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Helter skelter, topsy-turvy and “loonycolour”: carnivalesque realism in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

“With eleven pints of beer and seven small gins playing hide-and-seek inside his stomach, he fell from the topmost stair to the bottom”: so Arthur Seaton brings working class energy bursting into the post-war English novel.¹ Alan Sillitoe tells us that this was originally the opening sentence of the discrete (unpublished) story which became the first chapter of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, but “I later found this commencement too abrupt and sensational for a novel, and so decided to begin with a less violent ploy” (“Introduction” ix): Arthur’s fall is relegated to the novel’s second sentence. It is a small failure of nerve in a novel which positively celebrates the disruptive, both in the lives it represents and in its manner of representing them. Arthur’s comprehensive tumble “from the topmost stair to the bottom” sets up a repeated motif of overturning and upending in the novel, the instances of which, taken cumulatively, provide a radical challenge to the normal order, to the world seen the “right” way up. At the same time Sillitoe does violence to the standard modes of realism, thus challenging the formal and representational constraints of the tradition of working class fiction in which he is working.

Arthur’s fall takes place amid a scene of “riot” (9), in which metaphors of freedom and frustration, flood and explosion jostle, and danger and contentment coalesce as “Piled up passions were exploded...and the effect of a week’s monotonous graft in the factory was swilled out of your system in a burst of goodwill” (9). The shaking walls and rattling windows of the White Horse can barely contain the happy chaos it has itself generated (“the pub had burst its contribution box”) and at the centre of this turning world is Arthur, embodying its excesses and transgressions as he, the archetypal non-member, takes the place of Brenda’s absent husband, supping his share without shouldering his responsibilities. A

drinking contest means that further drink is free (for after all, “Free booze was free booze” [11]), and his fall crowns rather than undermines his victory. Far from stopping him in his tracks, his tumble offers a respite which sets him up for a further couple of pints, a top-up to the “high octane fuel” of gin and beer, which he then vomits, in a scene described at length and with vigour, over a couple of strangers. The episode ends with Arthur “floating endlessly down” into the warmth of Brenda’s bed, filling again the husband’s empty place. Just before this, as he lies happily cushioned on Brenda’s doorstep, Arthur frames a few questions to himself about his behaviour, but only to answer “Couldn’t care less, couldn’t care less, couldn’t care less” (170). The reader who resists the Bacchanalian spirit of this opening must line herself up with the conformist Jack who, in an irony milked both by Sillitoe and by Arthur, has vacated his bed to work nights in order to save enough money to buy Brenda a telly. The narrative’s sympathy is made clear back on the first page; any possible moral objection is forestalled by a statement of fact that stands as both explanation and justification: “For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostrate Sabbath.” (9)

If, as we are suggesting, both realism and the upending of the normal order are concomitant key features of a right reading of this novel, Arthur is the central figure who sustains in a rough harmony what might otherwise appear as contradictory impulses. From the off he is placed in a fully believable 1950s urban working class milieu, where work and play revolve around the same streets, and home and factory nudge shoulders. There is plenty of specific and knowledgeable detail to fix the scene, especially in the unprecedented descriptions of working at the lathe. But at the fluid heart of the novel is Arthur’s internal world, his consciousness, and it is through the interplay of inner and outer worlds that the novel’s take on reality is established. With the same finesse that Virginia Woolf shows as she

moves from omniscient to free indirect to stream of consciousness narration and back in the opening chapter of Mrs Dalloway, Sillitoe (for far different ends) quickly establishes a sliding narrative technique which allows the reader to move in and out of Arthur's mind. But while the mark of Woolf's free indirect technique is the adoption of a vocabulary peculiar to the consciousness of the subject (and thus distinguished from the cooler omniscient narration in which it is framed), the "framework" narration in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning is infected by the same raucous spirit as Arthur's. "The best and bingiest gladtime of the week" may be Arthur's expression or the narrator's; the effect of complicity powerfully endorses a world in which enjoyment supersedes morality. It also allows a sort of leakage of Arthur's more extravagant spirallings of imagination into the realist framework of the novel. The line between authorial narration and interior monologue is indeterminate, so that author and character seem to speak the same language.

Although Sillitoe's colourful rendering of working class reality has precedents in Dickens, Gaskell and Lawrence, none of these – not even Lawrence – derives the motive power of their descriptions from the consciousness of a central working class character. Not only does Arthur provide the magnified sense of reality which is the novel's primary mode, he even reflects upon that magnification, alerting the reader to it:

Time flew while you wore out the oil-soaked floor and worked furiously without knowing it: you lived in a compatible world of pictures that passed through your mind like a magic lantern, often in vivid and glorious loonycolour, a world where memory and imagination ran free and did acrobatic tricks with your past and with what might be considered your future, an amok that produced all sorts of agreeable visions. (39)

