British Women Writers and the Public Sphere between the Wars: 
Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West.

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison and Rebecca West appropriated the political ideas of the interwar period into their fiction and sought to transform abstract ideals into values with which to judge and improve social life. For all four writers, this pursuit takes the form of showing the complex relations between theory and practice as experienced by particular individuals. My premise here is the idea that political ideals are based upon the moral principles used by persons to guide their conduct in the pursuit of individual and collective happiness.

Chapter One discusses the socialist concepts of loyalty, equality and fraternity as the values upon which the good society should be constructed and the self-appointed role of writers as public intellectuals whose task was to counteract political apathy and encourage the practice of active citizenship. Chapter Two examines Holtby’s *Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit*, Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present* and Rebecca West’s “The Strange Necessity” to demonstrate how literature was intended as a tool in the defence against the atomisation effected by the impact of modern life on culture, and a bulwark against the concomitant subjectivism which resulted from the extensive retreat into private life. Chapters Three and Four examine the practice of politics itself, with particular emphasis on the social bonds proposed to replace the instrumentality of interpersonal relationships in capitalist societies. The texts examined are Mitchison’s *We Have Been Warned*, Holtby’s *South Riding*, Jameson’s *In the Second Year* and *Mirror in Darkness*, as well as West’s *Harriet Hume*. Chapter Five focuses on Jameson’s *That Was Yesterday* and West’s *The Thinking Reed* and discusses the difficulties faced by women unable to negotiate the boundaries between the domestic and the public sphere of sociability as a result of the irreconciliability of self-determination and social demands.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................................. 4
Introduction ............................................................................. 5

Chapter One  The Fundamentals of Ethical Socialism: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity .......... 11

Chapter Two  Literature and the Cultivation of Values............. 40

Chapter Three Politics in the Novel I .............................. 100

Chapter Four Politics in the Novel II ............................... 167

Chapter Five Private Life ....................................................... 202

Concluding Remarks .............................................................. 251

Bibliography ........................................................................... 254
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Introduction
This dissertation seeks to examine how Winifred Holtby, Naomi Mitchison, Rebecca West, and Storm Jameson incorporated political concepts into the narrative fiction they wrote in the 1930s. Their interest in politics, also prevalent in their non-fictional prose, was a response to the pervasive belief that their society was becoming increasingly uncivil and fragmented. The erosion of social bonds had adverse emotional effects on the members of their communities and prevented the creation of associations that would bring about the socio-political change needed to prevent another war. Politics were a means of establishing workable relationships between the sum of voluntary associations which constituted civil society, and the state, felt to be increasingly distant from the lives of the majority of the citizenry, and therefore contributing to its feeling of disempowerment. It was to the workings of civil society that these four writers turned their attention with a view to examining closely the intricacies of human relationships as they were under adverse conditions. At the same time, they offered alternative models of human interaction that would allow individuals to develop their personalities fully in a nourishing environment.

To inform my reading I make extensive use of the non-fiction written by Holtby, Mitchison, Jameson, and West. There is a marked distance between their theoretical ideas and the practice of politics as described in their fiction. By using the former to interpret the latter, it is possible to perceive clearly the difficulties of creating literary forms appropriate to express their democratic ideals. The problem they grappled with was how to present the average individual as a social rather than simply a psychological individual. Although all four writers avoided didacticism in their fiction by illustrating how political ideology is absorbed into experience and modifies the everyday life of their characters, they ultimately and, I think, deliberately, fall back on morality as the foundation of public criticism since morality was understood as a body of values that would regulate individual behaviour in the interest of sociability. Morality, for them, was thus always about social relationships. Their narratives are driven by the tension between the impersonality or impartiality required by politics (the capacity to understand that the interests of another are as important as one’s own) and private behaviour. The difficult transition from one mode of being to another is the theme of their novels.

Their aesthetic project was a response both to the excesses of individualism, associated with modernist, pre-war Bloomsbury, and to the increasing popularity of a
mass culture in collusion with capitalism. They were troubled by what they perceived as a breakdown in the solidarity that had previously cemented a more traditional social order based upon collective religious practice and belief. Social disintegration was caused by egoism and socio-economic factors such as the growth of industrialisation and urbanisation as they affected the internal (as opposed to the international) situation. Only socialism could offer a comprehensive body of shared beliefs and practices that would harmonise interests and regulate social behaviour in a way that would enable social cohesion by demonstrating the need for interdependence and reciprocity.

It is by now clichéd to introduce any study of writing by women with the argument that one intends to reinsert them into literary history, so far largely shaped, it is claimed, by the prejudiced criteria of male critics and writers. Fortunately, feminist scholarship over the course of the last couple of decades has successfully accomplished much of this corrective archaeological task. As a result of the pioneering work of critics such as Alison Light, Janet Montefiore, Maroula Joannou, Phyllis Lassner and Nicola Beauman, among others, we now have a richer canvas of the literary culture of the between-the-wars period which acknowledges the important role played by women writers in shaping it. However, a close examination of the thought of these four writers shows how difficult it is to group them on the strength of their interest in women’s position in society alone. Although they would have undoubtedly claimed to be against all forms of sexual discrimination should the question have been posed, the scope of their political interests grew beyond this exclusive concern as the threat of another war loomed larger and civil unrest at home became more visible: the struggle for women’s liberation was now subsumed in the struggle against capitalism. For this reason, I focus here on their political ideals so as to show that they come together as ethical socialists, distinct from other writers such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Ethel Mannin or Amabel Williams-Ellis who were communists, and also different from other contemporaries such as E.M. Delafield, Margaret Kennedy, Vera Brittain, Rose Macaulay, Rosamund Lehmann or Elizabeth Bowen who are indeed, as Nicola Beauman points out, engaged in writing what she has called the “woman’s novel”, written by middle-class writers for a middle-class readership with an “unmistakably female tone of voice. They generally have little action and less histrionics -they are about the ‘drama of the undramatic’, the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships” (Beaman 5). In the novels examined
here, as well as in their non-fiction, these writers emphasise class more prominently than gender as the preponderating factor shaping subjectivity.

Despite my own focus on women writers, I will attempt to illustrate the interrelations between writing by men and women, common themes, moods, literary forms, convergences and differences not always or exclusively determined by sex, but often shaped by personal relationships, shared political ideals or economic necessity. Because I am mainly interested in political ideas, I will read their texts in the context of the work of socialist political thinkers of their time such as Bertrand Russell, Harold Laski, and R.H. Tawney, all of whom were influential in shaping political debate. In what remains of this chapter, I intend to demonstrate that it is fruitful to group these four women writers on the basis of their socialism; here their voices become almost indistinguishable from each other. The remaining chapters focus on their differences.

Chapter two explores the attempt made by all four writers to reinvent what modern criticism has come to describe as the public sphere. This intention is obvious in Winifred Holtby’s Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit, which I use to outline the way in which the lifestyle of the middle class was perceived and how writers intended to undermine the growing power of this class. In Holtby’s dialogue we see clearly that civil society is indeed vigorous and diverse, yet unfortunately misguided by the illusory comforts and satisfactions of a life based in the home. Alison Light, once again, has identified this “privatisation of national life” during the inter-war period (Light 9) and complicates this perception by suggesting that this is only half the story, because the middle classes were also simultaneously undergoing a radical transformation. They looked to the past yet also embraced modernisation: “If the English middle classes found themselves in retreat after 1919, and the idea of private life received a new enhancement, nevertheless it was not the same old private life -the sphere of domestic relations, and all which it encompassed, had also changed” (Light 10). Light’s assessment is accurate. Holtby, West, Mitchison, and Jameson claimed that people were retreating into personal life, their identity and fulfilment found in the home, so as to escape from industrialisation and urbanisation. This retreat meant that the middle classes were less interested in the public life of society: thus sociability was sacrificed to domesticity. These writers sought, through literature, to harness this forward-looking impulse to create a better community. Rising prosperity during the 1930s, reflected in the construction of private housing, transformed domestic life, and together with a
decrease in working hours changed patterns of leisure. It was commonly believed that although the reading public had increased, the quality of the reading material had not. Holtby, Mitchison, West, and Jameson believed that literature had a civilising influence on its readers by example, but also because the reading process itself would teach discrimination. Readers would become more analytical, critical and articulate, and would therefore become better citizens if and when they were given appropriate reading material. This idea of literature was a response to the increasing influence of the media and popular culture, which seemed to stupefy its audience into an intellectual lassitude that made it vulnerable to political extremism. Jameson regarded Julien Benda’s idea of the detached intellectual as a model for all writers who should survey the social landscape disinterestedly. Intellectuals should deliberately live on the margins of society, avoid parochialism and uphold universal values. West’s approach is radically different, though equally ambitious. Art, for her, is a training in caritas; it teaches a morality of love based upon toleration, generosity, and altruism all of which simultaneously reduce blinding egoism and enhance the individual’s capacity to see the Good more clearly. Implicit in all these attitudes is the risk of becoming as elitist and coercive as the ideas they seek to challenge.

In chapter three and four I analyse a series of novels in which, in Irving Howe’s phrase, “the political milieu is the dominant setting” (Howe 17). Through these texts I intend to understand the type of society these writers envisaged as an alternative to the unstable status quo, and to ascertain how they thought that change was to come about. Violent revolution in the view offered by these novels, was not a viable vehicle for change, but instead they saw the gradual transformation of personality as the proper means by which behaviour should be modified. In the process, the social climate necessary for the individual to flourish would be created. The focal characters all belong to the middle class, and the novels explore the psychological obstacles that had to be overcome to engage in political activity, as well as the type of socialism embraced by this class. It was believed that the Marxist assumption that a transformation of the economic relations of production was the only means to achieve the social good did not resolve any contradictions at a subjective level. Like the writers themselves, the protagonists of the novels are not communists but active members of a community who are willing to sacrifice their privileges for the benefit of the majority: their allegiance is to a community rather than to a class. I have chosen not to apply one perspective or
methodology to all the texts, because upon close examination the four writers approach their subject with radically different assumptions about society. Thus each section addresses the issues raised by my primary sources with different questions in mind. What is apparent, however, is that what in theory is possible in practice becomes more problematic; the solutions to the conflict between self and other and the individual and the community are only partially resolved, and two of the novels are dystopian.

The final chapter focuses on two novels, Storm Jameson’s That Was Yesterday and Rebecca West’s The Thinking Reed, and illustrates how difficult it was for women to escape the confines of the home and interact with society at large. There are no doors open for women to emerge from domesticity into the social world. We first encounter Hervey Russell, the protagonist of That Was Yesterday, as a young woman incapable of sociability. Isabelle, though functional in her social environment, is dissatisfied with its demands and moral bankruptcy. Both heroines struggle simply to become members of their society without altogether surrendering their own individuality. The heterosexual romance plot fails as a means to achieve social integration and their eventual entry into society is reached by way of a compromise. Hervey renounces marriage and her youthful aspirations altogether, while Isabelle ultimately accepts that the differences between men and women are irreconcilable under the existing cultural conditions, so heterosexual relations cannot be as fulfilling as they should be. These novels do not seek radically to undermine dominant versions of women’s experience by introducing alternative possibilities, nor do they celebrate domestic life. Rather, it would seem that the growing opportunities available to women during the period are not as accessible as it may appear at first. Again, the distance between theory and practice is insurmountable.

This thesis, then, traces that very unsurmountability through a series of representative examples of women’s fiction and non-fiction which emerged out of the literary culture of the 1930s. In the process, our view of the relationship between literature and politics in the period will be broadened and deepened. More particularly, that very relationship will itself be subject to scrutiny: the moral vocation of literature will be explicated in the context of an understanding of politics that was in fact moralised to the extent that its values were separated from its practical realisation.
Chapter One

The problem of organising the vast populations of the modern world can only be solved by the use of machinery so complicated that no ordinary man, unless he be one of a small number of statesmen and bureaucrats in positions of administrative importance, can have any sense that there is a connection between his individual will and the actions of the state.

Rebecca West, *The Court and The Castle*

I

**Ethical Socialism**

Rebecca West, Winifred Holtby, Naomi Mitchison, and Storm Jameson are difficult to place on the complex literary map of England of the years between the two world wars, despite recent attempts to incorporate them into the 1930s literary canon. Although older than the writers associated with the 1930s -Auden, Spender, Greene, Orwell- they nevertheless expressed similar political concerns, engaged in aesthetic discussions about the role and function of literature as a social phenomenon, and often made use of the same literary language to address their concerns. However, all four carefully crafted a public image in contrast to the political enthusiasms of the Auden generation on the one hand, and pre-war modernist aestheticism on the other. They were of that generation which by the 1930s already had an established literary reputation and “were now turning to political subjects” (Croft 122). The phrase ‘between the wars’ was used by all four writers to identify a transitional phase in European and English history as well as in their own lives. They perceived themselves as survivors of the ‘lost generation’ (Jameson, “Lost” 321), their writing careers having begun seriously after World War One. It is important in this respect to examine the motivations behind this political and aesthetic position in relation to both the Auden generation and pre-war modernism because West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson all associated themselves with those intellectuals who, as R.H. Tawney put it, repudiated “Bloomsbury -not the geographical area, but the mental disease” (*Equality* 198).

This objection to Bloomsbury was political, aesthetic and, perhaps more importantly, moral. The “aesthete’s doctrine, the art for art’s sake” (Mitchison, “Anger” 91) associated with Bloomsbury, was believed to be fundamentally problematic because it focused on the exploration of a limited spectrum of inner psychological worlds rather than the portrayal of the diversity of collective life. This focus on the individual psyche -best exemplified in the much-criticised technique of stream of consciousness- had moral implications concerning the nature and position of the self living in a society of which these writers disapproved: Bloomsbury “self-consciousness” (West, “High” 592)
was associated with psychological and ethical individualism. These two ideas of
individualism were (mistakenly) conflated with economic individualism as a polemical
tool, so Bloomsbury then became politically associated with liberalism and, in terms of
morality, dangerously subjectivist. It is in opposition to the ‘diseased’ “Bloomsbury
mentality” that West, Mitchison, Holtby, and Jameson elaborated their moral and
aesthetic projects. Not only did they express their dissatisfaction with the existing
condition of society -this could be said of many writers-, but they actively sought to
influence their middle-class readers by suggesting the need “to give a wider scope to
individuals to play a part in the decisions which affect their lives, holding, almost
invariably, that this can only be achieved in an egalitarian society” (Ingle 10). The main
objection to Bloomsbury novelists and their various literary coteries was that these were
elitist whilst their readership was deliberately limited to a “personal audience”
(Mitchison, “Anger” 83).

Socialism could provide the objective standard with which to criticise the socio-
political situation and curb the influence of the “Bloomsbury mentality”. West,
Jameson, Holtby, and Mitchison sought social justice and an end to the alienation and
exploitation of the many not by describing the lives of the poor for a middle-class
audience, but by focusing, strategically, on how all interpersonal relationships are
regulated by the “cash nexus” -to use Marx’s own phrase- and suggest ways in which to
create the moral environment in which a radically different type of relationship between
persons could flourish. The questions they were asking themselves therefore concerned
human nature, which in turn informed their interpretations of what relationships
between human beings are, how they work, and how they ought to function. One means
of effecting the transformation of a corrupt society was through the creation of an
awareness of the mechanisms of oppression, and by drawing attention to the powerful
network of economic and political interests that exploited the majority of the
population. Blindness to this reality, it was argued, left the status quo undisturbed and
increased unhappiness. Put very simply, for these four writers bourgeois ideology
distorted the perception of reality for the middle classes, who unwittingly conducted
their lives and made choices according to the dictates of powerful capitalists, believing
that happiness was within their reach, and unaware that, in fact, the economic system
was not capable of promoting the realisation of this vision of the good life.
Consequently, the self-deceived majority suffered from spiritual dissatisfaction and
psychological malaise diagnosed by many writers at the time, which was caused by the “dislocation between our thought and social habits and the material conditions of our lives” (Mitchison, Moral 308). This dislocated state of mind, it was implied, could only be changed when people gained control over themselves and their environment.

Much of the fiction written by West, Jameson, Holtby and Mitchison may be interpreted as a response to a specific set of events in British history: the crisis within the Labour movement in 1931 which also led to the creation of Oswald Mosley’s fascist New Party, two events that were partly a consequence of the Labour Party’s lack of a “constructive Socialist policy” (Cole, History 258). Jameson’s Mirror in Darkness (1934-36), In the Second Year (1936), and Mitchison’s We Have Been Warned (1935) address the crisis directly. Winifred Holtby’s South Riding (1936), though not directly about 1931, explores the impact of actual, specific government policies on a rural community. West’s exploration of politics in literature is less historically specific: in Harriet Hume (1929), she addresses the relation between power and class by following the career of an opportunistic young man within the Conservative Party. Their role as witnesses and survivors of a generation shaped by the war, a position different from that of the writers associated with the 1930s, who saw themselves, famously, as having ‘missed out’, is crucial. Having lived through the pre-war period, they felt equipped to compare two worlds perceived as radically different, and thus to see the interwar period as transitional. Their perception of the political scene was consequently different as well. Unlike younger writers, they were not easily seduced by ideas of social revolution and the promise of a new world offered by Communism. Their distrust of politicians dated from WW1:

> the lives of ordinary men and women are increasingly in the power of politicians […]. Most of us are feeling ashamed and uneasy and profoundly distrustful of the future. We appear to be at the mercy of a number of rulers which have got power and who are using it without reference to any moral code we know of. We have begun to realise that, in all countries, the people with most of the money and their chosen politicians are prepared to do anything to keep their power, above all they are prepared to lie up to any point which they think useful, and that they will exploit the normal emotions and the attempt at moral direction which ordinary people make, for their own ends. (Mitchison, Kingdom 152-53)

Such suspicion of institutionalised politics did not silence their protests against Fascism and war, the two immediate and related threats to world peace: “Fascism can be defined
as that form of political rule of big business which plans for war as an alternative to the immediate breakdown of the capitalist system, and which has to take measures to secure if not the enthusiastic co-operation at least the silent consent of the majority of the population” (Holtby, “Diagnosing” 1478). Awareness of the odds against which individuals fought made these four writers more cautious about the possibility and extent of any radical change. They warned their readers of the irreversible destruction caused by hasty change and its unpredictable consequences: “We know now, because we have seen it happen, that the social order of a whole nation can be turned backwards” (Jameson, “Defence” 152). Despite their caution they did not discourage change; “it can be tried” as Jameson put it (Journey 15), even though success was not guaranteed. Their political writing was issued as a warning, because “the only successful prophet is he whose warning averts catastrophe and who thus is proved wrong in fact” (Holtby, “Diagnosing” 1479).

For evidence of these writers’ overtly political commitments, literary critics rely on their affiliations with political institutions such as the Labour Party. Jameson claimed to have joined the party in 1917, Mitchison in 1931, Holtby, according to her biographer, joined the Independent Labour Party in 1934 (Shaw, Clear 231); West, meanwhile, a self-declared socialist and member of the Labour Party, is constantly referred to as a liberal, despite her close ties to Fabian socialism before WW1. Yet one should remember that it is often difficult to reconcile political ideas with specific party programmes, a problem that is painfully obvious from critical commentary on the period. Storm Jameson, for example, has been described as ‘left-wing’, ‘socialist’, ‘no Marxist’, ‘anti-Fascist’, ‘pacifist’, a ‘sterner Marxist’ than many of her contemporaries, a ‘life-long socialist and labour supporter’, on the ‘liberal-left’, and so on. This is also true of Holtby, Mitchison and West, reminding us that, at the time, there existed a considerable ideological overlap between liberalism and socialism, a point made clearly in Winifred Holtby’s A New Voter’s Guide to Party Programmes: Political Dialogues (1929) and explored in detail by Michael Freedon (Freedon 294-328). On the other hand, unlike many writers of the 1930s, West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson cannot be identified as communists simply because they were just as suspicious of the Communist Party’s methods as was the Labour Party itself. Mary Joannou places them on the “liberal-left”, the measuring rod being the “narrow ‘party line”’ (Joannou, Women 4) set by the Communist International with its clearly Marxist approach to
literature and society. But Marxism was not necessarily the only political ideology of the Left available to English writers. Indeed, even Harold Laski was suspicious of it, praising its ideals but damning its methods in *Communism* (1927).¹ So what type of socialists were they? Obviously one cannot expect from these women a coherent body of political thought because they were writers of fiction above all, hence the often naïve and obscure quality of their political writings, but they were undoubtedly aware of the political literature circulating at the time and were indeed informed by it. For example, Jameson was clearly influenced not only by the Christian socialist R.H. Tawney -whom she openly admired- but also by William Morris. This is obvious from her pamphlet *The Soul of Man in the Age of Leisure*, the title of which is also reminiscent of Oscar Wilde. West was deeply influenced by Augustine, Pascal and Harold Laski; Holtby was familiar with L.T. Hobhouse and Harold Laski; Mitchison was influenced by the Fabian socialism of the Coles. Vera Brittain’s diary of the 1930s, which often refers to Holtby, Mitchison, West and Jameson, shows how widespread their connections were to the worlds of politics and publishing, how co-operative their relationships were and how pluralistic their interests. As editor of *Time and Tide*, and living in the Brittain-Catlin household at the time, Holtby was acquainted with the most important figures in public life, particularly in socialism, although in 1934 she delivered a paper, “The Responsibility of the Press” at the Liberal Summer School at Cambridge and was the election secretary of a Liberal candidate in 1922. Jameson published in *The Clarion*, *Fact* and the *Socialist Leaguer* (the platform for Stafford Cripp’s Socialist League, founded in 1932 with support from G.D.H. Cole, Harold Laski, G.R. Mitchison) and wrote for the *Highway*, the journal of the W.E.A (Tawney was president of the Workers’ Educational Association from 1928 to 1944). West was on the editorial board of the short-lived *Realist* which also included Harold Laski, G.L.R. Mitchison and Catlin. Mitchison (like Holtby and Jameson) wrote for *Left Review* (the journal of the British section of the Writer’s International), was published by Victor Gollancz (who

¹ Fascism and communism were both perceived as extremist ideologies. According to Andrew Thorpe, between the wars political extremists were identified as “those people and movements who shared a number of basic beliefs. Firstly, they either rejected parliamentary methods or else were prepared to use them only as propagandist tools in a wider struggle for power. Secondly, they wanted immediate radical changes in the country’s political, economic and social structures. Thirdly, they were prepared to countenance the use of violence and ‘unconstitutional’ action to gain power, and, once they had gained it, the suppression of opposition, again by violent means if necessary, and the creation of a virtual dictatorship as the means of government.” Neither Holtby, Mitchison, Jameson, or West contemplated the possibility of this sort of revolutionary transformation of society. See “Introduction.” *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-war Britain* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1989) 1.
ran the Left Book Club, knew Harry Pollitt (leader of the Communist Party), travelled to the Soviet Union with a Fabian Society group and, like Vera Brittain, was the wife of a Labour candidate. All four wrote for *Time and Tide*, Lady Rhondda’s ‘non-political’ weekly.

Political thought, the language and concepts employed to identify, explain and criticise specifically political phenomena, is grounded in determined historical contexts and has its own discursive genealogy. The basic concepts of political language were widely contested at the time because it was believed that those political beliefs and shared understandings about how a political community should organise and conduct itself employed before the war were no longer adequate to name new realities. The meaning of such terms as ‘democracy’, ‘fascism’, ‘peace’, ‘nationalism’, ‘loyalty’, ‘citizenship’, and ‘revolution’ was extensively debated. It is my intention here to look more closely at the vision these writers offer of the good society and the kind of person who would not only shape but inhabit and perpetuate this society. They all believed that their society was unjust because unequal, but their ideas about the nature of the people who made it up, their interpretations of what relationships between human beings were and how they ought to be vary considerably. However, all four of them subscribed to the mutually dependent values of democratic socialism: liberty, fraternity, and equality.\(^2\)

The logic behind these three principles is that, as Crick puts it, “greater equality will lead to more cooperation than competition, […] this will in turn enhance fraternity and hence liberate from inhibition, restriction and exploitation of both individual personality and the full productive potential of society” (Crick 79).

II

**Politics and Morals**

Morality was at the basis of their political commitment: all four chose to emphasise the moral implications of the social divisions within capitalism rather than the organisational or institutional aspects of politics. As a point of departure, I take Isaiah Berlin’s claim that ethical thought consists in the examination of the

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\(^2\) The concept of ‘ideology’ they used was broad enough to encompass all social life. Barker at the time defined it as “a set of ideas relating to one particular object, or concerned with one particular sphere. That object and that sphere I can only call by the name of socio-politics. Not only does it include politics; it also includes economics (here Marxism has had its say); it even includes the whole of social life. An ideology is now a set of connected ideas, relating to the aim and method both of Society and of the State. It relates both to aim and to method – both to the purpose and to the process of community-action.” Ernest Barker, “The Conflict of Ideologies.” *The Citizen’s Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937) 2.
relations between human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring and the system of value on which such ends of life are based. These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do, are objects of moral enquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and, indeed, mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is but ethics applied to society. (“Pursuit” 1)

Mitchison expressed a similar view when she stated that moral ideas are “to do with the relations of persons towards one another. There is no such thing as a static personal relationship, all relations are action, and cannot bevaluably considered except as such” (Kingdom 31). Politics and morals cannot be compartmentalised into different spheres of individual and collective life. A more nuanced inquiry into the origins and foundations of the political beliefs of these writers will show that not only were they far more radical than the Labour Party itself, of which they were consistently critical because it failed to offer its followers a sense of common purpose, but furthermore they in fact belong to a long tradition of English socialist thought. Though not theoretically self-conscious or structured as a tradition, according to Bernard Crick, English socialism has three distinctive features: it is much closer to and arises from popular thought, it is explicitly concerned with ethical values and considerations, and it thinks of culture as valuable in itself because - unlike Marxism- British socialism takes into account the specificity of national cultures in shaping politics and society (Crick 66).

The socialist ideas of Holtby, Jameson, West, and Mitchison can be understood within the tradition of English “ethical socialism”. Their critique of society springs from a sense of injustice rather than from sophisticated economic analysis: “if there were a revolutionary clash between the privileged and the dispossessed I would have to support the dispossessed, even if this involved me in personal danger” (West, “Letter” 1466). This partially explains why their socialism seems so theoretically unsophisticated, its critique of capitalism almost pre-Marxian. According to Norman Dennis and A.H. Halsey, this tradition of socialist radicalism has two distinctive though related components. One is directed to the individual conscience in that ethical socialism offers a prescriptive code of conduct shaped primarily by the Judeo-Christian moral inheritance, thus emphasising altruism and responsibility as fundamental principles in
everyday life; the other points towards social reform in order to create the conditions necessary for the development of human personality: “Circumstances can only make personal choices harder or easier: they cannot absolve the individual from making them” (Dennis and Halsey 1). Like any other political ideology, ethical socialism is founded on a particular understanding of human nature, and its basic assumption is that people live by ends as well as means. They posit free will and a self-consciousness which enable a man or woman to aspire beyond immediate desires or appetites towards the rational realization of a best possible self. The social organization that enables this realization of personality is democracy, which not only imposes constraints on individual action but also allows the exercise of choice, and the interpersonal relationship that enables this type of relationship is fellowship, in which each party is deemed equal and respected as a morally free person. It is a person’s conscience and respect for others as equals that functions as a limit to irresponsibility and exploitation or coercion; society is thus held together by “mutual regard” (Dennis and Halsey 2)

Ethical socialism is not a coherent body of thought, according to Halsey and Dennis, but there are nonetheless six core ideas which, in different combinations, constitute an identifiable type of socialism. The first three are liberty, equality and fraternity, the emancipatory “formula” derived from the French Revolution that West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson claimed for the Left. The fourth component is an antihistoricist rejection of historical materialism. Because there are no law-governed processes of social transformation, the assumption of ethical socialism is openness and “voluntarism”: “Free men and women, to be free, must make their own history in however difficult circumstances. And socialism is not inevitable nor irreversible if attained” (Dennis and Halsey 10). The fifth recurring element in this radical tradition is a perception of every age as an age of transition: “all ages are ages of transition” (Decline 16), as Jameson put it in a book prefaced by the following quotation: “Though for no other cause, yet for this: that posterity may know we have not loosely through

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3 It is worth dwelling on this last aspect since it is the aspect that the women writers discussed here focus on. Jameson praised this radical tradition in her novel The Moon is Making (1937) which tells the story of a Unitarian minister with a “hatred of poverty and injustice [...]. In an earlier century he would have been a Chartist, earlier still, a Leveller” (Journey 346). In this novel, the minister fights for a piece of common land that is being enclosed as part of a spa. West’s Augustinian and Pascalian morality, her reverence for tradition and ritual as ways of regulating behaviour, and Mitchison’s use of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress as a structuring device for We Have Been Warned, as well as her reinterpretation of early Christian thought in The Kingdom of Heaven as a blueprint for individual and collective moral behaviour, all point to these women’s belief in the importance of a moral tradition as a source of right conduct. The idea of a community they held up as an ideal was of Christian origin.
silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream…” The sixth and last component, perhaps the most important in terms of West, Holtby, Jameson, and Mitchison, is the idea that personal motivation is the “mainspring of individual conduct and social organization” (Dennis and Halsey 11). Fundamental to this last idea is the notion that any person can be improved so long as he or she is morally committed to do so. The long-term result of this individual effort is that history becomes a struggle to develop the moral qualities of individuals and, ultimately, of social institutions that will be shaped by the moral character of the members of a society:

Socialism can only be built on moral character and history is a never-ending struggle to develop the altruism of individuals, to mould social institutions in its image and to pass on its tradition to each new generation. This essential theory of human nature is interpreted contextually according to the social experience of each devotee. But its vision of an improvable if not perfectible person is a cornerstone, a moral commitment can surmount any material obstacle (Dennis and Halsey 11-12).

It is not surprising that as novelists West, Jameson, Holtby, and Mitchison chose to emphasise this moral aspect of politics and social reality and explore why more collaborative forms of relationship did not come easily to individuals; money, ambition and self-interest were difficult obstacles to overcome. Any social change had to start close to home, with the individual, and, as socialists, they believed that the individual could only be happy and achieve self-realisation in society. As Rebecca West put it, “the ultimate value of the state [is] the prime ingredient of literature: the individual” (Court 69). Co-operation, brotherhood, and love in the form of Christian caritas were the different types of relationship they explored with a view to resolving social disorder. If humans treated each other as means rather than as ends, if relations were therefore exploitative, the social environment created suspicion and resentment and so could foster neither solidarity nor reciprocity. Co-operation and planning for the common good was Holtby’s favoured idea; she more than the others emphasised the managerial, institutional aspects of political life, a subject explored in her novel South Riding, but a preoccupation also in Mandoa, Mandoa! (1933) and Poor Caroline (1931). Her position “regards humanity as an organic whole (a vital unity formed by the combination of contributory members mutually interdependent), and adopts the method of co-operation, having as its aim the fulfilment of service, and seeking such organisation of life as shall secure for everyone the most complete development of his powers” (Binyon 190).
Storm Jameson privileged fraternity, explored in The Pot Boils (1919) and Mirror in Darkness (Delicate Monster (1937) explores the perversion of friendship, as does In the Second Year), and, like Holtby’s concept of co-operation, friendship is invoked mainly as a political principle. ‘Fraternity’ and ‘co-operation’ lack the emotional associations of the terms preferred by West and Mitchison, who privileged caritas and love, emotions that are, in some sense, pre-political though may become an inspiration for political action. As Ernest Barker noted in 1938, fraternity, unlike liberty and equality, is not in itself a political principle because it does not determine or regulate State activity, it is simply a “common emotion” (Principles 160). However, it may become a political principle if and when the State is bound to provide the services and resources necessary for the “general unfolding of personal capacity” (162) which individuals cannot adequately provide for through their own effort or through voluntary associations. Without exception, these novelists believed that the State ought to provide the material resources constituting the ‘common need of all’ so that civil society could flourish. Once extreme material inequalities were reduced, class loyalty, antagonism and resentment would diminish; if “there are no possessions there will be nothing at all to create barriers of envy and mistrust out of” (Mitchison, Kingdom 39).

Fraternity is fundamental to this brand of socialism because it is closely related to the idea of work: it is “an attitude of mind, and one associated with activity” (Crick 99). This is not an abstract love of humanity (as Crick suggests, it is closer to friendship than to love), but arises when people work together to achieve a common end that cuts across class interests and other divisive issues, thereby making way for the mutual expression and acceptance of individuality. Crick warns that economic and political equality do not spontaneously produce fraternity, which is an “ethic that can grow only if believed in freely and practised” (106). Fraternity is not the “brotherhood of the trenches” (Jameson, “Lost” 321) experienced during the war, nor that nationalism emerging in Fascist countries. These four writers sought to create a model for workable social relations in peace-time that would not be a defensive reaction against threatening forms of authoritarianism. One reason why they all seemed to approve of the decentralisation of the state, for example, was that, as in South Riding, active participation in the decision-making process concerning the interests of the community did in fact seem to produce co-operation.
This spirit of co-operation could only be achieved when members of a community felt compelled to participate directly in the public life of their local community out of a sense of responsibility. But allegiance should be given cautiously, as Holtby warned, because loyalty to any organisation implied a belief in its principles (Holtby, “Loyalties” 636). The blind nationalism associated with Fascist states was incompatible with the patriotism they promoted, especially in view of the fact that the latter was, as Barker suggests, a term which “belong[ed] to the area of Society rather than that of the State”. Patriotism is defined as a “feeling of attachment to the very soil and the physical features of the whole ‘land of our birth’ or patria, in all its sweep and variety” (Barker, Principles 161). West, Jameson, Holtby, and Mitchison all shared this love of the patria and cherished the traditions and achievements of their compatriots. For West, national traditions were the source of a person’s identity and provided him or her with the knowledge required to navigate social life:

It is natural and wholesome that an Englishman, born and bred in England, should feel towards it the same kind of deep emotional concern, of visceral pull, that he feels towards his father and mother and brothers and sisters, and that this feeling for his country should for the most part, just like his feeling for his family, take a form which may reasonably be called love. (West, “Grandeur” 240)

For Jameson, Holtby and Mitchison traditions were more localised, though equally essential to a person’s identity and subjectivity: Holtby and Jameson returned to Yorkshire time and again in their fiction, and for Mitchison, who was later involved in the Scottish Renaissance and Scottish political and cultural life, Scotland was home. In this respect their fiction, like much of the working-class writing of the period, was regional. Mitchison pointed out in 1933 that “most modern books seem to have been written in and for and about the capitals of the world”, so London-centred novels “miss out Kennington, Wapping, Balham and such places”, and consequently seem “unreal” because capital cities are “safe [...]. Nothing unexpected happens; it is the world of Mrs Dalloway” (“Anger” 85). The problem with this cosmopolitan perspective, she argues, is that it is the only one available to readers, and although the “polis is elsewhere” (not in London) the way of life, perception, conduct, and morality of the city shape the minds of readers throughout the country and distort their perception of their own reality by being “misleading”: London-centred novels “have put into our heads, for instance, certain very definite ideas about private property in things and persons, about love and
hate and jealousy” (“Anger” 87). By ignoring local traditions and the sense of community they engender, literature that described metropolitan life contributed to the disintegration of rural communities, a process already taking place due to the gradual disappearance of the old industries (coal, iron and steel, cotton, and shipbuilding) and the increase in new industries, all concentrated in the south-east (Thorpe, Deceptive 67-70). It was deemed possible to establish an overarching society without endangering the cohesiveness of smaller, more localised communitites. Once loyalty is transferred to and organised by the State it may inspire “a missionary zeal for the spread of [the State’s] external power” (Barker, Principles 161), a process commonly associated with Fascism. This type of centralised and organised nationalist idolatry does not arise spontaneously from within the social body, so it is therefore threatening to its autonomy and self-identity. On the other hand, patriotism, which implies the recognition of the collective values with which a society functions, is the result of tradition. This type of emotion, clustered around a set of values, encourages the members of a society to look past their immediate self-interest in defence of a common life. Self-fulfilment and the public good need not, on this account, be mutually exclusive.

One consequence of the lack of a shared common project was a demoralising and disafflicting feeling of isolation and powerlessness, an emotional condition that hindered the development of a more socially-minded society. Political apathy was only one aspect of this widespread demoralisation, another expression of the unhappiness the causes of which lie “partly in the social system, partly in individual psychology -which, of course, is itself to a considerable extent a product of the social system” (Russell, Conquest 12). Examples of this preoccupation with apathy are abundant, the cause identified as social inequality. The middle classes had become complacent and inward-looking because of the steady rise in living standards, and although improved living conditions were welcomed, this greater affluence cut the middle classes off from society at large:

In too many small homes women use the domestic tradition to evade responsibility for everything else. ‘Oh, I’m only a housekeeper. I’m a private person. My job lies within four walls,’ they say complacently, finding it easier to be a good housewife than a good citizen. So long as their own children are healthy and happy, why worry because others are ill and frightened? (Women 148)
The working class was also apathetic, yet its mood was one of spiritual dereliction. According to Holtby, this widespread apathy was a backlash against the “rush of idealism to the head” that affected society after the war, when “Democracy and reason, equality and co-operation were acclaimed as uncontested virtues” (Women 113). However, after

about 1926, after the General Strike in England and its failure, after the entry of Germany into the League of Nations, and the delay by the Powers in making good their promises, the slump in idealism began to set in. Reason, democracy, the effort of the individual human will, liberty and equality were at a discount. As economic opportunities shrunk, so the hopefulness and idealism of the early post-war period dwindled. (Women 114)

The “hopefulness and idealism of the early post-war period” should be revived. Citizens should use their newly gained powers to demand social and economic equality: “Political emancipation”, Holtby explains, “is a condition of freedom; it is not freedom itself” (Women 53). If citizens chose to participate in the exercise of power, they would be in a position to demand greater civil and social rights: citizenship was therefore not only about political and civil liberties, but also about access to economic resources to which all were entitled as members of a community. Given the inevitable inequalities generated by capitalism, redistribution orchestrated by the state would relieve the disadvantages in education, health services, unemployment insurance, housing and so on: “The saner human being”, argues West, “will wish to be surrounded by a brilliant community which will appreciate his best ideas and help him to realise them” (“Grandeur” 259). The artificial causes of inequality limit individual freedom; once they have been eliminated, individuals will be free. R.H. Tawney expressed this as follows:

It is the fact that, in spite of their varying characters and capacities, men possess in their common humanity a quality which is worth cultivating, and that a community is most likely to make the most of that quality if it takes into account in planning its economic organization and social institutions -if it stresses lightly differences of wealth and birth and social position, and establishes on firm foundations institutions which meet common needs, and are a source of common enlightenment and common enjoyment. The individual differences of which so much is made [...] will always survive, and they are to be welcomed, not regretted. But their existence is no reason for not seeking to establish the largest possible measure of equality of environment, and circumstance, and opportunity. (Equality 55)
Civil society was the area in which the sphere of politics and the personal domain could overlap. At the time, the collapse of the private into the public was perceived as a Fascist strategy of repression, in which the state freely invaded the inner sphere of thought and action associated with the home and, perhaps more importantly, sought to engineer social organisation with coercion and manipulation. A retreat into privacy in a democracy was deemed harmful because “no State can be trusted always to judge objectively whether it has the excuse of a just cause and a right action, or whether it is serving its own interests” (“Grandeur” 254); only through the force of public opinion can a population protest against questionable measures introduced by the state. West firmly believed in the individual’s right to privacy. Her negative conception of freedom, that is, freedom from the interference of others, authority in particular, was a good worth dying for. This private sphere is not opposed to but situated within the public world; it is the area of free moral deliberation and self-development, in which the individual pursues his own good as he chooses. Instances of unwarranted state intervention in civil society were readily available in England: the outcry against the indignity and interventionism of means testing, the prosecution of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, not to mention police brutality in dealing with hunger marchers and strikers are but a few examples. Open resistance to the State was indeed a pressing matter. But a balance had to be struck between the non-interference of the state in private life and the inevitable intrusion of the state in the form of welfare provision, necessary if the resources required for self-realisation were to be redistributed. But the right to welfare entailed duties, and the link between the rights and responsibilities of active citizenship had to be emphasised.

To achieve this balance it was necessary to teach citizens to use their freedom responsibly, that is, to be self-governing agents aware of their political power. Loyalty to moral traditions and social conventions would ensure that the autonomous individual would think and act without harming others. West believed that “man has been shocked by the war into forgetting how to be a political animal. This suspicion is confirmed by the spread of Fascism, which is a headlong flight into fantasy from the necessity for political thought” (“Grandeur” 251). She acknowledged the possible dangers implicit in freedom when she stated that political behaviour was “to be repeatedly reinscribed by
education and argument” since the “necessity for government” was not one of the truths arrived at “without the exercise of thought, by immediate perception” (“Grandeur” 248).

III

Democracy and Freedom

It is within the space afforded by the private sphere that the individual soberly, honestly and freely reflects upon himself and the world around him and forms a personal judgement with which he conducts his life and influences public life. Democracy came to be identified with freedom. Useful as it may be to call these women “anti-Fascists”, it is more accurate to think of them as democrats because they were actively promoting a democratic way of life and not simply defending it or critiquing Fascism. For Mitchison, democracy as a way of life that is “worth living and dying for and worth trying to persuade other people to act in the same way about” (Kingdom 116). Loyalty, unlike patriotism, is an attachment to the values expressed and upheld by the State, as long as the State upholds the values for which it stands (Barker, Principles 165). Loyalty to the democratic values and institutions existing in Britain was therefore to be encouraged. Although there were no functioning democracies existing anywhere given the fact that so many citizens were effectively powerless, every democracy which fell short of the ideal could nonetheless be improved. In contrast, Fascism was everything that democracy was not. It was unreasonable, emotive, nationalistic and imperialist; it curbed civil liberties, it quashed individuality and the heterogeneity of persons, and its government unaccountable. It is therefore no surprise that democracy emerged as the keystone of all the positions taken up against Fascism and capitalism: as West stated in 1939, the “status quo is far from being ideal, but it is a long way nearer the social and democratic state than Nazi Germany” (“War Aims” 1519).

It is customary in feminist literary criticism to identify the public/private dichotomy as the separation between the family -women’s domain- and the public, which encompasses whatever lies beyond the domestic sphere. Thus the private/public dichotomy becomes interchangeable with that of the domestic/public, as Jeff Weintraub points out.4 But by taking the private sphere as the starting point of this line of thought,

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4It is important make a note of the dangers of using the domestic/personal and the private as interchangeable, a critical habit prevalent in feminist literary criticism which was in fact not a part of either of these writers’ conceptual tools. Jean Bethke Elstain has described the risks of this imprecision as follows: “For if there are no distinctions between private, personal and political, it also follows that no
the public becomes a residual category, analytically impractical because it encompasses the market economy and politics, as well as the entire realm of civil society (Weintraub 28). West, Jameson, Holtby, and Mitchison were alike engaged in understanding and explaining the conditions that enabled the existence of civil society, the non-state realm of society which cannot be identified either with the private, understood as domestic, or the public, associated with the marketplace and/or administrative institutions. For them, civil society thus “involve[d] all those relationships which go beyond the purely familial and yet are not of the state”, as Keith Tester states (Civil 8). How society is to be made civil was the question that occupied these writers because they believed their society was becoming increasingly uncivil. Given the “civil disorder”, West argued, there is need of a “new social formula” (“Grandeur” 251). The possibility of establishing a new creed, a mission these writers expected the Labour Party to pursue, was a fundamental aspect of the socialist political agenda, as Rebecca West pointed out:

We have now arrived at a crisis when the forces of capitalism are due to receive the greatest blow aimed at them since the beginning of history. The first major defeat we suffer at the hands of the Germans is going to cause a movement of revulsion against the Government, which will be entirely justified. This Government is packed with Ministers who are there because they belong to the privileged classes, and lack both efficiency and a creed. But however deserved its fall will be, it will be a disaster to the human race of there is not another and a better Government to take its place. I fail to see how the Left-Wing is going to seize this opportunity, unless it arrives at some sort of unity of policy and principle. (“Left” 1606)

West’s call was echoed by Jameson’s plea for a “new synthesis covering every activity, social and spiritual, of European man” (No Time 155): “Society has become a rabble of individuals, some rich, some poor, some anxious to serve the community, others anxious for their own interests” (Jameson, “Twilight” 195). Mitchison also called for a “rational moral code” (Kingdom 155) as an alternative to the “tremendous increase in superstition and irrationality of all kinds” (141). Holtby claimed that the real “tragedy of the Labour Party since the war has been a tragedy of confusion of values. Its members
did not know whether they wanted to make happy, complacent, middle-class citizens of us all, with a hierarchy of wealth, plus morning-coats, plus breeding, and the standards and social code of nineteenth-century society, with its leisured ladies, conspicuous consumption, social superiorities and all, or whether they wanted to establish an entirely new standard of human values” (“Dilemma” 163).

Citizens were to acquire civic virtue through education, literature, free social interaction in the working place or in voluntary associations and politics. Only an ongoing process of socialisation that taught people to navigate civil society would curb “cruelty [which] is one of our human lusts” (Jameson, “End” 18) and encourage them to become self-reliant individuals capable of forming an autonomous judgement on public affairs based on personal experience, common moral principles, cultural values and ways of life. In Bertrand Russell’s words,

> Political ideals must be based upon ideals for the individual life. The aim of politics should be to make the lives of individuals as good as possible […]. The problem of politics is to adjust the relations of human beings in such a way that each severally may do as much of good in his existence as possible. And this problem requires that we should first consider what it is that we think is good in the individual life. (Political 9)

Shared social networks and understandings would infuse individuals with a strong sense of their individuality because they would realise that their conception of the good life could coincide with the common good. For Jameson, for example, civil society is the locus of sociability, best described in *Mirror in Darkness*, in which characters from diverse social classes and with diverse life histories coexist, meet, part, are in conflict, or co-operate in a fluid movement. But sociability breaks down for her under economic pressure and the psychological malaise of post-war London. An apolitical sphere of life becomes politicised when it is disturbed by conflict: the civic space of the streets of London become the locus of political disagreement, collective action and resolution during the General Strike.

West, Jameson, and Mitchison all presumed the possibility of creating a more integrated society despite the complexity and scale of modern societies of which they were aware, because there had been periods in history when this had been possible. Tawney described how the idea of ‘purpose’ held society together:
The natural consequence of the abdication of authorities which had stood, however imperfectly, for a common purpose in social organization, was the gradual disappearance from social thought of the idea of purpose itself. Its place in the eighteenth century was taken by the idea of mechanism. The conception of men as united to each other, and of all mankind as united to God, by mutual obligations arising from their relation to a common end, ceased to be impressed upon men’s minds, when Church and State withdrew from the centre of social life to its circumference. Vaguely conceived and imperfectly realized, it had been the keystone holding together the social fabric. What remained when the keystone of the arch was removed was private rights and private interests, the materials of a society, rather than society itself. (Acquisitive 13)

West did not trace the dissociation of social organisation from moral criteria of conduct to the eighteenth century but she did exemplify this sense of purpose by way of reference to Augustine and Charlemange, both of whom encouraged the creation of a community of men by urging them to become “members of a great international body called Christendom. Then as now a man’s relationship to his home and his people was a matter of the greatest importance” (“Grandeur” 245). Although she was arguing the case for collective security, West explained that Christianity helped to place men in relation to others “regardless of their speech and race” (“Grandeur” 246). Augustine “hoped for a world in which there should be such an abundance of States as there are families in a city; and just as the families in a city have to unite before municipal life can be stable and effective, so those States would have to organise among themselves to make a peaceful world” (“Grandeur” 244). For Jameson, the government of England before the Civil War of the seventeenth century had “always before it an ideal” (Decline vii). The subsequent prevalence of the individualistic, competitive Puritan spirit of the bourgeoisie (as Jameson, following Tawney, had it), destroyed the “theory of society as one indivisible whole” (19). The result of this absence of a “common body of social ethics” (Tawney, Acquisitive 120) was that government and state came to serve the interests of a minority, so there was no longer a “sense of purpose”. Interestingly, it was not until the seventeenth century that anything like civil society came into existence, but the diversification of society and community feeling need not exclude the revival of loyalty and patriotism. These writers were aware of the difficulties they faced, as West clearly stated: “The more fractional the share of authority exercised by the individual, the less he can exercise his will. This is enslaved not by oppression but by imposed impotence” (Court 218).
Since WW1, ‘society’ could no longer taken for granted (Hynes, War, 344). What had seemed a natural entity, the product of an ongoing cultural process and uninterrupted reproduction of social relationships, suddenly became blatantly artificial and precarious: “Europe has displayed all the characteristics of a person shattered by a traumatic experience: capricious, distracted, given to violence towards the self and others, careless of their environment, and incapable of carrying on a normal constructive life” (West, “Grandeur” 250). As writers that bridged both historical periods, Holtby, West, Jameson and Mitchison felt better placed to see how cultural assumptions created this sense of social integration: bonds previously seen as natural and spontaneous had been undermined, and “we have learned by tragic experience the fragility of civilised habits” (Laski, Introduction, 88).

What was it that made the “social world social”? (Tester 5). Why did individuals need society and how did they experience it? Civil society, as Tester suggests, is “nothing other than a bounded community which divides the world into a milieu of those with whom it is acceptable and safe to associate, and a milieu of those with whom association is unacceptable and potentially dangerous” (Tester 10). Fascism was identified as a threatening, undesirable other, as a return to primitive atavism, in fact: ‘barbarism’, ‘half-tribal’, ‘political primitivism’, ‘unreason’ were some of the terms used to describe both the state of mind of Fascists and the conditions in which they lived. The victims of Fascist ideology suffered a personal regression. Mitchison argued that those willing to submit the conduct of their lives (their will) to the capricious authority of a totalitarian state were acting out a “death-wish, this groping back to the safety and darkness and helplessness and finally unconsciousness and the womb” (Kingdom 146). For West, supporters of Fascism

act in disregard of reality because they wish to return to the psychological conditions of an ideal childhood, in which they will be given every provision and protection by an all-powerful father if only they are good and obedient children. This attempt to organise the State on nursery lines gives many people a degree of emotional satisfaction far greater than they would receive from participation in political activities, and put them in an exalted state, comparable to that of young persons in love [...]. But it impossible to choose governmental systems according to purely subjective tests. (“Grandeur” 251)

By contrast, representative democracies were perceived as rational, civilised, progressive, governed by the rule of law: at once free and just. Civil society, conceived
as the space in which free adult individuals co-exist and interact voluntarily, was seen as a precondition for democracy. In a totalitarian regime there is no private sphere, and the state defines public interest, whereas in a democracy group interests are reconciled through political negotiation and government. The difference between a democracy and a Fascist state, as Jameson described it, is “between a disciplined herd and a society of well-educated men and women, whose minds and bodies are fitted to stand the rigours of freedom” (“Defence” 176).

