

“The Sky Above and the Earth Below”: The Tramping Narratives of Jack Hilton

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Abstract

This essay examines the representations of tramping in the work of the Rochdale writer, Jack Hilton (1900-1983), and argues that the act is considered as a key expression of working-class cultural and political autonomy in the context of 1930s Britain. Whilst Hilton and his writing was applauded by his contemporaries in George Orwell and W.H. Auden, his work fell into obscurity until the chance discovery of *Caliban Shrieks* (1935) in Salford's Working-Class Movement Library in 2021. Through readings of this novel, alongside *Champion* (1938) and *English Ways* (1940), my article explores how Hilton develops the figure of the tramp from an individualistic symbol of anti-productivist rebellion into a representation of a broader working-class cultural practice. In contrast to Orwell's depiction of tramping as social failure (filtered through middle-class perspective), Hilton's semi-autobiographical writing reframes the figure as one that asserts working-class agency. My paper therefore challenges dominant literary narratives of vagrancy, and contributes to a reimagining of working-class culture, community, and the English national identity in the interwar period.

Keywords

Jack Hilton, working-class literature, British literature, tramping, vagrancy, working-class culture, interwar period

Jack Hilton (1900-1983) was a writer almost unique in his approach to the re-telling of working-class narratives during the 1930s. A plasterer by trade, by the end of the decade Hilton had become a popular household name and was noted by George Orwell and W.H. Auden to be an important, newer kind of literary voice: one who wrote not only from personal experience, but also from a viewpoint of the wider class. Unfortunately for Hilton, he existed between two booms in popularity that proletarian literature faced in the first half of the twentieth century; an internal memorandum for his publisher Jonathan Cape, written shortly before a meeting with Hilton, reads that “the proletarian novel...is finished completely” (Howard, 1971, p. 176). As such, he and his works have since faded into near-total obscurity. In 2021, his first text *Caliban Shrieks* (1935) was rediscovered in Salford's Working-Class Movement Library, and his name is now beginning to receive the long overdue accolade it deserves (Self, 2024).

Max Krafchik has demonstrated that official responses to vagrancy in the 1930s increasingly framed the issue as an individual problem rather than as a consequence of structural economic issues; he notes that administrators were reluctant to admit that unemployment was a “major source of vagrancy”, since doing so would have implied that wider economic policies were systemically affecting society (Krafchik, 1983, p. 196). Instead, it was insisted that vagrancy's roots “lay in the individual” (Krafchik, 1983, p. 196). This identification in inter-war attitudes to transiency is significant as it demonstrates how the figure of the vagrant was constructed

through a framework of social sickness, a discourse that Hilton directly challenges. This essay therefore argues that in his novel *Champion* (1938), Hilton reconfigures tramping from a symbol of deviance or social failure into a lived practice rooted in working-class culture and experience.

An active supporter of trade unionism and the left-wing political environment, Hilton was secretary of the Rochdale Plasterers' Union between 1929 and 1935, and was also heavily active in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (Windle, 2013, p. 46). In 1932 he was banned from public speaking for three years following an altercation at Rochdale's Public Assistance Committee and so took up attendance at the Workers' Education Association (WEA) with the realisation that, "if chucking the soap-box Socialist game had stopped me from speaking aloud I could talk to myself quietly and put this on paper" (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 92a). Hilton aimed to show that the "mass culture" of the working-classes was just as valuable as the favoured high-brow and generally elitist tastes of his literary contemporaries, as they were inextricably linked to the social, economic, and material conditions under which his class lived. He believed in the legitimacy of the working class as a diverse unit with its own valuable cultural histories (Croft, 1985, p. 17). Social exploration texts by middle-class writers that aimed to show the idiosyncrasies of the working-class were immensely popular throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but they had the tendency of a myopic lens on destitution, poverty, and unemployment (Koven, 2004). Hilton classified these writers as "book socialists": intellectuals whose "ferocity" was "confined to the iron rigidity of terminology", and who participated in none of the pleasures of the class (he lists betting on horses, "being a sport", and "indulging in carnival sangfroidness" amongst these) (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 130).

One of these so-termed "book socialists" was Orwell. The two writers had taken up correspondence with each other following a review Orwell had written for the *Adelphi* of *Caliban Shrieks*, and, having received instruction from Victor Gollancz to "write a book about the condition of the unemployed in the industrial north of England", Orwell wrote to Hilton and asked if he could stay with him and his wife Mary, and use their home as a base from which to conduct his research, initially planning to focus on the mill workers of Rochdale (Crick, 1992, 278). Hilton not only declined the question of accommodation (mainly owing to the fact that the couple lived in a one up and one down), but also advised Orwell to focus on the colliers of Wigan instead, as he believed these to be a truer representation of an independent working-class culture (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 178). Hilton wrote of the resulting text, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), that Orwell "might well have stayed away" from Wigan, as he had "wasted money, energy and wrote piffle", on account of his position as a "all, ex-officer type, Eton, modest, non-hard-boozing, non-hard-cursing, non-crude-gamemstering, no locale in the dialect sense" who had failed to gain the trust of the working colliers (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 178).

Orwell spent much time masquerading in the life of a tramp and wrote about these experiences in his diaries and essays; sections from which were later extracted and inserted into *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935). The term masquerading is used, not because Orwell did not appropriately embody the life of the tramp – in fact, as Bernard Crick notes, "he lived rough, exactly as the tramps did and never carried more than a few shillings on him", but because he could choose to leave the lifestyle at any time he so wished; for example, Aunt Nellie, his "favourite relation" also resided in Paris at the time of his "down and out" status (Crick, 1992, p. 126). Crick derives this representation as a misunderstanding on the part of Orwell's readers and critics, writing that Orwell had never claimed to have *become* a tramp, "only to have been among tramps and in doing so to have freed himself from certain prejudices", yet this privileged freedom in being able to choose to

eschew these (class-based) prejudices denotes a paradoxical situation in itself (Crick, 1992, p. 127). Even if Orwell had never actually claimed to have literally become a tramp, his writing reveals a shifting perception of self when wearing the clothes of a tramp. He writes,

It gives one a very strange feeling to be wearing such clothes. I had worn bad enough things before, but nothing at all like these; they were not merely dirty and shapeless, they had – how is one to express it? – a gracelessness, a patina of antique filth, quite different from mere shabbiness... An hour later, in Lambeth, I saw a hang-dog man, obviously a tramp, coming towards me, and when I looked again it was myself, reflected in a shop window. The dirt was plastering my face already... Dressed in a tramp's clothes it is very difficult, at any rate for the first day, not to feel that you are genuinely degraded (Orwell, 1933, pp. 174-176).