Here Arthur rereads Marx in a wonderfully optimistic way. The alienation of the production line is replaced by the liberation of the imagination's "glorious loonycolour", itself an ordinary individual's personal equivalent of Hollywood Technicolor. Yet, though Arthur refers to his "pipedreams", it is no movie fantasy that he plays out in his mind but elements of ordinary life, revived and illumined by the (deliberately archaic, nostalgic) "magic-lantern" of his mind. As he notes, it is the "cosy world of pubs and noisy tarts" into which he will step at the end of his working day "that would one day provide you with the raw material for more pipedreams as you stood at your lathe" (39). The lathe is both the outward and visible sign of Arthur's fixedness in reality, and the begetter of his inner life; his skill is such that, once he and the machine are in "a favourable rhythm" (39) he can concentrate on the "compatible world of pictures" within. As he says, "This lathe is my everlasting pal because it gets me thinking" (202). Thus the life of the mind and the life of the factory floor, and of the streets, homes and pubs beyond, are internally connected, again suggesting a potential continuity rather than a divorce or frustrating conflict between them.

The authorial narration emphasises these continuities further when it adopts Arthur's imaginative vocabulary in representing his external world. Far from suggesting that the individual consciousness exists in a separate place, free-floating from, superior to, external reality, as modernist writing tends to do, Sillitoe shows instead the importance of its *transformative* power in reading the external world. By appropriating Arthur's "acrobatic tricks" to the omniscient narration, he pointedly eschews a solipsistic version of consciousness and suggests that insofar as the "riot" of the opening scene is a communal outburst of energy, the overturning figured in Arthur's fall is part of a shared, a common apprehension of a common reality which can be optimistically re-visioned by consciousness but which is always central to it.

We can see the way this works if we look again at the novel's opening. Perhaps Sillitoe's cautious first sentence has a further structural function, since it means that we first see Arthur from the point of view of the crowd surrounding him:

The rowdy gang of singers who sat at the scattered tables saw Arthur walk unsteadily to the head of the stairs, and though they must all have known that he was dead drunk, and seen the danger he would soon be in, no one attempted to talk to him and lead him back to his seat. (9)

For these "rowdy singers" as well as for Arthur, the night has been one of appetite and indulgence, and later they are drawn with him into the inclusive pronoun "you": "You followed the motto of 'be drunk and be happy', kept your crafty arms around female waists, and felt the beer going beneficially down into the elastic capacity of your guts" (9). Here their non-intervention signals not a lack of concern but a recognition of, a solidarity with, the freedom of Arthur's excess. To "lead him back to his seat" would be to side with the forces of moral constraint and to imply a criticism which their own behaviour belies. Later, as the fall is reprised, we as readers are also drawn into complicity with Arthur as he begins his fall, the free indirect style allowing us to both identify with his drunken state, and watch his drunken fate:

He felt electric light bulbs shining and burning into the back of his head, and sensed in the opening and closing flash of a second that his mind and body were entirely separate entities inconsiderately intent on going their different ways. For some reason, the loud, cracked voice singing in the room behind seemed like a signal that he should begin descending at once, so he put one

foot forward, watched it turn towards the next step in a hazy fashion, and felt the weight of his body bending towards it until pressure from above became so great that he started rolling down the stairs. (10)

As the hapless observer of his own fall, his increasingly careful concentration on the mechanics of his body is comically matched by his inability to control that body, and this is paralleled in Sillitoe's straight-faced meticulousness in the description. So the narrative dwelling on the fall makes it funnier, but also more significant, and in the next sentence the seven gins and eleven pints (earlier childishly playing "hide-and-seek" (9) in Arthur's stomach) are refigured as "a high octane-fuel" which has set him "into motion like a machine" (11) – another image of power and energy picking up the explosive motif of the first page, and suggesting progress rather than decline.

There follows a page of exposition recounting the drinking contest (thus placing it narratively after the event it has caused) and this is punctuated by a further retelling of the fall, catching it at the point where the previous one left off, as Arthur "started rolling down the stairs":

He was laughing to himself as he rolled down the stairs, at the dull bumping going on behind his head and along his spine, as if it were happening miles away, like a vibration on another part of the earth's surface, and he an earthquake machine on which it was faintly recorded. This rolling motion was so restful and soporific, in fact, that when he stopped travelling, having arrived at the bottom of the stairs – he kept his eyes closed and went to sleep. It was a pleasant and far-away feeling, and he wanted to stay in exactly the same position for the rest of his life. (11)

Here the apparent contradictions between the reality described and Arthur's impressions of it are most marked. On the one hand the energy is now seismic, global, yet Arthur himself only "faintly" registers it; he is not a racing machine now but a recording one (albeit of earthquakes!). At the same time the bumps on his head and along his spine as he hits each stair are experienced as a "rolling motion" which is "restful and soporific". What should have jolted him awake sends him into a contented sleep. At this point we begin to realise that Arthur is someone to contend with – and that the group from which he comes is a force to be reckoned with. This third account of his fall also completes its transformation into something benevolent, laughter-giving – in short, good. And again it is drawn together with the surrounding group through the "elderly man" who, humming a hymn tune, steps over Arthur's body, thinking "how jolly yet sinful it would be if he possessed the weakness yet strength of character to get so drunk" (12).

