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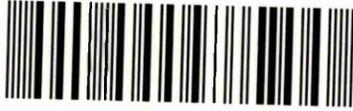
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**Negotiations between Public and Private Realms in British Writing of the
1930s**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The focus of this study is on the altering and altered significations of categories of 'public' and 'private' in selected British writings of the thirties. Its aim is to explore and further delineate possible ways in which the decade's major writers struggled to reconcile the realm of the private self, with its range of individual drives, neuroses and incongruities, with the impersonal and frequently hostile forces of the public, socio-political domain, during a period in which historic circumstances brought relations between the two realms into sharp focus to a degree unique within twentieth-century literary history. Concentrating primarily on writing by Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, George Orwell and W. H. Auden, and using a range of interpretative models, this study seeks to determine and interrogate the distinct and distinctive ways in which such a reconciliation might have been conceived and rendered by the individual authors under discussion, and considers the difficulties inherent in imaginatively realising and articulating such a conception through any single aesthetic or linguistic programme, and, consequently, the multiplicity of conceptualisations and categories of writing marshalled in pursuit of such a project. Thus, whilst thirties' writing has frequently been characterised as a site of confrontation between the public and private realms (most famously in Samuel Hynes's seminal book, *The Auden Generation* (1976)) my investigation further qualifies existing accounts of the period through an emphasis on the range of concepts, beliefs and theorisations underpinning the self/world interface within the individual texts and authors examined. The original contribution to knowledge which emerges from this study is an enhanced appreciation of the range of literary-aesthetic, intellectual and theistic perspectives and traditions drawn upon by the decade's key writers in their attempts to negotiate and give voice to the newly-troubled encounter between the individual and history. In particular, attention is paid to ways in which thirties' writing relies upon differing and distinct models of the self or 'subject' in its dealings with contemporaneity, in ways which, crucially, are shown to lie beyond the scope of much of the dominant critical and generic debate surrounding the literature of the period.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisory team, Professors Chris Hopkins and Steve Earnshaw, for their advice and encouragement in the course of preparing this dissertation, and to other academic colleagues who have taken time to offer additional comments and guidance. Thanks are also of course due to my friends and family, in particular to Sam Perry, and by no means least of all to my wife, Susan, for her continued patience and support. Lastly, I would wish to dedicate this work to my baby son, Louis.

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Abstract

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Introduction

*Literature is a social process, and also an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored.*¹

William Empson

This study is concerned with the changing significations of categories of 'public' and 'private' within thirties literature, and enquires after the location of the subject or 'I' at the interface of the public and private realms, the boundaries between which were radically called into question during the decade. Bearing in mind, firstly, the questions of canonicity which have necessarily added to the range of critical discourses surrounding thirties' writing, I would acknowledge at the outset that the present study accepts (though not without qualification) the eminent status widely afforded to the writers under consideration. The following chapters draw upon a wide range of perspectives and insights, ranging from the biographical and 'theoretical', through to the philosophical and theological, and explores the range of literary-aesthetic models used by my chosen authors in their respective explorations of the public/private binary. These include the use of the lyric genre, the drawing upon both Classical and Christian mythologies as sources of metaphor, and the uses of the Grotesque and the Pastoral as modes of writing.

The overall impetus behind the present study is towards a re-stating and a re-justification of the place of the writers featured within the literary history of the period, and, by implication, a re-stating of the importance of thirties' writing within twentieth-century literature more widely. Emphasis is placed on particular themes and tropes which have either been neglected by past critics or are in need of further attention, but which, it is suggested, are integral both to our understanding of the individual authors in question, and to our wider understanding of the periods' writing. In particular, the dissertation draws upon insights offered by the various and competing theorizations of selfhood and subjectivity, in order to better scrutinize the methods by which the relationship between the public and private realms, brought sharply into focus by the period's atmosphere of accelerating crisis, is variously represented in the work of the

¹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Hogarth, 1986) p. 19.

writers considered. Particular attention is given to the following works: Spender's *Poems* (1933) *Vienna* (1934) and *The Still Centre* (1939); MacNeice's *Poems* (1935) *The Earth Compels* (1938) and *Autumn Journal* (1939); Isherwood's novels, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939); Orwell's novel, *Coming up for Air* (1939) and Auden's *Another Time* (1940). In singling out these particular authors and texts for consideration, my principal criteria for selection has been to choose those works which, as this thesis demonstrates, provide a significant compliment to the dominant social and political conditions of the time, both in order to offer fresh readings of the texts in question, and to further qualify the respective statuses of these authors as important, and (which is in greater need of qualification) 'representative' thirties' writers. I would stress that these authors are included not on the basis of possible similarities and mutual influences which might be seen to operate within a (perceived) homogeneous 'clique', but rather precisely because of the *differences* between them, drawing attention to the fact that amidst this small group of writers whose work has formed the basis of much thirties critical discourse, there is a series of distinct and individual voices, each in its own way seeking to negotiate the shifting territory between the public and private realms. Certain additional texts and authors are cited, but in the main this is only where they can afford additional insights into the main text under discussion. I have devoted one chapter to each author considered, and in each case have provided an introductory section in order to lay out my approach to the author in question and to give reasons for their inclusion within the study. What emerges from the study as a whole is an account of the various and distinct representations of 'public' and 'private' within the body of writing considered, and effort is made to foreground key points of contrast which operate between the authors and texts studied, thus stressing the diversity of approach at work within the period's writing.

I

No new analysis of the literature of the thirties can proceed very far without first revisiting the familiar question of the positioning of the period's writing in relation to modernism. Certainly the literary-historical view of the thirties as a period which saw a marked and decisive shift away from modernism's overt

preoccupation with interiority toward a more socially and politically engaged literature, eschewing the modernist emphasis on the self and on aesthetic and stylistic considerations, and bringing about in an inevitable decline in literary and artistic standards, still holds considerable appeal. As critics such as Dennis Brown have argued,

Although Auden, in particular, assimilated much of the mood, and some of the mode, of Modernism, thirties writing, overall, appears something of a reaction against the preoccupations and textual complexities of the previous movement. The 'I' that becomes 'a camera' has suppressed the problems of selfhood and its representation to focus on the realities of the social nexus.²

More will be said shortly about the proliferation of the 'myth of the thirties', however, suffice to say at this point that such formulations, however convenient for literary historians, (and the undergraduate syllabus) are liable to distort and over-simplify. Rather, this study maintains that it was precisely those 'realities of the social nexus' which reinvigorated and brought the modernist interest in the instability of the self, and thus the representation of the 'I', into sharper focus. Indeed, as Valentine Cunningham has pointed out in his classic study, *British Writers of the Thirties*,

The thirties make a kind of apotheosis of Romanticist individualism in a literature of self-regard that got fuelled by the new psychology and philosophy and the mass of great writers – Conrad, James, Lawrence, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, T.S. Eliot, to name no others – attendant in their train. This is a period when...autobiography, the published letter and diary, the self-declarative title with I in it, the eagerly egotistic self-explanation ('Why I write') flourish as never before.³

² Dennis Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature – a study in self-fragmentation* (London: Macmillan, 1989) p. 176.

³ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p.214

it, then, thirties writers felt themselves obliged to deal with contemporaneity, and this must be understood as a consequence both of the literary modernism which was their immediate inheritance, and of the need to understand and express their experience of contemporary events in ways which incorporated yet also challenged the self-consciously aesthetic and stylistic preoccupations characteristic of the modernist project. Certainly it is worth noting the efforts of critics such as Steven Matthews and Keith Williams towards challenging the aftermyth of the thirties as a 'homogenous anti-modernist decade'.⁴ The following chapters therefore remain alert to the operations of those particular modernist voices - of Rilke, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Joyce - within the texts under discussion.

Just as the immense historic rupture of the First World War and its profound psychological after-effects were instrumental in the direction and development of modernism, so its after-effects continued to reverberate within the writings of the thirties (the altering effect of the war on the wider sensibility is treated in greater detail in chapter 4 with particular reference to George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* (1939)). In his book, *Rites of Spring* (1990) Modris Eksteins discusses the nature and impact of this historical fracture and the important shift in the contemporary consciousness which it precipitated,

As the war's meaning began to be enveloped in a fog of existential questioning, the integrity of the 'real' world, the visible and ordered world, was undermined. As the war called into question the rational connections of the pre-war world - the nexus, that is, of cause and effect - the meaning of civilisation as tangible achievement was assaulted, as was the nineteenth-century view that all history represented progress. And as the external world collapsed in ruins, the only redoubt of integrity became the individual personality...as the past went down the drain, the *I* became all-important.⁵

⁴ Steven Matthews and Keith Williams, *Rewriting the thirties, Modernism & After* (Essex: Longman, 1997) p. 1.

⁵ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring - The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London: Black Swan, 1990) pp. 286-287.

much has been said about the impact of the first world-war on post-war modernist writing. However, it is also true that the after-effects continue to register, in varying and altered forms, throughout the work of those writers who came of age during the thirties. As the High Modernist dual preoccupation with formal innovation and with rendering visible the inner life receded in favour of an ostensibly more socially and politically engaged literature, the importance of the 'I' did not diminish, but in fact intensified as writers sought to negotiate a viable path between subjectivism and the new and evolving social and political reality. It is perhaps easy to underestimate the intensity with which the anxieties generated by such a situation were felt. Rex Warner's poem, 'Sonnet', was written in 1937, at a time when the Spanish Civil War (which had begun the previous July) had started to engage the imaginations of British writers. The poem serves as a good exemplar of the mindset which was engendered by such events, neatly encapsulating the discord between the imaginative and emotional territories yearned for but which were, it seemed, no longer available, and the moral imperatives brought about by the newly invasive realities of the public realm,

How sweet only to delight lambs and laugh by streams,
Innocent in love wakening to the early thrush,
To be awed by mountains, and feel the stars friendly,
To be a farmer's boy, to be far from battle.

But me my blood binds me to remember men
more than the birds, not to be delicate with squirrels,
or gloat among the poppies in a mass of corn,
or follow in a maze endless unwinding of water.

Nor will my mind permit me to linger in the love,
the mother kindness of country ascending among trees,
knowing that love must be liberated by bleeding,
fearing for my fellows, for the murder of man.

How should I live then but as a kind of fungus,

Here, the opening pastoral vision is vitiated by intimations of war, private guilt, and the call to action, a contrast foregrounded by Warner's title and the sonnet form he uses. Nostalgic recollections of life on the land as a farmer's boy are met with the language of violence, of 'knowing that love must be liberated by bleeding'. But it is the rhetorical structure of the poem which can be read as constituting an important paradigm within thirties' writing: that of the struggle which must first be undergone in order that the kinds of experience and values to which Warner's poem alludes be thus preserved and granted a fresh legitimacy. Thus, as Rod Mengham has pointed out, any reading of thirties' literature has to attend to the problems that writers encountered in determining a position and perspective from which to speak.⁷

Raymond Williams, in his study of George Orwell, stated the difficulty in memorably stark terms, pointing out that, rather than presenting writers with a choice between whether or not to expose themselves to the social and political reality, it was truer to say that, 'the bitterness of the thirties was that no decent man could choose not to be exposed'.⁸ From such a situation came the wider anxiety that the nature and urgency of public events was liable to curtail the creative imagination of the writer. Certainly, Spender's own use of the word 'hounded' with regard to external events betokens a private ambivalence over the perceived intrusion of the public realm on the world of the writer. The wider search for a more public and collective function for poetry, and desire to reach out to an audience alienated by the esoteric practices of modernism, was thus tempered by a shared sense of unease over the extent to which this newly-discovered impulse towards a more democratic literature might prove imaginatively and aesthetically limiting. The case of W.H. Auden has frequently been cited as a case in point regarding the supposedly fallacious notion of any marriage between politics and literature. As Peter McDonald has written,

⁶ quoted from Robin Skelton (ed.), *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Penguin, 1964) pp. 101-102.

⁷ Rod Mengham, 'The thirties: politics, authority, perspective' (eds.), Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 359.

⁸ Williams, *Orwell*, p. 33

in the case of the 1930's myth, Auden's development from the politically *engagé* to the politically disillusioned, from the urgent (if opaque) messages of *Poems* (1930) to the elegant resignation of 'September 1, 1939', functions as a parable of the irreconcilability of poetry and politics, keeping intact the liberal consciousness but questioning the notion of feasible individual action.⁹

More so than Spender or Auden, Orwell was inclined to view tensions between the public and private realms in terms of artistic compromise, Orwell complaining of being forced into becoming, in his words, 'a sort of pamphleteer'.¹⁰ In his retrospective piece, 'Writers and Leviathan' (1948) Orwell discusses what he and others had perceived as the uniquely forceful nature of the public situation of the time,

The invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen [...] because we have developed a sort of compunction which our grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude to life impossible.¹¹

As Williams has been apt to point out in his analysis of Orwell's experience during the thirties, social awareness in writers was by no means a new phenomenon by this time, having been widespread and growing since the Nineteenth century. Certainly, in discussing the predicament faced by the thirties' writers, it is important not to inadvertently imply (as Orwell's remarks do to some extent) the existence of a somehow 'pre-political' era during which writers felt at liberty to occupy themselves solely with 'aesthetic' matters, dealing primarily in the subject matter of private interpersonal relationships, and ignoring the public world altogether. However, the following comments from R. D. Charques, in *Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution* (1933) will serve as an exemplar of

⁹ Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice - The Poet in his Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p.3

¹⁰ George Orwell, 'Why I Write', 1946, *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000) p.4

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 454.

literature at a time of emerging social and political crisis,

It is idle to speak of artistic neutrality at an acute stage of the struggle. Literature cannot be neutral...There is, in fact, very little material difference between the *fin de siècle* doctrine of art for art's sake and this new conception of art for detachment's or philosophy's or transcendentalism's sake. Both are founded on the assumption that there must necessarily be a favoured section of the community – an artistic section – which enjoys complete economic security and is undisturbed by the accidents of political strife.¹²

Whilst these comments are clearly embedded within and substantially motivated by a Marxian materialistic critique of the conditions of literary production operating during the period and in the preceding decades, they retain a paradigmatic significance in expressing the increased wider consciousness of those material factors which had in the past often been considered external and extraneous to the more narrowly 'aesthetic' practices of the writer. Moreover, whilst Charques argues (in what seems a partial rebuke against Nineteenth-century realism and naturalism) that 'there is no art in merely reproducing social chaos or in depicting horrors and enormities and the most realistic of novelists is not the most creative',¹³ the particular external pressures encountered during the decade – the General Strike, the Slump, the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil war, and the consequent felt need for action – nonetheless unarguably focused for the thirties' writers with a fresh and acute intensity the common problem of simultaneously holding in play literary and societal demands, and the difficulty of imagining and forging an adequate literary and creative response to the prevailing external conditions. The relations between writer and world were thus newly problematized by the pressing nature of the decade's events, precisely because the situation itself threatened to force a damagingly simplistic polarisation of the

¹² R. D. Charques, *Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution* (London: Martin Secker, 1933) pp. 52-53.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 158.

social and the aesthetic realms which, it was intimated, would be unacceptable neither on moral or literary grounds.

That the situation, thus described, inevitably gave rise to a certain level of mythologizing around the period was noted by such eminent critics as Frank Kermode, who, in his 1987 Clarendon lectures, offered the following summary of the thirties' myth,

There are myths about all periods (periods *are* myths) and we use them as formulas, as algorithms to programme the past and make it manageable...the thirties myth goes something like this: some writers of the time – some of the best writers of the time – were induced by its unfamiliar political pressures to write against their own bents. Uneasily allured by Communism, they professed a fatal interest in unemployment, the Spanish Civil War, the death throes of capitalism, the imminence of revolution and of world conflict.¹⁴

Certainly, Kermode is correct in drawing attention to those processes of mythologization which can distort or falsify our understanding. As Williams and Matthews point out, such periodising can be drastically inadequate for the task of illuminating the actual matrix of creative relations between the writers of the thirties and their modernist precursors.¹⁵ Yet one possible effect of such a statement might also be to lead us to too readily dismiss the operations of those historic factors which remain unarguably paramount. The public crises of mass unemployment, the rise of fascism and the Spanish Civil War remain integral to any proper understanding of the thirties literature, and the fact that such events are well-recognised in existing critical accounts of the period ought not to tempt the author of any fresh assessment to underestimate the psychological impetus they provided.

Stella Deen's summary of the situation faced by writers during the inter-war period can help us further here. Whilst seeking to align herself with those

¹⁴ Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) p. 5.

¹⁵ Matthews and Williams, p. 2.

resisting what they perceive as a hegemonic version of literary history and value',¹⁶ Deen nonetheless identifies a period characterised by

[...] a widely shared urgency to reassess the world in the wake of the European war: to grapple with loss on an unprecedented scale, to craft art forms appropriate to a world that was felt to be vastly changed, and to identify the global patterns that would expose hitherto unperceived social and human realities, including those that had produced the war.¹⁷

If those modernist authors writing after the Great War indeed undertook to contend with such challenges, then it is to this extent possible to point to important continuities from post-war modernism extending through into the literature of the thirties. Antony Shuttleworth offers the following formulation of the thirties as a period

[...] defined by what it could not comfortably ignore, by its obligation to thoroughly reassess what could count as a legitimate response to prevailing and emergent conditions.¹⁸

It is precisely in the range of possible responses to the profoundly unsettling prevailing and emergent conditions of the period that the present study is fundamentally interested. As Stephen Spender wrote in *World Within World*,

The peculiarity of the 1930s was not that the subject of a civilisation in decline was new, but that the hope of saving or transforming it had arisen, combined with the positive necessity of withstanding tyrannies.¹⁹

Indeed, as is shown in Chapter 1, Spender was among those whose work notably combined an at times paralysing anxiety over the shape and possibility of an

¹⁶ Stella Deen (ed.), *Challenging Modernism, New readings in literature and culture, 1914-45* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002) p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Antony Shuttleworth (ed.), *And In Our Time, Vision, Revision and British Writing of the 1930s* (London and NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003) p. 12.

¹⁹ *WWW*, p. 249.

aesthetically and morally valid literature with an initiative, if not fully realised sense of the creative and regenerative possibilities afforded by such a phase of intense public crisis.

II

Some further discussion is needed at this juncture regarding my reasons for selecting the particular authors and texts featured in the following chapters. Among those critics who have protested against the narrowly canonical view of the thirties which such a selection might be seen to endorse (and in particular the 'naturalisation' of Auden's centrality within the period) is Adrian Caesar, who has written,

Since about 1975, critics and literary historians have often agreed to define Auden by use of the words 'the 1930s' or vice-versa. So we hear that 'Auden's devices of style and habits of feeling are the thirties or a large part of the thirties'...this construction of the decade is partial and ideologically freighted.²⁰

Critics such as Caesar rightly draw attention to the need to question the formation of this (or indeed any) literary canon, to the possible or even likely 'ideological freightedness' of any such formation, and to the unavoidable simplifications and distortions that occur within the processes that give rise to literary history. However, in the case of the thirties, I would maintain that the difficulty remains still in imagining any way in which the authors considered here, whose work embodies a profound richness of response to the special problems of the time, might justifiably be sidelined in the service of any fuller understanding of thirties' literature (indeed, Auden, MacNeice and Spender still feature heavily in Caesar's account of the decade, albeit as the subject, or subjects, of some considerable hostility, certainly in the case of Spender). As indicated, then, this study acknowledges the canonicity of the authors featured and the familiarity of several of the texts under consideration, together with having necessarily excluded certain

²⁰ Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines – Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) pp. 2-3.

of those sets of writers and texts - such as women writers and working class fictions - which have formed the bases for alternative and/or competing critical constructions of the period. However, since much has indeed been done since Samuel Hynes's seminal study, *The Auden Generation* (1976) to reprove the critical view of the thirties as centred around the alleged 'Auden coterie' (and indeed to extend critical interest in the period to a fuller consideration of its fiction, as well as its poetry²¹) it is pertinent and justified to revisit and rethink the possible reasons for such a construction in the first place. I am by no means working on any assumption that an 'Auden-centric' view of the period remains the only really viable or worthwhile approach. However, I do maintain that the body of work which is (re)considered here remains, as the following chapters demonstrate, among that which is integral to our understanding of the period, for reasons which are yet deserving of further scrutiny.

Certainly, the thrust of much criticism of thirties' writing since the nineties has centred on work which had previously been, or is seen to have been marginalized, under-represented or undervalued in earlier critical accounts of the period. Patrick Quinn's *Recharting the Thirties* (1996) is, for example, among those books seeking to establish a more wide-ranging literary history of the decade through the inclusion of essays on such lesser featured (though by no means wholly neglected) writers as James Hanley, Anthony Powell, Edward Upward, Elizabeth Bowen, Katharine Burdekin and Rex Warner. Alongside this there has been the emergence of a more sustained critical interest in women writers of the period, most notably in Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996).²² Montefiore may also be numbered among those critics who, along with Andy Croft in his book, *Red Letter Days*, (1990) and Chris Hopkins in *English Fiction in the 1930s*, (2006) have sought to establish an alternative account of the thirties' literary scene through emphasising the work of hitherto under-appreciated authors. Whilst one might take the view that the respective categories of 'women's', 'working-class' or 'leftist' writing utilized and endorsed by such studies are themselves as potentially delimiting as the more 'canonical' approaches they

²¹ Other books including *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (1978) edited by John Lucas, have worked to this end, and have to this extent served as a helpful corrective to the earliest critical surveys of the period, among which are Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After* (1942), *Poetry of the Thirties* (1967) edited by Allan Rodway, *Poets of the Thirties* (1969) by D.E.S. Maxwell, and *The Poetry of the Thirties* (1975) by A. T. Tolley.

²² Also published in the same year was the anthology, *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, edited and introduced by Jane Dowson (London: Routledge, 1996).

purportedly oppose, such work has been important not least for the role it has played in (re)justifying the concept of the thirties as a coherent literary period. Others, such as James Gindin in his book, *British Fiction in the 1930s* (1992) are somewhat closer to the spirit of the present study in seeking to expand and qualify, without wishing to overturn, the (in)famous 'Auden Generation' formulation.²³ Moreover, volumes such as *And in Our Time, Vision, Revision and British Writing of the 1930s*, (2003) edited by Antony Shuttleworth, have undoubtedly had a hand in helping to redress the marginalization of the thirties within accounts of twentieth-century British writing more widely, through an emphasis less on 'neglected' texts and authors, than on the range of ways by which thirties literature might be seen as unsettling existing critical accounts of the century.

III

As I have indicated, this study is predicated on the idea that the terms 'public' and 'private' around which it is centred have multiple and shifting meanings and significances. Whilst theorists such as Jürgen Habermas have enquired into the evolution and concept of the 'public sphere' and subsequent interpenetration of the public and private,²⁴ I would stress that I am concerned here with qualifying and expanding the usefulness of such terms for understanding thirties literature in ways which do not necessarily reside within the scope of such enquiries. Rather, the following chapters seek to explore ways in which, in the texts considered, private forces are seen to be variously and often disturbingly manifest within the public realm, examining the shifting and interacting discourses and practices which explore and express such manifestations. As I have suggested, the forcefulness with which the public world bore down upon the private life during the thirties ensured that the question of the positioning of the 'I' within the literature of the period was granted a renewed urgency. It will therefore be useful at this point to give some indication of the possible theorisations and representational difficulties surrounding the use of the 'I', in order to provide an

²³ James Gindin, *British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 3.

²⁴ See: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989).

outline of the models on which my own enquiries have drawn. In his study of Bakhtin, Michael Holquist has written of the 'I' as follows,

It has long been recognised that the formal means for expressing subjectivity occupy a unique place in any language [...] if 'I' is to perform its task as a *pronoun*, it must not be a noun, i.e. it must not refer to anything as other words do. For its task is to indicate the person uttering the present instance of the discourse containing 'I,' a person who is always changing and different. In Jakobson's suggestive phrase, 'I' is a 'shifter' because it moves the centre of discourse from one speaking subject to another: its emptiness is the no man's land in which subjects can exchange the lease they hold on all language by virtue of saying 'I.' When a particular person utters that word, he or she fills 'I' with meaning by proving the central point needed to calibrate all further time and space discriminations: 'I' is the invisible ground of all other indices in language, the benchmark to which all its spatial operations are referred, and the Greenwich mean by which all its time distinctions are calibrated. 'I' marks the point between 'now' and 'then,' as well as between 'here' and 'there.' The difference between all these markers is manifested by the relation each of them bears either to the proximity of the speaker's horizon (here and now) or to the distance of the other's environment (there and then)...The gate of the 'I' is located at the centre not only of one's own existence, but of language as well.²⁵

Thus, the 'I' is best understood less as any concrete entity than as that element which is both shifting and stable; present and elusive; central and de-centred within thirties literary discourse, confronting both writer and reader with the recurring and multi-faceted question of precisely how one can legitimately utter 'I' in a time of crisis. The following passage from Louis MacNeice (written in 1940) testifies precisely to this sense of the 'I's simultaneous centrality and radical instability,

²⁵ Michael Holquist, *Bakhtin and his world* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 22-23.

'So am I to speak only as myself,' the poet might say, 'my whole self and nothing but myself?' If you know what my whole self is and my only self is, you know a lot more than I do. As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves, but I am often, as they say, not myself at all. Maybe it is just when I am not myself – when I am thrown out of gear by circumstances and emotion – that I feel like writing poetry.²⁶

These comments both correlate with and enact Holquist's description of the 'I' as 'a person who is always changing and different'. The closing remarks in particular, whilst issuing in part from modernist (and arguably proto-postmodernist) notions of multiplicity, are revealing of the role played by contemporary history in the thirties configuration of the 'I'. Yet it is precisely this ever-fluid, perpetually shifting self which MacNeice finds uniquely capable of responding, in creative and imaginative terms, to the public and private crises it encounters.

Whilst recognising, then, the importance of the historic and political conditions of production surrounding the texts discussed, this study is concerned to integrate an awareness of such contexts with a consideration of these works in view of particular 'theoretical' debates concerning the construction of the 'I' and competing notions of subjectivity. In his genealogical study of subjectivity, Nick Mansfield emphasises the ongoing centrality of the 'I' in Western culture,

The 'I' is...a meeting point between the most formal and highly abstract concepts and the most immediate and intense emotions. This focus on the self as the centre of both lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the - if not *the* - defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures.²⁷

Mansfield thus restates Holquist's conception of the 'I' as the point of confluence between the space occupied by private experience and the multiplicity of external

²⁶ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W B Yeats* (London: Faber, 1967) p. 146. Cited hereafter as *PWBY*.

²⁷ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity, Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (NY: New York University Press, 2000) p. 1.

discourses. Below, he points to the defining interrelatedness that exists between self and world, positing the interdependence of public and private experience,

'Subjectivity' refers [...] to an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, *the subject is always linked to something outside of it* - an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. It is this linkage that the word 'subject' insists upon.²⁸

Whilst the interpenetration of public and private worlds has been an insistent theme throughout thirties critical discourse, it is necessary to question the notion (which had been to some extent encouraged by writers including Spender and Orwell in particular) of the two realms as necessarily and inevitably antagonistic. Rather, in re-examining the work of these (and other) authors, I would maintain that it is more fruitful to consider the extent to which writers embraced the traumatic history of their time as a spur to a new creativity, where tensions arising from such public traumas might be imaginatively exploited, rather than treated as necessarily limiting. It is worth noting that Spender himself, who recognised and outlined with notable clarity the dilemmas faced by his generation, later came to recognise this possibility as such,

(M)ay we not say that the position of a writer who sees conflict in something which is at once subjective to himself and having its external reality in the world – the position outlined in Auden's 'Spain' – is one of the most creative, realistic and valid positions for the artist in our time?²⁹

The question alone of what might constitute a 'valid' position for the writer was indeed, and for reasons I have outlined, very a much live issue during the thirties. As Spender notes with reference to Auden's poem, 'Spain', the relationship

²⁸ Ibid, p. 3

²⁹ cited in: Cunningham, p. 263

period, and the following chapters all proceed on the basis that those thirties texts which continue to best repay critical scrutiny are works which engage and seek to represent the inextricability and multifaceted-ness of the public and private realms.

The following chapter, then, attends to Spender's thirties' poetry, arguing that the poems represent a sustained engagement with the task of integrating and reconciling the awareness of public crisis with a pervasive susceptibility to introspection and the exposition of the subjective. Spender's engagement with the crises of the decade is read in terms of the evolving confrontation between the omnipresent 'I' of the poems, and the political, social and economic forces seen as operating externally to the private consciousness. Chapter 2 interrogates notions of a poetic 'middle-way' as a means of approaching Louis MacNeice's thirties poetry, drawing in particular on the influence of MacNeice's early reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) alongside the wider classical and pastoral underpinnings of his dialectical rendering of the public/private binary. Chapter 3 concentrates on Christopher Isherwood's novels, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, arguing that these texts partake of a discourse of selfhood-as-style in a way that demonstrates the politically dangerous logic inherent in the relinquishing of any stable, integrated sense of self. Interwoven with this is a consideration of these novels in relation to specific theorizations of the grotesque tradition in literature. Chapter 4 focuses on George Orwell's novel, *Coming up for Air*, examining how the novel's engagement with ideas of public and private selves is interrelated with the employment by Orwell of the dualistic structures inherent in the pastoral mode, as a means of exploring the encroachment of modernity and of history on the private world of the individual. Finally, Chapter 5 centres upon on W. H. Auden's poetry of the second half of the decade, (in particular the volume, *Another Time*). It is interested in how the poetry subverts the too readily-made distinction between the nominally 'secular' and 'religious' phases of Auden's career, and thus seeks to take greater account of the poet's deepening acceptance of Christianity as registered and expressed in his poetry of the mid-to-late thirties.

Chapter 1: 'The other lives revolve around my sight':³⁰ In search of the real in Stephen Spender's poetry of the thirties

*Poetry expresses in a generalised and abstract way the dynamic relation of the ego to the elements of outer reality symbolised by words. This very generalisation is the source of its ability to voice with unique power the instinctive emotional element in man – the physiological component of the social ego.*³¹

Christopher Caudwell.

This chapter serves on one level as a case study, highlighting and drawing together those particular dilemmas and anxieties which trouble and preoccupy the texts of the thirties. Equally, it offers itself as helping to answer the continued need for further critical analysis of Spender's poetry in its own right. As has been pointed out by critics such as Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, anyone wishing to make substantial claims for Spender's poetry is liable to confront an enduring misconception, which is that the poems in themselves exist as mere footnotes, subordinate to an unusually interesting literary life.³² The following remarks made by Joan Bridgeman in a review of 2001 provide a good example of this view,

He (Spender) is not a figure who stands alone in the literary firmament but always as one of a group, with Isherwood, Auden,

³⁰ 'The Mask', by Stephen Spender, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Brett (London: Faber, 2004) p. 139. Cited hereafter as *NCP*.

³¹ Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1977) p. 321.

³² Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The thirties poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 35.

his time.³³

Among earlier less admiring critics is Willis D. Jacobs, who, in his essay, 'The Moderate Poetical Success of Stephen Spender', complains that, '(F)requently in longer works one winces over poem after poem spoiled as an entity by bathos, eruptions of false notes, and dismaying errors in taste – both in language and in the very structure of his poems'.³⁴ Leaving aside the unsound critical practice of dismissing an author's work on grounds of 'taste', the essence of Jacobs's objections has, nonetheless, been reiterated in the intervening decades, and it remains the case that Spender's poetic output has continued to be unfavourably compared with his considerable output of essays and critical pieces.³⁵

This is not to say that all critics have been similarly dismissive. In particular, the extended close readings offered by O'Neill and Reeves in their book on the thirties' poets, (as well as the former's efforts towards assessing the impact of Romantic poetry on Spender's work in his critical book, *The All-Sustaining Air*³⁶) have undoubtedly contributed to the critical retrieval of Spender's work. Earlier sympathetic critics such as Geoffrey Thurley had, meanwhile, proposed the operation of a 'Spenderian psyche', which, in the essay, 'A Kind of Scapegoat: A Retrospect on Stephen Spender' (1974) is described as comprised of 'confession, atonement and abasement'.³⁷ Defending his subject against the charge of poetic naïveté, Thurley insists that where such a feature exists, it asserts itself less as a fatal flaw it might otherwise be construed as, than as one of the poetry's most valuable characteristics. As he argues,

[...] the naïveté is Spender, or at least an important part of him: it goes along with a genuine innocence of eye, and a capacity not

³³ Joan Bridgeman, review of *Stephen Spender: A Life in Modernism* by David Leeming, in *Contemporary Review* (London: Jan 2001) p.52-53.

³⁴ Willis D. Jacobs, 'The Moderate Poetical Success of Stephen Spender', *College English*, Vol. 17, No. 7 [Apr., 1956] pp. 374-378

³⁵ Spender's plight has not been helped by the fact that, prior to the publication in 2004 of the *New Collected Poems*, the major volumes of poetry he published during the thirties had not been widely available. Indeed, the fact that such a volume took so long to emerge is itself indicative of the situation.

³⁶ See Chapter 4, 'The Guts of the Living: Auden and Spender in the 1930s', Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air – Romantic Legacies in British, American and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 83-104.

³⁷ Geoffrey Thurley, *On Spender: A Kind of Scapegoat* (1974) in: Ronald Carter (ed.), *Thirties Poets: The Auden Group* (London: Macmillan, 1984) pp. 152-168.

only for being easily and deeply moved, but for honouring that emotion in strong and direct expression.³⁸

In proposing Spender's work as the site of such qualities, Thurley paves the way for the tracing of Romantic legacies within the poetry later taken up by O'Neill. Earlier still, Francis Scarfe had suggested that Spender's particular drama had consisted in a struggle to 'understand and perfect his individualism, and to adapt his individualism to his social views'.³⁹ Certainly, and as this chapter presupposes, the particular obsessions inherent within Spender's work are more complex, and more important to an understanding of the problems of the age than his less admiring critics have tended to allow. As will be seen, the problem of attaining a coherent, integrated sense of self, and of squaring this with an evolving and often contradictory aesthetics, was directed and problematized by external historic events which seemed to demand not only an active response in the 'real' world, but equally a careful and rigorous reappraisal of precisely what it meant to be a writer at such a time. This chapter thus seeks to map the evolving and distinct ways in which Spender sought to reconcile his belief in the primacy of the inner life with a burgeoning public conscience.

I

There can be no denying that the perceiving, experiencing 'I' constitutes the essential capital of Spender's poetic enterprise, one which, as this chapter contends, is profoundly rich in meditations on this 'I' and its relations to the public world. Spender's response to the public traumas of the thirties, incorporating regular exchanges with the modernist poetics of figures including Rainer Maria Rilke, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot, may be seen as offering a unique level of emotional sophistication and integrity, in terms of its expression of an acute awareness of the unique social and economic pressures which were brought to bear on the private individual. Spender's anxiety over his role as poet, and over the question of sustaining the primacy of the private self alongside the public persona,

³⁸ Ibid, p. 154.

³⁹ Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After – The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (London: Routledge, 1947) p. 35.

is itself one of the core features of the poetry, and the spoken 'I' encountered within his work is frequently both that of the public poet and the private individual. Moreover, the sustained effort at allowing the poetry to be dominated neither by public concerns nor private introspection, but rather holding both in play, is for Spender also a matter of personal integrity, which emerges as manifest in a deeply self-conscious and continually self-justifying aesthetic. The present chapter argues that just as Spender's sustained appeals both to the world of the private 'I' and to the private values of love and friendship are increasingly posited as the primary means of resistance to the public traumas of the decade, so the poetic imagination is afforded the central role in negotiating the territory between the private life and the contemporary reality which is seen to bear down so heavily upon it. The poetry can thus be read as continually engaging and expressing the problem of the relation of the private self to the public realm, rendering a poetic 'I' which is at once central and decentred by external events, thus enacting the claim by made Charles Taylor in his book, *Source of the Self*, that 'decentring is not the alternative to inwardness; it is its complement'.⁴⁰

To the extent that Spender's poetry is expressive of a private consciousness besieged by events occurring in a world seen as external to itself, the poetry can be read as espousing an older, 'essentialist' model of selfhood, located beyond twentieth-century theorisations of 'the subject', in the belief in a private, autonomous self: that is, a subjective core upon which external forces may act but which nonetheless, with all its innate desires and irrationalities, takes precedence over the external world into which it is born. As Nick Mansfield has pointed out, this particular model of selfhood is traceable to works including Rousseau's *Confessions*, (1781). Here emphasis was placed on the uniqueness and autonomy of individual experience, with the ostensible aim on the author's part of providing an uninhibited and unapologetic representation of himself.⁴¹ The following poem, 'I hear the cries of evening', will serve as an initial example of the frequent privileging within Spender's poetry of the individual, perceiving 'I',

I hear the cries of evening, while the paw
Of dark creeps up the turf;

⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 465.

⁴¹ Mansfield, p. 16.

Sheep's bleating, swaying gulls cry, the rock's caw,
The hammering surf.

I am inconstant yet this constancy
Of natural rest twangs at my heart;
Town-bred, I feel the roots of each earth-cry
Tear me apart.

These are the creakings of the dusty day
When the dog night bites sharp,
These fingers grip my soul and tear away
And pluck me like a harp.

I feel this huge sphere turn, the great wheel sing
While beasts move to their ease:
Sheep's love, gulls' peace - I feel my chattering
Uncared by these.⁴²

Here, the experiencing 'I' is clearly paramount ('I hear'; 'I am'; 'I feel'). Spender's self is, or seems presented as the recipient of passive experience, where the intensity of the emotions is such that they are likened to physical sensations: the speaker is subject to 'the cries of evening', and 'creakings of the dusty day', whose 'fingers grip my soul and tear away/And pluck me like a harp'. The permeating sense of the centrality of the seeing, feeling 'I' is reinforced within the final stanza in the line, 'I feel this huge sphere turn'. However, the sensation of 'feeling the world turn' is also implicitly suggestive of the apprehension of external events, as it is of the solipsistic sense of a world revolving around a central 'I'. The speaker's ineffectual and unheeded 'chattering' portends recurrent doubts over the validity of the poetic utterance at a time of external crisis, and the anxiety generated by such doubts is expressed in contrast to the perceived ease and indifference of the surrounding natural world, the 'Sheep's love, gulls' peace', and 'hammering surf' outside. The latter image also contains a dual significance, serving as a metaphor

⁴² *NCP*, p. 5.

which expresses precisely the sense of self under siege which is the poem's main theme.

It is also worth noting here that the expressed pastoral impulse found in the second stanza, and implied tension between urban and rural modes of living, issues not from Spender's self-confessedly 'town-bred' status, but rather from his earliest encounters with poetry. As he recounts in *World Within World*,

The countryside...is fused in my mind with my first sustained experience of poetry. For here my father used to read to me the simple ballad poems of Wordsworth, 'We are Seven', 'A Lesson to Fathers', 'The Lesser Celandine'. The words of these poems dropped into my mind like cool pebbles, so shining and so pure, and they brought with them the atmosphere of rain and sunsets, and a sense of the sacred cloaked vocation of the poet.⁴³

Here, then, are described the beginnings of the process enacted within Spender's poem, at the heart of which is the central 'I' looking to negotiate a path between modernity and the imaginatively fostered Wordsworthian pastorals of youth; in other words, between a privately cultivated vision and the new and altogether more disturbing realities of the contemporary public realm. Moreover, the following journal entry made by Spender some years later tells, as John Sutherland has indicated,⁴⁴ of the extent to which he desired to connect the Wordsworthian lyrical 'I' with his own poetic practice,

'I' is Wordsworth's whole sentient being, the instrument of self that through the sense responds to, and is part of, nature. This sentient 'I' has direct communication with nature and therefore is not bookish – regards books as dangerous lore and intellect as only a part of being.⁴⁵

It can be seen that whilst the predilection towards the private lyric voice remained one of the staple features of Spender's poetry, it would not survive in any

⁴³ *WWW*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ John Sutherland, *Stephen Spender: The authorised biography* (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 383.

⁴⁵ Unpublished journal entry, 6 August 1955 (quoted in: Sutherland, p. 383).

straightforwardly imitative, unbounded (or indeed unbounded) form. In *Within World*, Spender admits that he moved on from his youthful encounter with Wordsworth's poetry to develop in his early maturity a conception of poetry which constituted a 'separate poetic world apart from the real world.'⁴⁶ As he explains, 'I thought of it as word-pictures and word-music outside everyday life'.⁴⁷

Such an attitude, however, did not itself prove satisfactory for long. The building tension between this self-consciously aestheticist position and the burgeoning sense of the need for engagement with the 'real' world can be illustrated with reference to the following passage from Rex Warner's allegorical novel *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937). On his quest to cross the frontier, protagonist George encounters the figure of Don Antonio,

Don Antonio: 'Let us, if you please, avoid particularities. There is nothing so dangerous to the elucidation of truth.'

George: 'But actions, or conduct, are a good test for the sincerity of a mind; for when the mind overgrows itself, so the body will pull it back.'

Don Antonio: 'Newfangled nonsense, my friend. It is just the opposite of this that I maintain. The mind can and does rise so far above and beyond its corporeal territory that it inhabits carefree a world of its own, a world more real than that which ordinarily we perceive with our senses, yet a world which is the perfect exemplar creative in a sense of the imperfect world in which we live.'⁴⁸

Antonio's insistence upon the higher reality of the mind may be read as a critique on Warner's part of the modernist privileging of individual consciousness over objective reality. For Antonio, the private world exists as a realm unto itself. Thus, it is, and constructs, its own reality, and is seen to be compromised, not enriched, by the particularities of an imperfect external world felt to be less real than itself. George tries in vain to persuade Antonio of his error in adhering to such notions of self-sufficiency, asking finally, 'is not an individual whose life is wholly unrelated to

⁴⁶ *WWW*, p. 94.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁴⁸ Rex Warner, *The Wild Goose Chase* (London: Merlin Press, 1990) pp. 55-56.

the lives of others almost a maniac? Let Antonio is unmoved by such objections, remaining locked in a solipsistic condition which denies the relationship between consciousness and social being upon which George insists. As will be seen, it is this very relationship with which Spender, having admitted the inadequacy of such a stance, seeks to come to terms. The above exchange thus serves as a useful exemplar of the dialogue Spender felt obliged to hold with himself.

Whilst, then, the writing of the twenties had, for Spender, been variously characterised by, 'despair, cynicism, self-conscious aestheticism, and by the prevalence of French influences',⁵⁰ he was not alone in suspecting that a decisive change was at hand in the way in which writers - or more precisely his generation of writers - viewed themselves and their role within and in relation to society and the rapidly encroaching public crisis. As Spender wrote in the following familiar passage from *World Within World*,

From 1931 onwards, in common with many other people, I felt hounded by external events. There was ever-increasing unemployment in America, Great Britain, and on the Continent. The old world seemed incapable of solving its problems, and out of the disorder Fascist regimes were rising...No wonder that the literature of this period is time-obsessed, time-tormented, as though beaten with rods of restless days.⁵¹

Certainly, the plight of millions of unemployed, the increased momentum of the Nazi movement, and the obliteration of the Labour and Liberal parties in the 1931 General Election, were among those events comprising a contemporary scene increasingly difficult to ignore. The line, 'beaten with rods of restless days' might indeed have been lifted from one of the poems, whilst the experience of feeling 'hounded' by external events reveals, as Samuel Hynes has noted, a sense of the pressure of the public life upon the private, of immediate history as an aggressor against the private man.⁵² This same sense is starkly reflected in Spender's play, *Trial of a Judge* (1938) where the judge, whose private ideals are challenged and subsumed by the public laws he is compelled to enact, utters the lines, 'We are

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 56.

⁵⁰ *WWW*, p. 139.

⁵¹ *WWW*, p. 137.

⁵² Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976) p. 67.

trampled beneath a brutal present far heavier than our life-long dream. The following speech from the Judge in Act II gives further voice to the private sense of moral disturbance and erosion of certainty generated by the public trauma which remained at the forefront of Spender's mind during this period,

JUDGE. How strange it seems
That to me justice was once delineated by an inner
eye
As sensibly as what is solid
In this room, tables, chairs and walls
Is made indubitable by the sun.
But now all crumbles away
In coils of darkness, and the existence
Of what was black, white, evil, right.
Becomes invisible, founders against us
Like lumber in a lightless garret.
I refresh myself in pleasant country
Or I stare round faces in a room
And although there is gold in the corn and gaiety
In a girl's eyes or sliding along the stream,
Everything is without a meaning.
Voices of hatred and of power
Call through my inner darkness
Only that might is right⁵⁴

The figure of the Judge offers a noteworthy dramatization of the tension between the public man and the private individual, in which the latter sees external events inexorably eroding the ground upon which he stands. He notes that the old sources of joy and vitality, the 'gold in the corn and gaiety/In a girl's eyes' are present yet no longer accessible, and is eventually compelled towards the recognition (ironically encapsulated within the bitterly uttered slogan 'might is right') that the liberal values he cherishes no longer hold good.

⁵³ Stephen Spender, *Trial of a Judge* (London: Faber, 1938) p. 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

As I have noted earlier, Spender's earliest remembered experience of poetry came from his father's reading aloud of Wordsworth's ballad poems during family visits to the Lake District. It was, however, from the encounters in his early maturity with seminal modernist texts including *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waste Land* (1922) that Spender derived his sense that inherently unpoetic-seeming things (for example, the pylons which would become the subject of one of his best-known poems) might themselves offer a viable basis for poetry. As he explained,

What seemed petrified, overwhelming and intractable could be melted down again by poetry into their symbolic aspects. The fantasy at the back of actuality could be imagined, and the imagination could create its order...The transformation of the sordid scene and life of the Dublin of Stephen Daedalus and Bloom into the poetic novel...the juxtaposition of scenes of European decline with ones recalling the greatest glories of the past tradition, in Eliot's *The Waste Land*: these showed me that modern life could be material for art, and that the poet, instead of having to set himself apart from his time, could create out of an acceptance of it.⁵⁵

Here, Spender offers his account of the modernist period, and of the importance of the Imagist movement and its prose corollaries in the fictions of Henry James, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The following comments from Spender's critical book, *The Struggle of the Modern*, (1963) are of relevance here,

All discussion of modern poetry is ultimately a debate about the relation of inner and outer worlds, the extent to which a certain ratio in past times of inner and outer life ordered traditionally can be maintained against the new and invading imagery of science,

⁵⁵ *WWW*, p. 95.

modern inventions, war, and societies which reduce the status of individuals to social units.⁵⁶

This account sees Spender making the distinction between the 'non-recognisers': those who fail to recognise the modern situation (here the Georgian poets⁵⁷ are invoked) and 'recognisers' (i.e. those who do recognise it). As Spender goes on to say, '(T)he modern arises from the need to express a situation outside and beyond the present time in imagery which is of the time.'⁵⁸ A distinction is thus made between 'modern' and 'contemporary' as modes of writing: whilst contemporaries deploy a realistic prose method, the moderns are seen to use an imagistic poetic one.⁵⁹ Spender continues,

The imagistic poetic method derives from the action of the external world upon inner sensibility. Individual consciousness is the centre which is acted upon by the environment. Contemporary economic conditions, politics, etc., affect it as discords in music, screaming colours, distorted form or lack of form. These conditions, that affect sensibility, form a 'climate' or 'atmosphere' – moral. Intellectual or aesthetic – which is the complex result of material and social circumstances, seen by the mind's eye, just as the physical eye sees the colours of the sunset which result from the precipitation of dust in the air.⁶⁰

As will be seen, this view of the external world as predominantly rendered in terms of its impact upon the individual consciousness forms one of the core constituents of the Spenderian poetic. Just as modernism legitimated for Spender the contours and topographies of modernity as material for poetry, so it is

⁵⁶ Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Methuen, 1965) p. 164. Cited hereafter as *SOTM*.

⁵⁷ Five anthologies of Georgian poetry were published between 1912 and 1922, under the editorship of Edward Marsh. Among the poets featured were Rupert Brooke, W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, D. H. Lawrence and John Masefield. Whilst the Georgian enterprise was in fact intended to signal the rejuvenation of English poetry, it has since tended to be regarded as synonymous with formal conservatism and escapist or neo-pastoral verse. That Spender uses the term 'non-recognisers' here would suggest that he took a similar view, and thus sought to distance his own work from that of the Georgians.

⁵⁸ *SOTM*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 117. Here Spender credits the Imagist movement with demolishing the frontier between poetry and prose, 'for if nothing except the image matters, and form, music, rhythm, rhyme, are of secondary importance, then there is no boundary dividing imagist prose and imagist poetry'.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 117.

necessary to also take account of Spender's continued faith in the perceptions of the private imagination as a means of ordering the external; the insistence that, as stated by Charles Larmore in his book, *The Romantic Legacy*, (1996) 'the mind does not copy but creates, and only through the imagination lays hold of reality.'⁶¹ Indeed, it is worth examining the notable confluence between Spender's early poem, 'He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye', and the lines on the Poet in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Spender's poem begins,

He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye
Or pitifully;
Nor on those eagles that so feared him, now
Will strain his brow;
Weapons men use, stone, sling and strong-thewed bow
He will not know⁶²

Whilst in *Prometheus Unbound*,

He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man⁶³

Given, not least, the confluence between the opening phrases here, it seems reasonable to infer that Spender had these lines in mind when he composed his own poem. Indeed, the points of contrast between the two works seem instructive: whereas the figure of Spender's poem 'will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye/Or pitifully', Shelley's poet watches '(T)he lake-reflected sun illumine/ The yellow bees in the ivy bloom'. Yet it is the following stipulation in both cases which would seem to cement the correlation: Shelley's poet will 'Nor heed nor see what things they be', whilst the 'he' of Spender's poem '(N)or on those eagles that so

⁶¹ Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) p. 23.