IV
Public Intellectuals

How did Holtby, Jameson, West and Mitchison inhabit the space of civil society? As Mitchison noted, writers like herself “combine journalism or publicity of some sort with our other writing” (“Anger” 91). The best term for their role as intellectuals was suggested by Holtby, who felt compelled to become a “publicist” because “the whole world is on the brink of another catastrophic war, & to go & shut oneself in a cottage writing an arcadian novel, when one might be trying to shove it one infinitesimal fraction of an inch in the other direction –seems to me a kind of betrayal” (Shaw, Clear 233). The exercise of power, in the form of the State, could and should be monitored and checked by a critical, vigilant democratic society and the “publicist” had a moral duty as a writer, as a private individual, and as a responsible citizen to encourage and guide this critical assessment of the State. Thus, by example, they would illustrate the links between the right to freedom of expression and association, and help to create a general climate of opinion.

R.H. Tawney believed that the acquisition of wealth should be “contingent upon the performance of services” (Acquisitive 24), an arrangement that sought to proportion remuneration to service: the acquisition of private property and wealth would be a secondary consequence of the performance of a social and economic function. Tawney emphasised duties over rights, and rights are “relative to some end or purpose” (96), namely the benefit of the community as a whole. Responsible members of a community should not be remunerated for performing tasks conducive to personal gain only, but should have a “social purpose”, the value of their work judged by the community itself. Thus, individual rights should entail duties, an idea starkly in contrast with the liberal conception of individual rights worthy of protection “irrespective of any social purpose
to which their exercise contributed” (10). Tellingly, no one was more reviled in fiction than the functionless ‘profiteer’ -who either inherited wealth or gained it through royalties or ground-rents. Such emphasis on service to the community was taken to heart by West, Holtby, Jameson and Mitchison, who were all acutely aware of their duty towards their fellow citizens: writers, according to Mitchison, are not “writing with an immediate eye on royalties” (“Anger” 81); West, meanwhile, went so far as to suggest that writers were “a species of Shaman -a person who is of service to the tribe because he often goes into a trance and delivers cryptic messages which turn out in the end to have more sense than ordinary common sense” (“Duty” 20). Words for these writers were action, and action would be generated from words because, as Jameson suggested, “[e]nquiry and criticism are infectious” (“Defence” 163).

Literature and polemic, then, were seen as means to encourage critical self-awareness and awareness of the power of citizens to use the political element of citizenship to enforce their civil and social rights; hence, individuals should be persuaded to recognise their potential for agency, find their voices, think independently, and be in a position to explain themselves to others in order to make their needs publicly known. If and when these demands were acknowledged and formulated as collective needs (rather than as merely private, particular desires), they would become subject to negotiation. Politics are understood as that aspect of collective human activity that involved both conflict and co-operation among groups of people with different, often conflicting interests and needs rather than as a means to satisfy their private desires: “quarrels will occur, not only between parties in the state, nor between citizens in the party, but between conflicting loyalties within an individual”, Holtby pointed out. But this process is valuable in itself because it is the “inevitable accompaniment of democracy” (“Loyalties” 637). At the time Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West were writing, conflict seemed to be escalating both at home and abroad, and although none of these writers believed in the possibility of a world without conflict since disagreement is constitutive of a democratic, heterogeneous society, it ought to be possible to resolve and discuss conflicts rather than eliminate them altogether or resolve them violently: “Fascism silences conflict, by silencing its victims” as Tawney observed (Equality, 197). Winifred Holtby, in 1927, was already lamenting the “decline in the fine arts of political abuse”. She argued that the laws of libel and the “machinery of party government” had undermined the productive “ardours of antagonism” indispensable to
the “political battlefield”: “The truth is that we have lost the rich amplitude of imaginative insult which once lent splendour to political antagonism, and we cover the poverty of our invention and the lassitude of our wrath by the thin cloak of legal prohibition” (“Decay” 215). Active citizenship could be realised through public debate and participation.

Democrats that they were, the four writers discussed here believed that it was from within civil society that the ends and means for a good society should emerge: ideally, the state would act according to a given society’s scale of moral values; at the same time, it was the task of society to define these values and ensure that the state lived up to them. West qualified the type of democracy that she would like to see. Equality is the key word here:

What did the Left-wing mean to those of us who counted ourselves as its adherents? It meant that we believed in liberty, fraternity, and equality. There has been no better formula yet discovered. We believed that no man should be prevented from following his own way to salvation, provided he hindered no other man in a like search; that we must respect the rights of others as we respect our own, even if these others are unknown or unlikeable; and that every man must have equality of opportunity, and that we should so much as possible share all material and spiritual goods that come our way. (“Letter” 1466)

Policy is not an area that either West or any of the other writers I am concerned with here influenced directly, even though all of them are critical of specific issues in their topical pieces. “Principle” was their speciality: “liberty, equality and brotherhood” (“Letter” 1466) were the ideas they offered up to public debate. As writers, they perceived the public sphere as indispensable to the configuration of a general will, a space in which all disputes were transferred from the “plane of violence to that of reason” (Laski, Democracy 32). But it was also a concept suited to bridge the gap between government and governed, state and society. It was precisely this gap which had been identified by the Mass Observation survey, a project which, by the way, all four of them admired:

There are two kinds of focus on society. One is the ordinary focus of the ordinary man or woman which centres round home and family, work and wages. The other is the political focus, which centres round government policy and diplomacy. What happens in this political sphere obviously affects the sphere of home and work; equally obviously, political developments are affected by the reactions of
ordinary people. But between the two there is a gulf of understanding, of information and of interest. This gulf is the biggest problem of our highly organised civilisation. (Madge and Harrison 25)

It is this gulf that civil society occupies, and the dimension that was of particular concern to “publicists” was the public sphere, where individuals discuss matters of common concern in an atmosphere free of coercion. This space encompasses the cultural dimension of civil society. Thus the public sphere is one aspect of that space in which society can function beyond the influence of the state, and without interference from government, though it engages with government insofar as power is “morally bound” to follow the view of the people who not only contest but scrutinise it. Charles Taylor usefully defines this common space of sociability in a way particularly relevant to our theme: in its ideal form it is

a common space in which the members of society meet, through a variety of media (print, electronic) and also face-to-face encounters, to discuss matters of common interest: and thus to be able to form a common mind about those matters. I say “a common space” because, although the media are multiple, as well as the exchanges taking place in them, they are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. ("Liberal" 259)

Taylor refines his definition by adding that potentially everyone can engage in discourse within the public sphere: it is all-inclusive. The links between people can be many, editorials, pamphlets, books, newspapers, public forums and meetings, precisely the kind of activity that West, Jameson, Holtby and Mitchison performed as “publicists”.

The modern public sphere is, Taylor explains, a crucial element in any society’s self-image, because it brings to mind a society in which individuals form their opinions freely and openly as both individuals and as a group. Common opinions emerge from this multilateral exchange that will somehow exert an influence on government: “We share a common public opinion, if we do, because we have worked it out together. We don’t just happen to have identical views; we have elaborated our convictions in a common act of definition” (260). It is obvious that in order to engage in a debate it is not always necessary to meet face-to-face, although those who do believe that they are part of a network of discussion about matters of common concern are inspired by a sense of common purpose, which is obviously grounded on and constituted by a series of common understandings. The possibility of participating freely in public debate is fundamental to a citizen’s perception of his society as free.
It is crucial that this space of free intellectual exchange be extrapoli
tical, “disengaged from partisan spirit”. For political power to be supervised and checked from outside, a “certain impersonality, a certain impartiality, an eschewing of party spirit” (Taylor, “Liberal” 265) is required of those involved in public debate, they must rise above particularity because it is commonly identified with self-interest. The relationships established between participants in a public debate are distinct from those that govern the private sphere. The distinction turns on the fact that, upon participating in a debate, individuals are free and equal, they engage, to use the term invoked in the 1930s, as disinterested “human beings”: “’Does not one of the sharpest divisions in the world lie between those who think in categories -of niggers, servants, foreigners, women, suburbs, and those who think in terms of human beings?’” (qtd. in Shaw, Clear 147).

In a discussion about the limitations of party organisations, Holtby argued that the majority of citizens are incapable of judging party policy and political conduct on the basis of “an abstract principle”: instead, she encouraged her readers to create “non-party organisations” which provide a “means of expression for those whose zeal for a non-party question outweighs their allegiance to one of the three basic political principles, and even for party followers provides a needful means of protest against undue compromise”. In a more participatory system of democracy, it would be possible for “those who see the political aspect of the state as the complete expression of its corporate life, and not as the means of gratifying one particular desire, to follow untormented by secondary considerations, the highest of all political loyalties, the allegiance to a spiritual ideal of society” (“Loyalties” 636). As Taylor describes it, the space in which such allegiances can be realised is not contained or established by rigid frameworks or institutions but exists insofar as people are interested in engaging in it actively. The public sphere would thus be an “association constituted by nothing outside the common action we carry out in it” (“Liberal” 267).

The vehicles created to enable discussion change in response to the needs of the moment. Journals were launched and their success depended on whether they could adapt to demand. The 1930s were highly prolific in producing a multiplicity of publications, the most obvious example being the Left Book Club, and writers often participated in public debates. As Taylor acknowledges, the public sphere is, in practice, obviously not as free from the political domain as he initially described it, though he
also emphasises that it is the idea of this space as free that is fundamental for a people who believe that they live in a democratic society. Essential to this, in turn, is the perception that people feel they belong to a community, whatever its size, and that they will be heard and thus valued. In this regard, the ruminations of Taylor on the subject of publicity were already canvassed by Holby, West, Mitchison, and Jameson. Although, as they further argued, the media are biased. Holby acknowledged this openly when she wrote, “proprietors may exert a very direct, personal and immediate influence” on the way news is reported. For Taylor, however, this is not a significant problem, precisely because in modern societies exchanges of opinion are dispersed, just as democratic decision-making is dispersed through public discussion. Holby, Jameson, West, and Mitchison believed that the uninhibited discussion of issues of common interest was central to the process of democratic decision-making and personal development. Participation in the public sphere became an exercise of reason, and reading was one way to exercise this critical capacity. At the time it was accepted that there was rarely “such a thing as a general public opinion” (Laski, Introduction 72), but there were a series of public opinions centreing around specific issues as they arose, and the “relative power of these opinions depends upon the knowledge and organisation they command” (72). As writers, Holby, Jameson, Mitchison and West came to identify freedom of expression and assembly as the good to be protected against Fascism which stifled both. West perceived this danger as a tendency already present within British society:

> If there is one thing certain in this world, it is the way by which our people must seek God is through faithfulness to the ideal of liberty. How are we members of the Labour Party to practise that fidelity if they are moved by a sentimental loyalty to defend the proceedings of a government which repeatedly denies its citizens the elementary rights of free speech and assembly? (“Introduction” viii)

Fascism reduced individuals to the roles assigned to them by the state according to its military needs: “At present”, Holby wrote, “I feel and think as a citizen and an individual; if the Blackshirts were victorious, I should be expected to think only as a woman” (“Shall I?” 172). Capitalism also stifled individuality by reducing persons to cogs in a machine. By attempting to formulate an adequate model of human relationships that would encourage altruism and co-operation, the members of their society would have to be endowed with a democratic disposition, be more tolerant, better able to engage in dialogue, better equipped to make their own decisions and
choices. Individuals living in adverse material circumstances and within a moral vacuum perceived themselves as disempowered and therefore too weak, emotionally and politically, to resist the seductions of extremist ideologies. If and when the individual was motivated by appropriate ideals, he could own himself or rise above his environment.

Capitalist democracy was based on what Laski called an individualistic “atomic conception of social life” (Democracy p.61), which was obviously incompatible with the socialist concept of solidarity. Holtby and West have often been described as individualists because for them the individual was the basic unit of value\(^5\). However, individualism must be distinguished from a respect for individuality, a distinction neatly drawn by R.H. Tawney. These writers were “individualistic, not because [they] valued riches as the main end of man, but because [they] had a high sense of human dignity, and desired that men should be free to become themselves” (Tawney, Acquisitive 20).

Even Mitchison, arguably the only writer of this group who unambiguously believed that humans are essentially benevolent social creatures, places the individual at the centre of meaning and the starting point of social analysis. In her organic model of life “everything fits inside everything else. The farther out you go the closer you come back to the end (Mitchison, “Outline” 8):

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\(^5\) I believe that when Jameson, Holtby, Mitchison, and West used the terms ‘person’ and ‘individual’ they understood the following: “A person is a being with a certain moral status, or a bearer of rights. But underlying the moral status, as its condition, are certain capacities. A person is a being who has a sense of self, has a notion of the future and the past, can hold values, make choices; in short, can adopt life-plans. At least, a person must be the kind of being who is in principle capable of all this, however damaged these capacities may be.

Running through all this we can identify a necessary (but not sufficient) condition. A person must be a being with his own point of view on things. The life-plan, the choices, the sense of self must be attributable to him as in some sense their point of origin. A person is a being who can be addressed, and who can reply”. Charles Taylor, “The Concept of a Person” in Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 97.
Fig. I. Naomi Mitchison, diagram from “Preface.” An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents (London: Gollancz, 1932) 10.

In this diagram Mitchison suggests that any explanation of the subjectivity and identity of the ‘I’, must be conducted within the intellectual, social and political environment of the present, looking first to the past which, presumably, allows for projection into the future. Only such an inquiry would enable a self-determining individual to realise what constitutes “the best kind of individual, the best kind of “I”, and at the same time to fit in with a group -to be what is called social” (“Outline” 11). Although the ‘I’ may understand itself within the context of its immediate influences (the family, society), the state and economics play an equally important role in determining his life.

Mitchison’s diagram concisely illustrates the supreme worth of the individual to which all four writers subscribed. Awareness of how language shaped the individual’s perception of himself as a historical subject informed their writing, so they deliberately sought to shape subjectivity by portraying a relational self, born into a social world with rules, norms, institutions and so on, which are not fixed. Although these social structures may be coercive, the individual which emerges in their writing is an empowered, autonomous, self-conscious agent who can choose to modify, preserve, or radically transform existing conditions. This process is interactive and entails the recognition of oneself as separate from yet simultaneously connected to others. Importantly, this relationship is the result of a deliberate choice.

I have traced the central and organising principles of Mitchison’s, Holtby’s, Jameson’s, and West’s work to a common source in ethical socialism. In explicating this source, it has been possible to show the way in which their core concerns branched
out into a ramified set of themes and values -benevolence, solidarity, community, caritas- in terms of which they subjected modern political movements and institutions -capitalism, liberalism, and fascism- to searing criticism. Engaged in a critical project of this kind, the writer is obligated to assume a public role -the publicist’s role- from a position located firmly outside the interstices of power yet still in critical dialogue with that power. In the next chapter I proceed to examine how preoccupations play themselves out in the specific area of culture.
Chapter Two

Literature and The Cultivation of Values
I

Introduction

The growing social and cultural power of the middle classes was of great concern to West, Mitchison, Holtby, and Jameson because it brought with it an impoverished public sphere. The middle classes, it was said, were complacent, fearful and inward-looking, and therefore indifferent to matters of public interest. In Holtby’s playful dialogue *Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit* these concerns are succinctly introduced and are addressed in greater depth by Rebecca West in “The Strange Necessity” and by Storm Jameson in *No Time the Present*. West and Jameson developed a more complex theory of writing and reading than Mitchison and Holtby. For both culture was a civilising force, shaped by a long tradition of political and artistic endeavour in Europe that was threatened by the irreversible destructiveness wrought by fascism. For West, however, cultural traditions were essentially conservative in nature, in that they sought to control and shape behaviour. For her literature was not intrinsically political but worked alongside political activity, providing an ideal of the good life and encouraging altruism. For Jameson cultural traditions were a form of resistance to authority and to outmoded, restrictive versions of reality. Literature was seen as a vehicle for the moral critique of a dominant form of life identified as middle class, because the writer structured the fictional world with a particular set of positive values in mind. As Winifred Holtby put it:

> Behind the choice of what experience [the writer] shall offer us lie other choices, between one sense and another, between the senses and the reason, between optimism and pessimism, between black and white. Morality lies behind it, and an ethical as well as an aesthetic convention. Further, beyond such a choice lies the influence that it must have upon its readers. (Woolf 46)

This claim is also typical of the perspective adopted by Mitchison, West, and Jameson, and I shall be examining its implications throughout this chapter. Here we see the claim being made that literature shapes human subjectivity, and that consequently its role is to encourage dissent by making the reader more self-aware. Ultimately, all four writers seem to fall back, unexpectedly, on the idea that there is a cultivated minority, not necessarily from a particular class or necessarily literary, but identified by its moral position, capable of overcoming the prejudices of self-interest in the interest of the
community, and placing before its audience a body of positive values which should
ground common life.

II

Reinventing the Public Sphere.

To the strong [the acquisitive society] promises unfettered freedom for the exercise of their strength; to
the weak the hope that they too one day may be strong. Before the eyes of both it suspends a golden prize,
which not all can attain, but for which each may strive, the enchanting vision of infinite expansion. It
assures men that there are no ends other than their ends, no law other than their desires, no limit other
than that which they think advisable. Thus it makes the individual the centre of his own universe, and
dissolves moral principles into a choice of expediencies.
R.H. Tawney, The Acquisitive Society

Concern for the corrosive impact of the mass media and consumerism on the collective
imagination and the moral integrity of the English was widespread among writers
between the wars. Capitalists were blamed for this unwelcome change, accomplished
through the manipulation of the willing middle class, “probably the nastiest people as a
class”, Mitchison argued, because “they are more usually bored, both in their work and
in their homes, and yet they cannot help realising, from their newspapers and movies
and other sources, that a large proportion of the standards and values of the world are
theirs. This must make for self-satisfaction” (Moral 318). The growing social and
cultural power of the middle-class was deeply worrying; as Mitchison suggests, the
middle class arrogantly and complacently identified itself as ‘society.’ The middle class
was perceived -inaccurately of course- as a homogeneous, expanding group identified
not by its income or employment but by its social aspirations, tastes and manners. The
“crass middle class” (Jameson, “Christmas” 605) was inward-looking, socially narrow,
apolitical, mobile so less rooted in local traditions, morally conventional, and suburban,
and what it prized most was its “privateness”, the “liberty to have a home of your own,
to do what you want in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of
having them chosen from above” (Orwell, Lion 39-40). This concept of “liberty” is not,
Orwell argues, that of political discourse. The very shapelessness of the middle-class
was taken as a sign of its inauthenticity, because, unlike the working and upper classes,
its identity was not grounded in tradition (Mitchison, Moral 318). The “chief figure of
our times, the Little Man spends anxious moments wondering why he is not happier”
(Jameson, “What is Happiness?” 37), his life a constant battle to preserve his precarious social status.

Mitchison, West, Jameson, and Holtby observed the transformation of society in the changing pattern of leisure pursuits of the middle classes during the period, taken as a reflection of middle class ideology and a measure of its influence. If, as Thorpe has pointed out, organised religion and drinking had previously been the main traditional communal activities (Deceptive 102), increased vacant hours, income, and provision changed this profoundly. As Eutychus, a character in Winifred Holtby’s Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit (1928) explains:

‘You could go to Church and remain sober or you could stay at home and get drunk. To-day, the Baby Austin and the motor char-a-banc are killing the sermon. The Sabbath is the day when all the townspeople go into the country and all the country people come into the towns. On Sundays the well-to-do play golf and the working-classes read the Sunday papers. Once upon a time a lively picture of vice, hell-fire, and whatnot had tremendous drawing-power. To-day, what chance has the sermon against The News of the World? […] You can read in the comparative comfort of your own back-yard, instead of having to sit on a hard pew of diabolical discomfort. Compulsory education has ruined the sermon. Cheap transport has ruined the sermon. The crystal set, the golf links, the Sunday-cinema, and the back-garden have ruined the sermon’. (10)

Moral decline was, in the view of these writers, to some extent linked to religious decline. A great concern to Holtby, West, Jameson, and Mitchison was that post-WW1 society lacked an embracing interpretation of existence of the kind previously provided by the church. The stability, homogeneity and relative continuity of pre-war society which these writers did not regard as a misconception was, they thought, based on the shared and established norms of religion which unified society because men and women related to it independently of their social position and thus had a strong sense of community irrespective of class. Thus religion not only provided moral unity, a collective identity and a common language in which people could communicate across the class divide, but was also a school for civic virtues such as tolerance, justice, fairness, love, compassion, and co-operation. Religion structured social life and simultaneously offered an alternative vision of a better life that could not be realised in this world but existed as a possibility. Mitchison, West, Holtby and Jameson were not religious, but they perceived their society as fragmented and indifferent to issues of morality and politics: people felt increasingly alienated from each other because no
secular doctrine had yet replaced the all-embracing interpretation of man and nature previously offered by religion. As Fenelon explains in Eutychus, “The Church was once held competent to speak for the State. Who speaks with its authority? The Church was once held competent to speak for art, for social order, for morality. Who speaks today of these affairs?” (23). For Mitchison, West and Holtby religion was a source for the collective symbolic imagination. Holtby, like West and Mitchison, believed that Christianity provided a valuable, convenient myth, “a body of traditional legend and lore, to serve us in metaphor and reference, to provide us with that shorthand of symbolism which tells us what we want to know by a single reference” (Holtby, “English” 111). All great literatures, including the Bible, “have been made possible by the intelligence of a public that will take certain things for granted. We need the Lingua Franca of personification and metaphor, the association which rings after certain names and phrases like an echo on the air, chiming softly into infinity” (“English”, p.110). West accepted the psychological need for this symbolic expression of the social life of a community, but, like Jameson also saw religion as a source of the social virtues necessary for good civic conduct. In their different ways all four writers proposed an alternative ethos with a view to directing human action guided by shared criteria which would inform social critique and provide a common vocabulary drawn from socialism. In Eutychus, Fenelon explains the transition in which these writers placed themselves: “You have pulled down God from his throne, and have set up instead a vision of impersonal Good” (140); this “impersonal Good” is socialist. Socialism, the writers believed, offered an alternative framework of beliefs that enabled humans to understand, criticise, and transform their society; literature was instrumental in this process because it presented alternative ways of imagining the world and portrayed different the types of personality suitable to the task, suggesting ways of perceiving the self and others that would empower the individual. Rather than look to another world to find happiness, socialism was a secular doctrine with the scope of a religion that encouraged humans rationally to transform their world into a more democratic one in which, given the appropriate economic conditions, people could pursue their own visions of happiness:

There is very little profit to be made out of inducing people to be more reasonable, because the more reasonable they are the less affected they will be by advertisement, the more emotionally self-sufficient they will be, and the less they will need to bolster up their insecurities
with possessions, many of which are in the category of luck-bringers (Mitchison, Kingdom 147).

Human action was understood in terms of narrative, an explanatory tool about how human life could be ordered and events understood to make a coherent whole with reference to a goal, a common end. If people were frightened and bewildered by an increasingly complex, chaotic, and alienating reality, they needed life to have form, order, a story, and the novels discussed below are to some extent a quest for order in which individuals are presented with choices the implications and consequences of which are explored in the context of public and collective life.

Winifred Holtby’s Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit may be read as an account of the changes in leisure during the inter-war period and an example of the unhappy consequences of this change for the conception of selfhood. It is presented as a dialogue on the future of religious teaching between Francois de Salignac de la Mothe de Fenelon, the seventeenth-century French archbishop, Anthony, a “real highbrow” (32), a sceptical Bloomsbury intellectual convinced that religion, an “illusion of human infancy” (11), has been superseded, and Eutychus, an “ordinary chap”, the “man in the street, man in the pew” (27). Marion Shaw observes that the “satiric form of the dialogue gives Winifred the opportunity to cast a slightly caustic eye over society’s numerous and varied do-gooders […]. It’s a culture in disarray that Eutychus portrays, but vigorous, engaged and optimistic, and Winifred’s enjoyment in it, and in the production of her ideas concerning it, are obvious” (Clear 213). Holtby was exceptional in embracing modernity, because it improved the condition of women. However, the playful tone of the dialogue does not mask her concern for the anarchic proliferation of dogmas, values, societies, and institutions that were replacing the church. Her slightly condescending portrayal of Eutychus betrays her misgivings: Holtby is also careful to give the last word to Anthony and Fenelon.

Holtby believed that it was a mistake to be uncritical of the changes in the modern world: “The individual with his impulses and fears has always been in conflict with the ethical and economic code imposed upon him by society. His salvation lies in a nice equilibrium between personal and social interests; but that balance has to be adjusted hour by hour. Accepted standards are not upholstered sofas on which we can lie at ease” (“Modern” 1202). The problem, in her view, was that the middle classes
preferred the comfort of their sofas, without adjusting their position: personal interests took precedence over social interests.

In the dialogue, Holtby explores the erosion of common values, and although she does not offer an alternative morality, her satiric treatment of Eutychus’ leisure activities betrays her concern for the growing preoccupation with personal salvation. Each interlocutor investigates one aspect of the problem. Fenelon discovers that, contrary to Anthony’s expectations, never has “interest in religion been so intense, so widespread, so intelligent, and so active as it is to-day” (37). The evidence he provides is that preachers “rush into print in order that their admonitions may reach a greater congregation” (39) with publications such as “The He-Woman, the She-Woman, and the Girl Voter of Twenty-Five” (38), and “Have You Found God Yet? You Ought to” (47), all of which seem to have wide appeal. By marketing their products as advertisers evangelists extend their audience. The fact that the clergy has jumped on the media bandwagon is not in itself execrable, although the content of the sermons has suffered in the process. The need for belief is sincere, Fenelon discovers, bewildered by the variety of doctrines available: Christian Science, Anglicanism, the Salvation Army, Evangelism, British Israelis, Nonconformism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Spiritualism, the “Y.M.C.A, Y.W.C.A., Toc. H., Rotary, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Mothers’ Union, Froth Blowers, Gugnunecs and the Automobile Association”, which have the “appearance of religious bodies, with hierarchies, ritual, songs, traditions, and authority”. Catholic archbishop that he is, Fenelon deplores the lack of orthodoxy of these so-called ‘religions’. There is a spiritual need among people of all classes, a “deep intuition, driving [man] to seek explanations of the universe, to learn whence he has come and whither he goes, an intuition driving him to seek salvation from his sins, and to find a way of righteousness of spirit” (52), but this impulse lacks “direction” (52).

Anthony agrees that the religious impulse is alive, but believes that its satisfaction is to be found in the creeds proclaimed by intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, political scientists, artists and businessmen. He believes that men are idle and cowardly and that the “herd” (62) wants to be “categorically instructed about [the purpose of life, the meaning of death, sin and punishment] in such a manner that no scope is left for doubt or questioning” (63). The ‘herd’ is motivated exclusively by “Habit, convention, self-interest and the sexual impulse” (63), so the demand for
religion is not, as Fenelon believes, a “holy thing” (52), but a by-product of fear, which “makes us seek reassurance concerning our ultimate destiny and how to reach it; it is idleness which makes the most of us to submit to the self-constituted authority of the few” (64), that is, a self-appointed elite who preach the salvation of “human personality” (66) and whose authority lies in specialised knowledge of their field. Modern preachers all agree that the natural order can and should be independent of culture, so humans can determine their future by working with nature. All these systems of belief and political ideologies develop their “Way of Life, their Ritual, and their Fellowship” (88). For all of them, culture shapes human nature with a view to achieving the good life of society as a whole, in an “age obsessed by problems of the community” (15). Among the ways of life offered by these preachers are Vegetarianism, Pacifism, Folk Dancing, Leather-work, and Fellowship, Open Conspirators, “Communists, Fascists, Patriots, Socialists, Nationalists, Conservatives, Liberals, Internationalists, Pacifists, Feminists, a “Church called the League of Nations” (94) and the “pulpit of Prosperity” of capitalists whose “God is Mammon” (97).

Eutychus, speaking for the majority, confirms the conclusions reached by his companions. The “ordinary man doesn’t seem to be interested in all your highbrow stuff” (36), he says; this ordinary man just wants “a little religion. He wants to be saved. What from? That’s your business gentlemen. We only know that we feel unsafe, as it were” (110). Eutychus seeks safety, and simply wants advice on how to live successfully, how to be wealthy, powerful, or famous:

'I like to be told what I ought to believe and how I ought to live, and where I shall go to when I die. Life’s a mystery, that’s what I say; but you do like to feel that there is someone who knows about it, saint or scientist, whatever you may call him, so that you can leave it all in his hands and get along with your own job’. (28)

Eutychus is incapable of abstract thought and theoretical argumentation; he wants simple formulae as guidelines to conduct his life. From his indiscriminate point of view, all bodies of thought are interchangeable. He is an impatient, self-indulgent consumer of belief, a shopper in a world in which ideas are sold like merchandise, all of equal value and each satisfying a particular immediate need: “‘You pay your money and you take your choice’” (111). Perhaps more importantly, however, his willingness to accept uncritically any of these alternative interpretations of life suggests that his self-image is mobile and discontinuous, and he has no sense of life as a narrative; his sense of
empowerment is simply the experience of a choice of commodities offered in the market-place of ideas: Eutychus lacks a strong sense of self because he is capable of yielding to any number of different possible identities offered to him. Eutychus wants to be “good”, but his understanding of goodness is self-satisfying, not other-oriented as Christian virtue should be. He is in need of religiosity, though not of religion: “I want to feel smooth inside and pleased with myself. What shall I do to be saved? [...] If you can’t be a martyr, be a Good Citizen. Be a Christian Wife and Mother. Be an Honest Businessman. Be a kind neighbour. Be a Loyal Socialist. Here’s success. Here’s honour. Here’s glory in a quiet way, which is after all as much as most of us want”” (Holtby, Eutychus 118). People are willing to believe in anything, voluntarily to accept as truth things which cannot be affirmed as knowledge through empirical evidence or rational argument.

Holtby’s message is clear. Traditional religious belief is obsolete because it is unable to compete with other forms of entertainment and social institutions. The consumer culture of the middle classes was becoming the dominant ‘Way of Life’. As Fenelon says, “‘It is, to tell the truth, the influence of Eutychus which most alarms me’” (142). Holtby’s “What We Read and Why We Read It” confirms the concerns of her contemporaries in relation to both the media and the changing composition of the “great intermediate class” (112). The “ignorant masses” (Holtby, Eutychus 141) were becoming consumers in search of the life of domestic comfort, isolated from each other, proud home-owners, and, more importantly, apolitical. Popular fiction is “produced and marketed for precisely the same reasons that mattresses and boots and bicycles are produced and marketed” (Holtby, “What” 112), that is, to encourage the reader/consumer to further his happiness by reconciling him to his world:

These are the books which cover the counters of provincial stationers and suburban tobacconists and newsagents; they are offered at station bookstalls; they are thumbed in trams and propped against sugar basins in cheap cafes; they are read in crowded living-rooms on Sunday evenings; they are smuggled into offices and cloakrooms. (“What” 113)

The act of reading this fiction does not encourage the active use of “detached intelligence”, a product of “civilization”, as Holtby argues, but lulls the critical faculty to “sleep” and simultaneously validates “snob-fulfilment” and “self-pity” or provides “solace for the lonely, the neglected, the dissatisfied”. More dangerously, however, the
passive consumers of the new media gradually lose touch with reality, feeding as they
do on fantasy and wish-fulfilment, escaping rather than confronting their everyday
world. Unguarded by reason, readers with more time on their hands and money to spend
are inevitably influenced by the “social and ethical values” of “those stories of passion,
deceit, distress and sudden reversals of fortune, served weekly as fact in The News of
the World.” (“What” 113). The hunger for “emotional indulgence” (“What” 114) sought
in the artificial, consoling world of cheap fiction arises from fear: “People living in a
state of ignorance, insecurity and limitation of mental interest are cultural egoists. Their
first question is: ‘What will happen to Me?’” (“What” 113). It is this egoism that also
worried Storm Jameson and Rebecca West as we shall see in what follows. Religious
belief was being replaced not by a secular creed such as socialism or a strong civic
culture, but by an explosion of individualist moralities; housewives, shop assistants, and
clers were interested only in fulfilling their own ambitions, untrammelled by
obligations and responsibilities to others beyond their immediate family. By focusing
myopically on the self people weakened their ties of solidarity with their communities.

As Holtby observes, cultural standards “percolate through the middle to the
working classes, and they affect, for better or worse, our social values”:

The amusements of the classes today may differ in quality of
champagne and orchestra, mount ridden or craft sailed; they do not
differ in kind. Snobbery persists; class distinctions exist; economic
feudalism still to some extent endures; but tastes today are identical;
the colonel’s lady and Judy O’Grady are more than ever sisters, not
only under their skins but over them -massaging their wrinkles with
the same cream, wearing underclothes of the same pattern, diverted by
the same cinema stars at the movies. The immense Democracy of
illustrated press, cinema, hire purchase system, cheap store and mass
production has wrought its own revolution. (“Debutante” 980)

This “revolution” cannot be embraced uncritically: the similarities between the
colonel’s lady and Judy O’Grady are cosmetic; access to consumer goods has simply
given them a semblance of equality. Additionally, it is by mistakenly identifying a
particular lifestyle with happiness that both women err. Like all consumers, they seek to
overcome fear and uncertainty with short-term, superficial measures instead of attacking
the underlying political and economic causes of unhappiness:

These forms of letter-press appeal immediately to the optimism, the
vanity and personal curiosity of their readers. They satisfy that
ineradicable desire for a Good Time Coming which lives in the hearts of those whose Bad Time is caused by material circumstances rather than by individual temperament. They partake to some extent of the quality of lotteries, gambling and sweepstakes. Their interest is purely speculative and individual. (“What”, p.113)

The rise in the culture of self-help described by Holtby was one aspect of the privatisation of social life that began in the 1920s, a trend deemed antagonistic to collective action which required a sense of duty and allegiance to a community. The withdrawal from social life is described by Eutychus:

‘Bring your favourite parson right into the home –that’s what I say. Now you’ve got the Baby cine and the Home Film, you can do it right away. But when you’ve got television, you can cut the rest out. Who’ll need to go to church except the parson? The rest of us can sit at home and put up our feet and take our religion as we like it and where we like it’. (135)

Politics did not attend to the personal dimension of the inter-war social crisis because they dealt only with economics and large-scale organisation. “Ethical standards enter more intimately into human lives than political principles” (Holtby, Women 61) and it was the role of literature to explore the impact of external factors on private life by examining the individual in relation to others in a shared social setting: ‘ethical standards’ are inherently about relationships.

How was the influence of the popular press to be curbed? “Supply and demand, you know, gentlemen. Demand and supply” (Eutychus 27). The intellectuals have to educate the masses. Eutychus is intellectually incapable of making a “‘higher demand upon his preachers’” (142), so it is up to the preachers to educate Eutychus by stimulating his intelligence and encouraging his critical faculties, “debate should succeed sermon” (141). The tide of suburban mentality is to be curbed by the artist, according to Holtby, because its “influence spreads over the whole community, until even the servant-girl buying a sixpenny gramophone record in Woolworth’s store, the young man taking his sweetheart to the movies, are affected by the dogma of the artists” (Eutychus 103). Argumentation, the fundamental right and obligation of an active citizen of democracy to challenge authority, is needed to effect change, but for people to participate equally in public debate they need to be freed from the enslavement of necessity: “To change literary values involves to a large extent revolutionalizing a mode of life” (“What” 114). Eutychus himself described the conditions that determined his
mentality: “when a fellow’s been working his eight hours a day he likes to have his bit of religion or whatever else is going, even if it’s only greyhound racing, and then get back to his supper and the wife and a good night’s rest” (29).

Among those held responsible for this trend are the figures associated with Bloomsbury. Virginia Woolf, though greatly admired by West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson as a writer, was a Georgian novelist whose aesthetic project was inadequate to the needs of the common reader. Her fictional exploration of consciousness “would appear to the readers of Cheated of Her Child or The Son She Sent to Prison as self-manufactured and superfluous”. Holtby found highbrow writers lacking not because of the aesthetic qualities of their work but because their class enabled them to write about experiences largely irrelevant to the lives of the majority of the reading public:

The particular type of melancholy based upon a sense of futility of all experience, suffered by sophisticated individuals who already enjoy comparatively comfortable circumstances, plays little part in the lives of people whose poverty, necessity and discomfort have persuaded them that if only these troubles could be remedied, all would be well […]. There are sound psychological reasons why Shoreditch should read Love-the Trespasser, Ealing Sorrell and Son, and Bloomsbury To the Lighthouse. (“What” 114)

Holtby’s criticism of Bloomsbury elitism was common at the time. A cartoon published in Time and Tide in 1927 serves as a commentary on the growing influence of Americans in England, the extent of Woolf’s fame, and her bewildering encounter with the reality of her common readers. More importantly, the caption, a parody of Woolf’s narrative technique written by S.T.W. (possibly Sylvia Townsend Warner), aims to reveal the absurdity of the arbitrary causality of a single consciousness for which everything is potentially significant. Relations between events or things are not necessary, the individual is enclosed within his own mind, nothing exists outside it, so there is not relation to a shared public world: “everything is confusing when one comes to think of it”. Holtby’s main objection to Woolf’s aesthetic was that in its desire to ignore the “external trappings of life” (Woolf 100) in the creation of character, it also disavows the morality implicit in all literature:

For good or evil, with or against our wills, we are all moralists, poets and novelists, Christians and Satanists, Stoics and Epicureans, Baudelaire and Dante, Sophocles and Chaucer, Jane Austen and Marcel Proust. Some proclaim the moral, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Dickens and Tolstoi. Others let it take possession of the reader’s
imagination unawares. But the moral is there and will have its effect. (Woolf 47)

Art pour l’art is the platform from which Woolf critiques the overt moral agendas of Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, but according to Holtby, “a work of art is not destroyed because its secondary influence upon those who encounter it is moral and persuasive” (49). Indeed, a writer cannot control the reader’s responses, though she can attempt to
Fig. II. S.T.W. “Mrs. Woolf is Visited by some Uncommon Readers.” *Time and Tide* (November 25, 1927) 1057.
limit her readership. As the caption suggests, even Woolf’s deliberate, unaccommodating stylistic technique cannot discourage the common reader from enjoying her books, although “congenial” is possibly not the response Woolf envisioned. Woolf finds fault with the Edwardians because they are ‘materialists’; character is created through the description of external phenomena and shown to be shaped by economic and social forces. Woolf’s objection, Holby states, is that such portrayals ignore the life of the spirit. But Holby also points out that Woolf’s theory of art as an end rather than a means to an end is itself a fallacy, contradicted by her own thesis in A Room of One’s Own, and Holby proves in her critical study of Woolf that even Woolf herself cannot avoid those ethical judgements that induce readers to “sign checks and join societies” (45). For Holby matter and spirit are inseparable,

We hunger for the absolute [...] but we are bound in mortality, prisoners in a world of compromise, where politics and aesthetic meet, where mercy and truth must kiss each other. Life, and the means of life; beauty and sanitation; integrity of vision and sickness-insurance; the abstract metaphysics of criticism and the financial difficulties of higher education for women, are all bound up together. (Holby, Woolf 52)

Holtby, like Jameson and West, was a politically committed writer. Indeed, as Marion Shaw suggests, the society portrayed in Eutychus is “vigorous, engaged and optimistic”, but it is also, I would add, apolitical. The ideology shaping civil society, the myriad of associations and groups mentioned in Eutychus, encourage not the self-reflexivity required of a citizen who identifies closely with his community out of choice, but conformity. Thus another ideology, such as socialism, should become the new creed. Influenced in different ways by socialism, West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson stress the influence of the external world on the formation of the self: “the nurture is the man” (Jameson, End 32). In what follows I will focus on the non-fictional work of West and Jameson, the moral and political roles they assigned to intellectuals and specifically to writers in a period experienced as critical, and the moral implications of reading and writing.

Morality, for West, Jameson, Mitchison, and Holtby was formed by and within a community. For West, as we shall see, cultural traditions were the repositories of moral values with which individuals could develop a sense of right and wrong, and literature was the ideal space in which to reflect upon the intricacies of moral life in a world
perceived as chaotic and precarious. For Jameson, intellectuals had the obligation to formulate and actively affirm a core of values for their community; for both, as for Holtby, the duty of writers was to articulate a moral voice for the community, the two core values defended by all were liberty and respect for human dignity.

III

Storm Jameson’s *No Time Like the Present*: the Expatriate in patria.

The idea that the definitive and general crisis of social, political, and artistic activity would end in chaos and catastrophe predominated in the 1930s: Stephen Spender commented on the crisis of liberalism and the “middle-class crise de conscience” (“Background” 24) and Caudwell warned of the (eagerly anticipated) crisis of capitalism; for F.R. Leavis “culture is at a crisis” (Mass 5), and Ralph Fox identified a crisis of the novel (Novel 20). This generation positioned itself at the end of one era and the beginning of another: the death of capitalism was perceived to be imminent (though constantly, frustratingly deferred) and the birth of a truly democratic society (or a dictatorship, it could go either way) would inevitably follow if and when the course of history was directed “intelligently” (Jameson, “Duty” 13). The possibility of bringing forth a “new reality” (Jameson, “Novel” 304) from the ashes of the old gained currency as the threat of another war increased, and writers felt, as Fox stated, that they exercised “some influence on society, and must intervene as the custodians of the world’s consciousness on the side of humanity” (Novel 7). Suddenly, the individual became empowered: “This was one of those intervals in history in which events make the individual feel that he counts” (Spender, “Background” 25). Storm Jameson responded to this sense of crisis by placing the writer centre-stage as a role model, a moral guide and bearer of the conscience of society. To carry out these roles adequately, the intellectual had to be both a member of society and a critical observer, a voluntary exile from his/her community and its accepted versions of reality, though deeply committed to the fate of this community. In what follows we shall see who this ex-centric persona is as described in Jameson’s first autobiography, *No Time Like the Present* (1933) and embodied later in Hervey Russell, the protagonist of the *Mirror in Darkness* series.
In her 1940 essay “The Leaning Tower”, Woolf notes that “no other ten years can have produced so much autobiography as the ten years between 1930 and 1940” (174). Like their predecessors Eliot, Strachey, Huxley, and Forster, dwellers in a stable ivory tower, the writing of Spender, Day Lewis, Auden, Isherwood, and MacNeice is possible only because of their privileged middle-class upbringing and expensive education, mainstays of the edifice of “bourgeois society” (172). However, unlike Woolf’s male contemporaries, who inhabited a stable tower in which they could calmly discuss “aesthetic emotions and personal relations” (169), the younger poets inhabited a leaning tower, under siege from a world changing so dramatically that they could write about nothing except themselves: “When everything is rocking round one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself.” Woolf dwells on the fact that these writers, the beneficiaries of the system against which they angrily protested, became “great egotists” (174) because of the uncertain circumstances which “stung [them] into consciousness -into self-consciousness, into class-consciousness, into the consciousness of things changing, of things falling, of death perhaps about to come”. Woolf concludes that the younger generation longed “to be whole; to be human” (173), to be like everyone else, but was, in fact, caught between two worlds, one “dying”, the other “struggling to be born” (176). Incapable of shedding their education yet simultaneously isolated from the working class they claimed to understand and represent, they feared the world which they wanted to bring forth and dreaded the destruction of the one they knew.

Woolf’s assessment of the autobiographies published throughout the decade, however, should be qualified in the face of the evidence available to the contrary: Orwell’s The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), Connolly’s Enemies of Promise (1938), and Storm Jameson’s No Time Like the Present are ostensibly autobiographical texts which gradually, almost inadvertently, become political and/or literary manifestos by thematising the relationship between the interpreter and the world. These texts deliberately complicate the ‘I’ and its relation to the social as a means of illustrating how identity is shaped by external factors. For these middle-class writers, the isolated individual came to be understood as politically alienated from both his/her class of origin and socially distanced from working-class life. Ironically, for Connolly, Caudwell, Jameson, and Orwell, Woolf’s generation of “New Mandarins” (Connolly 57) was itself understood as distinctly egocentric and subjectivist. Eliot, Forster,
Strachey, Huxley, and Woolf were, in Connolly’s terms, inhabitants of an Ivory Tower who “offered a religion of beauty, a cult of words, of meanings understood only by the initiated at a time when people were craving such initiations” (67); Orwell groups writers of the 1920s, whose tendency is “conservative” (“Inside” 137), on the basis of their “pessimism of outlook” (134) and notes their lack of interest in the world around them (“Inside” 136). This war of literary generations was staged as a battle over which was the most politically effective generation.

The basic argument of these 1930s writers was that the subjectivism and introspection of the post-war writers was an end in itself, an intrinsic aspect of their aesthetic, while their own self-awareness was a means to an end: the crisis of their world triggered a crisis of perspective which in turn gave rise to a new awareness of the contextual and intersubjective nature of the self. What they sought to achieve was not a revolution in literature, but a literature that would advance the revolution: “Literature concerned with change and the changing world is concerned with revolution, and with all the stages of revolutionary action” (Jameson, “New” 262). Connolly, like Orwell, notes that “there exists a whole mood for whose expression we must thank Eliot, the mood of dissatisfaction and despondency, of barrenness and futility- the non-day devil, the afternoon impotence which is curiously unpoetical and which no one else has been able so adequately to render in verse”. This despondency is apolitical because it betrays a “disbelief in action and in the putting of moral slogans into action, engendered by the First World War” (Enemies 53-54). Although 1930s writers openly acknowledged their aesthetic indebtedness to the previous generation, they also expressed a political unease with this legacy, since ‘futilitarianism’ was deemed incompatible with an active engagement in politics.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that one generation’s apolitical and artistically-minded ‘egotism’ is replaced by another generation’s unqualified, selfless, heroic and martyred political commitment. Rather, it seems that one of the effects of elevating crisis to the very condition of being in the world of the 1930s is an internalisation of this dichotomy. Surely it is no coincidence that the idea of split-mindedness recurs over and over again, as does the rejection of a liberal individualism centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out of greater issues or concerns, such as politics, that transcend, or at the very least complicate, the self. Subjectivity was seen as
the product of a constant negotiation between inside and outside, not generated from within:

The essential concern of the novel is with men and women in their times. With the passions and sympathies of men and women as these penetrate and are penetrated by the powerful social currents of their time […]. But if we are to speak of the essential form of the novel, we must think of it as depicting in some way, in any way, the social landscape and climate in which the individual characters move. This can be done in more than one way. It can be done as Balzac does it, or it can be done by so enlarging the individual that society is mirrored in him and in his actions. (Jameson, “Novel” 290)

Although Storm Jameson was caught up in the crisis mood, especially in her more topical pieces, and in fact used apocalyptic endings in two novels (a flood in The World Ends (1937) and a conflagration in Here Comes a Candle (1938)), she repeatedly emphasised the idea of transition in her interpretation of the inter-war period. The ‘for the duration’ feeling of the war years became an age in its own right in the years following the war during which permanence was transition: “the process of change, of decay, of growth, is taking place everywhere all the time” (“New” 263). It is highly significant to observe how Jameson created a self adequate to this “age of transition” (“Between” 129): “I am one of those who spend their lives practising how to live” (Jameson, “Technique” 238).

Jameson did not escape split-mindedness, though she expressed it in different terms:

The dichotomy of my mind –it goes deeper, but the larger word frets me- was there to be seen, if I had had eyes to see it: the instinct to withdraw completely, and the desire to live a flashing life in the world. How far back in the darkness must I force my way, to meet the self whose need was poverty, simplicity, solitude, freedom from possessions, and who was betrayed –oh, another of those large words, by the self hungry for a living which rests on money and power? Come to that, they betrayed each other. (Journey 162)

To ease the tension between these two essentially irreconcilable aspects of the self she submerged herself in ennui, that very literary state of mind characteristic, precisely, of Ivory Tower writers. Jameson is usually discussed as a writer of the 1930s, a politically active intellectual and the chairwoman of the English P.E.N. from 1938 to 1945. However, in her first autobiography (1933), she identified herself with “Class 1914”:
The story of my life ends with the end of 1914. It is only worth telling in so far as it is general. The moment it becomes particular (if I were to tell you how I married, had children, was happy, miserable, cursed, fortunate, scolded, praised) it ceases to be worth a pin to you. My beliefs and feelings, on the other had, will be worth nothing if they are not particular. (No Time 102)

Again, particularity and general relevance stand in a complex and rather paradoxical relationship to one another. Setting out to justify her story’s merit by its general relevance as the testimony of a survivor of WW1, the “beliefs and feelings” of which we are about to be told are “worth nothing if they are not particular”. A balance would need to be struck between the individually particular and a collective experience here, but it is precisely the seeming incompatibility of the two that not only drives the autobiographical project, but also gives a name to the dilemmas of the writer.

Jameson’s self is ennui, trapped in a stalemate between the two opposing forces of her mind which loosely correspond to the division between inner and outer life: on the one hand, there is the almost irresistible impulse to withdraw her attention from her surroundings and turn it upon herself, to be a passive observer of others; on the other, the equally powerful pull towards political action guided by the intellect, the business of which it is to “be inquisitive, to transform, to release new energies [and] change all the conditions of human life” (Jameson, “Crisis” 143). For Jameson, this dualism is not inherent in the human mind but the consequence of socio-economic phenomena such as scientific and technological innovation, the industrialisation of production, rapid urbanisation, the Protestant work ethic and its accompanying possessive individualism.

Jameson’s ennui mainly takes one of two forms. Firstly, boredom is a reaction to her feeling of estrangement from her immediate surroundings. The self is unable to adjust to the vertiginous pace of modern life in a “mechanical civilisation”; there is no longer a balance between the “speed of daily life and the mind’s ability to grasp it, to linger over an event, an action, long enough to turn it into something our nerves can assimilate” (“Crisis”, p.140). Bewildered by its inability to catch up with itself, the self simply seeks refuge in immobility. This is the mood of the immediate post-war years: “In a year of war the spirit lives out a lifetime of experience”, she explains, and this abnormal acceleration causes a “deep-seated [injury] showing itself in that tiredness for no reason, the readiness to drop what seemed at first touch important, the drying-up of vitality, the lack, less clear, of resilience and warmth” (No Time 100). This reaction is
almost involuntary. More consciously, Jameson’s public self claims deliberately to withdraw her interest from her surroundings to avoid complicity with the ideology of her Acquisitive Society, and to offer moral resistance to its pervasive impact on the psyche. The trajectory of her public self is described as an endless passage back and forth between ennui and action, often plotted as a series of real and metaphorical journeys. Thus, in terms of a self whose very condition is defined as transitory and whose only definable characteristic is boredom, it is this very self that is constantly under threat. Despair and happiness, merely momentary by their nature, constantly dissolve into the only permanence available, that of ennui.

