

Between Politics and Culture: Liberal Journalism and Literary Cultural Discourse at the *Fin de Siècle*

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THE ARTICULATION of journalism and literature in late-Victorian and Edwardian England has been the subject of a growing body of recent scholarship, but strangely enough, that scholarship has not examined in any detail the literary cultural discourse of specifically *liberal* journalism.¹ It is a curious omission because the assumed liberalism of the period's literary culture is a well-remarked phenomenon, and late-Victorian and Edwardian journalists, whatever the colour of their journals, were predominantly liberal. This article goes some way towards rectifying the omission. Focusing primarily on journalists and journals at the advanced or "progressive" end of the liberal spectrum, the first half of the article sketches in broad terms their close ties to the literary cultural world and the place they afforded literature in their politically progressive newspapers. The second half of the article then takes up in some detail a specific example of their literary discourse—the use of "life" as a term of value—in order to show how their political vocabulary inflected that literary discourse.

Although they are largely forgotten now, mainstream journalists played key roles in the shaping and circulation of *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian literary discourse. While the impact of the little magazines has long been recognised, we should not forget that the literary pages of the mainstream daily and weekly press were also sites in which contemporary critical assumptions were played out in thousands of book reviews and other forms of literary journalism. Through their use of categories for identifying, placing and evaluating texts, journalists acted as pivotal shunts in the circuitry of the literary culture, helping to shape the way new work was understood and appropriated. At a time when literary journalists were also helping to form and staff the

newly emerging field of academic literary criticism, they provided what Elizabeth Frazer has called in a different context “discourse registers,” “culturally familiar, public ways of talking”² about literary culture. In this way, journalists and the journals for which they wrote comprised an apparatus that was systemically related to the production, dissemination and reception of literary culture. Without it, English literary culture of the late-Victorian and Edwardian years simply would not have been what it was.

The political tenor of this journalistic apparatus was predominantly liberal, as we can gather from Robert Steven’s account of the National Liberal Club. The NLC had been founded in 1883 and Steven was its political secretary from 1897 to 1908. Writing in 1924, he considered that

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for a considerable time, at least, the National Liberal Club was one of the greatest and most interesting clubs in the world. Men from every quarter of the globe found shelter within its hospitable walls, from distant Colonies, from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India. Noted Continental and American names were on the Banquet list. The “Liberal” clergy, Anglican and Nonconformist, had a home and a welcome. The intellectual Socialist fraternised with the peer. Above and beyond everything the Club has always been a live one, full of interesting people, and where literary men like Frederic Harrison, Anthony Hope, H. G. Wells, and W. J. Locke found something in common with the least distinguished politician or journalist.

In those days there were gathered together all sorts and conditions of men. Primarily it was a political, but to no small extent a Bohemian and journalistic, club, with a cosmopolitan element. Every phase of political and journalistic thought was represented. It mattered little if the member—personally Liberal in politics—represented a Tory, a Liberal, an American, or a Continental journal. It is perhaps a curious, but none the less an accurate estimate that twenty years ago three-fourths of the prominent London journalists professed Liberal politics. In a sense the National Liberal was the Press Club of the world.³

As Steven’s portrait of the NLC makes clear, this world of liberal journalism was quite specifically Liberal in the *political* sense, not merely “liberal” in a broad ideological sense. The composition and fortunes of the parliamentary Liberal Party were closely linked to their general socio-political beliefs, and a career in journalism often went hand in hand with a political career. Within the Liberal Party in the 1890s and Edwardian years, James Bryce, Henry Labouchere, H. H. Asquith, George Newnes, Augustine Birrell, Charles Masterman, T. P. O’Connor, Justin McCarthy, Hilaire Belloc and Herbert Paul, for in-

stance, were just some of the sitting members who had been or still were journalists and men of letters. Moreover, despite the gradual transformation of the political press or press of “opinion” to the modern commercial press during this period,⁴ there was still a clear sense in which the daily, evening and weekly papers, and the journalists who worked on those papers, were openly committed to political parties. Dailies such as the *Daily News* and *Daily Chronicle* (though representing different points in the spectrum, and changing those points at the height of the debate over the Boer War); evening papers such as the *Star*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* (until 1895), and the *Westminster Gazette* (after 1895); and influential weeklies such as the *British Weekly* and the *Speaker* (later the *Nation*) were important London papers articulating and debating liberal politics and policies for a range of different readers. In a different register, generalist monthlies such as the *Fortnightly*, the *Independent Review*, the *Progressive Review* and the *Monthly Review* (during Newbolt’s editorship) also nailed their liberal colours to their mastheads.

