**The Socially Real Edge of Modernism**

***Political Agency in British Literature 1914-1939***

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**Acknowledgements**

Writing a thesis is a little like riding a bike; it can be a socially engaging and exhilarating experience, but the hard work is done alone. While the *peloton* can be reassuring, the solitary *grimpeur* competes with their own mind as much as they are enabled by any collective.

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I dedicate this work to Jeni and Owen, antidotes and inspirations to work.

**Abstract**

This study considers marginal modernist writers’ negotiations of counter-currents in political thought, especially in terms of literary and political strikes, moments at which the minor collective consolidates. Their theories of what democracy might mean to the twentieth century can be seen as important in a reinterpretation of the moment of modernism. The writers explored are neither reactionary nor apathetic, but imbricated in a cultural nexus that incorporates mainstream and radical currents, and that cannot be delineated by national or international categories. Their figuration of collectives and their fashioning of political agency are particularly relevant to considerations of the individual artist-intellectual and the engaged political activist, and the poems, plays and other discursive writings explored here respond to issues of commitment and the radical form in which that commitment might be expressed.

By focusing on close readings of British poetry (and other discursive forms) written in the period 1914-1939, I read minor modernist literature’s socially real content as being expressive of a modernist dialectic which takes experimental literary form as a technique to represent the contradictions of modern society. Each chapter is historically embedded in the context of the work, taking the form of four case studies analysing the flashpoints in the history of the inter-war period. These chapters centre on writers who could be considered as part of a minor Anglo-American modernist continuum, who are set in dialogue with the European avant-garde. Chapter one focuses on John Rodker and Mary Butts, writing in the context of pacifist debates and the state of exception during the First World War. Chapter two, on Mina Loy, considers her manifesto style in relation to post-war constructions of democracy, particularly in its implications for poetic subjectivity. Chapter three, on Hugh MacDiarmid and Edgell Rickword, isolates the General Strike of 1926 as a high-point of British historical radicalism, yet to be considered as a major topic of British literary engagements. The British Surrealist movement of the 1930s constitutes the focus of chapter four, with writers such as Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and David Gascoyne central to an analysis of representational poetic strategies in terms of their access to and influence on political and social reality. My conclusion is a kind of coda to the concepts of social realism latent in much of this work, bringing the study into the contemporary by way of an analysis of experimental form and the socially real in contemporary poetry of the British Poetry Revival, considering work by Andrew Crozier, Roy Fisher and Barry MacSweeney.

**CONTENTS**

**Introduction**: The Reflective Margins 7

**Chapter 1**: Guts and Occasional Glory: John Rodker, Disputes and Intersections 23

**Chapter 2**: Atomic Masses: Mina Loy’s Transvaluing Poetic 59

**Chapter 3**: Striking Symbols/Symbolic Strikes: Allegorical Responses

 to the General Strike of 1926 86

**Chapter 4**: British Surrealism: Dialectic of the Veridical 127

**Conclusion**: The Dialectic of the Real in British Social Realism and the

 British Poetry Revival: Modernism and its After-Lives 169

**Bibliography**: 185

**The Reflective Margins: An Introduction**

*The coming of modernism is like the Rise of the Bourgeoisie – the closer you look, the further into the distance it recedes.*

* Gabriel Josipovici

As far as propaedeutics are concerned, work undertaken by Rachel Potter, Drew Milne and Andrew Crozier, highlighting the importance of re-evaluating the boundaries and canonical expectations of modernist literature, inspires this project, which aims to investigate tendentially politically-radical poetry and prose originating in the margins of English literature from the period 1914 to the start of the Second World War, 1939. Thus, this study is bookended by the two World Wars, encompassing the 1916 Military Service Act, which brought in compulsory conscription, through the Russian Revolution, the ratification of Suffrage legislation, the General Strike of 1926, the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in the 1930s, events which will be central to considerations of literary responses to formative events of the early part of the twentieth century. Within this historical timeframe, government policies and historic events, particularly those involving the extension of the franchise, conscription bills and immigration laws and amendments, and alterations of the economic constitution of the UK, will be linked to the political and aesthetic considerations of writers who were, and still are, to greater or lesser degrees, marginal or peripheral to academic appreciations of ‘Pound Era’ modernism. The writers John Rodker, Mary Butts, Mina Loy, Hugh MacDiarmid, and the British surrealists Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and David Gascoyne have been the subject of revivals of interest in recent years, but their importance in terms of a minor modernist practice that significantly differs from the ‘mainstream’ of canonical modernism, in its links to a dissident, politically-radical practice of formally innovative creative production and questions of alternative political, philosophical and social theoretical content, has yet to be fully appreciated and contextualised. Attention to the work of these frequently overlooked writers helps to interrogate links between the minor and major in this period, with major figures of great influence such as Wyndham Lewis often situated as touchstones who are used to interrogate some of the overlaps and structural confluences between the ‘sides’, intertwined though they are, most often, in actuality.

The alternative canon suggested here has, as its foundation, recent interventions in modernist reception histories. Analyses of canonical modernism’s codes of reactionary politics have impacted upon the contemporary taste in reading early twentieth-century literature, now existing as the hyperbole to which properly historicised accounts respond: John Harrison’s *The Reactionaries: A Study in the Anti-Democratic Intelligentsia*, for instance, foregrounds the anti-liberal and potentially pro-fascist agendas of Eliot, Lewis, Pound and Yeats.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, we do not have to look far in the political writings of these authors to experience their shared sense of pessimism about the project of parliamentary liberal democracy, which connects readily to the right-leaning intelligentsia of the age. The hallmarks of this reactionary stance have been widely understood to be ‘a profound sense of cultural dislocation, a call for a new elite, anti-parliamentarianism, plans for the corporate organisation of labour, racism, anti-Semitism and a revolt against social and literary decadence.’[[2]](#footnote-2) In such studies, it seems apparent the extent to which the political and historical trends of the time impacted upon and shaped the underlying politics of the hegemonic class of those we now term modernists. Yet beyond the mainstream – and even within the mainstream, as we can see in the formal study of modernist experiment – scholars of modern literature continue to unearth voices that have been obscured by the imprimatur of now canonical figures.

A strong link has been established between canon formation and the rejection of democracy, mass culture and collectivity by ‘major’ modernists such as Pound, Eliot, Hulme and Lewis by critics such as Lawrence Rainey, Rachel Potter and John Carey.[[3]](#footnote-3) The case for a modernism that makes such clear-cut and trenchant readings problematic is still being made; the widely-held view that modernism exists as a reaction-formation to mass culture and democratic values holds sway. And yet many female modernists, such as Mary Butts, Mina Loy and Dora Marsden, alongside practitioners such as John Rodker and Hugh MacDiarmid, who are clearly imbricated in political concerns determined by their context within the productive relations of their time,[[4]](#footnote-4) articulate a thoroughgoing critique of ideas of democracy, espousing instead more nuanced and elaborate views of issues of democratic value that do not necessarily follow a Suffragist or explicitly modernist-as-reactionary line respectively. These writers not only develop a political tendency, but elaborate that tendency in their attention to techniques of articulating that tendency in terms of literary form.[[5]](#footnote-5) The technical considerations of these authors reflect changes in political structures that came about as a result of the First World War primarily, and the decline of Liberalism secondarily (and contingently), alongside the activities of committed radicals who envisaged alternatives to the right-leaning artist-intellectuals and other radicals who were influenced by and sometimes espoused the revolutionary aesthetic propaganda of the time. The ‘minor’ modernist figure’s scepticism of a burgeoning mass democracy and military-industrial state makes for a complex, often conflicted presentation, especially considering the putative extension of rights and freedoms to otherwise unrepresented sectors of society after the war, in the case of the franchise and women’s rights, and the resultant unfolding of new forms of collectivity that mass culture heralds. In this context, we can see how broader trends in the anti-democratic intelligentsia are often miniaturised and refracted in the minoritarian writers of the era. These writers, rehabilitated to our renewed attention, defamiliarise staid tropes of perceived modernist politics, and invite us to ‘set [them] into other cultural matrices which are less well mapped even than modernism,’ in the words of Andrew Crozier, introducing a new audience to the work of John Rodker.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Renewed attention to the practitioners of an art that challenges the accepted cultural matrix of modernist art opens up new spaces for critical engagement. Rodker, Loy, MacDiarmid (set in this context) and the British Surrealists sit outside mainstream trends, allowing a critical distance and a contemporary use value that might be otherwise unavailable in readings of ‘the men of 1914’; as Drew Milne writes of Loy, minoritarian texts of the period of modernism remain ‘unassimilated, still suggestive for what might become of twenty-first-century neo-modernism.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Part of the reason for this lack of assimilation is, as Milne reports, an uneasy or unenlightening relationship between the creative and critical work, which makes positioning their poetic output problematic. Matrices do not present themselves readily to assist in the forging of analytic hooks that could serve as hermeneutics to these sidelined works, necessarily. Their marginality is further embedded by the nationalist categories of English Literary criticism, which have all too readily consigned poets such as Loy to the American side of the Anglo-American divide, while at the same time retaining national categories within the boundaries of the British Isles that have marginalised poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid, the ‘geopolitical marginality’[[8]](#footnote-8) of whom persists despite historic connections to and contemporary implication in the institution of literary modernism. While it may be useful to position poets such as Rodker, Loy and MacDiarmid in relation to the literary giants that often sustained and enabled their artistic output, and it certainly helps to historicise their work as being produced by material changes in the social and political fabric that are often reflected in the materialities of that work, Milne is persuasive in suggesting that, bearing in mind the potential ephemerality of the term ‘modernism’, we as readers need to first take these poets on their own terms by engaging their work in close reading (see Milne, 160). As a methodology, this advice, together with the proviso parenthetically inserted, is borne into action in the close readings engaged in the following study.

In recent studies, modernism has been understood as having been more involved in a critical, multifaceted politics than its critics or mainstream adherents might be willing to admit. As Melba Cuddy-Keane writes:

Modernism’s focus on individual subjectivity has been criticised for neglecting the social and political, and modernism’s cosmopolitanism for implicitly attributing universality to metropolitan, European views. But a growing number of studies challenge the binary of individual and collective, investigating those versions of modernist cosmopolitanism that derived their communal visions from the recognition of, and responsibility toward, other individuals (Cuddy-Keane, 2003). Jessica Berman (2001) shows how modernist narrative models new process-oriented versions of cosmopolitan communities, resisting both authoritarian hierarchies and the coercive goal of ideal consensus, and opening a place for “pariah solidarities” among culturally marginalised or occluded voices.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rodker, Butts and Loy, in particular, route their engagement with politics through focussed studies of interpersonal relationships. Their urban personas generate a sense of collective representation when they are read in the context of the socially real. Modernists such as Rodker, Butts, Loy, MacDiarmid and the British Surrealists differ from their putatively privileged cultural arbiters manifestly in their aversion to the rhetoric of generally accepted narratives. While the postmodern mind has been termed ‘political’ in this very way, in its distrust of metanarratives (*pace* Lyotard) and promotion of ‘a qualified, limited truth, relative to a particular situation,’[[10]](#footnote-10) these particular marginal modernist figures practiced an analogous foregrounding of the processes of state interpellation and dissident thought or representation in their work (and lives). Each of them represent counter-poetics of the dominant discourse, not only in content, but in their formal decisions, which most often coalesce in a kind of materialist free verse, and which manifest objective poetic positions bearing upon the production and alteration of the subjectivities they compose. Christopher Caudwell seems to isolate this hypothesis in his 1937 study *Illusion and Reality*, where the value of poetry is indexed by its ability to incorporate the external reality of which it is a part: ‘From new poets we demand new manifest contents and new affective colouring, for it is their function to give us new emotional attitudes to a new social environment.’[[11]](#footnote-11) This study, like Caudwell, finds a kind of key to poetry in clusters of ‘suppressed pieces of external reality’[[12]](#footnote-12) that can be read into the techniques of the writers in question. Differing levels of ‘suppression’ often attend differing levels of ‘commitment,’ but even in the most ‘committed’ of poets, such as Hugh MacDiarmid, we find in the use of allegory as a representational technique, for example, a concrete instance of a manifested politically anarchist tendency.

Michael North and Marshall Berman, among many others, have located within the historical ‘period’ of the modernist movement a strong trend of upheaval, turbulence and violent change. Michael North, for instance, points to the First World War as the specific moment that British culture was forced to look upon its own revolution retrospectively, because of the rapid speed with which social and political change occurred.[[13]](#footnote-13) Immediately post-war accounts by the revolutionary left, such as those of Gramsci, are optimistic about the potentialities unleashed by the levelling factor of the conflict. In *The Conquest of the State* he writes of the war as a decisive moment in the class struggle: ‘The war has upturned the strategic situation in the class struggle. The capitalists have lost pre-eminence: their freedom is limited; their power is annulled.’[[14]](#footnote-14) The war had realised the power of the working masses, as it had ‘inserted [them] into the conscious historical process.’[[15]](#footnote-15) But while the teleology of the dictatorship of the proletariat had become visible to many, the means of its achievement remained a horizon upon which class struggle focussed. The 1917 revolution in Russia opened the possibility of concrete forms of political networking, which remained unrealised despite the theoretical incorporation of revolutionary ideas. From this scene of dislocation comes, for example, the postwar reassessment as a specific genre.[[16]](#footnote-16) North quotes C. F. G. Masterman, who compared post-war society to the upheavals of 1066: ‘Here, then, is a complete and startling transformation of values; not slowly changing from one to another, but suddenly and almost brutally forced upon the life of millions by causes altogether outside their own control.’ As North summarises it, Masterman registers the ‘displaced recognition of social changes that had already taken place, but so swiftly and completely that they baffled the understanding.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Masterman also makes a strong case for the idea of a new state of social control and mass culture inaugurated by the advent of the war; mass bafflement replaces informed opinion, mass culture sweeps away dissent, and a nefarious, capricious form of government, beset by geopolitical turmoil, has overtaken a traditional ‘soft’ Liberalism. As Gramsci understood, the hegemony of the commercially encoded democratic state was quick to absorb revolutionary tendencies. As we shall see, the enactment of numerous legislative changes during the war fundamentally altered the balance of civil liberties entrusted to British subjects – defence of the realm became a mode of social control during the war, and was sustained as the war economy became normalised as a mainstay of economic governance. By implicitly conceding power to such statist forces, the imputation is that no effective opposition voices existed to register the rapid changes heralded by global strife and mass involvement and the sudden staging of ‘the masses’ as the representational centre-piece of the first instantly-mediated global conflict, and therefore that Britain placidly strayed into a genocidal conflict. Much of the work done by figures of the modernist fringes, however, would run against the grain of this argument, particularly in their irenic positions during war and their critical attitude to the state’s pronouncements on individual responsibility and legislative change. By collapsing the personal into the political, and presenting a hybrid, spliced representation of political agency within the code of an elite cultural coterie, such modernist voices go some way to dissolving the hermeneutic of authoritarian modernism.

The notion that ‘modernism’ was and remains an authoritarian canonical formation still holds great sway; certainly, for critics such as John Carey and Lawrence Rainey, modernism may be defined by its antipathy towards a degraded modernity, its attendant sprawling, incoherent masses without necessary form, and its suspect tendency to promote techniques of bodily perfectibility – also explored in Tim Armstrong’s *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* – as a shortcut to bringing forth Nietzschean ‘supermen’ set against the mass. Yet such didactic hypotheses and readings tend to reduce the scope of modernism to focus on its canonical epitomes, rather than the productive forces at the fringes of modernism that could be used to test this surface tension, if not to explode the notion of there being one typical modernist practice. Rachel Potter’s analysis in her study of modernism and democracy is astute in its critical stance towards simple appropriations and anti-canonical readings, opposing the simple binary between a major and a minor practice by proposing a reinterpretation of re-readings that contains points of overlap between both.[[18]](#footnote-18) The purview of modernist practice can be seen as being an alembic of influences, Potter finally prioritising a site of critical tension that evolves into a practice by avoiding the monolithic statements of a doctrinaire and reactionary modernist politics and the dangers of inclusivity suggested by liberal democratic state ideology. As Michael Levenson writes in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, for Eliot in particular, ‘In the modernist polemic, no *tertium quid* is allowed,’[[19]](#footnote-19) which emphasises both the stringent dualistic (and often deterministic) thinking of the legislators of modernism, and the anxiety of influence from the movement’s discourse to that of its later critics. Yet the writers in this study are perhaps most often to be best understood as offering or striving to recognise their conceptual overcoming in a third term, perhaps most akin to Adorno’s static dialectic.

Potter emphasises the currency of this critical position by reference to Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide*, which develops a postmodern feminist appreciation of women writers as the excluded other of modernism, with subsequent prioritisation of women writers as the remainder of an inherently masculinist tradition, a position that finds its articulation through the collapsing together of ‘a democratised cultural sphere, women’s writing, and the “feminine’’ into a springboard for “enlightened” critical analysis.[[20]](#footnote-20) In doing so, reversing the canonical aspects of modernism and prioritising the underprivileged, however, Huyssen, in Potter’s view, unwittingly re-authorises the traditional ‘male’ modernist by locating cultural and political authority solely within his purview. This position also reinforces the idea of a feminised mass culture, where ‘the market-place is seen as [...] democratised and “feminised’’’, challenging ‘the male modernist text.’[[21]](#footnote-21) It is a consumerist notion of liberation, dependent upon market relations and the rights and freedoms allotted to them. Structurally, then, the division male modernist=authoritarian / female modernist=libertarian-democratic has been reinforced by readings of women modernists that attempt to salvage a truer sense of democracy from an ‘elitist’ literary-historical moment.

Potter’s methodology is to provide a historical framework to understand what precisely was meant by the terms ‘democratic’, ‘liberal’ and ‘authoritarian’ in the early twentieth century. For example, the notion of democracy had altered significantly over a twenty year period when modernists like Pound and Eliot disparately attacked democracy and liberalism as constrictive concepts: ‘the democracy that Pound had attacked in 1914 had disappeared by 1932, as the pre-war liberal democracies of Europe and America were replaced by the new mass democracies of the post-war period.’[[22]](#footnote-22) New political pressures and crises were being brought to bear on each separate discussion; in this way, Potter’s analysis is similar to Levenson’s, which likewise consistently seeks a third term within the dualism, viewing the modernist ‘moment’ as contingent upon rapidly changing and various historical contexts.

It was not only that the Reform Act of 1918, which gave the vote to all men and to women over 30, altered the constitutional order of politics in Britain. In the decline of liberalism was seeded the ascendency of political and economic competition, ousting what John Gray terms the ‘constitutional order of the free society.’ As Gray argues, one conception of liberal government, as it being ‘the guardian of the framework within which individuals may provide for themselves’, was destroyed in 1914, in favour of a ‘conception of government as the provider of general welfare.’[[23]](#footnote-23) And so, the government’s responsibility to and representation of the people had altered and become what might be understood as a means of controlling mass populations. Thus, the liberalism of the very early twentieth century was put under immense pressure, as Potter notes, leading cultural commentators such as L. T. Hobhouse to question whether liberalism could adequately face up to the challenge of mass politics and a new, febrile working class, without becoming a negative political philosophy based on antagonism between the free individual and the overbearing governmentality of state and state institutions. In this context, it is clear how the war sped up social and political change. The state fundamentally altered, increasing its power while enfranchising citizens into its mechanisms of parliamentary ‘choice’. Potter’s analysis of this change is fundamental to the understandings behind political agency in the minor modernists approached in this study:

[W]ar radically altered the relationship between the individual and the state. Compulsory conscription and repressive policies on freedom of information would have been unthinkable before the war, and many of these pieces of legislation were not revoked once the war ended. At the historical moment when Britain became a genuinely mass democratic state, then, the state’s authority over the individual was significantly and permanently extended.

The war speeded up [...] this contradiction between political authority and individual liberty. Many intellectuals argued before the war that the individual’s theoretical rights were in conflict with his or her actual liberty*: while the citizen was the bearer of more rights than ever before, in reality he or she had never been more powerless politically*.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The paradoxical state of governmentality has been analysed more recently by political philosophers and perhaps epitomised in Chantal Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox*. We can see how the metamorphosis of British political economy occasioned by the First World War that sought to inscribe basic rights such as the universal franchise actually signals the decline of a traditional Liberal political subject. Instead, this was undergoing substitution by the creation of a mass *polis* without a basis in individual liberty or collective self-determination. The influence of crowd psychology and the expansion of mass culture in the creation of such a mass democratic state should not be underestimated here; ideas of coercion and dominance by suggestion and leadership were gaining credence primarily by way of the highly influential crowd study of Le Bon, but also by the continuing currency of those ideas by well-known intellectuals such as Freud. By the 1930s, liberalism would be crushed as a genuine political force, unable to counter the geopolitical threats to British political stability represented by Soviet Russia and continental fascism.

Despite the cogency and sophistication of Potter’s analysis, her analysis rests on assurances about the political fabric of the society under consideration. A fixation upon the idea of a clearly-articulated historical break is considered formative of structural changes in cultural productions: ‘Before the war, modernists tended to define art against the liberal principles of equality, legality, and rights. Adopting the terms of the French debate about Rousseau’s legacy, T. E. Hulme, Irving Babbitt, Wyndham Lewis, and T. S. Eliot attacked Rousseauistic notions of equality and rights, and defended new models of authority. After the war, writers were more concerned with the way in which mass democracies were controlled by the economic interests of vast, hidden corporations.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Indeed, the corporate totalitarianisms of the emerging political formations were considered threatening even to the right-leaning intelligentsia, but there are other stories to tell here.

Potter’s inference that a fundamental split occurred in the discourse of rights and justice espoused by major modernist figures as a result of the war can be seen as strategic for the articulation of a broader critique of the public sphere and its mediation in the various modernisms (plural). Where female modernists are interesting for Potter, in distinction to large-looming figures such as Eliot, Pound, Hulme and Lewis, particularly in terms of politics, is in their questioning of democratic values, in spite of a ‘denigration of cultural inclusion’ from sources of authority that they have previously been critically read against, be they literary or political. For Potter, this informs the thinking that, in fact, a single ideology subtends the period of modernism:

It becomes clear that poets from across the political spectrum and the gender divide are sceptical about aspects of modern democracy, and that this informs their writing in important ways. This scepticism is not necessarily generated out of an elitist vision of poetic authority. At the heart of many modernist texts is the idea that modern democracies become formally inclusive at the historical moment when the state extends its power over the individual citizen. The change from restricted to mass democracy in the period alters the meaning of key political and aesthetic categories. At the moment when the state becomes inclusive, then, the terms of this inclusion become opaque.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Mina Loy’s post-war poems, according to Potter, are ‘haunted’ by this process. While the formal challenges manifested by female modernists remains as a distinct cultural reaction, in that they frequently seek to assert their distance from these politics by way of avant-garde borrowings, the terms of their political content can be seen as all too familiar. So while Loy’s poetry attacks phallocentric modernist peers and their ‘legislative poetics’, the political current that wars against capitalist state power and authoritarianism in democratic politics is seen as a concern shared in the modernist crucible. Potter refines down her analysis of Loy in terms of a diagnostic anti-democratic poetics: ‘her writing is at its most powerful when it engages with the limits of the ‘freedoms’ of modern democratic societies.’[[27]](#footnote-27) To be sure, minor modernism filters the shared ideological oppositions understood as inherent to the period, yet as we can see, the political unconscious of these writers is frequently unbounded by reactionary anti-democratic thinking. In fact, they frequently can be seen to seek a truer form of democracy, considering their formal incorporation of truth-seeking, inclusive poetic politics. We can see the borrowings made at the modernist fringes as attempts to find within modes of impersonality a potentially liberating strain of thought.

In quite clear ways, then, this study considers a number of minor modernist voices as being more involved in the historic avant-gardes than previously understood. As Milne argues, the geopolitical hegemony of canonicity resists such claims. Such resistances continue to inform the partitioning of trends across a line drawn around British poets that is seen as inhibitive of the revolutionary poetics of the European avant-gardes, as Sascha Bru argues:

Linguistic and social hurdles have always made certain patches of European modernism rather exotic to non-continental readers. One such exotic patch are the so-called ‘historic avant-gardes’ of futurism, expressionism, Dada and Surrealism, among others, which had no clear equivalents in the U.S. and Britain during the 1910s and 1920s.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This line suits Bru’s hypothesis that art as an institution was under threat as an exceptional cultural formation during the tightening of social control and suspension of liberal rights being undergone around the time of the First World War. Bru’s notion of political difference dictating the separation of European and Anglo-American modernisms seems at worst misguided. Hobsbawm’s ‘age of extremes’ defines Europe as a geopolitical entity – the political context in Britain, as we shall explore, still allowed for spaces of radical oppositionality in which the avant-garde notion of art as a social praxis could be mobilised. In general terms, though Bru is right to suggest that, in general, Britain and America produced ‘a less revolutionary and less innovative literature alongside the European avant-gardes,’[[29]](#footnote-29) it remains an issue that a full diversity of voices is often repressed to make way for rhetoric about the political tendencies of a canonical modernism. The notion that such an amorphous and indefinable institution as modernism could be considered as a figure of exception seems to misread the inherent plurality of that form. As the first chapter of the following study suggests, the state of exception operates on the basis of a biopolitics that seems incompatible with an understanding of a single institution. In this sense, my study is nominalist in that it seeks justification for political critique through minor instances of literary practice, political agency, and critical reading of form.

Yet the notion of a political modernist lyric poetry is still in the process of construction, conditioned as it is by early twentieth-century questions about the distinction between realism and modernism, a distinction which this study seeks to collapse. Brecht poses the central question to which this study is an attempt at an answer: ‘what about realism in lyric poetry?’[[30]](#footnote-30) For Brecht, formal decisions do not necessarily denote realism any more than the form of fascism operates as a coherent political ideology. Fluidity of form reflects the fluidity of reality as it changes according to the *episteme*. Brecht’s reorientation of the question of realism and modernism towards forms such as poetry reflects his quarrel with Lukács and his contention that modernism portrays interiority in a decadent bourgeois form. Experiment in this argument is considered a dangerous abdication of faithfulness in representing the complexity of lived existence, which Lukács argued was epitomised in the grand scope of the epic novel. Yet Brecht’s contention that realism cannot be defined in relation to particular forms of literature reflected his insistence that particular instances of formal experiment develop concrete historical relations that are only as good as their ability to interrogate the material reality of which they form a part. Though this provides us with a way of seeing certain avant-garde poetic expressions of modernism as being engaged in and critical of a real life praxis, we can also see how Brecht manipulates an argument on formalism to suggest that the message takes primacy over the medium; the medium becomes less relevant, and the message takes on a separate meaning from the art work, as Gillian Rose argues.[[31]](#footnote-31) Still, Lukács’s notion that formal choices are definitive of political choice, has been repeatedly attacked in arguments that see experiment as broadly mimetic of social, political and economic change, and reflective and constitutive of a kind of subjectivity that faces such a reality. Realism, which, in its social relation, forms the central focus of my conclusion chapter, has frequently been co-opted by representations that claim to speak for or about knowable events, objects or persons, often in ways that are amenable to a ‘plain reader’, in Milne’s critical terminology.[[32]](#footnote-32) Yet this illusionist realism is potentially more subjective, more fabricated, than the technical modernisms against which it often sets itself (especially in the case of Socialist Realism, focus of the fourth chapter on British Surrealism here); as Gillian Rose suggests, ‘a ‘faithful’ rendering of reality may involve fuller representation of it, or caricature of it, in a way which cuts across [Lukács’s] distinction between ‘abstract potentiality’ and ‘concrete possibility.’’[[33]](#footnote-33) Charles Altieri points the way to a revived understanding of modernism along these lines, claiming the developments of early modernists such as Pound and Williams as the concretion of a ‘new realism’ that could make of poetry a form of social inquiry.[[34]](#footnote-34) This concern of the type of realism interrogated in the following study seems to grow through the decades, culminating in an understanding of the discursive creation of reality itself in the anthropological thrust of the British Surrealists. This study focuses on the materialistic basis of the poetics of sensation. For Altieri, the new realists ‘[bear] witness to how expanded fields of sensation can introduce new possibilities for being alive as humans’[[35]](#footnote-35) – and certainly the conjunctures, disjunctions, splices and codings mythical, social and political of the poets studied here offer a formal sense of how we might begin to organise modernity – but this position can be seen to lack tangible politicisation. Certainly, for Rodker, MacDiarmid and Madge, language is both utilised and simultaneously critiqued as a methodology of reportorial bearing witness (indeed, it could be said the latter two writers gained this tendency from their experience of working in the news industry), quite against the Barthesian view that modernism promotes a violence oriented against language and on the types of sociality it is said to authorise.[[36]](#footnote-36) All of the poets in this study share a sense in which materialism interrupts the constructivism of the modernist aesthetic; as a kind of arrested dialectic, this forms the crux of their experiment. The central problematic here is the extent to which this renewed sense of material possibility and political agency in manifesting subjective states of critique could be oriented towards collectivities that evade the trappings of reactionary individualism *and* the illusion of a freely-determined utopian mass culture.

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Opening with John Rodker’s writing during and about the First World War, the first chapter of this study focuses upon one specific historical issue considered marginal to the war, conscientious objection. In Rodker’s early poetry, through to his post-war poetry, experimental prose work *Adolphe 1920* and the later *Memoirs of Other Fronts*, an idea of an idiosyncratic and challenging modernist voice can be heard, which makes reference to the bodily situation of the prisoner and the cultural/political outsider by way of an avant-gardist practice of fragmented writing reflecting experiments in evoking subjective states. The importance of an early reception point in British letters of the European literature that would inform Surrealism by way of Rodker’s interests, translation work, and his own poetic practice, will be considered. Recent theoretical work by Giorgio Agamben regarding the political status and function of the scapegoat helps to contextualise writing that connects the represented body with states of political exile and formal shifts in the operation of political and juridical power. Rodker’s position as a conscientious objector and a *persona non grata* of the British state – both in his ‘alien’ status as Jewish resident within the turbulent national mix of Whitechapel and his exile from home as a wanted man by the military authorities as a result of the compulsory conscription act of 1916 – informs his work with a close scrutiny of institutional authority and its reflection in the body of the observed or surveilled subject. A politics of sight and vision can be extrapolated from this attention to scrutiny, manifesting in the writing on early cinema forms in *Adolphe 1920*, which may be elaborated to signal a hitherto unfounded critique of scopophilia. Similarly uncharted is Rodker’s artistic attraction to forms of dialectic, in poetic structure and symbolism, which will be considered as inherently avant-gardist and challenging or even hostile to contemporaneous representations, based on his involvement with experimental European writers; his near-central role in a number of pivotal modernist little magazines bears this out.

Mary Butts, wife to John Rodker, was also involved in activities connected to the rejection of conscription, and worked for the non-combatants’ organisation and early form of the National Council for Civil Liberties, the National Council Against Conscription. This work provides the impetus for the early short story ‘Speed The Plough’, and coincides with her reading of pacifist texts such as Rose Macaulay’s *Non-Combatants and Others*, Bertrand Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy* and E. D. Morel’s *Truth and the War*, the influences of which have not been explored in the context of Butts’ writing or aesthetic considerations.[[37]](#footnote-37) Similarly, Butts’s proposition of mythical structures seems contingent upon her reading of J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, but the extent to which her mythological experiment is successful in providing an alternative to an overwhelming modernity is yet to be examined. Butts’s novel of 1925, *Ashe of Rings*, was self-proclaimed as a ‘war fairy-tale.’ Written during the war, it engages with the personal level of wartime society, haunted as it is by tortured interpersonal combat and the spectre of war’s alteration of social conscience. With its formal experimentalism, heavily informed by Joyce’s style, particularly that of the *Portrait* and its free indirect style, Butts’s novel utilises the cinematic jump-cut and the telegraphic sentence, very much to the effect of John Rodker, to signal changes in subjective states and in the process breaking down the voice of literary authority. This multi-perspective form has a correlate in Butts’s writing of the object within the novel. As Rochelle Rives has observed, Butts places the object in a problematic relationship to the observing subject: ‘Butts’s short stories and novels respond to a modernity that, as Rachel Bowlby claims, has erased all reference points for a collective emotional attachment. Ultimately Butts sees the basis for collective forms of empathy in a particular style of private ownership that dissolves the self, rather than solidifies it.’[[38]](#footnote-38) Butts’s writing, then, has specific relevance to the discussion of collectivity and mass culture, emphasising as she does the collective form and historical connectivity in private possession, a concern that applies to her staging of political conflict in terms of private agonisms. Rives points the way to a poststructuralist interpretation of Butts that applies to the study at hand, taking in as it does the notion of a majoritarian versus a minoritarian form of literature originating in the theory of Deleuze and Guattari, alongside theories of affectivity, experimentation on the self/body/body of work, and the concept of the fragment.

Mina Loy, Hugh MacDiarmid and the British surrealists remain as the marginal modernist figures under consideration here. Mina Loy, subject of chapter two, unites the political thrust of Butts and Rodker, espousing a feminism that disavows its mainstream adherents, the Suffragettes. In doing so, Loy situates the body as a site of generic disruption, which is reflected in her ribald and confrontational language and her avant-garde style. As with Rodker, Loy’s context is a soft city of experience, yet Loy’s expatriate location seems central to her refiguring of the French *flâneur* as female in ‘Three Moments in Paris’. Her linking of body, language and gender equality points to an even more radical notion of the relative or possible freedom of the subject than suggested by Butts’s mythical or intersubjective structures or Rodker’s attention to the technics of modern statecraft. Loy’s notion of ‘psycho-democracy’ poses an avant-gardist (not to say utopian) challenge to institutionalisation and discursive formation, rejecting the foundationalism of those discursive formations and offering a future subject defined by its ability to fully determine its own internal and external environment through post-Futurist forms of creative overcoming. Such thinking coincides with a commixture of egoism, feminism and Futurist political philosophy that provides a uniquely problematic challenge and suggests a radical alternative to commercially-oriented and state-managed modernity and its institutions. Loy’s interrogative relationship to Futurism and her instigation of a style that blends eroticism, autobiography, social critique and expressionistic, imagistic form can be seen as a precursor to Surrealist styles, and connects with the early Dadaist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who was championed at a pivotal moment by John Rodker. Rodker and Loy’s jovial exchanges in *The Little Review* are revealing of the currency of dialogism within the little magazine; mutually scorned in a review in *Poetry*, the two poets could be seen to form an alternative triumvirate with Loringhoven.

The inclusion of Hugh MacDiarmid in this study has as its rationale the form of a test-case for the marginal modernists detailed above. MacDiarmid’s attempt to take on the codes and practices of a London-centric cultural avant-garde and mix them with regionalist poetic language and dissident politics can be interpreted as an act of counter-avant-garde provocation (an avant-garde practice in itself) and national protest. MacDiarmid’s writing on the General Strike in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* engages with dissident politics and avant-garde practice, culminating in a form that has been categorised as a protest in itself, formally aligned with the agitation he aimed to represent, as indicated by Laura O’Connor: ‘A Drunk Man's caricatural poetics is more in tune with mass-protest by the proletariat than with constitutional nationalism.’[[39]](#footnote-39) MacDiarmid’s utopian vision of a united mass in volatile protest provides a unique interpretation of the potentialities of the mass and the collective in a period when crowds were an uncertain factor of theoretical thought about the democratic state. Finally, the expanding margins of modernism and its relation to imperialism can be tied to MacDiarmid’s attempt to create a unique cultural formation to rival modernist legislators, a process that in itself is fraught with the potential pitfalls of hegemonic thinking. One of the key factors in this study will be to weigh the potentially radical with the limits and specifics of the historical era; context is vital, as Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz warn in *Bad Modernisms*:

What reads in one frame as the purest oppositionality may appear in another as an intra-group squabble reinforcing all manner of tacit unanimities; what seems from one perspective the most spirited defiance of rules may be shown to require the retention or amplification of other strictures performing their own kind of gate keeping.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Thus, the extent to which the ‘marginal’ modernists under consideration here actually break from the tacit unanimities identified as the hallmarks of canonical modernism must be tested at all points.

The centrality of dialectics within this study is instanced in the way these modernists work off established writers to form new poetic ventures, extending their avowed avant-gardism. But the dialectic would come into its own through Hugh MacDiarmid’s theoretical dialectical materialism, and his politics of action engaged in his support for and involvement in strike action, which leads into the centrality of a kind of *literary strike* for the British Surrealist grouping, the subject of chapter four. The British Surrealists, a term that loosely describes a heterogeneous group of writers who spanned those flouting Bretonian styles to those of early Mass Observation, coalesced around the *London Bulletin* and the *Left Review*, and who reached international prominence in the Surrealist Exhibition at the Burlington Galleries in London in 1936. David Gascoyne’s *Short Survey of Surrealism* develops the thesis of the centrality of dialectics to a certain trajectory of modernist practices, forging unacknowledged links with Rodker as a translator of key works in the reception of surrealism at a very early juncture. Rodker’s attention to the value of works by Louis Aragon and the Comte de Lautréamont can be considered formative of a pre-history of surrealism that has a strong political unconscious. The peculiar dialectic of British Surrealism seems to resolve in the formation of a poetry of observation, practiced by Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings and grounded in the surrealism of the everyday social real, poised between a translation of the objectivity and neo-realism of late Surrealism and the influence of the British Mass Observation movement.

Each chapter of the thesis thus contains a coherent organising theoretical or historical principle, while the thread of the argument will remain based on the establishment of an alternative history of British avant-gardism that has natural tendencies to explode the individualist limits of subjectivity, and the national boundary. The underlying concept of the dialectic, based on the operations of a transindividual political unconscious, will be a central component of the study. By situating texts in their historical context, with particular attention to the currency of ideas in politics and philosophy, the thesis attempts to answer the prevailing question of what Loy’s ‘psycho-democracy’ could be; how do modernists envisage political engagement in the context of the kind of modernist seriousness that prioritises formal, imagistic poetics ahead of concrete engagements in social and political life? How do the modernists envisage collectivity when the reality of that term has receded as a warrant of legitimate engagement for the committed artist-intellectual as forms of mass culture come to dominate the lineaments of everyday life? The notion that the substantive body of this study engages with poetic concepts and trends that continue beyond their historical determinations into more contemporary poetic practice is tested out in the conclusion, which considers the inheritors of this hybrid of social realism, imagistic, fragmentary form and the politically agential. To take one example, Milne provides a kind of blueprint for similar trajectories in suggesting that ‘Mina Loy’s exemplary engagement with avant-garde art and poetics could be traced through Dada and Surrealism to later modernist poets working in Britain, such as Kurt Schwitters, Bob Cobbing, Edwin Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay.’[[41]](#footnote-41) While the exact linkages raised here remain to be made concrete, the understanding that marginal poets such as Rodker, Loy, MacDiarmid, Madge, Gascoyne and Jennings act as the named parts in a genealogy of the kind of poetry practiced by Andrew Crozier, Roy Fisher and Barry MacSweeney, linking symbolism, imagism, Futurism, Surrealism and the British Poetry Revival, Language poetry and neo-modernism, provides a coherent trend underpinning the following study.

**Chapter 1**

**Guts and Occasional Glory: John Rodker, Disputes and Intersections**

*But who is there who advocates peace? I have seen no true apostles. I have read of few. And it is notable that these do not form societies – Tolstoi to the contrary.*

*Peace requires genius to be preached. It is a rare high thing – it is not subsidised – it also has its courage*.

 - William Carlos Williams, from ‘Peace’, in *The Little Review*

**Part One: Lewis, Rodker and Influence**

Recent scholarship to re-establish the reputation of John Rodker, who was an essayist, poet and prose writer, translator and publisher active around the period of the First World War and in the inter-war period, has been increasingly successful, if the evidence of recent assessments in Tim Armstrong’s *Modernism: A Cultural History* and Jane Goldman’s *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse*, alongside studies by Ian Patterson and Dominic Williams, are to be taken as representative. Certainly, Armstrong’s view that Rodker’s poetry, particularly his collection *Hymns*, should be included in the canon of First World War poetry, alongside work by fellow Whitechapel Boy Isaac Rosenberg, suggests a gradual re-calibration of lines of influence in the genealogy of modernism. Rodker’s poetry and prose written around the period of the war has a visceral intensity that suits the scepticism about war and the generally pacific tenor of contemporary society. It therefore lends itself to anthologisation alongside works such as those by Sassoon, but its Poundian obliquity and Francophile borrowings require justification that seems to stretch the definition of modernism and modernist war poet in unusual directions; so, while as Jane Goldman contends the poet’s ‘experimental virtuosity’[[42]](#footnote-42) should be applauded, his context and the political edges of his work raise tangible and difficult questions in the project of restoration. Likewise, Mary Butts, who was married to Rodker for a short period during the war and helped him to set up the Ovid Press in 1919, can be considered another important and overlooked figure of this period, and, again, whose liminality in modernism’s field of influence suggests challenges of reconstruction. Though her work at its best bears comparison with that of Joyce, her political angle diverges sharply from Rodker’s, manifesting as an organicist pastoralism. Yet both writers present work that interrogates the kinds of modern subjectivity produced in the state of exception during and after the war period. As figures in the context of modernism, they have both become exceptional in terms of reputation and reception and while this chapter opens with a discussion of Rodker’s connection to literary modernism, their work expresses a political undercurrent that manifests a general critique of the state in war, and the subjective states it produces. First, by following the disputes and trails of reception which involve Rodker as he attempted to generate a reputation in a number of little magazines, alongside his activities in publishing, we are inducted into a dynamic history of material modernist practices and self-fashioning that open out in a reading of dialectical structures of thought motivating his creative works.

Though recent studies have rehabilitated Rodker as a prime mover in the modernist corpus by way of interrogating the value of his ethnicity and his work on translation[[43]](#footnote-43), relatively little has been done to connect Rodker with a European, and naturally transatlantic, avant-garde whose work implicitly concerns itself with and can be implicated in a politics of dissent. Despite Armstrong’s prioritising of Rodker’s ‘biological’ poetic interests of the 1920s,[[44]](#footnote-44) which supports Armstrong with his argument about the technologically enhanced body in modernist poetics, the signal of a more nuanced and historically accurate portrait of Rodker arises when we consider the subtitle ‘Late Modernism and Surrealism’,[[45]](#footnote-45) which might lead by association to the history of Rodker’s literary embeddedness within the history of a critical British proto-surrealist continuum. While Armstrong’s literary historiography has it that Eugene Jolas’s *transition* magazine forged the earliest links with dada and Surrealism through its publication of experimental works such as *Finnegans Wake* and work by Stein and Zukofsky, and that the ‘revolution in the word’ struck through to Anglophone modernists in the 1930s,[[46]](#footnote-46) in studying Rodker’s translation work and his own literary output, particularly in the little magazines *The Little Review* and *The Egoist*, it is possible to re-configure this view, considering Rodker’s inception of a proto-surrealist or dadaist trend in European and American letters at a much earlier juncture. Rodker corresponded throughout the 1920s with at least one figure who was incepting French Surrealist publications, Harry Grimsditch Smith, an otherwise unknown figure. His letter to Rodker of 31 May 1922 provides clear evidence that Rodker would have been aware of the late reception history of Leautréamont as a precursor of Surrealist aesthetic thought and practice.[[47]](#footnote-47) In this sense, Rodker was inserted into a radical nexus defined by its connection to Continental trends of the avant-garde. Making such connections helps towards a re-reading of modernism’s borderlines, and while Rodker’s liminality can be seen as a result of strands of anti-Semitism (and the very notion of ‘liminality’ can also be seen as part of the indeterminacies in defining ‘the Jew’ that could themselves be seen as anti-Semitic),[[48]](#footnote-48) much of Rodker’s work remains open-ended in terms of literary interpretation. While exploring the areas of avant-gardism, translation work and dada/Surrealism this chapter considers the concept of subjectivity in Rodker’s work in light of debates about the constitution of the subject in the context of reification and mass culture, and socio-political ideas and their concomitant critique in modernist manifesto-making, especially as sited in little magazines. Reading Rodker’s deployment of what Marjorie Perloff has designated a ‘poetics of indeterminacy’[[49]](#footnote-49) in the work of surrealists and other avant-gardists may also provide an interpretative framework within which to situate ongoing uses of psychoanalytically-inflected experimental writing in modernism between the wars.

Rodker contributed experimental writing to a wide selection of little magazines. Listed in the apparatus for his selected *Poems and Adolphe 1920*, edited by Andrew Crozier, there are over ten separate literary titles to which he contributed (not including single editions of selected writing taken from the pre-published work), particularly surprising considering his relatively short-lived writing career (the *Collected Poems* of 1930 runs from 1912-25, though he was being published until at least 1932, and thereafter sporadically).[[50]](#footnote-50) Notable among these sources are the magazines *The Little Review*, *The Egoist*, *The Tyro* and *Others*, which published Rodker’s work on a regular basis. By interrogating some of the original contexts of Rodker’s work, such as that of the little magazine, it is possible to attest to the presence of the ‘raucous dialogues between seemingly incongruent figures’ that informed modernism’s cultural moment, to follow new readings of little magazines by Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible, in order to determine where influences were being shared or seized from, and where those with vested interests were intending to drive literary culture.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Two such ‘incongruent figures’ are those of Wyndham Lewis and Rodker, the former being a *provocateur* contrarian of mainly right-wing reactionary persuasion, the latter being something of an anarchist and opportunist. Both Pound and Lewis considered and acted upon their high assessment of some of Rodker’s work, considering at various times launching him as their protégé. Lewis, along with Pound, was an inconsistent promoter; despite their collaboration and correspondence, Lewis’s assessment is tinged with suspicion and anti-Semitic discourses concerning hygiene, writing of Rodker: ‘He told me he had written a lot of filthy sexual verse, which, if he sends it, I shall hang in the W. C. He described it as Verlainesque, damn his dirty little eyes.’ Rodker remained an outsider, as Dominic Williams has suggested: ‘never part of the inner circle of modernism’, he was thereby in a position to ‘take many of its elements, including the sexual ones, to excess.’[[52]](#footnote-52) Lewis notoriously and scandalously satirised Rodker under the pseudonym of Julius Ratner in his novel *The Apes of God*, describing him as a ‘highbrow sub-sheik of the slum [...] the eternal imitation person [...] whose ambition led him to burgle all the books of Western romance to steal their heroes’ expensive outfits.’[[53]](#footnote-53) Ian Patterson has explored the wider implications of this discourse, which here issues as a function of the victimisation perpetrated by Lewis in the novel. In Lewis’s writing on Rodker, it is clear that class and ethnic markers are prioritised, and the inheritance of literary tradition figured as an act of theft rather than a process of legitimate engagement.[[54]](#footnote-54)

While it is important not to repudiate or ignore these divisive and dangerous forms of rhetoric, which often underlie the reception histories of marginalised literary figures, worked out in the private correspondences of key figures, material publishing practices would unite Rodker and Lewis in the midst of the great modernist alembic of experimental and politically diverse little magazines. *Blast* was one such, a journal that Rodker tried to gain entry into with his ‘Dutch Dolls’ pieces for an abstract theatre based on the *Commedia dell’arte* (and possibly Florence Upton’s children’s books, or David Bomberg’s *Vision of Ezekiel*[[55]](#footnote-55)) in 1915. Lewis rejected Rodker’s pieces as he could not acquire the whole series for *Blast*,[[56]](#footnote-56) though a discriminatory rather than discriminating letter between Pound and Lewis would suggest the rejection was based on Rodker’s ‘dentistry and manners,’ re-using the familiar prejudicial discourse of health and cleanliness.[[57]](#footnote-57) Still, Rodker’s inclusion in Lewis’s break-away publication *The Tyro* (1921-22) would suggest he had been largely successful in separating out literary cultural pragmatics from the exclusionary politics of his context, having done his apprenticeship working his poems into *The New Age* in 1912, *Poetry and Drama* in 1913 and *The Egoist* and *Poetry* in 1914; as Crozier states, ‘from A. R. Orage, to Harold Monroe, to Ezra Pound, the sequence of editors has the apparently irresistible logic of movement towards a centre.’[[58]](#footnote-58) But even as we perceive this movement into the inner circle, it is possible to witness the powerful effects of a *blasted* (post-*Blast*) post-war sensibility, which manifests itself in Lewis’s writing as a toughening and pseudo-militant recrudescence, and in Rodker’s as a radical satirical note and a prioritising of literary fragmentations and experiments, at work in both writers at the time of *The Tyro* that may have helped in drawing the two into one another’s purview.

After the avant-garde experimentation of *Blast*, and having suffered the after-shocks of the First World War, Lewis was tentatively trialling new representational forms that could fit his idea of a ‘repudiation of the aesthestic as a viable category,’[[59]](#footnote-59) in Paul Edwards’ words, as a result of the war experience. The rupture of war, as *total war*, was for Lewis the precursor to a crisis of representation, partially addressed in the concentration and intensification of image and style in *Blast*, through its avowed vorticism, but addressed strongly in his post-war art style, troped in the abstract ‘rigid formalism’[[60]](#footnote-60) of Lewis’s art around the time of *The Tyro*. In Lewis’s short-lived publication the illustrations are dominated by the Tyro figure, a static, totemic individual overwhelmed by an at once sinister, contemptuous and facile facial expression. As Edwards suggests of such figures, they are ‘puppets’[[61]](#footnote-61) emerging from war mythologised as eternally-grinning soldier-casualties. Introductory comments by Lewis would have the Tyro as ‘very powerful’, appetitive, exploitative, and represented in such a way as to blur the lines between internal emotion and agency and external forms of socially and politically determined physiognomy: ‘This sunny commotion in the face, at the gate of the organism, brings to the surface all the burrowing and interior broods which the individual may harbour.’[[62]](#footnote-62) This figure is totemic, for Lewis, of shiftless avant-gardist intent for the post-war arts, a ‘perpetually renewed effort’ for a European experimental art movement, which has been continually hampered by attending to ‘the letter of ... fashion’, an unguarded and Bloomsbury-ite incorporation of the ‘Gallic milieu’, which must be held in check by the figure of the Tyro.[[63]](#footnote-63) Now, Lewis suggests, the time is ripe to recognise a ‘Renaissance of Art ... much greater than the Italian Renaissance’ catalysed by the ‘Great War of 1914-18’ (proviso: ‘substitute however intensity and significance for scale’) and delivered through all art forms, again citing the Renaissance as an archetypal time where divisions between arts had not formed: ‘this duplication of activities was common enough, and no one was surprised to see a man chiselling words and stone alternately.’[[64]](#footnote-64) Substantiating Peter Burger’s thesis in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Lewis at this point wishes to ‘bring back art into touch with life’, as he tells the *Daily Express* in 1921.[[65]](#footnote-65) The attempt to synthesise art in the praxis of life, by any artistic means possible, therefore to have an effect on everyday life and as a sop to ‘the dominant School of Paris and Bloomsbury,’[[66]](#footnote-66) would lead Lewis and Rodker to experiments with satire and science fiction alongside persistent manifesto-making and militant posturing.

Metaphors of toughness, impermeability and sculpturing, contingent on a militant context, feature heavily in both Lewis’s and Rodker’s writing of this period – Rodker’s ‘War Museum – Royal College of Surgeons’ and ‘In the Courtyard’ are signal poems in this regard and bear further analysis later in this chapter.[[67]](#footnote-67) Such active, visceral language can be found to exist alongside metaphors of slackness, inaction, waste and imitation reserved for damnatory rhetoric when referring to non-radical art. Rodker’s elevated stature as ‘Foreign Editor’ of *The Little Review* in the early 1920s would allow him a platform from which to promote European forms of experimental writing, and to denounce, like Lewis, the ‘letter of fashion’ in mainstream publishing. In an editorial comment in the September to December 1920 *Little Review*, Rodker condemns the ‘steady poetical jog-trot’ that rival little magazine *Others* has ‘settled into’ by issuing an anthology of ‘the “townsman’s guide to nature,” known as Georgian poetry.’[[68]](#footnote-68) Conrad Aiken’s contribution, emulating Ford and Eliot, is ‘in form so incredibly faded, so emasculated’, replete with language which Rodker figures as ‘the detritus of every poet that has ever been [...] worked into an owl’s pellet’ (54). Rodker thus attacks what he perceives as a kind of poetry *ersatz*, a simulation of art rather than a provocative and living, socially-engaged art. While such antiquated ‘Georgian’ poetry is figured as refuse and inanimate matter (‘owl’s pellet’, ‘Frost’), it is also guilty by warrant of its debt to Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*, which was vilified by all mouthpieces of the modernist elite. It is thus fashionable for Rodker to write of a contributor to *Others* ‘spoonrivering with a vengeance’ (55), despite the linguistic idiosyncrasy. Rodker’s concern, however, is more telling of the styles he prioritises and considers vital to a living and presumably ‘masculine’ art, opposed to the ‘emasculated’ Georgians. Rather than the ‘blood’ (here implicated as an excess of *emotion*) of Spoon River, contemporary poetry should have ‘guts’ (54), a key term for understanding Rodker’s poetic philosophy and one which will be returned to in further discussion of his work in this chapter. ‘Spoonrivering’ is defunct as a poetic mode due to its inability to address the return of the repressed violence of the war in wounds and memories of a traumatic, visceral war experience as depicted by way of new technologies, such as the cinema newsreel. Reference to the new technologies of representation and mediation provide a further nuance to Rodker’s unfavourable comparison of the new ‘Others’ to the ‘eternal cinema’ of some of the poetry contained in that publication, pointing to an overuse of *stock* imagery for commercial gain. The ‘cinematographics’ of one contributor are ‘abominable’ to Rodker: ‘the paltriest film has more guts’ (54). The modernist experimenter’s ethos should have been fundamentally altered by such technologies of representation, Rodker suggests, presaging Lewis’s editorial commentary in *The Tyro* above on war’s opening up of a contemporary ‘Renaissance’. Rodker’s stark diction – ‘more guts’ – plays radically off the vapidity of the Georgian ‘Others’: ‘All these folks seem to think poetry is a polite after dinner amusement like musical chairs’ (54-55). The insistence of the rhetoric here, and the body-focused language, suggests that for poetry to be vital it must be ‘gutsy’, related to the guts as an affective zone of reception and digestion. It takes guts to make a statement that counters the hegemony of taste sustained by the aesthetic mainstream, but it also connects figuratively to the war and its threat of attack on bodies. Rodker’s poem ‘War Museum – Royal College of Surgeons’ again provides a referent in this regard, in that it anatomises the effects of war as a form of medical cataloguing: ‘Six feet of small bowel / shot into pieces’, ‘here is stomach / with a large hole.’[[69]](#footnote-69) Such poems are striking in their confrontational presentation of the corporeal – they offend the taste and the senses generally. An avant-garde poetry of substance would thus be *present* rather than ‘a succession of afterthoughts’ (55), to return to Rodker’s review. Socially and politically critical, poetry should be creative of diverse, arresting images, generating nuance and ambiguity in manifesting meaning (‘Orrick John’s cinema play “Kysen” is at least in colours and has beauty and he has *made* images’ (55)).

In the words of Lewis in his opening article in *The Tyro*, ‘The Children of the New Epoch’, figuring the First World War as a ‘mountain range’ ‘built solidly behind us’, ‘There is no passage across that to the lands of yesterday.’[[70]](#footnote-70) The new artistic terrain is being prepared as land cleared by war – in Lewis’s article, this is ‘a sort of No Man’s Land atmosphere’ – and inhabited performatively by a minority collective of experimental practitioners who are willing to take the recent traumatic past as a springboard for their future art: ‘we, then, are the creatures of a new state of human life, as different from Nineteenth Century England, say, as the Renaissance was from the Middle Ages.’[[71]](#footnote-71) An art such as that of Wyndham Lewis seems to suggest itself as one with the demands of the pacifist objector Rodker, with its hard lines and the curious interleaving of internal and external elements of the human subject represented by, for instance, the ‘Cept’, the totem-like Tyro figure that adorns Lewis’s first issue of *The Tyro*. I will be arguing that this embedded concept of duality (indeterminacy) and dialectical presentation of images and concepts has been integral to Rodker’s work, and the extent to which a political unconscious operates through this working practice.