While Arthur's fall in actuality would be likely to be painful, even dangerous, and humiliating, the narrative attitude – portraying in part Arthur's transforming consciousness and in part the attitude of those around him – has turned it into a pleasurable experience. Standard moral values have been upended, with drunkenness depicted as empowering rather than disabling (and this through rather than despite the fall it causes). While the emphasis on Arthur as individual might lead us to see this as an overturning peculiar to him – "once a rebel, always a rebel" (202) – the alliance between Arthur's consciousness (springing from his material position) and that of the "rowdy gang of singers" (9) is well established before his is differentiated in terms of specific experience and internalisation; and the overlap between authorial narration and free indirect access to Arthur's consciousness extends this alliance to the author as well. Danger and beneficence interchange, and in this climate it becomes the *natural* order for Arthur to be a non-member, to take Brenda's husband's place,

and to end up in bed with her while Jack works nights for that telly. In such a climate any attempt to divert Arthur from his fall would itself seem topsy-turvy. He becomes a rolling ball of energy, the sum of his appetites and powers, carrying to gargantuan excess what everyone else in the room is to a lesser extent experiencing, his fall a triumphant manifestation of their rumbustious force.

On the novel's opening page, Sillitoe describes Saturday night as "one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year". The Big Wheel makes a real appearance later in the novel, in the penultimate chapter of the long "Saturday Night" section. Here the annual Goose Fair is the setting of Arthur's last celebrations of transgressive pleasure, his brief sense of superhuman power, and his tilting against the windmill of death, before death itself threatens him in a severe beating at the hands of Winnie's husband and his swaddie friends (in the final chapter of this section). Through the realist representation of the Goose Fair, the actuality of carnival is placed at the heart of the novel, and at the heart of the working class culture the novel represents; in this the *carnivalesque*, in narrative form and medium, is rooted. The transgressive, disruptive energy of the Goose Fair (and its smaller version in the "riot" of the opening pub scene) signals the potentially ebullient, rebellious energy of the class. It might accurately be described, in Stallybrass' and White's term, as "a privileged locus of inversion" (18) in three senses: geographic, temporal and narrative. It draws people and equipment from the surrounding country ("huge trailers loaded with complicated roundabout components and Dodgem cars rumbled into the city from all over the Midlands") and is located "on a large open tract of field near the city centre" (157). It is "the great time of the year, the one place when you met people you hadn't seen for years" (157) and, along with Christmas and the fifty-two weekends, a window of license for the people. In the novel's narrative structure, the Goose Fair is placed at the end of the "Saturday Night"

section and functions as a crucial turning point in the minimal plot. It is here that Arthur is confronted with the choice he will have to make: is he to continue in his role as a mischievous Loki figure, cheating death and dodging jealous husbands, or will he succumb to the security offered by Doreen and matrimony?

This sense of the Goose Fair's centrality is emphasised by the elision of the first of Arthur's two visits to it. He takes Doreen on Thursday night (disappointing her, as fewer of her friends will see her "arm-in-arm with her young man" [159]), and saves Saturday night for Brenda and Winnie. To narrate the night out with Doreen would detract from the Goose Fair's power as a symbol of carnival. In the narration of Saturday night, the fair represents the peak of Arthur's topsy-turveydom. The Fair, presented as a place of insanity and bacchanalian mayhem, is the White Horse writ large. In this "crush of people",

Sanity was out of reach: they were caught up in balloons of light and pleasure that would not let them go. The four-acre fair became a whole world, with tents and caravans, stalls and roundabouts, booths and towers, swingboats and engines and big wheels, and a crowd that had lost all idea of time and place locked in the belly of its infernal noise. (161)

As at the White Horse Benefit Night, Arthur has usurped Jack as Brenda's escort (the dreadfully dull Jack has stayed in "to do the pools, check the union dues and enter them into his ledger" [159]); but this time, he is also usurping a second husband, Bill, with Winnie on his other arm. While his disruptive force in the White Horse scene was epitomised by a passive act (gravity takes him to the bottom of the stairs) which was viewed as if from a distance by the other revellers and himself, at the Goose Fair Arthur actively pursues a course of disruptive mischief on the Ghost Train, standing up in his carriage, then getting out and

wandering around in the dark. Initially one of those who has paid to be frightened, Arthur inverts his role and begins scaring the other passengers. Drawing level with a carriage full of girls, “his hands roamed, and they cried out in fear” (162). He jumps into another carriage and frightens a woman called Lil by announcing himself as Boris Karloff and demanding “a drink o’ blood”. Lil weeps, fearful of his “terrible laugh”, and imagines he has escaped from an asylum. Arthur has ridiculed the Ghost Train by revealing its rules, whereby passengers can experience a “legitimate sense of terror for which they had paid a shilling” (162); instead he injects genuine fear and uncertainty into the proceedings. Lil’s boyfriend, Alf, tries to reassert the order Arthur has overturned, asserting “He’s only one of the mechanics” and telling Lil, “You’ll be all right. We’re only in the Ghost Train.” Lil, it seems, knows better.