Many of the most influential liberal journalists writing for these papers were deeply immersed in literary culture and engaged prolifically in literary journalism. For example, editors such as Wemyss Reid (the *Speaker* 1890–1899), William Robertson Nicoll (the *British Weekly* 1886–1923 and the *Bookman* 1891–1923), Henry Massingham (the *Daily Chronicle* 1895–1899 and the *Nation* 1907–1921), J. A. Spender (the *Westminster Gazette* 1895–1922), and A. G. Gardiner (the *Daily News* 1902–1919) were literary editors at different moments in their careers and were widely read in both classical and contemporary literature. Together with liberal literary editors such as Richard Le Gallienne (the *Star* in the early 1890s), Henry Nevinson (the *Daily Chronicle* in the late 1890s and the *Nation* in the late-Edwardian years), Arthur Quiller-Couch (the *Speaker* in the early 1890s) and Charles Masterman and Robert Lynd (the *Daily News* in the Edwardian years) and the stables of book reviewers they assembled, these largely forgotten liberals played significant roles in the debates about the condition and direction of literary culture from the late 1880s to the First World War.

Particularly important in this respect were liberal journalists at the advanced or progressive end of the liberal spectrum, where liberalism spilt over into other forms of reformist and radical thought. As Jose Harris and others have noted, the late-Victorian and Edwardian decades were characterised by “an immensely vigorous associational and

reformist culture: by groups of people who constantly came together to improve, reform, rationalize, and revolutionize social institutions and to bring them into harmony with the perceived requirements of the modern world.”⁵ Within this context, advanced liberalism, like other progressive “isms” of the time, might best be understood as a range of ideas, theories and policies designed to bring about the regeneration of English society and culture. While the political dimension of progressive liberalism—the new liberalism—has been the subject of a significant body of scholarship, we should not forget that progress was understood in cultural as well as political terms, a point made by one of its foremost theorists in relation to the *Progressive Review*: “It was distinctive of the *Progressive Review* that, though primarily political-economic in its outlook, it realized that ‘progress’ was ‘cultural’ in the widest human sense. Not a few of its articles were written by leaders of free-thought in the fields of art and literature. Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, William Archer, James Oliphant, Karl Blind are among the names recorded.”⁶

The seriousness with which advanced liberal journalists took the “progressive” dimension of literary culture can be seen in the daily press too. Take, for example, the *Star*, established in 1888 by the Parnellite M.P., T. P. O’Connor, as a means of strengthening the Home Rule cause in the London press. The *Star* was initially edited by O’Connor with Henry Massingham as assistant editor, but Massingham soon became the driving force and was appointed editor in 1890. The paper provided trenchant support for the Progressives in the elections for the newly created London County Council, and took a strong pro-Union stance on the industrial disputes of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Its broad position was made clear in the first issue, which loudly proclaimed that this would be a “radical journal. It will judge all policy—domestic, foreign, social from the radical standpoint. This, in other words, will be esteemed by us good or bad as it influences, for good or evil, the lot of the masses of the people.” This radical political policy went hand in hand with a broadly based series of features ranging from theatrical and musical gossip columns through fashion and sport to book reviews. The cultural side was covered by A. B. Walkley on drama, Clem Shorter on books and writers, George Bernard Shaw, who wrote leaders and music criticism, Arthur Symons and Le Gallienne as book reviewers, and Joseph Pennell as art critic.⁷

The tone of the *Star* under Massingham was both politically and culturally progressive, committed not only to political democracy, but

also to a stimulating mix of literary cultural views. These were located primarily in the “Books and Bookmen” column, a full column appearing at first on Thursdays and later on Mondays and Saturdays as well, but also in two other less regular columns, “Bookland in Brief” and “Books and Booklets to Hand.” In a four-page newspaper, this was a sizeable space devoted to literary matters. As the title suggests, “Books and Bookmen” consisted of a mix of reviews, notes, comments, gossip, letters and interviews. It was edited for the first two years by Shorter (“Tatler”) and then by Le Gallienne (“Logroller”). Le Gallienne, whose *Volumes in Folio* (1889) was to be the first book published by John Lane and Elkin Mathews in the newly formed Bodley Head Press, soon became a literary adviser to the firm, and brought his *belles lettres* connections gained there back to the *Star*. These included Lionel Johnson, John Davidson and William Watson, founding members of the Rhymers’ Club, and later, at the *Chronicle*, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell.

Although the specific views advanced in the “Books and Bookmen” columns were often enough relatively mainstream, what is interesting is the way they functioned to produce certain reading effects in the paper’s largely lower-middle-class readers. Interviews with Whitman (interviewed in the USA by Clarke) and Vizetelly in 1888, for example, were followed by profiles of Zola, Wemyss Reid, Bjorn Bjornson, A. E. Fletcher (the new radical editor of the *Daily Chronicle*), Mrs. Humphry Ward and William Morris over the next year. Given that these interviews and profiles jostled with brief reviews of or comments on canonical or near-canonical writers (particularly Emerson, Milton, Lamb, Scott, Richardson and Tennyson) and contemporaries such as Swinburne, George Moore, Morris and Zola, what seems to be happening here is a process whereby the paper was establishing and legitimising what constituted the “literary cultural” for its readers. It seems fairly apparent from the format and the sorts of debates over, for example, Zola that these readers were being drawn into the immediacy and relevance of cultural markers that signified advanced literary culture, rather than the world of popular romance or adventure. In effect, the *Star* was asking them to consider themselves part of the “cultural” nation (and by implication, the “national” culture), rather than as members of a culturally excluded Demos. Its radical commitment to political democracy was, in effect, bolstered by a set of views that tended towards something we might now call cultural democracy. Even Pennell, who excoriated “the bourgeois and middle-class, and the whole