Orwell's inability to see himself in the mirror in this extract is a key component of his (mis)recognition of class; his judgements are founded upon a surface-level assessment and indicate a cursory understanding of the subtleties of class. Despite his long history of social commentary, Orwell depicts the clothes of a tramp with damning vernacular – degradation is the overarching theme here.

Indeed, Orwell's middle-class readership would no doubt have been highly entertained by the idea of the author donning these class-indicating garbs. As Seth Koven has shown, slumming was a lucrative tourist trade in the nineteenth century. A form of "social urban exploration", slumming was carried out for many different reasons by the rich and elite, and covert visits to workhouses, with subsequent publications, were especially welcomed by the public. Koven notes that figures like Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew had remained as outsiders when carrying out their own visits into deprived areas of London, whereas James Greenwood's series of articles under the name "A Night in the Work-house" ushered in a new era of sociological research: one of "incognito social investigation using cross-class dress" (Koven, 2004, p. 32). Greenwood's tactic fetishises the clothes of the working-classes and makes them a costume; a cultural appropriation of sorts. Clearly, this is problematic. It strongly others the working-classes by portraying them as a culture innately different to that of the middle- and upper-classes. Orwell continues this tradition in his own usage of "cross-class dress" and thus we witness the commodification of working-class culture for the enjoyment of those looking down upon it.

Class-based perceptions of walking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped judgements of tramping, with the act often seen as diminishing the "value" of pedestrianism when practised by the working-classes. Middle- and upper-class literary traditions, particularly those associated with the Romantic peripatetic mode and Transcendentalism framed walking as a means of "re-creation of the self, reconnection with nature and so the divine, continuity of sense, mind and spirit, community and connection with a communal past" – available to those who could afford leisure (Wallace, 1995, p. 17). Tramping, by contrast, was rarely afforded the same legitimacy. Luke Lewin Davies identifies this divide through examples from Henry David Thoreau's 1861 transcendentalist essay "Walking", that makes a "clear distinction between those who practise the true 'art of Walking', and other 'mere idlers and vagabonds'"; and Hilaire Belloc's 1902 travelogue *The Path to Rome*, in which he proposes that "the kind of man who boasts that he does not mind... roughing it, is... a man who cares nothing for all that civilisation has built up" (Davies, 2021, p. 178). In this context, walking is figured as a means of self-improvement, with itinerant life becoming a form of unproductive mobility. The "drift, drift, drift" of Hilton's tramps is thus rendered socially meaningless by these middle-class

commentators, and Orwell, renowned for his insight into the tramping subculture, actively continues this tradition in his own writing, believing this form of walking to be a waste of energy that would be better spent elsewhere (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 37). He writes,

One could not, in fact, invent a more futile routine than walking from prison to prison, spending perhaps eighteen hours a day in the cell and on the road. There must be at the least several tens of thousands of tramps in England. Each day they expend innumerable foot-pounds of energy – enough to plough thousands of acres, build miles of road, put up dozens of houses – in mere, useless walking (Orwell, 1933, p. 221).

The language used here clearly shows a preoccupation with the contribution to society that the vagrant is either willingly or unwillingly not making. With his disparagement of “futile routine” and “mere, useless walking”, it becomes apparent that Orwell’s time on the road did not awake in him an affinity to the lifestyle separate from his distrust in anti-productivism. As an individual who has chosen to go on the road, with the knowledge that financial security lies around the corner should he so wish to take it, Orwell seems unable to conceive of a life in which a person may actually choose to become anti-disciplinary and anti-productivist, or to refocus from desiring the right to work to, in the vein of the French political activist and literary critic Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* (Lafargue, [1883] 2017). In this pamphlet, Lafargue suggests a radical reframing of the proletarian cause, in which the working-classes cease to be classified by the products of their labour, and instead aspire to the right to leisure. Thus, in Orwell’s idealisation, which is based around the assumption that every unemployed person has the innate desire to work – he posits that to solve the problem of a useless vagrant, “every able-bodied tramp who presented himself could be made to do a sound day’s work”, as “under the present system tramps are as dead a loss to the country as they could possibly be” – there is no freedom for the proletariat: they must always be useful or be used within the means of production (Orwell, 1933, p. 222). Hilton’s idea that walking and tramping could be a “mental recreation for the fatigued body” under the constraints of labour are here unwillingly thrown back into a system in which the tramp’s body and physicality are once again controlled (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 62).

In his 1929 essay, “A Day in the Life of a Tramp”, Orwell uses animalistic, dehumanising language to describe a crowd of tramps who are waiting outside of a spike for it to open its gates. Twice he calls them a “herd”, they are “haggard, unshaven, filthy and tattered”, and “here and there, an imbecile jabbbers meaningless words” (Orwell, 1929). The impression that the reader garners is one of a group of people (Orwell notes that for every fifty men, there are two women, and their overall ages range from sixteen to seventy) who are on the very brink of human existence. Illiterate, sordid, crazy, a mere mass of bodies that are a damning indictment of a failed system and who seem to possess no humanity to speak of. Some of “the bravest prowl around the butcher’s or the baker’s”, while others lie on the grass or squat in the dust, inciting a picture of wild, undomesticated animals who exchange words “in a strange slang, the tramps’ special language, full of bizarre and picturesque words and phrases which cannot be found in any dictionary” (Orwell, 1929). The tramps are systemically othered by Orwell in a dual-subordination that invokes not only conceptions of the (out-of-)working-classes as illiterate, unproductive, and lazy, but a focus on their linguistic behaviours (one “jabbbers meaningless words”, whilst others talk in a “special language”, unrecognisable to an outside ear, presumably including Orwell himself) subjugates them as foreign objects in the English landscape who “live at the expense of the community” – furthering negative connotations about the unemployed not contributing fairly to society. (Orwell, 1929). Additionally, Orwell writes that “their faces make you think of the face of some wild animal, not perhaps a dangerous one,

