Mining the Meaning

Mining the Meaning:
Cultural Representations of the 1984-5 UK Miners' Strike

By

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For the strikers of 1984-5, and after

And for Julia Swindells, a striking lady

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INTRODUCTION

From novels to plays, musicals to films, the cultural history of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike is one of contestation, claim and counter-claim. In contrast to this extensive range of popular representations, writings by the strikers whose actions authored the conflict have received little academic attention. Instead, the post-strike period has been marred by the neglect and negation of strikers' literature. This study of cultural representations of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike argues that strikers' writings deserve to be added to the many existing representations of the conflict. Offering new perspectives on history as well as a significant outlet for the frustrations and pressures endured during 1984-5 and after, this study suggests that the act of writing provided strikers, their families and communities with a voice in a cultural climate that demanded their silence. Examining strikers' writings and placing their literature in dialogue with competing cultural representations of the coal dispute, the following study explores new understandings of, and perspectives on, the 1984-5 UK miners' strike.

This book began in 2003 with the identification of two archives of poetry written by participants in the 1984-5 miners' strike. One collection is held by the National Coal Mining Museum (NCM) in Wakefield and the other is based at the Working Class Movement Library (WCML) in Salford. These collections contain hand-written manuscripts, pamphlets, typed sheets of verse and several small volumes of poetry published provincially during the strike. Poems are scrawled across lined or plain paper, printed with typewriters, decorated with drawings or collected on scraps of paper held together by paperclips. Others are hand written on the back of cereal packets, on the sides of instruction manuals for household goods, on fly leaves ripped from published books and on blank pages from old school exercise books.

These writings chronicle unique perspectives on the death of an industry and a way of life, narrating both the United Kingdom's most significant post-war labour conflict and its resonating legacy. The fact that these writings remained trapped in paper files and obscure specialist libraries for over two decades may also suggest a profound disinterest in, or dismissal of, their potential contribution to existing histories of the coal dispute. Determined to mobilise the potential of this work and the new

perspectives on conflict it offers, this study is born from a desire to position strikers' poetry in dialogue with alternative cultural representations of the 1984-5 coal dispute, exploring the potential of formerly dismissed documents to help contemporary readers move beyond existing accounts of the strike, towards the construction of a wider multi-vocal cultural history, one informed by, and aware of, the contributions of many consciousnesses.

This study is grounded in the belief that history is not only open to confrontation and revision, but is incremental. Its arguments are founded on the work of Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, cultural commentator Raymond Williams and literary academic Gustav H. Klaus, which highlights the role and responsibility of the researcher in uncovering discourses of the marginalised and in examining "the forgotten volume of poetry […] the obscure artisan and […] the anonymous militant pamphlet" (Klaus 1985: ix). This reclamation is inescapably conducted within the context of a "selective tradition" that has largely ignored both the physical and literary labour of the working classes, a creative heritage which, like strikers' writings, has been "erased from the map of literary history" (Welsh Campaign For Civic and Political Liberties and NUM 1986: 30). Strikers' literature significantly contributes not only to our growing, multi-dimensional understanding of the 1984-5 conflict, but also to the ongoing development of a working-class literary tradition. Strikers' poetry documents a significant "social history in the sense that its main focus is the common people" (Figes 1996: xviii). As such, it also forms an important part of a larger project to reconstruct labour history, constituting material proof that it is possible to "find the great work amidst the turmoil of the great cause" (Maidment 1987: 5). As the 1984-5 coal dispute drifts further into the past, this study seeks to reclaim strikers' writings from "the enormous condescension of posterity", reasserting both the contribution of these texts to existing histories of the conflict and their relevance to continuing struggles of the twenty-first century (Thompson 1991: 12).

When analysing cultural representations of the 1984-5 coal dispute it is also important to take into account works "produced by outsiders, who were not born into mining communities" (Klaus 1985: 62). Looking at this work involves the study of a wide range of materials, what Raymond Williams classes as "the multiplicity of writing" (Williams 1989: 127). As Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin warns, in the fullness of time, "genres may be forced to compete with rival genres as the best way to visualize a given aspect of life" (Bakhtin quoted in Morson and Emerson 1990: 371). Attempting to place strikers' writings in a wider exchange with alternative cultural representations of the coal dispute, this study aims to investigate

how the history of this historical event has been articulated in a range of cultural forms, highlighting the dialogic relations between competing attempts to author the conflict during and after 1984-5.