Anglo-Saxon race, which loves banalities, boorishness and buncombe,” considered that the aim of the *Star* was to “elevate the masses,” and, as “Artist Unknown,” “believed [he] could bring art to the people.”⁸

The political progressivism became too much for the proprietors of the paper, and Massingham resigned in January 1891. In December that year he joined the *Daily Chronicle* as a leader writer under its radical editor A. E. Fletcher, and soon was to become its literary editor and assistant editor. The change of institutional base is revealing, because we find the same journalists who wrote for him on the *Star* coming to write for him on the *Chronicle*. The fact that Vaughan Nash, Shaw, Pennell, Edward Clodd, Archer and Walkley, for example, all became significant members in the *Chronicle*’s pool of contributors suggests that so long as the publication base was sufficiently congenial, advanced liberal journalists would continue to act as a group. The *Chronicle* reflected this. Politically, it “replaced the *Star* as the most influential friend of the Progressives in the London press,”⁹ touching, according to Massingham, “more surely, more seriously, the great main arteries of English middle and working-class life” than its daily press competitors.¹⁰ Culturally, “its liveliness, variety, serious tone, and intellectual thoroughness afford[ed] a welcome relief to the slovenly and unthinking opportunism which is the curse of the modern newspaper,”¹¹ and provided an increasingly important outlet for advanced thinkers.

During the 1890s, the *Chronicle* stood for a fairly clear set of cultural imperatives, forged largely through connections with various radical cultural groups. According to Pennell, the paper under Massingham “was not only violently reform—really radical, though not red—but in his reign also violently literary and artistic.”¹² A brief perusal of the sheer space given to literary and artistic matters supports this. At the beginning of 1891, a two-page *Daily Chronicle Literary Supplement* appeared on Wednesdays, given over entirely to book reviews and advertisements for publishers. From 30 November 1891, more wholesale changes occurred. The paper increased to ten pages and devoted page three every day to books and the book world. Page three, “that wonderful literary page,” as H. N. Brailsford put it, offered “a criticism not merely of letters but of life, a vehicle for every group of thinkers and artists which was struggling to escape from the prison house of Victorian convention.”¹³

This articulation between political and cultural progressivism was manifested in a variety of ways. During the 1895 election campaign for the London County Council, for instance, Massingham suggested to

Pennell that he ask other artists to illustrate the achievements of the Progressive Party in the pages of the paper. As Pennell recalls it:

I got Whistler, Walter Crane, Burne-Jones, William Morris, Phil May, Bernard Partridge, Alfred Parsons, Raven-Hill, Maurice Greiffenhagen, E. J. Sullivan, A. S. Hartrick, and Aubrey Beardsley to make drawings.... Only, when the votes for the new members were counted, it was found the Progressives had lost twenty-five seats and we had published about that number of drawings. Such was the power of art in England. I was told Beardsley lost us a lot of votes.¹⁴

While the politics of the *Chronicle* were not always as overt as that in cultural matters, nor perhaps as counterproductive, they were nevertheless present in various ways. A collection of poetry by Joe Wilson, a working-class poet from Newcastle, for example, evinces the response that “we have a tenderness for all genuine local literature, for any work racy of the soil, and especially for such local poetry as comes from those grimy industrial districts where the muse might be expected to ‘dwindle peak and pine.’”¹⁵ The clichés are there, of course (the review goes on to speak of the poet’s “genial, human, rough-hewn songs”), but the placing of Wilson in the context of other working-class writers (Edwin Waugh and Joseph Skipsey) is part of a strikingly positive assessment of at least some elements of working-class culture. Clearer commitments to a democratic literary culture can be seen in the almost uniformly positive accounts of Whitman who, not surprisingly, held pride of place in this context,¹⁶ among other American or colonial “democratic” writers. In addition to specific judgments of this kind, the general commitment to democratic culture was also manifested in the “Writers and Readers” column edited by James Milne. The column was typically generated by readers’ responses to some controversial article written a day or so before, and Milne himself considered that it “became a real channel of communication between publishers, book-sellers, book-buyers and readers, almost an intelligence department.”¹⁷ While there is clearly a commercial dimension to this, it should also be read against Milne’s commitment to “the Commonwealth of Reading” (“because in its many mansions there lodges a great democracy”) and his belief in “the Republic of Letters” (“meaning that those labouring in it are equals, though their gifts to it may not be”).¹⁸ For Milne, as for so many of these advanced liberals, literary culture was conceived in fundamentally inclusive rather than exclusive terms, reflecting their broader commitments to progress through democracy.