Considering the significant overlaps and confluences in critical ideas between the two modernists, it seems almost misleading of Peter Lawson, in *Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein*, to suggest that the relationship of Rodker to his artistic milieu is determined by perceived anti-Semitism. Such an interpretation, one favoured by Rodker specialists Ian Patterson and Dominic Williams, though insightful, entirely apt, and challenging, elides the significance of conversation and cross-currency in modernism that cut across lines of identity, particularly within the context of little magazines. The mutual representational awareness apparent in both Rodker and Lewis would suggest that a significant attempt at re-engaging art as praxis was being undertaken collaboratively. While Pound and Lewis’s anti-Semitism cannot be denied in this context, we can see how formal and structural approaches to creating art works are being shared among a community of engaged artists here. Certainly, the private letters between Lewis and Pound betray an undertone of anti-Semitism, though even this could be up for dispute in certain of Lawson’s readings.[[72]](#footnote-72) The fact that Rodker published Lewis’s *Fifteen Drawings* in 1922 through his Ovid Press,[[73]](#footnote-73) together with the co-presence of works in *The Tyro*, would suggest a superficially congenial imprimatur originating in Lewis, even if this was cynically orchestrated on the basis of stylistic affinity. Crozier’s apparatus for Rodker’s *Poems & Adolphe 1920*, in glossing Rodker’s addition to the first issue of *The Tyro*, ‘Mr Segando and Fifth Cataclysm’, proves revealing: ‘When [Lewis] solicited Rodker’s contribution [...] he asked ‘Have you ever dreamt of a perfect civilisation, that would really suit you: so adjusting matter & society as to eliminate every emetic sight and makeshift person?’[[74]](#footnote-74) Although evocative of the familiar strain of ‘fascist modernism’ and semantically concerned with metaphors of what might be read as the language of racial degeneracy, we could be generous to Lewis, especially considering his intended audience here, to portray this as issuing from a more general distaste of modernity that was shared among the two figures. Rodker’s publication of work by Corbusier would fit with the idea of a potentially fascist though ostensibly democratic-utopian modernist organisation of society. Further, the exchange would strongly suggest that both Rodker and Lewis were engaged in a pursuit of a radical poetic, one which turns on satire and hyperbolic absurdism. Rodker’s position in the modernist coterie can be seen as having been gained by the consolidation of an aggressive avant-garde rhetoric and a manipulation of influence, going some way to challenging Lawson’s notion that Rodker was positioned in an ‘asymmetrical affiliation’ with ‘present and future anti-semites.’[[75]](#footnote-75) The aforementioned ‘Mr Segando and the Fifth Cataclysm’ helps in bearing out this point.

It would seem there was a brief period of interest in a peculiar blend of satirical sci-fi attending on Lewis’s *Tyro* period. Paul Edwards makes reference to Lewis’s manuscript ‘Hoodopip’ as context for understanding Lewis’s motivations for representations of Tyros. In ‘Hoodopip’ Lewis ‘describes Tyronic life and its organisation in some detail, including its educational arrangements, its caste system, public monuments and so on,’[[76]](#footnote-76) having sketched out a spatial location twenty thousand years into the future populated by people shot from a gun and being communicated to by ‘the Prime Minister, the King and the entire Press ... that he must “stick it.”’[[77]](#footnote-77) The rictus grin persists as a relic of First World War culture, ‘a window dressing of joviality that afterwards could not be abandoned if it would.’[[78]](#footnote-78) Thus providing a satirical spin on the ‘grin and bear it’ stereotype of forbearance in war-time, Lewis also points to the traumatic after-effects of war experience, which might be registered as ‘permanent distention of the muscles,’[[79]](#footnote-79) a bodily manifestation of such trauma, or a metaphor for the return of the war-wounded. Rodker likewise attends to the psycho-social effects of the war in ‘Mr Segando’, a ‘satire on perfectibility’[[80]](#footnote-80) with H. G. Wells as its lampooned object. As the century progresses into the ‘forties and ‘fifties, the story goes, Segando (Wells) is taken to be a future prophet, upon whose ideas a whole society could be based. Progression into this spurious manner of social organisation rapidly invokes a *reductio ad absurdum*, so

Men with wide shoulders and wasp waists were encouraged. Women were preferred with large waists, larger posteriors and very small shoulders. The ideal female torso was an isosceles triangle – man’s the inverted.

The strictest homologies with contemporary colloquialisms had to be observed, and the eternal triangle was, if anything, more ubiquitous than to-day, save only in practice; for by this time both men and women were rather bored with each other. Intercourse was a matter of passing the time of day; the sentimental pressure of a hand and so on.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Rodker parallels Lewis in his formal re-arrangement of the human figure, but rather than having post-war humans assume phallic or totemic stature, his figures morph from organic evolution of sexually-significant physiology to mathematical representation or pure formal symbolism of difference. The satirical intent is clear; the assumption of the future’s likeness to current fantasies of what that future will be like is misplaced and risible, plus Wells’s ideas are wayward when given serious consideration (here, social policy is determined by a ‘Segando research committee’). In its pastiche of Wellsian doomsaying, this literary experiment comes close to a postmodern style, especially in its indeterminate message, which begins with literary satire and ends with the gradual recession of Segando in the context of a society in a constant state of confusion and continual overturning of political economy. Still, the rapid progress of modernity referred to, and the underlying sense that the society being depicted is seeking utopian solutions for a reason (perhaps the war) and that Rodker is taking on the Woolfian dictum that in undergoing modernity and in the face of lost authority society has fundamentally altered, seems to provide a unified, and thus modernist, message of critique. There is some sense that sexual relations have changed in Segando’s world because of a scientific interest in reproduction technologies, which would cohere with Rodker’s acquaintance with Havelock Ellis and his interests in Freudian psychology. The perfectibility of the species in the story invites attention to the idea of mechanisation and its effects on human relations; we get ‘moving stairways, speaking cinematographs’ and ‘life [...] speeded up to incredible intensity and London grew so rapidly and complicatedly that thousands of people had never been outside their parish’, ‘They [the SRC] experimented on themselves in the matter of speed, of ingested vegetables, of concentrated foods, converting themselves for the purpose into the most exquisite ‘Des Esseintes’ (8). Amidst all this, the humans have dispassionate sex, and accommodation features an otherwise-unexplained ‘head man’, and as the ‘cataclysms’ go on a back-to-nature cult takes hold, where ‘everybody was on the land, i.e. on six square feet of back garden’, while factories have been banished. Yet this is also seen as being controlled by an efficient autocracy that similarly reifies communities into enforced solitude, just as forms of technology could create alienated labour: ‘It was found that solitude so destroyed the virus of public-feeling and emulation that thereafter the outlaw became the most model and reactionary of citizens’ (8). As the cult of the individual grows, so does the incoherence of the public sphere likewise increase; institutions such as the press and the education system disseminate Orwellian, or, to be historically accurate, what could be J. A. Hobson-inspired, propaganda.[[82]](#footnote-82) The ideological statement, ‘As we hope for a better world’, is adopted as a greeting, eclipsing ‘cheerio’, with overtones of Lewis’s ‘Tyronic’ grin, effecting the replacement of a staple historic feature with a superficial and ironic representation that registers the influence of a traumatic event. Rodker’s notion of a desiccated public and private sphere has its roots in his experience of a society coerced into submission by the all-powerful war machine, and his fictional reference to the genesis of a purely individualistic, solipsistic culture has overtones of his collaboration with ‘egoists’, or Stirner-ites, around the time of the war. The representation of state power – in ‘Segando’, ‘A child became a person at twelve. Before then it belonged to the State.’ (8) – has particular relevance too, as Rodker experienced its privations – ‘their ability to dispose of his body as the state saw fit’, as Crozier writes[[83]](#footnote-83) – at first hand as a conscientious objector variously on the run and imprisoned during the First World War, a scenario that would inform much of his work and one which will be explored in further detail later in this chapter. The satirical construction of a society where the ‘people were neither happy nor unhappy’ and ‘did not therefore exercise themselves over a future life, duty to one’s neighbour, &c’, and where ‘there was very little in which a man might be indebted to you or interfere with you’ (8) is based on a salient reality: first of all, one in which the *socius* has restricted permission to freedom of expression, *vis à vis* the Defence of the Realm Act and censorship rows; second, one in which the State, in ‘Segando’ in the form of a kind of state socialism, encourages a *status quo* of affective equilibrium by both creating and modulating desire, which could be attributed to an acceleration of the effects of monopoly capitalism; third, the primacy of the body as a site of power relations is referenced, contingent on the absolute power of the state to manipulate the subject body as ultimately expendable matter, a power relationship that will be explored further in the context of Rodker’s semi-autobiographical *Memoirs of Other Fronts* with reference to Giorgio Agamben’s political philosophy.

For Rodker, art’s responsibility to speak of affective states, often of derangement or bodily excess, is given priority, alongside the opinion that representation should challenge the mundane, the average and the dictates of the State. As Andrew Crozier writes, ‘expression of feeling and sensation’ in Rodker’s work ‘yields to psychological insight and the imagery which articulates complex subjective states;’[[84]](#footnote-84) for this, as we shall see, Rodker relies upon symbolist modes of expression that work on a subtle dialectic that often has a political, or radical, concern. Rodker’s contributions to the second issue of *The Tyro*, the poems ‘Pieta’ and ‘Southern Syncopated Singers’, are more readily adapted to the above thesis, though in terms of symbolism, the bodies figured in the former poem have surprising affinities with the cubist-abstract triangular bodies of the future of ‘Segando’. ‘Pieta’ takes as its subject the Renaissance sculpture of Michelangelo’s, the eponymous sculpture the *Pieta*, thus referring analeptically, and with some irony, to Lewis’s stated aims for his Tyronic renaissance. Linking back in this way once again demonstrates Rodker’s embeddedness within the discourses of the contemporary scene, while the figuration of bodies has overtones of the kind of stock figures Lewis and Pound were writing of at the time:

How strange that the gay body

with groaning anguish

should so suddenly be clay.

How strange – the livers flaccid

and corpse cold – oh and heavy.[[85]](#footnote-85)

The point of view would appear to be Mary’s at this point, mixed with the poetic persona’s voice expressing heightened emotion and incredulity. Mixing emotion and direct imagery related to coalescence – ‘so suddenly clay’ – is reminiscent of the Imagist style formulated by Hulme, Flint, Pound and Lowell, of whom the last two figures were well known to Rodker. But the attention to a somatic level of detail – ‘livers flaccid/ and corpse cold’ – speaks to a contingent relationship between the bodily and the affective, typical of Rodker’s style. Sibilance, assonance and alliteration mix with a heavy, plodding prosody, throwing spondees (‘corpse cold’) in amongst an alternating iambic and trochaic metre, to highlight the process of solidifying sculptural figures textually. Opening with a reference to the ‘gay body’ puts an alternative spin on the *pietà* scene, which highlights Rodker’s awareness of form, as in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*, and simultaneously referring to Provençal poetry Pound was reviving, and ideology, Lewis’s ‘Wild Body’. Moving from the bodily location of the opening lines, we are inducted further into a wrought emotional present where the ‘mother’ ‘yearns’: ‘womb yearns, breast yearns... / Forces tears from her own clay’. An agonism is set up between the forms of matter seeking their stasis as pure matter, and an emotional pretext welling out into a present that renews the mythological background in an overwhelming sentiment: ‘the clay wells tears of water, gouts of blood / impatient to be dust’, while ‘Mary with tears of anguish, gouts of yearning / compels him to be clay’. The irony established here depends upon our awareness of Rodker’s antipathy to ‘spoonrivering’ types of poetic representation, where there is too much ‘blood’ and not enough ‘guts’. Mary’s emoting does not bring the figures into closer harmony, and we are left with the image of the Renaissance *Pietà*, only humanised, as it were, to understand on a social level ‘still they do not meet / and still she has him not.’ Here we have Rodker’s push and pull of stasis and dynamism, which in this case takes a historic figure as its object; as elsewhere, the stock nature of the characters involved is being used to tag on a psychoanalytically-inflected emotional drama. The mother is clearly being blamed for suppressing the natural gaiety of a Christ-like *jouissance*, and links Rodker’s work with a number of representations of mother-son and female-male, and often otherwise triangulated, relationships. In ‘Pieta’ [sic], the mother figure is blamed for not only an inability to (re-)animate Christ, but a wilful refusal to allow this to happen – she ‘compels him to be clay’. Rodker’s ‘Pieta’, then, is a psychoanalytical reading of Michelangelo’s sculpture, and it has a subliminal reference to the triangular nature of the work of art. Such readings of frames of reference lead to the understanding that Rodker’s work contains a balancing of (psychological, figurative) movement that works dialectically, in this case expressed in the subsumption of Christ within Mary to form a referential triangle, and in the play of forces between the two figures leading to a final sublation (or Hegelian *aufhebung*) in the drive to dust as sublimated death-drive. Rodker’s careful use of symbolism in the poem gestures towards the elevated styles of his venerated French symbolists; in the foreword to his *Collected Poems*, Rodker writes that he was ‘influenced [...] by the French poetry of 1850-1910.’[[86]](#footnote-86) In the dialectical movement of the poem, it seems quite clear how, following Crozier’s argument, ‘symbolism is translated back into the world of the senses’ (xxii). Poetic elevation and afflatus in Rodker’s poetry inevitably comes to be foiled by the empirical and contingent. The extent to which symbolism as a style, and to which the developments of a post-symbolist style influenced by Dada and early inklings of surrealism, proved influential can be seen in Rodker’s other contribution to the second and final *Tyro*.

‘Southern Syncopated Singers’ demonstrates the extent to which Rodker had absorbed poetic influence from his French peers and predecessors. The reader is transported to an undetermined location where a seemingly primitivist scene is played out. We are assailed from the beginning with ‘Lime’s full moon !’[[87]](#footnote-87) With its unclear subject-object relationship, this seems to be proto-surrealist territory, complete with ‘land crabs [...] on tall fingers’, ‘white ants’ and ‘pygmies’ with ‘Their gods [...] darkling around them’. But as we are introduced to the objective pronoun ‘us’, within whom a ‘godhead shines’, there seems to be a narrative development to satisfy the intrigue of the title:

Clothed in piercing sound

the granite fetishes

brood through sunken eyes

At this point, it is clear that the ‘us’ is an audience, and the atavistic references are intended to act as imagistic flights of fancy to refer to a jazz (‘Syncopated’) performance. The suspect racial overtones of the poem are at one with the ‘primitivist’ impulse manifest in modernism – see, for instance, D. H. Lawrence’s ‘Fetish’ chapter of *Women in Love* – and are an elaboration of Rodker’s early manifesto written for *The Egoist* in 1914 on ‘The Evocation of Race Memories’.[[88]](#footnote-88) In this, a manifesto for an affective theatre, Rodker argues that

a smell of musk wafted through a theatre would affect an audience more poignantly [...] than anything they had before then experienced. [...] This insidious smell of musk penetrates deeper into the mind through the senses, until the body is rapt into those vague splendid imaginings which are the flutterings of memories of man and the earth when they were young. (12)

The poetry of tradition and order is completely surpassed, Rodker suggests, by an experience of pure affect, which could be achieved by an adequately mimetic creation of sense data. ‘Primitive emotions’, Rodker states, evoke ‘race memories’, and these can be gained by a wordless theatre. In ‘Southern Syncopated Singers’, then, the references to nature are being deployed as attempts at a Rimbauldian derangement (*dérèglement*) of the senses, which leads to the final strong image of sculptural human figures, as in ‘Pieta’ using tropes of sculptural art to attach powerful symbolic meaning with the intention of altering the perception of the reader. Following Rimbaud, Rodker leads the reader to believe his poetic is radically indeterminate, but *contra* Rimbaud, gestures towards a sublation in its logic of meaning. Whereas in Rimbaud ‘the reader understands what is being said but not what is being talked about,’[[89]](#footnote-89) as Rodker’s poem moves on we are expected to have generated an affective scene with a conclusive image; this turns back on a Rimbauldian method, where the reader becomes ‘an accomplice who participates in the poet’s vision.’[[90]](#footnote-90) The method is nevertheless radical, and Rodker expects the audience to perform the poem’s hallucinatory logic, something alluded to in the use of the objective ‘us’ of the concluding lines.

Such poetic techniques are being explored as a rebuke to a kind of interior ‘realism’ that Wyndham Lewis also found distasteful. In his editorial for the same issue of *The Tyro*, Lewis’s polemic intends to restate the currency of avant-garde art, and thus justify *The Tyro*’s ‘majority of experimental work.’[[91]](#footnote-91) Modern art must be experimental and challenging, Lewis suggests, not least in the name of modernity and progress. This is very much of a kind with the overall concerns delineated in *The Tyro*, the combined effect of which suggests vulnerability and defensiveness bordering on paranoia. Contemporaneous developments based on abstruseness, abstraction and experiment had to be defended from the perceived risk posed by ‘provincialities’, in Eliot’s titular diction in the magazine (10), high finance (9), ignorance (7) and the mass culture of ‘sane-and-no-high-brow nonsense’ represented by the new media and the spectacle (5). Where Rodker fits in this, despite his attention to the affects of the spectacular and the workings of a very modern type of desire, is in his blending of the subjective and the objective, which Lewis at the time of *The Tyro* was promoting as a revolutionary new form of art: ‘A Third Method, Between Subject and Object’ (32). An art method located somewhere between the ‘impersonal and objective’ and the ‘personal and subjective’ would serve to circumvent ‘the religious tyranny of the subjective method, and would escape from the half sophistication that the other method begets or [...] [through which it is] designed’ (34). Such a method is deemed appropriate to representing the world as essentially ‘strange’ and different to everyday reality; Lewis wants the ideal artist to arbitrate between ‘pretending to be one of the audience’ and assuming the personal ‘sufficiency’ of the intended audience. The third term being pushed is one that does not alienate the public, but does not pander to the ‘undisciplined raw democracy of the intellect’ of the times either. It seems that Rodker, by fusing the method of pure presentation of images in surreal relations common to Rimbaud and other French symbolists, and the method of eliciting the response of an audience or reader, enacts in his poetry something very close to such a dialectical feat. The seeming congruency of Rodker and Lewis’s artistic vision at this point would suggest that Rodker, contrary to Peter Lawson’s view of his ‘asymmetrical affiliation’ with the major modernists, was artistically leading the vogues of a small coterie. This amicable reading depends upon an interpretation of the dynamics of little magazines within the corpus of modernism; as Churchill and McKible argue:

Little magazines provide a record of the large-scale conversation that became modernism, an odd and absorbing concourse that cannot be reduced to a single movement or coherent set of principles. These periodicals – ‘rich, dialogic texts’ – reveal modernism to be a complex network of artistic, social, political, economic, and technological activities. Presenting multiple voices and perspectives, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and both resisting and engaging mass culture, little magazines collectively represent the development of modernist art and modern ideas at least as well as Prufrock’s monologue.[[92]](#footnote-92)

The posturing and positioning of Rodker and Lewis becomes something of an art in itself, yet the self-presentation of Rodker does little justice to the range of his poetic techniques and, further, the dissident political positions adopted in his poetics. Having lingered over *The Tyro* as one nexus of dialogism and ideological synchronicity, the wider network remains to be examined. It is nevertheless the case that Rodker’s idea of an art of pure sensation would not prove quite so popular with less synchronised critics of the period in alternate literary arenas, such as in *The Little Review* and *The Egoist*. Richard Aldington, assistant editor of *The Egoist*, would castigate Rodker’s first verse collection *Poems* as ‘illogical and nonsensical’, while attributing Rodker’s flaws to a ‘spread of Prussian ideals,’ which says more about Aldington’s sense of patriotism than it might about Rodker’s political allegiances.[[93]](#footnote-93) However, Aldington’s review is exemplary for the purposes of historicising Rodker’s challenge to the establishment. Aldington’s defensive tone clearly has the ongoing war and Prussia (militarism) as its objects. Anxiety about such otherness in Rodker’s work connects to the connections being made, that might once again reflect paranoia about the East End Jewish other, though perhaps we might have expected an accusation of Bolshevism rather than Prussianism in this context. Aldington goes on to insinuate that this is no time for revolutionary poets. A mimetic relationship to the origins of the war is enacted on the grounds of literary appreciation: ‘we have all been reading French and Italian, when we ought to have kept an eye on Prussian philosophy [...] some of us would have been better prepared for what has happened’ (422). The readership of *The Egoist* is being encouraged to embrace the ideological powers of literary value. While for Aldington Rodker’s *Poems* is abhorrent, ‘At least he is free of the tyranny of Academicism; whether he is free from the tyranny of extreme revolution seems to me doubtful. But he is undoubtedly a person who cares more for rebellion in the arts than for anything else’ (422). Motivations for such an attack are complicated by the unanimities of the network in this example. We should consider that Aldington, as assistant editor, has been publishing the two poets being savaged, Rodker and Amy Lowell, serially over the last few numbers of the magazine. Peter Lawson has argued convincingly that Aldington, alongside other modernist arbitrators of taste such as Pound and Cunard, enlists an ‘Arnoldian opposition between the Hellenic (‘classics’) and Hebraic,’[[94]](#footnote-94) explaining Aldington’s assumption that Rodker must originate from a ‘tradition [...] so clearly Slavonic’ (422), yet this would be to ignore the currents of anti-Bolshevik sentiment at the time, and a general antipathy to anarchism that has its origins in the public outcries at anarchist terrorism in the late nineteenth century, such as the assassination of various world leaders, and the bombing of Greenwich Observatory, between 1881 and 1901. And yet a further twist to the seemingly didactic sentiment of Aldington arises as Aldington uses such a platform for the purposes of self-promotion: ‘THE EGOIST has had the great pleasure of printing some of his [Rodker’s] work’ (423). It is vital to maintain context in considering such vitriolic writing within the culture of little magazines, to remember the re-framing work necessary in understanding perceived modernist antagonisms counselled by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz warn in *Bad Modernisms* quoted above.[[95]](#footnote-95) Inter-group squabbles such as these reveal promotional forces otherwise overlooked.

Indeed, Rodker and Aldington cannot have had an easy alliance, with both of them translating and separately publishing the Comte de Lautréamont’s *Songs of Maldoror* (*Lay of Maldoror* in Rodker’s case). Aldington had a weight of literary translations behind him, and the threat posed by the fact that Rodker was a committed Francophile and translator – Rodker even goes so far as to suggest he ‘first came to poetry through that language’[[96]](#footnote-96) – would have been a call to arms. The publishing ventures of *The Egoist*, then, could have as much to do with the control and cynical delivery of a rival’s poetry in the case of Rodker as they have to do with a commitment to radical arts. Aldington’s similarly damning review of Rodker’s poetry in another little magazine, *Poetry*, confirms some of these suspicions: ‘I find Mr Rodker’s *Hymns* the exact opposite of Mr Flint’s book. Where the one is all candor [sic], simplicity, naturalness and health, the other is affectation, insincerity, falseness and disease.’[[97]](#footnote-97) The line between anti-Semitic discourse and metaphors of parasitism and uncleanliness is not clear cut in this case, but it is clear that Rodker’s connection to the radical new forms being translated from the French has been well and truly established: ‘when he screams, “Under the whips of men the skin shreds off – I bleed from every pore,” my compassion is quenched by repulsion for this mawkishness à la Leautréamont’ (45). Significantly, considering Rodker’s affinity with certain Dadaists – he wrote an early appreciation of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven in *The Little Review* shortly before Aldington’s review in 1920 – Aldington writes an antagonistic piece in the same issue aimed at Dada’s flamboyant practitioners. Positioning Rodker as a continental decadent would suit Aldington’s repressed claim for validation as a translator of works that would become important in the reception and development of texts of the avant-garde and those of their pre-history.[[98]](#footnote-98) Max Bodenheim’s defensive letter published in *Poetry* two numbers later replies to some of Aldington’s criticisms, arguing that Rodker’s attack on ‘health’ constitutes an invigoration of stale British aesthetics and that Aldington’s review treads a familiar conservative line: ‘I do not dislike candor, simplicity, naturalness and health, but I cannot see why they should have an endless monopoly on English poetry.’[[99]](#footnote-99) Bodenheim takes a Nietzschean approach, approaching Rodker’s poetry as an expression of an alternative ‘health’ productive of a ‘bitter strength far removed from the flabby virulence of disease.’ His reinterpretation points to the prejudice of Aldington’s frame of reference in terms of the selective quotations Aldington had taken from Rodker’s work, which misrepresent the variety and challenge of his poetry: ‘Rodker does not believe that life is a succession of unbroken colors – he spies tangled and elusive shades and strives to capture them with friendly metaphors.’ Not exactly defined by its ‘friendly metaphors’, it is clear how poems from *Hymns* such as ‘Hymn of Hymns’ could offend against the prevailing taste, with its eight stanzas opening with ‘God damn’[[100]](#footnote-100) and motivated by an attack on Romanticist and Victorianist sensibility. A kind of Lewisian/Poundian blasting, Rodker’s poem excoriates time-worn discourses and traditions, and ‘white mushroomy flaccid’ humanity. Neither the extremes of nature – ‘racing, wild, mysterious sea,’ ‘swift fiery wind’ – nor the poverty of everyday life, in which ‘mean houses hold mean lives, / wallpaper, flypaper / paperfaced brats’ (78), can assuage the dissatisfaction motivating the poem. Life and art are likewise portrayed as inadequate compensation for life’s inequalities. The final line’s satirical ‘God be with you, Reader’ (78), directs the poem towards an engagement with the lifeworld in which it is received, an address that may sit uneasily with the damnatory logic of that world delineated in the poem.

Rodker’s avant-garde theatre project and his poetry of the 1920s, especially as reviewed by Richard Aldington, exemplify the power Rodker’s works had to shock and move as they were contemporaneously received. The ambitious plan for a theatre of silent emotion, or of verse plays, ‘Theatre Muet’ and ‘Dutch Dolls’ respectively, were influenced by Pound, and possibly Remy de Gourmont, with both sources writing for *The Little Review*, including a de Gourmont poem subtitled ‘Theatre Muet’. In *The Little Review*, Rodker’s experimental theatre pieces are considered revolutionary by Jane Heap, another assistant editor of the rapidly changing roster. After declaiming ‘theatre as a place of Art is dead’, Heap goes on to appreciate Rodker’s ‘Theatre Muet’ pieces in the context of her radical vision for a theatre, much as Rodker’s, in which ‘Drama is emotion expression in motion (action)’, where ‘words are not needed to evoke the emotion or to explain the action’.[[101]](#footnote-101) As with the discussion of Lewis above, the movement is towards greater abstraction and the miniaturising of action as expressing a pure emotional energy; Heap wants theatre to follow other arts, where, she believes, ‘the modern artist has cut away tradition and convention, stripped down to the very soul, and given a chance for a new intense life. Only the dramatist lies inert, helpless, buried under the theatre, literature, the system, and the public’ (21). As we shall see, Rodker’s quest for the kind of agency envisaged for the ‘modern artist’ would become a signal concern, as it would for Mary Butts, Rodker’s wife, who was also being launched on to the scene in *The Little Review* from 1920 onwards. It should also be borne in mind the extent to which Rodker’s concern with ‘guts’ – for instance, in his *Others* review – which appears as a reference throughout most representations of his artistic ontology, in Pound’s commendations of Rodker and in Mina Loy’s riposte to a poor review in *The Little Review* in 1920, has great significance in Rodker’s work. The internal organs, as places of interaction between the external and the internal, are privileged in Rodker as the site of a commixture of forces, a play of spheres, that Wyndham Lewis evokes in his paintings of totemic figures in the early twenties, with internal human attributes displayed on external surfaces. This, for Rodker, as for Lewis and Heap, would be the avant-garde creative tactic that would be an attempt to inject ‘new intense life’ in the context of a moribund socio-political context.

After gaining the foreign editorship at *The Little Review*, Rodker was setting himself up for a move into publishing with Butts – according to Crozier, possibly as a result of Pound’s instigation (xvi). Publicity for Butts’s *Ashe of Rings* begins before its 1921 serialisation, and her short story ‘Magic’ appears in the July 1920 issue. A Woolfian miniaturised psycho-drama, Butts’s ‘Magic’ concerns two polarised male and female characters observed over a short space of time. In a writing that relies heavily upon free indirect discourse, Butts’s female protagonist dwells on an object above her male other’s head and sinks into a reverie caused by this object awareness and the male figure’s writing, his ‘pencil inscribing its version of her image’.[[102]](#footnote-102) The short work is obsessed with the process of representation, and what this does to the figure involved as subject, thus containing a subtext of female rights, and political representation. Butts’s female focaliser confirms the embedded textual dictum that ‘a good painter is free of the pain of opposites’ (3) by radically freeing up her perception to flights of fancy that allow her some form of agency over her male other: ‘she though late would reign’ (5). Finally, the story concludes with the appearance of ‘a triangle, the base of the given world. From one known she was to complete this figure of divine geometry’ (6). She thus overcomes the pain of opposites through an introspective journey that results in the appearance of a figurative depiction of dialectics, which may have a basis in Rodker’s repeated use of the third term that overcomes opposites, and agonistic battles, in his art. The story also has a contemporaneous similarity to Remy de Gourmont’s ‘The Raised Arms’, subtitled ‘Theatre Muet’, in the November 1917 *Little Review*. This concludes with the run-on lines:

the unconscious prayer ascends in milky radiance towards the multiform Ideal, and the souls again climb along the white road of heaven, the road which, henceforth, is to be swallowed up and in its supreme altitudes lost within the refulgent glory of the Triangle.[[103]](#footnote-103)

De Gourmont’s symbolist tale bears striking similarity to Butts’s story, though the latter’s blend of realism and fantasy is more akin to Rodker’s work and is filtered through the psychomachia of Rodker’s ‘Theatre Muet’ pieces, which centre on male and female relations. The translation of symbolist material into a sexual and bodily realm enables a political power to be generated in reading personal relationships as a kind of arena of war. Such relations, as they are integrated within a socio-political context in both Butts and Rodker, will be central to the following discussion of Rodker and Butts’s prose work of the nineteen twenties and thirties. The drive towards narrative forms to express the complex of affective states detailed above in Rodker, would be directly influenced by a commitment to representing the politics of the post-war era. For Butts, political agency has its origins in private responsibility and action; her work filters historical movement through the prism of personal myth and the dynamics of human relationships.

**Part Two: Mary Butts and Pacifism**

John Rodker and Mary Butts were married midway through the First World War, at a time when the former was under suspicion (and later imprisoned) for his objections to military service and the latter was involved in the organisation and running of the left-Liberal war-time group, the National Council for Civil Liberties, which had evolved out of the National Council Against Conscription and the Union of Democratic Control.[[104]](#footnote-104) Biographically, then, an involvement in such a politically-charged atmosphere was a central concern of Butts’s life and thought around 1916, though the extent of her involvement is unclear from the journals as released. As with Rodker, who claimed no particular political allegiance, despite his politicised upbringing and early reading, the creative work instead provides a guide to how we might read notions of agency and interpellation as a response along these lines.

Mary Butts’s novel *Ashe of Rings*, serialised in *The Little Review* around 1921 and published in 1925, will be seen as a key work in understanding and potentially re-evaluating the literature of the First World War. The political content of Butts’s work remains to be properly politicised in her rehabilitation. Her novel is an important development of Joycean style, and warrants further investigation of its states of formal derangement and its exceptionality in terms of its inventiveness – its avant-gardism – and its addressing of issues of political representation that tie choices in style to a broader critique of state power. This critique can be read through Giorgio Agamben’s idea of the state of exception, which is a politico-philosophical consideration of what is perhaps better known in Britain as the institution of martial law. The concept of the state of exception relates to the alteration of the British government and its powers around the time of the First World War that could be seen to open the possibility of ongoing and severe curtailments of liberty in the name of emergency powers. The First World War can be considered, through this lens, as an event that expedited an inter-linking of democracy and the kind of sovereign power which is state-dictatorial. Butts’s writing, in its blending of voices and narrative positions, in short, its formal experimentation, marks it out as exceptional in literary terms. How these two levels of exceptionality coincide will be one of the questions tested in this chapter.

John Rodker’s work intersects with Butts’s in surprising ways. Rodker’s literary output is defined by formal experimentation, psychoanalytic insight, and socio-political analysis. Their work is mutually dyadic in that it may be considered as part of the conflicted nature of the moment of modernism, internally divided as some of this work may be by avant-garde and progressive features of literary history as reaction to a more general revolution in representation. While for Rodker the telos of the creative output seems to be an increasing incorporation of psychoanalytic thinking as structural to the form of his work, for Butts we can detect a recessionary motivation in the quest for sustainable mythological epistemologies. As such, their political sense can seem more to do with a political unconscious motivating the work rather than involving discursive features available for comparison with historical models. In comparing the work of these two modernist figures, I take Rodker’s semi-autobiographical text *Memoirs of Other Fronts*, published in 1932, as one text that skilfully combines a dissident subjectivity with social and psychological analysis. Again, the concept of the state of exception and its figures will be seen as peculiarly germane to Rodker and Butts’s writing, diagnosing and signalling a change in political direction and subjective civilian constitution. While portraying the First World War as an expression of totalitarianism and restrictions on, or delimitations of, civil liberty, these writers create representations of people that bring to the fore the bio-political as the new form of political representation.

Butts and Rodker write of State formations of mass control and repression of opposition in their fashioning of specific radical politics that centre on pacifism. This politics is exercised in a paradoxically militant attitude of opposition to militarism and privations of civil liberty being perpetuated under the guise of a war economy. Rodker’s Conscientious Objector, in *Memoirs*, and characters from Butts’s novel *Ashe of Rings*, notably Vanna and Serge, all oppose combat while also constructing another type of warfare, run at the level of bodily affect and militating against the State. Rodker’s title may be seen to epitomise this view: *Memoirs of Other Fronts* suggests the invasion of war beyond its metaphoric ‘front’ and into lived experience. It was described in publicity material as a story of ‘futility and frustration on three fronts – social, national and domestic’, reflecting the three-part, a-chronological structure of the novel. Indeed his narrative is one of pugilism between himself and his social milieu as much as it revolves around the experience of an objector in the War. Rodker’s and Butts’ work shares a mutual examination of desire that invests in a social and political field, while also diagnosing widespread trends in the power structures of the early twentieth century, narrating the effacement of politic enfranchisement undergone by *other* subjects. Rather than viewing such modernist protagonists as as examples of distasteful and reactionary archaism – as John Carey does in his *The Intellectuals and the Masses* – it would be preferable to argue for the diagnostic effects of their writing. In one productive sense, each modernist in turn demonstrates a capacity to reveal underlying power structures, if not actually to undermine them. Butts and Rodker emerge as powerful figures in modernism in the sense that they provide us with alternative political positions that were capable of being taken as life praxis, confronting monolithic modernism as much as a monolithic State culture.

Near the close of *Memoirs of Other Fronts*, Rodker’s narrative becomes obsessed by the state of the protagonist’s bowels, a feature of the novel that incurred the opprobrium of early reviewers, and nearly cost Rodker his publishing arrangement with Putnam. He writes, in the first person narrator’s perspective:

I sat, closed round myself, drearily puzzled, not knowing what my bowels wanted to do, but convinced they would anyhow betray me. In the station, among the other scurrying figures, I might have been seen pushing desperately among them, no longer my contained self [...] in search of Water Closets.[[105]](#footnote-105)

And later,

Portrait of a man thinking, gnawing his fist, at odds with himself, hanging on hard, oh wanting to let go! Alone there, the city all asleep, he only struggling with himself, divided in himself as he was divided outside, his wife in one place, his daughter in another, no link, nothing to make of all a corporate whole. (236)

Such attention to the minutiae of bodily experience seems to suggest, by way of the interior monologue of Rodker’s protagonist, that not only are the family and wider social institutions part of the constitution of subjectivity, they also inhere within the body, which is privileged here as the site of power relations. Rodker’s portrayal of the corporate internalisation and dramatisation of the link between institutions – society at large – and the body, which are obsessively detailed in the closing pages of the novel, are representative of the balancing of affective states and subjectivity that makes his writing remarkable given the context of other modernist writing, such as that of Wyndham Lewis, and in which the mind and body remain separated as part of a guarded division of intellect from its embodiment. By punning on the bowels of the city and the bowels of the man, and furthermore suggesting that the blockage is some kind of abject ‘pregnancy’ – ‘It clings with every stubborn fibre to its child that every day more gravid drags it down’ (250) – Rodker figures the end-point of his war experience as the re-constitution of humanity as the bearer of a bad Constitution, in all senses of the word. This bodily crisis occurs in the dénouement of the novel, signalling the totalising blockage of desire and also a protection of the self. The protagonist’s withholding exemplifies his resistance to the production of anything that might be allied with any State, or that might transgress the sovereignty of the body. Such withholding, as a withdrawal of activity, can be seen to be operative in the protagonist’s hunger strike in military prison, depicted in the central section of the novel, and in his refusal to fight, which at first seems baseless, but, as we shall see, evolves in a manner revealing of cultural and historical factors. In the stasis of constipation, Rodker’s protagonist feels he can successfully control the spatial aspects of hhis daughter’s estrangement from him, suggesting that his body increasingly comes to be seen as perceptive, as a kind of scripting device; unable to take up further nourishment, and unable to engage in productive economies, the body becomes a symbol of refusal, being implicated as a zone of strike action, and in Rodker’s work this takes up the form of a kind of inaction. In the hunger strike, for instance, the protagonist’s strike is triangulated by a desire to be with his partner, and a desire to subvert the juridical:

Everything of her had so vitally grafted itself on my instincts they were in acute discomfort not to have her, and in revolt. And nothing I thought, no, no cage will hold me from her. So I stopped eating, and that gave me a good start [...] and I knew I should soon be no good either as a soldier or a C.O. [...] and I sat back on my seat with my eyes closed, hugging myself with joy because I was so cleverly cheating them. (124)

By refusing to act at all, Rodker’s protagonist makes his body, through passivity, into a reactive zone, which may then bear witness to his inscription by the State as a bio-political entity, constructed as a figure of the exclusionary and exceptional politics t that will come to govern statecraft from the point of the First World War onwards into the century.

 In Agamben’s works *State of Exception* and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, he contends that a fundamental change occurred in governance as a result of political crisis in reaction to its geopolitical context that made the government acting in exception, or in the state of emergency, such as the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, which Agamben cites as an example, a general rule of political economy. The Military Service Act of 1916, wherein the British government dictated that it intended to convert its politically enfranchised citizens into soldiers, can also be seen as exemplary of this kind of exceptional politics. For Clinton Rossiter, for instance, ‘The transition from Britain at peace to Britain at war was almost a revolution’, specifically in the extent to which ‘radical alterations in governmental organization and [...] the most sweeping invasions of civil and economic liberties’ cemented as part of the British state in the ‘entirely new constitutional theory of emergency government.’[[106]](#footnote-106) Amplifying the structural alliance of democratic rule and states of exception, the Defence of the Realm Act is specified by Rossiter as being the ‘the most radical parliamentary enactment in the history of England, indeed in all the history of constitutional government’ (153). By limiting the fundamental rights of the citizen, especially by using military tribunals as a form of jurisdiction over contests to military conscription – and thereby arbitrating on the political liberties of the population – and by re-writing legislation to allow the government unprecedented powers to regulate the economy, the state of exception became an organisational principle of constitutional security in British politics. It is Agamben’s point that the crisis war powers of DORA became a continuing state of exception after the war, with its official state of emergency, when these powers became normalised despite peace. The British state’s capacity to silence dissent, especially by intervening in public protests, would only strengthen as a result of such measures into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In regulating the physical life of the citizen, the state of exception takes a particularly bio-political mode. This attends the process of internment and the state of abjection experienced by the protagonist in Rodker’s *Memoirs of Other Fronts*: ‘I had nothing, I never had had anything, so I had nothing to fight for. I was so destitute that I had not even any feeling of rights and the need to defend my rights or other people’s rights’ (121), a subject position which we are more familiar with today in the internment without trial of subjects in extra-legal centres of detention. Agamben contends in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, that

The “enigmas” that our century has proposed to historical reason and that remain with us (Nazism is only the most disquieting among them) will be solved only on the terrain – biopolitics – on which they were formed. [...] And only a reflection that [...] thematically interrogates the link between bare life and politics, a link that secretly governs the modern ideologies seemingly most distant from one another, will be able to bring the political out of its concealment and, at the same time, return thought to its practical calling.

[[107]](#footnote-107)

Agamben supports the power of the diagnostic potential in reflection, whether literary or otherwise, on the over-determining powers of statecraft; such statements have relevance to both Rodker and Butts’s portrayal of characters who inhabit the role of ‘bare life’ that predicates the state of emergency. To help to clarify what we could mean by a biopolitical horizon of exceptional politics, we could draw comparison between the Asquith government and its restrictions on dissent through the deployment of methods of internment, such as Rodker’s actual internment in military prisons in Wandsworth and Dartmouth, and George Bush’s suspension of rights in his military order of November 2001, which, according to Agamben, authorised the indefinite detention of non-citizens accused of terrorism and their trial by military commissions (Exception, 3). Such an order, for Agamben, ‘radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being.’ (3).

For Agamben, this being is known as *homo sacer*, a figure of political outsiderhood named after its use in Ancient Greece as the term for a person accused of a crime but who is sentenced to be cast out of society as a pariah, and who is considered both ‘sacred’, in that they cannot be prosecuted by religious ceremony, and utterly dispensable in the law, so that anyone could kill the accused without fear of retribution. The figure of *homo sacer* epitomises the idea of a kind of ‘bare life’ being constituted in the treatment of outsiders to the statist hegemony. Agamben calls this bare life *zoe*, as opposed to the politically enfranchising life of *bios*; such are the two distinct terms for the individual in social and political life in Greek etymologies. Rodker’s work, particularly in *Memoirs of Other Fronts* and such poems as ‘A C.O.’s Biography’ and ‘Hymn to Death 1914 and On’ (from *Hymns* (1920)), represents the body as a central focus of political and martial conflict, or, in Agamben’s phrasing, following Foucault, ‘the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects’ very bodies and forms of life.’ (5). Rodker’s objector’s prison cell in Wandsworth, for instance, engenders a silence that seems to proliferate in cell division, linking the body, incarceration and the subjectivity that this creates:

Through the weeks, the months, it stretches, swells, sends out proliferating fingers till it grows into every order, every cell of the body, till an unexpected sound is a clap of thunder, stupendous, terrifying [...] till a secret word or message makes the whole being quiver for days and breaks up the face muscles into uncontrollable grimaces and the body muscles into a ceaseless quivering. (135)

Rodker’s effective use of the asyndetic coordination, omitting conjunctions to convey a proliferating language to match that of the silence of the cell, and working as an intensifier of subjection, portrays not only an intensity of bodily connections to powers of discipline but also an overflow, an excess, of language. It is exceptional language – defined against mainstream expression – and reflects the constitutive nature of power relations, registering the matrix of state power as invasive, specifically in its biopolitical significance. Bodily affects such as these are transmuted from the physical symptoms of war neuroses, which are seen not only in the military population, but on the home front also.[[108]](#footnote-108) The grimacing and quivering body signifies the excess imagined in the expansion of the bounds of the ego: ‘You fill your cell. You are outside your cell’ (135). The second person pronoun involves the reader in the absenting and dispersal of self, and its diffusion in an amalgamated scene, making the writing serve as a performative reflection of the logic of internment, in which the constriction of the cell dominates the subject’s sense of space and the space of their imagination. Such a sense of metaphysical entrapment, where even the logic of thought becomes entangled in the relation of self to cell, develops in Rodker’s work over time, but his reflections on military internment in *Memoirs* builds on the metaphoric work done in his earlier poetry. ‘From a Biography’ and ‘A C.O.’s Biography’, the first of which was published in *Hymns* of 1920, explore this experience further:

He was a spider inside a tumbler,

a miserable gannet caught by wire.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The poem’s past-tense opening line, separating off the dual metaphor, emphasises the production of deadening metaphors (unfriendly metaphors, to rework Bodenheim’s description of his work) as a definition of experience. This stanza closes in a recapitulation of this discursive production of prisoner subjectivity: ‘Life had ebbed from him, his past was forgotten. / It was a story read in a book’ (82). Disconnected from human relationships, depicted as so often in Rodker as tormented sado-masochistic battles (he ‘remembered her only to hate her’), the poem collapses any notion of solidarity into a hardening of the resources of the self: ‘he thought of himself, and his bitterness faded’ (83). Human interiority seems to become the prison metaphorised in the social, romantic and actual imprisonment being undergone in the experience of Rodker’s personae. One concrete example of this multiplication of division and containment can be found in Paul Nash’s picture used as cover art for *Memoirs*, which depicts an isolated Arc de Triomphe surrounded by and framed by archways, as if imprisoned by the stolid architecture that contains and produces the kinds of regimentation depicted in the novel, and in the militarisation of society that followed DORA. Rodker’s unpublished *An Ape of Genius* – signally titled as a literary riposte to Lewis – similarly depicts this metonymic interest in the micro-politics and micro-effects of power. His depiction in chapter four of ‘cells’ entering ‘rebellion’ in the body has clear implications for analysing effects on a social body; insofar as the kind of cell divisions referred to in *Memoirs* are a kind of cancer, they

implied a measure of destruction to their host, separated out in the society of twenty years ago and taking their aliment from the general blood stream, returned it in a form somewhat different, contributing a new ferment, so that perceptibly the host was modified, and to a degree that makes it probable when variation there is transmissible.[[110]](#footnote-110)

These proliferating, absorptive forces fundamentally alter the body of society. As a kind of ideology, these effects take a particularly biological form, adducing that social change occurs in the movements and sympathies of smaller aggregations that build into larger social forces; alarming violent impulses, for Rodker, were building up to the war period and ‘answered by the extrusion of those polar fecundating bodies’ (‘Apes’) in the socio-cultural matrix. From this angle we can see how Rodker reconstructs ideology as the amassing of a micro-politics indebted to the contagion theories of crowd psychology. His depiction of individuals as cells that depend on and compose a larger body also appears to be informed by the theory of Unanimism as developed by Jules Romain, whose work *The Body’s Rapture* Rodker translated in 1933, but who developed his theory in novels like the 1911 *Mort de Quelqu’un* onwards . Romain’s theory ‘intended to unzip “the individual” into the social relations that compose it,’[[111]](#footnote-111) and discern the process by which social and conceptual wholes are composed out of the relations between things. And so Rodker’s intense scrutiny on the perceiving consciousness of his narrator-protagonist in *Memoirs* can be seen to compose relations between the individual and the social. Despite his separation, then, the narrator finds himself aggregated with the cell-life of political dissidents, specifically those who have been divested of their constitutional liberty.

The further deprivations of franchise and democratic right are registered in Rodker’s writing insofar as the protagonist ‘had nothing [...] not even any feeling of rights and the need to defend my rights or other people’s rights’ (121), quoted above. Thus Rodker’s writing suggests that figures of exception must be created in order for the state to reconstitute liberty as the expression of a militaristic security; inter-war democracy then depends upon the ability of the state to organise its citizens, down to its bodily subjection of them, and the figure of the scapegoat, the *pharmakos* or *homo sacer*, the one without rights, represents the fundamental symbol of the State’s power to acting to safeguard itself by containing and actively nullifying its Others. Rodker writes:

I believe that at the time the C.O.’s fate was still in the balance. I imagine there was just a chance we might be shot. It has always seemed to me easier to be shot than to shoot another [...] I would submit to them with a certain calm, in a resignation that has something of fulfilment in it. (120)

Rodker’s objections, then, are not simply allied to one cause or another – they are not unequivocally anarchist or socialist or libertarian. In fact, he is explicit about this in his attitude to his own pacifism, which seeks no justification in party politics: ‘another war will come and I shall be a pacifist again and hate myself for it’ (197). His politics is, rather, implicitly linked to performances of sacrifice, passivity and the punitive capacity of the state. Rodker subscribes, in his 1935 essay on his objections, ‘Twenty Years After’, to the post-war psychoanalytic view that all reactions to war, whether positive or negative, express an innate death-drive: ‘The warrior and pacifist correspond to different types, fighting for different reasons. And no one at this stage can say which attitude is likely to prove most fruitful in the end.’[[112]](#footnote-112) The refusal to be allied to any group, expressed in all accounts of his opposition to service, and even in his hunger strike, which the narrator of *Memoirs* describes as emanating from a ‘serious [...] feeling nothing would ever involve me’ (117), could be considered, then, as a parodic reflection of the sacrificial logic of the state in war. By offering up his body as a representation of the repressed part of military and state logic, Rodker’s protagonist exposes the limits of exclusionary politics. In a letter of July 1923, Ford Madox Ford

 writes to Rodker congratulating him on the singularity of his early novel *Montagnes Russes*, an early version of *Memoirs*, reassuring him that he can ‘have the conviction that you’re erecting a good solid monument to Unknown Pacifists’, expressing the parallelism inherent in the subject positions of soldier and objector, while also satirising the associations of war with selective remembrance and monument-building. In fact, Rodker had expressed a similar revision in his 1921 poem ‘War Museum – Royal College of Surgeons’, in which the final stanza concludes:

Therefore for the unknown warrior

let us make a Christ

sweating blood but speechless.

With the open chest

the snapped heart

the gashed liver

and cutaway bowels,

[...]

and an obliterated face

that dribbles a tear from an eye corner.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Here, the signifiers of wounding and disfigurement come to symbolise the culmination of an apocalyptic war. A second Christ is fashioned in the poem in the form of a disfigured scapegoat, unable to express suffering because of its speechlessness and facelessness, whose destroyed organs register the figure’s bodily abjection as a symbolic site of mourning. Not only does this express the true horror of war, but it also raises the issue of symbolism as a contested site, both for patriotic forms of national mourning, and as adequate representation of the visceral reality of war experience. This ambiguity maps onto that of the bodily symptomatology of Rodker’s conscientious objector – at once reviled, marginalised, and yet thoroughly dependent on the arbitrary dictates of a state, such figures express the breakdown of difference in subject populations in war-time, to follow René Girard’s theory, and the creation of scapegoats in order to express a whole community’s subjection to militarism. Rodker’s depiction of Christ is as much an apostasy as that expressed in his revision of the unknown soldier; similarly, the Conscientious Objector offends the very idea of sacrifice central to war-time ideology, exposing the massification undergone in that society – the accusation of betrayal or wrongdoing, as Girard states, ‘bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body.’[[114]](#footnote-114)

Similarly, in Mary Butts’s *Ashe of Rings*, within a narrative based around aristocratic lineage and over-determining ideas of blood lines and national roots, the character of Serge, a Russian émigré and political suspect, embodies Agamben’s theory of political constitution and its enforced militaristic encoding through scapegoating. Serge’s partner Judy, who for Butts represents the war and its sadism in what Butts calls her ‘war-fairy-tale’, consistently betrays Serge by reference to his non-combatancy. Serge’s pacifist threat splits them apart, a moment that is laden with the discourse of scapegoating:

“We do not seem to be winning this war. To people on the losing side, you are a luxury. Your dear Germans torture our prisoners. If I could I would send you over there. I’d hand you over to a Prussian officer. It’s discipline you want.” (78)

We are pr pivy in Butts’s novel to the disciplinary force of citizens as they register their constitution as bearers of a hegemonic ideology dependent on forces of power and knowledge. In thoroughly incorporating the disciplinary mechanisms of the state at war, Judy becomes a symbolic presence, embodying the miniaturisation of militarism being worked out through gendered power struggles. In this way, Butts can effectively portray war, and the modernity that it brings, as operative on a micro scale that ties bodies to the body politic. Later scenes in the novel such as Judy’s encouragement of a male character to attempt to sexually violate Vanna likewise compound this point, and serve to link up private action with a barely-repressed public crisis. The language of Judy, especially in her didactic sense of military duty – ‘To people on the losing side, you are a luxury [...] Germans torture our prisoners’ – also makes her the mouthpiece of a guilt-bearing propaganda, again filtered down to a personal level of interpersonal pugilism. Butts’s writing thus overlaps with Rodker’s in surprising ways, though Butts’s work contains sublimated political elements that must be foregrounded and unpacked from their allegorical expression to realise the link. Whereas Rodker is explicit in elements of his critique of the state and its organs – for example, in *Memoirs*, he writes of imprisoned objectors: ‘Watched by each other, irritated by the rivalry for indoor jobs, we were made still more uneasy by the stolid gaze of the British Public and large amorphous press. We felt they approved both those in the trenches and those in prison, but for us had only hatred and contempt’ (177) – Butts allegorises personal relationships as indicative and suggestive of the war and its fundamentally re-constitutive force and, like Rodker, meditates on the invasive logic of war discourses. In her diaries, for instance, Butts figures the war as ‘like a monstrous inconvenience in every room of the house – a wall crawling with deadly caterpillars which sometimes drop off and go for one. One goes on living in the middle. Frieze-figures ‘doing our bit’ even in pacifism.’[[115]](#footnote-115) Like Rodker’s imprisoned objector, Butts experiences restrictions enacted by the state and inaugurated in war as an invasion of space. This miniaturisation of state affects in imagery of insect life that contains potentials for metamorphosis (‘caterpillars’, the irrationality of their actions) links to a politicising of domestic space in modernism more generally, but is also performed in *Ashe of Rings* in the depiction of Serge’s banishment. As if to find a metonymic symbol of war on a par with the allegorical figure of Judy, who for Serge is ‘inside me, playing [war’s] infernal tunes [...] the war’s smallest doll’ (81), he, in hunger-induced hallucinations, imagines his room filled with ‘white bees’ (82). Initially falling as snow, the bees amass but then gradually metamorphose into their double negatives, images of death:

Mean and menacing, the life of his room closed in, the imperceptible worms of dust. [...] [H]e sensed a thickness in the air, specks marching, whose infinite ranks sank and stirred, and sank back and turned on themselves again. [...] [T]hey swelled, binding one another, each a tiny death and a tiny life (84)

Poetic in its management of rhythmic sense in each sentence, filled with assonance and alliteration miming the ways the bees bind one another, this moment in the novel seems to be a culmination not only for the political crisis of the character engaged in discourse, but also in the collapsing of fairy tale into war through its reading of imagery as allegorical. In allegorising war, Butts’s work could be linked to Benjamin’s definition of allegory as ‘history as petrified primordial landscape’ – as the scenes of action move from domestic urban to druidical rural landscapes, the work is imbued with particular senses of the allegorical that often issue from the author’s manipulation of space. Furthermore, as Alex Houen points out in his book on terrorism, the etymological roots of allegory connect it to a ‘gathering’ (*ageiro*) of ‘others’ (*allos*) through speech.[[116]](#footnote-116) The allegorising work done in *Ashe of Rings*, then, connects the work to a wider social body while pointing to the unstable elements of representing war’s outsides, or margins.

The gendering of war in the character of Judy, for instance, heightens the sense that the war has invaded the bodies of the characters involved in the novel, making the location of the Rings as a stage for the production of allegorical roles. Judy ‘loves’ war, and her visceral passion for it is offset by the character of Serge, who is ‘either wanted for military service here, or for deportation back to Russia. I [Vanna says] don’t doubt that you have a political record.’ ... ‘She [Vanna says of Judy] wants to see it break you. She wants to break you herself. She is a microcosm of it.’ (67). Serge’s outsiderhood is emphasised by the uncertainty of his position: we are left uncertain whether Serge is wanted by the authorities on grounds of ‘conscience’ (‘Nearly’, he says), or as a ‘Political suspect’. He wants to ‘avoid the police’ (65), because, as he admits, his ‘papers are not in order’ (65). Serge says Judy has ‘infected’ him (57) and that she ‘must be fed on blood’ (58), linking an idea of disease in the individual body to a wider disease of society, and mapping war onto a docile body: ‘A cobweb threaded them; a rope of bloody hair tied him to Judy’s wrist’ (60). Judy is a symbol of authoritarianism and the militarised state: ‘She insists on the police’, while Vanna proclaims that the police represent ‘an institution we despise’ (66), a sentiment that leads us back to Butts’s actual involvement in peace institutions and pressure groups such as the National Council Against Conscription. The inclusive pronoun ‘we’ signals for a moment the wider collective link between Butts and Rodker – the Council Against Conscription, later the National Council for Civil Liberties, would have been involved in the representation of C.O.s throughout the war, and was indeed under surveillance by the war-time state.

Butts’s allegorical staging of war as personal combat and Rodker’s miniaturisation of the processes of bodily inscription and coercion, while providing examples of the exceptional politics of the First World War, corroborate Paulo Virilio’s statement in *Pure War* that the division between civilian and soldier, between democracy and militarism, has broken down since the First World War, and that the war economy, with its meshing of artillery production and civilian economy, and its continued implementation after the war provides evidence that, even outside of the spectacular twentieth century wars, democratic peace *is* war. Rodker’s speculation in his essay ‘Twenty Years After’, that weapons of mass destruction provide the only solution to the spectre of war, can be seen as uncannily prescient in this respect: ‘Peace under threat of war seems the best we can so far hope for’ (291), he writes. Yet this seems to be alluded to as originating in the war as represented in Butts and Rodker’s earlier works: following Foucault, we can see how it was essential for the state to inaugurate a link between peace and war through the exposure of the body to a capture of its forces for the sustaining of life in the shadow of the threat of its extinction. Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*:

The power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual’s continued existence. The principle underlying the tactics of battle – that one has to be capable of killing in order to go on living – has become the principle that defines the strategy of states.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Foucault’s concept of state power reinforces Agamben’s idea that life undergoes a shift in terms under the condition of war, which is the dominant condition of twentieth and twenty-first century politics. The knot of bloody hair that ties Judy and Serge seems an adequate symbol of such a link between sustenance and living death.