but one which has become at once savage and timorous through lack of rest and care” (Orwell, 1929). The framing and racialisation of the working-classes or tramping subculture as a throwback to an earlier form of civilisation is a trope that has its roots in the nineteenth century. In his study *London Labour and the London Poor* Henry Mayhew categorises “two distinct races of men”: “the wandering and the civilized tribes” (Mayhew, 1861, p. 2). In an attempt at ethnography, Mayhew states that the “nomadic races of England” (he bands the “habitual vagrant – half-beggar, half thief” and itinerant worker together in this categorisation) have a “greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man”; they can be marked out by their “high cheek-bones and protruding jaws” and, like Orwell, “use of a slang language” (Mayhew, 1861, pp. 2-3). Ideas of evolutionary degeneration and colonial overtones are applied to the tramping subculture to designate them as part of the undeserving poor – in problematic Victorian terms they are “savages” in need of civilisation.

By contrast, Hilton relates the “spoken word” of “the people of the abyss” (a direct reference to Jack London’s 1903 text) as being “emphatic”, writing that “even in its humour it was highly coloured and the popular colour was red, and running as though the beat of time, were regular expletives, suggesting of contiguous fecundity” (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 41). Hilton’s tramping class speak in the insistent language of socialism, and if Orwell admits to struggling to understand the speech of tramps, does that then indicate that Orwell cannot relate to the working-classes, in his position as one of Hilton’s “book-socialists” whose “ferocity is confined to the iron rigidity of terminology”? In his disinterest in learning the associated cant or slang of the tramping lifestyle, Orwell reveals that he does not appreciate it as a fully formed and distinct subculture. He thus reproduces and sustains a ruling ideology that seeks to marginalise the (out-of-)working-classes. This operates by othering the class, severing it not only from the middle- and upper-classes, but also by fuelling ideological differences between it and the broader working class. The thoughts and actions of the (out-of-)working-classes are subjected to forms of control and exclusion, rendering them as an inert and unimportant section of society.

To situate Hilton alongside Orwell is to consider a key difference in class-based perspectives on cultures of the 1930s, demonstrating a fundamental disparity in ideological and cultural codes surrounding walking. Orwell’s position as a ‘book-socialist’ with the privilege of elected poverty ultimately places a limitation on the authenticity of his literary representations. This is a danger in itself. Orwell’s position as a leading intellectual of the day, with his work read by a varied group of people, means that his writing is not just a representation of class, but instead, a vehicle by which class can be defined. Hilton’s tramping is a form of resistance that emphasises working-class autonomy as opposed to productivity; a value of being that is not directly tied to working. Hilton’s writing on walking and tramping therefore unsettles dominant middle-class narratives of working-class existence, and foregrounds the class’ identity in self-determination.

Part-sociological essay, part-polemic, part-memoir, *Caliban Shrieks* has divided opinion since its inception. An unnamed reviewer for the *Rochdale Observer* decided that it was “not an easy book to read, nor is it easy to write about”, calling it ‘monotonous’, “crude”, and finally postulating that “one cannot avoid feeling a real sympathy for one who finds so little in life except greed, selfishness and sham” (*Rochdale Observer*, 1935, p. 14). The next week, there was a response to this review written by a Mr H. Briercliffe, in which he called the original article “hardly fair”, as “what there is undoubtedly rings true without extravagance or vague wanderings into the spirit world”, and that “there is sincerity throughout the book and at no time greater than in his final reaffirmation of faith in the mass of humanity” (Briercliffe, 1935, p. 14). It started life as a series of personal essays that Hilton accidentally handed in to his

WEA tutor, Mr Mason, instead of the prescribed assessment for that week. Hilton, by his own admission in *Caliban Boswelling*, was so embarrassed by the mix-up that it took him several weeks before he could bring himself to raise it with Mr Mason, but the tutor pleaded ignorance at receiving the notebook. The matter was seemingly finished. However, some months later Hilton received a copy of the *Adelphi* through the post with a letter enclosed from the then-editor, Richard Rees, congratulating him on his contribution and asking him to consider submitting another (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 92a). It transpired that Mr Mason had been so impressed with the quality of Hilton's writing that he had sent it to the *Adelphi* in secret. Correspondence was struck up between Rees and Hilton, with the editor eventually suggesting that the "dozen penny exercise books on the mass-working lad's experience" should be published in book form, and thus, the Rochdale plasterer became a published author with the release of *Caliban Shrieks* in 1935 (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 92b).

Hilton's political and philosophical project – to celebrate the tramp figure as one of radical selfhood in an inherently exploitative time for the working-classes – is articulated through the following extract:

Rebellion came upon me, and I, intended for industry, for being a clean-nosed respectable god-fearing climber, surrounded by grime, strict discipline, crowding and the dignity of labour, took to the road, the open road, with visions of liberty, freedom, air, sun, and health. Damn the methodical work game, damn the churchwarden and his tray for the eternal threepenny bit, hang the football coupons. The road, nomadness, no shaving, no soft-soaping to respectable city fathers, no accepting of patronage from bilious old Victorians of the duffer brand, no more ambition, no set purpose, just drift, drift, drift, complete scope for nanny-goat whimsicalness, and eternally the 'captain of my soul' (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 37).