⁶² *NCP*, p. 3.

⁶³ quoted from Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism, an anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) p. 898.

reared him, now/ will strain his brow. The poem is revealing of Spender's anxiety over the insufficiency of poetry during a time of crisis, and for this reason Shelley's poet is re-conceived as the would-be heroic 'airman' figure in Spender's verse, whose imaginative power diminishes into pathos, and who, in his failed quest, himself becomes the Icarus-resembling object of pity envisaged at the poem's end,

This aristocrat, superb of all instinct,
With death close linked
Had paced the enormous cloud, almost had won
War on the sun;
Till now, like Icarus mid-ocean-drowned,
Hands, wings, are found⁶⁴

Whilst, then, Spender's constructions of the 'real' can on one level be seen to issue from a conscious affiliation with the romantic concept of the imaginative transfiguration of reality through the poetry, poems such as this betray a deep uncertainty over the viability of such a project in an age where the sense of leadership embodied in the oratorical prowess of the public figure seemed to take precedence over (what Shelley had characterised as) the unacknowledged legislature of the poet.⁶⁵ Indeed, there is, or seems, a manifest tension between Spender's stated affinity with the modernist project and his desire to endorse the romantic privileging of the imagination as the primary means of accessing reality, not least because such a privileging, with its reliance upon the personal vision, may be held as antithetical to a (Poundian or Eliotian) modernism which, as Charles Taylor has suggested, partially seeks to denigrate such subjectivism as an inadequate response to modernity.⁶⁶ Yet critics such as Michael O'Neill have persuasively sought to position Spender as working precisely within a neo-Romantic idiom which is capable of confronting the major issues of his time.⁶⁷ Moreover, it should be pointed out that Taylor by no means denies the continuities which are acknowledged as existing between Romanticism and Modernism, indeed noting that the Romantic aspiration to recover contact with moral and spiritual

⁶⁴ *NCP*, p. 3.

⁶⁵ In his essay, 'A Defence of Poetry', (1840) Shelley famously argued the case for poets as being 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. See: *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, (London: Edward Moxan, 1840) p. 57.

⁶⁶ Taylor, p. 490.

⁶⁷ O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air*, p. 103.

sources through the exercise of the creative imagination becomes only more urgent for the modernists, precisely because of the impoverishment wrought on individual lives by a modern fragmented, instrumentalist society.⁶⁸ With this in mind, we can begin to appreciate that Spender's own attachment to both camps is both necessary and inevitable.

III

Spender's introduction to his critical book, *The Destructive Element* (1935) is further revealing of his conception of the historic contingencies upon which the relationship between the individual and society rests, and of the altering significances of public and private actions. Indeed, the genesis of the book itself is instructive in this regard. Having begun life as a critical study of Henry James, the book is clearly inflected by the preoccupation with inner and outer worlds precipitated by the deepening European crisis. As Spender wrote,

In times of rest, of slow evolution and peace, society is an image of the individual quietly living his life and obeying the laws. In violent times the moral acts of the individual seem quite unrelated to the immense social changes going on all around him. He looks at civilisation and does not see his own quiet image reflected there at all, but the face of something fierce and threatening, that may destroy him. It may seem foreign and yet resemble his own face. He knows that if he is not to be destroyed, he must somehow connect his life again with this political life and influence it.⁶⁹

Thus, from the unsettling and uncanny sense generated by the personal encounter with the moment of historic crisis, the individual, confronted with the alienating experience of being overtaken by events, is compelled to realise and reconfigure the connection between the public and the private. The poem 'What I expected' is

⁶⁸ Taylor, p. 490.

⁶⁹ *DE*, pp. 18-19.

illustrative of precisely this primary clash between consciousness and the external world, as experienced by the young poet, and offers a useful and instructive paradigm for mapping the dilemmas which are seen to preoccupy much writing of the period. The poem gives an account of a self-confessedly naïve and youthfully idealistic world-view, surprised at being overtaken by the morally corrosive effects of time and the exigencies of the outer world. It begins by describing the desire to locate a selfhood realised in action:

What I expected was
Thunder, fighting,
Long struggles with men
And climbing.
After continual straining
I should grow strong;
Then the rocks would shake
And I should rest long.

This first stanza anticipates the chance to prove oneself through effortful struggle, as indicated by a stream of verbs - 'fighting'; 'struggles'; 'climbing'; 'straining' - all emblematic of dignified, worthy endeavour, and seeming to suggest the possibility of a heroic self realised in action. However, it becomes clear that what had seemed like a difficult, yet attainable route to personhood is complicated by the unforeseen realities of the suffering precipitated (though this is not made explicit in the poem) by the social and economic crisis. Thus, from early on in Spender's career, ontological concerns are met with problems of agency: the extent to which we are able to act with intent and awareness, and how we should, or are able to change society through concerted individual action.⁷⁰ Whilst private actions seem to be denied all meaning in the face of external crises, the relationship with the public realm is such that, as Spender himself wrote, 'individuals, particularly the young [...] found themselves in a world where no action of theirs, and nothing they created or thought, could alter the course of events'.⁷¹ Thus the pressure of the socio-political circumstances of the period force the writer to confront a moral position which seems to negate the value of the private act (such as the act of

⁷⁰ Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2004) p. 5.

⁷¹ *WWW*, p. 286.

writing) as sufficient unto itself, and must take account of the possibility of action in the 'real' world.

In the poem, then, the unforeseen external realities ('the sick falling from the earth') bring the speaker to the slow understanding that the chance for self-realisation he had envisaged is contingent not just upon private endeavour but also upon the sustained negotiation of moral and temporal hurdles which, if unaccounted for, serve to negate any solipsistic or self-contained version of selfhood,

What I had not foreseen
Was the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away,
The lack of good to touch
The fading of body and soul
Like smoke before wind,
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

The intimations of the 'lack of good to touch' are, on one level, expressive of the yearning to be in contact with the real which runs through the poetry, revealing a self which desires to transcend its own limitations in an effort to make contact with a world outside its own experience. As Spender wrote in his later critical book, *The Thirties and After*, (1978)

(T)he concern with being 'real' or 'unreal' arose because we felt ourselves to be living in a contemporary reality from which we were somehow shut out by circumstances⁷².

These circumstances included not only the fact of having been born too late to participate in the First World War, but also the relatively privileged class status of Spender himself, and his colleagues, which in turn engendered a sense of guilt and of separateness from the public traumas of the day. 'What I expected' is thus motivated by the recognition that, in Spender's words, 'to realise oneself to the

⁷² Stephen Spender, *The thirties and After - poetry, politics, people (1933-75)* (London: Macmillan, 1978) p. 243. Cited hereafter as *TAA*

fullest extent of one's powers means an entering into that which is beyond oneself.⁷³ Yet the route towards personhood is subject to the corrosive temporal force of 'the gradual day/weakening the will'. The desired tangible creation, the integrated self or the completed poem, dissolves as 'smoke before wind', an image which has a possible source in the Latin inscription by Mantegna on his portrait of Saint Sebastian (noted and admired by Spender in the epigraph of T. S. Eliot's poem of 1920, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar') which reads: 'nothing endures except that which is divine; all else is smoke'.⁷⁴ Indeed, this very sense of the transience of a modern experience situated outside and beyond any viable framework of belief reveals an understated affinity with the modernity of Eliot's poetry of the twenties, and may be seen as informing this and other poems written by Spender during the early thirties. The 'corrupt, unsubstantial' reality which Spender's poem here describes can be seen to issue from a sensibility which is in certain aspects complementary to that informing Eliot's poem 'Gerontion' (1920). Before quoting from Eliot's text, it is worth noting that Spender's commentary on this poem is especially illustrative,

The 'I' who is the narrator of the poem [...] is the very centre of the poem. His narration consists of the laying bare of his symptoms, which are indistinguishable from those of the contemporary civilisation. He is the decay of history become conscious in him. Gerontion has no character apart from the attitudes and symptoms he reveals, which are those of Christian civilisation in its senescence. The poem is about what the man who is as old as the civilisation itself sees. The reader does not stand outside 'Gerontion' [...] He is drawn into the vortex of conscious history. He is made to see that he also is corrupted by living within the decadent civilisation, and that he cannot be other than corrupted by it.⁷⁵

Thus the distinction between what motivates the two poems may well be couched as that between the thwarted idealism of youth and the embittered disillusion of

⁷³ *WWW*, p. 91.

⁷⁴ Cited by Spender in his critical book, *Eliot* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975) p. 59. Spender appreciatively adds, 'beautiful, the Latin *'nil nisi divinum stabile est; caetera fumus'*'.

⁷⁵ Spender, *Eliot*, pp. 62-3

old age. Whilst Spender's poem does not insinuate the reader's complicity to anything like the same degree as Eliot's, both poems record by means distinct a process, akin to corruption, of private delusion debunked in the face of a stifling, failed modernity. Whilst Eliot's poem contains the warning lines,

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.⁷⁶

Spender's 'I' is unhappily subject to,

The wearing of Time,
And the watching of cripples pass
With limbs shaped like questions
In their odd twist,
The pulverous grief
Melting the bones with pity,
The sick falling from earth –
These, I could not foresee

Here is revealed how the realization of the ideal, heroic 'I' envisaged at the beginning of the poem is, in actuality, perpetually deferred whilst the poet confronts the external 'pulverous' grief which serves to negate such a pursuit. Whilst the speaker reacts with pity to the sufferings of the poor, the poem also notes that such an emotion can have a debilitating effect, that of 'Melting the bones', thus working as a restrictive as much as an enabling force. The 'cripples' of the poem, with 'limbs shaped like questions' reiterates, meanwhile, the youthful lack of regard for the world of the poor, and serves to further emphasise that it is the very solipsism of the artist of which the questions must now be asked. The task is, finally, to integrate the outer, public realm with the private, inner world; that is, if the 'final innocence' described in the poem's final stanza is to be achieved,

⁷⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1935* (London: Faber, 1971) p. 38.

For I had expected always
Some brightness to hold in trust,
Some final innocence
To save from dust;
That, hanging solid,
Would dangle through all
Like the created poem,
Or the dazzling crystal.⁷⁷

The redemptive imagery of the created poem attains a greater resonance as the decade progresses. As is maintained here, whilst Spender asserts the autonomy of the poem as a 'separate and complete and ideal world', with poetry itself operating as 'a function of our emotional life',⁷⁸ the creative imagination is increasingly posited as the means of resistance to the destructive forces at work in Europe.

Just as 'What I Expected' struggles to bridge the felt disconnect between the private 'I' and the larger public world, so poem VIII (also appearing under the title 'Trigorin') may similarly be read as issuing from a sense of the disjunction between inner and outer selves brought about by an invasion of the private self by that world,

An 'I' can never be great man.
This known great one has weakness
To friends is most remarkable for weakness
His ill-temper at meals, dislike of being contradicted,
His only real pleasure fishing in ponds,
His only real wish---forgetting.

To advance from friends to the composite self,
Central 'I' is surrounded by 'I eating'
'I loving', 'I angry', 'I excreting',
But the great 'I' planted in him
Has nothing to do with all these

⁷⁷ *NCP*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁸ *TAA*, pp. 48-52.

we can see how the poem is both motivated and troubled by the question of the functioning in the world of the operative will. This second stanza presents a state of disunity, in which the self is deconstructed down into its composite parts ("I eating', 'I loving, 'I angry', 'I excreting".) Spender portrays a self which is inhibited, rather than enabled, this time by both its physical being and the emotions to which it is subject: those aspects of being human, in other words, which render us weak and vulnerable. This state of dissipation amidst the self's bodily and emotive functions may be illustrated with reference to Auden's prose work, 'The Prolific and the Devourer' (1939). Here, Auden writes,

At first the baby sees the limbs as belonging to the outside world.
When he has learnt to control them, he accepts them as parts of
himself. What we call the 'I', in fact, is the area over which our will
is immediately operative. Thus, if we have a toothache, we seem to
be two people, the suffering 'I' and the hostile outer world of the
tooth. His penis never fully belongs to a man.⁷⁹

Here Auden outlines the same sense of division within the functioning self intimated in Spender's poem, whereby the physical functions of the body are conceived not as constituent parts of the central, experiencing self, but rather are consigned to the status of 'other', belonging instead in the outer world of things, and thus numbered among those external features at odds with the project, and projection of the 'I'. Spender records his intimations of a possible heroic identity as separate from that self whose impulses are towards the nominally escapist practices of 'fishing in ponds' and 'forgetting'. This 'I' can 'never claim its true place', and, rather than realising itself by some heroic endeavour, is positioned amidst the other, fallible selves, exchanging the glimpsed heroic role for that of quarrelsome interloper,

Resting in the forehead, secure in his gaze.

⁷⁹ quoted from Edward Mendelson (ed.), *The English Auden* (London: Faber, 1977) p. 394. Cited hereafter as *EA*.

The great I is an unfortunate intruder
Quarrelling with 'I tiring' and 'I sleeping'
And all those other 'I's who long for 'We dying'.⁸⁰

In citing Auden above, it is worth drawing an initial distinction between the approaches of the two poets to the extent that, whilst (as is discussed in chapter 5) the latter's work reveals an intellect consciously engaged with the intricacies of the psyche, Spender's poems give a contrasting sense of recording his own developing stages of thought, so that, far from being held at bay by the opacity of the verse, the reader is invited to recognise and to share in the experience of learning being undergone by the speaker.

Poem XXIII ('I think continually of those who were truly great') recalls and extends the theme of desired heroism found in 'What I expected'. Here, Spender's 'I' appeals to past lineage and tradition, in an utterance marked by a daring individualist impulse towards a neo-Romantic transcendentalism,

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.

⁸⁰ *NCP*, p. 6.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest heaven
See how these names are feted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.⁸¹

Given that this is one of Spender's most famous poems, it is perhaps surprising how few critics, either of Spender's work, or of thirties' writing more generally, have attempted any serious or sustained analysis.⁸² That the poem on one level presents itself as an apparently straightforward expression of youthful dreams of 'greatness' might, in some measure, help to account for this, and it is true that the poem is markedly resistant towards any self-protective irony which might otherwise have shielded it from charges of mawkishness. Certainly the recurrent contemplation of the 'truly' great must in part be understood within the context of an acutely felt need for leadership during the thirties (a need explored somewhat more obliquely through the figure of the Airman in Auden's long poetic work of 1932, *The Orators*). Moreover, it is worth noting that a further inspiration for the poem, for the 'endless, singing hours' it describes, may be found in Spender's appreciation at this time of Beethoven's late quartets,⁸³ and that the composer undoubtedly numbers among those 'truly great' figures to whom the poem is addressed. Thus, as Samuel Hynes has put it, the poem articulates the separation of the present from the heroic past, and the Self from the Hero.⁸⁴

The surface passion of the poem should, however, by no means be taken as a signifier of artlessness or lack of intellectual poise. We might note at the outset that the first line announces a strangely confessional tone, as though the admission made were something beyond the mere act of private thought. The emphasis is

⁸¹ *NCP*, pp. 16-17.

⁸² Indeed, it seems odd that Samuel Hynes, having offered some detailed analysis of 'What I expected', says that the poem 'needs no elaborate commentary', (Hynes, p. 69.) whilst the discussion by O'Neill and Reeves remains among the few longer appreciations of the poem (see O'Neill and Reeves, pp. 56-57).

⁸³ Spender corresponded over this with T. S. Eliot, who, in a letter of March 1931 (prior to the publication in 1944 of *Four Quartets*) wrote of his admiration for the 'divine joy' of the A minor quartet, and his hope that he might be able to capture something of this in his verse (see discussion of this in David Leeming's critical biography, *Stephen Spender, A life in Modernism* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1999) p. 57).

⁸⁴ Hynes, p. 69.

ostensibly upon individual periectionity, upon striving toward what is described as the spirit 'clothed from head to foot in song'. Moreover, the Romanticist tendency inscribed in the descriptions of those 'who hoarded from the Spring branches/The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms' indicates that the longing for what is called 'greatness' is not borne of the confrontation with contemporary reality alone. Rather, such a confrontation has precipitated the expression of more deeply held anxieties regarding the speaker's struggle to reconcile his individualism with a newly acquired moral sense. The concomitant attempt to locate an identity in past lives, embedded in and reinforced by notions of 'the soul's history', represents part of a wider effort to realise a self which is equal to the challenge thrown down by the exigencies of the period. So conceived, this relationship between the private self and the external world ties in closely with Spender's belief that the poet should reinvent the world of external impersonal forces as his inner personal world, so that, as Spender put it, the impersonal modern world may be personalized in poetry.⁸⁵ Thus, the exhortation is that we never 'allow gradually the traffic to smother/With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.'

Here as elsewhere, then, the exercising of the poetic imagination is posited as one of the few available modes of resistance. And yet the suggested transience in the sky-writing image with which the poem finishes, coupled with the allusion to the Icarus myth ('they travelled a short while towards the sun') injects a note of doubt into the poem's otherwise confident tone. The suggestion is that the feted 'greatness' of such forebears will not be sustained merely of its own volition, but rather must be incorporated into an ongoing process of regeneration and renewal. The poem thus ultimately stakes its claim less as the inheritor of past values than as part of a still living tradition. Moreover, it is only by such means that 'The names of those who in their lives fought for life' might be mobilized to meet the coming crisis. The following comments by Spender in *Forward from Liberalism* (1937) are in this sense illustrative of the poet's motives in writing the poem,

The greatest romantic poetry springs from a deep and intense contemporary awareness, combined with feelings of hope and deep apprehension. The romantic cannot fail to see and be

⁸⁵ *SOTM*, p. 52.

wounded by actuality which he views from the standpoint of a high ideal. The romantics did not dismiss the world of the industrial revolution from their consciousness; they appealed to other values, of Shakespearean or Greek poetry, against that world.⁸⁶

Whilst Spender is thus at pains to stress the flow and contiguity between Romantic and political ideals; the extent to which the Romantic artist is engaged in the task of, in Spender's words, 'struggling to comprehend the relation of men's passional lives to the social pattern in which they are compelled to spend their time',⁸⁷ he also cites the attacks of schizophrenia suffered by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (whose poetry Spender was avidly reading at this time) as an instance of Romanticism's difficulty in reconciling a world of high imaginative values with the failure of the world to such standards.

The following translation of Hölderlin's early poem, 'Buonaparte' (which appeared in John Lehman's *New Writing* in 1936, having been produced in collaboration with Spender's friend Edwin Muir as part of an abortive larger project) expresses on the one hand a view of the poet's role consonant with Spender's poetic rendering of the 'truly great', yet in the same breath registers the keenly felt tension between the young poet's burgeoning consciousness and the adequacy of the poetic response on the one hand, and the public world of action on the other, a tension with which Spender can clearly be seen to identify,

Holy vessels are the poets,
Wherein the wine of life, the spirit
Of heroes itself preserves.
But the spirit of this stripling
The swift one, must he not shatter,
Where it would comprehend him, the vessel?
The poet must leave him unattempted, as nature's ghost,
Before such matter the master becomes as a child.
Shall he live and remain in poetry?

⁸⁶ Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism* (London: Gollancz, 1937) p. 32.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 31.

Hölderlin's poem (which was written in 1797, ostensibly in praise of Napoleon's victories in northern Italy) is configured in Spender's translation as expressive of the problem whereby poetry is the 'vessel' that preserves and sustains the heroic spirit, yet the inherently containing properties of poetic form are posited as being at odds with the spirit's need to burst forth into the world of action, a progress which 'shatters' the vessel of poetry which, paradoxically, supplies its essential nourishment. Spender's affiliation with the conflict between thus remaining 'in poetry' or 'in the world', remained one of his most enduring themes as the thirties progressed, and his interest in Hölderlin's work at this time supplies further evidence of his efforts to draw upon what he undoubtedly saw as the poetic antecedents to his own plight.

Poem II, 'Rolled over on Europe', seems to avoid direct engagement with the public world. The poem records a moment of existential bleakness, does so, initially at least, in a voice whose inclusive use of 'our' runs counter to the solitary mood in which the poem is couched,

Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars
 Below us; above our heads, the night
 Frozen again to stars; the stars
 In pools between our coats; and that charmed moon.

There are some recurring symbols at work here: the first is that of 'Europe' itself, which may be read as symbolic of the political struggle occurring on the continent, and so on this level revealing of a framing awareness of the unfolding crises taking place. The image of the stars occurs frequently in the poetry, and it is here that another of the sponsoring modernist voices, that of Rainer Maria Rilke, is heard. The following lines, found in the ninth of Rilke's 'Duino Elegies', strike a remarkably similar note, in terms of both imagery and sentiment,

...Above all, the hardness of life,
 The long experience of love; in fact,

⁸⁸ *NCP*, p. 71.

Purely untellable things. But later,
under the stars, what use? The more deeply untellable
stars?⁸⁹

In Spender's poem, the presence of the stars is threefold, being positioned below, above and between. The way in which the stars are conceived and represented seems to enact an important tension which is bound up with ideas to do with fixity and fluidity within the poem: the stars exist as transient and active natural phenomena, yet appear as fixed, seemingly permanent entities in the sky. Here, Spender exploits this apparent dichotomy in order to express the sense of an indifferent universe. Yet, as becomes clear, the scheme is ultimately that of positing 'the real' as residing solely within the private centre of the poet's being, situated precisely amidst an ephemeral external world, burning yet static. The poem proceeds to interweave the framing sense of contemporary political strife with intimations of a wider crisis of belief,

Ah, what supports? What cross draws out our arms,
Heaves up our bodies towards the wind
And hammers us between the mirrored lights?

The sense of an ongoing crisis of values is ironically conveyed by the deployment of the Christian symbol of the cross against the poem's otherwise secularist backdrop. In asking, 'what supports', Spender reckons precisely on a world without belief, calling into question the basis on which a sense of self might now be forged, and gesturing towards the loss of possible values upon which such a sense might be based. The focus of the poem's second stanza is narrowed and brought to bear upon the poet's private, subjective centre,

Only my body is real: which wolves
Are free to oppress and gnaw. Only this rose
My friend laid on my breast, and these few lines
Written from home, are real.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1964) p. 63.

⁹⁰ *NCP*, p. 3, my italics.

Here the image of home is brought to symbolise a self under siege. Indeed, the Romantically-derived equation of self and home can be seen to persist in Spender's writing during this period, at least up until the end of the decade. For example, his autobiographical novel, *The Backward Son* (1940) - which explores the suffocating childhood experience of boarding school - includes the succinct yet aptly potent phrase, 'being I is home'.⁹¹ Whilst such strategies plainly imply the decisive retreat, in the face of external threat or oppression, back towards the private self, 'Rolled over on Europe' simultaneously brings into play a further dimension to Spender's quest for reality, whereby the self's manifestation in the physical body is reclaimed and posited as an alternative possible site of the real, as though, in the face of external pressures, the speaker has temporarily relinquished possession of the abstracted 'I', seeking refuge instead in the concrete materiality of the physical body as the sole remaining locus of a reality that might yet be fully or sustainably owned. The poem thus records a further stage in the ongoing negotiation between the private consciousness and the exigencies of an outside world which asserts itself with increasing forcefulness.

Poem XXII (later called 'Us') adds a more explicitly political dimension to the idea of reality as located in the physical self as much as in the outside world. Here, the opening comradely exhortation gives way to a warning of imminent revolutionary change, whereby the possession of body and soul is exalted over and above the transient mechanics of exchange inherent in the material realm,

Oh young men oh young comrades
It is too late now to stay in those houses
Your fathers built where they built you to build to breed
money on money - it is too late
to make or even to count what has been made
Count rather those fabulous possessions
which begin with your body and your fiery soul:-
the hairs on your head the muscles extending
in ranges with their lakes across your limbs

⁹¹ Stephen Spender, *The Backward Son* (London: Hogarth, 1940) p. 121.

whilst, with images of ghost houses ('it is too late to stay in great houses where the ghosts are/prisoned') the poem insinuates the sense of generational antagonism characteristic of the inter-war period, ('those ladies like flies perfect in amber/those financiers like fossils of bones in coal') the speaker also gestures towards the necessary and inevitable subsidence of existing socio-political frameworks. The final stanza incorporates the sense of (homo)sexual liberation (which Spender had encountered in Germany in the early years of the decade) with, as the word 'comrade' suggests, the call for political rebellion,

Oh comrades step beautifully from the solid wall
advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill
advance to rebel and remember what you have
no ghost ever had, immured in his hall.⁹²

The poem thus sees Spender combining a sensual understanding ('Count rather those fabulous possessions/which begin with your body and your fiery soul') with a (seemingly) revolutionary language. This is reinforced by the image of the entombed ghost in his hall, suggesting a life/death dichotomy operating between the living physical and spiritual self, and a moribund social order. Such a dichotomy may be counterpointed with Rex Warner's poem, 'Hymn', which intimates a similar relationship between valuing the body and political rebellion,

The splendid body is private, and calls for more.
No toy; not for a boy; but man to man, man to girl
runs blood, sweat oozes; each of us has a share.
All flesh is a flag and a secret code.

Just as the speaker urges the audience to 'remember what you have,' Warner offers the complementary suggestion of the body as a uniquely private domain to which, unlike the mind, the outer world cannot gain access. The insistence that 'all flesh is a flag and a secret code', with its suggestions of both public and private modes of exchange, complements Spender's assertion of private and shared ownership of body and soul as allied to the possibility of revolutionary change,

⁹² *NCP*, pp. 15-16.

Come with us, if you can, and, if not, go to hell
with your comfy chairs, your talk about the police,
your doll wife, your cowardly life, your newspaper, your
interests in the East,
You, there, who are so patriotic, you liar, you beast!
Come, then, companions. This is the spring of blood,
heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good.⁹³

Whilst Spender was less forceful than Warner in pressing for revolutionary action, his essay, 'Poetry and Revolution' (which first appeared in *New Country* in March 1933) offers some illumination of his own attitude towards the relations between politics and poetry,

Apart from the remote possibility of a kind of poetry being written which would incite people to action as effectively as the propagandist film, poetry remains an intellectual activity which is idealist in the sense to which most revolutionaries most strongly object. That is to say the poet, often a potential revolutionary, is able to escape from the urgent problems of social reconstruction into a world of his own making. This world is a world of the imagination only bound by the limits of the imagination.⁹⁴

Such a statement is not exactly equivalent to the claim famously made in Auden's elegy for Yeats that 'poetry makes nothing happen'.⁹⁵ It does, however, supply further evidence that, despite Spender's sustained affiliation with the politics of the left, he nonetheless attached equal importance to the exercise of the individual creative imagination, the poetic expression of which were seen from the left (incorrectly, in Spender's view) as counter-revolutionary. Understandably, (and astutely) Spender felt reluctant to position himself on either side of what he suspected to be a false dichotomy between materialism on the one hand, and the (supposedly) suspect 'delights and consolations' of idealism on the other.⁹⁶

⁹³ quoted in Skelton, pp. 59-60.

⁹⁴ *TAA*, p. 48.

⁹⁵ W. H. Auden, *Another Time* (London: Faber, 2007) p. 98. Cited hereafter as *AT*

⁹⁶ *TAA*, p. 49.

The poem, in 1929, takes up again the theme of time which preoccupies much of the volume, as it traverses history in an effort both to locate and subvert the joined and separated private lives caught between the decades and centuries,

A whim of Time, the general arbiter,
Proclaims the love instead of death of friends,
Under the domed sky and athletic sun
The three stand naked: the new, bronzed German,
The communist clerk, and myself, being English.⁹⁷

That the 'general arbiter', time, proclaims on a whim 'the love instead of death of friends' signals the same alertness to contingency awakened in 'What I expected', and it is clear that the peace it envisages is precarious at best. Here, the 'domed sky' both protects and entombs, while the closeness of the words 'domed' and 'doomed' itself serves to reinforce the poem's delicately achieved tension between hope and bleakness. The specific historical moment embodied within the title would seem to locate the poem in a fixed time and place, yet the following stanza undercuts this fixity, and unsettles the reader in encompassing both hindsight and prophecy,

Yet to unwind the travelled sphere twelve years
Then two take arms, spring to a ghostly posture.
Or else roll on the thing a further ten
And this poor clerk with world-offended eyes
Builds with red hands his heaven; makes our bones
The necessary scaffolding to peace.⁹⁸

It is worth drawing attention to the aptness of this stanza's clear echoes of Hamlet's third soliloquy, especially when we recall that the latter is a figure noted for his obsession with the question of identity, and for hesitancy and self-recrimination in the face of the possibility of action. The three figures in the poem are imaginatively projected both backwards and forwards in history into circumstances which on one level negate their 'naked' status as individuals, ('the

⁹⁷ *NCP*, p. 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 10.

new, bronzed German/ The communist clerk, and myself, being English) whilst seeming to bring about the enactment of their latent national, social and political identities. The figures are imagined as assuming the 'ghostly postures' of their forebears, or else (in a line anticipating Auden's notorious phrase in 'Spain', the 'necessary murder') erecting from the bones of their fellow man 'the necessary scaffolding to peace'. The stanza thus works to draw attention to a situation in which individuality and friendship, those dual staples of the private life, seem ultimately contingent upon historic circumstance.

Yet the pessimism this might imply is by no means absolute. These final lines reiterate once more one of the key insights running through the poetry; that private love and friendship represent the invisible means of resistance to the dehumanising effects of war and political repression, invisible because unrecorded in the annals of history, and beyond the reach of the sciences, or indeed the bleak philosophies woven by 'Our father's mystery, the dead man's mercy, The cynic's mystery', that grimly envision the history of man as 'lipping skulls on the revolving rim'. For Spender, it is poetry alone that recognises

Lives risen a moment, joined or separate,
Fall heavily, then are always separate,
A stratum unreckoned by geologists,
Sod lifted, turned, slapped back again with spade.⁹⁹

The speaker intimates that it is only in the recognition and recovery of such lives that the very real public crises of the time will be adequately met. As Spender insisted in a journal entry of September 18th, 1939,

However much one becomes involved in the struggle from day to day, one must have a long-term view of the final issues for civilisation and also for reconstructing people's lives. Politics alter from day to day, and therefore lack continuity; for this reason private life and personal standards become very important because they have a continuity that one mustn't allow to be broken by outside events.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Spender, *Journals 1939-1983* (London: Faber, 1985) p. 37.

Spender thus restates (to borrow from the title of his second major volume) his ideal of the 'Still Centre' of the private life as a permanent locus of value, set against the intensifying chaos and trauma of the public world. Yet it is also worth noting that this ideal did not always endure for Spender himself. At the end of the decade, the renewed outbreak of war in Europe coincided with a point of crisis in Spender's personal life, the breakdown of his first marriage. It was likely, then, that Spender would discern some sense of equivalence between the two developments, one public; the other private. A diary entry of the time reads: 'It so happens that the world has broken just at the moment when my own life has broken.'¹⁰¹ Thus, the sense here is that true crisis arrives when both the public *and* private realms are under duress: when the private realm, now itself a place of (emotional) violence, cannot any longer be appealed to as a site of resistance. In 'The Separation', written in the summer of 1939, the speaker thus feels himself to be '(S)hattered by dark at the still centre/Of the world's circular terror'.¹⁰²

Poem XX, 'The Prisoners', which first appeared in *New Signatures*, represents an important stage in the development of Spender's poetic method, and serves as a useful example of how social concern is capable of usurping emotional territory previously occupied by personal experience. The poem both expresses and enacts a condition of stasis in the face of the reality it encounters,

Far far the least of all, in want,
Are these,
The prisoners
Turned massive with their vaults and dark with dark.

They raise no hands, which rest upon their knees,
But lean their solid eyes against the night
Dimly they feel
Only the furniture they use in cells.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁰² *NCP*, p. 129.

¹⁰³ *NCP*, p. 14

Whilst critics such as Cunningham have drawn attention to the fact that we are left somewhat in the dark as to the precise identity or location of the 'prisoners',¹⁰⁴ the significance and emotional force of the poem derive from its clear attempt to come to terms with the fact of human suffering. The idea of entrapment, inscribed in the poem's title, and brought home by the imagery of vaults, 'dark with dark', is clearly central, whilst the raising (or not raising) of hands is brought to symbolise both the possibility and impossibility of action, firstly where 'They raise no hands, which rest upon their knees', and later, 'when I raise my hands to strike,/It is too late'. The poem continues,

 Their Time is almost Death. The silted flow
 Of years on years
 Is marked by dawns
 As faint as cracks on mud-flats of despair.

 My pity moves amongst them like a breeze
 On walls of stone
 Fretting for summer leaves, or like a tune
 On ears of stone¹⁰⁵

In spite of the desire to 'plant some hope', the speaker's pity moves among the figures as an ineffectual 'breeze' (a word which, used elsewhere, would be likely to carry somewhat more idyllic connotations) and seems the predominant emotion of the poem. Indeed, we can see how the repetition of 'stone' (first 'walls of stone', then 'ears of stone') enacts within the structure of the stanza the speaker's mood of futility, moving only from barrier to barrier. One might note that such a response to the sufferings of the poor is permitted only by the poet's own comparatively privileged situation, yet the mindset within which 'The Prisoners' seems caught in is one that Spender needed to (and did) find a means of progressing beyond. To this extent, the poem's title might be read as self-rebuke. As Spender would later write,

¹⁰⁴ Cunningham, p. 80.

¹⁰⁵ *NCP*, p. 14

Pity is not an adequate emotion in poetry. It tends to become negative, exhausting, sentimental, masochistic. The only way it can avoid sentimentality is to plunge into extreme subjectivity and become projected as self-pity.¹⁰⁶

Here is the tacit acknowledgement that the marriage of public concern and private sentiment in poetry is not an easy one. Yet within 'The Prisoners' itself are contained certain emotional markers which, by virtue of their very presence, would seem to counteract the ostensible defeatism running through the poem. In stanzas five and six, for instance, Spender writes,

...when I raise my hands to strike,
It is too late,
There are no chains that fall
Nor visionary liquid door
Melted with anger.

When have their lives been free from walls and dark
And airs that choke?
And where less prisoner to let my anger
Like a sun strike?¹⁰⁷

Whilst anger is presented as justified though ineffectual, the very presence and repetition of the word itself (repeated three times) within the poem is, nonetheless, finally responsible, for the subtly-balanced tone that the poem ultimately achieves.

Spender's sensitivity to the contradictions inherent in seeking to represent social suffering via the medium is further evident in poem XXX ('In railway halls'). The poem begins,

In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic,
They beg, their eyes made big by empty staring

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element* (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1983) p. 218. Cited hereafter as *DE*

¹⁰⁷ *NCP*, pp. 14-15.

And only measuring time, like the blank clock.

The realism in the imagery of 'railway halls' and 'pavements near the traffic' announce the poet's determination that this will be more than a circuitous working-out of the speaker's own subjective response to the plight of those reduced to begging. In the second stanza, the speaker insists,

...I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
To make them birds upon my singing tree:
Time merely drives these lives which do not live
As tides push rotten stuff along the shore.

The obvious paradox contained within the first line reads as a possible rebuke towards the inwardness and self-conscious artistry of modernism, and a literature in which heroic prominence is afforded to the person, in Spender's words, 'most conscious of himself as a receiver of impressions, and most likely to make use of his impressions as a means of cultivating himself rather than of acting upon the world'.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the poem can, in response to such a literature, be seen to issue from Spender's desire to be, in his words, 'on the side of the accusers'.¹⁰⁹ The third stanza insists that

- There is no consolation, no, none
In the curving beauty of that line
Traced on our graphs through history, where the
oppressor
Starves and deprives the poor.¹¹⁰

For Spender, here is a world in which lives are not actively lived, but rather are actively prevented from being realised in any meaningful sense, and are instead driven forward only by time itself, as passively as 'tides push rotten stuff along the shore', thus betraying a system which reduces such individuals to the status of automatons. The nominal 'beauty' of the line drawn to represent such a situation

¹⁰⁸ *WWW*, p. 96.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 135.

¹¹⁰ *NCP*, p. 22-23.

registers the comfortable distance from such realities enjoyed by the statistician, and insinuates that the artist who would obscure such realities amidst the 'tracery of pen-ornament' places himself on a similar footing.

To this extent, the poem would seem to evince a clear, if potentially disabling scepticism over the limitations of bourgeois literary conventions in conveying a world which is seen to lie emphatically outside the text, and we can appreciate how the pathos reflected in these lines masks an alertness to the complexities and contradictions inherent in using conventional literary modes in order to convey social distress. As Spender himself pointed out, 'The artist cannot renounce the bourgeois tradition because the proletariat has no alternative tradition which he could adopt'.¹¹¹ The poem, then, is built precisely on the poet's sense of the insolubility of such a paradox.

Poem XVI (later called 'Unemployed') is among Spender's most successful attempts at integrating subjectivity with a seemingly intractable subject matter. By mid-1932, unemployment in Britain had reached its highest point, and the poem is characterised by a sympathetic yearning to make contact with a world it manages to describe without recourse to sentimentality,

Moving through the silent crowd
Who stand behind dull cigarettes,
These men who idle in the road,
I have the sense of falling light

They lounge at corners of the street
And greet friends with a shrug of shoulder
And turn their empty pockets out,
The cynical gestures of the poor

Here Spender sets up a shift between the collective 'silent crowd' and the camera-like observer, deploying images of those who, with no work, can only 'lounge at corners of the street' and 'greet friends with a shrug of shoulder'. The references to 'cynical gestures' and 'dull cigarettes' are emblematic of the spiritual, moral and material deprivations to which these unemployed are subject. The third stanza,

¹¹¹ *TAA*, p. 51.

however, carries some sense of ambivalence. Here, it is not immediately clear whether the poem is gesturing towards a shared common humanity between the classes, or articulating a sense of bitterness on behalf of the poor,

Now they've no work, like better men
Who sit at desks and take much pay
They sleep long nights and rise at ten
To watch the hours that drain away.

Understood in class terms, the reference to 'better men' ought probably to be read as more self-effacing than self-incriminating. Certainly there is no doubting Spender's sympathy with the plight of the unemployed, yet there seems to be, as O'Neill and Reeves indicate, an implicit recognition on the part of the speaker that his involvement with the subject is wrapped up with needs of his own, such as the longing to get in contact with 'real' suffering, a desire generated by his own privileged detachment from poverty.¹¹² It is at the end of the poem that Spender, directing the reader's attention back to the experiencing 'I', confesses to a self-indulgent (some might say perverse) sense of envy,

I'm jealous of the weeping hours
They stare through with such hungry eyes.
I'm haunted by these images,
I'm haunted by their emptiness.¹¹³

Here the reader is returned to the speaker's consciousness, and we are reminded that the images of the public world are mediated via the vexed consciousness of the speaker. The claim of being 'haunted' by the images recalls the complaint of having felt 'hounded' by external events, and the embedding of the language of social reference within the personal lyric further tells of the extent to which social conditions and outside events were directing the poet's sensibility at this time. Whilst such a tendency to take great issues personally could, as Hynes wryly puts it, give the impression of every public event being a potential lyric poem,¹¹⁴ poems

¹¹² O'Neill and Reeves, p. 40.

¹¹³ *NCP*, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ Hynes, p.360

such as unemployed demonstrators, in their careful handling of the gravity of their subject matter, a complex self-awareness, registering a sense of pity on the one hand, but also of ambivalence, as Spender's concern with appearing 'sincere' is tempered by an unwillingness to let his poem rest on easy indignation.

The following comments from *World Within World* indicate Spender's awareness of the difficulty inherent in entering into and representing experiences which were not his own,

In poetry I was confronted with the dilemma of stating a public emotion which had become a private one, and which yet had never become completely my own experience because...it invaded my personality rather than sprang out of it.¹¹⁵

Spender's only long poem of the decade, *Vienna* (1935) is especially illustrative of the difficulty he encountered in treating an invasive public topic about which he felt strongly in a way that rang true, both for himself and for readers. Nonetheless, the poem represents Spender's most sustained effort at integrating subjective experience and public trauma into a coherent poetic whole. The event which provoked the poem was the suppression of a socialist uprising by pro-fascists in the city in early 1934, in which the working-class areas of the city were shelled, and some 2000 or more socialists were killed or executed.¹¹⁶ The private backdrop was a turbulent, indeed terminal phase in Spender's relationship with his then-lover Tony Hyndman, coupled with a burgeoning romantic interest in the American psychologist, Muriel Gardiner (who herself had come to Vienna to seek out one Dr Freud).

As with the Spanish struggle and the triumph of German Nazism which were to follow, the seeming simplicity of a good-versus-evil struggle of fascism against socialism readily lent itself to myth-making, and provided a landscape onto which Spender was able to map his own personal and psychological dramas. *Vienna* documents, then, not only the poet's indignation at the suppression at the uprising, but is also (less obviously) concerned with a love relationship. It moves from the interior monologue of part one, 'Arrival at the City', through the series of speeches entitled 'Parade of the Executive', onto a relatively straightforward

¹¹⁵ *WWW*, p. 191

¹¹⁶ Sutherland, p. 171.

narrative section, *The Death of Heroes*, and culminates with the five voices which comprise the 'Analysis and Statement'. The opening section of the poem is permeated with an acute sense of death, to the point where even the living themselves seem dying,

Whether the man living or the man dying
Whether this man's dead life, or that man's life dying
His real life a fading light his real death a light growing.¹¹⁷

It is not, however, only the deaths of individuals with which the poem is concerned, but also the loss of what Spender calls an 'absolute peace', one which is intrinsically felt rather than consciously apprehended,

It is not death we fear but that a memory
Reported in our veins as absolute peace
And scrolled on buildings built by ancestors
Should turn an agonised, deathly face...¹¹⁸

Spender's method in *Vienna* may be seen to bear traces of T. S. Eliot's influence, most notably in terms of its movement between voices. The comparison, however, scarcely rewards any lengthy pursuit. In spite of the suspected Eliotian imprint, the fragmentary voices within the poem remain at odds with Spender's natural lyric voice. Consequently the poem displays features which (in a manner recalling the poet's consciousness of Hölderlin's fate) might justly be termed 'schizophrenic', containing lines as comparatively impenetrable and resistant to paraphrase as

Hanging at doorways, I choose the wholly dead.
I hold their leathern hands. Their courtesy
Like lamps through orange fog, with a glazed eye
Can preach still.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ *NCP*, p. 49.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

Let the poem also accommodate moments of lyrical night, built, in the lines below, around a particular conception of memory, and offering symbols of hope,

There are some flowers spring in our memory

There are some birds that cut the bare sky

Whilst the personal troubles framing the poem are not made explicit, they can nonetheless be seen as contributing to the indignant and embittered tone of much of the poem. The following excerpt, from the final 'Analysis and Statement' section, bears testimony to Spender's sense of the political outrage in terms of the violence it would and had visited upon the private lives of the young socialists in the city,

O man and woman minute beneath their larger day;

Those burrowing beneath frontier, shot as spies because

Sensitive to new contours

It seems clear from these lines that Spender wished to affiliate himself and Muriel, the 'man and woman minute beneath their larger day', with the plight of hundreds across the city; moreover, that his developing private affection for Muriel occupied in his mind, however tenuously in reality, a key role in such an affiliation. As he later explained,

I meant to show that the two experiences were different, yet related. For both were intense, emotional and personal, although the one was public, the other private. The validity of the one was dependent on the validity of the other: for in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined.¹²⁰

It is important to note that the event and aftermath which inspired *Vienna* are presented not by way of any assumed persona, but, again, are mediated via the consciousness of the speaker. One of the effects of this is that the poem is in places an incoherent work. Yet it is, paradoxically, the very subjectivity inherent in the

¹²⁰ *WWW*, p. 192.

poem which lends it its core integrity, since it is precisely this capacity to accommodate such seeming unintelligibility which permits the poet's dovetailing of his troubled emotional state with his sense of public indignation in a manner which, foreshadowing *Trial of a Judge*, grants precedence to private emotions over political ideology.

Allied to both the personal and the public concerns of the poetry, then, is a thematic preoccupation with love and friendship as not simply a source of intense private emotion, matter for the personal lyric, but, equally, Spender contends, as a force capable of reclaiming and redeeming history. Thus, poem XXIV seeks to affirm love's essential intractability amidst a modern civilisation built by the 'languishing rich' where 'death stalks through life/Grinning white through all faces'.¹²¹ The poem draws together several of Spender's main thirties' preoccupations, combining to powerful effect the awareness of social trauma with a sense of the possibility of revolutionary change,

In this time when grief pours freezing over us,
When the hard light of pain gleams at every street corner,
When those who were the pillars of that day's gold roof
Shrink in their clothes; surely from hunger
We may strike fire, like fire from flint?
And our strength is now the strength of our bones
Clean and equal like the shine from snow
And the strength of famine and of our enforced idleness,
And it is the strength of our love for each other.

Readers of this strange language,
We have come at last to a country
Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes all faces,
Here you may wonder
How it was that works, money, interest, building, could ever
hide
The palpable and obvious love of man for man.¹²²

¹²¹ *NCP*, p. 17.

¹²² *NCP*, pp. 17-18.

here, the poet imagines a new country in which the values and virtues of love might be reiterated and upheld. The poem's admission of its own 'strange language' reveals a subtle self-awareness which might easily be missed by the readers whom it addresses, thus anticipating and fending off the risk of appearing merely gauche in the pursuit of a simultaneous emotional and rhetorical impact. The refrain, 'equal like the shine from snow', recalls and reproves the earlier 'hard light of pain', and light itself, previously used in an inverted manner, now regains its positive meaning in a process of redemption which both mirrors and underscores the poem's political invocation.

The poem, 'Acts passed beyond' supplies an alternative to such politically driven language, instead couching the expression and experience of love in modern imagery borrowed from war and industry. As the narrator says in the final stanza,

So 'very kind' was merest overflow
Something I had not reckoned in myself,
A chance deserter from my force. When we touched hands
I felt the whole rebel, feared mutiny
And turned away,
Thinking, if these were tricklings through a dam,
I must have love enough to run a factory on,
or give a city power, or drive a train.¹²³

The images run on open-endedly, and show how such deeply private moments as are conveyed here became infiltrated in Spender's mind by his consciousness of the wider, public world. The conception of love as 'enough to run a factory on' or 'give a city power' paves the way for a vision (taken up at length in Auden's work) in which the sick society is symptomatic of love's absence or failure, with the intimation that both individual lives and whole civilisations may fail for this same reason. Moreover, it is worth noting the extent to which the influence of D. H. Lawrence in particular is detectable in the language of the poem. The following excerpt from *Women in Love* (1921) in which Gerald agonizes over his involvement with the running of his father's colliery, can on one level be seen to issue from much the same position as Spender's poem,

¹²³ Ibid, p. 5.

It was this recognition of the state of war which really broke his heart. He wanted his industry to be run on love. Oh, he wanted love to be the directing power even of the mines. And now, from under the cloak of love, the sword was cynically drawn, the cloak of mechanical necessity.¹²⁴

Here, as in Spender's work, love is conceived in visionary terms, needlessly at odds with the 'mechanical necessity' of modernity. Similarly, in *Trial of a Judge*, which concerns itself with the simultaneous need for, and failure of liberal ideals, the character of the Fiancée laments how 'all we need is love. And yet we play the meaningless game of a machine'.¹²⁵ Such lines may well be construed as naively idealistic; however the important point to be taken here, as elsewhere, is that the preservation, rather than the forgoing of private affection, in the face of public traumas, must underpin any recovery from them. However (and without seeking to diminish the power of this insight) it ought also to be acknowledged that the stance embodied in 'Acts passed beyond' is not necessarily quite so straightforward. Some further reference to Lawrence, this time his 1917 essay, 'Love', can help us here,

The bond of love! What worse bondage can we conceive than the bond of love? It is an attempt to wall in the high tide; it is a will to arrest the spring, never to let May dissolve into June, never to let the hawthorn petal fall for the berrying.¹²⁶

Read in light of this passage, Spender's poem, and in particular the image of love 'trickling' through a dam which otherwise holds it at bay, may be understood less in terms of a force which might be harnessed for the betterment of humanity, but rather in somewhat more negative terms as a force unnaturally restrained. Indeed, the following comments from Spender's short piece, 'Notes on D. H. Lawrence' endorse the belief that any revolutionary conception of love rests precisely on the

¹²⁴ D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (London: Penguin, 1921) p. 253.

¹²⁵ Spender, *Trial of a Judge*, p. 68.

¹²⁶ D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1974) p. 25.

willingness of individuals to go against the grain of traditional, received notions of love; indeed against the very apprehension of love as an 'idea',

The importance of Lawrence as a revolutionary and a preacher is that he insisted on real and living values: real life, real sexual experience, real death. All *ideas* of love and honour could be sacrificed to these realities. This is revolutionary, because it is clear that if human beings insist on having lives with these values, they cannot accept society as it is.¹²⁷

Here Spender endorses Lawrence's insistence on the application of such insights not in any abstract capacity, but in the real world, and by individuals in their real lives. His poetry can thus be read in conjunction with this as placing the personal experience, or rather, the experience of inter-personal relationships, at the centre of his engagement with the public realm.