By the late 1890s and early 1900s, the advanced liberal formation centred around the *Chronicle* extended into a sizeable portion of the

London base of progressive literary culture, providing it with a daily outlet unmatched before or since, and with no equivalent on the conservative side of politics and culture.¹⁹ Liberal literary journalists writing for the paper were also members of literary circles such as the London Irish group, the Meynell circle, the Colvin circle, and other cultural and social-progressive groups such as the Friends of Russian Freedom, the London Ethical Society, the Rainbow circle and institutions such as the University Extension Movement and Toynbee Hall. Through such articulations, many of England's major modern novelists and poets were drawn into a formation they found politically and culturally congenial. Take, for example, Alice Meynell who, together with her husband Wilfred, was the centre of one of the most eminent literary circles of the 1890s and the early Edwardian years. William Morris, Coventry Patmore, Katherine Tynan and Lionel Johnson were just some of the writers drawn into the Meynells' periodical *Merry England*, and Patmore and George Meredith were Alice's two most powerful supporters at a time in the 1890s when it seemed she might become Poet Laureate. As the Tynan and Johnson connections suggest, the Meynell circle also had intricate links with the Irish group in London, and it was partly through this group (with other connections through Le Gallienne and Elizabeth Pennell) that Alice had come to write for the *Daily Chronicle* in 1895–1896, and continued to do so through the latter years of the decade.

During these years, the consistent anti-imperialism held by advanced liberal journalists also helped bind them together. Massingham, Brailsford and J. H. Hammond, for example, were founding members of the South Africa Conciliation Committee and the League of Liberals against Aggression and Militarism, both established in 1900. Although Massingham's forced resignation from the *Chronicle* in November 1899 took away a key institutional base, the replacement of Wemyss Reid by Hammond as editor of the weekly *Speaker* in the same year provided an alternative outlet, as did the appointment of A. G. Gardiner as editor of the *Daily News* in 1901, following the resignation of the pro-imperialist E. T. Cook. What is interesting is the way their anti-imperialist bent was taken up in their literary critical discourse. For Charles Masterman, contemporary literature could only be understood in relation to what he calls "the Reaction," the literature and politics of imperialism, which he sees as the dominant mode of the nineties. This literature (he cites Henley and Kipling as examples) was one of "intoxication," of "forced ferocity," that was "divorced from real things."

Fascinated with “the idea of war,” it collapsed when confronted with the “reality” of the Boer War.²⁰ One of the consequences of the Reaction was a mood of *ennui*, of disillusionment, of escape, characterised by a preoccupation with “dreams and memories” or utopian visions.²¹

Against such world weariness (with which he equates Hardy’s phrase “the ache of modernism”), Masterman posits the need for “life.” This term is a central marker of value in the formation’s literary cultural imaginary. How literature is imagined or conceived, the assumptions about its purpose, and thus the nature of literary judgments are all replete with the term or its offshoots. In “The Task of Realism,” for example, Hobson sees the first half of the nineteenth century as a period when “poetic prophets, co-operative socialists, utilitarian theorists and philosophical radicals ... all aimed consciously and avowedly at a general transformation of life.”²² Hobson argues that increased scepticism and specialisation in the second half of the century undermined these laudable aims, but that “a great intellectual and spiritual revival” was again at work by the end of the century, and he invokes the names of Wagner, Millet, Whistler, Nietzsche, Whitman, Tolstoy, Zola, Ibsen, Shaw and Brieux as contributors to this revival. Hobson’s list of names reads like a pantheon of proto-modernists, but the point here is that he has a view of literature and the arts that emphasises iconoclasm and freedom. This is what he means by the spirit of realism, a “fuller realism” to be distinguished from “the cruder realism whose only facts were hard and dead.” It isn’t that a realist literature is to serve politics, but that literature and other fields have as their common aim the “transformation of life.”²³ In a similar vein, Clarke sees in Whitman literature “once more vitally associated with life, as it was in the days of Elizabethan dramatists, of the buoyant Cervantes, of the majestic Dante. It is not a profession, a separate calling, an affair of libraries and literary coteries, but a transcript from actual contemporary life.”²⁴ Indeed, literature *is* life, not so much in the sense of classic realism’s reliance on correspondence as in the sense of coherence, manifesting a meaningful, authentic wholeness.

The emphasis on the organic relatedness of individual to community, of parts to the whole, is typical of this advanced liberal literary discourse. Thus the writer of “The Outlook in Fiction,” a 1908 piece in the *Nation*, argues that the poor state of English fiction is a result of “talents isolated, with ideas and ideals strikingly divorced from the people’s life.” This is not to say that writers are to pander to a general public’s taste (the “Philistine temperament of the practical-minded

Englishman”), but that they should try “to see their class as a whole, or the larger significance of the stratified layers of class interests and class prejudices.” At first glance, this might appear to be the kind of view that Virginia Woolf was to criticise in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” but the writer extends the argument to include the psychological as well as the social realms: English writers are inferior to Continental writers in their “psychological analysis” because, rather than trying to analyse character “by broad human standards,” they rely on “parochial or suburban tests.”²⁵ Psychological analysis, like social analysis, is valuable insofar as it moves beyond the individual or local case and tries to understand the particular in relation to the general. The point is made clearly by William Archer in a review of Chekhov the following year: “It is very striking that the more humanly deep and the finer the shades of psychological truth presented by a piece of literature, the less does the modern Englishman seem to grasp it.... And that is where the Russian writers beat the English hollow—in placing the individual figure in relation to the vast scheme of life around us.”²⁶

