he did not comply with their demands. But the kind-hearted Capitalist told them not to be insolent, and spoke to them about honesty, and said if they were not careful he would have their faces battered in for them by the police, or if necessary he would call out the military and have them shot down like dogs, the same as he had done before at Featherstone and Belfast.<sup>81</sup>

Noonan uses these recent examples of counterinsurgency to inform the reader about the connections that bind class privilege and imperial power – means that have already been put to use both in Ireland and England. The 1907 Belfast docks strike, which was met and crushed with military force, has become the model for counter-insurgency in Britain, where working-class resistance will be met with similar measures. In the end, Owen warns, the state will not hesitate to resort to military measures to contain strike action at home or abroad and this violence, he warns, is its first resort when meeting resistance in a self-reproducing dialectic of violence.

Rejecting electoralism as pointless and fraudulent<sup>82</sup> and calling, finally, for revolution, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is the product of Noonan's radical, anticolonial imagination. Contradicting the social democratic left's reformist agenda, Owen's declaration that "we must destroy the whole system"<sup>83</sup> proposes the eradication of both capitalism and imperialism, presenting, instead, an uncompromising demand for the complete transformation of property relations. Such is the ideological core of the novel, predating bolshevism's rejection of liberalism, as articulated in Trotsky's *Communism and Terrorism*. For Noonan, the class war against capitalism and its economic violence could only have one outcome because this system itself was so inherently cruel and dehumanizing. Desensitized by its brutality and indoctrinated into accepting their own inferior status within capitalism, the workers, in Owen's view are "simply not intellectually capable of abstract reasoning", unable to "grasp theories"<sup>84</sup> and incapable of understanding abstract socialist ideology. The only hope for them, Noonan believed, lay in their realization of the very harshness of their repression:



There was only one hope. It was possible the monopolists, encouraged by the extraordinary stupidity and apathy of the people would proceed to lay upon them even greater burdens, until at last, goaded by suffering, and not having sufficient intelligence to understand any other remedy, these miserable wretches would turn upon their oppressors and drown both them and their system in a sea of blood.<sup>85</sup>

Noonan's novel is, clearly, an insurgent text and its enduring underground popularity lies in its exposure of the material conditions and inherent violence that formed the practical bases of contemporary capitalist normality. Drawing on his own exposure to Edwardian capitalism's shock doctrine, the text is characterized by the authenticity of its portrayal of poverty, which scholars from such as Raymond Williams, Jack Mitchell, Fred Ball and Dave Harker have all cited as the key to its importance to proletarian readers. Noonan's documentation of the human casualties of the prolonged building slump of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presents a bleak portrayal of a dissolving and uncertain world of low wages and zero-hour contracts.<sup>86</sup> Existing on the edge of a decentred universe where their desperation goes unacknowledged by the bourgeoisie, the story of these marginalised English workers and their experience of exclusion and dispossession was told by an author who, as an economic migrant and colonial outsider himself, remained deeply sensitive to the brutality of contemporary capitalism and its profound capacity to inflict suffering. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* conveys the experience of workers who lived, laboured and despaired on the sinking periphery of the pre-war British economy. The ironic intensity of its satire still speaks to the radical imagination, capturing a world that remains, still, very familiar to the class-conscious reader.<sup>87</sup> Capturing its atmosphere of anxiety and desolation, Noonan radicalized twentieth-century popular political and literary consciousness, both in Britain and in Ireland.