IV

Spender's final volume of the decade, *The Still Centre* (1939) has frequently been represented as marking the beginning of a decisive backing-away from the public realm, and from the engagement with political and social themes which, as has been shown, represents a distinctive feature of his earlier poems. Critics such as Sanford Sternlicht cite Spender's own declared intention to turn back to a 'more personal' kind of writing (as if he had ever ceased producing poems which were unarguably personal) declaring,

Intrepid Spender flew in the face of expectations: he would write a song of himself when all thought he would continue to engage in political battle with fascism...As Eliot fled from the wasteland to religion and as Auden ran away to America to escape the coming chaos, Spender retreated to the still centre on the isle of self. ¹²⁸

¹²⁷ *DE*, p. 180.

¹²⁸ Sanford Sternlicht, *Stephen Spender* (New York: Twayne, 1992) p. 38.

stermment's closing remarks in particular signal an over-readiness to ascribe to literature produced by Spender (and others) at this time a pervasive end-of-decade-ness which can, in fact, be easily over-stated. That the poems included with this volume retain a strong subjective core is not to be denied. Indeed, the volume's title unambiguously reaffirms Spender's commitment to rendering the personal. And yet such an assessment, with its deliberate allusion to Whitmanesque self-regard, gives only a partial view, one liable to obscure the continuity which exists between these and earlier poems.

Certainly, the poem, 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum', clearly retains the themes of social and spiritual deprivation that we encounter in *Poems*,

Far far from gusty waves, these children's faces.
Like rootless weeds the torn hair round their paleness.
The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper-
seeming boy with rat's eyes. The stunted unlucky heir
Of twisted bones, reciting a father's knarled disease,
His lesson from his desk. At back of the dim class,
One unnoted, sweet and young: his eyes live in a dream
Of squirrels' game, in tree room, other than this.¹²⁹

In spite of the thematic continuity, it is worth noting that the 'I' of the earlier poems has been conspicuously dropped (while the clipped style marking the final three lines betrays the influence of Auden's early poetry). The poem itself reveals a world not of 'ships and sun and love' evoked by Shakespeare and by the 'Open-handed map/Awarding the world its world', but of 'the narrow street sealed in with a lead sky'. Indeed, the poem entertains the notion that 'Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example', since these offer only an illusory partaking of such places to which, in reality, such children are debarred access. The rendering of the slum classroom itself begins 'far from gusty waves', later exhorting its audience to 'show the children to the fields'. Here the imagery of absent pastoralia is deployed to press home the deprivations which characterise such children's lives, exchanging the duality of public and private worlds for an analogously related

¹²⁹ *NCP*, p. 101.

structure of urban squalor and imprisonment versus the freedoms associated with traditional pastoral imagery.

That there is ample evidence to refute the notion of a decisive turn inwards by Spender toward the end of the decade is perhaps best demonstrated with reference to the poetry he wrote in response to the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, we might well note that Spender's earlier poem, 'Who live under the shadow of a war', foreshadows precisely those anxieties which his encounter with the war in Spain brought to a head,

Who live under the shadow of a war,
What can I do that matters?
My pen stops, and my laughter, dancing, stop
Or ride to a gap.¹³⁰

In spite of the seeming rhetorical method in this opening stanza, the sentiment is as genuinely felt as it is naively expressed. The poet's debilitating sense of the ineffectuality of his craft ('My pen stops') is countered by an implied psychological imperative to continue writing ('I am shot with thought') couched, once again, in distinctly Lawrentian terms as it seeks, finally, to affirm those 'realer passions of the earth', in a poem which once more worries the gulf between representation and reality.

As critics including Valentine Cunningham have noted, the Spanish Civil War served as that event which would summarize and test the period's myths and dreams, encapsulating its dominant themes and images.¹³¹ Thus Spender, Auden, and Orwell were among the many writers who were moved to visit Spain in order to bear witness to (and in some cases participate in¹³²) the ideological battle that was being played out. Among the best-known responses to the conflict are, of course, Auden's elegiac poem, 'Spain' (which is discussed in Chapter 5) and Orwell's account of his somewhat more hands-on encounter with the war, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In his thematically arranged first *Collected Poems*, (1955) Spender grouped together his own poems on the subject under the heading 'Poems

¹³⁰ *NCP*, p. 12.

¹³¹ Cunningham, p.419

¹³² Those who became directly involved in the conflict included Orwell, who volunteered on the Republican side and was seriously wounded in the throat, and Christopher Caudwell, who was killed in action in 1937.

about the Spanish Civil War.¹³³ In none of these does he aspire to the high-flying, historical panorama achieved by Auden. Neither is truth-telling the primary concern (such was Orwell's declared motive). Rather, Spender's response sets itself at imaginatively entering into the experiences and sufferings encountered by people on either side of the conflict. Perhaps the best example of this approach is found in the poem 'Two Armies'. Here, Spender writes,

From their numb harvest, all would flee, except
For discipline drilled once in an iron school
Which holds them at the point of the revolver.
Yet when they sleep, the images of home
Ride wishing horses of escape
Which herd the plain in a mass unspoken poem.¹³⁴

Here, then, political partisanship is not so much obfuscated as it is overridden by a sense of common suffering, and the acknowledgment of a shared humanity among the protagonists. As in 'Elementary School Classroom in a Slum', the dynamic of the poem is delicately structured around a tension between opposites. Thus, 'images of home' are mobilized to resist the 'inexhaustible anger' of the soldier's guns, and, as with Spender's unemployed, the desire to escape unifies the protagonists, giving voice to a 'mass unspoken poem'.

The poem, 'Port Bou', brings home emphatically, and with remarkable syntactic poise, the theme of the action of the outer world acting upon the experiencing 'I'. The poem, which recounts the witnessing of a firing practice, opens with a description of the harbour where the shooting practice is to take place. Here Spender uses the image of the incomplete circle to reflect the unclosed self at the poem's centre,

As a child holds a pet
Arms clutching but with hands that do not join
And the coiled animal watches the gap
To outer freedom in animal air,
So the earth-and-rock flesh arms of this harbour

¹³³ Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems, 1928-1953* (London: Faber, 1955)

¹³⁴ *NCP*, p. 114.

Embrace but do not enclose the sea

Which, through a gap, vibrates to the open sea

Where ships and dolphins swim and above is the sun.

In the bright winter sunlight I sit on the stone parapet

Of a bridge¹³⁵

Once again, Spender, his speaker located 'at the exact centre', gives full reign to his drive towards place the perceiving 'I' centre stage. In this poem, rather than seeking to distance himself from his subject, the speaker's emotional response to the scene is attentively traced, moving through a building sense of apprehension which culminates in a state of acute physical fear. Whilst the poet seeks to justify his initial detachment ('Because I search for an image') it is precisely the emotional response to the events described which forms the main body and essence of the poem, as the speaker, finding himself unable to deny the evidence of his senses, himself fulfils the role of unwitting participant. Accordingly, the language of the body enters once more into Spender's discourse of the self, as the intensity of the experience is further underlined by the figurative rendering of the scene in starkly physical terms,

I tell myself the shooting is only for practice,

And my body seems a cloth which the machine-gun stitches

Like a sewing machine, neatly, with cotton from a reel;

And the solitary, irregular, thin 'puffs' from the carbines

Draw on long needles white threads through my navel.¹³⁶

The admissions of physical cowardice themselves serve as testament to the integrity with which the poem is invested. What begins as self-reflexivity by the poet ('seeing an image I count out the coined words') modulates into a painstakingly rendered representation of the impact on the poet's consciousness, in which 'My mind seems paper where dust and ink fall'. The speaker experiences the temporary obliteration of his identity, his consciousness becoming in this instant a mere 'blank-slate' onto which the moment inscribes itself. Thus, the poem

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 122.

¹³⁶ *NCP*, p. 123.

enacts an instance of where the private individual's encounter with external events carries the capacity to inadvertently precipitate the negation of self.

'To a Spanish Poet' is dedicated to Manuel Altolaguirre (whom Spender had befriended and whose poetry he had translated). This poem serves as a valedictory piece, seeming to affirm, as John Sutherland has noted, that 'what will survive of the horror of the war is poetry and friendship'.¹³⁷ Indeed, the very problem of translation is implicit here, as it is not the experiencing 'I', but rather the perceiving other, the 'you', which is positioned at the poem's centre,

You stared out of the window on the emptiness
Of a world exploding:
Stones and rubble thrown upwards in a fountain
Blasted sideways by the wind.
Every sensation except loneliness
Was drained out of your mind
By the lack of any motionless object the eye could find.
You were a child again
Who sees for the first time things happen.¹³⁸

Here sensation is registered only as absence ('Every sensation except loneliness') whilst the speaker records the violence of the moment not in any positive aspect, but rather conceiving of the destruction of the city in appropriately negative terms, as the absence of a desired stasis, the 'lack of any motionless object'. Thus at the heart of the moment of destruction Spender's poet perceives an emptiness which functions as a vacuum threatening to engulf its beholder in the very act of perception. The perceiving consciousness has no stable object on which to fix its gaze, and it is this sense of radical external disorder which disperses any stable vantage point that might have been held. Rather, the poet becomes 'a child again/Who sees for the first time things happen'. Spender thus insinuates the presence of the possibility of rebirth, both in personal and historical terms, at the heart of the destructive moment.

The poem is also further revealing of Spender's obsession with the relations between 'real' and 'unreal' worlds, and gives voice to his persistent anxiety over

¹³⁷ Sutherland, p. 246.

¹³⁸ *NCP*, p. 141.

the status and validity of personal relationships in a time of crisis. So the poem offers up recollections of

Laughing images
Of a man lost in the hills near Malaga
Having got out of his carriage
And spent a week following a partridge¹³⁹

That it is the images, rather than the speaker, that are seen to be 'laughing', would indicate that they occupy an autonomous realm of their own; that the warm camaraderie and gentle humour they invoke exists inviolable, apart and independent of the mind that recalls and relates them. Yet this inviolability seems provisional at best: the poem is, in fact, compelled to legitimate this private idyll precisely by juxtaposition with

...the violet violence of the news,
The meaningless photographs of the stricken faces,
The weeping from entrails, the vomiting from eyes,
In all the peninsular places¹⁴⁰

That the violence is seen to occur only in the peninsular places would, coupled with the 'meaningless' photographs, suggest the relative marginality of these events in the mind of the speaker. The fifth stanza takes up the perennial concern with the indeterminacy of the boundary, especially in time of war, between 'real' and 'unreal',

Perhaps it is we who are unreal and dead,
We of a world that revolves, dissolves and explodes
While we lay the steadfast corpse under the ground
Just beneath the earth's lid,
And the flowering eyes grow upwards through the grave
As through a rectangular window
Seeing the stars become clear and more clear

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 141.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 142.

in a sky like a sheet of glass,
Beyond these comedies of falling stone.¹⁴¹

There is the suspicion (which Spender does little to discourage) that the poem's stark images of war are really the projections of private fears. However, the final stanza works to validate this anxiety by situating it within a wider legitimating context,

Oh let the violent time
Cut eyes into my limbs
As the sky is pierced with stars that look upon
The map of pain,
For only when the terrible river
Of grief and indignation
Has poured through all my brain
Can I make from lamentation
A world of happiness.
And another constellation¹⁴²

This final stanza thus modulates into a form of secular prayer. Whilst the desired fusion of eyes and limbs suggests an idealistic merging of perception and action, the poet ultimately places his faith, here as elsewhere, in the alchemic potential of the poetic utterance and its capacity to induce a change in consciousness. This itself can be read in light of the fact that Spender's wider creative enterprise in the thirties marks a paradigmatic rite of passage, one neatly enunciated in the above lines, whereby the artist is compelled, as an matter of faith, to subject himself - at the level of the imagination - precisely to the traumas of the time, allowing the 'terrible river/Of grief and indignation' to flow though him, in order that a new and newly valid creative voice, 'another constellation', might emerge.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 142.

¹⁴² Ibid, pp. 142-143.

Chapter 2: 'The gap reducible only by language':¹⁴³ 'In between states' in Louis MacNeice's poetry of the thirties

*For the true poet the metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a representative image that really hovers before him in place of a concept. For him, the character is not a whole laboriously assembled from individual traits, but a person, insistently living before his eyes, distinguished from the otherwise identical vision of the painter by his continuous life and action.*¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche

In spite of Louis MacNeice's widely endorsed status as a major twentieth-century poet, it remains worth acknowledging that critical appraisal of his work has shown a tendency to oscillate between the less-than-generous and the unwittingly damaging. Among the earliest commentators on MacNeice are critics such as Francis Scarfe, who approvingly cast him as the 'common-sense'¹⁴⁵ figure of the decade, discerning in his writing an intellectual 'honesty' which served to set him apart from the 'impetuous stream of Left poets'¹⁴⁶ at work during the thirties. This is a view which has endured, and, it must be said, is one which MacNeice himself helped to encourage, as is suitably demonstrated by the following remarks made in his critical book, *Modern Poetry*, (1938)

¹⁴³ Louis MacNeice, 'Memoranda to Horace', *Collected Poems* (ed.), Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007) p. 604. Cited hereafter as *CP*.

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1993) p. 42. Cited hereafter as *BT*.

¹⁴⁵ See Scarfe, 'Louis MacNeice: Poetry and Common Sense', pp.53-67.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 59.

My own prejudice...is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric. I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.¹⁴⁷

Yet the 'common-sense' view of MacNeice, neatly encapsulated in the 'fully-rounded' figure envisaged here (which arguably excludes as much as it purports to sanction), as that member of the Auden coterie who sensibly refused to ally himself with the in-vogue ideologies of the day, may also work to place undue limitations on the way in which we read his poetry, and thus on our understanding of his particular contribution to thirties literature. Indeed in certain quarters the 'common-sense' view appears to have done the poet few favours. Other early critics such as Graham Hough were notably less sympathetic than Scarfe in their assessment, seeing in MacNeice's work little more than 'a rather shallow goodfellowship; vague conviviality; moderate attachments and quirky velleities',¹⁴⁸ and continuing with the somewhat damning verdict that MacNeice was 'neither a man of ideas nor a creator of form'.¹⁴⁹ Even Scarfe, who writes from a standpoint of admiration, concludes that '(H)is common-sense attitude to life and poetry has led to a series of negations: there is no centre, as yet, to his work.'¹⁵⁰

Yet MacNeice continued (and continues) to attract substantial critical attention, particularly in the decades following his premature death in 1963,¹⁵¹ and much has since been done to correct Hough's undue indictment of his intellectual and poetic scope. This includes a number of book length studies,¹⁵² as well as several articles covering a range of aspects of MacNeice's work. Yet the idea

¹⁴⁷ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry – A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 198. Cited hereafter as *MP*.

¹⁴⁸ Graham Hough, 'MacNeice and Auden', in Carter, p. 122.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 122.

¹⁵⁰ Scarfe, p. 67.

¹⁵¹ And indeed continues to do so, as was evident at the 2007 centenary conference at Queen's University, Belfast.

¹⁵² Earlier critical books on MacNeice's poetry include: William T. McKinnon's, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (1971); D. B. Moore's, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (1972); Terence Brown's, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (1975); Robyn Marsack's, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (1982); and Edna Longley's, *Louis MacNeice: a study* (1988).

his writing. Much more recently, for example, Alan Gillis has argued that,

MacNeice's poetic steers a course between ironic and organicist apprehensions. His poems swerve from one pole to the other (negation to integration) ultimately focusing on metaphorical moments when the two are held in tension. Thus, he can retain Adorno's 'non-identity between the concept and the object' while avoiding nihilism.¹⁵³

Gillis thus points towards MacNeice's particular talent for maintaining a steady and carefully-wrought poetic irony, which, as this chapter shows, is capable of registering both the world's particularities and the social and economic mechanisms of modernity, and which, far from nihilistically negating such preoccupations, in fact enables these and other ostensibly warring or contradictory elements within the poetry to be held simultaneously amidst an ongoing, generative interplay. As Alan Heuser has aptly pointed out in his summation of the nominal 'connoisseur of paradox',¹⁵⁴

MacNeice's world may have been one of non-transcendence, of prose, a common-sense earthy reality, yet it was transformed by psychic types and scenes out of dream, fantasy, myth – the imagination alive within him from childhood, from boyhood readings of saga, epic, romance, and the picaresque...¹⁵⁵

Focusing primarily, then, on poems within the volumes *Poems* (1935) and *The Earth Compels* (1938) and also making reference to MacNeice's seminal thirties text, *Autumn Journal* (1939) the aim of this chapter is towards refining and interrogating the above notions of a poetic 'middle-way' as a means of approaching MacNeice's work. It draws, in particular, on the influence of his early reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) and on the wider role played by his reading in philosophy and in the classics in his approach to the special problems of

¹⁵³ Alan Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 41.

¹⁵⁴ Alan Heuser, Introduction to *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed., Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) p. xvii.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

frequently noted concern with the realm of the everyday, coupled with his sense of poetry's social dimension. I argue that these are tempered not least (though also not exclusively) by a pastoralism whose contexts are both the poet's own familiarity with the ancient pastorals of Horace and Virgil,¹⁵⁶ and the contemporary thirties notion of the challenged pastoral, in which there is a sense of a lost Arcadia which has been displaced by the deracinating forces of modernity.¹⁵⁷

I

Certainly, MacNeice's perennial sense of himself as outsider in a number of respects, a sense engendered in no small measure by his Anglo-Irish status (and in particular by his position as the son of a Nationalist rector in the North of Ireland) further served to direct his response to the events of the thirties, and may be counted among those factors helping to explain his tendency towards producing a poetry at once aloof and involved, occupying an uncertain territory somewhere between the serious and the satirical. As Terence Brown has argued in his study, *Sceptical Vision*,

A personality so early confronted by the knowledge of life's impermanence and assailed throughout life by conflicting social and cultural loyalties would obviously not be one to whom belief and commitment would come easy.¹⁵⁸

If we are willing to accept Brown's thesis, founded on the notion of MacNeice the 'true exile'¹⁵⁹ (and we cannot afford to fully discount it) then it might seem less surprising that the poetry is frequently seen to lend itself to notions of in-betweenness, seeming to straddle the pure forms of modernism and the more

¹⁵⁶ Having studied Greek and Latin at Marlborough College, and Classics at Merton College, Oxford: MacNeice was appointed assistant lecturer in Classics at the University of Birmingham in 1930, before moving to Bedford College, University of London: in 1936.

¹⁵⁷ Other evidence of the interest in the pastoral mode (in its various manifestations) during the thirties includes Cecil Day Lewis's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (1940) and the publication of William Empson's critical book, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) as well as George Orwell's critique of the nostalgic pastoral mode in *Coming up for Air*, (discussed later) and the 'leftist pastoral' of Ralph Bates' *The Olive Field* (1936).

¹⁵⁸ Terence Brown, p. 15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

journalistic modes of writing seen to predominate during the thirties. And yet it would be misleading to characterise the MacNeicean poetic solely in negative terms, as largely attributable to the poet's congenital absence of faith. Rather, the following comments offered in MacNeice's critical book, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1914) testify to the pervasive sense held by the poet of the fundamental inseparability and interdependence of things, which, as this chapter shows, underpins his constructions of public and private,

The poetic self - like any human self - is ipso facto emotional and intellectual at the same time. Emotion can be subordinated to intellect, or vice-versa, but the two elements are always present. Every poet does two things...He reacts emotionally to his subject matter and he selects and arranges that subject matter in order to square it with some intellectual system of his own. But even this distinction is too crude, for these two moments of the poetic activity are inseparable like the positive and negative in electricity.¹⁶⁰

This is one of several possible examples pointing to MacNeice's persistent sense of the non-legitimacy of any *single* account either of the practices of the poet or of the reality he/she hopes to represent. The following comments, taken from *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, serve to further elucidate MacNeice's own sense of the precarious position which he occupied as a poet, one which might be construed as that between real and ideal,

Every poem is by its nature a compromise. A poem may be a bridge to the Unknown but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known. Those mystics proper who have written poetry, have had in so doing, when trying to express the ineffable, to descend from the mystical plane; they start from a sense of mystical union, a fusion of subject and object, and have to translate this into the language of a world where subject and object are separate and clearly defined. The normal poet, on the

¹⁶⁰ *PWBY*, pp. 21-22.

other hand, starts in this world of distinctions and approaches the mystical plane from below and, as it were, incidentally. The poet's medium is language and the purpose of language is the making of distinctions. Therefore, though the poet may transcend the world of distinctions, he can only do this by a kind of bluff, by pretending at least to recognize that world.¹⁶¹

MacNeice makes it clear that he does not regard his subject, Yeats, as a 'mystical' poet in any genuine sense (that is, as having had direct mystical experience) and such comments bear witness to his keen sense of the materiality of language, and the necessary demands on the 'normal poet' to find ways of negotiating its inherent limitations. The following lines from the early, uncollected poem, 'Address from my Death-Bed to Dr. Bruno, the Concrete Universal' (written in 1929, and dedicated to the Nineteenth-century philosopher and theologian Bruno Bauer) will serve to neatly illustrate the fine line that MacNeice pursued from the outset between a cultivated philosophical knowledge and awareness, and the distanced, sardonic tone which presents itself to many readers as one of the chief hallmarks of his work,

Eh, Dr. Bruno, how do you do?
It is only by negation that you and I are two,
And too much two at that.

You are a hole in a strawberry-net
And strings divide the you that is me from the me that is you,
And it is all rather a tedium and a sweat.¹⁶²

Whilst it is unclear from the death-bed of which person or persona the 'address' is delivered, the question to which it gives voice (with deceptive lightness of touch) of whether divisibility, in metaphysical terms, amounts to negation, seems to foreshadow the intrusion by language upon the 'mystical union' of subject and object thus meditated upon some ten years hence in the excerpt above.

¹⁶¹ *PWBY*, p. 25.

¹⁶² *CP*, p. 663.

As we have seen, the socio-political contexts of the period brought newly into focus the question of the self in its context of society, giving rise to tensions in the work of the decade's writers between contemplation and action. MacNeice, no less than his contemporaries, was aware of living through a time in which external circumstances were, as he wrote, felt to be 'making a strong assault on our sense of values'.¹⁶³ He undertook his study of Yeats in 1939, and in his introductory chapter writes,

I had only written a little of this book when Germany invaded Poland. On that day I was in Galway. As soon as I heard on the wireless of the outbreak of war, Galway became unreal. And Yeats and his poetry became unreal also.¹⁶⁴

Here is described an instance whereby the moment of poetic apprehension becomes suspended by the interruptive momentum of contemporary history. No less than his friend and contemporary, Stephen Spender, MacNeice was aware of the profound sense of unreality that the political exigencies of the period seemed to foster, both in the eyes of the artist and of the wider populace. His sense of precisely what was at stake, and of the threat of what he described as 'genuine spiritual imprisonment',¹⁶⁵ is recorded in the following passage,

My friends had been writing for years about guns and frontiers and factories, about the 'facts' of psychology, politics, science, economics, but the fact of war made their writing seem as remote as the pleasure dome in Xanadu. For war spares neither the poetry of Xanadu nor the poetry of pylons. I gradually inferred, as I recovered from the shock of war, that both these kinds of poetry stand or fall altogether. War does not prove that one is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both.¹⁶⁶

It is clear that MacNeice, like Spender, feared the development of a situation in which poetry (and indeed art in general) would come to be regarded as obsolete,

¹⁶³ *PWBY*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ *SLC*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁶ *PWBY*, p. 18.

its pursuit secondary to the exigencies of war. Indeed, on being asked where he stood regarding the struggle against fascism in Spain, MacNeice had outlined the situation somewhat more flatly,

Normally I would only support a cause because I hoped to get something out of it. Here the reason is stronger; if this cause is lost, nobody with civilised values may be able to get anything out of anything.¹⁶⁷

Whilst, then, it is clear that MacNeice by no means underestimated the dangers posed by the political situation on the continent, it is equally true that his response to events did not involve disengagement in political terms any more than it did any well-intentioned grafting of socio-political themes onto his work; two responses towards which any writer might understandably have been tempted. Rather, he sought to operate from the principle that poetry should, in his words, 'develop organically from the organic premises of life'.¹⁶⁸ MacNeice helpfully expands on the notion of organicism in poetry as follows,

A poem is a self-contained entity but an organic one; it is not a lone comet. Any particular animal is himself and no other animal but it is the stream of life running through him from outside of himself that keeps him alive and allows him to affect other lives. A poem too, is specifically itself but it has a stream of life running through it, otherwise it could not communicate with us; the poet has given it legs with which it leaves him behind and treks the world on its own.¹⁶⁹

Here, the aesthetic and communicative properties of poetry are seen to be intimately connected. Whilst poetry is on the one hand seen by MacNeice as necessarily self-contained, these remarks signal his awareness that it is equally embedded within a particular set of social and linguistic systems. Moreover, this

¹⁶⁷ ed. Alan Heuser, *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) p. 42. Cited hereafter as *SP*.

¹⁶⁸ ed. Alan Heuser, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) p. 114. Cited hereafter as *SLC*.

¹⁶⁹ *PWBY*, p. 194.

very embeddedness is itself a condition of meaning in any poetic utterance. MacNeice's declaration of having 'no sympathy with the idea that artists are people who should not soil their fingers with life',¹⁷⁰ if 'life' is taken to mean the everyday concerns and practices of the ordinary citizen, thus emerges from a sense that any viable aesthetic programme is necessarily sanctioned only by its connection with the external, social realm. Seen in this light, Samuel Hynes' not unreasonable suggestion that MacNeice had always been the 'least political writer of his generation'¹⁷¹ could mislead us into assuming that MacNeice saw himself and the role of the poet as embodying a transcendental aestheticism of the kind which might be attributed to certain of his modernist forebears. The truth is perhaps more nuanced than this, as MacNeice insists from the beginning that the poet must, in his words, 'transcend but not exclude'.¹⁷² It is, then, useful to consider how his thirties' poetry sought to approach and incorporate the external, public world, in a way which is prepared to view the poet's refusal to accept any one ideological creed as symptomatic of a wider (and, for MacNeice, highly problematic) underlying search for a system of belief to which he felt he could finally commit.¹⁷³ As he wrote in May 1940, in one of a series of passionate exchanges with Eleanor Clark,

I suppose you think the reason I haven't got a lovely comprehensive world-view is that I am not interested in world-views...I did try to do without a world-view but it was a failure & I have known for years that that I must develop one & I am trying to develop one but I am damned if I am going to swallow Marx or Trotsky or anyone else lock stock and barrel unless it squares with my experience or, perhaps I should say, my feelings of internal reality.¹⁷⁴

That MacNeice felt pressured towards any such ideological conformity as he saw it is itself further revealing of the nature of the intellectual and political timbre of the

¹⁷⁰ *SP*, p. 46.

¹⁷¹ Hynes, p. 294.

¹⁷² *SP*, p. 5.

¹⁷³ Critics such as Terence Brown have suggested that the confluence of a number of biographical factors, in particular MacNeice's inability to settle in Ireland, together with his rejection of Christianity as he had initially encountered it, lay behind his scepticism about belief. (see 'The Roots of Art' in *Sceptical Vision*, pp. 5-28)

¹⁷⁴ ed. John Allison, *Letters of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 2010) p. 396.

period. In *The Strings are False*, MacNeice was able to render this left drive towards commitment towards a monistic system of belief more in, and on his own terms,

Our life being so episodic we are always wanting to hitch our wagons to stars. Which cannot be done. This romantic self-indulgence is in fact a self-abnegation, and the Christian paradox – Whoso saveth his life shall lose it – still holds good, in politics and social life, in art, in personal relationships. Born in the epoch of the crooked Gods – *al tempo degli Dei falsi e bugiardi* – our logical conclusion, if we thought these gods supreme, would be nihilism. And many of us admit that they are supreme but, the flesh being too weak for nihilism, we try to isolate something in our lives and blow it up to become the whole. Which cannot be done. But anyhow it need not be done, for those gods are not supreme.¹⁷⁵

Here MacNeice gestures more firmly towards the 'internal reality' to which he alludes in his letter. The pervasive sense of the consequent inadequacy of any monological world-view finds voice in the poem, 'Ode', where the speaker insists, 'I cannot draw up any code/There are too many qualifications', a line which is clearly indicative of the poet's sense of reality's resistance to any attempts to codify it, at the same time underwriting the poet's 'refusal to abdicate his position in Here and Now'¹⁷⁶ (a stance attributed by MacNeice to Yeats). His grappling with public and private may, then, be characterised on one level as a struggle between the 'real' and the 'ideal': an effort towards a poetic fusion of the invisible world of the self with an external world which seems incontrovertibly *other*. For MacNeice, achieving the correct balance of these elements in a poem is vital to its success: as he argued in his 1935 essay, 'Poetry To-day', 'the value of a poem consists in a ratio.'¹⁷⁷ This formulation may of course be taken to imply division as well as unity, and indeed may seem suggestive of the very processes of systematization that MacNeice resisted. Yet it is in the dynamics of exchange between elements on either side of any such ratio that MacNeice is interested. In his later essay, 'Experiences with Images' (1949) MacNeice goes on to explain that his basic

¹⁷⁵ Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False* (London: Faber, 1965) p. 21. Cited hereafter as *SAF*.

¹⁷⁶ *PWBY*, p. 160.

¹⁷⁷ *SLC*, p. 34.

conception of life is dialectical, though adding that this is in the philosophic, rather than the political sense';¹⁷⁸ that is, pertaining to metaphysical, rather than (dialectically) material realities. He continues,

I have tended to swing to and fro between descriptive or physical images (which are 'correct' so far as they go) and *faute de mieux* metaphysical, mythical or mystical images (which can never go far enough)....But the two being interlinked, the two sets of images approach each other. Why in some poems does the mere mention of, say, a flower carry the reader not only out of the garden but beyond his normal horizon?¹⁷⁹

Here, as so often elsewhere, MacNeice's chief gesture is towards a sense of the inseparability of things. Thus the distinction is made between the image categories of the merely descriptive (which may be 'correct' or 'incorrect' but ultimately limited in their capacity for carrying meaning) and those arising from the poet's sense and/or knowledge of the metaphysical, mythical or mystical, only to collapse both down into a poetics in which each is seen as necessarily approaching the other.

This intimation of an essential link between different types of poetic image can be traced to MacNeice's reading in philosophy at Oxford. In *The Strings are False*, he describes his encounter there with an unsatisfactory and limited intellectual culture, in which too much stress was placed on pitting the ancient philosophies of Aristotle and Plato against each other, and which, he intuited, was sorely in need of a modern counterpoint. Thus, MacNeice recalls how 'reading F. H. Bradley's *Logic* I was delighted to find him saying that any judgment about anything whatsoever is a judgment about the Universe'.¹⁸⁰ He elaborates on his own burgeoning philosophical position as follows,

I was drawn two ways. I wanted the world to be One, to be permanent, the incarnation of an absolute idea...At the same time any typical monistic system appeared hopelessly static,

¹⁷⁸ *SLC*, p. 156.

¹⁷⁹ *SLC*, p. 156.

¹⁸⁰ *SAF*, p. 125.

discounting becoming as mere illusion and hampering human
action...my instinct was to drag in ultimate reality everywhere.¹⁸¹

These comments emerge from the sense that metaphysics represents not an abstract or scientific, but rather an *artistic* account of reality.¹⁸² Thus, as MacNeice explains, 'I tried to orchestrate my philosophical reading not only with other literature but with the random details of life'.¹⁸³ In the concluding chapter of *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice further elucidates his view of the poet's task as follows,

His object is not merely to record a fact but to record a fact *plus and therefore modified by his own emotional reaction to it*; this involves mannerism in its presentation – hence the tricks of poetry. Poetic truth therefore is distinct from scientific truth. The poet does not give you a full and accurate picture of the world nor a full and accurate picture of himself, but he gives you an amalgam which, if successful, represents truthfully his own relation to the world.¹⁸⁴

This 'amalgam' corresponds noticeably to the alchemic processes involved in the writing of poetry later identified by Spender in *The Struggle of the Modern* (discussed above) and is one towards which MacNeice himself may similarly be seen to be striving. Whilst he makes no pretence to objectivity, neither does he elevate the subjective above all else. His plea, rather, is for an 'impure poetry'; that is, for 'poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.¹⁸⁵ As he wrote in a book review of 1936 (entitled 'Subject in Modern Poetry')

Not only the muck and wind of existence should be faced but also the prose of existence, the utilities, the sine qua nons, which are never admitted to the world, or rather the salon, of the Pure Artist. Art for Art's sake has been some time foundering. A masthead or two even now show above the water with their inconsequent

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 125.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁸⁴ *MP*, p. 197.

¹⁸⁵ See MacNeice's preface to *Modern Poetry*, in which he wrote: 'This book is a plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.

ceased showing themselves off as mere poets. They have better things to do; they are writing *about* things again.¹⁸⁶

I would point out that the seeming disdain expressed here for the purportedly self-contained modernist aesthetic, and the inherent contradictions that such a view of poetry and of the poet's role might imply, in terms of the extent to which, in apparently extolling a 'common-sense', demystified view of poetry, it would seem to deny the poetry's own 'writtenness', have been explored in some detail by Antony Shuttleworth in his doctoral study of MacNeice's work, and need not be reiterated at this juncture.¹⁸⁷ It is, however, to be expected that MacNeice's predilection towards a pluralistic world-view, and thus away from any single-mindedly aesthetic or intellectual pursuit should find its most potent expression in the poetry itself.

The poem, 'Plurality', sees MacNeice expressing somewhat unambiguously his disdain for what he saw as the intolerable rigidity of any single philosophical programme. The poem begins by berating the 'smug philosophers [...] who say the world is one', insisting that 'the formula fails that fails to make it clear/That only change prevails, that the seasons make the year'.¹⁸⁸ In lines which recall the famous lyric, 'Snow' (shortly to be discussed) the poet asserts that the world is 'full of blind/Gulfs across the flat, jags against the mind', and postulates the manifest creativity of the neurotic private consciousness,

Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
Raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux.
Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux¹⁸⁹

MacNeice's reliance upon notions of 'flux' as expressing the sense of a perpetually fluid reality is well documented, and indeed the term itself, as Neil Corcoran has

¹⁸⁶ *SLC*, p. 58.

¹⁸⁷ Antony Shuttleworth, *The Poetics of Impurity: Louis MacNeice, Writing and the thirties* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1991). See Chapter 1, 'Impurity and The thirties', pp. 1-39.

¹⁸⁸ *CP*, p. 204.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

noted, has become something of a cliché in critical writing about him. Let it also remain doubtful how far Corcoran's proposed embargo on the term might justly be maintained, given the extent to which it is seen to resonate throughout the poet's work and thought. It is in *The Strings are False* that MacNeice states that, 'Heraclitus recognised the flux [...] one has to do that to be modern',¹⁹¹ and MacNeice's intimation of the link between Heraclitan notions of flux and the condition of modernity ought not to be too readily discounted when assessing his engagements with the cultural and socio-political terrain of the thirties. He continues,

Life is like water and water must always be on the move, it is the only way you can realise its value...for pattern is value and a *static* pattern dies on you.¹⁹²

Whilst in earlier years the associations of flux for MacNeice were largely removed from the political arena, by the time of the publication of *Poems* it can be seen that the term had taken on a much more contemporary significance. Now, as McDonald has observed, the symptomatic details of the present become aspects of a more profoundly threatening flux, hostile to all the abstractions by which it might be contained.¹⁹³ MacNeice insists that 'the flux is the reality, so it has to be recognised', though he wryly adds that 'you can make this recognition with style'.¹⁹⁴ Such a statement may itself be read as countering precisely those clichéd or over-generalized applications of the term that Corcoran targets.

To return for a moment to the poem, 'Plurality', an instructive contrast might, furthermore, be made here between the representation of the frailty and heroism of collective human enterprise, and Stephen Spender's envisioning of worthy private endeavour in his poem 'What I Expected', insofar as whilst the speaker in the latter poem peers, as it were, outwards from inside, MacNeice's speaker stands *outside* the self in order that the speaker might see and place himself amidst a collective of selves, thus assuming membership precisely of that

¹⁹⁰ Neil Corcoran. 'The Same Again? Repetition and Refrain in Louis MacNeice' (*The Cambridge Quarterly*, 38:3, 2009) pp. 214-224.

¹⁹¹ *SAF*, p. 109.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, p. 127.

¹⁹³ McDonald, p. 35.

¹⁹⁴ *SAF*, p. 119.

species become rich by seeing things as wrong/And patching them'.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, these lines belie the fact that, as this chapter shows, ideas both of individuality and of the individual as social being are, for MacNeice, by no means clear-cut.

II

If, then, MacNeice's work instinctively posits the interdependence of the public and private realms, then there is indeed a distinction to be made between this conception of public and private, and that which is discernible in Spender's work, in which the public world exerts an unsettling force from without which threatens to consume a private self which, nonetheless, is seen to precede it. Thus, in my previous chapter I argue that the 'I' of Spender's poems should be viewed less in terms of contemporary notions of a 'subject' constructed by forces external to the self, than with the longer established idea of a private, 'essential' self which must negotiate the pressures and compromises foisted upon it by the external, public world. It followed that Spender's poetic response to the events of the thirties was marked by his striving to come to terms with both the artistic and the moral implications which he felt the social and political crises of the decade held for him as a poet and as a man. MacNeice's engagement with the public realm is, as this chapter shows, of a different order to that found in Spender's work. Whilst the notion of the 'I' as the centre of lived experience remains integral to MacNeice's poetry, its relatedness to the external world is, in poetic and intellectual terms, configured somewhat differently. Certainly he did not find it necessary to contend with any predisposition towards excessive subjectivity which so defined Spender's work. Indeed, in his essay 'Poetry To-day' (1935) MacNeice suggests that the poet ought to 'fulfil' rather than 'express' himself¹⁹⁶, and was by temperament wary of excessive indulgence of personality ('Push your personality as far as it will go and you end in a padded cell'.¹⁹⁷) Moreover, as Alan Heuser has pointed out, MacNeice may equally be distinguished from friend and sometime collaborator W. H. Auden in his scepticism of the diagnostic and medicinal properties of psychoanalytic practice, as is suggested by the following remarks,

¹⁹⁵ *CP*, p. 205.

¹⁹⁶ *SLC*, p.40.

¹⁹⁷ *SAF*, p. 144

...when Freud has learnt us his diving suits of father we borrowed
them, and now we are going finally to get to the bottom of it. And
so they get there, and as they have forgotten to leave anyone
behind to pull them up again, they stay there.¹⁹⁸

Yet despite the wariness of the perceived hegemony of psychoanalytic discourse (aptly expressed in the remark that 'if you want to give your unconscious a chance you must keep your eye on something else'¹⁹⁹) there is ample evidence of the extent to which MacNeice intimated the primacy of the private psychological and emotional forces at work behind the public world of external events. In *The Strings are False*, he warns,

(This) adult make-believe is something we have foolishly
ignored...it is not only a mistake but a disaster to ignore those
underground motives which cause both art and war. Economic
factors? Yes, but they aren't the whole story. Man is essentially
weak and he wants power; essentially lonely, he creates familiar
daemons, Impossible Shes, and bonds – of race or creed – where
no bonds are. He cannot live by bread or Marx alone; he must
always be after the Grail.²⁰⁰

Here, MacNeice draws attention to the invisible, private forces present behind modern civilisation, directing 'both art and war' (as he would write in his later poem, 'Woods', 'Make-believe dies hard...The grown-up hates to divorce what the child joined',²⁰¹ lines signalling the persistent, shaping role of the imaginative vision acquired in childhood). The insistence that Man, as MacNeice wryly puts it, 'cannot live by bread or Marx alone' signals a rejection of the idea that political commitment might occupy a vacuum of belief left in Christianity's wake, yet at the same time accepts that such a vacuum exists. Equally, the refusal to accept that the contemporary situation might be grasped in economic or materialistic terms alone signifies both a determined resistance to overly-simplistic conclusions and further betokens a sense of the ongoing role played by concealed emotional and

¹⁹⁸ 'Our God Bogus', *SP*, pp.1-2.

¹⁹⁹ *SLC*, p. 37.

²⁰⁰ *SAF*, p. 77.

²⁰¹ *CP*, p. 272.

psychological forces. The reference to bonds created where once none existed is both humanistically empathetic and revealing of a need to exercise a personal vigilance in interrogating the bases of those ideological structures upon which man is seen to rely.

One of the most succinct expressions of MacNeice's scepticism over the adoption of Marxism as an interpretive and remedial system is found in his poem, 'To a Communist'. Here the poet gestures towards the tension between the general and the particular famously pursued in the lyric, 'Snow'. More specifically, however, this poem works to expose the fallacy inherent in the pursuit of ideological closure. Sensing a climate in which, as he records in *The Strings are False*, 'young men were swallowing Marx with the same naïve enthusiasm that made Shelley swallow Rousseau,'²⁰² MacNeice brings to bear not just his own disinclination towards unambiguous political statement, but more importantly his deeply intuitive awareness (which he shared with Auden) of the provisionality of such modes of belief. The poem is short enough to cite in its entirety,

Your thoughts make shape like snow; in one night only
The gawky earth grows breasts,
Snow's unity engrosses
Particular pettiness of stones and grasses.
But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear,
Consult the barometer -
This poise is perfect but maintained
For one day only.²⁰³

There is an instructive parallel to be drawn here between the 'shape' of the snow and the 'pure form' to which MacNeice's narrator alludes in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', (shortly to be discussed) to the extent that both pertain to a self-enclosed and unadulterated ideal which, so far as the poet is concerned, is in practice both unworkable and undesirable. The illusory notion of an 'engrossing' unity, symbolized by the snow, is set at odds with the 'particular pettiness' of the stones and grasses of the earth's surface. That such entities are registered as 'petty' serves to ironically draw attention to their stubborn refusal to be subsumed

²⁰² *SAF*, p. 146

²⁰³ *CP*, p. 20.

apty-chosen in its ability to suggest the ephemeral nature of such systems, being destined to melt away and reveal again those features of reality they had obscured. To this extent, the poem would seem to play out MacNeice's apt observation that 'even the most intelligent communist tends to relapse into crude generalisations'.²⁰⁴ Yet for his part MacNeice himself was 'intelligent' enough to recognise that 'to shun dogma does not mean to renounce belief',²⁰⁵ and 'To a Communist' is revealing of the fact that the poet remains engaged in a search for a viable mode of belief, one which, clearly, is not to be found in the teaching of the Party. The wryly-offered injunction is to 'consult the barometer' before making the final proclamation, although it might be pointed out that this arguably requires the reader to overlook the barometer's status as an instrument of scientific measurement, and thereby symbolic of precisely the kind of rigid systematizing which the poem purports to disavow. Perhaps, however, this is to miss the poet's underlying and more profound point, which is that the true measure of the times is not to be obtained by any systemic, quasi-scientific or ideological set of codes or co-ordinates, but is, rather, reliant upon a quite different set of antennae which are attuned precisely to those textures and patterns operating at and below the surfaces of daily life.

It is, then, on this basis of a sustained resistance to political and ideological dogmas in favour of the richness of life's particularities that the speaker of 'Train to Dublin' assures the reader, 'I will not give you any idol, creed or king', offering, rather, only 'the incidental things which pass'.²⁰⁶ The later poem, 'Leaving Barra', features the expression of a state of longing and sense of quest which is unlikely to be satisfied by political 'commitment',

For fretful even in leisure
I fidget for different values
Restless as a gull and haunted
By a hankering after Atlantis²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ *SLC*, p. 7.

²⁰⁵ *SLC*, p. 113

²⁰⁶ *CP*, p. 17.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 88.

it is worth noting here that the poet confesses himself haunted not by, as in Spender's case, images of the materially deprived or the suffering of the unemployed, but rather by what Terence Brown describes as a longing for 'imaginative kingdoms'.²⁰⁸ Yet it is telling that the narrator recognises signs of those values he hankers after not in 'alien' religion or philosophy, but rather as fostered among

The beauty of the moon and music,
The routine courage of the worker,
The gay endurance of women²⁰⁹

If, however, MacNeice remained suspicious of those who professed their allegiance to any single political or philosophical system, then neither was he prepared to accept in response any cult of the individual. Indeed, what is clear from the following remarks (taken from a review of Spender's *The Destructive Element*) is that, far from viewing 'political' and 'individualist' attitudes as antithetical in any meaningful sense, he in fact regarded them as ultimately two sides of the same delusional, or 'attitudinising' coin,

The individualist is an atom thinking about himself (Thank God I am not as other men); the communist, too often, is an atom having ecstasies of self-denial (Thank god I am one of a crowd); and this too is attitudinising. It is essential to get rid of this atomist conception of personality, which psychology has undermined from below and which true communism ignores from above. The ego as an indestructible substrate is as obsolete as the old philosophical conception of 'substance'. Yeats has recognised this in insisting that there are no hard and fast, no private minds.²¹⁰

It is necessary here that we note MacNeice's concession of the dual roles played by psychology on the one hand, and 'true communism' on the other, in eroding essentialist conceptions of personality. Indeed, with regard to the latter, MacNeice

²⁰⁸ Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice, Sceptical Vision* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1975) p. 33.

²⁰⁹ *CP*, p. 89.

²¹⁰ *SLC*, p. 6.

signals here that it is not communism *per se* that he rejects, but rather its appropriation by those ill-equipped to appreciate its full logic or implications. As he goes on to say, 'Communism in the truer sense is an effort to think, and think into action, human society as an organism'.²¹¹ Indeed, it is worth noting that the latter term reappears in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', in which urban society is conceived precisely as 'this vast organism grown out of us', a construction which powerfully affirms the poet's sense of the interconnectedness of the public and private realms. Moreover, there is, in MacNeice's rejection of the concept of the 'self-contained' ego, a distinct foreshadowing of the argument later put forward by Michel Foucault's that the individual ought not to be conceived as 'a sort of elementary nucleus...on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike'²¹². This concurrence of thought, in its rejection of essentialism, further highlights the distinction between MacNeice's and Spender's conceptions of selfhood and subjectivity. MacNeice's scepticism towards 'bourgeois' conceptions of individuality finds a further correlative in Christopher Caudwell's insistence that 'the bourgeois is always talking about liberty because it is always slipping from his grasp'²¹³. Yet it is, tellingly, the poet Yeats, rather than Freud or Marx, to whom MacNeice here makes his ultimate appeal.

Poems such as 'The Individualist Speaks' betoken precisely this ambivalence to these notions of individualism. The poem ironically unsettles the 'atomist' conception of personality just as it appears to revel in its own political and moral irresponsibility:

We with our Fair pitched among the feathery clover,
Are always cowardly and never sober,
Drunk with steam-organs, thigh-rub and cream soda
- We cannot remember enemies in this valley.²¹⁴

It is worth noting that a poem ostensibly giving voice to the individualist begins not with 'I' but rather 'we', a feature which, together with the commercial enticements of 'steam-organs, thigh-rub and cream soda', runs counter to the individualism to which the speaker lays claim. MacNeice's metaphorical fair,

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 6.

²¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980) p. 98.

²¹³ Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*, p. 71.

²¹⁴ CP, p. 16.

tauntingly pitched among the leathery clover symbolises a privileged, enclosed world at odds with the external destructive forces which threaten to overcome it. The speaker, 'always cowardly and never sober', with his seeming defiance and provocatively escapist stance, fails to comprehend the fallacious nature of his sense of individualistic privacy, only dimly registering the possibility that 'A prophet scanning the road on the hither hills/Might utter the old warning of the old sin'²¹⁵. The speaker purports to evade the external threat from those 'who scale off masks and smash the purple lights', and in a final statement which is somewhat comical in its would-be tone of defiance, the speaker declares: '...I will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the Fair'. Indeed, it seems MacNeice's individualist would do well to take account of the following comments from Stephen Spender, who, in *Forward from Liberalism*, points out,

The isolated individualist may imagine that he escapes from his environment, that he can preserve and create values of life out of a vacuum of surrounding fear and death. It is not true. He cannot escape from his own consciousness: and consciousness is never completely isolated. He cannot reject every impression of his senses: and every impression is imperceptibly coloured with the time in which he lives.²¹⁶

If, then, we can reasonably suppose that MacNeice's own stance resides outside of the persona deployed in 'The Individualist Speaks', then it follows that the poem's rhetorical position (bearing in mind that the utterance announces itself not as the voice of one individualist, but in deliberately generic terms, as that of *the* individualist) may be judged to be in accord with Spender's insistence on the inextricability of the individual from their environment, and of the consequent inadequacy of the purported retreat into individualism. The title of MacNeice's poem, moreover, ironically implies that the individualist's usual condition is silence. Yet the breaking of that silence in this projected speech constitutes in itself an entering-into dialogue, and thereby into the social realm, a fact which paradoxically effaces the speaker's ostensible insistence on his own separateness. Thus, MacNeice's dual ambivalence over the self as individual and as social being is

²¹⁵ Ibid, p. 16

²¹⁶ Spender, *Forward from Liberalism*, pp. 26-27.

poem.

It is natural, then, that MacNeice's deeply equivocal view of the primacy of the individual should extend to include his attitude towards the lyric poet, and by extension his own poetic practice. Indeed, in an early essay entitled 'Our God Bogus' (1929) MacNeice had shown himself keen to rebuke any equation of individualistic self-expression for its own sake with worthy artistic endeavour,

Art is necessarily conventional, superficial. To chew one's cud in the void may be ravishing, but it is not art. The preachers of 'subjectivity' send one back to moo in long-abandoned meadows. To 'express oneself', what need one do but moo? The essence of art is that it expresses other people.²¹⁷

Such comments are indicative of the poet's attitude towards his craft from an early age, underlining the fact that his interest in subjectivity, as understood against what was a literary background of intensified autobiographical activity, is most usefully explored in terms of how his articulations of personal experience expand to include and sympathetically reveal and express the everyday experience of others. Moreover, whilst the implicit concern with the social nature and function of language and of poetry that this implies, and which underpins the above remarks, is tempered by MacNeice's natural scepticism towards notions of political orthodoxy, it is worth noting the extent to which such comments reveal a striking confluence with the thought of Christopher Caudwell, who wrote as follows,

When the bourgeois poet supposes that he expresses his individuality and flies from reality by entering into a world of art in his inmost soul, he is in fact merely passing from the social world of rational reality to the social world of emotional commonness.²¹⁸

Thus Caudwell, like MacNeice, is concerned with challenging, or at least interrogating, the idea of the self-expressive individualist artist, both seeking to

²¹⁷ *SP*, p. 4.