Whether it was Masterman’s “affirmation of life,” Hobson’s “transformation of life,” or Clarke’s belief in “the fulness of life” (which, “as the final and complete end, transcends and includes all minor and partial ends”²⁷), the term “life” takes on an almost totemic significance in its frequency of use and its function as a foundational touchstone. The explanation for its popularity is a separate issue but is certainly bound up with the centrality of evolutionary and organicist discourses at the time. Committed as they were to democratic change, advanced liberals exhibited what Michael Freeden has called “the co-operative-altruistic version of Darwinism in progressive social thought,”²⁸ which saw more highly evolved species developing via mechanisms of cooperation rather than competition. Perhaps the most extreme example of this approach is Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), a collection of essays he wrote throughout the 1890s in response to T. H. Huxley’s controversial *Evolution and Ethics* (1894). As a higher function in the evolutionary process, reason played a crucial role in the development of cooperation. The aim, William Clarke argued in his editorial introduction to the first issue of the *Progressive Review* in 1896, was to quicken and improve “the pace and character of popular progress ... by imparting a higher conscious purpose to the operations of the social will.”²⁹ The articulation among this “higher conscious purpose,” reason, ethics and democracy is made clear a few lines later: “Faith in ideas and in the growing capacity of the common people to

absorb and to apply ideas in reasonably working out the progress of the Commonwealth forms the moral foundation of democracy.”³⁰ The social organism, then, was “vital,” continually evolving, and its evolution was progressive insofar as it was an evolution towards greater cooperation. For members of this advanced liberal formation, the use and effects of rationality were key instruments in evolutionary progression, being part of “the need for constant action of an optimistic and rational spirituality upon a world which at best was only dimly conscious of ultimate ethical values.”³¹

This is essentially a dynamic view of society, driven by the belief in open-ended possibilities that are as yet unclear and unrealised. As Hobhouse put it, “a progressive movement ... must have an ideal, and an ethical ideal for the future must be in so far abstract as it is not yet realized and embodied in social institutions.”³² It is a future-driven imaginary, not just intellectually, but emotionally as well, tapping into the psychic conditions that characterised radicalism in the late nineteenth century, “a time of adventure and life renewed ... of infinitely varied experiment,” as Nevinson later recalled.³³ The place of liberalism in this open-ended dynamic is central; indeed, it is the very nature of liberalism itself to be open-ended. As Hobson put it, speaking of the ways liberalism needed to change to take account of the new emphasis on collectivity:

It surely belongs to Liberalism to think thus liberally about its mission and its modes of progressive achievement. Not, however, of fulfilment. For it is this illimitable character of Liberalism, based on the infinitude of the possibilities of human life, in its individual and social aspects, which affords that vision without which not only a people but a party perishes, the vision of

“That untravelled world where margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.”³⁴

What “life” meant varied over time, depending on what it was used to critique, whether the dry rationalism of an earlier liberalism, the formulae of European socialism, the excesses of Decadence or the unreality of Boer War jingoism. Broadly speaking, there seem to be two main currents of meaning running through its use during these years. In the first meaning, it functions as a positive term opposed to a range of negative terms that are perceived as somehow rigid. In an intellectual environment dominated by debates about evolution, it was not surprising that life should become a contested concept. For advanced liberals, laying claim to life as a conception of evolution that included the capac-

ity for reflective cooperation and open-ended progress over a conception of evolution that was fundamentally deterministic, stressing the competitive animal foundations of humanity, was a powerful move in this environment. As William Clarke put it, if we “consider man as a phenomenon determined by heredity and environment,” we treat him “as a body, not a soul. His life is to be so organised, so drilled, so machined, that a kind of automatic rectitude will obtain.”³⁵ The second broad usage opposes life not so much to rigidity as to its opposite, the felt disaggregation of contemporary aspects of culture and society, a kind of untrammelled atomism characteristic of market society. Here life stands not so much for freedom as opposed to determinism (the first usage), but collectivism as opposed to individualism, cooperation as opposed to competition. Thus Hobson criticises both the old political economy of Smith, Ricardo and James Mill, and the new political economy (which came to be called economics) of J. S. Mill, Jevons and Marshall for their reliance on “the money standard,” arguing instead for the need to “convert ‘costs’ and ‘utilities’ from terms of cash into terms of human life.”³⁶