Butts engages in an important discussion of the role of state and socialisation, suggesting that the new form of life inaugurated by war is a demented form of government:

“People like Judy live on the fact of [war], and get spirit-nourishing food out of the ruin of so much life.

“There are no checks on such people now.

*“Childe Roland to the dark tower came*.

“That’s an English poem.

“Now the dark tower is this: It is the vortex of death, or of life under a form absolutely inimical to man. When the human machine, and the soul – whatever that is – runs down. A room in a tower where a wheel spins against the course of the sun. Judy is your tower. She has brought you there.”

[...]

“The war is not all death, but she is purer than the war because she is tiny.

“She is a death-hound following us. [...] Wounds manufacture them [people like Judy].” (148, paragraphing as original)

The notion of the wound, individual and social, corresponds to the biopolitical element of subjectivity under a warring state; violence thus becomes the precondition of civilisation. For Freud, ‘civilisation is a scar tissue from a past of violence and destruction’,[[118]](#footnote-118) and the First World War, for Butts and Rodker, as for Freud, re-opens the wound as both a literal destruction of bodies in the war, and an inscription on the body, social and individual, of the war machine as productive of a new ideology of sacrifice. The exceptional language in the quotation above, which figures culpability as rooted in an amalgamated history of intentional misreading and violence, links history as nightmare to productive economies of war that seek totalisation.

It has been suggested that Butts’s portrayal of her characters as locked in a war of blood in its racial sense betrays a mysticism that would ally Butts with the canonical modernists’ fetishism of the prpriimitive, and further divorcing her writing from political critique. Yet, as I argue above, the mythological invests the real, imbuing collective violence with its character – the ancestral and primitivist frame of Butts’ novel expresses both a conservatism and quest for mythical order, while simultaneously exposing that order as at least partially constitutive of social and historical breakdown.

Bearing out Fredric Jameson’s analysis in *The Political Unconscious*, that ‘there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed [...] everything is “in the last analysis” political’ (*Political Unconscious*, 20), and that historical forms must be subjected to political critique, we can see that even Butts’s classicism relates to an explicit critique of contemporaneous issues of state formation and the creation of individual subject positions. Demonstrating the formal elements of her hallucinatory prose, Butts writes in paratactic form of Serge:

He sobbed and twisted and tore at his hands because of his shame, because he had been handled and held up to insult. Pharmakos of Hellas, scapegoat of Israel, a matted animal dead of thirst, a man and woman whipped with squills. Outside the city walls. Naked to the terrors outside the life of man. (94)

This connects the character of Serge explicitly with the ancient figure of *homo sacer* as the excluded subject who confirms the rule of exclusionary practices, the re-constitution of the population as bodies for manipulation and as subjects of a sovereign power which arrogates the right of its less cooperative citizens, its unwanted elements, for the purposes of state power. Telegraphic sentences that deliver information as individual units of sense also mark the exceptionalism of the style here. Internally, the sentences have a dithyrambic quality emphasised by rapid alterations in sentence-length. Gradually, through the erosion of personality figured in the process of scapegoating, the language reflects a denuding of political agency. Again, the narrative’s understanding of this as a literal process raises the sense of allegory, the unreality of the discourse and events related, as an exploration of literal experiences of outsiderhood and political disenfranchisement.

Representation through textual processes – in both peace narratives and propaganda – has a key role in understanding reactions to the war in marginal modernist writers. Particularly in Rodker’s work, the war becomes an unavoidable and fully intrusive aspect of life; with narratives of war comes the acceptance of war into the home as a national trope of homeliness and comfort. ‘They’, Rodker writes of the popular war writers Remarque, Graves and Sassoon, ‘wanted it, like the *Daily Mail* and the Liberal government then, and they went, singing, keeping their peckers up’ (198). While this is the case of propagandists, Rodker aims to turn his objector’s body into an opposing force that confronts the political representation of dissenters as outsiders. By representing his insides, his corporeal constitution linking appetite and denial of that appetite with strategies of refusal and absence, Rodker confronts the biopolitical significance of representations of war: his protagonist aims, he says at one point in *Memoirs*, to attain the viscerality of Barbusse as a point of departure from uncritical war analyses (195) and further:

We must make a stand against these organs that like cannon, fire themselves perpetually at the world to destroy all, spouting always, knowing it does not matter, that the wastage is made good. And *All Quiet* and *Sergeant Grisha*, and all the rest, this is war’s joy, not its horror, to show we are all proud of war and our baptism of fire [...] A new generation will read and see this battle as other battles.’ [...] ‘A civilisation [...] rotten with the cowardice that will not let us live our lives fully joyously, promiscuously even if we must; and damns that being in us who wills atrocities, and comes out and kills, kills, kills, and kills the German effigy, makes him the scapegoat for ourselves, leaving us free to face life violently for a while again.’ (143)

Collapsing the distinction between opposition forces and the political prisoner of conscience, the process of scapegoating can be seen to work both ways, in recognition of an external enemy and perhaps more insidiously, more inevitably, turning upon the host body politic to see infection as working within, in ritual processes of persecution.

It is in the hunger strike as a corollary of this organised subjection – also depicted in Rodker’s poem ‘A C.O.’s Biography’ – that we encounter the relation between the organs of society at large as expressions of the state and the individual body as passive material, as bare life in the eyes of the state, for organic manipulation. Such strikes form the limit to which a protest can become militant against state biopolitics, and resides in the attempt for the bare life of the political outlaw to be administered not by the industrial-military complex, but by the individual for whom political imprisonment is consonant with the manipulations of life and death indicative of political authority. As Agamben writes in terms of this coercive control, ‘The absolute capacity of the subjects’ bodies to be killed forms the new political body of the West’ (125). Rodker’s depiction of hunger strike in *Memoirs of Other Fronts* coheres in the creation of a body that rejects even life in the face of his rejection by the state: ‘I knew I should soon be no good either as a soldier or a C.O., and I sat back on my seat with my eyes closed, hugging myself with joy because I was so cleverly cheating them’ (124). Underpinning this political protest is an attempt to address the issue of being an alien, or outsider: he ‘belonged nowhere’, and thus separates himself from the war crowd being constituted by the government:

In Paris I feel English, in London a foreigner. There are a lot of men like that, but it is only now, well on in life, I realise how much of a foreigner I am, how much of one I always was. ... It is as though the very fibres that composed me, tired at last of the incessant struggle with the thing I longed to be, at last in intense consciousness of what it was I strove to suppress, stressed only that side of me, piling on ... atavisms of centuries ... the harsh bonds of ideal society, propriety [...] and which finally too much circumscribed me. (16)

The idea of Rodker’s protagonist as *homo sacer*, then, seems to correspond to an idea of the political prisoner as the subject of attempted coercion, and the object of a military gaze; the other must be isolated and therefore inoculated of resistance. It is also significant, as Dominic Williams has explored, that tropes of infection and disease to be found throughout Rodker’s work are also symptomatic of racial stereotyping of the ethnically Jewish other, another subject position that Rodker’s creative work represses. The forces of social and political positioning that condition this subject are further expressed as a shattering of the self – though objection promises group solidarity, its offer is rejected in *Memoirs*. The protagonist is antipathetic to the group identifications, whether anti- or pro-war:

Once the thought that I was part of a movement had encouraged me, made the unpleasant endurable. Now I saw there was no movement, only a collection of disparate elements compressed to an artificial cohesion by the Government. But it was under protest we cohered, and at each moment the mass flew apart into the individuals that composed it. (191)

The failure of strikes in objector detention centres like Dartmoor, in which protests such as those of radicals like C. H. Norman, connected to the No-Conscription Fellowship, would lead to increased persecution in the form of solitary detention or hard labour,[[119]](#footnote-119) atomises the individual protestor, and yet paradoxically connects them to a context of similarly atomised individuals.

Rodker’s non-combatant protagonist represents a critical and interrogative figure who understands the fatality inherent in the powerful tides – physical and ideological – in support of the war effort and its capacity to become a totalitarian force, but also in his ability to see other crowds a s being potentially coercive. Thus he opts for a capitulation to the organisation of his own ‘bare life’. The forces involved in the war effort become increasingly analogous, as in Elias Canetti’s description of war as an ‘*eruption of two crowds* […] the supreme purpose of each is to preserve its existence through both belief and action. To abandon the crowd would be to abandon life itself.’[[120]](#footnote-120)

Rodker’s protagonist seeks to gain power through his subjection, through his positioning as a threat by the State: he is alone and distanced as a foreigner, expressing his genesis within pre- and inter-war society as radically other, thus joining minority groupings of C.O.s in Britain at the time. Exposure to what Canetti describes as the abandonment of life itself in opposing the war is strictly necessary for such a grouping, and this is raised in *Memoirs of Other Fronts* as a pitched battle between a whole society and the individual:

We felt keenly that our compromise had betrayed our own movement. Watched by each other, irritated by the rivalry for jobs, we were made still more uneasy by the stolid gaze of the British Public and large amorphous press. We felt they approved both those in the trenches and those in prison, but for us had only hatred and contempt. (177)

The danger of being annulled by society is always at hand; the state’s disciplinary focus is omniscient and organised through institutions that mediate. For Rodker as with Butts the forces of state coercion are always in operation, even on the discursive level of interpersonal relationships. A key example of this is the quote, ‘It’s discipline you want’, as Judy says to Serge in *Ashe of Rings*, quoted above (78).Yet the abandonment of life, and therefore of political organisation, is perhaps the most resonant form of strike action available in this context. An adequate reaction to such disciplinarian society, for Rodker’s protagonist as for Serge in *Ashe*, is to practice modes of abstention and withdrawal, but as we have seen, these reactions are radical, in that they connect subjects to a wider social field of protest, and representative, in that they symbolise the political position of scapegoats.

Ian Patterson locates the importance of strategies of silence and passivity in Rodker’s writing in their positioning ‘against the upsurge of emotive rhetoric that accompanied the outbreak of war.’ Withdrawal from discourse reflects a concern that the power of language cannot reflect the realities and complexities of war-time society: ‘Words were regarded in some quarters, notably here in Rodker’s wartime experiments, as inadequate to represent and communicate the primitive, unconscious structures of emotional experience that underlie human behaviour.’[[121]](#footnote-121) We have seen, also, how ‘words’, in their relation to representation, political and mediatised, can be effectively divorced from their potency as expressions of suffering and co-opted by the propaganda machine. Rodker’s poem ‘In the Courtyard’ figures a society ‘mangled, bleeding, hysterical’ in the midst of the war on the home front, in which the rhetoric of propaganda cannot compensate for either the loss of access to poetic thought, or the investment of aberrant discourses in the fabric of society:

It is as though some verminous rag

were shaken clean, then dropped in the old place –

Life carelessly invests it...

In peace,

a cut finger made my heart bleed more

than all these ‘mangled limbs’

these ‘fair bodies murdered in their prime’,

outraged women, mutilated children.

Not the spattering of bullets

make me think of hail

the coolness of rain

the curves of English downs,

low dark clouds that enfolded me close

but yesterday.

No! it was not yesterday.

Many days have passed...

A screaming shell tears the sky

Bursts...

The rag’s clean again (92)

War is figured as a kind of cleansing of the social fabric, which the society then proceeds to stain with codes of tradition (‘the old place’), incautious to fateful recovering (‘carelessly’), emphasised by the semantic residue of ‘infects’ in ‘invests’. The poetic persona’s seemingly callous comparison between minor injury and mass destruction in fact marks the distance Rodker creates between personal harm and state-managed and mediatised political rhetoric of mass suffering. Language, here, appears guilty in its manipulation of real events to perpetuate the ‘upsurge in emotive rhetoric’ to which Patterson refers. The moment of violence is perceived as a disorientation of time and memory, insofar as the remembering being done in the pastoral shades evoked in the fourth to last stanza are dismissed as a ‘yesterday’ that did not exist. Time has been interrupted by the cyclical time of war – bombing, material reconstruction, social reconstruction, remembering in contingent tranquillity, then more bombing. ‘In the Courtyard’ does for time what Rodker’s depictions of the objector’s jail do for space: material changes reflect as alterations in the life processes of the subject. We can see this work as being deeply committed to a realism of expression, especially in the way that form, broken, syntactically deranged, can be considered as an erosive force on the stability of subjects presented in the content.

The controverted state of the non-combatant can be experienced as a kind of conscription in its other connotation; to write, to put together in writing. Rodker’s conscientious objector and Butts’s figure of the al thienated and scapegoated orphan of the war experience a conscription in language that affects their constitution and focuses on the body as the origin of political ontology. Ian Patterson anticipates the potential for critiquing Rodker and Butts’s work through the political philosophy of Agamben by referring to the sacrificial status of the Conscientious Objector. Those who refuse to be sacrificed as offerings to the State – non-combatants – become ritual objects of sacrifice in national reparation for those who volunteered their sacrifice. In this way, the dissenter faces a similar fate to that of the combatant – and, indeed, conscientious objectors were treated with brutality in prison, threatened with firing squad, and faced a future of poverty through enforced restrictions on employment after the war – but at the hands of those who are supposedly representative of the non-combatants citizenship. The writers explored here portray non-combatants who are forced into battle, but in the most unexpected of territories.

**Chapter 2**

**Atomic Masses: Mina Loy’s Transvaluing Poetic**

*The* Dummy Public *originated by the Press, financed by the Capitalist:*

*For whom the politician legislates,*

*The army fights,*

*The church collects.*

– Mina Loy

In a *transatlantic review* article of 1924, Mina Loy prefaces her hagiography of Gertrude Stein with the following short epigraphic poem:

Curie

of the laboratory

of vocabulary

 she crushed

the tonnage

of consciousness

congealed to phrases

 to extract

a radium of the word

This ekphrastic fragment, which, further, Roger Conover terms *maieutic*[[122]](#footnote-122), unites the scientistic language of contemporary developments in the use of radioactive materials for previously unknown functions in medicine and the register and form of avant-garde linguistic experiment. Emphasising the physicality of language as a medium of representation and the fluidity – that which does the ‘congealing’ – of the poetic and public subject in the creation of an aesthetics of action, Loy’s poem epitomises the thematics that will be explored in the following chapter, which consists of a detailed reading of Loy’s provocative manifesto, ‘Psycho-Democracy’ and an exploration of the politics of Loy’s brand of modernism. As we can see in ‘Gertrude Stein’ above, the scientific material, especially that relating to the atom (which yet has pre-atomic era connotations, especially of philosophical atomism), is being manipulated as metaphor and troped as a referent for modernity and avant-gardism, where the literary technique is analogous to experimental science and language is a medium of inherent instability and apocalyptic power. But it also encodes a peculiar strand of dialectic in its mining of material upon which to base such experiments on language, and the language of the subjective consciousness set in balance against that of others and the otherness of language. These moments of dialectical poetic argumentation, most explicit in Loy’s erotic and satirical poetry, warrant further investigation in terms of their modelling of political agency and the limits of their utopian activism vis-à-vis the socially real, first in the context of the manifesto.

Written and revised between 1917 to 1919, and issued as a pamphlet for distribution on the streets of Florence in 1920, Loy’s manifesto is signed in the original, true to its nature, ‘Mina Loy/ Mexico, Buenos Aires. Surrey. Geneva. / Florence.’[[123]](#footnote-123) Highlighting the internationalism of one strand of modernist praxis, this signature further emphasises Loy’s determination to author a new political, philosophical and geographical subject. Together with an early typescript of the manifesto sent to Carl Van Vechten, a friend and arts correspondent for the New York Times, Loy writes that this is ‘Not public candy’. Instantiating the avant-garde gesture *par excellence*, Loy initially intends for ‘Psycho-Democracy: A Movement to Focus Human Reason on THE CONSCIOUS DIRECTION OF EVOLUTION’, to give its full title, to be an attack on public taste, to be bitterly digested as a corrective medicine. However, such Poundian, and, as we shall see, Nietzschean, conceptions are being used in radical ways in the reading proposed here, which focuses on the transformative or transvaluing ethic so important to Loy’s interpretation of political ontology. Particularly important in this reading will be the symbol of the radioactive atom, as it is variously expressed as being key to understanding Loy’s subject positions and representations that fuse the external with the internal, the self and the other, the individual and the social. Paradoxically radical and reactionary, the manifesto seeks to ‘democratise the Dominator’s standard,’[[124]](#footnote-124) which is figured as a metaphor of nuclear mass, namely one of neutron capture,[[125]](#footnote-125) in which a nucleus absorbs particles to form greater mass: ‘the dominating class is a psychological nucleus progressively absorbing all similar elements into itself’ (17). The massification of dominant ideology envisaged here leads to social pacification and stagnancy, an inhibition of the ‘liberating ideal’ of creative democracy of ‘The Spirit’ (14), which Loy retains as an abstract and vaguely-defined concept of social good and (post-)radical potentiality. Contingent in this reading is a raised awareness of Loy’s analysis of social and psychological conditioning, which sheds some light on post-First World War power/knowledge relations and the incorporation of theoretical insights into modernist articulations.

While many critics of Loy have been understandably quick to argue out gender positions and representations in her work, I am interested in contextualising the Psycho-Democracy manifesto, following recent work by Rachel Potter, as situated in political debates about the formation of a particular kind of democracy after the First World War. Loy’s polemic is comparable in its content to politico-philosophical thinking such as that of J. A. Hobson, whose work *Democracy After the War* of 1917 perspicaciously observes:

The emergency powers of militarism during the war exhibit various ways in which National Service, in time of peace, may be utilized for the defence of capitalism […] [M]ilitarism is intended to stay, and that its beneficent influence, like that of charity, ‘begins at home.’[[126]](#footnote-126)

The post-war democracy, then, is formed out of economic principles that offer a guarantee of stability and peace, something fervently argued by Keynes, who pointed to the Treaty of Versailles as a Carthaginian Peace, a situation in which brutality and coercion is justified paradoxically through recourse to a rhetoric of the pacific.[[127]](#footnote-127) The economic consequences of the war were consonant with the war economy, which for Keynes were delusional and representative of a wider breakdown of the social, the ‘convulsions of a dying civilisation’ (2). It is in the context of such militarising of the social – the development of a war economy that would remain intact throughout the twentieth century and the constitution of the democratic subject – that Loy writes her manifesto, but the political value of Loy’s work is yet to be raised as a central problematic of her work. The extent to which the subject of democratic constitution and its dependence on the context of the market economy guides the text is evidenced in the Florence version, in which she requests that you ‘Invest Your Consciousness / in / My Idea-Market.’[[128]](#footnote-128) Whereas the bellicose anti-state rhetoric of Marinetti’s manifestoes, which Loys’ certainly emulate, mimic and satirise, asks for no such investment but rather a voluntarism of the faithful, Loy interpellates a reader-audience who may be coerced out of their commercial identity by way of an ironic procedure involving suggestions for political investments that structurally mimic those already available in state and economic ideology.

Potter characterises the problematic apparent in reading Loy’s manifestoes in this way: ‘Was [Loy’s interest] in “mental spatiality” and the subconscious an apolitical withdrawal into the self, or was Loy interested in developing a different kind of political aesthetic?’[[129]](#footnote-129) Loy’s own investment in ideas of a utopian democracy of the ‘Spirit’ and of a potential collectivity are clearly part of a wider political critique, and her politically-oriented prose and poetry work can be seen as attempts to enact those concepts. Indeed, Loy’s attention to the lyrical self embroiled within genderised battles has often been read as an assertion of the power-struggle being enacted on a wider stage of early feminist debates and activities of the ‘New Woman’. But Loy’s repeated staging of such battles speaks also of the pugilism of the avant-garde, and to the inherence of a more complex dialectical structure, which often finds its expression in images and figures of forms of nuclear reaction such as fission, and in abstract imaging of agency. Two examples clarify the poles of Loy’s structural incorporation of atomic matter: the poem ‘Parturition’ and the short *théâtre muet* play ‘Collision’. ‘Parturition’ appears to be an exploration of pain, specifically the pain of childbirth, envisaged as a shattering of the bounds of the lyric identity; ‘Collision’ imagines revolution as an allegorical experiment in a lab, but using the similar metaphors of nuclear fission. For the persona of ‘Parturition’, the natural world, and specifically the centre of our solar system’s nuclear energy, the sun, cannot correlate to the universe of affect evoked in the poem:

[...] the bland sun

Has no affair with me

In my congested cosmos of agony

From which there is no escape

On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations

Or in contraction

To the pin-point nucleus of being[[130]](#footnote-130)

Loy continues to play with the expansion and contraction, the wave form, that pain takes as it follows labour contractions. Notions of ‘intension’ and ‘extension’, Bergsonian terms reflecting the duration of experience as a felt time beyond constraints of metaphysical time, are refined down in the atomic reference of the nucleus, which here works as a codification of being that traverses identities of mother and baby. Existence becomes elemental in the context not necessarily of childbirth pain, but in this quest into cellular ontology. Scathing of the image of motherhood, and in many senses far from ‘ecstatic’, as Alan Marshall has termed Loy’s evocation,[[131]](#footnote-131) the lyric subject experiences life as negation: ‘I should have been emptied of life’ (6). As a discrete atomic unit, the mother is ‘Indivisible’ and ‘absorbed / Into / The was-is-ever-shall-be / Of cosmic reproductivity’ (7), as if her elemental experience reduces the human subject to its smallest individual component, the atom. Loy cannot tell whether this is death or life – a state alluded to in the shattering work done to expose the atom, while at the same time exposing matter as animate even in its decomposition, the residual atom being corporate in its fragmentariness – just an ‘unfolding’, stated in an indented line as a single word, torn from its subject of knowledge in the previous two lines ‘I am knowing / All about’ (7). The next, final stanza could be seen as bathetic in the arrival of a number of figures referred to as ‘woman-of-the-people’ ‘Doing hushed service’; their ethical presentation of subjectivity, ‘Wearing a halo’, is considered ‘ludicrous’, the behaviour of religious saps. Loy’s presentation of physical existence as one with physics brings identity into conflict with society, and as such we can see how an atomic figurative schemata can on one hand present critical ideas about agency.

‘Collision’, on the other hand, seems to be almost an attempt to make language stutter to the extent that it explodes on the page: ‘occasional explosions irrupt the modes of / DISHARMONY.’[[132]](#footnote-132) Capitalisation highlights the attempt here to make the drama explosively dramatic, a radical mimesis. Such manifestly explosive devices radically alter our perception of Loy as viewed through the prism of Ezra Pound’s consideration of her as a practitioner of ‘logopoeia’, which has been summarised by Potter as being ‘most distinctive for [its] extinction of personality, foregrounding of aesthetic artifice, and [...] lack of ‘emotion.’’[[133]](#footnote-133) Rather than viewing Loy’s writing in such moribund terms it seems clear in a close reading of ‘Psycho-Democracy’ that Loy prioritises affective states of friction, absorption and repulsion, foregrounding the instantiating potential of language, that radically transvalue gender, political and social relations, particularly through the exploitation of interpersonal conflicts which are transmuted into universal and politicised agonism. For instance, in her ‘Feminist Manifesto’, Loy writes that ‘Men & Women are enemies, with the enmity of the exploited for the parasite, the parasite for the exploited.’[[134]](#footnote-134) It seems that the unclear syntax and reversible relation between clauses here is deliberately intended to situate both men and women as the subjective focus of a wider critique of the public sphere, which is characterised as a place of exploitation and residual conflict. Keynes’ analysis of the war economy led him to the conclusion that ‘Never in the lifetime of men now living has the universal element in the soul of man burnt so dimly,’[[135]](#footnote-135) despite the utopian possibilities offered in the internationalism of the economy; a wider sense of social breakdown and local enmity was endemic at this historical moment. Loy responds to this broader inequality in her staging of gendered enmities. The manifesto as much as the poetry suggests itself as a staging ground for conflict and its enforced resolution, to the extent to which the modernist manifesto demands the enunciation of speculative solutions. Indeed, in the same manifesto, she writes of her utopian re-imagining of social relations, ‘For the harmony of the race, each individual should be the expression of an easy and ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments.’[[136]](#footnote-136) And yet, even this egoistic application of the general relativity of Loy’s thought will be surpassed as she writes of a global subject divested of reified notions of gender oppositions in ‘Psycho-Democracy’.

It should be considered foremost in the understanding of Loy’s thinking on intersubjectivity and its politics that they depend upon an agonistic framework, that is, one that rests on mutual opposition or struggle. Again, while Carolyn Burke has noted that ‘Loy writes [...] of the psychic and social disconnectedness that results from a love affair come apart at the seams’[[137]](#footnote-137) in her most representative work, ‘Songs to Joannes’, Loy seems rather to present the reader with a sort of corporeal political ontology in which language and a socially and politically invested desire are interlinked. Her work is modelled upon Stein’s ‘vocabulary’ ‘crushed’ under ‘the tonnage of consciousness’, producing ‘incoherent debris … littered around the radium that Stein crushes out of phrased consciousness.’[[138]](#footnote-138) This is presented as a possible epigraph for her own work, but as we see the phrasing was recycled as poetry dedicated as ekphrasis, suggesting again the public re-use of private material, the interpenetration of the two spheres in the radical conception. To apply Conover’s apposite term, Loy’s thinking can be seen to be maieutic in a number of senses, not least in the extent to which it marries concepts and things, deploying ideas by way of a consistent strain of materialism. Her conceptual strain is particularly tied to a tendency to seek third terms – being a ‘midwife to ideas’ (as the figure of maieusis), her poetry, especially in ‘Parturition’, as explored below, frequently obsesses over imagery and symbolism of birth. The atomic figure presented in the discursive field associated with Stein accords with Loy’s own poetic value system in which the smashing of self-consciousness and its attendant desires segues into material referent worlds, referred to in a linguistic mimicry that is signaled by her use of ekphrasis as literary modelling. Descriptions of love affairs and other events of clashing opposites have a socio-political value primarily in the presentation of such language as public, interventionist and incendiary, the performative fallout of which is offered up as politically revolutionary. Despite this, we can see from the resurgence of the concept of *rarity* in the redeployment of the metaphor of radium as a kind of literary material, that, though her incorporation of materialism has radical connections, Loy endorses elite values borrowed from the ‘Dominators’ of her manifesto. The mining of literary material for prized nuggets of empowering discourse is not only a will to power but also an exploration of literary potential, metaphorised as a form of atomic energy that traduces the subjectivity that might engage in concepts of domination and enslavement.

Re-published in the Autumn 1921 Brancusi issue of *The Little Review*, Loy’s manifesto opens by rhetorically interpolating a public in its address after boldly summarising its rationale, ‘to replace the cataclysmic factor in social evolution WAR. An absolute, constructive and liberating ideal put to the will of mankind for acceptance or rejection.’[[139]](#footnote-139) In formulating a public for her work, and using the associated speech of performativity, Loy engages in the language of universalism current in the manifesto form. According to Janet Lyon in her study *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, manifestoes enact a particular form of speech act that performs what it says: ‘the manifesto provides a foothold in a culture’s dominant ideology by creating generic speaking positions; the nascent audience interpellated as ‘we’ is then held together as a provisional constituency through a linguistic contract’ (24). Particularly through its address, but also in its thematic of the proposition of a new anti-Statist subject, Loy’s manifesto enacts the kind of anarchistic public sphere she professes to create through the manifesto. Averring that a new form of consciousness must be constructed out of legislated and mandated forms of social existence in modernity, Psycho-Democracy is levelled against the ‘dominant ideology’ of ‘fixed concepts’ (15) originating in a regimented ‘destructive element in collective consciousness’ (16). It will be important when continuing this reading to keep in mind the extent to which Loy adheres to Lyon’s definition of manifestoes as the repository of a type of political universalism that effaces boundaries of geography or other modes of individuation: the manifesto ‘always makes itself intelligible by putting the case of a particular group into a context that honors the *idea* of a universal political subject.’[[140]](#footnote-140) Yet Loy’s Psycho-Democrat has no essential identity, despite the universalism of the manifesto’s claims. Such universalism, then, is a function of the ironies of style being deployed here – at once a parody of Marinettian bombast and a genuine attempt to manifest a sense of creative and interventionist agency in the political landscape of the day, Loy’s work here is urgent while also being diffuse in its objects and objectives. But whereas Lyon would situate Loy at the point of contradiction in her reading of Loy’s ‘Feminist Manifesto’, I would propose that ‘Psycho-Democracy’ remains coherent and idiosyncratic in its revision of the liberal-democratic subject, ‘the cataclysmic factor in social evolution WAR,’[[141]](#footnote-141) in order to be critical, but not fully condemnatory, of the mass democracy debated and frequently derided in mainstream modernism. As in her poetry, the radicalism of her ideas is often rhetorically indistinguishable from familiar modernist fascisms. In her circuitous logic, which borders on an invitation to a studied rejection, Loy advances something of a neo-Malthusian model of humanity as requiring forced evolution – a movement focussing human reason on consciously directing evolution – while seeking a mandate for such change as if that could ever be ‘democratic’, and further labelling it absolutely liberatory. For sure, the instantiating required of the modernist manifesto demands such apocalyptic alterations in the social body; the shrill voices of Lewis or Pound, and their attendant fascisms, is the formal precedent for radical manoeuvres in this context. The dialectic is too slow for Loy; the logic that would have cultural forms ‘gnawed at varying rates by the forces of life’, in Simmel’s phrase,[[142]](#footnote-142) is replaced by the instantaneous revolution of atomic experiment. In this sense, dialectical trends of gradual development could be engineered by force – as the atomic revolution exposes considerations of matter to considerations of the immaterial of desubstantiating knowledge of composition, so Loy’s understanding of modernity as revolution exposes it to multiple embedded historical trends that are as engineerable as they are knowable. Loy sees this as her policy of reinvigoration, where political affiliation follows an appropriate, ‘intuitive’, *qua* Bergsonian, mental application: ‘The Psycho-Democratic Policy is / Habeas Animum’ (15).

Loy’s idea of ‘conscious’ evolution transvalues Darwinian and Malthusian theory, urging us to ‘establish a new social system’ by way of fostering ‘different tendencies in human nature’; ‘Human Evolution’ is derided for its ‘Tediousness’ (16). The prioritisation of the intellect and rejection of Darwinian notions of gradual evolution are Nietzschean gestures, but they also direct attention to the progressive aims of modernity as being the project of instituting Enlightenment ideas of rationality, no matter the cost, a theory more recently formulated by Habermas. In the introductory comments, ‘Mina Loy’s Tenets’, of the Florence pamphlet version of the text, Loy makes this paradoxical aim – seeking an aristocratic revolution of the mind by way of a democratic linking through the political unconscious – clear in stating:

Our intent is to reproach the Heroic Personification of Man as Dominator of the Elements until those elements are at the disposal of every man, to his greatest advantage [...] to inspire the leisure requisite to the human organism in its progressive racial conquest of consciousness. Our Party is an Invitation, not a Control [to] the obviation of social crises by the Excavation of individual and group psychology.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Collapsing evolutionary theory, aesthetics, psychoanalysis and discourses of equality, Loy intends to ‘dissuade Man from any longer considering his destiny as being extraneous to his logic.’ Psycho-Democracy, then, would be a construct of hyper-intellectual development and hyperreal speeding up of progress, and would depend upon the linking of sympathetic minds in a form of Jungian collective consciousness. But this peculiar ‘psycho’ vision demands the ‘*Excavation*’ of psychology, not its expansion, which we could read as implying either a clear-out or an exploratory dig. Loy intends this to be a ‘liberating ideal’, free of false consciousness, but we might balk at the eugenic overtones of some of the crypt words – to pick up on the social philology Rachel DuPlessis uses to read Loy and other late modernists – like ‘conscious direction’, with its embedded sense of a fascisizing coercion, and not least the ‘racial conquest of consciousness’, which envisages progress as an overcoming of ethnic psychological categories, the cost of which is unmentioned[[144]](#footnote-144). Such embedded ideological contradictions lurk suspiciously in Psycho-Democracy, as part of the psycho-babble of its referents, but are extant in Loy’s manifesto-making through the unpublished ‘Feminist Manifesto’ to her 1917 manifesto precursor to ‘Psycho-Democracy’ (featured in Dada magazine *The Blind Man*), ‘The Artist and the Public’. The latter concludes with a familiar antagonism set up between the figure of the artist versus the uneducated masses, ending with the deterministic observation:

So, *The Public* and *The Artist* can meet at every point except the – for *The Artist* – vital one, that of pure, uneducated seeing. They like the same drinks, can fight in the same trenches, pretend to the same women – but never see the same thing ONCE.

You might, at least, keep quiet while I am talking.[[145]](#footnote-145)

Again, the ‘racial’ or genetic dissimilarity of the artist-intellectual and the social body it defines itself against is asserted in a negation of maieusis. This forbidding stance is further clarified in Loy’s poem ‘Apology of Genius’, in which ‘Our wills are formed / by curious disciplines / beyond your laws.’[[146]](#footnote-146) The staging of a rift between poet and reader is striking here, as is the concluding stanza’s metaphor for the artist as ‘A delicate crop / of criminal mystic immortelles’ standing ‘to the censor’s scythe’ (‘Apology’, ll. 34-6). Immortelles, as Roger Conover glosses them,[[147]](#footnote-147) are papery flowers that retain their vibrancy in alien conditions of drying and pressing – the symbolic referent has moved us from the communication inherent in the maieusis of Steinian poetics to the glory of immortality in sublimely aristocratic intellect. Such Nietzschean hyperbole is hard to square against the radical democracy envisaged in her manifesto. We might then perceive the objects of Loy’s scorn in ‘Psycho-Democracy’ as being yet the organs of democratic society familiar to the anti-democratic modernist (to peek down the blind alley set up by John Carey in his largely false dichotomy between the modernists and the masses), and indeed it does seem upon first reading to be a bizarre tract that demonstrates all the hallmarks of Janet Lyon’s ‘dual anxieties of modernism – the disdain for democratic homogeneity and the distrust of mass production’ (6). This is structurally necessary to bring out the irony of Loy’s proposition, however, as we shall see. It might be useful to keep in mind the ironic tone of ‘The Artist and the Public’, the Dadaist paratext of which naturally lends a satirical tone to the final line – asking the audience (and we’re left uncertain whether she means the avant-garde or the public) to ‘keep quiet while I am talking’ – that might destabilise the avowed intentions of the foregoing manifesto. Similarly, in the Florence pamphlet of Pyscho-Democracy, Loy invites us to ‘Make the world your Salon’; a Surrealist aside referring to art as life praxis that would be excised from the more serious, or perhaps more bourgeois, *Little Review* version. Still, the agonistic framework – public versus artist – exists to cement the ideas of battle and equipoise necessary to the identity of a Modern subject, whose dialectical conditioning relies on artistic strategies such as irony and humour, in a similar vein to Stein’s rejoinder to Marinetti in her ‘anti-manifesto’ *Marry Netti*, explored in Marjorie Perloff’s *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*.[[148]](#footnote-148) Furthermore, in this formulation Loy expressly intends to re-insert art into the fabric of life, with all its overtones later to be understood as Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde. In blurring the boundary between producer and audience, as Loy does wittily above, and which she does in the Gertrude Stein article, which is consulted in further depth below, and in her injunction to ‘make the world your Salon’ in Psycho-Democracy, Loy seeks to ‘[do] away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life [wherein] it is logical to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient.’[[149]](#footnote-149) Psycho-Democracy also intends at all costs to get beyond the solipsism that Bürger warns is the danger of this position – it is repeatedly referred to as a ‘collective’ movement of free individuals. The positioning of the artist at the threshold of a social praxis is metaphorised throughout Loy’s work, through the manifestoes, the poetry, especially in ‘Songs to Joannes’ where erotic encounters stand in for collective engagements, and in the Futurist-inspired *thèâtre muet* plays.

To return to the elements of critique in the manifesto, Loy writes that Psycho-Democracy will be applied to ‘all social problems, for the interpretation of political, religious and financial systems’, and thus shares some concerns with the earlier ‘Feminist Manifesto’, which argues that institutions such as parliament construct institutional barriers to female emancipation. ‘Economic legislation’, for instance, simply ‘gloss[es] over reality’. Psycho-Democracy will instead rely on a policy of *habeus animum*, ‘To illuminate the earth with her people’s eyes’. The scopic referent links back to the opposition set up in the earlier ‘Artist and the Public’ manifesto quoted above, yet in this formulation the vision is democratic rather than essentialist. Punning on the foundation of individual political liberty, *habeus corpus*, here Loy proposes to link up a mass vision to scorch the earth of a grey liberal-democratic progressivism characterised by ‘the hypnotism of Education and the Press.’[[150]](#footnote-150) Taken as chiasmatic, the ‘eyes’, as in much of Loy’s poetry, refer to separate ‘I-egos’ linked in a chain of mutually supportive individualism. It is this balancing and instantiation of multitude that will provide the way out of the democratic/authoritarian dualism of much modernist thinking, particularly as it is drawn up in Wyndham Lewis’ *Blast*, for example, which shares its typographical appearance with Loy’s ‘Psycho-Democracy’, and the ideological formulations in his *The Art of Being Ruled*. As in ‘Songs to Joannes’, where ‘I would an eye in a Bengal light / Eternity in a skyrocket / Constellations in an ocean / Whose rivers run no fresher / Than a trickle of saliva // These are suspect places,’[[151]](#footnote-151) Loy’s lyric I resides in a decentred, incendiary position of desire and possibility, as explosive and diffusive as a firework or missile propelled away from ‘suspect places’, connotatively the locations of individuation, tradition and mundanity. Following Carolyn Burke in ‘Supposed Persons: Modernist Poetry and the Female Subject’, Loy’s eye/I integration makes the reader ‘aware of the dispersal of perception in space and conscious of the self as if from a great distance as well as from within.’[[152]](#footnote-152) Allowing for a radically otherised subject, Loy also, in the ‘Songs to Joannes’ quotation, brings the poetic/aesthetic and the personal to a transvaluing conclusion, they also constitute ‘suspect places’. Loy’s project, then, seems to relate modernity to trans-individual agency by way of affective modes of existence that verge towards a Will to Power, alluded to in the scopic regime set up in the above quotation from ‘The Artist and the Public’ – that the artist and the public never see the same thing, despite looking at it in the same moment. Yet Psycho-Democracy offers a *vision* that is radically inclusive, animating the public with an illumination that reflects off itself as a mass, encompassing the mass’s otherness even in its singularity, its ‘eyes’ similar to the atoms that compose larger bodies.

Similarly, Loy applies this logic to democracy, envisaged as a flexible category of representational politics. While ‘Most movements have a fixed concept towards which they advance, we move away from all fixed concepts in order to advance’. In order to conduct this advance, Loy proposes:

We make the experiment of a ‘collectivity’ moved by the same intellectual logic as are the tactics of the successful individual reckoning with ‘actual’ values and following the rules of the game of life, influencing our era by right of the merits of our (collective) personality.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Loy’s new politics, then, tend towards the envisioning of the contemporary nomadic global subject – surely one element alongside her ambiguous identity politics that endear her to contemporary readers – theorised in Hardt and Negri’s book *Empire* as the ‘agent of biopolitical production and resistance against Empire.’[[154]](#footnote-154) The connection is somewhat anachronistic, but, for the contemporary reader, Loy’s creation of a bodily subject of enunciation in her poetry and manifestoes, and her eponymous reference, in *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, to her identity as ‘mongrel’, are consonant with the manifesto’s construction of embattled political agency. In more contemporary terms, Loy seems to reach this agency in fusing an anarchist individualism, sourced from Dora Marsden and Benjamin Tucker’s political philosophies as presented in *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*, with the democratic ideal of a post-Modern collective subject. With the combined ‘eyes’ [as organs] and I’s [of self] of such a collective agent, the psycho-democrat is incited to see beyond the ‘dummy Public originated by the Press, financed by the Capitalist: / For whom the politician legislates, / The army fights, / The church collects.’ The move into poetic metre and rhyme here signifies Loy’s aestheticisation of the manifesto form. Rather than considering the *Little Review* version of the manifesto as being ‘tamed’, then, we could see it as being poeticised, and thus brought to bear on the context of her poetic *oeuvre*. Her democracy is one manically inflected with voices and styles, and it performs what it gestures towards, a mining of consciousnesses, of psychologies, of individual sites of political investment. Its political message is inflected by such artifice because artifice – the product of the clear-eyed artist – is necessary for the revolution of Psycho-Democracy. The Brancusi sculptures interleaved through the *Little Review* version of the manifesto clearly evoke the work being done by artifice, especially in the manifesto’s complex paratext. Brancusi’s abstraction was said by the artist to denote a reality deeper than the facts of externality: ‘They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form, but the idea, the essence of things.’[[155]](#footnote-155) And so Loy’s ekphrasis moves in a similar way, working sculpturally ‘away from all fixed concepts’[[156]](#footnote-156) towards a perceived actuality.

In Loy’s poem ‘Brancusi’s Golden Bird’, published a year later in *The Dial*, the play of opposites abounding in the work under consideration here is reduced to or sublated by abstract geometric form, releasing an inner substance:

some patient peasant God

had rubbed and rubbed

the Alpha and Omega

of Form

into a lump of metal

[...]

the ultimate rhythm

has lopped the extremities

of crest and claw

from

the nucleus of flight[[157]](#footnote-157)

The degree to which Loy is diagnosing an expropriation of power in her figure of the public as a hollow representation – the ‘dummy Public’ – could be debated, but we are certainly to be made aware of the social, cultural and political construction of identities inaugurated by the mass media. Against this, of course, is the ‘polished hyperaesthesia’ (again from ‘Brancusi’s Golden Bird’) of the Modernist subject – both informed by an artistic sensibility or armour, and magnetised atomically to a new rhythm, reality, and abstract form, of social life. The kind of bare life imagined in Psycho-Democracy and the sculptural humanity evoked in the Brancusi poem recall the indictment of subjectivity in art cited as credo in Marinetti’s ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature’ of 1912. Of course, Loy’s connections to Futurist figures has been widely examined,[[158]](#footnote-158) yet we can see here the extent to which the theories of futurism suffuse her thinking on representations of the human, with Marinetti dictating for adherents to:

Destroy the “I” in literature: that is, all psychology. The sort of man who has been damaged by libraries and museums, subjected to a logic and wisdom of fear, is absolutely of no interest anymore. We must abolish him in literature and replace him once and for all with matter, whose essence must be seized by strokes of intuition, something which physicists and chemists can never achieve.

Capture the breath, the sensibility, and the instincts of metals, stones, woods, and so on, through the medium of free objects and capricious motors. Substitute, for human psychology now exhausted, the lyrical obsession with matter.[[159]](#footnote-159)

The institutional awareness of Marinetti carries over into Loy’s theme of power and suasion, as does the underwriting of exceptional movements in thought and life with figurative language originating in physics. Yet while Marinetti’s attempt to abolish the centred subject results in a new mimesis studied on language’s ability to approximate matter, Loy’s poetry treats matter as representational rather than moving towards materialist poetics. The distinction is clear in following Marinetti’s line of argument in the manifesto, where the futurist is warned

not to assign human sentiments to matter, but instead to divine its different governing impulses, its forces of compression, dilation, cohesion, disintegration, its heaps of molecules massed together or its electrons whirling like turbines. There is no point in creating a drama of matter that has been humanized. (122)

Again, the futurist process abolishes human motivation, substituting the ethos and findings of science as literary material. The language of physics is being used as a representational language of its own materiality, rather than as metaphor or likeness. Though Loy uses materialist strategies in some of her poems, especially in her continual formal preference for ekphrasis, the appearance of matter in her work clearly operates as a way of thinking about human and political agency. Her images are critical condensations of ideas. One of the casualties of the destruction of the literary ‘I’ is the figure of liberty existing above or beyond the commercial or political state. So while the Psycho-Democratic subjects attain the quality of Brancusi’s sculpture, abstract, geometric, dangerously modernist, their limbs are ‘lopped’ – in the welter of modernity, what tools do modern subjects have with which to get a purchase on their reality?

Another potent image figuring the transformation effected on the body politic by the state of exception informing the period’s democracy, as mentioned in the earlier quotation from J. A. Hobson and in the previous chapter on John Rodker, and of the incursion of ideological state apparatuses into the interpellation of the ‘dummy public’, is of the butterfly with the imprint of news type on its wings in ‘Songs to Joannes’:

We might have given birth to a butterfly

With the daily news

Printed in blood on its wings[[160]](#footnote-160)

The mingling of fragility and violence here speaks powerfully of the formative influence of the massified representations and mediations on the newly birthed modern subject as well as allegorising sexual violence as an interrogation of power relations. If this is birth, then it has overtones of the messiness and stark (tabloid?) horror of backstreet abortions rather than the fleeting modernity emblematised by the butterfly. Yet there are undercurrents of a broader anxiety here, ones that circulate freely in ‘Psycho-Democracy’. The manifesto’s paranoia is an ironic facet of its general message. In the manifesto, ‘power is a secret society of the minority, whose hold on the majority lies in the esoteric or actual value of social ideas’. While Loy’s vision diverges from the anti-Semitic or misogynist statement-making of Pound, Eliot and Lewis – Loy’s feminist and pro-Semitic credentials have been comprehensively argued for by critics such as Burke, Kouidis and Kime-Scott – her notion of power relations is remarkably similar: an unseen hand (that of ‘the Dominator’) is perceived as guiding democratic life in the early twentieth century. Yet, as mentioned previously, Loy’s message relies upon the manifesto form as a repeatable, but active and performative structure through which to articulate a message that departs significantly from the standard political discourse of modernism. The conservative elements of Loy’s literary ontology are perhaps the price to pay to make a more radical point, being as shocking and illuminating as the mass cultural discourse it parodies and criticises. Embedded in this radicalism is a critique of ideology, especially that which constitutes the power of the dominant culture. As Nietzsche writes in *Untimely Meditations*, the age of atoms signifies a capitalist society in social fragmentation, opening up the potential for disaster and true chaos: ‘everything in our modern world is so dependent on everything else that to remove a single nail is to make the whole building tremble and collapse’. It is this fragility that defines ‘the uncanny social insecurity which characterises our own times.’[[161]](#footnote-161) The dominant culture represses this anxiety in the power of its institutions and the power of its discourse, especially that of international, specifically Anglo-American belligerence.

Historically, of course, Loy’s manifesto post-dates Nietzsche by some decades, so the historical precedent causative of ‘social insecurity’ for Psycho-Democracy alters according to the dominant event of the age, which has an analogous relationship to Nietzsche’s critique of mass culture. There is an explicit awareness that a ‘cosmic neurosis’ has incapacitated the mass mind, and the origins of this disturbance are to be found in the experience of war. In a refreshing inversion of Yeats’ vision of a slouching figure of Demos approaching in ‘The Second Coming’, Loy writes of the incomprehensible spectre of the war as it registers in the decade succeeding it: ‘the blowing up of other millions of human organisms will appear as the nightmare of a criminal lunatic.’[[162]](#footnote-162) ‘The destructive element’, here a kind of social death drive that issues out of collective canalisations of desire, has caused a national psychosis, providing further etymologies for the manifesto’s title. Yet though a mass psychology of fear and ‘international suspicion’ has infected the collective psyche, the reaction formation of pacifism is likewise found to be inadequate as a formal response to the ideology of war, it offers a ‘negative conception which leaves a void’ (18). So, while militarism cathects the collective death drive to mobilise the mass, pacifism empties out space, it does nothing with the Nietzschean social atoms that, as we have seen, are potentially fragile in a state of disorder. Loy, then, seeks a dialectical pacifism ‘of equal value to that of militarism’ (18) through structured enlightenment and anarchist revolt. That this depends upon an aestheticised agonism is made apparent in the staging of conflict as being an essential factor of our social being:

This thing called *life* which seems to be the impact of luminous bodies, knocking sparks off one another in chaos, will be transformed through Psycho-Democratic evolution from a war between good and evil, i.e. (between beneficent and painful chance) to a competition between different kinds of good (beneficent spontaneities) (16)

In an unpublished letter to Mabel Luhan of 1914, Loy writes ‘I am in the throes of conversion to Futurism – But I shall never convince myself – there is no hope in any system that “combats [sic] le mal avec le mal” - & that is really Marinetti’s philosophy.’[[163]](#footnote-163) The Psycho-Democracy manifesto seems to respond to this ethical prerogative; a spiral of fascism replaced by the free competition of the good, as the concluding statements of the manifesto emphasise in the centrality of adjectives such as ‘Divine’, ‘heroism’ and ‘renassence’ (*sic*, 19). This leads us to a projected public sphere where ethics circulate like ideas in a collective mind immune from hypnotic crowd psychology, but where the war of ethics between mutual *good* agonisms can be maintained as a dialectical step beyond the atomic agonism of ‘knocking sparks off one another’. Beyond good and evil, Loy would also propose a pseudo-Marxian levelling of the class divide that ‘will be easier to impose on humanity than the hypnotic war lust’ through a ‘magnetism’ to match the aforementioned mechanism of the ‘dominating class’, the ‘psychological nucleus progressively absorbing all similar elements into itself’ (19).

Loy’s manifesto’s proposition that a nucleus of psychology could be used to absorb the majority into the purview of a powerful minority core, offers a remarkable concatenation of scientific registers that specifically centre on nuclear fission and speculative advances in cognitive perception. The language of nuclei and atoms seems influenced by experiments pioneered by Marie Curie – not least in Loy’s comparison of analogous breakthroughs in Curie and Stein – and figures such as Ernest Rutherford and Frederick Soddy. The transmutation of atoms was being studied by Rutherford and Soddy in the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge from the late nineteenth century, and the splitting of the atom by artificial transmutation was being investigated from 1901 and achieved in 1919. Soddy himself was writing utopian tracts based on the fervid modernity to be achieved by atomic energy, imagining in 1908:

that one day we should come to break down and build up elements in the laboratory as we now break down and build up [chemical] compounds, and the pulses of the world would then throb with a new force.[[164]](#footnote-164)

Loy thought Stein and Curie’s experimentations as being equivocal in importance and impact, specifically in that experiments in language were considered experiments in material reality. Experimental syntax would be as important for Loy as knowledge of the potential functions of radium would be for Curie. Scientific breakthroughs are registered as impacted on social and linguistic registers. Similarly, then, Soddy imagined science as having an equivalent impact on the course of history insofar as science and the social interpenetrate. History weighs heavily in these considerations, as Soddy goes on to suggest that modernity’s ‘art of kindling fire’[[165]](#footnote-165) in harnessing radioactive energies comes with the burden of exercising a possibly aberrant control over nature. Further, the discovery of radioactivity may have ‘annihilated time’ in that evolution progresses as a constant recycling of timeless energy. Similarly, Nietzsche was deploying metaphors of atomic energy that have uncanny similarity to Loy’s. In *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche pinpoints individualism as the scourge of modernity, inspired by the restlessness of commodity fetishism, suggesting that the masses are but dimly aware of ‘absolutely fundamental convulsions’, of the ‘absolutely unavoidable...atomistic revolution’, ‘the age of atoms.’[[166]](#footnote-166) Loy envisages Nietzsche’s pessimistic view of social atomisation by making it positive, contra Nietzsche in arguing that his notion of ‘the uncanny social insecurity which characterises our own times’ can be overcome through the atomic age thinking of Psycho-Democracy. Though nature is ‘indestructable’ (*sic*, 19), Psycho-Democracy intends to render human nature as it stands redundant, to be ‘superseded’ by a ‘different tendency in human nature’ (19). The radical transvaluation of nature and natural time that Soddy envisaged as radioactivity’s potential is harnessed in Loy as being socially useful.

The utilizing of atomic energy, specifically the feature of transmutation, as a metaphor for avant-garde political progress has a correlate in Loy’s analysis of the liberating effects of modernity’s disruption of other segmentations as it bears upon language production in her article ‘Modern Poetry’, written a few years after ‘Psycho-Democracy’. In this, modern literature generates out of the ‘composite language’ of immigration, ‘the welter of this unclassifiable speech [out of which] the muse of modern literature arose, and her tongue had been loosened in the melting-pot.’[[167]](#footnote-167) That the melting-pot is overlayed with the scientific, the military and the institutional, is a perspective elaborated upon in Psycho-Democracy. The new political subject would be able to use polyglottism and a radioactive *vision* of many, to be able to see through, or X-ray, hitherto obscure democratic institutions of repression. Out of fragmentation comes illumination, and those who exercise their vision are the powerful, the inheritors of a patriarchal dominance that is distinctly post-war in character. That Loy’s plan for the future of humanity in Psycho-Democracy is beset by contradiction, specifically in the incitement to ‘democratize the Dominator’s standard’ (18), is perhaps a structural reaction to the social agonisms being dealt with, yet such a solution seems to react to two specific historical trends: war and revolution.

In ‘Psycho-Democracy’, it is observed that a ‘cosmic neurosis’ has incapacitated the mass mind, and the origins of this disturbance are to be found in the experience of war. Loy writes of the barely comprehensible spectre of war as it appears to post-war eyes: ‘the blowing up of other millions of human organisms will appear as the nightmare of a criminal lunatic’. In the place of war, we must ‘Evolve and establish a new social symbolism, a new social rhythm, a new social snobbism with a psychological significance of equal value to that of militarism’ (18). Again, the contrast is stark when read against Marinetti’s Futurist glorification of war, which in 1915’s ‘War, the World’s Only Hygiene’ he had promoted as creative inspiration and sustenance. Indeed, Conover cites this manifesto as being the one to which ‘Psycho-Democracy’ is the ‘prose answer.’[[168]](#footnote-168) Yet the precedents, historically closer to the publication history of Loy’s manifesto, seem more likely to be Marinetti’s proto-, actually, and post-fascist publications centered around the 1919 publication *Democrazia Futurista*, with which, as we can see in comparison with the introductory manifesto ‘An Artistic Movement Creates a Political Party’, Loy’s manifesto shares a number of sympathies. Yet while Marinetti once again iterates here his indebtedness to and relish of actual war, commemorating Futurists wounded and dead on the front line of the first world war,[[169]](#footnote-169) Loy wishes to cathect the power of the military, and military leadership – the modernist *war machine* – together with the fissile energies of the nucleus, to create a new global citizen capable of leading the moribund polis, hidebound by legislation, out of its mediated and reified position, and into a new intellectual-artistic becoming. Again, figures from atomic science are relied upon to make this point, this time in linking militaristic rhetoric with group psychology: ‘Militarism forms the nucleus of national *Influential symbolism*,’ which suffuses the mass mind. This in turn ‘Sustains the *belligerent masculine* social ideal’ and is ‘*psychically magnetic*’. Figures of atomic energy – and its associated attraction, repulsion and synthesis – are inflected with late nineteenth century theories of the crowd as they had been formulated by Le Bon, Nietzsche and Freud. Loy clearly avers against Marinettian revolutionary violence, expressed through the Futurist party’s ‘ultraviolent, anticlerical, antisozzialist [sic], and antitraditionalist movement […] founded on the inexhaustible vigor of Italian blood’ (277-8).

In gesturing to such thought, deploying a lexis that would be instantly recognizable as being waged against Marinetti’s fascist sympathies, Loy’s manifesto is overlaid with discourses of and about anarchism. Whereas in ‘Aphorisms on Modernism’, ‘Anarchists in art are art’s instantaneous aristocracy’, and ‘The individual is the inhibition of infinity,’[[170]](#footnote-170) the Psycho-Democracy manifesto is more subtle in its exploration of the capacities of the creatively and politically motivated individual. In the tenet directly below the ‘Psycho-Democratic Aesthetic’, which lies in the democratization of elitism and evolutionary and creative aristocracy, entitled ‘The Aim of Society is the Perfection of Self’, Loy writes of the self as ‘the covered entrance to infinity.’[[171]](#footnote-171) This is not the only time this phrasing is mobilized by Loy to refer to the individual in its social context. In ‘Being Alive’, an archived fragment of prose, she writes of the individual ‘I’ as separated in existence from the multitude being ‘like a phialed [sic] viable explosive’, conditioned by the existential patterning inherited from a sense of otherness, and only distinguishable by ‘his’ ‘personal contribution […] to this human experience of which he is composed.’ Existence seems to involve a persistent doubt about agency, in that the individual ‘has no concrete proof of being other than a soft machine that moves in a landscape’; only ‘close-up’, removed from nature, does the individual appear ‘as if he formed a covered entrance to infinity, he would seem to include something as illimitable as the universe external to him.’[[172]](#footnote-172) We can see then how Loy composes selves out of the materiality of which they are a part. This material presence likewise appears in Loy’s 1919 poem ‘O Hell’:

To clear the drifts of spring

Of our forebear’s excrements

And bury the subconscious archives

Under unaffected flowers

Indeed–

Our person is a covered entrance to infinity

Choked with the tatters of tradition[[173]](#footnote-173)

Here, the inclusive pronoun, *we*, enacts the occlusion of infinitude, further blocked off by the waste left over by the past, by tradition. The ‘unaffected flowers’ operate as an ironic image of poetic plainness, as if the opening of the poem might actually be parodic, set in counterpoint to the final stanza, which highlights the terminal caesura after ‘tradition’: ‘Goddesses and Young Gods / Caress the sanctity of Adolescence / In the shaft of the sun’. The domineering sibilance of these closing lines sets up the youth as sublime inheritors of a phallic creativity, warmed by nature, preferred by the light. We can see how self, for Loy, then, is a kind of non-self, a creative nucleus that awaits connection to the universal subject, the external. Though the self occludes connection to a fissile cosmic energy, it is yet being seen as the stubbornly persistent point of access. Loy’s images of creative super-dominance, wherein subjects are free to circulate as ideas circulate in forms of loose social organization, but ones linked to an idealized state of fulfilled desire, can be construed as an anarchist development on the fascisms of Marinetti expressed in later manifestoes such as ‘The Proletariat of Talented People’ and ‘Beyond Communism’ (both 1919), which attach racial, nationalist importance to creative endeavors. It is only by recourse to roughly contemporaneous discourses of anarchism that we see the influence in the lexical tendencies strewn throughout Loy’s prose and poetry. To take a pertinent example, an *Arena* article of 1902 argues that there is no coherent body-politic to anarchism; it is a ‘mass of individual cells, nucleating together in temporary forms, free to break up at any moment…its type is the jelly fish or sponge.’[[174]](#footnote-174) Imposing a neo-pacifistic version of militarism, that is, one ‘easier to impose on humanity than the hypnotic war lust’, comes with its own psychology of fascistic leadership, however. Indeed, there is a terroristic quality in Loy’s intention to ‘vindicate Humanity’s claim to a Divine Destiny’, testing the extent to which the human intellect, stripped of a socially determined consciousness, can become a social weapon of equal ‘magnetism’ to militarism, both democratic and apocalyptic.