Critics have long attacked the English literary canon for its rejection of literature authored by marginalised class groups. Within this marginalising tradition of working class literature, the miner has been subject to further disregard, successively depicted as an isolated 'other', a being that must be spoken for, rather than with. What little research there has been into mining literature has tended to focus on representations of mines and mining life, or on literature about miners, rather than by them. Mining literature itself has been recognised as a much "neglected topic", a form of "paraliterature" which "occupies the space outside the literary enclosure as a forbidden, taboo and perhaps degraded product" (Thesing 2000: xxii). Fewer studies, including the otherwise impressive work of John Kirk and David C. Duke, have focused on literature produced by the inhabitants of the coalfields. Even Kirk admits that, although miners are often the subject and authors of poetry, this work is "less frequently" addressed by his own study which instead focuses on representations of mining life in twentieth century novels and film (Kirk 2003: 12). As a direct result of this sustained 'othering' and exclusion, the literary canon has established the miner as a silenced and alienated being, a creature without a voice.

The historical silencing of working class literature, and the exacerbated marginalisation of the miner within this tradition, is nowhere more apparent than in strikers' writings from 1984-5. The need to salvage the perspectives of their work as historical witnesses has been highlighted as a central concern as the 1984-5 conflict recedes further into the past. In his assessment of the strike in the year of its twentieth anniversary, Ken Smith noted the continuing "need to rescue the many heroic endeavours of the millions of ordinary working class people and especially of the miners and their families that were carried out during the strike". "More than ever", Smith argued, "a proper accounting of the strike and its aftermath is necessary to strip away the one-sided pessimistic gloss heavily applied throughout the years". Consequently, the study of strikers' writings is vital not in spite of, but precisely "because of the huge volume of material that has denigrated the miners or drawn false and negative conclusions about the strike" (Smith 2004: vi). This study does not satisfy Smith's desire to "strip away" or "correct" existing histories with a radical exposé, but instead investigates alternative accounts of the strike, as well as interrogating the politics of both the means and function of their production and dissemination.

Although strikers' writings have been historically denied a wider audience, some strikers have made more successful attempts to reclaim their history through literature. The post-strike years saw a resurgence in the popularity of people's histories, both in the context of the miners' strike and as a means of re-addressing and 'popularising' historical conflicts. As Orlando Figes suggests in his own "people's history" of the Russian Revolution, accounts of conflict authored by its participants can provide "a much more convincing picture" than existing histories are otherwise able to offer (Figes 1996: xviii). People's histories addressing 1984-5, like much strikers' poetry, aim to present an alternative version of the strike, "before history is re-written yet again to suit those in power" (Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and NUM 1986: 9).

Despite the promises made by available 'people's histories' of the 1984-5 miners' strike, these accounts were predominantly narrated through the voices of a small number of strikers or an external editor and quickly fell out of print. This was perhaps because such small-scale publications were only ever intended as the first stage in a wider authoring of the strike by the "people [...] when they have time to record and develop their own accounts". Thus, Thurcroft's people's history offers itself not as "a record but as a contribution to the continuing debate about the strike from a rarely-heard source, that of rank and file activists" (Gibbon 1986: Preface).

Strikers' writings mirror Thatcherism itself in their efforts to re-position and re-write the working class in relation to the dominant order, mediating and highlighting wider issues actualised by the coal dispute. In this way, strikers' poems constitute another form of 'subhistory', portions of the past that unite to illuminate a wider cultural history. Contributing these fascinating, and hitherto unacknowledged, perspectives to existing historical record, their poetry challenges the idea that history comprises the discourse of the dead. Instead, it suggests that existing histories concerning the conflict contain incomplete representations and partial explanations, versions of the past that these poems deserve to stand beside, complement or challenge.

Studying strikers' poems enables the twenty-first-century reader to reconceptualise paradigms of received wisdom concerning the 1984-5 conflict. This new literature effectively re-writes the 1984-5 dispute, from the initial days of area walk-outs to the post-1985 restitution of the coalfields. Each poem constitutes a micro-history of the period, encouraging readers not to discredit existing histories, but to allow new perspectives to sit alongside such accounts. Strikers' literature is evidence of a history from below which purposefully challenges dominant representations of

historical and current ‘knowledge’ about the past. Strikers’ poems provide readers with the opportunity to rediscover history and realise the potential of dismissed documents. Each piece of writing is an important primary source, a written testimony with implicit attitudes, values and assumptions. It is precisely because of, rather than in spite of, these implicit values and assumptions that this poetry represents such a powerful source of understanding.