It is through the concept of life that the social and political imaginaries of progressive liberal journalists most closely articulate with their cultural categories and values. For example, in their use of the metaphors “healthy” and “diseased” to evaluate particular works of art or broader cultural trends, members of the formation were not simply tapping into a preexisting cultural discourse that was permeated by these metaphors, though they were certainly doing that; they were also employing them in ways that specifically articulated with the social imaginary adumbrated above. Take, for example, the following comments by William Clarke and L. T. Hobhouse. Clarke, in a largely negative article on Nietzsche, agrees with him that “it is true that the present decadent movement in literature and life is profoundly unhealthy, though we may be unable to see in Wagner, for instance, as Nietzsche sees in him, a leading representative of disease. But the literature of the age is sombre, and we agree that firm and elastic fibre and a joyous spirit must always attach to a great productive era.”³⁷ If at first this seems rather like the Decadence-as-disease arguments of Henley and other Imperialists, we should read it against Hobhouse’s argument that

Whatever else this war has done, let us hope that for a time it has stopped the talk of decadence. There are good things in civilisation which are often threatened with decay, but physical vigour, courage, and enterprise are the last qualities to be seriously endangered.... It is the gentler and

humaner elements of civilisation that are more often in danger, and the cant of physical decadence is at bottom a part of the campaign against all progress in the peaceful arts by the active and plausible advocates of rebarbarisation.³⁸

The “disease” is not decadence understood as a series of supposedly physiological or psychological characteristics (the degeneration of the physiological organism tending towards insanity) manifested in artistic representations, though Clarke’s language draws on that kind of critique. It is, rather, the decay of interpersonal cooperation (Hobhouse’s “gentler and humaner elements of civilisation”) or the closing off of possibility (Clarke’s “productivity”). These elements of cooperation and potentiality are the features of a living, healthy organism, and disease occurs when they are missing. Hobhouse, for instance, sees “suburban villadom” as having “no healthy corporate life” because it is constituted by a middle class which is fundamentally selfish, “a class of moderately well-to-do people almost wholly divorced from definite public duties ... respectable to the point of being incapable of reform.”³⁹ Something is healthy or diseased, then, not so much in terms of its individual physiology or psychology, but more in terms of its capacity to reinforce or detract from the life of the larger organism, understood as an ideal of dynamic, open-ended cooperation. Cultural artefacts are healthy, not merely because they exhibit the dominant cultural preferences of the time (though that is often the case), but because they manifest, through their particular form, the potentiality of life, the sense of the open-ended possibilities that characterise the evolving social organism. Understood in this way, the widespread emphasis on virility (Clarke’s “firm and elastic fibre and a joyous spirit”), though often retaining the masculinist overtones so typical of the time, also manifests one of the ways in which life and its related concepts were used in cultural discourse as markers for democratic progress. As Hobhouse put it, “even the imperfect, halting, confused utterance of the common will may have in it the potency of higher things than a perfection of machinery can ever attain.”⁴⁰

In short, the literary cultural discourse of advanced liberal journalists was underpinned by an open-ended, democratic progressivism for which life and its cluster of related terms was a key marker. The terms provided those journalists with both a conceptual and an axiological framework that was built around a series of mediations (for example, between the whole and the parts, stasis and movement, authority and creative freedom) in which neither one side nor the other was domi-

nant. This is a dynamic framework whose characteristic move is to transcend binaries through the notion of an open, unfolding set of possibilities.

In both its general tenor and specific terms, this framework was central to *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian progressive liberalism, but it also extended more generally into the literary culture. Both the *Star* and the *Chronicle* were key institutional sites for its dissemination, and as Alfred Havighurst has put it, “during the Massingham years the *Nation* published most of England’s significant writers: poets, novelists, dramatists, essayists, critics,” “and the artist and the critic were confronted to their mutual benefit.”⁴¹ Much of this networking occurred at the weekly *Nation* lunches which, according to Charles Masterman, “represented something so unique and exhilarating that one would sweep away all other engagements in order to attend.... Every kind of genius or freak streamed at times through that quiet room in the National Liberal Club.”⁴² The result was the circulation of a literary cultural discourse that underpinned many Edwardians’ understanding of what constituted the new and significant.

Clarke and Masterman are worth considering in this respect. For Clarke, writing in the early 1890s, “the great innovating thinkers and artists will always be ahead of [the community], and if they were not, they would be of no value,” and he sees his own time as “manifestly associated with the ideas of artistic change” when “we seem to come nearer to the essential fact, to seize on the very spirit of life.”⁴³ Clarke sees these innovations in the psychological novel and the increasing complexity and spirituality of music. As he puts it in relation to Whitman, “the most representative bard of democracy,” it is a case of apprehending “the needs of our time”:

Our acceptance of Whitman, therefore, mainly depends on whether we accept the advent, welcome or unwelcome, of a new world.... Here is the ultimate ground of judgment on Whitman’s verse; here is the ultimate test which will decide whether he is welcomed or repulsed. Do we long for a larger, deeper life, for a richer experience, no matter how bought? Have we courage enough to quit the shallows for the deep blue?⁴⁴

Writing a decade later, Masterman also posits the need for life in modern literature. In 1905, he sees this in the Irish School (“one of the few vital things in the world of today”), Nevinson (whose pictures of slum life are based on “things seen” in comparison to “the cleverness, the essential ignorance ... the same eye for picturesque effect and the same contempt for its peoples” which developed under the inspiration of the

Reaction), Belloc and Chesterton.⁴⁵ By 1909 he is less sanguine about Belloc and Chesterton, whose earlier affirmation of life has been overtaken by a focus on decay, on “a people which has abandoned Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, of political parties bought for ignoble ends, a nation which has turned its back upon the clean ways of progress.”⁴⁶ Masterman now places Belloc and Chesterton with Wells and Shaw as “analytical” or “critical” writers. Like Nevinson, who responds to Ibsen in similar terms, Masterman thinks highly of these writers, but ultimately sees their vision as a negative one in contrast to writers such as Whitman, Maeterlinck, Morris and Jefferies, who engage in what he calls “life-worship.”