The six pages describing Saturday night at the Goose Fair present an intensification of Arthur’s rebellious energy in a series of confrontations with authority figures. After he tries to throw Winnie to the snakes, the zoo keeper “chase[s] them down the steps waving a whip over their heads” (161). When he emerges from the Ghost Train he sees “a spanner-brandishing mechanic rush[ing] towards him through the uproar” (163) and escapes by throwing the cloth skeleton over his assailant, leaving him “struggling and cursing” (164). Finally, when he reaches the bottom of the Helter Skelter, he is confronted by the swaddies, in their army uniforms, and he “dive[s] into the crowd”. In these comic encounters and escapes, Sillitoe does mischief to realism which climaxes in the dual-functioning of Arthur’s slide to earth as both realism and symbol. But at the same time, a seed has been planted for the curtailment of this mischievousness.

The zenith of Arthur’s carnivalesque energy is his fight with the skeleton, in which he overturns order by upending death. When he attacks the cloth skeleton it falls from its hooks, suggesting the fate which awaits us all – Arthur is described as “trapped” and “buried” – yet even in this situation he remains focused on the mayhem he has created and continues his

efforts to create more: “hearing people running from train to train, ... he shouted through the hole in the cloth: ‘Fire! Fire! Run for your lives!’” He defeats “the darkness” with his laughter, flipping death onto his back, “glistening skeleton-bones looking like tiger-streaks over his back, head and shoulders.” The fight climaxes with Arthur’s most triumphant and celebratory exclamation: “‘I’ve won!’ he screamed out to everyone. ‘I beat that bloody skeleton!’” (163). Even as his and our carnival laughter echoes through this scene, there is a dark edge to it not present in the opening chapter’s riot. While Arthur’s power as a locus of carnival energy is intensified, he defeats only a cloth Death. There is a hysterical note in his triumph, but also a touch of self-irony, because he is only too conscious of the impossibility of defeating the real thing; and it is perhaps the realisation that he will not live forever which causes him to look again for Doreen after she has spied him with his two lovers and vanished into the crowd (164). Furthermore, this mock fight presages Arthur’s fight with the swaddies, in which order, both moral and narrative, is restored. Official morality is reasserted in that Arthur gets his comeuppance for offending the institution of marriage. Narrative realism is re-imposed in that, whereas Arthur’s earlier drunkenness, fall and vomiting were narrated in a transformative, celebratory mode, the physical blows Arthur suffers here are narrated realistically: they hurt now.

Arthur felt a crack explode down his face that seemed to break all the bones in it, pain bursting across his eyes Knives and arrows went into all parts of his body. They want to kill me, he thought dimly. (175)

This shift in modes between the fight with Death and the fight with the swaddies possibly *to* the death turns on the interposed description of Arthur’s slide down to earth on the Helter Skelter (a parallel to his earlier tumble downstairs) which embodies both the peak of his

rebelliousness and a transforming epiphany. The minute-long journey back to earth is an unsettling period of introspection: “so many thoughts were trying to enter his mind that it was the least pleasurable of all his rides” (165). This confusion may arise from a disorienting incident narrated just before the Helter Skelter ride: Arthur, at his most mischievous, kisses each of his lovers when the other’s back is turned, only to be confronted by Doreen. The trio of Arthur, Brenda and Winnie stand “where the crowd was thickest” – they are at the heart of carnival – and Doreen’s face is described as appearing “suddenly ... through the crowd” (164). She is a disembodied apparition, representing forces which delimit carnival. Arthur’s eyes turn from Winnie to Doreen and “the light of ecstasy left them”. Yet, Arthur here acts uncertainly for the first time: he makes “a slight acknowledgement of her presence by an attempted wave of the arm”. Although Doreen has threatened his spirit of abandon, Arthur looks for her again, but unsuccessfully. As he slides down the Helter Skelter, he may wonder why.

He was near the earth once more, close to the chute-end ... He felt relaxed now that it was nearly over. There was nothing else to do but wait, a voice said to him. But wait for what? (165)

The terms we have been invoking in this discussion are of course Bakhtin’s. However, as Stallybrass and White warn: “the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression” (16). Carnival is not a timeless, transcendent, unchanging or essential principle. The Goose Fair of the 1950s is a product of a specific intersection of factors, whereas Bakhtin’s elaboration of the nature and meaning of carnival, articulated as it is in the modern world, is based on a cultural expression of the late mediaeval world. Indeed

he distinguishes between the “open”, communal body of that era and the “closed” individual body of modernity. His theorising of carnival (via Rabelaisian representations of it) depends on hierarchies and polarisations of a sort much more marked 500 years ago than now, and his readings of carnival are derived from examples embedded in an “ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Bakhtin 4). This was also still a constitutively agrarian world in which pagan ritual was attached to seasonal cycles (and had a meaning in relation to those cycles, e.g. the warding off of darkness in midwinter, the throes of appetite before the Lenten fasting coinciding with the leanest time before new growth [Bakhtin 8-9]). Furthermore, as Bakhtin says, “The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong” (10). Thus the overthrowing of order which Bakhtin proposes as constitutive of carnival was rooted in its opposite, order, in a way in which the Goose Fair in 1950s industrialised Britain was not (and the length of time devoted to it in the earlier era – Bakhtin posits as long as an average of three months in the year – underlines this).