There are a few things of note to pick out from this extract – ideas that are first introduced here but which form important frameworks for further analysis of Hilton's work. First, there is a clear dichotomy between the "grime" of the working person's life and the refreshing vitality of a life spent on the open road. Hilton paints a picture of a country and a people sullied by mechanisation; its land scarred from the aftermath of an Industrial Revolution that introduced the "strict discipline" of a "dignity of labour" and seems to yearn for a nostalgically bucolic ideal. Elsewhere in the text he draws attention again to the connection between rurality and tramping, writing that "you had 'ten thousand vagabonds infesting the roads, begging and stealing, many of whom had been divorced from the land by enclosure acts'", thereby reinforcing the tramp's historical connection to land and highlighting the social and political forces that forced working-class displacement. This therefore challenges their representation as dangers who are "infesting" the countryside – in fact, Hilton reminds us that it was political ideology that necessitated their presence (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 53). In the above extract Hilton also attacks the established structures of labour, organised religion and leisure, reinforcing Croft's assertion that his writing presents an innate resistance to a "fully industrialised work pattern" – tramping becomes a methodology in which a person can remove themselves from all strictures of capitalist society (and in this view, even leisure-time becomes heavily structured and something to escape) (Croft, 1985, p. 14). The condemnation of "bilious old Victorians of the duffer brand" demonstrates a frustration with ruling ethical and moral codes that were perceived to dictate the livelihoods of the working-classes. This aligns Hilton with the flourishing Modernist movement, in that he also wants to "make it new" but, unlike the writers of that sect he does not have the strength in institutional backing or privately educated upbringing that they enjoyed and utilised. His personal approach extends itself as a

visceral discomfort with any and all forms of establishment. The final few words of this extract are perhaps the most important, and indeed, nearly sum up all that precedes them. Interestingly, the words “captain of my soul” are borrowed from William Ernest Henley’s highly Victorian typified poem, “Invictus”, which is notable for its themes of stoicism and resolve in the face of adversity. This somewhat complicates Hilton’s condemnation of “Victorians of the duffer brand” and their associated moralities – in this reclamation of Victorian thought, Hilton shifts the message of self-determination and individual will to become a tool of working-class resistance, rather than maintaining its original imperial associations. The desire to become the captain of his own soul points to a judgement that the working-classes have no freedom under an economic system that is innately exploitative. He believes that taking to the road is the only possible way to garner true freedom in the context of 1930s Britain – during a worsening political climate across Europe, the rise of extremist groups like Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, and the impoverishment invoked by the National Government’s Means Test – a place in which his class, fundamentally, are not a free people. In rejecting work, respectability, and purpose in favour of “drift” and autonomy, Hilton affirms his vision of the tramp as a literary embodiment of working-class individualism in the 1930s, transforming it from a victim of circumstance into deliberate iconography.

Champion was Hilton’s first explicit foray into the world of fiction. It follows the story of two men from Northern England: Jimmy, an unemployed plasterer who lifts his family out of abject poverty by becoming a championship boxer; and the political activist Charlie, Jimmy’s brother’s childhood friend, who takes to the road in a display of protest after being incarcerated for breach of the peace. There is something of the young Hilton reflected in the figure of Charlie. *Champion* was a text written with publication and the possibility of a middle-class audience in mind (unlike its predecessor), and so Hilton’s approach considerably differs. Thematically, tramping (for Hilton) still has ties to anti-productivism, as the sections concerning Charlie will show, but the wider purpose of its inclusion demonstrates Hilton’s belief in the importance of walking and tramping as a fundamental working-class cultural exercise. Class consciousness and walking are married together ideologically as tramping becomes a way to foster different kinds of community that are not socially, economically, or culturally exploitative. At this stage, Hilton recognises the impracticality, or impossibility, of removing oneself entirely from society; instead, he positions the subculture alongside this assertion from Phillip O’Connor, that what has made the tramp “fail in our society might well make them succeed in a foretaste of the one to come” (O’Connor, 1963, p. 185). In *Champion*, Hilton develops the ideologies first seen in *Caliban Shrieks*, particularly in relation to a communion with nature, begins to celebrate a sense of solidarity and community amongst the tramping subculture itself, and also introduces elements of a utopian society in which behaviours deemed deviant at the time, such as homosexuality, are allowed to flourish.

The text’s first engagement with the tramping experience emerges during Jimmy’s spell of unemployment. He has heard possibility of a building site that may have need for plasterers, and so he rises in the earliest hours of the morning and sets out on a four-mile walk to a town called Forton in search of a job. Once there, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no need for him after all, and he, along with a crowd of other hopefuls, are subsequently turned away. From there, Jimmy walks from site to site in the hope of finding work but to no avail. Whilst Jimmy is unemployed, his pedestrian movement is dictated by the operational structure of the failing labour market. This is a reflection of Hilton’s reconfiguring of tramping, as the act begins to become tied to economic necessity, rather than being purely individualist as in *Caliban Shrieks*. Tired and dejected, Jimmy is making his way home when it begins to rain and

so he takes shelter in a nearby wood shack in the park, in which sits an old woman. Hilton describes her as wearing

an old black satin skirt, the style that his grandmother had worn long ago; brown, tight-fitting costume jacket, the suns of many summers had faded the dye; over her head, gipsy-fashion, was a dirty large red handkerchief, and loosely hanging around her shoulders was a striped shawl, much mended. Her feet were buried in men's boots, much too large, and of different pattern... On the seat beside her was a bundle, and a big handbag, the strap of which was off and substituted by string (Hilton, 1938, pp. 106-107).