²¹⁸ Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*, p. 141.

'I' is revealing of an experience less private than might be supposed, being, on the contrary, rooted precisely in its very commonality. As will be seen, however, for MacNeice, this particular awareness derives in the first instance not from any specific Marxian insight, but rather from his early encounters with philosophy and classical literature.

III

It is especially instructive to consider MacNeice's conception of the operations of the subjective voice within modern poetry in light of Nietzsche's early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which the poet had read during his time at Oxford. Nietzsche's rendering of the classical Apolline-Dionysiac dichotomy via German Romanticism held a strong appeal for MacNeice, whose conception of an instructive neo-Hegelian dialectic operating between the Apollonian and Dionysian art impulses may be seen as significantly derived from Nietzsche's text.

In *The Strings are False*, MacNeice describes his encounter with *The Birth of Tragedy* as follows,

Reading for Honour Mods. was on the whole repellent to me – I could not bear niggling over textual commentary – but I sweetened it with side-dishes, was delighted for instance by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, though I knew it to be perverse and historically upside-down. It made the Greeks seem much more human because it made them seem as gloomy as the moderns and as orgiastic as D. H. Lawrence. 'Up Dionysus!' became my slogan; it was a good comeback to that authority on the Greek Drama who overheard hexameters in the bathrooms.²¹⁹

Certainly, Nietzsche's famous assertion that 'it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified'²²⁰ held considerable appeal for MacNeice, yet he also sought and found within Nietzsche's text what he felt was the

²¹⁹ *SAF*, p. 110.

²²⁰ *BT*, p. 32.

necessary countering force to a world view predicated on aestheticism alone. Thus, the concomitant Apollonian demand for self-definition, moderation and self-knowledge is validated only by its role in restraining the chaos which would result from the otherwise unchecked destructive energies of the Dionysiac impulse. As Richard White has argued, whilst the Apollonian individual would be a 'subject' in the fullest sense - since the Apollonian imperative for self-definition is likely to result in an understanding of self only as the product of the various codifications of class, race, gender, nation, etc., - the purely Dionysian individual also falls short of any ideal of individual sovereignty, since it is not clear whether such an individual, totally removed from all codes and boundaries, could really be a distinct 'person' at all.²²¹ Indeed, it is the very principal of individuation which, in Nietzsche's book, *Dionysianism* is seen to resist. Thus, in discussing the relation between the lyric poet and the 'Dionysiac-Apolline genius',²²² Nietzsche wrote as follows,

(T)hroughout the whole of art we demand above all else the conquest of the subjective, release from the 'self', and the silencing of all individual will and craving; indeed, we cannot imagine a truly artistic creation, however unimportant, without objectivity, without a pure and disinterested contemplation. For this reason our aesthetic must first resolve the problem of how it is possible to consider the 'lyric poet' as an artist: he who, in the experience of all ages, always says 'I' and sings us through the full chromatic scale of his passions and desires.²²³

Nietzsche asserts that the artist, in the Dionysiac process, is united with a 'primal oneness' reflected to him by a 'musical atmosphere of moods' which precedes the poetic idea. The 'I' of the lyric poet therefore issues not from any atomistic individual voice, but rather 'sounds from the very depths of being'²²⁴. The 'subjectivity' of the artist, in, as Nietzsche explains, the sense in which it is used by modern aestheticians, is thus revealed as a falsehood, since the term presupposes a

²²¹ Richard White, 'Art and the Individual in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, (1988) Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 59-67.

²²² *BT*, p. 28. It is also perhaps worth noting that the title of MacNeice's 1941 collection, *Plant and Phantom*, is borrowed from Nietzsche: the quotation in question, 'ein Zweispalt und Zwitter von Pflanze und von Gespenst' can be found at the start of the collection. The poet's interest in Nietzsche did not dissipate as early as might be assumed.

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 28.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 29.

MacNeice himself argued,

The word 'lyric' has always been a terrible red herring. It is taken to connote not only comparative brevity but a sort of emotional parthenogenesis which results in a one-track attitude labelled 'spontaneous' but verging on the imbecile.²²⁵

Thus, MacNeice colludes with Nietzsche in envisioning a lyrical 'I' whose coordinates are located beyond the usual Romantic territories of purportedly spontaneous self-expression. Nietzsche developed his argument as follows,

The lyric poet's images are nothing but the poet himself, and only different objectifications of himself, which is why, as the moving centre of that world, he is able to say 'I': this self is not that of the waking, empirically real man, however, but rather the sole, truly existing and eternal self that dwells at the basis of being, through whose depictions the lyric genius sees right through to the very basis of being.²²⁶

As will be seen, poems by MacNeice including 'Snow', 'Upon this Beach', and 'Wolves' are, in their successive intimations of the ever-shifting and potentially destructive forces operating beneath the deceptive fixity of the everyday and the mundane, revealing of the continued appeal of Nietzsche's modern reading and rendering of the ancient mythologies of Apollo and Dionysus. As MacNeice wrote in his study of Yeats,

Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* argued that Greek tragedy is a blend of what he calls the Apollonian and Dionysian elements, Apollo tending to stress distinctions, Dionysus to obliterate them. This is not the place to criticise Nietzsche's topsy-turvy

²²⁵ *SLC*, p. 155.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 30.

It can be seen in this maturer reflection how MacNeice accepted both the necessity and the limitations of Apollonian rationalism as conceived by Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy* was instrumental in enabling the poet to develop a means of framing and expressing the tension between the poles of fixity and flux that, as Jon Stallworthy has noted, would generate the voltage of so many of his poems for years afterwards²²⁸. This particular tension, rendered via Nietzsche, afforded for MacNeice a means of accessing and drawing upon the Classical mythologies in which he was steeped so that they might be harnessed in order to help express his encounter with modernity.

Evidence of an aesthetic engagement with the Nietzschean rendering of the Apollo-Dionysus tension is present among the earliest of MacNeice's poems. The poem 'Paradise Lost' (written whilst still at Oxford) sees MacNeice invoking the symbol of Apollo and the endangered dream of the Apollonian poet in order to articulate the same early apprehension of the private, creative sphere under threat from the external world found in Spender's work. The poem, despite the archaic diction from which MacNeice's poetic style had yet to emerge, serves as a useful example of his effort towards bridging the private worlds evoked in the first collection, *Blind Fireworks* (1929) and the considerably enhanced awareness of the external world captured in *Poems* (1935),

Caught in Apollo's blended dream
On the dim marge of Poesy
My rose red lips unlock to scream.

My horticultural mind did teem
With roses once in rosemary
Caught in Apollo's blended dream.

Now an unorthodox regime
Has whelmed my soul in lethargy,

²²⁷ Ibid, p. 83.

²²⁸ Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 2010) p. 133.

my rose red lips unlock to scream
The sinister tall gas-works seem
To vitiate my destiny
Caught in Apollo's blended dream.²²⁹

From the outset, a tension is rendered apparent between the invoked symbol of Apollo, the god of measured harmony and form, and the desired 'unlocking' of the Dionysiac 'scream'. Whilst the bemoaning of an 'unorthodox regime' and resultant lethargic state probably allude to MacNeice's experience at Oxford as much as to any wider social or political shift, the notion of the 'blended dream' reveals the poet's recognition (if not yet acceptance) of the interwovenness of private illusion and external reality, and anticipates the difficult task of achieving a poetic accommodation of the two. As William T. McKinnon has argued, MacNeice can no longer reflect only the world of 'roses and rosemary', but must accept and express the 'blended dream' that includes the 'sinister tall gas works'.²³⁰ In this sense the poem may be read as anticipating the heightened conflict which was to occur in the coming decade between writer and environment; the speaker's sense of his own 'vitiating destiny' revealing on one level an antipathy towards modern industrialism which is seen to recur in varying forms throughout the thirties. Moreover, whilst the rather adolescent tone of the final stanza in particular reminds the reader that a more mature vision has yet to emerge, lines written by MacNeice some ten years hence would appear to reiterate the same sense of a creative impulse, the 'horticultural mind', diminished by circumstance,

He lived among blue prints
For a castle in the air,
Perfecting it on paper
Year by year,

Who finds now that his building
Subsidy is gone

²²⁹ *CP*, pp. 661-662.

²³⁰ William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 53.

To build his castle on.²³¹

Here, as before, MacNeice is describing the falling away of those structures capable of supporting and sustaining an aesthetic project untrammelled by social or political considerations. Indeed the very image of the castle in the air would seem to suggest that such structures were, in any case, little more than fantastical imaginings to begin with. Further lines written at this time combine nostalgia and deep foreboding to powerful effect:

In the Nineteen-Twenties
Life was gay,
They made the clock run
Until it ran away.

Ten years later
In a desert place
They met the clock again
With murder on its face²³²

Thus 'Time', portrayed as the enemy and personified in the image of the banished clock, returns with a vengeance, demanding payment of debts accrued by the seeming frivolities of the twenties, in a manner directly anticipating the 'evil time' at the opening of 'An Eclogue for Christmas'.

Further evidence of the operation of Dionysiac principles within MacNeice's thought can be found at the end of canto III of MacNeice's long poem and seminal end-of-decade thirties text, *Autumn Journal*. Here, MacNeice's narrator speaks as follows,

None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives,
Are self-deceivers, but the worst of all
Deceits is to murmur 'Lord, I am not worthy'
And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.

²³¹ *CP*, p. 775.

²³² *Ibid*, p. 774.

And may my feet follow my wider glance
First no doubt to stumble, then to walk with the others
And in the end - with time and luck - to dance.²³³

The invoking of the 'dance' as the ultimate goal or ideal here is very much in tune with Nietzsche's exposition (which in turn emerged under the influence of the German composer Richard Wagner) of the Dionysiac principle of ecstatic music and dance as the expression of the relinquishment of self in favour of experiencing a sense of primal 'oneness' and communion with nature. Indeed, the dance metaphor is one which recurs within MacNeice's work during this period: for example, in the earlier poem, 'Mayfly', the invocation is to 'Let us too make our time elastic and/Inconsequently dance above the dazzling wave.' In *Autumn Journal*, this can in turn be read in light of the narrator's earlier gesturing away from cultural elitism, and decrying of the material inequities such an elitism implies, towards a notably more inclusive and egalitarian ethos:

... It is so hard to imagine
A world where the many would have their chance
without
A fall in the standard of intellectual living
And nothing left that the highbrow cared about.
Which fears must be suppressed. There is no reason for
thinking
That, if you give a chance to people to think or live,
The arts of thought or life will suffer and become rougher
And not return more than you could ever give.²³⁴

Thus, MacNeice can be seen extolling a more democratic ethos even as he admits (or implies) the culturally elitist and hence politically right-wing and ultimately fascist route down which a Nietzschean-driven aesthetic might otherwise logically proceed. The end of the poem sees MacNeice revisiting the idea of music as expressive of the dynamic formlessness symbolised by the Dionysiac, yet in a

²³³ *CP*, pp. 106-107.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 106.

way which, paradoxically, would render accessible to all the unadorned multiplicity
of which it permits:

What is it we want really?
For what end and how?
If it is something feasible, obtainable,
Let us dream it now,
And pray for a possible land
Not of sleep-walkers, not of angry puppets,
But where both heart and brain can understand
The movements of our fellows;
Where life is a choice of instruments and none
Is debarred his natural music²³⁵

'Snow' is one of the most frequently cited of MacNeice's shorter lyrics, though the 'Dionysiac' properties which inform the poem, and the moment of epiphany which is its culmination, have gone largely unnoticed. The poem harnesses a succession of images which, as Terence Brown has suggested, attempt to catch the exact, particular essence of an experience,²³⁶ in such a way that purports to evade the limitations imposed by 'the deliberating brain' which, MacNeice declared, 'tends to hamper, rather than to assist, those experiences which are forming new wholes'.²³⁷ The poem begins

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

The poem thus opens with the arresting interplay of 'Spawning snow and pink roses' against the room's great bay-window. With its plethora of images and use of alliterative sound, the poem enacts the very sentiment to which it gives voice, insisting that

²³⁵ Ibid, p. 163.

²³⁶ Terence Brown, pp. 114-24.

²³⁷ *SLC*, p. 24.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural, I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

That the speaker emotionally intuits, rather than intellectually apprehends the 'drunkenness' of things being various stresses the poem's emphasis precisely on knowing by intuition rather than intellect, just as in 'Aubade', a poem similarly concerned with the interplay of subjectivity and the external world, the speaker has '*felt with fingers that the sky is blue*'²³⁸. The final stanza of 'snow' returns to the poem's opening imagery of the snow and roses:

...the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes –
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's
hands –
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.²³⁹

Here the poet arrives at the verge of epiphany, as the reader is left with a tantalising final line focusing attention back onto the central dual image of the snow and the roses. The 'world' here, expressed by the fire's 'bubbling sound', incorporates both the tumultuous social and political events of the time and a more deeply-held sense of the creative-destructive Dionysiac forces which are seen to precede them. Whilst the reader is left to consider what is located between the roses on the one side of the glass and the snow on the other, any search for readily definable metaphorical resonance must be undertaken with caution. Here as elsewhere, the poetry works to resist precisely any such notions of epistemological finality, continuing to search, rather, for a seamless language, the harnessing of which would restore to the window in the poem its proper symbolic function as imaginative portal rather than linguistic barrier.

That the medium of language itself served, paradoxically, to hinder the conveyance of the sense of 'ultimate reality' and of the world's 'suddenness' proved

²³⁸ *CP*, p. 28.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 24.

an abiding theme for MacNeice. The poem 'Wolves' evokes, ultimately, the apprehension of a gulf between the poet's own consciousness and the external world:

I do not want to be reflective any more
Envyng and despising unreflective things
Finding pathos in dogs and undeveloped handwriting
And young girls doing their hair and all the castles of sand
Flushed by the children's bedtime, level with the shore

In rejecting (or appearing to reject) the search for the 'poetic' in the everyday, the poem mediates an inherently paradoxical desire for a somehow unmediated experience, whereby the barrier is removed that exists between writer and world. This suggests a tendency by MacNeice to view language, and even the poetic medium itself as necessarily obstructing, rather than facilitating his engagement with the world. Moreover, it can be seen that this impulse towards a direct, and thus by definition unattainable communion with reality has its antecedent for MacNeice in *The Birth of Tragedy*,

The realm of poetry does not lie outside the world, a fantastic impossibility, the product of a poet's mind; it wishes to be precisely the opposite of this, the unadorned expression of truth, and must for this very reason cast off the mendacious finery of the man of culture.²⁴⁰

The second stanza of 'Wolves' sees the poet deploying, but then undercutting the conventionally poetic and emblematic image of the sea, seeking to re-infuse an old symbol with a fresh, and personal significance²⁴¹,

The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want
To be always stressing its flux or its permanence,
I do not want to be a tragic or philosophic chorus

²⁴⁰ *BT*, p. 41.

²⁴¹ MacNeice himself grew up near the coast and would recall his childhood impressions of the sea in his essay, 'Experiences with Images' (*SLC*, p. 158.)

But to keep my eye on only the nearer future
And after that let the sea flow over us.²⁴²

The narrator's desire for unreflective immersion in the world of 'things' conveys a sense of himself as exiled from the experience he craves, whilst the insistence on not being 'a tragic or philosophic chorus' appears to signal a rejection of the Nietzschean justification of the world in aesthetic terms alone. Indeed, to this extent the poem is suggestive of MacNeice's awareness of the need to develop beyond his classical background in order to explore new means of articulating the interactions between the trajectory of his own life and external events. Yet behind the reluctance to look beyond the 'nearer future' lies the apprehension of irresistible catastrophe; the intimation that the social unity, here represented by the circle of joined hands, is incapable of resisting the destructive forces at work just beyond the waves, on the European continent, and we may, to this extent, discern some critique of the leftist politics adopted and espoused by MacNeice's peers. Yet this is by no means the primary motive of the poem. Any such critique is subsumed beneath the poem's more fundamental desire to, as it were, 'un-write' itself, in such a way as to dissolve the attitudes of pathos towards the 'unreflective' in the recovery of the moment of experience, a process which is underwritten precisely by those external dangers which serve to guarantee the primacy of the experiential moment. The poem ends as follows:

Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,
Join hands and make believe that joined
Hands will keep away the wolves of water
Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed
That no one hears them among the talk and laughter.²⁴³

Whilst this third stanza invites the reader to 'Join hands and make believe that joined/Hands will keep away the wolves of water', the speaker himself seems unwilling to enter the circle; that is, unable to partake of the make-believe he seems to advocate. The poem ends with a veiled sense of menace and of thwarted escape, as the speaker seems to warn; 'be it assumed/That no one hears them

²⁴² *NCP*, p. 27.

²⁴³ *CP*, p. 27.

among the talk and laughter. In this way, and as this marine column, waves expresses the desire for escapism, yet steadfastly avoids becoming 'escapist' in itself.

The desire for an experience unrefracted through the artist's lens is pursued further still in the poem, 'Upon this Beach'. Here, it is coupled with a more fundamental doubt over the ability of language (or rather art itself) to properly reflect and represent the textures and the contours of reality,

Upon this beach the falling wall of the sea
Explodes its drunken marble
Amid gulls' gaiety.

Which ever-crumbling masonry, cancelling sum,
No one by any device can represent
In any medium.
Turn therefore inland, tripper, foot on the sea-holly,
Forget those waves' monstrous fatuity
And boarding bus be jolly.²⁴⁴

MacNeice signals his awareness of the limitations of the linguistic medium where, as he wryly notes in a review of R. C. Trevelyan's translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, 'as words cannot do everything, poets have often to compromise'²⁴⁵. Here, the speaker's reduction of the sea's 'drunken marble' to mere 'monstrous fatuity', set against the frivolous gaiety of the world of the day-tripper, seems to signal a rejection of private meditation in favour of celebrating basic, everyday pleasures. Indeed, the concern to grant greater privilege and precedence to the submerged experience of the everyday realm, and concomitant belief that art 'expresses other people' (see above) is reiterated in the poem 'Hidden Ice' (*The Earth Compels*, 1938). Just as, in 'Leaving Barra', the poet sets alongside the 'beauty of the moon and music' the 'routine courage of the worker', here the speaker laments the fact that

There are few songs for domesticity

²⁴⁴ *CP*, p. 24.

²⁴⁵ *SLC*, p. 124.

For routine work, money-making or scholarship.
Though these are apt for eulogy or for tragedy.²⁴⁶

The poem proceeds to evoke the commonplace realities of everyday life, praising the adaptability and 'inconceivable stamina' of those,

Who work to the clock and calendar and maintain
The equilibrium of nerves and notions,
Our mild bravado in the face of time.

Again, the use of the collective 'our' over the solitary 'I' is designed to imply shared experience, whilst the attention drawn to a strenuously maintained 'equilibrium of nerves and notions' echoes the same balance and tension which is fundamental to MacNeice's poetic. At the same time, one of the striking features of this poem is the way in which the prosaic nature of the first four stanzas gives way to complex poetic imagery, the significance and meaning of which are by no means clear-cut,

But some though buoyed by habit, though convoyed
By habitual faces and hands that help the food
Or help one with one's coat, have lost their bearings
Struck hidden ice or currents no one noted.

One was found like Judas kissing flowers
And one who sat between the clock and the sun
Lies like a Saint Sebastian full of arrows
Feathered from his own hobby, his pet hours.²⁴⁷

It becomes clear that the poem is by no means an unequivocal celebration of the day-to-day world, or of the private practices which are seen to underwrite it. Whilst these latter stanzas suggest the existence of a private realm beneath the visible surface of the everyday; the privately passed 'pet hours', the deployment of the Saint Sebastian image suggests that MacNeice's concern is equally with the accumulated grief, the 'hidden ice', beneath the shared surface and the reassurance

²⁴⁶ *CP*, p. 89.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 90.

of everyday life. The reference to currents no one noted serves to warn of the invisible forces which persist beneath the 'calm upholstery' of the domestic realm. Moreover, the overt manner in which the measured, observational tone of the earlier stanzas gives way to intimations of a darker, unruly undertow beneath the surface; of the creative-destructive impulse either harnessed and/or expressed, or else privately squandered, corresponds once more to the underlying Apollonian-Dionysiac tensions similarly at work beneath the surface of the poetry.

IV

In a letter written to Anthony Blunt in September 1926, shortly before his departure for Oxford, MacNeice wrote the following:

I'm tired of theories. It will be some time before I read another 'aesthetic'. Theories are the combination of abstractions & an abstraction is the rough & ready term that covers a lot of individual concretes. It saves time but it doesn't lead anywhere. To talk about the man-in-the-street is easy but it doesn't give you any information about the men in the street.²⁴⁸

These comments can be read in the context of MacNeice's nominal rejection of the doctrine of pure form (as explored by Clive Bell in his then-influential volume, *Art*²⁴⁹ (1914)) in favour of an emphasis on the realm of the ordinary and the 'everyday'. The poem, 'Birmingham', is revealing of such an emphasis; yet, as will be shown, the democratic insistence on the virtues of the 'ordinary' by no means implies any lack of formal or intellectual sophistry on MacNeice's part.

The tone of the poem is, characteristically, both distant and involved: sardonic yet sympathetic, and the poet's own participation in the scenes described seems actual as well as imaginative, leading to what critics such as Edna Longley have described as a 'single felt image of Birmingham',²⁵⁰ a view which would appear to situate the poem somewhere between the deliberate concentrated

²⁴⁸ MacNeice, *Letters*, p. 122.

²⁴⁹ See: Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914)

²⁵⁰ Longley, p. 48.

immediacy of Imagism and a socially engaged poetic journalism. The poem opens with a breathless stream of words (clearly suggestive of the influence of Joyce) which seems to compel instant re-reading:

Smoke from the train-gulf hid by hoardings blunders upward, the
brakes of cars
Pipe as the policeman pivoting round raises his flat hand, bars
With his figure of a monolith Pharoah the queue of fidgety machines
(Chromium dogs on the bonnet, faces behind the triplex screens),
Behind him the streets run away between the proud glass of shops,
Cubical scent-bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops²⁵¹

The use of enjambment both emphasises the hurriedness of the city-centre scene and is suggestive of the fast-paced succession of sense impressions made on the speaker. The poem evokes a number of the harsher realities of modern urban life – such as the exploitation of workers by an upwardly mobile middle class, or the reliance of modern commerce on the creation of artificial needs and desires - and thus on one level operates as an indictment of modern commercial and industrial life. Yet to read the poem in these terms alone fails to do it justice, since it also reflects the poet's desire to make and maintain contact with, as he put it in *Strings*, 'the rest of the world'. As MacNeice explains:

Living in Birmingham had reconciled me to ordinary people; I
found reassurance in silent gardeners, inefficient hospital nurses,
in a golfer cupping a match in his hands in the wind, in business
men talking shop in the train. I found no such reassurance in the
intelligentsia.²⁵²

The idea of the continuance of ordinary life serving as a basis for reassurance is telling here, pointing to a sense that something of value is being preserved, and suggesting, therefore, that MacNeice attaches a moral value to such experience. Yet the argument, as put forward by Samuel Hynes, that MacNeice's celebration of ordinary life and love of the commonplace functions as 'a kind of substitute for

²⁵¹ *CP*, p. 22.

²⁵² *SAF*, p. 145.

everyday. It is instructive at this juncture to refer back to comments made by MacNeice in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* on relations between the figure of the 'ordinary man' and the poet:

The stage of thought [...] is a stage of distinctions and of consciousness of the ego. The mystic proper transcends these distinctions and once more merges the ego in the cosmos. Ordinary civilized men live most of their lives in the intermediate stage – the stage of distinctions and egoism. The poet is found among them because the poet's job is to be articulate and man cannot be articulate unless he makes distinctions: the logical outcome of mysticism is silence. On the other hand the poet shares the paradoxical position of the ordinary man. The paradox is this: man lives by egoism, by making distinctions, but he derives his driving force from a stage below distinctions and he derives his ideals from a stage above them.²⁵⁴

To this extent, then, it can be seen that MacNeice is insistent upon the location of the poet and the ordinary individual on the same existential plane, insofar as both groups are subject to a common paradox whereby life, both lived and written, is seen to be reliant upon the simultaneous upholding and subverting of distinctions. At the same time the articulation of the accompanying conflict between civilized man's undefined pre-cognitive drives and the machinations of the private ego in the social realm is seen to be conditional upon the exercise of certain 'specialized gifts'²⁵⁵ (not, MacNeice wants us to understand, to be confused with mysticism) with which the poet alone is endowed. The prominence afforded to the commonplace and the everyday in poems such as 'Birmingham' can thus be seen to issue from a belief that those categories of experience which are bound up with such realms are in no way detachable from the wider continuum. The following stanza continues with its chronicle of ordinary life in the poet's adoptive home town,

²⁵³ Hynes, p. 295.

²⁵⁴ *PWBY*, p. 24.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
Seducingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips
pressed
So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic through bleary haws
And only a six-inch grip of the racing earth in their concrete claws;
In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms
With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to the
fickle norms
And endeavour to find God and score one over the neighbour
By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built beauty and sweated
labour.²⁵⁶

This second stanza, with its descriptions of the half-timbered houses of the suburbs, and inhabitants attempting to simultaneously 'find God and score one over the neighbour', registers contempt for the middle-class values and 'fickle norms' to which they aspire. Lines describing 'only a six-inch grip of the racing earth' momentarily and sardonically evoke a lost closeness to nature, whilst the subtle discord operating between the dynamic image of the 'racing earth' and that of the 'concrete claws' is delicately though firmly suggestive of the fundamental tensions between fixity and flux underpinning the poetry more widely. Yet the overall poem is motivated less by a desire to lament the fact of modern life, with the narrow and provincial attitudes which it is seen to engender, than with dramatizing, in a poetic language replete with the objects and fixtures of modern life, the experience of those living within its confines, and of those popular strategies which are adopted as a means of transcending these. Thus, as Stephen Regan has aptly pointed out,

What we see is not just an acute apprehension of the changing urban and suburban landscape, but a skilful fusing of lyric and dramatic modes of writing to forge a style appropriate to the

²⁵⁶ *CP*, p. 22.

What such comments perhaps do not take full account of is the inbuilt pathos inherent in, for example, the ironic notion of searching for 'Platonic Forms' precisely amidst the material reality constituted by the surfeit of consumer goods. Such lines serve to give voice to the poet's consciousness of the now-proximity of such realities to the philosophic ideals of antiquity via his own professional engagement with them. In so doing, they bring the attendant values into juxtaposition, not with a view towards 'reconciling' them as such, but rather by way of gesturing towards the *possibility* that such a reconciliation might be envisaged.

The third stanza deploys at its close the inclusive 'we' to suggest the common predicament of facing a deficit which, with the references to 'Inspid colour, patches of emotion', registers both on a material and a spiritual level:

The lunch hour: the shops empty, shopgirls' faces relax
Diaphanous as green glass, empty as old almanacs
As incoherent with ticketed gewgaws tiered behind their heads
As the Burne-Jones windows in St. Philip's broken by crawling
leads;
Inspid colour, patches of emotion, Saturday thrills
(This theatre is sprayed with 'June') – the gutter take our old
playbills,
Next week-end it is likely in the heart's funfair we shall pull
Strong enough on the handle to get back our money; or at any rate
it is possible.²⁵⁸

Here, it can be seen how the individual 'I' is contained within the 'we' and the 'our', as the private voice defers to a discerned shared experience, and the commonality of the sense of hope which, in tandem with the routine of alternating work and leisure, renews itself on a weekly basis. Whilst the representation of such

²⁵⁷Stephen Regan, 'Coming up England by a Different Line: Louis MacNeice and Philip Larkin', eds. Fran Brearton and Edna Longley, *Incorrigibly Plural, Louis MacNeice and his Legacy* (Manchester, Carcanet, 2012) p. 250.

²⁵⁸ *CP*, p. 23.

experience is enabled only the adoption of personae whose lives by no means necessarily reflect the poet's own, it is precisely this method which permits an imaginative entering-into such lives. The final stanza modulates once more back to the descriptive voice,

...the factory chimneys on sullen sentry will all night wait
To call, in the harsh morning, sleep stupid faces through the
daily gate.²⁵⁹

Here, the potent simile of trams moving 'like vast sarcophagi' reveals a building sense of pessimism reinforced by the reference to 'the frayed and fading zone/Of the West', whilst the poem's final line brings the sense of a cycle concluded and ready to resume once more. The image of the 'daily gate' connotes the ritualism implicit in the common routine, and whilst, with its suggestions of entrapment, would seem to give little cause for hope, it is worth remembering that, read in metaphorical terms, the image of the gateway is typically synonymous with a sense of possibility rather than of defeat. Indeed, as Chris Wigginton has noted, the poem attends to the commodified surfaces of city existence, whilst refusing to condemn the masses' involvement in them in the manner of the majority of the High Modernists.²⁶⁰ 'Birmingham' as a whole is revealing of MacNeice's insistence on the communicability of the experience of modern industrialism, and in its lengthy topography reveals his own immersion in a shared landscape inhabited by poet and worker alike.

V

Among the more prominent of the ways in which MacNeice is seen to have drawn on his knowledge of ancient and Classical literatures is in his appropriations of pastoral modes of writing. Whilst critics such as Valentine Cunningham have portrayed MacNeice as 'besotted by this particular tradition - cutting his teeth on Theocritan/Virgilian-type eclogues'²⁶¹, it is perhaps truer to say that poems such as 'An Eclogue for Christmas' both evoke and subvert this ancient mode to convey

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

²⁶⁰ Wigginton, p. 21.

²⁶¹ Valentine Cunningham, 'MacNeice and Thirties (Classical) Pastoralism', Brearton and Longley, p. 89.

a distinctly modern subject matter. The opening line with which the reader is greeted ('I meet you in an evil time') announces an unequivocal bleakness which, one imagines, it would be difficult to surpass. It is understandable, then, that readers should detect here the familiar apocalyptic overtones of the thirties; that, for example, critics such as Richard Danson Brown should argue for a mood of 'striking pessimism'²⁶² in the face of cultural decline. To attribute such a stance, however, is purportedly to assume that the two voices of the poem speak as one. And yet this is exactly what the form and dialogic structure of the poem work to avoid. Rather, it is precisely the use of multiple voices permitted by the eclogue form which provide MacNeice a means of staging his dialectician's vision of contemporaneity. Thus, the poet's deployment of the eclogue may be seen less in terms of modifying or 'updating' the existing tradition, than as having adopted that poetic model best suited to his purpose. As Paul Alpers has pointed out,

The chief interest of the modern eclogue is not in making a significant adjustment in the order of similar poems that precede them - rather, their points of engagement are contemporary, and they characteristically make sense in relation not to other poems of the same 'kind' but to other poems by the poet himself.²⁶³

To this extent, then, the poem may be read as being in dialogue not only within itself, but with other poems in the collection. Indeed, it is worth noting, as Alpers has, that the four eclogues written by MacNeice are strikingly unlike each other.²⁶⁴ Moreover, it is by no means an easy task to identify with any confidence those factors most instrumental in occasioning the seeming transition between the overt aestheticism of *Blind Fireworks* and the discovery of a social voice by the time of *Poems*. The following remarks from MacNeice suggest that the social and cultural concerns within 'An Eclogue for Christmas' (the first of the *Poems*) came as something of a revelation,

I wrote it with a kind of cold-blooded passion and when it was done it surprised me. Was I really as concerned as all that with the

²⁶² Richard Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (Tavistock, Northcote House, 2009) p. 51.

²⁶³ Paul Alpers, 'Modern Eclogues', *Triquarterly*, (Evanston, Summer 2003) Iss. 116, p. 20.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Decline of the West: Did I really feel so desperate: Apparently I
did. Part of me must have been feeling like that for years.²⁶⁵

The opening of 'An Eclogue for Christmas' foregrounds an encounter between poet and audience at the same time as it introduces the alternate voices permitted by the eclogue form. The two voices of the poem, A and B, are respectively town and country dwellers, though it is worth noting MacNeice's ironic reversal of the Lawrentian 'back to nature' imperative where speaker B advises his companion to 'Go back where your instincts call/And listen to the crying of the town-cats and the taxis again.'²⁶⁶ Their dialogue evokes a series of distinctly modern anxieties, ranging from the political to the existential, to which both speakers are seen to be susceptible:

A. I meet you in an evil time.

B. The evil bells
Put out of our heads, I think, the thought of everything else.

A. The jaded calendar revolves,
Its nuts need oil, carbon chokes the valves,
The excess sugar of a diabetic culture
Rotting the nerve of life and literature.²⁶⁷

Here, the language of cultural decay (precipitated by the 'excess sugar of a diabetic culture') and decimated selfhood ('I...Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets'²⁶⁸) seems on the one to bear distinct echoes of *The Waste Land* ('These fragments I have shored against my ruins'²⁶⁹). At the same time, the following lines appear to give voice to a reaction precisely against modernist aesthetics,

I have not been allowed to be
Myself in flesh or face, but abstracting and dissecting me
They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,

²⁶⁵ *SAF*, p. 146.

²⁶⁶ *CP*, p. 3.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁶⁹ *Collected Poems, 1909-1935*, p. 77.

Such lines serve to underscore what critics such as Chris Wigginton have correctly described as MacNeice's complex, ambivalent critical attitude to Modernist aestheticism.²⁷¹ Here the speaker appears to lay the blame for his sense of disembodied fragmentation not, as might be expected, at the door of modernity itself, but rather on the incessant 'sifting' and 'splintering' of the self, its reduction to a mere series of obscurely sculpted 'abstractions scalped with a palette-knife', at the dictates of the modernist enterprise, whilst the direct and deliberate reference to Clive Bell's doctrine of 'pure form' supplies further evidence of the poet's increasingly ambivalent attitudes towards any attempt at upholding such principles ('I don't believe in pure form. I don't believe in pure anything'²⁷².) For such reasons, readers should be wary of too-readily identifying in MacNeice's poem a restatement of *The Waste Land's* envisioning of modernity as disjointed nightmare (indeed, MacNeice writes in *Modern Poetry* of having initially found Eliot 'repellent': 'His subject-matter was ugly, I did not like his form, and I found him very obscure'²⁷³.) The dourness of the countryman's grim insistence (couched in suitably rural terminology) that 'the soil is stale', coupled with the repeated assurance that the current malaise extends to town and country alike, is met with a striking declaration of optimism from the town-dweller,

But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous
In this vast organism grown out of us:
On all the traffic-islands stand white globes like moons,
The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,
And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes
With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like
chrysanthemums.²⁷⁴

Whilst, then, the poem asserts an ongoing intersection between public and private malaise, it refuses to succumb to any full condemnation of the modern civilisation.

²⁷⁰ *CP*, pp. 3-4.

²⁷¹ Chris Wigginton, *Modernism from the Margins, The 1930s Poetry of Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007) p. 13.

²⁷² MacNeice, *Letters*, p. 122.

²⁷³ *MP*, p. 56.

²⁷⁴ *CP*, p. 5.

here, the cocooning haze of the city forms a clouded amber which seems to offer a form of sanctuary and comfort, both visual and auditory, as it 'purrs and croons', providing, if only intermittently, some relief from the sense of displacement. The yellow light emanating from 'bus after tall bus' radiates with 'a glory like chrysanthemums', a simile all the more arresting for its near-preposterous juxtaposition of images. Indeed, to this extent, and in response to the forebodings of MacNeice's countryman, such utterances may, in the context of MacNeice's use of the eclogue form, be read as approaching a species of 'urban' pastoral, in which, just as George Orwell's narrator in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) seeks warmth and meaning around the hearth of the working-class home, so MacNeice's speaker finds poetic sanctuary in traditionally 'unpoetic' imagery and subject matter. The envisioning of the city itself not as a hostile, external space, but rather a 'vast organism grown out of us' serves as a reminder of the interdependence of self and society at the socio-economic level, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of how it is rendered via the individual consciousness, gesturing towards (without fully endorsing) the modernist sense of the external environment as being as much an imaginative as it is a physical reality.

Yet at the same time the poetry remains determinedly grounded in tangible realities, anticipating MacNeice's insistence on what, in 'Snow', he terms the 'drunkenness of things being various'²⁷⁵, and assuring the reader that the reflections on the relationship between self and society are derived not from those 'theory vendors' disdainfully singled out in 'Turf Stacks' (shortly discussed) but from the standpoint of an everyday experience as concrete as it is sensual. Moreover, whilst speaker B predicts that 'We shall go down like palaeolithic man/before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan', speaker A responds with the suggestion that 'it is time for some new coinage', a statement which might equally be read as suggestive of the need for language itself to develop and adapt in order to be able to meet the demands that a changing society will place on it. The comparison with Eliot's poem may, then, be more usefully drawn in terms of the possibilities for rebirth and renewal afforded by a period of crisis. Moreover, as O'Neill and Reeves suggest, the poem's picture of modern life as divided and fragmented hints at an *ideal* of the complete man, where flesh and spirit, body and soul, and intellect and experience are united.²⁷⁶ Indeed, if there is any meaningful

²⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

²⁷⁶ O'Neill and Reeves, p. 65.

the presence of such terms as 'culture', 'nerve' and 'life and literature' which, as Edna Longley has pointed out, carry social meanings with which Eliot's poem is not primarily concerned.²⁷⁷ Thus, the poem finds itself, as Paul Alpers notes, poised between public critique and troubled self-representation.²⁷⁸

The eclogue concludes with the deployment of a revised Christian terminology: 'Goodbye to you, this day remember is Christmas, this morn / They say, interpret it your own way, Christ is born'.²⁷⁹ It is precisely on the act of interpreting, on his own terms, his encounters with both political and religious systems of belief, and with the confrontations between 'private' and 'public' worlds, that the poet insists. Moreover, given that, as has been argued, MacNeice was temperamentally inclined to refuse any monological position, there is a particular aptness in his adoption of one of the most typical and exemplary pastoral structures – that of the debate (traditionally represented in pastoral literature as bucolic dialogues and singing contests) a form precisely capable of sustaining and exploring multiple points of view whilst resisting any final resolution of the differences arising from them.

A further example of MacNeice's use of structures traditionally associated with pastoral writing is found in 'Turf Stacks'. Here, the tension between individualism and cultural homogenisation is analogously rendered as the poem purports to invoke rural life as a means of critiquing modern, industrial society,

Among these turf-stacks graze no iron horses
Such as stalk, such as champ in towns and the souls of crowds,
Here is no mass-production of neat thoughts
No canvas shrouds for the mind nor any black hearses:
The peasant shambles on his boots like hooves
Without thinking at all or wanting to run in grooves.

It is, firstly, worth drawing attention to the reference to the 'souls of crowds', since the phrase seems to recall, on the one hand, Nietzsche's conception of the 'primal

²⁷⁷ Longley, p. 45. Yet there can be no doubting Eliot's significance for MacNeice, who wrote that 'To find a bridge between the dominant poetry of the early nineteen-twenties and the dominant poetry of the nineteen-thirties we have to look back again to T. S. Eliot' (*SLC*, p. 21.)

²⁷⁸ Alpers, 'Modern Eclogues'.

²⁷⁹ *CP*, p. 7.

oneness in *The Birth of Tragedy* (see above) whilst at the same time participating to invoke the idea of the individual consciousness subsumed beneath the collective. The latter connotation is indeed reinforced in the subsequent allusion to mass-production, which stands both as a reference to the accelerated development of mass-produced goods, and the concomitant homogenizing processes of modernity leading, the poet suggests, precisely to the mass-produced uniformity of (neat) thought(s). The latter part of the stanza leaves the reader to ponder the identity of the nameless 'peasant' who 'shambles on his boots like hooves', and from whose way of life, it seems, the speaker is equally disengaged. The line delivers a countering image of rurality, registered not least through the use of the word 'peasant', which also serves to align the poem with the ostensibly 'realist' proclivities endemic within thirties' writing. The archaic use of 'peasant' (as opposed to, say, 'farmer') further testifies to the use made by MacNeice of the pastoral form, since the term itself is used in a self-conscious literary sense to refer in generic terms to the rural or agricultural worker. The use of the term, then, is clearly not without irony. The shambling, seeming unreflectiveness of this figure ought not to be read in straightforwardly derogatory terms: on the contrary, it is precisely this perceived un-self-conscious, and hence more 'authentic' mode of living which is the subject of the envy of the supposedly more 'sophisticated' city-dweller, who, by contrast, is reduced to seeking solace in the meagre consolations of his daily and weekly routines, whose supposedly greater proclivity towards thought and reflection does not prevent him from 'wanting to run in grooves'. On the contrary, it is precisely the urban trammelling of thought along pre-ordained lines to which the poem draws attention.

Moreover, the class-ridden connotations of the word 'peasant' provide in some measure the basis for the next stanza. Having thus established the familiar country-city dichotomy, the poem pointedly re-deploys the term as it mounts an attack on precisely that urban-centred bourgeois intellectualism whose theorizings would emancipate the beleaguered peasant from his bondage to the land:

But those who lack the peasant's conspirators,
The tawny mountain, the unregarded buttress,
Will feel the need of a fortress against ideas and against the
Shuddering insidious shock of the theory vendors,
The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy

Here, the urban subject, in his separation from nature, lacks the 'fortress against ideas' needed in order to resist the operations of the 'aggregate beast' in the borrowed form of the Trojan horse, whose only gift is the commodified thought peddled by the theory-vendors. In response, the concluding stanza asserts that

...we are obsolete who like the lesser things
Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads;
It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia
Or any other tunnel where the world recedes,
Or turn blind wantons like the gulls who scream
And rip the edge off any ideal or dream.²⁸⁰

The suggestion of obsolescence carries some degree of ironic self-effacement, with those 'who play in corners with looking glasses and beads' mirroring the 'urchins playing with paint and filth' in 'The Individualist Speaks'. What does become apparent, however, is that the speaker's own status is outside *both* of the sections of society portrayed. At one level the poem *is* symptomatic of a wider tendency to invoke nostalgia for an imagined (typically rural) place of retreat as a response to contemporary trauma – as the speaker says in the final stanza, 'It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia/Or any other tunnel where the world recedes'. Yet the poem implicitly suggests the limitations of any such retreat into individualistic privacy, and in declining to state a preference for one way of life over the other, may be read as further suggestive of the poet's ongoing search for a centre of belief from which to operate.

I have attempted to show, then, that MacNeice's earlier efforts towards a fusion of 'public' and 'private' are determined by a wider impulse, closely informed by his reading and understanding of the classics and of metaphysics, towards a tentatively conceived philosophic and poetic unity. At the same time, the poetry is tempered by MacNeice's sense of his own sense of outsider-ness and ongoing quest for a system of belief to which he felt able to subscribe. His poems do not display

²⁸⁰ CP, pp. 15-16.

the kind of reticence which characterises Hayden's poetry, yet neither do they approach the emotional candour which is seen to infuse Spender's work. Neither the public or private worlds are permitted to dominate the poems, but rather hold equal sway as the poet strives to maintain a fundamental yet delicately poised poetic equilibrium which properly reflects his profound sense of multiplicity and belief in the necessary impurity of any valid or viable poetic enterprise. MacNeice's poetry of the thirties thus endeavours to give voice to his intuitive sense that both the public and the private, and the ephemeral and the permanent, necessarily co-exist.

Chapter 3: 'The style is the man':²⁸¹ fantasy, reality and the grotesque in Christopher Isherwood's fictions of the thirties.

Each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity.

Geoffrey Harpham, 'The Grotesque: First Principles'²⁸²

As has been shown, Spender's formulation of the relationship between public and private rests on the idea of a pre-existent, essential self which is liable to be invaded by the public realm, but which nonetheless is shown to take precedence over the external world. Thus, the task of integrating outside events into the private consciousness remained paramount in Spender's engagement with the 30s public/private dichotomy. In contrast to this, as my second chapter has shown, Louis MacNeice was no more inclined to grant full legitimacy to the primacy of the private subjective vision than he was to the public realm, being concerned with rendering what he sensed was an essentially dialectical relationship between the public and private realms, with the self most clearly discernable at the intersection of the two.

This chapter offers a further dimension to my study of the interplays between the public and private realms within thirties literature, and is the first of two considerations of how the public/private binary is explored within thirties fiction(s). It offers a re-reading of two of the decade's most important novels, Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains*²⁸³ (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). Whilst these texts, in their renderings of thirties Berlin, do not, in the same senses as outlined above, posit any single or integrated model of selfhood to be realised and maintained, it is argued that, to the extent that they feature instead a succession of self-invented and meretricious personae (from Arthur Norris to 'Herr Issyvoo' to Sally Bowles) they partake of a discourse of selfhood as style, one which

²⁸¹ Christopher Isherwood, preface to *Lions and Shadows* (London: Methuen, 1963) p. 70. Cited hereafter as *L&S*.

²⁸² Geoffrey Harpham, 'The Grotesque: First Principles', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (34.4, 1976, pp. 461-68).

²⁸³ Published in the US under the title *The Last of Mr Norris*.

is reliant upon both creating and sustaining an external persona which is seen to supplant the possibility of any integrated or authentically-realised individualism. In so doing, these novels demonstrate the politically and culturally dubious logic inherent in the relinquishing of any stable, integrated sense of self through the sustained reliance on such adoptive masks. The private, yet outwardly manifest fantasies entertained and enacted by such figures are, these texts suggest, intimately linked to Nazism's reliance on spectacle and theatricality. They are revealing of how the neurotic, self-created worlds of Isherwood's gallery of grotesque characters, in their reliance on precisely the same conflation of aestheticism and reality upon which German fascism is seen to have been predicated, reflect precisely those conditions which in turn permit and give rise to a burgeoning totalitarianism. Isherwood thus casts the relationship between public and private in terms of how private fantasy and public spectacle, under such conditions, come to reflect each other. In conjunction with these modes of enquiry, this chapter argues for the situation of Isherwood's texts in relation to specific theorizations of the grotesque tradition in literature. It considers the extent to which, in seeking a means of accommodating, in particular, the often simultaneously comic and abhorrent scenes to which these texts bear witness, they gesture towards a further modification of this long and multi-faceted aesthetic category through the combining of particular textual features closely associated with the grotesque mode with an explicit and radically disturbing political dimension.

Whilst maintaining its primary focus on the two Berlin novels, this chapter also draws on Isherwood's fictionalised autobiography, *Lions and Shadows* (1938) and reference is also made to *The Mortmere Stories*, whose role in Isherwood's literary development has yet to be properly accounted for.²⁸⁴ Whilst critics such as Paul Piazza have pointed to Isherwood's ostensible rejection of *Mortmere* 'precisely because it has no connection with the real world'²⁸⁵, this chapter shows the continuity which in fact exists between the grotesque elements found in these early writings and Isherwood's unsettling explorations of the dynamics of fascism. The following remarks from David Garnett, writing in the *New Statesman*, are especially apt in this regard:

²⁸⁴ The fact that they were not published in any collected form until 1994 goes some way towards explaining their omission from prior critical accounts.

²⁸⁵ Paul Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood – Myth and Anti-Myth* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 17.

There are so many people who do not see various forms of unpleasantness; some of us even manage not to see accidents in the street or quarrels or acts of cruelty or horrible deformities. Most of us see these things and are shocked...Some kind of idealism enables us to take very little notice of the less blatant, but equally disturbing, kinds of ugliness.²⁸⁶

This chapter is interested, then, in the extent to which the relationship between public and private is rendered by Isherwood in such terms as means of delineating the negative interplay between fantasy, artifice and fascism, using a narrative 'I' which is especially complex, multi-faceted and unstable. Isherwood's famous 'camera' records 1930s Berlin through a particular kind of lens, one which signals a consciousness of precisely those unacknowledged 'quarrels or acts of cruelty or horrible deformities' which are revealed as key determinants of the city's public and private lives.

I

Despite remaining relatively innocent of public events into the early part of the thirties, there is evidence to suggest that as the decade got underway, Isherwood joined the company of those writers now entering a period of increased political awareness. As can be seen from a letter written to Spender in the autumn of 1931, he came to have little doubt over the alarming nature of the developing situation in Europe,

Germany is pretty bloody. This Revolution-Next-Week atmosphere has stopped being quite such a joke and somehow the feeling that nothing catastrophic really will happen only makes it worse. I think everybody everywhere is being ground down slowly by an enormous tool. I feel myself getting smaller and smaller.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ David Garnett, *New Statesman* (March 1939) p. 11.

²⁸⁷ Unpublished letter, October 1931, cited in: Peter Parker, *Isherwood* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 229.

here Isherwood restates the familiar notion of feeling oneself overtaken by public events, and such statements might indeed tempt readers towards assuming a closer affinity with Spender's formulation of the 'invaded' self than is actually the case. As this chapter argues, the concept of the joke-turned-sour, and accompanying modulation of the trivial into the tragic, forms one of the key trajectories explored in Isherwood's thirties texts. Whilst the historical background to these works is primarily the final years of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Third Reich, I would maintain that the topicality of the Berlin novels does not reside primarily in the expression of moral indignation or liberal alarm in the face of a developing totalitarianism (such as might be argued of Spender's work). Rather, as Paul Piazza has argued, Isherwood's stories achieve political significance not because of their ideological commitment, but because of their heightened sensitivity to 'the obscure dread, the vague, unnatural menace inherent in the last days of the Weimar Republic.'²⁸⁸ Piazza continues,

Isherwood's method is to catch the unrest and shabby chaos of the larger life around him in the microcosm of the individual.