There are, then, some difficulties in applying Bakhtin’s analysis of the role of carnival and the carnivalesque to mid-twentieth century reality and fictional representations of it. In Bakhtin’s founding and constitutive example, the work of Rabelais, we may see a direct continuity between the world in which the work was produced (or at least that part of it which was a “second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year” [6]) and the carnivalesque nature of the work’s forms and expressions. They are connected through popular culture and folk tradition, in whose “thousand-year development”, Bakhtin argues, “Rabelais’ images are completely at home” (3). But for the twentieth century writer “the wide beaten roads followed by bourgeois Europe’s literary creation and ideology” (3) since Rabelais’ time have effectively broken the connection between literary form and folk culture,

so that there is not a ready tradition of folk humour and grotesquerie for Sillitoe (or any other mid-twentieth century author) to draw on. Furthermore the reality Sillitoe seeks to represent is that of the late modern industrialised world in which the actual participants in that reality are themselves no longer part of an essentially agrarian tradition in which carnival finds its natural place.

This said, the Goose Fair is set up by Sillitoe as an archaic social form which opposes the modern entertainment provided by television. Peter Clarke points out that television, which took up an increasing portion of leisure time from Elizabeth II's coronation onward, "provided a private setting for the enjoyment of a range of leisure pursuits which had previously taken place outside the home" (253). Television threatens those activities which involve stepping out and joining a throng of people – football matches, cinema, carnival – an opposition which recalls Bakhtin's dualities of corporate/private, festive/insular. Throughout the novel, Arthur scorns television, characterising it as an opiate which prevents subversion.

Television, he thought scornfully ..., they'd go barmy if they had them taken away. I'd love it if big Black Marias came down all the streets and men got out with hatchets and go in every house and smash the tellies. Everybody'd go crackers. They wouldn't know what to do. There'd be a revolution, I'm sure there would, they'd blow up the Council House and set fire to the Castle. It wouldn't bother me if there weren't any television sets, though, not one bit.

(184)

Arthur rejects the passive and private nature of this modern leisure pursuit in favour of the public, riotous, and archaic pleasures of the White Horse and the Goose Fair.

Furthermore, in the Goose Fair Sillitoe has found a perfect bridge between the agrarian/pastoral and the industrialised worlds. Though it has lost its original function in the rural economy, the Goose Fair has preserved its cyclical position and significance in the calendar; thus its acting as a beacon against darkness and a medium for excess and transgression remains almost as part of a folk memory. Industrialisation accentuates rather than dispels this, through the medium of consciousness; it is as Arthur sweats at his lathe that he reflects:

The future meant things, both good and bad, to look forward to, like the coming of summer (good); military training at the end of August (purgat'ry); Goose Fair in October (smashin'); Bonfire Night (good if you didn't get blown to bits); and Christmas at Christmas. (129)

Thus, in spite of our caveats, the similarities between Sillitoe's Fair and Bakhtin's notion of carnival are striking. For Bakhtin, carnival festivities are "nonofficial, extraecclesiastical, and extrapolitical" (Bakhtin 6). They represent a sort of underworld, an alternative hell to the one threatened by official culture.

Folk culture organised the inferno according to its own fashion ... If the Christian hell devalued earth and drew men away from it, the carnivalesque hell affirmed earth and its lower stratum as the fertile womb, where death meets birth and a new life springs forth. (395)

The Goose Fair is similarly opposed to official culture, which is characterised by restraint and repression (and represented by characters like Jack, who tells Arthur he needs to "knuckle

under” if he is to “enjoy life” [190]). It is an alternative hell, with its crowd “locked in the belly of its infernal noise” (161), and the occasion of Arthur’s encounter with a parody of Death, from which he emerges triumphant. In Bakhtin’s terms, “the defeat of fear [is] presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of power and violence turned inside out, the comic images of death and bodies gaily rent asunder” (91). Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque literature is concerned with downward (that is, earthbound) movements, imagery that leads towards the lower elements of body, culture and cosmos (370) and Arthur’s slide down to “that unclean turbulent ocean” which brings him “near the earth once more” (165) is one such movement.

But to what extent is that movement subversive? Eagleton puts a key criticism of Bakhtin thus: “Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off ... As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool” (Eagleton 148). Jonathan Dollimore argues that dominant culture may in fact engender (rather than simply permit) subversion in order to have the opportunity of containing it, thus consolidating its position and exercising power (Dollimore and Sinfield 12). However, he adds that, “once installed, [subversion] can be used against authority as well as used by it” (12). There is nothing magical about official culture’s power: it may permit a little too much licence, and find itself threatened.