Dislocated from their authors and distanced from a potential readership, strikers’ poetry has not been deemed worthy of study or print. A central question which this material inspires relates directly to this matter—why are these poems in archives instead of published books? Why have writings from the strike, by strikers, been ignored, while accounts from detached individuals, with little or no experience of the 1984-5 conflict (Granelli 1997; Peace 2004; O’Rourke 1996; Waites 2003; Davies 1986; Williams 1989) triumphed in print? The decline of the NUM (National Union of Miners) and the UK mining industry may have played a significant role in the isolation of this material. After the 1984-5 strike, union structures and leadership were fatally weakened and there was a marked drift away from collective social and political protest. Perhaps the post-strike period itself was a time for healing rather than redressing, a point at which memories of defeat were still too raw, and the regeneration of mining regions too premature, to justify a re-visiting of such work.

However, a plethora of ‘factual’ accounts of the miners’ strike, published during the 1980s and the 1990s (particularly during the strike’s tenth and twentieth anniversaries) suggest otherwise. In addition to these accounts, the years following the conflict saw many individual ex-strikers publish their own personal autobiographies of the conflict, focusing on singular experiences and the personal impact of the pit closure programme. As a result, literature concerning the 1984-5 strike that addressed economic and political issues, or identified individual plights, readily found its way through the publishing industry onto bookshelves. Conversely, writings concerning the strike that sought to express a collective voice through individual experience within a wider movement—exemplified by strikers’ poetry—lingered unpublished, unrecognised or inaccessible. Could the anonymity of this literature be attributed to its form, one that may have alienated historians who have traditionally “been notably insensitive to the complex nature of literature as historical evidence” (Maidment 1987: 16)? Or could it be that a hybrid of establishments—literary, social, historical, economic and political—did not wish to recognise or consider a poetic history of the 1984-5 strike which, like the literary history of the Chartists’

collective action, articulates "the voice of the mob" (Maidment 1987: 258)?

Culture is foregrounded by this study as an effective means of cultural resistance—a site for the struggle over the legitimacy of reality. The poetic dominance of strikers' writings immediately inspires questions regarding the politics of form, of why strikers chose to author the conflict using poetry, while competing rewritings authored their versions of the strike using alternative genres such as the novel, stage or screen. The function of strikers' writings as a means of dialogic interaction with the developing dispute is explored as an essential element of their literature. Throughout the following chapters, strikers' poetry is offered as a source of articulation both in and of conflict. As part of the battle to define the events of 1984-5, strikers hit the surface of the page transgressively to interrogate the capacity of poetry as a means of defining contemporary conflict and as a potent right of reply.

Chapter One begins with a discussion, necessarily subject to brevity, of the political and economic contexts of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike. Much of this context closely relates to the narratives offered by existing representations and is intended as an introduction to the discourses that strikers were forced to write against, or engage with, in the process of creating their own representations of the dispute. Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five discuss how, why and with what effect strikers employed the poetic form during and after 1984-5 to confront the conflict beyond the limitations of their immediate experience, articulating resistance and ruin, agency and urgency, through a profoundly dialogic exchange. The strike itself was fought on the basis of Thatcher's claim that "there is no alternative". Strikers' poems are offered as evidence of that alternative in their economic, social and political engagement with counter-discourses concerning the dispute. Chapter Two highlights writings from the central period of the strike as evidencing both crucial forms of resistance and rising models of solidarity as part of a wider "structure of feeling". As Raymond Williams argues, "the arts of a period [...] are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, [the structure of feeling] is likely to be expressed" (Williams 1975: 64). Emergent structures of feeling in strikers' writings from the flux of 1984-5 illustrate the capacity of the poetic form to accommodate dialogic discourse, as men, women and children independently address different issues through their common use of poetry. Exploring the nature and function of this poetry, the chapter offers writing as part of a recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of a way of life—a means of establishing a voice representing a community and a

commonality of feeling—and a key element in re-positioning "the story" of the strike.

In Chapter Three, the language of conflict is a central concern. Writings from the key months of the strike illustrate how the linguistic sign, in the words of linguist Voloshinov, "becomes an arena of class struggle" when terms such as "picket", "scab" and "pig" transform into explosive weapons in an escalating war of words. The chapter explores the power of language to name, author and claim conflict, in reference to three central figures implicitly involved in the coal dispute. In Chapter Four, poetry produced towards the end of the conflict and in the months following the return to work is seen to further test the limits of its form, reflecting an essential interplay between the "represented" and "representing". In these later writings, dialogues between past and present, the 'golden age' of mining and the onslaught of Thatcherite market forces, form key interactive poetic discourses in an attempt to author and author(ise) the conclusion of the 1984-5 conflict.