Although he does not say it explicitly, Masterman in effect is suggesting that modern literature is “new” only insofar as it makes for life. Not only is “life-worship” a consistent standard of judging the new, it is broadly democratic insofar as its “sense of inspiration and splendour ... could become part of the common life of humanity.”⁴⁷ As a new liberal collectivist, like many of the members of the network, he is looking for community rather than competition, shareable experiences rather than excessive inwardness. In effect, the negativity of the “analytical” Edwardians reflects a failure of liberalism for Masterman, and what he is really after is a kind of literature that, like his own commitment to social reform, reflects a constructive, positive belief in the possibilities of modern life. Masterman is not naïve about these possibilities, and there is a frequent elegiac quality in his work. Like Clarke, though, he understands and values these new literary forms to the extent they are the antennae of emerging social forms that manifest the evolving life of a social democracy.

Such an approach to the new puts a different complexion on a good deal of *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian fiction. Socially concerned novels might have made Virginia Woolf feel as though she should “join a society, or, more desperately ... write a cheque” in order to complete them,⁴⁸ but their authors were much more than mere proselytisers. Although in many ways inheritors of high-Victorian modes of narrative authority, writers such as Arthur Morrison, Clarence Rook, Hubert Crackenthorpe, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy were also concerned with who sees and who speaks in their fiction. Though clearly not disruptive to the same extent as the emerging fictions of modernism, their work frequently undermines fixed distances between narrative voice and the subjects of the narrative, and narrative authority is itself often subverted by irony and other techniques that attach more validity to

the words of the subjects than those of the narrator. Intersubjectivity of this kind stresses variety and difference, is inherently decentred rather than centred, and is based on a fundamental commitment to democracy. Of course this is not always achieved, and there are many examples of the omniscient preaching that so annoyed the modernists. However, in their emphasis on the relativity of subject positions these writers were much more modern than Woolf and others thought, even though in their exploration of the organic relations between subject positions they were also inheritors of the high-Victorian tradition. In a sense, they were trying to balance their recognition of the unknowability of the Other with their commitment to the ideal of a knowable community, an aim which led to much of the tension in their work.

It is precisely this sense of variety and difference combined with connectivity and possibility that is encapsulated in the discourse of life. As we read through the pages of the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Speaker* in the 1890s, the *Daily News* and the *Nation* in the Edwardian years, and the various essay collections published during those years, it quickly becomes apparent that contemporary literature was understood and assessed by advanced liberals largely in these terms. The extent to which this discourse penetrated the working assumptions of *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian writers is difficult to gauge, even from memoirs and notebooks, but given its ubiquity, it is hard to resist the thought that it figured in some way in shaping actual compositions. Certainly it provided a critical framework for the reception of contemporary works, enabling some to be judged as new by virtue of the ways in which formal experimentation or the extension of subject matter contributed to the broad unfolding possibilities—the progress—of human life. As this article has shown, such progress was neither linear nor known: it could take many forms and its ultimate condition was unknown. For the formation of advanced liberal journalists, whose members were both “practical reformers” and members of “the cultured class,”⁴⁹ it was, to use a common metaphor of the time, something of an “open road” on which both politics and culture travelled in tandem.

Notes

1. For some recent examples, see Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett, eds., *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Kate Campbell, ed., *Journalism, Literature and Modernity: From Hazlitt to Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). On the liberal dimension, there is a partial exception in the history of the press, where Alan Lee, Stephen Koss and Aled Jones among others have examined both the overtly Liberal press and some of the liberal conceptions of the press held at the time. See Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976); Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, 2 vols. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981, 1984); and Jones, *Powers of the Press* (Brookfield, VT: Scolar Press, 1996). The work of these scholars is an essential reference point, but their concern has been less with the politics of literary culture than with the politics of media culture. Where both politics and literary culture have been treated in newspaper history, the focus has been on individual editors or on individual journals.

2. See Elizabeth Frazer, “Teenage girls reading *Jacki*,” in *Culture and Power*, Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger, Colin Sparks, eds. (London: Sage, 1992), 182–200, 195.

3. Robert Steven, *The National Liberal Club* (London: Robert Holden & Co., 1924), 33–34.

4. See Koss, *Rise and Fall*, for an extended discussion of this.

5. Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870–1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 36.