For long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but ... given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*. (14)

Carnival, then, offers a *potential* site for subversion. The extent of this potential is a question with which Saturday Night and Sunday Morning engages. The novel presents a series of spaces in which working class characters can escape oppression and reification: the weekend, the countryside, the Goose Fair, Christmas. But the status of these spaces – as either controlling devices or opportunities for subversion – remains ambiguous.

So, sitting at the top of the Helter Skelter, Arthur surveys the Goose Fair:

He looked over the lights and tent tops and people bellowing out a rough voice to the sky, at the three-day ritual bout of forty thousand voices. He felt like a king up there with so much power spreading on all sides below him ... wondering how many columns of soldiers could be gathered from these crowds for use in a rebellion. (165)

His previous fantasies of rebellion have involved only himself (single-handedly blowing up the factory or turning his gun against the army). Here, he momentarily imagines himself at the head of an armed rebellion involving thousands of others. This is a vision of a different order, motivated by the sense that all these people share a grievance. In other words, it is political. However, the vision is a brief one: “Two hands stabbed into his back and pushed him into oblivion” (165). Even as he imagines a people’s army overthrowing the state, Arthur is made aware that the subversive power of carnival has its limits: it is a “three-day ritual bout” (165) which, like *Twelfth Night*, is temporally restricted and licensed by authority. All thoughts of rebellion evaporate as he hits the ground and, confronted by the swaddies (actual agents of the state), makes his escape.

This enactment of the ambiguous nature of carnival’s role precipitates a new mode in the second section of the book, “Sunday Morning”, which opens with a supine Arthur, lying

“in an apathetic state” and staring “without recognition at the pink wall of the bedroom” (179), lacking entirely his earlier energy. When he was “buried” by the Ghost Train skeleton, he flipped it over and emerged triumphant, enacting the death/rebirth cycle of folk festivities. But, here, he lies “buried for three days” before rising in an altered state, suggesting a Christian (that is, “official”) resurrection.

The process of change Arthur undergoes takes place in the context of another event to rival the White Horse benefit night and the Goose Fair: Aunt Ada’s Christmas celebrations reiterate familiar elements of carnival. The house is a tumult of boozing, story-telling, eating, singing and gambling (195-7) which carries a suggestion of subversive potential: “jokes ... fell like sparks on the relaxed powder barrel of each brain” (193). However, this scene is narratively hemmed in, and infiltrated by, unsettling counter-currents. It is preceded by Arthur’s encounter with Jack in a factory corridor, where they perfectly characterise opposing value systems:

“You’re too much of a trouble-maker, Arthur,” [Jack] said mildly. “You’re too violent. One day you’ll really cop it. And you’ll ask for it as well.”

“And you’re too narrow-gutted ever to get into trouble...”

“You won’t knuckle under, Arthur. If you would, you’d enjoy life.”

“I do enjoy it mate,” he said loudly. “... Yo stick ter your managin’ and the races, an’ I’ll stick to the White Hoss, fishin’ an’ screwin’.” (189-90)

Jack’s incorporation into officialdom is worth kicking against, but Arthur’s defiance appears forced, and hollow, after his beating, undermining the ensuing Christmas revelry. Christmas Eve in Ada’s house is punctuated by a pub crawl during which Arthur spills beer over a woman’s coat. There is a faint echo of the vomiting episode at the White Horse, but when he

squares up for a fight with the her husband, the situation is defused (194), and potentially violent energy is reined in. The curious argument between Jane and her husband Jim extends this sense of carnival's being delimited and dissipated but, paradoxically, it simultaneously brings Arthur to new life. Jane breaks a beer-glass on Jim's head and, as Arthur soaks a handkerchief and holds it against Jim's wound, he undergoes some kind of epiphany:

The cold water ran over Arthur's hand and woke him up. He pressed the cold wet handkerchief to Jim's head, feeling strangely and joyfully alive, as if he had been living in a soulless vacuum since his fight with the swaddies. He told himself he had been without life since then, that now he was awake once more, ready to tackle all obstacles, to break any man or woman that came for him, to turn on the whole world if it bothered him too much, and blow it to pieces. The crack of the glass on Jim's forehead echoed and re-echoed through his mind.

(201)

The violence he has witnessed is not in that comic mode which we might imagine would make him feel "joyfully alive", but rather in a realist mode – Jane's attack leaves "a deep, half-inch split in the skin" from which "blood oozed and fell down [Jim's] face" and she "draw[s] back at the sight of so much blood" (201). Yet, the epiphany completes Arthur's rebirth/resurrection. What has been missing from Arthur's life since the fight with the swaddies is conflict, and Jane has shown him that marriage can be characterised by conflict rather than submission. Ambiguity characterises the final movement of the novel, in which the extent and nature of Arthur's transformation (centring on his move towards matrimony) is nothing if not protean.