The woman's attire immediately earmarks her as one of the tramping class. Rachel Worth has highlighted the difficulties in clothing acquisition for the rural labouring poor in the nineteenth century, documenting that "the combination of low wages and large families meant that clothing for working families would have been basic and in short supply", and although clothing was of course a necessity, the immediate focus must be that of rent, fuel, and food, and so "new clothes – let alone considerations of 'fashion'", were unlikely to feature prominently in their lives, if it all (Worth, 2018, pp. 52-53). If this is to be true for those who earned money – however little it may have been – then for the tramp, who had no income to speak of at all, fashions of the day were of the very least importance. Nonetheless, this lady is noticeably set aside by the manner of her garments, as not only is she dressed in skirts of the late-Victorian style (even in the context of scarcity of new clothes, these are considerably old-fashioned), her sun-discoloured jacket is too tight for a body changed by age, her shawl has been visibly mended, and most notably of all – she is wearing men's boots, that are both too large and not a matching pair anyway. However, what appears most strikingly is the tone that Hilton applies to her. By connecting the woman to Jimmy's grandmother, Hilton invokes a personal connection not often ascribed to the homeless population at this time, with what Elizabeth Coggin Womack terms an "ingrained association" between walking and idleness or criminality, due to centuries of vagrancy and poaching laws (Womack, 2016, p. 119). The phrase "the suns of many summers" is almost romantic and almost certainly idealistic (he does not draw attention to the ice of many winters), and Hilton also falls into the trap of racial exoticism, with the woman's scarf being tied "gipsy-fashion" around her head – another idealistic image of a traditionally nomadic lifestyle. The image of the woman painstakingly mending her shawl with feet "buried" in ill-fitting boots that would have brought great discomfort to a walker travelling some twenty miles a day between casual wards is one of deep pity and feminises her. The clothes that the tramp wears tell her story piece-by-piece, and when viewed as a complete image there arises a poignancy ascribed to her poverty. Hilton's attention to clothing presents tramping as a lived and gendered experience, as opposed to the direct symbol of rebellion ascribed to the act in *Caliban Shrieks*. This poignancy is reflected through Hilton comparing the woman to *Cymbeline's* Imogen, whom Bonnie Lander characterises as a symbol for observing "how the cultural forces of gender and nation on the individual interact with the knowing individual's assertion of independence and agency", much like Hilton's perspective on socio-political effect on the tramping figure (Lander, 2008, p. 165). As she puffs on her pipe clouds of smoke surround her head, and through this "mind-eye-smoke-X-ray", the "symbol of love, motherliness, and life's renewal" is portrayed (Hilton, 1938, p. 109). Hilton does not portray the lifestyle as admirable, but rather, the individual who endures it. This overall depiction of the female tramp broadens the conception of the figure beyond the young, politically alienated, and male rebel as set out in *Caliban Shrieks* – a more nuanced interplay between the duality of oppressive systems (especially in relation to gender) now comes to the forefront, reinforcing my argument that, in *Champion*, Hilton attempts to move away from the

harsh and centred individualism of Caliban in order to showcase that the tramping subculture was composed of a wide range of socially marginalised people. Tramping is not just a case of sole political protest, but a social and cultural reality.

Before leaving the shelter, Jimmy considers a handful of rough change he has left in his pocket and leaves a few pence for the woman who now sits asleep, regaining the energy required to continue her tramp onwards to Manchester (a journey of ten miles). Jimmy's own relative destitution as one of the mass unemployed brings this action into sharp focus and signifies an inherent class solidarity between the two in their shared deprivation. On his way home, Jimmy is stopped by a male tramp who asks for directions to the "grubber" (alongside "spike", both slang terms for the casual ward of a workhouse). Notably, Jimmy immediately understands this tramp's use of cant or slang. His linguistic knowledge earmarks him as part of a wider, class-based community, signalling belonging and shared experience. The male tramp looks as if he "had robbed a scarecrow", is both wetter and older than Jimmy himself, and is "very badly shod", as he "slurred along on his heels, for his toes were too blistered and blood-soaked to put on the ground" (Hilton, 1938, p. 118). The spike is yet another three miles onwards. When Jimmy finally reaches home, he realises that since leaving the house at six-thirty in the morning, he has walked some sixteen miles in search of a job. By placing emphasis on the condition of both tramps' feet (with the man's being blood-soaked and the woman's being encased in ill-fitting boots), and the fact that Jimmy has walked so far, Hilton highlights the material effect that socio-economic policy has on the body through poverty and transiency. It is here that walking truly becomes a material form of working-class cultural expression, with bodies tangibly marked by class and labour conditions.

Whilst Jimmy's tramping experience is short-lived, and stems from a search for work, Charlie Smith decides to take to the road as a result of disillusionment with what he considers to be failings within the labour movement. Both men's experiences are directly shaped by the same socio-economic dynamics, but Charlie's actions are propelled by a desire to be anti-productivist, in contrast with Jimmy who is seeking the opposite. Charlie is introduced by Hilton at the beginning of the narrative, as a sanatorium wardmate of Jimmy's brother, Freddie, who is suffering from consumption. Charlie is shown to be a kind and sensitive young man, and he entertains the ward with fantastical stories to distract them from their illnesses, and ultimately, it is Charlie who is there when Freddie passes away. Freddie had contracted tuberculosis as a direct result of a heavy manual labouring job, and by the time he had taken on a lighter job, it was too late. The human cost of capitalism and industrialism has a profound effect on Charlie, and scenes such as these, of previously fit, healthy, young bodies being damaged or destroyed by the effects of industrial labour, are a clear instigator for the development of a class consciousness in an individual. Additionally, Hilton comments on the devastation that the Industrial towns of the North faced during the 1930s, with levels of unemployed reaching those previously unseen. Charlie reflects that the "chimneys that as a boy he had seen spouting black smoke, were oftentimes smokeless; those happy chattering tongues of the boom days were now silent and gloomy", accentuating how deeply the rapid decline in industrialisation impacted the cultural makeup of the north of England (Hilton, 1938, p. 193). The space comes to represent a hinterland – a place in which there are no known associations. As well as the direct economic effects that marked these communities (severe poverty, hunger, homelessness, fuel hardships), the appearance of the town and thus its atmosphere had vastly changed too. Suddenly, these bustling industrial areas were quiet and smokeless, and the scenes that many had known since childhood, and were for the most part all they knew, were irrevocably distorted. Hilton uses the death of Freddie and the decline of the once-prosperous North as symbols of the devastating impact that industrialism had on the working-class

communities who lived there; Freddie's fate is emblematic of workers all over the country, whilst the town's deterioration itself signifies the erosion of economic foundations that sustained working-class cultures. As such, Charlie's decision to strike out on the road and physically remove himself from the changed landscape of his youth signifies a rejection of those who have failed him, the rest of his class, and the place that he calls home. Tramping is thus tied to the working-class experiences of loss, displacement, and resistance, reinforcing the notion that, within *Champion*, tramping is not a purely individualist act, but rather an integral cultural practice that arises from the material conditions of the 1930s.