Isherwood is not an archivist like Orwell, prying into totalitarian atrocities, but rather a seismographer capable of reading the subtlest tremors that ripple across his personal landscape.²⁸⁹

Indeed, as Antony Shuttleworth has persuasively argued, the importance of these works arises from Isherwood's interrogation of the possible causes of totalitarian politics, whilst at the same time seeking to take account of their dangerous allure.²⁹⁰ Certainly, such analyses have done much to help rehabilitate the Berlin novels following, not least, Isherwood's own repudiation of them on the basis that he believed they were 'callous' and 'unfeeling'. Indeed, *Mr Norris* would later be condemned by its author as a 'heartless fairy story'.²⁹¹ However, whilst Isherwood himself may indeed have expressed some regret at the lack of basic compassion which he came to feel characterised the Berlin stories, to read his work in such terms undoubtedly risks obscuring their engagement with the manifest

²⁸⁸ Piazza, pp. 88-89.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 89.

²⁹⁰ Antony Shuttleworth, 'In a Populous City – Isherwood in the thirties', eds. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century – Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) p. 151.

²⁹¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Exhumations* (London: Methuen, 1966) p. 86.

interrelations between public spectacle and private fantasy which are key to understanding his fictions of the thirties. Moreover, such detached and ironic modes of narration function precisely as part of the grotesque mode within which, as this chapter suggests, the stories may productively be seen to operate. Thus, rather than seeking to understand or to criticise the works on moral or humanistic grounds, I would argue that a more productive approach would be to recognise that the ironic reserve and understatement characteristic of such narratives in fact represents, as Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund point out, a key part of the structural dynamics of grotesque forms.²⁹² To this extent, grotesque offers a means of accounting for the incongruity inherent in Isherwood's seeming ironic treatment of such weighty subject matter.

This is not, however, to deny the care which must be taken when seeking to apply the grotesque as a literary or aesthetic category. As Edwards and Graulund point out in their book on the topic,

One of the methodological problems when approaching grotesque texts is that the label can be over-determined: it can mean everything and nothing. A way to deal with this problem is to recognise that the grotesque appeals to readers and audiences across periods and regions, but that which is considered grotesque is tied to an historical context. What is considered grotesque to a twenty-first century audience, for instance, might not have been thought to be grotesque by an Early Modern audience. Thus, in order to understand the grotesque, the work must be placed and understood in relation to the socio-historic context in which it is produced.²⁹³

Certainly other critics have commented on the challenge inherent in approaching a working definition of the grotesque. Geoffrey Harpham has, for example, pointed out the extreme limitations inherent in any narrowly etymological understanding of the term.²⁹⁴ However, Edwards and Graulund are by no means the first to suggest, as they do here, that its usefulness might best be understood in terms of

²⁹² Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 5.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁹⁴ Harpham, 'The Grotesque: First Principles'.

described as grotesque. Indeed, as Harpham has argued,

While one can define it in terms of the forms employed by artists who, either consciously or unconsciously (in other words, in the critic's judgment) used the grotesque, or in terms of the psychology of such an artist, easily the most crucial and measurable aspect is the effect of the grotesque on the reader, listener, or spectator. This is not to say that the genre of a work depends upon the sang-froid, gullibility or sense of humour of the audience; it is simply to recognize that while the forms of the grotesque have changed remarkably over the centuries, the emotional complex denoted by the word has remained fairly constant.²⁹⁵

It is true, then, that the grotesque as encountered within Isherwood's thirties' texts must, in accordance with the former comments by Edwards and Graulund, be seen to operate within specific historic and cultural parameters. Whilst Isherwood's early predisposition towards the grotesque and the fantastical, which found early expression in the creation of *Mortmere*, has been noted by critics such as Piazza, and more recently David Garrett Izzo, the trajectory which exists from this youthful predilection towards what the latter has termed 'imaginative mythmaking'²⁹⁶ and Isherwood's subsequent explorations of the interplays between public and private in thirties Berlin, has yet to be explored in light of this. Yet, as is argued here, it is precisely Isherwood's retention and deployment of elements of the grotesque within the realistic frameworks frequently seen as characteristic of his fictions of the thirties which both complements and facilitates his unique rendering of the public/private interface.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ David Garrett Izzo, *Christopher Isherwood: His Era, His Gang, and the legacy of the Truly Strong Man* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2001) p. 8.

II

The overarching purpose of this chapter is, then, to further establish the nature of Isherwood's engagement with the historic contexts which framed and informed his writing during the thirties, and to consider the literary modes and methods which he drew upon as he strove to formulate his response. Whilst John Lehmann (to whose magazine, *New Writing*, Isherwood had contributed stories which would form the genesis of *Goodbye to Berlin*) recalls a shared search for a 'new imaginative literature',²⁹⁷ Isherwood himself would later suggest that his own motivation as a writer was rather more personal:

...I write in order to find out what my life means and who I am, to find out if there's meaning in the external world, and then, I suppose, if I decide that there isn't, to impose a meaning of my own.²⁹⁸

This notion of self-imposed, constructed meaning is integral to Isherwood's method of characterisation both in *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*. Isherwood's later remark that 'people are not real entities - they change'²⁹⁹ seems especially telling when understood in conjunction with his fictional texts, and would seem to confirm his continued unbelief in the possibility of a stable selfhood. Indeed, in a diary entry of 1938, Isherwood had gone some somewhat further in outlining his anti-essentialist view of the self,

The more I think about myself, the more persuaded I am that, as a *person*, I really don't exist. That is one of the reasons why - much as I'm tempted to try - I can't believe in any orthodox religion: I cannot believe in my own soul. No, I am a chemical compound, conditioned by environment and education. My 'character' is simply a repertoire of acquired tricks, my conversation a

²⁹⁷ John Lehmann, *Christopher Isherwood: A Personal Memoir* (New York, Henry Holt, 1988) p. 24.

²⁹⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *Isherwood on Writing*, ed. James J. Berg, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) p. 54.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

repertoire of adaptations and conceals, my feelings are dictated by purely physical, external stimuli.³⁰⁰

It is worth pointing out that there is a basis for such a view in more recent theorisations of the 'subject' which may serve to further illustrate the model of the 'invented' self here espoused. Indeed, such theorisations have worked to affirm the *necessity* of such invention. For example, as Michael Holquist has argued, 'the act of creating a self is not free: we *must*, we *all* must, create ourselves, for the self is not given to any one of us.'³⁰¹ This is not to suggest that such a situation (if we accept it) directly precipitated the monstrous conditions which unfolded in Germany during the thirties, but I would maintain that the interest of Isherwood's texts does centre around Nazism's readiness to exploit precisely this vacuum left by the absence of any 'given' self. The underlying implication is not, then, that the self may, by virtue of its inherent instability, be freely and benignly 'constructed', with meaning thus attained. Rather, the texts demonstrate that there is real danger, at both the personal and political levels, in seeking to maintain the illusion of any nihilistically free-standing or 'floating' personhood; in a continual reliance on invented personae which, by definition, is inauthentic and, finally, unsustainable. The implications of this idea of the private self as terminally untethered to any wider stabilizing moral, emotional, cultural or economic framework to may be illustrated with reference to Modris Eksteins' discussion of the origins of Nazism following the First World War. Eksteins wrote,

Nazism took as its point of departure the subjective self, feeling, experience, *Erlebnis*, and not reason and the objective world. That objective world was simply discarded. It could provide no hope, no warmth, no consolation. When Hitler returned from the war he had no job, no homeland, no profession, not even an address. In conventional terms he was a nothing, a nullity. All that he possessed of a positive nature was his conviction of his merit as an artist and his war experience. He was able to define himself not in any standard social terms, only in terms of personal emotions

³⁰⁰ Unpublished diary, August 1938, cited in: Parker, p. 391.

³⁰¹ Holquist, p. 28.

and the way in which meaning ought to be given to life.³⁰²

Thus the idea of the subjective, feeling self, posited as central by Spender, and regarded with scepticism by MacNeice, is inverted in Isherwood's writing, ultimately revealing itself as the basis of a cultural and political abomination. The concomitant adherence by practitioners of fascism to 'style' over 'substance' is taken up by Piers Brendon as follows,

Fascism was a belief in the common bond of nationhood enshrined in the personality of a charismatic leader. The gospel that the leader preached was less important than his magical capacity to evoke the latent genius of his people. Fascism relied upon propaganda before policy, mythology before history. It conjured with rhetoric, ritual, incantation and pageantry.³⁰³

As Shuttleworth has written, under these conditions, a see-saw confusion of art and life exists where a political regime does not speak to a population so much as create it, and where a particular form of art finds its purpose in actions which are legitimated by nothing more than art itself.³⁰⁴ Thirties' Berlin is thus cast by Isherwood as the site of a dangerously merged and merging private and communal fantasy, a city at once aesthetically entrancing, and hostile and inhuman, in which the transformation of reality into art renders obsolete any moral objection to the conditions of such a world, since its inhabitants (of which, as is shown here, the self-invented figures of Arthur Norris and Sally Bowles supply consummate examples) are free to invent and reinvent the system of codes on which any such objection might be based. The point may be developed with further reference to Eksteins, who accounts as follows for the popular support enjoyed by the Nazis,

It was not the substance – there was no substance to the frantic neurotic tirades – that allowed the party to survive and later to grow. It was the style and the mood. It was above all the theatre,

³⁰² Eksteins, p. 413.

³⁰³ Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Cape, 2000) p. 22.

³⁰⁴ eds. Berg and Freeman, p. 152.

and the street...Nazism, whether one wore brass knuckles and carried a rubber hose or simply played along vicariously, beating up communists and Jews in one's mind, was action...Politics was now to become 'genuine' theatre, as opposed to the pompous posturing of the democratic era.³⁰⁵

The question of collapsed and collapsing boundaries between art, myth and reality, and the aestheticisation of politics, is addressed by the German critic Walter Benjamin in the epilogue to his famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1955). Here, Benjamin warns that 'all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.' He continues,

Mankind(s) [...] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic.³⁰⁶

Thus, under fascism, mass expression is encouraged just as private freedom is repressed. Moreover, in speaking of man's 'self-alienation', Benjamin seems to reiterate the idea of fascism itself as facilitated precisely by the absence of a stable and coherent sense of selfhood. As Benjamin points out (in a remark which gestures towards the peculiarly modern brand of narcissism prevalent in Isherwood's writing) 'mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself'.³⁰⁷

Some initial reference might usefully be made here to *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, where the notion of the aestheticisation of politics finds an apt correlative in the description of the novelist Marcel Janin, encountered by the narrator and nominal protagonist, William Bradshaw, during his ill-advised jaunt to Switzerland, who discourses on his methods of work as follows,

³⁰⁵ Eksteins, pp. 414-415.

³⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (New York, Schocken Books) 2007, p. 241.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

A couple of days ashore from a cruising liner had furnished M. Janin with the material for most of his works. And now Switzerland was disposed of, too. Looking for fresh worlds to conquer, he had fixed on the Nazi movement. He and his secretary were leaving next day for Munich. 'Within a week,' he concluded ominously, 'I shall know all.'³⁰⁸

Here (and in a seeming nod to the burgeoning popular and mass cultures of the 1930s) Bradshaw's narrative bears witness to the perverse process whereby Nazism, far from provoking suitable feelings of horror and outrage, is instead commodified as the object of cheap sensationalism. As Bradshaw aptly observes, 'M. Janin's particular brand of pornography, if one was to judge from his clothes, appeared to have hit the public taste'³⁰⁹. Moreover, that the text registers the gathering Nazi movement in this way serves both to reflect and reiterate the unsettling nature of the aesthetic processes in which it is seen to be entrenched and upon which it is necessarily dependent.

In *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood's narrator points explicitly to the ominous trajectory which can be charted from origins located in private fantasy, to outward expression through the sense of participation purportedly offered in the public realm. Here, the shared sense of guilt at having missed the war and consequent urge to be somehow 'tested' become inverted and transformed into an extended daydream in which there yet remains the possibility to lead, and to thus 'prove' oneself,

It was no good, of course, pretending that my own school career had been in any sense romantic, heroic, dangerous, epic – that wasn't necessary. I built up the daydream of an heroic school career in which the central figure, the dream I, was an austere young prefect, called upon unexpectedly to captain a 'bad' house, surrounded by sneering critics and open enemies, fighting slackness, moral rottenness, grimly repressing his own romantic

³⁰⁸ Christopher Isherwood, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (London: Cape, 1979) p. 149. Cited hereafter as *MNCT*.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 149.

obstacles, passing the test, emerging – a Man.³¹⁰

As is later shown, it is in *Goodbye to Berlin* that Isherwood takes up once again the issue of the Nazi movement's particular readiness to exploit the private, egoistic need for outward recognition; to be, as it were, 'taken seriously' by one's peers. Rod Mengham helps us to further understand the link between the sense of having missed out on the war, and the consequent felt appeal of extreme political ideologies, pointing out that,

The expectation of the need for sacrifice – which never came – and the resentment stored up against those who had demanded sacrifice in their own interests, were transformed into a potent psychological inheritance whose conflicting pressures made it easier to accept the alternatives of Fascism and Communism. What Fascism offered was not just the chance of fulfilling the impulse towards self-sacrifice, but of doing it not in support of the dominant culture, not in the service of the parental generation. Fascism showed how to sacrifice oneself in a way that would actually replace the old order, not reinforce it.³¹¹

Here Mengham draws attention to fascism's revolutionary appeal, and it is clear that the insidious nature of this appeal was far from lost on Isherwood. As is shown in the following passage, also from *Lions and Shadows*, the author reveals an acute grasp of the dangers involved where the private urge towards heroism, the realisation of the 'dream 'I'', is permitted to transgress across into reality. He was thus aware of the real possibilities for individual fantasy to find its expression in the outward spectacle of a totalitarian political regime, an awareness which is expressed here in no uncertain terms,

It is so very easy, in the mature calm of a library, to sneer at all this homosexual romanticism. But the rulers of Fascist states do not sneer – they profoundly understand and make use of just

³¹⁰ *L&S*, p. 47.

³¹¹ eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, pp. 359-360.

should have reacted to the preachings of an English Fascist leader clever enough to serve up his 'message' in a suitably disguised and palatable form? He would have converted me, I think, inside half an hour.³¹²

As is maintained here, Isherwood's well-developed sense of the sinister, first captured during the production of *The Mortmere Stories*, is harnessed in his thirties' writing in order to insinuate this especially sinister feature of the relationship between the public and the private, whereby the dominant political structures, far from looking to suppress, to (in Spenderian terms) 'invade', or to counter those 'phantasies and longings' harboured by the private individual, work, rather, to realise, and thereby *mobilize* them precisely to its own ends. It is certainly worth noting in the above passage the narrator's admission of his own vulnerability in the face of this systematic blurring of external and internal realities. Indeed, this susceptibility is closely echoed in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, where (in a rather more comically rendered anticipation of Winston Smith's interrogation by O'Brien in Orwell's *1984*) Bradshaw confesses that, at the moment of their final parting, 'had he (Norris) demanded it, I'd have sworn that two and two make five'.³¹³

III

As has been indicated, Isherwood's writing has, from his earliest period onwards, been revealing of a preoccupation with the relationship between fantasy and reality, the ways in which they co-exist, and the extent to which each may be seen as shaping and conditioning the other. The propensity towards fantasy had always been with Isherwood, from his early immersion in the world of Beatrix Potter to his imaginative transformation of his native Cheshire landscape inspired by his adolescent reading of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. As he would later assert,

³¹² *L&S*, p. 48.

³¹³ *MNCT*, p. 178.

of the children's book and of the fantasies that arise from it.³¹⁴

Describing his childhood memories of reading Potter, Isherwood recalls 'a feeling that just by opening some little door, by getting through some nook or cranny you will find yourself in another world altogether'.³¹⁵ Certainly, then, the genesis of *The Mortmere Stories*, which were devised in collaboration with Edward Upward during his and Isherwood's time at Cambridge, is revealing of the extent to which Isherwood allowed his natural childish fantasies to permeate his adult imagination, and thus his early writings. Indeed, in *Lions and Shadows*, the origins of the idea for Mortmere are described as follows,

One evening, as we were strolling along Silver Street, we happened to turn off into an unfamiliar alley, where there was a strange-looking, rusty-hinged little old door in a high blank wall. Chalmers said: 'It's the doorway into the other town'.³¹⁶

The Mortmere Stories thus present a parallel 'other town' superimposed on the authors' real experiences. As is explained in the 'Introductory Dialogue', 'We were Manicheans, passive resisters, psychic tourists discovering a metaphysical University town'.³¹⁷ The stories are narrated by a pair of alter-egos, the two self-styled pornographers, Hynd and Starn,³¹⁸ and centre on the invented village of Mortmere and its eccentric, sinister (and often malicious) inhabitants, qualities which Isherwood's future characters can clearly be seen to have inherited. As Katherine Bucknell has pointed out,

Certain characters in Isherwood's early novels, such as Arthur Norris or Sally Bowles would never have emerged so vitally from the seedy low-life context in which Isherwood discovered their originals had it not been for his Mortmere training in discovering

³¹⁴ ed. Berg, p. 47.

³¹⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

³¹⁶ *L&S*, p. 42.

³¹⁷ Christopher Isherwood and Edward Upward, 'Introductory Dialogue' to *The Mortmere Stories* (London: Enitharmon, 1994) p. 41. Cited hereafter as *TMS*.

³¹⁸ Although Isherwood has suggested that the figures of Hynd and Starn were initially developed independently of the Mortmere idea itself.

over a dreary scene the lurid and decadent atmosphere that brings it to life for other eyes.³¹⁹

Early evidence of Isherwood's creation and deployment of grotesque characters may, then, be found in the portrayal of figures such as the lurid aristocrat Kester Wranvers in the Mortmere tale, 'The Horror in the Tower'. Isherwood's description of Wranvers, with its combination of fascination and revulsion, clearly anticipates his later imagining of the character of Arthur Norris.³²⁰ He is described as follows,

He was a hunchback of so pronounced a character that his torso seemed to have been bent in half like a piece of cardboard. His eyes were of a vivid green and his hair was ruffled on the crown of his head like the crest of an eastern bird. But the most arresting feature of his face was undoubtedly his mouth, which was abnormally large and covered by a very broad and flexible upper lip capable of extension to the dimple just above the chin or of elevation to the nostrils.³²¹

It is on the horrified discovery at the end of the tale of Wranvers' deviant eating habits that we are brought to realise the grotesque function of the abnormally large mouth. At the same time, however, such descriptions foreshadow the equation in Isherwood's later texts of physical ugliness with moral and spiritual degeneracy. It is useful here to refer to the section of grotesque theory which focuses not just on the image of the body, but precisely on the mouth as the dominant grotesque characteristic. As Mikhail Bakhtin has argued,

Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body...but the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually

³¹⁹ Katherine Bucknell, Introduction to *The Mortmere Stories*, TMS, p. 21.

³²⁰ It should be acknowledged that Norris is also based on an acquaintance of Isherwood's named Gerald Hamilton, whose help Isherwood had ill-advisedly enlisted in attempting to obtain a new nationality for his then lover, Heinz, to avoid the latter's being drafted into the German army.

³²¹ TMS, p. 49.

reduced to the gaping mouth, the other features are only a frame
encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.³²²

Certainly we may discern a notable confluence between Bakhtin's insistence on the facial features, and on the mouth in particular as emblematic of the grotesque, and the descriptions we encounter in Isherwood's writing. Indeed, in 'The Horror in the Tower', we see how particular emphasis is placed on the mouth as the focus for the narrator's increasing disgust at his host's physical appearance,

I was struck more than ever by Kester's resemblance to the mad earl. Both had the same hair, the same green eyes and the same repulsively flexible lips.³²³

Whilst, as I have indicated, the presence within these early writings of features closely associated with the tradition of the grotesque has gone unremarked in accounts of Isherwood's work, further perspectives offered by those who have written on the grotesque as an artistic and literary mode can help give us further insight into the processes at work within these texts. The following comments from Wolfgang Kayser in his important book on the grotesque are of relevance,

(H)umour and terror are twin children of their mother imagination, since both are suspicious of mere facts and distrust any rationalistic explanation of the world. Both deal sovereignly with life by refashioning, exaggerating and stylising certain of its aspects.³²⁴

It is precisely this process of refashioning and transfiguring reality that we can identify as originating within *The Mortmere Stories*, and extending into Isherwood's writing of the thirties. Thus, contrary to claims made by critics such as Fredrick Buell that the Berlin stories are 'just the opposite of Mortmere',³²⁵ it can be seen how the sinister and shape-shifting figures which populate this 'other'

³²² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984) pp. 316-317.

³²³ *TMS*, p. 61.

³²⁴ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1963) p. 139.

³²⁵ Frederick Buell, *W. H. Auden as a Social Poet*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London: 1973) p. 49.

world do not depart from the writing, but instead find themselves transposed to a new and, crucially, more realistic setting, as Isherwood's fiction modulates beyond the world of private fantasy to recognise and incorporate the public realm and its new and far more immediate set of horrors. In his discussion of twentieth-century Grottesque, Wolfgang Kayser thus outlines a world,

[...] in which greed and charity, love and hatred, crime and innocence are closely allied, where not only the Self but the entire world has become sombre and mysterious. To this world...belong the trapdoors, the subterranean passages, and the chinks which permit a glimpse at the hidden world. Man and his environment are merged.³²⁶

Kayser's discussion pertains to Gustav Meyrink's novel, *Der Golem*, (1914) yet the trapdoors and subterranean passages, set amidst the suitably 'narrow, dark, and labyrinthine Jewish quarter of old Prague with its strange inhabitants'³²⁷ are, it can be seen, equally part of the imagined world of Mortmere. Indeed, the merging of man and environment to which Kayser refers finds a noteworthy complement in the following passage from *World Within World*. Here, Spender recalls his time spent with Isherwood in Berlin, and gestures towards ways in which both ideological and private modes of expression may be seen as finding form in the topographical structures of the city itself,

The architecture of Berlin was unlike that of any other town. It had a unity amid its diversity, and was like (as it was meant to be) an ideological expression in stone, granite, and concrete, of certain ideas. The streets were straight, long, grey, uniform, and all their ornaments expressed the idea of Prussian domination. There were a good many squares, but these had little positive character. They were just places whose several streets halted and had a rest before going on with their uniformed march...Other parts of Berlin represented wild fantasies, as though the architects who had restrained themselves when they designed the more austere neo-

³²⁶ Kayser, p. 144.

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 144.

they came to design the cathedral and the palace.³²⁸

Spender thus draws attention to the fact that it is possible to identify a co-existent relationship between political ideology and private fantasy which is as apparent in the physical features of the city as it is in the behaviour of its inhabitants. Yet *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* each reveal the consequences of the two ceasing merely to co-exist; rather, they are seen to intersect with fresh and radically disturbing consequences.

It is in keeping with the fantastical nature of *The Mortmere Stories* that the project was never completed, and indeed that only relative fragments of the text survive. Yet this lack of finality in the remaining text paradoxically made way for an enhanced creative impetus. As Isherwood's narrator explains in *Lions and Shadows*; '(A)s long as Mortmere remained unwritten, its alternative possibilities were infinite; we could continue, every evening, to improvise fresh situations, different climaxes'³²⁹ Certainly Isherwood's involvement in the production of *Mortmere* was in part a function of his own wider revolt at Cambridge against academia, a world which he felt curtailed his imaginative and creative powers, and in which he had resolved, therefore, to fail. It is perhaps no surprise that the experience unwittingly reawakened his natural propensity towards the creation of alternative fantasy worlds. As Isherwood has the figure of Chalmers (a thinly-veiled version of Edward Upward) declare in *Lions and Shadows*,

Cambridge is a monster, a blood-sucking blasé monster. It attacks you when you are off your guard, and before you know where you are all poetry and individuality have been drained out of you, and you become a motor-bike or history maniac. Beware of the daemon of history: it is merciless, it casually eats the flesh and heart and leaves the bleaching bones. History, history, hysteria!³³⁰

The extravagant and comically exaggerated language and imagery of the above passage, with its references to the monstrous and the demonic, are on the one

³²⁸ *WWW*, p. 125.

³²⁹ *L&S*, p. 28.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 28.

hand offered up with tongue-in-cheek irony, yet at the same time are permitted to serve as an indictment of the real external pressures which bore down on the author's sense of identity during his time at Cambridge. We might note that this technique of deploying grotesque figures or imagery as a means of giving voice to a sense of outraged selfhood is also found in the curious description of 'The Watcher in Spanish',

'The Watcher in Spanish' was the latest of our conceits. The phrase came, I believe, from a line in a poem, about: 'The Watcher in Spanish cape....' We imagined him as a macabre but semi-comic figure, not unlike Guy Fawkes, or a human personification of Poe's watching raven. He appeared to us, we said, at moments when our behaviour was particularly insincere; one might, for example, be telling a boastful story, or pretending an interest in heraldry, or flattering the wife of a don – and there, suddenly, he would be standing, visible only to ourselves. He made no gesture, never spoke. His mere presence was a sufficient reminder and warning...never to betray ourselves by word or deed. He was our familiar, our imaginary mascot, our guardian spirit.³³¹

'The Watcher in Spanish' numbers among the gallery of grotesque figures populating Isherwood's thirties fiction. The figure can be taken to represent a self-reproaching imaginary projection of the ego, whose sinister appearance supplies a visual rendering of the disharmony between the private conscience and the assumption of a false self through social pretension, itself a recurrent, indeed defining pattern both here and elsewhere in Isherwood's work. Moreover, the combination of 'the macabre but semi-comic' aspect with which the Watcher is imbued proves one of the definitive and distinctive traits of Isherwood's writing as it modulates from the private to the public arena.

Isherwood goes on to detail in *Lions and Shadows* the imaginative fracture which eventually occurred between himself and his collaborator, and the need, felt with particular acuteness by Upward, to develop beyond the privately-conceived realm of Mortmere,

³³¹ L&S, pp. 33-34

He was to spend the next three years in desperate and bitter struggles to relate Mortmere to the real world of the jobs and the lodging-houses; to find the formula which would transform our private fancies and amusing freaks and bogies into valid symbols of the ills of society and the toils and aspirations of our daily lives.³³²

It is clear, then, that for Upward the gulf between private fantasy and the external world remained fundamentally unbridgeable. And yet it is important to recognise that, for Isherwood, the felt need to move towards a more 'realistic' mode of writing represented precisely the *fulfilment*, rather than the negation of the Mortmerian enterprise. It is pertinent at this stage to draw attention to the distinction which theorists of the Grotesque such as Philip Thomson have made between the fantastical and the grotesque, since this is instructive in understanding the transition which Isherwood underwent between the productions of 'Mortmere' and the Berlin stories. Thomson makes the following point,

(F)ar from possessing a necessary affinity with the fantastic, it is precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful.³³³

It is precisely this postulating of a realistic framework as essential to any meaningful conception of grotesque which provides the essential basis of the contrast between Isherwood's respective presentations of the imaginary location of 'Mortmere' and the realities of Weimar Berlin. Keen to dissociate the grotesque from the fantastic and the fanciful with which it is often associated, Thomson pursues his point as follows,

³³² Ibid, p. 168.

³³³ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972) p. 23.

(1) a literary text takes place in a fantasy-world created by the author, with no pretensions to a connection with reality, the grotesque is almost out of the question.³³⁴

Thus it seems that a more accurate reading of 'Mortmere' would point to the presence of grotesque *elements* within the text whilst necessarily stopping short of assigning the work as a whole to the category of the grotesque. Indeed, if we are prepared to accept the position as outlined above by Thomson, then we can in fact say that it is precisely the transition seen to occur in Isherwood's writing from the closed fantasy of 'Mortmere' to the realistic and political textures of the Berlin novels which enables us to describe the latter works as grotesque. The connection between 'Mortmere' and the Berlin stories can thus be construed in terms of Isherwood's 'importing' of such elements - of bringing to bear his consciousness of the grotesque - in, and into his rendering of the public/private binary as played out in the Berlin of the thirties.

By contrast, Edward Upward's somewhat agonised search for a literary medium by which to express his own increasingly politicised view of the relationship between the public and private realms eventually found expression in the novella, *Journey to the Border* (1938). Here, in a narrative which occurs entirely in the mind of the protagonist, (a young man working as a tutor for an upper-middle-class family) the narrator's psychological instability, reflected in his radical questioning of the knowability of any external reality, leads him almost to the point of breakdown. As with Isherwood's work (though arriving at different conclusions) Upward's text shows how the absence of a stable or coherent sense of selfhood in turn leaves the individual in a state of intense doubt over the nature of reality itself, or rather; his ability to *make contact* with the phenomena of the external world,

...these names are only mental decorations foisted by you and other 'thinkers' upon a non-human world which, but for your interference, would have had no names. Can this hill think or feel or speak, can it say 'I am Belstreet Hill', can it even say 'I am *something*? It cannot even say that. It has nothing to do with

³³⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

names of thinking or feeling. It is not ugly, it is not beautiful, does not owe its shape to volcanic eruption or to erosion by wind, water or ice, has no shape, has no colour, knows nothing of science or aesthetics. Describe it, give it whatever qualities you like, but don't pretend that the description or the qualities have anything to do with the real hill...the real hill is something about which you cannot know anything at all. ³³⁵

In so positing the perceiving self's apprehension of a perpetual disconnect between sign and 'referent', Upward's text is at once subjective and anti-subjective, since the world of the text *is* the subjective world of the narrator, yet at the same time we are presented with a consciousness seeking precisely to escape its own limitations by appealing to an external world of things existing independently of itself. To this extent, both Isherwood's and Upward's texts can be seen to feature characters seeking either to mask or mollify their private malaise. Whilst Upward's protagonist ultimately locates the 'remedy' in revolutionary socialism, William Bradshaw in *Mr Norris Changes Trains* falls prey to the charms of a terminally duplicitous fraudster in whose illusory world his own psychological needs compel him to believe. Yet whereas Upward ultimately found himself struggling to integrate the external world with his own private vision,³³⁶ Isherwood set about re-casting the relationship between fantasy and reality in a way which spoke resonantly to the public upheavals which were to follow.

IV

Before turning to discuss the Berlin stories in detail it will be helpful to refer briefly to Stephen Spender's discussion of the relationship between prose and poetry in *The Struggle of the Modern*. Here Spender identifies a common aim, suggesting that: 'the rationale and justification of each method are that it is an

³³⁵ Edward Upward, *Journey to the Border* (London: Enitharmon, 1994) p. 28.

³³⁶ A struggle which in fact culminated in the destruction by Upward of many of the original Mortmere manuscripts.

attitude towards, and a means of grasping reality. At the same time he suggests that a useful distinction between the two might be to say that,

The poetic method is seismographic, barometric: the prose method is sociological and cataloguing.³³⁸

Spender's view of prose and poetry as both working towards the same end, that of 'grasping reality', is particularly resonant when applied to thirties' writing, illustrating as it does the disjunction which himself and others, Isherwood included, felt existed between their own experience and the events they saw unfolding around them. Isherwood, for his part, sought as far as possible to keep his writing true to the Berlin he had witnessed at first hand in the earlier years of the decade. Yet the distinction Spender makes between prose and poetry is by no means absolute. Indeed, as has been indicated by Piazzzi, Isherwood's method in the Berlin novels might be seen as equally 'seismographic' in terms of the underlying sense of menace which is registered in the narrative, and whilst any expression of the author's own political consciousness is muted, the social and political upheaval remain omnipresent, forming an increasingly threatening backdrop to the private inter-relations between the characters which are, for the most part, kept at the forefront of the narrative. At the same time it is clear that the often remarked-upon documentary-style prose owes something to the 'sociological and cataloguing' tendency associated not only with the traditional realist novel but also the neo-realism of the thirties. Yet, as this chapter presupposes, Isherwood's use of the realist mode is more nuanced than any such unqualified categorisation is likely to allow. Isherwood's frankly-delivered commentary on a draft of a novel by Spender (entitled 'Escape', which Spender had sent to Isherwood whilst in Berlin) is worth quoting here for what it reveals of his attitude towards his own craft,

(W)hat I really complain of is the book as a whole. It simply hasn't come off. It is so violent, so hectic, so queer, so utterly seen from within...You must develop consciousness in your art. At present there is none. You are right down in the scrum with your characters, not up in the grandstand, as you ought to be. You must

³³⁷ *SOTM*, p. 118.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 118.

see round things more. I think, as a matter of fact, that most of the novel, as subject matter, is too near to you. You haven't digested it. You describe scenes but you are unable to suggest to the reader what their significance is. The earliest part of the book is by far the most digested, the most consciously 'told' and 'seen'. This is no mere accident. You are farthest away from it.³³⁹

It is worth recalling again Isherwood's later self-rebuke concerning what he saw as the coldness with which he approached his subject matter. Yet the criticisms offered here are revealing of precisely this belief that reality can be properly apprehended only at some remove from the primary raw material of experience, the subject matter having been suitably digested in order to be re-constituted as imaginative prose: as he wrote in *Goodbye to Berlin*, 'Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed'.³⁴⁰ Thus, what Isherwood later characterises as undue callousness is arguably more properly regarded as a function, indeed a condition of the success of his narrative method. The very distance between the observing 'I' and the other inhabitants of the city itself assumes a central importance for Isherwood: just as *Goodbye to Berlin* is revealing of the political consequences in Europe of its citizens' mutual isolation, so *Mr Norris Changes Trains* tacitly reveals how its narrator desires to belong to a human group that seems, when viewed from the outside, to be a 'living and energetic whole'.³⁴¹

By the mid-thirties, as Isherwood sought to establish his own voice and literary style, his writing was clearly displaying less of the influences of Joyce, Woolf and Forster plainly discernable in his first two novels, *All the Conspirators* (1928) and *The Memorial* (1932). Yet whilst these works can themselves scarcely be described as grotesque, it is significant that Isherwood chose to resurrect and re-employ the grotesque traits first seen in *The Mortmere Stories* when he came to write about the world of thirties' Berlin. *Mr Norris Changes Trains* opens with Bradshaw's recollection of his first impression of Arthur Norris, whom he meets during a train journey to Berlin. This primary encounter is, significantly, recalled as being 'as though we had collided with each other bodily in the street',³⁴² a description which is significant in that the initial physical collision foreshadows

³³⁹ Unpublished letter, spring 1929, cited in: Parker, p. 194.

³⁴⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Vintage, 2003) p.9. Cited hereafter as *GB*.

³⁴¹ Hynes, p. 180.

³⁴² *MNCT*, p. 7.

the recurring collisions between fantasy and reality, and between comedy and outrage, that constitute so much of the subsequent narrative. Even more apt are the following comments,

As he spoke he touched his left temple delicately with his fingertips, coughed and suddenly smiled. His smile had great charm. It disclosed the ugliest teeth I had ever seen. They were like broken rocks.³⁴³

Norris's nervous demeanour in this first meeting, his eyes described as 'startled and innocently naughty', endears him to Bradshaw, yet it also deludes him as to Norris' true nature, and throughout the novel he buries his suspicion over Norris' conduct and character beneath an almost parental, yet at-bottom egoistic feeling of protectiveness bordering on the possessive. Certainly, the clues are there from the beginning: in a seeming echo of T. S. Eliot's remark in 'The Burial of the Dead' ('One must be so careful these days'³⁴⁴) Norris's remark to Bradshaw, at the end of their first meeting, that 'things are so very complex nowadays'³⁴⁵ betrays a flippancy towards the suffering of others which ought not to be overlooked. But it is clear that Bradshaw's 'discovery' of Norris and subsequently blinkered attitude to his moral shortcomings is bound up with needs of his own. Indeed, Bradshaw readily confesses how

I wanted to imagine him (Norris) as a glorified being; audacious and self-reliant, reckless and calm. All of which, in reality, he only too painfully and obviously wasn't. ³⁴⁶

Thus Bradshaw draws the reader's attention to his willingness to submerge himself in fantasy, to suspend his own disbelief, confessing how 'I, too, wanted to be finally, completely convinced'.³⁴⁷ Certainly his friend, the hard-nosed journalist Helen Pratt, is suitably unmoved by Norris' performance,

³⁴³ *MNCT*, p. 7.

³⁴⁴ *Collected Poems, 1909-1935*, p. 63.

³⁴⁵ *MNCT*, p. 17.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 41.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 40.

'you won't trust that man an inch.'

'I don't,' I said.

'Oh, I know you. You're soft, like most men. You make up romances about people instead of seeing them as they are.'³⁴⁸

Correct as Helen proves to be, the important point is that Bradshaw's construction of Norris is inextricably linked in the novel with the construction of his own self-image, and thus with his own private needs. Anxious that his other friends should approve of Norris and thereby help reinforce his own delusions, Bradshaw explains,

Stage by stage I was building up a romantic background for Arthur and was jealous lest it should be upset...I was fond of Arthur with an affection strengthened by obstinacy. If my friends didn't like him because of his mouth or his past, the loss was theirs; I was, I flattered myself, more profound, more humane, an altogether subtler connoisseur of human nature than they.³⁴⁹

Whilst Bradshaw's somewhat condescending attitude to his friend is in itself enough to arouse the reader's suspicion over his own motives, it is his un-alertness to the more sinister implications of Norris' congenital reliance upon performance and pretence which is, in certain key respects, his chief failure. Indeed, their relationship can to this extent be understood precisely amidst the wider and widening appeal of politics-as-theatre, a fact attested-to in chapter five, where Bradshaw describes their attendance at a meeting of the German communist party as follows,

...(W)hat struck me most was the fixed attention of the upturned rows of faces...They had not come here to see each other or to be seen, or even to fulfil a social duty. They were attentive but not passive. They were not spectators. They participated, with a curious, restrained passion, in the speech made by the red-haired

³⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 39.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 41.

man: he spoke for them; he made their thoughts articulate. They were listening to their own collective voice. At intervals they applauded it, with sudden, spontaneous violence. Their passion, their strength of purpose elated me. I stood outside it. One day, perhaps, I should be with it, but never of it. At present I just sat there, a half-hearted renegade from my own class.³⁵⁰

Whilst there is a humorous contrast to be drawn between the sincerity and attentiveness of the audience, and the absurd spectacle of the self-appointed 'comrade' Norris, what comes through here is the sense that Bradshaw's need for a sense of participation in the scene witnessed is, in spite of the ostensibly observational tone of the passage, no less than that of the people he describes. A similarly telling episode is related in *Goodbye to Berlin*, in which is described a visit to a clearly choreographed boxing match at a nearby fairground, which the audience, nonetheless appears (or wants) to believe is genuine. The narrator notes how,

The audience took the fight dead seriously, shouting encouragement to the fighters, and even quarrelling and betting amongst themselves on the results...The political moral is certainly depressing: these people could be made to believe in anybody or anything.³⁵¹

Here, it seems that it is only by virtue of the character-narrator's separateness from the mass whom he criticises that he is able to attain his perception of what is really taking place – insight is gleaned at the micro-level of the individual observer; the roots of totalitarianism are viewed, as it were, not from above in a sweeping panorama, (such is Auden's tendency, to be discussed in Chapter 6) but rather from-the-ground-up. But the passage is worth recounting here due to its revealing of an insight which is crucial, yet which, in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, has yet to be reached. Whilst the comedy of Norris' 'triumph' following his speech at the communist rally is not lost on Bradshaw, what *is* missed is the more troubling realization that such an ostensibly ludicrous figure is nonetheless capable, under

³⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 53-54.

³⁵¹ *GB*, p. 235.

the right conditions, or generating considerable political momentum. This much is confirmed in the following scene in chapter 11, which takes places in the aftermath of the November elections,

Several of the bystanders laughed sympathetically. 'Good old Arthur!' exclaimed one of Otto's friends loudly. The name was overheard, taken up, passed from mouth to mouth. 'Arthur...who's Arthur? Why, man. Don't you know who Arthur is?' No, they didn't know. Equally, they didn't care. It was a name, a focus point for the enthusiasm of all these excited young people; it served its purpose. 'Arthur! Arthur!' was caught up on all sides. People were shouting it on the floor above us; in the hallway below. 'Arthur's here!' 'Arthur for ever!' 'We want Arthur!' The storm of voices had risen in a moment. A mighty cheer, exuberant, half-humorous, burst spontaneously from a hundred throats.³⁵²

The scene is comedic yet decidedly unnerving in its depiction of the ease with which in Arthur's own – somewhat ironically chosen - words, 'a clever unscrupulous liar can deceive millions'.³⁵³ The scene serves, in identity terms, to decisively align Norris with Isherwood's other characters ('Arthur...who's Arthur?') as a figure who is not, in any integrated sense, a real entity, but who serves instead as a receptacle for the misplaced adoration of the crowd. Moreover, that this is, or ought to be a source of concern is not altered by the fact that the movement in question is communist rather than fascist: as Bayer observes to Bradshaw's consternation, 'the Nazi of today can be the communist of tomorrow'.³⁵⁴

It is precisely the notion of a self predicated not on any positive or clearly discernible values or beliefs, but rather on a fundamentally amoral brand of aestheticism, which informs Isherwood's portrayal of Norris. As Brian Finney has pointed out, Norris' aestheticism neatly illustrates how he contrives to turn questions of morality into matters of taste.³⁵⁵ The reasons Arthur gives for joining the communist party are substantially revealing of his attitude, and betray an

³⁵² *MNCT*, p. 114.

³⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 188.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 117.

³⁵⁵ Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood – A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1979) p. 113.

façade itself,

...hatred of tyranny is in my blood. Even as a small child, I could never bear injustice of any kind. It offends my sense of the beautiful. It is so stupid and unaesthetic. I remember my feelings when I was first unjustly punished by my nurse. It wasn't the punishment itself which I resented; it was the clumsiness, the lack of imagination behind it.³⁵⁶

Here can be seen, then, how a speech ostensibly justifying Norris' 'commitment' to communism confirms precisely the opposite. The obvious ironic humour with which the speech is imbued is played off against the chilling suggestion of a preference for more 'imaginative' forms of punishment (which is partially fulfilled in the novel's sado-masochism scene, later discussed) and attendant implication that the 'justness' or otherwise of the punishment is itself an irrelevance. That Norris is able to condemn cruelty and injustice only on aesthetic grounds, as an affront to his 'sense of the beautiful' reveals him to be, at worst, a potential monster, and at best a disingenuous poseur. In either case, as will be shown, the implications, translated into political terms, bode ominously. The key point is that whilst Norris is physically ugly, it is his dubious moral sense which is revealed as truly grotesque.

That *Mr Norris* maintains a subtle and delicately achieved sense of comic irony, despite the underlying public and private tragedies which comprise its essential backdrop, is one of the text's definitive features. Certainly there can be no denying the humour inherent in the prospect of Norris being chased around the globe by his employee-turned-nemesis, the ghastly Schmidt. Yet equally we ought not to ignore the discordant relationship between Isherwood's use of comedy and the discomfiting reality of the political landscapes inhabited by his characters. This is a feature of the text which was not lost on John Lehman, who commented as follows,

³⁵⁶ *MNCT*, p. 58.

a shock to anyone who was remotely connected with the fateful crisis in the history of Europe which forms the near background of the book, and in which Isherwood had made it perfectly clear that his central character played an entirely ignoble part. The emotions prepared in such a reader are indignation, horror and pity; and yet one is forced to read the last few pages shaking with laughter.³⁵⁷

Lehman thus draws attention to the complex emotional response engendered by Isherwood's text, a response whose incongruity mirrors precisely the grotesque discord between the mirth-inducing conditions of Norris's departure and pursuit by Schmidt, and the burgeoning political terror in Berlin. That Norris in his outrage pointedly refers to Schmidt as a 'creature' or 'monster' serves to heighten the laughter, even as the use of such terms ironically underscores the real crisis. Indeed, Norris's scribbled postcard to Bradshaw, advising him that 'the MONSTER has arrived',³⁵⁸ reads in political-historical terms as especially apt.

Our understanding of Isherwood's use of the comic mode both in this text and in *Goodbye to Berlin* is, then, enhanced with reference to those theorizations of the grotesque which insist precisely on the centrality of the comical within the Grotesque tradition. As George E. Duckworth has argued in his study of Roman comedy,

No grotesque, even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity.³⁵⁹

The use of comedy as a feature of the grotesque mode may be further illustrated with reference to Kayser's study,

³⁵⁷ quoted in: Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) pp. 329-330. No reference given.

³⁵⁸ *MNCT*, p. 189.

³⁵⁹ George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton University Press, 1952) pp. 10-12.

genre – that of comedy. At first glance, this connection between the grotesque and comedy appears to hark back to the traditional identification of the grotesque with comique, ridicule, and bouffon. (Victor) Hugo acknowledged this antecedent but considered it merely one aspect of the grotesque, the other being the deformed and the horrible: 'The grotesque...is everywhere; on the one hand it creates what is deformed and horrible, on the other what is comic and farcical'.³⁶⁰

Thus, as Edwards and Graulund point out, Kayser locates the grotesque in the conflation of the disturbing with the comical, a combination thus liable to elicit a paradoxical and ambivalent response from the witness to any such spectacle. An especially neat example of this occurs in the 'On Ruegen Island' section of *Goodbye to Berlin*, in which Isherwood's narrator describes a violent yet ludicrous encounter between his two companions, Otto and Peter, in the following terms,

It was funny, and, at the same time, unpleasant, because rage made their faces strange and ugly.³⁶¹

It can be seen here how characters not represented as inherently grotesque in appearance, manner or behaviour are nonetheless susceptible under certain conditions to habitation by grotesque forms. The faces of the two friends-turned-mutual assailants are not merely rendered unfamiliar by the encounter, but take on a temporary 'ugliness' which renders them grotesque in the eyes of the narrator. It is precisely the effects and the proliferation of the conditions giving rise to such metamorphoses that Isherwood's thirties texts work to expose.

It can be seen, then, how the comedy pervading *Mr Norris* is set at odds with the more brutal details of what is happening in Berlin which are allowed to emerge towards the end of the novel ('Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere'³⁶²). The reader is carried along with the juxtaposition of experiences, by abrupt turns comic and fearful, which are undergone by the characters. Thus, no

³⁶⁰ Kayser, p. 57.

³⁶¹ *GB*, p. 112.

³⁶² *MNCT*, p. 90.

pity than the narrative descends swiftly into nightmare,

The town was full of whispers. They told of illegal midnight arrests, of prisoners tortured in the S.A. barracks, made to spit on Lenin's picture, swallow castor oil, eat old socks. They were drowned by the loud, angry voice of the Government, contradicting through its thousand mouths.³⁶³

Here there is a sense that, having been deprived of the spectacle of Norris's performance, Bradshaw is now susceptible to the more sinister implications of the former's constructed fantasy. It is at this point that the tales of Nazi atrocities begin to take a hold of his imagination, with the public, political world thus asserting itself forcefully against his own private world. Indeed, it is at the end of the novel, when we find Bradshaw lying sleeplessly alone in his room, that the sense of comedy becomes noticeably diminished, giving way to the feelings of dislocation and insecurity which, we may note, themselves form a further element in Kayser's definition of the grotesque,³⁶⁴

One morning, as I stared, half asleep, at the wallpaper above my bed, the pattern suddenly formed itself into a chain of little hooked crosses. What was worse, I noticed that everything in the room was really a kind of brown: either green-brown, black brown, yellow-brown, or red-brown; but all brown, unmistakably.³⁶⁵

The invocation of the notion of pattern formation is itself significant, suggesting the replication of the sense of fear and menace across the city, as well as the role played by the crosses-turned-swastikas in unambiguously symbolizing the steadily increasing grip of terror and violence on the wider populace. The scene gestures towards the supplanting of the natural states of sleeping and dreaming by a nightmare at once constructed and real, and the tone of the narrative shifts

³⁶³ *MNCT*, p. 179.

³⁶⁴ Kayser insists upon, 'the abysmal quality, the insecurity, the terror inspired by the disintegration of the world' as 'essential ingredients of the grotesque'. *The Grotesque*, pp. 51-52.

³⁶⁵ *MNCT*, p. 181

accordingly from wry detachment to muted dread, as the reality and political logic of Bradshaw's indulgence in fantasy begins to show, as it were, its true colours.

Another dimension to Isherwood's sense of the invasion of the personal by the political is suggested by the scene in chapter four, in which Norris's sado-masochistic tendencies are comically brought to the fore. Following a new-year celebration (in which Bradshaw is introduced to Norris's friend, Baron von Pregnitz, a prominent politician and homosexual whose own attempts to keep separate his public and private lives end in ignominious suicide) Bradshaw is startled when he happens upon Norris in the throes of masochistic pleasure,

The first person I saw was Anni. She was standing in the middle of the room. Arthur cringed on the floor at her feet. He had removed several more of his garments, and was now dressed, lightly but with perfect decency, in a suit of mauve silk underwear, a rubber abdominal belt and a pair of socks. In one hand he held a brush and in the other a yellow shoe-rag. Olga towered behind him, brandishing a heavy leather whip.³⁶⁶

As C. J. Summers has pointed out, Norris's revelry in the simulated punishment of sadomasochistic games depends on a discrepancy between fantasy and reality, yet in the novel reality gradually intrudes into fantasy, and the make-believe torturers are finally replaced by a truly sadistic political regime.³⁶⁷ Moreover, the scene demonstrates how fantasy and artifice, as utilised by the dominant state apparatus, have at the same time infiltrated even the most supposedly intimate aspects of the private life.