As we have seen, Loy’s linguistically constituted, radioactively sustained subject is one that seeks to discredit patriarchal governmentality and take arms against autonomous art. It aims to turn Nietzsche’s nihilism, his idea of entropy – ‘*That the highest values devalue themselves*’[[175]](#footnote-175) – into a pursuit of a higher value that could be self-perpetuating, that could develop energy as productively as a transmuting atom. Loy also attempts to transvalue democracy to include aesthetic categories and to make consciousness the site of revolution. Psycho-Democracy could then be epitomized by a statement on the modern moment in Loy’s study of Stein:

Modernism has democratized the subject matter and *la belle matiere* [sic] of art; through cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality […] Brancusi has given an evangelistic import to eggs, and Gertrude Stein has given us the Word, in and for itself [thus to tackle] an aesthetic analysis of the habits of consciousness in its lair.[[176]](#footnote-176)

In this formulation Loy writes of the insertion of art into the fabric of life, with its overtones of Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde. In blurring the boundary between art work and mass media – a connection that anticipates the media theories of Charles Madge, dealt with in Chapter Four of this study – Loy sees modernist art as persuasive in its impact on democratic consciousness. The material of art and the material life are seen as being integrated in an interpenetration of influence where the real is seen as being fabricated, sustained and constituted by the artificial and the constructed. Production and reception are thus intermixed, as in the notion that Pyscho-Democracy could possibly allow for a ‘conscious direction of evolution.’[[177]](#footnote-177) Yet the agential proposition in the Stein article, that modernism has effected this change, suggests that the psycho-democrat has almost dignified the mass media, which as we have seen can imprint a body with the ideas of the ‘secret society of the minority’ (17), and the barrenness of stark reality, a material world that recedes as a blank horizon to the perceiving subject in much of Loy’s work. The artist hovers upon this threshold of influence, judging the dialectics of such a position as if arrested by its potential. An attention to atoms is not only motivated by the metaphorical potential of social atomism as propounded by Nietzsche, but also operates as a reminder of the vestigial reality that modernism sublimates. If, as Rachel Potter suggests, Loy’s work focuses on the boundaries of selfhood, in that ‘what is inside and what is outside the self is central to the representational strategies of her writing’ (157), it could be argued in this connection that the blankness at the centre of Loy’s experiments in poetry and politics subtends the space of lived reality, a subject that would increasingly concern her as Loy’s poetic subject-matter moves towards urban representations of the rhythms and realities of city and street life in her later poems (see, for instance ‘Mass-Production on 14th Street’ (1942) and ‘Hot Cross Bum’ (1949)).

By using figures of atomic science, united with theories of group psychology, and by revising the term democracy for her own ends, particularly against fascistic trends embedded in Futurist theory, Loy writes a utopian plan of escape from a totalizing politics, and speaks of her continuing project to recognize the potential for avant-gardism inherent in mass culture. Portraying the utopian modernist subject as a unit in a series of interconnected social atoms – in her poem ‘The Dead’ of 1918, ‘We splinter into Wholes’[[178]](#footnote-178) – Loy exposes the susceptibility of ‘molar’ or ‘macropolitical’ systems to be infiltrated by ‘molecular’ or ‘micropolitical’ elements of the mass mind, thus inserting the work of literature into the practices of social and political life, by way of an irradiated composite language.[[179]](#footnote-179) When applied to a politicized, lived reality, especially via the manifesto form, we can see first of all how utopian and idealist these micropolitical interventions might be when posed against the actual, an irony that seems to hover at the edges of Loy’s prose work. The concluding paragraphs of Psycho-Democracy retain the prospect of an unfinished ideal: the ‘concrete’ of her ‘vital ideal’ remains in a ‘nebulous state’, a teleology of a truly democratic politics that has ‘reason’ and ‘logic’ (the closing word of the manifesto) as its buttressing.[[180]](#footnote-180) In its conclusion, then, we can see the extent to which Loy’s notion of creative utopia can be allied productively with Habermas’s notion of ‘communicative rationality’. In Habermas’s theory, the transmission of rational cultural knowledge leads to a mutually supporting sense of social understanding, and, therefore, social and cultural solidarity that bypasses the deforming effects on the social world of the capitalist mass media. Communication that is ‘oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus – and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims’[[181]](#footnote-181) creates a sense of rational social cohesion that could sustain a healthy and engaged *polis*. Yet the expectation that social interaction could ever be led and characterized by consensus, and that stability and social health could be promoted by rational debate, have been repeatedly countermanded by Loy’s structural alliance of creative democracy with the redirection of belligerent desires. The excess represented by desire is repeatedly engaged in Loy’s poetry, alongside the sense of apocalyptic breaking away from the lines of tradition – that which ‘choke[s]’ with its ‘tatters’, in the words of the poem quoted above – that would negate the social consensus theorized in Habermas. In this sense, creativity exists as an atomic anarchist core to Loy’s idea of democracy.

The notion of ‘splintering’ into federated social agglomerations that Loy presents as a sustainable position for the politicized artist-intellectual-citizen has widespread resonance in the types of sociality encountered in Loy’s work. We have already noted how Loy’s sense of political enfranchisement depends on a kind of instantaneous dialectic represented by atomic experiment. Social bonds similarly rely on figures of attraction and repulsion borrowed from science, yet the more the reader follows the matter animating these pulsions, the closer we get to the absent centre of Loy’s vision of human potential. Julie Gonnering Lein has written persuasively of the centrality of illumination as a conceptual key to *Songs to Joannes*[[182]](#footnote-182) – indeed, many scientific and technological developments heralded in modernity are incorporated into Loy’s figurative armature. Electrical charges resonate through her work as signifiers of interpersonal connection or disconnection, as these currents are intermittently shorted, diverted or burned out; though Lein’s suggestion that Loy’s vocation as a maker of lampshades impacts on her poetic output seems tenuous, as the modes of illumination seem to point the reader more towards the evanescence of material force just as electricity as a flow of charged particles speaks of the insubstantiality of human relationships based on idealized notions of romance. Light is only understood in terms of perception by the observing consciousness; the lampshade impedes this in a form of opacity that Lein does not entirely follow in its importance as an element of this symbol, for while it amplifies and aestheticises light, it also obscures it, as another occlusion to an entrance (thinking of her ‘covered entrance to infinity’) into Loy’s molecular infinitude. While Loy suggests in her prose writing that humanity seeks a higher connection to ‘divine force’ or ‘divine destiny’ that transcends the material body, as Sandeep Parmar argues,[[183]](#footnote-183) this ‘transcendence’ appears in evidence as a further materialism. To illustrate this point, consider poem IX of *Songs to Joannes*:

When we lifted

Our eye-lids on Love

A cosmos

Of coloured voices

And laughing honey

And spermatozoa

At the core of Nothing

In the milk of the Moon[[184]](#footnote-184)

The social vision, achieved through specifically-identified organs of perception (the ‘eye-lids’), sees a blank core dominating conceptions of love, a universe of relativity enclosing and subtending its human inhabitants. Moving from the universal to the personal-biological, this poem figures the division of lovers and people more generally, otherwise central to the faltering relationships depicted in the *Songs*, as being encapsulated in the microcosm of reproductive cell-life. Yet the polarities of cosmos and microcosmos are set up as interpolating each other, in the same way that eye-lids and love meet and commingle in assonance and alliteration. Such sound-effects set up the interposition of ‘spermatozoa’, blustering with scientific multisyllabic factitiousness, as a kind of biological third term that disrupts the organ-ised activity of the eye and the concept of emotional attachment, and the diction of courtly romance now sectioned off by a line-break. Even this sense of development is undone in the awkward enjambment that highlights the syntactic excess that we have reached at this point, falling off from the conjunctions of the previous lines to find a spatial location echoing the hauntingly bathetic ‘Nothing’ in the planetary and allusive space of the ‘Moon’. The moon, blank and vaguely reflective, mimics the action of the absent eyes, occluded in a solitariness otherwise unheralded by the socially-binding inclusive second person that opens the action of the poem. Such atomism bears heavily upon the critique of interpersonal relationships in poem XIII, in which a conspiratorial persona warns the reader of attachment, ‘Or we might make an end of the jostling of aspirations / Disorb inviolate egos’ (58).

The entirety of *Songs* stages a kind of atomic battle where conjunction is the testing ground for forms of wider engagement with the material world. So though ‘Where two or three are welded together / They shall become god’, the poetic persona then goes on to warn of the consensual as if it represents the false dialectic of sociality suggested by the speculative ‘or three’:

Don’t let me understand you Don’t realise me

Or we might tumble together

Depersonalized

Identical

Into the terrific Nirvana

Me you – you – me (58)

Thus Loy asserts and exploits the kind of impersonality that Charles Altieri reads into her work, set alongside the models of impersonality presented by Eliot and Pound[[185]](#footnote-185). What is interesting here is the care with which Loy manages the reality of identity and individuation, which cannot help but set itself in reluctant apposition in the ambit of the three personal pronouns deftly set up in rhyme here, preceded by the ‘two or three […] welded together’. This is worked out alongside the irony of apostrophe that occurs in these lines, counterbalancing attention to the interpellating work of otherness and a distanciating attention to the de-individuating moment of collectivity in the union of at least three subject positions available in the final line. Such balancing of internal tension within Loy’s deftly maneuvered prosody has been expertly read by John Wilkinson, who observes the way in which the poems ‘gather their positions and stages in an uneasy coexistence.’[[186]](#footnote-186) Thus we can understand how Loy could retain materialist techniques and objects of thought while personally subscribing to the doctrine of Christian Science, whose founder Mary Baker Eddy considered the human realm of matter, which she equated with ‘error’, as an inscription of mind, specifically the mind of God.[[187]](#footnote-187) Loy draws on the pun in her deployment of ‘realise’ to suggest that movements into interpersonality that connect people together in metaphysical unity are a kind of material event in reality of a kind with the world of physics referred to once again in poem XXVII. ‘Disorb’ing, welding, and tumbling together – active verbs borrowed from astronomic and engineering registers – are all activities of the atomic universe. This action seems to cast human activity in a pessimistic light when those actions do not pertain to the creative infinitudes, the desires that connect agonisms, that Loy concocts. The ‘Nucleus Nothing’ that opens poem XXVII lies behind the ‘ephemeral conjunction’ of bodies; the promise of greater fulfillment, the ‘Much’, actually resolves in the fated approach of capitalized ‘NOTHING’ (64). Typography re-confirms the static of language attempting to approximate the state of a relativistic universe, the capitalized noun ramifying after hyphenation in the previous line, as if pointing to the blank space that is the page.[[188]](#footnote-188) Her nothing thus highlights the materiality of her art, in the same way that, as Rowan Harris has noted, ‘Scientific terms become ornaments.’[[189]](#footnote-189) It also provides the negative to her metaphysics of presence, expressed in the equation ‘the universe=absolute presence. All dimension time space contract to the hereness of one Being, and this hereness [is] identical with the hereness of all beings of all time.’[[190]](#footnote-190) As with the ‘radium of the word’ in the poem with which this chapter opened, language is presented as manifesting a sense of this *haecceity*, the hereness of the thing, in this case the physical universe. But radium gains its radioactivity by its rapid decomposition – words are radium in that, deployed by the avant-garde, they can become social weapons, yet they also decompose into noise. Poem XXIX of *Songs* sees the offspring of ‘equality’, and it is unclear whether Loy means political equality or a kind of false parity between sexual others, as those who ‘shall jibber at each other / Uninterpretable cryptonyms / Under the moon’ (65). Opposition for Loy, like the necessity of opposition in magnetism, is necessary for the social and interpersonal good, a position that accords with Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of ‘agonistic pluralism’, a political theory that approaches the ineradicability of antagonism with a rational understanding of types of democratic consensus that might be achieved in forms of mutual opposition and debate.[[191]](#footnote-191)

As I have explored in this close reading of *Songs* – and this is borne out in the prose forms Loy worked in – for Loy a political unconscious, if you will, has been achieved through a dialectical process. Readers of Loy, such as John Wilkinson, have been ‘tempted’ to apply the term ‘dialectical’ to this work, but in the reading presented in this chapter it seems inherent in the movement of her thought and her treatment of poetic, social and scientific and philosophical concepts how central dialectics might be. For Loy, dialectics is a method of retaining the world of physics – the atomic, the universal – in balance with the individual and the interpersonal, in that the individual, through pugilisms of intellectual and sexual natures, consistently gives way to a broader sense of collective agency that is modeled on analogues of material force. In conclusion, I will consult a prose fragment, ‘Tuning in on the Atom Bomb’, written much later in Loy’s career and collected in Sara Crangle’s edited collection of the prose, as a concrete example of the operation of the dialectic of science and art just outlined. The possibility of atomic warfare referenced in the title, dating the otherwise undated fragment to 1940s tests such as those conducted as part of the Manhattan Project. Loy’s narrative explores a mental space opened up by ‘a shattering terror of the limited incarcerated within the illimitable,’[[192]](#footnote-192) as if transposing the matter of nuclear science into an epistemology of the writer’s identity, ironically depicted in a pastoral location of tranquility, ‘Serene, amid scintillas of sunlight’ (286). Loy’s piece moves from a metaphoric explosion that tears through her sense of poetic inspiration – ‘I struggle to regain serenity, to re-focus tremulous perception [...] to see “Nature” as before my inexplicable shock? explosion blast?’ (286) – to a reception of material force as constitutive of this moment and the sense of destructive potential in writing. As the subject moves away from a reposeful sense of identity, so the subjectivity of the writer becomes opaque; the ‘blast’ has exposed her as a ‘dupe of molecular pretence to forms of reality’, an expression of the physical universe’s ‘intangibles crushed one upon another like endless proportionless strata of inexistent glass, reflecting nothing (*néant*)’ (287). Images of fragmentation are abundant in modernism, but rarely if ever are they so nihilistic, so extinguishing of the perceiving consciousness. If the atomic denotes chaotic forms of repulsion, bonding and agglomeration, then so does the literary, the biographical, the philosophical – this contingency can be exhilarating and freeing, but also opens up a language infected by contingency, here riding shock-waves of panic: ‘Jam packed into an instant the linked infantile panics diffused by ill-mated parents – the consequent catastrophes of maturity shrouded in lethal anxieties – rearose - - - from dreamy hollows, long since sealed by my inconquerable [sic] optimism due to the fascination of existence - - - - - - anxiety ……… an inexhaustible fount of terror involving force in fear of itself’ (*sic*, 287). En dashes designate spaces in the process of thought as it responds to a personal explosion of memory, set off by movement in the unconscious mind, ‘speared by an echo of some forgotten wisdom sunken in ancient time, forbidding all revelation of some perilous secret’ (286). Secrecy is of course polysemic here, in that it speaks of individual repression and military-industrial secrecy relating to the atomic weapons race. So the individual becomes a site of dialectical access to the material world, perhaps against the overt thrust of the narrative, which resolves in a crisis of faith, finally coded in mystery and uncertainty over ‘the terror that appeared to invade me from something endlessly surrounding me – till it faded to the annoyance of neurosis - - - - - - this lessening’ (289). The logic of dissolution, as it relates to the recurrence of agonism in Loy’s other works, here equates with an invasion of material force, ‘induced by extracting force from Power’ (286), as she writes in the opening sentence. The atomic moment in Loy’s work, then, can be seen to instigate the critique of powers of discourse from social, political and personal arenas, glimpsing an amalgamated universe of affect in her dialectical investigations into materiality. ‘Tuning in on the Atom Bomb’ represents the traducing of interiority that Loy undertakes – her agonisms bear outwards onto what is objective, and to the masses of which subjectivity is composed.

**Chapter 3**

**Striking Symbols/Symbolic Strikes: Allegorical Responses to the General Strike of 1926**

A ‘distinctively Scottish *sinisterness*’

 - C. M. Grieve, ‘Causerie’, 1922

In their summary of literary treatments of the General Strike of 1926, Adrian Mellor, Chris Pawling and Colin Sparks write that ‘It is quite possible [...] using only this apparently unpromising material, to attempt an initial reconstruction of the whole range of typical literary responses to 1926, and through that, to begin to disinter the whole range of typical social responses.’[[193]](#footnote-193) This ‘unpromising material’ includes work by Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells, writers who deal conservatively, both politically and formally, with the incendiary events of trade unionism and labour activism in the 1910s and ’20s. Indeed, attesting to the retrogressive temporalities generically unfolded by contact with the strike, a Galsworthy character – Soames Forsyte (with his suitably Churchillian/Conservative given name), in *Swan Song* (1928) – observes:

The war had burned them all out, but things, yes, and people, too – one noticed – were beginning to sprout a bit, as if they felt again it might be worth while. Why, even he himself had regained some of his old connoisseur’s desire to have nice things! [...] With [...] the General Strike broken, there might even be another long calm, like the Victorian, which would make things possible.[[194]](#footnote-194)

With the trade unions pacified and the plucky spirit of resourceful Brits restored in the scenes of strike-breaking that abounded in May 1926, Galsworthy had reason to suggest that a certain consensus had prevailed. Yet Galsworthy’s eerily vegetating (positively ‘sprouting’) suburbanites were clearly always committed to their ideologies of compromise and Victorian complacency – the Strike sparks a traumatic neural link with the First World War, not even a decade since its ostensible close, only to be figured as an unruly storm in a placid sea bounded by Tory horizons. Such was the failure of public intellectuals to deal sympathetically with, or, widely, actively engage with the politics of, the strike, that Mellor et al have to go a long way to reconstruct a political unconscious at work in ‘modernist’ fiction of the ’20s. This can be seen to lurk within writing by D. H. Lawrence, Storm Jameson and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, but finding it is a task that takes significant analeptic reconstruction, especially in that ‘apparently straightforward reactions to the General Strike are in fact mediated by the economic and political experience of the thirties’ (339).

The view expressed by George Orwell on writing of the 1920s – that ‘when one looks back at the twenties, nothing is queerer than the way in which every important event in Europe escaped the notice of the English intelligentsia’ (338) – suggests a division, in which aesthetically prioritised modernists are seen as largely apolitical or straightforwardly reactionary, as opposed to working class writers who lack the literary skill to represent complex political situations with the requisite ambiguity, that has widely obtained. Yet the political landscape of 1920s literature, as John Lucas has suggested,[[195]](#footnote-195) contains more transgressive thought and militancy and, further, more of a borrowing from avant-gardism, than extant accounts have suggested, as we shall see. Orwell’s partial view of British intellectuals significantly, but understandably given his contextual viewpoint, elides those on the borders of mainstream trends, especially those working within little magazine culture or from parts of the British Isles outside England. Hugh MacDiarmid and Edgell Rickword, for example, are two figures that, despite their significance within their contemporary contexts, are frequently left out of literary histories of Anglo-American-centric modernist studies and the General Strike in particular. Rickword and MacDiarmid have been largely silenced in the context of political literature of the 1920s, owing at least in part to the former’s subsumption within the ambit of hard left politics in the 1930s onward, and the latter’s yet persistent marginalisation in the canon of English Literature. The ‘whole range of literary responses’ to the General Strike has yet to be properly addressed and historicised, suggesting that the conservative responses of public intellectuals such as Woolf, Galsworthy, Wells and Bennett have held sway for too long.

A specific class agenda underwrites this dominant trend, given that, as Margaret Morris has written, ‘the vast majority of manual workers supported the strike but most of the middle and upper classes wanted to see it defeated and many of them were eager to act as strike-breakers’ (Morris, 11). Virginia Woolf’s diaries reflect precisely such an exasperation of a bourgeoisie temporarily under threat: ‘What one prays for is God: the King or God; some impartial person to say kiss & be friends – as apparently we all desire.’[[196]](#footnote-196) Woolf’s anxiety – a form of Nietzschean *bad faith* – expresses itself as a simplistic call for a sovereign to restore order through the divine manipulation of divided bodies. Such elitist views, ones that explicitly attempt to establish a hegemony of opinion and political will (‘we all desire’), are not merely encomia of peace and reconciliation so much as expressions of class anxiety attending on figures of stability, stasis and ordering. As we shall see, the specific challenge that Rickword and MacDiarmid pose in their writing of the General Strike concerns the capacity of literature to *act*, and the complex dialectic they construct out of their experiments in form, allegory and material history. Part of their novelty must also lie in their solitary voicing of Leftism out of the literary-canonical void of the 1920s in British culture.

Before considering Hugh MacDiarmid’s contribution to the literature of the General Strike, it may be useful to limn the responses to political extremism from a more sympathetic voice of modernism, that of Wyndham Lewis. In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis makes a case for the serious consideration of exactly the anarcho-syndicalist ideas informing the radicals who pushed to a General Strike in 1926, the biggest in the history of workers’ organisations at the time. For Lewis, as for the centrist/Liberals examined above, roots the experience of revolution in the experience of war:

The Great War was of course not a war, strictly speaking, in a nationalist or dynastic sense, but a revolution. It was a gigantic episode in the russian revolution [sic]. From one end of the world to the other there was nothing that was not changed by it[[197]](#footnote-197)

The First World War, for Lewis, as with the ‘affaire Dreyfus’, which hardened commentators’ responses in a strict pro/con, Left/Right binary, would be revolutionary because it marks ‘a great change of ideas,’ from which ‘people thought and felt [...] quite differently than they did before it’ (Lewis, 18). Such revolutionary ideas, and the forms of ‘socialism’ they inspire are value neutral, leading as much to fascisising violence as much as to the ‘armed proletarian revolt’ (18). The suspicion in reading this theory of history and violence is that, through the satirical lens, we are given an insight on the justification of the ways of fascists to a high brow readership of the revolutionary Right. In this, Lewis wilfully misreads Sorel, suggesting that syndicalists are simply rulers in disguise: ‘At the bottom of the syndicalist idea is the wish for a caste system. This is not explicit in the syndicalist doctrine’ (29). In the ‘phantom man’, ‘*l’homme élairé* ’ (the ‘enlightened’ man of ‘aristocratic leisure’), we find a metonym for the abstracting and homogenising influence of democracy who should be ‘ruler’ come the syndicalist revolt (31). Such probing of the emptiness of rhetorical figures of radical democratic outcomes leads Lewis to suggest that actually, our notion of revolution is misguided: ‘We are in the position of impatient heirs, waiting for a long-expected demise, torn between pious concern for the sufferer, and anxiety, since now nothing can avert the catastrophe [...] to get on with our business’ (Lewis, 32). ‘Revolution’ has not, in fact, changed anything; ‘socialism’, generally speaking has, for Lewis, become a fashionable word to parlay with in fashionable *salons*: ‘That is “official” revolution, as it could be called. It is today everywhere obligatory – just as evening dress has become more or less obligatory, at the same time, in our society. Every one who has money enough is today a “revolutionary”’ (33). The erstwhile rulers of the Western world are the empty puppets who accept a bureaucratic knowledge of political revolt who Lewis later describes as ‘sub-men’: ‘If what Le Bon calls the *élite* could only combine against this outrageous sub-man, instead of selling him deadly gases and weapons and inventing things for him to destroy everything with – if, IF! – what a syndic that would be! [...] better to say: Since you *must*, arm him to the teeth! He may destroy *himself*.’ (192). Lewis’s revolution ironically turns to pacifism as it satirically explores the unsuitability of current economic rulers to do their job properly. Empty sub-human *bourgeoisie* have failed to tap into the revolutionary trends appearing in the opening decades of the twentieth century, partly because of their failure to realise the value of Lewis’s art. Art must be restored to its incorporation into social praxis: ‘the inventions of creative artists will enter the social world more efficiently, as it will be clear to everybody that it is the artist’s job to gild the butterfly, brighten the worker bee’s hive and generally make life more zestful.’[[198]](#footnote-198) For Edwards, the vagueness of Lewis’s positive vision exposes the limits to satire, which are not formally required to suggest creative or critical alternatives to social, political or other questions. Lewis’s vision is one that returns to its own point of critique without providing a dialectical understanding, nor does it genuinely engage in any real critique of class relations, specifically working class consciousness. To take a concrete example of Lewis’s diagnostic method, the overblown satire of *The Apes of God* deals directly with the General Strike as a moment of Sorelian disruption:

There can be no doubt that Lewis, who associated Bergson’s *élan vital* with the Schopenhauerian Will (that Nietzsche represented under the figure of Dionysus), saw this revolutionary violence as the reality that was intimated and propitiated in the large-scale Saturnalian festival of the twenties that masked it. [...] But there was no such violence, and the General Strike is in this sense a false Saturnalia, just as it is a false climax to the narrative, in which no real social or political change takes place. [...] (356)

Lewis’ evocation of anarchy in depicting the General Strike tends towards the satirically overblown – ‘trams had been wrecked and street rails torn up by the mob, and the Police stoned and injured [...] mines were flooded, mills were blazing, and the troops were firing with machine-guns upon the populace’[[199]](#footnote-199) – yet the ‘absence of newspapers’ has historical accuracy, and the absence of subjects of agency in the language of these descriptions points to the conclusion that Lewis here wishes to satirise violence *per se* rather than the bourgeois ‘puppets’ who fail to act on the provocation to revolution. Lewis thus falls back on to a default position of futility and despair: his aesthete-artisan model of revolt has not been realised either by working-class uprising, or bourgeois or ruling class forays into the intellectual *zeitgeist*, dominated as it is by a resurgent ‘dead Victorian culture’ (357). In Lewis’s ‘May-sky’ (May being the month of the Strike) at the end of *The Apes of God* ‘all was dead and pleasant. But,’ the narrator goes on, ‘it was a death of life – the throbbing circulation of incessant machines, in thunderous rotation, in the arteries of London was stopped.’[[200]](#footnote-200) The body politic, in danger of being revivified by revolutionary futurist and syndicalist violence, has rejected its viral attack and has been normalised to a stultifying bland lifelessness, returning to the rule of ‘sprouting’ suburbanites and aristocrats taking back the normalcy of a ‘Victorian’ peace, similar to that wished for by Virginia Woolf. For the avant-guardist leaning to the right, then, the General Strike was simply an expression of the perceived conservative forces at the heart of revolutionary thinking. Lewis specifies Georges Sorel as epitomising this ulterior motive, suggesting in *The Art of Being Ruled* that the syndicalist wishes above all for a re-stratification of society that ‘would equally serve the forces of traditional authority’ (119). Satire opens the way for Lewis to scorn a political stalemate post-World War One, and it provides an ideal forum for his quasi-fascistic critique of the revolutionary moment, in effect capturing and stalling the moment of revolution. The fatalism of Lewis’ position ironically allies him more to Bloomsbury than he would like and, specifically, lays the groundwork for a serious foray into the National Socialism of Hitler, on whom Lewis wrote one valedictory and, after the unfolding of historical eventuality, one critical study. Lewis’ search for strong, accountable and apposite leadership that would tap into the radicalism of Modernism and pump blood through a decrepit body politic obviates any engagement with serious analyses of Strike action, which engage with complex issues such as the role of myth, the realisation of historical and diachronic forces, and radical notions of agency. Yet if for Lewis war and revolution produce sameness – and in this regard he is in agreement with René Girard[[201]](#footnote-201) – for writers on the growing Left, approaching the 1930s, the Strike would open up a specific point of radical alterity, which is then registered in writing that proposes figures of effacement of social, political and historical forces. For MacDiarmid and Rickword, as for Rosa Luxemburg, historical forces at the time of the General Strike were inappropriate to the radical project of a revolution of the proletariat. Luxemburg writes, in *The Russian Revolution* (1918): ‘a model and faultless proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism, betrayed by the international proletariat, would be a miracle.’[[202]](#footnote-202) The Strike invokes a limit in the bounds of historical possibility, and in this case speaks of an inherently necessary failure in the process of revolutionary thinking and practice. Infelicitous uprisings, contrary to Lewis’s pessimism on the subject, for Luxemburg are meaningful and revolutionary in their own way; they ‘are of greater significance as explosions of a deep inner contradiction which spills over into the realm of politics.’[[203]](#footnote-203) The fallibility of the strike action, for Luxemburg – as it similarly becomes in the work of MacDiarmid and Rickword – speaks ultimately of an actually democratising tendency to realise the incommensurability in the actual representation of mass agency. The symbol Luxemburg creates for this is one of unstoppable plenitude and explosion that exposes historical and political narratives as inherently contradictory.

Such compounded contradiction defines Hugh MacDiarmid’s poetic and political ontology. MacDiarmid concretises a Scottish form of dialectics that he terms, following work by G. Gregory Smith, the *Caledonian Antisyzygy*, a universal maintenance of opposites, that, as we will see, are subtly brought to unison or immanence, particularly in the abiding imagery of the rose contained within the thistle in the symbology of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. MacDiarmid’s ‘quarrel wi’ th’ owre sonsy rose’ involves plumbing the ‘routh o’ contraries’ raised in its symbolic depiction in order to pour light on the ‘necessity o’ foes’ that defines his agonistic mentality that seeks, but rarely finds, symbolic totality.[[204]](#footnote-204) The intention to find the ‘root’ of the Scottish ‘soul’ ostensibly motivates MacDiarmid’s project here, seeking to diagnose ‘the secret clyre [disease/tumour] in Scotland’s life,’ which has ‘brust and reams through’ the Drunk Man who personifies and voices these debates (ll. 2258-9). It will be ‘in the routh / O’ contrairies that jostle in this dumfoondrin’ growth’ (ll. 1111-2) that a fundamentally new vision of Scottish national life will be formulated. A similar frictional metaphor is used later in the poem: the cosmic ‘wheel’ described in the late stages of the poem, with its symbolic freight, part of which unites MacDiarmid to claims of national independence in Ireland (as we shall explore later), has an end in the human consciousness: ‘And birl in time inside oor heids / Till we can thraw oot conscious gleids [sparks] / That draw answer to oor needs’ (ll. 2500-2503). The collective human subject, then, becomes conscious in its frictional powers to seek redress in moments of collective, symbolic understanding. Though the poem here becomes an exploration of metaphysical space as much as physical consciousness, the fact of material and human embodiment never quite absents itself from such seemingly apolitical speculation. MacDiarmid writes: ‘Oor universe is like an e’e [eye] / Turned in, man’s benmaist hert to see, / And swamped in subjectivity’ (ll. 2572-5). The subjectivity involved in the political agency of Luxemburg’s revolutionary subject (the ‘deep inner contradictions’) is here adopted as MacDiarmid’s view of the socio-political subject of his poem, suggesting an almost terroristic dependency on the claims of nationalism and the infinitude of the political subject:

He canna Scotland see wha yet

Canna see the Infinite,

And Scotland in true scale to it.

Nor blame I muckle, wham atour [those around whom]

Earth’s countries blaw, a pickle staur [a little dust],

To sort wha’s grains they hae nae poo’er. (ll. 2527-2532)

The later stanza here suggests a dangerous view of natural selection that involves sorting the strong from the weak. But, as with all the symbolic formulations in the poem, the Drunk Man’s speculation on such dependencies as cosmic vision and national recognition are brought to a crisis in the immensity of the suggestion: as true infinity is poetically realised it bathetically, and ironically, turns against the national claim, in that Earth becomes ‘A’e point’, the Drunk Man advising that ‘I wis nae man ‘ll ever see / The rest o’ the rotundity [glossed as ‘the celestial sphere’]’ (ll. 2545-2547). This counterpointing technique defines the symbology of MacDiarmid’s work in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, placing the poetic ontology, and its readers, in a position of beguiling recursivity.

The potential for disruptions of temporalities in the context of the strike has been noted above, and has furthermore been commented on extensively by Morag Shiach, whose study on modernism, labour and selfhood takes its cue from Georges Sorel’s statement that ‘the general strike has a character of *infinity* because it puts on one side all discussion of definite reforms and confronts men with a catastrophe’[[205]](#footnote-205). The strike, then, leads into temporalities that are fundamentally disrupted and distorted, into scenes of repetition and crisis, propelling the literary text into depictions of reproduction and sexuality in an anxiety to affirm order (see Shiach, p. 200-246). The metaphysical discussions of MacDiarmid’s Drunk Man are therefore given a political spin: the alternating and self-abnegating poles of infinity and bounded materiality of the penultimate section of *A Drunk Man* are shot through with a mythologising global violence that attends on the kind of interventionist political radicalism proposed in the General Strike, which MacDiarmid deals with as his central subject in the section of his epic poem, alternately called ‘The Ballad of the Crucified Rose’ or ‘of the General Strike’. MacDiarmid’s slippage into historical contingency, and moments of self-awareness, I suggest, parallel the polemic forwarded by Sorel who, for Shiach, ‘cannot sustain his sense of the general strike’s integrity nor of its infinity’ and is threatened by the ‘everyday’ and ‘repetition’ (215). But whereas Sorel has to rely on the processes of labour, modernism and the new media to acquire coherency in political economies beyond such contradictions, MacDiarmid attempts to resist totalisation by raising contradiction and contingency as modernist strategies, and by writing about the General Strike in an allegorical form, one that allows for dialectical understandings that simultaneously evoke disillusionment and potential.

The logic of contradiction in MacDiarmid comes in many overlapping forms, from the authorial paratext to the quasi- or actually dialectical content of his poetry. In the context of widespread authorial reticence in the face of the strike of 1926, evoked above, MacDiarmid (and, as we shall see, Rickword) joins a select grouping of committed Leftist artists in Britain in the 1920s. The splitting of authors into ‘camps’ foreshadows the side-taking of the 1930s in preparation for the anti-modernist backlash that was to come, and the consolidation of the political unconscious (welling up from engagements with the politics of national boundaries in Ireland, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, Suffragism and ongoing strike action leading up to the General Strike, in particular) of earlier modernist writers in more explicitly political work.[[206]](#footnote-206) Certainly, MacDiarmid sets a formidable pace and tenor in his labour activism, Scottish separatism and serious engagement with Marxist-Leninism, differing greatly from the mainstream of modernist authors in the urban centre/s of England dealing with the strike, those who ‘struggle to constitute the liberating or at least enabling temporality of the future tense’ (230) in their work. The ‘hangover’ from the First World War, registered intensely in the work of writers on the fringe of the English national canon such as John Rodker, Ivor Gurney, Edgell Rickword and Hugh MacDiarmid (and further, into the British Surrealism movement of the 1930s) as an incorporation of *bricolage* techniques. For MacDiarmid, this is expressed as ‘the way in which I bespatter all my writings with innumerable quotations from the most heterogeneous writers of all times and countries,’ a technique which ‘is one of the most frequent points of complaint against me.’[[207]](#footnote-207) The active verb to ‘bespatter’ evokes the expressionistic technique in use in much of MacDiarmid’s handling of symbol as it relates to material reality. This is a similar form of dislocation and disordering to that present in the moves MacDiarmid makes into Scots vernacular, into his *nom de plume* from C. M. Grieve as he becomes culturally more associated with letters than journalism, and in his self-avowed position ‘whaur/ Extremes meet.’ The revival of vernacular was accompanied by an avant-garde movement away from literary and national centres; MacDiarmid’s pen-name change from Grieve in 1922 has been historicised as being attendant on the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1922, the auspicious *annus mirabilis* for canonical modernism (publication year of *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, etc). Grieve was born in 1892 in Langholm, in the borders of lowland Scotland. He helped to found the Scottish National Party in 1928 after helping to establish the Scottish Renaissance movement from Montrose with fellow writer Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and, as the (in)famous narrative goes, joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1934, from which he was expelled for his nationalism, despite being expelled from the SNP for his communism. The sense of new beginnings, and anti-traditionalism is clear in reading about this context, and MacDiarmid’s sense of finding new bases for invigorating culture and politics is axiomatic in his rallying cry as editor of *The Scottish Chapbook*, ‘Not Traditions – Precedents!’[[208]](#footnote-208) Despite his turn to epic in book-length poems such *A Drunk Man*, he considered his art as being consonant with the progressive form of democracy he viewed in the Soviet experiment: ‘It is epic – and no lesser form – that equates with the classless society’ (quoted in Riach, op cit, 41). Taking on symbolism as a technical reflection of the contraries being maintained here, *A Drunk Man* manipulates an epic reflection on the thistle that allegorises the contradictions within and without the poem:

[...] in seely flooers to brak

Like sudden lauchter owre its fousome rags

Jouks [evades] me, sardonic lover, in the routh [profusion]

O’ contrairies that jostle in this dumfoondrin’ growth (ll. 1109-1112)

While the thistle has rhizomatic roots, and so evades any sense of tree-like growth, it contains a materially-transcendent beauty in its ability to bear flowers alike to roses, and so epitomises the marginality of lowland Scots and the dialectical contraries being presented as immanent within the symbol. It is all things at all times, elsewhere compared to ‘the mind o’ a’ humanity’ (l. 2239), a mind which MacDiarmid sees as being schizophrenically wrenched between abstraction and concretion. The thistle thus operates as a dialectical object of embodied polarity and union in the same moment, a symbol that suggests a cultural analogy to the strike action depicted in the ballad section that focuses MacDiarmid’s interpretation of the General Strike. Strikes, like literary avant-gardes, attack their hosts.

As his own ‘Causeries’ in the *Scottish Chapbook* begin to register the poetic subjective mind as bipolar, we see how C. M. Grieve began writing about Hugh M’Diarmid[[209]](#footnote-209), and then MacDiarmid’s ‘berserker’ split personality reveals him to be an ironist in rebellion against the institutional in which he works: ‘the ironist invents a mad self in order to reflect on his madness thus objectified.’[[210]](#footnote-210) This multiple fragmentariness is a peculiarly Scottish, and marginal-Modernist part of the poem’s ontology. MacDiarmid writes of how the most Scottish (specifically Gaelic) poems have been political poems in a very particular way, ‘rebelling against established institutions and received ideas of all kinds and advocating and ingeminating revolutionary measures’ (quoted in McCulloch, 72). We will later see how Rickword likewise sketches out a politicised British poetic tradition that remains to be fully integrated into a technical practice of formally appropriate (contextually challenging) political poetry that has a basis in social reality. The non-English dialect encourages this kind of experimental form, ironically exploding the national boundary, ‘to bring Scottish literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation.’[[211]](#footnote-211) MacDiarmid’s *Drunk Man* has quite rightly been considered as an expression of the ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ so frequently cited, though it would be a mistake to see MacDiarmid’s political or philosophical work as being the expression of simple ‘antitheses’. For MacDiarmid, the poem was all-consuming, not only in that he put everything into it, but that the multiple literary styles amalgamate the lyric persona presented: ‘It [*Drunk Man*] is me in every way – satire, lyricism, and all the rest of it: beauty and fun and savagery and objectionable elements all mixed. Just as they are in me.’[[212]](#footnote-212) Multiplying techniques that disrupt the literary surface of modernist texts, where technique, to invert Arthur Redding’s statement on experimental literary potentialities, ‘becomes the supreme agent of a textual will-to-power intent on [de-]regulating semantic anarchy’[[213]](#footnote-213), the poem wages war on a number of literary constructs, even while it incorporates those into the complex allusive structure. Specific allusions to work by ‘high modernists’ such as T. S. Eliot, particularly his 1922 *The Waste Land*, are an index of the extent to which the radical symbolism and technique of that work fired a generation of poets in the 1920s and ’30s. A re-thinking of the place of politics in avant-garde cultural work would lead W. H. Auden, for instance, to observe: ‘the provincial England of 1907, when I was born, was Tennysonian in outlook; whatever its outlook the England of 1925 when I went up to Oxford was *The Waste Land* in character.’[[214]](#footnote-214) This is a poetic that attempts to deal with the ‘rag and bone shop’ of the polity. As Nancy Gish has written, ‘The Ballad of the General Strike’ contained in *A Drunk Man* represents a central point of summation of the poem’s themes. It is ‘one flowering’ of the thistle’s potential radical energies, a particular instantiation of the poem’s themes and techniques – the strike action ‘represents a kind of creative force, a realisation, an example of the creative side of that chaotic whole of reality.’[[215]](#footnote-215) The following interpretation takes the Ballad as a central point at which MacDiarmid’s politics, rather than an abstract ‘creative force’, are most cogently concretised in the scope of the *Drunk Man*, and from which the rest of the poem gains a certain historical coherence (yet as Buthlay warns in his introduction to his annotated edition, it would be wise to be wary of imposing a sense of ‘factitious continuity’ (30)). If, as Harvey Oxenhorn has argued, the poem as a whole declares itself as having ‘a distrust of analysis, a preference for raw experience,’[[216]](#footnote-216) then the experience of the General Strike and its poetic construction within the poem becomes an integral, if not defining, facet of this tangible, experiential practice. The May temporal location has further ironies, in that a common mnemonic poem has it: ‘Speed them in May / They are up the next day. / Speed them in June / They will come again soon. / Speed them in July / Then they will soon die.’[[217]](#footnote-217)

My hypothesis here is that the failure of General Strike is raised as structural necessity to the poets’ negative dialectic project of politicising culture in the late 1920s. MacDiarmid poses this as an impossible project of reconstruction that would inevitably be to misinterpret the organic sense of growth associated with the thistle:

What strength ‘t’ud need to pit its roses oot,

Or double them in number or in size,

He canna tell wha canna plumb the root,

And learn what’s gar’t its present state arise,

And what the limits are that ha’e been put

To change in thistles, and why – and what a change ’ud boot... (ll. 1113-1118)

MacDiarmid requests here that the reader makes investigations into historical and political history to ‘plumb the root’ of the present. This is a kind of allegory of cultural materialism and dialectics. Attesting that the state of nature is separate and unknowable to humanity, MacDiarmid re-affirms what de Man theorises as allegory’s anti-Romantic power to divorce the subject from the object and affirm subjective temporality and finitude.[[218]](#footnote-218) The Drunk Man wishes to know the ‘craft that hit upon the reishlin’ [rustling] stalk [...] And spired it syne [launched it there]’ (l. 1107), thus connecting the form of allegory with speculation in labour, once again raising attention to the very productive forces that led to the literary construction of the symbol as it is, questioning its capacity to hold the contradictory forces asked of it, before swiftly moving on to the interpolated part which I want to focus on, ‘The Ballad of the Crucified Rose’ (elsewhere known as ‘The Ballad of the General Strike’), which overturns the symbol once again and opens it out into an allegory of political actuality.

The attempt to analyse the various levels of strike action undertaken in the literary practices of this epic poem and inhering in the complex signifying mechanisms, particularly of symbolism and allegory, contained within it has been discussed as a distortion to the poem’s overall sense of mystical nationalism. Yet the ‘Ballad of the Crucified Rose’ provides a key reference point to non-English views of radical political action. This dense and complicated response to the General Strike of 1926 registers clearly the sense of disillusionment attending on political, historical and literary readings of the moment. Readings that obscure the germane political content of MacDiarmid’s work would do the kind of violence to the poem that MacDiarmid himself attacks in his project to raise awareness of the fringe status of Scottish politics and culture against the hegemonic trends of an anglicised Britain; as Daly has commented:

Even when a temperamental resistance to the aesthetic models offered by English literary discourse has asserted itself, the brute fact of English economic ascendancy means that cultural and linguistic concessions to England and Englishness are [...] the norm rather than the exception[[219]](#footnote-219)

Daly’s point is that a temperamentally utopian political project issues forth from MacDiarmid’s experiments in Scots vernacular and, specifically, Synthetic Scots, which complicates the dialectic of margin and centre usually read into Scots linguistic interventions. Yet the overwhelming facts of economic ontology in this context ride across the boundary, leaving MacDiarmid in a position of futility. I would suggest a further divisive claim to the cross-currents in the work, in anchoring this general point about tendency to the specific historical contingencies of MacDiarmid’s poem in reading the Ballad’s allegory of the betrayal of the General Strike as being a symbolic welling-up of *the political* repressed within the metaphysical and nationalist scope of the work. *A Drunk Man* cannot fail to acknowledge the historical reality of its context – it fails, falters, stumbles like a drunk, and registers betrayal, deliberately in order to prove the assertion that Scotland is suppressed and yoked into a masochistic relation to its neighbour – despite the claims of literary critics who would subsume such considerations within an analysis that tends towards viewing the poem as an *aesthetic* *cri-de-coeur* rather than a political one. This locates the poem as a hinge point in historical and literary trends, where the aesthetically-informed decadence of the 1920s, with its famous ‘Bright Young Things’ whom MacDiarmid parodies in the lines ‘Do you reverse? Shall us? Then let’s. / Cyclone and Anti? – how absurd!’ (ll. 2200-1) is subsumed within the scope of a politicised vision and in which utopia meets contingency in dialectical process. Still, the resistance to this reading is compounded by such as Kenneth Buthlay, the editor of the definitive edition of *A Drunk Man*, who glosses the ‘Ballad of the Crucified Rose’ as follows:

the reader would not know that the poem had anything to do with the General Strike. Interpretations of it in specifically political terms do not take account of certain things in the poem: most notably the idea that the rose which the thistle aspires to produce will bring its life to *beauty*, and the later imagery with the rose becoming a ball of fire in the sky and Earth resuming its original place in the mind of God. All this seems somewhat remote from the political aims of the Strike. And it is rash to give priority to MacD’s politics. (138)

Buthlay actively deters political readings of the text, given the codings of symbol MacDiarmid employs. Yet, given the currency of conservative literary and political responses to the General Strike, it is worth noting to what lengths MacDiarmid goes to affirm the politics of this specific section of the poem, and the text overall, and further, reading his recourse to allegory as being both aesthetically and politically astute.

MacDiarmid may have written in favour of subsuming politics within a general interest in the ‘interdependencies of life’ (138), but he also wrote passionately about his decision to include the Ballad within his pre-existing epic. It should be noted here that the poem comprises a sequence of sections that are independently labelled and, some would argue, rather arbitrarily edited into the work as presented. MacDiarmid’s decision to include the Ballad as a central interpolation was motivated by his own connection to political activism, he writes:

I was thick of the General Strike too. I was the only Socialist Town Councillor in Montrose and a Justice of the Peace for the county, and we had the whole area sewn up. One of my most poignant memories is of how, when the news of the great betrayal came through, I was in the act of addressing a packed meeting mainly of railwaymen. When I told them the terrible news most of them burst into tears – and I am not ashamed to say I did too.[[220]](#footnote-220)

It is clear that the politics of the strike are analogous to MacDiarmid’s wider poetic and political vision, being connected intimately, however much through symbolism or allegory, with mass protest, the revolution of the proletariat and the lifting of mediation from a cultural, social and political centre. The poem, then, takes on the ballad of the strike as synecdochically connected to issues of national identity and human progress, and which might have the capacity to speak of the pathos and disillusionment of the Strike’s ‘betrayal’. In a letter of May 1926, just 12 days after the end of the General Strike, MacDiarmid writes:

I think you know my political position. Nothing ever shook me to my foundations as this Strike – and the hellish Betrayal of its Collapse. I have been unable to think of anything else. Inter alia I have incorporated in my *Drunk Man* a long ‘Ballad of the General Strike’ which I think will rank as one of the most passionate *cris-de-coeur* in contemporary literature.[[221]](#footnote-221)

The ‘Ballad’, clearly marked out by MacDiarmid as having a quality of protest embodied within it, is interpolated into the text at a late stage in its genesis. This interruption parallels the moment of the General Strike, in which a central concern is disruption and temporal confusion, reminding us of Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘explosions of [...] contradiction which [spill] over into the realm of politics’, confronting us with Sorelian ‘catastrophe’ as textual disturbance. Becoming emblematic of MacDiarmid’s writing of the General Strike, the ‘Ballad’, especially for MacDiarmid, can *only* be seen in any productive way as a textual manifestation of radical politics. MacDiarmid, writing about himself in 1952, states:

His poetry has always been one of the weapons of his general political fight. It is a mistake to imagine that he came to political poetry late; his poetry was political from the outset, as the ‘Ballad of the General Strike’ in his [*A Drunk Man*] and many other poems there and in earlier books makes clear enough. [...] [I]n the words of Patrick Geddes, he might say of the spirit that has animated all his work: ‘The great need: Intenser life for men and women! Thus in this period of intensest crises in all main lines of life and thought, social and individual alike, I have been seeking life more abundantly. Seeking life first for myself, then others; but now more fully for others, beyond my ageing self. Thinking and doing, seeking for others ... now and beyond.’[[222]](#footnote-222)

Especially given the strong allegorical drive of the Ballad, we can see the importance of the temporality of a life cycle as impacting on the ‘infinite’ temporalities of the strike, as discussed by Shiach. The biological basis of MacDiamid’s political philosophy coincides with that of Sorel, Spengler and Solovyev, as we shall explore later, but the central fact here of the political will-to-power being raised as germane to the matter of the *Drunk Man* connects us back to the mythologising of the General Strike in the poem as betrayal. For MacDiarmid, the failure of the strike opens up the totality of vision to the persistence of its relativism: as Catherine Kerrigan writes:

Poetry will offer direction again, claimed MacDiarmid, when it expands knowledge about the universe in a way which is consistent with and attuned to the ‘vision’ of a science which sees as its end, not only the extension of understanding about the material world, but also the synthesis of that knowledge into a whole developed view of life.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Freedom, for MacDiarmid, following the thinking of James Young Simpson, can only be achieved in gradations according to the capacity to *act* (107), and is related to the capacity for the subject to be a universal subject of intellectual power, in which ‘every new idea of world moment manifests itself sporadically in contemporary consciousness’ (quoted in Kerrigan, 108).

In the ‘Ballad’, the central symbol of universal, revolutionary hope is a rose that grows out of a flowering thistle. The voice of the thistle opens the action of this allegorical process:

‘What hinders me unless I lack

Some needfu’ discipline?

- I wis I’ll bring my orra [nondescript] life

To beauty or I’m din!’

Sae ran the thocht that hid ahint

The thistle’s ugsome guise,

‘I’ll brak’ the habit o’ my life

A worthier to devise.

‘My nobler instincts sall nae more

This contrair shape be gi’en.

I sall nae mair consent to live

A life no’ fit to be seen.’

Sae ran the thocht that hid ahint

The thistle’s ugsome guise,

Till a’ at aince a rose loupt out

- I watched it wi’ surprise.

A rose loupt oot and grew, until

It was ten times the size

O’ ony rose the thistle afore

Had heistit to the skies.

[...]

And still it grew until it seemed

The hail braid earth had turned

A reid reid rose that in the lift

Like a ball o’ fire burned. (ll. 1139-1166)

Subjecting this section of the poem to some close associative scrutiny, and in the knowledge that MacDiarmid wanted this to be read as a ballad with the General Strike as its concern, we can begin to pick out lineaments of a narrative. MacDiarmid evokes a subject of labour who has realised the extent of their exploitation, ‘what hinders’ them from development, if we read the thistle’s development as a reflection of collective activities and the poetic persona as a symbolic figure of a Scottish mass unconscious understood in terms of a third person ‘they’. Upon realising their lack of freedom, or the extent of their limited freedom – the ‘habit’ of an ‘orra’ and ‘ugsome’ life – in their conscription to the capitalist cause, namely in their exploitation in the expropriation of their surplus value, which prevents them from ‘seekin’ / Some airt to cheenge its life’ (ll. 1128-29) and diminishes ‘worth’, they find themselves in a position to choose between an aestheticised form of liberation – bringing the ‘orra life / To beauty’, which could be seen as part of the myth of strike action and the unfettered freedom offered to the workers of the world in Marx and Engels’s *Manifesto* – or symbolic death (‘or I’m din!’). Choosing to ‘brak’ the habit o’ my life / A worthier to devise’, the thistle throws off the chains of suppression in habitual labour and breaks out into flower, transcending its biological existence. In doing so, the working people, the thistles of the poem, have organised to create a new form of collective life, in consensual organisation. At this point, the collective struggle, literally transcending, reaches a crescendo of political potentiality which suffuses the spatial co-ordinates of the scene, exploding into an infinitude of space and time. The stretch towards infinitude accords with Sorel’s vision of the mass strike, which ‘partakes of a distinct temporality that is infinity,’ and which ‘has no located place in the unfolding of a continuous historical narrative, but rather breaks down boundaries between past, present and future.’[[224]](#footnote-224) As the symbol of the unifying rose suggests, the representational co-ordinates of the emblems of rose and thistle have been radically transvalued, thus overcoming, at least in this brief moment of political optimism, the divisions of labour and nation otherwise stressed in the rest of the poem.

**Potentiality and Organisation**

Given MacDiarmid’s persistent recourse to metaphors of universal scope, and his trend towards allegorising in terms that suggest totality, might there not in fact be a strain of apocalyptic terror in his poetry? In the opening decades of the twentieth century, there was, as A. J. P. Taylor has commented, ‘a feeling of the end of things.’[[225]](#footnote-225) We can see how for MacDiarmid this was inverted into a general spirit as an opening out into new reaches, as it was for Havelock Ellis, though specifically in terms of Marxian politics. In Havelock Ellis’s *The Dance of Life* (1923), a ‘new renaissance centred on “relativity” in human affairs’ (8) began in this time period. So, on an existential level and a political one, the Drunk Man’s sighting of, and presumably voicing of, the thistle’s transmogrification, speaks of world-historical trends and taps into the episteme of early twentieth century theories of potential. MacDiarmid repeatedly strains towards the cosmic in a way that allegorises Hegel’s world spirit, divested of its religious underpinnings, as Marx did in his materialist envisioning of historical ontology. Kerrigan points out how MacDiarmid borrowed imagery from sources such as the mystical visions of Jacob Boehme in order to tap into a Renaissance mythology of forging new directions of the will.[[226]](#footnote-226) The Drunk Man’s perspectival shifts, as we saw above, take subjectivity in an almost terroristic direction engulfing the universe of the poem, but this goes so far into realising an anti-anthropocentric concept of nature that the subject is continually effaced: ‘little it cares hoo we may feel’ (l. 2589). The unknowability of the so-called sovereign individual, then, becomes a metonym of the dispassionate, biocentric universe, thus losing its agency. Indeed, as Yeats prophesied in his doom-laden ‘The Second Coming’ of 1919, ‘the centre cannot hold’, and for MacDiarmid this becomes an integral part of his poetic, and his politics, as dialectics comes to figure as a constant source of the instability of his symbology, and his vision of the biological subject of political ontology.