The post-strike regeneration of the UK coalfields is addressed by Chapter Five. In the weeks and months following the 1985 return to work, newly ex-strikers turned again to poetry to make sense of the changes and developments brought about by their experiences. Exploring these writings as key examples of "chronotopic poetics", this chapter highlights the presence of a series of sub-generic space-time intersections that collectively function to highlight the empowering presence of the past as a source of strength and direction in an emergent post-industrial landscape. The authority of literary form in the re-writing of history is highlighted by Chapter Six in an examination of contemporary novels that represent the 1984-5 miners' strike. Exploring the capacity of historiographic metafiction to address or contain such a conflict, the chapter interrogates a distorting and factional monologism at the heart of contemporary fictional histories of the coal dispute. Chapter Seven concentrates on representations of the 1984-5 strike offered by stage and screen. Exploring television news reports, documentary film, drama and musicals, it reveals a pronounced focus on individualism propounded by media representations of the strike. Setting this focus against the counter-representations created and distributed by strikers and their supporters during and after 1984-5, the need for dialogism and plurality is foregrounded by the chapter as essential to any understanding of the problematic, and ongoing, relationship between the media and the strike.

The following study seeks not only to address new perspectives on the 1984-5 miners' strike, transporting some formerly marginal representations,

such as those found in strikers' writings, from the anonymity of the archive to the illumination of the collective consciousness, but to juxtapose the perspectives they offer with competing counter-representations, and heterodox—sometimes contradictory—ways of understanding the events in question. The significance of these competing representations as they engage in a wider battle for "authenticity"—a brush between the aesthetics of form, art and culture and the actuality of mining, conflict and experience—is central to the following discussion.

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POETRY

In *The Heart And Soul Of It*, a people's history of the pit village of Worsbrough, one writer notes in his introduction that, "whilst looking into local history for certain information about the 1926 Miners' Strike, it became apparent that too little was recorded about the people most affected by the strike" (Worsborough Community Support Group 1985: 2). Yet writing was a fundamental part of the 1984-5 miners' strike, acknowledged by strikers as a valuable tool with which to articulate their beliefs and rights. Strikers' poetry highlights the written word as a site for the struggle over the legitimacy of the authority of reality, encouraging twenty-first century readers to confront and acknowledge those denied authority, authorship—the right to communicate an account of conflict—and to question the significance of the forms in which accounts are recorded. Significantly, strikers' writings challenge common presumptions about what exactly constitutes historical evidence, furthering the claim first made by Brian Maidment that "none but those who have lived it, or lived with it, are able to describe that which they have seen" (Maidment 1987: 363). Despite their strong sense of the validity and superiority of historical experience, strikers' writings do not suggest the wholesale destruction of alternative narratives concerning the conflict, no matter how unfair or 'incorrect' they appear to be. Instead, the strategies of recuperation employed in this work draw attention to the role of writings about, as well as from, the strike, establishing literature not as a mere reflection of social reality, but a space for the struggle over its meaning.

Literature itself can be regarded as a means of maintaining rather than challenging the status quo—of distracting workers with 'eternal' truths to prevent them reacting decisively to the injustice of their immediate situation. As Eagleton points out, before elite universities integrated the discipline into their education programs, literature was, somewhat ironically, viewed as the domain of those it would go on to exclude, "a subject fit for women, workers and those wishing to impress the native" (Eagleton 1996: 25). However, writing from the 1984-5 UK miners' strike shows how literature can be employed as a valid means of challenging as well as legitimising relationships (Marx quoted in Hall 1983: 35). Perhaps it is only at times such as the miners' strike—moments of total social,

political, economic and ideological conflict—that this kind of literature can find a space within dominant culture to present alternatives, to transform itself from a narrative of the marginalised to one able to contest prevailing hegemonic discourse. Marx highlights this "unequal relationship of the development of material production [...] to artistic production" suggesting that periods of great uncertainty and doubt in industry may in fact produce the most creative work. In many ways the 1984-5 miners' strike can be seen as an example of this, a time of uncertainty leading to creative opportunity, a moment in which literary counter-discourses could break through, using the poetic form at an undeveloped stage, to confront competing accounts of conflict.