However, unlike other post-war writers who, according to Jameson, complacently focus on the inner life and are indifferent to the chaos surrounding them, Jameson elevates boredom to the ideal mood for writing in the modern world: in fact, this state of mind is indispensable to the intellectual because it allows for a detachment from the world of things from which one is better placed to view the world critically. In her 1928 assessment of the literary scene The Georgian Novel and Mr Robinson, Jameson argues that the Georgian novelists, though very talented, lack “faith” in the “stability of the world” and hope in the possibility of changing it (70). Discussing Virginia Woolf, the narrator explains this generation’s inability to produce a masterpiece because of its lack of “humanity”: Woolf’s talent has been “carefully tended, pruned, enriched [but] has no roots in our common earth” (62). Like Connolly, Orwell, and Spender ten years later, Jameson here claims that the Georgian novelists are essentially conservative in spirit, nostalgic for a “vanished leisure” (72); that is, their attention is focused on the past so they are blind to the present, indifferent to the “stirring of new life” (73). The writers of this generation are in despair because of the absence of a moral framework with which to structure their world, and consequently withdraw into the self as the only source of meaning. A new generation of writers, presumably her own, will be more sensitive to change, and this receptivity is to be brought about by a political transformation of the writer’s consciousness. According to her, detachment from not indifference to the world of objects is essential to obtain a new perspective on reality. The search for clarity necessary to discover “reality in the conflicting appearances” (No Time 155) must overcome one obstacle, which is “precisely our self. Only when we make ourselves free of it are we able to write with real knowledge -earned by living attentively, and without self-love, or the self-pity
which blurs much of the new war poetry”. The self is suspended, distanced from its immediate “fears and hungers” to allow room for the intellectual and emotional realities of others. Jameson describes the writer’s task as follows:

The novelist must be a receiving station for the voices coming from every corner of the society he lives in. He need not report them directly, but he must hear them. He must be able to say to himself: I hear of a death and I hear of a birth; I will show the truth of all these things, so that people may know what is going on, so that they may not cling in their hearts to what is dead, and become deaf and blind to what is living. It is because the novel can do this that it is important. Everything depends on the novelist being sensitive enough to detect the past and the future existing together in the present, and honest enough to turn the light on it, without caring what it reveals. (“Novel” 290)

The dissonance of the modern mind cannot be resolved under the existing social and economic arrangements, so it is the writer’s duty to make the reader aware of the difficulties involved in the achievement of happiness by pointing out the contradictions between the ideals of capitalism and lived reality. The writer cannot avoid addressing moral issues simply because “there is no such thing as a book or a picture existing apart from human terms of reference” (“Craft” 55). That is, the novelist is dealing with persons, beings with a sense of self, with values and the ability to make choices and adopt life-plans, so the questions to be asked are: “What is happiness? what is a good life?” (“Technique” 238). These are, of course, fundamental ethical questions.

Jameson often distanced herself from the writers of the 1930s who, though showing a welcome interest in politics, seemed uncritically eager to “sign manifestos and letters to the paper on subjects of which they are on the whole as ignorant as ever they were. But at least their indifference, their complacency has been shaken. That is always to the good”. Writing propaganda was not the role of the writer, no one should “legislate” for a novelist (“Craft” 74). She always “disliked giving implicit obedience, distrusted dogma” (“Apology” 11), a defining trait of her generation, and throughout her life had a very clear idea of what the writer’s role should be in relation to politics, specifically in relation to power and authority. Like Julien Benda, she believed that the intellectual should be located in a moral rather than a sociological space. The primary task of the “clerc” (Benda’s well-known term for the intellectual), is to preserve the spirit of truth and justice. Jameson formulated the project as follows:
I hold that a writer should not in any circumstances or for any cause surrender his duty to criticise and to enquire freely into the soundness of any idea, faith, doctrine, delivered to him by the mouth of authority. He must doubt everything that is offered him to believe. And having believed must still keep his scepticism alive. He will need it- to see that his belief does not harden into dogma or his free agreement into a mere obedience. (“Apology” 11)

This is clearly inspired by Benda’s La trahison des clercs (1927), whose image of the intellectual shaped her own public self and gave force to her assaults on the “sacred clubrooms of literature with the intention of giving the members the dressing-down of their lives” (Jameson, “Culture” 116). The treason in Benda’s title was the “clerks’” betrayal of their ethical vocation as intellectuals, or, as Jameson put it, “La Trahison des Clercs de nos jours. Our ‘clerks’ are not fighting to help us” (No Time 157).

Benda divided the social world into intellectuals and laymen, the latter devoted to the pursuit of “material interests” (Benda 29) in the realm of “real life” in which the principal motivations are self-interest and self-promotion. Political passions are realist passions, Benda argued, because they encourage humans to exploit their environment for their own benefit by whatever means necessary to procure power or material advantage. According to Benda, clerks, whose proper sphere is “outside the real” (25), have abdicated their social duties by joining the layman in the “market place” (32):

If a man exhorts his compatriots to recognize only a personal morality and to reject all universal morality, he is showing himself a master of the art of encouraging them to want to be distinct from other men, i.e. of the art of perfecting national passion in them at least in one of its aspects. The desire to take none but oneself as a judge of one’s actions and to scorn every opinion of other people is undoubtedly a source of strength to a nation, as every exertion of pride is a source of strength of an institution, whose fundamental principle whatever may be said to the contrary –is the assertion of an ego against a non-ego. (76)

Benda’s main objection is that clerks have systematised and rationalised political hatreds. Rather than use their indifference to material gain to guarantee the impartiality of their opinions on politics and social phenomena, they use their knowledge and “moral prestige” (33) to justify irrational political passions, and compromise their moral authority in the process. Clerks have thus “condescended to the arena” (35) by encouraging the values of the bourgeoisie, so “at the top of the scale of moral values they place the possession of concrete advantages, of material power and the means by
which they are procured; and they hold up to scorn the pursuit of truly spiritual advantages, of non-practical or disinterested value” (81).

True clerks should not pursue personal gain, their role should be, therefore, to further liberty by encouraging the disinterested discussion of the activities of realists from the point of view of objective and impartial criteria founded on reason, with arguments that counter irrationalism with the fruits of knowledge and the principles, values, and attitudes of a universal morality: “abstract principle[s] superior to their egotisms” (147). Benda diagnoses clerics as extolling particularism at the expense of “humanitarianism” (61). It is of great importance to recognise the intrinsic dignity and value of individual humans by observing the “abstract quality of what is human, is the only one which allows us to love all men” (62). Xenophobia, class antagonism and racism exacerbate difference. Given the prevalence of politics in every sphere of life, the social space in and from which members of civil society are able to resist political despotism has itself been overrun by politics.

Though no less ambitious, Jameson adapted Benda’s program for the intellectual to suit her perception of the condition of Britain, which had experienced its own series of disillusionments: the social devastation of WW1, the fiasco of the General Strike, the relatively few gains made by the feminist and labour movements, the betrayal of the Labour Party in 1931, the depression, unemployment, the destabilising impact of political extremism in the guise of both Fascism and communism and the growing threat of war. The cumulative effect of these events was, as Jameson saw it, “moral collapse” (“Duty” 14). Jameson cast the writers of her time as the conscience of society, although she believed it impossible in times of widespread crisis to remain as detached an intellectual as Benda would have liked.

Jameson’s No Time Like the Present is above all an indictment of the “Elder Statesmen” (96) and clergy who betrayed their constituents by unnecessarily prolonging WW1, and, more seriously, by placing their moral authority at the service of the practical ends of capitalism, an accusation Jameson also levelled at writers. Benda’s critique that intellectuals were promoting militarism is echoed in her autobiography:

As the War progressed, the forces set in motion by it –patriotism (the noblest and the meanest –sacrificial devotion and spy-hunting), greed, personal and public ambitions, commercial interests- took charge. There took charge as well a subtle progressive corruption. War, like any powerful passion, like the passion of jealousy, begins by
destroying the very source of reason. It becomes a state -of being-
from which people argue, as the old astronomers argued their
conception of the universe from the existence of God. (207)

Because it is expected of spiritual and intellectual leaders to protect their people, it is,
according to Jameson, inexcusable that they allow themselves to be misled by “common
sentiment” (No Time 192), valuing above all the “corruptible rather than the
incorruptible -what is dead above what lives” (163). The clergy decided, during the
War, that “because the State has declared war it becomes all our Christian duties to
support it” (193), and by arousing nationalist fervour lost their former prestige: a “priest
inciting to war is an embarrassing sight” (195). By 1933, the betrayal of the Church,
politicians and many writers had created a moral vacuum. There is

no supreme Value to which all of us, we writers, stockbrokers,
bankers, soldiers, must subordinate (if only in word) our smaller
personal values, no embracing spiritual life to which the efforts of our
personal lives are in a final account subdued. There exists only a
number of conflicting values. We live to serve ourselves (and our
children, friends, lovers) alone. That by which we live is personal to
each separate soul of us. We live only to live, I by writing, the banker
by lending money, the soldier by fighting. We have fallen out of the
hands of the Absolute –in our world the roads run their parallel
courses forever, and the infinite in which they meet has only a
mathematical existence. (159)

It is the duty of the intellectual to offer a critical standard, a “common measure of
value” (110) appropriate to post-war England, a country in which most citizens are felt
to be either apathetic and inward-looking out of fear and uncertainty, or dangerously
misguided by irrational political passions which offer the illusion of safety and
permanence; people are “cling[ing] to anything which offers a foothold. Hence the
growth among us of this new vicious Nationalism” (Jameson, “Defence” 177). Jameson
believed that the “desire for order is a primary need of our nature” (No Time 157); thus,
man expects and needs a harmonious society to experience the
deep satisfaction of knowing himself bound up with that which is
moving to some defined end. Whether he is to conform or rebel, he
needs -to give meaning to his conformity, his rebellion- the
unequivocal statement of a supreme Good, to which stands in an
agreed relationship every lesser good desired by his body, and by his
mind and spirit. (158)
Unfortunately, as a result of the war, “we suffer, in our kind, from the feeling of disintegration, of the final futility of life” (159). To avoid the self-reflection that may prompt either gloom or critical self-awareness, people who feel that they have nothing to live for frantically keep themselves distracted, although in moments of repose “we know what is lacking to us: we lack that, outside ourselves, which would shape our lives and fragmentary activities into a whole” (159). Previously, State and Church, as supreme authorities in the worldly and spiritual spheres provided moral leadership, but the intricate network of interests shared by politicians, the clergy, capitalists and the media has, in Jameson’s view, undermined their authority.

Jameson reached a compromise: her intellectual was not completely detached from society, but instead profoundly committed to a common enterprise without losing critical distance: “Something which has been going on in the world for a long time has reached a stage that alters everything. So that even those people who would rather not have been involved are involved against their will” (“Novel” 277). Identification with a community could not and should not be grounded in unconditional agreement with prevailing values; thus, to gain some distance from the social world the intellectual could imaginatively position himself as an outsider, writing for others about himself as a social being:

His proper passion -and all the rest are not worth a straw- is to show us to ourselves as we are [...]. I believe with all my will that a novelist is more important than a politician. The politician merely exploits or is afraid of our passions. And when we understand ourselves, and our secret motives and desires, we can do anything, we can even get the better of the machines. (“Craft” 76)

Social criticism is a social activity, and although writers are private individuals in Jameson’s view, they are also members of a community speaking to other members about their collective life: “There are moments in the history of the human race when what is personal in man is less important than the fears and hopes, the impulses, he shares with a great many of his fellows” (“Novel” 294). Her period was one of those moments. “What ought to come naturally from a good ‘clerk’, is contempt for the money power itself” (No Time 166), Jameson argued, but unfortunately some clerks have bought into the ideology of capitalism “nearly without protest” (164). Other ‘clerks’ have deliberately retreated from the world and “suffer from a sense of futility, the feeling, one of unassuagable bitterness, that they are cut off. Their inner life feeds on
itself, having nothing else on which it can feed” (156). Life is meaningless if one cannot
make sense of it in relation to a common end, that is, the idea of a common life has been
so diluted that clerks, like the majority of the population, identify very weakly with the
society of which they are a part.

Jameson clearly identifies and places herself on the side of the silent victims of
authority. Her life-story is valuable only insofar as it is common to all survivors of the
war, so her personal experience gives moral authority to her adversarial position within
society: “On whom can we count, you and I, to speak for us and for our children when
the time comes?” (No Time 203). The critical distance she gained *vis a vis* post-war
society is a consequence of her metaphorical death: it is the death of youth (of an entire
generation) and of the “naïve faith” of this lost generation, that was “destined to lead a
crusade against poverty and national hatreds” (132). The first section of Jameson’s
autobiographical *No Time Like the Present* is a description of a young student’s life, a
confident poor scholar in pre-war London, untrammelled by social or financial position,
and “beginning a new age” (71):

We were not tax-payers or citizens [...]. Like that we were happy,
because we were outside the machine. As soon as that vagabond life
comes to an end, when from poor scholars you become tax-payers,
heads of family and what not, you may be comfortable, but are you
happy? Of course not. You have possessions—and that alone is enough
to destroy your peace of mind. (77)

This is clearly an attack on private property and an economic system that forces humans
to protect their interests rather than subordinate them to a common end. As the
economic system changes so do its morals, and, for Jameson, this is a historical process
of decline that began in the Renaissance, when “material success became a virtue”
(162). Her metaphorical death is the origin of her exile, a position of marginality
constitutive of her self: “I never felt separated from an exile by more than a thin
membrane” (Journey 323). Her restlessness, one symptom of boredom, is a product of
this self-imposed condition of homelessness. Jameson’s first autobiography opens with
her exile from Whitby, a home from which she is permanently exiled, a place,
moreover, which exists in her imagination as the memory of a stable, homogenous
“organic community” (Jameson, “Culture” 121) with a body of values that binds the
entire community but has been ruined by the “vulgarity of a mechanical civilisation”
(No Time 13): “grass now grows in the last shipyard, and this is in some sort a death”
(No Time 14). Her self-imposed exile from this home brings about a radical change in her social status: no longer the grand-daughter of a shipowner, but a “vagabond”, a poor scholar who, additionally, is androgynous, treated by her male friends as a “young brother” (60), but also released from the prescribed path plotted for her to a large extent, by her mother’s ambitions. She thus also frees herself from familial pressure.

Jameson’s self-fashioned public image placed the intellectual as an outsider, at odds with her society. This self-imposed exile is experienced as a liberation from prescribed social roles, pressures and expectations. Jameson chose how she wanted to live her own life, in her view “eccentric” (No Time 106) and unconventional. She goes to great lengths to explain that her education was not conducive to “Scholarship for its own sake” since at her university education had a “definite purpose –[her colleagues] needed degrees in order to teach, to do commercial research, to become engineers, dyers, managers in steel works and woollen mills” (54). Jameson’s own ambition was to be a don. Once at university in Leeds, however, she is already on her journey away from home, further estranged by her growing awareness of the realities of capitalism, “around me and under my feet the pulse of a vast machine” (54). Her eccentric life as a poor scholar gradually frees her from the “forms of a purely mechanical civilisation” that she feels “clamped around us” (55). Estranged from mechanical civilisation, she cannot find happiness as others do so she lives according to a different set of norms, citing “social ignorance” (56) to explain her failure to adjust to a world familiar to everyone else. Jameson’s life is, as she explains, a series of voyages, oscillating between the life of a vagabond and a life of domesticity. All her troubles “came of trying to lead a comfortable life” (82), which she read as a “bourgeois weakness”: “again and again in my life, I have worked, plotted, forced circumstances, in order to have ‘a settled life’. Only to discover -in the very moment of achieving it- that it is the last, absolutely the last, thing I want” (116). So Jameson is suspended between the memory of an organic community like Whitby and industrial capitalism, between the “mechanised and the natural sides of life” (“Crisis” 155), between her desire for a home and its oppressiveness: she is condemned to a “state of inbetweenness”, the very condition of Britain entre deux guerres. Her marginality in relation to the “comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness” (Said 44), however painful, has its rewards: a “habit of making comparisons” (“Crisis” 153). Having left one place and never fully adopting another, Jameson is in an ideal position to compare both. By juxtaposing and comparing
experiences or ideas originating in different worlds, the ‘clerk’ gains a more universal perspective which allows her to see how things came to be as they are; she perceives “situations as contingent, not as inevitable, looks at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible” (Said 45).

In a speech delivered at the 1941 P.E.N. congress in London, Jameson explained that, from the Renaissance onwards the idea that “we have natural duties” had become increasingly popular, with citizens insistently demanding “natural rights. The right to life, the right to struggle for liberty, the right to pursue happiness” (“Duty” 13). Yet such demands are irresponsible. Jameson believed that these fundamental rights presume correlative “natural duties”, that is, the obligation of every member of a community to ensure that the state facilitate the realisation of the social and economic conditions that would guarantee the possibility of fulfilling these rights: the

first and last of these [duties] is our duty to honour -not any national State only because it is the State we were born into- but the material and immaterial values we have decided are worthy paying for. When the State is honouring the demands of these same values, it will be our duty to honour and help the State. We have agreed that in this war the values -resting on a Greek, Roman, and Christian base- of Western civilization are in danger. (“Duty” 13)

Thus the writer’s duty to his fellow humans is to communicate and preserve in writing the store of those normative, binding values -loyalty, liberty, justice, truth- that have informed Western political and social practices by exploring that “territory of ideas [that] can cross and re-cross without being held up by frontiers” (“Crisis” 137). These values transcend national boundaries because they are the product of “sovereign reason, a law which is above nationalism” (“Duty”, p.14). Jameson’s attack on nationalism pre-dates this, however. WW1 had created a gap in the “continuity of human experience” (“Novel” 281) because it had depleted the generation that would have ensured such continuity. Her ancestors, she claimed elsewhere, could “sleep quietly on the deeply-rooted and intangible ideas of a more of less humane and liberal creed. Though they did not always practice tolerance, they invoked it at least as an ideal to be reached by going forward” (“Crisis” 139). The task of the intellectual is twofold: first, he must criticise all aspects of his society, specifically the activities of “authority [which] changes its habits and methods but not its nature. It is natural for authority to regard obedience and
docility as very useful social virtues” (Jameson, “Writing” 190). Secondly, the intellectual must hold up to society the values of civilisation, “justice, tolerance, respect for truth. It is the reflection of a precise idea of human dignity” (“Writing” 190). These abstract values are the measure against which reality is to be judged. The writer “may, he must revolt against hypocrisy, worn-out conventions, injustice and cruelty” (“Novel” 305). The eighteenth century, she claimed, was the last period in which there was a congruence between “inner” and “outer” life, that is, between a person’s moral orientation and the values of his community:

Today the disparity, the antagonism between the inner and outer worlds, is so great that it forces itself on the minds and hearts of all of us. The ordinary man suffers without knowing what is wrong with him. Aware of discomfort, he seeks in business, in politics, in sex, rarely in religion, what will assuage his restlessness: he drives his car faster or switches on the wireless or plays tennis or bridge or tries sun-bathing. (No Time 154)

How is this split to be resolved? There is the need to “impose a higher order on the increasing disorder of our common life” (No Time 155), that is, an ideal of the Good, a “new synthesis covering every activity, social and spiritual, of European man” (No Time 155). In Jameson’s own time, there are no common goods, no supreme Good in fact, no longer the certainty that ideals will be reached by “going forward”, no authority that will ensure their stability, even the belief that men are capable of being good is in question.

If the intelligentsia of our day were to acknowledge any duty except to themselves (which –it makes me happy to give credit where it is due— they perform arduously), they would long since have begun a mass attack on two salients of the present social system.

The first is the theory that labour is a commodity to be bought in the cheapest market [...]. The second salient of an order which creates, with an equal inevitability, Dean Inge, poverty, war, and various social evils, is in its schools. In our country education is still infected by what Professor Tawney has called in this paper “the old bad doctrine that the great majority of children require only an elementary education. (Jameson, “Salients” 63)

The first problem is, of course, both political and economic: because of the division of labour the exploited worker is reduced to an appendage of machinery, without autonomy or personal satisfaction in work and therefore lacking in self-respect: poverty
is demoralising. Jameson, like West, was an individualist in that she believed that every man should be treated as an end in himself, never as a means to an end, that is, not as a cog in the machine: the “unit of value in the world is not a mile of frontier territory or a dollar, or even a bushel of wheat, but a single human being, the most obscure, the least outspoken” (“Duty” 15). Labour power is a commodity.

The second related problem is cultural and social, though ultimately the consequences may be political. Strong communal ties can only be gained by teaching the virtues of civility, the “cultivation of values” (Jameson, “Cultivation” 28): these would show the masses how justice was incompatible with xenophobic nationalism, collective security more valuable than conformity, self-realisation better than self-gratification, future welfare better than the satisfaction of present needs. In sum, the individual should conceive himself as an individual-in-society, in a relation of interdependence with his fellow citizens. It is the duty of intellectuals to encourage a critical attitude in all their readers who should adopt Jameson's instinctive “rebellion against authority” (“Novel” 276), a healthy scepticism instead of self-protective apathy. The problem with education is not only that is it unequal in quality and distribution, but that “no provision is made at any stage of our educational system for developing critical sensibility” (“Culture” 116). Jameson was not calling for a particular kind of education, but simply one that developed a critical faculty and encouraged relatively independent thought, that is, a “valuing habit of mind” which she argued is not necessarily acquired in the “process of reading for an Honours degree in ‘English Language and Literature’” (“Culture” 117). Such specialised knowledge is the product of an institution, and thus not conducive to an education the proper end of which is “a human being in full control of himself, actively aware of his environment, able to judge it as it affects his moral and physical growth” (“Culture” 121). The consequence of this lack of judgement is that the reader/pupil passively absorbs those values promoted by the “press, the cinema, the pronouncements of public men, in brief, all those voices which, as soon as he is out of school, din his ears and seek to exploit his emotional responses for their own ends” (“Culture” 118). Critical reading would train people to adopt a critical stance with reference to a common set of abstract values in the interest of their community. Intellectuals had to wean the malleable masses from their immature dependence on figures of authority by encouraging reflection, a rational rather than a predominantly emotional relationship to the world which only creates an imbalance in the person. She
wanted education to be a tool with which individuals could lift themselves above the mass.

The media secured consent, according to Jameson. Vulgar and sentimental novels encouraged intellectual narrowness and emotional dependence. By making the reality they seek to name easier and simpler they distort it, so that the reader is reconciled to the values of the Acquisitive Society that oppresses him. Undiscerning readers of popular, cheap books are like clean slates, receptive to anything that comes their way. “Why Do You Read Novels?” is the title of a review by Jameson of Q.D. Leavis’ Fiction and the Reading Public in which she agrees with Leavis’ conclusion that the act of reading popular fiction “has a definitely weakening and rotting effect on the mind”:

You cannot drench yourself in passion of the Sheik or Rosary kind and yet appreciate or learn to appreciate the passion of Sons and Lovers or The Passage to India. A mind relaxes by continual indulgence in the second-hand and second-rate judgements that pass for thinking in even the better kind of novel lose the power to tackle what is hard, real, and serious. Loses, in fact, the capacity to form a independent judgement or to tell a genuine emotion from a conventional one. (Jameson, “Why?” 12)

Jameson disagreed with Leavis’ solution to this problem: a critical minority could not alter a society which “gets the fiction it deserves; social rottenness breeds rotten fiction as it breeds slums, Hollywood, war, and disease”. She shared both Leavises’ objections to the destructive forces at work in culture listed in Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture: standardisation, mass-production, stock responses, levelling-down, and advertising. Like Leavis, Jameson blamed this on the machine: the cinema, the wireless and the automobile which, taken together, created a “substitute life” (Jameson, “Dangers” 10), a term borrowed from F.R. Leavis to indicate that readers passively consume second-hand emotions which had not been experienced by the writer but had been mindlessly imitated, reproduced from other media. The descriptions of the world found in this kind of fiction are, according to Jameson, false. Ideas and words are the currency of the writer, a currency which had been greatly devalued by the War. The implication here is that the masses do not have an “inner life as complex as an intellectual’s” (Carey 20). Accordingly, the type of culture Jameson most detests is that of the “chief figure of our times, the Little Man”, who
spends anxious moments wondering why he is not happier. Everything possible is done for him and his wife; he has his golf and his little car at week-ends, instead of the old quiet sermon-and-roast-beef-Sunday; he can see Garbo for a shilling; his wife has a vacuum cleaner, copies of Paris models, three hundred varieties of face cream; there are the wireless, the sixpennies, the hire purchase agreement. They need never have a dull or an unoccupied moment. Then why is their life not one continuous smile? (“What is” 37)

Why indeed? Reality falls short of the promises made by advertisements, and consumption is not satisfying. The figure if the “Little Man”, like Holby’s Eutychus, West’s Mr. Smithers, and Jameson’s own Mr. Robinson, is obviously suburban, an ordinary, average undifferentiated, anonymous, fearful and child-like figure in need of moral guidance because intellectually incapable of knowing what he wants and imagining what the good life could look like for him. Jameson’s explanation of the reading process is similarly simplistic. The unsuspecting reader opens a novel with the expectation of being “pleased or entertained”; therefore he is relaxed, “prepared to receive everything the novelist is offering”:

the people who read them, leaning in Tube trains, in the evening idle and half-listening to the wireless, are subtly persuaded that sexual passion is the be-all and end-all of life; that success is money, a car, holidays in the South Seas; that you can’t change human nature; that something called Beauty floats messily round us all; that Socialism is more unpractical (untidy, dangerous, etc.) than Imperialism; that women are (this); that men are (the other). Now, all these are lies, and either we are deceived by them, or, knowing them to be lies, turn to them for relief from hard reality: we are either dupes or drug-addicts. In any event, herd prejudice has been strengthened and the channels of genuine feeling choked. (“Why” 12)

Jameson bemoaned the gradual loss of a familiar, time-honoured vocabulary with which to describe the moral life. Politicians and clergy had initiated the sentimentalisation of this vocabulary, and the post-war popular press and advertising, perpetuated this tendency: “In our day the moral framework of society is collapsing from dry rot. If I use such words as ‘honour’, ‘goodness’, ‘passion’, I ought not to assume that they convey roughly the same meaning to everyone. Words and ideas shift their meanings to suit each reader’s private system of values” (No Time 129). Moral consensus is the prerequisite to social cohesion and language plays a crucial role in cementing understanding. Just as Holby and Orwell claimed that the language of
political debate was debased by “staleness of imagery” and “lack of precision” (Orwell, “Politics” 359), Jameson claimed that moral vocabulary was corrupt and wanted to regenerate an older one: “The novelist is showing you his mind by means of words. He has to take his chance that certain words which stand for ideas and sensations and not for things -such words as ‘honour,’ ‘decency,’ ‘passion’- mean to us what they mean to him” (“Craft” 61). To “regenerate the novel means to regenerate the language” (“Novel” 305) because words are reappropriated, wrenched from the context in which they are devalued, and thus new connotative processes are set into motion. Jameson wants to undermine the strength of mass-produced literature by dislocating clichés, upsetting reading habits, challenging the beliefs and assumptions brought to the reading process by redescribing reality in a different form.

Published in Fact in 1937, one of her most partisan and frequently quoted essays on fiction is a call for the production of socialist rather than proletarian literature. The latter concentrates exclusively on the working class as its subject matter (elsewhere she wrote that “in all but the essential details [proletarian novels] are exactly like novels about middle-class life” [“Novel” 300]), while the former explores the intricate, dynamic interaction between the material and cultural forces at work in a changing society involving all classes, with particular attention to the coexistence of different temporalities, as well as “of change, of decay, of growth” (“New” 263). Socialist that she was, Jameson believed that “every individual, in his day-to-day actions, recreates and reproduces society at every moment: this is both the source of what is stable in social organisation and the origin of endless modification” (Capitalism, 35) as Giddens explains, thus, any “fact” contains within itself elements of the whole. Jameson’s emphasis on change is, in her view, more realistic than the reified world of popular fiction, that is, “made artificially static by excluding from it all the factors of change and the rumour of the real world” (“New” 262), as it was full of clichés, fossilised intellectual habits, and predictable emotional responses.

Jameson emphasised the “angle from which to make our pictures”, because the ordering of material is implicitly both a “criticism of values” and an exposition of “our moral judgements”. What she argued against was the “dreadful self-consciousness which seizes the middle-class writer”, whose intentions, though “decent and defensible”, are conditioned by an education that encouraged self-centredness, a “habit” which is “natural” though not exclusive to him: “To put it brutally, the writer is not born
to express himself. His egoism is worthless unless it embraces the egoisms of other people. He has no knowledge of reality if the only reality he knows is that of his own sufferings and pleasures” (“Duty” 18). Self-consciousness is not confessional self-analysis, however, but an awareness of how the self is constructed in society. The middle-class habit of self-centredness was the basis of an aesthetic that posed an “outlook on life” in complicity with the ideology of an Acquisitive Society (“Novel” 287). The writer, Jameson urged, should deliberately go “into exile” (“New” 13), estrange himself from his environment and from himself: every good writer “has some inborn capacity for detaching himself from his experience. Those of us who are only talented are always falling into the temptation of thinking that our personal emotions, especially when they are intense, are valuable for their own sake” (“Novel” 303). Jameson acknowledged that the division of literature into “objective and subjective” is “arbitrary” (“Craft” 63), but the subjective and objective differ in terms of “stress”: the writer can either focus on and use himself as a measure of value, or he can break through egoism to “give an account of the whole man and of the activities which relate him to his fellows” (“Craft” 64). Selfhood and agency are socially produced and specific. Therefore, the problem is not the personal voice but the moral perspective used to organise the fictional world. According to Jameson, the process of self-criticism involved in the creation of critical self-awareness should be conducted extratextually. As a result, personal experience is defamiliarised to such an extent that people and events are shown to be connected not by a single, intrusive viewpoint but to co-exist, connected by an intricate network of social and economic phenomena:

What in effect the novelist says is: Here is the social web I am uncovering for you. Look closely and you will see how men and women work, suffer, rejoice, and die in it, like fishes in water. Look closer still and you will see that the web itself moves, changes, and the human creatures with it. (“Novel” 293)

Montage was the literary device Jameson suggested to create this social “web”. By stringing together apparently disparate fragments of reality, montage disrupts normal causality, that is, the expected connections between different events or characters. Thus the narrator does not impose a shape based on his own controlling psyche, in which elements are significant only in terms of their impact on himself. Good fiction, Jameson
argued, should make a “dent in our consciousness” (“Novel” 285) precisely by throwing up a previously invisible “pattern”:

The truth is that the order which the artist imposes on the flux of life is drawn solely from himself. He has arranged things in a certain order in his mind, putting some things first because he sees them as most important, and it is this order which appears in his work. Its style is the reflection of his personal style, of the value at which he assesses different modes of living. (“Craft” 56)

Keith Williams’ reading of “New Documents” within the context of the documentary film movement and the new reportage of the kind written by Orwell is useful here. According to Williams, Jameson’s project like that of her colleagues in Fact, fosters the belief that the reporting of ‘facts’ would stimulate the creation of a new social consciousness and culture that would “safeguard society from Fascism and facilitate Socialist transformation” (K. Williams, “Post/Modern” 166-67). Citing Althusser, Williams describes the project as one in which writers wanted to subvert the “subject’s imaginary relations to their real conditions of existence” of capitalist cultural practices using montage to show the “real conditions of existence” by defamiliarising social life. (“Post/Modern” 167). To Jameson’s mind, attention to a single individual was not the best way to deal with the complexity of modern, urban life, in which the scope of an individual’s point of view and his sphere of action became insignificant in relation to the social, economic and political forces that shape his life and against which he was powerless to act alone, assuming that he was even aware of their existence. Jameson argued that a good novel should make “you more sensitive in your relations with your fellows and more aware of what is going on within and without you” (“Craft” 61). In her view, subjective novelists were “like a man who tries to tell the time by examining only the works of his watch” (“Craft” 64), that is, without reference to any external, impersonal criteria of judgement his world became arbitrary.

This need for an appropriate socialist system of values to organise collective life became more urgent as the menace of Fascism escalated. The energy of people in times of peace was innocuous because they were preoccupied with personal problems, but in an uncertain world people were more susceptible to the reassuring seductions of extremist ideologies. Hence the importance of literature as a civilising tool:

So long as the units which compose ‘democracy’ are uneducated and emotionally undisciplined, bred and maintained cheaply and rottenly, so long as they prefer cheap, rotten, and frivolous newspaper to a
thoughtful responsible one. Back we come to the same place. Create awareness, train sensibility, educate taste. A man trained to use his mind will -use it. (“Culture” 124)

Whereas Jameson believed that humans are social and benevolent beings who are corrupted by their environment, which should, ideally, enable self-realisation, West thought that the individual comes into the world with pre-existing characteristics that make him, to a certain extent, selfish. Thus, West emphasised signifying practices as a means to explain the existence of community, because without the coercive influence of culture society would cease to exist.

III

Rebecca West’s “The Strange Necessity”: Literature, Love, and the Good

I realize now that what is good on this earth does not happen as a matter of course, it has to be created, it has to be maintained, by the effort of love, by submission to the Rule of Law. But how are we to manage to love, being so given to cruelty, how do we preserve the law from being corrupted by our corruption, since it is a human institution? As I grow older I find more and more as a matter of experience that there is a God, and I know that religion offers a technique for getting in touch with Him, but I find that technique difficult. I hope I am working a way to the truth through my writing, but I also know that I must orientate my writing towards God for it to have any value. It is not easy but I remind myself that if I had wanted life to be easy I should have gotten born on a different universe.

Rebecca West, “I Believe”

Unlike Storm Jameson, who emphasised the role of the intellectual as an example of the type of citizen who seeks to free himself from the oppressions of culture, Rebecca West focused on how cultural artefacts are liberating at the level of the individual psyche, but cohesive and to a certain extent coercive in terms of society as a whole. The contemplation of a work of art, according to West, is liberating because it is an exercise in love and empathy and thus allows for a better contemplation of the Good by drawing the self beyond itself. In “The Strange Necessity” West argues that art, simply one expression of a culture, is a necessary instrument in the survival of humans because it is a record of a community’s experience. At an individual level, it is a means to curb the very aggressiveness that allows humans to overcome the obstacles they face in their quest for survival. Thus the individual search for happiness and the common good coincide: they eek to perpetuate life. As we shall see in what follows, however, West’s model does not allow for social change.
Over the past two decades, feminist critics have successfully restored West to a “place of honour among the writers of the twentieth century” (Kermode, “Grand” 58). Bonnie Kime Scott has incorporated West into the English modernist canon, and Jane Marcus describes her as a “voice of female authority, whose clear ringing tones have roused faint-hearted feminists during doldrums and bounced off the barricades in times of struggle” (Marcus, “Voice” 237). The early West to which Marcus refers was indeed combative and irreverent; she thrived on the polemical denunciation of exploitative class and gender relations, and her contributions to the socialist The Clarion and the suffragist The New Freewoman were, undoubtedly, a call for “riotous living” (West, “Riotous” 134). By contrast, the mood of the quote above is introspective, contemplative, speculative; West’s growing conviction in the existence of a God seems incompatible with her previous iconoclasm, just as the “scientific humanism” she espoused in the 1930s is at odds with her later religious beliefs. I will suggest, however, that West’s conception of God, obviously not understood within the strictures of the Church, has the attributes of Iris Murdoch’s Platonic idea of the Good, that is, an idea of perfection indispensable for the orientation of a rich moral life toward goodness and happiness. As we shall see, West regards art as a guide in life’s “spiritual pilgrimage [towards] the centre and essence of morality” (Murdoch, Metaphysics 367), suggesting as it does the possibility of unity, an imaginative truth, which is only experienced with difficulty in the modern, dislocated world: “Art promises [harmony], and it is the high joy of humanity that it has fulfilled its promise” (Ending 305). The Good is, therefore, an idea of order a person requires to experience his or her life as a whole, because it gives it direction, and encourages the pursuit of perfection; at the same time, however, God/the Good is also an idea necessary for rational inquiry grounded on the presupposition that the world constitutes a single orderly system that can be known.

Art, for West, is also a unique expression of the zeitgeist of an age, and is thus an important tool for the fashioning of social subjectivity:

A work of art is the analysis of an experience, an expression of the consciousness of the universe at a particular moment. Religion aims at the analysis of all experience, at an expression of the consciousness of the universe through all time. It claims through revelation and prayer to arrive at the final knowledge which art can conceive of existing only at the inconceivable moment when all works of art have been created. (West, Augustine 52)
Literature, the “instructor of man” (Court 4), is thus instrumental for West in a perpetual civilising, progressive process; it shows people how they ought to live in the face of the difficulties, conflicts and possibilities of their personal and social lives. This education is accomplished because “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue” (Murdoch, Sovereignty 86), to put it in Murdoch’s words, which explain the role that art plays in strengthening the moral fabric of society. Spiritual perfection was, for West, the object of a moral education motivated by “the question the inner self perpetually asks itself: ‘what am I doing, and is it good?’” (Black 183). In keeping with her individualism, a moral pilgrimage is a good in itself, a process of overcoming the limitations of the self in the quest for self-realisation. If we read West’s inter-war non-fictional writing from the perspective of her later production, it is possible to discern the beginnings of a more abstract, nuanced and thoughtful understanding of how and why social and political change can be effected, and perhaps, above all, an avowal of the insurmountable limitations of human beings whose greatness lies in their “heroic attempt to cover all, to know all, to feel all, although fixed to one point in the universe, and thereby pinned to ignorance” (“Grandfather” 207). Human dignity resides in the ceaseless attempts of human beings to overcome their own limitations by means of the intellect, a spiritual power that West calls the “thing that flies forth, the logos, the symbol of the spirit” (“Grandfather” 176), often symbolised as a dove. The existence of this spirit is demonstrated and made available to consciousness through an epiphany which takes the form of a Romantic breeze, a “cold wind” (“Grandfather” 203). Through this transforming experience, the individual acquires a will to believe, that is, he or she takes the conscious decision to affirm what lies beyond the natural powers of the mind. The narrator of “A Letter to a Grandfather” explains this certainty after she experiences an epiphanic moment: “I have accomplished what Christians call the will to belief; that is I admit what I believe. That brings, I see, an inevitable happiness” (209).

West comments on her apparently capricious defection from radical politics as follows:

When I was young I understood neither the difficulty of love nor the importance of law. I grew up in a world of rebellion and I was a rebel. I thought human beings were naturally good, and that their personal relations were bound to work out well, and that the law was a clumsy machine dealing harshly with people who would cease to offend as
soon as we got rid of poverty. We were quite sure that human nature was good and would soon be perfect. (“This I Believe” 100)

This she wrote in 1953, but there is earlier evidence of the fundamental shift in her understanding of human nature which, in my opinion, was a direct response to WW1. In “A Letter to a Grandfather” (1933), the narrator C. Beauchamp (a translation of West’s name, Cicily Fairfield) suggests that the French live full, meaningful lives because they do not suppress the innate destructive aspects of the self, but instead work with them:

They do not attempt to conceal that they are cruel, and they even let it appear that cruelty almost inevitably manifests itself during the operation of the forces that lead to glory, to great deeds, to great art. The do not pretend that man is without this disposition to cancer. That pretence dropped, they can get on with living. (200)

By accepting the “disposition to cancer” it is easier to identify what is good, namely that which leads to “glory”. It is no coincidence, therefore, that, while in Paris the narrator of “The Strange Necessity” experiences an epiphany similar to C. Beauchamp’s, whose “spiritual apotheosis” (“Grandfather” 207) allows her to understand fully the historical significance of her age, “pitted with shell-holes by the war” (199). In both essays France is held up as a living example of an organic society, bound together by culture, that is, a “whole way of life” (R. Williams, Culture 11), the sum of long-standing beliefs and practices as they have developed in a specific geographical context: clothes, lace, food, the quality of light, religious iconography and ritual, a village fair, art, “the postman’s early morning greeting, the first sentence in the newspaper leader, the type used for an advertisement on the hoardings, the way the flowers are planted in the cottage gardens” (West, “Strange” 172) are all cultural expressions essential to the health of a “world unified by common experience and a common art” (“Strange” 172). This romanticised environment fosters the capacities of all its inhabitants, including the artistic imagination, which is said to flourish in such an organic social order. Culture, therefore, is seen by West as a store of information essential to the optimal development of both the individual and the group. “Corruption, “sin” and “cruelty”, by contrast, are words West began to use in the 1920s to refer to the essential egoism of human beings, suggesting a mildly Hobbesian conception of the individual as aggressive and selfish. She explains this “cancer” by means of a very sketchy model of evolutionary theory from which she infers that the human organism is predisposed to aggressive behaviour
because of the “biological job of adapting to [its] environment” (“Strange” 181). Contact with art, however, not only expands human understanding of the world and therefore ensures survival, but is also a means of checking selfishness by enhancing the capacity to love, by which West means “all that which leads through personal relationship to the perpetuation of the agreeable in life, and the frustration of the harsh” (“Strange” 53). The moral life is about organising and directing this potentially destructive energy towards the good life.

A moral life, for West, demands a constant and conscious effort as well as vigilance on the part of the moral agent in his pilgrimage towards self-realisation, a journey that requires “innumerable tricks and feints and advances and retreats, sometimes seeking refuge every now and then in error and apathy” (“Strange” 82). The pursuit of a clear, just, and more objective view of the “real” in the interest of assessing the meaning and value of life involves the constant negotiation of fantasy versus reality.

The good is a standard of perfection we use to discriminate between events, persons, activities, and feelings and evaluate their quality. A good artist, West stated, “is able to prosecute with spectacular vigour the effort to make the fantasy and reality match” (“Strange” 65):

A major work of art must change the aspect of reality, for it is an experience of the kind which breaks up the present as we know it, transforming it into the past and giving us a new present, which we like better or less than we liked the one taken from us. It must have a bearing on the question which concerns us most deeply of all: whether the universe is good or bad. (Court 5)

West associated the public with the state, and the private sphere with civil society, each governed by different criteria of right and wrong and therefore exacting from individuals as private persons and citizens different possibly contradictory modes of behaviour. (These distinct realms of social life she later referred to as the ‘court’ and the ‘castle’). The “Rule of Law” and the “Rule of Love” were the norms that regulated social interaction in these distinct social loci, each enforcing values, duties, obligations, and rights. West came to believe that social change, in an “order based on arbitrary social and economic privilege” (“Grandfather” 200), was possible only by first effecting change closer to home: “we live outwards from the centre of a circle and … what is nearest to the centre is the most real to us” (Meaning 333). Self-awareness and interiority are vital processes for a rich moral life understood as the “human burden of
discrimination and calculation” (“Strange” 16). This evaluative process requires constant effort because it is, ultimately, the “continuous daily work of the soul fighting its way between appearance and reality and good and evil” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 356). The private sphere is the space of moral life where humans conduct the “practice of pursuing happiness” (“Strange” 93), while the state was, for West, an instrument created to guarantee the autonomy of this space and protect it from intrusion:

[...] I see the main problem of my life, and indeed anybody else’s life, as the balancing of competitive freedom. This involves a series of very delicate calculations, and you can never stop making them. This principle has to be applied in personal relations, and everybody knows that the Ready Reckoner to use there is love; but it takes a lot of real talent to use that effectively. The principle has to be applied in social relations also, and there the Ready Reckoner is the Rule of Law, as political scientists call it: a sense of mutual obligations that have to be honoured, and a legal system which can be trusted to step in when that sense fails. (“This I Believe” 100)

If one accepts that “cruelty” is an intrinsic, biologically determined aspect of human nature, all interpersonal relations are relations of power in which the suppression of another’s freedom is the price exacted to preserve the integrity of the self. In the public sphere, the rule of law protects the individual from the aggressive intent of others; in civil society, culture plays this role.6

The starting point of “The Strange Necessity” is the anonymous narrator’s “state of pleasure” (13). She leaves Sylvia Beach’s Parisian bookshop with a copy of Joyce’s *Pomes Penyeach* in a state of heightened consciousness that colours her perambulations in Paris while she seeks to explain to herself, as she proceeds with her many occupations, why these enhance this emotional, sensual, and intellectual feeling of pleasure. West perceived pleasure as the “test of value” for human endeavour. That humans tend to seek happiness is a philosophical commonplace that West shared, “for what more imperative duty can lie on human beings than to play the part in the pattern which they think is theirs by destiny?” (“Strange” 94). That a human being was at any moment properly fulfilling his goal of furthering his happiness is attested by the physical and intellectual pleasure aroused in him when his activities were “

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6 West called herself a liberal because of her belief in liberty as a Good: “… it is the aim of liberalism to grant each individual the fullest degree of liberty which can be enjoyed without damage to the claims of liberty justly presented by other individuals. This is the creed by which I, as a writer and as a private
accordance with fact” (162). That is, when he was fulfilling the “imperative duty” of accepting his “destiny”. “Every child has an intuitive knowledge” (“I Believe” 375) of the value of pleasure, she argued:

I find an ultimate value in the efforts of human beings to do more than merely exist, to choose and analyse their experiences and by the findings of that analysis help themselves to further experiences which are of a more pleasurable kind. I use the word pleasurable in its widest sense: to describe such experiences as come from good food and wine, exercise, the physical act of love-making, the practice of a beloved craft or art or science, a happy marriage […]. By indulgence in these experiences life is made more pleasant from day to day. That is in itself of the first importance. That end would be worthwhile pursuing if no other benefit were obtained. But it also serves the purpose of furnishing each human soul with access to the avenue along which it can advance farthest toward the comprehension and mastery of life. Pleasure is not arbitrary; it is a sign by which the human organization shows that it is performing a function which it finds appropriate to its means and ends. (“I Believe”, p.373)

Notwithstanding the obvious difficulty of using such an imprecise test of value such as pleasure as the basis for government action, West assumed that people knew what was best for them and that they were capable of spontaneously and then rationally identifying their interests and calculating the best means to achieve them, namely self-realisation. This is clearly of utilitarian origin. As Bertrand Russell explained, for Bentham

what is good is pleasure or happiness –he used the words as synonyms- and what is bad is pain. Therefore one state of affairs is better than another if it involves a greater balance of pleasure over pain, or a smaller balance of pain over pleasure. Of all possible states of affairs, that one is best which involves the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. (Russell, History 741)

Happiness is the only good and it is the business of government to ensure the conditions necessary for an individual to seek his own happiness. How to ensure that private interest coincided with the general good is a problem which, according to Russell, Bentham never fully resolved, although Bentham believed, like West did, that it was in the interest of the individual to obey an effective legal order, what West called the “Rule

of Law”. Bentham’s basic principle of psychology, Russell went on to say, is comparable to Pavlov’s experiments with dogs in that both had a “deterministic account of mental occurrences”: the organism reacts to conditions imposed upon it from without. Therefore,

To Bentham, determinism in psychology was important, because he wished to establish a code of laws –and, more generally, a social system- which would automatically make men virtuous. His second principle, that of the greatest happiness, became necessary at this point on order to define ‘virtue’. (471)

Culture, in tandem with the state, was the civilising agent in West’s view, and as we shall see, her ideas of the influence of culture on the formation of the self are as deterministic as Bentham’s.

At time it seems that West believed in the existence of a transcendent order beyond the apprehension of the human intellect, with an externally guaranteed pattern and purpose. However, this order is embodied by her concept of cultural tradition, formed by the gradual accumulation of a potentially infinite amount of interpretations of reality: “It is humanity’s highest hope that in the end it will get a complete vision of reality, and every individual can make a contribution to what is the highest function of humanity […]. We want a complete vision -it is our absolute ideal” (West, “Writers” 21). A single individual could never fully comprehend the complexities of reality, limited as he is by his specific historical location and his comparatively short life-span. West found solace in a fallen world, “exiled [from paradise] by some cosmic misadventure” (“Strange” 197), by turning to the abundantly productive, dynamic, permanent natural world that provided her with apprehensions of an endless process of change that underpinned human endeavour:

If we are not related to the apes and all lesser beasts, we are the loneliest of orphans and when we die our kind dies with us. But if the higher human achievements are the products of the same sort of activities that have brought organic life up from the primeval ooze, then they are a pyramid which has the earth for its base and shall not perish before it, and if organic life engendered by a force that has found so many manifestations, should we fail our failure is of not such

7 West’s contribution to Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War (1937) clearly expresses the centrality of the rule of law in her thought: “I am for the legal Government of Republican Spain against Franco, since Spain herself, at a properly conducted election, chose that Government and rejected the party which now supports Franco” (Cunningham “Women” 228).
great moment, since no doubt it could find another instrument. (“Strange” 83)

Despite the brevity of human life, the life of an individual is neither futile nor meaningless. Every human contributes his unique experiences of life to that “common fund of ascertained reality” (“Strange” 167) which, for West, constituted cultural tradition, thus each person achieves a degree of immortality: “being detached from their makers [cultural phenomena] do not have to die with them” (“Strange” 128). Thus, it is intersubjectivity that makes the transcendent reality available to human inquiry; it reaches beyond the limitations and the blindness of men’s intrinsic egoism. The gradual accretion of these many individually-crafted insights into reality constitutes, West believed, an organic whole. The desire for order is, West argued, instinctive. Humans are born with what she called a “freedom reflex” and an “investigatory reflex” (“Strange” 74): “from man’s earliest moment his most immediate necessity is to know what it is all about” (“Strange” 59). Human consciousness is “one-making” (Metaphysics 1), it seeks to see the world as a coherent, meaningful whole and to experience the self as a unity within an unfolding, collective story; this desire for the unity of order is essential for the production of meaning:

The intellectual tendency to create unity is dangerous because it simplifies reality and therefore hinders the objective pursuit of knowledge. West was ever weary of false totalisations, those “comforting beliefs” and creeds that “pretend to explain the total universe in terms comprehensible to the human intellect” (“I Believe” 372). She identified one common response to the difficulties that present themselves to the human mind, “which is quite inadequate for the purpose of mastering his environment”: the oversimplification of complexity produced by arranging the “universe in antitheses, in dichotomies”. The task of a moral life is precisely to achieve a growing awareness and understanding of the “insensible gradations that there [are between] light and darkness, life and death, pleasure and pain” (“I Believe” 388). Moral reasoning, which works in specific contexts because morals are about decision-making in concrete situations, is the best means to attain happiness. The exploration of variety and nuance of moral reflection is the task of literature:

It is the business of philosophy to establish what truths she can so that the artist growing up within the sphere of her influence starts work as close to reality as possible; and it is her business to examine truths
established by his creations to see what bearing they have on those of her own finding. But the conceptions of philosophy are so much coarser than those of art that it is infinitely distressing to see them thrust on the artist. (Ending 299)

Science, too, contributes to the goal of fully understanding the universe by working on the observable world. Once the laws of human nature and of the universe are understood, they are no longer constraining but instead become tools for the emancipation from necessity. Science “deals with man’s experience of controllable material, which does not tell lies to the observer”, while art “deals with uncontrollable material which cannot be weighed and measured in a laboratory, and can be apprehended only subjectively” (West, “Woman” 370). However, science too is limited; only art opens the space of, and demands reflection upon the chaotic, fleeting experience of emotional and intellectual life by giving it form, although it too is a “way of collecting information about the universe” (“Strange” 89):

Now, if we turn to literature we find that a condition very similar to that which changes a dog story to an experiment is necessary if a novel (or a play or a poem) is to become a work of art. It is not enough for the author to combine the novel of character and the novel of plot into a whole, though that is an advance on writing them singly. The combination may be extremely entertaining, and interesting, and moving, but it will remain a casual and inessential flower in the button-hole of the universe, unless the prophetic sense of the author invents a story which when enacted by these particular characters traces a significant pattern. The novel must have a theme. Its story must be a myth, in which bodies which are embodiments enact an event which is a type of event […]. Anthony Trollope passed the whole of his material through his imagination …, and having thus gained an accurate non-sentimental view of it he told the truth about it so helped him God. And at the end of it he has established just how certain kinds of people act in certain circumstances that uncover their attitudes to recurring and fundamental factors of life, just like Professor Pavlov has established how a certain kind of dog behaved when it was given meat powder under certain conditions. An experiment has been conducted, an observation has been made, bearing on a principle, it has been fully reported. (“Strange” 87)

Works of fiction are comparable to scientific experiments in that they are the controlled manipulation of events in a restricted environment designed specifically to produce observations on a hypothesis devised by the artist. A tradition is a permanent source of practical knowledge gained in this way, through experimentation: in cultural artefacts,
the “community can find out at leisure what actually happens in these moments that encountered in reality flash by so quickly, can decide what are the most convenient ways to take these experiences, can educate its members by repetition to take them in these ways” (“Strange” 130).