The ‘metaphysical’ topos of the section of the ‘Ballad’ clearly illustrates this dialectical trend. Fleshed out in detail in the rest of the poem, particularly in its final sections, the *Drunk Man* focuses cosmic and metaphysical concerns, yet, as I will suggest, these are continually undermined or re-fashioned by the tempering effects of an awareness of or recourse to historical and material contingency. Tom Nairn historicises MacDiarmid’s oppositionality and links his obsession with the metaphysical as reactionary to a longer history, since the Union, of subjection to, and implication in, the Imperial standard.[[227]](#footnote-227) Attempts to distinguish Scottish culture in the context of being internally orphaned in the British nation-state would express themselves as sentimental ‘Kailyardism’ (a mawkish kind of ‘cabbage-patch’ or backyard bonhomie) and ‘sentimentalised savagery.’[[228]](#footnote-228) Given MacDiarmid’s horror of sentiment, the kailyard would provide an object which his interventions into Scottish cultural practice would be militated against. Nairn suggests that the cultural elite formed by the Scottish Renaissance was a historically and politically necessary step towards national self-determination by Scots, but that the primary reaction of this elite was one of ‘panic’ (169):

The only terrain available [upon which to negotiate a national ontology] is the Kailyard, from which of course flight is obligatory – if not into emigration, then into symbolic emigration, the Cosmic Universalism MacDiarmid has made into a second home. One is driven towards ‘the totality, the general balance of things’ because the particular balance of things in one’s country is so intolerable, because its schizophrenia threatens ‘cancellation to nonentity’. One must fight for the absent because the present is what it is, for forlorn hopes because the real hopes are so small. (169)

The allegation that *A Drunk Man* expresses MacDiarmid’s internal exile through metaphysical escape has some acuity, and, certainly, Nairn’s concept of schizophrenia will be one that I wish to return to, but the central fact of the political sublation of material in the ‘Ballad’ in particular attests to the importance of political strategy in the work. MacDiarmid’s creative flights are not simply lines of escape from cultural, political and historical phenomena; in fact, they are often allegorical or symbolic forays *into* the body of them. For instance, in discussing the atomic level of understanding the fabric of the universe, the Drunk Man muses on the capacity of such parts to form wholes: ‘A’ needfu’ particles first brocht thegither, / Could they wi’ timeless labour be combined’ (ll. 1079-80). The level of scepticism here reveals the secularisation of the cosmic vision of the Drunk Man, who again and again sees the activity of *labour* in the creation of these cosmic visions, and the separation of the subject of these visions and the things that make them up: ‘For naething’s seen or kent that’s near a thing itsel’’ (l. 1088). Comprehension, then, only goes so far towards encompassing the object of its attention; the individual cannot assimilate the objects of its knowledge. Similarly, the maddening attention given to creating a symbolic life of the thistle, wrought with irremediable paradoxes of definition, is at various points brought to performative life by the suggestion that it is ‘A symbol o’ the puzzle o’ man’s soul’ (l. 2065), which can only be known ‘through the warld that’s pairt o’ you’ (l. 2079). MacDiarmid’s project, then, has both metaphysical *and* ‘materialist’ components, the latter constantly being read ironically through the former. MacDiarmid, in explaining his labour, states:

In scores of directions I find two very different impulses animating me – 1/ to avoid coming to any conclusions on certain fundamental matters: i.e. moral and ethical problems; and 2/ to experiment with the artistic expression of every different attitude to them I can conceive, i.e. to make every different attitude as wholly mine at a given time as I possibly can and find to what extent I can make a ‘convincing’ poem of it.[[229]](#footnote-229)

Relativity is acknowledged as a philosophical impetus through the contradictory forces of undecidability and artistic totality of vision, which two are read through praxis in the work of poetic art. In the *Drunk Man* MacDiarmid deploys strategies of allegory – because MacDiarmid’s allegories seem to be strategic, though unacknowledged, rhetorical features – as a method of maintaining the relativity of the arrested dialectic, a subjective method that continually effaced the subject as it likewise becomes relativised. As Keston Sutherland has suggested in connection with reading Marx as a stylist: ‘Satire and allegory are also, “necessarily”, as Marx insists that phantoms in the brain must be, “sublimates of [wo/men’s] material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.”’[[230]](#footnote-230) The connection between a historically materialist conception and the work of aesthetics, primarily in allegory, is nowhere more apparent than in MacDiarmid’s ‘Ballad’. That the interpolated section is an allegory can be induced from MacDiarmid’s footnote gloss, which states unequivocally how the ‘Ballad’ should be read: at the first line (line 1119 of the complete poem), ‘I saw a rose come loupin’ oot’, he writes ‘The General Strike (1926)’ (138). Through attention to the allegorical features herein, we can see how MacDiarmid works against Nairn’s reading of the supposedly metaphysical content of the poem; for poets who impose allegorical features ‘draw back the veil of an optimistic, metaphysical illusion to reveal the truth of its origin and the certainty of its undoing.’[[231]](#footnote-231) Allegory devours in its progression, requesting interpretations that aim towards univocal meaning, it ‘makes us interpret throughout’ (5) and thus exposes us to the critical and destructive tendencies that MacDiarmid reads into the strike in its capacity for ironically creative political intervention. A further irony resides in the positive framing of the political act, in that it embodies possibilities of political representation, revolution and collective harmony. This sense of allegory, as ‘continual interpretation [...] giving us the feeling that we are moving at once inward and upward toward the transcendental “other”’ (4), has a material parallel in the optimism in radical political activism represented by the counter-cultural grouping around ‘Red Clydeside’, the militantly left-wing and unionised worker’s Soviet located near the heavily industrialised Glasgow docks. In the optimism of the rose developing in MacDiarmid’s allegorical vision we hear the siren song of collectivism issued through the Clyde at the moment of their internationally-validated apotheosis in the Russian Revolution of 1917:

the Clyde workers received the news with a wild shout of joy ... The great bulk of workers knew one thing, the one thing that mattered: the Russian workers had taken power, had overthrown the capitalist class and were now energetically preparing the way for an end to the war and for the *reconstruction of society*. The call for an immediate peace with no annexations and no indemnities, the publication of the secret treaties, these were hailed with raptures of delight throughout the whole area. Huge meetings, night after night, rose to extraordinary heights of enthusiasm in support of the Bolshevik revolution[[232]](#footnote-232)

The political trend shared in discussions of the Russian Revolutionary moment and its reception in the international ideas market, and those of the General Strike of 1926, is their Utopian discourse of sublimity, which is mapped in MacDiarmid as precisely the anagogic movement of a rose lifted into the sky as a symbol of international unity, an amalgam of radically spliced nationalist iconography, poetic symbolism from Blok and Yeats, and the literalising of the lifting movement of hope, read through the ‘transcendental’ potential of the allegory. Utopian and dialectical trends in modernism are curiously combined in this poetic vision, which seems to read the Nietzschean potentialities of the early twentieth century through the rhetoric of Marx’s rising proletariat, squared with the historical vision of development of Yeats, via Hegel.

Receptions of the Strike from creative and political commentators alike generally figured the action as that of a radical *outside*. Hamilton Fyfe’s *Behind the Scenes of the General Strike*, written in the year of the strike from a position sympathetic to Labour activism, suggests that the strike in actuality was much removed from the Syndicalist or Luxemburgian vision of mass protest:

None but a few crazy idealists had ever wanted a General Strike. Now the very people who have always been most strongly opposed to it are forced to admit that there is no other way for the Trade Unions to carry out their pledge of support to the miners.[[233]](#footnote-233)

For Shiach this provides evidence that ‘this is a vision of a political rather than a proletarian general strike, where the aim is the achievement of particular political and economic concessions, rather than any revolutionary challenge to the State’ (229). Trade Unions and Labour were in agreement that the revolutionary call to arms should not be mobilised in order to meet their needs, which were avowedly not allied to Sorelian or Luxemburgian notions of disruption and reconstruction. Further speaking of the continuity between the Strike and the Russian Revolutionary moment, Shiach quotes Ramsey MacDonald as saying, in the House of Commons, that ‘with the discussion of general strikes and Bolshevism and all that kind of thing, I have nothing to do’ (229). This further speaks to the division between a revolutionary leftism and a conservative/centrist vision of mandated ‘democracy’, but in MacDiarmid this is furthermore mapped onto compounded divisions of minority politics and State hegemony, such as that of the British State and its regional colonies. MacDonald’s position is to the Bennett-Wells-Woolf continuum what Red Clydeside’s is to MacDiarmid. This seems to be exemplified in Woolf’s rapidly declining interest in the Strike, as represented in her diaries, which by 13 May 1926 note, ‘I suppose all pages devoted to the Strike will be skipped, when I read over this book. Oh that dull old chapter, I shall say. Excitements about what are called real things are always unutterably transitory’ (quoted in Shiach, 244).

 Yet the transformative event that the Strike becomes for MacDiarmid has a politicising impact on his work that will continue into the late 1920s and early 1930s, when he begins writing his epic Hymns to Lenin. The rose in the Ballad, then, speaks of a concrete optimism in the development of a radical continuum. For MacDiarmid, the General Strike *is* the expression of a proletarian strike, but one that was prone to failure. We can see his engagement in translation work, then, as being synonymous with an attempt to consolidate the internationalist tendencies of workers’ movements in Scotland at the time. For MacDiarmid, as for Yeats and Joyce, political revolution and revolution in the word were parallel concerns:

The way to produce the literature in modern Scotland which measured up to the ‘becoming tendencies’ in the great writings of the last hundred years in the various countries of the West, especially on the continent, was now to be achieved by breaking with Masson’s principle of the internalisation of Scotticism, and by starting up a Scottish renaissance similar, it was hoped, in character and effects to the renaissance of Ireland and the other corresponding countries.[[234]](#footnote-234)

The internal revolution of MacDiarmid’s Word would be outward-looking, then, placing, as Wyndham Lewis does, importance on the external over the internal, an alignment primarily achieved through figurative experiments in allegory and irony. But in MacDiarmid’s case, the political content of his work would also be worked out through an engagement with the Hegelian dialectic, as refracted through G. Gregory Smith’s *Caledonian Antisyzygy*.

Davie situates MacDiarmid’s *Drunk Man* at a decisive moment in Scotland’s pedagogic history, namely one in which a commonsensical knowledge-based educational system was coming under pressure from neo-Utilitarians such as Dewey who establish the American pragmatism that would inform the atomisation of educational knowledge streams that occurs as the twentieth century progressed. MacDiarmid’s poem issues out of what Davie knows as the Ordinance 70 affair, which fundamentally altered the classicist persuasion of education in Scotland. In the discussion of philosophical trends leading up to this moment, we can see how a Hegelian tendency informed these disputes:

the conflict of principles reappeared in the eighties and nineties in the more gentlemanly form of the disputes between Caird of Glasgow, who spoke in the name of a Hegelianised version of Mill’s utilitarianism, and the Edinburgh-based philosophers, S. S. Laurie and Pringle-Pattison, who stood – the latter explicitly – for a Hegelianised version of Reid’s Philosophy of Common Sense. (124)

MacDiarmid explicitly engaged the politics of educational philosophy, particularly in the *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, which were commissioned by an educational board, as a way of ‘continuing intellectual argument among the Scots, which the universities had decided to avoid’ (125). For Davie, MacDiarmid’s ability to stage a philosophical debate in *A Drunk Man* between scepticism and its opposite, one that ‘is a continuing battle against a scepticism which is no sooner refuted well and truly in one form than it reappears in another and more difficult form’ (126). In this truly dialectical strategy, MacDiarmid revives the ‘forgotten doctrine of Adam Smith, Schelling and Hegel that self-consciousness is inseparable from mutual consciousness, i.e. from being aware of oneself as an object to the others’ (136). MacDiarmid went to great pains to oppose his position to Kemp Smith, who in turn opposed the WEA (Workers’ Educational Association), whose activities were emanating from the Red Clyde.

MacDiarmid’s tendentious Hegelianism, thus situated in its period, can be found wherever one looks for it in the poem, as much as, once the appearance of allegory and irony have been considered, figurative procedures are seen to inhabit the entire work. His attempt to take on the codes and practices of a London-centric cultural avant-garde and to mix these with regionalist poetic language and dissident politics can be interpreted as an act of counter-modernist provocation – it contains references to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, particularly important as a challenge to Eliot’s view against there being such a thing as a Scottish literature in ‘Was There a Scottish Literature?’ (1919). That such attitudinising builds on the foundation of a dialectical form of argument can be adduced from the following lines:

a’ that’s Scottish is in me,

As a’ things Russian were in thee,

And **I in turn ‘ud be an action**

To pit in a concrete abstraction

My country’s contrair qualities,

And **mak’ a unity o’ these**

Till my love owre its history dwells,

As owretone to a peal o’ bells.

And in this **heicher stratosphere**

As bairn at giant at thee I peer…. (ll. 2014-2021, ellipsis original, emphasis mine)

Ostensibly concerned with the self-identification the Drunk Man makes with Dostoevsky, the Russian at issue here, this stanza connects the symbolic and the politico-philosophical. Preceded by the question ‘Is Scotland big enough to be / A symbol o’ that force in me, / In wha’s divine inebriety / A sicht abune contempt I’ll see?’ (ll. 2009-12), MacDiarmid brings attention to the capacity for language to adequately express the subjective state of a subject of national representation. It also wittily sets up the inevitable expression of this self-same procedure, thus doubling the self under consideration as one that contemplates and one that becomes that contemplation. Though the language here is plagiaristic of a Richard Church article in the *New Age* about Dostoevsky,[[235]](#footnote-235) the reader cannot help but register the Hegelian *overtone* to the language being used by MacDiarmid, via Church. This is the dialectical language of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and his *Science of Logic*. For Lenin, ‘Hegel is completely right’ in his postulation that thought proceeds from the concrete to the abstract:

From living perception to abstract thought, *and from this to practice*, – such is the dialectical path of cognition of *truth*, of cognition and objective reality [...] Hegel exalts knowledge, asserting that knowledge is knowledge of God. The materialist exalts knowledge of matter.[[236]](#footnote-236)

Dostoevsky, then, for MacDiarmid provides an ideal bridging point from which to launch his dialectical project, and the Russian link provides further evidence that the internationalist position is one that highlights the currency in revolutionary ideas between the Red Clyde of Scotland and the radicals of Russia. The matter, allegorised in this instance at the moment of closer interrogation, becomes a literal question of literary materialism – by drawing attention to his sources in this way, MacDiarmid prioritises the collagist techniques he is using to upbraid a technically powerful opposition. Further, by incorporating this opposition in quotation and apostrophe, as MacDiarmid frequently does with Eliot and Yeats, he repeatedly emphasises the bellicose nature of this project as literature *on strike*. The dialectical sublation referenced cannot be obtained because of the persistence of irony in this passage, and the reader is drawn back into the question MacDiarmid poses as foundation for the extended quotation, putting the subject, the Drunk Man, back in his position of doubt, contingency and temporality. Answering the question that precedes this, he will not at any point in the poem ‘be caught / In ony satisfaction [...] bird-lime that winna let me soar’ (ll. 2006-8).

The lack of transcendence afforded here ultimately renders the thistle and the perpetual cipher of all symbolism in the poem, the Drunk Man himself, an image of MacDiarmid’s Nietzschean vision of humanity, neither one thing nor another, ape nor superman: ‘The poet will remain impaled on the thistle, the symbol for an obdurately historical and material reality that outwears symbolic transformation.’[[237]](#footnote-237) The symbolism of *A Drunk Man* all amounts to a breakdown of symbolism, as the strike is an example of a failed revolution in labour equality and a breakdown in the attempted revivifying of class, cultural, historical and national consciousness, and as such the poem cannot fail to tell a story of profound disappointment, much as the 1917 Russian Revolution was in danger of becoming. Breakdown would also have a significant role to play in MacDiarmid’s life, as shortly after completing his first major poems of philosophical and political insight, he would suffer a mental breakdown that saw him exiled to the Shetlands for a period of recuperation. The breakdown becomes a personal and political event, seemingly issuing from the horror of the great ‘betrayal’ in the compromises reached in the final days of the General Strike. The idea of collapse is essential to considerations of the deflation of the strike in MacDiarmid’s wilting cosmic rose – such a sense of deflation after anagogic allegorical moments is common to both Rickword and MacDiarmid, and uncannily anticipates the deflation of Depression, which is deeply ironic in relation to Arnold Bennett’s outspoken remarks about the Strike, which is ‘revolutionary’, ‘a political crime that must be paid for.’[[238]](#footnote-238) This sense of deflation accompanies moments of allegorical ruin:

O fain I’d drink until I saw

Scotland a ferlie [marvel] o’ delicht,

And fain bide drunk nor ha’e’t recede

Into a shrivelled thistle syne,

As when a sperklin’ tide rins oot,

And leaves a wreath o’ rubbish there!

Thus we are left with the image of material historical existence, the Eliotic detritus, the waste of excess signification, contrary to any transcendental possibility of the metaphysics read into the poem by critics such as Buthlay, who would avoid the political dimension to the poem. As MacDiarmid is aware, the apostrophic breakdown elicited by such excesses and contradictions is part of the poem’s inherent ‘insuperable difficulties’ (‘Author’s Note (1926)’ Buthlay, 245). While providing a valediction for his admittedly ‘high-brow’ product, MacDiarmid also suggests that the work can only be understood ‘*more Boreali* [Northern]’. The reader must be immersed in order to understand, thus raising the typical modernist strategy of interpellating a common reader with a mixture of invitation and exclusion. Yet the strategy of putting figurative processes to the stress of materialism defines a typical project in MacDiarmid’s poetic. In MacDiarmid’s own essay on himself, ‘The Poetry and Politics of Hugh MacDiarmid,’ he quotes one of his own poems, ‘Manual Labour’ (1943), that speaks of this commitment to the dialectical materialism he grows to incorporate into a life philosophy – he is ‘fully alive to the danger / of...’

“The common mistake of regarding

The skilful manipulation of symbols

As an activity altogether more respectable

Than the skilful manipulation

Of material objects.

I am organically welded with the manual workers

As with no other class in the social system”[[239]](#footnote-239)

MacDiarmid’s work from the early 1920s onwards in his novel form of ‘synthetic Scots’, has often been overlooked in canonical – or more accurately, ‘core’, English, canonical – approaches to British modernism, however much his writing embodies the tendencies of a specifically Joycean blending of registers and ironising of national and class distinctions. Indeed, MacDiarmid’s literary product was self-styled as ‘high brow’, a return to the canonical Scottish literature of poetic forbears such as the fifteenth-century William Dunbar, the Chaucer of Scotland. MacDiarmid aims towards a literary internationalism by way of a liberated nationalism, abandoning the cultural centre of British modernism, London, in favour of a renovated dialect writing style that at the same time aims to overthrow the currency of a devalued and degrading parochialism of Scottish letters informed by a cloying Burnsian (or Burns-lite) sentiment, or *kailyardism*, to use the dialect term. The demotic, vernacular and dialect linguistic forms that compete within the text contain a politicised form of *transplanted* modernism*.* In fact *grafted* might be more appropriate to the root of the thistle often symbolised. MacDiarmid explicitly links his aesthetic vision to the experience of the war, which is seen as clearing the way for the experiment of modernism and preparing an audience for further revolutions in politics and (Scottish) art:

[The Scottish Renaissance’s] inception synchronised with the end of the War, and in retrospect it will be seen to have had a genesis in kin with other post-war phenomena of recrudescent nationalism all over Europe, and to have shared to the full in the wave of Catholic revivalism which accompanied them. It took the full force of the War to jolt an adequate majority of the Scottish people out of the their old mental, moral and material ruts; and the full force of post-war reaction is gradually bringing them to an effective realisation of their changed conditions[[240]](#footnote-240)

This testifies to the powerful analeptic tendencies released in the post-war climate, not just in the context of the General Strike. The experience of war encodes a sacrifice, of which there are abundant examples in *A Drunk Man*, based in the rhetoric and practice of eliciting troops for and understanding the processes of the First World War, that is necessary for the political, social and cultural development of the British population. Naturally, for MacDiarmid this process is explosive and arrestingly demystifying, and one that finds an ideal correlate in the experience of the General Strike.

MacDiarmid’s poetry frequently turns to what Alan Bold has argued is a Calvinist doctrine of the elect, and figures the possibility of salvation as being linked to sacrifice.[[241]](#footnote-241) Earlier in the poem we are told to anticipate the coming of a ‘greater Christ, a greater Burns’ (which could be either, among many, Dunbar or Dostoevsky):

A Scottish poet maun assume

The burden o’ his people’s doom,

And dee to brak’ their livin’ tomb.

Mony ha’e tried, but a’ ha’e failed.

Their sacrifice has nocht availed.

Upon the thistle they’re impaled. (ll. 1108-13)

In the context of post-First World War literature, sacrifice has resonances that apply to the poem in a number of important ways. Marie Bonaparte, for instance, writes of the experience of being called up to serve the army in war, as being:

dedicated to the dangers of war and death [...] [which] suddenly transformed the hitherto commonplace citizen into someone sacred: in receiving his call-up or reading the poster mobilising his group, the aura of the ‘sacred’ begins to invest him[[242]](#footnote-242)

Encompassing the position of the Drunk Man as self-appointed saviour of the Scottish people and his standing in for a ‘Greater Christ’ and the sacrificial mentality that so defines the poem, Bonaparte’s notion of a transference of power, a mediation, in the discourse of war, applies aptly to MacDiarmid’s poem. MacDiarmid himself squared the relation in the quotation above by suggesting that the war cleared a space for intellectual movement. Frequent calls for sacrifice, such as ‘I chowl my chafts, and pray / ‘Let God forsake me noo and no’ / Staund connoisseur-like tae!’ (l. 1217), are part of a mentality that allegorises the process of authoring a war-like discourse, an avant-garde strike. In its connection with the traumatic experience of war, the sacrificial mentality joins in the temporal succession of historical conflicts that the General Strike evokes. It is ‘As roond a hopeless sacrifice’ (l. 1185) that the action of the ‘Ballad’ centres. In the ‘Ballad’, the poet, figured as a thistle, must sacrifice himself because of the force of historical continuity the Strike as a historical phenomenon implies. Morag Shiach has written of literary texts of the General Strike that the more nuanced approaches figure the Strike as ‘the culmination of a longer historical process’ (234); MacDiarmid’s approach is exemplary in this regard, to the extent that he sees history ‘through a cylinder o’ wombs, / A star reflected in a dub [puddle], / I see as ‘twere my ain wild harns [brains] / The ripple o’ Eve’s moniplies [intestines]’. By gradually miniaturising attention and seeing the general in the particular, MacDiarmid applies a nominalist’s perception to world-historical cycles. MacDiarmid seems in this respect to have been following the philosophies of the Russian mystic philosopher Solovyov, whom he quotes as writing:

Reality is one living system, each part of which, while remaining unique and individual, enters at the same time into the composition of a wider whole. And the whole, which includes the limitless multiplicity of forms, may itself be regarded as an individual entity; and just as the particular forms that enter into it require for their explanation to be related to the Absolute Being of God, so, too, the perfect whole – tout dans l’unité – can only be conceived as dependent upon God as the eternal object of the divine thought and love.[[243]](#footnote-243)

For Solovyov, ‘God’s thought’ is depicted as ‘Sophia’, a female principle underlying the universe, but as with Lenin’s secularisation of Hegel in preference of ‘material’, likewise MacDiarmid puts Solovyov’s philosophy to clear material literary historical purpose. As Catherine Kerrigan notes, Solovyov was one of Russia’s foremost symbolists, and who developed the symbol of Sophia as being ‘an emblem of the collective experience of Russia. [...] In the same way that Yeats had presented Cuchulain to the Irish imagination, Sophia [...] provided a spiritual continuity with the past while offering an image of hope for the future.’[[244]](#footnote-244) Yet MacDiarmid consistently devolves the cosmic proportions of his work to the demands of the central symbol of the poem, the thistle. Material concerns dominate the symbolic ordinances of the work. We can see in the female principle that unites Solovyov and Yeats with the poet in a kind of performative literary history, how the poet continually comes to define collective experience as embodied in a temporally situated symbolism, collapsing historical epochs, as in the ‘wild harns’ collapsed into ‘Eve’s moniplies’. When MacDiarmid sees his visionary ‘wheel’ turning he sees ‘John Knox and Clavers in my raw, / And Mary Queen o’ Scots ana’, // And Rabbie Burns and Weelum Wallace, / And Carlyle lookin’ unco gallus [extremely reckless], / And Harry Lauder (to enthral us)’ (ll. 2605-10). In MacDiarmid’s collective symbol of the wheel we have the broad church – ‘A’ the Scots baith big and sma’, / That e’er the braith o’ life did draw’ (ll. 2611-13) – of a truly democratic sentiment. MacDiarmid’s references to historic occasions in this section, particularly to Flodden and Bannockburn (l. 2467), while simultaneously referencing cyclical trends of victory and defeat, are in danger of falling into the nationalist ‘trap’, as characterised by Tom Nairn: ‘from *Waverley* onwards the emphatic, undeniably ‘historic’ quality of a deceased culture provided writers with a perfect avenue for that kind of retrospective, once-upon-a-time national feeling which has become mandatory’ (168). While MacDiarmid does not engage these historical events in a context of reflective myth-making, the fact of their reference in the context of relativity raises their capacity to be used as part of the growing referential system to engage in a form of national strike. Reconfiguring his ‘cause’ to be one of taking advantage of the moment provided by post-war reflection, and telescoping historical reference in a condensed experimental style, MacDiarmid reflects Sorel’s theorisation of the authoritarian action-philosophies of strikers:

Men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians, I propose to call myths.[[245]](#footnote-245)

Sorel’s notion of projection relies on the construction of myths as being central to imagining political action, placing emphasis on the abiding power of cultural representations as having the ability to coalesce images, symbols and allegories that inspire action, entirely in line with the avant-guard’s re-connection of art with the practices of social and political life.

The appearance of science in the mystical ‘wheel’ section (ll. 2395 onwards), with its intense preoccupation with relativity and Nietzschean-Darwinistic super-evolution could be useful to keep in mind in linking to Ezra Pound’s breaking down of rational thought and expression:

[We have no need] to think in terms of monolinear logic, the sentence structure, subject, predicate, objects, etc [...] we are as capable or almost as capable as the biologist of thinking thoughts that join like spokes in a wheel-hub and that fuse in hyper-geometric amalgams.[[246]](#footnote-246)

This links some of MacDiarmid’s technical flair – his use of *terza rima* in this section neatly references Dante and leads us into the ‘Paradiso’ of the final ‘silence’ – to contemporary art movements such cubism and vorticism. Such a fragmentary, allusive, almost cut-up style (or literally, editorially cut-up in the case of the ‘Ballad’ under consideration) is being utilised in a method analogous to that of science, which incorporates elements of investigation through part-work and fragmentary exercises into holistic views where particulars can fundamentally alter the entire field of enquiry, much like the strike has the potential to insert itself into the determined range of political practices as a form of symbolic disturbance analogous to the incorporation of a fragment into a long work, an interpolation. It is important, then, to keep in mind the fact that, in the Ballad’s extended allegory of the General Strike, it is Bergson’s *élan vital* being punctured as well as the symbolic vision of the rose when, we can assume, the news of the ‘betrayal’ is announced.

As we have already explored in terms of the subjective temporality opened up in the use of allegory, the attempt to transcend biological existence is figured in MacDiarmid’s work as a dangerous strategy that leaves the allegorist open to historical ruin. After the rose rises into the sky in the Ballad of the General Strike/Crucified Rose, as the betrayal comes, so does deflation, difference and temporality, reaffirming the disunifying procedures of allegory. A ‘vicious sway’ of, presumably, a return to colonial imperatives manifests in a fragmentation of the symbolism leading up to the rose lifting into the sky at the General Strike’s zenith. This subjects the utopian motion of that gesture upwards to some disarray. As we have seen, the General Strike becomes emblematic of MacDiarmid’s nascent avant-gardism, splicing explicit politics into his epic poem of Scotland’s contradictions, with good fortune being mixed in with like material. Reflecting the sense of disillusion that the collapse of the strike evoked, MacDiarmid’s ‘Ballad’ seems to balance the competing tendencies to political activism, which carries through the entire poem, and impotent depictions of deflation. For Tom Scollan, the reaction to the conclusion of the strike through governmental wrangling among the Glaswegian working class was ‘“Disgust, absolute disgust, all over Glasgow, all sides, some heaved a sigh of relief ... who didn’t know the issues that were at stake, but the rank and file movement were still loyal, would have carried on.” The dominant feeling was one of “betrayal.”’[[247]](#footnote-247) The Partick Strike Committee, though, almost went as far as striking in order to regain the right to strike, calling upon the Scottish TUC to resume strike action. The betrayal, where the strike broke down under massive government repression and various misleading Whitehall deals with the Baldwin government and the central TUC, epitomises the intrusion of contingency into idealism, a thorn on the rose of hope, or a wilting of the rose on an unlikely thistle. The Strike is allegorised in the Ballad as a flower, seen as a rose, blooming from a ‘camsteerie [a perverse, unmanageable] plant’, a thistle, which, personified, speaks in the poem as wanting to ‘brak’ the habit o’ my life / A worthier to devise.’ The rose produced exceeds its material situation to evolve into a universal symbol of hope: a ‘reid reid rose that in the lift / Like a ball o’ fire burned’. It is then ‘burst’, under the imposition of ‘the ancient vicious sway’, which could be read as British colonial suppression. It must be remembered here that the Scottish thistle is ‘unlikely to have been found in Scotland as early as the fifteenth century, although, of course, if it was present it may well have been cultivated in royal gardens and hence become associated with the monarchy and the state.’[[248]](#footnote-248) The thistle thus has British monarchical overtones, even as it has been claimed, since the late fifteenth century, as a specifically Scottish emblem. The second reason given for the breakdown here is a failure of ‘nerve’, a ‘coward strain’ (l. 1179). The thistle is depicted as a ‘rocket’ soaring into the sky, but returning to earth as the spent material refuse of the explosive. Some link is therefore made to the persistence of rhetoric of *weaponry* in discourse of the national imperative to strike-breaking: the *Morning Post* was commissioned to carry a message from Henry Asquith on 8 May 1926 under the headline: ‘British People on the Rack. Strike Weapon Aimed at Daily Life of the Community. Must be sheathed Before Negotiations.’[[249]](#footnote-249) Ironically the rose is burst, or *shot down* in an inversion of the ‘weapon’ image, creating ‘waste’ (DM, l. 1195) out of anti-state projects. This is also a dialectical response to the ‘Tyauvin’ wi’ this root-hewn Scottis [sic] soul’ (l. 395). Finally, the rose becomes emblematised as a figure of Christ’s sacrifice, joining once again the sacrificial rhetoric of much of the poem. With further irony, the ‘Ballad’, generally taken to be a pessimistic and misguided excursus in an otherwise coherent enterprise, subverts the destructive tendencies associated with allegory to affirm the continuation of radicalism by making the General Strike part of a sacrificial ideology that precedes and galvanises interventionist politics.

In the First World War, the sacrificial rhetoric that MacDiarmid uses to redirected effect in *A Drunk Man* was used to unify the troops going in to battle, as we have seen. The specific importance of death for all youth/able-bodied was that such a death would elevate the status of the war dead and continually affirm the necessity of meeting a national calling. This rhetoric would be used again in the conflation of strikers during the General Strike and the German enemy of the First World War, rife in the popular press. *The Times*, for instance, was writing: ‘Trade unions … must know […] that in a general strike they will have the nation against them’. The state coalesces and solidifies in pursuit of a common enemy. This time, the enemy was situated within the state, as with pacifists and non-combatants during war-time, a link made explicit by *The Times* again in the same article: ‘Foolish and provocative speeches will not tempt them [defenders of the State] into indiscretions any more than did the exasperating language of ‘pacifists’ and ‘defeatists’ in the deadly struggle with Germany’ (133). The implacable State, however, makes itself vulnerable to infection precisely by way of its defensiveness. Baldwin, as a case in point, stated that if the General Strike went ahead, the ‘community has to protect itself … [to] astonish the forces of anarchy throughout the world’ (130). This is done by restricting freedoms in the name of democracy (Emergency Powers Act, DORA), and by allowing known fascists to infiltrate the civil defence, specifically through access to the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), which was set up in September 1925 as a bulwark against Bolshevik infiltration (127).

Critics such as Davie and Oxenhorn have raised questions about the extent to which a symbolic artistic protest can become active, participating in the concrete realities of protest. Similarly, it is necessary to raise the question of why Rickword and MacDiarmid chose to write about a historical event in archaic forms – MacDiarmid’s in ‘biblical diction and ballad metre’[[250]](#footnote-250) and Rickword in the form of a masque – rather than the ‘realist’ forms that attend literary treatments of the Strike in Bennett, Wells, (even) Lewis and others. Oxenhorn argues that the ballad form is incongruent with the theme of representing a striking population, de-politicising MacDiarmid’s intent:

the ballad form [...] carries with it a weight of historic and cultural association tending toward romance, instinct, and lyric simplicity. In this case, the intrinsic nature of the form undercuts the poet’s own political stance, and turns a volatile topical subject into timeless Literature. (99)

In this process, apparently, ‘we lose not only the music of poetry, but also the natural rhythms of spoken prose’ (100). However, Oxenhorn overlooks two central counter-arguments to such reactionary assertions: first, as we have discussed, the temporal contingencies opened up by allegorical representation radically counter the ‘timelessness’ of the ‘Ballad’ (in fact, it is stridently *timely*), and, second, the history of the ballad form reveals it to be closer to an appropriate metrical and stanzaic form than Oxenhorn gives credit for. The ballad form is in fact a formal device that connects MacDiarmid’s poetry back to a folk cultural form. It can be a ‘popular, usually narrative, song, *especially* one celebrating or scurrilously attacking persons or institutions’, and one that, performatively, ‘tells a popular story.’[[251]](#footnote-251) Edwin Muir, contemporary of MacDiarmid’s in the Scottish Renaissance, suggested that modern Scottish poetry had ‘not evolved forms capable of embodying modern disassociation’ (101), but perhaps there is more than a touch of irony in MacDiarmid’s choice of form here. Is it not quite possible that by writing in a form that could be considered as one that lends itself to folk art, particularly the song, MacDiarmid raises the unavailability of folk forms at the point of expressions of national discord? The form’s very accessibility raises the issue of formal irony, which effaces the subject and forces the author into increasing engagements with ironic representation.

It must be remarked, however, that MacDiarmid’s vision often corresponds as much with a sense of collective trauma and attempts to seek the freedom of a people as with individualist visions of messianism of a particularly solipsistic kind. The thistle, for instance, can become ‘an emblem with fixed associations’ (94). Yet this, as with many readings, mine included, takes the symbology out of context. The ‘fixed’ ‘emblem’, having undergone symbolic transformation in the representation in the ‘Ballad’ as allegory, must retain its allegorical value. The Drunk Man questions the value of the poetic project undertaken here also: ‘Unless, mebbe, a poem like this’ll / Exeriorise things in a thistle’ (l. 1673). The ballad still transmogrifies from a basic form of sentiment, connected to the song form and taking as its germane material that of everyday life, to a form that is capable of expressing a complex range of allusive and conceptually dense work. This is a complex reaction to an uprising of a working people, an index of the surplus signification unleashed in the Strike:

[the Strike] has become a key metaphor for British society, which like all powerful symbols encodes a verity of conflicting meaning about British and English identity, class relations, and appropriate behaviour. The strike appears [...] as the event that quintessentially defines what it is to be English. [...] [T]he event and its participants became national folk symbols.[[252]](#footnote-252)

In its capacity to speak metonymically of a moment and a people, this also involves the necessity of infelicitious side-effects of strike action, namely in the ‘arming’ of the middle-classes,[[253]](#footnote-253) in the coalescence of oppositionality around briefly taking over the means of transportation and production. Hence, the symbolism, also through the operations of allegory, in the *Drunk Man*, undergoes a distortion which often appears in the poetry as an unfinished, unresolved or un-sublated dialectic. The binary is never allowed to resolve into its straightforward polarity: ‘A mongrel growth, jumble o’ disproportions, / Whirlin’ in its incredible contortions’ (ll. 1047-8). In its performativity as a ‘scurrilous attack’ on the institution of state, we can, after having done some serious unpacking, put some spin on the ‘elitism’ Michael Gardiner detects in MacDiarmid from a perspective of postmodern approaches to cultural and linguistic difference in Scottish literature and culture.[[254]](#footnote-254) There certainly is an element of utopianism in MacDiarmid’s practice, as we have explored. And yet MacDiarmid’s Poundian ‘new’ has been rigorously politicised and historicised in the practices of *A Drunk Man*. He makes new material out of the post-war Eliotic detritus, going further than Eliot, looking backwards and forwards at once, and suggests that a new literature both undertakes borrowing and creates a language of the future (a critical stance that would spin Gardiner’s argument back to its Deleuzian methodological underpinnings).

While dwelling on the formal properties of MacDiarmid’s work in *A Drunk Man*, it may be important to make some observations regarding the Chaucer and Dunbar intertexts suggested by the central symbols discussed, the thistle and the rose. It is rarely commented upon that Dunbar’s ‘The Thistle and the Rose’, certainly an allusive lynchpin, is an occasional poem to celebrate the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor in 1503, which foreshadowed the Union of the Crowns. In the English Rose being crowned, we have the symbolic precedent of MacDiarmid’s rose-thistle-rose dialectical symbol. We are provided, in this knowledge, unique access to the concatenation of the personal and the political that will attend MacDiarmid’s vision – allegorically, the thistle exists as a weed, a terrible flower, and Dunbar’s poem warns as much about sexual infidelity of a rhizomatic plant/man as it celebrates a peaceable union of sovereigns and states. This also returns us to further considerations of sovereignty – put at issue in Woolf’s diary entry on the Strike – through Louis Fradenburg’s reading of Dunbar and Chaucer:

Dunbar, in the *Thrissill* [*Thistle and the Rose*], is subjected to a discipline whereby his own voice becomes an instrumentality for the totalising discourse of sovereignty: the poem which follows, then, is an ‘observance’ – it fulfils a duty, performs a service, answers a demand; the desire of the poetic subject is not, at first, the poet’s own.[[255]](#footnote-255)

MacDiarmid’s practice is uncannily similar to Dunbar’s, then. But how does this bring us to a new understanding of MacDiarmid’s poem? The lyric ‘I’ recedes from view in the ‘Ballad of the General Strike’, being taken over by the ‘voice’ of allegory – missing the sovereign, the body of the sovereign recedes from view, perhaps exposing the *body politic* or Leviathan (that is referenced elsewhere in the poem). This could be linked back to MacDiarmid’s engagement with Hegelian dialectics, in terms of Hegel’s envisioning of world historical cycles:

Hegel regards the emerging reliance by Western civilisation on the authority of reason, and the emerging understanding of reason as a fully critical self-determination (as absolute freedom) to be deeply continuous with the pre-modern tradition. Modernity itself is then not a ‘revolution,’ or autochthonous or self-grounding; it is the whole of human history that must be seen as ‘absolutely’ self-supporting or self-grounding, and modernity is just the beginning of the final realisation of this self-consciousness itself, as well as a realisation of a *telos* already implicit at the origin of the Western experience.

[...]

[I]n a way much like the classical ideal of freedom as ‘realisation within the whole,’ Hegel too tries to show how the attempt at self-determination requires [...] an understanding of oneself as occupying a ‘place’ within a larger whole, except in his view that the whole is not nature or the cosmos, but the history of a collectively self-determining subject. More concretely, it means that Hegel thinks he can show that one never ‘determines oneself’ simply as a ‘person’ or agent, but always as a member of an historical ethical institution, as a family member, or participant in civil society, or citizen, and that it is only in terms of such concrete institutions that one can formulate some substantive universal end, something concretely relevant to all other such agents[[256]](#footnote-256)

MacDiarmid’s writing on the General Strike in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* engages with dissident politics, in that it envisaged the individual as a ‘collectively self-determining subject’ that links in to a collectively self-determining mass of protest. And he is Hegelian by dint of the notion of the way he seeks particular bases for the exploration of and critique of the universal. He yields a form that I would categorise as a protest in itself, as indicated by Laura O’Connor: ‘A Drunk Man's caricatural poetics is more in tune with mass-protest by the proletariat than with constitutional nationalism.’[[257]](#footnote-257) Indeed, the figure of the child approaching the giant of universal harmony – ‘as bairn at giant at thee I peer’ – echoes the Marxian theory of dependence in alienation: ‘Man depends on the other for his own realization; but this realization is …denied him [in his estrangement from nature in the labour process and his attendant decrease in value in the production process], and the other is made his enemy.’[[258]](#footnote-258) The sense of possibility, and subsequent betrayal, in the Ballad of the Crucified Rose, emanates from a symbolism that sees beyond such mediation – beyond the ‘sentrices’ [scaffolding] (e.g. from l. 1026 onwards) that MacDiarmid alludes to frequently – to a point of abstract unity – significantly, in the ballad the ‘haill braid earth had turned / A reid reid rose’. MacDiarmid’s utopian vision of a united mass in volatile protest – making a ‘unity o’ these’ – provides a unique interpretation of the potentialities of the collective in a period when crowds were an uncertain factor of theoretical thought about the democratic state. In his attention to the ‘sentrices’ of biological and historical existence, MacDiarmid keenly affirms the collectivity of all determinations of human being: ‘coontless corpses in us thrang’ (l. 1957). The trajectory goes towards, rather, a vision of world spirit: ‘A force to which I ne’er could grow / Is movin’ in’t as ‘twere a sea / That lang syne drooned the last o’ me […] drooned […] A’ that could ever come frae Man’ (ll. 1963-67). The movement is towards Hegel’s *Begriffe* or universal shapes that issue in fact and history, but with the added dimension of historical contingency.[[259]](#footnote-259) MacDiarmid’s symbolism has the thistle as potential unifier of the contradictions inherent in the practice he employs, precisely in its own internal contradictoriness as spiky dissimulator, anti-mass culture, pro-individual and pro-collective in one. For example:

The thistle yet’ll unite

Man and the Infinite!

Swippert [agile] and swith wi’ virr [quick w/ vigor]

In the howes [hollows] o’ man’s hert

Forever its muckle roots stir

Like a Leviathan astert,

Till’ts coils like a thistle’s leafs

Sweep space wi’ levin [lightning] sheafs.

Frae laichest deeps o’ the ocean

It rises in flight upon flight,

And ‘yont its uttermaist motion

Can still set roses alight,

As else unreachable height

Fa’s under its triumphin’ sight. (ll. 481-494)

Rather than being a point of absolute rupture, of complete revolution, the Strike is made into a symbol of idealism’s failure, or betrayal. Though roses are present within the thistle (beauty in ugliness, regeneration in a waste land), likewise such roses contain their own undoing, their canker: ‘The vices that defeat the dream / Are in the plant itsel’’. The sacrifice enacted in the Ballad section comes as an analogue of the poem’s own sacrifice of the sequentially previous symbol of a rose of hope: ‘Oor growth at least nae steady progress shows, / Genius in mankind like an antrin [rare] rose / Abune a jungly waste o’ effort grows’ (l. 1031). Thus the poem repeatedly draws attention to its own contradictions – in fact, valorising Shestov’s notion of whether ‘contradictions are not the condition of truthfulness in one’s conception of the world’[[260]](#footnote-260) – its own impossibility, and therefore its avant-garde status, specifically in terms of becoming a literary strike. In its own way, then, MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* of 1926, can be said to embody dissent in its style and content. In apostrophising out, asking the reader to respond to ‘a poem like this’ (l. 1673), questioning ‘Hoo weel my verse embodies / The thistle you can read!’ (l. 1227), MacDiarmid performs a parabasis, a point at which the author becomes visible in the textual fabric. For de Man, from this point ‘there is no way back from his fictional self to his actual self’, thus further opening up the futurity of totality or unity that irony and allegory imply.[[261]](#footnote-261)

As Scott Lyall points out, MacDiarmid’s ‘heterodox communism’ frequently relies on a Blakean dialectic of innocence and experience, wherein the head term in any binary becomes undone in order to relativise absolutism or politicise aesthetics[[262]](#footnote-262). In ‘Ode to All Rebels’ from *Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* (1935), for instance, MacDiarmid writes:

As the heavy earth is the same below

Though insubstantialised in the sunshine

I see a man's slack mouth and goggling eyes

Behind this glory and know them for mine

Nor if I could would I lose for a moment

Divine in human or human in divine.

O double vision fighting in the glass!

Now light blots out this last distinction of class.

 O magical change, O miracle

 I am suddenly beyond myself.

 Red, white, and square,

 Tearing the soul to rags![[263]](#footnote-263)

The poet’s ‘vision’, at once metaphysical and physical, moves from the material to the immaterial, and back and forth in an interplay of oppositional forces, throughout this extract, validating an understanding of resolution as being predicated on ‘the heaven of a new revolutionary order.’[[264]](#footnote-264) A tendency to aestheticise experience resolves into a political formula of mutual recognition, of otherness depending on sighting an other and relating it to the otherness of the lyric self, one that overcomes the solipsism of a bourgeois ‘soul’, torn through by a blinding, supersessionary, ecstatic visionary project. It also links back to the notion of the ‘necessity of foes’ (l. 2376) in the *Drunk Man* and the symbolic contortions synthesized as follows: ‘E’en as the munelicht’s borrowed frae the sun / I ha’e my knowledge o’ mysel’ frae thee’ (l. 921). For Kojève, writing on Hegel, this accords with the ‘taking account of the Negativity which [the subject of universal knowledge] implies or realizes – that is, by describing the 'dialectical movement' of his real existence, which is the movement of a being that continues to be itself and yet does not remain the same.’[[265]](#footnote-265) MacDiarmid’s ‘beyond’ speaks of the proto-transcendent symbolic realm envisioned in the ‘Ballad of the Crucified Rose’’s ‘red rose […] in the lift’, which inevitably falls due to its ‘canker’, the ‘human in divine’ of contingency. It is important to make the link here, considering MacDiarmid’s ‘vision fighting in the glass’ in this later poem, explicitly linking the concerns of the Drunk Man, who sees socio-political reality and philosophical conjecture through the lens of a whisky or beer glass, with the concerns of a Leftist political-poetic engagement of work. This likewise brings us back to the ‘vision’ on offer in *A Drunk Man*, which frequently alludes to the idea of new organs developing that would suggest the formation of new organs of state, but also to a Nietzschean vision of biological self-determination:

Juist as man’s skeleton has left

Its ancient ape-like shape ahint,

Sae states o’ mind in turn gi’e way

To different states, and quickly seem

Impossible to late men,

And Man’s mind in its final shape

Or lang’ll seem a monkey’s spook (ll. 1532-8)

There are suggestions here of organic metaphors that place MacDiarmid’s writing in the continuum of modernist writers who were dabbling in eugenics and fascistic rhetoric on the compounded backwardness of unthinking people. Occasionally MacDiarmid slips into a diagnostic mode that allies him to the Lewis of *The Art of Being Ruled* read at the start of the chapter. As David Goldie has written regarding MacDiarmid’s *Lucky Poet*, ‘MacDiarmid does not see himself so much as a fellow sufferer with his fellows in the condition of modernity as a divinely-appointed physician destined to cure them with his draconian surgery.’[[266]](#footnote-266) And yet MacDiarmid politicizes these moments as ones of a Whitmanian *democratic* vision, as when in Havelock Ellis he sees ‘a hand that is pointed towards an approaching new horizon of the human spirit.’[[267]](#footnote-267) In fact, this notion of a democratic telos can be isolated in relation to a dialectic sense that motivates the Caledonian antisyzygy, as MacDiarmid refines his thinking to a Hegelian vision of human potential. As Joseph Bien has written of Hegel’s dialectical vision:

Hegel’s work might be read as the conception of historical movement which culminates in the realisation that truth is the unity of thought and being. This is accomplished through the dialectical relationship of subject and object in which the subject continually encounters the object as one thing, finds it to be another, and adjusts its new view of the object that it has now taken in. This in turns leads to another view of the object [...] In the end one finds that the subject has appropriated all otherness to the conception that it holds of it and has arrived at absolute knowledge. For Hegel, the culmination of the movement, the movement of subject-object realisation, is to be found in the State[[268]](#footnote-268)

Though the ‘Ode to Rebels’, unquoted by MacDiarmid, states, before the key quote under analysis, ‘I’m no slave to the dialectic system’, it seems that MacDiarmid’s vision of political and personal ontology necessarily coalesces around a dialectical scheme. That this relies on allegory as one of its central features, particularly in representing political actuality, has great irony, in that it temporalises and puts contingency into a project that tends towards envisaging a totalizing mode of thought. In MacDiarmid, then, the allegory functions as a future-proofing of his response to the General Strike, but one that ironically attempts to control its literary future. This foreshadows MacDiarmid’s turn to social realism *after the fact* in his *Hymns to Lenin*.

In conclusion, and to elaborate on the allegorical trend in politicised poetic interpretations of the General Strike, I turn to comparable writing by Edgell Rickword, one of the foremost politically-left writers working in Britain at the time. Rickword’s poetry responds to an imperative to find representational forms that engage with historical forms that have otherwise been misrepresented through processes of hegemony:

[I]f we had a real history, a history of what men did and not what it suits some people to have us think was done, we should find that the sixty years before 1914 were an incessant struggle of the masses to secure the fundamental rights that alone could protect their standard of living against the pressure of competitive production. Every partial advantage, whether an extension of the franchise or an improvement in the legal status of Trade Unions, had to be wrenched from the grasp of those who controlled the machinery of government.[[269]](#footnote-269)

Clearly, for Rickword, the pre-history of the First World War is a battle for class consciousness. His dramatic poem, *The Happy New Year*, seems to respond directly to this notion, as we see below. Yet it was equally imperative for Rickword to show how a teleology of progress, for which the Hegelian overcoming of a ‘real’ representation of the masses serves as a metonym, failed in the context of war. The horizon of living democracy once again receded:

By 1914, it is safe to say, all that was best in the nation was imbued with a sense of hope and confident of continued progress, through the improvement of our democratic institutions, towards a real transformation of the national standard of life which the advance of science had made not only possible but imperative. That confidence was very soon put to the test, for the outbreak of war, allegedly to free the world from the tyranny of Prussian militarism, was rapidly followed by the virtual suspension of the democratic rights which had been won with so much effort. As the effects of the Defence of the Realm Act became felt, with the intrusion of the police and the bureaucracy and amateur tribunals of local big-wigs and die-hard dug-outs, into every aspect of the people’s lives, deep resentment was aroused. It was realised, particularly by the working-class, that these anti-democratic measures were not being used to ensure the most efficient conduct of the war, but to safeguard the profits of the same monopolists who held up progress in peace-time. (xxi)

Rickword’s historicising of the progressive moment recognises that, as Rodker had experienced, the authoritarian trend that emerged during wartime developed beyond the categories of class warfare, but were intrinsic to the constitutional democratic process itself. And so Rickword, in his anthology of which these comments provide the introduction, defines democracy in terms of a dichotomy between a formal democracy and a politics of a truly liberatory ideal. The poet must distinguish ‘between those who prate of democracy whilst they curtail our actual freedoms, and those who devote themselves to defending freedom in the workshop, in the streets, in the Press, in all the channels of expression open to us’ (xxi). In a similar vein to Humphrey Jennings’s *Pandaemonium*, which warrants closer attention in the next chapter on British Surrealism, Rickword’s volume collects together poets who seem to represent pervasive but often overlooked trends of radical British literature traced from the battle against feudal oppression to the desire for social justice in the twentieth century. On Robert Graves’ idea, expressed in *The Long Weekend*, that there might have been an English revolution between the wars, Rickword is sceptical about the political conditions for that kind of radicalism: ‘I’m not convinced. There wasn’t anybody to lead it, except the Clydesiders and the Welsh miners who were more militant than anybody else.’[[270]](#footnote-270) As we have seen, the Clydesiders provided a model for radical political engagement enjoined in radical poetry of the inter-war period. Rickword suggests that some of this fervour translated into tangible political support and commitment:

I remember that at Oxford [after WWI] we supported the bus-strike, and there was a semi-riot in which buses and cars were overturned. Some chaps were arrested and taken to the police-station. The crowd said, “Let’s get them out!” When we went to get them out, we found the road barred by a lot of Bullingdon chaps, all in their dinner-jackets. There were all kinds of strikes in the early days, after the war, about demobilisation. Yes, a lot of discontent at that time. We didn’t do much about it, but it seemed to us the proper thing to be done. (77)

So to what extent did this sense of political activism and representation of class struggle, here endorsed but not fully engaged in life practice, reflect in Rickword’s poetry? Again, as with MacDiarmid, on the one hand a traditional sense of continuity is manifested, while at the same time that tradition is being subverted by precedent, by hybrid forms.

In terms of a politically engaged poetry, it can be seen how Rickword maintains a traditional notion of form that remains, for him, without contradiction with the avant-gardism of the poetic gesture. For instance, in reading Rimbaud, Rickword sees developments in content as being only gradually evolved into a revolution of form: ‘[T]he poems were very much in [socio-political] revolt [...] [H]is style was certainly “in advance”, even while using traditional forms. But in the great *Lettre du Voyant* he broke through all such distinctions as poetic and social’ (80). Rickword’s writing on the General Strike seems only tangentially related to the historical event. Yet relating work such as *The Happy New Year: A Masque* to MacDiarmid’s ‘Ballad’ in particular, suggests a trend that connects to the radical literary history that has been suppressed through British history. Both poets express a minorised desire to understand the General Strike through the lens of allegory, and to figure it through a dialectical schemata of competing forces that suggest an underlying harmony of disharmony. Both writers also share a similar taste for irony, and a specific one for parodying the culturally-defining work of modernism embodied in that of Eliot. As John Lucas suggests, ‘The Happy New Year’ contains features that mark it out as intending to burlesque *The Waste Land*.[[271]](#footnote-271) The strike, for both MacDiarmid and Rickword, then, brings up the possibility of renewal (which is gradually eroded into betrayal, collapse, breakdown, failure) and the opportunity to realise a corporate body of an alternative mass, and the opportunity, then, to strike out at all orthodoxies. As we understand, MacDiarmid refused on a number of levels his emplotment within any particular literary genre or category, and we can see the adoption of a traditional literary form in Rickword’s masque as exactly this kind of re-appropriation and experiment on literary form.

Just as the General Strike offered up the opportunity for the upper classes to engage in carnivalesque switching of roles to play at those of working citizens[[272]](#footnote-272) – referred to in Saltzman as a ‘violence’ of role reversal, a kind of terroristic take-over – the two poets write of the General Strike in a way that suspends ‘rules’ of literary production and figure symbols as inherently prone to bathetic collapse. For instance, Rickword’s celestial inversion in *The Happy New Year* finally succumbs to a sun that rises rather than falls away, thus re-establishing the frame of patronage and class hierarchy that are unsettled in the opening discourse of the masque.[[273]](#footnote-273) Use of archaic forms, whether those of the masque in Rickword, or the ballad form in MacDiarmid, sets up some sense of parity between the two writers. Burgeoning in both of their poetic works is a sense that writers of the Left in the late 1920s quite clearly articulated the potential for revolution, rather than it being an encoded message to be reconstructed in literary history, these poems of class conflict are clearly an attempt to re-purpose the literary as political. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind how radical these poems are in their context, which, as Scott McCracken writes, is rife with radical potential: ‘in the interwar period, the years between the General Strike and the Nazis’ seizure of power are perhaps the most important, marking the transition between utopian and political aesthetics.’[[274]](#footnote-274) Yet the appropriations of that force, as Rickword explores in the masque, would be seized upon before its realisation as a revolution of the left. A deflationary sense of spoiled hope concludes *The Happy New Year*, as the ‘Sinisters’ concede a symbolic defeat:

Then fetters soft as daisy-chains

bound day to day with puerile joys –

now goat turds blot our fragrant toys

and morning herds us to the trains. (103)

This moment of collapse, replete with the sense of the failed strike as envisaged in MacDiarmid’s ‘Ballad’, is foreshadowed by the symbolic return of the sun and ‘his’ ‘fair promise of abundance’ (101). Not only does Rickword dwell on notions of symbolic failure, he situates critique of political failure as a kind of literary-institutional failure also, as the forces of reactionary modernism congratulate a return to the symbolic order: ‘dullest Kensington, and City ants, / and owl-wise Bloomsbury, all send up a shout’ (103). At this point in the narrative of the masque, ‘The wide globe swims in milky seas of bliss!’ (103), and while this points to the concluding lines’ humour in connecting the rise of the ‘Dexters’ with a rise in masculine tropes of bodily tumescence and virility, it equates political stability with occluded vision. A true force of democracy is beyond the imaginary scope of the mainstream: ‘you happy norms / guess not our frontiers nor the brunt we bear’ (104). And while the victorious forces of stability celebrate, the masque’s ‘presenter’ concludes the play with a glimpse of the life of the socially-oppressed masses (105).