III

In moving on to examine the novel for which Isherwood remains best-known, *Goodbye to Berlin*, one can see still more clearly why his work has been seen by

³⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁶⁷ C. J. Summers, *Christopher Isherwood* (London: Lorrimer, 1980) p. 21.

certain critics as fundamentally concerned with the idea of self. The second of the Berlin novels sees the author imitating a mode of writing, the diary, which, by definition, places the perceiving, experiencing 'I' at the centre of events. However, it is worth considering more fully the implications, in terms of the author's envisaging of the self and its place in history, of this chosen mode of narration. It can, and has, been noted that the fragmentary, episodic nature of the novel reflects similarly the fragmented self (or selves) depicted.³⁶⁹ As Judy Suh has pointed out, however, these same qualities which are associated with the diary format also allow Isherwood to explore different modes of political observation and perspective that strictly narrative fiction does not allow.³⁷⁰ To this extent, it is possible to trace a development in Isherwood's writing away from the more clearly delineated narrative structures of *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. Given, then, that Isherwood has placed the 'I' more squarely at the centre of his work than has so far been the case, it is notable that the essence of this same 'I' proves, in *Goodbye to Berlin*, more elusive than ever: at both the authorial and character levels, in the figures of Sally Bowles, and Natalia and Bernhard Landauer, any essential self has disappeared from view.

The novel opens with the first of two 'Berlin Diaries'. Here, the present-tense narrative lends the writing a sense of immediacy, even as the text registers the despondent mood pervading the city. In spite of himself, Isherwood's narrator finds himself emotionally compelled by the mutual isolation he records,

At eight o'clock in the evening the house-doors will be locked. The children are having supper. The shops are shut. The electric sign is switched on over the night-bell of the little hotel on the corner, where you can hire a room by the hour. And soon the whistling will begin. Young men are calling their girls. Standing down there in the cold, they whistle up at the lighted windows of warm rooms

³⁶⁸ Rebecca Gordon, for instance, argues that Isherwood 'depicts various identities within his writing in which the act of composition is in fact an act of construction of the self' (see abstract, *Constructed Selves: The Manipulation of Authorial Identity in Selected Works of Christopher Isherwood*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2009). See also Lisa M. Schwerdt's *Isherwood's Fiction: The Self and Technique* (London: Macmillan, 1989) on Isherwood's multiplication of personae through narrators.

³⁶⁹ Certainly the episodic nature of the book invites comparisons with James Joyce's *Dubliners*, (1914) a work which is also made up of free-standing stories which may simultaneously be read in terms of the wider vision they reveal.

³⁷⁰ Judy Suh, *Christopher Isherwood and Virginia Woolf: Diaries and Fleeting Impressions of Fascism*, *Modern Language Studies*, 2008, Vol. 38, pt. 1

where the beds are already turned down for the night. They want to be let in. Their signals echo down the deep hollow street, lascivious and private and sad.³⁷¹

Here is a world in which sexual desire is accompanied not by love but by loneliness, and the utterance, 'they want to be let in', is imbued with an emotional resonance beyond its literal meaning. Isherwood draws attention not only to the barrier that separates the 'I' of the narrative from the lives of the individuals whom it records, but also to the same separation which exists between each of these other 'I's. As David Izzo has pointed out, Isherwood understands (as Spender does) that one is always self-absorbed in his own consciousness as a single 'I' separated from many 'yous'.³⁷² Indeed, it is worth remembering that what would finally emerge as *Goodbye to Berlin* was conceived as part of an epic novel to be called *The Lost*, a title which, as Chris Hopkins has pointed out, implies this very sense of dislocation, and hints that the fragmentary form in which the text has appeared is indeed appropriate to the experiences of its characters, and to the experiences of people all over Europe.³⁷³ Moreover, it is clear from the opening paragraphs of the first 'Berlin Diary' that Isherwood's narrator is by no means deaf to the 'despairingly human' calls around him. Just as the account offered by the recording 'I' is deeply unsettling in its unwitting revelations regarding the exercise of political power though exploiting private insecurity, the 'I' itself is, equally (and like the medium of photography itself) less unfeeling, less passive, and less objective than it claims.

The merging of character and environment remains integral to Isherwood's rendering of the relationship between public and private in *Goodbye to Berlin*, and is especially well instanced in the following excerpt, in which 'Isherwood' describes the room of his landlady, Fräulein Schroeder,

The extraordinary smell in this room when the stove is lighted and the window shut; not altogether unpleasant, a mixture of incense and stale buns. The tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured, like an altar. The washstand like a Gothic shrine. The cupboard

³⁷¹ *GB*, p. 9.

³⁷² Izzo, p. 147.

³⁷³ Chris Hopkins, *English Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Continuum, 2006) p. 88.

also is done, with carved ecclesiastical windows. Dismal as faces the King of Prussia in stained glass. My best chair would do for a bishop's throne. In the corner, three sham mediaeval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand. Frl. Schroeder unscrews the heads of the halberds and polishes them from time to time. They are heavy and sharp enough to kill. Everything in the room is like that: unnecessarily solid, abnormally heavy and dangerously sharp. Here, at the writing-table, I am confronted by a phalanx of metal objects - a pair of candlesticks shaped like entwined serpents, an ashtray from which emerges the head of a crocodile, a paper-knife copied from a Florentine dagger, a brass dolphin holding on the end of its tail a small broken clock. What becomes of such things? How could they ever be destroyed? They will probably remain intact for thousands of years: people will treasure them in museums. Or perhaps they will merely be melted down for munitions in a war. Every morning, Frl. Schroeder arranges them very carefully in certain unvarying positions: there they stand, like an uncompromising statement of her views on Capital and Society, Religion and Sex.³⁷⁴

In this way the room is explicitly portrayed as variously emblematic of those frequenting its confines. The narrator's claim that the unusual smell is 'not altogether unpleasant' is suggestive of his complicity in the moral and spiritual decay betokened by the various features, items and artefacts which comprise the room. Whilst the manner in which 'Isherwood' recounts his memories of Frl. Schroeder and others is frequently laden with tongue-in-cheek irony, the descriptions also accommodate the underlying sense of threat and disgust, reiterating the fact that such places and the figures who inhabit them are by no means as benign as they might initially appear. This is well exemplified by the description of the halberds which, we are told, are fake medieval, and manipulated into the guise of a hatstand, yet which in spite of its fraudulent nature remains, we are pointedly assured, 'heavy and sharp enough to kill'. Thus, at work within the

³⁷⁴ *GB*, pp. 10-11

ostensible frame of the narrative is a series of disorienting processes designed to register and induce in the reader the same simultaneous feelings of horror and derision experienced by the narrator, which his own account of such encounters works to suppress. This is a further aspect of the text which aligns it with the grotesque, displaying once more what Philip Thomson describes as the 'co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable'.³⁷⁵ It is this theme of the disturbing contemporary realities operating insidiously beneath a carefully maintained façade (reinforced in the above excerpt by the allusion to the theatre) with which Isherwood, in *Goodbye to Berlin*, remains heavily preoccupied.

The second section of the novel introduces the famous character of Sally Bowles. She is described by Isherwood's friend, Fritz Wendel, as an actress, a term which, as is evident from her first appearance ('Her mouth opened in a fatuously sweet smile. Fritz and I sat watching her, like a performance in a theatre'³⁷⁶) refers more to her general behaviour than to tangible career. At the end of this initial encounter, there is the sense of some metaphorical significance in Fritz's notoriously strong black coffee as evocative of a wider sense of toxicity following ours, and 'Isherwood's' exposure to Sally's performance: 'When I got back to Frl. Schroeder's, I felt so giddy that I had to lie down for half an hour on my bed. Fritz's black coffee was as poisonous as ever'³⁷⁷. Already, Isherwood hints at a sinister correlation between this spectacle and the Nazi cult of the visual. As Linda Mizejewski has argued, Sally's particular species of eroticism,

[...] only reinforces the stereotypes of Weimar decadence, the richness of its temptations, the multiplicities of its sexualities – a disruption of the 'natural order' which leaves the society vulnerable to Nazism',³⁷⁸

Certainly, one of the clearest points of comparison with the figure of Norris is found in the description of Sally's hands,

³⁷⁵ Thomson, p. 3.

³⁷⁶ *GB*, p. 35.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.

³⁷⁸ Linda Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence – Fascism, Female Spectacle and the Makings of Sally Bowles* (Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 4.

Sally lit another cigarette. She smoked the whole time. I noticed how old her hands looked in the lamplight. They were nervous, veined and very thin – the hands of a middle-aged woman. The green finger-nails seemed not to belong to them at all; to have settled on them by chance – like hard, bright, ugly little beetles.³⁷⁹

Here, as with his descriptions of Norris's rotten teeth, Isherwood reasserts the motif of the disturbing reality beneath the surface façade as manifest in the physical appearance of the characters (indeed, both 'Isherwood' and the reader are shocked to discover that Sally herself is only nineteen years old). Berlin has, it seems, already worked its corrupting power on Sally, and closer scrutiny betrays a grim worldliness at times only thinly concealed behind the regular pose of frivolous gaiety, her aged hands signifying Berlin's seedy, decaying underbelly. Like Norris, the 'Sally Bowles' encountered by Isherwood's narrator is a means to an end; the mere fulfilment of a self-assigned role, rather than a human-being capable of and desiring meaningful connection with others. It is precisely in a city populated by such figures, coupled with the readiness of the wider populace to submit to the spectacle on offer as a means of escaping their own everyday hardships (such as the squalor faced by the Nowaks) that fascism finds itself well able to thrive. Isherwood thus connects the idea of the privately disconnected, insubstantial self with the public tragedy of fascism's rise to political dominance.

V

Isherwood develops the range of grotesque meaning in his fiction still further in the latter sections of *Goodbye to Berlin*. It is in the closing sections of the novel that the grotesque finds further expression in Isherwood's rendering of encroaching fascism. Here is evoked a sense of unreality borne of the unfolding spectacle of violence and betrayal, where Hitler, now in power, is declared master of the city, and where the tools of murder and violence are seen to be no longer sporadic but routine. Yet at the same time, more subtle instruments of control are brought into play, in the form of the instigation of a socio-political climate in which such behaviours are both wittingly and unwittingly legitimated. Framed by a

³⁷⁹ *GB*, p. 43.

such insidious modes of power and the grotesque is elucidated by Edwards and Graulund as follows,

Power...is governed by a logic that is not only wielded by the executive, judiciary or legislative powers. Power is fluid. As such, it is itself a sort of *monster*, an organism that can exceed the control of individuals or groups of individuals. Power is a force that eludes boundaries and controls as regularly as the deviants it is meant to regulate. In this, power is often grotesque. Its grotesquerie operates through the faceless mechanics of the state, in the anonymous bureaucracies of asylums, hospitals and prisons, and in a more personalised image: the power of the 'strong man', the dictator.³⁸⁰

Isherwood's sidelong renderings of the encroaching and increasingly disturbing operations of the fascist dictatorial apparatus are, then, a further means by which his work can be read with reference to the grotesque. This can be illustrated with reference to the second 'Berlin diary'. Here, grotesque power is discernible precisely in terms of the dissemination of terror by a dictator. The following passage will serve as an example,

Overhead in a cafe: a young Nazi is sitting with his girl; they are discussing the future of the Party : The Nazi is drunk.

'Oh, I know we shall win, all right,' he exclaims impatiently, 'but that's not enough!' He thumps the table with his fist: 'Blood must flow!'

The girl strokes his arm reassuringly. She is trying to get him to come home. 'But, of course, it's going to flow, darling,' she coos soothingly, 'the Leader's promised that in our programme.'³⁸¹

As in earlier passages, here we see the characteristic mingling of humour and menace. Whilst the tone with which the scene is rendered purports to be coolly

³⁸⁰ Edwards and Graulund, p. 27.

³⁸¹ *GB*, p. 245.

sardonic, the reality it betokens is precisely the disturbing normalization of disseminated violence which is poised to take hold of the city, thus laying bare the means by which the Hitlerean ideology is to be enacted.

Just as *Mr Norris Changes Trains* registers an increasingly porous barrier between the public and private realms, so *Goodbye to Berlin* develops this theme further still. As the text progresses, it is evident that the chief element (although both remain present) is increasingly less comedy than fear. In the penultimate section of the novel, Isherwood relates the story of the Jewish department store owner, Bernhard Landauer, who, we learn, lives in an state of apparent seclusion from the public world ('Isherwood's' account of their relationship recalling having rarely discussed the political condition of Germany). The following passage supplies details of the visit to Bernhard's Berlin home,

(The) door was so heavy that I had to push it open with both hands; it closed behind me with a hollow boom, like the firing of a cannon. Then came a pair of doors opening into the courtyard, then the door of the Gartenhaus, then five flights of stairs, then the door of the flat. Four doors to protect Bernhard from the outer world.³⁸²

Bernhard, like Norris (though with more directly tragic consequences) is inevitably unsuccessful in his bid to keep the external world at bay, and we sense in both cases that the barrier is deployed merely to suggest its very illusoriness. We are later led to infer that Bernhard has been murdered by the Nazis, a development which further announces the destruction of any sense of private security which by this point is already well in train. This development represents, moreover, a further progression within the text towards the grotesque, facilitating the gradual shift toward the profound sense of unreality finally embedded in the novel's famous closing remark that '(E)ven now I can't altogether believe that any of this has really happened'.³⁸³ Some further reference to the Mortmere tale, 'The Horror in the Tower', is instructive here, to the extent that the memorable and unsettling visit to a mysterious location featured in both texts serves in the latter

³⁸² Ibid, p. 192.

³⁸³ *GB*, p. 256.

such conditions the description of the journey itself assumes a distinctly metaphorical significance. It is worth, then, noting the similarities between the following passages,

We reached the house at sunset, or, to be more exact, some minutes after the sun's disappearance behind the western moors. A long scroll of cloud, faintly tinged with red, indicated the place of its descent. In the hollow, into which we were about to enter, the mists were already gathering. They formed spirals and fantastic garlands around the dense thickets and stunted bushes, and partly concealed from our eyes the outline of the house itself.
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The car whirled along the black Avus, into the immense darkness of the winter countryside. Giant reflector signs glittered for a moment like burnt-out matches. Already Berlin was a reddish glow in the sky behind us, dwindling rapidly beyond a converging forest of pines. The searchlight on the Funkturm swung its little ray through the night. The straight black road roared headlong to meet us, as if to its destruction.³⁸⁵

In the latter text, the narrative thus begins to assume the symbolic manner of Marlow's journey in *Heart of Darkness*, (1902) whereby just as Conrad's protagonist famously embarks on an odyssey which proves both bewildering and profoundly disenchanting, finding in his quarry only an 'impenetrable darkness',³⁸⁶ so Isherwood's text similarly assumes the multiple incongruities of nightmare, closely allied to gathering intimations of reality. The city itself recedes from view, in an enactment of the novel's title which operates on both a literal and a symbolic level, whereby the city's blood-reddish glow ominously portends Bernhard's own destruction, along with that of the city itself, which now seems consigned to the

³⁸⁴ *TMS*, p. 50.

³⁸⁵ *GB*, p. 207.

³⁸⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2007)

arrival at the house,

We had reached the house. Bernhard opened a glass door, and we passed through a little conservatory into a big drawing-room full of jumping shadows from the fire burning in an open English fireplace. Bernhard switched on a number of lamps, making the room quite dazzlingly bright.

'Need we have such illumination?' I asked. 'I think the firelight is much nicer.'

'Do you?' Bernhard smiled subtly. 'So do I [...] But I thought, somehow, that you would prefer the lamps.'³⁸⁷

Bernhard's insinuation of his companion's sensationalistic preference for distraction, shadow and mystery (suggested here by the reference to the open fire) over unforgiving, hard light is not lost on him, issuing as it does an implicit rebuke to the amoral, near-voyeuristic stance with which he has regarded much of what he has witnessed thus far. The switching on of the lights prohibits further indulgence in such illusions. Moreover, it signals Bernhard's own exclusion from fascism's political aesthetic, foreshadowing the oncoming tragedy in which, far from participating in any such spectacle, he is scheduled to be claimed as one of its victims. Once again, it is not the predilection towards the sensational and the spellbinding which is grotesque in itself, but the situation of such elements precisely amidst a radically disturbing realistic framework.

Some months later 'Isherwood' finds himself duped into attending a social gathering at Bernhard's. Unable to properly immerse himself in the spirit of the occasion, he notes with unease the forced gaiety of his host, recoiling at his frivolous attempts at sociability, as political events in Berlin stubbornly dominate the mood and exchanges between the guests. What emerges is an awareness that the would-be idyll of the lakeside garden party rings decidedly false against the increasingly discomfiting events taking place in the city. On his return to Berlin, the latest headlines prove this prophetic sense somewhat self-fulfilling,

³⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 211.

As we came down the Laurentienstrasse, they were selling papers with the news of the shooting on the Bulowplatz. I thought of our party lying out there on the lawn by the lake, drinking our claret-cup while the gramophone played; and of that police-officer, revolver in hand, stumbling mortally wounded up the cinema steps to fall dead at the feet of a cardboard figure advertising a comic film.³⁸⁸

The scene is a symbolically potent example of Isherwood's adept use of grotesque juxtaposition. Here, the two worlds evoked within the wider text are brought into stark and deliberate contrast, locating the events of the novel along a distinctly tragi-comic axis which simultaneously invites and rebukes the laughter of the reader. The advert for the comic film is appropriately modified by the addition of the dead policeman, invoking and enacting the new and unfolding spectacle postulated by the wider narrative, in which the comic and the macabre interact to generate a disturbingly modern variety of grotesque.

The manner in which we learn of Bernhard's death represents a further retrenchment of Isherwood's use of the grotesque mode. The scene offers a freshly-disturbing reminder of the moral degradation which has taken hold, with news of Bernhard's apparent murder presented in an unsettling casual manner as an item of overheard gossip in a Prague restaurant,

Two men were at the next table, talking German. One of them was certainly an Austrian; the other I couldn't place - he was fat and sleek, about forty-five...

'Seen the papers, this morning?'

'No. Didn't have time [...] Moving into our new flat, you know.

The wife's coming back.'

'She's coming back? You don't say! Been in Vienna, hasn't she?'

'That's right.'

...The fat man began to pick his teeth...

'There was a bit in about Bernhard Landauer.'

'Bernhard?' said the Austrian. 'Let's see - he's the son, isn't he?'

³⁸⁸ *GB*, p. 219.

I wouldn't know ... The fat man dislodged a tiny fragment of meat with the point of his toothpick. Holding it up to the light, he regarded it thoughtfully.

'Whoever he is,' the fat man flicked the scrap of meat on to his plate with a gesture of distaste; 'He's dead.'

'You don't say!'

'Heart failure.' The fat man frowned, and raised his hand to cover a belch. He was wearing three gold rings: 'That's what the newspapers said.' ...

The Austrian looked very uncomfortable: 'Those Nazis ...' he began...

'Concentration camps,' said the fat man lighting a cigar. 'They get them in there, make them sign things [...] Then their hearts fail.'

'I don't like it,' said the Austrian. 'It's bad for trade.'

'Yes,' the fat man agreed. 'It's bad for trade.'

'Makes everything so uncertain.'

'That's right. Never know who you're doing business with.' The fat man laughed. In his own way he was rather macabre: 'It might be a corpse.'³⁸⁹

We might detect here some homage by Isherwood to nineteenth-century Dickens-style naturalism, to the extent that the scene bears a resemblance, not least in terms of the emotional response which the scene is designed to elicit, to that in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, (1843) in which the characters of Joe and Mrs Dilber are infamously glimpsed scavenging over the remnants of Scrooge's remaining possessions, a scene witnessed 'with a detestation and disgust which could hardly have been greater though they had been obscene demons marketing the corpse itself.'³⁹⁰ Certainly the former scene is among the more notably grotesque in Isherwood's text, provoking the repugnance of the reader (and indeed the narrator) precisely by way of the naturalistic detail on offer (the fat man

³⁸⁹ *GB*, pp. 226-229. It is worth mentioning that Isherwood himself later called into question the feasibility of this particular episode, writing in *Christopher and his Kind* that 'the timing of his (Bernhard's) death, so early in the persecution, is unconvincing – unless he was murdered by mistake. The Nazis would surely have waited long enough to prepare some false charges against him' (*C&HK*, p. 60).

³⁹⁰ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London and Glasgow, Blackie and Son Ltd, 1959) p. 98. It is worth noting that Dicken's relationship with the grotesque has been the subject of a full-length study by Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

contemplating a fragment of food picked from his toothy cavity yet simultaneously woven into the overall sense of coldness and moral degeneration reflected in the dialogue. In particular, the repugnant manner in which the fat man is portrayed, in terms of speech, mannerisms and physical appearance, is mirrored by his companion's own barely-concealed sense of disgust (which he lacks the courage to declare outright) and is revealing of the grotesque inhumanity with which Bernhard's death, and by extension the multiplying deaths of others, are regarded. Isherwood thus depicts a distinctly grotesque situation in which murder is seen as objectionable less from a moral point of view than because it is 'bad for trade': Bernhard's death is met not with the sense of outrage it properly merits but with a mere 'gesture of distaste', recalling, once again, the cold inclination of figures such as Arthur Norris and those like him towards measuring human behaviours against aesthetic rather than ethical standards.

In the closing pages of the novel is found one of the most explicit intimations of fantasy made (all-too) real. Here, the narrator reflects on the likely fate of his friend, a young 'communist' named Rudi. Having wryly noted, some pages earlier, his friend's taste for heroic affectation, the comedy once more turns sour as we are reminded of the danger inherent of being taken seriously at one's own game,

Rudi's make-believe, story-book game has become earnest; the Nazis will play it with him. The Nazis won't laugh at him; they'll take him on trust for what he pretended to be. Perhaps at this very moment Rudi is being tortured to death.³⁹¹

Thus, the narrative attests to a world in which something describable as a mere 'story-book game' can easily result in being tortured to death. The sense of horror is reinforced by the grim pathos embedded in the lines: Rudi's friends fail to take him seriously and only laugh at his poses; by contrast, the Nazis, it is implied, are more than prepared to pay him the respect he deserves. Here, as is the case throughout Isherwood's fictions of the thirties, private choices and actions are granted a real yet terrible significance within the public realm.

³⁹¹ *GB*, p. 245.

Chapter 4: 'I missed that pleasant haven':³⁹² Appropriating the pastoral in George Orwell's *Coming up for Air*.

*Passion for the past is a kind of spiritual homesickness
contrasting these grey walls with that bright South.*

Stephen Spender³⁹³

The name of 'George Orwell' provided Eric Blair with both a literary and a public identity through which he shifted and which he perpetually altered to suit his purpose, and occupies an assured, yet oddly precarious position within thirties critical discourse. Leaving aside for a moment the considerable and ever-growing body of critical and biographical material dedicated to the man and his work, the feature of his writing which is perhaps its most hard-won quality, the 'window-pane' clarity of the prose, remains, paradoxically, that which is most liable to cause problems for the reader wishing to get under the skin of Orwell's texts. The inimitably readerly prose-style is apt to give a disarming illusion of simplicity, thereby masking the myriad contradictions, ambivalences and anomalies inherent within the writing. Yet it is precisely this plain-speaking tone, abundantly in evidence throughout Orwell's writings, which should continue to give the reader cause to examine the possibility of deeper significances located beneath the surface of the texts and operating amidst the seeming transparency of the work under scrutiny.

In *Coming up for Air* (1939) the novel which is to be the subject of this chapter, we encounter, for example, the seemingly clear-cut symbolism with which Orwell imbues the secret pool which his protagonist and unlikely prophet, George Bowling, hopes to rediscover. It can be seen how on one level the pool operates as a symbol of Bowling's neglected and decaying youth, which he returns to his home town of Lower Binfield in the hope of reclaiming. However, with its concealed and unexplored depths, the pool can in conjunction be read as subtly suggestive of the unconscious creative processes involved in the act of writing itself. It is in thus beginning to consider the differing levels on which such symbols operate that this

³⁹² George Orwell, 'A happy vicar I might have been', ed. Peter Davison, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Volume Ten (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998) p. 524. Originally published in *The Adelphi*, December, 1936.

³⁹³ *SOTM*, p. 212.

period.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Isherwood's thirties fictions render the public/private binary in terms of exposing the politically dangerous consequences of the absence of any stable sense of selfhood, since the resultant moral and emotional void may be readily exploited by the agents of totalitarian regimes. I also showed how Isherwood deploys features of the grotesque mode as means of accommodating the various and discordant elements arising from such a situation. The present chapter departs from such modes of enquiry to explore how Orwell's rendering of 'public' and 'private' is intertwined with his exploitation in *Coming up for Air* of the dualistic structures inherent in the pastoral mode (shortly to be discussed) as a means of exploring the encroachment of modernity and of history on the private world of the individual. Through its (both implicit and explicit) appeals to pastoral tradition, *Coming up for Air* is a text which may be read as militating against the burgeoning effects of commercialism and industrialism during the thirties. The novel presents the relationship between public and private in terms of the processes by which the protagonist's inner world, closely linked with his idyllically-rendered childhood, becomes invaded by the realities of historical contingency, and by the deracinating forces of a modernity which reveals itself to be indifferent to the ideals and seemingly insignificant, often invisible private practices and experiences upon which a viable self-identity is, in fact, seen to be predicated. To this extent, we find in Orwell a perhaps unlikely adherent of Spender's 'essentialist' model of selfhood, yet whilst we can say that the latter's faith in the primacy of the central 'I' remains unabashed, Orwell's fictions in general (and *Coming up for Air* in particular) record a process whereby this 'faith' is tested almost beyond breaking point. The pastoral thus supplies Orwell with a structure for articulating precisely this pattern of loss and (attempted) retrieval. *Coming up for Air* repeatedly enunciates its protagonist's liminal positioning, as Orwell's 'I' sits at the threshold of the past whilst seeking a strategy for his future survival; less, it should be noted, in terms of saving his own skin (of this much he remains confident enough) than in preserving the very sense of individual autonomy which the present modernity and any impending totalitarianism would seek to eradicate.

The following description of Bowling's mother at work in the family kitchen serves as a good initial example of the manner in which the invisible practices of

the private (in this case domestic) realm are afforded a privileged position within the narrative,

I used to like to watch Mother rolling pastry. There's always a fascination in watching anybody do a job which he really understands. Watch a woman - a woman who really knows how to cook, I mean - rolling dough. She's got a peculiar, solemn, indrawn air, a satisfied kind of air, like a priestess celebrating a sacred rite. And in her own mind, of course, that's exactly what she is... When you saw her cooking you knew that she was in a world where she belonged, among things she really understood. Except through the Sunday papers and an occasional bit of gossip the outside world didn't really exist for her.

Here is a further restating of the public/private binary, in which the narrator appeals to a clearly delineated role or identity, situated within a literal or figuratively constructed notion of home which is presented as a locus of belonging and meaning. It is significant that the act of rolling the pastry is likened to a sacred rite, in a manner which anticipates the secular epiphanic encounters with nature later described.

Written in Morocco in 1938, (following Orwell's well-known and famously disillusioning visit to Spain) *Coming up for Air* recounts the journey of middle-aged insurance salesman, George Bowling, back to the small Oxfordshire town of Lower Binfield³⁹⁴ in an effort to revisit the site of his rural childhood. Bowling has, we learn, had to negotiate both the particular uncertainties and anxieties of his age, along with the changes wrought by ongoing industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation, and like Orwell's earlier protagonists such as John Flory and Gordon Comstock (and later Winston Smith, for whom Bowling represents a fledgling prototype) is nominally cast by Orwell as an unexceptional yet resilient figure struggling to retain a sense of autonomy in the face of common external pressures. Certainly the shared historic contexts of Bowling's plight: the aftermath of the Great War, and the rise of Hitler in Europe, coupled with the continued advanced of consumer capitalism which is brought to represent modernity at its worst, are very

³⁹⁴ Which also features in Orwell's tramping experiences as detailed in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).

much at the forefront of the narrative. Moreover, as Robert Colis has pointed out, Bowling understands that this is not just his story: that he is not alone in wanting to live in a way that will endure.³⁹⁵ Orwell's tale, then, is presented not simply as the unlucky experience of one wrong-headed individual (such as may be argued of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) in which the central character's antipathy to society is, erroneously or otherwise, predicated on the notion of an unassailable 'money-god') but rather is offered up as an account, disarmingly couched in a colloquial narrative which is by turns ironic, angry and peppered with cliché, of a profound and profoundly modern predicament, one in which material poverty is seen to be supplanted by a poverty of ideas, and in which notions of personal autonomy seem both as important and as endangered as ever.

The following passage will serve as an initial illustration of Bowling's intimations of the situation he faces,

It struck me that perhaps a lot of the people you see walking about are dead. We say that a man's dead when his heart stops and not before. It seems a bit arbitrary. After all, parts of your body don't stop working-hair goes on growing for years, for instance.

Perhaps a man really dies when his brain stops, when he loses the power to take in a new idea.³⁹⁶

These remarks are made in reference to Bowling's academic friend, Porteous, and serve as a double-edged critique of contemporary culture as he encounters it. On the one hand Bowling detects a deep-rooted intellectual stagnation among the ranks of those nominally best-equipped to withstand the societal and cultural decay brought in the wake of modernity, and on the other he points towards a burgeoning late capitalism, whose symptoms are delineated at length elsewhere in the novel, which is tacitly reliant precisely upon this same death of ideas among the wider populace. Certainly, as Patrick Reilly has pointed out, Bowling himself is far from abandoning his own perspicacity for 'old' Porteous' brand of insolvent optimism.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ Robert Colis, *George Orwell, English Rebel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 129.

³⁹⁶ George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 168.

³⁹⁷ Patrick Reilly, *George Orwell, The Age's Adversary* (London: Macmillan, 1986) p. 232.

As has been indicated, this chapter takes as a point of departure those enquiries which posit the pastoral as a further possible model for revisiting the familiar texts of the period. It may seem superfluous to acknowledge that *Coming up for Air* sits outside of the poetic modes through which pastoral themes have traditionally found expression, yet the present chapter maintains that Orwell's novel is usefully re-read against the context of the wider tendency during the thirties to invoke the pastoral mode not only as a means of expressing the sense of a vanished Arcadia displaced by an unhappy present (see above, Chapter 2) but also as a means of articulating a pervasive sense of ambivalence generated by the positioning of the individual between that Arcadia, both literary and actual, and a modernity which would seem to deny the viability of such a world and the poetic modes by which it might be expressed.

There has already been valuable work done towards validating the pastoral as a viable mode for revisiting and understanding thirties texts. For example, in his critical book, *English Fiction in the 1930s*, Chris Hopkins focuses on Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933) and Ralph Bates' *The Olive Field* (1936) in the course of investigating working-class and documentary pastorals within the fictions of the period. Moreover, (and as I have indicated in Chapter 3) the meaning of the term 'pastoral' is itself far from fixed or self-evident. Whilst the form has its origins in early Greek and Roman poetry, and in oral tradition, modern definitions of pastoral seem ever-expanding and open to further modification.³⁹⁸ Yet, to the extent that pastoral has, from its earliest days, centred around a fundamental tension between the presentation of a seemingly straightforward rural idyll on the one hand, and the contrasting realities of war, industrialism, modernity, or indeed the harsher, often glossed-over aspects of rural life itself, on the other, *Coming up for Air* may productively be read in terms of its construction around this same

³⁹⁸ In addition to Classical and Renaissance pastoral, critics such as Terry Gifford have identified two further broad usages of the term: firstly the use of 'pastoral' to refer to an area of content, meaning, according to Gifford, 'any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban' (the novels of James Herriot are cited) and finally the pejorative use of the term, whereby the pastoral vision is seen as too simplified and thus an idealisation of real life in the country (see: Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 1-2). Clearly, as Gifford acknowledges, these three general strands of usage (if we accept them) are liable to overlap. The development of ecocriticism, with its emphasis on environment over landscape, represents one of the more recent shifts in our understanding of the term.

Novel,

(P)astoral, appearing whenever metropolitan life grows hard to bear, rejects ambition, opposes wealth, urges a self-contained community, and tends to create an economic idyll of favourable weather, bountiful nature, and freedom from work.⁴⁰⁰

Thus Squires, whose book works to extend the pastoral tradition to include the novel genre, stresses the emergence of the pastoral precisely as a response to the prevailing and oppressive conditions brought on by a modern, urban-centred materialism. Moreover, as Jonathan Bate has pointed out, a battle between the country (customarily regarded as the sign of nature) and the city (the sign of civilization) has been fought almost since literature began.⁴⁰¹ Bate thus stresses the extent to which the city/country binary has, for centuries, held a residual power as a staple feature of literary texts, and it is of course true that the literary tradition of celebrating the peaceful rural idyll over the worldly sophistications of the town reaches back to antiquity. Certainly the development of literary pastoral from the singing competitions in local peasant communities, through to conceptions of 'urban pastoral' in the guise of thirties socialist realism is itself evidence enough that the relation between the pastoralist and his subject matter is inherently unstable. Yet as a vehicle for holding contraries together in apparent unity, the pastoral mode, thus extended to include the novel form, affords Orwell a means of exploring a profoundly modern dilemma, in which his protagonist embarks on a quest both temporal and geographical, in the hope of resisting being streamlined into what he recognises as a manifestly unsatisfactory, homogenised existence. As Patricia Rae has pointed out,

Preeminent among potential consolatory resources for Britons facing the repetition of war was the concept of an English Arcadia: a 'green and pleasant land' that was socially harmonious, that

³⁹⁹ Raymond Williams examines in detail the often illusory constructions of the town/country binary in his classic study, *The Country and the City*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973). See Chapter 5, 'Town and Country', pp. 61-71.

⁴⁰⁰ Michael Squires, *The Pastoral Novel* (University Press of Virginia, 1974) p. 7.

⁴⁰¹ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Harvard University Press, 2000) p. 3.

provided for solitude and for the individual, and that was associated, above all, with peace.⁴⁰²

Coming up for Air articulates a keenly felt sense that if any such 'English Arcadia' is to be retained in any viable way, indeed if it is to be retained at all, there are certain obstacles ahead; challenges which must first be overcome.⁴⁰³ In his introduction to Ralph Bates' *The Olive Field* (1936) a novel which richly evokes the ancient rhythms of life in rural Spain, Valentine Cunningham aptly poses the question,

Is the pastoral vision, in fact, ever possible – that wishful, dreamed-of existence, peaceful and creative, communally harmonious, organically in tune with nature, morally blessed and blessing?⁴⁰⁴

Certainly it has not gone unnoticed by critics such as Cunningham that cravings for an 'unvexed pastoral world' are present throughout Orwell's work. As he has argued,

What troubles and outrages Orwell's writing is the way pastorals of every kind have been moved out of reach. His journeys across the surface of England are overwhelmed by the regretful difficulty of achieving pastoral consolations amidst the continuous erosion of pastoral places.⁴⁰⁵

On one level it would be hard to disagree with this, yet Cunningham's assertion does imply an at base negative attitude towards the role played by the natural world which is substantially at odds with that revealed in Orwell's writings. Aside from the merely consolatory functions of nature, it should be noted that there is an important positive, indeed *moral* dimension to Orwell's representations of the

⁴⁰² Patricia Rae, 'Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain' (*Twentieth Century Literature* 49.2, 2003) pp. 246-75

⁴⁰³ Indeed, it is this same sense with which Orwell concludes his essay 'Inside the Whale' (1940) where he goes so far as to argue for the 'impossibility of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into a new shape'. (*Essays*, p. 133.)

⁴⁰⁴ Valentine Cunningham, Introduction to Ralph Bates' *The Olive Field* (London: Hogarth, 1986)

⁴⁰⁵ Cunningham, *British Writers of the thirties*, p. 238.

natural world, one which emphasises the value of retaining contact with what Orwell termed the 'surface of the earth',⁴⁰⁶ which underpins much of his work. This is something which is shortly to be looked at in detail.

We can note at this juncture that Orwell's modern pastoral finds an unlikely complement in MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, in which is encapsulated the same sense of the unavailability of the rural idyll that we meet in *Coming up for Air*, and the challenge inherent in imagining a modern pastoral literature,

In the days that were early the music came easy
On cradle and coffin, in the corn and the barn,
Songs for the reaping and spinning and only the shepherd
Then as now was silent beside the tarn...

...The uplands now as then are fresh but in the valley
Polluted rivers run – the Lethe and the Styx;
The soil is tired and the profit little and the hunchback
Bobs on a carthorse round the sodden ricks.
Sing us no more idylls, no more pastorals,
No more epics of the English earth;
The country is a dwindling annexe to the factory,
Squalid as an after-birth.⁴⁰⁷

It should be acknowledged that any such alignment of Orwell with MacNeice seems, as Samuel Hynes has noted, an unlikely one.⁴⁰⁸ Yet, as Hynes also points out, the two works share an unparalleled intensity of vision, both in terms of their evocations of private loss and their apprehension of the future. Certainly the notion that there are, in MacNeice's words, 'no more pastorals' to sing of comes through with equal intensity in Orwell's novel. It is against such a context that Bowling's description of the now polluted small stretch of the Thames where he used to fish appears resonantly symbolic,

⁴⁰⁶ In a frequently-cited passage from Orwell's essay, 'Why I Write', (1946) Orwell says, 'So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information'. (*Essays*, p. 6.)

⁴⁰⁷ *CP*, p. 144.

⁴⁰⁸ See: Hynes, p. 367

I know the water has changed. I remember the Thames water as it used to be, a kind of luminous green that you could see deep into, and the shoals of dace cruising round the reeds. You couldn't see three inches into the water now. It's all brown and dirty, with a film of oil on it from the motor-boats, not to mention the fag-ends and the paper bags.⁴⁰⁹

Here Orwell brings ideas of surface and depth into play, suggestive not only of the deceptive surfaces of modernity which George encounters at every turn, but also of the private depths of a self obscured, amidst the detritus of the modern world - the 'fag-ends and the paper bags' - beneath the public identity. Again, it is clear that two worlds are present: one is the stable, changeless world that existed before the First World War, the other is the present and everything that is coming.⁴¹⁰ Bowling is presented as embarking on a course of what Patricia Rae has aptly described as 'psychological rearmament',⁴¹¹ mentally stockpiling the resources of his Edwardian boyhood in both the face of another war and in response to the consolidating forces of modernity.

II

As has been suggested, to the extent that *Coming up for Air* may be read as proposing an obscured yet potentially retrievable self, it would seem, on the face of it, that Orwell shares and espouses Spender's evinced belief in a self which is constituted by an inner, submerged core whose private practices are posited as a lone source of moral and spiritual rectitude. Indeed, even as, like his creator, Bowling contends with the continuing problem of resolving the disparity between the private identity and the public mask, his personality remains intact throughout the novel. Certainly, there are regular allusions in the text to an obscured, authentic self, symbolised, as critics such as Michael Carter have noted, not only by the obfuscating fat in which Bowling has become interred,⁴¹² but also by the very premise on which the story is based; namely the 'I's attempt to reconnect with its

⁴⁰⁹ Orwell, George, *Coming up for Air* (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 214. Cited hereafter as *CUFA*.

⁴¹⁰ Hynes, p. 374.

⁴¹¹ Rae, 'Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain'.

⁴¹² Michael Carter, *George Orwell and the Problem of Authentic Existence* (London: Croom Helm, 1985) p. 143.

authentic origins. As Robert Colis has argued, *Coming up for Air* is essentially about recognizing and being recognized.⁴¹³ Orwell's 'I' is, then, offered as that of the ordinary, sensual man striving to maintain some semblance of an earlier self obscured both by the ontological violation of the Great War and subsequent incarceration within Orwell's suburban dystopia. However, as critics such as Richard Smyer have pointed out, there is also a sense in which the novel may equally be read as challenging those very notions of an original, pristine self which its representations of an identity located within a more 'authentic' past, compared with the devitalised present, would otherwise appear to affirm,

What Orwell is questioning is the Edwardian myth of the autonomous self, the individual largely unconditioned by social and personal determinants and therefore free to unfold and fulfil himself. In other words, what Orwell is criticizing is the assumption that man's essential humanity, his progressive development as a human being, exists apart from history, apart from social, economic and political factors.⁴¹⁴

Insofar as it is appropriate to refer to the possibility of individual autonomy in terms of belief, Smyer's comments remind us that Orwell's distinctly ambivalent position is perhaps best understood as that of the agnostic: his writing emerges from a *desire* to believe in an essential, autonomous self, but equally from a compulsion to test this belief against those factors seen to challenge it. Indeed, it is true that secularised versions of faith and doubt - in the natural world; in the autonomous individual; in the possibility of a modernity which allows for the continuance of such things - abound throughout the novel. Moreover, it is precisely the felt challenge to any such individual autonomy from the intractable social, economic and political factors Smyer points to which, taken together, are seen to provide the chief impetus for *Coming up for Air's* nominal recourse to the pastoral. Such recourse is validated by the fact that Bowling is prepared to acknowledge that the sense of security that he had enjoyed during his Edwardian childhood was illusory, even as he affirms the continuance of the world-view it afforded him.

⁴¹³ Colis, p. 128.

⁴¹⁴ Richard Smyer, *Primal Dream and Primal Crime – Orwell's Development as a Psychological Novelist* (University of Missouri Press, 1979) p. 90.

Thus, Orwell's narrative is simultaneously engaged in acknowledging the historic contingencies to which any such experience of stability and security is subject, whilst maintaining the validity of such experience as a moral and spiritual resource, particularly at a time of public crisis, and as material that might be drawn upon in the process of regenerating an eroded sense of private identity.

Alan Sandison was the first critic to write at length on the significance and function of 'nature' in Orwell's work, to the extent of insisting that 'the interplay of material world and man's senses conspicuously informs every book he wrote'.⁴¹⁵ Whilst other earlier critics such as George Woodcock have argued that 'beauty in the external world, the beauty of natural surroundings, of animals and birds, is an element in almost all his (Orwell's) books',⁴¹⁶ this is a point which in fact surprisingly few other critics have been prepared to account for, and the importance of the concept of engagement with the natural world as a mode of resistance to the perils of modernity is something which is looked at in detail later on in this chapter. More recently, critics such as Annette Federico have argued that to conclude that Orwell's novel is defeatist or apocalyptic is 'to deny the ethical importance of both the excessively engaging mode of its narration and the survival tactics it determinedly describes'.⁴¹⁷ Still more recent critics of *Coming up for Air* have included Michael Levenson⁴¹⁸ and Antony Shuttleworth.⁴¹⁹ Whilst the former sees the novel's open nostalgia as a determined imaginative act which 'articulates a stubborn view of constrained possibility'.⁴²⁰ the latter notes the various forms of artifice which constitute Bowling's environment (the fake hot-dogs; the sham Tudor villas) and perceptively points out that it is the absence of a *genuine* modernity, a state of affairs which is genuinely new and progressive,⁴²¹ that Bowling points to. Certainly it is significant that whilst Isherwood's Arthur Norris attempts to utilise artifice and illusion almost as ends-in-themselves, Bowling's impulse throughout (and Orwell's) is to deconstruct and expose them wherever possible.

⁴¹⁵ Alan Sandison, *The Last Man in Europe, An Essay on George Orwell* (London: Macmillan, 1974) p.10

⁴¹⁶ George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit – A Study of George Orwell* (Minerva, 1966) p. 294.

⁴¹⁷ Annette Federico, 'Making Do: George Orwell's *Coming up for Air*', *Studies in the Novel* (University of North Texas, Vol. 37, Spring 2005) p. 50

⁴¹⁸ See 'The Fictional Realist: novels of the 1930s', ed. John Rodden, *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

⁴¹⁹ See 'The Real George Orwell', ed. Shuttleworth, pp. 204-220

⁴²⁰ ed. Rodden, *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, p. 73.

⁴²¹ ed. Shuttleworth, p. 210.

The critical situating of Orwell's text as responding to the pastoral tradition is further justified by the novel's sustained delineations of childhood memories. Scholars of the pastoral including Peter Marinelli have drawn attention to the long-standing connection which has existed between pastoral writing and an emphasis on childhood experience and sensibility,⁴²² and it is precisely in Bowling's recollections of his earliest memories that the narrative seeks to make sense of the transition which has occurred in his relationship with the external world,

When you're very young you seem to suddenly become conscious of things that have been under your nose for a long time past. The things round about you swim into your mind one at a time, rather as they do when you're waking from sleep. For instance, it was only when I was nearly four that I suddenly realised that we owned a dog. Nailer, his name was... I met him under the kitchen table and in some way seemed to grasp, having only learnt it that moment, that he belonged to us and that his name was Nailer. In the same way, a bit earlier, I'd discovered that beyond the gate at the end of the passage there was a place where the smell of sainfoin came from...all these things dropped into my mind one by one, like bits of a jigsaw puzzle.⁴²³

In recalling his childhood impressions of his family's home and shop, Bowling thus records an early process of assembling and making sense of the world around him,⁴²⁴ as the individual fragments of sensory experience come together to form a picture of the world whose meaning had seemed comprehensible. It is striking that the simile of the jigsaw puzzle is the exact inverse of the situation described several years hence, when Bowling is denied the possibility of any such process of comprehension. As he wearily remarks on recalling his experience of the war, 'by 1918 one had simply got out of the habit of expecting things to happen in a reasonable manner.'⁴²⁵ Thus, it emerges that a rupture has occurred between the

⁴²² Peter Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971) p. 75.

⁴²³ *CUFA*, p. 36.

⁴²⁴ The influence of Dickens, himself the subject of a lengthy critical essay by Orwell, seems clearly discernible here, specifically the opening paragraphs of *Great Expectations* (1861) in which Pip, describing his 'first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things', recalls his mental assembly of the topography of the marsh country and imaginative impressions of his dead mother and brothers from their tombstones (see: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin, 1994) pp. 5-6.

⁴²⁵ *CUFA*, p. 122.

world of Bowling's youth and that which has emerged after the war, and that the nostalgia he feels is as much for a sense of unity with his environment as it is for that environment itself. Whilst, as Michael Carter has argued, the world of Bowling's youth is understood through the 'I's relation to it, not as something which stands in separation to the 'I',⁴²⁶ it is with the invasion of the private self by the external, public world that consciousness attains its 'divided' status, assimilating the realities of war and of modernity, and seeking to survive by partially detaching itself from a modern world in which it must nonetheless function, and simultaneously retaining those fragments of memory of a world which, unlike the present, seemed solid and immovable. Under these conditions, the 'I' ceases to be an integrated unit, at one with its environment, and is pushed instead towards a condition of perennial alienation.

III

As I have suggested at the beginning of this chapter, *Coming up for Air* is a text which remains, in spite (or perhaps because of) the clarity of its prose, a deeply problematic text, one which only really begins to make sense once we accept the novel's fundamental ambivalence, signalled not least by Orwell's pervasive (and distinctive) use of ironic humour as one of its core traits. Orwell's dual focus, on the general condition of modernity, and on the myriad observable phenomena of the natural world, simultaneously reflects a specially heightened political consciousness, on the one hand, and a close interest in nature on the other (indeed, further evidence of the latter is found in the diligently observed detail found in the recently published *Diaries*⁴²⁷). However, in order to properly understand the meaning of George Bowling's nominal retreat into nostalgia and rurality, it is necessary to first consider the nature and representation of the suburban dystopia whose clutches he so fervently hopes to evade. The following comments from Jonathan Bate serve to draw attention to those categories of experience both delineated and gestured towards by Orwell,

⁴²⁶ Carter, p.151

⁴²⁷ First made available in 2008 on the Orwell Prize website, followed by a collection in 2009 edited by Peter Davison and published by Penguin.

suburbia is a new kind of living space, a simulacrum of the quiet country within the bounds of the 'fast' city, where manicured lawns and imported ornamental evergreens stand in for meadows and productive native broadleaf woodland.⁴²⁸

As we can see, Bate's own picture of suburbia is rather less hysterical in tone than that proffered at certain points within Orwell's text, yet it should be recognised that both views emerge from the same cultural and geographical positioning of *sub-urbia* as being, by definition, neither one thing nor the other. Indeed, it is precisely this notion of 'standing in': ideas, in other words, of substitution and masquerade, with authentic experience always just out of reach, that so pervades Orwell's text. Bate also points up the contrast between the countryside 'proper' as a site of natural production and sustenance, as compared with its cosmetically pleasing, yet inherently sterile suburban counterpart. Again, a similar contrast between rural and (sub)urban is made and/or implied throughout *Coming up for Air*, even if, taking into account the inherent slipperiness of Orwell's text, this is not necessarily a formulation which the reader should, or is expected to accept. The opening of the novel is set in the latter location, with suburbia itself the subject of a lengthy critique in the novel's opening pages,

Do you know the road I live in – Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley?
Even if you don't, you know fifty others exactly like it.

You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses – the numbers in Ellesmere Road run to 212 and ours is 191 – as much alike as council houses and generally uglier. The stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door. The Laurels, The Myrtles, The Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon Repos, Belle Vue. At perhaps one house in fifty some anti-social type who'll probably end in the workhouse has painted his front door blue instead of green.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Bate, p. 16.

⁴²⁹ *CUFA*, p. 9.