West expressed her wish that “The Strange Necessity” be “treated as a technical, high brow book? Reviewable really as a book on psychology” (qtd. in Rollyson, Literary 54). In this essay, originally called “A Hypothesis” (Hutchinson vii), she explains, on the basis of Pavlov’s experiments, that man’s psychological and physiological characteristics account for his need of culture, of which art is an indispensable component; culture is a tool which enables the survival of humans as a species and an indispensable socialising mechanism that ensures the integration of individual humans into their social environment. The awkward, pseudo-scientific term she devised to refer to culture is the “super-cortex”, a collective organ developing naturally as an extension of the individual cortex:

What the physiologists make lay people like myself see is a progressive resourcefulness of life. It makes itself a substance that reacts to the external world: which, in effect, means that it makes a substance that reacts to the external world in ways profitable to itself; since a substance that reacted in unprofitable ways would cease to exist. On experiencing the extreme coyness and impurity of the universe, on finding that perfect forms of nourishment do not leap forward to offer themselves to the organism, but, on the contrary, may often maintain themselves (having themselves an instinct for survival) in as inaccessible positions as may be, and that reproduction is increasingly a need and a nuisance, and that even the negative blessing of repose cannot be enjoyed without shelter having been secured against organic and inorganic enemies, life so arranged matters that the brain made itself. (“Strange” 125)

Just like the brain “made itself” spontaneously, out of a biological necessity, the super-cortex developed out of nature: culture is already within the organism. The “continuity of the animal and the human mind” (“Strange” 83) is drawn from the similarities between their “instincts” and physiology and supports the idea of an ordered world so dear to West:

I do not think we can exaggerate the fundamental unity of all art and all experience. In both alike the individual is examining his environment to see what chances of survival it affords him. This does not mean that he is looking for nuts to gnaw or a cow to milk; it
means that he seeks circumstances in which his soul can exercise certain choices. (189)

Culture as a way of life is not made, fabricated and artificial, but cultivated: human beings merely co-operate with their given tendencies, facilitating the evolutionary process. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, ‘organic’ was, in the nineteenth century, often understood in contrast to ‘organised’: an “organic society was one that has ‘grown’ rather than been ‘made’” (Keywords 228). For West, the purpose of both the super-cortex and the brain is to “select out of the whole complexity of the universe these units which are of significance to the organism, and to integrate those units into what excites to further living (“Strange” 128). Art communicates the experiences of individual cortices that process stimuli, making experience the “property of as many people as are aware of it; and […] art deals with experience from the point where the cortex finishes with it” (“Strange” 128). The need to communicate experience is fundamental if humans are to avoid the “loops and whorls” of unprocessed or half-apprehended experiences which only confuse and “threaten” them; people are thus under the necessity of forming a communicable “pattern” out of the stimuli around them and externalise this pattern (“Strange” 128). Conflict, disorder, and opacity are paralysing and destructive; internal anarchy must be disciplined by reality. Thus the individual needs to test and confirm or revise his hypotheses about the world against reality.

West’s concept of the self is multi-layered, best understood as an image of the self as a series of concentric circles which begin with a core of primordial energies and extend to the outer layers of the self. Self-image is constantly under revision because of the self’s unceasing contact with reality. An artist’s work, for example,

is determined by the strength of the stimulus which is making him write or paint or compose, or whatever his job may be, and the associations which this stimulus rouses in him. But the minute he has recorded the reflex which is aroused in him by this stimulus and these associations, this formulation of what before was not definitely thought, this realization of what was before only vaguely apprehended, must alter his view of the universe to a greater or lesser degree. The pattern may be altered in some important respect, or that half-millimetre of rosepink in the N.N.W. corner may be one-millionth of a tone lighter, but in any case it must make some difference. Hence the reaction to the next stimulus will be that of a
totally different self from that which reacted to the last one. ("Strange"
127)

This dynamic process is limited by several inescapable factors. Humans are born with
potentialities of varying degrees and kinds, which can only be fully developed if the
individual successfully breaks free of the illusions of “fantasy” that stand in the way of
a clear vision of the real. “Fantasy”, the word used by West to name the distorting and
blinding because self-centred, attitude of man, is no other than the “tissue of self-
aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is
there outside” (Murdoch, Sovereignty 59).

West’s premise in this inquiry into the psyche is that humans are all egoists. The
founding moment of the self is when the psyche, on the basis of the experience of
reality, fabricates a simple, self-serving “fantasy”, a working “hypothesis” about how
the world works in relation to the self, even though, given the child’s limited
experience, the fantasy “stands not a dog’s chance of corresponding to the world of
reality” ("Strange” 61); thus, it is “full of falsity, because the child is at the mercy of the
false logic with which external appearances perpetually present us” (60). Maturation
involves the gradual modification of this founding self-image as it is continually tested
against reality with the intention of harmonising the one with the other through
“affirmation or alteration” (62). There are varying degrees of success in achieving a
“victorious relationship with reality” (82). Some individuals are enraptured with
themselves and thus are condemned to be always “mistaken about the nature of reality”
(63). They are inner- rather than self-directed “stupid and neurotic people [who] live so
much in the world of dreams that any exploration of the real world would be useless to
them” (116). Others lead a half-hearted existence because of their weak apprehension of
both their fantasy and of reality. Most, however, are “actionists”, people who “work out
their fantasies in the sphere of conduct” (63). Of these, a small minority are artists with
an extraordinary capacity to objectify and thus break free from these confining fantasies
because they “work out their fantasies” imaginatively.

Empathy is the imaginative ability to bridge difference by sharing in the reality
of other persons who are transcendent to the self. Far from being a contemplative,
passive relationship to the object of attention (which can be a person or a work of art),
empathy requires an imaginative effort on the part of the reader/interlocutor. For West,
this is an uncomplicated process of identification between character and reader in terms of literature:

The exploration of different phases of one’s own being involves an exploration of other people’s being also, since this identity of instinct and in most cases of all but the most immediate circumstances will mean that in the houses of most souls (particularly of those living at the same time or within the orbit of the same civilization) the rooms have certain close resemblances. Furthermore, from the beginning of time every individual has had to watch all others to see that his safety was not threatened, there must be now a human habit of watching other people and trying to deduce their inner lives from their behaviour which will enable the extent of these resemblances to be inquired into and recorded as fully as any phenomena we encounter. (“Strange” 104)

Reality, for West, is intersubjective in that the individual’s perception of it is limited by both his fantasy and his historical place, and only contact with others can correct his myopic vision. In itself, art does not offer a direct description of reality either (“Strange” 131), but if the artist has been true to himself, that is, if he has sincerely rendered his “theme” or “pattern”, he will inevitably contribute to the truth common to all: for West, artists have a “prophetic sense that if out of the innumerable phenomena of the universe one makes a certain pattern, an agreeable consequence would follow” (“Strange” 80). This “pattern” or “theme”, as West explains, is unique, exclusively determined by the self’s particularity, but it is, according to West, unproblematically understood by the interlocutor because “on the foundation of our own experience we are able to penetrate imaginatively into the experience of others” (“Strange” 100). The worrying assumption here is that the interlocutor is strips himself of accidental particulars to enable recognition of another’s experience on the basis of a similarity.

This empathic relation can only be achieved when the artist has been sincere. Lionel Trilling has explained that the state of the self called sincerity, a moral virtue that became problematic in the eighteenth century is the complete congruence between “feeling and avowal” (Sincerity 2). Trilling traces the emergence of two historic conceptions of the self, the “honest soul” and the “disintegrated consciousness”. The first, with origins in a stable, rigid, hierarchical society, assumes the existence of an essential, natural self to which one can be true. The second is more troubling. Once social mobility threatens social stability and the identification of people according to their origins becomes more difficult, the idea that the self is inevitably corrupted by
society gains currency; the self can no longer keep itself whole, so to speak, it is no longer impervious to the “constant influence, the literal in-flowing, of the mental processes of others” (Sincerity 61). West’s image of the single-minded creative process of the artist as a tree suggests that this pre-social idea of the self is what she had in mind. The artist does not experience any kind of conflict between what he is and what he does; he “communicate[s] without deceiving or misleading” (Sincerity 58) because there is a concordance between “me and my own self” (4):

For the non-sentimental artist has an intention of writing a book on a theme which is as determined and exclusive as the tree’s intention of becoming a tree, and by passing all his material through his imagination and there experiencing it, he achieves the same identity with what he makes as the growing tree does. Now neither the tree nor the artist has eyes, neither has ears, neither is intelligent: simply they are becoming what they make. The writer puts out his force and it becomes a phase of his story, as the tree puts out its force and makes a branch. Both know how much force to put out, and where next to reassert it, because having achieved this identification with their creation they would feel a faulty distribution of balance as one would a withered limb. (“Strange” 17)

Clearly, for the artist there is, to use Trilling’s words, “no within or without” (Sincerity 93): the artist and his creation are one, and this integrity guarantees the authenticity of the finished product, which is “its own authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by laws of its own being” (99). Sentimental artists are insincere, in West’s opinion, because they seek to ingratiate themselves to their audience rather than to please by creating an object of beauty; they fail to overcome the “threshold that divides life from art” (“Strange” 21). Their fantasies distort their perception of themselves and of others. Unsuccessful novels are impaired by

a narcissistic inspiration, which inevitably deforms all its products with sentimentality, since the self-image which it is the aim of narcissism to create is made not out of material that has been imaginatively experienced but out of material that has been selected as likely to please others. (“Strange” 22)

This is West’s main objection to Joyce, who is driven by the “compulsion to make a self-image and to make it with an eye to the approval of others” (“Strange” 21). Joyce is incapable of achieving the transcendence that is, as Murdoch states, the “ability to see other non-self things clearly and to criticise and celebrate them freely and justly”
Joyce has manipulated his material (“Strange” 17). That West believed in an essential human essence, however much it may have been conditioned by the accidents of circumstance, becomes obvious. The narrator of the essay is pleased by Joyce’s poem “Alone” because it sheds light on a “certain system of relations, on the nexus of forces which is Mr. James Joyce. When I apprehended the particular facts concerning him which this poem reveals, which are his want of taste and the power of self-criticism, the facts I had previously known about him fell into place and formed a recognizable design” (“Strange” 69). The apprehension of this “design”, an internally determined telos, is an exercise in empathy, the identification of sameness:

I am a human being who cannot be very unlike James Joyce, because he also is a human being. I live in the same civilization, therefore I am exposed to practically the same excitatory complexes. Those which are derived from straight, unanalysed, unsynthesized experience may appear to be very different, but at least they will have a fundamental unity because they spring from the activity of our common human instincts. Those which are derived from art and science are more obviously the same. We both live in Europe, we have been exposed to the same philosophy, the same physics, the same pictures, the same books, the same music, and, what is fully as important, we have lived all our lives among people who were similarly children of Europe, who were imprinted by a like science and art. Now since we have such similar individualities, and are the subjects of so nearly identical a stream of excitatory complexes acting on our individualities, our experiences are bound to be very much the same.

It is therefore as certain as may be that I have among my experiences one that bears a strong resemblance to James Joyce’s experience which made him write Ulysses. (“Strange” 179)

Therefore, every man has within himself the blueprint of a many-sided human being. The empathic process does not entail assimilation and integration or exchange, but is a relation in which the self activates its potentialities in response to external stimuli, which otherwise lie dormant. The encounter with another does not necessitate a distortion of the self, it simply allows for the further expression of a store of possibilities, the “emotional goods that are found on me” (“Strange” 195). Thus, the self is not seduced and misled into “role-playing, to fantasy and impersonation” (Trilling, Sincerity 68), but encouraged to look within. The pleasure experienced by the narrator upon reading Joyce is a result of the experience of oneness with herself mediated, by the experience of being at one with another.
The social conditions that facilitate this experience are those of an organic society. As Trilling has explained, only a “simple soul, the honest consciousness, the integrated self” can envision the “world of harmony and order, of salubrious activity” (Sincerity 51). This harmony, however fleeting, is the condition of possibility for West’s idea of the good life. The enjoyment of art is a pleasant and nurturing experience that reassures and comforts the reader by mitigating the estrangement or alienation which fosters aggressiveness. Humans, it would seem, are not destined to be at odds with the community to which they belong, despite their biological predisposition to be cruel: it is apparent that socialisation from early childhood extenuates fear.

It would seem that, for West, social alienation is not a phenomenon of the twentieth century; she limits her examples of the estranged, destructive self to the “émigré, the deracine” to explain why individuals are in need of culture. Anglo-Indians (Kipling), Anglo-Irish (Yeats, George Moore) and Italian immigrants to the USA, such as Al Capone, are not emblematic of the human condition. Tradition provides individuals with a “social ethics” that teaches them to value life over death. Because immigrants and colonials are faced with the necessity of conducting their lives without the aid of a “common fund of ascertained reality” (“Strange” 167) available to them only in their country of origin, they have to create a moral framework in isolation and based on their limited experience. Culture distils experience and presents in compact form the values necessary to survival. These immigrants are alienated not because they are corrupted by society, i.e. alienated from themselves, but because they do not belong to the foster community, a self-determining collective intent on survival and improvement. In this new context they are unable to link the “individual to the universal” (“Strange” 159) but, rather, are forced to “pretend that [their] personal experience was identical with the universal” (158). A community regulated by tradition is a necessary condition for humans to know and experience themselves as human. What Al Capone lacks, for example, is a moral framework with which to orientate himself in social space: a culture not his own “will not show him what the ultimate significance of that experience is; it will not show it to him in relation to the experiences of others that impinge on it. He is left isolated” (172). Tradition encourages a sense of community, so it is a “necessity for every human being to remain embedded, physically and mentally, in the life of the country in which he was born” (138). The problem with exiles is that they are trapped within themselves, enslaved by their own fantasies:
Deprived thus of any real guidance as to the nature of experience, except what he himself can find out, the exile dashes about from experience to experience, trying to do, trying to make, but in a state of ignorance as to what doing or making are, and to what end they should lead. Hence Scarface Capone, symbol of the disaster of such exiles, engages in his disordered fantasies of conduct. (168).

By migrating Capone has become “destitute of the past” (159) and thus disdainful of external authority, incapable of controlling his selfish interests for the good of the whole. In Italy, his country of origin, religion would have played the vital role of instilling morality, because it is the basis of a collective identity and links ideas of perfection with certain rules of conduct and social values through ritual and a wealth of symbolism. Religion, a “community art-form” (“Strange” 160), teaches through rite and prayer the “conviction of the sacredness of life and the disagreeable mortality of the murdered” (166) as it provides the community with a narrative that guides its members through life. Religion also teaches compassion, caritas, a “marvellous tenderness towards the world, which is a worthy symbol for man’s capacity for love, and the power to reverse the order of nature and work miracles, which is a worthy symbol for his genius” (“Strange” 162); it also preaches the ultimate value of the individual and his right to life: the “to curtail [an ordinary man’s] life is to steal from him and his fellows a treasure of wonder” (“Strange” 163). Thus, the immigrant is crippled by meaninglessness, condemned to create meaning for himself, while the outside world is discontinuous with the world inside, the depth and chaos of personality mirrored in the anarchy of the external: the “man who goes out from his people cannot attain his full growth” (“Strange” 140). The imposition of prohibitions, obligations and punishments on the individual who threatens harmony by violating important social rules is thus the only way of ensuring that he understand the “sacredness of life” and the need for interdependence: “there is no other way by which man can effectively be dissuaded from the act of murder when it seems to his advantage” (“Strange” 166).

Loretta Sec, in her discussion of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, has noted the double-edged nature of nationalist ideologies, which have the power to both liberate and oppress. In her travelogue, West invokes nationalism in its defensive capacity as a weapon against imperialism, but elides the “potential contradictions in the definitions and uses of nationalism” (Sec 139). More importantly, however, the nation for West is, as Sec points out, a “natural entity”, built out of the “instincts” and “souls” of its
peoples. Although West, in “The Strange Necessity”, does not discuss nations as political entities as such, she does refer to “zone[s] of civilization” which are held together by immutable bonds. In this essay, imperialism is not an evil in itself (nowhere does she condemn the oppression of the colonised), but an unfortunate circumstance that weakens the moral fabric of the colonisers. The nation, for West, is derived from nature like the cultural traditions that cement it, is pre-social and thus depoliticised. In Black Lamb and “A Strange Necessity” West betrays a nostalgic desire for an organic community; her picture of the human and the world is ultimately anachronistic.

It is possible, though perhaps a little far-fetched, to read the 1928 essay as a response to the sense of dislocation of West’s world on the strength of the faith she placed in love as the only faculty able to dissipate the fogs of egoism. As Murdoch has explained, if in good art we seek the “comforting sense of a unified self, with organised emotions and fearless dominating intelligence, a complete experience in a limited whole”, art must therefore somehow also suggest the self’s “real disunity” (Metaphysics 88); in other words, unity can only be identified by its absence. In “The Strange Necessity”, love is excited by beauty, which nourishes and motivates the narrator of this piece to live because it promises the possibility of harmony. Both art and personal relationships inspire love:

As for the letters from my friends, of course they rank in their effect on me with works of art, because love is a condition which makes one believe that life is presenting itself to one in the same assimilable state as art. One looks at a beloved object and says to oneself that at last a phenomenon has presented itself to one in such terms that it can be of the greatest use as an excitatory complex before it is subjected to analysis and synthesis, that it is of such a miraculous nature that it instantly delivers itself to one because of one’s beaux yeux instead of reluctantly yielding to our laborious work on it. We protest that we know everything about it as if we had known it for a lifetime, that our knowledge has ever inspired us with such courage and power. In fact we are getting out of it exactly what art gives us, but without the effort of creation or perception, and we are travelling in a phase of experience where apple-dumplings grow on trees and rivers run ale, where life is no longer difficult to live. More joyful and intoxicating are the emotions we derive from love than those we derive from art, because they spring from a condition which promises an actual mitigation of the harsh intractability characteristic of the universe; whereas art never claims more than that it has a method of handling that intractability which is satisfactory if one knows how to use it. But both alike make me go on living. (“Strange” 192)
West was religious in the limited sense that religious practice involves the orientation or attraction to a Good that exerts a magnetism that counters the centrifugal force of the self. The Good is not God, a supreme person or a first cause. Rather, it is a reality principle: “the universe seems to have laid it down as a condition of survival that one must prefer reality” (“Strange” 142). This unifying idea of the good (the logos and its revelation in art), is an ideal with which we evaluate events, persons, activities: it “lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its authority” (Murdoch, Sovereignty 62). The light emitted by this centre of attention, which is an idea of perfection or truth, gives the narrator greater insight into reality: in fact, goodness is identified closely with a better apprehension of intersubjective reality, and this implies a clearer understanding of the self. The passage quoted above establishes the connection between art, the Good and love. Iris Murdoch has explained that love is the activity of focusing one’s attention upon an object of value (a person or a thing), and a work of art invites this lingering, sustained, focused regard. The narrator of “The Strange Necessity” deliberately stands back or suspends awareness of her immediate self in order to admit the other: “But I was under the compulsion to turn my back utterly on all direct experience and to immerse myself so far as possible in art, for the reason that at that particular moment I was glutted with direct experience that had not been digested and was stored away in my mind in a crude state” (“Strange” 196). The loving contemplation of an object requires a pause, a momentary arresting of and detachment from a “preoccupation with personal issues” (“Strange” 193), as well as the interruption of the “stream of experience” (“Strange” 188); the narrator turns her gaze away from the self, she “gives herself over” to the work of art (“Strange” 193). The act of surrendering to the pull of an object is, as Murdoch puts it, “contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love” (Sovereignty 66). Deeper understanding of an object outside the self leads, by virtue of countering egoism, to a clearer, more realistic vision of the real and simultaneously provides a sense of direction. The good, according to Murdoch, is a “source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are” (Sovereignty 70), in all their detail and uniqueness as individual, discrete realities previously experienced as undifferentiated, distorted by the self. As the narrator points out, the “beloved object” “delivers itself” despite the fact that she was initially under the
false impression that it was “known”. The ease with which she apprehends its essence is the result of her clarity of vision; she sees with beaux yeux, and she suggests that we “grow by looking” (Murdoch, Sovereignty 31). The experience of love is a “starting-point of reflection” (Sovereignty 71); in West’s terms, it “helps one to go on living” (“Strange” 197) because the more one understands reality, the more unified it becomes. The good life is a movement towards selfless care for others, who are objects of love.

“The Strange Necessity” is narrated in a heightened state of consciousness. As the narrator steps out of the Parisian bookshop, her gaze is immediately arrested by a dove, a symbol of the spirit, “and I felt that interior agreement with its grace, that delighted participation in its experience, which is only possible when one is in a state of pleasure” (13). Pleasure is a person’s spontaneous reaction to the congruence between his “design” and the activity he is involved in; it is a sign that he is enjoying “the same man’s practice of pursuing happiness” (“Strange” 93). This protracted state of pleasure culminates in an epiphanic moment.

The epiphanic moment liberates the self from temporal, spatial and psychological limitations: C. Beachamp describes the “moment of vision” of one of her many visionary ancestors as follows: “his consciousness stretched up and down through time and out through space” (“Grandfather” 178). Sue Thomas has identified a shift in West’s political position, claiming that the move from left to right is a change from a “materialist to a more essentialist sexual political philosophy”. According to Thomas, West espoused a “Romantic vitalist feminism” inspired by the work of the Romantic poets, best expressed in the trope of what Abrams called the “correspondent breeze”.

As Thomas explains, West sought in nature the energies necessary to counter the “mechanization of work and culture which threatened healthy autonomy” (Thomas 93). But in “The Strange Necessity” and “A Letter to a Grandfather”, the “correspondent breeze” is akin to grace, a “supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality” (Murdoch, Sovereignty 55); rather less

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8 The image is biblical. West uses imagery such as a rented veil and dove to refer to the spirit and the vision of truth. As Abrams has pointed out, the wind becomes a “vehicle for radical changes in the poet’s mind. The rising wind, usually linked with the outer transition from winter to spring, is correlated with a complex subjective process: the return to a sense of community after isolation, the renewal of life and emotional vigour after apathy and deathlike torpor, and an outburst of creative power following a period of imaginative sterility”. Given West’s widespread use of religious imagery and her familiarity with Augustine’s Confessions, she intended the breeze to be more than Thomas suggests; though secularised, the “religious element remains as at least a formal parallel, or a verbal or rhetorical echo”. See M.H. Abrams. The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism. London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1984: 26 and 39 respectively.
revolutionary than Thomas suggests, the use of such Romantic imagery points to a very personal experience. Contrary to Thomas’ suggestion that all humans are capable of liberating themselves from the oppressions of capitalism, West seems to believe that only a select few can experience the “heroic attempt to cover all, to know all, although fixed to one point in the universe, and thereby pinned to ignorance” (“Grandfather 207”). The idea that art is a specialised craft and that the artist has unique qualities, both of which are Romantic ideas, is expressed in both essays. C. Beauchamp has inherited her ability to experience “intimations” (“Grandfather” 174) from a long line of aristocratic men: “the spirit, the full life of which is lived only by certain human beings” (176). In “The Strange Necessity”, West clearly expressed her disdain of those people so bewitched by their own fantasies that they will never experience the harmony of unity or even be susceptible to beauty, they live in fear of the truth (“Grandfather” 174). Indeed, they may not even live a happy, good life. Trilling, writing about Wordsworth, has identified two different though related forms of epiphany. In one, the sudden revelation communicates to the poet a transcendent message which bears upon the comprehension of human existence or upon the direction his own life should take […]. The other, less grandiose and more closely connected with Joyce’s epiphanies, has as its locus and agent an unlikely person […] who, without intention, by something said or done, or not done, suddenly manifests the quality of his own particular being and thus implies the wonder of being in general. (Sincerity 90)

Wordsworth, Trilling continues, chose marginal people as the cause of the epiphany, which disclosed that “these persons forcibly exist as human beings. In this context the stress properly falls not on the word ‘human’ but on ‘beings’” (91). It is thus not gratuitous that C. Beauchamp’s epiphany is brought about unexpectedly by a “very tall negro, no longer young, dressed in evening clothes made of faded cloth, wearing a top-hat, and carrying a cane with a gold crook for a handle” (“Grandfather” 203). The man, responsible for seating revellers in the cars of a merry-go-round, “compell[ed] the will of the people who looked up at” the ride with his gesticulations: “His teeth shone, his rolling eyeballs exhibited the whites of his eyes; it was as if a gleaming bird, a dove, shot forth from his face” (205). C. Beauchamp’s vision allows her to perceive the “truth of one’s position in time” (208). The war-torn generation has “long lived in winter, but it has deplored it. I no longer do”. Her vision of the good symbolised as the “dove and
its flight” incites a clear, humble, compassionate apprehension of the spirit of her generation: “I exult in being just where I am” (208). But this change of perspective is effected by stripping the self of particularity to become pure, changeless spirit, “being”: C. Beauchamp reaches knowledge of others through consciousness of existence (Trilling, Sincerity 92). This liberating freedom from temporal constraints is described in similar terms in “The Strange Necessity”:

Not only am I wandering in the universe without visible means of support, I have a sort of amnesia, I do not clearly know who I am…what I am…. And that I should feel this transcendent joy simply because I have been helped to go on living suggests that I know something I have not yet told my mind, that within me I hold some assurance regarding the value of life, which makes my fate different from what it appears, different, not lamentable, grandiose. (“Strange” 197)

Unlike “A Letter to a Grandfather”, in which the social conditions of her the narrator’s time are indicated, “The Strange Necessity” seems deliberately to avoid social and political commentary. For art to be an effective critique or an inspiration for collective change West would have been obliged to introduce social conflict into her argument here; instead, there is an absence at the centre of the essay that undermines West’s forceful plea for the necessity of art, which is defined as such a rarefied and specialised activity that it cannot be an effective agent in political change. The only battle is between the individual psyche and reality. However there is an even greater, though related problem. Egoism may be channelled, civilised, though never completely eradicated. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, however, any conception of a natural human essence (whether it be good or bad) is “pre-cultural. Neither version of man takes its origin from a view of man in society, man within culture; both are based on speculation about his isolated, pre-social condition” (Culture and Society 192). This is, of course, precisely where West falters. Although she strives to portray culture as nourishing, life-enhancing and liberating, as a condition, in short, that encourages self-realisation (it is, in fact, a “necessity”), her belief in man’s corrupt nature and the extent of his rigid determination by nature seems to severely restrict the influence of culture: “the difference in human beings is probably not so great as we suppose from the surfaces they offer us” (“Strange” 101). The very language she uses to describe the human struggle for survival in a hostile, dangerous environment, such as ‘profit’,
‘competition’, and the suggestion that art has use value would suggest that capitalism is an inevitable outcome of evolution!

How does social and economic change occur once the individual has freed himself from his enslaving fantasies? Whether, for West, culture is a defence against capitalism is something we can only infer. However, one question remains unanswered: how and where is the individual allowed to exercise his limited freedom if the course of his life is already predetermined, even if his “design” is unique? The limits imposed upon this already restricted field of action are both internal and external; culture is a supra-individual, coercive force acting upon the predictability of human behaviour. An individual’s choices, the exercise of his will, are severely restricted by both his environment and his nature. The terms set up in “The Strange Necessity” to explain human behaviour cannot deliver the conditions necessary for West’s idea of a good society as she described it in 1953, nor can they explain how society changes:

I believe in liberty. I feel it is necessary for the health of the world that every man shall be able to say and do what he wishes and what is within his power. We must understand life if we are to master it; and each human being has a unique contribution to make towards our understanding of life, because every man is himself unique. His physical and mental make-up is unique, his circumstances are unique. So he must know some things which are known to nobody else. He must be able to tell us something that could not be learnt from any other source. (“This I Believe”100)
Chapter Three

Politics in the Novel I
I

Introduction

Despite the exciting diversity of approaches to political life in the novels analysed here, there is one common theme running through them all: civil society is in disarray because relationships are corrupted by capitalism. If politics is to some extent concerned with both conflict and co-operation between groups of people, Mitchison’s dystopian We Have Been Warned focuses on the first, clearly a Marxist idea. In contrast, Holtby focuses on co-operation, the development of consensus among a community in its search for prosperity. Storm Jameson’s dystopian In the Second Year is less optimistic about the future and the possibility of radical change, the society depicted here is paralysed by disaffection, a condition also described in Mirror in Darkness. She more than the other three writers focused on the psychological impact of life in an urban environment experienced as unstable. Chapter four discusses Jameson’s Mirror in Darkness series, composed of three novels, and Rebecca West’s Harriet Hume. In this novel West explores the consequences of betrayal by following the career of a young politician. Politics is an important aspect of a cultural tradition and any attempt to upset continuity is punished. In all these novels we see how West, Mitchison, Holtby, and Jameson believed that if society was to change the individuals in it must also change by establishing nourishing relationships. The novels in chapter three explore the effects of social practices and institutions on particular sorts of people, those discussed in chapter four teach how personal idiosyncracies affect others. To use Rorty’s words, they are books “which show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing” (Rorty 141). Yet in all these novels it is clear the all four writers believed that “we are all capable of love. We impose limitations upon our love. We can transcend these limitations if we choose, love when expressed is returned” (Ingle 124).

II

Naomi Mitchison’s We Have Been Warned: Motherhood and the Sentimentalisation of Politics

I suppose our chief problem is, in some form or another, that of the conflict between the individual and the group: why it happens, whether it is necessary, whether and how it can be resolved. It is the
contemplation of this problem which has made the most vital political issues, most religious issues, and sooner or later all artistic issues.
Naomi Mitchison, “Two Moderns: Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot”

It is unusual to find a novel that has been routinely disparaged since its first (and only) printing; according to one critic, after its publication Naomi Mitchison “never recovered her literary reputation in England” (Benton 106). It is even more unusual to find that critics and reviewers from across the political spectrum agree that the shortcomings of We Have Been Warned (1935) arise from the quality of mind of the novel’s protagonist, Dione Galton, described by William Plomer as a

generous-natured, indefatigable and infinitely humourless upper middle-class Scotchwoman, wife and mother, a heroine who seems to want mankind to turn into a great big jolly chattering family all romping together towards the millennium in a confused atmosphere noisy with forced bonhomie, false with inverted snobishness, and vaguely glamorous with what used to be called ‘free love’. (706)

The novel explores the “borderlands of socialism and communism”, but is unfortunately ‘modish’: the ‘free love’ idea put forward is banal and detracts from the serious political issues raised, and the heroine’s perception of political commitment as a type of “martyrdom” transforms the novel into a “bargain-sale where Utopias are going cheap”. Wintringham in Left Review is even less tolerant of the book’s politics, again quoting the heroine’s naïveté as the main problem. Mitchison’s socialist agenda is undermined by the “sentimentality, soft and sticky as warm cocoa-butter” of Dione Galton’s personality (381). Her “cuckoo-economics and cloud-politics” are based not on sound economic theory but on a “conception of socialist morality” (Wintringham 382) grounded in a sentimental sexual morality, portrayed, he says, baffled, through “stories of rape and of the ‘nationalisation of women’”. Dione’s motivations and gradual involvement in politics are gratuitous and implausible, the novelist purports it is a “historical novel about my own times” but in fact the characters in the book are “curious people [with] very curious ideas”:

For a considerable part of the book the perplexed reader wonders: is this not, after all, a satire on the people described? When the author goes in detail, and apparently with innocent relish, through page of glutinous sentimentality, is she not cruelly pretending the innocence and relish? This Labour candidate and his wife, these Labour Party members and Communists –are they not seen with an ironic eye? As the book proceeds, this wonder fades –and gives place
to a greater: that a writer so sensitive to ideas and people of the past should be so insensitive to those of the present.

The book does not further the cause of socialism. Its dystopic ending suggests that a violent, fascist counter-revolution will inevitably follow a socialist revolution, hardly an incentive to change, as Wintringham points out. Q.D. Leavis also picks up this point, though she places the novel within the context of previous literature dealing with the subject, not in relation to the immediate political situation. The novel may be an attempt to “arouse revolutionary feeling on behalf of the workers of England” (“Lady” 318), yet the writer’s “innocently bourgeois background” that “smears everything she handles with a nauseating brand of sentimentality, so that Revolutionary feeling is for her bound up with an incessant kissing and pawing between and among the sexes” (“Lady” 332) and her ignorance of working-class culture and tradition undermine the attempt to arouse even an “elementary social consciousness”. Mitchison’s arrogant ignorance of the “cultural history of the working class of her own country” (“Lady” 325) and her failure to create imaginatively the working class character of which she has no first-hand experience do the working class a disservice, depriving it of the “cultural heritage which their ancestors heroically earned” (“Lady” 333), a source of strength, hope and identity. In Leavis’ opinion, Mitchison imposes upon the English working class a foreign culture of resistance, the “ideals and beliefs of a whole group of people with extreme left-wing opinions” (“Lady” 335) who believe that the “English worker is culturally in the position of the Russian worker at the time of the Revolution” (“Lady” 333). Mitchison’s quasi-Marxist position disregards the heritage of the English working class and in the process she depicts the workers as an “alien order” (“Lady” 333), reduced to “symbols of capitalist exploitation”.

The novel is, intentionally, a sourcebook for the literary topoi of the time, firmly in place by 1935. Themes, images, public figures are all there. Slums, Means Testing, the “well-known type of working-class housewife” (“Lady” 332), Hunger Marches, the “Noble Worker” (Plomer 706), unemployment, contraception, the Co-op, the shell-shocked veteran, the Bloomsbury artist and the Bright Young Thing, the “real Communist” (Wintringham 381), the deferential Labour Party bureaucrat, the earnest spinster, the Tory candidate, Harold Laski, Cole, Woolf, Lawrence, psychoanalysis, and the list goes on. These are all components of a literary language that emerged to deal with new social realities, a language exhaustively studied by scholars such as Bernard
Bergonzi, Samuel Hynes and Valentine Cunningham. Mitchison’s attempt at all-inclusiveness undoubtedly adds to the novel’s shapelessness, it “does not quite hold together” according to Jill Benton, and for Elizabeth Maslen this lack of cohesion stems from the “attempt to marry too many elements from different styles of novel; there are aspects of thriller, fantasy, dystopia, romance, political realism and stream of consciousness, jostling each other in unlikely combinations” (Maslen 37). I would agree that the novel’s inadequacies are a result of Mitchison’s penchant for all-inclusiveness, a sign, perhaps, of her desire to intervene in an “increasingly insecure” (Mitchison, Memoir 81) world to warn readers of the consequences of political apathy and short-sightedness by using familiar literary conventions rather than more sophisticated, inaccessible prose: the novel is topical. Perhaps the most important problem, however, is that Dione’s attempt to apply the dynamics of familial relationships to the community as a whole as the basis of a socialist community is not a feasible alternative to the exploitative relationships of capitalism. It is this ideal of motherhood that critics consider sentimental, the “jolly chattering family” (Plomer 706) described in the novel cannot be a model for the kind of community envisaged by radical politics.

This in itself need not be a problem if Mitchison were presenting a case for a politics modelled on motherhood. But Dione’s ‘sentimentality’ stems from the fact that she can afford to be preoccupied with her poorly imagined inner life because she is not first and foremost preoccupied with material needs. So although the novel is structured as a story of awakening in which the heroine becomes aware of her social identity, this process is possible because of the economic inequalities she allegedly wants to eliminate. Wintringham notes the implausibility of the character’s behaviour in the turning point in Dione’s quest, when she is raped by Idris Pritchard:

Dione goes back to England, meets another member of the Communist Party, who rapes her […] Ten minutes later, after one and three quarter pages of description of her feelings, we find that she has forgiven the man –because the bathroom he used was nasty. “No wonder Idris Pritchard was like he had shown himself to be. No wonder. Poor Idris. Poor people in a house like this. In the other houses like it. Oh, poor dears, poor dears, how could one blame them for anything”. (Wintringham 382)

However implausible the psychological consequences of her rape may be (one does, with some justice, expect a more detailed account of an experience which is so
traumatic that in the novel it is substituted by an ellipsis), I believe Mitchison was attempting to illustrate the conflictive nature of class relations by using male violence as an expression of class hatred, which is the result of the social and economic inequalities inherent in a capitalist society. But the possible consequences of class conflict are not described convincingly.

No one allows for the possibility that Dione is deliberately unusual. Mitchison defended her heroine against the unremitting criticism of her otherwise friendly publishers as follows: “I am more sure about this book than I’ve ever been about any of the other books. I know Dione behaves in an odd way but I am quite certain of her behaviour. She isn’t a completely normal person any more than Erif Der was or I am myself” (Memoir 173). Mitchison was aware of her heroine’s peculiarities, as were her readers, though unlike her they lacked the tools necessary to understand Dione’s behaviour. According to Gerard Genette, “what defines plausibility is the formal principle of respect for a norm, that is, the existence of a relation of implication between a particular conduct attributed to a given character, and a given, general, received and implicit maxim... To understand the behaviour of a character (for example), is to be able to refer back to an approved maxim, and this reference is perceived as a demonstration of cause and effect” (qtd. in Miller 29). In Dione’s case, there seems to be no “maxim” available to the reader in the novel itself to account for her behaviour, so it reads as unmotivated and unconvincing. However, although the novel itself may not provide a norm, Mitchison’s The Moral Basis of Politics (1938) and The Kingdom of Heaven (1939) do. Both are non-fictional essays in which Mitchison offers a “practical morality” which concerns “what we ourselves and other people ought to do, or ought to aim at doing” (Kingdom 63) to avert an impending war. So, for example, in The Moral Basis of Politics violence is treated as only one way of achieving radical social and economic change, motivated by “hatred”; the other, conversion, peacefully brings about desired change by grounding it in the personal conviction that “human life must be of supreme value, because the Good we postulate can only be in terms of it” (Moral 295). The corresponding emotion is a particular kind of love, “the Pauline word charity” (Moral 94).

Dione’s rape is therefore an expression of Idris Pritchard’s “state of hate”, while Dione’s misplaced though charitable goodwill is an attempt to “be good”, that is, to establish the “right free relationship we are after [which] is one of life and well-
wishing” (Moral 93). Her infantile naivete is a sign of her inexperience that makes her vulnerable; she has led a sheltered upper-middle-class life and must learn to navigate the treacherous world outside the home. As Mitchison explained, “If you could achieve your moral end by reciting a formula or eating a certain berry or going through a particular set of postures, you did not need to consider any other means, nor did it at that time seem to have any connection with politics” (Moral 99). Dione puts the cart before the horse in her attempt to “live the same way that I think” (Mitchison, Warned 241), by adopting the “postures” expected of a socialist woman. But intellectual conviction, it seems, is not enough: we must “grow into politics” (Moral 271), that is, acquire skills to act morally and politically by understanding the self in social reality, as constructed by those relations which shape subjectivity. However unconvincing the process may be, Dione’s story is intended as a description of one woman’s awakening class consciousness as she grasps the implications of her own position as a member of the “possessing class”, while simultaneously realising that it is in her interest to co-operate with the “non-possessing” (Moral 152) working class, to participate in collective action for the purpose of transforming an economic system that benefits a ruthless minority and exploits an unhappy majority. This maturing process is plotted as a voyage outward, prompted by a radical transformation “in ’inside’ terms, as individuals” (Moral 107).

Dione’s awakening entails the crossing of real and metaphorical frontiers, a common theme in 1930’s literature, as Bernard Bergonzi has pointed out: frontiers were used to describe the “division between states of feeling, between known and unknown, present and future, the small group and society” (Bergonzi 66). In texts with a socialist intent crossing the frontier often meant a “transition to a new world of faith and hope and meaning” (Bergonzi 73), a world Dione associates with Aristophanes’ Cloud Cuckoo Borough or “fairyland” (Warned 312) and Mitchison called the Kingdom of Heaven, not depicted anywhere in detail but imagined as an ideal relationship. The claim that Mitchison “takes the socialist, un-individualist outlook for granted” (Wintringham 382), that the hero of the novel is a group, a class or small community seems inaccurate, because the only community or group (one hesitates to call it a community) is the local Marshbrook Labour Party, hardly representative of an entire class. We have only brief, superficial glimpses of all other social groups -Bloomsbury intellectuals and artists, the Communist Party, Oxford, the aristocracy and the middle classes. Indeed, in novels such as We Live and South Riding social change emerges
from within a community that works together in a common cause. In We Have Been Warned we only have descriptions of individual members of the working class who are Labour supporters. This point is important, because technically Dione’s political awakening involves the realisation that the relationship between persons implied by the idea of “brotherhood” is not, unlike all other relationships in a capitalist society, “really a commercial idea. Brothers and sisters don’t bargain, do they?” (Warned 444). Potentially this conclusion has far-reaching psychological and social implications because the very nature of relationships is transformed:

If men and women can begin, even in a small way, among their immediate friends and relations (often it is harder to do that than to be nice to strangers) to live in good relationships and in a series of good situations, so that all persons involved are as much themselves and as free as possible, without crossing of purposes and thwarting, then they are helping forward the good, both by practice and by example.

We should be wrong to separate public and private life; in fact, I think such terms are unreal. The cultivation of good relationships is part of the general idea of good, even if such a relationship is with husband or wife or child. (Mitchison, Moral 174)

A moral life, a life oriented towards the Good conceived as a dynamic, continuous intersubjective relationship in which individuals treat each other as a supreme value, is a prerequisite for any political action that intends to further the Good, “it is a whole-time thing; those who want to do it have to be doing it all through their work, play, personal relationships, and so on” (Mitchison, Moral 102). I would like to suggest, however, that Mitchison’s assumption that relationships of kinship are by nature radically different from and potentially subversive of existing exploitative unequal relationships is dangerous; they are inherently not the sort of impersonal relationship required in political associations. In the novel, Dione’s relationship to the other is not between equals, despite her stated intention, but an all-embracing indiscriminate, protective, and nurturing maternal love inescapably conditioned by her class.

Mitchison takes from Christian thought the idea of equality that implies a mutual acknowledgement of shared humanity between two persons: what can happen to another can happen to oneself insofar as one is a human being. Despite Dione’s attempts to be regarded as a ‘comrade’ she finds herself rejected by the working class. Her search for a friend is, again, another common theme of 1930s literature, explored by Frank Kermode who suggests middle class intellectuals figured their encounter with the working class
other as a relationship of “necessary love” (Kermode, History 25). Writers of the 1930s sought, in fact “wanted, or tried to want, that handelasp with the unknown and innocent oppressed” (52), to overcome their own prejudices so as to find and love the “Ideal Friend” (26), who, according to Kermode, had previously been held at a comfortable distance. The process was often presented as a “love-story, almost a story of forbidden love” (81), the other perceived as genuine, complete persons. Dione’s transformation of consciousness can be achieved, she believes, by uniting with the genuine working class article. Mitchison’s love is derived from the Christian idea of caritas, a conscious effort to turn one’s attention “to some extent away from our selves into the external, moral field” (Moral 244), away from capitalist egoism, a rejection of “horrid little individualism, unashamed little lusts crying I want, I want” (Warned 350).

Sensitive to 1930s writers’ apocalyptic feeling of the “inevitability of vast historical change, of revolution and war, of which poverty and class hatred were the social signs”, Kermode notes the fear tempered by hope underlying much of their writing: “Conscience was reinforced by intellect, and the desire to love one’s fellow humans by fear”. It is conflicting feelings of “‘being frightened of losing what we’ve got’” (Mitchison, Warned 430) and the sincere impulse to love that Dione experiences in different guises. Wintringham was aware of the unresolved conflict in the writer’s mind, a fear that is political but expresses itself in the “artistic symbols” of bombs and rape (382). The problem that he registers concerns Mitchison’s crude depiction of political conflict, which in the novel is resolved, simply, through violence. Gill Plain has explained how for Mitchison love undermines patriarchy and capitalism because women’s transgressive otherness which originates in the supernatural, crosses boundaries, undermines binary oppositions and is subversive of the patriarchal symbolic (Plain 152). Yet in We Have Been Warned, Dione sets up an opposition that it is not mainly one of sex, but of class, and it is not undermined but radicalised. Plain argues that Mitchison’s heroines inherit their subversive powers from their mothers, but I would argue that although matrilinearity is an important source of identity for many of Mitchison’s heroines including Dione, the same applies to the identity of male characters. By drawing on the past as a source of meaning, as both example and explanation, Mitchison was pointing to the necessity of preserving the vital cultural continuities of a given community, whatever its size, as “social glue” to gain the cohesiveness and sense of identity which was essential to her ideas of loyalty and
brotherhood. Unlike the “herd-instinct”, which is a reaction against the threatening other, the “not-self” (Kingdom 61), brotherhood is inclusive and requires the development of sympathy, the ability to dwell imaginatively on the condition of another person, to have an active regard for the other’s good that would enable a view of him as a fellow human being, an end in himself rather than a means to an end. The purpose of politics is to ensure that the life of every single individual is of the same value: “either you think of people as means to something, or as ends in themselves” (Moral 60).

Dione identifies with her ancestor Green Jean MacLean, a woman tried and acquitted in the seventeenth century for witchcraft, though eventually driven to her death by the Campbells, who threw her onto a snow-covered hillside with her child, where they both died. Dione decides that Green Jean was indeed a witch, persecuted because she had “belonged to this other, this oppressed secret society, and had probably had dealings with some pre-Celtic and conquered folk” (Warned 4). Why exactly the Campbells felt threatened by Green Jean is unclear, although in The Moral Basis of Politics Mitchison suggests that the motive behind “witch-burning” was “social fear” (129). From the beginning of the novel the connection between the witch and Labourites, as well as Dione, is obvious: they are all oppressed by a powerful minority, and as a group are feared by and perceived as a potentially disruptive force of a particular social order: “The Sabbats sounded very much like Labour Socials” (Warned 5). The main opposition set up in the novel is between the Coke-Browns, wealthy newspaper owners, and the disempowered MacLeans. There is thus a historical continuity in the relationships between groups of people, transmitted from one generation to another, determined by their ownership of private property and concomitant influence in the spheres of economic, social and political activity. The MacLeans are pitted against the Campbells, just as the Galtons and MacLeans are pitted against the Coke-Browns:

The Church. And the Campbell women, the cruel, successful people, the Campbell women who had helped to drive Jean MacLean out into the snow. Like the Coke-Brown women at lunch parties with her sister-in-law at Sallington […]. There was something always going for one, going for the good group and turning it bad. Or was it the groups themselves, something really wrong with people? (Warned 6)

Dione sustains the analogy between the Campbells/Coke-Browns and the MacLeans throughout the novel because it is an example of the conflict between two distinct
visions of the good. Mitchison explained that political conflict is inevitable because there will always be more than one political vision available at any given time while there are several groups competing for power, but ultimately there are “two main sets of people [who] have different and mutually exclusive visions of the good” (Moral 27). Thus feudalism, liberalism and fascism are all fundamentally non-egalitarian political visions and therefore not conducive to happiness. (By “political vision” she means conceptions of life and its ends, their moral justifications and political organisation.) The first group of people

wants things to stay as they are on the whole; the alterations it seeks are for the perfecting of already existing institutions with their attendant modes of thought and action (such as empire, church and private ownership of property); it believes these institutions are capable of perfection and capable of producing a happy and prosperous society. In general those who hold these beliefs are also materially interested in the continuing of existing institutions, or else suppose themselves to be. (Moral 25)

The Coke-Browns are Tory press barons who belong to the Church of England (Warned 59), and are willing to die for the “British Empire, glory, the Union Jack” (68). Their social power originates in the hold they have over the press, whose tendentious, manipulative contents are described as follows:

A Sallington mystery of some kind, in which blood, or sex, or both were involved—something to make you exclaim with delighted horror, for, if it wasn’t actually in the street next yours, at any rate you’d seen trams which went just along there! It had plenty of photos, too, a lot of general news under good splashy headlines, pages for women and children and movie fans, a crossword—which always delighted the Taylors— a serial, and always one political article, which was generally supposed to be written by Daniel Coke-Brown himself. Labour and good Liberals could avoid reading it, but, of course, the whole paper was propagandist. (174)

This reading material not only causes “mental harm” (Warned 175) but also lacks impartial political discussion (and therefore undermines the democratic process) since its ideological position is controlled by a specific, identifiable social group whose interests it promotes. But the paper simultaneously and insidiously encourages escapism by promoting an entire way of life, typified in Dione’s eyes, by the inhabitants of inward-looking Morrow Hill: “semi-modern detached houses, seven- or eight-roomed,
with laburnum trees and potting sheds and often a little garage [...]. Safe little houses, dear little, dull little houses, little home-nest, families of two children only, the rest birth-controlled. Too right” (Warned 52). Though this class plays no active role in determining the events of the novel, the extremes to which “all the clan of Coke-Browns” (Warned 20) are willing to go to defend their property is clear: Tom Galton’s sister Rosalind, married to the manufacturer Reginald Coke-Brown, has her brother shot for treason.