Over the course of the narrative Charlie becomes the voice of the working-classes in Rochdale and a bastion for the unemployed – a figure that Jimmy comes to regard as Christ-like in his personal mission, explaining to his wife that, “I used to listen to him sometimes when I was out of work; he used to speak on the market-place for the unemployed... I felt in his way of talking something of what I thought Christ would be... There's something of the bleeding, and suffering, and striving, and burning for fellow-man in him” (Hilton, 1938, p. 165). Charlie's personal mission becomes a spiritual burden, and after he is arrested for causing disturbances in the House of Commons, this is only intensified; Hilton writes that, “the cause of the workers was in his blood, it pushed him, enraged him, and worked him up to an impassioned, animal vitality” (Hilton, 1938, p. 172). Charlie is eventually arrested for inciting unemployment riots and is sent to prison for three months. He serves his time and makes a return to his hometown, but the months have been long for those he left behind, and Charlie finds that people are suddenly wary of him, with the fear and threat of more civil unrest hanging heavily over their heads. Charlie's arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent alienation from his community highlights the impact of institutional power upon individual resistance, and he is affected by a deep depression. After he initially resolves to drown himself, Charlie instead decides to strike out onto the road, in a chapter aptly entitled “A New Life”. This represents more than just a physical departure; it is a symbolic break from a society and culture that he deems to have failed him. Hilton's own frustrations at the disconnect between the consciousness of the working classes and the power structures that kept them in place are clearly echoed throughout the pages of *Champion*, and in particular through Charlie, as he tries to publicise the struggle of the common people.

Hilton has shifted the motivations of Charlie's life almost totally, and his cynicism toward the labour movement leads to a new life that is stripped back to its bare essentials; nothing else seems to matter apart from “the sky above” and “the earth below” (Hilton, 1938, p. 193). An unnamed tramp in O'Connor's study gives some indication as to the affinity that tramping had with rurality, writing that ‘one did own the sky at night. I've never felt nearer to it than on a road in the evening with nowhere to sleep... Union with it [nature] is very good for one, for reassurance about the naturalness and not the bloody “drama” of human existence’ (O'Connor, 1963, p. 88). This seems to be Hilton's, and therefore Charlie's stance, in that most things cease to hold importance whilst amongst nature and on tramp. The presence of nature becomes a deep comfort for Charlie and offers a new, quasi-religious framework to rebuild his life around, at once reflecting Jimmy's earlier suggestion that Charlie is Christ-like in his dedication to the Socialist cause but also offering a new, non-institutional framework which explores how working-class spiritual identities might develop outside of organised religion. Charlie, once the isolated martyr, is now surrounded by a newer, more comforting spirituality. Moments of “solitude and communion with the brook's rippling water” and “the early greeting of the morning swallow” have now become his ‘new gods, more worthy gods than any others he had known’, and “whilst at first they had refused him their companionship” as he had “been untutored in their mysteries”, he is eventually enveloped in profoundly spiritual surroundings

(Hilton, 1938, p. 198). With this moment of retreat into nature, Hilton subverts the notion identified in this essay's introduction of the vagrant as socially sick as Charlie finds a profound connection to landscape. The support that Charlie finds from his rural surroundings are not only a safe space for him mentally but also carry out a physical and legal functionality. As Charlie's sense of self converges with his surroundings, Hilton writes that "the birds had told him when to rise, and when to go to bed, when to shelter, and when to flee, and when to hide from the farmer, who would send his dog along"; this is a symbolic intimation from Hilton that the working-classes have the right to the countryside. The natural and anti-systemic structure is rooted in organic rhythms, rather than the strictness of externally imposed ones. This subverts notions of farmers and landowners as custodians of the country and reinforces rural communion between the working-classes and their surrounding landscapes (Hilton, 1938, p. 198). Ben Clarke notes that, within *Champion*, Hilton "disrupts the notion of a universal working-class hostility to what J.B. Priestley called 'Old England'...and uses residual social formations to criticize the forms of capitalism that displaced them" (Clarke, 2016, p. 777). The countryside becomes a site of reclamation, as the working-classes assert their right to be there.