In any examination of strikers' poetry the issue of why and how strikers decided to exercise their protest through the pen as well as the picket cannot be ignored. As Terry Eagleton argues, "literature may be at least as much a question of what people do to writing as what writing does to them" (Eagleton 1996: 6). A sense of urgency in commemorating historical struggle is echoed by several strikers in their early writings: "we are living through history and when this is all over […] I am going to write an account of the happenings during the strike. For our children the memory would fade, and it really shouldn't" (Mackney 1987: 47). For other strikers, literary aspirations that had previously been repressed or unrealised were liberated as a direct result of the conflict. As Maurice Jones, editor of *The Miner*, claims in his foreword to the poetry anthology *Against All The Odds*: "Rarely, if ever, can a dispute have released upon the world such a flood of talent as the miners' strike of '84. It is as though a dam has burst, bathing and enriching the land in the waters of creativity" (Jones 1984: 2).

External support for this new literature was invaluable and rapid, with many regional educational institutions providing extra writing workshops during the strike. These workshops encouraged contributions not only from strikers and members of mining communities, but from other individuals sympathetic to the cause, so that the urge to be creative spilled out of the strike and into the local population at large. A mass of literary activities emerged around the strike and as a result the cultural consciousness of mining communities was raised. The kind of poetry being read during 1984-5, including many people reciting their own work from the floor, was also increasingly relevant to people's experiences, allowing them to relate to poetry in a way they previously could not. Tutors reported that in 1983 they were regularly forced to abandon poetry events due to a lack of

interest. One year later, they held similar events to packed audiences, often at miners' welfare institutes.

The poetic form also offered practically appealing advantages to strike writers. Although every striker undoubtedly had their own reasons for putting pen to paper, their work would suggest that a large number of strikers felt unable to share anxieties and fears about the conflict and instead turned to the written word in its most immediate, accessible and distributable form. As Raymond Williams argues, it would be wrong to assume, even in contemporary society "that there is effectively equal access to written and printed material or anything like effectively equal opportunities to contribute to it" (Williams 1983: 4). Poetry is arguably one of the easiest literary forms to engage with—the writing of free verse requires no formal training or stylistic knowledge and can be readily adapted to suit the constraints of time or language. It also displays strong ties to the oral heritage of mining communities (in which the recitation of poetry from memory was common) allowing readers to engage with discourses of the past at the level of both form and content. As well as expressing a particular history and being arguably one of the purest expressions of authorship, the poetic form was quick to craft and consume. In this way, poetry can be seen as both a practically and ideologically appropriate form for strikers to engage with and relate to key discourses within the confines of their limited means of production.

Although hijacking the poetic form to communicate counter-discourses proved effective, strikers were also forced to acknowledge the potential limitations of the poetic mode as a tool of working class cultural resistance and a medium for the documentation of labour history. These limitations were usually associated with the historical use of poetry as a medium of high culture within the literary canon. The significance of forms in "carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works" cannot be ignored or detached from any consideration of strikers' writings (Jameson 1981: 99). Maidment confronts this question in relation to Victorian working class literature, asking "how far are literary forms themselves, however ably appropriated to the needs of fast-developing working class writers, an aspect of an inescapable middle class cultural hegemony, which would dominate the practice of writing whatever the ideological perspective of the author?" (Maidment 1987: 14). Confronted with cultural forms historically aligned to necessarily diametric concerns, strikers were forced to negotiate the possibility of a working class re-appropriation of the poetic form.

In the context of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike, poetry can be seen as the ideal medium with which to re-orientate working class narratives of experience. Through their poems, strikers challenge presumptions that poetry is best employed to relate 'eternal', 'universal truths', instead employing it to communicate discourses of the dispossessed. As a result, their work engages the reader at the level of the immediate strike movement, as well as that of the aesthetic, re-aligning and politicising poetry as a medium of record and resistance. In their hands, the poetic form is viewed not as a restriction, but an instrument of discovery. Rather than submitting to the prescriptive expectations determined by the canonical tradition, their work offers the poetic mode as a progressive, radical, sympathetic and, above all, appropriate medium for the vocalisation of marginalised counter-discourses.