Whilst it is true that the accompanying cultural and critical debates surrounding notions of 'Englishness' have multiplied somewhat in recent years,⁴³⁰ it remains the case that in his treatment of suburbia as a newly emerging geographical and cultural space, Orwell encountered a problem which was new to both himself and his contemporaries, novelists and poets alike, of how to represent this new side of England, neither idyllically rural nor squalidly urban, but lodged uneasily somewhere in between, and, as a partial consequence of this, often appearing as neatly emblematic of the worst aspects of contemporaneity. Bowling continues,

When you've time to look about you, and when you happen to be in the right mood, it's a thing that makes you laugh inside to walk down these streets in the inner-outer suburbs and to think of the lives that go on there. Because, after all, what is a road like Ellesmere Road? Just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches. There's a lot of rot talked about the sufferings of the working class. I'm not so sorry for the proles myself. Did you ever know a navvy who lay awake thinking about the sack? The prole suffers physically, but he's a free man when he isn't working.⁴³¹

Whilst it might be argued that we are invited to read such remarks as self-delusory, or in ideological terms, it is worth remembering that the idea of the pastoral idyll as located not in the countryside, but within the lives and homes of working men is a recurrent motif in Orwell's writing. In this instance it is made

⁴³⁰ J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) is a clear and recurrent reference point here, (even if Orwell resisted comparisons between Priestley and himself, particularly with regard to *The Road to Wigan Pier*). Priestley identifies three co-existing Englands, the first being 'Old England', 'the country of the cathedrals and minsters and manor houses and inns', long extinct yet still preserved in certain pockets; the second the industrial England of the nineteenth century, whose unfortunate legacy is, for Priestley, to have 'found a green and pleasant land and left a wilderness of dirty bricks'. The 'third England', however, is that which most closely anticipates the England encountered not only in Orwell's work, but also notably in poems such as MacNeice's 'Birmingham' and indeed 'Autumn Journal'. Here, Priestley describes an England of 'Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons'. (*English Journey*, London: Penguin, 1984, pp. 371-377.)

⁴³¹ *CUFA*, pp.10-11.

clear that any such myth is beyond the reach of those living within the boundaries of the suburbs. Rather, suburbia, as Simon Dentith has noted, is characterised in much thirties' writing as the arena of inauthentic lives.⁴³² Yet it is arguable that Bowling's view of the world is, in any case, often more working-class in its attitudes than the palpable element of fear he discerns among the middle-classes.⁴³³ This is demonstrated, for example, by the low status he affords to the money worries which preoccupy his wife, Hilda, which are seen to form the basis of her own notionally limited world, and by Bowling's own contrasting inclination towards sensual enjoyment wherever obtainable. However, whilst 'Old' Hilda undoubtedly gets short shrift in the novel, portrayed as a dreary, joyless character, able to conceive of little beyond the mundane occupations of day-to-day survival ('Butter is going up, and the gas-bill is enormous, and the kids' boots are wearing out, and there's another instalment due on the radio - that's Hilda's litany')⁴³⁴ it is important to recognise that the relentless materiality denoted by the figure of Hilda is deployed by Orwell as a further method of articulating his protagonist's alienated experience within the particular sphere of modernity he occupies, serving as a key motivating factor in Bowling's strengthening desire to retreat into a rural world which he intimates is superior.

IV

Just as Orwell's response to the pastoral is, then, substantially reliant upon the time-honoured interplays between rural and urban, so the psychological and cultural effects of the First World War form a crucial part of the sensibility which is evinced in the text. Reference to Paul Fussell's classic study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) can shed a useful light on the extent to which Bowling's yearning for 1900s rural Binfield is determined in no small measure by its proximity to the war. As Fussell points out,

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting

⁴³² Simon Dentith, 'Thirties Poetry and the Landscape of Suburbia', eds. Williams and Matthews, p. 115.

⁴³³ Indeed, in her book, *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell* (Hampshire, Ashgate, 2008) Loraine Saunders has argued that *Coming up for Air* is Orwell's 'most recognisably proletarian novel', Bowling himself 'the stuff revolutions are made of' (pp. 22-23).

⁴³⁴ Daphne Patai is among those critics who have sought to take Orwell to task for his negative representation of women (see *The Orwell Mystique*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

oneself against them. Pastoral reference, whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects, is a way of invoking a code to hint by antitheses at the indescribable; at the same time, it is a comfort in itself, like rum, a deep dugout, or a woolly vest. The Golden Age posited by Classical and Renaissance literary pastoral now finds its counterpart in ideas of 'home' and 'the summer of 1914'.⁴³⁵

Whilst works such as William Empson's critical book, *Some Versions of Pastoral*⁴³⁶ (1935) provided a radical re-envisioning of the scope of the pastoral mode, (with the suggestion that proletarian literature might be included within an otherwise rural and often aristocratic tradition) it is true, as Fussell notes, that the concept of the 'Golden Age' found its modern correlative in the invocation of pastoral oases as a response to the horrors of warfare and the traumas and degradations of modern life. To this extent, Orwell's partial deployment of an Arcadian vision of England in the face of an unhappy present may be described as having an antecedent in the work of the Georgian and the First World War poets. Indeed, it is in its rendering of the transformative effects of the war on the sensibility of the generation which lived through it that *Coming up for Air* (like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)) is particularly impressive, especially given that Orwell himself, like the rest of his generation, had been too young to experience the war first-hand (although he is likely to have drawn on his recent experience in Spain and also his time in the Imperial Police Force). As Bowling puts it,

The war did extraordinary things to people. And what was more extraordinary than the way it killed people was the way it sometimes didn't kill them.⁴³⁷

What is interesting is that whilst Bowling's personal experience of the war does not (as may be argued of Woolf's character, Septimus Warren Smith) tempt him towards nihilism or despair, it does endow him with an ironically-rendered sense

⁴³⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 235.

⁴³⁶ In which Empson famously described the pastoral as 'putting the complex into the simple', (Empson, p. 22).

⁴³⁷ *CUFA*, p. 120.

of the absurd, suitably characterised as a kind of questioning attitude. ... Certainly Bowling's encounter, farcical though it is, (he spends the latter part of the war guarding tins of bully beef on Twelve Mile Dump) can be said to have indirectly benefited him by affording him the time to read books and thus 'improve' himself. As he explains, 'the effect of all this was to leave me with a feeling of disbelief in everything'.⁴³⁹ Bowling goes on to state the position in characteristic fashion, using a terminology which is crude yet apposite,

If the war didn't happen to kill you it was bound to start you thinking. After that unspeakable idiotic mess you couldn't go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable, like a pyramid. You knew it was just a balls-up.⁴⁴⁰

Once again the notion of challenged faith is brought to the fore, with the war in particular seen as having played a key role in engendering the wider crisis of belief which is evinced both here and elsewhere in the text. Moreover, the ironic humour pervading much of the writing may be seen as a symptom of precisely this shift in sensibility. Fussell notes as follows the interpretative use of irony precisely as a means of coming to terms with, and making sense of the widely dissipated trust in the authority of hitherto prevalent narratives,

The Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the idea of progress.⁴⁴¹

Indeed, Fussell goes further still, arguing that this same ironical attitude which the war inadvertently fostered in fact remained to become one of the principal features underpinning modern consciousness,

I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it

⁴³⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, p. 127.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 127.

⁴⁴¹ Fussell, p. 8.

events of the Great War.⁴⁴²

It is in the account of the demise of George's father, a small-time seed merchant whose business is slowly run into the ground by the emergent competition, that Orwell develops the novel's sense of transition between the old and new worlds, gesturing towards a widening generational (as well as economic) gulf, and the shift in sensibility which is seen to have occurred between one generation and the next,

Father had had a bad year and lost money, but was he really frightened by the future? I don't think so. This was 1909, remember. He didn't know what was happening to him.⁴⁴³

In a novel ostensibly built around one man's nostalgic reverie, we are warned (and not for the last time) of the dangers of failing to adapt to the times, to fail, in Spender's words, to 'recognise the modern situation'.⁴⁴⁴ As George later says of his parents,

They never lived to know that everything they'd believed in was just so much junk. They lived at the end of an epoch, when everything was dissolving into a sort of ghastly flux, and they didn't know it. They thought it was eternity. You couldn't blame them. That was what it felt like.⁴⁴⁵

It is worth noting that the pessimism of Bowling's comments here is offset by a markedly humane, sympathetic tone. The flux seen as characteristic of the present reality is contrasted with a remembered sense of 'not being in a hurry and not being frightened', one which, as Bowling asserts, 'you've either had and don't need to be told about, or haven't had and won't ever have the chance to learn'.⁴⁴⁶ The war signals, then, the division between two worlds that Bowling has known during

⁴⁴² *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁴⁴³ *CUFA*, p. 96.

⁴⁴⁴ *SOTM*, p. 159.

⁴⁴⁵ *CUFA*, p. 112.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 107.

his life, uprooting him from a time and place where he experienced a genuine sense of belonging. In the Lower Binfield of the early 1900s, self and environment had been felt to co-exist in a seemingly immovable world, and Bowling is able to recall being part of a world he understands and trusts,

I'm back in Lower Binfield and the year's 1900. Beside the horse-trough in the market place the carrier's horse is having its nose-bag. At the sweet-shop on the corner Mother Wheeler is weighing out a ha'porth of brandy balls. Lady Rampling's carriage is driving by, with the tiger sitting behind in his pipe clayed breeches with his arms folded. Uncle Ezekiel is cursing Joe Chamberlain. The recruiting sergeant in his scarlet jacket, tight blue overalls and pillbox hat, is strutting up and down twisting his moustache. The drunks are puking in the yard behind the George. Vicky's at Windsor, God's in heaven, Christ's on the cross, Jonah's in the whale, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are in the fiery furnace, and Sihon king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan are sitting in their thrones looking at one another – not doing anything exactly, just existing, keeping their appointed places, like a couple of fire-dogs, or the Lion and the Unicorn.⁴⁴⁷

Despite the sentimental tone signalled by the opening line, Bowling's nostalgia, here as elsewhere in the text, is not allowed to proceed too far before it is wryly undercut by the naturalistic imagery of the drunks 'puking in the yard'. But there is nevertheless a deliberately erected contrast between the perceived, if not necessarily desirable certainties of 1900 (it is also worth noting the accommodation of Christian iconography here) and the radical instabilities of the present time. The very notion of 'appointed places' itself serves to foreground the terminal uncertainty surrounding Bowling's temporal, geographical and ontological positioning, and his tale reveals a contemporary situation in which reality no longer rests on any guaranteed explanation of the natural order. Thus, Orwell's ostensibly realist prose delineates, paradoxically, a world of continually competing realities.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 31.

It is on the return visit to Lower Binfield that Orwell asserts most forcefully the symbolic parallel between what has happened both to Bowling and to his hometown in the intervening years since his departure. Just as Bowling's inner self is revealed as having been breached by modernity, so Lower Binfield itself is now given a taste of the new type of war that is headed its way. In a familiar blending of tragedy with farce which closely recalls Bowling's earlier account of his war experience, a bomb is accidentally dropped on the town during a training exercise. The description offered clearly draws on Orwell's own experience of warfare (indeed it might have been lifted from the pages of *Homage to Catalonia*) its violence and immediacy forming a stark contrast with the lyrical tone of just a few moments beforehand,

What does it sound like? It's hard to say, because what you hear is mixed up with what you're frightened of. Mainly it gives you a vision of bursting metal. You seem to see great sheets of iron bursting open. But the peculiar thing is the feeling it gives you of being suddenly shoved up against reality. It's like being woken up by somebody shying a bucket of water over you. You're suddenly dragged out of your dreams by a clang of bursting metal, and it's terrible and it's real.⁴⁴⁸

Once more, the account is delivered in a language of sensation, though the experience recounted is of a wholly different order. We learn how the bomb has destroyed the lower rooms of a house adjoining the now flattened greengrocer's shop, and in a macabre juxtaposition of violent and domestic imagery which serves to enact the interpenetration of the public and private worlds, Bowling describes how 'blood was beginning to get mixed up with the marmalade'.⁴⁴⁹ Indeed, the wider text's oscillations between representations of childhood innocence and the innate tendencies towards cruelty ('That's what boys are like, I don't know

⁴⁴⁸ *CUFA*, p. 233.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

why⁴⁵⁰ closely mirror its continual shifts between images of home and visions of the coming war. Thoughts of 'sitting all day under a willow tree beside a quiet pool – and being able to find a quiet pool to sit beside' seem to have no place in the modern arena, and Bowling's original, 'authentic' self is undermined by modernity to a point where it stands only in relation to its antithesis. He belongs to two worlds, yet by virtue of this very fact he also belongs to neither. The randomness of the accidental bomb serves as a reminder of Bowling's helplessness in the face of contingency, while the emphasis on the insurmountable *reality* of the explosion in all its felt immediacy is suggestive of the possibility of new and terrifying realities to come, asserting themselves ever more aggressively against the private self. The following quotation from Stephen Spender, taken from an analysis of the functions of literary nostalgia in the early twentieth century, is helpful in further illustrating the nature Bowling's encounter with modernity,

We contemporaries are, as it were, condemned to be ghosts, because we live in the world of industrialism and fragmented values: and if we know in our hearts that we stand outside the present, feed with passion upon images of past history, then we are still ghosts, haunting the past and unreal in the present, differing from our contemporaries only in being more self-aware [...] to be sufficiently aware of the past is to be aware of the present; for nostalgic images are vivid by contrast.⁴⁵¹

Whilst, as David James and Philip Tew have pointed out, Arcadian or bucolic traditions may indeed be misunderstood or misrepresented as simply a contraction into conservative nostalgia,⁴⁵² Spender's insistence that sufficient awareness of the past implies awareness of the present is borne out at length within Orwell's text, which gains its momentum precisely from the sustained interplays between past and present. Bowling's return visit to Lower Binfield cruelly brings home to him the unavailability of such a past, which is offered up as a resource which the self may draw upon but never again inhabit. When Bowling finally arrives back at his home-town, the repeatedly-described sensations of

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 70.

⁴⁵¹ *SOTM*, p. 212.

⁴⁵² David James and Philip Tew, 'Reenvisioning Pastoral', ed. David James and Philip Tew, *New Versions of Pastoral*, (London and NJ, Associated University Presses, 2010) p. 13.

ghostliness in his account reinforce precisely this dream-like state of unreality engendered by the displacement of the world he remembers - and from which he would re-construct his identity - by a succession of commercially-driven facades, each trading upon a tawdry and superficially-experienced sense of nostalgia, and themselves emblematic of the very modernity that Bowling seeks to resist. His account of the visit thus charts an unsettling process of defamiliarisation in which he experiences an acute sense of both geographic and temporal estrangement. As he recounts,

All the way down the hill I was seeing ghosts, chiefly the ghosts of hedges and trees and cows. It was as if I was looking at two worlds at once, a kind of thin bubble of the thing that used to be, with the thing that actually existed shining through it.⁴⁵³

To borrow from Spender's terminology, we can say that Bowling's unsettling experience at Lower Binfield amounts to 'haunting the past and unreal in the present'. Like a ghost, he is unable, in spite of his hopeful efforts, to broker any meaningful point of contact between himself and the town's present inhabitants, ('I used to live in Lower Binfield myself, a good while ago'⁴⁵⁴) and consequently is subject to an acutely disorientating condition of temporal displacement. Bowling thus finds himself, in his words, moving 'through a world that wasn't there',⁴⁵⁵ yet desperately seeks to navigate the present town by mapping his private memories onto a once familiar yet profoundly altered terrain.

It is worth noting that extent to which, as a rejoinder to this alienated condition, the sentiments expressed in Orwell's earlier poem 'A happy vicar I might have been' (1936) serve as a precursor to *Coming up for Air's* sustained emphasis on the residual resistant power inherent in the ostensibly trivial and unvoiced encounters of youth,

All ignorant we dared to own
The joys we now dissemble;
The greenfinch on the apple bough

⁴⁵³ *CUFA*, pp. 190-191

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 199.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 210.

This question of ownership is one which *Coming up for Air* implicitly addresses throughout, in terms of ownership of one's self, one's experience, and one's region and environment. To this extent, Bowling's trenchant remarks near the beginning of the novel regarding the middle-class illusion of home-ownership ('We're all bought, and what's more we're bought with our own money'⁴⁵⁶) might be read as alluding to more than just bricks and mortar. In a later stanza, Orwell continues,

It is forbidden to dream again;
We maim our joys or hide them.⁴⁵⁷

The challenge seems clear enough: either we strive to make and maintain contact with the joys on offer in the real world of things, or else, it seems, the world of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, as the logical fulfilment of the modernity encountered by Bowling, ultimately awaits.

What is key, however, is that, for all his disillusionment and cheery cynicism, Bowling retains the ability to turn aside from the day-to-day realm in order to focus on those phenomena which are posited by Orwell as antithetical to the trappings of modernity. It is no accident that where Bowling does manage to make contact with nature, fleeting though this contact is, he is closest to reconnecting with his own submerged self. To this extent, then, the novel operates from the position that nature, as Charles Taylor has argued, stands as a reservoir of good, of innocent desire or benevolence: as Taylor notes, 'in the stance of disengagement, we are out of phase with it, cut off from it; we cannot recover contact with it'.⁴⁵⁸ Orwell reiterated this point in a letter to Henry Miller (whose work he admired): 'I have a sort of belly to earth attitude and always feels uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard'.⁴⁵⁹ In his later essay, 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad' (1946) Orwell pursued this theme as follows,

I think that by retaining one's childhood love of such things as trees,
fishes, butterflies and...toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴⁵⁷ ed. Davison, p. 524.

⁴⁵⁸ Taylor, p.370

⁴⁵⁹ Letter to Henry Miller, August 1936 (*Complete Works*, p. 496.)

a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.⁴⁶⁰

It is this same 'hatred and leader worship' which is evoked by Isherwood in *Goodbye to Berlin* (see above, Chapter 3) as indicative of the dire political and cultural climate. Here, the continued valuation of the natural world, as a continuation of childhood encounters with nature, is presented as a guarantor against the traumatic public events, which, by the time Orwell came to write this piece, were known to have unfolded across the continent. That Orwell's own faith in the importance and resilience of these private and often fleeting encounters remained intact closely parallels *Coming up for Air's* insistence on similar values. Indeed, far from being a mere rhetorical device, it is clear that George Bowling's feeling for nature clearly originates in the author's own love of the countryside and appreciation of the natural world, authenticated, as Sandison has noted, in the delight and precision of the observation and in the capacity to name.⁴⁶¹ As Orwell later wrote, 'If we kill all pleasure in the actual process of life, what sort of future are we preparing for ourselves?'⁴⁶² The rhetoric here is all the more compelling in its apparent simplicity: the recognition of the inestimable value of basic *joie de vivre* is a vital antidote to the equally inestimable horrors Orwell believed were coming. In *Coming up for Air*, the delights of the natural world are presented not merely as desirable in themselves, but also as a means of resistance to encroaching totalitarianism.

Perhaps of still more immediate significance is the fact that, just as Bowling's privately experienced encounters with nature recall a sense of unity with his environment which is felt to have been lost, Orwell's richly detailed narrative deploys the variety and availability of the natural world as a means of presenting a rhetorical challenge which seeks to supplant the routine humdrum practices of modern life,

⁴⁶⁰ 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad', George Orwell, *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000) p.363

⁴⁶¹ Sandison, p. 8.

⁴⁶² Orwell, *Essays*, p.362

why don't people, instead of the idiosyncrasies they do spend their time on, just walk round *looking* at things? That pool, for instance – all the stuff that's in it. Newts, water-snails, water-beetles, caddis-flies, leeches, and God knows how many other things that you can only see with a microscope. The mystery of their lives, down there under water. You could spend a lifetime watching them, ten lifetimes, and still you wouldn't have got to the end of even that one pool. ⁴⁶³

Here Bowling displays his delight in simple yet precise observation. Orwell deliberately contrasts the sense of wonder offered by the natural world with the feelings of degradation and bewilderment which are presented as characteristic of day-to-day urban life, and it is clear that the countryside is offered up not only as a mere place of escape or site for nostalgia (although it undoubtedly *is* these things) but also as an organic space where there exists the potential for self-recovery. Pausing along his way back to Lower Binfield, Bowling's gaze shifts to the surroundings of the countryside, the mode of expression alters, and the tone becomes suddenly lyrical and reflective. The narrative no longer invokes the familiar imagery of 'coloured shirts and machine-guns rattling'⁴⁶⁴. Instead, we are told how 'in the valleys fires were burning...the smoke twisted slowly upwards and melted into the mist...a kind of mist of young leaves on the trees. And utter stillness everywhere'.⁴⁶⁵ The focus turns to the smouldering remnants of a fire just inside the field, which at once assumes a symbolic significance, indicative of the sense of wonder reawakened, 'What I felt was something that's so unusual nowadays that to say it sounds like foolishness'.⁴⁶⁶ Bowling's difficulty in articulating his emotional response ('There's something about it, a kind of intensity - I can't think of the exact words. But it lets you know that you're alive yourself. It's the spot on the picture that makes you notice everything else'⁴⁶⁷) reveals the inadequacy of the cynical day-to-day discourse upon which he typically relies, and demands the temporary relinquishment of the external self, the 'fat man of forty-five, in a grey herringbone suit a bit the worse for wear and a bowler hat',⁴⁶⁸ in order to reverse his estrangement from nature and briefly partake of what he

⁴⁶³ *CUFA*, p. 173.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 169.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 170-171.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 171.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 172.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 172.

knows is the only thing worth having. It is worth noting that his response here is instinctive rather than reasoned; an unlikely yet profoundly felt re-engagement with the elements is suggested, and just as the essentialist view of the self which the novel propounds may be affiliated with that intrinsic to romanticism, so too is George's brief yet meaningful commune with nature.

It is, however, a measure of Bowling's sophistication that the strength of his desire for the consolations on offer from the natural landscape does not prevent him from acknowledging the socio-economic realities upon which such experience is, or seems contingent. His account of the pleasures and consolations offered by the rural landscape is thus qualified in the following terms,

...don't mistake what I'm saying. To begin with...I'm not soppy about 'the country'. I was brought up a damn sight too near to it for that. I don't want to stop people living in towns, or in suburbs for that matter. Let 'em live where they like. And I'm not suggesting that the whole of humanity could spend the whole of their lives wandering round picking primroses and so forth. I know perfectly well that we've got to work. It's only because chaps are coughing their lungs out in mines and girls are hammering at typewriters that anyone ever has time to pick a flower. Besides, if you hadn't a full belly and a warm house you wouldn't want to pick flowers.⁴⁶⁹

Here, as elsewhere, the narrative is driven forward by the juxtaposition of opposites, in a language simultaneously permitting of both rural and urban perspectives on the countryside and the natural landscape. The acknowledgement of the economic realities underpinning the opportunity and the desire to partake of such experience is posited as one of the conditions of such a partaking, and Bowling's vision of peace is indeed rendered subject to ironies it has yet to show itself capable of withstanding. Yet the argument does not end here. Bowling continues,

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 173.

...that's not the point. Here's this feeling that I get inside me - not often, I admit, but now and again. I know it's a good feeling to have. What's more, so does everybody else, or nearly everybody.⁴⁷⁰

Whilst it might be tempting, then, to read the insistence on cultural and material realities as a partial negation of the regenerative properties inherent in the natural landscape, such a reading is anticipated in advance, being itself incorporated into a rhetorical stance whose claims to truth-telling are legitimated, as Shuttleworth has noted, precisely by the consequences of the unavailability of such experience as a mode of resistance.⁴⁷¹ Moreover, it is precisely this dialogic aspect to the text which further aligns it with the pastoral mode, harking back as it does to the bucolic exchanges characteristic of the ancient pastoral eclogues.

A further instance of this particular aspect may be found in the exchange (noted above) between Bowling and the caricatured figure of retired schoolmaster Porteous. The episode serves (in spite of the questionable plausibility of the friendship) to highlight the distinction between Bowling's temporary nostalgia and a wilful flight from modern reality. Orwell thus sets up a dialogue between the two figures, describing the 'book-pipe-fire atmosphere' of Porteous's home, a place where, instead of contemporary visions of 'hate-world, slogan-world', the sense instead is of 'nothing mattering except books and poetry and Greek statues, and nothing worth happening since the Goths sacked Rome'.⁴⁷² Unfortunately, Bowling is unable to occupy such a world except as a means of temporary escape; the classical idyll it represents is, it is implied, unavailable to men like him. At the same time, however, we are compelled to recognize the politically dangerous stagnation in Porteous' refusal to accept the modern world: in spite of his apparent learning, his mind appears to have stood still, so that he only 'says the same things and thinks the same thoughts over and over again'.⁴⁷³ Whilst Bowling may lament the loss of his youth and the experiences with which it is associated, Porteous is shown incapable of any similar feeling, and it is significant that Bowling turns to his friend not for counsel but for distraction; as he simply says, 'I like to hear him talk'.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁰ *CUFA*, p. 173.

⁴⁷¹ 'The Real George Orwell' ed. Shuttleworth, p. 216.

⁴⁷² *CUFA*, p. 162.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

just as the conversation between Bowling and Portland further reinforces the dynamics of cultural and temporal exchange which pervade the novel, there are a number of other devices used by Orwell to facilitate his exploration of the discord between various competing realities. In a novel rich with symbolism, Orwell is especially adept at using food to highlight contrasts between rural and urban; past and present; reality and unreality. Indeed, as is noted in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 'it is curious how seldom the all-importance of food is recognised'⁴⁷⁵. Certainly it is worth comparing the famous description of Bowling's experience when he visits a milk bar and is served a fish-filled hot dog, with his account of the foods naturally available to him as a child,

There's a kind of atmosphere about these places that gets me down... Everything spent on the decorations and nothing on the food. No real food at all. Just lists of stuff with American names, sort of phantom stuff that you can't taste and can hardly believe in the existence of. Everything comes out of a carton or a tin, or it's hauled out of a refrigerator or squirted out of a tap or squeezed out of a tube.⁴⁷⁶

[...] But in a sense I do remember different seasons, because all my memories are bound up with things to eat, which varied at different times of the year. Especially the things you used to find in the hedges. In July there were dewberries – but they're very rare – and the blackberries were getting red enough to eat. In September there were sloes and hazel nuts... Later on there were beech-nuts and crab apples... Angelica is good in early summer, especially when you're thirsty, and so are the stems of various grasses. Then there's sorrel, which is good with bread and butter, and pig-nuts, and a kind of wood shamrock which has a sour taste. Even plantain seeds are better than nothing when you're a long way from home and very hungry.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 2001) p. 84. Cited hereafter as *RWP*

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 38.

what is immediately striking here is how much longer the second passage is. Thus, whilst modern food is summed up as 'everything slick and shiny and streamlined',⁴⁷⁸ the outraged description blatantly echoing Betjeman's 'air-conditioned, bright canteens' with their 'tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans/Tinned minds, tinned breath',⁴⁷⁹ the list of foods recalled from childhood is by contrast detailed, varied, and appealing, as food itself is shown as central to Bowling's formative experience, his private memories being 'bound up with things to eat'.⁴⁸⁰ Moreover, as L Coffey has argued, food is more than a sensory aid to memory; it sustains and is itself a product of the cyclical rhythms of nature.⁴⁸¹ Once more, notions of real versus unreal are brought into play. Whilst modern food is unreal and unfulfilling, hunger had previously been satisfyingly met, and nutrition adequately afforded. Orwell thus seeks to demonstrate how modernity, with its shifting realities and deployment of artifice over substance, is capable of infiltrating even this most basic of functions. As he wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier*,

I think it could plausibly be argued that changes of diet are even more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion. The Great War, for instance, could never have happened if tinned food had not been invented.⁴⁸²

Orwell's point that the streamlining of food, rather than in any sense abetting a better, healthier means of living, in fact facilitates and makes modern warfare possible, is driven home in *Coming up for Air* in a tone of enraged despondency,

It gave me the feeling that I'd bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was really made of. That's the way we're going nowadays. Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else...when you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a sausage for instance, that's what

⁴⁷⁸ *CUFA*, p. 22.

⁴⁷⁹ John Betjeman, 'Slough' (1937) Skelton, p. 74.

⁴⁸⁰ *CUFA*, p. 38.

⁴⁸¹ L. Coffey, *The Recovery of History through Memory and Nostalgia in the mid Twentieth-Century Novel* (unpublished doctoral thesis, London: Birkbeck, 2005).

⁴⁸² *RWP*, p. 84.

you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting inside
your mouth.⁴⁸³

It is no accident that the 'bombs of filth' on George's tongue recall the 'roar of bombs' over England foreseen at the end of *Homage to Catalonia*,⁴⁸⁴ (1938) as Orwell deftly interweaves his dismay at the horrors of modernity with a prophetic glimpse of its gravest implications. Indeed, he would record this same sense of cultural decay in a diary entry of June, 1940,

Always, as I walk through the Underground stations, sickened by the advertisements, the silly staring faces and strident colours, the general frantic struggle to induce people to waste labour and material by consuming useless luxuries or harmful drugs. How much rubbish this war will sweep away, if only we can hang on throughout the summer. War is simply a reversal of civilised life, its motto is 'Evil be thou my good', and so much of the good of modern life is actually evil that it is questionable whether on balance the war does harm.⁴⁸⁵

It is interesting to note here how war, rather than being simply a destructive force, is posited by Orwell as a possible agent of change *for the better*. Whilst the passage reads as somewhat petulant in tone; (there are clear shades of Gordon Comstock, especially in the last remark) there is the underlying suggestion that war itself might prove to be the very means by which the worst aspects of modern capitalist culture are checked. Moreover, Orwell reaffirms here the idea, which runs through *Coming up for Air*, that reality is often the inverse of what it seems, and that it is the needs and interests of contemporary commerce, rather than those of the individual (which are, indeed, actively subverted) which are served by such illusions.

The most potently symbolic image of Bowling's obscured, private identity is the secret pool hidden in the woods behind Binfield house. In describing his discovery of the pool Bowling speculates about its origins, generating a private mythology which further imbues the pool with a deep personal resonance,

⁴⁸³ *CUFA*, p. 24.

⁴⁸⁴ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 196.

⁴⁸⁵ George Orwell, *Diaries* (London: Penguin, 2009) p. 254.

I knew what had happened. At some time this pool had been connected with the other, and then the stream had dried up and the woods had closed round the small pool and it had just been forgotten. It's a thing that happens occasionally. A pool gets forgotten somehow, nobody fishes in it for years and decades and the fish grow to monstrous sizes. The brutes that I was watching might be a hundred years old. And not a soul in the world knew about them except me.⁴⁸⁶

The separation of the pool from its original source clearly mirrors Bowling's ontological plight. The pool provides a clear and deliberate source of symbolic focus which is closely bound up with the vision of a lost paradise, and again, ideas of surface and depth are invoked by Orwell, for just as it is only Bowling's external, surface self which is now visible, he recalls how as a child he was able to see 'deep down into the water as though you were looking into a kind of dark green glass'⁴⁸⁷ (a simile notably comparable to Orwell's frequently cited maxim that 'good prose is like a window pane'.⁴⁸⁸) The activity of fishing is intrinsically bound up with the pool's meaning, becoming, as Michael Carter has suggested, 'comprehensible as a fishing for roots'.⁴⁸⁹ For Bowling, fishing is capable of provoking an intensity of feeling unrivalled in adulthood, constituting an affirmative experience more enduring than anything on offer in the modern world. The sensation he experiences on spotting one of the monstrous fish in the secret pool is 'as if a sword had gone through me'.⁴⁹⁰ Just as in 1916, fishing offers a means of resisting the 'atmosphere of war', constituting, for Bowling, its very antithesis: 'Fishing', he insists, 'is the opposite of war'.⁴⁹¹ It is an activity he has shared with friends as a youth, but also one whose meaning and significance remain intensely private,

The very idea of sitting all day under a willow tree beside a quiet pool – and being able to find a quiet pool to sit beside – belongs to the time before the war, before the radio, before aeroplanes,

⁴⁸⁶ *CUFA*, p. 80.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁴⁸⁸ Orwell, *Essays*, p. 7.

⁴⁸⁹ Carter, p.157.

⁴⁹⁰ *CUFA*, p. 80.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 85.

before Hitler. There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbell, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They're solid kind of names. The people who made them up hadn't heard of machine-guns, they didn't live in terror of the sack or spend their time eating aspirins, going to the pictures and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.⁴⁹²

As with the list of foods, the very act of naming the varying species of fish constitutes a means of resistance not only to the modern world but also to the totalitarianism, later envisaged by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) which would seek to eradicate any such notions of empirical reality.

The idea of the quest for a sense of meaning and belonging over a state of artifice and alienation is clearly not confined in the Orwell canon to *Coming up for Air* alone. As I have indicated near the beginning of this chapter, Orwell's earlier book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, had sought to transcend the alienating circumstance of the author's own class status by seeking its idyll not in the countryside but rather within the working class interiors encountered on his visit to the industrial North of England. As Orwell wrote,

In a working-class home – I am not thinking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes – you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere.⁴⁹³

There is an unmistakable similarity between the description offered here of the working class home and the reverence with which Bowling recalls his past. It is perhaps unsurprising that Orwell, who had worked hard to understand and to resist what he felt were the particular assumptions and prejudices of his own 'lower-upper-middle-class' position, should choose to find refuge in such a place. Yet we suspect that, as with Bowling's Edwardian Arcadia, its appeal lies precisely in its very unavailability. 'It is', Orwell insists, 'a good place to be in'; yet he adds the caveat: 'provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently *of* it to be taken

⁴⁹² Ibid, p. 76.

⁴⁹³ *RWP*, pp. 107-108.

accursed itch of class difference, like the pea under the princess's mattress',⁴⁹⁵ separates him from the working-class world to which he aspires to belong, so time and history have estranged Bowling from the happier, pre-war world of his youth. In both cases the perceived idyll is significant less because of its perceived contrastive relation to modernity than in terms of its role as a projected locus for the self, whereby the individual senses contact with values and experience with which he feels better attuned and which, moreover, appear largely absent from day-to-day life.

The overarching purpose of this chapter has been to examine the ways in which *Coming up for Air* draws together and gives voice to many of the wider anxieties relating to the interrelations between the self, history and modernity during the thirties. The novel records the sought retrieval of an obscured yet resilient private self-identity, (a process neatly encapsulated in the novel's epitaph, 'He's dead, but he won't lie down') and its appeals to a happier, rural past, tempered by the pervasive consciousness of both the perils and shortcomings of modernity, suggest a commitment by Orwell to both past and present, in terms of integrating both into an aesthetic vision capable not only of reflecting both the political and artistic crises of the decade, but also drawing both together to form the locus for his conception of selfhood. Bowling's attempted quest amounts to more than a simple attempt to retreat into the past; representing, rather, an integral part of a dynamic based around the inherent tensions within the text between past and present; rural and urban; public and private. Bowling himself is well aware that nothing will guarantee his own annihilation more surely than wholesale retreat into the past, intuitively sensing in his own way Spender's insight that 'the driving force within nostalgia is that it is a passion which must be constantly correcting itself'.⁴⁹⁶ The novel as a whole is thus motivated not by the arch-pessimism for which Orwell is both popularly and critically renowned, but rather by an unassailable impulse towards rectitude and reification, and by the author's intimations of the need to preserve and defend the realm of the private self against the acute and multiple onslaughts of the public world.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 108.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 145.

⁴⁹⁶ *SOTM*, p. 212.

Chapter 5: 'History opposes its grief to our buoyant song':⁴⁹⁷ The self in history in W. H. Auden's later poetry of the thirties

*The tides in the human body mingle with the tides of the
macrocosm.*⁴⁹⁸

Louis MacNeice

In his introduction to the critical volume, *W. H. Auden in Context*, Tony Sharpe has reasserted the point that, 'the dialogue (or dispute) between private and public impulses and responsibilities was a continuing provocation of Auden's work.'⁴⁹⁹ Certainly, there can be no denying that the interdependence of the personal and public domains was increasingly at the forefront of Auden's poetry of the thirties (and indeed this is widely acknowledged to be the case). However, as with the previous writers featured within this study (and as Sharpe's comment hints) the precise nature of Auden's engagement with these themes remains in need of greater scrutiny. Auden's claim in his preface to *Oxford Poetry 1927*, that '(A)ll genuine poetry is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of a public chaos',⁵⁰⁰ appears on the one hand a helpful distillation of the poet's then attitude towards poetry. Yet it also contains within it some degree of self-effacement: the statement is, we notice, not without qualification, and (notwithstanding Auden's occasional tendency towards facetiousness) it remains to determine exactly in *what* sense all 'genuine' poetry thus exists.

There is undoubtedly a sense in which Auden might be described as a poet of ideas, his poems borne of a formidable intellect capable of absorbing a multiplicity of concepts at a ferocious rate (indeed, it is this feature of the earlier poetry in particular which had led to the coining of the term, 'Audenesque', defined by Bernard Bergonzi as 'that particular manner of Auden's that became a collective idiom.'⁵⁰¹) Yet it is also clear that the conceptualising process, and the poet's deployment of a range of psychological, political and theological ideas is not an end

⁴⁹⁷ *EA*, p. 256.

⁴⁹⁸ *SLC*, p. 223.

⁴⁹⁹ Tony Sharpe, Introduction to: *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 3.

⁵⁰⁰ Auden, W. H., 'Preface to *Oxford Poetry 1927*', ed. Mendelson, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden*, (Princeton University Press, 2002) Prose, Vol. I, p. 4. (Cited hereafter as *CW*).

⁵⁰¹ Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the thirties: Texts and Contexts* (London: 1978) p. 39.

in itself, but rather is part of a broader and evolving poetic strategy. Thus, we can identify, as Michael O'Neill has pointed out, a fusion of emotional and conceptual engagement⁵⁰² at the heart of the poetry. As Auden himself said in a talk given at Columbia University in 1940,

Art is not metaphysics ...and the artist is usually unwise to insist too directly in his art upon his beliefs; but without an adequate and conscious metaphysics in the background, art's imitation of life inevitably becomes, either a photostatic copy of the accidental details of life without pattern or significance, or a personal allegory of the artist's individual dementia, of interest primarily to the psychologist and the historian.⁵⁰³

Here, then, Auden asserts the need of art in general, and poetry in particular, to operate within a viable framework or belief system in order to supply the work with coherence and direction. Moreover, by the time of this talk, Auden's own search for such a system had already entered its latest phase.

Auden's intellectual life, as Carpenter has argued, may be feasibly characterised as a search for synthesis and order; an attempt, somewhat ambitious, to find the formulas which would 'express and interpret the whole of human existence.'⁵⁰⁴ That such a search led Auden to entertain various systems of belief, all of which were on the one hand provisional, yet each in turn leaving its mark, has been adequately noted. However, in order to approach a proper appreciation of Auden's poetry and its contribution to thirties' writing, it is necessary to note, as O'Neill and Reeves have indicated, that in spite of its intellectual air, Auden's poetry eschews the straightforwardly rational;⁵⁰⁵ that, in other words, the poetry necessarily amounts to more than the sum of its intellectual parts. Stan Smith's claim that Auden is 'a *text* [...] a badly wrapped parcel of discourses'⁵⁰⁶ might seem to imply a somewhat reductionist approach to the poetry. Yet it should not be taken to mean that the poems are beyond

⁵⁰² Michael O'Neill, 'The 1930s poetry of W. H. Auden', ed. Neil Corcoran, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 115.

⁵⁰³ cited in: Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London: 2005) p. xii.

⁵⁰⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden, A Biography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981) p. 83.

⁵⁰⁵ O'Neill and Reeves, p. 147.

⁵⁰⁶ Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) p. 9.

substantive account of Auden's poetry of the thirties is liable to involve the reader in consulting a range of sources so diverse as to seem at times discordant. With these points in mind, the present chapter focuses on how the poetry can be seen to subvert the too readily-made distinction between the 'secular' and 'religious' phases of Auden's poetic development,⁵⁰⁷ and proposes a re-alignment of our understanding of Auden's work during the thirties which, in particular, takes greater account of the poet's deepening acceptance of Christianity,⁵⁰⁸ and which is prepared to see the final poems of the decade as thus answering anxieties embedded within the earlier poetry. I would emphasise this as an important dimension to Auden's thirties' poetry that has tended to be underplayed (or indeed gone unrecognised) in existing critical accounts both of Auden himself and of thirties' writing more generally.⁵⁰⁹

I

It has been argued by critics such as John Fuller that Auden was 'our first major poet to have a scientific education'.⁵¹⁰ Undoubtedly Auden's father's profession as a general practitioner ensured ready access to a library of scientific and psychological textbooks which the younger Auden would come to draw upon just as, during his time at Oxford, he began to absorb the austere tenets of literary modernism. Indeed, that Auden's educational background had been more clinical than creative, privileging the factual over the aesthetic, is evident in the tension

⁵⁰⁷ Barbara Everett, for example, correctly acknowledges the continuance throughout Auden's career of the same dualities of 'Freedom and Necessity, Isolation and Community, Art and Reality', yet still asserts the same misleading division between 'political' and 'religious' terminologies in Auden's earlier and later poems which has persisted in critical accounts of his work (see: Barbara Everett, *Auden*, (Edinburgh, Oliver Boyd, 1969) p. 8.)

⁵⁰⁸ Which he had begun to approach through, among others, the ideas of Augustine, Newman, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. We might also do well to take note of remarks made by Auden in 1956, where he says, 'I could escape acknowledging that, however I had consciously ignored and rejected the Church for sixteen years, the existence of churches and what went on in them had all the time been very important to me. If that was the case, what then?' (Cited in: Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Vintage, 2003) p. 169.)

⁵⁰⁹ Certainly Auden's Christian leanings did not go unnoticed at the time by his friend and collaborator Isherwood, who sardonically notes in *Christopher and his Kind* that; 'When we collaborate...I have to keep a sharp eye on him – or down flop the characters on their knees; another constant danger is that of choral interruptions by angel voices'. (*C&HK*, p. 181)

⁵¹⁰ Fuller, Introduction to *Selected Poems*, p. x

identifiable in his poems between the frequent use of scientific imagery, and a sustained effort to apprehend the concealed and less quantifiable aspects of human behaviour. Auden's ability to hold in play both his scientific and poetic sensibilities is certainly one indicator of his remarkable yet unsettled intellect. His continued sense of the discord between poetry and science is evident in the following remarks from his later essay, 'The Poet and the City' (1948),

The true men of action in our time, those who transform the world, are not the politicians and statesmen, but the scientists. Unfortunately poetry cannot celebrate them because their deeds are concerned with things, not persons, and are therefore speechless.⁵¹²

Here Auden places the 'speechless' scientist in marked opposition to the poet, for whom, by contrast, speech is the only tool available. This Auden notes in the poem, 'September 1, 1939', in a well-known line which simultaneously attests to the circumscribed but also uniquely powerful role of the poet: 'All I have is a voice'.⁵¹³

Stephen Spender's article, 'W. H. Auden and His Poetry' (1953) is among the more incisive of the earlier commentaries on Auden's work. (Indeed, the piece is of interest for what it reveals about Spender himself as well as Auden.) Spender argues as follows,

There is a dualistic idea running through all his work which encloses it like the sides of a box. This idea is Symptom and Cure... The symptoms have to be diagnosed, named, brought into the open, made to weep and confess, that they may be related to the central need of love, leading them to the discipline which is their cure.

⁵¹¹ Indeed, Auden's poetry has been the subject of sustained linguistic, as well as literary analysis. See for instance: Ronald Carter, *Towards a theory of discourse stylistics A study of some applications of linguistic theory to the analysis of poetry, with particular reference to W. H. Auden* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1979).

⁵¹² W. H. Auden, 'The Poet and the City', *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber, 1962) p. 81. Cited hereafter as *DH*.

⁵¹³ *AT*, p. 105.

in a review written in 1955, Auden's own list of the symptoms of an 'invaded society', included 'mass production, advertising, the divorce between mental and manual labour, magazine stories, the abuse of leisure...', all of which, Auden insists, 'can only be finally cured by attending to the cause.'⁵¹⁴ Spender's own allusion to the uncovering of buried trauma as part of the process of psychoanalytic therapy itself seems instructive in our understanding of the processes operating within Auden's work, though functioning less in literal terms than in the sense of adding to an ever-expanding pool of metaphors to be drawn upon as the poetry, alongside the religious belief, deepened and developed. Spender continues,

It is his conception of the Cure which has changed. At one time Love, in the sense of Freudian release from inhibition; at another time a vaguer and more exalted idea of loving; at still another the Social Revolution; and at a yet later stage, Christianity. Essentially the direction of Auden's poetry has been towards the defining of the concept of Love.⁵¹⁵

Spender's acknowledgement of the way in which Auden's preoccupation with the concept of 'Love' modulates through the various stages of his thought is especially perceptive. Moreover, the analysis is all the more convincing for its awareness of Auden's nominal shortcomings as a poet, and the simultaneous recognition that such traits constitute in certain important respects the essence of Auden's achievement during the thirties, shaping and directing his response to the history of his time. For instance, Spender's signalling of the notorious 'difficulty' of Auden's poetry may appear somewhat critical,

His (Auden's) skill conceals a defect which he has never entirely overcome – a lack of the sense of the inner form of a poem.⁵¹⁶

However, Spender does not lose sight of what he perceives as the real value of the poetry, maintaining that,

⁵¹⁴ *EA*, p. 318

⁵¹⁵ Stephen Spender, 'W. H. Auden and His Poetry', ed. Spears, Monroe K., *Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 28.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 28.

Throughout the 1950s he provided a commentary on events which magically transformed public violence into the bogeys of personal fantasy. In this way he asserted what is perhaps the most difficult and important truth for people today to understand: that the public wrong can only be atoned and cured within the personal lives of individuals.⁵¹⁷

Whilst Spender's remarks here tell of his own eventual disavowal of Marxism, he correctly draws attention to the sustained exploration by Auden of the irreducible role of the private life within the public realm, and the private individual's unwitting complicity in the public trauma. Seamus Heaney, writing some years later, offers the following helpful view on Auden's task as it appeared at the beginning of the decade,

From the start, Auden's imagination was eager to make a connection between the big picture that was happening outside in Europe and England and the small one which was being shown inside himself: he sensed the crisis in a public world poised for renewal or catastrophe as analogous to an impending private crisis of action and choice in his own life.⁵¹⁸

Here, Heaney aptly notes the analogous nature of the relationship between public and private in Auden's poetry. Yet, as will be seen, Auden's use of such an analogy would continue to shift and develop beyond any simple equation between the two realms this might seem to imply. The following remarks by Dylan Thomas (whose own contribution to thirties' literature must remain the subject for a separate study) are especially instructive in this regard, and Thomas comes closer than many to evoking the irreducibility of Auden's particular talent,

I sometimes think of Mr Auden's poetry as a hygiene, a knowledge and practice, based on a brilliantly prejudiced analysis of contemporary disorders, relating to the preservation and promotion of health, a sanitary science and a flusher of

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, p. 35.

⁵¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Sounding Auden', *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988) p. 116.

admire intensely the mature, religious, and logical fighter, and deprecate the boy bushranger.⁵¹⁹

Whilst, then, my study of Spender's thirties poetry argues that the poems are constructed around an 'essentialist' view of the self in which the external world - that is to say, the world external to consciousness - may compromise, corrupt or challenge a nonetheless autonomous self or 'I' which is seen to precede it, it becomes clear that, by contrast, Auden's engagement with the crises of the decade is coupled with an unwillingness to take any notion of an independent, autonomous 'I' for granted. This in turn has, understandably, tempted critics towards a proto-postmodern interpretation of Auden's model of the self.⁵²⁰ As Stan Smith has argued,

Auden's use of pastiche and parody, his sleeping-around with poetic forms and his plagiarising of other poets' voices, constitute a deliberate assault on the idea of the autonomous authentic self, speaking with its own unique accents. All art is ventriloquism, he implies, and the discourses which shape our identity are impermanent, continually shifting.⁵²¹

We need not necessarily accept Smith's thesis here in order to point to the acute difficulty inherent in identifying the precise model of self at work within Auden's poetry. Certainly, where the 'I' is present, we note that the presence behind it is by no means self-evident: that the 'I' itself, is, as Spender aptly remarks, often either an abstraction or else an anonymous commentator.⁵²² The apparent suppression of the poet's own voice - the experiencing 'I' that is, by contrast, the hallmark of Spender's work - is an aspect of Auden's poetry which has been repeatedly remarked upon, and indeed has resulted in Auden having been regarded with a degree of suspicion in some quarters (F. R. Leavis was prepared, as late as 1950, to

⁵¹⁹ Dylan Thomas, *Early Prose Writings*, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1971) p. viii.

⁵²⁰ Indeed, critics such as John Fuller have been provoked to stake Auden's claim as being 'our first post-modernist poet' See Fuller's introduction to: *W. H. Auden, Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 2000) p. x.

⁵²¹ Stan Smith, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 9.