Arthur's difficulty is that the institution of marriage (along with the army and the factory) is a crucial site of containment for the officialdom which he scorns – the novel's husbands have no share in Arthur's energetic topsy-turveydom – but he recognises that it is also a secure space in which to ritualise commitment and love:

It must be good to live all the time with a woman, he thought, and sleep in a bed with her that belonged to both of you, that no one could turn you out of if they caught you there. (129)

Arthur needs to negotiate a path to this attractive space while escaping containment. The narrative manages to suggest both the inexorable pressure of a sanctioned institution and Arthur's potential to transform it.

At their first date, Arthur waits for Doreen at the cinema “with his back to a glass-case of Technicolor stills” (157). Marriage threatens his loonycolour re-visioning of the world with Hollywood's inferior alternative, “stills” neatly opposing his earlier energy, and Sillitoe's phrasing suggesting a man with his back to the wall. But, if this suggests a process of compromise on Arthur's part, his courtship also has a transforming effect on Doreen. She begins as a nineteen-year-old who fears she is left on the shelf (155) and wants nothing more than a husband to show off to her workmates. By the evening of Arthur's proposal, she has become a more passionate (Brenda-like) figure, taking the initiative, with Arthur following instructions:

She moved clothes and newspapers from the settee so that they could sit down and kiss there undisturbed. ... A few minutes later she broke free and stood up: “Let's make as if you're going now.”

“The same old trick,” he said, following her through the scullery to the back door.

Doreen opening it with a loud click, calling out forcefully:

“Good night, then, Arthur.” ...

The door slammed so violently that the house shook, Doreen making sure that her deaf mother’s ear reacted to the noise. Arthur, being still on the inside, followed Doreen tiptoe back into the warm, comfortable, well-lit living room.

(213-4)

This process of change centres around the characters’ relationship to the country, a space accessed by working people only on Sundays, and idealised by Arthur.

Arthur was happy in the country. He remembered his grandfather who had been a blacksmith, and had a house and forge at Wollaton village. ... The building – you had drawn your own water from a well, dug your own potatoes out of the garden, taken eggs from the chicken run to fry with bacon off your own side of pig hanging salted from a hook in the pantry – had long ago been destroyed to make room for advancing armies of new pink houses. (205)

Arthur sets the country in opposition to the encroaching town, locating there an archaic, pre-industrial working class identity unsullied by the reification of factory work. Sillitoe confines this description in parenthetical hyphens, enclosed by the narrative of its destruction. This is a space under threat, but it continues to offer Arthur the opportunity to escape town and factory and re-connect with “the transitional mechanisms of each season [glimpsed] only at the weekend” (129).

It is into this space that Arthur wishes to lead Doreen on a Sunday walk. He meets her “on the outskirts of the housing estate” – where that army of houses is (temporarily) halted. Doreen would prefer to walk in town, guessing that Arthur chooses the country because it offers greater opportunities for sex. When he tries to kiss her, she pulls away. But the stream over which they stand has a transformative effect which leads to an “irresistible passion” and their first sex. The moment gazing into the stream is described twice. Gazing into the water, Arthur experiences a “silence within himself that no particle of his mind or body wanted to break” – a silence that opposes the racket of the factory, “a noise that made the brain reel and ache” (30). He imagines the water as a refuge for Doreen and himself, where “the fang-like claws of the world would come unstuck from their flesh” (206). Doreen later describes the same moment in a statement which serves as an acceptance of Arthur’s marriage proposal:

Her face grew radiant: “I shan’t forget that walk we did that Sunday,” she said quietly, taking his hand, “when we looked into the water near Cossal, and then went into the fields.” (214)

Arthur’s motives for bringing Doreen to the country are sexual, but he also inducts her into an understanding of the country’s importance in his worldview. He creates a relationship between the country and sex which takes sex outside of the moral confines of sanctioned procreation. Until this moment, he had only achieved this by sleeping with married women (thus ridiculing the institution). Here he achieves something similar while approaching marriage himself. Arthur sees the country and sexual passion as two facets of the same rebellious instinct (“Intelligent co-operation meant falling for a slip-knot, getting yourself caught in a half-nelson, though he knew a way to get free from both. The only peace you got

was ... sitting on the osier-lined banks of a canal waiting for fish to bite, or lying in bed with a woman you loved" [132]) – and appears not to (want to) sacrifice either.

Arthur's position in relation to the forces of containment, then, is complex. He becomes "Doreen's young man" (202) – a phrase which suggests surrender – while continuing to think rebelliously, arguing that the ruling classes have made an error in equating the workers' relative affluence with contentment.

Blokes with suits and bowler hats will say: "These chaps have got their television sets, enough to live on, council houses, beer and pools ... We've made them happy. What's wrong? Is that a machine-gun I hear starting up or a car backfiring?"