In her introduction to *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, Marilyn Butler argues that "poetry in a popular style might be dangerous if it became an ideological weapon in the popular cause" (Butler 1981: 5). Although the employment of poetry for radical means is not in itself 'radical', during 1984-5 strikers collectively employed not only the content, but the form of their writings in radical ways. While some commentators argue that form is "no more than the rules and conventions specific to particular 'kinds' of art", writings from the 1984-5 miners' strike indicate that form played at least as great a role, if not greater, than the content of the work itself (Milner 2002: 99). Where Formalists argue that the form or device of literature acts to estrange the reader from the text, strikers' writings indicate that form can also be employed to inspire recognition at an instant level of audience identification. Indeed, it may be valid to argue that all literature to some extent manipulates the expectations of literary form. According to Theodor Adorno, "stereotypes" or forms are culturally essential because they encourage the reader to anticipate experiences, while allowing the author to confound them (Adorno 1982: 47). Jameson even refers to form as a definite "contract" between writer and reader, one that firmly establishes agreements and expectations before the content of the work is encountered (Jameson 1981: 102). Form is itself a sign of convention, a mark of recognition, respect and awareness. However, it must be highlighted that the conventional impact of any form rests on the centrality of this initial sense of 'recognition'. Awareness of the literary conventions being manipulated is necessarily at the mercy of an informed, conscious reader, while any writing is reliant upon this set of expectations before its content can begin to confound or fulfil them. Forms are therefore at once "horizons of

expectation" for readers and "models of writing" for authors, "classes of texts which both constrain and enable, presenting a set of rules regarding the perceived limits and possibilities of a piece of work" (Todorov 1990: 16; 18).

In his study of representations of mining life, Duke asserts that the "message is far more important than the medium" (Duke 2002: 175). Conversely, this study of cultural representations of the 1984-5 UK miners' strike suggests that the medium is not just as important as the message, but is part of it—that the forms in which history is represented are just as significant as the history itself. Any history of cultural form is significant because it closely relates to a record of marginalisation, to whose voices are articulated and which experiences are related. Literature has historically been perceived as part of the superstructure of society, but it would be naïve to view strikers' writings as mere reflections of their economic base. Instead, their poetry encourages readers to view its form as a social relationship, rather than an abstract classification, "a social process that [...] becomes a social product" (Williams 1977: 185-6). Consequently, their writings chronicle a dialogic exchange between the base and superstructure of society, between the substance of history and the form in which history is authored. As Eagleton points out, "in poetry it is the author who decides where the line ends, whereas in prose it is the typesetter" (Eagleton 1996: 21). This responsibility for both the content of a work and its presentational shape means that "artistic form is no mere quirk on the part of the individual artist" (Eagleton 1996: 91). The true value of a text consequently lies in its internal relations of form and content—between what it says and how this is said—and an understanding that these two elements are indissociably bound to one another. This interplay of form and content is in itself a significant part of the process of meaning creation in literature, constituting another level of dialogue and exchange, since both features of production carry meaning necessarily independent of, and inter-dependent on, one another.

Throughout strikers' poetry, working class culture is firmly established as a culture of struggle, one experienced in manipulating and inverting forms of high culture as part of a wider battle for expression and authorship. Strikers' poetry explodes monologic perceptions of its form, communicating and challenging a plurality of discourses central to the coal dispute. In doing so, it documents an active dialogue both within and between representations. The discourses in strikers' poems thereby seek, in Benjamin's terms, to "brush history against the grain", allowing the marginalised figure, community and cause, to engage in a dialogue of

contention, problematising existing dominant scripts (Benjamin 1969: 257). As dialogic writings, these poems are aware of, and often acknowledge, their own subjectivity and partisanship. Strikers present the poetic form as a site for the struggle to overcome, or contest, the monologic utterances that characterise centralised official languages of conflict. Their poems dialogise history, providing not only a discursive account of reality but de-centring 'official' accounts of the past. Each poem constitutes a fragment of dialogue from this much wider conversation, a documentation and articulation of the discourses that shaped the 1984-5 coal dispute.

These engaging discourses evidence tensions between individualist Thatcherite economic aspirations and the collective traditions of mining culture. During the 1980s, working class status was advocated as a temporary state, something to be shaken off as soon as possible in the upward drive for professional and economic gain. In their firm avowal to remain grounded in a profession and class, the strikers of 1984-5 confronted these over-arching ideologies head-on. Through their poetry, strikers articulate counter-hegemonic discourses intent on promoting and aiding social change. These discourses involve the reader in a similar manner to the chants of the picket lines, narratives that can themselves be deemed 'poetic'. Dialogic exchanges within and between strikers' poems, protest chants and picket line songs not only capture the intercourse of utterance, but establish utterance itself an act of authorship, encouraging the authoring of the conflict to go beyond the written word in the re-animation of past forms.