⁵²² ed. Spears, p. 36.

denounce the intellectual properties of Auden's poetry as evidence of little more than 'the natural appetite for kudos'⁵²³). However, if we are willing to accept Auden's status as a serious poet, (that is to say, worthy of sustained critical attention, as this study presupposes) it might be more productive to view the fact of the often absented 'I' less as a flaw in the poetry, than as one of its definitive attributes. What can often come across as a proto-postmodernist view of the self as emerging only at the intersection of competing discourses in fact attests to Auden's provisional and still-evolving world view, with which his conception of self is inevitably and inextricably bound-up. It is this very provisionality which the present chapter maintains is itself among the definitive traits of Auden's poetry during the thirties (one which might be seen to militate against those whom, in the early poem, 'Since you are going begin today', Auden terms the 'holders of one position, wrong for years'⁵²⁴.) Moreover, as O'Neill and Reeves point out, the impact of the poetry often stems precisely from not knowing how fully Auden identifies with the voice he creates.⁵²⁵

Auden's preoccupation with contemporary psychology has been well documented, and there can be no denying that this field of interest, issuing from the poet's continued concern with the operations of concealed drives and desires beneath the visible public realm, played an important role in the development of his response to the public crises of the thirties. As Auden insisted in his important essay, 'Psychology and Art Today', (1935) the influence of Freud in particular 'cannot be considered apart from other features of the contemporary environment'.⁵²⁶ In this essay, Auden explicitly considers the relationship between psychoanalysis and poetry, and the analogous processes in which the neurotic and the artist are involved (and also where they diverge). Auden warns against any misappropriation of Freud's ideas as he understands them (in particular by those whom he terms 'irrationalists eager to escape their conscience'.⁵²⁷) He continues,

Both Marx and Freud start from the failures of civilisation, one from the poor, one from the ill. Both see human behaviour

⁵²³ F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1967) p. 184.

⁵²⁴ *EA*, p. 45.

⁵²⁵ O'Neill and Reeves, p. 146.

⁵²⁶ *EA*, p. 337.

⁵²⁷ *EA*, p. 341.

determined, not consciously, but by instinctive needs, hunger and love. Marx sees the direction of the relations between outer and inner world from without inwards, Freud vice versa. Both are therefore suspicious of each other.⁵²⁸

The idea of psychological discourse as itself a 'by-product' of bourgeois civilisation is put forward by Christopher Caudwell, who, in his book *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938) takes Freud to task for failing to take into account the material conditions which, for Caudwell, themselves give rise to consciousness. Thus, Freud is criticised for assuming,

...firstly that the consciousness of men is *sui generis*, unfolding like a flower from the seed instead of being a primarily social creation, and secondly that there is a source of free action in the individual, the 'free will', the 'wish', or the 'instincts', which is only free in proportion to the extent to which it is unrestrained by social influences.⁵²⁹

Caudwell continues,

No modern school of psychology has ever studied social relations as primary, as conditioning the consciousness which is generated by them. None study concrete society and its non-psychical basis. No modern school of psychology has ever yet got so far as to formulate its basic approach to the environment of the psyche it studies, continuous interaction with which is the law of psychic life.⁵³⁰

Thus Caudwell states the essence of the Marxist objection to Freudianism. It may be countered that Caudwell's stance is no less one-sided than that which he attacks, yet he is sufficiently measured to allow that the scientific platform from which he would argue is itself a product of consciousness: his stance here is

⁵²⁸ Ibid, p. 341.

⁵²⁹ Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1957) p. 161.

⁵³⁰ Ibid, p. 177.

essentially one of rectitude rather than assertion. Moreover, it is one with which Auden held some sympathy (though not unqualified). As he goes on to say in 'Psychology and Art Today',

The socialist accuses the psychologist of caving in to the status quo, trying to adapt the neurotic to the system, thus depriving him of a potential revolutionary: the psychologist retorts that the socialist is trying to lift himself by his own boot tags, that he fails to understand himself, or the fact that lust for money is only one form of the lust for power; and so after he has won his power by revolution he will recreate the same conditions. Both are right.⁵³¹

Thus, Marx and Freud are seen to have equal power as diagnosticians of society's ills. Indeed, the latter's importance for Auden as historian is noted by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, who argues as follows,

For Auden [...] Freud joins the company of those historians he admires because he is, like all good historians, caught in an intractable bind: he must discover laws that he knows are not laws of the kind that scientists discover or legislators make.⁵³²

However, whilst Auden's penetrative intellect is clearly evident in the analysis quoted above, the search remained for a viable model with which to interpret history and in particular the contemporary crisis in Europe. Moreover, it was the task of envisioning and rendering this apprehension of history in meaningful poetic terms which remained paramount and by far the greater challenge. As C. Day Lewis commented in his book, *A Hope For Poetry* (1934),

It is a truism that a sound society makes for sound individuals,
and sound individuals instance a sound society. For the post-war

⁵³¹ *EA*, p. 341.

⁵³² Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, 'Auden in History', ed. Sharpe, p. 182. It is worth noting that Auden offers an exploration of the distinction between human and natural law in the poem, 'Law Like Love' ('Others say, Law is our Fate;/Others say, Law is our State;/Others say, others say') *AT*, p. 6.

poet, living in a society undeniably sick, that criticism has turned
into a dilemma.⁵³³

Certainly, critics such as Rod Mengham have drawn attention to the ways in which Auden's work sought to challenge Freudian orthodoxy, in terms of its envisioning of a psychology focused not just on private neuroses, but which, as Caudwell suggests, moves towards relating individual symptoms to wider, societal problems, thereby seeming to gesture towards a 'synthesis' of Marxist and Freudian methodologies.

As this chapter maintains, however, this does not in itself give an adequate account of Auden's developing understanding of the relationship between the private individual and history. As is argued here, the ultimate trajectory of the poetry points beyond any attempted 'merging' of psychological and political insight, and is, by the end of the decade, revealing of an effort to subsume any such psycho-social paradigm through emergent appeals to a developing theological stance. This is signalled not least by the increasing persistence of Christian language and imagery in the poetry, which is further echoed and expounded upon in the prose works. Moreover, as Monroe Spears has argued, the poet's religious position is itself best understood not as a denial, but rather as a fulfilment of his earlier 'beliefs'. As Spears suggests, the religious values do not contradict the others, but rather clarify them and take them to another level.⁵³⁴ Whilst there should be no doubting the extent to which both psychological and political ideas helped to shape Auden's earlier poetry, this chapter suggests ways in which the poems reveal a growing sense of the interpretative limitations of such systems, as the poetry moves towards, in Herbert Greenberg's phrase, 'a point outside itself',⁵³⁵ towards what might be best described as a more fully realised, if still evolving theological position.

II

⁵³³ Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope For Poetry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1942) p. 47.

⁵³⁴ Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden – The Disenchanted Island* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) p. 172.

⁵³⁵ Herbert Greenberg, *Quest for the Necessary, W. H. Auden and the dilemma of divided consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1968) p. 101.

it is true that critics such as Peter Firchow have been apt to point to what, in Firchow's words, has been described as an 'anti-rhetorical' streak present in Auden's work from the beginning.⁵³⁶ The poet's later suppression and alteration of poems including 'Spain' and 'September 1st, 1939', together with his oft-quoted line that 'poetry makes nothing happen' can (and have) been cited in support of this. Auden's suspicion of grandiose poetical rhetoric can be seen as manifest in his endorsement and adoption of, in particular, the parable mode. The following oft-cited comments from 'Psychology and Art Today' are of relevance here,

You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions.⁵³⁷

It is interesting to note how the choice of words here ironically recalls the Communist maxim, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs',⁵³⁸ such that it might be noted how the psycho-social axis seems inscribed in the very phraseology of the writing. If we consider the presence of the parable form in the New Testament, it is reasonable to infer that Auden's burgeoning Christian position during the thirties, from earlier works such as 'The Orators' (1931) to the later cautionary ballads, 'Miss Gee' and 'James Honeyman', finds expression in his very choice of genre. Auden continues,

There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love.⁵³⁹

Whilst the preceding remarks do not of themselves tell of the poet's still unrealised, though latent Christian stance, it is notable that the language used in the latter comments would perhaps seem to leave the reader in less doubt.

⁵³⁶ Peter Firchow, *W. H. Auden, Contexts for Poetry* (London and NJ, Associated University Presses, 2002) p. 135.

⁵³⁷ *EA*, p. 341.

⁵³⁸ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, (New York, International Publishers, 1938) p. 118.

⁵³⁹ *EA*, pp. 341-342.

before his move to the United States in January 1939, and has indeed been seen, both at the time and subsequently, as a pivotal volume in his career. While the sense of its transitional status is to some extent engendered by the controversial timing of his departure, the poems themselves both register and manifest a shifting relationship between the categories of public and private. The opening poem, is, as its dedication suggests, clearly personal in origin. Yet the poem retains an abstract quality whose aphoristic, if not prophetic nature is clearly indebted to Blake,

Every eye must weep alone
Till I Will be overthrown⁵⁴⁰

The poem anticipates, in its seeming assertion of the necessary resistance to the fatal temptations of the Will by human love, the famous line of 'September 1, 1939', 'We must love one another or die', thereby signalling a thematic unity amidst the collection's remarkable stylistic diversity. The disarming (and deceptive) simplicity of the poem gives little clear hint of the public realm which exists beyond its apparent private boundary, but which is not yet brought into view. As Auden writes in the third stanza,

Then I's can meet and grow,
I Am become I Love,
I Have Not I Am Loved,
Then all I's can meet and grow.

Here Auden signals the possibility of a transition beyond humankind's ontological positioning, towards a more fully realised stance, becoming, 'I Love'; 'I Am Loved'. Nonetheless, the poem falls back on its initial warning, a reiteration signalling the fact that the resolution Auden envisages remains as yet remote and unrealised.

In his later essay, 'The Poet and the City' (1962) Auden holds forth as follows on the shifting nature of man's public and private roles,

⁵⁴⁰ AT (no page reference available).

To the Greeks the Private Realm was the sphere of the ruled by the necessity of sustaining life, and the Public Realm the sphere of freedom where a man could disclose himself to others. Today, the significance of the terms private and public has been reversed; public life is the necessary impersonal life, the place where a man fulfils his social function, and it is in his private life that he is free to be his personal self.⁵⁴¹

Whilst Auden notes here the modern reversal of the public and private realms, the following remarks from his uncompleted prose work, 'The Prolific and the Devourer' (written in 1939) reveal a far stronger sense that the two domains are not so easily separated, suggesting that such 'freedoms' which may be enjoyed in the private life are likely to entail some degree of personal duplicity,

To be forced to be political is to be forced to lead a dual life. Perhaps this would not matter if one could consciously keep them apart and know which was the real one. But to succeed at anything, one must believe in it, at least for the time being, and only too often the false public life absorbs and destroys the genuine private life. Nearly all public men become booming old bores...It is folly to imagine that one can live two lives, a public and a private one. No man can serve two masters.⁵⁴²

So conceived, this view of the conflict between the public and the private life would appear to amount to a disavowal of the public persona as the enemy of the authentic, inner self; politics itself the domain of the ineffectual 'booming old bores' of public life. As this chapter shows, the poetry itself betokens a far more nuanced and equivocal position than these passages might in themselves suggest. The following remarks, in a letter written to Spender in the early months of 1941, are especially revealing of Auden's acute sense of the way in which private choices and actions begin to pattern in the public realm,

⁵⁴¹ *DH*, p. 80.

⁵⁴² *EA*, pp. 400-401.

I have absolutely no patience with pacifism as a political movement, as if one could do all the things in one's personal life that create wars and then pretend that to refuse to fight is a sacrifice and not a luxury.⁵⁴³

Auden had by this time met and befriended the Christian socialist and theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who, as Carpenter notes, had some role in dissuading him from pacifism. It might well be argued that given Auden's totalising view of history, coupled with his acute sense of the interconnectivity of the public and private realms, it seems unlikely in any event that pacifism would have been acceptable to him on either ethical or logical grounds. Indeed, this has been nowhere more apparent than in the complex ethical stance towards poetry and violence embodied within the poem 'Spain' (later 'Spain 1937'). Here, the notorious one-liner referring to 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder' drew a savage response from George Orwell, who argued that the poem 'could only have been written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word*'.⁵⁴⁴ Auden held to his conviction (in actuality shared by Orwell) that pacifism was unacceptable in the face of the threat from fascism, and denied that he had ever excused totalitarian cruelty. Nonetheless he appears to have been sufficiently wounded by Orwell's 'densely unjust'⁵⁴⁵ criticism to amend 'necessary murder' to 'the fact of murder' in the revised version of the poem which appeared in 1940.

III

In turning now to examine more of the poetry in greater detail, we can see, firstly, how Auden's sense of the tension and interplay between the view of the private self as both hampered and driven by internal neuroses, and as compromised and buffeted by the external world, is clearly evident in the poem 'The Creatures'. Here, the poet refers to 'the poles between which our desire unceasingly is discharged'⁵⁴⁶. Here, it is worth noting how, in spite of Auden's use of this kind of

⁵⁴³ cited in: Carpenter, p. 309. No reference given.

⁵⁴⁴ Orwell, *Essays*, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁴⁵ cited in: Spears, *The Disenchanted Island*, p. 157.

⁵⁴⁶ *AT*, p. 8.

the poem. Thus, Auden outlines,

A desire in which love and hatred so perfectly oppose themselves that we cannot voluntarily move; but await the extraordinary compulsion of the deluge and the earthquake.⁵⁴⁷

Set against the socio-political backdrop of the thirties, the apocalyptic images possess a somewhat familiar ring. Yet, as my earlier comments have indicated, it would be an error to read the poem as issuing from any single political or intellectual standpoint. The poem, 'Oxford', supplies a case in point. The poem opens in expressing a sense of how the proximity of Nature testifies precisely to man's terminal separation from it,

Nature is so near: the rooks in the college garden
Like agile babies still speak the language of feeling⁵⁴⁸

The poem's earlier stanzas appear to reinforce the public/private polarity in evoking the sense of an ancient, self-contained world, seemingly buffeted from external dangers, yet the poem's speaker is situated outside, and contained within the lines is a polemical reproach,

O in these quadrangles where wisdom honours herself
Does the original stone merely echo that praise
Shallowly, or utter a bland hymn of comfort,
The founder's equivocal blessing
On all who worship Success?⁵⁴⁹

Indeed, then, the blessing is equivocal, and the notion of 'wisdom', thus presented, is diminished; Rather, as the speaker later warns, 'to the wise/Often, often it is

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

the argument of the poem,

Knowledge is conceived in the hot womb of Violence
Who in a late hour of apprehension and exhaustion
Strains to her weeping breast
That blue-eyed darling head⁵⁵⁰

Here knowledge is conceived (literally) in terms which suggest the myth of the fall. Moreover, bound up with this is the barrier posited by the poem between the intellect and the natural world. Auden thus presents to us the realm which exists outside the college boundary, which is offered up in stark contrast,

Without are the shops, the works, the whole green country
Where a cigarette comforts the guilty and a kiss the weak;
There thousands fidget and poke and spend their money:
Eros Paidagogos
Weeps on his virginal bed.⁵⁵¹

Yet the precise meaning of the contrast is by no means self-evident. Whilst the 'weak' and the 'guilty' outside, in their 'almost natural world', are set up in opposition to the weeping intellectual 'Eros Paidagogos', the final stanza reaffirms the capacity of the intellect to, as Auden puts it in 'The Prolific and the Devourer', 'widen the horizon of the heart'.⁵⁵² To this extent, then, Auden would appear to gesture towards an understanding of the public/private interface generated precisely by the materialistic logic inherent within the analytic capabilities of Marxism, yet enhanced and informed by the intimations of the inner life precipitated by psychoanalytic investigation. Yet, as I have suggested, it became increasingly apparent to Auden that whilst the public traumas of the period might be partially diagnosed by appeals to Marxist or Freudian ideas, both the curative and interpretative properties inherent in such modes of thinking were, in the last analysis, ultimately limited.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, p. 11.

⁵⁵² EA, p. 395.

instructive here,

(T)he basic human problem is man's anxiety in time; e.g. his present anxiety over himself in relation to his past and his parents (Freud) his present anxiety over himself in relation to his future and his neighbours (Marx) his present anxiety over himself in relation to eternity and God (Kierkegaard).⁵⁵³

Indeed, just as Caudwell had proffered his critique of psychological practice from a Marxist standpoint, Reinhold Niebuhr (whose book *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1936) proved influential in the development of Auden's thought) points to the incongruity inherent in the Communist position,

Communism expects to use political measures and techniques in order to create a world in which all human relations will be moral rather than political.⁵⁵⁴

Certainly, there is much evidence of a shift towards what might indeed be characterised as a more moralistic stance by Auden by the time we come to the poems he wrote for *Journey to a War*⁵⁵⁵ (collected under the heading, 'In Time of War'). However, the mid-decade poem, 'A Summer Night'⁵⁵⁶ (1936) had already signalled, by way of its residual Christian ethic, the poet's growing apprehension of the collision between the public and the private, or between, in Auden's words 'the external disorder, and extravagant lies'⁵⁵⁷ of the external world, and an unsettled and complex sense of personal and moral integrity. As Patrick Deane has argued in

⁵⁵³ W. H. Auden, 'A Preface to Kierkegaard', *CW*, Vol. II, p. 214

⁵⁵⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Christian Politics and Communist Religion' ed. John Lewis, *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (London: Gollancz, 1935) p. 442. Auden himself contributed his important essay, 'The Good Life', to this same volume.

⁵⁵⁵ This book is a collaborative account of Auden's and Isherwood's journey to China at the time of the Sino-Japanese war.

⁵⁵⁶ It should be pointed out that whilst the poem was included within Auden's 1936 collection, *Look, Stranger!*, it was in fact composed in June 1933 when, as John Lucas notes, the forces to which it alludes would have been all too obviously emergent (see: 'Auden's politics: power, authority and the individual', ed. Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 158.

⁵⁵⁷ W. H. Auden, *Look, Stranger!* (London: Faber, 2001) Cited hereafter as *LS*.

his essay on the exchanges between English literature, socialism and Christianity during the 1930s,

Auden in the mid-thirties seems drawn to Christianity not as a body of doctrine but as a source of metaphors for his vision of a well-adjusted community and for the kinds of human action that might contribute to its realization.⁵⁵⁸

The poem, famously inspired by Auden's vision of Agape,⁵⁵⁹ announces itself as a celebration of Edenic harmony, yet as it progresses charts with remarkable dexterity and sleight of hand the gathering awareness of the forces at work beyond its boundaries, both prophesying and enacting the destruction of the lyric pastoral of the poem's opening phase as a matter of both moral necessity and historical inevitability. Auden writes in stanza three,

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening,
 Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding
From leaves with all its dove-like pleading
 Its logic and its powers.⁵⁶⁰

However, as John Lucas has noted, under the same European sky that apparently shelters the few whose privileged existence the poem has so far celebrated, now 'Poland draws her Eastern bow', and 'violence is done'⁵⁶¹ (indeed, it is worth noting that Auden wrote the poem in 1933, the same year in which Hitler came to power). The poem thus moves into its transitional phase; the vision extends beyond the enclosing walls of the garden, to recognise 'the gathering multitudes

⁵⁵⁸ Patrick Deane, "Building the Just City Now": Exchanges between English Literature, Socialism, and Christianity in the 1930s', ed. Shuttleworth, p. 25.

⁵⁵⁹ Auden later gave an account of this vision in his introduction to Anne Fremantle's *The Protestant Mystics* (1964). He later made the following distinction between Eros and Agape, whereby the former denotes 'a desire to get possession of something one lacks', whilst the latter represents 'a dynamic free expression...a continually novel decision to love'. (see: Auden, W. H., *Forewords and Afterwords* (London: Faber, 1973) p. 36)

⁵⁶⁰ *LS*, p.3.

⁵⁶¹ John Lucas, 'Auden's politics: power, authority and the individual', ed. Smith, p. 158.

outside, and the imminent upheaval, which soon through the dykes of our
content/The crumpling flood will force a rent'. The speaker notes how

The crepered wall stands up to hide
The gathering multitudes outside
Whose glances hunger worsens;
Concealing from their wretchedness
Our metaphysical distress,
Our kindness to ten persons.

However, the poem's vision extends beyond this as well, looking ahead to the time 'when the waters make retreat', retaining, even as it challenges, the private values of love and friendship contained within the opening stanzas. Yet, added to this, as Michael O'Neill points out, is a gravely troubled acceptance of the fact that private happiness may well involve shielding the self from unpalatable historical truths,⁵⁶²

May this for which we dread to lose
Our privacy, need no excuse
But to that strength belong;
As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned voices of his parents rise
In unlamenting song.

It is worth noting that Auden's use of the prayer form here is retained to become a recurrent trait within his poems of the latter part of the decade, in particular within the 'Occasional Poems' which comprise the third section of *Another Time*, including his elegy for Yeats and, perhaps most famously, 'September 1, 1939'.

Whilst there can be no denying that the social concern which marks the poems within *Look Stranger!* (1936) is still in evidence in *Another Time*, it is also true that there has by now been a marked shift in emphasis and tone. The opening quatrain of 'Brussels in Winter' records a sense of the city's unreality, ('The city still escapes you; it has lost/The qualities that say 'I am a Thing') while in the following quatrain the speaker aptly observes how

⁵⁶² ed. Corcoran, p. 111

Only the homeless and the really humbled
Seem to be sure exactly where they are,
And in their misery are all assembled;
The winter holds them like the Opera.

Whilst the final simile here serves to betray the distanced, bourgeois positioning of the speaker, whose privileged status the poem as a whole would appear to denounce, it remains an arresting image, conveying a sense of the human tragedy which the city is seen to embody, a place where,

A look contains the history of man,
And fifty francs will earn the stranger right
To warm the heartless city in his arms.⁵⁶³

Here, above the 'heartless city', 'Ridges of rich apartments rise to-night', yet the visitor to the city experiences, ironically, a greater sense of alienation than its materially poorer inhabitants, for whilst the latter at least have the certainty of knowing 'exactly where they are', the stranger can embrace the city only by paying. Thus, both visitor and native find themselves subject to a cruelly materialistic ethos. Indeed, it is worth pointing to the extent to which Auden's descriptions of Brussels, a city where 'isolated windows glow like farms', clearly echo Isherwood's sketches of a decaying Berlin, and both point to a Europe where human beings remain isolated from each other, expounding upon a condition of both collective and personal estrangement, one which is poised for fascism to take hold. Indeed, the theme of the isolating modern metropolis is taken up again in the first of the 'Lighter Poems', ('Sharp and silent in the...'). Here, the speaker asks,

Who when looking over
Faces in the subway,
Each with its uniqueness,
 Would not, did he dare
Ask what forms exactly

⁵⁶³ *AT*, p. 18

suitable to their weakness
Love and desperation
Take to govern there.⁵⁶⁴

Although the poem, as Fuller notes, ostensibly details the 'purely random thinking' of the poet as he awaits a prearranged sexual encounter,⁵⁶⁵ there is a sense in which this stanza, in its study of the uniqueness of faces met on the subway, reads as a re-envisioning of Ezra Pound's poem, 'In a Station at the Metro' ('The apparition of these faces in the crowd/Petals on a wet, black bough'⁵⁶⁶). However, Auden's purpose is to delve beneath, rather than encapsulate the moment of apprehension: to discover and to speculate over the possible forms assumed by the governing forces of 'Love and desperation'.

IV

This chapter maintains that whilst it is clear that Auden saw that the self, in its quest to satisfy its drives and desires, is challenged and often thwarted by external factors which might be described as political, societal or economic, and equally continued to accept, (if not necessarily on quite its own terms) the Freudian insistence on the primacy of the unconscious drives and needs which motivate human behaviour, there is also evidence to suggest the poet's increasing dissatisfaction with psychology as an interpretative model. In his important (yet often overlooked) prose piece of 1939, 'Jacob and the Angel', Auden wrote as follows,

What attitude should we adopt to that half of life which dominates the night, to the Unconscious, the Instinctive and extra-personal, the Determined, the Daemonic?⁵⁶⁷

In asking here what 'attitude' should be adopted, it certainly seems clear that this piece finds Auden in the process of questioning the existing interpretative systems which have thus far been brought to bear. As is shortly discussed, what he calls

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 57.

⁵⁶⁵ Fuller, p. 276.

⁵⁶⁶ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems 1908 – 1969* (London: Faber, 1977) p. 53.

⁵⁶⁷ W. H. Auden, 'Jacob and the Angel', *The New Republic* (December 27, 1939) p. 292.

here the Daemonic is precisely one of the conceptual tools by which he now strove to look beyond any psycho-social axis in order to begin to evolve a fuller understanding of both past and present histories. The use by Auden of constructions of 'the demonic' as a means of codifying the force, both creative and destructive, operating within the individual and beneath the public realm. He continues,

Both in art and life, above all in social and political life, we are today confronted by the spectacle, not of a Utilitarian rationalism that dismisses all that cannot be expressed in prose and statistics as silly childish stuff, but rather by an ecstatic and morbid abdication of the free-willing and individual before the collective and the daemonic. We have become obscene night worshipers who, having discovered that we cannot live exactly as we will, deny the possibility of willing anything and are content masochistically to be lived, a denial that betrays not only us but our daemon itself.⁵⁶⁸

This essay (ostensibly a review of Walter de la Mare's anthology, *Behold this Dreamer*) has readily been discussed in terms of its exposition of the shifting relations between conscious and unconscious.⁵⁶⁹ However, the fact of Auden's choice of the biblical myth as his source of metaphor has scarcely been acknowledged (less still interrogated). The above comments would at first appear to suggest the negation of free-will by the operation of what is termed 'the daemonic', yet the closing reference to the possible betrayal of this very 'daemon' should alert us to the fact that Auden is far from straightforwardly envisaging a force to which we, as individuals, are passively subject. One might indeed point out that the assertion that we are 'content masochistically to be lived' in fact inversely implies *choice*, and the comment is especially telling when read in view of Auden's rejection of pacifism after 1939, and his thesis, as noted by Stan Smith, that

⁵⁶⁸ Auden, 'Jacob and the Angel'.

⁵⁶⁹ See: Rachel Christofides, *Aspects of the Self in the Poetry of W. H. Auden* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 1997) pp. 249-255.

in crisis.⁵⁷⁰

It is worth drawing attention at this juncture to Auden's elegy for Ernst Toller (the German expressionist dramatist who had committed suicide in New York) in which Auden appears to borrow directly from Groddeck's *The Book of the It* (1923). Here, Auden writes,

We are lived by powers we pretend to understand:
They arrange our loves; it is they who direct at the end
The enemy bullet, the sickness, or even our hand.

It is their tomorrow hangs over the earth of the living⁵⁷¹

Groddeck was an influential psychologist who held a psychosomatic view of illness, which he cited as evidence of self-deception in the sufferer. The following passage from his work is of particular relevance here,

One thing above all will become clear to you, that our lives are governed by forces that do not lie open to the day, but must needs be laboriously sought out...I hold the view that man is animated by the Unknown, that there is within him some wondrous force which directs both what he himself does, and what happens to him. The affirmation 'I live' is only conditionally correct, it expresses only a small and superficial part of the fundamental principal 'Man is lived by the It.'⁵⁷²

Whilst Auden's interest in Groddeck is widely acknowledged, the point has not yet been made that the basis of the latter's appeal might well be seen to lie in the postulating of psychological insight allied to the belief in an unknown quantity: in other words, in a psychological – that is to say, 'scientific' - discourse which makes no claim to omniscience. The clue to this may be found in the Toller elegy's pointed

⁵⁷⁰ Smith, (1985) p. 120.

⁵⁷¹ *AT*, p. 101-2.

⁵⁷² Georg Groddeck, *The Book of the It – Psychoanalytic Letters to a Friend* (London: The C. W. Daniel Company, 1935) p. 16. It is easy to see why Groddeck's book has on occasion been mistakenly referred to as 'The Book of the *Id*'.

reference to the presence of understanding, a line which, notwithstanding Auden's own remarkable intellectual prowess, signals his wariness over humanity's overconfidence in its ability to properly anatomise and explain its own history. The precise association between Groddeck's ideas and Toller's plight is not made explicit in the elegy. Yet as the poem comes to rest it posits against this mysterious unknown force, the 'It', the certainty that 'We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving'. The important point here is that Auden retains and continues to deploy this notion of the 'It', though its meaning and significance would begin to alter under the influence of his theological reading. The confluence in Auden's mind between Groddeck's 'It' and 'the demonic' thus begins to reveal itself in the poetry he had by now begun writing.

The opening quatrain of the first of the 'In Time of War' sonnets explicitly brings into play the encounter between the individual and history, a theme which is explored at length, and with remarkable breadth of vision, as the sequence progresses. Whilst the present study affords a limited opportunity to do the sequence full justice, it is worth noting that, as John Fuller has pointed out, this particular poem re-asserts Auden's central theme of the conflict between the dangerous, apparently unavertable reality of the external political world and the continuing moral challenge of the inner life,⁵⁷³

Here, though the bombs are real and dangerous,
And Italy and Kings are far away,
And we're afraid that you will speak to us,
You promise still the inner life shall pay.

As we run down the slope of Hate with gladness
You trip us up like an unnoticed stone,
And just as we are closeted with Madness
You interrupt us like the telephone.⁵⁷⁴

As Fuller argues, Auden locates evil here in the genteel prejudices of the English middle-class,⁵⁷⁵ with the moral critique of History being deftly interwoven with

⁵⁷³ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden, A Commentary* (London: Faber, 1998) p. 230.

⁵⁷⁴ *EA*, p. 249.

⁵⁷⁵ Fuller, p. 230.

references to Forster's novels, (the latter being the subject of Auden's dedication), which themselves may be read as working to expose such prejudices. Indeed, it is worth noting that the reference here to 'the inner life' derives from chapter xxxvii of *Howard's End*, at the point where Margaret and Helen Schlegel discover that, in Forster's words, 'the inner life had paid'.⁵⁷⁶

It can be seen, moreover, that Auden's use in particular of the myths of Eden and the Fall – as has already been noted above in the case of the latter with reference to 'Oxford' – as a means of interpreting and coming to grips with history persists in his poetry from the mid-thirties onwards. A further example may be found in sonnet II, from 'In Time of War', where we encounter the lines,

They wondered why the fruit had been forbidden;
It taught them nothing new. They hid their pride,
But did not listen much when they were chidden;
They knew exactly what to do outside.⁵⁷⁷

These lines seem to get to the heart of man's fallen state; the jaded sense of 'nothing new' itself suggestive of innocence usurped by knowing cynicism. The sonnets, read in sequence, begin to assume the form of a parable of mankind, a fact underlined by the shifting pronoun 'He'; which tells us that, as Greenberg has pointed out, the sonnets give the history not of men but of *Man*,⁵⁷⁸ and which has yet to develop into the individual, experiencing 'I'.

Auden's very tendency towards what might be understood as a Hardyian 'hawk's eye' view,⁵⁷⁹ abundantly evident in the war sonnets, was, as his work developed, itself indicative of his deepening religious world-view, and quest towards a totalizing poetic vision. Moreover, it can be seen that the notion of 'the demonic' as a conceptual tool for understanding history held an increasing attraction for Auden from the mid-thirties onwards. The following comments from Reinhold Niebuhr are of particular relevance here,

⁵⁷⁶ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin, 1989) p. 292.

⁵⁷⁷ *EA*, p. 251.

⁵⁷⁸ Greenberg, p. 88.

⁵⁷⁹ Auden would attribute the beginnings of this tendency to his early admiration of Thomas Hardy, writing in the 1940s that 'what I valued most in Hardy, then, as I still do, was his hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height' (cited in: Carpenter, p. 36, no reference given).

There has been little suggestion in modern culture of the demonic force in human life, of the peril in which all achievements of life and civilisation constantly stand because the evil in men may be compounded in collective actions until they reach diabolical proportions.⁵⁸⁰

Such an argument clearly resonated with Auden, who was by this time also beginning to absorb the ideas of the theologian Paul Tillich, who explores the concept of 'the demonic' at considerable length in his book, *The Interpretation of History* (1936).⁵⁸¹ As Brian Conniff has pointed out, Auden's attraction to the Christian realism and neo-orthodox theology of Niebuhr and Tillich, with its roots in the European reaction to World War I, constituted a logical response to the heightened sense of the human capacity for evil that Auden, like Spender, MacNeice, Isherwood, Orwell and others, had developed largely by witnessing the rise of fascism.⁵⁸²

It should be noted at this juncture that Tillich's definitions of demonry and 'the demonic' are various and multi-faceted. Its description is scarcely aided by the fact that 'the demonic' itself is not to be encountered in any pure form, its nature being better understood as relative or conditional, so that, as Conniff notes, its destructive power is always merged, inextricably, with creative or productive energy.⁵⁸³ As Tillich explains,

The dialectics of the demonic explain the vacillating verbal usage of the word 'demonic.' If the word has not yet become an empty slogan, its basic meaning must always be retained: the unity of form-creating and form-destroying strength⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁰ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1937) p. 26.

⁵⁸¹ It must be acknowledged that Auden's interest in Tillich's category of 'the demonic' as a conceptual tool has been noted by Brian Conniff in his essay, 'Answering Herod: W. H. Auden, Paul Tillich, Ernst Toller, and the Demonic' (ed. Izzo, David Garrett, *W. H. Auden, a legacy* (Cornwall, Locust Hill Press, 2002) pp. 279-328). However, I would stress that the interest of this piece is predominantly in its implications for Auden's development after 1940.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵⁸⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (trans. N. A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey, London & New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936) p. 81.

which proceeds to argue that, in the Biblical myth, it is 'the creative ambition to be like God that leads to the fall, not simply being overcome by sensual nature'.⁵⁸⁵ So-conceived, 'the demonic' appealed to Auden as offering the beginnings of a new poetic language, over and above the psycho-social model upon which he had previously been reliant, by which the crises of contemporary civilisation might be better explored and understood. One of the more concise definitions of 'the demonic' is put forward by Tillich as follows,

The demonic is the perversion of the creative, and as such belongs to the phenomena that are contrary to essential nature or sin.⁵⁸⁶

We can note that this construction of 'the demonic' as residing primarily in the perversion or suppression of the creative gift is one that Auden repeatedly returns to in his elegies for Edward Lear and Matthew Arnold, and ballads such as 'James Honeyman'. Tillich expounds further in explaining that,

The object of demonic destruction is the personality standing in social connection and the social structure itself, which is built up by the former.⁵⁸⁷

Thus, we can begin to see how, so-conceived, the operations of the 'demonic' within the private, and would-be creative individual may be played out at the societal and political levels.

Among the more important poems which may be read as registering Auden's move towards a more overtly theistic perspective is that which is dedicated to the 17th century French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, whose *Pensées* Auden had been studying around this time (and which, alongside Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, was the model for what may be termed Auden's own 'pensées', 'The Prolific and the Devourer'). Some insight into the personal resonances within the poem may be gleaned from a letter Auden wrote to Spender in autumn 1940,

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 94.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 93.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 92.

As you know, my dominant faculties are intellect and intuition, my weak ones feeling and sensation. This means I have to approach life via the former; I must have knowledge and a great deal of it before I can feel anything.⁵⁸⁸

Just as Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) with its attack on cerebral activity, spoke to a deficiency Auden came to recognise in himself, so 'Pascal' begins to articulate a new and emergent affinity with a life involved in religious discovery,

Knowledge was lifted up on Love but faced
Away from her towards the lives in refuge,
Directed always to the moon-struck jeering neighbours
Who'd grown aware of being watched and come
Uneasily, against their native judgment,
And still were coming up the local paths
From every gate of the protective town
And every crevice of the noon-hot landscape.⁵⁸⁹

As John Fuller has pointed out, Pascal's story, in which a two-hour vision at the age of thirty-one ('And in the night the Unexpected came') prompts the mathematical prodigy to abandon his scientific 'gift' in favour of religious revelation and the writing of Christian apologetics, would clearly have appealed to Auden at this time⁵⁹⁰ (Auden himself was thirty-two at this point). In the poem, knowledge itself is 'lifted up on Love', that same knowledge which, as Auden confessed to Spender, had been his only route to feeling and sensation, essentially a product of worldly egotism, and which is in his subject thus transfigured,

The empty was transformed into possession,
The cold burst into flames; creation was on fire
And his weak moment blazing like a bush,

⁵⁸⁸ Unpublished letter, cited in: Carpenter, p. 83.

⁵⁸⁹ *AT*, p. 25.

⁵⁹⁰ Fuller, pp. 260-261.

A symptom of the order and the praise

The epiphanic and generative moment experienced by Pascal, in which 'The cold burst into flames; creation was on fire', bears a key semblance to Tillich's account of the emergence of 'the demonic', which becomes visible 'only when the cleavage of the ego has an ecstatic character, so that with all its destructiveness, it is still creative'.⁵⁹² Importantly, however, just as the poem seems to have recounted a private journey culminating in the moment of epiphany, the final stanza deftly shifts its stance, and the private vision is subsumed by the public voice as the 'Just city' is invoked,

...But round his neck
Now hung a louder cry than the familiar tune
Libido Excellendi whistled as he wrote
The lucid and unfair. And still it rings
Wherever there are children doubt and deserts,
Or cities that exist for mercy and for judgement.⁵⁹³

We can suppose the description of writing the 'lucid and unfair' to refer to the composition of Pascal's *Pensées* (and the notion of 'unfairness' a wry allusion to the short shrift which Pascal, like Auden, afforded those whom he perceived his intellectual inferiors). Yet overriding this is the 'louder cry' which signals a religious motivation which will prove deeper and more enduring than the mere whistling of 'Libido Excellendi'.

It is also worth noting that Auden found in the motif of the 'gift' itself a useful and malleable poetic device, capable of simultaneously carrying psychological and religious significances. To take a further instance, we learn in 'The Novelist' how, for Auden, the former is obliged to 'struggle out of his boyish gift and learn/How to be plain and awkward'; moreover, that,

.... to achieve his lightest wish, he must
Become the whole of boredom, subject to

⁵⁹¹ *AT*, p. 27.

⁵⁹² Tillich, p. 87.

⁵⁹³ *AT*, p. 28.

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,
And in his own weak person, if he can,
Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.

With Auden's novelist, as with Pascal, the gift is at once a force to be resisted and harnessed. The insistence that the novelist must 'suffer dully all the wrongs of Man' would seem to suggest that the novelist occupies a redemptive, Christ-like position, carrying out a willing self-sacrifice which involves his preparedness to be 'one after whom none think it worth to turn'. That Auden should posit the distinction between the roles of poet and novelist in such terms is further revealing of his own deepening belief and its gradual yet unmistakable integration into the poetry.

The poem, 'Matthew Arnold' attests further to Auden's interest in the creative/destructive potential of the 'demonic', as registered via the notion of the suppressed 'gift'. The poem begins with the line, 'His gift knew what he was – a dark disordered city', and in this opening statement comes Auden's intimation sense of a force, Arnold's 'gift', like Pascal's, operating within, and yet distinct from the character of Arnold himself. The second stanza develops the idea further to outline a creative potential that might yet have been realised; the gift

...would have gladly lived in him and learned his ways,
And grown observant like a beggar, and become
Familiar with each square and boulevard and slum,
And found in the disorder a whole world to praise.⁵⁹⁴

Unchecked, Arnold's gift is thus capable of redeeming disorder, finding in it 'a whole world to praise'.

Some further reference may be made at this point to 'Spain 1937', which is among Auden's most famous and important thirties poems. Here we find Auden

⁵⁹⁴ *AT*, p. 46.

expanding the use of the 'I' so that it becomes the symbolic personification of what
is at once a nation and an ideological battleground,

'What's your proposal? To build the Just City? I will.

I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic

Death? Very well, I accept, for

I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain.'

The poem is one of the best examples of Auden's increasing inclination towards the omniscient voice, and is further revealing of his drive towards a necessarily complex, yet complete and unified understanding of human history. In its grand sweep, the poem tells of the 'the invention/Of cart wheels and clocks'; 'the bustling world of the navigators'; 'the theological feuds in the taverns'; 'the construction of railways in the colonial desert'; 'the classic lecture/On the origin of mankind', yet all are subsumed, even rendered irrelevant, by the present moment, the 'today' which seems to demand our intervention, and gravely postulates our role in the determination of history's next phase. Thus, 'Spain' becomes, for Auden, the site where private weakness and individual choice become visibly and decisively enacted within the public realm. As Edward Mendelson has argued, the poem affirms the irreducible privacy in which all choices are made, and insists on unique personal responsibility: on man's equal freedom to build the Just City, if he chooses, or to rush into romantic death.⁵⁹⁵ The 'I' of the poem is in one sense history personified: 'I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain', yet, as O'Neill points out, 'History' itself is not as the poem might seem to suggest, 'the operator', but rather the sum of human choices.⁵⁹⁶ Auden maps mankind's privately experienced, yet publicly manifest crises onto a country whose geographical proximity to the African continent might seem to place it on the periphery of events, but which history has in fact rendered the decisive site of the European crisis,

On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe,

⁵⁹⁵ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1999) p. 317.

⁵⁹⁶ ed. O'Neill, p. 850.

Here Auden combines his sweeping aerial vision with an insistence upon precision: he sees the active 'menacing shapes' at work, 'precise and alive' in their operations. Yet the nature of the 'fever' which animates them can and must be properly understood if their progress is to be checked. Moreover, it should not escape notice that intimations once more of 'the demonic' seem embedded within precisely this image of 'our fever's menacing shapes', a phrase which renders visible the at once elusive and intelligible malevolent forces whose actions are manifest on the perpetually 'inventive' European continent.

Of further importance to Auden's engagements with contemporary history, and particularly to his interest the idea of 'the demonic' as a feature of such engagements, are his explorations of the concept of evil itself. Auden now came to recognise that good and evil are not always distinguishable, indeed that evil is closely akin to 'the demonic' insofar as it is always intermixed with good and thus may seldom be encountered in pure form. Particularly telling is the rarely commented-on insistence in the poem, 'Herman Melville' (written about Melville's unfinished parable, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924)) that

Evil is unspectacular and always human
And shares our bed and eats at our own table,
And we are introduced to Goodness every day,
Even in drawing rooms among a crowd of faults.⁵⁹⁸

As Stephen Schuler has pointed out, the line 'eats at our own table' is an oblique reference to the last supper and Judas' betrayal of Jesus. As Schuler notes, 'evil appears not as a dramatic, overwhelming malevolence but as the always-possible infidelity of a friend or lover, not as a palpably malicious being but as the potential for deceit and unfaithfulness.'⁵⁹⁹ Evil is thus demystified in the poem, rendered 'unspectacular and always human', and located not in any spiritual or mythical realm, but within humanity itself. Such an insight corresponds closely with that put

⁵⁹⁷ *AT*, p. 95.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁹⁹ Stephen J. Schuler, *Augustinian Auden: The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on W. H. Auden*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Baylor University, 2008) p. 130.

forward in *The Ascent of F6*, (1936) in which the character of the Abbot assures the mountaineer, Ransom, that '(N)othing is revealed but what we have hidden from ourselves; the treasure we have buried and accursed'.⁶⁰⁰ Moreover, we can see that Tillich's 'demonic' in fact issues from a similar position, where the latter argues as follows,

The affirmation of the demonic has nothing to do with a mythological or metaphysical affirmation of a world of spirits. But it is true that only in personalities does the demonic receive power, for here the form not only grows by nature, is not only imprinted on existence, but confronts existence by demanding something and appealing to the freedom and self-mastery of living persons.⁶⁰¹

We can see how Auden's reading of Tillich, combined with his impulse to demystify and explain the processes by which evil operates within history, began to give rise to intimations of a complexity of a new and different kind. In his elegy for Freud, Auden tells of how the psychologist

[...] went his way,
Down among the Lost People like Dante, down
To the stinking fosse where the injured
Lead the ugly life of the rejected.

And showed us what evil is: not as we thought
Deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith,
Our dishonest mood of denial,
The concupiscence of the oppressor.⁶⁰²

Like Tillich's 'demonic', evil is characterised here not as a discrete entity, but in similarly negative terms, as something *absent*, or, in Tillich's words, 'the actuality

⁶⁰⁰ W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6*, (London: Faber, 1936) p. 73. Cited hereafter as *F6*.

⁶⁰¹ Tillich, p. 85.

⁶⁰² *AT*, p. 109.

changeability of the 'demonic' is attested to in *The Ascent of F6*, where the Abbot assures Ransom that the ostensibly mythical guardian demon of the mountain is indeed quite real, '(O)nly his ministry and his visitation are unique for every nature'.⁶⁰⁴ Moreover, we can say that 'the demonic' itself can, accordingly, be construed as a force which directs both from within and without, being the shape given both to the private will and those external forces by which we are 'lived'. As is asserted in *F6*, 'you can only rule men by appealing to their fear and their lust; government requires the exercise of the human will: and the human will is from the Demon'.⁶⁰⁵ It follows that whilst 'the demonic' eludes any single definition, it is precisely this elusive quality which guarantees its potency for Auden as a symbolic and conceptual tool with which to interpret both past and present histories. In the above elegy, Auden implicates both audience and speaker in his equation of our both private and collective 'dishonest mood of denial' with 'the concupiscence of the oppressor', with evil located in the processes of repression which are seen to result both in private grief and public trauma.

It is in 'September 1st 1939' that the personal 'I' conspicuously resurfaces to reclaim its place at the centre of the poetry, signalling, as O'Neill has noted, that Auden is ready to concede and explore his subjectivity.⁶⁰⁶ Individual experience is both exalted and mistrusted in the poem: we encounter the speaker sitting 'uncertain and afraid', in an equally uncertain location, 'one of the dives/On Fifty-Second Street'. Here, the understanding of history unearthed by the labour of the academic emerges as a commonly apprehended truism,

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know

⁶⁰³ Tillich, p. 79.

⁶⁰⁴ *F6*, p. 72.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶⁰⁶ ed. O'Neill, p. 848.

Those to whom evil is done

Do evil in return.⁶⁰⁷

Once again, Auden's faith in the intelligibility of our past and present histories is brought to the fore, even as he increasingly lacks confidence in the means by which it is more usually understood. The suggestion of discovering 'what occurred at Linz' (where Hitler had grown up) insinuates once more the possible anatomizing of history along psychoanalytic lines. Yet at the same time it is clear that Auden by now sees limited value in the pursuit of such causalities, as he pointedly locates the recognition of truth not amongst the ranks of the learned, but rather in the unarraigned knowledge of the schoolchild. Moreover, and as the following lines will further attest, Auden final poems of the decade frequently occupy a tonal space somewhere between political prophecy and the mournfully elegiac,

So many have forgotten how
To say I Am, and would be
Lost if they could in history.⁶⁰⁸

As has been argued here, Auden's poetry of the thirties was by no means marked by exclusively psychological or political preoccupations, still less by any consciously attempted 'synthesis' of the two. Rather, the poetry – and in particular that written during the latter half of the decade – is more properly viewed as a site of exchange between these more widely acknowledged concerns and a rediscovered Christianity which served both as a body of doctrine but also an important source of metaphors in the quest towards a fuller envisioning and negotiation of man's relationship to history. Auden's later poems of the thirties can thus be seen as a fulfilment of a quest begun some ten years earlier, whereby the drive towards rendering visible the interminable negotiations between the public and private realms takes on a significance beyond the political or the psychological, emerging, rather, as part of a wider poetic enterprise whose aim was towards a totalising view of history, itself a function of Auden's predisposition

⁶⁰⁷ *AT*, p. 103.

⁶⁰⁸ 'For us like any other fugitive', *AT*, p. 50.

towards thinking only in the largest possible context, and which reflects his recognition, in Reinhold Niebuhr's words, that '(M)an seeks in history what he conceives to be already its truest reality – that is, its final essence'.⁶⁰⁹ It is perhaps to be expected that the self which emerges from such a project is both diminished and exalted, history's subject and its arbiter, whose nature and function is conceived only as the result of an ineffable logic.

Conclusion

This study has attended to a range of ways in which the public/private binary continues to afford an interpretative model against which the literature of the thirties might productively be (re)read. Whilst it must be acknowledged that, in terms of the contexts against which I have situated my chosen authors' respective treatments of public and private, there is more that can and needs to be said on a number of the aspects treated above, I would reiterate that the overarching purpose of this project has been precisely to help generate an enhanced sense of the scope of thirties' writing through a fuller consideration of key individual authors against a range of literary and intellectual traditions. This is an approach which, whilst holding true to the clashes between the personal and the political which have remained a central feature within thirties critical discourse, has nonetheless led me some way in the course of the thesis from what might be considered the prevalent view of the thirties as a period predominantly characterised by the documentary realist impulse as the principal mode of response. But it is an approach which also, I hope, leads, through its invocations of a range of literary-aesthetic, intellectual and theological modes of engagement, towards a deeper appreciation of the immensely variegated texture of thirties literature, and by extension of the importance of the decade's writing as situated against the wider twentieth-century literary canon.

I would also wish to point out that the necessary and unavoidable selectivity of this study in terms of the authors and texts discussed should by no

⁶⁰⁹ Niebuhr, p. 19.

means be taken to imply that further useful work might not be done in pursuing the operations of public and private themes in other writings of the decade, both in other texts by the authors here examined, and in works by those authors not discussed here, but who might, given greater space, have justifiably been included. Certainly the interplays between public and private selves and situations in writings by authors including Walter Brierly, James Hanley, Winifred Holtby, Walter Greenwood, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Rex Warner, Patrick Hamilton and Naomi Mitchison, among others, would reward the consideration along such lines which has not been possible within the parameters of this dissertation, both in order to substantiate, and to provide an additional dimension or dimensions to the literary-critical map of the decade's writing which emerges from the above chapters. I would, however, qualify this by stressing that the impetus behind the present work has not been to attempt to instigate the public/private binary as an interpretative model to be applied to all thirties' texts, but rather in a sense precisely to challenge, and thereby re-envision the possible functions and usages of such a binary by enquiring into specific ways in which it retains a key importance in our reading and understanding of the decade's literature.

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