Der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der. I hope I'm not here to see it, but I know I will be. (203)

Heralding Arthur's marriage, this passage might be read as bluster, illustrating a need in Arthur to portray himself as "always a rebel" in the face of his acquiescence, although the ambiguities of his entry into marriage make this, at most, one possibility. Arthur's wish not to live to see the revolution he predicts is characteristically contradictory: he sees through a system which contains an exploited working class, but prefers to be a knowing victim, rebellious in thought, than a revolutionary. This has the attraction of setting him apart from the Jacks and Bills of the world, enjoying the status of outsider (a figure not fully controlled), while simultaneously rooting his discontent in the exploitation and containment of a class with which he fully identifies.

Sillitoe develops this complex, ambiguous position with the novel's closing scene, in which Arthur sits on a canal bank and catches a fish. Arthur's monologue considers marriage

as both an instrument of containment, along with the factory, (“you were roped in by a factory, had a machine slung round your neck, and then you were hooked up by the arse with a wife”), and as offering the possibility of “something better”. He pictures himself as a fish attracted by bait (“You swam about with freedom ... doing anything you wanted to do and caring about no one, when suddenly: SPLUTCH! – the big hook clapped itself into your mouth”) but he transforms the metaphor from one connoting entrapment to one connoting the seizing of new opportunities for vitality through conflict.

If you went through life refusing all the bait dangled before you, that would be no life at all. No changes would be made and you would have nothing to fight against. (217)

For Arthur, the murderous “contest” of marriage has become a potential catalyst for the energy of the carnivalesque. He describes it as “the vital bait”, with “vital” implying both necessity and life force. He equates it with other sources of conflict (factory, army, husbands) against which he defines himself as a rebel: “He laughed to think that he was full of bait already ... that had certainly given him a fair share of trouble” (217).

Arthur’s thoughts are interrupted by a fish taking the bait on the end of his line and he expertly reels it in. Having just described himself as a fish who has taken bait, the encounter is ambiguous – at which end of the line is Arthur? – recalling the topsy-turvy world of carnival. John Jervis comments that among the reversals commonly depicted on the banners in early carnival processions was an image of “the fish eating the fisherman” (Jervis 17). As Arthur holds the captured fish in his hands, his first thought is of the fear of death (akin to that fear imposed by official culture through ecclesiastical/political means): “He looked into its glass-grey eye, at the brown pupil whose fear expressed all the life that it had yet lived and

all its fear of the death that now threatened it” (218). However, he then imagines the fish in a broader cycle of nature, bringing to mind Bakhtin’s cycle of death and rebirth:

The glow of long-remembered lives was mirrored in its eyes, and the memory of cunning curves executed in the moving shadows from reed to reed as it scattered the smaller fry and was itself chased by bigger fish was also pictured there. (218)

A sense of solidarity with the fish leads him to throw it back but this is a suspension in the rules of engagement. The cycle of life and death at the heart of carnivalesque energy must continue. Yet it is part of the topsy-turveydom of that force that Arthur is both in struggle with his catch and complicit with it, just as he is rebelliously at odds with his class while being firmly rooted in it. As he was once “stirred by the sound of breaking glass” (108), now he is energised by the struggle with the fish: “The float bobbed more violently than before and, with a grin on his face, he began to wind in the reel.” (219) This, the novel’s final sentence, leads the reader in a circle back to the vitality of the opening riot.

Representation can intensify and accentuate and present in a certain mood a reality which, in reality, would strike us quite differently; thus it can overturn – subvert – what our responses would be in actuality. Sillitoe’s novel does this, while remaining resolutely braced by the framing mode of realism, so that even as we are inspired by the revolutionary vision offered, so we are not allowed to forget the individual realities, realities like our own, which lie behind that vision, and sometimes undermine it. Bakhtin’s overarching theory may be criticised for being monolithic, but it allows us to see the joyously subversive spirit alive even in texts which have been reductively sidelined as “working class realism”, where that term

implies a non-transformative reportage of a grim reality. The triumph of Sillitoe's novel is that it uses both carnival and the carnivalesque as an expression of (and representation of) a death-defeating energy which springs from the actuality of working class life. It allows us, if only temporarily, to see reality in a different, a radically optimistic way. At the same time, his version of the carnivalesque is less romanticised than Bakhtin's, since he is alive to the dangers of containment which lurk at its heart.

But finally, what survives for the reader of this iconic working class novel is image after image of relentless extraordinary optimistic energy. Arthur's laughter as he rolls down the stairs and as he beats the skeleton, the laughter of the "riot" at the White Horse Club and of the Christmas party at Aunt Ada's, echo through and beyond the novel's ending, like the "mobile waves of hope" (218-19) which run through the body of Arthur's fish, and Arthur himself. As Bakhtin's mighty work reminds us, such "festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (Bakhtin 92). Saturday Night and Sunday Morning has itself too long been oppressed and restricted by the traditionally narrow category of working class realism; it is time to recognise the liberating power of Sillitoe's carnivalesque images which, like those of Rabelais, "have a certain undestroyable non-official nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can co-exist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity" (Bakhtin 3). Of course this language itself would and should make Arthur laugh; but in its echo we can just about hear the "der-der-der" of his revolutionary army.

Note

1. Sillitoe 1994: 9. All references to the novel are to this edition.

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