Throughout 1984-5 and in the years after the conflict, the poetic form was employed by strikers to chronicle a dialogic exchange of allegiance and tension between the individual and the collective, to define and defend the right to work and maintain a way of life. Consequently, strikers' poetry can be regarded as evidence of "the practice of a group in a period, rather than the practice of a phase in a genre" as a direct result of its sustained discourses of collectivism and communality (Williams 2005: 48). Rather than submitting to notions of poetry as the "most private and least accessible" form of art, strikers suggest that the form may be employed to narrate a collective struggle, articulating an essential interplay between the individual and the collective in conflict (Hoffman 1979: 497). According to Raymond Williams, working class culture is "primarily social [...] rather than individual" (Williams 1963: 327). As expressions of working-class culture, strikers' writings could be both socially produced—in groups, on picket lines and with social matters in mind; and socially productive—performed orally to change or illuminate minds. Consequently, the

discourses of unity expressed by this work establish literature alongside more traditional mediums such as home, family and church, as a means of mediating experience.

As a direct result of articulating these structures of feeling, strikers' poems inspired a "catharsis of recognition", encouraging other strikers to realise that they were part of a wider community that shared these pressures and refused to bow to the demands of monetary individualism (Brecht 1959: 109). Their poems stand apart because, through their communication of emergent structures of feeling, they seek not only to articulate marginal discourses, but to help others to recognise and unify, showing that it is possible to make sense of history emotionally, through feelings and lived experience. In this way, writing may be viewed as a socially symbolic act, as well as a means of symbolically encoding social reality. As Gramsci prophetically wrote in his Prison Notebooks, "every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore" and that these problems would lead us to "reorganise the cultural hegemony" (Gramsci 1985: 183-4). The language of strikers' poems is not, and can never hope to be, neutral, since all language is steeped in subjectivity and value suppositions. Through their struggles with and against language, strikers demonstrate their ability to author conflict—not to impose absolute order on the chaos around them—but to give the greatest degree of understanding possible to their world.

The employment of dialect played an important part in this struggle, allowing strikers to turn to the past in an attempt to reinforce their identity and traditions and to further their understanding of the dispute through the employment of alternative discourses. Across their poetry, dialect is employed as a means of engagement with dominant historical narratives. Dialect is intentionally and effectively articulated, not only to foreground the pride of a region and its people, but also to establish a sense of possession, both geographically and historically. Dialect writing represents a different way of seeing the world, a symbolic bond between individual and collective, past and present, region and nation. In strikers' poems, distinct dialects from Northumberland to Nottinghamshire are raised as verified discourses of equal worth to the 'official' discourses of Standard English, polit-speak and media assertion. In this way, dialect becomes a further form of discourse between competing languages as part of a wider battle to author the strike. The articulation of situated discourses of dialect firmly places these poems in a competitive exchange with the external,

impersonal reality exemplified by Standard English and the seemingly objective language of history.

The communication of these alternative discourses was wholly dependent on the circuits of production and dissemination established by strikers and their communities during 1984-5. The means of literary production, distribution and exchange involved in strikers' writings—the social production of this literature—highlights both the historically limited access to print endured by the working classes and the many difficulties that had to be confronted and resolved before their writing could formally emerge to a wider audience. The availability of competing means of production—from printing to handwriting—is significant to any understanding of this poetry, because it plays a crucial practical and ideological role in determining literary form. As Walter Benjamin argues in his essay "The Author as Producer", although art requires certain techniques of production (such as the brushstroke in painting, the stage in drama and publishing in literature) these techniques of communication are not just a means of producing art, but part of its productive forces, involving social relations between producer and audience, writer and reader (Benjamin 1986: 220-238). During the 1984-5 UK coal dispute, dominant mechanics of twentieth-century formal literary production jarred with the inherent purpose of strikers' literature. Thatcher's valorisation of consumerism promoted polar opposite values to a mining industry designed to produce rather than consume. As a result of these dual pressures of necessity and morality, many strikers became "artisanal" during the conflict (Williams 1981:44). These writers turned to the 'people power' of self-publishing, transcribing poems by hand onto 'news sheets' of poetry, or forming their own publishing presses, many of which continue to flourish to this day. Other strikers sought help from local, sympathetic printers and publishers, rejecting the large-scale mechanical reproduction of commercial literary organisations.