The conventionality of the suburban lifestyle of Morrow Hill to which even Labourites aspire is one aspect of the ‘vision’ Dione and Tom want to undermine. An alternative lifestyle is found in the USSR, where they are both transformed by their encounter with the other, again a symbolic voyage described as a crossing of real and imaginary boundaries. Following the section located in the USSR, “The House of the Interpreter to the House Beautiful”, there is a chapter (also headed with a title taken from Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress) called “The Valley of Humiliation, by Vanity Fair, to Doubting Castle”, in which the couple return only to be disillusioned by the lack of radicalism of the British Labour Party, criticised severely throughout the novel for being so conservative in its politics, burdened by an “old-fashioned trade union view” (Mitchison, Warned 383). The USSR is representative of the other vision of the good that obviously receives Mitchison’s approval. This group of people wants things to be altered, not towards any perfecting of existing institutions, but towards their complete abolition and supersession by something different in kind. It believes that unless this is done there can be no general happiness or prosperity. In general, those who hold these beliefs have either no material interest in upholding existing institutions [...], or else, if they are materially interested, they are in some way incommoded by existing institutions. (Mitchison, Moral 27)

Dione and her husband are “incommoded” by their conscience, since they are not “oppressed”, that is, “as a class, forced to be iller, hungrier, uglier, more frightened, more insecure, more easily hurt and more unhappy than the people who are interested in the continuance of the present system” (Moral 27). Their political belief is at first simply an intellectual conviction, but as a result of their “conversion” both are eventually persuaded that socialism is the only path to achieving the Good despite political apathy and institutional resistance. The criteria employed to determine whether a particular “vision” is good for people, Mitchison believed, depends on whether the
organisation of the state facilitates the development of a “right relationship between people and groups of people” (Moral 33): that is, the state must enable the individual’s development by improving social living. All other political ideologies prevent good relationships because they prevent the individual from developing fully his potentialities, trapped as he is in a particular position, role or status, thus unable to be a “whole sel[f]” (Moral 37). Only in the USSR, where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is partially achieved, can “a larger number of individuals […] fulfil their capacities and sensibilities” (Moral 67). Although, Mitchison admits, the communist experiment is in its early stages and may be yet another disappointment, its psychological impact on its people is important, “the fact that money-power has been abolished and is now ill thought of has made certain direct differences. People are rather ashamed of being cumbered with many material objects, evidence of wealth. They are not much interested in them” (Moral 70). This freedom from ownership allows them to be “free to be more interested in other people” (Moral 70) and a life oriented towards the happiness of another is a true moral life. Again, the important transformation here is psychological, “a complete substitution for the ego-centric power instinct, putting in its place an other-regarding love instinct” (Moral 85). But the economic conditions that would foster a “society in which each individual shall be expressing him or her self freely within a relationship of non-coercion” (Moral 357) must be brought about by the creation of “economic equality”, which does not mean “‘equal pay for all’” (Moral 83) but the provision of the “necessities of life” (housing, education, health, security) according to need and in proportion to a person’s contribution to the general good. Mitchison believed that poverty was the result of unequal distribution rather than scarcity, so technology could and should be used to diminish the need for labour; in the end, nothing but greed would stand in the way of the Kingdom of Heaven. This explains Dione’s use of the images of the Power Station (Warned 254) and the tractor associated with Aristophanies’ Cloud Cuckoo Borough, both expressions of how “man had control of the forces” (Mitchison, Warned 57) without exploiting the workers who are markedly absent from the production process. The State should simply be more efficient at distributing wealth. Once the excesses of “money-power” (Moral 82) have been abolished, no one group will have the means to exert power over another.

The motive driving the heroine’s quest, though articulated half-way through the book, is “What does a Socialist woman do?” (Mitchison, Warned 238), a moral question
that guides her politisation and concomitant acceptance of social responsibility: her fate, like that of her family, is inevitably bound up with the fate of the community.

‘If there is a revolution, we shall all be uncomfortable for a bit’, she said, ‘but it will be worth it in the end, because afterwards everything will be planned and reasonable, and we shall all want to help with the plan—all the people of good will. We shan’t go on being unhappy because most people are miserable and shut off from us and we can’t help them; we’ll all be friends. That makes up for being uncomfortable’. (Warned 46)

This process entails a crossing of boundaries for Dione, a “shifting of the focus from the immediate field of the self to the outer field in which moral judgements happen” (Moral 287), a passage from and negotiation of the threshold dividing, yet simultaneously joining the “individual and the group” (Mitchison, “Two Moderns” 447). Mitchison believed that quest was a general principle always guiding human behaviour: “Humans are always seeking for something, they don’t quite know what. Some see it in political terms, others in religion” (Mitchison, “Afterword” 721). Dione’s journey is a moral one, structured and described through a series of scenes in which she is presented with “dilemmas, choices and temptations” (Moral 121). In all these situations she confronts two possible courses of action, moments “in which some choice has got to be made and it is not immediately clear which it should be” (Moral 127). One course is conducive to furthering the Good, the “relationship of active love” (Moral 179), the other self-serving. The criteria governing the choice must be clearly articulated and therefore susceptible to argumentation; emotional responses are not legitimate unless backed by reasons. The final outcome of any dilemma is unknown, Mitchison believed, but the “deliberately and rationally chosen” route should be guided by the principle that most people want to think and act in ways that are not exclusively self-interested, geared to the satisfaction of self-regarding “appetites and needs”. So in the novel we have temptation scenes, or occasions in which she is faced with a dilemma of “choice” (Moral 127), as when she must choose between having an abortion or giving birth to another child. It is not until she is convinced that the satisfaction of a private need does not necessarily exclude the common good that she takes action. Her quest is not so much one of self-discovery, but the emergence from the field immediate to the self to the growing awareness and acceptance of the other. Dione realises that the Good exists only in relationships, it is a social rather than an exclusively individual state of mind:
“Good is a good of situations, and of situations between people or something to do with people” (Moral 34). Morals are, to begin with, about an individual’s behaviour, they belong to the world of private relationships, but they may be extended to include relationships between groups of people because any transformation must involve the whole self, it requires a “shifting of the focus of the experienter -that is to say, by enlarging or altering his field so that he becomes aware of morality” (Moral 286).

Dione’s first important dilemma arises from her wish to initiate Donald McLean to the pleasures of the flesh. Her course of action is presented as a struggle within herself, a conflict of loyalty between love of her husband and attraction to the other in the shape of the working-class Donald. Dione knows what she ought to do but is not able to act upon her beliefs because of her own prejudices. To transgress the “bourgeois” (Warned 229) idea of fidelity, for example, is a step into uncharted, frightening territory: a “Socialist woman must not be frightened” (Warned 243). At the beginning of the novel Dione explains her sense of estrangement from Tom’s constituents, and the reasons for this:

’Neither of us ever feel we’re properly–the same as them. Friends in a way, because one feels this great affection for them. Comrades because we’re working together (it’s a silly word in English!). But not- not what one is with quite ordinary acquaintances here. It seems to be a matter of –contact […] I can’t be quite easy with them. There’s this house and garden, and not having to cook or wash baby clothes oneself. I’m not sure how much they mind. In fact I think they don’t mind because they see it’s all rather accidental and unimportant’. (Warned 103)

But these appurtenances of class are important because they colour her subjectivity. With Donald in Moscow she feels “like a housemaid with her young man. With her out-of-work riveter. She was sacrificing herself to her ideas. And then suddenly she thought, that isn’t how a Socialist woman behaves. Sacrifice -what a dirty, novelette-reading, hole-in-the-corner mind I’ve got. Sacrifice!” (Warned 252). And yet she is never purged from this sense of degradation, feeling like an “adulteress”, the “sort of women she had always supposed she would never be” (242). She finds a more accepting state of mind when she persuades herself that the betrayal of her husband is “for someone else, not because one wanted to oneself” (242), thus the motive is to help another altruistically. But even this gesture is coloured by her class.
Donald, like many of the working-class characters in the novel such as Agnes Green and Mary Taylor, is portrayed as sexually inexperienced, and Dione takes it upon herself to release these others from their own abnormal abstinence and enable them, as free sexual beings, to “be themselves”, fully to express and develop “certain capabilities and certain sensitivities” (Moral 74) and therefore be better equipped to live in the “right free relationship we are after [which] is one of love and well-wishing” (93). The working class is cut off from what Dione perceives as pleasure and intimacy, sexual satisfaction which is a liberating, healthy human need: celibacy is “apt to be very bad for people who practise it for long at a time. They become morbid and their intellectual or spiritual progress is twisted or perverted” (Mitchison, Home 72). They therefore experience a particular type of alienation, a stifling of the “‘good healthy instincts’” (Warned 229) by “bourgeois” prudishness, and the real fear of the burdens of childrearing. According to Dione, Donald is “all oppressed and bound” (Warned 241), never having “had girls” (229). His reaction to the bare skin of his middle-class travelling companions on the ship to the Soviet Union is radically different to the ease with which she talks about sexuality and carries herself (227). However, as Wintringham points out, Dione is “saved -half regretfully, from having to keep her promise” (Wintringham 382) to Donald, who meets Marfa, one of his own kind, a Russian factory-worker and, predictably, a Party member: they are comrades in the true sense of the word. The relationship between them is “non-coercive” and a “matter of choice” (Moral 180). Working-class Russian women “were real; they’d been talking about real things, work and wages and food. He was comfortable with them. He resented Dione being at the hotel waiting for him, the fine stuff of her dress, her soft skin and hair, her mind full of things he didn’t understand and didn’t hold with” (Warned 272). Dione is equally uncomfortable with their arrangement, she is “terribly frightened” (Warned 242) of Donald because he is a stranger or, rather, she is a stranger in his world. In the midst of the working-class she feels like a “foreigner” (Warned 62), both in England and in the USSR, so it is her class that determines how others perceive her. Her fear, however, is largely self-induced.

For Mitchison fear was an instinctive reaction to change, associated with meaningless chaos, the “breaking-in of the nightmare night world on to the predictable day-time world” (Moral 56). It is out of fear that people “huddle together” and look for a leader to guide and protect them; totalitarianism is particularly attractive for this
reason. But the psychological impact of fear is that it induces a defensive withdrawal from social and political life into the domestic, “we retire into egoism and the focussing of our imaginations and actions on to our immediate selves or at least our immediate group […] and the less we are interested in morality” (Moral 57). Dione expresses her fear to Donald like this:

‘I’m a bit frightened of men looking at me, I expect. Yes, I suppose at bottom I’m frightened of rape or at least – of people coming up from behind and– kissing me or something. But I’m frightened of women sometimes, their eyes and hands: women who’ve been hurt, probably, and who want to hurt back when they see me wearing nicer clothes than theirs. I’m frightened of the places one feels one’s a stranger in – an intruder, an alien – the sort of person they’re bound to hate, to want to do down in some way!’ (Warned 254)

Dione dreads direct physical contact with the working-class other, a somewhat unexpected reaction because she encourages others to enjoy physicality and feel more at ease with their bodies. Unlike the “proletariat”, who have nothing to fear because they have nothing to lose and are strong as a group because of their common oppression, Dione feels she has everything to lose. Her social position is therefore uncertain and precarious, more so than that of the capitalist Coke-Browns whose identity is grounded in property. Her terror during a crisis situation in which the very existence of the self is in doubt, provides the “shock which is necessary for conversion” (Moral 266).

According to Mitchison, there are only two possible states of mind in which to conduct social relations: the first is based on hatred and anger and manifests itself as violence. The second is based on “love and well-wishing” (Moral 93), which Dione in the novel associates with comradeship (hence her persistent need to be addressed as ‘comrade’ by members of the working class), a form of address signalling that she is accepted by them as an equal. The first type of relationship is an inevitable product of any economic system based on inequality which ideologically encourages individualism and competitiveness: “Up till lately our key-word has probably been competition: that has been so in the economic and political fields, and also in the reflecting fields of knowledge, education, religion, emotions, and art” (Moral 14). The alternative to violence is conversion or catharsis, “a purging or turning inside out; these figurative words are used for a certain kind of violent change which does, in practice, take place in people’s minds, spirits or emotions” (Moral 107). In “normal” everyday life one is not
self-aware, “one is walking through the street, or having breakfast with the family, but there is no conscious awareness of relationship, or of a good or bad situation, and the moral question does not really arise”. In this case, attention is turned upon the self and others are peripheral to the self: “consciousness” is “narrowly focussed, in the field of the self” (Moral 278). Morality comes into play only when the person is actively engaged in social interaction. A life-threatening experience in which an individual’s integrity is endangered by an other immediately focuses awareness of the self’s precarious boundaries, usually protected by a self-centredness that eclipses the reality beyond the self. The result of a shock is that we “stand outside ourselves” (Moral 256) and thus bring the self back into focus in relation to the outside world, so one becomes “one among many factors in a situation or relationship” (Moral 278). This process implies a recognition of the boundaries of the self and those of the other because this other becomes a real, external, independent and particular entity, not just an abstraction in the self’s “immediate field” of attention, distorted by the “pleasant blurring made by oneself” (Moral 278). Dione’s encounters with Donald and Idris Pritchard serve the purpose of increasing her awareness of herself in relation to the other, although this is not immediately apparent. The voyage to the USSR and the rape scene both prepare the ground for Dione’s greatest moment of fear, when she allows it to “get at me too much I become irrational, nightmare haunted, unable to think clearly, or, for that matter, to think at all” (Moral 265).

It is in this context that we can interpret the scene in which Dione is terrified, feeling persecuted by the imaginary voices of the Campbell women who try to tempt her away from socialism, “this nonsense […]. After all, we know you don’t believe in it,” they would say, “it’s not your song” (Warned 366). Dione, absurdly, begins to sing the Red Flag to herself and conjure the image of Lenin, Green Jean and tractors in her mind’s eye as a way to provide herself with reassuring bearings. She has returned from the USSR “all romantic about Communism” (Warned 343), a stranger there (neither Marfa nor her working-class roommates “call her tovarish back” (283)) and more of a stranger at home: “Dione felt curiously out of it –as though she had been to a magic place and come back into the ordinary world, but it had lost its value” (358). Once her “stability of value” (Warned 365) is lost, the framework with which her world was previously intelligible also vanishes, “there was nothing, only so far an emptiness” (Warned 366). Lenin and Green Jean, the tractor and the Red Flag are signposts that
guide the way to Cloud Cuckoo Borough by focusing her attention on the Good, away from her fear, and thus give her a sense of direction: “It is all as simple as that, so simple that a child or a peasant can understand it. A child or a peasant can become better by thinking of Lenin. You or I can become better by thinking of Lenin. If that is a religion, then a religion it is” (Warned 280).

These symbols are not exclusive to Dione’s personal morality, but are shared, they “[bind] a group together” (Moral 311) by creating a sense of belonging: loyalty is the “social glue that sticks groups of people together” (141), providing a shared goal. This positive sense of belonging is cemented by what Mitchison called a “mythology”, a frame of reference, taken for granted by the members of a community, consisting of a corpus of “circumstance stories and event stories and places and names” (Moral 145) which provide a common discourse that over time informs values (“courage, solidarity or friendliness, sincerity, etc.” (Moral 152)), ideals, patterns of conduct, forms of life, ideas of good and evil, the “cake of custom and trust” (Moral 146). These cultural traits govern the behaviour of even small groups of people. Hence, according to Mitchison, there are scientific, national, religious, socialist, and class loyalties, the cinema itself is “making one such across national boundaries” (Moral 144). The “culture pattern” of the West is fundamentally of Christian origin (Moral 12) and it is upon this that Mitchison suggests people should learn to “give trust and active friendship” (Moral 147) to all persons, based on the “idea of Christian equality, the equality of souls” (Mitchison, Home 23). It is impossible to feel any sense of identification with an abstraction like the world, but one can feel a sense of commonality with a particular human being.

Dione mistakenly assumes that she and Donald have a common background because they are both Scottish, though as he points out to an embarrassed Dione, “‘I am the son of your mother’s gardener’” (Warned 71). His loyalty is not to Scotland or to his family, but to his class, and Dione eventually acknowledges this:

She was –yes, she was, and she was right to be!- proud of England as it was now, of England and Scotland, of Magdalen Tower and Folly Bridge, New College Cloisters […]. She was proud of Dunbar and Shakespeare and Donne; she was proud of Virginia Woolf and Lawrence and Shaw and Wyndham Lewis and Aldous Huxley […]. She wanted to say all this to Donald.

And then she thought, what does it all mean to him? No one has ever given him Oxford or Cambridge to live in; London to him would be mean streets and dockyards; Edinburgh would be dark, weary-
staired closes, one privy to each tenement, no water above the basement. (218)

Dione’s class identity is fluid in comparison, she moves freely within the bounded territory of the “Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle” (217), an intellectual and artistic milieu, but outside this group she cannot function, an indication of her own prejudices and of the divisions of society. In contrast, in the USSR there is a true feeling of community, based as it is on a common national project and social condition:

Leningrad was crowded. There were always people in the parks and by the Grave of the Revolutionaries. In these white nights no one seemed to go to bed. After work the citizens wandered along the river and canal banks, talking and singing; sometimes they took boats and rowed; sometimes they sat on benches reading text-books on economics and engineering, or newspapers. (254)

The citizens of the USSR are honest, optimistic, liberated, spontaneous, genuine, they are themselves because of their public-spirited disposition towards each other. Public life as depicted here suggests a capacity for sociability conducted in shared public spaces. The city is the arena of civic virtue, the “Grave of the Revolutionaries” a commemoration and recognition of a shared common past which also points to the future and provides direction for active friendship. The only comparable spectacle of civic pride in England is during the Hunger Marches and demonstrations, but these are not a spontaneous expression of friendship, orchestrated as they are by the party machine. They do, however, provide a model for peaceful, co-operative collective existence:

They came to the Market Square; in the middle was the old market cross, tastefully decorated with iron railings and in any case usually half hidden by trams, as it was a main tram stop. In front of it a statue of Queen Victoria marched forward to victory. The contingents from the Divisional Labour Parties were forming up under amiable police supervision. The Sallington Party agent was there in his bowler, and John Collis. The Barstone Labour candidate had brought his little boy. Some of the Marshbrook Bridge people were there already, and more were getting out of each of the west-side trams. Tom and Dione were shaking hands, talking to one friend after another, all cheerful and most wearing their Party badges or ribbons. […]. Most of the lorries were to have scenes on them -propaganda tableaux of some kind, protests against armaments, against the Means Test, against tariff walls, release the Class War prisoners, Hands off Russia, or emblems of Labour solidarity. (177)
Significantly, after her rape, Dione loses her bearings in Sallington. Her mental disarray is reflected in the broken sentences and free association usually associated with the modernist style (418). According to Jill Benton, Mitchison structured the novel around the rape scene. The scene is interesting because of Mitchison’s ideas on conflict, the outcome can be read as a “Conversion-situation” (Moral 289). Dione’s encounter with Idris Pritchard confirms her fears of the resentful working class, trapped in a “state of hate and anger [which] stops the senses (the channels of communication with the outside world) from functioning properly” (Moral 93). However, this act of violation is highly symbolic. It marks a loss of innocence by showing how Dione’s protected life has not prepared her for the realities of social and political life, thus emphasising a discrepancy between her ‘romantic’ idealisation of the Noble Worker and the sobering realities of the psychological impact of social displacement. Seduced by the fact that Idris addresses her as ‘comrade’, again, an apparently trivial act, she feels accepted by the “thing he was part of” (Warned 412), that is, the closed circle of the Communist Party. Although she is at first uncertain about her impulse to dine with him, she immediately quells her doubts: “Was she being -doing- was it safe? But damn it all, he’d called her comrade. It was like Donald vouching for the man himself” (404). But her trust in him is unfounded, of course: Idris and Dione are caught up in the “tendency to personify and to make single people the representatives of classes” (Moral 261). For him she is just a “Labour lady”. For her he is an unindividuated member of the working class, a means to an end: to encounter the other. However, so as not to disparage the working class and for it to retain its status as a source of good, Dione discovers that Idris Pritchard is not an authentic member of the working class, he is not “proletarian. Your’re only an imitation ‘Varsity man’” (Warned 417) she realises. His political commitment is inspired not by genuine commitment to his own class, as it is with Donald, but out of a sense of personal injury: “‘If people of my kind got a fair deal, I would not be in the Communist Party’” (407). The reasons Dione adduces for having sex with Idris are the squalor of his living conditions. Although she has no genuine interest in relieving his suffering, and does not see him as a fellow human being, a unique individual with particular values, character, beliefs, she imagines herself in his environment because she is, as she tells him, “trying to see you as one of a whole class of people who’ve had a bloody time and who can’t help doing bloody things back”
(416). Her motivation is therefore self-regarding, prompted by what she imagines she would feel if she were in his situation. Again, as with Donald, Dione is willingly turning herself into an object, a means to an end: “‘Yes’, she said, ‘yes’, wanting so much to dispel the hate and envy in his mind” (413). But this, her second failed attempt at establishing a good relationship, not only highlights the obstacles she has to overcome on her quest, namely, the distortion of the other’s reality by class prejudice, but also introduces the possibility that male power and supremacy are expressed through sexuality. In theory Dione may deliberately be using herself as a means for the good of another individual, an acceptable course of action according to Mitchison (Moral 298), but in practice she is caught up in sexual politics.

The novel, according to Jenni Calder, is “not only about politics and sexual politics, but about sex as politics” (Calder 124). Sex emerges as an instrument of either oppression or liberation, implicated in the social relations structured by power and in this sense it is political. “The idea of equality is permanent, and inherent in the idea of the socialist family” (Mitchison, Home 112), but Dione’s relationship to her husband is unequal: she does not work outside the home and is, moreover, an appendage to his political campaign: “just the wife of all this. She talked to other wives as shy as she was, glancing quickly round the rooms, looking automatically for books and seldom finding them” (Warned 52). Dione cannot overcome her estrangement from the working class because she cannot shed her middle-class values and assumptions, which are inextricably bound up with her identity as a wife and mother. Indeed her radically liberated attitude to sexuality is itself a product of her background, but ideology is so deeply entrenched that it also shapes her emotional life. When one of Tom’s constituents dies, for example, Dione experiences “Hot-house, high-brow feelings” of sorrow, “a very unimportant by-product of too much money” (120). The assumption here of course is that the working class is so oppressed by the need that mourning cannot be afforded. Even Mason, a member of the working class, confirms the irrelevance and uselessness of “‘fancy notions’” (117). As Leavis points out, “Mrs Mitchison wishes to assert that the working class lack the ‘finer’ feelings of her own class and that this is a mark of superiority because it comes from closer contact with reality” (Q. Leavis, “Lady” 328). Leavis is undoubtedly right, but Mitchison was introducing, however clumsily, the common belief among socialist writers that an excessive focus on the self necessarily implies indifference towards others. Active
involvement in politics, as Dione herself suggests to her sister, provides her with “something else to think about besides the emotions” (16). Despite Dione’s growing involvement in the Labour Movement, she cannot shed her cultural baggage, so her relationship to Tom’s constituents is non-political; it is not the impersonal bond of friendship as comradeship but an extension of maternal feeling. Mitchison pointed out that a “woman is always expected to have a good deal of time to be kind and sympathetic and expand her maternal instinct over any males -especially her own husband- who happen to want the comforting they got as children” (Home 85), but, interestingly, Dione herself reproduces this behavioural pattern, hence Leavis’ perceptive observation that Dione comes across as “insufferably patronising”. Her reaction to Donald is that “she wanted him to be a baby to be picked up and kissed well again” (240), she addresses a working class wife and mother as “you great goose” (505). Examples of this maternal emotionalism are many, and they betray the inequality of the relationship between a mother and child in which the mother wields considerable emotional power. The working class has not attained adulthood, in her view.

In contrast, intellectual, political discussion defines the “equal” (Warned 317) relationship between Tom and Oksana, who is not in a subordinate position to Tom because they are equals economically and achieve a “state of mutual love and trust, which is only possible between persons who are emotionally and intellectually stripped: that is, completely honest with one another and sensitive to one another” (Kingdom 71). Through her he feels “happy and innocent like always, stripped and new-born” (324) and becomes

sensitive to other people as he had never been before […]. But he felt now he would never be able to deal with anyone without thinking of them first and immediately, not as some category of person, classifiable according to his own prejudices, but each as someone new and individual and to be learned from, yet touching him so intimately that he could not feel separate from them. (324)

This state of happiness, Mitchison believed, is only sustained with difficulty over a long period of time, but both Dione and Tom are familiar with this heightened consciousness through his political campaigning. When Tom addresses his constituents he is “possessed” by the “daemon” in him and when he makes speeches he transfers “mana from himself to the Labour Movement” (94). It would seem that men can establish good relationships with women but that a woman from Dione’s class is incapable of
achieving the critical awareness required to overcome bourgeois subjectivity, she is condemned to actively reproduce it.

In The Moral Basis of Politics Mitchison argues that ideas such as ‘democracy’ and ‘love’ are transcendent ideals guiding individual and collective behaviour which have not been realised yet or even well-understood. “Christian love” is “interpretable in terms of human love –yet there is always an element of stretching out from the best one can produce towards something better still. So with democracy” (Moral 275). Both love and democracy are founded on the “sacredness of human life” (Moral 295), and an experience of conversion makes way for the genuinely selfless understanding of another’s particularity. This is an altruistic attitude and emotion that Dione does not experience but that her husband, Tom Galton, discovers through Oksana: tenderness is the “most necessary quality in private relations between individuals (the quality of sensitivity to other people with ability to use it for their happiness or good)” (Moral 284). But the limitations of casting a political problem in the shape of a personal transformation are immediately apparent. Although Tom claims to have experienced the “happiness” of the ideal good relationship, possible only in a remote and romanticised USSR, his relationship is not transgressive of any boundaries: it is socially acceptable for a man to have an extra-marital sexual relationship, irrespective of the class of his sexual partner. Dione’s brother Alex says as much: “‘God knows it’s easy enough for a man to have a working-class girl without altering his point of view one bit. It’s happening the whole time’” (363). In contrast, Dione is not only objectified by Idris but is punished for her adventurous sexual behaviour. Adultery, “a key question, involving the whole basis of the patriarchal home, the ownership of women and their children by men” (Mitchison, Home 68), is ultimately punished, despite Dione’s apparent liberation from traditional morality.

Tom’s relation to Oksana is fundamentally based on their shared political language. They argue about ideology and political activism, thus bridging their differences, as he bridges differences of class with his male constituents by bonding over the legendary fraternity experienced by combatants during the war. This is, of course, how political conflict should be resolved in a democracy: through dialogue. Tom’s enhanced receptivity to the other’s particularity seems to be a pleasant ramification of this first fundamental level of communication. In contrast, “The women did not talk politics much, […] but the men asked pertinent questions and discussed all
the local problems” (52). Even in this group Dione’s role is more irrelevant than that of working class women, whether they form part of the wage labour force or not (she herself is not engaged in domestic labour), because her relation to them, and to the outside world, is mediated through Tom.

Mitchison argued, following Engels, that the bourgeois family and women’s oppression within it was the result of its place within a mode of production based upon private property and the concomitant divisions of class. She believed there was once a matriarchy, when women were not as oppressed by their biological functions because the sexual division of labour within the family and the community was less marked. Women were actively involved in communal life, property was held in common and there was no division between family and society. But the “mother-right changed to father-right”, a change in the relation between the sexes in social groups which saw the “beginnings of private property, as opposed to personal property” (Mitchison, Home 5). Men wanted to ensure the preservation of their private property by tightening their hold over women “so as to be sure to own their children”: “Not only does the man –the patriarch- own a woman or women, but he also owns the means for conservation of life, for keeping the home together” (Home 5).

Despite Mitchison’s awareness of the oppression resulting from the division of labour, fully articulated in The Home and a Changing Civilisation (1934), the family as an institution, is not threatened or questioned in the novel but indeed emerges as an unhistoricised natural arrangement. Even the liberated Oksana wants a happy family life (Warmed 328). Mitchison believed that “ownership” was to some extent natural: “Ape society is made up of owner and owned, though it is a purely biological ownership” (Mitchison, Home 2) for the sake of the survival of the species, as female apes are unable to fend for themselves while pregnant or caring for their young. The biological family is perceived as the basic social unit (hence Dione’s loyalty to her clan), and the sexual division of labour is perceived as an inevitable phenomenon. Ties of kinship, the “affections which tie human beings to one another” are inherently non-exploitative, whereas the “doctrine of each for himself is of course opposed to any tradition of a close group such as the family” (Home 62). Dione’s ideal family is not simply a group of individuals who live together to survive in a hostile environment; it is based on friendship and therefore a matter of choice, “all kind to one another in their various ways […]. Kindness, the opposite of possession, is the motive force of the relationship”
(Home 65). This relationship is humanising, members of a family are socialised within this closed group and learn to care and be responsible for others. This in itself need not be problematic, of course, but in this text the family is, contrary to Mitchison’s critique of it in The Home, not the key site of women’s oppression, and the ideal family life is more a refuge and a source of goodness than a radically different alternative of communal life despite the experiments in Russia of communal living. Dione’s model is the nuclear family in which individual interests are sacrificed to the needs of the whole family.

Dione’s moral deliberations ultimately allow her to articulate the truth about her world, that the “universe happen[s] to fit in with the ideas of the upper middle classes of north-west Europe and North America at this particular and non-significant moment of time” (Warned 439), so “we see the universe as a vast transaction, a deal, a merger” (Warned 441). Biological familial ties are not exploitative or relations of exchange, so loving, parental values prevail. Dione believes that right relationships, fraternity, should be modelled upon bonds between members of the family. Her role as wife and mother within this social group is an identity she fully assumes, publicly and privately, and the vantage point from which she perceives the world. Therefore her progress from the family to civil society is not emancipatory in a feminist sense because she comes back full circle untransformed by her encounter with the other, although she has allegedly undergone a profound transformation in the process. The condition of happiness is one in which “one is completely oneself, unthwarted, doing what is most fitting for one to do in relation to others in the same position, the result seems likely to be this positive new result, happiness” (Moral 254), and Dione finds that she is most ‘herself’ as a self-abnegating mother, infantile in her goodness and naive, the redemptive child.

Motherhood is Dione’s way of inserting herself into history as an agent of change, a mother’s concern for the future of her offspring is the basis of her political belief, though she must overcome her moral objections before having another child: “I haven’t the right to when people at Marshbrook Bridge haven’t got enough food and clothes for theirs”” (Warned 491). Tom provides the political reasons for not having the child: “We can’t go giving any more hostages to safety first. And what sort of a world is it going to be for the children? If there isn’t a revolution it’s likely enough that they’ll be killed in another war. You don’t want to breed sons for that, Dione” (491). However, despite these reservations, Dione decides to have the child because Oksana convinces
her that she is providing for the future: “Oh, Dione, do not have this abort! […] It will be a so good world for Socialists and Socialist children, not perhaps now everywhere, but soon. If it is even a bad world for your children, yet for their children it will be good” (498). From a socialist perspective, then, being a housewife and mother is of value to the community as a whole and, potentially, a source of self-respect, meaning and purpose, whereas Dione had previously felt devalued by her exclusive involvement in the realm of the personal and particular: “sometimes one feels one would give anything for a little kudos – a little fame and glory for oneself quite on one’s own” (105). Despite the fact that, as Mitchison pointed out, women “were most effectively owned and chained to this [patriarchal] system by a houseful of children whom they had to look after” (Home 83), Dione chooses to remain ‘chained’, so the moral authority of motherhood is maintained.

Mitchison attempted to resolve this issue, unsuccessfully, by pointing out that there are two distinct forms of ownership, one social and the other, personal. The first encompasses two distinct forms of relationship, male oppression of women and children and the economic exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. Both relations are based on an unequal distribution of power derived from the possession of property. Personal ownership is different, however, because it is based on sharing and mutual dependency: “the difference between this kind of possession and ordinary social and economic possession is that here nothing is taken away although something is added” (Home 148). Thus, Idris takes from Dione violently, because “it is taken for granted that no one likes to be possessed, to have something taken from them: so it must be by violence” (Home 148), whereas the relationship between Oksana and Tom is voluntary.

The narrative unsuspectingly undermines its own ideological agenda in one other crucial way, as all critics have accurately pointed out. It seems possible, Leavis says, to “retain your leisure, servants, holidays and cocktails with an even enhanced complacency provided only you learn the Russian alphabet and take a trip to the USSR, and say very loudly all the time that back-to-back houses are disgusting and the Means Test inhuman. You thus enjoy the luxury of having it both ways and the pleasure of feeling superior to those who haven’t. Thus a new snobbery seems to have been created” (Q. Leavis, “Lady” 319). Although the heroine sets out to transform the basic rules governing relationships by crossing class boundaries, in the end she is safely ensconced in her middle-class marriage with a clearly defined sexual division of labour,
despite the fact that both Tom and Dione believe that their marriage is not determined by the “proper buying and selling pattern” (Warned 488). But as Dione herself states, without irony, “I’m a respectable married woman” (465). The novel suggests, however, that the only person capable of healing the ills of a misdirected society is she who is outside and exists in relative independence of economic and social realities, not a radical, subversive other, but an idealised mother and wife, economically dependent on her spouse, bearing the responsibility of raising her children though not directly involved in domestic chores, all-nurturing and all-forgiving, exercising control over others by her very otherworldliness. She does not rule by force but by love: “The state of ‘being good’ may date to nursery days. It can be described as being in a right and fitting relationship with other people. The ‘being good’ is in the relationship between child and parent of child and nurse” (Moral 32). Although Mitchison believed that “We should be wrong to separate public and private life; in fact, I think such terms are unreal”, she suggests in this particular text that separation is indeed inevitable because the alternative relationship cannot be a model for political activity. The problem seems to be that political associations have no place in her separation of spheres, since the relationship of comradeship and fraternity that she offers as an alternative to violent conflict cannot be modelled on familial relationships because it requires a certain degree of impersonality, precisely that which Dione’s familial brotherhood does not have, based as it is on intimacy, an intense personal relationship which necessarily is limited to a few individuals. The socialist principle of fraternity is based on the egalitarian principles of friendship, and may be extended to the organisation of society as a whole, but as they are presented in We Have Been Warned, the model being familial, they cannot be blue-prints for political action.

III

Winifred’s Holtby’s South Riding: Local Government and the Creation of Consensus.

Winifred Holtby’s writerly persona was both cosmopolitan and parochial, a two-tiered political identity that allowed for loyalty to community and to universal democratic principles. South Riding reflects these two loyalties. Holtby wanted to write an
“immense spread book” depicting the impact of the “agricultural slump” (Brittain Friendship 441) on the social, political and economic life of a small community in the imaginary region of the South Riding during the period between June 1932 and May 1935. Despite the subtitle, “An English Landscape”, South Riding is Holtby’s second attempt to write about the “drama of rural Yorkshire as I knew it, as it had filled my whole horizon until the war destroyed a small and settled world, against the backdrop of historical change and progress” (Holtby, “Mother” 274). However, the mood of South Riding is not nostalgic, as in Anderby Wold (1923); the innocence of the Edwardians, a literary commonplace in the 1920s, is no longer a reassuring, ready referent. Even this small district cannot escape the economic and social changes transforming the country as a whole, nor the unstable situation abroad: South Riding is “Anderby Wold theme post-war, but active not passive” (Brittain, Friendship 412). Unlike Jameson, Mitchison and West, Holtby embraced “progress” selectively, condoning its democratising political and social consequences, but less welcoming of its cultural impact and critical of the excesses of consumerism. As we shall see, South Riding addresses this ambivalence: modernisation is inevitable, but the process should be controlled by local government and the “active” participation of a critical citizenry.

For Holtby the interwar period was a transitional phase which in the novel is played out as “town vs. the country” (Brittain, Friendship 412). South Riding explores tensions between a traditional England “complete with squires, fox hunting, and gnarled yokels; sustained no doubt more from dividends than from agricultural rents” and the “England of the twentieth century, shapeless unplanned, yet representing the ideal towards which all Englishmen unconsciously moved” (A.J.P. Taylor 386-87). But in Holtby’s view the emergence of “England of the twentieth century” is planned,

"each part [of the novel] treats of some aspect of administration as it affects human life or several human lives, while all the time a fight is going on between the people who want to plan and change things by deliberate will, and the people who just want to “Let things happen”. (It is a more profound cleavage than between mere Conservatism and Socialism, to my way of thinking.) (qtd. in Brittain, Letters 273)

The fundamental changes are, to use Orwell’s words, the “spread of middle-class ideas and habits among the working class” (Lion 67). Unlike Mitchison, who perceived social conflict as a violent battle between conservatism and socialism, Holtby focused on consensus, on a more complex vision of social stratification that was not determined
exclusively by the ownership of private property but by prestige and reputation. The members of the community are solidary with one another in the sense that they have a consensual relation to a common normative body of values and goals. This type of relationship is essentially democratic because basic decisions emerge from a truly representative institution such as the county council. Indeed, _South Riding_ is not a novel about organised party politics like _We Have Been Warned_, but a description of the social landscape of a particular region of England which is witnessing the demise of a backward-looking, pre-war, traditional vision of the good life and the emergence of another forward-looking and modern, each with its particular idea of what society should look like and what place the individual is to have within it.

The community of _South Riding_ is organised to further a particular desirable lifestyle typical of the new interwar middle classes, perhaps specifically of the petit bourgeoisie, bound by a shared Protestant background guided by the idea of the “calling (in the sense of a life-task, a definite field in which to work)” as Max Weber put it (79). This set of traditional values is reinforced by a common language (the Yorkshire dialect), and a shared history, all of which provide the common ground for inclusive solidarity among members of this group, yet also serves to exclude outsiders such as Pratt, the travelling salesman, described as a “new-comer” of “post-war vintage, with sleeked hair, pretentious accent, noisy motor-cycle, and the expectation of impressing his companions” (Holtby, _South_ 93). Holtby explores the determinant factors of a community’s involvement in the “process of social and political usurpation involving a collective struggle to enhance access to scarce resources and thereby to improve the collectivity’s position within the system of honour” (Turner 7). This process entails the reproduction of a typical lifestyle and cultural inheritance with the intention of organising communally for the defence and enhancement of social privileges: “beyond economic need, there is every variety of want, religious, cultural, domestic, the satisfaction of which becomes possible through the social instinct of man” (Laski, _State_ 8). It is no surprise, therefore, that Holtby chose to focus on the daily work of a district council. Each section of the novel addresses different aspects of local government, in charge precisely of apportioning resources according to entitlement: the “kinds of objects, religious, economic, cultural, political, in which [individuals organised into associations or groups] are interested” (Turner 9). Mitchison’s idea of solidarity was based around the creation of a closed organisation (a party) whose objectives were
specific to one interest group and goal-oriented, whereas Holtby’s community was meant to endure, the relationship between its members was based on subjective attitudes and it was reliant on its perception of itself as a more inclusive voluntary association.

Turner employs the term “status communities” to refer to those collectivities that, like the largely middle class community in South Riding, enjoy a similar lifestyle and for whom economic wealth is less important than prestige or honour in determining an individual’s position within that community. The novel focuses on a particular group -the members of the county council- to explore how they and others perceive their privileges, symbolic and moral power and wealth and claim for themselves social honour and prestige. Shared cultural references and aspirations “produce separate, solidaristic communities which are organized to protect or advance their enjoyment of cultural and social benefits and privileges”. There are two related aspects of status, one pertaining to lifestyle and the other to “politico-legal” entitlements. I will focus on the first because it is this aspect of social stratification that South Riding explores. In the novel the political and legal aspect of status is less complicated. It is clear that whatever personal motivations underlie the councillors political positions and decisions, this county council seeks to distribute its scarce resources as fairly as possible with a view to improve the well-being of the community as a whole, while simultaneously recognising individual differences (Miss Roper and Mr Mitchell receive public assistance according to their needs (279-290)), working upon the assumption that all citizens are entitled to welfare when needed and according to their capacities: equality of opportunity is their working principle, their objective to facilitate individual achievement. The important aspect is that the council relates to its citizens “middle-class to middle class” (South 289), they shape the lives, expectations and attitudes of those they help, with their consent.

For Holtby, it was the business of the state to secure the conditions necessary for “human intelligence and will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom” (South 48). Some of these conditions are mentioned in the Prefatory Letter:

But when I came to consider local government, I began to see how it was in essence the first-line defence thrown up by the community against our common enemies -poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment. The battle is not faultlessly conducted, nor are the motives of those who take part in it all righteous or disinterested. But the war is, I believe, worth fighting,
and this corporate action is at least based upon recognition of one fundamental truth about human nature – we are not only single individuals, each face to face with eternity and our separate spirits; we are members one of another. (South xi)

Health, education, housing, social insurance are only some of the provisions offered to the citizens of South Riding. The decisions taken by the local council change the social landscape by altering the physical map of the area, just as the shape of the novel is determined by the meetings of the local government: “each part is called by the title of a committee of the Council, e.g. Education; Mental Deficiency; Public Assistance. And each part treats of some aspect of administration as it affects human life -or several human lives” (Brittain, Letters 273). In South Riding the transition from an ailing agricultural economy to a consumer economy is planned and even encouraged by the county council. Snaith’s dream of the garden city is realised, creating in its wake “a quite new kind of communal sense”:

‘The garden city will bring to the South Riding a quite different type of ratepayer. These tenants in our Council houses belong to a new generation –the age of the easy purchase system, of wireless and electricity and Austin Sevens. They want good motor roads, because they dream one day of driving their own cars. They want libraries and schools and clinics and cheap secondary education. They attend lectures in Townswomen’s Guilds and Women’s Institutes about ‘The rates and how we spend them’. (419)

Holtby in general welcomed the expansion of the welfare state:

I am a countrywoman. I remember a village in which was no artificial light, no telephone, no health insurance system, no transport beyond the private dogcart or carriage of the well-to-do farmer, or the weekly carrier’s cart with its slow horse which took an hour and a half to drive to the nearest shops. I remember the alarms of sickness by night, the long painful hours of waiting for the doctor, the babies that died unnecessarily, the monotony of winter, the rigid class divisions. I remember my father, the gentlest of men, whose beloved memory is today a legend in the village where he lived, opposing the Saturday half-day-off for his farm labourers. I remember the village idiots, once a recognized feature of the countryside. And I think today of the raised wages, the improved housing, the health services, buses, women’s institutes, the regulated hours of work, the wireless, the young farmer’s clubs, the playing-fields, the extremely well-run homes for mentally defective children, the rural community councils… No, no, no. As a countrywoman I cannot protest against Jubilee celebrations. (“Notes” 648)
All these services are mentioned in the novel. Lydia’s dreams are fuelled by music from the wireless; Mr. Holly and Mrs. Brimsley decide to marry when they are jostled together on the bus; Sarah drives a car whereas Carne must hire one; Mrs. Beddows visits a mental hospital. “The modern citizen is enmeshed at every turn in the network of [the state’s] operations” (Laski, State 10), and nowhere is this shown more clearly than in South Riding: Holtby describes the “unseen pattern of the English landscape” (xi) by illustrating how local politics determine the daily existence of the average citizen. The social and cultural consequences of the decision-making process are best exemplified in the story of Lydia Holly. Legislation extends far into private life. With the possible exception of Astell, a “troubler of the peace” (242), the members of this community feel a “positive identification” (R. Williams, Long 85) with the society in which they live. Members like Sarah and the reformers on the Council are motivated by a “sincere desire to change this or that aspect of the general way of life [which] is perfectly compatible with adherence to its general values, and with the kind of insistence on the essential continuity and unity of the society to which reformers and critics usually adhere” (R. Williams, Long 89) (Astell is a socialist rebel, his relationship to society is “one of declared opposition and struggle” rather than compromise).

But the novel also expresses reservations about the emerging consumer economy: Pratt, Carne’s brother and his wife (“straight, brittle and inhuman as a glass wand” (South 276) are one unfortunate by-product of urban culture which has not yet become part of the South Riding but is becoming a threatening presence. The description of their house is an example of 1930s writers’ disdain for suburbia: cold, inhuman, unnatural, highly mechanised, ‘modern’, superficial, false, “a world with all the principles of laissez-faire run mad, a huge inflation of Tudor villas on arterial roads, wireless sets, tin cars, golf-clubs -the paradise of he bourgeoisie” (Spender, Forward 189):

The house stood back from the road in a smart prosperous geometrical garden. The lawns had been mown, the hedges clipped, the begonias planted in unhesitating rows. There was a cubist bird-path, a crazy-paved sunk garden, a rubble tennis-court, a grass court, a rose-garden. The house was all white and chromium, and rectangular, with windows cut out of the corners. (Holtby, South 275)
Only Snaith has a comparable “ideal home”, significantly built overlooking Kingsport and Kiplington; its symbolic presence and his real power are an indication of the ways in which the country will change, a danger that, according to Holtby, the media and better communications merely increase. Social mobility creates estrangement, as we observe in Snaith’s isolation and his sterility. His alienation from all that is creative is one possible consequence of modernisation which can be controlled only through collective resistance. Unlike the others, who experience life vicariously through the cinema or popular fiction, Snaith coldly experiments with “human nature” by lending money to Huggins simply to “see what [he] would make of it” (South 443). Snaith

was torn between two principles of desire. Sometimes he wished to frustrate and thwart men’s natures, so that they might all be as he was, impotent of passion. In that desire lay negation and lethargy and death.

But sometimes he wished them to fulfil their natures. He remembered very well his desire for Huggins. That five hundred pounds had been the price of life, of vitality, of fulfilment. Tempestuous, lustful, violent, whatever the preacher was by nature, that he should be. Poverty should not frustrate him. Fear should not hold him back [...].

Not entirely wasted [money] because even his bruised body and aching head reminded him that he had not, after all, that day been quite without the experience of passion. He had been literally swept off his feet be an orgasm of fury. He had been, as they say, shaken well out of himself. And there was an odd masochistic pleasure to be found in this contact with energy, even though the energy itself were hostile – a sort of vicarious satisfaction, a novel response to unfamiliar stimuli. (445)

The undesirable aspect of modernisation was that the individual became a consumer, illusions and aspirations were no longer spontaneous but artificial and unnatural, mediated by the media (or, in Snaith’s case, by a person that he can buy). This generated anxiety: “What’s never seen is never missed” (178), Lydia says. Prosperity does not necessarily produce happiness. On the contrary, the disparity between desires and their satisfaction may create unhappiness.

As Harold Laski pointed out in 1935, since 1919 legislation tended to reduce the contrast between rich and poor, and one notable result of the general improvement in living conditions was that the expectations of the citizens increased: “the ability of the state to win the loyalty of its citizens depends upon its power continuously to soften contrast. Attainment in one sphere is invariably followed by demand in another” (State
59). These expectations were the inevitable consequence of democratisation, but they were also gained by consensus; citizens felt that they were entitled to these goods. Snaithe’s house, particularly his bathroom, Sarah’s rented cottage “on the Central Promenade, between the plebeian North and the superior South sides” (Holtby, *South* 63), the Hollys new home in Leame Ferry Garden City, the Huggins’ drawing room, Tom Sawdon’s image of himself as the publican of a pub “as famous as the Catterick Bridge Hotel, or the Bell, Hendon” (90) are evidence of the widespread demand for a middle class life-style.

*South Riding* carefully explores the nuances of social stratification based on status rather than class. Difference is marked by a wide range of highly symbolic details such as gestures, speech, dress, reading habits, aspirations, home-decorations, mode of transportation. These are obviously determined by economic resources, but, more crucially, are shaped by cultural factors such as taste, upbringing and education. Artefacts and appearances allow members of the community to place themselves and each other in social space, they are a source of rivalry and a celebration of “life and all its richness” (*South* 47), because they are means for individual self-expression. We are aware of the disillusionment, anxieties, fears and unhappiness of the characters, often a result of the disparity between their social hopes and the economic reality of the slump. All seek to overcome their private woes in ways that are not condemned by the narrator as self-interested and petty, but accepted instead as necessary for self-respect. This tolerance of diversity is exemplified through Sarah’s growing acceptance of her community. At first Sarah Burton, the protagonist, prepares to wage a war against the frivolity, vulgarity and small-mindedness of Kiplington:

On the left and right of the thoroughfare ran mean monotonous streets of two-storied houses, bay-windowed and unvarying -not slums, but dreary respectable horrors, seething with life which was neither dreary nor respectable. Fat women lugged babies smothered in woollies; toddlers still sucking dummies tottered on bowed legs along littered pavements; pretty little painted sluts minced on high tilted heels off to the pictures of dogs or dirt-track race-course. (*South* 47)

Her disdain of suburbia, however, is later tempered by her realisation that the members of her community all heroically take solace where they can: the “companions of her pilgrimage, faced life without the consolations of triumph, the stimulus of success. Their sturdy endurance in obscurity made her ashamed” (491). Thus Carne marries above his station, falls into debt and loses his property because of his wife, but in
exchange, as Snaith grudgingly acknowledges, he “had lived” (424) intensely through the marriage that was his downfall. On the opposite side of the social spectrum, Nancy Mitchell, who “married on hope and found small substance for it” (30), becomes as poor as the Hollies yet struggles desperately to maintain the “edifice of respectability” (227) she builds around herself to distance herself from the “lower classes” who are “dirty, careless, frivolous” (230).

All the characters overcome self-doubt by engaging, like Sarah, (whose mother was a Methodist (160)), in “impersonal action” and the “fulfilment of a large impersonal hope” (257), a moral commitment and “consistent method of conduct” (Weber 117) in keeping with a Protestant background: worldly activity “alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace” (Weber 112), as Weber explains. Thus Snaith, who upholds the “proud intellectual traditions of Nonconformity” (South 57), is an “evil-minded individualist” (421); “in himself [he] might be nothing, unloved, unfulfilled, unhappy; but he would identify himself with the happy and triumphant development of his county” (439). However arrogant he may be, there is a positive aspect to his belief that “L’etat, ce’est moi” (439). Huggins, though self-indulgent and self-interested enough to be fraudulent, is a popular lay preacher and a committed councillor: he is “doing God’s work” (192). Mrs Beddows discovers that her husband is a “man of straw” (130), so “when her own affairs became intolerable, she could stifle all thoughts of them by public business” (238). Even Mrs. Brimsley marries Mr Holly and becomes a mother to his orphaned children because she “wanted to be needed. She wanted to feel her hands full of necessary work and her services appreciated. She wanted to scold her family and sacrifice herself as she had scolded and sacrificed at Cold Harbour Colony. Anything less meant an end to active living; and she was not ready to make an end” (332). Each has a “calling”, a self-appointed task understood as the “fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume” (Weber 80). The feeling of self-worth and the respect of others are crucial tools in the constant battle against “shame, illness, bereavement, grief and fear” (South 491). Only Huggins, who “mistake[s] the private interest of a few for the well-being of the whole community” (Laski, State12) is punished in the novel. The other characters balance their private needs with the good of their community.