The rural space also serves as a space in which there is a lack of surveillance, and this enables the tramp to engage in behaviours that would be policed within urban or city areas; as Kenneth Kusmer notes in a US context, "life on the road...allowed a variety of sexual practices to flourish that normally would have been condemned by a larger society" (Kusmer, 2002, p. 143). There is a longstanding history of homosexuality within the tramping subculture, and whilst Owen Clayton identifies a common "dynamic of mastery" between older men and younger boys on the road in the States, and Orwell openly calls sexual advances from another tramp whilst in a spike together "a nasty experience", the homoerotic subtext found within Hilton's novel is almost utopian (Clayton, 2023, p. 84; Orwell, 1933, p. 174). As these kinds of relationships were not possible in mainstream society, the tramping lifestyle acts as an alternative space in which non-traditional relationships are able to flourish. One night, whilst sleeping under a bed of straw amongst some pigs in a barn, Charlie is joined by a fellow tramp. They do not acknowledge each other's presence, and Charlie leaves at four in the morning to resume his walk. Whilst bathing in a river some few miles from his overnight stay, his bedfellow, Harry Sykes, suddenly appears and tells Charlie that he has been following him "as a speck two miles in the distance" (Hilton, 1938, p. 203). This in itself is indicative of desire – the two men had made no contact the night before, and so Harry's decision to follow Charlie is unusual, unless it is recognised as a demonstration of sexual and emotional longing, made possible by the anonymity and lack of surveillance on the open road. Charlie immediately sets to sharing his can of tea and offers up his "grub", 'mooched the day before" (the food Harry declines, he is aware of its scarcity in comparison to tea) (Hilton, 1938, p. 202). A friendship strikes up between the two, and when Charlie admits to not knowing where he is going next, Harry invites him along to Epsom Derby. Charlie accepts, and after noticing that Harry is "out of condition" (his face is red and blotchy and his waistcoat is markedly sullied by beer stains), convinces him to strip off his clothing and join him in the river. Whilst Charlie swims "like a tadpole" Harry floats on his back and cries, "Christ, it's like being kids again", to which Charlie yells in reply, "that's what we always should be" (Hilton, 1938, p. 204). The almost immediate bond between the two men incites an excitement and youthfulness – the often-hard reality of tramping is cast aside as they revel in the initial lure of the culture. Harry proceeds to play some piece of Schubert on his cornet which was "fitting for two men at six a.m. in a wooded valley with water dashing down from a chalk rock above them", and they, with "not a stitch upon them other than that their feet were covered by rags and shoes", dance in and amongst the trees in a display of unadulterated exuberance (Hilton, 1938, p. 205). Hilton reimagines working-class masculinities to include queerness, directly supporting his broader goal of destabilising

narratives that act to stigmatise the tramp; instead of presenting the subculture as one of ‘social sickness’, it becomes a space in which social freedoms can be explored.

The homoerotic nature of Charlie and Harry’s relationship continues through their journey to Epsom and beyond, as they visit cottager’s houses to beg for their dinners, wake each other up in the night by dangling wet frogs over faces, and revel in the gaiety of public houses together. They also share equally in all proceeds made from Harry’s busking. However, this relationship is destined to remain in the rural outskirts as following the closing race of Epsom, Harry informs Charlie that he will now be going down to London to work the theatre queues with his cornet. To this, Charlie replies that he will do the same but Harry quickly rebuffs him: “‘You can’t come in on the theatre business; it’s summer, and there’s not enough taken for one’, said Harry, to have an understanding from the beginning” (Hilton, 1938, p. 241). What this “understanding” entails is an end to their easy-natured and often idyllic existence together, whilst also signifying the transient nature of relationships on the road. This was a subculture wholly founded on the basis of movement, and therefore there was an acceptance that people were also transient themselves and an understanding that relationships formed had no true permanence – a fact which does not undermine their emotional depth. Instead, the impermanence of their relationship highlights the poignancy of what the tramping subculture can offer.

A deep sense of comradeship and community in the tramping subculture is depicted in Hilton’s writing about the tramping presence at Epsom Derby, one that he marks as of historical significance. The “Tramp’s Hollow” is an area surrounded by trees that, since the time of Kings James and Charles, had been a piece of land exclusively camped on by “tramps and sturdy beggars” during Derby eve (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). In the space, “half a dozen cauldrons were provided, timber was in abundance”, and “the police never interfered”; Charlie and Harry are offered some “rosy-lea”, as “some sport has left a hundred-weight” for the gathering of down-and-outs (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). Curiously, in the original typescript for *Champion* Hilton handles this place with a decidedly more spiritual approach. It is instead named “Tobey’s Hollow” (tobey/toby being slang for tramp/vagrant), is described as the tramping class’s “place as a right”, and the presence of tea is due to, rather than a charitable donation, an entitlement, with Hilton explaining that “the mystique of Tobeys’ Hollow ensured this for somehow or other over forty years, at least, the tramps had a traditional right to water and timber and cauldrons” (Hilton, n.d.-b, p. 57). Here, Hilton presents the tramps not as trespassers, but as rightful inhabitants of a historically significant space which rooted in continuity and communal practices; this writes back against the same socio-political mechanisms that divorced the working-classes from the land and which Hilton criticises elsewhere. Either way, Hilton believes in the tramping class as a legitimate subsection of the (out-of-)/working-classes, and he demonstrates this in both versions of the text with the statement that “the Derby was England’s National Festival, the King attended it, the beggar attended it, and all the important nobodies inbetween attended it” (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). By including all echelons of society within this grouping, Hilton suggests that cultural preferences are not dictated by class status. Clarke adds that Hilton’s account of the Derby in *English Ways* (in which he again stresses the egalitarian nature of the meet) “resists the kind of simple conception of the nation that characterised contemporary nationalism, emphasising diversity and an essential democratic identity that emerges even in seemingly hierarchal celebrations” (Clarke, 2016, p. 779). This insight from Clarke underscores a key aspect of Hilton’s broader project in challenging homogenised middle-class narratives of English national identity. Hilton’s writing is an attempt at a deliberate challenge towards cultural discourse of the time, and the inclusiveness of the Derby shows the actual realities of lived experience, thus framing working-class culture as an

important part of understanding conceptions of Englishness with various complexities. The tramps gathered at the Derby participate in ritualistic storytelling, a verbal tradition that positions them in a lineage of community-based heritage and invokes a sense of communal identity as they pass around stories from their common history – “Sheffield Sam”, who had won a thousand pounds at one meeting of the Derby, and who remembered the “Jubilee Plunger”? (Hilton, 1938, p. 222-223). The sharing of stories, sustenance, and a sense of right to land is not a direct rejection of traditional society, but rather, a redefining of how society can function. The focus shifts from tramping as radical individualism to a source of communal freedom.