Ironically, we can see how Rickword’s poem re-interprets mainstream modernism. For instance, Woolf connects us back to Rickword’s theme in *The Happy New Year*, and Lily Briscoe’s thesis in *To the Lighthouse*, in which she ponders: ‘It was a question ... how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left.’[[275]](#footnote-275) Returning us again to Woolf, the establishment would indeed subsume the breakaway worker’s groupings in a dialectic of its own, which pushes the notion of ‘democracy’ through the mill of war, into repressive tendencies, and back into pacifistic statements after the General Strike. Pacifistic sentiments could be entertained so long as they were not part of labour agitation – the 1927 Trades Disputes Act, for instance, made general strikes illegal and made labour organisation more difficult than ever (see Kent, 142). Revolution, as Baldwin saw it, was ‘un-English’ (Kent, 147). But for Rickword, the question remained open as one of possibility, asking how the Left can manifest an uprising: significantly, it is shortly after the discursive appearance of ‘owl-wise Bloomsbury’ that the ‘Sinisters’ (i.e. Lefties) of the masque register the re-appearance of ‘fetters soft as daisy-chains.’ Woolf’s vision of suburban harmony returns as a form of capture cloaked in the pacifist metaphor of daisies. With the resurgent middle-class, rising in the wake of its successes in consolidating in and after the General Strike, comes the discourse of work and regularity – the ‘day to day’ grind of commuting to work. The Left’s ambitions, their utopia, have literally been dumped on (here in the form of a goat with ‘an old-man’s cough’ (103)). But this seems indeed to return us figuratively to the zone of affective nullity raised in the interpretation of activism as a kind of utopian force that cannot manifest as a politics of the everyday in Britain at this time. For Wyndham Lewis, processes of social reform and radical innovation mask a confrontational mode that intrinsically taint the fabric of society with the divided and factional: radicalism

is not there because it is pleasant, beneficent, or abstractly desirable, but solely because it is at the moment *useful*. It is almost always a weapon of war. Almost all our arts of peace are today disguised weapons, for the good reason that there is nowhere anything that could be described as peace.[[276]](#footnote-276)

In the courtly form of the masque, then, we can see how tradition is unmasked as the perpetuation of social injustice. With the ‘Sinisters’ of the Left deposed from any oppositional stance capable of the warring instinct so powerful to Lewis, we are faced with the debility of the avant-garde to manifest political power – they counsel, ‘New blood begets new forms / for comedies or tragic shows, / new vigour to confront old storms’ (104), yet the old forms seem to show that new forms have not been made available or viable through the existing social matrix. All that remains, in Rickword’s vision, then, is a scene of social decay that uncannily presages Charles Madge’s Surrealist vision as expressed in his epic poem ‘The Hours of the Planets,’ which I consider in the following chapter: ‘I see others who walk the earth tonight, homeless / throughout the city, pacing day’s void suburbs’ (105). Surrounded by the refuse of everyday reality (‘cinders and tin-cans and blown evening papers’), these revenants of the socially real pass ‘through the infinite extension of this landscape, / with thoughts like pilgrims’ staves they picked their way / to a lucid zone, whence fresh horizons blazed’ (105). So the material progress of these people is sublimated to a mental horizon of utopian longings, unavailable in the current geopolitical context. The socially real presents as a political stalemate, the replication of age-old divisions and exclusions. It still remained, therefore, a pressing concern as to how poetry might approach social problems in a way that retains the complexity of social and political contexts while manifesting a challenge to the existing bourgeois order of aesthetic production. Debates about what decadence or aestheticism might be in relation to politically mandated forms of socially real art would become integral to the public debates occurring in the *Left Review*, which Rickword helped to edit, and which forms the opening reflection in the following chapter.

**Chapter 4**

**British Surrealism: Dialectic of the Veridical**

*It is quite possible that artists who are now working in the convention of Superrealism will later return to realism, and then they will also be able to enrich realism with new weapons.*

*–* Anthony Blunt, ‘Art Under Capitalism and Socialism’

*When logics die,*

*The secret of the soil grows through the eye,*

*And blood jumps in the sun*

*–* Dylan Thomas, ‘Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines’

Around 1936, Charles Madge began making plans to innovate an experimental form of poetry based on collective forms of mutual understanding, collaboration and creation. His ‘Popular Poetry’ would encompass ‘Coincidence Clubs’ – a (col-)laboratory of surrealism-inspired discourse analysis for the masses – programmes of lectures, courses and conferences, a ‘PP Newspaper on mass basis’, and ‘Text Book of PP’[[277]](#footnote-277). These nascent ideas led Madge to the proposal, in an article titled ‘Poetic Description and Mass Observation’, published in the February 1937 issue of *New Verse*, to unite the ideology of Mass-Observation and poetic practice. Subjective description of social reality, in his view, naturally tends towards the poetic, and through observation, the poet-observer becomes reconciled to an alienated social existence (albeit one that could be enjoyable): ‘English people must learn *to like* their surroundings before they can change them. The curse of misery is apathy’ (quoted in Hubble, 77). The event horizon of mass observation as poetic practice, then, would be one of revolutionary class consciousness, achieved through a synthesis of poetic cognition and anthropological vision. Modernist impersonality in this regard entails not only a connection to transhistorical poetic material, but also the material reality of a late capitalist society. Madge was not alone in his attention to the possibilities of representational forms that would tap into collective experience, or could originate in collective authorship. The experimental collective poem, realised through group observation, can be seen as exemplary of a wider politico-aesthetic project. For David Gascoyne, for instance

The most vital feature of surrealism is its exclusive interest in that point at which literature and art give place to real life, that point at which the imagination seeks to express itself in a more concrete form than words or plastic images. Hence the Surrealists’ frequent reference to this phrase of Lautréamont’s: ‘Poetry should be made by all. Not one’.[[278]](#footnote-278)

This accords with the wider aims of the Surrealist movement to create a ‘new, universal culture’ (87) through psychic investments that refer to and evoke material reality through imaginative work, and concomitantly re-invest imaginative potential in that material reality. Late Surrealism as a movement features a specific aim, to limn the appearance and historical reality of the collective. Breton’s second Surrealist manifesto specifically targets this dialectical feature, in that the movement attempts to discern the point at which ‘surreality resides in reality itself’, and so late Surrealism would feature a growing trend towards representing the collective nature of material reality. The notion of collectivity formed at this point in the history of this avant-garde, which also pertains to a physical group composition – in Maurice Nadeau’s words, ‘a collective organisation, a sect of initiates, a *Bund* subject to collective initiatives, whose members were linked by a common discipline’[[279]](#footnote-279) – one of which Breton was particularly exclusive and authoritarian, is significantly altered in its British incarnation. As Mengham (2001), Sheringham (2006) and Cooper (2009) have explored, the British Surrealist movement was far from coherent in its affiliations, theories and practices, lacking the institutional collectivity of the French mainspring. And so the branches of British surrealism are various, though the following reading will see it rather as developing in the form of two poles that intersect even within the work of the writers concerned. Broadly, the first of these poles is a Romantic literary-historical aesthetic, and the second a Socialist Realist form of political engagement.

Throughout its lukewarm reception in British letters in the 1930s, the little magazine scene was largely responsible for the dissemination of French *Surréalisme* and its theories[[280]](#footnote-280). Though traces of a vestigial intellectual and artistic tendency exist in work by minor writers appearing in *transition* and *The Little Review* from the 1920s onward, such limited and most often provisional receptions are the marginalia to the formation of a self-defining British avant-garde movement. As Rod Mengham observes, British surrealism arises in the wake of the politicised rebranding of Bretonian *Surréalisme* in the late twenties and early thirties by way of Breton’s renewed focus on representing everyday life.[[281]](#footnote-281) Strands of such thought are inherited by the British grouping primarily through contact with this late theory and the Continental dialogue opened up by David Gascoyne and Roland Penrose, before reaching public attention in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London, summer 1936. British surrealism’s inception proper comes at a point at which the literary establishment was engaged, in a number of little magazines from *The Criterion* to *The Left Review*, in debates about the value of propaganda in art, and, in left-leaning circles, the possibilities of a radical proletarian art and what literary form this may or should take. This attention to (one of) the unrepresented other(s) of high modernism concurrently impacted on a critique of various types of realism and the particularly dialectical formation of a British surrealism that attends on socially mimetic forms of representation, setting out an aesthetic that makes of the everyday the material of a peculiar surrealist vision, a dialectical trajectory that looks towards social anthropology as its resolution. As Michael Sheringham states, ‘Surrealism never parts company with a kind of realism’[[282]](#footnote-282), and in the work of practitioners such as Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and David Gascoyne, we can see that a politicised realism not only shadows the surrealist enterprise, but substantiates it in its British translation.

One of the primary factors in Surrealism’s consolidation in the British reception stems from the debate occurring in the pages of the *Left Review*, centred on Surrealist aesthetics as it relates to the balance between Socialist Realism and what is perceived as a bourgeois Modernism. While a number of commentators in the *Left Review* argue that Surrealism belongs to the latter, practitioners such as Herbert Read and Charles Madge offer interpretations that blur the boundaries between the two perceived ideologies, pushing a line that suggests that a socio-politically engaged art, as Breton and Trotsky argue in their manifesto ‘Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,’ published in translation in the *London Bulletin* in October 1938, can offer radical experiment as a dialectical approach to reality and mass culture that simultaneously disavows its allegedly bourgeois orientation away from a Soviet state-approved proletarian art.

Such faith in the suitability of Surrealism as a vessel for radical messages of the kind for which Breton and Trotsky argue, however, issues as a reaction from persistent testing by the left-wing intelligentsia, expulsions from the French Surrealist grouping as a result of the increasing rigidity of credo enforced by Breton, most notoriously that of Louis Aragon, and the formation of a state doctrine of art advocating Socialist Realism at the first Pan-Soviet Literary Congress in Moscow in August 1934. In Britain, the *Left Review* was characteristically inclined towards the dissident position of Aragon, who, for the Zhdanovite reviewer, represents the dialectical overcoming of a decadent phase in aesthetics. For Aragon, the artistic practice, ‘in the maze of the expiring bourgeois culture’ should move properly ‘from Dada to Surrealism and Surrealism to Realism.’[[283]](#footnote-283) Yet, as the following argument will suggest, British surrealism, being such a late manifestation, could not entirely move through something like Aragon’s dialectic, perhaps fortuitously stalling in the *real* of the *sur*real.

In the July 1936 *Left Review*, one month after the International Surrealist Exhibition, a nine-page ‘Surrealism Supplement’ appeared, giving a sense of the polarised public debate. Herbert Read argues here that Surrealism was the ‘only all-embracing aesthetic which opposes the aesthetic conventions of the capitalist epoch’. Surrealism is unique for Read in manifesting the applicability of dialectical materialism, while rejecting the currency of socialist realism: ‘why,’ he asks, ‘should socialists,’ with their scientific outlook on forms of ideology, ‘still retain a pious respect for the pictorial conventions of the Royal Academy [?]’ Socialist Realism, to Read at least, is a regressive form, unwittingly allied to outdated modes of bourgeois expression. He would later characterise it as symptomatic of, in Sam Cooper’s words, ‘a politics of lowest common denominators which erodes the necessary complexities of Marxist thought’, and in his words an art of “vulgar ineptitude.”[[284]](#footnote-284) Anthony Blunt and Alick West, however, persist in arguing in contradistinction that surrealism is pseudo-revolutionary, relying too heavily on simple opposition to mass culture to be in a position to adequately critique it,[[285]](#footnote-285) with West writing that Surrealists ‘[take] no account of the fact that they are using bourgeois conventions in a negative form all the time’. Indeed, this might be substantiated by Read’s acknowledgement that contemporaneous capitalist society could not provide a “satisfactory basis”[[286]](#footnote-286) for an art that could destroy its foundations.

A. L. Lloyd’s review of Read’s *Surrealism* in the January 1937 *Left Review*, similarly attacks the revolutionary pretences of the movement, arguing that surrealism is in fact an ideological consort of *fascism*, ‘whose object it is to perpetuate our more and more irrational capitalist system, to assail in every conceivable way the supremacy of human reason’. Further, Lloyd contends that surrealism fails in its emancipatory project:

The frivolous fames of automatism and newspaper-clipping-creation, of goosy ghost-hunting and a hazardous preoccupation with chance, though in many cases of undoubted scientific interest and value, can play no serious part in making the proletariat conscious of its social and revolutionary responsibilities.[[287]](#footnote-287)

While this stereotypical interpretation ties in with the ‘Ludic ethos’ Cyril Connolly discerned in late Surrealist writing in a review of David Gascoyne’s *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, Lloyd negates the potential resistances of the movement, ‘the pugnacious side of the movement’, in Connolly’s words, the genuine power of subversion and shock inherent in the presentation of the unreality of everyday reality.[[288]](#footnote-288) Deprecation of surrealism from the agencies of the international Left seems to hinge upon the valency of materialist dialectics as a frame for aesthetic production. Of course, for all parties, avowedly Socialist or Surrealist, the opposition framework always lacks necessary dialectical rigour. David Gascoyne, for instance, reads the Surrealist lineage as a rebuttal of Aragon’s in his *Short Survey of Surrealism*, in that he theorises it in terms of dialectical negation: ‘Dada: negation. Surrealism: negation of negation; a new affirmation, that is’. The dialectical step into realism that Aragon makes above is stalled in Gascoyne’s dialectic. He suggests that a politicised aesthetic need not bear the hallmarks of its political determination. Specifically referring to the Aragon ‘affair’, Gascoyne poses the political question thus: ‘Is a militant Communist poet justified in writing any but propaganda poems or poems directly bearing on the working-class struggle? Yes, say the Surrealists; and No, say Aragon [...] and a few others’ (87). Expanding the material base of art would in fact contribute more fully to ‘the practical facts of the political struggle’ in their unearthing of ‘the foundations of a new, universal culture’. So Gascoyne further points to the political expediency of this movement as a new foundation of modern subjectivity, quoting from the first number of Breton’s *The Surrealist Revolution* of 1924: ‘A new declaration of the rights of man must be made’ (45). Proposed constitutional reform, which grounds Surrealism’s challenge to orthodoxy as a practical commitment to socio-political change, coming about through the negative sublation into positivity of the European avant-garde, was similarly being diagnosed as the movement’s abiding political application in Herbert Read’s introduction to the movement. His edited volume *Surrealism* also places Breton’s achievements in the context of liberatory post-war reconstruction of radical artistic ideology:

For good or for evil the instinctive components of our being are irreducible and irreplaceable, and we ignore them or repress them at our peril. Not merely the neuroses of individuals result from such repression, but there is more and more reason to believe that the mass hysteria manifested, for example, in such a nation as Germany, is the collective aspect of general repressions.[[289]](#footnote-289)

Read’s argument against idealism in modern thought, an intellectual branching back into the fray of debate in the *Left Review* and its reviewers’ accusations of surrealism’s potentially fascist Romantic idealisms, not only serves to emplot British surrealism’s relation to its European manifestation, but also historicises the movement as part of a continuum of resistance to state propaganda in the inter-war period. Surrealism thus has a decisive role to play in its curious blend of Freudo-Marxism, that of overcoming ‘adult codes of morality’ which lead directly to the ideology of war. In a Surrealist figure, Read imagines the organs of the British state as ‘Bull-necked demagogues [who] inject a poisonous propaganda into our minds and then the storm of steel breaks above us; our bodies become so much manure for an acid soil’ (35). In praising the negativity of the Surrealist enterprise as a force that could realise the fascisms inherent in state power, Read prefigures the opening up of a use value for public poetry and social observation envisaged by practitioners such as Charles Madge. However, even this element of avant-garde praxis would be seen to have a paradoxical function in that data obtained by such democratic means could be put to both peaceful and violent ends – Mass Observation, for instance, would appeal to both ‘the pacifist [...] and the war office,’[[290]](#footnote-290) as its findings are useful to both commercial, military or governmental instrumentalisation and social, collective or revolutionary epistemologies.

The subjection of Surrealism to a consideration of its practical value in its British reception unites its commentators, from the argument for Romantic inheritance in Herbert Read and Hugh Sykes Davies, to the argument for continental borrowing in Gascoyne, and to the historicising work done by Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, which folds back on a poetic tradition that also encompasses the Romantics while establishing an artistic vision that could document the real.

British surrealists, then, arrive at the movement as it enters a new phase in its doctrinal incarnation, formed in the context of a debate about the value and the appropriate form of realism in the arts of the avant-garde. Yet where Rob Jackaman has schematised the genealogy of Surrealism as having a dyadic relationship to Social Realism – the British Surrealists of the 30s and the Social Realist Group are labelled as thesis and antithesis respectively on his flow-chart[[291]](#footnote-291) – the following argument suggests that this dialectic may be multiple, that, in fact, British Surrealism grafts genetic data from Socialist Realism in its aesthetic and political construction. As depicted in the writing of Madge, alongside Humphrey Jennings and David Gascoyne, the material appearance of reality, most often depicted in terms of nature or the mass culture of urban centres, has to be excavated from mythic and allusive features in the work. Though attempts to realise, as in, to make real, the possibility of a representational form that could attain such an access are clearly problematic in the context of poetic production, the poets of the British Surrealism movement can be seen to develop a dialectical form of surrealism that combines a politicised bearing witness on one hand, and a Romantic-Symbolist mode of imagistic presentation on the other. In this sense, the British development of surrealism can be seen to gain momentum as it diverges from doctrinaire adherence into a dialectic of the socially real, and which emanates out of work that counter-balances historical continuity and historical ruin. Such a process appears to be embedded in Madge’s long poem ‘The Hours of the Planets’ (1934), which will be consulted in depth throughout this chapter, as much as the later experimental ‘collective poem’, ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ (1937).

Summarising Madge’s ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ as ‘extremely trite,’[[292]](#footnote-292) Valentine Cunningham takes issue with the privilege of the participants in Madge’s project of attempting to unite the ideology of Mass-Observation and poetic practice, a synthesis which he had indicated as a desirable trajectory in his earlier article ‘Poetic Description and Mass Observation’. Madge’s class background is perceived to multiply with the canonical biases of his academic cohort to equal staleness, archaism and bourgeois risk aversion. For Cunningham, this poem exemplifies an endemic failure of attempts to represent the masses with any kind of ‘authenticity’ in late modernism: it is ‘characteristic of the defeat of similar literary aspirations in the period. The Mass-Observation poem had about as much of the masses in it as Group Theatre or, for that matter, a country house charade did’ (340). But broad appeal, and faithfulness to a largely unknown object (the ‘masses’), were not necessarily the ultimate ends of Madge’s experiments in collectively-voiced art. Nor is the class or institutional background of its participants an absolute barrier to appreciating the audacity of the experiment. Such identifying features are in fact acknowledged by Madge in his prefatory remarks to ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ as being constitutive of the structure of the process: ‘as soon as the Observers begin to *describe* [social activity], each one uses a style and each style incorporates a certain amount of fantasy – not necessarily individual or literary fantasy, because he is instructed to keep these out, but social fantasy representative of his class environment.’[[293]](#footnote-293) No wonder, then, that the ‘dominant image’ invoked in the poem is one of the privileged point of view and preoccupations of the Oxbridge intelligentsia.

Contrary to Cunningham’s brief analysis, the form of ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ is more complex than the dismissive summary, ‘iambic pentameters, the traditional staple of English verse’ (340), provided, gesturing as it does towards three stanzas of Italian sestets. The three sestets, rhymed or half-rhymed into some regularity, enclose lines that strain at pentameter, but frequently overspill or become deflated by conflicting accents. Irregularity makes the lines ‘Thunder, announcing war’s climacteric’ (l. 12) and ‘And on our heads the crimes of our buried fathers [...]’ (l. 17) stand out, the former’s trochaic turn reversing order in a proclamation of imminent conflict, the latter’s turn to trochaic ‘buried fathers’ with its allegation of blame for such conflict on a previous generation’s historically resounding war-mongering. A pacifist voice, bourgeois or not, then, speaks strongly in these lines, inflected by an awareness of a Freudian generational process. The ‘predominant image’ seems to be of ruin and war, rather than simply of literary *zeitgeist* (see Cunningham, 339), and thus appears characteristic of Madge’s summary of the poetic content:

It has the sense of decay and imminent doom which characterises contemporary Oxford. It expresses a feeling of [...] responsibility being neglected now and in the past. This reflection of the immediate scene is what is looked for in a collective poem. (quoted in Cunningham, 339)

A reading of the poem that interprets the line ‘Christ’s corn is mildewed and the wine gives out’ (l. 15) as ‘Christ Church meadow and undergraduate distress over too little wine’ (340) wilfully misreads the allusive patina of the poem, which hints more towards failure of rebellion and resilience in the face of geopolitical crisis, particularly in the rise of fascism, than such local frustrations. ‘Christ’s corn’ places us in biblical territory, specifically in reference to Matthew 12:1 in which Christ breaks the Sabbath with his disciples. But whereas the biblical corn is ripe for harvesting and thus fodder for hungry itinerants, in the collective poem the natural world has prevented such a symbolic opportunity, and simultaneously invokes Christ’s *scorn*. Further, the wine dwindling, and its combination in the order of symbolic produce, brings us back to the Psalms, in which God’s plenty is offered as a substitute for natural plenty (Psalms 72); grace, signified by abundance of corn, wine and oil, has been lost, as has the pregnant moment of revolutionary salvation in the historical present.

Not only the breakdown of religious symbolic systems, but failures of other types abound here; of fathers who have allowed their children to be ‘slain’ (l. 4), of the materiality of clothing (l. 7) and timekeeping (ll. 9-10), and of the natural world, whose ‘hill has its death like us’ (l. 13). The ‘iron saints’ (l. 1), whom we are encouraged in the heroic opening word to ‘Believe’, and who are bedecked in the symbolically laden colour *red*, are yet ‘Expostulating with the winds’ (l. 7). Worn out workers’ boots – ‘tongues of torn boots flapping on the cobbles’ (l. 7) – come to stand in as symbols of saintly demise – ‘Their epitaphs’ (l. 8) – tapping out a *time* that will not be the workers’, despite their agency in bringing about new epochal possibilities. Whether of the hunger marchers, who passed through Cambridge in 1934 and 1936,[[294]](#footnote-294) and who provide some of the socio-historical context to Madge’s work explored below, or of a more universal degraded industrial proletariat, the voices of the urban poor are depicted with some prominence in the symbolic and imagistic hierarchies of the collective poem, but are also deracinated, unavailable. An abiding sense prevails in these breakdowns – first of all, that the promised workers’ revolution persistently falters and fails, as it has done throughout British history, and, second, that sedimentations of social and class identity create blockages in free communication within the polity.

This reading finds some unity amidst a chaos of images that strain at disunity and fragmentation, and certainly elides the class bias of the participant ‘observer’ poets who co-authored the work. Unfortunately, the poem indeed returns to a vision of individual fantasy, against the intentions of Madge, in the simple fact of its list-like division of images by line. This enforces the amateurish, dilettantish tone that Cunningham perceives, one that Madge seems to be aware of in his summary that the group-writing process, with its anticipated editorial hive-mind, was ‘insufficiently radical.’[[295]](#footnote-295) The poets also contrive to break the silence of socio-cultural and historical disunity and debasement, which coalesces around the powerful image of the workers’ boots, by having the ‘rebels’ gain a voice (‘shout’) in the final line. But the strongest voice emerging from such a voice-filled poem (an ironically apposite one at that) is that of Madge. Foregrounded in my reading of ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ above are the central tenets of his poetic preoccupations and techniques. Returning to mythical structures of collective existence, the temporality of change and possibility of revolution, the ruinous effects of war and attempts at cultural and social revival through collective understandings, ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ could almost have been written by Madge himself. Even formally, too, the poem is strikingly bound to his practice, bearing as it does the stamp of an inflection of the Italian sestet, which had been incorporated into the English tradition by Spenser, whose work Madge studied at Cambridge. Kathleen Raine, for instance, writes ‘Spenser was the poet he most loved; in appearance he somewhat resembled him’.[[296]](#footnote-296) Resemblances aside, this understanding productively introduces us to the concerns of Madge’s poetry: the ‘collective account’, in terms of the referentiality of the poetry and the political motivations and concerns of the work, defines his poetic practice.

It is worth dwelling on the elements of the ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ germane to Madge’s *oeuvre*, as they provide a way in to thinking about his connection to poetic tradition, as collective cultural archive, as well as his work’s understanding of and figuration of history as a process of class struggle. As explored above, the natural world featured in the poem has significance as both a material referent and a symbolic deployment. The ‘mildewed’ crop of ‘corn’ carries a deep symbolic lode, which also points to allusive material orienting the work towards a dialogue with revolutionary romanticism. Blighted corn features in historical texts as a result of divine punishment or as a symbol of privation, not least in Blake’s prophetic works.[[297]](#footnote-297) This trope contains what could be seen as a critical articulation of nature’s relation to humanity. The natural world has the capacity to nurture and deprive, and natural disaster or misfortune figures in both Blake and the British surrealists as a correlate to exploitation and social disintegration, combining as key features of their ‘romantic anti-capitalism’, to purloin a phrase Michael Löwy applied to Georg Lucáks.[[298]](#footnote-298) Infection of corn by the ergot fungus, which blighted corn after rain or other damp conditions, and if ingested causes side-effects such as gangrene, convulsions and other neurological symptoms, was a serious concern for the hungry proletariat who relied on rye bread for sustenance. Ergotism features as a referent in Blake’s early sketches of ‘The Good Farmer’ and throughout *The* *Four Zoas*[[299]](#footnote-299) as a ‘bread of torment and delusion’ (185). Lamenting the state of the nation and the exploitation of the rural poor, now become the urban proletariat of the second industrial revolution, seeds a common theme. Madge’s mystical vision of a Blakean London in ‘The Hours of the Planets’ provides an early example of this allusive framework, in which the natural world – in which a mobile global population figures in a poetic schema that seems at first to be dominated by an astrological sequence of planetary movement – from cosmic to microscopic dimensions, reflects a material human situation of dispossession, population movement and utopian communality. Further, as if to clarify the paradoxical features of the collective in this vision, the poem speaks of ‘silent groups [...] scattered in the fields’, who ‘wave’ as to a camera eye that watches their form through history:

[...] they falter, sisters and daughters

On the wave their motion pauses, falls, is free

The political strain of Madge’s vision is seen as a physical wave and a metaphorical wave of historical connectedness, further emphasised by the internal rhyme linking physical people and a historical pause, which divides into the broken rhyme in its punctuated motion, leading to a fall into a freedom that is clearly an articulation of loss rather than of exuberance. The rural location of this collective is important in speaking of the physical location of the peasant class and their dispossession here. ‘They’ become a hungry multitude, picking up again on the trope of hunger as a politicised element of class struggle throughout history, from the links between food production and political suffrage in the Peasant’s Revolt, to the protests against the Corn Laws and the literal hunger at stake, to the hunger marches in the 1930s. The ‘cry’ that sounds in ‘Hours’ narrates this as a quotation: ‘Two wanderers that were in a month / Heard a cry, Oh mother I shall die’. The quotation is from Mahler’s libretto to *Das Irdische Leben*, which in turn took inspiration from folk sources marking historical moments of deprivation. A simple declarative voice speaks of wider social and political neglect and dejection here, cutting through the complex modernist textual patterning as a material voice of the ‘folk’. As chapter four explored in connection to Hugh MacDiarmid’s work concerning the General Strike, it is again important to note the integration of non-elite cultural material into the work of modernists of politically radical persuasions. Allusion can both obscure and refine – in Madge it does both, though the abiding interest in allusion seems to be in forcing the poem into contact with material significations. The social historical reality at issue in the allusion to Mahler, for instance, brings the reader into Madge’s present and the importance ascribed in both the poem and the poet’s life to the Hunger Marches of the 1930s. As Hubble notes, the poet had been politicised by contact with the hunger marchers of the NUWM, contact with whom persuaded him to join the CPGB in 1932.[[300]](#footnote-300) In the semi-autobiographical ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’ of 1933 the poem moves through the development of a reactionary activist persona, advancing from angst, to informed dissent, to cultural allegiance – after reading Auden ‘all the world’s stationary things / In silence moved to take up new positions’[[301]](#footnote-301) – to political commitment: ‘And then the hunger march, one wet night, / Brought me out of doors [...] to action came’ (l. 37-8). With them they bring a ‘new planet come to anchor’ (l. 73), one with the global modernity referenced in ‘Hours’ but also one ripe with communistic and democratic future potential. It anchors, or maps, on to the England in turns lovingly and critically depicted in the penultimate stanza of ‘Letter’, a place of traditions that await radicalisation of some sort or another – the poet has ‘seen the prints of those feet’ (l. 62), the Blakean simulacra striding out into glorious revolution, and so the poet and his poems go ‘haunted’ (l. 65) with the traces of an alternative cultural heritage. In many ways, Madge’s awareness of the *puissance* in both tradition and modernity is a bold and radical statement, considering the powerful trend of anti-Modernism in the labour movement of the time, which elevated the status of Folkism and mainstream Romanticism as genres suitable for the documentary arts movement.[[302]](#footnote-302)

The allusive strain – pervasive in Madge’s work – provides a solution of sorts to the paradox read into at least one understanding of British Surrealism. While Herbert Read on the one hand maintains that Surrealism ‘has no respect for any academic tradition, least of all for the classical-capitalist tradition of the last four hundred years’, he simultaneously avers on the other that Surrealism could be a ‘filter through which received cultural forms might be re-energised, and their faded radicality revamped.’[[303]](#footnote-303) The reading of Madge advanced above, however, sees no paradox in the historical linkages apparent in the work. Rather than repeating the idealisms of British Romanticism, Madge takes on its radical material to create a patchwork of reference where literary-historical reference contains a strong political message. Rather than merely repeating tradition in the name of historical continuity, this work instead forges links that emphasise the dissonance of literary material and the political power it interrogates.

The currency of the ‘dark Romantics’ to British surrealist writers is evidenced in comparable work by George Barker, whose poem ‘Vision of England ’38’, is anticipated by Madge’s ‘Hours’. Among other voices in Barker’s ‘Vision’, Blake’s is ventriloquised in the form of a lamb, lamenting England’s ‘fall’ to ‘the foot of Christ’. Further, uncanny echoes of Madge’s Thames-side location in ‘Hours’ resound in ‘How can your word or sword sleep / While the Thames is the sweat of the people.’[[304]](#footnote-304) The equivalence of the Thames and ‘the people’, specifically their ‘sweat’, metaphorises the exploitative nature of work as a subliminal flow that passes through London. Similarly, for Madge, the Thames has a further symbolic role in ‘representing their,’ by which we might infer the people’s, ‘unconsciousness’ (Hours, l. 78) – the descriptor evoking both a psychoanalytic inflection in a familiar trope for the surging, flowing unconscious mind, and a lack of wakefulness in a tide-bound multitude. Barker and Madge utilise the Romantic form of the dream vision, though in divergent ways – while Barker takes from the Romantics a formal inspiration, in which lambs could represent Blake, for instance, Madge incorporates an associative dreamwork into an organising principle of his poetry. While his dream vision can be seen as an aesthetic manipulation of literary history, a kind of formal and thematic play, the detail of this play suggests its political orientation is both committed to concrete historical reality and utopian moments of insight.

The extent to which this is put to political ends can perhaps be gauged by the specificity of the symbolic schema. In this way, Madge seems to provide an answer for one of the abiding questions frequently put to surrealists, here raised by Adrian Caesar: ‘How can an aesthetic bent upon transcending material reality express a Marxist materialist vision, or embody a materialist critique of capitalism? [...] Surrealism represents an extreme of individualism which clearly runs counter to the aims and aspirations of Marxism.’[[305]](#footnote-305) Madge’s work, in contrast, ironises the transcendental movement of aleatory surrealist methodologies. In ‘Hours’, for instance, the mystical and mystificatory whole of the poem yields to an excavation of its referential parts, which often evoke ways of referring to masses and to the global economic and social situation through allegorical writing. British surrealism, particularly as expounded by Madge, obsessively returns to visions of collective life. For example, the movement of people in ‘The Hours of the Planets’ speaks of nomadism as economic necessity: ‘Life, more persistent than thought, continues to flow / Out of Europe grown gaunt and old / Multiple genera untabulated’ (l. 79-81). The pull of the capital city, evoked in the assonant and alliterative pull of the prosody here, reflects the transformative, and deforming, influence of finance capital, its age-old presence interlinked with cycles of urban growth and decline. Where Barker sought a divine intervention to contest the metaphoric elision of Thames and workforce, Madge depicts a population ebbing and flowing according to the trends of capital. If the Thames is the sweat or the unconsciousness of the people, its tributaries are found in a ‘tiger hinterland’ (l. 23), a wild riverside location in which affective life is particularly degraded, being objectified in the form of ‘living creatures’ who ‘know not what they feel’ and who ‘equal all in inequality’ (l. 13, 19, 5). The polity is mapped onto a geographical zone that is both ‘London and unLondon’ (l. 2), which blends, as does the poem, the city and its unrepresented other, and so rationality and irrationalism, abstract and concrete, historical and mythological. The flow of people, figured as prehistorical social movement, parallels the capital and social flight towards Northern centres of industry and the capital city, and away from collapsing global markets, in the 1930s. By 1933, three million people in Britain were jobless and the engines of state corporatism were seeking increasingly interventionist methods of industrial development.[[306]](#footnote-306) Nationalisation and state intervention standardised infrastructure, such as in creating marketing boards for agriculture, introducing tariffs in heavy industries such as steel, and the establishment of the London Passenger Board in 1933, which took authority over London’s transport systems. As a result of corporate state interventions, as well as the increased impact of advertising and the cheap manufacture of consumer goods, the early 1930s also witnessed the emergence of working-class mass consumption. The appearance of ‘my kind pattering about / The shafts [...]/ And rolling silent out in silent daylight / Innumerous pellicules’ (ll. 40-43) (re-)imagines the commuting mass as part of the poem’s genus or ‘genera’. When they ‘Passed the X [...] / [...] slept along / Crossed by the Pass of two Towers / And so ad infinitum to the stars’ (ll. 44-47), the mass is both a literal movement of people in the capital, passing King’s Cross and London’s Tower, and a spectral, unconscious horde inhabiting the astrological and utopian schema of the poem, the ‘X’ denoting religious crosses and sacrifice, finally travelling into a sublime firmament. Yet Madge’s paratextual ‘stage directions’ or marginal comments accompanying the poem refer to ‘Glimpses of reality’ at this point, at which ‘The towers came nearer over the mist’ (l. 39). And so a materialist vision emerges out of verbiage and misdirection, as if the poem demands its own critical deconstruction. Its surface is a ‘mist’ of signs and symbols – historical, commercial, and poetic – out of which a double-vision can unearth ‘reality’.

The ‘MAN MANIFORM’ section of ‘Hours’ bears out this notion of duality of vision and its resolution in literary materialism. Commuting and migrating hordes – rising into consciousness in the melting pot of the city – provide key images of an at-once literary-mythical and a material reality, as they begin ‘turning into men, extraordinary’; ‘in images they seem to cross a bridge [...] Thames representing their unconsciousness’. As the Thames represents industry and continuity, it also seems to represent a colonised consciousness that feeds organically on its material context:: ‘The growing leaves are wet with primal tears / In middlesex [sic] the semi-animal kingdom’. Out of undocumented lands is coming a new people; in a literal sense, the new proletariat is one formed out of disaggregation by economic need: ‘In the early 1930s, agrarian capital, in full flight from the countryside, sought new outlets for investment in the towns. Subsistence peasants who need credit for survival now set off for the towns as wage hunters and gatherers.’[[307]](#footnote-307) Primitivism attends the Darwinian nature of such movements of population. Threats of incursion by figures of modernity registers from a political to the poetic level; Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, worried that ‘our population is too great for our trade’[[308]](#footnote-308) – unemployment, economic migrancy and population expansion are linked as threats to social order. A nomadic people arise out of previously settled subsistence peasantry and a squeezed bourgeoisie. The sense of threat, excitement and futurity attending the coming ‘genera’ of Europe, presented ironically in Madge’s poem as primitive hordes, links directly to the contemporaneous studies being undertaken by Malinowski and Harrison, for instance in their anthropological studies of Trobriand Islanders and the society of the New Hebrides. This connection has been damningly made by Rod Mengham in a slightly different context, reading Madge’s ‘Bourgeois News’ thus: ‘a report on the British, who have been made the object of the kind of scrutiny which an anthropologist would bring to bear on the so-called primitive rituals of an exotic tribal culture.’[[309]](#footnote-309) Madge’s diction emphasizes the scientific-taxonomic approach to observing the masses that parallels that of Malinowski and Harrison – the ‘genera untabulated’ await classification as subjects of unknown working-class otherness. While this scientistic reification seems at first to be the point, Madge simultaneously extends a referential web over his deployment of the adjective ‘maniform’ and the pronoun ‘they’, alongside the strange insubstantiality of such masses, which seem to be one with Coleridge’s vision of ‘Those bright [m]aniform [o]cular Spectra, which people a new world of Space when my nervous system is feverous.’[[310]](#footnote-310) Yet the Spectra of Madge’s vision – ‘Moon-sprung, sun-hatched’ – come from ‘Real houses’, are ‘real inhabitants’. They, and their ‘semi-animal kingdom’ form a ‘reich of riches’, which is apostrophized as follows: ‘O reich of riches, urbs of all superb / When will you break your banks? […].’ Madge thus refers to economic collapse, as well as the breaking of suburban peace, by way of a pun that extends the ‘hinterland’ image as potential to overflow and flood. The natural world, ironically sublime, cannot provide a designated declivity with the urban; they are both unstable, reflecting the instabilities in the culture that fills it. The Thames-side figurative world of the poem is inflected by references to colonial spaces, such as the ‘tiger hinterland’, and to similarly defamiliarising spatial codings, such as the Third Reich reference embedded in ‘reich of riches’. In this sense the potentially demeaning ‘scrutiny’ seemingly exercised by Madge has a dual function in that, fed through literary allusion, the material of the text reflects the shifting materiality of the object world it describes. The affects produced in subjects of a late colonial world that at once exploits and observes its subjects are chased through an ironic literary reworking of a now secular subjecthood: ‘They know not what they feel’ (l. 19). Though the poem suggests the subject of duality from the start – the sun ‘Sees twice, sees London and unLondon’ (l. 2) – it is really in this zone of multiplicity and linguistic and literary plurality that Madge locates his most significant poetic insights. In this sense, ‘the real’ in Madge’s poetry can only be discerned in amongst literary and material fragments, in which the reality of contemporary subjecthood resides, entwined. In many ways this is a kind of ‘profanation’ of modernism to parallel Humphrey Jennings’ notion of the ‘profanation of Art’ undergone in the integration of the machinic and the aesthetic in post-Industrial Revolution arts movements. Rather than seeing ‘the real’ as a pole of opposition, ‘the real’ is rather an event horizon upon which these experiments are focussed.

Madge strains to unite the re-invigoration of literary history with the recognition of embedded socially revolutionary power and disruptive potential in these ‘unconscious’ masses. One of the many metaphors depicting the urban in the poem provides a startling moment of seeming sublimity: ‘The whole of London was a sea of lilies.’ Typical of Madge’s disruptive, discontinuous style, the metaphor at once holds out a notion of wholeness or totality, yet the metaphoric sea breaks down in atomisation through the symbol of lilies, which pulls the image into metonym. A tentative notion of rebirth is proposed through this figure – the lily flower is symbolic of birth, emblem of the queen of the Greek gods, Hera. Further, the sea lily belongs to the phylum of echinoderms, crinoidea, which take their name from a conjunction of *krinon*, lily; and *eidos*, form. That social *eidos* becomes an abiding interest in Madge’s later sociological work is perhaps more than a coincidence in this connection. From his early work with the Mass Observation group onwards, Madge’s ‘focus on finding a ‘scientific classification’ for ‘social incidents’ clearly displays a determination to bring Batesonian anthropology home’ (Hubble, 61). Batesonian methods (so named after Gregory Bateson, whose work utilised experimental conceptual categories to engage with the observation of social reality), and particularly the concept of *eidos*, were central to Mass Observation because they were said to reveal the affective proclivities of a culture. In Madge’s interpretation, for Bateson *eidos* is ‘a standardisation of the cognitive aspects of the personality of the individuals’ of a culture, whereas he regards *ethos* as ‘the culturally standardised system of organisation of the instincts and emotions of individuals.[[311]](#footnote-311) The focus on *eidos*, then, aims at unveiling the relationship of the ‘individual in the world’, in Bateson’s words (61).

That such a focus is literalised in Madge’s work as a manipulation of literary technique – moving from metaphor to metonym in the figure explored above; prioritising allusion as ironic critical content rather than as the continuation of tradition, and so forth – lends further weight to the argument that suggests his engagement with literary history is one with his vision of modernity. Both are considered as being in need of enchantment. In ‘Hours’, Madge returns again and again to the representation of nature by way of contrasting mystical and material poles. A kind of celestial telescoping underpins the poem’s shuttling between polarities – ‘A careless phantom rapture’ heads ‘deepest in the earth’ and the ‘the dream has begun’. Explorations of materiality tend to be both an attempt to make of the poetic a real substance, but also a form of mining that unearths the immaterial, the conceptual, the referential. In ‘Solar Creation’, a poem from the same collection (*The Disappearing Castle*) as ‘Hours’, Madge follows similar lines: this sonnet ends with the couplet, ‘And over all, like death, or sloping hill, / Is nature, which is larger and more still’ (23). Nature traverses and conceptually obliterates the ‘crowded’ world of the ‘ragged’ that inhabit it. Likewise, in ‘Delusions II’, the bourgeoisie is figured as being essentially hubristic in its dialectic of progress: ‘Till, one fine day, still hoping against hope / In spite of all this once to be exempt / From nature’s warrant and the hangman’s rope, / The bourgeois perishes in his attempt’ (48). Politically and philosophically, this owes as much to Marx as it does to the Rousseau of the Discourse on the origin of inequality and *The Social Contract*, in which the state of nature is one of equality of suffering as well as communality, preceding the social state, in which law and ‘morality’ prevail.

The present, for Madge, is stasis and ruin; the historical is likewise denuded in that it both erases potential and reaffirms time’s sway: ‘Ever they change, spires steamers ears of corn, / Ages of gloomy iron, ages of stone, and ages that return anew’. Age morphs from its local to its transhistorical meaning, revealing historical time as a kind of death, a notion finally encapsulated in Madge’s phrase, ‘the lost identity of change’. While physical forces of time and space clearly dominate potential in these early poems, the lyrical subject is also implicated as an impotent figure. In ‘In Sua Voluntade’, the poet speaks thus: ‘I am broken. The air is full of holes // I cannot have the round world in my hands. I cannot join with the ascending light. / ... England is fallen. Home is gone. Time stands’ (from ‘In Sua Voluntade’, 17). Time ‘has not come yet’ (‘Delusions III’, 50). For some, then, the enchantment of the world cannot be complete. Historical progress obliterates change in the lyrical subject and the possibility of revolution for the people – everything changes, yet certain factors remain, including the decay necessitated by time.

While the ruin envisioned in many of Madge’s poems has such temporal and historical contexts as explored above, it simultaneously relates depictions of (late) modernity to the war economy in the aftermath of the First World War. Ominous statements such as in ‘Life’s flight is deathly peace’ (‘In Sua Voluntade’) speak of a condition of liminality figured in the paradox of this line – war is peace, progress is death. Life is both presented as absence as well as an absenting presence. This presence, that of the object world, is often imaged as a something hovering or flying, or the something yet to come – ‘An aeroplane sinks down above the iron stacks’ (‘The Loves of the Lions’, 24), ‘The bird of war, thunderless on leaden roof.’ It also marks a concern with economic problems such as capital flight, as a result of capital movements as investors retrenched in the financial contraction of markets in the early 1930s, as well as the portent of further war. In this sense, the war and the war economy are linked. ‘Flight of the Margarine’ is not such a whimsical surrealist romp if put in this context. As an object of the productive economy, it is related to a burgeoning awareness of the surplus value coalesced in a product (relating this reading to Madge’s interpretation of Lenin’s theory of commodity production[[312]](#footnote-312)). This reveals the planetary consciousness as part strategy of a planetary or internationalist tendency in Madge’s thought, but also as a bathetic ruse to counterpoint the references to suburban stupor (‘in Kennington, / Where the kitchen range showed one red spark’). Again, we are presented with a part mythic and and part allegorical structure that ironises social reality, here relating to urban decay: ‘ “I, margarine, where is it that I am / Or was? Am I in London still, or hell?”’ (111-114). This further raises the feature of a modernist sneer – how do we take these images of mass culture and the multitude it subtends? It is a metonym for mass consumerism, and a concrete focus point of the unacknowledged unity of the world’s workers: ‘Bare margarine, leninist margarine, / The food of thousands, nurturer of man, / Stalinist margarine, from Russia to Spain / The pound of margarine, again and again / On kitchen tables, son of all desires’ but yet ‘A mockery for those who understand’. This is a rarefied product sold to reified humanity, a product divested of ‘life’ (‘bare margarine’, ‘forfeiture of life’) but invested with the labour of an unknown wage labourer.

The proletariat haunts Madge’s poetry – while for Sam Cooper British Surrealism (particularly as it segues into Situationism) manifests itself as a spectral shadow of continental Surrealism, that is, it is defined by its *hauntology*, we might instead look for the spectre of the working masses as the repressed referent in poetry by a broad selection of British Surrealist writers. The utopian Romantic vision of rural life and the utopian vision of equanimious working class communities are undermined by visions of looming features of modernity such as mass spectacle, the media, commercialisation of culture and manipulations of consumer desire. The ominous clouds that persistently obscure the utopias otherwise glimpsed in Madge’s creative work speak of the importance of realism in his version of surrealism. In deconstructing such visions, Madge ironises the process of poeticising reality. The conditionality of utopian thinking had been addressed in the early poem, ‘On One Condition’, in which an unspoken glory, perhaps of a revolutionary kind, vacillates on the point of arrival: ‘voices that say / Shall come, it shall come, for it shall come / A door half open to surprise’ (15). Each stanza opens with the word ‘If’, concluding with the single line ‘If it had been’, implying that a linguistic or poetic logic depends for its veracity on a prior reality. Though reality is undone by poetic logic, it is reinstated by its situatedness in a continuum of history. Yet that reality is also constituted by myth, for instance the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. Thus we can discern more clearly why Madge also writes against the flow of logic, as in the ‘MAN MANIFORM’ section of ‘Hours’, where the imagery starts out with real houses and ends with the presence of people from genetic prehistory, the ‘primitive’. And so in counterpoint the vision of reality is undone by a deeper sense of evolutionary identity, or more generally the appearance of dialectical opposition. Conscious and unconscious are permeable – as with the metaphor of the door in ‘On One Condition’, the facility of vision is mediated, by biology, history, consciousness and the vestiges of mystery, the animistic forces that Jennings believed had been swept asunder by Industrialism. The continuum of this logic is exemplified in the opening lines of ‘Saeclum’: ‘Sad future, weighed with seas / Upon the worldwide shore’ (‘Saeclum’, 33). So while mythopoeic structures will inhere in world-historical reality, that same logic works simultaneously to real-ise myth.

This seems to describe the super-real propensities of the British Surrealists, as, for Herbert Read, the above material falls into one of his ideal categories of art:

Art is more than description or ‘reportage’; it is an act of renewal. It renews vision, it renews language; but most essentially it renews life itself by enlarging sensibility, by making men more conscious of the terror and the beauty, the *wonder* of the possible forms of being.[[313]](#footnote-313)

To some extent, the thrust of Read’s interpretation of Surrealism is mystificatory, a Romanticism *tout court*, in that he conceives of an art that is aimed at disclosing ‘the secrets of the self’ (27), and to a degree proportionate to the similarity between this and Breton’s first manifesto, the vision is individualist and diagnostic. Yet, as with Breton’s early philosophy, a line runs through individualism to the collective and the collective unconscious. Following the reading of Madge’s ‘Hours’ above, in which feudal strife figures heavily, specifically in images of children of a nation starving and voicing their concerns, through allusions that force the reader back into radical history, we can see how central Read’s notion of renewed vision through a super-real kind of bearing of witness is to the British incarnation. Madge’s ‘On One Condition’ also concerns the social and historical *condition* of a people – with its conditional sense developed through stanzas opening with ‘If’. The possibilities entertained are aimed not only at renewal but also at specific notions of political fraternity: ‘Out of a touch make the worlds kin’ (‘On One Condition’, l. 12). The global utopian vision of community and solidarity here is emphasised in the play on ‘worlds kin’, which elides fraternity and bodily conjunction in a global ‘skin’, and simultaneously suggests the tenuous fragility of that bond. Yet this haptic utopian vision is brought to pathos in the final line, ‘If it had been’ (l. 18). Madge implies first a criticism of historical failure, in that hegemonic forces have repeatedly foiled attempts to realise utopia, and, second, a critique of the contingency of class sympathy. The ironic admixture of pastoralism and modernist collage in Madge’s vision presages the two poles of class identification in the early ontology of Mass Observation. In one consideration, the movement upholds a ‘covert pastoralism’[[314]](#footnote-314) resulting from the biases of the authors of the work. From the perspective of white, upper-middle class intellectuals, the working class come to be considered as an alternative ‘tribe’, approached through the anti-populist lens of culture critique and an elitist anthropology. On the other hand, in the consideration advanced by contemporaneous poet-observers such as Madge and Jennings, as well as contemporary critics such as Walker, Sheringham and Highmore, the project of observation is conceived as a ‘radically democratic project.’[[315]](#footnote-315) In fact, the tendencies of Madge’s poetry can be encapsulated in this positive consideration of Mass Observation. As Roberts writes, Jennings sought out in M.O. a way of synthesising Surrealism with a more scientific understanding of social features of the time, to create ‘something other than romanticised escapism, and of documentary something other than realist usefulness’ (98). As has been explored throughout this chapter, while this speaks of the inherent dialecticism of M. O., it also helps define Madge’s poetry itself. For Nowell-Smith, Jennings conceived of M.O. as ‘an opportunity of democratising the discoveries of Surrealism and of representing popular subjectivity dialectically and in unromanticised form.’[[316]](#footnote-316) Breton would have been the first to argue that Surrealism did not require any ‘democratising’, despite his borderline Stalinism, yet Nowell-Smith’s formulation seems to neatly categorise the innovations that Madge had wrought on the poetic enterprise in the years before M.O. was engaged as a feasible project.

Yet the British Surrealists maintained a potentially dangerous over-confidence in the avowed proletarianisation of the movement. To what extent did they bridge the divide between the world of high art and intellect, and the workers of the world? For Read, the Surrealists ‘have the certainty of speaking in the name of all men. They are masters of their own conscience’ (183). The *will* to engage with social reality was certainly present, yet in the assurance of Read’s statement we can hear the authoritarian tone of the classical modernist, and the peremptory judgement of the self-mythologiser. The position here, as Rod Mengham has perceived, is one of critical observation – a masterly vision, or scopic dominance – rather than either the pure objectivity of the scientist or the atypical empathy of the modernist among the masses that the surrealists could easily be read as representing. Yet the shift of emphasis towards the observed rather than the poet-observer, though over-laden with a guiding heuristic of investigation, transposes the immersion of subject and object discerned by Hugh Sykes Davies in Romanticism and continuing through into the materialism of Surrealism into the realm of the public, making an art out of mining the lineaments of collective mythology and mass consciousness. Davies reads into Coleridge a progressive dialectical tendency that presupposes the basis of identity as being a self-knowing hinging upon awareness of subjectivation, through self-consciousness. Epistemological and ontological enquiries, then, stem from a desire to unite the antitheses of subject and object into a synthesis of self-knowledge. Imagination is the conduit of such knowledge, having a unique power, according to both the Romantics and the Surrealists, to access the world of reality; so for Davies:

[P]oetry […] so far from being regarded as a rejection or distortion of reality, comes to embody the only complete approach to reality [...] [Surrealism] has found itself faced by a violent divorce between the worlds of action and dream, reality and phantasy, and has protested against this divorce.[[317]](#footnote-317)

The mythology created by Surrealism, and presumably its historiographical tendency also, for Davies ‘fills an intensely practical purpose’ (148), which is the integration of art into life practice. Surrealist poetics differ from those of the Romantics in that, as Davies writes, Surrealism ‘employs a materialist dialectic in place of the idealistic dialectic of Coleridge. Where he branched into veiled religion, Surrealism has clung to evidence and experiment’ (148). This statement unites Davies’ admittedly abstract theorising of Surrealism’s time and place with the debate raging in the *Left Review* and in the cultural wing of the Soviet Union about the value of experimental arts as they relate to dialectical materialism. What may surprise us, considering Breton’s persistent fascination – increasing over time in tandem with his politicisation of the movement – with the automatic, the mystical and the fantastical as procedurally central tactics of manifesting art works, is the practicality of what Davies proposes as Surrealism’s defining features. So, ‘Surrealism is organised, orderly and conscious’ where Romanticism ‘was notoriously inchoate, disorderly, intuitive’ (168). On the other hand, Éluard argues:

Surrealism, which is an instrument of knowledge, and therefore an instrument of conquest as well as of defence, strives to bring to light man’s profound consciousness. Surrealism strives to demonstrate that thought is common to all, it strives to reduce the differences existing between men, and, with this end in view, it refuses to serve an absurd order based upon inequality, deceit and cowardice.[[318]](#footnote-318)

As can be seen here, then, the attention to the ‘marvellous’ and the technique of ‘automatism’ increasingly come under pressure from a politicised and aestheticised ‘everyday’ in French surrealist theory. Both Breton and Éluard, in Read’s exhibition collection of essays, refer to the move towards collectivity and practical engagement in their art movement:

They [the poets] have gone out into the streets, they have insulted their masters, they have no gods any longer, they have dared to kiss beauty and love on the mouth, they have learned the songs of revolt sung by the unhappy masses and, without being disheartened, they try to teach them their own (183)

Éluard here valorizes the freedom of poet-artists to experience life beyond constraint and to become masters of their own experience. What unites such calls to arms is a critical approach to the language of late capitalist society – the social manifests through its language, so it follows that experiments on the language are experiments on society.[[319]](#footnote-319) As Schulte-Sasse writes, the Surrealists ‘wanted to expropriate the expropriated language,’[[320]](#footnote-320) though they failed to the extent that they were blinded by an intense focus on the particular to the dialectics of experience and language, which are clearly more complex than that of a singular totalizing category against which to wage war. It is perhaps in the horns of this dialectic that the anthropological poetry of Madge situates itself. Breton’s late conception of the ‘fantastic’ would be one key to understanding Madge’s work. For Breton, the poet-artist must seek out rupture in order to make sense of the contemporary world:

Above all we expressly oppose the view that it is possible to create a work of art or even, properly considered, any useful work by expressing only the *manifest content* of an age. On the contrary, Surrealism proposes to express its *latent content*.[[321]](#footnote-321)

Submerged elements of political, historical, philosophical and cultural content could be explored by recourse to the ‘fantastic’, the category of latency. Breton further politicizes this statement by suggesting that Socialist Realism is inhibitory of an experimental exploratory art of the ‘fantastic’, or the unconscious by any other name, the artery of the collective. Surrealism is the art that would liberate the unconscious as the revolutionary political, philosophical and existential category of an episteme. Yet the polarization of real and fantastic for which Breton makes a case is factitious, as Madge and Jennings in particular were aware. They would instead derive their conception of representation from a realistic base that would in turn yield its self-defamiliarisation. The Real, in other words, is considered as having the innate propensity to turn to the fantastic by warrant of its connection with unconscious collective human mediation.

As this chapter has explored, two poles unite in British Surrealism – an imagistic Romanticism, that is, Modernism squared with its Romantic sources; and the documentary form of Socialist Realism, which draws British Surrealism into Mass Observation and finally into documentary form. The historical moment of British Surrealism lends it an eccentric character – coming so late in Surrealism’s overall development, it is a translation of the movement rather than a copy. According to Breton, the British Surrealist movement was inaugurated in the context of a new French Revolution, ‘at the very moment when the French workers [...] were forcibly occupying the factories and, as a direct result of the simultaneous adoption of this attitude, were everywhere triumphant in their principal demands.’[[322]](#footnote-322) Indeed, the early 1930s witnessed the height of popularity of the Popular Front, who were elected in May 1936, and the French general strike in February 1934. Trotsky analyses the genesis of class conflict in his study, ‘Whither France?’:

The bourgeoisie is leading its society to complete bankruptcy. It is capable of assuring the people neither bread nor peace. This is precisely why it cannot any longer tolerate the democratic order. It is forced to smash the workers and peasants by the use of physical violence. The discontent of the workers and peasants, however, cannot be brought to an end by the police alone. Moreover, if it often impossible to make the army march against the people. It begins by disintegrating and ends with the passage of a large section of the soldiers over to the people's side. That is why finance capital is obliged to create special armed bands, trained to fight the workers just as certain breeds of dog are trained to hunt game. The historic function of fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organizations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery.[[323]](#footnote-323)

The interests of capital and the interests of democracy are seen as fundamentally inimical. As a new wealthy bourgeoisie rises, in turn the value of liberty falls. Madge references this movement in ‘Hours of the Planets’, in the marginal paratextual directions that accompany the poem: ‘The rise of the bourgeoisie’ visually glosses the following lines:

Rising along the sun’s long escalier

All equal all in inequality

Looking not one to one but each from each

Different in self-indifference

The paratextual reference multiplies the class critique embedded in the lines with political material from Engels (*The Decline of Feudalism and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie*) and Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, which also dedicates much thought to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the erosion of liberties for the people which it attends. For Trotsky, ‘the petty bourgeoisie is economically dependent and politically atomized. That is why it cannot conduct an independent policy. It needs a “leader” who inspires it with confidence’ (‘Whither France?’). Fascism rises as the bourgeoisie seeks an illusion of independence, feeding on the atomisation of classes. Equally, a proletarian revolution is envisaged by Trotsky, which would command the same power the bourgeoisie is willing to invest in fascism. The realisation of politically enfranchising power is the bourgeoise moment of ‘divinity’ glimpsed in Madge’s later poem series ‘Delusions’. In ‘Delusions I’ the bourgeois ‘home is wrecked’, but ‘Beyond the printed words that catch their eyes, / And the chance gleam of some suspended sign, / May fall the blissful moment of surprise / When the dull bourgeois can become divine’ (47). The mystic experience explored above as the natural tendency to mythologise experience here yields to an added meaning in terms of political power. Transcendence in mass culture, the ability to decode discourses and signs, can be democratic in ways that not only link people together and help them realise artistic proclivities, but also link them to enfranchising notions of commitment. These are yet glimpses. Madge wrote extensively about mass culture, and believed that the otherwise derided form of newspaper media contained radical potentialities. Though newspaper reports may ostensibly seek out truth through factual, objective detailing, ‘facts can be distorted, suppressed and selected. It is by the distortion, suppression and selection of facts that the Press can profoundly modify the social consciousness.’[[324]](#footnote-324) Acknowledging that the reading public are more capable of discernment than is otherwise attributed them, however, Madge allowed for the possibility that literary judgement could be exercised on a mass scale: ‘suspension of disbelief’ is also applied in the reading of factual material. The reality of reportage, then, has more in common with dreams, with feelings and affectivity, than with the irreality of manipulated ‘fact’. As the press provides the reading masses with ‘some common basis of opinion, some data on which to form collective opinions, however false or incomplete’ (152), it functions as a reflective medium which actually fosters class consciousness, criticism of the political mainstream, it is ‘subversive of itself’ (152). Further, it provides a public service in that it necessitates a dissemination of prurient or uncomfortable subject matter previously unavailable to the masses. While for George Orwell ‘history stopped in 1936,’[[325]](#footnote-325) for Madge the new media and the new literate masses had embarked on a new historic trend underpinned by new representational forms. These new representational forms, for Madge at least, expressed more clearly and formed more effectively the ‘element of the mass-wish’ (160). Despite itself – considering the class interests of the newspaper financiers and owners – the newspaper can be considered formative of and ironically produced by the masses, given that ‘the mass is already largely what it has been made by the Press and the rest of capitalism’ (154). The newspaper is the poetry of the people, it is ‘poetic fact’ laying down ‘poetic memory’ (151).