Despite the nuances of status within this overwhelmingly middle class community, there are clearly two groups of people: Robert Carne, his daughter Midge
and the Sedgmires on the one hand; on the other, Snaith, the Mitchells, the Hubbards, the Beddows, and Sarah Burton, who is separated from the majority of her peers because of her education, yet very different from the aristocratic Carne, her “antagonist” (South 257): “I dislike, I oppose everything he stands for, she told herself -feudalism, patronage, chivalry, exploitation…. We are natural and inevitable enemies” (175). Carne perceives society as a hierarchical, static order in which relationships are modelled upon the bond between the landlord and his labourers (like that between Robert Carne of Maythorpe and Hicks), which is a deferential lord-vassal relationship: power and social status are determined by heredity rather than merit. Carne perceives this order as follows:

He worshipped the Creator of earth and heaven, the Lord of Harvest, the Ancient of Days and Seasons, who had in his beneficent providence ordained that Yorkshire should be the greatest county in England, which was the grandest country in the world, the motherland of the widest empire, the undoubted moral leader of civilisation, the mistress of the globe. He worshipped the God of order who had created farmers lords of their labourers, the county and the gentry lords over the farmers, and the King lord above all his subjects under God. He worshipped the contrast of power and humility implied in his religion, and on Sunday evenings, in the pew which was his property, sang that God had put down the mighty from their seat, and had exalted the humble and meek, with no effect upon his social principles. (Holtby, South 404)

For the middle class the good society is more fluid, the individual is an end in himself: “Life was what each man made of it” (South 161). This social order allows and encourages mobility; social status is “achieved” rather than “ascribed”, to use Bryan Turner’s terms (4).9

Despite Sarah’s animosity towards Carne, the novel, like We Have Been Warned, also plots the awakening of a heroine mediated through her relationship to another, in this case Carne. Unlike Dione’s quest, which requires a radical transformation of the self, Sarah’s is a modification of the blind individualism that has guided her life and undoubtedly served her well. Her motto at the beginning of the novel is: “The world is what we make it, she would preach; take what you want. Take it and pay for it. The

9 Turner defines status as “a position within the social structure by which an individual, according to various ascribed and achieved criteria, is evaluated by reference to prestige or honour […] This evaluation will be both personal and objective, in that one’s self-evaluation is closely related to the external evaluation that one receives from significant others according to one’s location in a social hierarchy.” (5)
earth belonged to those who were prepared to pay most for their dominion” (161). Her experiences as headmistress and the realisation that her efforts as an educator will be fruitful only when other aspects of her students’ lives are also seen to, give her the opportunity to acknowledge by the end of the novel that “We all pay; she thought; we all take; we are members one of another. We cannot escape this partnership. This is what it means to belong to a community; this is what it means, to be a people” (491).

So Sarah acknowledges the limitations of her arrogant Faustian “spiritual bargain” (491) while Carne dies accidentally, reconciled to his death. He has surrendered his responsibilities “as eldest son, farmer, squire, husband, landlord, father”, but is incapable of beginning a new life:

This story could not have a happy ending. It did not even have a happy beginning. I deserved this. Whether he lived or died the results were equal. He belonged to a past age; his world was in ruins. There was not hope for him alive or dead. (355)

Sarah accepts that his death is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of the new. Even his crumbling house is demolished to make way, ironically, for a mental hospital. The movement from an established social order, in which individuals are “servants” or “subjects” who have no choice other than to obey and accept a way of life and their allocated place in it, to the modern democratic one, in which the individual is a member of society and feels that he belongs to it in essential ways and may, even in a limited way, influence its purposes, is presented as inevitable, not as a radical break (R. Williams, *Long* 85-88).

However, the importance of tradition and a sense of place as the basis of community feeling is a crucial aspect of Sarah’s transformation. She becomes a member of her community by accepting its positive values, the “things of the spirit” (475) to which Carne adhered: kindness, courage, honesty, gentleness, endurance, loyalty, virtues associated with the natives of Yorkshire and embodied in him. These are the qualities for which others admire him, Mrs. Beddows and Snaith, as well as Carne’s dependants, and of which Sarah becomes aware when “bound together by a shared intention, throwing the whole of their united strength into the business of saving life” (164), they help each other during the difficult birth of a calf. When Sarah assimilates the tradition Carne embodies, she restores the communal bonds that had weakened when she left in pursuit of her goals. Carne’s death is Sarah’s homecoming:
Something had happened. Quite simply she knew that she was not entirely alone, not arrayed against him; for he was within her. He had entered into her as part of the composition of her nature, so that they no longer stood in hostile camps. She could no longer hate herself, for that would be hating him too. He would not hate her for what she was doing, even if she stayed and fought against all that he had stood for. (476).

Sarah’s unrequited feelings for Carne may be ostensibly romantic (this is the assumption of critics such as Sally Brown, Susan Leonardi, Jean Kennard), but upon closer examination the failed romance plot is a device used to explore Sarah’s moral education in selflessness, sacrifice and resignation, “she was reconciled to failure, glad of sorrow. She was one with the people round her” (491). This is a curious reversal of the 1930s device of the Ideal Friend employed by Mitchison, because through love of a member of the landed gentry Sarah experiences “intense creative pangs of birth, not death. Her rational, decisive, rather crude personality seemed to enlarge itself, with desperate travail of the imagination, until it could comprehend also his slow rectitude, his courage in resignation, his simplicity of belief” (476). Although at first Carne seems to be the object of Sarah’s quest, his position in her imagination changes after his death. Her infatuation is an indulgence which erodes her sense of self, paradoxically, by turning her attention away from “impersonal action” towards her self: “Because she loved and desired to be loved, she exposed herself to vanity. She became vulnerable, afraid, disarmed before a hostile world” (257). Her self-abasement is such that she even wishes to become Muriel (rather like the narrator in Du Maurier’s Rebecca), momentarily risking the autonomy she has gained “at such considerable public cost and private effort”. She had relied on the basic liberal principle that her person is her own property, to be disposed of as she wishes: “Her person and her pride remained, she considered, under her own suzerainty” (49). Through Carne Sarah realises that her triumphs can only be attained at the cost of his life, so it is he who indirectly pays for her triumphs. Her own position in society, the status she has as a successful emancipated single woman, her pride in self-fulfilment and self-determination are precious goods, but Sarah learns about failure, her own limitations and vulnerabilities: Carne’s death allows her to understand the sense of loss experienced by others.

The characters in South Riding bond on the strength of their personal loss and disillusionment; even Lydia loses her capacity to hope, “some spring of confidence,
some ease of temper, had been stolen for ever by premature adversity from that big, heavy, sullen, gifted girl who had encountered too early the irony and bitterness of fate. Still, she was saved from complete disappointment” (South 26). Mrs. Beddows, Snaith, Lydia, Huggins, Sarah, Tom and Lily Sawdon, Hicks, Midge, Carne are all in their different ways disillusioned, a spiritual condition which was commonly believed characteristic of the post-war era, but in this case seems more akin to resignation: each must “follow his own path alone to meet a destiny which has been decreed for him from eternity” (Weber 104). Or, as Mrs Beddows puts it, there is a “higher Providence” (South p.188): “You’ve just got to get along as best you can with all your shames and sorrows and humiliations” (South 472). Fatigue, fear, the sense of failure and exhaustion beset all the characters in this text, and Holtby suggests that their only escape is through “intoxication and forgetfulness” (“Psychology” 56):

It was a night out. The Empire sold the noises of happy uproar with its tickets. True, no single face in all the company there was lit by real gaiety. True, that behind the toasts, the jokes and cat-calls, thoughts of death, sickness, unemployment and loss tugged, nagging, at their minds. The laughter was not loud enough, the jokes were inadequately brutal, the good fellowship too ephemeral, to drown that consciousness. Yet on the whole, these Yorkshire men and women were having a good time. They had paid for it and bought it; they enjoyed it. (432)

Mrs. Brimsley identifies with the “languishing lady on the screen” (331), just as Lily Sawdon identifies with Mata Hari, like her “condemned to death […] Her pride rose and enfolded her. It wrapped her away from contact with the other watchers of the screen, the shoppers in the street” (215); Mrs. Beddows’ mind is “drugged happily by the absorbing incongruities of a Wild West romance” (324) and she certainly thinks of Carne as a hero of romance. The narrator expresses the widespread opinion held by intellectuals in the 1930s that the media only stupefy the audience: Mrs. Brimsley leaves the cinema “more discontented than she had entered it” (332). The cinema, wireless, romance fiction and popular music create the emotional atmosphere, the sense of security, which is lacking in everyday life. They are also escapist occupations, providing temporary distraction from and simple solutions to problems which cannot be solved except by economic recovery. However, inspired by the cinema, the world of the imagination -in which they cast themselves in desirable, heroic roles- is intrinsic to their sense of self, providing a necessary space which allows them to function in the real
world of demanding family life. Entertainment compensates for their disappointment in others and disillusionment with their lot. Even Sarah falls prey to the need for a role model, though her “well-educated mind” conjures up with Jane Eyre when she meets Carne.

At the heart of the unhappy relationships between the characters is status. Carne loses his property “not because he could not farm it, but because he had lived for years beyond his income” (South 380), but he maintains his status throughout the novel despite his bankruptcy; Sarah crosses class boundaries when she chooses to spend the night with Carne (for him she is merely a distraction (411)) but endangers her reputation in the process. Despite the “skeleton in the alderman’s closet” (190) Mrs. Beddows “enjoyed her popularity, however, and appreciated its power” (6). The deaths in the Holly family are the result of poverty, and the family is saved not because, as Sally Brown suggests, “sexual issues” are unimportant in the relationship between Mrs. Brimsley and Mr. Holly (165), but because they leave the Shacks for the new garden village, a move facilitated by Mrs. Brimsley’s five hundred pounds and Barnabas Holly’s paid employment as a builder (a discrete reference to the building boom of the 1930s). Sally Mitchell leaves her husband, refusing to suffer the indignities of public funding, the “bottomless pit of humiliation” (288); Huggins loses everything, except his self-respect:

He knew that he was a ruined man. He would retire from the Council. He had thrown away his savings. His reputation was at any man’s mercy.

But he breathed great draughts of air into his lungs. Triumph exalted him. He had told Snaith what he thought of him. He was triumphantly free. He had spoken his heart before God in admonition. (444)

According to Vera Brittain, Holtby considered naming the novel “Councillor Carne of Maythorpe or The Teacher and the Alderman” (Friendship 13). Her final choice obviously determines how we read the novel: it is the story of a region. Nevertheless, Carne remains the most important character in the novel, playing a crucial symbolic role in the lives of Snaith, Astell, Mrs. Beddows, Midge, Huggins, and Sarah, because they all fabricate their sense of self in relation to him. He is a man of few words, yet every character invests him with properties, both real and imaginary, depending on their self-perception. Holtby’s technique of multiple focalisation is crucial
in this respect, allowing access to the characters’ concern and anxiety about their self-
image. Their position in relation to their neighbours is determined not necessarily by
money but by the roles they play in the community and their personal prestige.
Significantly, the characters all hold each other in high esteem, yet their self-esteem is
not built exclusively upon the respect of their peers, but on how they perceive
themselves in relation to their image of Carne. Snaith, Astell, Sarah, Mrs. Beddows, and
Huggins always fall short of what he represents to them.

In economic terms, the gap between these characters and Carne has narrowed,
but in terms of status he remains their superior: “Carne had never thought of himself as
belonging to any class. He was Carne of Maythorpe” (289). This is an effect of self-
perception, but others situate him thus as well. It would not have occurred to Sarah, the
daughter of a blacksmith and a midwife, to treat him as an equal if she had not returned
to Kiplington a schoolmistress. Nevertheless, Carne’s presence makes her self-
conscious, uncertain of her position: “A schoolmistress of forty, ugly, clumsy, vulgar,
not a lady, with big reddish hands and a head too large for her small body –a
blacksmith’s daughter” (396). Status is what she is afraid to lose as a result of her
indiscretion in the hotel: “This is the end; she repeated his words. She meant the end of
her security as a respectable and respected professional woman” (351). Mrs. Beddows
sympathises with Carne’s “reverence for the aristocracy” (38) and feels that she gains
prestige in his company: “She loved him so much that to scold him was a sensuous
pleasure to her. When a small child she had regarded Maythorpe Hall as a superb and
inaccessible place. To have Robert, old Mr. Carne’s eldest son, there at her mercy,
sitting in her arm-chair […] gave her satisfaction too profound for words. He was so
handsome, so big, so masculine” (41). Mrs. Beddows continues to perceive her
relationship to him as that between servant and master: “she realised that her long years
of patient loyalty and service had at least brought this difficult and strange relationship
through to triumphant confidence and love” (369). Snaith defeats Carne politically and
economically, yet Carne triumphs in Snaith’s imagination:

Carne had lived; he had been rooted deep in the soil; he had
loved and hated and begotten and feared and dared […]. He never held
himself back as Snaith had done. His violent, immense, instinctive
growth had brought him sorrow, but he had known colour, increase and
passion. He had lived.
And I? Thought Snaith. Between Carne who lived by instinct and Astell who lived by an idea, he felt that he was nothing—a stream of water, cold, metallic, barren, without colour or form, moving along its self-chosen channel till the sand sucked it up and it disappeared. Unfecund, flavourless, formless—a direction—a flow—a nothing. (424)

As Orwell put it, the post-war period saw the appearance of “something that had never existed in England before: people of indeterminate social class” (Lion 68). This class was becoming increasingly powerful, both economically as consumers and culturally. Sarah left Yorkshire the daughter of a blacksmith and a midwife and returns as the schoolmistress of the local school; Snaith begins his life as the “undersized raw out-of-elbows boy once running errands in a back-street insurance office” (59); Huggins is born in a slum; Astell a poor schoolmaster. Yet they all hold more political power than Carne.

According to Phyllis Bentley, the “regional novel is essentially democratic. It expresses the belief that the ordinary man and the ordinary woman are interesting and worth depicting” (Bentley 45). Holtby successfully included “every possible kind of family” (Brittain, Letters, 273) in her social tableau, describing their personal idiosyncrasies in great detail, yet also highlighting that it is about “ordinary people [working together] against the troubles that afflict us all” (South 474). However, she carefully notes that the process of homogenisation is uneven, as are the ways in which a community appropriates the hegemonic culture of the media by accommodating it within its own particular cultural background. She does this by focusing on a particular region, and celebrating the “diversity in England” (Bentley 7) of “character, speech, custom and scene” (Bentley 8) which need not be annihilated by the pressures of capitalism. Thus despite the influence of Snaith and everything he represents, the members of the community are loyal to each other because their loyalty is rewarded with benefits.

Keith Williams has suggested that South Riding is a “microcosm of Britain” (British 169) and in a sense it is: Holtby is describing an economic and cultural phenomenon which affected many areas of the country. But Phyllis Bentley (and Andy Croft more recently10) place the novel within the tradition of regional fiction which includes Charlotte Bronte’s Shirley, Mrs. Gaskell’s Mary Barton, the work of Trollope,

George Eliot, Hardy, Arnold Bennett, J.B.Priestley, Mary Webb, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Lettie Cooper, R.H. Mottram, Doreen Wallace among others. This literature focuses on a particular area so that the “reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiates it from others in the common motherland” (Bentley 7). Holtby self-consciously called herself a “countrywoman”, probably because regional differences became particularly significant at the time and were in danger of disappearing. Her task as a writer therefore was to some extent one of conservation: “the frequent travel made possible by improved communications showed Yorkshiremen and Somersetmen other counties, so that they realised how different was their own” (Bentley 12). According to Bentley, the surge of regional literature in the 1930s was a result of the peculiarly English mode of industrialisation: “a trade in England is often coterminous with a region”, so any alteration in the predominating “system of maintenance” in an area necessarily disturbed all aspects of life. Though participating in the national identity, Bentley argues, regions define themselves in contrast to neighbouring areas on the basis of three factors: the racial composition of the population, the peculiarities of the environment (its geographical characteristics) and a more abstract historical requirement, what she calls “‘basic human communication time’”, the pace with which change travels from one region to another. Bentley’s example of the latter is the USA, where cities a thousand miles from New York seem closer to each other than York is to London because they were linked at first by train lines and later by “telegraph, cinema, radio and so on, very soon after their foundation they became only a few seconds’ mental distance from the commercial capital of the country” (Bentley 8).

The economy of South Riding is determined by its geographical characteristics, as are the demographic patterns. Despite its diminishing isolation from the rest of the country, there is still the illusion that this is a community in which everyone knows each other personally or know of each other. Mrs. Beddows relates to others like this, with their approval: “She knew now –through Mr. Tadman, who had told Mrs. Tadman who told Cissy who told Mrs. Parsons who told Sarah” (106). Although communications threaten the community’s identity and weaken the bonds that hold it together, they also enrich its culture: Elsie “talked B.B.C. English to her employer, Cinema American to her companions, and Yorkshire dialect to old milkmen like Eli Dickson” (17). Holtby employs these devices to create the community of South Riding. Although she did not
set much store by heredity as a source of political and economic power (she is blatantly critical of the aristocracy; Muriel Carne is clearly not Carne’s heir), the characters do in fact have a certain organic connection to their environment: Sarah recognises the sound of the calving cow because of her “inherited instinct” (163), Lydia Holly has her father’s irrepressible gusto for life, and Carne embodies an organic relation between man and nature. His relation to the land is religious, respectful, natural, his life is ruled by cycles, not by the meetings of the County Council: “At least, thought Carne, one can be certain of some things. Birth comes at its appointed time. These men are honest. Summer and winter, seed time and harvest, ploughing and lambing –these at least do not change” (148). In contrast, the capitalist Snaith who accelerates the transformation of this predominantly rural area is estranged from his nature:

He felt himself an outcast among all this building of nests, this mating of birds and animals […]. He was aware that sometimes, in his plans for the happiness of the South Riding, he was moved by a secret desire to press down, to raze, to subjugate the spring. He would bind it with cement and concrete, crush it with engines, scoop out great wounds from the fecund earth, and set there race-tracks and roads and villas. He would drive away the rustling, purring, mating creatures that lurked in the banks and hedges. All this chaos of natural life should respond to his dominating will. (415)

It is this connection which is deteriorating in the process of modernisation, so the members of the community must create other sources of solidarity. According to Marion Shaw, “Holby’s sustaining philosophy was a loss of the individual in the collective self” (“Alien” 43). But I believe that, on the contrary, the community is based on the shared interests of individuals as consumers. Sarah learns to establish a balance between the claims of individuality and sociability, she encourages her pupils to ‘adjust the balance’ by becoming vigilant, responsible citizens:

‘Question everything -even what I am saying now. Especially, perhaps, what I say. Question every one in authority, and see that you get sensible answers to your questions. Then, if the answers are sensible, obey the orders without protest. Question your government’s policy […]. This is a great country, and we are proud of it, and it means much that is most lovable. But questioning does not mean the end of loving, and loving does not mean the abnegation of intelligence’. (488)
Sarah’s moral education and loyalty to her community are not the reflection of a general trend but are, on the contrary, exceptional and presented as a counterbalance to the “privatisation of national life” (Light 9) which is undermining the traditional social life of the community. Keith Williams has suggested that the novel is “modestly collectivist” (British 169), but in my view the novel seems to suggest that traditional communal ties are breaking down under the combined pressures of the economic slump and the apparently inevitable and irreversible process of modernisation which the new road will accelerate. As a result of these processes, the community has become a collection of individual citizens who agree to co-operate for the satisfaction of “mutual wants” which are primarily, though not exclusively, “economic in character” (Laski, State 8), a point underscored by Holtby’s decision to focus on how local government shapes society. In her role as educator of the “citizens of the future” Sarah declares war on the fear of change:

‘There are certain things I hate -muddle, poverty, war and so on- the things most intelligent people hate nowadays, whatever their parties. And I hate indifferentism, and lethargy, and the sort of selfishness that shuts itself up into its own shell of personal preoccupations’. (104)

Yet this “indifferentism” is a consequence of the process of modernisation which she herself is pledged to forward. “No change in our social or economic habits is made without some loss” (“Counting the Cost” 57), and the image of society emerging from South Riding is one in which the rural community is in danger of becoming increasingly atomised. Face-to-face relationships are bound to disappear.

Sarah’s call to dissent is a warning that the individual should exercise her obligations as an active citizen according to the dictates of his or her conscience: commitment to any cause requires continuous effort because the world is changing continuously. But it is also a call to the exercise of their rights. Precisely because the modern citizen is “enmeshed at every turn in the network” of the state’s operation, complacency and indifference, ‘inactivity’ to use Holtby’s word, are at odds with liberty and the democratic process: “Those who are silent in the presence of injustice are in fact part-authors of it” (Laski, Liberty 70). Thus, Holtby welcomed active intervention of the state when it satisfied political, civil and social rights, yet also believed that these rights entailed obligations, the active participation of its citizens. If the right of education, Sarah’s field of action, is a universal right, it is intended as a tool for the cultivation of a
citizenry capable of expressing and demanding the satisfaction of their needs: if “a man’s citizenship is the contribution of his instructed judgement to the public good, and that right action for him is action upon the basis of that judgement, clearly the factor of instruction is of decisive importance” (Laski, Liberty 130).

IV

Storm Jameson’s In the Second Year: Ressentiment and the Origin of Fascism.

The late 1930s witnessed a growing interest in political ideology and the ways in which language shapes political acts, beliefs and practices. This aspect of political life, previously the domain of politicians, revolutionaries or political theorists, became a subject of interest to writers as well, when they realised that no one could escape the actions of their government, a lesson already learned from the experience of WW1, but more immediately apparent in the context of the Spanish Civil War and the increasing economic instability in Europe. The series of events at home prompting this preoccupation were the General Strike of 1926, the Labour governments of 1924 and 1929, economic depression and, above all, the 1931 crisis that prompted Labourites to ask whether their party was equipped to establish a new order via a “peaceful revolution” (Tawney, “Choice” 62). It became apparent after 1931 that the Labour Party lacked a coherent belief-system with which to guide its practical politics. In 1934 R.H. Tawney explained this weakness in response to the “debacle”:

The gravest weakness of British Labour is one which it shares with the greater part of the world, including British capitalists. It is its lack of creed. The Labour Party is hesitant in action, because divided in mind. It does not achieve what it could, because it does not know what it wants. It frets out of office and fumbles in it, because it lacks the assurance either to wait or to strike. Being without clear conviction as to its own meaning and purpose, it is deprived of the dynamic which only convictions can supply. (“Choice” 55)

Jameson’s 1936 dystopian novel In the Second Year is prophetic, a warning of the far-reaching, almost unimaginable and irreversible consequences of bad government. Specifically, it is a direct response to the 1931 crisis: MacDonald’s minority government did not “fall with a crash, in a tornado from the blue. It crawled slowly to its doom, deflated by inches, partly by its opponents, partly by circumstances beyond its
control, but partly also by itself” ("Choice"). It is precisely because the collapse was gradual that Jameson believed it could have been averted, hence the novel as a warning to the incompetence of leadership.

Indeed there were many factors that contributed to the collapse of the Labour government in 1931 (elected in 1929 with 287 seats) which made way for a coalition under MacDonald’s leadership dependent on the Conservatives. The Labour party found itself unprepared to take on a role in opposition after its humiliating defeat in 1931, weakened by internal strife, lack of direction, a realignment of factions and the reshuffle of its prominent figures (Pimlott 18). Andrew Thorpe mentions the economic recession as the principal reason for the crisis, because it increased unemployment (countries that previously bought British goods were no longer in a position to do so because American money ceased to flow (A.J.P. Taylor 358)) and neither MacDonald nor Snowden had a plan to curb this other than to increase taxation and reduce public expenditure. The reduction of expenditure was passed but the minority was so large that MacDonald was forced to resign and form a coalition with Tory leaders, Liberals and a handful of faithful Labour supporters.

The result of Labour’s disarray, particularly for writers and ideologues like Jameson and Tawney, was disillusionment with the Party, in particular with its “play for safety” (“Choice” 53) in the short-term interest of remaining in office, at the expense of its principles: “The moral of 1931 seemed to be that Labour must have nothing to do with politicians who did not share a socialist determination to transform the system” (Pimlott 41). This determination was expressed in the creation of intellectual research groups such as G.D.H. Cole’s New Fabian Research Bureau and the Socialist League (consciously identifying with William Morris’ Socialist League). Their ideological position, according to Ben Pimlott, was that the 1931 crisis proved that “capitalists would employ almost any means to sabotage socialist legislation” and in order to avoid a similar crisis Labour should put forward an unequivocally socialist programme, because capitalism was “rapidly transforming itself into fascism, and the next general election might be the last” (Pimlott 53). The results of not taking decisive action are, in In the Second Year, the downfall of the Conservative government which cannot deal with the outbreaks of unrest that follow the unhappy end of a General Strike, making way for the rise of a fascist dictator on the strength of a private army, a “home defense corps” (Jameson, Second 21). Frank Hillier, the dictator, betrays his friend Sacker and
strikes a bargain with the capitalist Thomas Chamberlayne, banker, financier and newspaper owner who arranges an American loan (Second 12). The Labour Party in the novel is unprepared for the political vacuum created by the Strike that provided them with an opportunity to gain power, but membership of unions declined and leaders simply made “speeches urging the nation to close its ranks and so on and so forth. They used every other smooth formula of our times” (Second 21):

For ten years, after [the leaders of the Labour Party] lost office, during a crisis, they threatened socialism. They promised the earth. When they went in again in January, what happened? What could happen? A financial crisis, partly real, the fears of people innocent enough to believe that this time they meant it, partly induced by persons who the Government of the country does not control at any time. Did our leaders of revolution try to behave as socialists? They did not. Some of them were for staving off the crisis once more by cuts in wages. There’d been a plenty, they said. They had a duty to their class. Unfortunately they had no plan for driving their socialist cart and plough in an emergency. (Second 61)

The emergence of Hillier as a leader, whose power is initially relies on a National Volunteer Guard, is not all that distant from reality. Oswald Mosley resigned from the Labour Party because of its failure to take drastic interventionist action to deal with the problem of unemployment, having himself proposed several “creative” (A.J.P. Taylor 359) measures to deal it (he held a junior office with responsibility over employment), but as these were rejected he resigned and went on to found the New Party with a fighting force similar to Mussolini’s Blackshirts (comparable to Swann’s organised private army in Mirror in Darkness and to Richard Sacker’s Volunteers in In the Second Year), which he retained after disbanding the NP and later founding the British Union of Fascists (1932)11.

Andy Croft believes that the novel explores “what [Jameson] saw as the elements of latent fascism in British society” (Croft 231), elements already featured in Mirror in Darkness. “The collapse of doctrinaire Socialism” was in part to blame for the rise of Nazism in Germany (“Twilight” 191), according to Jameson, and although by no

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11 Jameson clearly intended to address issues that dominated political discussion at the time. Stephen Spender and Eliot are mentioned in the novel, and it is safe to equate R.B. Tower with R.H.Tawney. Jan Montefiore has identified Hillier with Hitler, the similarity between Sacker and Ernst Rohm has been noted by Gill Plain. Sacker’s volunteers are a composite of the National Volunteer Guard and the BUF blackshirts, Wincham and Winchell, the writer Sophie Butts is possibly Amabel Williams-Ellis to whom the novel is dedicated.
means an impartial observer, Andrew Hillier, the main narrator of In the Second Year, holds the Labour government responsible for his cousin Frank Hillier’s rise to power:

If they had not, both of them, made more mistakes and sent out more blundering orders than the leaders of a party, any earthly or heavenly party, can afford to do, they would not have been here […] I could not for the life of me see that men who could not survive in an emergency could in any circumstances master the country. (Second 63)

I would like to interpret Jameson’s In the Second Year in the context of these political discussions. Although the economic and social conditions which enabled the emergence of German Fascism were discernible in England at the time she wrote the novel she believed, in 1936, that political solutions were still feasible and certainly preferable to warfare, which had threatened the fragile peace in Europe since the end of WW1. But Jameson was cautious about political extremism as she became increasingly aware of the power of ideas to modify people’s sense of reality. What Irving Howe says of the “essential quality of totalitarianism” described in 1984 is equally applicable to Jameson’s perception of the dangers of Fascism:

The totalitarian state assumes that –given modern technology, complete political control, the means of terror and a rationalized contempt for moral tradition- anything is possible. Anything can be done with men, anything with their minds, with history, with words. Reality is no longer something to be acknowledged or experienced or even transformed; it is fabricated according to the need and will of the state, sometimes in anticipation of the future, sometimes as a retrospective improvement upon the past. (Howe 241)

Jameson was aware that ideas determined the ways in which humans actively lived their lives, interpreted their roles in society and perceived themselves as individuals “in a world in which nothing, not even the cycle of birth and death, is unchanging and unchangeable” (“Twilight” 199).

The Communism/Fascism, Capitalism/Socialism antitheses which had provided a conceptual scheme for political discussion at the beginning of the decade were redrawn by the introduction of what Ernest Barker called a “tertium quid”, a third option that exploded the dichotomies by offering new possibilities for change, specifically in his opinion an endangered liberal democracy alive in England: “The kaleidoscope has shifted: the antithesis with which we are now presented is an antithesis
between the free process of discussion and the dictated uniformity of the single-party state” (Barker, “Conflict” 12). By 1937, Russia was, like Germany, anti-democratic, thus leaving an ideological vacuum in the “great stadium of argument to-day” (“Conflict” 21) which Europe had become. In discussions that pitted Communism against Fascism both became “dummies”, he argued, because upon closer examination they were “similar, and even identical”: Communist and Fascist states had mixed economies, were isolationist and single-party states which “dispense with the process of discussion” (12). In contrast, democratic states privilege the method and process of government, i.e. the “process of community-action”, they have no “single set of connected ideas about the ends or aims of government. On the contrary, it is its essence to have a plurality of sets of ideas, represented by a plurality of parties, and to trust the play of discussion for an accommodation and conciliation of the competing sets of ideas in some generally accepted compromise, some majority-minority agreement, on which the general life can amicably proceed” (13). Barker concludes that the conflict between fascism and communism and between democratic and undemocratic states amounts to a “mental fight” between reason and “anti-reason”. He privileges the democratic, gentlemanly deliberation of political ideas, the “peaceable civil war of ideas” (14) in which individuals practise their good judgement and capacity to reason with objectivity over the single-party state which atrophies this capacity by drawing exclusively on the part of our psychological constitution which is irrational. Given the spread of education and the influence of the media, the population has grown “self-conscious” (6), but this self-consciousness is not the critical self-awareness of the ideal thinking, responsible and educated citizenry of democracy but a surrender of individual responsibility to group identity, and these collective identities are organised through identification with “proletariat, or race, or transcendent national organism” and bound by “group-emotion and collective magnetism”, fly in the face of “individual thought and mutual discussion” (15).

According to Jameson, totalitarian ideologies exploited the economic insecurity, fear and apathy of the people; ideology took hold of the imagination like a religion, irrespective of class, because people would always need “something to believe in”, a creed with which to make sense of their lives in a world in which nothing could be taken for granted. The masses are described as irrational and emotional, they “will cling to anything which offers a foothold” (“Defence” 177). Communists and Fascists did not
hesitate to employ violence as a means to achieve their ends, nor did they hesitate to exploit the fears of their vulnerable compatriots, and this was clearly not a viable solution to social instability; as one character in the novel states, “‘Democrats can’t appeal to violence’” (Second 62). Jameson was undoubtedly a democrat:

People wanted to believe. More than anything, they wanted belief. Just that –belief. Not reasons or facts. The narcotic of belief. Believe, and ye shall be saved. They had felt insecure for years and [Hillier] promised them security; he promised the workless to find work for them, and he promised the hopeless a new hope. He promised all of them what they wanted, and in their revulsion from despair and the cynicism of despair they never asked themselves if he were more able than others to give it to them. They believed. (Second 269)

Jameson was not straightforwardly anti-fascist: she was a socialist and an active, critical member of the Labour Party, which explains her endorsement of the Socialist League, the “Party’s left wing conscience” (Pimlott 42). Therefore she applied to national and international events an “economic interpretation” (“Defence” 153). In the early 1930s, when she believed that another war was imminent but could be prevented by negotiation, she assumed that capitalism and Fascism were two sides of the same political coin: “A world in which only in order to exist, each nation must outsell all the others, is a world perpetually on the step of quarrelling” (“Twilight” 189). Even that “partial and unsteady freedom we have” (“Defence” 162), the deeply flawed democracy in Britain, built as it was on inequality and exploitation, emerged as the best form of government available because it claimed to guarantee the two ideas she held dear: the “inalienable right” (“Defence” 164) to freedom of thought and expression and the related issue of government by consensus. This can inferred from her insights into the workings of Fascism:

If, as in Germany, poverty and humiliation are widespread, men who are conscious of their misery look round them for support. Perhaps they find it in an idea. But an idea sings no songs and carries no banners. To most, the thought of a leader is more consoling—a leader who gives them banners, who does not ask them to think or to understand what is happening in the world, but warms them with his appeal to their emotions and animal instincts. Thus the difficult step towards a more rational form of society is avoided—at the cost of plunging farther into unreason. The leaderless mob does not, since in the conditions of a disorderly and irrational society it cannot, evolve into a community of self-respecting and free-thinking citizens. It takes
a step backward, to the mediaeval creed of blind obedience to an
overlord. (“Twilight” 196)

Jameson’s opinion of the masses was ambivalent: on the one hand, they were
incapable of good judgement because ignorant and untrained to use it; on the other, only
they could be the agents of radical social change. In the novel, the description of the
crowd’s reaction to Hillier’s speech, clearly seen from Andy’s embittered mood, is an
example of the first position; Hillier emerges as “the arbiter of their consciences”
(“Defence”, p.165):

It was a superb piece of declamation […] There was not one solid
piece of reasoning in the whole speech, not one fact to support all he
said of revival and prosperity. I am sure the crowds did not observe it.
To hear them roar and split their throats at him made me wonder why
anyone has ever laboured to improve men (Second 149-51).

Jameson’s greatest fear was that reality would be distorted by ideology and that most
people would unwittingly fail to notice any discrepancy between the credible reality as
fabricated by Hillier and a recognisable shared reality. Phyllis Lassner has argued that
Jameson challenged “the specious simplicities of dualistic thinking and the separation of
language from act” (Lassner 89), but her concern went much deeper: she knew that
ideas could transform the very notion of what it meant to be a human being. Like
Barker, she feared extremist propaganda because it affected the uneducated masses who
were particularly vulnerable to the manipulation of the persuasive rhetoric of
opportunistic, proselytising political leaders who offered facile solutions to complex
problems: “The appeal is to the mass, and to the lowest emotions of the mass, because
these are the easiest to reach. Each catchword is repeated a million times: revenge:
tribute; Germany awake: kill the Jew: hereditary enemy. No half tones are possible”
(“Defence” 168). But “half tones” were Jameson’s domain. She believed that writers

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12 According to Asa Briggs, the meaning conveyed in the first half of the nineteenth century by use of the
word ‘masses’ could be either “of fear and mystery or of power”. See his essay “The Language of ‘Mass’
Numbers, Places, People. Sussex: Harvester, 1985: 34-54. In the Second Year Andy openly expresses
his disdain and it is implied in Hillier’s condescension, but throughout her writing –in which she also
employed “mob” and “rabble”-, Jameson did not generally identify it with a specific class but rather with
a state of mind. This is not the only nineteenth-century political concept employed by Jameson without
reefining it. Although familiar with Marxist terminology, she generally employed terms like “The
Machine Age” which is reminiscent of Thomas Carlyle’s “The Mechanical Age”. This may simply betray
her distaste for communist propaganda of the kind written by John Strachey or Stephen Spender in
Forward from Liberalism: “None of us wishes to become pamphleteers and tub-thumpers in a cause”
(Jameson, “Defence” 173)
and leaders used words casually, emptying them of meaning or merely trivialising them, thus distracting from harsh realities by creating credible illusions. Leaders like Hillier, speaking from a position of power, divorced signifier from reality because they could “master by naming” (“Between” 129): “demonstration”, “financial readjustment”, “second revolution”, “clean-up”, the “irreconciliables”, “training camps”, “bloodless revolution” are some of the euphemisms used in the novel. Hillier “divorces words from realities, so that it is possible to forget that nations are made up of living human beings, with brains and hearts. Many people, who have been educated out of their senses, talk about war in the same way” (Second 43).

So Jameson believed that there was “a crucial need to maintain a distinction between unavoidable discursive transfigurations of events by characteristics of mediation which are inherently ideological, on the one hand, and systematic distortion for politically directed ends, in the other” (K. Williams, British 3). However false this distinction may be, she was aware that there was no privileged position from which reality could be viewed undistorted, but consensual positions are more objective. This distinction in the novel is embodied in the characters of Hillier and Tower; the former crudely substitutes truth with lies, whereas Tower is devoted to the pursuit of truth, whatever the consequences. It is significant that Hillier and his supporters all suffer from impaired vision. Hillier’s eyes “often seemed to have died, to be only lumps of pale jelly” (Second 245), Sacker’s drunkenness, Hebden’s drugged state, the ‘traitors’ who live “wonderfully protected from reality, spotless from the world” (284), and Ekhart “one of those young men, of no special intellect, to whom an idea becomes a religion. They serve it blindly, without thought. Hillier was Ekhart’s God. Everything he said Ekhart accepted. He was truly out of himself” (149). The strong moral fibre of the prisoners in Winchell, Lewis, Myers and Tower stands out in contrast to the corruption of Megan, Smith, Denham, Dalton: “The spectacle of a man who, having first lost his honesty, has lost his soul with it, is an unpleasant one” (120). R.B. Tower (significantly compared to Socrates because he is “incorruptible” (162)) is the very embodiment of freedom; and as Harold Laski stated, “the secret of liberty is always, in the end, the courage to resist” (Liberty 72). Andrew Hillier is unable to accept the incongruity between reality and illusion which literally stifles him, yet he bestows upon Tower the moral authority of the novel. His critical assessment of the situation is accepted as truth by the narrator.
Sylvia Vance has praised the novel because Jameson portrays the “psychic condition necessary to produce the Fascist mind-set. It is a condition possible in every man, as she demonstrates by giving us the childhoods of the two main characters, Richard Sacker and Frank Hillier” (Vance 43). For Jameson, however, all humans were emotionally susceptible to the seductions of Fascist rhetoric because of the damage done to them by a hostile environment. Facile explanations and solutions to complex social and economic phenomena were embraced by men like Hillier and Sacker because they manipulated the *ressentiment* caused inevitably by the social inequalities intrinsic to unprincipled capitalism: “Politically, all men are equal. In all other ways inequality is the established religion” (“Twilight” 196). Hillier sincerely wants to alleviate the poverty in England but believes that the only way to achieve this is by force. The democratic “compromise between force and goodwill” (Second 260) has been replaced with force alone. He is aware that the “heart of the State is an economic heart” (266) and that he must give his people a faith.

The psychological impact of capitalism affects both rich and poor. Many of the characters are either physically or emotionally scarred: Lotte is sterile, Hebden castrated. The “inert mass of the people” (Second 235) is apathetic and demoralised by poverty and Hillier believes he can understand them because he himself has experienced it. His vindictiveness and hunger for approval and celebrity spring from class hatred: “He resented the fact that his father had failed in everything, last of all in the shop he opened in an out-of-the-way town” (16). The origin of Hillier’s ambition is social *ressentiment*, of his hunger for power, his accumulated envy and vindictiveness against those who (like Andrew Hillier) are privileged. He perceives his inequality as a deliberate, personal slight, which in turn feeds on hatred and envy of those objects he covets: “‘Vanity has been the moving spring of his life’” (77). Hillier either appropriates the appurtenances of the status of which he has been deprived but to which he feels entitled, or simply seeks to destroy all the cultural traditions which have oppressed him:

‘I have a dream in which I am a serf of some sort, in another century,’ Hillier said. ‘I seem to be working in an immense field, far out of sight of the lord’s house or castle, or whatever it is. He has never heard of me. I am unknown, lost, a speck crawling slowly along the furrows for ever, as long as I live’. (177)
In fact, Andy realises that Sacker and Hillier are outsiders by virtue of their class: “I never realised before that Richard was outside the ruling caste in England. Hillier was outside it too. But he had perhaps been adopted into it, for reasons of policy?” (79). The ‘policy’ is Chamberlayne’s (he belongs to the “ruling caste”) but he needs a charismatic leader like Hillier, and Tower confirms Andy’s insight when he points out that Hillier and Sacker are merely necessary “instruments” in the banker’s amoral pursuit of his own financial interests:

If ever a man were certain that he had the way -indeed that he was the way, the truth, and the life- Thomas Chamberlayne, banker, was that man. He would never want to take Hillier’s place from him. He had no ambition to be lifted up, was content to be himself. And to know he knew what was best for his fellow-men to do, if they would only do it. […] He knew that they must have gods. That, perhaps, was why from the first he had encouraged Hillier. (238)

This need of “gods” is a result of the gradual deterioration of the moral fabric of the members of society, reflected in the wasteland they inhabit. The dispersal of community under the impact of economic recession is described in terms familiar to readers of 1930s novels about unemployment:

At six o’clock in the evening we were passing through what had been a centre of industry. The doors to the buildings were barred, windows boarded over, chimneys cold and smokeless, empty sidings. Men stood about at the street corners and a few listless children quarrelled in the gutter. I have seen deserts, but I have never seen anything to equal in desolation this region of derelict mills. A cold shabby Purgatory […] It would take an age for these valleys to return to life and in the meantime what became of their human scrap-iron? (Second 68)

As Andy Croft has explained, images of the “dying landscape” not only focussed attention on de-industrialisation and long-term unemployment, but more generally signalled “the death of community, skills and individuals” (Croft 70), the debilitating inactivity and powerlessness of unemployment, and the demoralisation and apathy of the members of communities that had been bound by a long industrial tradition. Evil rises from the wasteland of industrial capitalism: ruined farmland, abandoned oil wells, aeroplanes, machines that turn labourers into automatons. Jameson did not demonise “scientific progress” altogether, as Phyllis Lassner has suggested (Lassner 91), but in
fact celebrated “our inventive genius” (“Twilight” 188) as one important aspect of man’s desire to be freed from the enslavement of necessity:

Think first that there is now enough knowledge and mastery of Nature and enough machines invented and set up to abolish poverty and fear of poverty in every corner of the world. Think now that what actually happens is that each new and more efficient machine delivers goods on one side and unemployment on the other, and that this cannot by any means be altered, unless the system be altered whereby a few men, by their personal control of money and of all the natural and mechanical resources of the world […], all we must use to live, can and indeed must create a world in which the greater part are cheated and many of us undone by toil and poverty. (“Defence” 162)

She argued that greed could be tempered with morality and that proper mechanisms of redistribution should be put in place because poverty was an unnecessary waste of human life. Advanced industrialisation could provide sufficient goods for all. The problem was the mismanagement of material and human resources and the socially irresponsible attitude of capitalists, not with technology itself. R.B. Tower identifies the deterioration of social bonds as one of the consequences of authoritarianism:

‘Repression is not evil only for its floggings and torturings, but because it makes people lie to themselves in the privacy of their hearts. It makes lies the common food and poisons the wells. It is what I hate. The world is closing in on those of us who have sought truth, shutting us off from other human beings. And this is the worst thing of all. The awful isolation’. (90)

He is here lamenting not only the loss of freedom of expression, but also people’s fear to act in accordance with their consciences, which makes them seek refuge in “‘Inertia. Dreary indifference, worse than malevolence. The unliving spirit’” (216). Tower has identified a social malaise that in practice translates into incivility: “people in London are growing very bad-tempered. They scowl at you and snarl in the buses if you tumble against them. They’re impatient and rude. There’s a nervous tension. As though you were expecting a blow, or a danger of some sort” (180). Respect and deference to others is undercut by the suspicion and aggressiveness that a police state inevitably generates: “People had begun to look over their shoulders before speaking even to a friend. They had begun to avoid strangers” (234).

Sylvia Vance has misread Andy’s position: “In part, Andrew unchanged suits the novelist’s technique; the more unchanged the character, the more suitable he is as a
foil. But on another, more significant level, an unchanged Andrew presents the powerlessness of the liberal in the face of fascism” (Vance 132). This was an opinion held at the time (Brown 280), but in fact Andy does change, albeit with deceptive subtlety. If at first he is an observer (78), his position changes after his visit to Winchell and his conversations with Tower. Though not quite as dramatic as an epiphany, there is certainly a turning point in his allegiance to the country which he had left years before: “The cold on the moor when I walked and stumbled to the village revived me, but to feel the more. I felt despair and anger. All the fears of my childhood rushed through me in a dark flood. I fell on the moor and passed the night there, with my face on the ground” (67). It is from this moment that Andy becomes a half-hearted accomplice in Sacker’s conspiracy, justifying his involvement by claiming guiltily that he does it for the prisoners of Winchell. To emphasise the extent to which the country has changed, the bulk of the novel is narrated from the point of view of a character who is “both a part of and yet detached from the events in Britain” (Plain 38), as Gill Plain interprets Andy’s position. In this sense, his position highlights the importance of loyalty to one’s country yet simultaneously describes the obstacles of achieving it when one’s compatriots are “only busy with [their] own private fears and secrets” (Second 235).

Jameson was unashamedly patriotic, her identification with England an intrinsic aspect of her socialism and her role as an intellectual, which was expressed as active resistance to authority:

Since there is no reason other than lack of common will why England should not become a nation of free men and women, not indeed equal in skill and quality but all equally apt to use such skill and quality as they have to the best purpose. Anything less is an open cheat. I cannot respect any man who is content to enjoy a comfort and security that others of his countrymen have not. The will to see England rebuilt, her every child happy, well reared, faithfully and wisely bred, is the only degree of patriotism I understand.(“Patriotism” 260)

This civic commitment to the improvement of all members of society, she argued, should be the basis for a patriotic sense of belonging. As Margaret Dietz explains, patriotism became nationalism when its vocabulary was assimilated into the discourse of the nation and the state, so “at a certain moment in history, patriotism ceased to be the springboard for opposition to a government’s program, and became instead the basis for uncritical support of the ‘my country right or wrong variety’” (Dietz 189).
Jameson called upon a political and non-conformist tradition as the backbone of her patriotism, rather than upon the more obvious shared legacies such as language, territory or ethnicity. Not only did she despise the particularism and exclusiveness which bred intolerance (in the novel Andy thinks that “it needed a few years of isolation of this part of England for them to begin burning witches again” (6)) but, as a voice for collective security, she also cultivated cosmopolitanism: “In the past there have been little Englanders (one has a pen in her fingers writing the words), in love with an England which never was but could be, and, as if opposing them, internationalists of a country no smaller than Europe. It is time for the two dreams to grow together” (“End” 221). Loyalty was not bound to territory but to a particular revolutionary, republican European tradition which had originally emerged as a reaction to a hierarchical, aristocratic political order:

Our tradition is threatened now equally by war and violence, whether of Left or Right […]. These things are only part of our inheritance, which is so rich it can scarcely be surveyed. The habit of self-government: freedom in religion: love of nature: the deliberately taught doctrine that cruelty to children and animals is repugnant: the right to free speech: the habit of freedom in thought and action, an old and sturdy growth. (“Defence” 169-70)

This is a tradition of resistance common to other European countries, and Jameson sought to overcome antagonisms dating back to WW1 by raising the abstract principles of “liberty, equality, and fraternity […], the notes of an old song, many times silenced, and forever springing out again” (“Defence” 166) to the status of universal aspirations. Her patriotism is based on the idea that free citizens have a stake in the well-being of the patrie. A sense of solidarity with and commitment to community should be based on a common tradition of palpable daily practices, institutional arrangements and increasingly democratic political organisations. Since democracy was endangered, she appealed to its revolutionary modern origins as an alternative to the bond of ethnicity touted by National Socialism: “’We must cleanse the blood, we must wash the bones and the veins, we must rebuild the credit’, as Hillier puts it (Second 266). He is not only severing the “spiritual continuity with [the] past” (“Twilight” 200) essential to patriotism, but turning back the clock to the “dark ages” (Second 219) by being culturally and economically isolationist; hence his prohibition to play nothing other than English opera and to “have no debts to other nations and to rely only on ourselves” (35).
Andy, like Tower, is a patriot, and although he does not agree with the revolutionary methods employed by Myers and Lewis, he respects their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country. In contrast, the conspirators he half-heartedly aids are acting only for themselves: “Not one of you, I thought, cares a tinker’s curse what happens to England. Major-General Smith is thinking of his ambitions, Denham of saving his place, and Richard of his destructive power and position” (222).

The extent of this breakdown in community feeling is reflected in the destruction of personality. The authoritarian state is paternalistic, its citizens are reduced to obedient, childish subjects incapable, like the writer Sophie Butts, of uttering intelligible sentences. This is a world in which “individuality has become obsolete and personality a crime. The whole idea of the self as something precious and inviolable is a cultural idea” (Howe p.237) which fascism destroys. This possibility lies in the near future in Jameson’s novel, aware as she was that the Fascist “conception of the individual [is] flatly opposed to the democratic conception”. Andy is “an animal without hope of posterity” (Second 63) who should have been born in another age, “say the eighteenth century, when it was still possible to believe in progress” (94). Although he acknowledges that he is an historical aberration, there is one principle of his liberalism which remains morally defensible: “the supreme and intrinsic value, or dignity, of the individual human being” (LuKes 45). Additionally, crucial to this idea of respect for human dignity essential to freedom are the three related ideas of autonomy, privacy and self-development. Andy is “opposed to all repression’’ (134), and his thoughts on the murder of Tower betray this:

My first separate thought was that it was the end of the world. There is nothing more to be hoped for from a world which, deliberately, with deliberate cold violence, murders the best man living in it at the time. There is no excuse for that world. It is corrupt in every dish. Even the child in its mother’s flesh is filthy. None of us is clean any more, none of us is innocent -none deserves to live. (281)

Andy implicates the community as a whole in Tower’s assassination because silence implies consent.

Freedom was, for Storm Jameson and some of her contemporaries, the supreme good because it was the indispensable condition for the pursuit of happiness. At this time it was believed that democracy could no longer be taken for granted. Evidently a “moderate who now swung left” (A.J.P. Taylor 431) like Harold Laski (also involved
with the Socialist League) shared her concern, though he explored it in a more systematic and informed manner. He too believed that freedom was a negative condition: “Liberty [is] the absence of restraint upon the existence of those social conditions which, in modern civilization, are the necessary guarantees of individual happiness” (Liberty 33). Individuals are “unfree” (33) when compelled to conform to modes of conduct which they dislike and cannot openly contest.