As the evening wears on, the imagery of Tobey’s Hollow takes on a mythical and ancestral tone. The light of the blazing fires throws the men into profile, with their faces resembling “men of a pre-civilized era; unkempt, they belonged to the soapless age, unshaved and dispossessed of every vestige of respectability, they seemed to be the brothers of the early Saxon men” (Hilton, 1938, p. 223). The tramps are anointed with ancestral continuities that situate them in a lineage of invoked community throughout time. They are not just comrades with those sat around the fire on that particular night, but also with every tramp who has sat around a fire in the Tramp’s/Tobey’s Hollow throughout the temporal space. Hilton is working within the same tradition as Orwell by framing tramps as part of an evolutionary throwback – what differs is that Hilton ascribes Anglo-Saxonism to the group, as opposed to Orwell’s depiction of crude, animalistic savages. Anglo-Saxonism is a historical ideology that was prevalent in the late-nineteenth century, and which believed in the racial superiority of civilisations descended from the Anglo-Saxons, attributing this to their physical, intellectual and democratic traits, and a mythologised notion of freedom. Nineteenth-century intellectuals utilised this ideology to justify the expansion of Empire, as well as a focus on piety and tradition, with Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) becoming a foundational text in his mythologisation of the Anglo-Saxons as the “true” English people. Moving into the Edwardian era, Velma Bourgeois Richmond comments that G.K. Chesterton (a vocal opposer to empire) advocated for an “Englishness” that emphasised rural values that had been “largely lost through industrialisation and the disappearance of the peasantry”, and William Morris “added socialist ideology and a tremendous enthusiasm for northern identity” into their conceptions of Anglo-Saxonism (Richmond, 1997, p. 174). Additionally, Joanne Parker considers that the Anglo-Saxon novels of the nineteenth century were written in response to definite social changes, such as the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), which had “generated a widespread British fear of invasion” and heightened interest in defining national characteristics (Parker, 2020, p. 638).

Writing in the late 1930s, at a time where Britain was on the cusp of another major conflict, Hilton employs the same strategies that focus on an emphasis of rural narratives, socialist ideology, and questions of nationalism, but, by applying Anglo-Saxonism to the tramping class, he does not bolster nationalist or imperial agendas and instead reclaims these ideologies, a notion of a “real England” for the dispossessed. In this sense, Clarke’s assertion that Hilton’s representation of the Derby in *English Ways* “resists the kind of simple conception of the nation that characterised contemporary nationalism, emphasising diversity and an essential democratic identity” that mobilised against fascism suggests that, in *Champion*, Hilton attempts to stabilise English identity before the outbreak of war through democratised cultural belonging (Clarke, 2013, p. 779). He portrays the (out-of-)working-classes as deeply rooted in an English national identity that expresses ideals of a much older form of civilisation, reinforcing their cultural legitimacy and reconfiguring Anglo-Saxonism from a place of nationalist dogma into one that can sustain a radical and egalitarian proletarian image of the

future. The cultural richness of the gathering at Tobey's Hollow is therefore a direct rebuttal of the concept that tramping is socially isolating as it not only brings forth a sense of community amongst those physically present but also roots that community in an ancestral continuity across time.

In *Champion*, Hilton develops his portrayal of tramping from being something that is a radical expression of working-class individualism, anti-productivism and autonomy into an example of a lived, bodily practice that is deeply entrenched in working-class experience. The figure becomes a representation of social endurance, reaching its zenith at the scene in Tobey's Hollow, whereupon symbolic intimations become mythologised and reimagine the very idea of Englishness itself.

In 1939, following the publication of *Champion*, Jack Hilton and his wife Mary set off from their home in Rochdale, pushing a perambulator filled with, as Hilton describes, "all the things my wife considered necessary for home comforts away from home" with himself as "the potential donkey", and walked to Plymouth, a journey which took them six months (Hilton, 1940, p. 17). This journey was undertaken by the Hiltons as a study into the cultural make-up of the country, with Croft arguing that the resulting text, *English Ways* (1940), was written as a direct response to Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for which "Hilton felt partly responsible" (Croft, 1990, p. 250). He notes that "the account of a Lancashire working-man (and his wife) tramping from Rochdale to Epsom and back was the exact opposite – and consciously so – of Orwell's brief journey north" (Croft, 1989, p. 162). *English Ways* thus stands as an attempt by Hilton to reframe the representation of working-class life made by middle-class authors such as Orwell; H.V. Morton, *In Search of England*, 1927; and J.B. Priestley, *English Journey*, 1934. Clarke observes that "the most obviously radical feature of *English Ways* is Hilton himself", with the text resisting "the idea of a generic working-class response to places and institutions" (Clarke, 2016, p. 777). Significantly, Hilton's conception of walking has now fully moved beyond the earlier articulation of anti-productivism in *Caliban Shrieks* to function as a means of social observation. In his new role of social investigator, he reimagines the nineteenth century tradition of "slumming" and shifts the terms of "productivity" from a capitalist understanding to one based in the understanding and formation of cultural heritage.

Hilton published his next novel *Laugh at Polonius* in 1942, and then, ten years after *English Ways*, he and Mary retraced their steps from Rochdale – this time walking to Brighton and then back via Blackpool. The resulting book was called *English Ribbon* (1950). In the introduction to this text, Hilton writes that "whilst sorting out the material so gathered, I sulked. It was all so sunny in colour, and for me to write a sunshine story was incredible. But Art and Truth are related" (Hilton, 1950, p. 11). This signals the ideological evolution in Hilton's writing, from his beginnings in *Caliban Shrieks* to *English Ribbon*. It also reflects a shift in the broader cultural landscape for the working-classes – the 1930s were a decade marked by deep economic depression and political unrest, indicating the need for *Caliban Shrieks*' call for a radical assertion of autonomy in the form of tramping, an act that stood as a way to establish agency. In *Champion*, Hilton had developed his ideology into one that positioned tramping as a lived, bodily practice, and which could offer a site of utopian cultural reclamation in its connection to the rural and freedom from dominant social norms, but which was still tangibly marked by the material conditions that the class was subjected to. By the time of *English Ribbon* in 1950, the post-war welfare state and social reforms had begun to transform the experience of working-class lives, and Hilton's almost disbelief at writing a "sunny" story signifies an inherent hope for the future of his class. Hilton's focus on walking throughout his literary career

captures the shifting cultural, social, and political associations of working-class life in the first half of the twentieth century and symbolises the ongoing journey of identity and resistance.

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