There are clear Freudian underpinnings to the notion of mass wish fulfilment and the formation of collective desires and memories through the conditioning of each individual, notions that Madge and Jennings are clearly familiar with in their references to *Totem and Taboo*. Jennings’ essay on the impact of machines, ‘The Iron Horse’, utilises similar Freudian material. Published in the Surrealist periodical *London Bulletin* in June 1938, Jennings argues that realist art can traduce the split between art and machine science. Precisely in the sublimation of desire in art can this be achieved. According to Freud:

Only in one field has the omnipotence of thought been retained in our own civilisation, namely in art. In art alone it still happens that man, consumed by his wishes, produces something similar to the gratification of these wishes, and this playing, thanks to artistic illusion, calls forth effects as if it were something real.[[326]](#footnote-326)

 So here we have a unification of the surreal in the real dialectic and the Freudian base for surrealism courted in its early guises.

For Breton, the unification offered by the Burlington exhibition in London in 1936 provides a nodal point of temporal and spatial conjunction of the various international surrealist tendencies that would unite the world of art and the everyday world. Surrealism at this point in history, ‘[...] far from being simply a unification of style, corresponds to a new consciousness of life *common to all*.’ (99). Surrealism, as in its British guise, suggests itself as a levelling factor, linked up to the radical democratic experiments of the general strike in France and the mass media in Britain. Madge himself was highly critical of the bourgeois sympathies of his fellow literati – in a letter to Michael Roberts, editor of various collections of cutting-edge British verse, Madge accuses him of proposing a ‘schoolmaster’s revolution’ for suggesting revolution would come from “the absorption of the proletariat into a cultured middle class”. Instead, ‘the proletarian consciousness is going to carry you off.’[[327]](#footnote-327) The letter to Roberts accompanies a poem entitled ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’, considered in brief above. Again, the statement of class leveling is dampened by contingency, so while ‘Cloister Time ended with adieu to kings’, the overall tone is percipient of cautious revolutionary intent. Deeper facets of experience obliterate individual lives and triumphs, hence the ‘adieu to kings’, even kings of the Left such as Lenin, a figure addressed in the poem as being much in need. Lenin ‘spoke beyond Time’s passions […] You would have seen, you would have seized the hour’. Yet time is constantly slipping away in Madge’s cosmology – though the communist revolution is seen as being upon the moment of the poem, line 76 is radically halved by caesura: ‘Half-time’s late to begin.’ (l. 76). The utopian point cannot overcome the moment’s contingency; the radical future is constantly being deferred. In this case, it is deferred until the fabled unity of theory and practice: ‘Theory and practice once in contact, see / The sparks fly’ (ll. 79-80). The persistent anxiety of the age seems to be that the future will not arrive, as no extremism can unite an atomized culture.

As Madge implies, the age is one of extremes, where the masters are ‘to left or right turning’, and in which ‘knife-sided nothing will devour / The deviators’ (‘Letter’, ll. 56-7). The paradoxical rise of fascism and socialism is historically witnessed in the rise of Franco and the resulting Spanish civil war, among other international disputes, and the overbearing international significance of the Soviet experiment. For Breton, the masses involved in war and political conflict, and the proletarian masses are different in important ways; the revolutionary forces in France and Spain, then, express international aims and desires:

Thus we can observe these revolutions which must certainly be in essence but one revolution at two different stages and learn this lesson particularly, that if against certain temporary forms of exploitation the collective action of folding hands has triumphed, it is no less necessary to arm those same hands against a return of this exploitation in forms infinitely more daring and more sinister.[[328]](#footnote-328)

For Breton, the revolution must continue ‘in the streets’, as a form of revolutionary terroristic violence rather than in the guise of armed militias. So while Breton in many ways traduces his own dictates in that he makes his *communiqués* express manifestly what he wishes to remain latent in the work in order to be found as ‘fantastic’, we can see how on the other hand, in British Surrealism, the notion of latency is taken almost as a rule that encodes the work as if for literary archaeology. Madge’s forthright ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’ aside, the abiding tactic alongside allusion, is semantic profusion. To return to ‘Hours of the Planets’, we can see how the ‘father’ rising is an extremist leader, whether fascist or communist, ‘The father of death and healing’. Fathers figure strongly in Madge’s work – one of his collections is titled ‘The Father Found’, for instance. In ‘Surrealism for the English’ Madge writes of the father as tradition – he has to be figuratively killed for poetry to come into imaginative power. Politicising the imagination, Madge can be seen to enact this overcoming in the opening line of ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’, which apostrophises Lenin in a rewriting of Wordsworth’s ode to Milton: ‘Lenin, would you were living at this hour’. Yet if Madge repeatedly writes of a lapsarian or contingent present, to what extent has a father been ‘found’? Whereas in Holderlin, the father turned his face away from men in disgust, the father depicted in Madge is a ghostly presence, a revolutionary spectre. A second apostrophe in ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’ is addressed to England; the lyrical subject ‘found you [...] You are always beside me, so I go haunted [...] knowing you / ‘D rise from the dead and prove my superstition true’. This helps to make sense of Madge’s later verse drama, the eponymous ‘The Father Found’ of 1939. The characters, a king, his daughter and a traveller – one part Trinity, one part dialectical figure – engage in a fight with an ‘electric ghost’ in the conclusion. In the fight with the ghost, the king seems to be defeated by his daughter’s voice, which witnesses the return of workers and peaceful nature to the kingdom, though the final words are the traveller’s:

There comes at last

The buried past

 Clothed in long sparks

 And diamond marks.

I thought the mound

Contained the dead

But now instead

Here, above ground

The father found. (82)

The father is in this sense a return of a fruitful and utopian sense of tradition. It must be stressed, however, that this tradition is a naturally communistic one, and must therefore be fought for in some way or another. The father who ‘secretly was born’ in ‘Hours’, as explored above, is attended by conflict: ‘The day grew cold and still / As the embrace of enemies at war / Upon a mountain rich with copper ore’. Elemental nature has its value to both sides of the extreme – to fight over material wealth is an error. This moment seems to unite the allegorical reading of the poem, with its celestial and terrestrial time (the day) with the historical present, emblematised by antagonism and a place of contested mineral wealth. The ethical sphere is occluded by the poem’s mystical framework. Despite the latency of these invitations to read revolutionary history into Madge’s work, the father occasionally bursts in to provide polemical manifest content. To some extent, Madge’s work still relies on these strong quasi-fascistic voices. For example, in ‘Delusions III’ ‘some little Lenin of the mob’ has to remind the crowd that they are working in unison, for the good of ‘the workers’ state’. Breton’s didacticism, which we have seen clearly in his ordinances, at times overdoes the latent political content of the work. On the other hand, poems such as ‘Rebirth’, again from the collection *The Father Found*, utilise surrealist imagery to make bold statements about their relation to materialism. In this poem, the physical presence of ‘sons’ is ‘everywhere’, growing through the industrial landscape as a kind of grass, or, as Madge writes, ‘fibrils of their being.’[[329]](#footnote-329) The poem is an invitation to recognition, to the kind of increased or renewed vision to materiality and material history that Herbert Read argued Surrealism could achieve for the poet and reader. It ends with the imprecation, ‘Each piece is vital, to build the animal whole, / And we must know them all and look after them carefully’ (‘Rebirth’, ll. 13-14). We can see these ‘pieces’ as genetic-historico-cultural images, awaiting discovery as the latent content of late modernity. In many ways, then, the poem invites the reader into a dialogue with the object world, similar to Breton’s argument in ‘Crisis of the Object’, in which the rational and the irrational, the artistic and the scientific are set in dialectic play: ‘the real, confused far too long with given data, splinters in every direction conceivable and tends to become a component of the possible.’[[330]](#footnote-330) Madge and Jennings’ use of what had previously been used as a mainstay of modernism, imagism, was then indebted to Breton’s theory of subject-object relations. Images, for them, evoked fragments of modernity, encapsulating the Real in ‘vital pieces’. The genealogy of these literary pieces may be mapped as follows.

The translation of European Surrealism into Britain gained an admixture of Cambridge academicism applied by both Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings. Madge and Jennings are fundamentally allied in their projects: writing of Jennings after his death, Madge observes, ‘paradoxically solid and fluid, the images are moments in the flow of human experience […] Jennings calls for “the use of technique, to create mutations in the subject, and the subject thereby to be in its proper place, as the basis of a metamorphosis.”’[[331]](#footnote-331) Whereas Jennings would concentrate such experiments in the plastic arts, Madge attempted them more extensively on the literary plane. A nucleated image, with its condensation of times, places and references of history, politics and society, becomes the very metonymic form of collective representation to suit his notion of a ‘popular poetry’. As Madge writes, an image in Jennings’ poetry could have ‘both a local and a universal significance’. It also contains the stamp of labour:

The image […] has historical and geographical coordinates but it belongs also to that ‘inner labour’, that ‘private zone of culture’, which the psycho-analyst finds to be characteristic of ‘the artist and scientist, the mystic and the lunatic – for that matter all of us’ and on which we expend so much of our mental energies. (49)

The imaginative labour of the artist and the artistic production of images are thus connected to a collective experience. The Romantic imagination is therefore developed out of solipsistic inner journeying to being the social lubricant flowing through the masses and into the art-work, if its field remains open to it. Madge glosses the above with a quote from John Rickman’s ‘The Development of Psychological Medicine’, in which ‘inner labour’ is considered as a material that overflows in the ill but is otherwise contained in the mass of humanity as a ‘meed of pleasure’ untapped except in artistic expression. The pleasure obtained from reading Madge’s work, concomitantly, might be indexed by the extent to which the reader attaches significance to the procession of images being combined in the poem. Yet though these connections are ones potentially equitable to the masses, we can see how collective images also have limitations, in a tendency to their own elitism. I. A. Richards, for instance, argued in *Principles of Literary Criticism* that a poet’s facility is in creating metaphors that would establish *wholeness* – the wholeness of experience – rather than the radicalism of Madge’s experiment, wherein images express and perhaps simultaneously embody fragmentation, immanent critique *and* democratic potential.

The attempt to embody this method in poetry and research in Britain in the 1930s speaks of the step change being demanded by Breton in his *Second Manifesto*. Dialectics offers the only solution to the contradictions of contemporary life: ‘Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.’[[332]](#footnote-332) Similarly, advances in technology and science were considered as equally-placed in the revolution of the word – the Surrealists, as Breton says in ‘Crisis of the Object’, were making a science out of the irrational to rival the innovations in experimental literature opened up by Rimbaud and Lautréamont in parallel to the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry in 1870.[[333]](#footnote-333) Acts of communication would then be as instantaneous as dreams, as fast and illogical as the communications revolution opened up by telegraphy. Madge of course addresses these ideas in poems such as ‘Hours of the Planets’, but also in his critical writings. The dialectic proposed by Breton, specifically that of raising the objective into subjectivity, and *vice versa*, had clearly been absorbed as aesthetic and political ideology in the British Surrealists’ work. The dominant image of the day is part of the dominant language of the day, and so experimentations on the level of the image are experiments in subjectivity. This act of communication finds parallels in Breton’s *vases communiqué* or ‘communicating vessels’ – again, another way of bridging the gap between the subject and object in modernity. Madge elaborates on this point in his essay ‘Poetic Description and Mass Observation’, writing that ‘There is no need for [the mass observer] to try to make […] events real: the observer has simply been a recording instrument of the facts.’[[334]](#footnote-334) The ‘facts’ are therefore part of the irreality of modern life – as such, British Surrealism’s experimental poetry can be considered as a form of realism, one which has to be carefully judged to avoid poeticizing the fragments of reality, in which case, ‘the poetry makes the real fragments unreal, and the real fragments give to the poetry an air of artifice which is the reverse of the poetic effect produced in the descriptive poetry of Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy’ (3). Poetry and the arts more generally have operated as mediation against direct experience of the object.

Such ‘direct experience’ has been eroded by strict adherence to ‘norms’ of society. For Herbert Read, the problem can be expressed as part of the Classical-Romantic dialectic (see Read, 24-5). The Classical equates to a conservative ideology of art and society, which Jennings would later see as an institutionally conservative order of the day, one which presupposes that it is, as Herbert Grierson argues (quoted extensively by Read, 24), a ‘synthesis’ of Romantic and Classical tendencies. Read sees this as a ‘false dialecticism’ (25), masking the ‘economic dominance and therefore the cultural dominance of [one particular] class’ (25). Concepts of ‘order’ in aesthetics are related to a repression of ‘vital instincts’ for change and democracy. Madge’s conception of the poetry of Mass Observation seems to directly address this in his utilization of a radical Romanticism, but also in his democratic project of poetic production: observations of mass society ‘produce a poetry which is not, as at present, restricted to a handful of esoteric performers. The immediate effect of MO is to de-value considerably the status of the “poet.” It makes the term “poet” apply, not to his performance, but to his profession, like “footballer.”’[[335]](#footnote-335) Thus we can also discern late modernism’s increasing antipathy to what Jennings writes of as the ‘classical-military-capitalist-ecclesiastical racket’, ‘by which,’ Rod Mengham writes, ‘he can only mean T. S. Eliot’. A poetry of the people would be one that takes on The Real as a connective material base upon which poetic material could be made. It should not be taken as trivial that Madge envisages an egalitarian world of poet-observers, in that such a poetic could bring literature into a radical life praxis: ‘In taking up the role of the observer, each person becomes like Courbet at his easel [...] The process of observing raises him from subjectivity to objectivity. What has become unnoticed through familiarity is raised into consciousness again’ (3).

As Courbet revolted against a particular formalism in order to depict reality as he saw it as a ‘living art’ without pretence, a ‘physical language, the words of which consists of all visible objects’, so Madge and Jennings produce art which has its basis in the experience of contemporaneity, a reality that could not be depicted ‘realistically’, since, as they saw it, it had become so deformed by the mystificatory system of modern capitalism. Mass Observation’s project has been compared to that of Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*, and if we see *that*, as Rolf Tiedemann does, as an attempt to allow historical objects perceived as dreams to ‘step into our lives,’ thus ‘awakening’ us to the contours of the Real, then Madge and Jennings’ work can similarly be considered as an ‘awakening’ of the dialectic of the real in Surrealism. This dialectic would be depicted in stark terms in Jennings’ documentary (sur-)realist film *Spare Time* of 1939, the commentary of which, as narrated by Laurie Lee, poses the central Surrealist dialectic of sleeping and awakening in terms of the reality of economic production and individual liberty: ‘Between work and sleep comes the time we call our own. What do we do with it?’[[336]](#footnote-336) Again, this further emphasises the degree to which materialism became the locus of concerns for the post-British Surrealist grouping. Yet this is not to say that Jennings especially did articulate such ideas in his earlier creative work. Indeed, Jennings writes, in his article ‘The Iron Horse’, appearing in the June 1938 edition of *London Bulletin*, that Courbet’s ‘Cliffs of Etretat’ is ‘practically a large coloured illustration to Lyell’s *Manual of Elementary Geology*’. Such materialist cultural historiography confirms Jennings’, and in turn Madge’s, commitment to recognising the importance of situating artistic practice in relation to the current mode of production, the current conditions of existence. Madge and Jennings, especially through their poem and prose collages written around this period, write a poetry of presentation, a materialist poetic, pushing Surrealism into documentary forms that favour social observation, perhaps a classically dialectical development. The selectivity of the artist-observer parallels that of the mythos, texture and collective unconscious, underlying modern life, in a wider sense of living modernity. Contemporaneous aesthetic theories tended to work otherwise, however. For instance, S John Woods, in an article entitled ‘Who’s Been Frightened by the Big Bang?’, in the March 1939 issue of *London Bulletin*, while making the connection between mass spectacle and subjectivity – ‘the real level of the mass-unconscious is found in the Christmas editions of the illustrated papers and in the decoration of cinemas’ – concludes by stating ‘Action is a necessity at such a time and art and action just don’t mix. Failure to realize this, causes a barren hopelessness and a naïve trust in realism – and for a contemporary artist such a trust in realism is a flight from reality.’[[337]](#footnote-337) The question of whether art can successfully speak to and for the people at the moment of late modernity is answered here by a call to political action. Art, for Woods, has lost its social role as spectacular forms of entertainment take its place. Yet for the avant-garde, represented in this context by Madge and Jennings, art must be revolutionized to reflect the material alterations in the social, political and economic fabric of their time – the only way of politicizing art, for them, would be to mimic its context. In this way, the 1930s British avant-gardists reclaimed realism in the name of surrealism – the parameters of realism had, however, moved on radically from its conception in critics such as Woods.

The objective descriptions of mass observation would evade, according to Madge, the deforming influence of time on the literary artefact. In one sense, such descriptions would have to be untied from their authorial mastery. Antirationalism was the nostrum for British Surrealists such as Read: ‘it is towards the limit of automatism, and away from the limit of rational control, that we find the most enduring vitality, the words which live when the poet is dead, when even his name is forgotten’ (29). The contemporary moment, for Read, the British Surrealists and the Mass Observers alike, hung on knife-edge of potential obscurity. Objective chance would seem important in this sense, as so much historical weight was laid upon each decision, each party affiliation: ‘our ideas, our aspirations, the whole structure of our civilization, becomes a history which the future may not even record’ (35). War, specifically, and class conflict more generally, had opened up for a whole generation of artists and intellectuals the notion of the contingency of the modern moment. David Gascoyne’s ‘The Supposed Being’, with its conditional and hypothetical ‘Supposing’ (l. 1 *passim*), seems to respond equally to such pressures and concerns of contingency. The first stanza, for instance, ‘supposes’ a ‘mouth’ ‘Whose language is black whose language has / Never been ours’ (ll. 10-11). Such attention to the historicity of the utterance – its potential for ‘enduring vitality’ or complete abnegation – accords with Jennings’ also, but we can see this anxiety about time’s sway as germane to Madge’s poetry, temporal manipulation being one of the central features picked up by, for instance, Steven Connor.[[338]](#footnote-338) A comparatively strange aspect of Madge’s theoretical explication, given the replicability of social traits across masses, resides in his desire for originality: a poetic description used by Madge that does not have the quality of mass observation, though being deeply imbricated in a specific time and place, contains ‘phrases [...] as if borrowed.’[[339]](#footnote-339) We can consider such early statements as being inconsistent insofar as they express inherent prejudices that are constantly being repressed by Madge in his quest to elevate mass culture to the status of art. In his essay, for instance, the notion of romantic love is roundly derided as being undialectical, unoriginal. An original observation, capable of a direct poetry, would be one like that of the mass observer quoted in the essay as being affronted by a petulant official on a bus, as long as it is encompassed within a category of scientific observation, in this case ‘the relation of superiors to subordinates and subordinates to their superiors’ (5). Only by way of an immersion in the real, the particular, can universals ‘worthy’ of poetry emerge into light. Though this expresses a potentially generative nominalist empiricism, it is constrained by its relation to critique. Not all mass observations are worthy of being sublimated into artistic form. This criticism, however, is addressed by the British Surrealists, such as in Read’s understanding of the Surrealist ‘found object’. For Read ‘Selection is also creation’ (64). In this case, selection betrays the subject, forced to acknowledge the power of objects in their relation to the identity of the individual making the selection. In Madge and Jennings’ popular poetry idea, the Surrealist ‘found object’ is being transmuted into material selection in ethnography, issuing through Jennings’ historical ‘images’. The selectivity of the artist-observer parallels that of the mythos, texture and collective unconscious, of modern life. We can see how this logic works in the selectivity of the artist-intellectual Madge as he considers what might be worthy of consideration for publication as mass observation – the work has to have an element of the fantastic that links it back to the transhistorical imaginative work that takes precedence in the British Surrealists’ literary historiography. Literary borrowing would be acceptable in the linkages it makes to an English tradition of radical poetry, but the borrowing of commonplace language in mass observation would be *passé* in that they would betray the ‘unconscionsness’ of the observing subject, prey as it is to the deformations of hegemonic language. The attempt to witness rather than dictate historical movement can be viewed as a teleology that continues to recede along with the revolutionary future that constantly escapes or further recedes in the poetry of the British Surrealists.

Madge, Jennings and Gascoyne all create artworks based on verbatim quotation – in ‘Hours of the Planets’, this takes the form of embedded quotation or paratextual stage-managing. In Jennings the combined forms of historical artwork, collapsed into the vessels of an allusive art form (i.e. the prose poem or anthology of quoted sources in *Pandaemonium*) form *images* that re-arrange their meanings according to an interplay between the collectivised artist and the reader assemblage. They are therefore fundamentally democratic art works in intention. Madge’s ‘Division of Labour’ further elaborates on the possibilities of re-presentation – the only original aspect of it is the title, ‘Division of Labour’. The text itself originates from *The Percy Anecdotes* of 1823, a curio of assembled snatches of information grouped into thematic bundles, much like Jennings’ *Pandaemonium* would be under the re-authorship of Madge. Thematically the fragment or ‘prose poem’, if it could be so called, as it is a re-siting or plagiarised piece, concerns the natural communism of Alpine marmots, in which ‘the least enviable part [being a carrier of goods] is taken by every one of the party in turn.’[[340]](#footnote-340) Germane to Madge, the naturalistic observation of this behavior can be seen as analogous to the practices of Mass Observation (perhaps a derogatory connotation if we consider the human subjects of the movement); the ‘Mr Beauplan’ of the piece has sustained ‘the curiosity to watch them at it for days together’ (34). Transposed into a collection of poetry, the information is radically recontextualised, and reflects on the communality represented in the other poems. The natural world is seen as having the potential to heal the division of labour at stake in the 1930s more generally – for instance, economists such as Keynes and Sombart were concerned that ‘the international division of labour would decrease as many areas moved away from their dependence on commodity exports, and the preeminence of the industrial countries would be eroded’[[341]](#footnote-341) as a result of the depression and contraction of the international markets in the early 1930s.

Madge’s prose poetry, as in ‘Division of Labour’, perhaps most radically expresses his use of quotation and borrowing. Cunningham does Madge a disservice in minimizing the significance of his prose poetry, dismissing it as the seeking out of ‘plain styles’ (301). More interesting, however, is Cunningham’s reference to prose poetry as being a translation of Socialist Realist style. Madge’s work takes Socialist Realist style – the surface appearance of ‘plain prose thought’ (301) – but transforms the material dialectically through contact with Surrealism. Again, the selection of material and its placement in the paratext of poetic art is its expression of ‘creation’. The utopia envisaged in ‘Division of Labour’ is glimpsed as if in documentary form – its complexity can be indexed by the extent to which the reader attaches significance to the objects it raises into readerly consciousness. In the words of his 1932 poem ‘Instructions’, ‘This poem will be you if you will. So let it.’ The irony of re-using poetic material is raised as defamiliarising, but also references the collective nature of individual utterances.

Reintegration of poetic material accompanies Madge’s vision of the dreaming collective. In ‘Hours’, again ironically considering the widespread allusive qualities of the whole, one line sits in quotation marks, ‘ “glaze the dark eye that holds eternity”’. This encompasses Blake and Tennyson – Blake’s ‘hold infinity in the palm of your hand And eternity in an hour’, and Tennyson’s ‘his eyes are heavy; think not they are glazed with wine. Go to him, it is thy duty, kiss him, take his hand in thine’. As with imagism, the force of allusion is centrifugal – both instigations to allusive material readings encapsulate images of compressed time, but reflect the compression of material in the work also. Similarly, the diction betrays the complexity and range of reference in the poem – ‘ewig retrograde’ seems to fit into the astrological position of the sun, while also helping to piece together the old high Germanic diction running through the poem as being indebted to Mahler. Arising in the libretto for *Das Lied*, *ewig* means ‘eternal’, and in this context refers to high Romantic attempts to break through to a state of externality, overcoming direct pressures of being in the world, in eternity. The literary world of quotation and the cosmos are linked, as they are in Walter Benjamin’s reading of Surrealist geographies and their relation to the production of art:

The Surrealists’ Paris, too is a ‘little universe’. That is to say, in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different. There, too, crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day. It is the region from which the lyric poetry of Surrealism reports.[[342]](#footnote-342)

For Benjamin, as for Madge, the Surrealists opened up new possibilities in reading social reality. The experiential content of Surrealist poems could kindle ‘a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration’ (565).

The materialism of the British Surrealists’ conception of poetic art is referenced both in the prose statements of the Mass Observation group and the Bretonians represented by Gascoyne. For the M.O. grouping, mass observation reports are, like Benjamin’s reading of Surrealist Paris, a ‘little universe’ or landscape:

Every report is a landscape with figures: the sharp focus is on the figures, and the landscape retires into varying degrees of subjectivity. In order to get focussed onto this hinterland, the background of social fantasy, we have been experimenting on what [...] has been termed the “dominant image of the day”.[[343]](#footnote-343)

The images in a collective poem are considered profusive, constructive of the objective landscape – again, the quest is for experiments on language to equate to experiments on social reality. The production of a ‘score’ of images from which to choose in Popular Poetry expresses the objective chance inherent in social observation. Here we find strong parallels in Madge’s and David Gascoyne’s work, which in some critics’ assessments are strongly divided.[[344]](#footnote-344) Mengham, for instance, writes that ‘Gascoyne […] despite his grasp of surrealist doctrine, in most of his 1930s work, represents a continuity with the earlier, individualist mode [Breton’s *First Manifesto*], inclining towards automatic writing.’[[345]](#footnote-345) And yet we can see in this connection between physical and psychic landscapes how Gascoyne’s ‘Landscapes’ poems engage in a broader continuity of concerns. The ‘Landscapes’ series of poems seem to attempt to blend human and natural materials in ways that dissolve subjective human and objective material realms. This unites Madge’s poetic and Gascoyne’s – *Holderlin’s Madness* of 1937-8 extends prosopopoeia to become a technique of access to objective/subjective melding.

In a narrative uncannily similar to Madge’s ‘Father Found’ poem, featuring a range of reference uncannily similar to Madge’s ‘Hours of the Planets’, Gascoyne’s poem ‘Figures in a Landscape’ emplots the landscape and its figures as subjects, thus melding and dissolving subject and object in the landscape evoked. First, the landscape is personified – rivers, birds, land, sun, sea all have voices, all are acting: ‘The verdant valleys full of rivers / Sang a fresh song to the thirsty hills’ (ll. 1-2). Yet signs of inhabitation and civilisation are apparent, one with the body of the landscape: a road splits the personified earth: ‘Among the landscape’s limbs (the limbs / Of a vast denuded body torn and vanquished from within) / The chaste white road, / Prolonged into the distance like a plaint.’ The use of simile here is ironic – the road is both an expression of anguish and its cause. As the narrative continues, a human figure appears in between the ‘Opposition’ of natural forces (land/sea, etc), naked ‘Against the whirlpool and the weapon, the undoing wound // And met himself half-way’, and merges into the landscape and into timelessness. Struck by lightning, he dissolves into the landscape, in the process righting the balance of nature; the sun returns casting rays, transformed from the ‘blood-red rays’ of an angry sun into mystical ‘influences’ that ‘pass through and again / Like golden bees the hive of his lost head’. In this sense, the process of writing poetry and the process of constructing material reality are seen as being alike. In Gascoyne’s earlier poem, ‘Landscape’, the object world is evoked as a kind of writing:

The light like a sharpened pencil

Writes histories of darkness on the wall,

While walls fall inwards, septic wounds

Burst open like sewn mouths, and rain

Eternally descends through planetary space. (ll. 6-10)

Gascoyne’s poems are especially engaging in regard to their treatment of their subjects. Reality becomes overwhelming to the extent that it has the capacity to swallow its participants. Poems such as ‘Charity Week’ aggressively foreground the moment at which the subject of writing is erased by the apprehension of a physical object: ‘These are the phenomena of zero / Invisible men on the pavement / Spittle in the yellow grass / The distant roar of disaster / And the great bursting womb of desire’ (37). Not only does Gascoyne represent the human body as a conglomeration of partial objects – ‘fragments strewn upon the waters’ – he writes of a human subject as residue. Leo Mellor has written persuasively of the trend for Gascoyne’s work to efface its own practices of writing – in its ‘attempts to grasp scribal traces’, a powerful motive resides in the poetic persona’s subjective immersion in war-time scenes of bombing and blackouts[[346]](#footnote-346). While ‘Charity Week’ certainly figures such a battle-scarred landscape, replete with the language of explosions and bodily attack, it also suggests that public space has been colonised by ideas rather than bodies, that nature has been traduced, and that as such the public sphere is the location for pathological investments. Earlier images of horror, disruption and disorder – ‘lice in their hair / noughts in their crosses’ – give way to ‘Hysteria upon the staircase’, images that finally come to ‘zero’. Though such a psychoanalytic material suggests itself here, it may also be useful to keep in mind the abiding notion in this context that Gascoyne may be referring to a deeper nihilism, that the stream of barely logical imagery in the poem, which seems to present itself as self-consciously surreal, cannot justify a conclusion of any *value*. Gascoyne could then be seen to engage in a negative praxis, perhaps one that refers to the further negation required of Surrealism in its dialectical character. Another poem, ‘Not Having Knife-Edge to my Ermine Cape’, bears out this reading to an extent, in which the lyrical subject, disconnected from the prim cut of a ceremonial robe, dematerialises:

Like smoke I float down passages of

Dust and rust and leave not cut or smouldering

Trace. Tick-tock. Didactic. Vague.

And now stop short

 to scatter

A careless crumb or two of imagery.

In the enjambment of the ‘smouldering’ and the ‘Trace’, the poetic persona burns out into the broken syntax of automatism. The breakdown minimises the poetic traces that lead into surrealism’s own twisted logic, now contradictory and staid. Hackneyed strategies become authoritarian, yet their outcome is indeterminate, hypnotised by stasis, blocking the access of new images. The multiple caesurae that curtail the surreal logic underlying the rhythmic pulse of the opening lines acidly cut through the elasticity of the line upon recognition of the vestigial remainder, the stubborn persistence, of poetic identity. This is then sent up as being conventional – again, the poem turns against its own ontologies – but then the bathetic offering comes in the form of a ‘rose’ for ‘madame’ and for ‘sir, a factory, or a star perhaps’. The poetic persona, defeated, concludes by offering a pessimistic future for their revolutionary spirit: ‘When as the future raises barricades / I find myself too late to be inside’. Not only is this a parody of poetic devices, it is also a swipe at attempts to manifest an ‘insiders’’ perspective on revolutionary political engagement as well as a commentary on the lateness of Surrealism’s intervention in British letters. Yet by the reference to the ermine cape, could the reader also consider this a critique of bourgeois poetic logic? The lyric subject cannot gain admission to a radical social praxis because of its entrapment within that very subjectivity. Though the commonplaces of poetry are passé, so are modes of irony and self-effacement incompatible with the political. In this sense, Gascoyne’s poetry deploys dialectic against the very material of poetry; it is a poetry defined by its abnegation.

The embeddedness of the political in Gascoyne’s work, as explored above, further expresses a major difference between continental and British forms of Surrealism. Even to the twilight days of the movement, Breton insists on the centrality of the aleatory to Surrealist practice. He attempts to make a science – expressed with the ‘brevity and exactitude which prevail in medical observations’ – out of automatism, which he defines as a category containing the perceptive modes of ‘objective humour and objective chance.’[[347]](#footnote-347) Automatism would provide the key to representing the dialectic itself: ‘An appeal to automatism in all its forms is our only chance of resolving, outside the economic plane, *all* these contradictions of principle which, since they existed before our present social regime was formed, are not likely to disappear with it’ (105). For Breton, automatism is presented as the sublation of contradiction, that is, an overcoming of the duality of nature in terms such as dream and reality, reason and madness, objectivity and subjectivity, collective and individual, past and future, and so on. In foregrounding the unconscious as the material of this automatism and situating it as the third term in binary logic, Breton commingles Freudian and Marxist theories in a hybridised idealism that can be seen to be tested out if not falsified in the work of the British Surrealists. Gascoyne’s ‘The Supposed Being’, for instance, ends with the material ‘being’, evoked in the penultimate stanza as a natural entity as real and hard as ‘stone’ or as forceful as ‘a torrent’, reduced to a dematerialising concept in some sort of Hegelian space:

Such a being escapes from the sight of my visible eyes

From the touch of my tangible hand

For she only exists

Where all contradictions exist

Where darkness is light and the real is unreal and the

World is a dream in a dream. (ll. 58-63)

The terms of subjectivity and objectivity are reversed in this final stanza. A being that has radically altered its own subjectivity to become part of the objective, the landscape itself, then returns to subjectivity in the imagining of the poetic subject, which realises its own embodiment. The being could then be seen as a personification of automatism itself. If this is the case then Gascoyne’s summation is critical – automatism personified finds itself in a space of continuing contradiction, ensconced in an existence buried under folds of mirrored dualism. The world, then, is not a ‘dream in a dream’, but its opposite – the dream remains contradictory to the reality at hand; the automatic returns to the materiality of the poem, becoming aware of its own logic.

As explored earlier in this chapter, likewise in Charles Madge’s work, the dream uncovers its pathetic reality – literature itself abdicates as it explores the limits of an unreal poetic logic of automatism, personified in Gascoyne’s poem. Abdication as a term is particularly relevant here, as Rod Mengham has explored in the context of the Abdication Crisis of 1936. This provides a historical frame for a wider anxiety in the work of Madge connected to collective attachments in the work, evoked in a ‘sense in which the subject matter of the early poems has to do with abdication, with the fear of renunciation, of abandonment by default, with the sense of cutting oneself off from, or of being cut off from, a collective identity, a sense of belonging.’[[348]](#footnote-348) Further, as can be seen in Gascoyne’s poetry, ‘The structures of [Madge’s] early poems are frequently abdicative, obliging the reader to progress through a dereliction of meanings and occasionally of syntax’ (*ibid*). In the work of both Madge and Gascoyne, the reader’s attention is drawn to the materiality of the text itself, as if to anchor meaning to the attention of reading. In the final section of Madge’s ‘Hours of the Planets’, for example, ‘THE KEY’, we are incited to a practical directive: ‘Read backwards’ through history and pre-history (‘Turn backwards into white prehistory’). Yet here the reader finds only the product of the self-same directive, its literary representation: ‘Here pause, and look upon the title page’. This circularity of logic, as with Gascoyne’s ‘World is a dream in a dream’, raises attention to the constructed nature of objective social existence, in that readings of reality are seen as readings of myth, yet the myth yields to socio-historical representation, finally yielding to the materiality of bare life in and of itself. Reading, like observations in M.O., has the potential to uncover myths of contemporary life. Again, the folding out into the project of social anthropology is entered upon here. Like Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, Madge was engaged in 1932 on a ‘key to imagery in English poetry’ he titled the *Ideolexicon*, a prospective ‘guide to the hidden stores of knowledge in the poetic unconsciousness.’[[349]](#footnote-349) Literary reading at the point of the long poem ‘Hours’, then, was being proposed as an early key to mining the collective unconscious, and to interrogating the ‘real’.

The instrumental use of (literary) myth is seen as performative, closely linked to Madge’s understanding of language and power. In his review of Gascoyne’s *Short Survey of Surrealism*, he questions the appropriateness and timeliness of Gascoyne’s prose work, realising that the movement is only just gaining its moment in world-historical literary attention. But he also takes Gascoyne up on the issue of style: ‘words, which lie about quite inertly on the floors of newspaper offices, begin to explode when loaded into the breeches of guns. / I therefore wish, with the least possible fuss, to point out this simple fact: that difficulties of style are real.’[[350]](#footnote-350) In connection with the readings of Gascoyne above, however, we can see how closely Gascoyne’s poetry embodied this notion, and the extent to which the British Surreal would be a politically-motivated approach to representing The Real as mediated by language. In his 1933 essay ‘Poetry and Politics’, Madge states unequivocally: ‘Of human activities, writing poetry is the most revolutionary. A successful poem does not call a halt. It gives the order to march [...] There is no world but the world and that world is the poem’s world.’[[351]](#footnote-351) As if to illustrate this point, published in the same issue of *New Verse* is the poem ‘New Verse’. Obviously ironically titled to be included in the magazine, Madge’s subject matter is the search for an object of language, a search for a noun, the literal representation of things, to express otherness:

For if our ghost-or-skeleton keys

Should ever fit such locks as these

Inside it may be well there is

Mouth and a gap, teeth and in

The crack to slip, prick bubble-skin

Pass out and let the other win. (ll. 13-18)

The object of the verb is left in question in the fourth line, ‘if there is an is at all’, suggesting that in an ontologically vague existence, finally the question must be a political one – who to speak of, who to address, who or what is the subject and how does poetry address the subject’s otherness? Discourse becomes central to questions of politics as it presents itself as a cipher for better understanding, better forms of communication between inside and outside, and an attempt to overcome the separation of subject and object, that central concern of Left intellectuals of Madge’s time. Christopher Caudwell, as one of the foremost Marxist intellectuals of the thirties, considers poetry as a great art only to the extent to which it amounts to a capture of reality: ‘A poet who brings into his net a vast amount of new reality to which he attaches a wide-ranging affective colouring we shall call a *great* poet.’[[352]](#footnote-352) The ascription of affective connection to objects in poetry, for Caudwell, lends poetry its power to transcribe reality, its skeleton key to the lock of the real. Poetry then becomes an art of the real in an act of translation: ‘Just as the key to dream is a series of instinctive attitudes which provide the mechanism of dream-work, so the key to poetry is a cluster of suppressed pieces of external reality – a vague unconscious world of life-experience’ (241). Poetry is socially useful, as it affects external reality, making things happen, and in this sense it bridges the disconnection between subject and object, working against the reification of humanity under conditions of capitalism. Hence Madge’s paratextual direction ‘Glimpses of reality’ in ‘Hours of the Planets’ precedes ‘Nature as the unity of contraries’, as if translating elements of Marxist theory in narrative. It is worth noting that the politico-philosophical quotation is inflected with the literary in a similar way to the literary politics of Caudwell. In ‘Nature as the unity of contraries’, Madge refers to Sidney’s ‘Pamela’s Faith’, abridging the longer quotation, ‘It is as absurd in nature that from an unity many contraries should proceed, still kept in an unity, as that from the number of contrarieties an unity should arise.’[[353]](#footnote-353) In Sidney, this is waged as an accusation against Pamela, who advances such a materialist, nominalist perspective. Madge takes this on to suggest in his poem ‘Hours’ that, as in Caudwell and Gascoyne, the *real* issues out of the surreal. Gascoyne’s dream ‘where all contradictions exist’ has a material basis; ‘glimpses of reality’ are the event horizon of the poetry of the British Surrealists.

An opposite but equivalent movement to that of Gascoyne’s in ‘Figures in a Landscape’ and ‘The Supposed Being’ occurs in Jennings’ prose poem ‘Report on the Industrial Revolution’, published in the Spring 1937 issue of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*:

The material transformer of the world had just been born. It was trotted out in its skeleton, to the music of a mineral train from the black country, with heart and lungs and muscles exposed to view in complex hideosity. It once ranged wild in the marshy forests of the Netherlands, where the electrical phenomenon and the pale blue eyes connected it with apparitions, demons, wizards and divinities.[[354]](#footnote-354)

In this text, natural and artificial objects are relatively indistinguishable, yet from the context of Jennings’s interest in the impact of the machine-age on civilisation, particularly upon cultural ontologies, it seems likely that the referent here is a defamiliarised locomotive. The trend for poetry to transform its own material into animistic, mythologised subject-matter is parodied in the comparison of the final sentence; it also finds a logical equivalence in the continuity of objects of nature and human inventions. As the train finds its equivalent in the horse, so the poem finds its equivalent in metaphoric and allusive slippages.

Jennings’s thesis relied upon the notion that a fundamental shift in episteme occurred as part of the Industrial Revolution, shifting the referential matter of art’s form to an engagement with the kinds of material reality heralded by the steam train and wider machine revolution. The prose poems produced by Jennings around this period link back to this notion of material change, the ‘material transformer’ referred to in the work above. Intuitions about the unconscious mimesis of structural changes in the economic landscape occurring in art are expressed in his reading of Courbet’s work in his essay ‘The Iron Horse’, published in the Surrealist little magazine *London Bulletin* in 1938. Courbet’s work *The Cliffs of Etretat*, for Jennings, represents the landscape as an index of economic reality: ‘Courbet’s “Cliffs of Etretat” is practically a large coloured illustration to Lyell’s *Manual of Elementary Geology.*’[[355]](#footnote-355) We could almost say that Jennings’s understanding of aesthetic ontology is based on the notion of an ekphrasis that he suggests is inherited from the innovation of machinic industry that models its capacities on those of animals (see ‘Iron Horse’, 22). The notion of replacing animal energy with the animism of machines motivates Jennings’s claim that realisms of an industrial type substituted for the poetic animisms of an earlier generation of poets. Abstractions of the modern avant-gardes, such as cubism, are considered as the realisation of this historic development, so ‘The point of creating pseudo-machines was not as an exploitation of machinery but as a ‘profanation’ of ‘Art’ parallel to the engineers’ ‘profanation’ of the primitive ‘sacred places’ of the earth’ (28). The first of his ‘Two American Poems’, published in the *London Bulletin* in 1939, portray exactly the scene depicted in Courbet’s picture, unacknowledged, as if to emphasise the sense of silent ekphrasis occurring in the aforementioned process of material change. Again, the form is that of the prose poem:

The hills are like the open down of England – the peaceful herds upon the grassy slopes, the broken sea-washed cliffs, the beach with ever-tumbling surf, the wrecks that strew the shore in pitiful reminder, the crisp air from the sea, the long superb stretch of blue waters – the Graveyard.[[356]](#footnote-356)

The overwhelming sense of this fragment is one of pathos, where nature provides a sense of bland presentation of its likeness to all nature. Categorised as ‘the Graveyard’, capitalised, one sense of this is that nature has been consigned to history, a victim of its representation and its supposed defeat by the forces of industrialisation and aesthetic mediation. A wider criticism, considered in light of Madge’s ironising and re-purposing of English tradition, and Gascoyne’s pervasive theme of negation, seems to be that the pastoralism of English poetry is unsustainable in the face of technological progress, and that forms of poetry need to adapt to reflect alterations in the nature of reality. Jennings moves from geology to excavation to make way for rail development and other heavy industry – the realist artwork then substitutes for preliminary scientific investigation. We can thus infer that realism emerges from a change in the economic base, and thus we can read one strain of British surrealism as being involved in a cultural materialism, in which cultural changes must be understood in relation to material phenomena.

Socialist Realists and Surrealists alike had battled to argue that their respective arts were most capable of representing social reality, specifically the social reality of the working classes. In a retrospective comment on the intentions of the *Left Review* in promoting and producing Socialist Realist literature, Edgell Rickword says:

[I]t was literature that expressed and reflected the actual struggle of the down-trodden, as it were, or could convey by realistic treatment, reportage, their actual conditions of work and communicate their humanity and the plight of their position in a [...] society that was bilious with riches at the top.[[357]](#footnote-357)

Yet the unity of realist content and commitment to particular forms of political agency were being addressed in styles that could be said to feature politico-social commentary and an objective realism as their latent content. The literature produced by the British Surrealists can be seen through a particular, and particularly dialectical, lens, as being a kind of ‘reportage’. Such a connection was made by Christopher Caudwell, in relation to the mass media, which he theorised as being ‘the real *proletarian* literature of today’ (123) and the British Surrealists were perceptive to engage with and imitate these forms in order to subject them to critique (‘because it helps to maintain man in unfreedom and not to express his spontaneous creation’ (123)). The foregoing argument is a retort to the relatively widespread assumption, here raised by Sam Cooper, that British Surrealism ‘never managed to theorise an art form that was both aesthetically challenging and politically committed’ (37). Surprisingly, the poetry of David Gascoyne can be seen to have a strong sense of the political unconscious as its pervasive latent content, while the Mass Observation grouping are seen to manifest their politics concretely in their use of ‘images’ and intertextuality, along with a radical deployment of Romanticism. Samuel Hynes argues that the British Surrealists act as a kind of unconscious mind to thirties writing, ‘a means of expressing not political ideas, but the emotions behind ’30s politics [...] of possible violence and outrage beyond the projections of reason: in short, [they] provided a parabolic method for the social nightmares of the time.’[[358]](#footnote-358) Yet British Surrealism, in the guise explored above, can be seen as entirely *reasoned*, a dialectical point in between Socialist Realism and Bretonian automatism, a point at which representations of mass culture and the power of avant-garde sentiments to insert art into life praxis reached a point of fusion.

**Conclusion**

**The Dialectic of the Real in British Social Realism and the British Poetry Revival: Modernism and its After-Lives**

The art critic John Berger once claimed that there exists ‘no realist style’. As if his readers might have been uncertain of so strident a claim, he argues ‘there is certainly no such thing as a realist subject matter.’[[359]](#footnote-359) If this is the case, then what styles, objectives and contexts pertain to *social realism*, if it exists at all, and what are the grounds for the argument that suggests realism is a genre ripe for reappraisal, as David Tucker proposes? If there is no such thing as a realist subject matter, then what is being represented as reality in the cultural products that feature such ends? What exactly are contemporary Cambridge poets of the British Poetry Revival such as Andrew Crozier writing about when they avowedly seek forms of expression that aim to more accurately deploy language that constructs us as subjects, that becomes our reality?

The foregoing study of modernism has suggested that realist subjects have pervaded the avant-garde styles at the modernist fringe. Despite their lack of adherence to or compatibility with political movements such as Communism, Socialism, Liberalism, and other movements of the political Left, the poets under study manifest a poetic of radical commitment. Jon Silkin contends that the antimony between apolitical, asocial art of perception and ‘propagandistic [...] heuristic or didactic art’ is untenable and false.[[360]](#footnote-360) Hopefully in the chapters that constitute my exploration of a materially-based, politically-committed and socio-culturally realist poetry, the study has gone some way to answering the question posed by Silkin: ‘how might a hermetic or imagistic art be engaged with an art that wanted without compromising its essentiality to be socially orientated, involving, as this does, some move toward the discursive [?]’ (26). Resistances to the aesthetic radicalism offered by modernist experiment, as we witnessed in the staging of a conflict between Socialist Realism and Surrealism in Chapter 4, which I argue is artificial, can be seen to be motivated by decisions manifested in the supposed contradictions in the social body between activism and passivity. Herbert Read, for one, retrospectively states that his decision to turn away from Imagism was motivated by its perceived apolitical form: his argument to ‘shrink from the exotic and decadent,’ he suggests, was a symptom of ‘the contradiction that was being forced on us by our daily experience. We were trying to maintain an abstract aesthetic ideal in the midst of terrorful and inhuman events.’[[361]](#footnote-361) The discursivity of John Rodker’s long poem ‘A C.O.’s Biography’, for instance, seems to approach this difficulty in practice, balancing a narrative quality with moments of heightened imagistic poetic condensation. We can see more clearly in retrospect how Rodker manipulated the material of his personal experiences as political critique. His sense of entrapment in prison reflects in the forced and painful depiction of sado-masochistic relationship types, and the general sense of dislocation is ramified in the fragmentariness of the narrative style and the presentation of the poem on the page in the form of numbered sections.[[362]](#footnote-362) The alienation of the poetic persona speaks of the biopolitical emplotment of the political outsider: ‘Life had ebbed from him, his past was forgotten – / it was a story read in a book’ (119). In this sense, the life-denying instantiation of state power is figured as a kind of literary production; the further that state power coerces the body of the dissident, the closer to artifice becomes the moment of self-reflection. Yet the realism of this poem is not achieved by formally reflecting everyday speech or common existence, it is quite clearly articulated as a paratactic modernist production, not really mimetic but reflective of social and political atomisation, reification – in the instances of flat, affectless presentation – and alienation – in the aggregation of numerous forms of social distance. To refer back to my introductory comments, this may be seen as fairly typical of the modernist ‘new realism’; indeed, for Pound, the new realism would be achieved through an anti-mimetic art:

‘There are few fallacies more common than the opinion that poetry should mimic the daily speech. Works of art attract by a resembling unlikeness. Colloquial poetry is to the real art as the barber’s wax dummy is to sculpture. In every art I can think of we are damned and clogged by the mimetic.’[[363]](#footnote-363)

In the reading of Rodker above, we can see how minor modernism was free to develop forms of structural mimesis that would bear on the social and cultural fabric that they wish to bear upon. A poetry that is neither mimetic nor fully oriented to the formal bricolage or presentation of Pound would seem most likely to be a socially and politically engaged form of hybrid art. Rodker’s is a relatively unambiguous example of the types of political representation available, however. In his writing on drama, we can see how Rodker aimed to manipulate forms of dramatic action to simulate and reproduce states of affectivity that connect to a deeper sense of collectivity in the state of nature.[[364]](#footnote-364) His experiments in *théâtre muet*, staged as dramatic episodes of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, use stock figures to represent emotional states, and as such engage traditional dramatic form, clearly presented as artifice, as being closer in its capacities to a realism of affectivity. The masks of these stock characters can be seen to express a function of the presentation of personal relationships in the poetry, in that social types are creations of social construction and interpellation – they point us to the understanding that personal relationships are being portrayed as reflective of wider collective anxieties.

\* \* \*

Realism in all its guises has perhaps never been as unpopular as a subject of academic study, nor as a style adopted for ‘serious’ contemporary literature, particularly non-mainstream poetry. Attempts to represent reality in forms bearing pretences to authenticity have been broadly considered suspect at least since the advent of critical theory, particularly in postmodernism, which has served to draw attention to the artificiality and contingency of representational strategies. The rendering of ‘authentic’ speaking positions or experiences, especially in poetry, has become a politicised and contested act in the context of a generic crisis or effacement of subjectivity that has deepened in the arts since at least the late nineteenth century. Contemporary realism spells the commercial style of television, popular cultural conservatism, and kitchen sink drama; in other words, the stereotypical style representing, of, or for, the working class. For some, modernist styles have similarly been co-opted by the mainstream as a style or code of advertising – we can see in the contemporary aesthetic moment a unification of both modes in the commercial coding of everyday life. Yet criticism attending the mode of realism, where it exists, most often has an axe to grind of some sort, whether in promoting further cultural pluralism or in bemoaning the saturation of all such cultural forms in capitalist codings, two polarities emerging from reactions to the use of a critically unfashionable form. Though such ready identifications are patent generalisations, they yet speak of the attachments of context that attend the genre, and to displace the typicality of those attachments has become a strategy of some potency. Recognising the plurality (if not the complete non-existence) of realism’s terms reinvigorates the form for both creative and critical deployments. As stated in the introduction, modernism as a term is likewise beset by confusion over its properties of genre, its period, and its producers, not least in the confusion over identifiable properties distinguishing avant-garde from modernist work.[[365]](#footnote-365) The boundaries of these categories seem far more permeable than their border-guards would allow – this study, for one, has considered British writers on the modernist fringe as being engaged in aesthetic practices that bridge divisions of theory and practice, realism and modernism, concrete political engagement and radicalism in style. Such practice can be seen to provide a historical link that crosses the line of late modernism as its denoted periodicity ends in the Second World War and extends into the revivalist modes of poetry created by writers such as Andrew Crozier, Barry MacSweeney and Roy Fisher, work of whom suggests a kind of coda to the foregoing study.

Yet the case for reading ‘modernist’, post- and neo-modernist work as socially realist is only just being made. Readings of British Social Realism in literature are scant. David Tucker’s edited volume of essays on British Social Realism, then, has to seek justification on a number of levels. Tucker’s collection makes a case by evoking the continuing importance of social realism as a form and as a methodology of reading cultural texts. For Tucker, social realism in twentieth-century British arts can be emplotted between the camps of an awareness of the ‘incomprehensibility of the real’ and an ‘anthropology of ourselves’ in practices such as Mass Observation and other so-called self-determining representations.[[366]](#footnote-366) Either way, social realism as a form contains, at its best, a powerful negativity, in that it draws attention to its own constructed nature, reality being the unknowable object of subjective projections, the social being the incommensurable agglomeration of subjective existence(s) contained in that reality. Social realist representations are therefore transformative, with the presentation of the social ‘fact’ remaining dependent on the position of the observed and the observer, and formal choices that betray ‘complex and shifting dynamics of social, political, economic and familial power’ (9). Historicising textual artefacts, as the six essays in this collection do, following the pithy conspectus of the introduction by Tucker, seems to be germane to the contingency of social realism itself, which emerges out of engagements with context. The ‘mutable complexity’ (Tucker, 10) of the form requires a mutability in the terms denoting the form, so, as Tucker argues, critics are invited to insert plasticity into understandings and evaluations in the texts under scrutiny in order to broaden understandings of social realism as a feature of texts as well as a definition of them. Each essay here invites the question, posed by Stephen Lacey, ‘what is there in this [text] that is social realist?’[[367]](#footnote-367) Thus, a new disciplinary focus may go some way to remedying the misprisions of critics who would define the form as unfashionable and problematic:

Descriptions of realism [...] have been all too often subjected to a postmodernist caricature that tended to define realism as the naive and somewhat embarrassing aspirant to transparency and meaning, against which subtler and more up to date isms might measure their own excellence. (11)

Following Jameson, Tucker promotes the ‘demiurgic’, experimental and excoriating potentiality of realist practice, as well as its active engagement with ‘the visceral’ (12). Social realism may be seen through this lens to have affinities with a more politically engaged form of modernism, a marginal feature that mirrors the marginality of such a form in contemporary scholarship. Each critic here also links such practice to active relations with social reality – it is not only an imitative or reflective medium, but one containing the power to act on the world within defined conditions of knowledge. This allows, for instance, Rod Mengham to trace a genealogy of minor tropes within classically realist texts that reveal the concurrence of post-war ideology and social actions within those texts and the representational strategies utilised by their authors, while Keston Sutherland evokes a kind of manifesto advocating the adoption of a *social* *realist literary criticism*, which should emerge, perhaps in a utopian gesture, out of an engagement with poetry that ‘invigorates interest in complex material relationships.’[[368]](#footnote-368) If a reinvigoration of the study of social realism is required, then the breadth of reference and depth of analysis of the concept of the generic category in evidence in the studies collected in Tucker’s volume are an incitement to that process.