Laski argued against the idealist theory of the state of fascism, which proposed that the will of the individual is fully developed only when subordinated to (absorbed into) the activity of the state, “my personality, it is said, is simply an expression of the organized whole” (Liberty 39). This view, which denies the uniqueness of each individual is, he goes on to say, easily contradicted by the evidence of experience. An individual is “real” to himself “not by reason of the contacts he shares with others, but because he reaches those contacts through a channel which he alone can know. His true self is the self that is isolated from his fellows and that contributes the fruits of isolated meditation to the common good which, collectively, they seek to bring into being” (41). Several conditions are necessary for a person to pursue his objectives freely, such as security of employment, economic security, the crucial right to education that schools a person to use freedom. Without these basic conditions it is impossible to “make explicit our experience of life, and so report to the centre of political decision the wants we derive from that experience” (35). For political institutions to work in the interest of the citizenry, they depend on its determination to make them work effectively, hence it is up to each individual to make his views known. There is no a priori common will in any society, despite the claims of the idealist theory of the state for which the will of every member of society is the same, but a proliferation of wills which must be negotiated to attain a common purpose: “The unity of the state, in a word, is not inherently there. It is made by civic acceptance of what rulers propose. It is not necessarily good because it is accepted; it is not necessarily right because it is proposed. Obedience ought always to depend on the substance contained in the rules made by government; it is a permanent essay in the conditional mood” (44). It is on the basis of the person’s interaction with the world that he can first privately deliberate and then articulate his ideas and express them intelligibly and because it is the job of government to satisfy the wants of the governed, it should be informed of the wants that persons deem necessary for their
happiness: “New truth begins always in a minority of one; it must be someone’s perception before it becomes a general perception” (75).

The self Laski invokes is not the rational self of the idealist tradition in which the individual is free only when one aspect of his self is called upon in the service of the state, but an indivisible self:

My true self is not a selected system of rational purposes identical with those sought by every member of society. We cannot split up the wholeness of a personality in this way. My true self is all what I am and do. It is the total impression produced by the bewildering variety of my acts, good and bad and indifferent. All of them go to the formation of my view of the universe; all of them are my expression of my striving to fulfil my personality. Each, while it is, is real, and each, as real, must give way only in terms of a judgement I make, not of one made for me by another will, if I am to remain a purposive human being serving myself as an end. (41)

This is the ideal self of democracy, whose liberty is never absolute because he lives in a community. However, it is through experience that he learns to cohabit peacefully with his neighbours, accepting certain ways of behaviour which are conducive to the continuity of liberty.

Hillier imagines himself as the midwife who will facilitate the rebirth of a new England composed of infantilised subjects. The “nationalist theology” on the rise in Germany has an intellectual father, Hegel, for whom the “national State was the final social and political reality, in which is subsumed every activity of its members” (“Twilight” 201). Not only are men and women forced into accepting and remaining in their roles as warriors and nurturers respectively, but in a paternalistic state individuals are servants or children, incapable of independent, critical thought. As Harold Laski explained, to shelter the individual from acquiring experience –clearly Hillier’s intention- is harmful: “I must, in general, learn my own limitations by experimentation with myself. I cannot pass my life adjusting my conduct to standards and habits which represent the experiments of other people” (Liberty 122). The emphasis here is on the process of growth which each must embark upon as on a quest of self-discovery and self-knowledge. A person will only thus learn of his limitations, his virtues, skills, etc.: “If he surrenders his will to others, he surrenders his personality. If his will is set by the will of others, he ceases to be master of himself. I cannot believe that a man no longer master of himself is in any real sense free” (44). Instead of protecting private life from
the unwarranted intrusion of the state, the Fascist state absorbs it: in Jameson’s novel the Special Guards freely invade the home of those who are not threats to national security, such as the couple on the settlement. The extent of the violation of privacy is poignantly illustrated in the disrespectful destruction of Lotte’s private property:

The house was full of Special Guards. They were poking into all the cupboards and emptying drawers and shelves on the floor. One handsome youth had dressed himself in a hat and long coat of my sister’s, and was parading up and down her room with her sunshade held over his head. (Second 305)

Jameson was aware of how precarious privacy would become and how important it was as a space in which the individual, alone, was “able to do and think whatever he chooses –to pursue his own good in his own way” (Lukes 59). Under Fascism individuals were subjected to the arbitrary whims of a leader who could not be held accountable for his actions: “But when the Fascist writes of the Absolute National State that it ‘has itself a will and a personality,’ he is writing of the will and the personality of one individual, the Leader, the State-in-person. His will is arbitrary, a usurper of all other wills” (“Twilight” 203) or, as Hillier puts it, “‘I am the State’” (266).

Leaders are just as susceptible to the destruction of personality as their subjects. Hillier changes in the novel, he becomes more fanatical and self-absorbed, enthralled by his own words:

He put his fingers under his jacket in the traditional gesture of dictators, Mussolini and what not. It was strange and unpleasant that his features altered from within, as though he had no true face of his own. The next minute it was full of a pained nobility, no longer Caesar but one of his assassins, carrying out an unpleasant job in a disinterested anguish. (265-66)

Obviously Andy has become more critical by this time, but Hillier is clearly entranced by the images he conjures up of himself according to his own plot: “I suppose that when he was speaking and preaching he believed in himself” (269). Hillier has no “true self”, he has reduced himself to only one role, that of the “Messiah” (269) with an uncanny ability to transform himself into what other people want him to be. Previously Lotte had noted that he had no authentic self:

His eyes were without centre, rather, the centre was inert and empty. At once, with sharp clarity, she realised that he was in a sense faceless. Any one of a multitude of images could take possession of
that vacant surface [...]. Ah, but who fills the vessel itself? She wondered. Perhaps the succession of prophets, she thought, was a line of such hollow vessels, to be filled by voices from without and within the mind. (212)

Hillier is a spectacle to himself and to others, and one has the impression that he exists in a world of his own: “He had begun to work himself into a voluptuous excitement. His eyes were glazed and turned upward, and his gestures became looser, like a drunken man. I saw the saviour of his country emerge from him and take full possession. Even in my desperation I was partly fascinated by the sight” (268). Hillier is deliberately oblivious to the social unrest sensed by other characters, including the conspirators, for whom the regime is transitional rather than the beginning of a new era. He loses a sense of historical perspective because he is persuaded of his own immortality, although he, like the leaders whom he ousted, cannot in the long term suit his actions to his words. In the end he is nothing more than Chamberlayne’s puppet.

R.B. Tower believes that man is a function of a process that can only be controlled collectively, there are “brief rests between a caste society and one in which there are no classes except of individuals, of like mind” (86): Hillier wants a “caste society”. For Tower, this is a transitional phase in which the human will is overtaken by events spiralling beyond control, and it is only possible to sit back patiently and wait for the flood to recede. ‘Crisis’ became a catchword for Jameson as early as 1934, when she believed that it was feasible to negotiate peace and guide the gradual collapse of capitalism down the socialist road. The social and political instability caused by economic forces was a direct result of WW1, which had increased awareness of the precariousness of social institutions and cultural assumptions, even those deeply ingrained and believed to be impervious to external change and manipulation, grounded as they were in a long, uninterrupted tradition: “The War did great damage to the invisible increase with us of the idea of freedom. To teach a man contempt, not only for his own life but for the lives of his fellows, is a sure way to give him a contempt for himself” (“Defence” 160). Yet Jameson’s belief in the power of politics to solve problems was unwavering:

The question for us now is whether we are hopelessly dependent on time, on the slow or quick unfolding of events, or whether we have the wit to decide how far we can go in the use of power and speed without finally over-straining our minds and senses. Whether we can close the
gap between what we can do and what we can bear. Between what we know how to do and what we can do decently, peaceably. Cavour said about statesmanship that it is “le tact des choses possibles”. Le tact des choses possibles. If anything can save us, by restoring our balance—and in time- it is the degree of tact: the intuitive understanding of what is possible, and the refusal to go beyond it. (Jameson, “Crisis” 150)

She wrote this at a time when the opportunity to direct the flow of events to prevent another world war had been missed and nothing more could be done but plan for the future. But the above is a rule for both leaders and citizens, and in the novel this method of government is second nature to the English: “‘The English are different. There is a tough root of belief in them. Compromise, easing of the present, will come in time’” (Second 309). For both Jameson and Laski patience and tolerance were necessary principles of good government, the constant tension between the makers of policy and the governed was a “permanent essay in the conditional mood” (Laski, Liberty 44) or, in Jameson’s words, it is the “way of trial and error, of free argument and research … and there is no other road (“Defence” 170). With the objective of forming a co-operative community, patience and tolerance, they believed, should be cultivated as civic virtues; people should learn to consider the interests of others even to the extent of preferring them and thus counteract selfishness and self-interest.

It was popular throughout the 1930s to compare current events with past eras. The most common referents were the decline of the Roman Empire, the English Civil War or the French Revolution. In their fiction Phyllis Bentley and Naomi Mitchison turned to Rome and Greece, Sylvia Townsend Warner to the failed Paris uprising of 1848 in Summer Will Show, Rebecca West to the Roman Republic in St Augustine and in 1930 Storm Jameson turned to eighteenth century England. In In the Second Year R.B. Tower exemplifies his theory of the rise and fall of ideologies with reference to the Roman Empire. These comparisons place the 1930s in a very broad historical perspective, past events provide an example and a means of explaining the origins of contemporary problems, so, reassuringly, the present is merely another phase in human history. Tower argues that ideologies (what he calls faiths), decline and then rise from the ashes renewed. For Tower, the realisation of international socialism is a possibility that lies in the future, just as the failure of the Labour Party in 1931 simply postponed the realisation of its utopian agenda. Societies could be radically, violently transformed, civilisations destroyed, human beings re-educated and conditioned, all those cultural
assumptions taken for granted and believed to be permanent could be eliminated, but as Lewis states in the novel, “The hangmen and jailers, Metternichs, Thiers, Goerings, Hebdens, Hilliers, come, use their whips, and go. We remain. Kill us and we will rise again from the dead. We come again. (Second 136). Andy, the liberal, cannot imagine and refuses to accept a post-war world (311), but he makes way for Tower’s utopian future by saving the young Steffy and Ernest, Tower’s disciples, who have learned to believe in “the eternal infallible debt of man to man” (184). The novel is a warning: although Andy acknowledges that “we did nothing to prevent” (282) the destruction of all that he holds dear, the moral of the story is that the readers of the novel can.
Chapter Four

Politics in the Novel II
I

Introduction

When one comes to the practice of politics, anyone writing about his life in the years 1924-1939 must answer the crucial question: ‘Where did you do in the General Strike?’ Leonard Woolf, Downhill All the Way

Storm Jameson was perhaps the least optimistic of the four writers discussed here because she identified and explored the enduring psychological effects of war and poverty that could not be remedied easily, through individual transformation, collective action or the introduction of economic measures, because circumstances external to all individuals prevented the possibility of fostering meaningful interpersonal ties. West also focused on the psyche and the difficulties encountered by persons in their search for meaningful relationships, though unlike Jameson, she located the origin of these difficulties in the individual’s tendency to focus exclusively on private projects.

II

Storm Jameson’s Mirror in Darkness: The Aftermath of War and the Impossibility of Intimacy

Jameson carefully crafted an identity as a survivor and witness of the war for an audience that by 1933 possibly had no direct experience of it. In Company Parade (1934), the first novel of her Mirror in Darkness series, the importance of bearing witness to one war as a warning to prevent another is clear: “That year a few people saw that they were living in a new age: it was impossible to return to the old as to Elizabethan England—both were now historic and the child Richard, born during the four years’ destruction, would feel the one no less strange and distant than the other.” (190). Any generation, but particularly a literary generation, is self-consciously crafted by those who identify with a group and create a collective identity by drawing on shared experiences or goals. Jameson did not intend to speak for all the members of a generation, but only for those who had grown up with the post-impressionist exhibition, Wells’ The New Machiavelli, the exciting ideas of Orage’s New Age: “We felt, as everyone who was young with us felt, that we were beginning a new age” (No Time 71). What the War destroyed, according to Jameson, were not Edwardian certainties, but the faith that these would be shattered by progressive politics: “our belief—of which
nowadays we laugh, to get our laugh in first- that we were destined to lead a crusade against poverty and national hatreds; all that naïve faith, crude and uninstructed, which the War killed [...] We rebelled” (No Time 132). The war did not enter Jameson’s writing as direct experience; instead she told the story of what the war “did –to history, to society, to art, to politics, to women, to hopes and expectations, to the idea of progress, the idea of civilization, the idea of England” (Hynes, War 439). Jameson captured a mood and described a spiritual landscape associated with Eliot’s Waste Land.

Jameson’s war generation is above all a literary generation, and as such it not only created -or appropriated and transformed- a mood but also shaped the forms best suited to its expression: “A poet only (T.S.Eliot) has succeeded in evoking for us a defined vision of the Waste Land; but the reintegration he suggests has only personal validity”, the vision is of a post-war world dominated by “the feeling of disintegration, of the final futility of life” (Jameson, No Time 159). The citizen of this Waste Land is, according to Jameson -again inspired by Eliot-, ‘The Hollow Man’. In No Time Like the Present and Mirror in Darkness Jameson relies heavily on what Samuel Hynes has called the “Waste Land Myth of the War”, noting that Eliot’s poem is essentially about the aftermath of war, its subject is ruin, loss, and the fear of life (War 352). David Renn, a tired, sceptical man, is engaged in writing a long poem, “London”, that like Eliot’s is about the Waste Land but unlike it is based on immediate experience: Eliot “never lived there” (Love 222). Indeed, Mirror in Darkness is itself about this urban waste land because it describes the moral and psychological effects of social disaggregation. Thus, personal change runs in parallel with general social transformation. Mirror in Darkness explores the period after the war marked by loss with apparently few or no rewards. The first two novels of the trilogy describe the private life of characters from radically different economic and social backgrounds. We are apprised of their ambitions and fears, and together their stories give us the impression that civil society is weak because the individuals that compose it are themselves broken: “the War had done invisible damage to dear England” (Company 43). Lack of public spirit is a symptom of moral and spiritual bankruptcy: individuals do not have the will to reconstruct society.

One consequence of the War is that it ended the political “crusade”. The post-war “naïve cynicism” (Jameson, Love 225) and “profound scepticism touching […] men’s deeds and hopes” (None 680) of characters such as David Renn, Hervey Russell,
T.S. Heywood, though describing themselves as socialist and actively involved in supporting the General Strike as editors of the *British Worker*, is presented as typical of the educated middle-class. Renn describes himself as an “unlikeable sort [of socialist] – not liked by any side. I distrust the State, I dislike violence and appeals to emotion, and I want to enjoy a world without rich and poor” (*None* 56). The role of “watcher[s]” (*Love* 100) they play in the new post-war public sphere is less active and participatory, epitomised in the novel by the short-lived journal *The Week*, which aims “to keep an eye on the scoundrels, politicians, financiers, bishops, writers and the like, who want to betray us” (*Company* 98). If before the war socialism was a “‘religion’”, T.S. Heywood says, after it is an “‘establishment. It used to have martyrs. Now it has respectable trade union leaders’” (*Company* 308). Their mainly intellectual political commitment seems to be the only way in which this disillusioned generation can participate in politics because available political institutions are unreliable. They are critical observers. The new type of citizen, represented by Henry Smith, is altogether different, more committed and hopeful: “He was feeling too well and happy to want to talk. When he was working he was able to concentrate the whole of his magnificent energy on to one end, and as soon as he released it it leaped a dozen ways through him, a fountain of delight and good-temper. At the moment, he felt like he had in him the strength of the anonymous millions of strikers” (*None* 120).

The last novel in the series focuses on the General Strike, perceived as another inevitable consequence of the post-war economic situation and the widespread disillusionment of unemployed war veterans. Jameson wrote her trilogy in the context of 1930s concerns such as international relations, fascism, unemployment and made use of the political ideas then popular, in particular the relation between capitalism and war which predates the war and was thus one factor that linked both periods: “The Acquisitive Society perpetuates the existence of irresponsible classes. War is the final solution of their mindless and irresponsible activities” (Jameson, “End” 215). The capitalist characters Thomas Harben, Marcel Cohen, William Gary and Jess Gage leave us in no doubt about this, but for them the General Strike is a dress rehearsal for the next war: they actively encourage social unrest (Hunt, the “wife-beater” is an *agent-provocateur* (*Love* 356)). In fact, the trilogy suggests that the General Strike was inevitable and that financiers deliberately provoked it for their own personal gain: Swann’s militaristic Economic Council, unlike the Labour Party and the trade unions, is
prepared for it.13 This historical narrative which begins with the end of the war and ends in 1926 not only allows characters to make sense of personal tragedy, but also allows them to give meaning to the war itself as the end of an era which could be placed within a broader temporal framework that also extends into the future: “A bad treaty doesn’t settle anything -except the causes of the next war” (Company 97). Thus the social and economic problems of the 1930s are the product of previous events.

Jameson’s periodisation was not unique. According to Wyndham Lewis the post-war period came to an end with the General Strike: “I call ‘post-war’ between the War and the General Strike”, after there “began a period of a new complexion” (Lewis 1). Both Samuel Hynes and John Lucas would concur that with hindsight for many writers the General Strike in many ways became more significant than the Wall Street Crash. Lucas notes that it “turned out to be a severe anti-climax that could only be because people were prepared for, eagerly anticipating or dreading, some sort of climax” (Lucas 151). Both these interpretations can be found in the novel. Harben and Gary “had foreseen the need for the Strike, they knew how to use it for the best, to cripple and discredit the men’s unions at the opening of a campaign in known country. The Strike was an incident in the campaign. They believed, that England was becoming weaker in the world” (None 46). The fear of a bloody revolution had haunted the public imagination since 1917, a fear embodied by George Ling: “the War had been a blunder [...]. He blamed it for everything he disliked and feared: social unrest, the price of hand-made boots, his failing health, the invidious position of his daughter, a married woman living apart from her husband, his losses, the collapse of morality” (Love 318). Rhetorically, as Samuel Hynes has noted, the Strike was a reversion to the days of the war and this is certainly true of None Turn Back, but it also shook such hopes and expectations as had survived the war. But these hopes were dashed. The psychological impact of the failure of the Strike is expressed by Renn: “The truth is that if we succeed we shall have brought off a revolution against the wish and under the nose of the

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13 Julian Symons has explained that at the time of the General Strike the British Fascists were not a political party but a “quasi-military group of the extreme right, headed by a retired Brigadier General and Rear Admiral” who resembles Timothy Hunt. Before the outbreak of the strike the British Fascists merged with the Organization for the Maintenance Supplies, so Swann’s Economic Council is indeed modelled on an existing organisation. See Julian Symons, The General Strike: A Historical Portrait, London: Cresset Library, 1987: 20-27. It is also worth noting that, according to Hynes, the British Fascists attracted many war veterans, “one of this party’s first acts was to offer its assistance to the government in the mainenance of order during strikes (the government declined the offer).” Samuel Hynes, A War Imagined 356.
leaders. And if we fail it means ruin,’ he said quietly, ‘oh, not of any obvious kind, but the most complete moral ruin in history’ (None 62). Jameson explored this aspect of the General Strike rather than its unhappy political consequences: the nature of social and personal relationships was conflictual. As John Lucas has pointed out, the Strike, like the war, seemed to require that people should take sides (217). All relationships were a threat to the already precarious integrity of the self.

Contrary to Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that the War liberated women from their traditional roles, for Jameson it only reinforced middle-class notions of femininity: women were expected to be selfless nurturers once again, in charge of the emotional work involved in relationships because war veterans were disaffected, withdrawn and psychologically incapable of interacting with the world in a sustained, focused manner, displaying a “half-willing resistance to life” (None 155). Hervey, for example, makes “herself weak so that [Nicholas] could be whole” (None 150) and Georgina Roxby, like Harben’s mistress Lise and Hunt’s wife Delia (who dies of wounds inflicted by him), are similarly self-effacing. The majority of heterosexual relationships in the novels are dysfunctional: “Why do we talk glibly about sharing lives when we can scarcely share the simplest feeling with the being nearest to us” (Love 343) asks Hervey Russell, the heroine of the trilogy. What emerges from these novels is that after the war intimacy was impossible to achieve, indeed it is a “burden” (Company 318). Men and women of the war generation were physically and emotionally injured, “the injury is there, deep-seated -showing itself in that tiredness for no reason, the readiness to drop what seemed at first touch important, the drying-up of vitality, the lack, less clear, of resilience and warmth” (Jameson, No Time 99). This injury is an “impassable barrier” (Love 149) between persons: “From Nicholas she was, deeply, separated, except in a few rare moments” (None 162) and the implication is that this distance cannot be remedied because it is the condition of an entire generation. All the characters are irreparably wounded, and their injuries -fears, insecurities, physical and emotional wounds- skew their perception of reality, as if they saw the world through them. In Mirror in Darkness the intimacy of love relationships is destructive. All marital relations in the novel are unworkable because the exhausted post-war self is threatened by the tangle of mutual obligation and responsibility, the intricacies of power games. Relationships are described with the language of war, like the General Strike, they too shaped by a martial state of mind:
Under the calm of her marriage was always strife. An endless, silent struggle between them – she wanting, above everything, certainty, the complete possession of him, to know herself master in his heart; he holding her off, defending himself now in this way, now that, punishing her because he was tired in body, ash-dry and impatient in mind. [...] She created a young Nicholas: and found herself denied by an older sceptical man, who loved her only as much as he was able, and at times hurt her to death. (None 153)

The beginning and ending of Hervey Russell’s story coincide with the post-war period. The Armistice was signed in the last months of 1918 and presented to Parliament on 11 November by Lloyd George, one month before Company Parade (1934) begins with Hervey’s arrival in London, described in the conventional terms of a novel of development: “A young woman comes to London in the month after the Armistice. She is inexperienced, poor, ambitious, burdened. This is what happens to her” (9). Hervey is not the typical young Bildungsroman heroine whose story is of gradual socialisation - she is already married and has a son, “burdened” with memories as well- but the mood augurs a new beginning. Nonetheless, the trilogy can be read as the story of her domestication and the parallel, gradual emergence of an albeit precarious peace in her society. None Turn Back (1936), the last novel of the roman fleuve, ends on 12 May 1926, the day the General Strike was called off unconditionally and the day that Hervey recovers from a hysterectomy figured as a metaphorical death and rebirth: she becomes a sterile woman, thus sharing in the barrenness of the many other characters in the novel, but it is also obviously the loss of an important aspect of her femininity, a process comparable to the male loss of masculinity in the trenches. More importantly, however, she is no longer a stranger in her social environment. Hervey faces the operation with the “relief of one who is at the end of her journey. There was nothing more for her to do, or trouble about. She had arranged everything, visited the past, and caught glimpse of the future [...]. I am needed and loved, she thought” (None 181). Love in Winter (1935), the novel concerned with Hervey’s private life upset by betrayal, ends when the ghosts from the war have been put to rest: “A decade of disorder and bitterness was over” (338). Again, Hervey’s experience is shared by others:

Even her young London had now died a score of times. The ghosts it had given up were three poor merry scholars, and then a harassed
young wife, and then young men in an earth-coloured uniform, a boy
clumsy in his airman’s jacket, with shamed tears in his eyes, and then
Philip who should have died sooner. She scarcely thought of these.
She thought of Nicholas, of her home, … of her present life, uncertain,
without quiet or security, of her own uncertainty and ignorance, of the
need to overcome them, and of her son. (Love 397)

Memories of “young London” begin to fade for other characters as well, to be replaced
by uncertainty: “everything has changed, everything is uncertain; it is no good believing
in the future” (Love 180) comments Hervey in the second novel of the trilogy, devoted
to the exploration of a pervasive sense of being “caught between two moments” (None
142)14. This temporal and spatial disorientation is referred to as ‘disorder’ in Jameson’s
fictional world: the war seems to have created a state of permanent political, social,
moral and cultural crisis and uncontrolled transformation with unforeseeable results.

Jameson was in no doubt that the disorder at the centre of every sphere of
existence, personal and social, was an inescapable legacy of the war:

War ennobles few it does not kill. It happened to a great many non-
combatants in the last war to suffer a loss less palpable than the loss of
a son, a husband, a lover. They lost heart or decency, or only their
heads. There is some natural law in this. If some quarter of a modern
town or city were set apart for the legalised slaughter of human beings
there would spread from it a strange infection through the rest. The
very streets, the children playing in them, would wear an air of
listening: what in one quarter ran off in blood would excite in degree
the senses of all knowing of it. Now, not a city only but whole nations
are involved in modern war, and the law becomes general. (Company
117)

The war caused the loss of common values and a concomitant lack of direction, moral
disintegration, class conflict, egoism and emotional sterility, economic recession,
political apathy, unemployment and unbridled capitalism… the characters in the trilogy
either thrive on this condition or fall victim to it (with the exception of the new
generation Ridley, Hannah, Henry Smith, Swann and Rachel); all are debilitated by a
feeling of disempowerment. Hervey leads “a disorderly life” (Love 14), Georgina, the
token Bright Young Thing in the novel “live[s] for excitement” (Love 90), Evelyn has a

14 This condition is also shared by the characters in H.G.Wells’ 1927 novel about the General Strike: “In
the measure in which one saw life plainly the world ceases to be a home and became the mere site of a
home. On which we camped. Unable as yet to live fully and completely. Since nothing was in order,
nothing was completely right. We lived provisionally”. H.G. Wells. Meanwhile: The Picture of a Lady.
London: Ernest Benn, 1927: 41.
“void within her … created only by the disorder in the world” (Love 125), Nicholas Roxby is “bored”, emotionally removed from his surroundings (Love 88), T.S. is “as helpless as my mother to bring order into living” (None 119). Only capitalists benefit from disorder. William Gary seeks to impose “order —to avert the most frightful disorder” (Love 218), Cohen “flourished on the disorders which have infected our civilisation, because he accepted the conditions of disorder” (Company 155). Harben, Gary and Cohen are self-interested war profiteers who exploit disorder, destruction and death, having no respect for the dignity of human life or freedom:

He had been born without a conscience and without love. And perhaps nothing very much can be done to make the world a tolerable place, until surgeons can detect and destroy spiritual monsters at birth […]. Certainly Harben did not know, when he gave an order, that because of it one woman would die of hunger and a young man hang himself in despair, but if he had known he would not have acted otherwise. He did not know how to act in any other way. (None 47)

These men live in “a world of things” (None 49), people themselves are simply tools (their own alliance is strictly instrumental), and they have no moral reservations about their unbridled greed: their “religion -a successful deal justifies everything from theft to murder” (Company 123). The flipside of the general breakdown of civility they provoke actively is incivility, depicted in the novel as a constant, barely controlled potential for aggression and violence underlying all relationships.

Apathy, dryness, futility, boredom, restlessness are the symptoms of the ‘infection’ afflicting civil society, related expressions of a spiritual malaise caused by hostile, overwhelming and bewildering social processes beyond individual control. In 1930 Bertrand Russell published a self-help book about unhappiness, explaining that unless this widespread personal affliction was remedied there could be no hope of finding a solution to larger social problems such as war, poverty or exploitation. According to Russell, unhappiness commonly affects city-dwellers who are aware of their suffering yet unable to account for it. However, he identifies the causes in “mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life, leading to destruction of that natural zest and appetite for possible things upon which all happiness […] ultimately depends” (Conquest 13). Self-absorption, ennui and disgust with the self, which do not allow for the full enjoyment of life, are the result of an original, decisive loss:
The typical unhappy man is one who, having been deprived in youth of some normal satisfaction, has come to value this one kind of satisfaction more than any other, and has therefore given to his life a one-sided direction, together with a quite undue emphasis upon the achievement as opposed to the activities connected with it. There is, however, a further development which is very common in the present day. A man may feel so completely thwarted that he seeks no form of satisfaction, but only distraction and oblivion. He then becomes a devotee of ‘pleasure’. That is, he seeks to make life bearable by becoming less alive. (Conquest 17)

Byronic unhappiness, competition, boredom and excitement, fatigue, envy, an overpowering sense of sin, persecution mania, fear of public opinion are the most significant causes of unhappiness (coincidentally, all figure in Jameson’s Mirror in Darkness). Russell suggests that to counteract these symptoms one should look beyond the self: “The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile” (Conquest 101). The consequences of self-interest are social, moral, and political isolation.

Jameson concurred with Russell in the need to counteract self-absorption with active interest in the external world. Nicholas is “turned narrowly on himself, dry, without warmth” (Love p.84); Georgina Roxby escapes meaningfulness with introversion, “you should sink in yourself, down as far as you can go -that leaves room between you and what is happening, and you’ll find you don’t mind it nearly so much” (None 36); Hervey, in contrast, is “afraid, not of dying, but of living and being overtaken by dryness” (None 169). But attention could be misdirected. Jameson believed that her society was caught up in a vicious circle “of instability, tension, explosion, exhaustion, instability, tension, explosion, exhaustion” (No Time 183). Judging from the behaviour of characters such as Evelyn, Swann, Hunt and Georgina, the General Strike was the occasion for explosion in this cycle, “so much agony, must be balanced, somewhere, by an intenser life” (None 142). Evelyn feels the need “for a new faith” and is seduced in body and mind by Swann’s fascism and Hunt’s brutal sexuality: “Either the State is supreme or it is not. There must be authority. If we don’t govern, some other class will. Think of Ireland. Think of Russia. One knows –how one knows!- what happens in a country where the natural order is inverted. There must be discipline, there must be authority, there must be obedience” (None 45). Georgina Roxby
had no life of her own, and she knew, when she was at her most honest, that there was an indolence in her character which halted her from making any effort. She began things and dropped them. She was vain but not vain enough. Her liveliness, her eager love of life, ran away to nothing when she had no object to expend it on, and the object must be a man. She had no ambitions of her own. (None 202)

She finds Swann attractive because he is a man of action: “He attracted her by his other qualities, chief among them his sensual restless energy. Dangerous and destructive it might be, but it roused her and made her dissatisfied and discontented with her life (None 202). These characters are in a particular “state; it was the being ready to satisfy a need, but the need changed, it altered from one person to another, almost from hour to hour” (Love 92). It is this desperate need for the semblance of order amidst instability and a release from anxiety through a “frenzy of unreal excitement” (Company 109) that allows these characters to embrace the authoritarianism implicit in the fascist ideologies of the resentful Swann and Gary, “born without a conscience and without love” (None 47): “men and women are craving for a belief. For authority and obedience … to save them from the horror of loneliness and anarchy” (None 124).

Although the characters inhabit the same city, they move in different worlds, isolated from each other by their class but connected by those who like Hervey, Renn, and Earlham have greater social mobility as members of the middle class; Evelyn, the Cohens, the Harbens, Gary are always protected, isolated by their possessions, indoors, whereas all the other characters meet in and enjoy public spaces. However, the slums and Mayfair are economically interconnected and dependent upon each other as illustrated by the house on Smith Lane, Henry Smith’s symbol for the economic system he wants to destroy (None 104). The form of all the novels is particularly suited to the depiction of the power wielded by capitalists. Harben’s complicated business interests are well depicted in Renn’s drawing of him (Love 42) and Gary’s image of himself as the lord and master of the nation demonstrate the scale of his ambition. As the owner of the means of production (coal mines, iron and steel mills, shipping lines) he sees himself as the “centre” of a society organised like an army: “There were lights in the windows of hotels and in the street, and a thread of light ran over the centre of the road like a direction sign. The wheels of cabs crossed and recrossed it, weaving the bold many-hued pattern of a city. Gary thought: I am that thread. The wheels go over my body” (Love 189). All the characters in the novel are caught up in the intricate network
of production, exchange and consumption that these men control. In her autobiography of 1969/70 Jameson explained that she was unable to proceed with Mirror in Darkness because “no single novel of the series had a clear centre”. Ironically, it is precisely this trait that makes the novels so appropriate for the depiction of a world in crisis in which there is no longer a sense of community. Hervey finds consolation in the anonymity of city life: “Because of all these people she had a sharp feeling that she was alone, the knowledge that she was alone, and in that like them (Love 383). The multiple focalisation not only avoids the “odium of I, I, I” (Journey 283) rejected by 1930s socialist writers who associated modernist introspection with individualistic egoism, but creates the illusion of simultaneity, as in the section on the two minutes’ silence (Company 261-286), and highlights the fragmentariness of modern life.

Hervey’s marginal position in society is comparable to the position Jameson assigns to the intellectual. She is both a member of and a stranger to her community. As Jameson states in the foreword to the trilogy, Hervey Russell’s mind is a mirror that reflects all the characters with which she comes into contact, however briefly. A “wise, forward-looking Ulysses” (Love 78), Hervey places herself outside the society she keenly observes: “If you deprived her of her other senses and left her her eyes she would be happy. Why not? She only half listened to what was said to her and did not enjoy speaking, but her eyes could never look enough and she lived in them” (Company 17). Hervey is free to move physically and emotionally between her homeland and London, Danesacre is a mooring that other characters lack. Hervey is nourished by the “deep roots” in Danesacre (Company 334), but this attachment to “the one place in the world in which she was not a stranger” (None 319) also prevents her from becoming a wanderer, detached from every given point in space: she is a “vagabond in spirit” (Company 338), but importantly, not a “rebel” (None 178), she longs to be “alone” (None 145), she has a “profound contempt for people” (Love 102).

The distinction between a vagrant and a rebel is important because, as Raymond Williams has suggested, a vagrant simply wants to be left alone, society as such has no meaning. This is not a particular society to be rejected or accepted, but “a meaningless set of accidents and pressures, which as far as possible he evades. He will do anything that is necessary to survive within this, but this activity will have neither personal nor social meaning; it is merely a temporary way of keeping alive, or ‘getting by’ (“Individuals”, p.91). A rebel, in contrast, has a strong personal commitment to
transform the society of which he disapproves to establish another. Hervey cannot live like a vagrant, a “vagabond in spirit, she despised vagabonds” (Company 338) because a part of her is eager to belong to the community, so instead she compromises and chooses to inhabit society as a stranger.

Simmel described the stranger as a person “fixed within a certain spatial circle - or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries- but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it” (Simmel 143). The relation established between a stranger and a group is, like other relations, based upon the perception of distance and proximity or difference and similarity, but in this particular case the effect is that “one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near” (Simmel 143). Hervey enjoys greater mobility than the other characters because she is not organically bound to the community, nor does she have any respect for its values: “She never felt that other people’s behaviour touched her at all. Even when she was trying to please them she did not take many people seriously. Once out of her sight they ceased to exist for her” (Company 52). One effect of this mobility is that, like any stranger according to Simmel, Hervey is capable of an objectivity, a critical distance which those who have bonds with the community lack: she has a “strange impersonal gaze. Even when she liked people, she could not help a movement of cold curiosity towards them” (Love 133). Objectivity, Simmel points out, is not non-participation (which implies a non-relation) but the freedom which comes of detachment: the stranger’s gaze is not clouded by prejudice and self-interest because she uses “standards that are more general and more objective” (Simmel 146). That is, with a stranger one shares only very general qualities, while closer relationships are “based on the similarity of just those specific traits which differentiate them from the merely universal”. Simmel explains that in relationships established between a stranger and others the semblance of closeness is based on traits such as nationality, social position, occupation, which certainly establish commonality but do so indiscriminately, it is a “similarity so widely shared [that it] could just as easily unite each person with every possible other” (147). In contrast, a closer relationship is based on similarities which are unique to the parties in the relationship:

They are not determined only by the existence of certain common characteristics, which the individuals share in addition to their
individual differences, which either influence the relationship or remain outside of it. Rather, the kind of effect which that commonality has on the relation essentially depends on whether it exists only among the participants themselves, and thus, although general within the relation, is specific and incomparable with respect to all those on the outside, or whether the participants feel that what they have in common is so only because it is common to a group, a type, or mankind in general. (146)

Hervey’s estrangement from Londoners arises from her essential honesty, she has no “public face” (Company 49), an inherited character trait with moral implications that sets her apart from those around her. However, ultimately what she shares with them all is the existential, “frightful certainty of loneliness, the ache of separation, felt at the last hour, the sense of being thrust out to hang there alone, without even the companionship of thieves” (None 180). Her unique position on the fringes of the social groups she comes into contact with allows other characters to feel an intimate connection with her which is in fact non-existent, because of her indifference to them as persons and their inability to establish intimate relationships: “It occurred to her at once that it is never possible both to understand human beings and to conquer them. At the time of seeing through Ridley she lost her identity and her voice: and always would” (None 23).

Jennifer Birkett has discussed Hervey’s ambition to become a successful novelist and her “failure to achieve what the world counts as success in a woman. She cannot be the daughter her mother wants, the pliant wife her husband wants, or the mother she thinks her child needs. Nor can she be the strong career woman she herself would like” (Birkett 82). Birkett points out an important, unresolved problem facing the character (the impossibility of combining her ambitions in the public sphere with the demands of motherhood) and suggests that it was a dilemma with no solution at the time because of women’s position in society. However, I would suggest that had Hervey been able to resolve the dilemma (which she in part does accomplish) she would have remained dissatisfied because she is a woman of her times, a restless creature because her social environment is itself in flux. Of course, Jameson left the roman fleuve unfinished, but the dynamics of Hervey’s life and the nature of the society she inhabits do not provide the certainty and stability necessary for closure in the novel itself and in her life. Hervey cannot hope for a unitary life because of the sense of crisis surrounding her; the conflict between personal ambition and domesticity identified by Birkett is in fact a spiritual,
internal rift typical of all Hervey’s contemporaries. The cycle of “instability, tension, explosion, exhaustion, instability” (No Time 183) is driven by her conflicting selves, her impulse to wander (her restlessness is an existential condition) and her need of security, available only as middle-class domesticity.

Why are you here, shut in a dull house, in a dull unfriendly country, with a little boy and an absorbed tired man – writing, preparing meals, darning stockings, mending clothes, worrying over bills for things you never wanted, writing, writing, writing? [...] Who ever heard of a woman without the least instinct to make and live in a home? So she piled heavier earth on the body of her reckless, violent, disorderly self, and trod it down. (None 150)

Domesticity is here not merely routine and the care of others, impossible to reconcile with Hervey’s desire for solitude and independence. “Home” is also a metaphor for stability, order and permanence, a condition unimaginable to Hervey who is caught up in the never-ending pattern of “instability, tension, explosion, exhaustion, instability”. It is up to her son’s generation to interrupt this cycle. Unlike Mitchison and, to some extent, Holtby, Jameson believed that a post-war world of such instability could not provide the necessary social environment for any positive relationship to flourish. There is an element of resignation here that characterises the War generation which can only exist on the periphery of social life. However, there is a glimmer of hope in the future: the new wholesome generation will bring about change, a positive note also found in In the Second Year, which can be read as a continuation of Mirror in Darkness because the failure of an imaginary second general strike brings about totalitarianism. In the Second Year is an overtly political novel in that it focuses on government, power and leadership, but the themes explored in Mirror in Darkness recur. The social disaggregation and instability created by a lack of shared moral beliefs make way for totalitarianism.

III

Rebecca West’s Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy: Political Tradition and the Dangers of Self-interest
Harriet Hume is radically different from the novels discussed so far, although it addresses the issues of leadership directly. But West’s perspective was less topical, her periodisations broader. She was more concerned with the nature of human beings and their hunger for power as well as the role of tradition as a coercive mechanism curbing this destructive impulse. Rebecca West described Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy (1929) as a “novel about London” written, she explained, “to find out why I loved it” (Black 1084). West’s declaration of intent is intriguing. Nowhere is the non-coincidence of authorial intention and a reader’s expectations better illustrated. As one critic has noted, her allusions to London are so personal that she seems to deliberately exclude the reader. The novel focuses exclusively on two characters, most of the action takes place in spaces described with excessive, stifling detail, the world invoked in the novel is self-enclosed, artificial. Unlike We Have Been Warned, South Riding, or Mirror in Darkness, Harriet Hume does not invite comparison to the extra-textual world, despite explicit references to the contemporary scene which include Thomas Cook, the decline of British imperialism, automobiles, suburban housewives, Surbiton, war veterans, the post-war housing boom, DORA, as well as allusions to well-known art, music, parks and buildings. West deliberately cultivates this sense of artificiality, so many of the critical readings of the novel struggle to contain the book’s elusiveness by focusing on the “opposing dualities of all kinds, and the dialectics of gender” as embodied in Harriet Hume, “her creator’s idea of undiluted femininity” and Arnold Condorex, “a distillation of masculinity” (Glendinning 126). I would like to suggest, however, that this binary division of gender is only one expression of an underlying metaphysical inquiry into the nature of good and evil which underpins both the natural and social worlds inhabited by the characters, shaping their moral principles and the states of mind which guide their action and determine their identities and purpose. That is, from the particular nature of existing things it is possible, West seems to suggest, to uncover an ultimate reality, with principles applicable to everything that is real in the existing world, albeit a spiritual reality of which we are normally unaware, accessible through art or visionary moments of heightened consciousness.

West provided a key to the text’s apparently gratuitous and bewildering playfulness (mistakenly read as modernist “textual play” (Scott, Refiguring 139)) by stating that it was a “fantasy”, not a “novel” (Glendinning 126). The book is easier to grasp by placing it within the context of two literary modes: fantasy and melodrama. On
the one hand, the book’s “stylized, fanciful manner, like [that of] light opera” (Glendinning 127), its “mannered and archaic language” (Glendinning, “Introduction” 1) are theatrical devices suggestive of the extravagant “rhetorical excess” (Brooks 36) typical of the melodrama. Every gesture, word, object seems to have a meaning that exceeds its literal, immediate meaning yet is of significance in a cosmic, moral drama that is “both indicated and masked by the surface of reality” (Brooks 5). On the other, the subtitle alerts us to the ways in which the text will disrupt the expectations we bring to a novel of mimetic intentions. West clearly indicates that Harriet Hume is written and should be read within the context of a literary mode with the literary qualities expected from myth, fairy tale and romance, an indication later confirmed by Harriet’s “fairy tales”, disruptive stories within the story, which reveal realities and meanings normally invisible in the familiar world yet always threateningly present. As Rosemary Jackson explains, fantasy is not about inventing “another non-human world: it is not transcendent al. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson 8).

Artist that she is, Harriet comfortably inhabits both worlds, the “material” and the “spiritual” (West, Ending 191): apparently trivial gestures and objects (quince and apple jelly, cherries, articles of clothing, bric-a-brac) have a hidden, latent relevance which becomes apparent as the book progresses. Arnold is aware of Harriet’s seemingly inexplicable ability to move from one realm to another: “though her spirit was so marvellously transcending all ordinary human limitations, she nevertheless kept as faithful a bond with fact as the tick of a clock. Dizzied, [Arnold] tried to recall himself to order, to world order” (West, Harriet 32). Arnold, on the contrary, though priding himself in his firm grasp of this “world order” in which he intends to “rise”, and dismissive of Harriet’s extravagant behaviour, proves unable to “rise” precisely because of his inability to grasp the relevance of the “spiritual world” (229) to his everyday existence. It is not until he acknowledges that the separation between the spiritual and material is harmful, and his actions in one world can only be good if guided by the values of the other, that Arnold fully understands himself.

When confronted with phenomena he cannot explain rationally (such as Harriet’s ability to read his mind), Arnold experiences a fleeting moment of uncertainty which we as readers experience with him. Harriet is perceived, by him, as a witch, a
bird-woman, a little girl, a trollop, a princess, an angel, and the existence of the inexplicable and supernatural is further emphasised by constant reference to cats, shadows, statues, mirrors, ghosts, unlikely coincidences, Harriet’s ability to communicate with dogs (Harriet’s trick with the piano is a playful reversal; she provides a rational explanation for a bizarre occurrence, adding to Arnold’s uncertainty): all these are elements of the fairy-tale. The world of the marvellous begins to encroach upon the real world, which as a result becomes neither entirely real nor entirely unreal, but is at first “located indeterminately between the two” (Jackson 19). Arnold’s inability to interpret Harriet in accordance to a conventional frame of reference recurs at their every encounter, and his momentary uncertainty, compounded by the abundance of supernatural detail, prepares us for the ending: the fantasy becomes progressively otherworldly, the supernatural events cease to be intelligible with reference to an external reality and indeed assert their primacy over this everyday world when the realisation dawns on us that both Arnold and Harriet have become unearthly phantoms. The conventional happy ending associated with the fairy tale simply confirms this suspicion.

So by the end of the book we part company with Arnold’s point of view. As readers we eventually decide to accept the marvellous, our hesitation is resolved because strange events are indeed given otherworldly causes, they acquire meaning within the terms of another reality gradually set up in the text, although they are not immediately familiar. The Dudley sisters in Harriet’s fairy tale, seemingly fabricated as mere entertainment to explain to her lover the presence of three trees in her garden, gradually become a tangible presence: though symbols of human destiny, these Parcae, as trees and spiritual forces, actually metamorphose (West, Harriet 280). So the book as a whole is not marvellous, the characters have merely passed from one order of existence to another. As Todorov suggests, the anxiety produced when extraordinary events are introduced into a narrative is a result of the fact that they can neither be explained nor understood according to any criteria internal to the text, nor can they be dismissed as supernatural phenomena. “The person who experiences the event”, he explains,

must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination-and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event
has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he exists, precisely like other living beings, with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. (Todorov 25)

The fantastic occupies the “duration of this uncertainty” (Todorov 25), a state of “arresting strangeness” (Tolkien 69) that we experience through and with Arnold, who hovers between the two possible explanations. Our sense of bewilderment is not dispelled by the narrative voice which itself does not discriminate between the “manifestly unreal” (Jackson 34) Director of the Department for the Engenderment of Larger Oysters, the Union of Anglican Wives Opposed to All Amorous Delights, Lord Ketchup, and recognisable institutions or public figures like the League of Nations or Gladstone. Once uncertainty is resolved, Todorov explains, we are in the region of the uncanny or the marvellous: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 25). Arnold is not sure whether the events are a product of his imagination, a distortion of perception caused by Harriet’s supernatural powers, or they are real, “possible, but as a general rule unlikely” (Todorov 38). Without this vacillation, we would be in the realm of the marvellous, “with no reference to everyday reality” (Todorov 38).

So within the text there are two orders of existence or, to use J.R.R. Tolkein’s convenient terms, a “Primary” and a “Secondary” world, the first familiar and orderly, with a certain degree of close relation to “an external reality”, the second otherworldly. In the text, London and politics, the objects and details of the characters’ physical and social environments, give plausibility to a world familiar to the reader. However, the characters lack the psychological complexity associated with a conventional concept of selfhood. Arnold and Harriet are drawn with very few traits (though they are not recognisable stereotypes), they belong to a “Secondary” world unlike our own which gradually acquires a certain degree of inner consistency though never quite becomes a world in itself, and is clearly not parallel but in a “parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real” (Jackson 20). What purpose does this “Secondary” realm play in the narrative? It is a predominantly spiritual order of existence, so lacks the coherence and autonomy of the Primary world, but also lacks the consistency of the Secondary world in a fairy-tale. For West it is a space of imaginative play, creativity and freedom. Harriet retains a
childlike capacity for wonder, and this active, creative use of the imagination to redescribe the world is precisely what art is about: a “major work of art”, West wrote, “must change the aspect of reality, for it is an experience of the kind which breaks up the present as we know it, transforming it into the past and giving us a new present” (West, Court 5). West implies that the boundaries between the spiritual and material worlds are not as impermeable as they may appear, nor should they be. Harriet has an integrity lacking in Arnold, who renounces spirituality and thus inevitably fails in his pursuit of worldly goods.

In a “A Strange Necessity” West employed the word “fantasy” to refer to a mental construct which all humans fabricate in order to apprehend their relation to and position within their social and cultural environment. As this construct interacts with the external world so it is modified; if this process is accomplished adequately the self will properly apprehend reality and be better equipped to live a good life. West focuses on the intricacies of Arnold Condorex’s increasingly self-referential, delusional mental processes in Harriet Hume, illustrating the detrimental effects of his unwavering egoism, a blindness that impedes a true vision of reality, and leads to his inevitable death. Arnold’s vision is distorted by his moral confusion and self-interest (Harriet, on the contrary, has difficulty reading about real life because she has dwelt at length in the spiritual dimension of her art). His sin is treachery: politician that he is, he fails to “acquit himself in [a people’s] common destiny” (West, Meaning 33). The gradual move in the text from the fantastic to the blatantly marvellous is accompanied by Arnold’s increasing lack of contact with the realities of politics and his rejection of the morality of good government. More importantly, as Harriet points out, Arnold fails to listen to his authentic “interior self” (194), which is concealed by his “excessive development of the habit of negotiation” (199): he is deaf to his conscience. Harriet’s telepathic abilities are prompted by Arnold’s blindness to this inner self. In the garden she acquires the role of his conscience: “When had he been infected with this monstrous doubt that rising in the world was not the supreme good? Why, that very night, along with some other very disagreeable happenings, in the garden of Harriet Hume” (63). Harriet experiences Arnold’s every treacherous act or thought as a physical blow, a part of his self is lost to him but saved in her.