6. J. A. Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 54.

7. Generally on this see Wilson Pope, *The Story of the “Star”* (London: “The Star” Publications Department, 1931), 16–21; and Alfred Havighurst, *Radical Journalist: H. W. Massingham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 21. On Joseph Pennell, see Joseph Pennell, *The Adventures of an Illustrator* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1925). Pennell, an American illustrator of Quaker descent, came to London briefly in 1883 and returned in 1885, when he met Bernard Shaw at Kelmescott House, and through him got the post as art critic on the paper.

8. Pennell, *The Adventures of an Illustrator*, 215, 160.

9. Havighurst, *Radical Journalist*, 45.

10. Massingham, *The London Daily Press*, 123.

11. *Ibid.*, 144.

12. Pennell, *The Adventures of an Illustrator*, 249.

13. Quoted in Havighurst, *Radical Journalist*, 60.

14. Pennell, *The Adventures of an Illustrator*, 250, 252–53. Regardless of the accuracy or otherwise of Pennell’s conclusion, two important points emerge from this incident. The first is that Massingham clearly had a sense of the political function of art; that art, like literature and other cultural forms, could—and should—be used to support radical politics. The second concerns the artists Pennell called in to support that radical politics. As with Le Gallienne and Symons in the case of the *Star*, these artists are remembered now for their commitment to “advanced” art.

15. Anonymous, “On Our Book Shelves,” *Daily Chronicle*, 11 March 1891, 7.

16. Andrew Elfinbein discusses this in “Whitman, Democracy, and the English Clerisy,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 56 (2001), 76–104, though he doesn’t specifically deal with advanced liberal accounts of Whitman.

17. James Milne, *The Memoirs of a Bookman* (London: John Murray, 1934), 93.

18. *Ibid.*, 93, 5.

19. The literature pages of the Tory and Liberal Imperialist metropolitan daily press throughout the 1890s and Edwardian years have received no scholarly attention. However, even a brief perusal of major conservative organs such as the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* (after it was taken over by the Tories in 1892) and the *Times* shows the paucity of the literature pages compared with their Liberal counterparts. In the case of the weeklies, the *Saturday Review* was an influential organ of Conservative politics combined with literary culture, especially under W. H. Pollock (1883–1894). Yet its next editor, Frank Harris (1884–1898), attracted Shaw, Wells, Max Beerbohm and other radicals to its pages. Perhaps only the *Scot’s Observer* (later the *National*

Observer) under Henley's editorship (1888–1894) consistently promoted literature and literary values that reflected his Imperialist and Tory politics.

20. C. F. G. Masterman, *In Peril of Change* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1905), 6–9.
21. C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), 179–80.
22. J. A. Hobson, "The Task of Realism," *English Review*, 3 (September 1909), 324–34; reprinted as "The Task of Reconstruction," in J. A. Hobson, *The Crisis of Liberalism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1974), 261–76.
23. Hobson, "The Task of Reconstruction," 270, 275.
24. William Clarke, "Walt Whitman," in *William Clarke: A Collection of His Writings*, Herbert Burrows and J. A. Hobson, eds. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1908), 177.
25. Anonymous, "The Outlook in Fiction," *Nation*, 11 July 1908, 536.
26. William Archer, "Anton Tchekhoff, *The Kiss and Other Stories*," *Nation*, 16 January 1909, 618.
27. Clarke, "Stopford A. Brooke," in *William Clarke*, 255.
28. Michael Freedon, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 80.
29. William Clarke, "Introductory," *Progressive Review*, 1.1 (October 1896), 1–9, 8.
30. *Ibid.*, 9.
31. Freedon, *The New Liberalism*, 259.
32. L. T. Hobhouse, "The Ethical Basis of Collectivism," *International Journal of Ethics*, 8 (1898), 139.
33. Henry Nevinson, *Changes and Chances* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1923), 110.
34. Hobson, *The Crisis of Liberalism*, 95.
35. Clarke, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *William Clarke*, 201.
36. Hobson, *The Social Problem* (1902; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 45.
37. Clarke, "The Philosophy of Nietzsche," in *William Clarke*, 387.
38. L. T. Hobhouse, "Decadence," in *L. T. Hobhouse: His Life and Work*, J. A. Hobson and Morris Ginsberg, eds. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), 339.
39. L. T. Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction* (1904; Brighton: Harvester, 1972), 68, 69.
40. L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (1911; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 117.
41. Havighurst, *Radical Journalist*, 156, 155.
42. Quoted in Lucy Masterman, *C. F. G. Masterman: A Biography* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939), 79. Masterman's full account (written when Massingham lost the editorship in 1923) gives us the flavour of the lunches; more generally, see Havighurst, *Radical Journalist*, 151–55.
43. Clarke, "The Limits of Collectivism," *William Clarke*, 39.
44. Clarke, "Walt Whitman," in *William Clarke*, 175, 188, 188–89.
45. Masterman, *In Peril of Change*, 12–36.
46. Masterman, *Condition of England*, 186.
47. *Ibid.*, 196.
48. Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *Collected Essays. Volume One* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971), 326.
49. The terms are Hobson's. See *The Social Problem*, 38.

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