The comparative ease with which strikers were able to get their writing published during 1984-5 was rare for any writer, let alone working class people writing for the first time. This acted as another boost to the confidence of would-be authors. As strike poet Jean Gittins recalls: "we were definitely flavour of the month!" (Gittins 1985: 18). As a result of the increased amount of writings produced by pit communities during the strike, regional printing presses were forced to respond to a new demand for published works. Some small publishers such as Canary Press published books at cost price to show their support for the strike, while larger community publishers such as Yorkshire Art Circus (along with

others like Artisan and Bannerworks) not only gave valuable help and advice to strikers, but also produced their own publications about the strike (Morley 1982: 32). Another important function of strikers' poetry and its intimate means of production was its role in raising funds. As Maidment highlights, forms of self-taught literary production have historically been relied upon as a means of generating a necessary income for a cause. Writing on Victorian self-taught poets, Maidment highlights "the attractions of performing the whole literary process—production, distribution, sales and promotion—by oneself were obvious to many writers, as this system offers an alternative to the impersonal forces of the national marketplace without denying the cash nexus as a key factor in literary production" (Maidment 1987: 328).

During 1984-5, locally published pamphlets and books diverted profits from the circuits of corporate literary production, instead providing valuable funding for the organisations that had produced the literature, such as local women's support groups, the Miners' Solidarity Fund and, after the return to work, the Miners' Victimisation Fund. Through this independently published literature, strikers were able to offer a direct account of the conflict, unmediated by publishers or historians. Distributed locally through independent bookshops, co-ops, NUM Branches, fund-raising galas or via word of mouth, this new literature literally emerged from the boundaries of the dominant tradition to challenge and confront the 'story' of the strike. In this way, the very means of production involved in strikers' literature can be viewed as a significant way of challenging the traditional textuality of dominant literary and historical forms.

However, it would be misleading to claim that every striker created material intended for publication. Many concentrated on the interiority of their strike experiences, the personal, intimately social and local. As such, their work forms a further level of tension between discourses of individuality and communality. Significantly, their poetry shows that this type of interior strike writing was more likely to be inscribed on unconventional, domestic resources, such as household appliance instructions, flyleaves from published books and the back of cereal packets. This particular writing highlights not only a limited access to the tools necessary to instigate a wider, assertive and communicative authorship, but the implicit dialogue of materiality between the physicality, mode, means and function of literature which must be foregrounded by any study of this unique material. The materiality of strikers' poetry would suggest that in authoring their own record of the dispute, the strikers of 1984-5 effectively literalised the metaphor 'writing on the margins'. In this

innovative inscribing of their work, strikers allow contemporary researchers a unique opportunity to reconstruct context through the physicality of the material artefacts that carry their writings. Strikers' poetry therefore not only raises important questions regarding the significance of the forms in which such writings are expressed, but also of the physical resources necessary in twentieth-century society for working class people to engage in an act of authorship.

Although strikers' writings are undeniably partisan and have hithero received little attention in comparison to other representations of the dispute, their work is significant because it does not attempt to silence other perspectives on the strike but rather demonstrates the dialogic capacity of its poetic form. In his seminal essay, "Discourse and The Novel", Bakhtin suggests that the poetic form is monologic. This monologism—a form of unidirectional discourse—is caused by the poet's refusal to acknowledge the 'other'—context, person or language—as a significant and influential element of the communication process. Monologism therefore occurs when "an utterer and utterance do not take into account the possible reply of an addressee, discourse becomes closed, directed and intentional" (Wesling 2003: 35). In the poetic form this singularity of articulation manifests itself at the levels of language and structure.

Poetic language, according to Bakhtin, is a prison beyond which the poet is unable to progress. Bakhtin considers the poetic form to be "narrow and unlifelike", bound by its "hardened and no longer flexible skeleton" to an "authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" approach (Bakhtin 2004: 10; 3). Poetry is predicated on this "idea of a unitary and singular language and a unitary and monologically sealed off utterance" (Bakhtin quoted in Eskin 2000: 380). Within poetic utterance "all traces of the social diversity of speech and language are erased" in favour of a "tense discursive unity" (Bakhtin quoted in Eskin 2000: 381). The poetic word operates at the level of functionalism and direct intentionality—it can be "ambiguous or polysemous but not double-voiced or dialogic" (Bakhtin quoted in Eskin 2000: 385). As a result, poetry suggests words' unmediated availability—as if they were "severed from any interaction with alien words" (Bakhtin quoted in Eskin 2000: 380). This "sealed and impermeable monoglossia" allows its speaker to think only within the limited confines of their own language, limiting the capacity of poetic articulation to engage in any meaningful dialogue with competing discourses of the real world. Bakhtin even goes so far as to claim that the poet would rather invent an entirely new language than resort to engagement with real-world discourses. In the