Of the cultural forms encompassed by social realism, film has received the most consistent scrutiny. Samantha Lay’s *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (2002) avers that social realism has frequently characterised British screen culture since the documentary movement of the nineteen thirties and continuing to this day, despite an increased focus on the private and personal rather than on the socio-political that previously defined the term. Changes wrought on the form are seen to be historically determined by economic changes, especially in Paul Dave’s chapter in Tucker’s volume, which sees neoliberalism as a deforming influence on social realism’s techniques and its status as a generator of critique. While Dave’s argument ranges widely over pertinent material, providing a comprehensive assessment of approaches to realism from Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton, integration of theoretical perspectives and readings of film texts is strained by division, especially in the author’s reading of Shane Meadows’s film work, some of which does not necessarily fit notions of ‘common culture’ (see 34-41). Nor is Dave’s conception of neoliberalism properly defined – some statements beg questions. For example, Dave writes, ‘Bullying, as something structurally integral to neoliberalism, is [...] brought into poignant focus’ (40) in Meadows’s work, yet the integrity of bullying to such political ideologies has not been evidenced. Another way of reading Meadows’s films could be as productions of neoliberalism themselves, rather than as instancing resistances to the political mainstream. Viewing films as diagnostic rather than symptomatic pushes Dave’s argument towards a validation of a kind of artistic authenticity whereby social realism exists as a political outside to what is evoked as a fundamentalist, omnipotent logic of neoliberal capitalism. For experimental neo-modernist writers such as Keston Sutherland, this accusation would seem to betray the engagement with political poetry being undertaken in the formal choices made in creating the art-work, which tropes jargon-filled media culture as a re-presentation of the discourse of a schizophrenic society.[[369]](#footnote-369)

One question that arises here, and elsewhere in Tucker’s collection, is the extent to which social realism and some social realist readings fetishise their subject-matter. Whereas some social realist works such as *A Taste of Honey* can be viewed as being so defined ‘by virtue of the people it represents, and its refusal to adopt a moral stance towards them’ (65), as Stephen Lacey writes, the films chosen as exemplary by Dave, such as *This Is England* and *Red Road*, are explicitly moralistic, both in their message and in their treatment of key characters. *This Is England*’s Combo, for instance, can be nothing other than a folk devil, whose ‘role is to activate the fault line of historical weakness in the working class idea of the social’ (35), a determination that erodes the potential complexity of material relationships available to representation. Limitations like these may indicate the extent to which social realism has become hegemonic as a language of the mainstream arts, in film, television, theatre and literature – a trend that is observed by Gillian Whiteley in her chapter on visual art. Radical theatre of the nineteen nineties staked its radicalism on a dehiscence of social meaning, reacting against the standardisation of techniques of mimesis, naturalism and verisimilitude, as Stephen Lacey explores in his chapter on post-war social realist theatre. Though social realism emerged in the theatre as a reaction against traditional values of solidarity in the post-war settlement, it became, after sixties revolutionary fervour and seventies individualism, more and more allied with a British state that validated the homogeneity of social values, to the extent that audiences for realist productions became predominantly bourgeoise (63-4). As social realism turned inside, towards the home and the domestic, so did social realist theatre reach its widest audiences – Trevor Griffiths, for instance, committed himself to the ‘strategic penetration’ (71) of mainstream cultural institutions in the mid-seventies. This turn to the personal came at the expense of radicalism in form, a deficit that would lead to a wholesale restructuring of social realist texts. ‘Naturalism’ came to be associated with illusionism and artifice in the theatre, as in other arts such as poetry, where, similarly, cultural producers of the latter half of the twentieth century issued fervent denunciations of cultural forms that speak *for* a social grouping, or that construct identities based on particular stencil outlines. The Cambridge school of poetry, in recent years, has been at the forefront of such reformulations of social representation, acting on ethical imperatives such as those raised by Sam Ladkin, in reference to the poetry of Keston Sutherland: ‘How do events excluded from the experience I call “my life” relate to my desire, to what “I want”?’[[370]](#footnote-370) Theatre increasingly engages with such a radical notion of ‘social extension’ (a phrase of Williams’s used often in Tucker’s book), as can be seen in productions such as Nicolas Kent’s documentary play based on the Macpherson Report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, *The Colour of Justice* (1999) and Roy Williams’s *Sing Yer Heart Out* (2002), which takes national sport as a metaphor for cultural, social and racial division. Yet while the former allows ‘reality’ to dictate the terms of its own difficulty, its own comprehension through social discourses beyond the theatre, the latter remains allied to a notion of the theatre as metonymic device standing in for reality. Again, the form is seen to have multiple limitations, some of which arise ironically from its formal plurality.

Mengham approaches the subject with an appropriate negativity. His examples address ‘the relationship between the individual and social existence and the very grounds of the social’ (86), rather than conceive a social realism as sufficient in itself as an adequately representational form. Form and content are determined by historical and economic factors: ‘The emergence of social realism was coincident with the disillusionment of a populist culture that had both won the war and lost the peace’ (81). Formally constructed out of growing inequalities of post-war society, the texts under consideration are read as part of an ‘elegiac inquest into the kinds of loss experienced in an era of affluence’ (81). Social realism pertains here to numerous discursive markers of a pervasive social unrest ramifying under the linguistic surface. Semantic residues of loss, alienation and withdrawal are unpacked through close reading of figurative language suggesting economic hardship, insolvency and a broader existential sense of inauthenticity, infected by the ideology of war and compounded by individual loss of insight. In thoroughly investigating cultural and historical reality as they impact on representational strategies, especially through sustained close reading, Mengham mines the controverted seam of social realism as a zone of contradiction, where unity equals or is traduced by disunity, where perception reveals only unreality. Undoing the commonplaces of realism and working class representation – turning them over, sifting them for residues – becomes a realist strategy in itself.

The concept of social realism contained in Mengham’s analysis could be applied to Roy Fisher’s poem ‘For ‘realism’’, especially in the sense that the poem is haunted by the contradiction of the representational strategy evoked in the title, which is eponymous of that strategy.[[371]](#footnote-371) Separated off from its first line by a colon, imprinting its graphic space as if it implied a curatorial bracket, the poem proceeds after the further bracketing off done by way of the scare-quotes surrounding ‘realism’. The semi-colon of the third line seems to equate to a shift into the space of industry depicted, a ‘lamp factory on a summer night’. Fisher’s opening stanza relies upon a dialectic of light and sight that raises the question of authorship – does the poem shed light on the scene, or is the light represented self-sufficient as a presentation? Workers are depicted as one with their landscape, much as British Surrealists such as Gascoyne and Madge presented geographical landscape as socio-political. Just as the ‘lamp factory on a summer night’ presumably sheds little light, so the workers are depicted as having little resistance to their movement to ‘cracks for them to go to’. The effect of the amalgamated scene, however, is suggestive of the ‘dispersing’ of energy first of all from the energies released in industrial production and, second, in the political energies of a conditioned workforce. As Simon Jarvis has noted, the process of poetic production mirrors the processes of commodity production, in that ‘realism is worked over until it produces an object with value.’[[372]](#footnote-372) Production seems then to resist the fragmentation of the long sentence that composes the three-quarters of the poem, broken as it then is by a solitary figure of a suited man ‘facing into a corner, straddling, / keeping his shoes dry.’ A medial pause is drawn into significance with the full-stop, succeeded by ‘Women step, / talking, over the stream’. Breaking into human action, the poem then proceeds to elaborate on the abstract ‘dignity’ which hovers above the suited man who converses with his workmates. Glimpses of human determination break up the flowing of figurative language here, disrupting the conceptual negativity hinted at in the evocation of an industrial landscape without ‘conscience’, but rather an evocative absence: ‘what concentrates in the warm hollow’. The final stanza’s epiphanic trajectory into a sunset recoils in bathos, which the reader should have expected in the penultimate stanza’s *reflection* on the absences suggested by a wan light refracted through windows, ‘lake-stretches of silver / gashed out of tea-green shadows’. Rather than suggesting that the poem take a message from this industrial scene, Fisher’s perspective fundamentally alters by reverting to the discursive:

A conscience

builds, late, on the ridge. A realism

tries to record, before they’re gone

what silver filth these drains have run.

Again, a punctuated medial caesura signals the tonal shift, here from the blend of abstract and material embodied in the emotive landscape to a reflective sense of the poet’s art, presented in a gesture of futility and ephemerality. This is one realism of many, yet it shares the conflicted sense of realism’s inability to document the lived experience of workers in an industrial landscape beyond reporting on activity within that landscape. Fisher turns attention to the instability of an art that claims through its artifice to represent the real – the admission of futility confirms the commitment of this work to its task, and to the representation of material reality, despite itself. We could also consider how the breakdown or acknowledged crisis of representation that this signals reflects the alterations in the industrial and economic fabric of the moment represented. Conscience here has been read as the motivating force against which everyday representation attempts its act of re-presentation, ‘associated with a bureaucratic programme of rebuilding (and consequent rehousing and uprooting).’[[373]](#footnote-373) While the poem clearly deals with the conflicting processes of transforming and recording, the final line’s ‘silver filth’ suggests the inherent luminescence of the scene as presented; not simply a diamond in the rough, this signals the transformative potential inherent in such allusive congeries of natural and human-made materialities. Again, we might want to reflect back to modernist precursors in remembering where this study has located the new realist impulse that organises such care in its approach to the real that, despite the hesitations of poetry at the threshold of this kind of illumination, allows material reality its own kind of voice in presentation, a balancing signalled by Peter Barry:

The ludic dimension of his (and all modernists’) work is of little interest unless it is in constant tension with the realist impulse (as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*), for the subversive text which undercuts and questions realism must also provide us with the material on which these subversive processes must operate.[[374]](#footnote-374)

Transitioning between the two polarities in this formulation seems too readily diagnostic of what I have suggested Fisher’s poem achieves, but it certainly helps in the contextualisation of certain contemporary impulses borne out of social ruins that connect the work of figures of fringe modernism and later practitioners. Realism can be viewed, quite clearly and justifiably, as a suspect feature, especially in texts that set out with intentions of being, featuring or speaking to ‘the real’. Too often, as Keston Sutherland observes, the realistic mode over-simplifies the complexities of social existence, making social realism a particularly difficult form for art to take. Sutherland defines social realism as being against commercial and establishment pressures, self-reflexive in its radicalism, self-critical, and, importantly, sceptical: ‘sceptical about the value and the tendencies of poetic artifice, it is sceptical about rhetoric, rhyme, versification and metaphor, and its scepticism is not logical or linguistic, simply – not just a professional scepticism about semiosis and the power of words to designate objects or ‘signifieds’ – but moral and political’ (103). It is also concerned with the power of artifice to affect actual change in the real world, and to attend to the suffering compounded and sustained by late capitalism. Sutherland acknowledges the enormity of such claims, especially in light of poetry’s general absence from debates about cultural realism. Yet, as his subtle reading of Tom Leonard’s poem *nora’s place* demonstrates, a reading attentive to the formal wealth of properly socially realist work is one that leads to an active engagement with the complexities of reality and to an awareness of the formal poverty of other work generally considered ‘realist’. Not for the first time in criticism originating in the ‘Cambridge school’, Larkin is singled out as being representative of a stifling influence on both reading and writing practices, whereas

Realist poetry not only sustains and progressively heightens that interest [in material relationships] without trying to box up its emotional content into the form of a sentiment, but also (and this is the decisive thing) it passionately advocates interest in the world, in the critical expectation that the poem will encourage readers to outgo and transgress against the limits of its own analytic competence. (118)

Leonard’s poem exemplifies this in its attention to its perhaps unexpected ambiguities and generosity of spirit. Social realism’s felicity, then, lies in its capacity to encompass states of being in relation to reality otherwise inaccessible to the reader, viewer, audience or consumer either through the representing medium, or through their being in the world. Thus returning to the power of signifying practices, semiosis: ‘to specify reality must compulsorily be to simplify it, not simply because language in general, or in this particular case, is somehow inadequate to the job of specifying reality, but because reality itself is complex precisely in how it coerces us into simplifying it’ (125).

The rhetorical flair and conceptual difficulty of Sutherland’s argumentation, not to say his ideas themselves, are familiar to the traditional close reading practices practiced and promoted by the loosely-defined Cambridge school. Sutherland on Larkin is reminiscent of Andrew Crozier on Larkin, the former’s argument on the bathos of Larkin’s poetry, a ‘strangulating’ (Tucker, 118) influence on contemporary British poetry, advancing on the latter’s deconstruction of Larkinian/Movement pathos over two essays collected in volumes edited by Alan Sinfield from 1983 and 2000. Each writer is thoroughly critical of notions of canonicity in British literary criticism, both have written texts that aim to preserve the complexity of the socially real from the reductions of a cultural core, and both are poets as well as critics. The Cambridge school that both are said to naturally adhere to lost a central figure upon Crozier’s death in April 2008. His reasoned objections to the mainstream made him a champion of alternative and experimental poetries, especially poets recovered from obscurity, such as Carl Rakosi and John Rodker, and figures from the transatlantic margins. Like other Cambridge figures, he saw modernism as an unfinished project of formal experimentation; his introduction to his edition of Rakosi’s *Poems 1923-1941* of 1995 asks ‘How much of modernism went unenacted in its permanent record of published works?’ (190). We can therefore trace the tendencies, techniques and concerns of this contemporary grouping directly back into an unreconstructed radicalism situated in entombed modernist poetics. Involved in publishing from an early age, in his guardianship of The Ferry Press from 1964, and the founder, in 1966, of the important little magazine *The English Intelligencer*, Crozier was a great promoter of poetry in general. An editor, critic, benefactor and teacher, he steered critical attention towards objectivism and language poetry, and, perhaps in an imitation of the market logic of modernism, towards the Cambridge poets who mutually supported and promoted one another’s enterprises. Ian Brinton’s *Andrew Crozier Reader* collects a substantial grouping of his critical essays, fulfilling Michael Schmidt’s intention to publish a ‘Selected Writings’, alongside a comprehensive reprinting of his poetry from the early 1960s to 2004, correcting the absence of his work from current publishers’ printing lists.[[375]](#footnote-375) This is a substantial project, given the dispersed nature of the published output, but one that was certainly thought necessary by at least one of his champions, Nicholas Johnson, who, in an obituary published in the *Independent*, attributed the rigor and influence of Crozier’s critical and practical work to his ‘precise gift as a poet’ (1). Yet if it is clear, from the high profile critical work, that Crozier the critic has a degree of importance and influence – Schmidt writes that such work ‘dig[s] far deeper and uncover[s] far more than most of the critical writers I admire’ (4) – then it remains to be seen what reception and kind of longevity may be expected of the wider poetic oeuvre. Where the critical writing inhabits the cognitive landscape evoked in the material under scrutiny, methodically working through byzantine logics, with what Schmidt refers to as a ‘Ridingeque insistence’ (4), the earlier poetry especially can appear overdetermined by attachments to the direct landscape evoked through the identity of which it is a part. In other words, an uncomfortable relationship evolves between the experimental thrust of the linguistic surface and the awkwardness of the domestic and personal subject-matter. *Pleats*, for instance, almost falls into a diaristic mode, and, in some senses, comes across as being intermittently *dull*, inflected with pathos. The subject-matter returns, as it does in other poems, to scenes of domestic interiors, car travel and descriptions of married life, the triviality of everyday life presented in a trivial way. This makes segues into metaphysical speculation appear forced, as in:

...You return to sleep

diffusing heat and moisture. The other

person I sleep with I am as ever

beside you drawn into the breaths

you take. Not speaking. Hearing such space

that slowly stills into an ambient

jointure of being. Here. Far off.

The world rises into us. (126)

The distillation of identities occurring here as two people are figured sleeping next to one another is deftly achieved, though the superfluity of detail, such as ‘Not speaking’ and the general drift of consciousness as the poetic persona succumbs to sleep, opening up the poem to the chthonic state of night, do not tell us any more about such experiences as we perhaps already know. The identities presented in *Pleats* are ones of civilised subjecthood, the interior monologue of an academic, absorbing lessons about social life through an inhalation of new realist modernism.

Brinton’s edition includes some discursive context to accompany the setting of the poems, throwing light on the movement of Crozier’s life and art through time, providing biographical detail as well as reviews and responses by figures such as J. H. Prynne and Douglas Oliver. Prynne’s contributions are definitive of the esoteric streak of Cambridge poetics, and frequently instance the power of criticism to make of its material something rich and strange, where that material might otherwise appear ironically prosaic. Prynne’s reaction to ‘How Does It Go?’ of 1965, an occasional poem on the memory of a brief dalliance, as brief as melting snow (*groan*), is particularly stunning in this regard:

What strikes me about the piece [...] is that the schism you speak of is very nearly held across. Not entirely, at such short notice; but there is a shape which is workable. The nub is crucially in ‘the day / ’s’ and the arrival which this brings off. So we come to it as the allegory you’ve spoken of, the adverbial phrase full of grammar and other people’s language, which across that vacant line is swivelled to be a vessel for loveliness. (39)

In terms of the task outlined by Sutherland above, of preserving the complexity of social and material relations, Prynne’s example is excessive in its reading of complexity, perhaps too willing to recognise wit, reference and formal innovation all the more to revel in the circumlocutions of prosodic logic presented in his argument. Prynne’s formidable attentiveness highlights the capacities of methodologies of close reading, which are similarly much in evidence in Crozier’s critical work (see his comparative close reading of Larkin and Fisher in ‘On British Poetry’ (circa p. 210) and Oppen’s objectivism in ‘On Objectivism’ (circa p. 200)), and which may in one consideration link to the kinds of critical authority otherwise challenged in neo-modernist or language poetry. In terms of a realism, this deals with poetic material as an object in need of its own objective reconstruction. But Prynne’s criticism invites bafflement as much as enlightenment, an accusation that has similarly attended his poetic work. The question of comprehensibility perennially returns in connection with work in both poetry and prose from the school of Prynne and Crozier. A text that avowedly stakes its claim to reality through functions of language that raise the very unreality of reality, or the foundational nature of language on constructions of identity, and yet which uses language in such an abstract way that it alienates the very people it aims to ethically address, is surely problematic. This is not to say that the Cambridge school fails in its task(s), but that it can seem to be an expression of an ironic elitism. Incomprehensibility is one familiar readerly reaction, where the writer might otherwise be defensive. Sutherland addresses this as a pervasive strain of British ‘antimodernism,’[[376]](#footnote-376) which, through a conformist mentality, brands difficult art an offence against a prescribed ‘realistic mentality.’ Yet the bafflement argument seems to have been well expressed by Emily Witt, who suggests that too frequent a recourse to aporia can leave the reader in an insurmountable chasm:

the poets felt that the very act of defying the language we spoke to one another and read in a newspaper had the power to reveal (as W.S. Graham once put it) what the language is using us for – if it was language that was catastrophically exploiting us – then, well . . . the question remained: What was the point if nobody understood what you were writing, however broad a definition you want to give to the word “understood”?[[377]](#footnote-377)

The social realism of the poem as it interpolates the reader, then, can unwittingly turn itself against its own best intentions. Yet that would be to traduce the inherency of difficulty as a foundational principle of the challenge presented by the art considered in my study of modernism. At its best, however, Crozier’s work generates a painterly reality, akin to an abstract expressionist canvas, wherein philosophical, personal and scientific discourses commingle and mutually enlarge the scope of that reality. As Jeremy Harding observed, the ripple-effects of Crozier’s handling of logic and image ‘has the effect of ascribing thought and emotion not to the speaking subject (the poet) but to the processes of the poem’ (Crozier, 3). ‘The Veil Poem’ (1972), *High Zero* (1978), and ‘Free Running Bitch’ (2009), featuring long poetic sequences, have received most critical attention, and it is easy to see why, in their patient unfolding of multiple layers of thought and being. *High Zero* engages with the Prynnean form, titled after Prynne’s *High Pink on Chrome* and John James’s *Striking the Pavilion of Zero* and parodying and sampling elements of their work to situate his numerically-precise long sequence of 24 poetic units of 24 lines.[[378]](#footnote-378) Crozier’s analysis of his own poetic practice as a kind of autobiography in which the biographical is traduced by the poet’s presentation of that code of identity as *material* rather than narrative (see Crozier, 136) seems to bear comparison with the close reading strategies mentioned above, in that they both ‘foreground the act of combination,’ in the words of Andrew Duncan (139). In that sense Crozier’s poems are similar to the critical essays, which deliberate to the point of intense scrutiny on what their subject matter is doing, and how that is dependent on any number of contextual factors. This seems to signal the confluence of postmodern and traditional literary practice, both of which might be said to express wariness of master codes or narratives in preference for ‘drawing attention away from the largest unit as the ultimate verification of what meaning may be’ (140). Poetic (and critical) units enter new combinations as they are placed in different contextual fields – as *High Zero* repeats poetic material it creates the effect of re-composition. But here we find some irony in the ‘experiment’ being waged on material: Crozier mentions the essentiality of prosody for his understanding and practice of poetry, the absence of which, to him, would render poetic language oblique (142). So Crozier’s claims against the established literary canon, direct or indirect in the kinds of poetry he engages, especially as presented in his partner essays ‘Resting on Laurels’ and ‘Thrills and Frills’, can seem conflicted in that they might depend on a very limited sense of the ‘matter’ of poetry and of the kind of reader envisaged by the poet as an addressee of such limited concerns, who might have the capacity to read *High Zero* with the sense of *déjà vu* that Crozier imagines issuing from his concept of material borrowing. We might question the lack of footnotes here – perhaps Brinton’s discursive paratext that precedes the poem betrays this anxiety. Despite the musicality of the long line that evolves most fluidly away from the quatrains that open the poem, *High Zero* resists interpretation on its own terms particularly in its insistence that the reader appreciate its perceptual apparatus as an engagement with phenomenology. The ‘rare gases’ of the first poetic unit that signify the contents of lighting equipment, the air that separates objects from the perceiver, and the occlusion of vision in its detachment from romantic notions of illumination, seem to compound the sense of stifling that I earlier suggested, rather unfairly, issues from an academicist poetic position. Again, a sense of pathos attends the concluding stanza of the opening unit: ‘And for ever and a day runs on / at arm’s length, held with scents / too vivid to see: beneath / the reckless apex of that hope’ (143). If the material used in this poem is as Crozier stated, a means to divorce meaning from its point of issue in the organisation of the human mind, then the re-combination of that material from its experimental fragmentation yields predictable results for a poet who frequently imagines the object world as an overwhelming site that overruns the bounds of human perception. The time of the object world continues to outstrip the hope of the poet attempting to grasp its potential, here depicted in a stasis suggested by the invisible materiality of the gaseous. The ‘apex of that hope’ seems to coincide with the horizon of ‘conscience’ depicted in Fisher’s poem as considered above – anxiety over the limits of human emotion in connection with the phenomenological raise the concept of their production in the relation to that object world.

As Andrew Duncan has suggested elsewhere, the political interpolations sit uneasily with this philosophical sense; he points to a late poetic unit in the sequence beginning ‘There they were surrounded / by their infidelities’ (157) as ‘fraught’ by its deflation of the symbolic value of the poem as it attempts a political observation about the cyclical nature of political representation.[[379]](#footnote-379) This sense of awkward judgement seems to issue from the poem’s own sense that the political offends the visionary quality of perceptive illumination, or attempted insight, and the simple *jouissance* of embodied existence: ‘Their nudity is a dirty joke / the reckless apex of that hope’ (157). The repeated line is analeptic, inserted here to remind us of the poetic crisis evoked in the first sequence; the facile rhyme foregrounds the nullity of the political gesture, the ‘o’ reminding us of the zero of the title. Difficulties of this nature suggest the limits to which a poetry of philosophical and scientific exactitude and phenomenological investigation can manifest the kind of political force understood as central to the genealogy of modernism traced in this study. The political ‘consciousness raised like a / speculative loan’ compounds this sense that political representations are considered as expressions of an identity that defrauds its own creator, and that leads the human subject into debt: ‘they ask for more than they can give’ (157).

To end on a note of comparison, we could contrast Crozier’s reluctance to entertain the political to the position adopted by another poet of the Poetry Revival who made of the visceral a political art, Barry MacSweeney. MacSweeney’s poems are ‘state of the nation’ screeds, inflected with the reportorial sense that he would have gained from his career as a journalist for the *Kentish Times* and Bradford’s *Telegraph and Argus*. As John Wilkinson suggests in flagging up the poet’s immersion in the ‘very midden where false authenticity is generated,’[[380]](#footnote-380) the politics of bearing witness here are tinged with a powerful negativity generated by incorporating and assimilating material for the processes of inoculation by the poet’s generated sense of auto-immunity, which not only consumes its political foe, but then mobilises the destructive energy of the pathogen as an attack on the very institution of poetry. One such ‘state of the nation bulletin’, ‘Colonel B’, written in 1978-79, is dedicated to J. H. Prynne.[[381]](#footnote-381) Yet MacSweeney’s engagement is with the political Prynne rather than the artificer, allowing free expression to a violent impulse of protest. This modality differs in important ways from the political unconscious that underscores the fringe modernist work explored in previous chapters here – rather, it brings to the fore an *id* of political and cultural information that swamps the poetic organisation. Wilkinson has written convincingly of the movement of MacSweeney’s thought, though the following sentence opens with a false dichotomy which this study has been careful to reject: ‘MacSweeney’s writing seeks to move out of modernist aesthetics towards a political engagement, and at the same time suffers the inquisitive tentacles both of secular forms of truth which render subjective particularity a mere sociological or linguistic construction, and of laws which render political and aesthetic acts nugatory – particularly the invisible hand of the market’ (92-3). So the invasion of discourses that structures ‘Colonel B’, presented as a kind of urban poetic graffiti, signals something like the enjoinment of aesthetics for political ends, while at the same time signalling the constant effacement of a coherent political agency. The opening section depicts a Medusa figure ensconced in a bureaucratic nightmare scene, where

[...]Blind

men crawl. White

sticks click, venom. Walking

men see too many politics. Commons

 pin-time. Shredding machines

 hot with use.[[382]](#footnote-382)

The indentation of this stanza reflects the coalescence of a political microclimate reflective of the wider bureaucratic organisation of society being undertaken by the conservative government of the time. Fracturing of political agency is signalled in the line break separating the enjambed ‘blind men’; here, men crawl in a misogynistic vision of female authoritarianism later referred to as ‘*The Maggie Beast*’ (93).[[383]](#footnote-383) Romantic visions of courtly love and passionate excess or escape are glimpsed, but never seen as anything more than poetic codes in a stage-managed purgatory. Perhaps we could compare the corporeal shock of some of MacSweeney’s lines with the sexually frank imagery of Mina Loy’s ‘Songs to Joannes’:

Butchers

all I see. Flesh hanging

off the bone & hooks. Burning

books. Taj Mahals

of muttshit, people

eating anthrax virus. Horned

fuckdust plugs their eyes. (89)

As in Fisher and Crozier, a dialectic of vision suffuses these lines. While the reader is presented with an imagery of grotesque overload, the ‘people’ depicted are blind. In this case, they are blinded by the residues of a pornographic culture of waste and material excess. Consumption is envisaged as a kind of coprophilia, depicting this commercial culture of the public sphere as shockingly abject. The poem as a whole is too densely allusive to unpack for the purposes of this conclusion, but we can see how the jostling of registers presented in MacSweeney’s poetry repeatedly stages the poetic material as bathetic in order to structure a politicisation of the form. Moments of allusion are presented as infected by their reception as part of a totalising commercial culture: ‘I to the Qwood muste goe because there is more cash in It’ (*sic*, 90). Tripping medieval song becomes an avenue of profit, not only in the logic of the poem, but also in the economics of poetry production, against which MacSweeney militates. These are ‘dreams that clash’ (91), and yet they coalesce into the form of a master script that ‘We / learn page one, page three, banner trash’ (91). Codes learned in books – ‘middle english sense’ (91) – are now the commercial codings of the spectacular mass media – page three unfolding as the sexist tabloid media – and the empty epithets of political slogans or banners. Finally, the invasion of the land of Cuthbert and Bede, geographically positioning the work as authored by a semi-autobiographical narrative sensibility originating in the North-East of England, is a cultural substitution of Vikings for Margaret Thatcher: ‘stainless bint is number 10’ (92). As if reluctant to formally name Thatcher directly, the poem stutters as ‘private practice thrives’: ‘Weep in drizzle / of raincoat doubled majorities. THE MAGGIES BEATS. THE MAGGIE BOEAST. // *The Maggie Beast*’ (93). Her coming is portrayed as an apocalyptic event, a horror metamorphosing out of modern and ancient languages, that traduces the imaginary invested in the poetic sensibility offended here, and the North-East’s history and mythology: ‘Albion, a new geography / Albion, to be repealed’ (92). The poem ends on a note of complete dejection, as plaintive and logical as the prosody in which it is delivered: ‘Up for sale / we go, driven into / roots / by blood & silence / of our lives’ (94). Any rhizomatic sense of liberation in the badinage of discourse is dispelled here as a fascicular fascism obliterates any sense of self-determination envisaged in the dejected and violent socius represented in the poem. So while the realism of Fisher and Crozier takes material reality as its testing ground for a politics of representation, MacSweeney’s poetry really connects as the contemporary horizon of the sidelined, minorised modernist poets of the inter-war period – their politics finally issues as a social realism that has to admit the almost complete domination of political agency by commercial and political codes that obscure the capacity for collective action.

Were it not for this complete extinction of hope, this poetry might provide some kind of guide in the reconstruction of genuinely representative collectivity of which contemporary society is in desperate need. The minor modernist writers considered in this study have more to teach us yet.

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3. Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1998); Rachel Potter, *Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligensia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have Benjamin’s theory of ‘the author as producer’ in mind here: see Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, in his *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: NLB, 1977) pp. 85-103 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. cf. Benjamin, p. 87 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Andrew Crozier, ‘Introduction’, in John Rodker, *Poems and Adolphe 1920*, ed. by Andrew Crozier (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. vii [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Drew Milne, ‘Modernist Poetry in the British Isles’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, eds. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 147-162, p. 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Milne, *ibid*, p. 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cuddy-Keane, Melba, ‘Global Modernisms’, in Bradshaw, Daviland, Dettmar, Kurin (ed.s). *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (Maldon, MA; Oxford; Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 558-564, p. 561 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Brian Nichol, ‘Postmodernism’, in Bradshaw 2006, pp. 565-578, p. 570 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937; 1973), p. 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Caudwell, *ibid*, p. 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. see Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Antonio Gramsci, ‘The conquest of the state’, trans. by Michael Carney, in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 12 July 1919;

http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1919/07/conquest-state.htm, accessed 01/05/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gramsci, *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See North, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. North, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. see Rachel Potter, *Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy Of Modernism: A Study Of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984),p. ix [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Potter, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Potter, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Potter, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. John Gray, *Liberalism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Potter, p. 6, my emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Potter, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Potter, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Potter, p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Sascha Bru, *Democracy, Law, and the Modernist Avant-Gardes: Writing in the State of Exception* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Bru, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bertolt Brecht, ‘Against Georg Lukács’, in *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. ‘Brecht does not destroy ‘autonomous’ art and put a new functional art in its place. On the contrary, he makes art even more autonomous, because, by using it didactically, emphasising the ‘primacy of lesson over...form’, he makes it even more formal instead of more effective.’ Gillian Rose, ‘The Dispute Over Modernism’, in Francis Barker (ed.), *1936: The Sociology of Literature Volume I – The Politics of Modernism* (University of Essex: 1979), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Milne, p. 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rose, p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (London: Blackwell, 2006), p. 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Altieri, p. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a fuller discussion of the alliance of decadent with modernist styles, implied in this critique, see Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995), p. 60 *passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Nathalie Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* (New York: McPherson, 1998), p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Rochelle Rives, ‘Mary Butts, Modernism, and the Etiquette of Placement’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 12:4 (2005), p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Laura O’Connor. ‘Neighborly Hostility and Literary Creoles: The Example of Hugh MacDiarmid’, *Postmodern Culture*, 15:2, (2005), pp. 11-32, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Milne, 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) ; Jane Goldman, *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Brian Cheyette, ‘Constructions of ‘the Jew’’ in *English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1870-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Ian Patterson, ‘Translation and John Rodker’, *Translation and Literature* 12, 2003, pp. 88-113 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Armstrong, p. 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Armstrong, p. 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Armstrong, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. ‘I note that you give Leautréamont as being 1846-74 (as does Remy de Gourmont) whereas Philippe Soupault, in his preface to the edition of Poesies recently published under the auspices of the Dadaists, give 1850-70.’ V. [Harry] Grimsditch-Smith to John Rodker, 31 May 1922, Harry Ransom Center, John Rodker Papers Box 40, folder 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. For instance, a late letter from Pound in Rodker’s archive develops a notion that anti-Semitism originates in his perception that ‘jews [sic] differ from one another. [...] Pogroms and other outrages [...] occur from FORGETTING this basic proposition’ (Ezra Pound to John Rodker, undated (c. 1954), Harry Ransom Center Archive, Box 39, Folder 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics Of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud To Cage* (Princeton; Guildford, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. John Rodker, *Poems and Adolphe 1920*, ed. by Andrew Crozier (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible (eds.), *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Dominic Williams, *Modernism, Antisemitism and Jewish Identity in the Writing and Publishing of John Rodker*, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Leeds, 2004, p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Wyndham Lewis, *The Apes of God* (London: Arthur Press, 1930), pp. 143-44 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ian Patterson, 'John Rodker, Julias Ratner and Wyndham Lewis: The Split-Man Writes Back', in A. Gasiorek, A. Reeve-Tucker and N. Waddell (eds.), *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), p. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Crozier, in Rodker, *Poems*, p. 182, *n*. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Crozier, in Rodker, *Poems*, p. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Crozier, intro., Rodker, *Poems*, p. viii [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Crozier, intro., Rodker, *Poems*, p. xi [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Edwards, p. 274 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Edwards, p. 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Wyndham Lewis, ‘NOTE ON TYROS’, *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, No. 1 (London: The Egoist Press, 1921), p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Lewis, *Tyro I*, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Ibid*, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Quoted in Edwards, p. 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Edwards, p. 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Rodker, *Poems*, p. 125 and p. 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. John Rodker, ‘Discussion: The “Others” Anthology’, *The Little Review* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Sept.-Dec. 1920), p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Rodker 1996, p. 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Tyro I, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Tyro I, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. C.f. Peter Lawson, ‘John Rodker: Minority Modernist’, *Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein* (London; Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2006), p. 77: ‘Though Rodker’s Jewishness is not explicitly identified in [Lewis’s letter to Pound, July 1915], I suggest that Lewis seems provoked to atavistically medieval slanders against the ‘poisonous’, together with modern disgust (‘repellently’) towards ‘dirty’, Jews.’ Not to play down or apologise for the repressed anti-Semitism in the passage, there is caveat enough to read Lewis’s letter otherwise; for instance, Lewis might have been genuinely appalled by Rodker’s ‘filthy sexual verse’. Being an avant-gardist, Rodker would have more than likely relished the hint at infamy, even if we disregard the anti-Semitic undertones. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Lawson, p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Rodker, *Poems*, p. 187 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Lawson, p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Edwards, p. 259 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. quoted in Edwards, p. 259 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. quoted in Edwards, p. 259, emphasis original [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. quoted in Edwards, p. 259 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Rodker, *Poems*, p. 187 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Lewis, *Tyro I*, p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. J. A. Hobson’s *1920: Dips Into the Near Future* could have been an influence [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Crozier, in Rodker, *Poems*, p. xv [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Crozier, in Rodker, *Poems*, p. xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. John Rodker, ‘Southern Syncopated Singers’, *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, No. 2 (London: The Egoist Press, 1922) [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. John Rodker, *Collected Poems 1912-1925*, quoted in Appendix B of Crozier, op cit, 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. In Lewis, *Tyro II*, p. 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. John Rodker, ‘The Evocation of Race Memories’, *The Egoist* 1, 21 (2 November 1914) [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Perloff, *Indeterminacy*, p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Perloff, *Indeterminacy*, p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Lewis, *Tyro II*, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Churchill and McKible, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Richard Aldington, ‘Two Poets’, *The Egoist*, 1, 22 (16 November, 1914), pp. 422-423 [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Lawson, p. 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*, p. 9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Crozier, in Rodker, *Poems*, p. 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Aldington, Richard. ‘Flint and Rodker’, in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, ed. Harriet Monroe, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Chicago: 1920), pp. 44-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Aldington’s positioning of Rodker as rebarbative may also be a publicity stunt aimed at improving the literary reputation of both writers, given the later correspondence between them in Rodker’s archive (though mainly dated around 1928) [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Maxwell Bodenheim, ‘In Defense of Rodker’, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, ed. Harriet Monroe, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Chicago: 1920), pp. 170-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. (Rodker 1996, 77) [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. *jh*, ‘The Drama as Art’, *The Little Review* Vol., No. (Dec. 1917), p. 21-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Mary Butts, ‘Magic’, *The Little Review*, (July 1920), p. 3-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Remy de Gourmont, *The Little Review*, (November 1917), p. 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. See Nathalie Blondel (ed.), *The Journals of Mary Butts* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. John Rodker, *Memoirs of Other Fronts* (London: Putnam, 1932), p. 233 [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in the Modern Democracies* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1948; 2002), p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power And Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Particularly clear in Freud’s studies of war neuroses and shell-shock [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. ‘From a Biography,’ Rodker, *Poems*, p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. John Rodker, *An Ape of Genius*, unpublished typescript, Harry Ransom Center Archive, Box 35.7, unpaginated [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Louis Cabri, ‘Unanimism and the Crowd’, in *Jacket* *2*, November 9 2011, at www.jacket2.com, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. John Rodker, ‘Twenty Years After’, in Julian Bell (ed.), *We Did Not Fight: 1914-18 Experiences Of War Resisters* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1935), p. 285 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Rodker, *Poems*, p. 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Mary Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature, From Joseph Conrad To Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979) p. 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. See Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. For further detail about life in such detention centres, and historical reflection on figures such as Norman, see Jo Velacott, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 153 *passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (1960; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), p .72 [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ian Patterson, ‘Translation and John Rodker’, *Translation and Literature* 12, 2003, pp. 88-113 (p. 92) [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. See Roger Conover in Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 203. The definition of the maieutic or maieusis follows in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. A short publication history is provided in Keith Tuma and Maeera Shreiber (ed.s) *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1998), p. 519 [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Loy 1921, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Scientific terms may of necessity remain those of the layperson throughout this chapter, but an explanation of the physics of the kind of reaction envisaged here can be found in Jean-Louis Basvedant et al, *Fundamentals in Nuclear Physics: From Nuclear Structure to Cosmology* (New York: Springer Science, 2005), p. 377 [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. J. A. Hobson 1917, *Democracy After The War* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1917), p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. For Keynes, the Treaty of Versailles heralded a ‘Peace which, if it is carried into effect, must impair yet further, when it might have restored, the delicate, complicated organization, already shaken and broken by war, through which alone the European peoples can employ themselves and live’ (John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), p. 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Loy 1982, p. 277 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Rachel Potter, *Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 164 [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. ‘Parturition’, in Loy 1997, p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Alan Marshall, ‘The Ecstasy of Mina Loy’, in Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson (ed.s), *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy* (Cambridge: Salt, 2010), pp. 166-187, p. 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Loy 1982, p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Potter, p. 152 [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. ‘Feminist Manifesto’, Loy 1982, p. 154 [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Keynes, p. 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Loy 1982, p. 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (California: Uni of California Press, 1996), p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Mina Loy, ‘Gertrude Stein’, in Lawrence Rainey (ed.), *Modernism: An Anthology* (London: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 432-437, p. 434 [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Loy 1921, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Lyon, p. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Loy 1921, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Georg Simmel, quoted in David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Loy 1982, p. 276 [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. For further discussion of the eugenic argument in Loy’s work, see Elisabeth Frost, ‘Mina Loy’s “Mongrel” Poetics’, in Shreiber and Tuma (eds.), pp. 149-162. Frost considers Loy’s approach to racial categories more ironic than promoting of eugenics – eugenics are linked to other conceptual categories apart from race in her figurative language. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. ‘The Artist and the Public’, Loy 1917 [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Mina Loy, ‘Apology of Genius’, Conover, op cit, p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. see Conover in Loy 1982, p. 197 [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 98-112 [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Bürger 1984, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Loy 1982, p. 276 [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Loy 1997, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Burke 1985, p. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Loy 1921, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 411 [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Constantin Brancusi, quoted in Matthew Gale and Carmen Gimenez, *Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things* (London: Tate, 2004), p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Loy 1921, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. ‘Brancusi’s Golden Bird’, Loy 1997, p. 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. As recounted in the majority of accounts of Loy, but examined in detail in Carolyn Burke’s biography *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*, op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. F. T. Marinetti, ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature’, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Christine Poggi (New Haven: Yale Uni Press, 2009), p. 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Loy 1997, p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. quoted in Frisby, p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Loy 1921, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Mina Loy to Mabel Dodge Luhan, February 1914, Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers YCAL MSS 196, Box 24, Folder 664 [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. quoted in Sclove 1989, 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Soddy, p. 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. quoted in Frisby 1986, p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Loy 1997, p. 159 [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Loy 1997, p. 194 [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. See F. T. Marinetti, ‘An Artistic Movement Creates a Political Party’, in Günter Berghaus (ed.), *F. T. Marinetti: Critical Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), p. 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Loy 1982, p. 311 [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Loy 1921, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Mina Loy, ‘Being Alive’, YCAL MSS 6, fol. 20, typescript, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Loy 1997, p. 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. quoted in Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1885; 1967), p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. ‘Gertrude Stein’, Loy 1924 [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Loy 1921, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Loy 1997, p. 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. It may be fruitful to connect Loy’s utopian thought to the notion of the ‘minor utopia’ theorized alternately by Benjamin Kohlmann and Jay Winter in Kohlmann’s edited volume, Rosalyn Gregory and Benjamin Kohlmann (ed.s), *Utopian Spaces of Modernism: Literature and Culture 1885-1945* (London; New York: Palgrave, 2011), though to suggest Loy’s utopian vision is uncontaminated by the fascisms of major utopians would be too uncritical in this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Loy 1921, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981; 1984), p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Julie Gonnering Lein, ‘Shades of Meaning: Mina Loy’s Poetics of Luminous Opacity’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 18:3, 2011, pp. 616-629 [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Sandeep Parmar, ‘Mina Loy’s ‘Unfinishing’ Self’, in Potter and Hobson 2010, pp. 71-98 [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Loy 1997, p. 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (London: Blackwell, 2006), p. 78 *passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. John Wilkinson, ‘Stumbling, Balking, Tacking: Robert Creeley’s *For Love* and Mina Loy’s ‘Love Songs to Joannes’, in Potter and Hobson 2010, pp. 146-165, p. 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. For further elaboration on the impact of Christian Science on her work, see Tim Armstrong, ‘Loy and Cornell: Christian Science and the Destruction of the World’, in Potter and Hobson 2010, pp. 204-220 [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Note in connection to Loy’s *mise-en-page* that she expressly wanted the *Songs* to contain meaningful blank spaces: ‘get Songs for Joannes published for – all together – printed on one side of each page only – & a large round in the middle of each page – & one whole entirely blank page with nothing on it between the first and second parts – pause in between moods) – the dedication – ‘TO YOU’’, she wrote to Carl Van Vechten (Conover’s gloss, Loy 1997, 191) [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Rowan Harris, ‘Futurism, Fashion, and the Feminine: Forms of Repudiation and Affiliation in the Early Writing of Mina Loy’, in Potter and Hobson 2010, pp. 17-46, p. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. *sic*, quoted in Parmar, in Potter and Hobson 2010, p. 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See, for instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985; 2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Mina Loy, ‘Tuning in on the Atom Bomb’, in Sara Crangle (ed.), *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2011), p. 286 [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Adrian Mellor, Chris Pawling, Colin Sparks, ‘Writers and the General Strike’, in Margaret Morris, *The General Strike* (London: Journeyman, 1976; 1980), pp. 338-357, p. 338 [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. quoted in Morris, p. 342 [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, Culture* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Virginia Woolf, diary entry 6 May 1926, quoted in Kate Flint, ‘Virginia Woolf and the General Strike’, pp. 323 [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1989), p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 2000), p. 345 [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. quoted in Edwards, p. 356 [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. quoted in Edwards, p. 356 [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, Chapter 8, http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch08.htm (1918), accessed 15/06/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Rosa Luxemburg, *Theory and Practice: A Polemic Against Comrade Kautsky’s Theory of the Mass Strike*, Part 2, http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1910/theory-practice/ch02.htm (1910), accessed 15/06/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Quoted in Morag Shiach, *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), p. 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. I follow John Lucas (Lucas 1997) in his assertion that 1926 marks a pivotal moment in the political culture of British literature [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: a self-study in literature and political ideas, being the autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943; 1972), p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. See Alan Riach, ‘C. M. Grieve/Hugh MacDiarmid, Editor and Essayist’, in Margery Palmer McCulloch (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 36-47, p. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Margery Palmer McCulloch, ‘Journals for a New Age: Little Magazines and Literary Revival in Interwar Scotland’, http://www.cts.dmu.ac.uk/exist/mod\_mag/file/palmer\_journals\_new\_age.pdf, accessed 15/06/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Jean-Pierre Mileur, ‘Allegory and Irony: “The Rhetoric of Temporality” Re-Examined, *Comparative Literature*, 38:4 (1986), pp. 329-336, p. 332 [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. C. M. Grieve, ‘English Ascendancy in British Literature’, in Margery Palmer McCulloch (ed.), *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939; Source Documents for the Scottish Renaissance* (Glasgow : Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), p. 282 [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. MacDiarmid, *Letters*, 6/09/26, p. 322 [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Arthur Redding, ‘The Dream-Life of Political Violence: Georges Sorel, Emma Goldman, and the Modern Imagination’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 2:2 (1995), pp. 1-16, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. W. H. Auden, quoted in Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (eds), *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Nancy Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and his Work* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press, 1984), p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. G.F. Moore, ‘71st Report On Dialect’, *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science*, 100 (1968), pp. 367-71, p. 367 [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. See Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, in his *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 198-230 [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. MacDonald Daly, ‘Margin and Centre: Scottish/English Literary Negotiations’, http://mlpa.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000064/01/NMLP\_Mac\_Daly\_article\_Margin\_and\_Centre.pdf (2007), accessed 01/06/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. MacDiarmid, *Company*, p. 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Hugh MacDiarmid, letter of 25/5/26, in Alan Bold (ed.), *The* *Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), p. 364 [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘The Politics and Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid’, 1952, in Duncan Glen (ed.), *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Los Angeles: Uni of California Press, 1969), pp. 19-38, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Catherine Kerrigan, *Whaur Extremes Meet: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid 1920-1934* (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1983), p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Shiach, p. 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Quoted in Clive Bloom, *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, 1900-1929* (London; New York: Longman, 1993), p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Kerrigan, p. 154 [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. See Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Nairn, p. 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. MacDiarmid, *Letters*, p. 331 [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Keston Sutherland, ‘Marx in Jargon’, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca; London: Cornell, 1996), p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. W. Gallacher, ‘Mass Movement for Peace,’ in *Revolt on the Clyde*, anthologised in Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, *Spokesmen for Liberty: A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939; 1941), p. 398, my emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. quoted in Shiach, p. 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. George Davie, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: The Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), p. 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. who ‘subtly gathered all these inconsequentialities into what we must paradoxically call a concrete abstraction. This unity is vivid through all his work [...] just as the overtone creeps into [...] a peel of bells’ (Buthlay, 194) [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Lenin’s annotated copy of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*,trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/ch03.htm#LCW38\_171, accessed 01/06/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Ian Duncan, ‘ “Upon the thistle they’re impaled’: Hugh MacDiarmid’s Modernist Nationalism’, in Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses, *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899-1939* (Durham; London: Duke U. P., 2007), pp. 246-266, p. 260 [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. quoted in Lucas, p. 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. MacDiarmid, *Essays*, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Hugh MacDiarmid, from *Albyn*, quoted in Duncan Glen, *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh, London: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Bold, *Letters*, op cit, viii [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Marie Bonaparte, *Myths of War*, translated by John Rodker (London: Imago, 1947), p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. MacDiarmid, *Essays*, p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Kerrigan, p. 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. quoted in Shiach, p. 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Ezra Pound, ‘Epstein, Belgion and Meaning’, *Criterion* IX (1930), p. 475 [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Quoted in Morris, p. 409 [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Carl G. Liungman, *Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Norton, 1995), entry on *thistle* [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Quoted in Kent, p. 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984), p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. OED, ‘ballad, *n*’, definitions 1.b and c. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Flint, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Shiach, p. 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. See Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), p. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Louise Fradenburg, ‘Spectacular Fictions: The Body Politic in Chaucer and Dunbar’, *Poetics Today*, 5:3 (1984) pp. 493-517, 506 [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Mass., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 71-73 [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. O’Connor, Laura. ‘Neighborly Hostility and Literary Creoles: The Example of Hugh MacDiarmid’, *Postmodern Culture*, 15:2, (2005), p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Fredric Jameson, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, p. xiii [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Cf. G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. By A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Quoted in Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch, *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), p. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, in *Blindness and Insight*, p. 219 [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Scott Lyall, ‘MacDiarmid, Communism and The Poetry of Commitment’, in Lyall and McCulloch (ed.s), op cit, pp. 68-81, p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. MacDiarmid, *Collected*, p. 543, ll. 1-12, line spacing as original [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Lyall and McCulloch, p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Alexander Kojeve, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. by James H. Nichols (Ithaca; London: Cornell, 1947; 1980), p. 209-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Lyall and McCulloch, p. 131 [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. quoted in Lyall and McCulloch, p. 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Joseph Bien, ‘Introduction to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures in the Dialectic*, trans. by Joseph Bien (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. xi [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Edgell Rickword, in Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, *Spokesmen for Liberty: A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939; 1941), p. xxi [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Edgell Rickword, in Alan Young and Michael Schmidt, ‘A Conversation with Edgell Rickword’, *Poetry Nation*, No. 1, 1973, p. 73-89, p. 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Lucas, p. 194 [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Flint, p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Edgell Rickword, *The Happy New Years: A Masque*, in Edgell Rickword, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Charles Hobday (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 95-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. McCracken, in *Modernism and Theory*, p. 193 [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1927; 2000), p. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Lewis, *Art*, p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Quotes from Madge’s personal papers archive in Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1935; 2000), p. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Maurice Nadeau, quoted in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. by Michael Richardson (London; New York: Verso, 1994; 2006), p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. The rendering of the word ‘surrealism’ in this chapter relates to its complex etymological history. The following orthographical decisions apply: *Surréalisme* denotes the French form and its references in early modernist periodicals, capitalized Surrealism denotes its institutional ‘brand’, while ‘surrealism’, all in lower case, refers to the *style* or *tendency* of work in the surreal mode. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Rod Mengham, ‘Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge’, *New Formations*, 44, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Quoted in Alan Young, *Extremist Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. 162 [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Sam Cooper, *‘A Lot to Answer for’: The English Legacy of the Situationist International*, unpublished thesis, *University of Sussex*, May 2012, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Young, p. 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Quoted in Cooper, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. A. L. Lloyd, ‘Surrealism: A Review’, *Left Review*, Jan 1937, pp. 21-24, p. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Cyril Connolly, 14 December 1935 review in *New Statesman and Nation*, quoted in Cooper 2012, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Read, p. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Cooper, p. 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Rob Jackaman, *The Course of English Surrealist Poetry Since the 1930s* (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1989), p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 339 [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Charles Madge, ‘Oxford Collective Poem’, in *New Verse*, No. 25, May 1937, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Madge studied under I. A. Richards at Cambridge. For further information on hunger marches and their gradual erosion of public hostility, and thus their socio-political power, at this time, especially in high-profile meetings with the rich and powerful at Cambridge, for instance, see James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 249 [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. *New Verse* 25, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Kathleen Raine, *Autobiographies* (London: Skoob Books, 1991), p. 166 [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. See Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), ‘Blake and the Blighted Corn’, p. 180-202 [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (London: Verso, 1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Burwick, p. 180-190 [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Hubble, p. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’, Madge, ll. 24-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. See John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Cooper, p. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. George Barker quoted in Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Caesar 1991, p. 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. See John Morris, in Gary Day (ed.), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume 2: 1930-1955* (London; New York: Longman, 1997), p. 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Chandavarkar, in Jackson, p. 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Quoted in Jackson, p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Rod Mengham, *Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge*, in *Jacket Magazine*, at http://jacketmagazine.com/20/meng-jen-madg.html, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. See entry on “maniform, adj.1”, *OED Online*, December 2012, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113509?rskey=UJHMZV&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed 18 July, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Quoted in Hubble, p. 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. See Charles Madge, ‘Surrealism for the English’, *New Verse* 1933 [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Read, p. 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Roberts, p. 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Quoted in Roberts, p. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Hugh Sykes Davies in Read, p. 147 [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Paul Éluard in Read, p. 180 [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. See Jochen Schulte-Sasse, ‘Forward’, in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Uni of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. vii-xlvii, p. xxxi *passim* [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Bürger, p. xxxii [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Breton in Read, p. 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Breton in Read, p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Leon Trotsky, ‘Whither France?’, 1936, at http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/whitherfrance/ch00.htm, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Charles Madge, ‘Press, Radio, and Social Conscsiousness’, in C. Day Lewis, *The Mind in Chains* (London: Fredrick Muller, 1937), pp. 147-163, p. 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. George Orwell, quoted in Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media, 1930-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*: *Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. by A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1918), p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
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329. ‘Rebirth’, ll. 1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Breton, ‘Crisis of the Object’, quoted in Franklin Rosemont, *Andre Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Madge in Mary-Lou Jennings, p. 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. (Breton, quoted in Rosemont, 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. (see Rosemont, 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Madge, ‘Poetic Description’, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Madge, ‘Poetic Description’, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Humphrey Jennings, dir., *Spare Time* (1939) [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. S. John Woods, ‘Who’s Been Frightened by the Big Bang?’, *London Bulletin* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 13-14, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Steven Connor, ‘‘A Door Half Open To Surprise’: Charles Madge’s Imminences’, *New Formations*, 44 (2001): pp. 52-62 [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Madge, ‘Poetic Description’, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Madge, p. 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Harold James in Jackson, p. 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, in Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Jane Goldman (eds), *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni Press, 1998), pp.560-567, p. 566 [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. *New Verse* 25, p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. See Rod Mengham, *Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge*, in *Jacket Magazine*, at http://jacketmagazine.com/20/meng-jen-madg.html, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
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347. Breton in Read, p. 104-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Mengham, *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Hubble, p. 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. *New Verse*, 18, p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. *New Verse*, 3, p. 1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937; 1973), p. 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Philip Sidney, ‘Pamela’s Faith’, from *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, Book III, http://www.bartleby.com/209/151.html, accessed 01/02/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Humphrey Jennings, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, 10, Spring 1937 [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Humphrey Jennings, ‘The Iron Horse’, in *London Bulletin* (1:2), May 1938, pp. 22-28, p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Humphrey Jennings, ‘Two American Poems’, in Kevin Jackson (ed.), *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 294 [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Quoted in Caesar, p. 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930’s* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), p. 226 [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. John Berger, *Looking Forward* (exhibition publication) (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1956) [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Jon Silkin, ‘Introduction’, in Jon Silkin (ed.), *Poetry of the Committed Individual: A* Stand *Anthology of Poetry* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Herbert Read, quoted in Silkin, p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. See Rodker 1996, p. 115-122 [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Ezra Pound, ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris: XI,’ *New Age*, 10:16 (February 1912), 369-70 [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. John Rodker, ‘The Theatre’, *The Egoist*, 1:21 (2 November, 1914), pp. 414-415 [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Andreas Huyssen, to take one example, is unequivocal on stating the case for dividing the terms of modernism and the avant-garde. See his *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 162 [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. David Tucker (ed.), *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 1-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Stephen Lacey, in Tucker, *ibid*, p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Keston Sutherland, in Tucker, *ibid*, p. 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. To take perhaps the most allusively dense, complex and lengthy of his works, see Keston Sutherland, *Hot White Andy; Together With Two Essays on Keston Sutherland's Poetry*, in *Chicago Review*, 53:1 (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
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371. Roy Fisher, ‘For ‘realism’’, in *Stand*, 8:1 (1966), p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Simon Jarvis, ‘A Burning Monochrome: Fisher’s Block’, in John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (ed.s), *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 173-193, p. 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Michael O’Neill, ‘‘Exhibiting Unpreparedness’: Self, World, and Poetry’ in Kerrigan and Robinson 2000, pp. 209-231, p. 214 [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
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375. Andrew Crozier, *An Andrew Crozier Reader*, ed. Ian Brinton (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
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377. Emily Witt, ‘That Room in Cambridge’, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/241414, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. See Crozier’s interview with Andrew Duncan reprinted in Crozier 2012, pp. 134-142 [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. See Andrew Duncan, review of *High Zero*, ‘The Long Poem of the 1970s, 9 August 2012, at http://angelexhaust.blogspot.co.uk/, accessed 01/05/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. John Wilkinson, ‘A Single Striking Soviet: The Poems of Barry MacSweeney’, in his *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: Salt Press, 2007), pp. 77-96, p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Barry MacSweeney, ‘Colonel B’, in *Wolf Tongue: Selected Poems 1965-2000* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2003), p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. MacSweeney, p. 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. It may be of interest to learn that MacSweeney’s archive at Newcastle University contains press cuttings, one of which, written for the Bradford *Telegraph and Argus* on 25 October 1984, concerns an attempt by Bradford Council to invite Thatcher to the city for ‘a holiday’ to witness the crumbling of infrastructure and the social collapse of the city in person. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)