Arnold’s particular “fantasy” becomes clearer when it is compared to West’s examination of the motivations behind William Joyce’s treason of England during
World War II in The Meaning of Treason. Like Joyce, Arnold is motivated by a “desire for power” (Meaning 6), which obviously, as his motto “a man must rise in the world!” reveals, has little to do with the strength of his ideals:

intention was unalterably a part of himself. He could no more remove it than he could uproot his own breath [...] But with a groan he realised that he cared for nothing else. It dominated him, he was its instrument. There might have been a vast superior spirit which had invested him and was so much greater than himself that its loins sprung from his shoulders, and it used his body as legs to carry it about on its business of rising in the world. (Harriet 57)

Arnold’s advance through the ranks of the Conservative Party is ill-fated from the beginning, based as it is on a deception: in a god-like way Arnold transforms Pondh into Mondh (“let Pondh be Mondh” (71)), to save the image of the British Empire and prove himself useful in the India Office. He does not regret this deception, persuading himself that he would not be “advancing the cause of the British Empire, of civilisation, of peace” if he were “honestly rude” (71). Ultimately, he is a traitor to his political party, turning his back on all those whom he has used to “rise in the world”, and he is a traitor to himself. The instrumental use of another human, West believed, was inexcusable: “What is the sin against the Holy Ghost? It is perhaps to deal with people as if they were things: to pick them up and set them down, without respect for their uniqueness, for their own wills” (Meaning 159). William Joyce, like all the traitors West discusses, also breaks the “sacred” (Meaning 225) contract binding society: “loyalty is, in essence, a beautiful contract” (Meaning vi). Both Arnold and William Joyce seek power over others because they are “unable to fit into the society into which they were born, and the cause of that incapacity in their case is a disturbing society which catches those around them off their guard and therefore provokes them in their turn to strange behaviour. Hence their lives become a chain of fantastic events” (Meaning 251). West believed that Joyce’s resentment against those with hereditary power and privilege arose from the feeling that he was irremediably an outcast, deprived of the opportunities of self-advancement and self-development which those of noble birth enjoyed so. For this reason, Fascists were so effective because they promised that “those outside should find themselves at last inside, that the powerless should find themselves as equals among the powerful” (101). Dogged by the feeling that “the whole world was furtively deriding one Arnold Condorex” (Harriet 23), Arnold sees “enemies
everywhere” (24). This resentment is cloaked by both Arnold and Joyce behind the misconception that they are acting in the best interests of their country. Neither Arnold nor Joyce are “gentlemen” (Meaning 92). Arnold does acquire a title of respectability as Lord Mondh and holds “high office”, but the “great did not frequent him, they denied him intimacy, they would not come to his house” (Harriet 171). A similar fate befell Joyce: social “awkwardness occurred” when he was invited into the homes of Mosley’s “upper-class supporters” (Meaning 92). However, West argued that Joyce craved power and was willing to be merciless in attaining it because he did not “realize that we do not please, that we are not liked, that we are not loved” (Meaning 213). Genuine personal relationships, she explained, are comparable to the relationship that true believers feel they have with God. Yet, child of his times that he was, Joyce “had been trained over the trellis erected round him by society, and that trellis was cut in a non-Christian or even anti-Christ pattern” (215) so he turned to politics to drive “out that terrible companion loneliness” (216). Rather than accept that his ambition was motivated by this isolation, Joyce convinced himself that he was altruistically acting in the best interests of Britain, led into “loving England” and therefore planning “her salvation through subjugation to the architects of Belsen and Buchenwald” (46). Yet the substitute relationship between him, as leader, and his followers was inherently corrupt because self-interested, each believing “that the other is God”:

the leader looks on his followers as his creatures, and, not being God, omits to give them free-will and the right to work out their own salvation. The followers curl their lips at the leader, who is presumptuous enough, being human, to exercise his control over all-knowing divinity. Then the leader forms round him a hard core of followers, specially loyal to him by reason of infatuation or bribery, to impress and in the end to terrorize those more critical. Then the followers close in on this leader to divest him of his oppressive authority, and to direct these conspiracies throw up new leaders, who, in time, are resented, protect themselves with their own gangs, are attacked, and either maintain their power by bloodshed or are deposed by bloodshed. These clumsy wrestlers roll together on the floor of civilization, crying out complicated declarations of their identity which are couched in the forms of dissent even when they agree, for when one gasps ‘You are God,’ the other answers in a repressive roar, as if his claim had been disputed, ‘No, I am God.’ This disorder, though accompanied by cries, gasps, cheers, and shouts, nevertheless seems to accomplish itself in silence, as if it were happening behind a glass; for none of the persons involved ever speak of the real motives which impel them to their agony, but continually refer, in accents of
assumed passion, to motives which do indeed preoccupy some people, but not them. (Meaning 217)

Arnold’s situation is different because, unlike Joyce, he enjoys the selfless recognition of Harriet, his loving companion who validates, accepts and empathises with him, but he is unable to accept and value her “prodigiousness” and the spiritual life she offers him. This causes his downfall. Blind as he is to the altruistic motivations which should inform his political activity, his goal is purely personal and particular, independent of a genuine desire to make his society more democratic. He expects others to treat him as their equal however: “I could never have suffered obscurity, he argued. I shall not rest until all men have admitted that I am their peer; ay, and beg me to make admission of equality” (Harriet 113). Harriet, comparing the performance a “quartet, and the quintet” to the art of government, explicitly articulates the ideal of the democratic process, and the dangers of arrogance:

‘we play together, my love, because in the trio, the quartet, and the quintet, we have solutions of a problem that is, I fancy, not unlike the fundamental problem of government that vexes you politicians […]. Are you not all occupied in finding a form of government which shall allow that invisible thing, the will of the people, to express its sense of the need for its own preservation, and its traditional knowledge of what subserves this or frustrates it; and which shall not be deflected from its end by the personal interests of any group? […]. To sit alone at one’s instrument is to be like an unlimited monarch. If one can express one’s personal genius without let of hindrance, why so we can express our personal follies too’. (Harriet 141)

Arnold cannot identify with Sir George’s and Saltoun’s political ideals, “this fundamental stuff of politics has never interested me. ‘Tis the negotiation that has ever charmed me, and the struggle for eminence” (143). His agenda is clearly ‘personal’. If a governor breaks his contract with the governed and thus betrays their trust, as West sustained in her theory of the corrupting nature of power, he should be removed. The promise exchanged between the “electors and the elected” is based on the assumption that the people should “like” their leader, but neither Arnold nor Joyce are liked; they “drove out the element of liking from the governmental situation” and, instead, asserted that “power should not be won by love but should be seized by force” (Meaning 213).

This contract is not easy to maintain, West acknowledged. The “relationship between a man and a fatherland is always disturbed by conflict if either man or fatherland is highly
developed” (Meaning 339), mainly because the individual will is often hampered by restrictions imposed by the state on a citizen’s liberty for the good of the majority. However, all citizens should have a “drop or two of treason in their veins, if the nations are not to go soft” (Meaning 339). Subjects should curb the potentially unbridled power of a sovereign who can easily become short-sighted: “‘self-criticism’”, Harriet states, “‘is the weakest form of criticism save among the saints”’ (143). However, outright treason is, for West, an unnecessary, generally untimely and unjustified revolutionary impulse. William Joyce was a revolutionary, and a revolutionary blows both hot and cold: he hates order and he loves it: he wants to overthrow the order which exists and which may be the only order capable of existing. But he risks the annihilation of all order only because he believes he can evade it and can substitute for the existing order another which he believes to be superior. This may be an absence of order which, by a mystical logic, he has proved to be more orderly than the presence of order. But perhaps the revolutionary is not really treating order as an end in itself, but using it as a means to an end. Perhaps he is really preoccupied with the establishment of a balance which alone can restore nothingness to a world so obstinately created, so irretrievably stuffed with things. All the available energy of the will is poured out into the destruction of a system that has come into existence not at the behest of that finite human force, the human will, or any number of human wills, but as the result of the interaction of innumerable forces, some invested in man, some diffused through air and fire and water, not combined in man but in their purer forms. Not in a short term is the nature of man modified; so the human interests which profited by a system after it has crashed. The changes wrought by science on earth and air and fire and water proceed slowly; so when the will and earth and fire and water set about to make a new system, it is bound to be like the old. In revolution there is a vast explosion of the creative powers, and nothing is created; nothing is even altered. The appetite for death that is in us all is immensely gratified. (Meaning 126)

Time “inexorably engenders order” (Meaning 210), a social order organised according to the needs of a particular moment as felt by a community with a common culture, a product of the experience of material, economic and social conditions elaborated through time as a strategy of collective survival, an effort to forestall death. Arnold effects a “rebellion” against the “well-ordered society” (Harriet 113) to which he wants to belong; his wish to ensure its continuity is perceived even by him as a “not ignoble reason for his ambition” (Harriet 113). But the means to achieve this goal are ignoble: he eventually acknowledges “there was more than ignobility in his ambition” (129). He
overthrows the “old wing” (114) of the party, associated in his mind with all those who benefit from “integrity” and the “inheritance of tradition” (145) out of vanity and resentment. Arnold is temporarily successful in effecting his “conspiracy to overthrow [his] elders” (163) and persuades himself that his motives are not “mercenary” (163), though his triumph is short-lived. The process spirals out of his control (unaware of his own limitations, he believes that his power is unlimited), since there are circumstances beyond the scope of his will (the ambition of others and the party’s conservatism):

‘Do not forget that I found it impossible to work without surrendering to the principle of negotiation; and that it led me to murder, and logically so. For that principle forbids one ever to let the simple essences of things react on each other and so produce a real and inevitable event; it prefers that one should perpetually tamper with the materials of life, picking this way with the finger-nail, flattening that with the thumb, and scraping that off with one’s knife and stamping it on the ground with one’s feet’. (267)

He is also haunted by his conscience and a sincere respect and “love of order” (25), acknowledged at the end when he is faced by the rule of law as embodied in the ghostly policemen, who are there to preserve order and protect life. To them he confesses that “I am disorder personified” (266). Harriet has “come between him and every human being’s right not to know quite what he is doing” (110). As Harriet points out, Arnold’s litany, “Rampound has done worse than this”, is the haunting voice of his conscience, so she draws out of him what is already within (“her mind was indeed a mirror” (166) of his moral life), and eventually allows him to perceive himself free of his own distorting fantasy about himself: “It is I who have contrived my own ruin by my own qualities. [Harriet] was but conscious of them. She did not manufacture either them, or the external circumstances against which they dashed themselves to pieces” (266). If we recall the constant battle the self wages against an apparently resistant reality described in “A Strange Necessity” (it is against reality that the person tests and modifies his fantasy), Arnold’s eventual acceptance of the limitations of his will is a recognition of the impregnability of the physical world, of his material environment, which offers “resistance” to human understanding, though the act of comprehension must nonetheless be attempted. The existence of an unseen order of things is masked by the distracting, and apparently contingent, surface of reality.
Both characters undergo a transformation, the text does not end with the creation of a new order but a reaffirmation of the values of an older status quo. This narrative structure is comparable to that of melodrama (fall-expulsion-redemption), which begins with the description of an idyllic, peaceful state in Harriet’s home and its immediate destruction, the “catatrophe that befell us in my garden” (100) when she acquires the ability to read Arnold’s thoughts and thus discovers his plan to betray her and marry for advancement. Although read by Arnold as a supernatural phenomenon, Harriet’s mind-reading ability is also a sign that the edenic state of equilibrium, described at the beginning of the book, has been upset:

‘Harriet, I am sure you know that it is so! –that there is a real and infrangible union between us. I will not say it comes from a mystical transfusion of our spirits, for indeed I do not know what spirit is, and this seems something as homely and natural as could be, ay, and very fixed and irrevocable. It is as if our finger-nails were cut from the same piece, or that there was confusion in the first distribution of our parts, and some of your hair is growing on my head, and you have some of mine. Oh, Harriet, admit we are not quite separate, and do not feign we are entirely so!’

She met his gaze and nodded, though she did not seem as gay in assenting to his proposition as he was in making it. (149)

Harriet believes that their ‘spirits’ should be discrete, separate entities, so she is on the defensive, resisting his attempts to corrupt her. She speaks, but cannot act; Arnold is the force that drives the plot. The (temporary) ‘transfusion of our spirits’ is prompted when he introduces discord into Harriet’s enclosed garden: the conflict between good and evil, conceived as embattled opposites, is a “suspension of the proper order of nature” (64). His betrayal of Harriet banishes him from this original state, the garden becomes “accursed”, her house “desecrated” (58). Arnold’s first treacherous act is a partial death, the “fire” in the “hearth” of Arnold’s breast

might have been called loyalty, or gratitude, or nobility, but had now no need for a name since it was ashes, and would presently be dispersed by the winds and be as if it had not been at all. For if he meant to marry Lord Soudeline’s only daughter before he went to Ireland, why, then, he was a traitor; a double traitor, since she was betrothed to the only son of Lord Derrydown. (104)

Between the moment in which an idea is conceived and its enactment there is a moment of reflection, a space in which the will -the faculty of choice and decision- is exercised:
it is at this precise moment that Arnold ‘negotiates’ with himself. Too late does Harriet realise that her self-imposed passivity is also to blame for the “universal crisis” (260). They both learn to love and recognise each other’s nature. For this reason, their relationship is no longer one of antagonism but of interdependency and tolerant co-existence: “‘Ay, we are opposites,’ said Harriet, putting her hands under her cloak as if she feared they might be slapped. ‘But surely that is no great harm. There is the North, and there is the South, and there is no war between them’” (203). Arnold wants to destroy Harriet, until he too understands her “‘pretty image about the North and the South, which would have kept me from identifying difference with enmity, and I most maliciously pretended that the spiritual world had been infected by you with a condition of hatred that was entirely of my own making’” (271). Their mutual recognition, however, has implications beyond that of love, understood as a private emotion, or, as critics believe, difference understood as sexual difference. The claim made by Arnold, when he tries to make sense of Harriet, points to this other meaning:

‘I suspect you of being the embodiment of some principle, of having behind your head or under your feet an invisible scroll bearing the name of some quality such as young women in the mural decorations of some public buildings are prudent enough to display visibly? Are you love? Are you truth? You are not justice, though you might be mercy. Are you poetry? Are you philosophy?’

She made him take the hand she was offering in farewell. ‘Write me down,’ she told him, ‘as all that Arnold Condorex rejected’. (93)

Harriet does not deny that she is a “principle”, but her nature can only be apprehended negatively, she is the “negative impression of the object”. We should recall that West believed that the Good could only be described negatively. Shakespeare, she wrote, depicts “man without grace; so can we understand what grace must be” (West, Court 58); there is no need nor is it possible to depict the Good accurately, it is sufficient to merely discern its existence and orient our action towards it.

As we have seen elsewhere, West believed that in a normal state of mind humans are incapable of perceiving the true nature of reality (and therefore truth and beauty), because they are limited in time and space. However, exalted states of awareness sharpen the senses, and both Arnold and Harriet are habitually in this state, removed from the “plane of actuality […], in a more rarefied atmosphere where each statement is a total and coherent gesture toward the representation of the cosmic moral
drama” (Brooks 40). West incorporated narrative elements conventionally associated with the melodramatic imagination, to use Peter Brooks’ term to describe the rhetorical excesses, heightened dramatisation, a dualistic moral universe and intense, stark emotionalism of this mode. According to Brooks, the tendency to overstatement and the avoidance of ambiguity, emotionalism and moral polarisation—all present in Harriet Hume— is an essential element of melodrama precisely because it is a dramatisation of the battle between good and evil, it offers and makes legible a moral universe of “absolute moral entities” (Brooks 17). The structure of melodrama requires an initial moment in which the identity of innocence is called into question, its signs are temporarily obscured, so innocence can triumph only when its true nature is unambiguously and publicly recognised. The recovery of original clarity entails the parallel acknowledgement of the true nature of that evil which has upset the proper order. In order to recognise fully and articulate the existence of both evil and innocence it is necessary to re-establish their moral identity. Hence, argues Brooks, the rhetorical excesses of the mode, its tendency to “overstatement and overemphasis” (36) express the heightened emotional states when moral identities are thrown into question. The outcome “turns less on the triumph of virtue than on making the world morally legible, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large and bold characters” (42). Characters tend to “say, directly and explicitly, their moral judgements of the world”, not allowing for any ambiguity, nuance or possible opacity of moral categories; moral epithets—integrity, loyalty, gratitude—are a short-hand for characterisation, simply adding to the unambiguous representation of moral categories. Even introspection is “pure expression, the venting of what one is and how it feels to be that way, the saying of self through its moral and emotional integers”. Arnold’s introspection has these characteristics. He openly ‘negotiates’ with himself and is compelled to identify his nature clearly, expressing not only the psychological but the moral and emotional experience of his true nature, unashamedly accepting what he is: “I must admit that I am a rogue in a much less recondite sense than I am a good man. Why, I have all the hallmarks of a rogue, even to the follies, though I am so shrewd” (Harriet 226). Arnold has been so successful in dealing with his conscience that his mind has become a “masked ball” (195). Yet for the moral categories to become clear, for cosmic order to be re-established, evil must be publicly acknowledged and innocence redeemed:
Well, since a rogue never realises his roguehood till it has grown common knowledge to all the world, I suppose my quality has been notorious for years. And the deuce of it is, I am come the wrong time to win success with my peculiar quality, for in each generation there is but one rogue and no more who is allowed to be great. One of the kind the common man is willing to pamper and adore for sometimes he himself tires of respectability, and then it is a comfort to him to see a rogue sitting in comfortable grossness with his ration of eight bottles of champagne and two wenches a day, all earned by cheating, and coming to no harm, nay, on the contrary, rising to power, wearing red robes at the Opening of Parliament [...] For if a rogue can triumph so, the universe is not such a closed prison as they say, and one might find a road yet out of Surbiton. But, mark you, there must be only one of us, for if there are more, why, this ceases to be a heartening dream but another certificate that life is intolerable; since that it would be, if there were an army of scoundrels that had to be fed on earth’s first fruits before the virtuous might eat. Oh, there is reason in it. And the rogue’s single seat is occupied. (227)

Arnold’s downfall makes him a scapegoat who fulfils a public need to affirm the quest for a shared moral and cultural order: “all men rejoice in the ruin of others, and most of all if it be one like me, in whom the desire to rise was a social impertinence” (225). West often acknowledged that societies required sacrificial scapegoats because they speak to the “demons in other men’s hearts and stir them up” (Meaning 22); by purging themselves of their own “meanness” humans are both cleansed and exempt from responsibility for cruelty. But the premise that “pain is the proper price of any good thing” (Black 827) is false because, as she explained, the Good cannot be annihilated: “It is not possible to kill goodness”.

Although Arnold acknowledges that he is driven by an uncontrollable force, there is certainly an element of will involved in his behaviour -he does have freedom of choice. In the garden he is “infected with this monstrous doubt that rising in the world was not the supreme good” (Harriet 63), and this doubt opens the space for reflection. By the end of the novel he is aware of this freedom of choice, “consciousness, the heavy burden which is the will”, but a moral life requires constant effort: humans have no “rest” (230). Once he begins to “negotiate” with himself he loses sight of the moral truths which should guide his action: his choices should be determined by universal principles. The initial order thrown into disarray at the beginning of the novel is reinstated at the end, and in the process Harriet and Arnold establish their moral positions: she loses her telepathic abilities because he has recovered his moral integrity
and Arnold acknowledges that “‘I am that from which a community would in any case … want to purge itself’” (266).

West made use of symbols, value systems and myths to explain human behaviour, acknowledging that humans created these to make sense of their universe at any given moment in history. Their explanations and answers depended on their context because it has always been impossible, she argued, to contend that “all is known, and there can now be laid down a system of rules to guarantee salvation” (Black 171):

Truth cannot be known once and for all: A work of art is the analysis of an experience, an expression of the consciousness of the universe at a particular moment. Religion aims at the analysis of all experience, at an expression of the consciousness of the universe through time. It claims through revelation and prayer to arrive at the final knowledge which art can conceive of existing only at the inconceivable moment when all works of art have been created. (West, “Strange” 52)

West understood Manicheanism as a work of art, a fiction which she used throughout her life to explain human conduct because it held that the “universe is a field for moral effort” (Black 171), a conflict between an instinctive need for the good and order and the sinful nature of human beings. This myth of origins held that there had

been in the beginning of time a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness, existing side by side without any conmixture, and that these had later been confused, as the result of aggression on the part of darkness. This was the origin of the present world, which Mani very aptly called The Smudge. It became the duty of all men who were on the side of the light, which was identified with virtue and reason, to recover the particles of light that have become imprisoned in the substance of darkness, which was identified with vice and brutishness. (Black 172)

It is the task of humans to release the particles of good in themselves and others to further the good of all. The difference between Christianity and Manichaeism is that for the former maintains that humans have a soul, which may, though sinful since the Fall, seek redemption through ritual and sacrament. The latter encourages humans to “analise” themselves in order to seek, in their everyday lives, “virtue and reason”. Manichaenism is, in her view, more realistic about human nature because at no point does it posit the existence of an original, innocent state of nature. It is the duty of the good to seek out the good, and in this Harriet fails: she has remained inactive, a sin she
herself recognises as an abstention from her duty. Goodness must be actualised in time, in action, for its effect to be felt:

‘Why, what was the use of being so innocent in this g-g-garden’, she bleated into her handkerchief, ‘when I had no power to impose my state on the rest of society? I may have been innocent, but I was also impotent. If I had derived a comprehension of harmony from my art, it was a grave lack in me that I could not instil it into others and establish it as the accepted order of life: and I should be churlish if I blamed those who have the power I lacked, and went out into the world, and did what they could or what they knew to govern it. Humanity would be unbearably lackadaisical if it were none but my kind alive. ‘Tis the sturdy desire you have to shape the random elements of our existence into coherent patterns that is the very pith and marrow of mankind. Think, my love! You must admit that when you were not pursuing the chimera of greatness, you performed many very worthy achievements that enabled our species to establish itself on this globe more firmly. Did you not see to the building of bridges, the teaching of children, the suppression of riot and bloodshed? Is that so small a thing?’ (267)

The elements of melodrama illustrate the moral dimension of everyday life in this narrative. It is less stark about moral positions than melodrama, because West thought it naïve to believe that humans were not evil. Arnold is not vanquished or eradicated altogether; he simply resumes his proper place in a moral universe in which evil and good tolerate each other, because “natural man is mean” (Black 172). Manichaeanism tolerates evil, instead of fearing it:

We cannot understand this in the West, where we assume that sincere hostility to sin must be accompanied by a reluctance to contemplate it and desire to annihilate it. But according to the Manichaean faith there was no need to take action against darkness except when it enmeshed with light. When the kingdom of darkness was existing side by side with the kingdom of light without any conmixture, then it was committing no offence. (Black 175)

Toleration is a state of mind. This lesson is important, politically and morally: Arnold’s intolerance is expressed as hatred and represses difference. The conditions humans need to make the choices concerning self-advancement and a good life ree stifled. Otherness should not only be accepted but encouraged. Harriet’s “one duty [is] not to die” (264), and she plays is passive role of resistance vis-a-vis Arnold’s active hatred: “To concede to one’s opposite, in the most infinitesimal degree, is to die” (205). So she remains
intact, an embodiment of a moral principle whose strength lies in its integrity, but whose “disposition to insipid compliancy” (130) is a fault: “‘the end of contemplating the eternal beauties, and doing nothing to yoke them with time,’ mewed Harriet, “is smugness, and stagnation, and sterility!’”. These “eternal beauties” must be actualised in time if they are to exert any influence on reality. Elaborating upon the myth, West suggests that good and evil may also be “known under the names of matter and spirit” (West, Augustine 45). Thus Harriet must act upon the world of matter and Arnold incorporate the spirit in his political life.

Despite the seemingly unambiguous defence of order and tradition associated mainly with the Conservative Party, Harriet Hume does implicitly critique this particular regressive political ideology. Arnold, born in poverty and socially displaced, believes he cannot use the existing democratic institutions to rise to power: he has no loyalty to the existing political institutions nor to a class but instead upholds a sense of nationalism associated with a moribund imperial nation. His club, the Senile Abercon, and the elderly members of the party like Sir George, as well as their offspring (like Ginevra) belong to a dying age and class: without change, nations “go soft”. The peaceful existence that both Harriet and Arnold associate with Andrew and Phoebe is precisely that associated with this antiquated London. However, the city also allows for the social mobility of Arnold and Harriet. Yet there is a difference between this Conservative attempt to forestall change and arrest historical process and the need to encourage change with discrimination, identifying both the loss and the gain which any change implies. The London of Harriet Hume consists of famous architecture, monuments, streets and parks. It is sparsely inhabited, not the bustling modern city of collective action of the Mirror in Darkness trilogy, for example, though it too is more than a physical fact: London is a social institution, a civic space with a wide variety of cultural meanings. However, West restricts her description of London to a particular social milieu, that of the conservative upper classes whose lifestyle, protected with “primitive savagery”, is founded on the “purity of cooks and the sacredness of property” (Harriet 8). Neither Arnold nor Harriet have been born into this class, but Arnold aspires to belong to it whereas she does not. We know little of their origins, though both were born “naked of material inheritance”. Arnold knows nothing about Harriet’s origins, “not even where, in the widest sense, the sense of class, she had been born”, and he too is “never quite sure what class he had belonged to himself” (16). One explanation
for West’s selective survey of London may be found in a review article in which London is clearly identified as the seat of government and political power, tradition and English national identity. Walking along Piccadilly towards St. James’s Square recalling the famous men who have inhabited the buildings along these two miles ( Carlyle, Chamberlain, Balfour, Gladstone, Disraeli, Peel, Wren), the narrator realises that the architecture in Central London does not express the modern life of its inhabitants, but houses “ghosts”: “I pass no buildings which are not either old or designed to harmonize with old neighbours. Not one single architect has found it possible to erect anywhere in those two miles a façade that has any reference to modern life” West, Ending, 55). Her explanation for this “English habit of wandering into the past as a refuge from the distressful present” is historical:

There is a reason why this should be an English and not a generally European habit. The past we can escape to through our associations is not merely the past, it is peace. Between the Crimean and the South African wars nothing military vexed us save distant consequences of our militarist expansion; at home we had a succession of steady governments. The same period in France was split across by the War of 1870: and from then until the Great War it had an average of a government a year. (“Dead”, p.40)

London is not isolating and alienating but reassuring and inclusive, because it allows the narrator to escape into the familiar past and “disregard … the people in the streets who happen to compose the age in which I live” (“Dead” 35). The city has a permanence which places human time in perspective: the products of human endeavour survive the death of their creators, they give a meaningful perpetuity and continuity to human life. These monuments concentrate the past, the present and the possible shape of the future. There are three coexisting temporalities in this text: one is eternal, in which time is not linear or successive, it is the order of the spirit which is mutable but endless. This order prevails at the end. Another intermediate temporal order is the properly human time of history -of politics and art-, and the last is the comparatively short span of an individual life. The haunting presence of the Parcae is a reminder that “all matter [is] subject to growth and decay”, but their mythical quality also invokes the eternal, which is thus inextricably bound up with the first: as Arnold wanders the streets of London at the end of the narrative, time has stopped, the “spiritual world is paralysed” (Harriet 251) and it is only when he is reconciled to his proper place in the order of things that the process
of change is resumed. Arnold and Harriet are immersed in successive time, though she - seemingly ageless- also inhabits those other temporalities: she always “looked as if she were nodding time to music that only she could hear” (17). Thus London is a symbol of the continuity and stability of cultural traditions, and like Harriet’s music, a tangible expression of the knowledge of a people, part of an ongoing process whereby, through interaction with ideas, values, material causes and established practices, they make sense of their lives and their environment. Politics, Arnold’s sphere of action, is part of cultural tradition, the Houses of Parliament are the repositories of political memory, just as London is the site of civic memory, a shared space of recollection of the accomplishments and failures of a people. In The Meaning of Treason, for example, the “neo-gothic outlines” of the Houses of Parliament allude to “Christianity, associated with power, symbolizing tradition, … the tower raised up against the winter skies Big Ben, the portrait of time, wrought large, to be seen by those on both sides of the river, who are alike subject to its discipline” (Meaning 219). Arnold attempts to destroy this order, without a clear idea of what to put in its place.

In Harriet Hume politics are not quite as obvious a theme as in the novels previously examined, because they do not control the novel but are merely located in the context of West’s ongoing preoccupation with the relations between persons, that is, with morality. For West, art and politics are activities by means of which humans come to grips with their reality, understand themselves and their relation to others and to their environment in their search of “order”. Harriet Hume warns us that revolutionary change is predominantly an act of destruction because any significant change can only be effected through time and the unforeseeable interaction of factors beyond the individual will. Politics cannot be the means to achieve a personal end, as they are for Arnold, if only because the individual will is so easily corrupted by the arrogance of self-centred fantasies. However, passivity and silence could be interpreted as consent; Harriet’s self-imposed docility and muteness do not contribute to the makings of a better life either. Far from being an exclusively interpersonal affair, love, the “perpetuation of the agreeable in life, and the frustration of the harsh” (West, “Strange” 53), should be expressed as loyalty to an entire culture. It is therefore necessary to accept the “metabolism of human nature, by which experiences are absorbed into the mind and magically converted into personality, which rejects much of the material life brings to it and handles the rest to serve the interests of love or hate, good or evil, life or
death, according to the inhabiting daemon, whose reasons are never given” (Meaning 336). Ultimately, it is up to the individual to make decisions, judgements and choices by balancing the claims of public morals and private interests in the interest of the general good and personal happiness.
Chapter Five

Private Life
I

Introduction

The two novels discussed in this chapter are not stories about the triumphant liberation from oppressive social structures which force women to bow to restrictive, dominant notions of femininity: the two heroines do not take up an oppositional stance, neither do they identify with other oppressed groups and politics are markedly absent from their awareness. Hervey Russell and Isabelle Sallafranque do not seek to re-write their own lives by embarking upon a trangressive path. Rather, the heroines of both That Was Yesterday and The Thinking Reed, harm themselves as a means of breaking free from limitations which are both external and self-imposed. Yet despite their potentially liberating acts the novels, like their lives, have no closure: the novels end when the protagonists accept the impossibility of radically transforming their lives because their social milieu does not allow for it. What is interesting about these novels is that there seems to be no way out of domesticity, no path into society. The protagonists are critical of their social environment yet realise that they must conform to it, falling back on an internal resistance to social demands rather than taking action in the public sphere of civil society. In both cases the heroines seem to withdraw, reluctantly, resigned, into inwardness: freedom exists, if at all, as a mental condition, irrespective of the contraints imposed by the outside world. Thus Isabelle disapproves of the moral bankruptcy of her aristocratic milieu and retreats into marriage, defending her decision by claiming that her choices are rational and deliberate. Marriage is, as West explained elsewhere, a “shelter from the cruelty of the universe” (“Grandfather” 198). Hervey despises the middle class yet needs it as a source of identity.

II

Storm Jameson’s That Was Yesterday: the End of Youth.

You can’t argue with a raging want. You can, but it is useless. No doubt much would be simpler, and we greatly happier, if life had evolved passions and a mind only in masculine bodies. Life is as blind as justice. It takes the mind of a girl, fires it with ambition and the greed of beauty, houses it in a body apt for bearing, warming, and sheltering of young children, and says: “Mind what I tell you, and get on with your job.” Which job? That is where life has you. The joke is a little grim.

Storm Jameson, That Was Yesterday

No doubt for purely commercial reasons, on the flyleaf of a 1945 edition of Cloudless May Jameson’s fictional oeuvre is classified into two groups, novels about “personal
life” and those about the “crisis”. Listed among the first are That Was Yesterday, “A Day Off”, “Delicate Monster” and Farewell, Night; Welcome, Day; among the latter (I mention only those written between the wars), her Mirror in Darkness trilogy and In the Second Year. The classification is not inaccurate. In her autobiography Jameson explained that the publication of That Was Yesterday coincided with her growing interest in politics which “swung me around the compass as a writer” (Journey 300) by inspiring her to write books of “social significance”; gone was the “narrow ravishingly subjective (egotistical) road” of her previous novels. This shift in perspective implies a rejection of her particular interpretation of high modernism: “no more atmosphere, I said, no evocations of rain and moonlight, even by a word, no ‘inward landscapes’, no peeling of the onion to reach the core of an emotion, no stream of consciousness”.

Jameson’s shift is crucial. However, there are continuities between her ‘personal’ and ‘social’ novels: characters resurface, particularly the female protagonist with the androgynous name of Hervey Russell. London plays a crucial role as a space of modernity and transitoriness, and the conflict between self-determination and socialisation played out as an internal conflict in her personal novels becomes a socialist investigation into how material circumstances determine consciousness: the individual has lost the capacity for absolute self-determination. In That Was Yesterday (1932), a transitional text in her development as a writer, the conflict is internal; nevertheless, played out against the backdrop of the First World War, the breakdown of Hervey’s marriage mirrors the disarray of the pre-war conventions which once regulated impersonal social relations.

All her novels establish in varying degrees a relationship between the crises of social and personal life caused by the bewildering speed of change: adultery emerges as a symptom of the breakdown of social life under the pressures of social and economic disarray and is present in “The Single Heart” (1932), Company Parade (1934), In the Second Year (1936), “A Delicate Monster” (1937) and Loving Memory (1937). As Franco Moretti and Tony Tanner have explained, in literature marriage is a frequent metaphor for the social contract, the act that founds civil society: “For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organizing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure or System” (Tanner 15) with which society structures its operations and transactions, be they interiorised or held up as ideals. Adultery is a transgression of this contract, thus showing the “provisionality of social laws and rules and structures”
(Tanner 15): “It is only when marriage is seen to be an invention of man, and is felt to be the central contract on which others in some way depend, that adultery becomes, not an incidental deviance from the social structure, but a frontal assault on it” (Tanner 17). In In the Second Year, Company Parade and That Was Yesterday adultery and betrayal are metaphors of the erosion of the social contract.

Jameson believed that the war had worsened the position of women, as she explained on one of the few occasions in which she wrote specifically about women:

> I cannot persuade myself that what the advantages of the new order are to my sex. It is a bewildering state of mind to find myself, this summer morning, in the year 1931, when every lane, street, and seashore, is a scene set for the triumph of women. This cherished and precious independence of ours –for which we fought, bit policemen (yes, this I did –in Hyde Park, of a fine Saturday afternoon in the year before the Great War), cut off our hair, grew it again, drove omnibuses, entered Parliament, and walked all day in the rain, carrying a change of clothing, with bare knees and untidy hair- must it be marked down to a doubtful bargain? (Jameson, “Man” 124)

After the war there were calls for new kinds of relationships inspired by the availability of new career opportunities for women and the more widespread use of contraception: Vera Brittain’s “semi-detached marriage” or Bertrand Russell’s “trial marriages” are examples of this desire for more innovative, equal relationships (Russell Marriage; Brittain, Halcyon). However, there was still much evidence in literature of the difficulties, both material and, more importantly, subjective which prevented these changes: the fundamental problem was the centrality of the “ideology of familialism” (Barrett 206). For Brittain and Russell the solution to the problem of child-care resided in an utopian future in which the State would replace the father who “will be completely eliminated before long, except among the rich (supposing the rich to be not abolished by Socialism). In that case, women will share their children with the State, not with an individual father” (Russell, Marriage 122). Interestingly, nowhere is there the suggestion that the father should help to rear children.

In the essay quoted above, Jameson expressed her conviction that women lost ground with the war, despite their tangible gains, because these were accompanied by an unexpected transformation of pre-war ideas of masculinity. Women became responsible materially and emotionally for themselves, their children and their partners
because the division of labour had not been altered substantially despite their greater freedom in the workplace:

The normal tendency of the male has been towards being supported. Woman, on the other hand, tends normally to do the supporting. Every change in the position of woman since the beginning of the century has been towards independence, economic and spiritual. The corresponding changes in the position of man have been first towards discarding the notion that a man is bound to support his wife. This point reached, the normal man finds it easy and natural to rely on the greater energy and competence of a woman in confronting the increased strain of modern life. (“Man” 117)

Men emerged from the war either “tired” or “irresponsible” (“Man” 123). In That Was Yesterday, Hervey Russell is married to a man who does not assume responsibility for either her or their child, and Hervey blames this on the war: “One thing she saw was that the freedom for which some women had been struggling had now lapsed into all their hands” (Yesterday 196). Hervey is caught up and torn by the irreconcilable demands of her roles as mother and wife -the expectations of her in-laws and her mother, in fact of society as a whole- and her expectations of herself:

The division was in herself -between woman and the queer tortured double self of Garton and dreamer, between woman and artificer. To deny the existence of the division would have been silly. As silly as to label one figure sentimental and the other sensible, or one good and the other selfish. There is no final solution. (Yesterday 360)

Hervey is avid for change, although the bewildering number of possible roles available to her are in fact closed. Her divided self embodies the unresolved conflict between her identities as a woman and an aspiring ambitious writer, material circumstances and social prejudices do not allow a satisfactory compromise:

“If I say: I’m working to get money for my child, everyone will say How brave and loyal of you. If I say it’s for myself, because I have an imagination and ambitions, they’ll cry Selfish beast. Here she recalled Charles Frome’s comment on a certain Laurence Storm: “one of your Napoleonic young women, who will have a career and the devil take her man and her child.” The contrast, she said to herself, must have been with his Harriet, who was a known musician when he married her and is now and very beautifully an unknown wife. (She wondered for a brief moment whether Frome himself did not regret the death of the musician.) [...].
She supposed that she was now one of these Napoleonic young women. If I am, I am, she thought, with a foolish feeling of decision. My final responsibility is to [my son] Richard. If I’m leaving him, it’s for his own good as well as mine. And here the familiar anguish seized her. How much is it for my good and how much for his? Is it for his good, at all? Her terrible imagination flung up one picture after another. Children cannot reason themselves into not minding, she thought; he hasn’t lived long enough to feel that there is always another day. Tears gathered in her eyes, and behind them her head felt as though it had been scraped. (Yesterday 360)

However uncertain she may be about the merits of her choice, it is the first decision she has taken as an adult by effecting a compromise between her ambitions and her responsibilities. Just as Harriet Frome, an “unknown wife”, was born from the ashes of a famous musician, so Hervey Russell comes into being out of the metaphoric death of Mrs. Thomas Penn Vane, so the process is reversed. The conflict worked out in the novel is announced at the very beginning:

She like to call herself Hervey Russell. Had she, a married woman, a legal right to the use of her maiden name? Mrs. Thoman [sic] Penn Vane. What nonsense! What a name! She looked in the glass, trying to see the difference between the two Herveys. A face, blurred and half-formed –childish- confronted her. (Yesterday 1)

Hervey’s youth is the psychological point of departure of the novel, which can, arguably, be read as a Bildungsroman because from the outset the protagonist is embarking upon a period of formation of personality. The novel uses elements of this genre, as described by Franco Moretti: the relation between youth and change and the ensuing conflict between youth and maturity, the restlessness and mobility of the protagonist in conflict with the harmonious stability associated with bourgeois happiness set up as a norm, the meaninglessness of existence outside the social whole, the eventual integration of the protagonist into society by means of her gradual disposition to “abandon [her] own viewpoint in order to embrace that of the other” (Moretti 49) and, above all, the legitimisation of the prevalent bourgeois social order because “[o]ne’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple part of a whole”(Moretti 16). But Hervey’s story has one significant ‘rift’. That Was Yesterday begins with the heroine’s already problematic marriage and ends with her rejection of it, the happy ending she imagines does not include her husband: “She would be all right, and [her son] Richard would be
all right -somewhere, and as soon as she had made a little money she would come back for him and they would live happily ever after” (Yesterday 353). However, Hervey does not reject society in its entirety; she does not in fact commit adultery but turns her back on marriage and on heterosexual relationships, to embark upon a process of self-development underpinned by the distorted Puritan ideology of “worldly success” which, according to Jameson, “has eaten deeply into the spirit of England” (Jameson, Decline 292). Puritanism’s “primary virtues”, Jameson believed, are

simplicity, industry, honesty, [which] are self-regarding virtues. […] Simplicity harshened to narrowness, industry to drudgery, thrift to greed. Honesty by careful casuistry fell to necessity and expediency. The touchstone of godliness was worldly success. (Decline 286)

It is due to Hervey’s deep-rooted Puritanism that she turns her back on marriage to Penn and Gage to embark upon the pursuit of her own goals, a legacy of success inherited from her mother’s family: “All her training had gone to strengthen the Garton part of her nature. Her mind was partly her own, her body, she supposed, was altogether her own business, but she had a Puritan spirit, not hers, given to her” (Yesterday 332). The cornerstone of this spirit is self-improvement.

The quest plot of the Bildung, unlike the romance plot, revolves around a protagonist who seeks to interact freely with the world in pursuit of self-definition, growth, the development of a sense of independent, individual selfhood. But the irreconcilable differences between the self of romance and the self of quest are heightened if the protagonist is a writer because, as DuPlessis points out, “using the female artist as a literary motif dramatizes and heightens the already-present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the ideals of striving, improvement, and visible public works, and the feminine version of that formula: passivity, “accomplishments,” and invisible private acts” (DuPlessis 84). Literary conventions, argues DuPlessis, are organised by ideological scripts which depict experience and interpret it. According to her, they produce and disseminate the “assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create fictional boundaries for experience. Indeed, narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale –as a system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is” (DuPlessis 3). It is the project of twentieth-century women writers to solve the contradiction between love and quest by replacing traditional endings with alternative resolutions, a project in which
many writers between the wars were engaged, although in many cases the contradictions were resolved with great difficulty.

As Franco Moretti has explained, the Bildungsroman plays out “a dilemma coterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (15). For female protagonists this process entails integration into a society organised by prevailing cultural understandings of gender, and generally means that they take up their rightful place as wives, mothers and daughters. Yet even in a novel like That Was Yesterday which severely criticises the assumptions underlying heterosexual relations the influence of romance retains a strong hold over Hervey’s imagination. Her quest begins the moment in which she realises that the promises of her marriage are incommensurate to its reality; however, even then, a “poet of the facile sweet-sweet school existed in her mind, always on hand to make fauns out of lean young schoolmasters and the like” (Yesterday 16). That Was Yesterday uneasily resolves the contradiction between Hervey’s pursuit of her vocation and her roles as mother and wife: the failure of one plot makes room for the beginning of another, but they clearly cannot coexist, so she reaches a compromise by accepting the imperfect, unjust social order for the sake of practicality and sacrificing her youth and illusions.

Hervey experiences marriage as an exile from the social world, the symbolic death of her budding potentialities rather than the fulfilment of her womanhood. Her marriage transforms her perception of the world around her. Contrary to custom, marriage is not a means to become a member of society. The public space in which she should move freely, the social field for self-realisation, is inaccessible and she observes it in complete passivity.

Everything now depended upon Penn. With his air and manner he would soon get a better post; in time he would be a headmaster, and there would be money for everything Richard needed. ‘Have you met Vane’s wife yet? She’s charming: that young man will go far’. (Yesterday 114)

She follows her husband from one dwelling to another, optimistically shedding her belongings with each move, though invariably she finds herself trapped again in the domesticity she hates, and defeated by her inability to balance the new possibilities open to her and the pressures of motherhood. At the same time, she withdraws from the
world by turning into herself, at first stubbornly, disdainfully refusing to engage actively with it until she eventually becomes incapable of doing so. This is a spiralling voyage inwards which is not an introspective journey of reflective self-discovery but a gradual disintegration of personality that comes to an end when she is forced out of her old, inert self and is born anew or, as Moretti has expressed it, she must “grow weary” of her individuality and allow the process of living to continue by developing a firm sense of self capable of elaborating life-plans and making choices. Because she comes to perceive the world around her through the narrowed, distorting viewpoint of her personal desires, she cannot acknowledge a world which exists independently of her wishes; in fact, the less attentive and the more absorbed in detail she is, the greater the perceived threat from the other. No longer a stable familiar whole, the increasingly arbitrary social world becomes an enemy that persecutes her, so she is suspicious and distrustful of it whether it takes the form of Penn’s parents, her mother or the strangers that cross her path and only heighten her already extreme self-consciousness. When her relationship vis-a-vis the other is completely distorted, she cannot bring together the different parts of her experience into a meaningful whole.

One telling expression of her sense of detachment and resulting disorientation, for example, is the “elaborate system of magic” she fabricates out of a desperate need to create the illusion that she controls her fate:

If I reach that tree before another person passes me there will be a letter. If the number of steps I take between here and the gate of the field is even. If that gate is still open when I reach it. The validity of this magic lies in not cheating. Steps must not be lengthened or hurried, but if a test failed to produce the right answer there was always another that could be made, with an equal hope. (Yesterday 248)

The depth of her despair is further emphasised by her self-imposed daily routine, which again gives her life a semblance of order and a degree of control over her life:

She ordered her days with a pathetic precision, so that she could sweep, scrub, wash clothes, cook, dust, polish furniture, prepare food, dig, and look after Richard with an equal energy, and no time wasted between jobs, not so much time as it takes a thought to drop between two seconds. (Yesterday 164)
Hervey cannot be spontaneous and has difficulty articulating and communicating her anger: she “had lost the habit of linked thought” (87). Her engagement with the other is no longer the free play of negotiation and exchange, the constant mediation between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ worlds, but becomes automatic because she does not have the viewpoint of a personality with which to filter and interpret experience. Hervey seems to conduct her interaction with social reality according to predetermined texts written by herself in solitude, again a desperate effort to control her circumscribed and meaningless life. One of the recurring images she has of herself is as a famous writer: “I wanted a bright gay quick life, to write and to listen and to see and hear and learn” (107). See, learn, listen, hear: Hervey protectively cuts herself off from what gradually becomes a threatening reality, the “ways of escape seemed closing” (87):

She did not know that anything was wrong with her or that she was in some way, not to do with her physical ear, deaf. Her mind, clumsy and powerful, blundered about, peering through her sharp long-sighted eyes and listening to a vast dissonance of unrelated sounds, which in the moment of entering her mind ceased to be sounds and became hard scattered images, like the rubble of stones and roots left behind by the vanishing cream. (186)

Hervey’s gradual, self-imposed reduction of her sphere of activity is one aspect of a particularly feminine form of passive protest: self-starvation. Because she cannot satisfy her worldly ambitions she deliberately attempts to restrain her appetites by focusing on food to the exclusion of all else and on her ability to survive without it. Hervey substitutes the spoken word with tears, her craving for fame is substituted by the private performance of self-starvation, so ultimately she feeds only on her imagination. Like women who suffer from anorexia, her hunger expresses rage against the circumscription of her life, though it is “A self-defeating protest”, writes Maud Ellmann in The Hunger Artists, “since it is women who become the victims of their own revolt […] The anorectic turns her anger into hunger, and eats herself up lest she should be tempted to engorge the opportunities that she has been denied” (Ellmann 2). Eating, as Ellmann suggests, is an exchange which enables the self to establish boundaries in relation to the other, a sense of self “is established by excluding what is not itself, and by devouring whatever it is striving to become” (40). Hervey cuts herself off from her social world when she marries, narrowing her attention to her hunger, sustaining the
illusion of self-control by regulating what she takes into her body: the simplest transaction of all becomes the most perilous.

Hervey chooses to starve, at first justifying it to herself as a sacrifice for her son, although she deliberately seeks contact with those things she craves for herself:

She went out of her way to come home past the shops, and bought Richard a box of soap. She bought the best baby soap, just as she bought him the best powder and fine woven vests and special milk. It was to pay for these things that she starved herself. She never thought of doing anything else. Naturally, if you have a baby, you give it the best. Her sound middle-class upbringing made this seem perfectly reasonable. She scarcely believed that she was half starved, since reputable persons do not starve. (165-66)

Later, however, her hunger becomes an end in itself, a platform which allows her to position herself as morally superior to all those people who make impossible demands upon her: “she would have preferred to go on being miserable. There is a stage in any misery when the victim begins to find a deep satisfaction in it” (84). Maud Ellmann has argued that starvation is a form of speech whose meanings are embedded in the particular cultural milieu in which it occurs. Unlike the political hunger strikes of the suffragettes, who refused food in the name of a collective movement, or the hunger marchers of 1931 for whom it was a sign of exploitation, Hervey’s hunger speaks out against circumstances which have no bearing on other women in the novel. At no point is there any suggestion either from herself, other characters or the narrator that her silent protest is anything more than the result of her private idiosyncrasies. Nonetheless, it is a self-imposed fasting which takes on several interrelated meanings.

To begin with, it is a form of self-mortification with which she punishes herself for her past actions and frustrating inability to act as a free, thinking individual: “She was painfully humiliated by the thought that she would have to confess that life had trapped her at the very beginning -before she had done all the things she meant to do” (Yesterday 86). But ‘life’ is a process in which the individual engages to various degrees of efficacy. Obviously Hervey chose to marry Penn, her marriage is a trap she herself set up as if to sabotage deliberately her own desire to live a life for herself. Chronically fearful of failure, she places obstacles in her way to pre-empt any possibility of disappointment by simply avoiding a situation which would test her as yet untested potentialities. But her self-starvation is also an atonement for disappointing her
mother, Sylvia Russell, who “in some obscure way counted on Hervey to make up to her defeat and laying waste of her own life. And no one would ever know the bitterness of her disappointment when at nineteen Hervey married” (48).

Another possible meaning of her self-starvation emerges, as we have seen above, from a distorted understanding of maternal self-sacrifice for husband and child, taking her “Victorian sense of duty” to an unreasonable extreme. Although she fulfils her role as nurturer adequately, her efforts are not acknowledged and she therefore feels unjustly treated. This gives her the satisfaction of moral superiority which is the impulse behind her desire to “rub Penn’s nose in the fact of her hunger” (249). In turn, he does not keep up his end of the marriage bargain: “He was not a father or a husband, not a support; not even an equal” (349). As Ellmann has pointed out, “it is impossible to live by hunger unless we can be seen or represented doing so” (Ellmann 17), the viewer must be implicated in the spectacle for the hunger striker’s purpose to be validated. Ironically, Penn is oblivious to her suffering: “she fainted and came to herself much surprised on the cold tiles of the floor. “Now, how did I come to do that?” she said aloud, and getting no answer gave the question up. In the morning she told Penn, and he laughed so spontaneously that she saw he did not believe her. This vexed her. It is disappointing to faint and get no credit for it” (164). Her hunger simply reinforces her sense of invisibility because its language is not decoded by anyone. If, as Ellmann says, “its secret is to overpower the oppressor with the spectacle of disempowerment […], it is an ingenious way of playing hierarchical relations rather than abnegating their authority (Ellmann 21). In Hervey’s case this type of blackmail fails altogether.

Ultimately her self-starvation is an attempt to escape her physicality (her failed suicide is a precedent). She imagines that she wants to “live like a vagus, without home, without duties, without decency” (Yesterday 29) by imitating the life of the ascetic, in which case her body becomes a burden: “self-inflicted hunger is a struggle to release the body from all contexts, even from the context of embodiment itself. It de-historicizes, de-socializes, and even de-genders the body” (Ellmann 14). This attempt at disembodiment will release her from her marital duties: “you were held [to your husband] because he did you the honour of his body” (Yesterday 230). But Hervey at no time feels any sexual pleasure, despite the fact that she is familiar with Stopes’ Wise Parenthood: “She could scarcely keep her eyes open and when he finished with her she fell asleep without moving” (Yesterday 61). Hervey does her best to disappear.
The protest is not exclusively directed at Penn but at all those whom she blames for her utter dispossession:

Lying hungrily in bed, she heard them talking and laughing downstairs. That loud Vane laugh, of which they are all so proud, she thought bitterly. I should like to turn them out of my house. Waves of dislike and futile anger rolled over her. She clasped her hands over her empty hunger. I hate them all—Penn, too. She felt an insane resentment of their mere presence in her house. I won’t have them in my house again. My house—I’m like my mother, she thought dimly, she always says My house, my threshold. Her teeth chattered, half from cold half with hunger. I could have been eating a good dinner tonight instead of cooking it for them to eat alone. She choked back tears of disappointment. I didn’t want their food. Don’t think of it, think of something else. (135)

Hervey construes the intentions of others as malevolent, they deliberately flaunt their enjoyment in the face of her misery, to which they are oblivious. Additionally, by not sharing her meals she is rejecting the sociability associated with communal living which would require from her the emotional and imaginative effort to understand others as well as the effort to articulate her own thoughts and emotions. She substitutes companionship with imaginary conversations: “She talked to herself a great deal. Sometimes she noticed it and tried to check it” (82). As well, she feeds her hunger with imaginary meals: “She ate an imaginary poached egg through all its stages, from the first delicate incision when the yoke pours out, smooth and yellow, to the final polishing of the plate with a piece of bread pushed across it, as if absentely, on the end of a fork” (82). The more she starves herself the greater her verbosity becomes, particularly significant because she is a writer. Although she cannot keep herself alive by writing, she feeds on her imagination: “Hervey Russell’s [imagination] was erratic to a degree, not powerful enough to lift her clear off the ground, and yet able to distract her and set her stumbling among common things. In short, less imagination than an ignis fatuus of her spirit” (44). She lives in a state of reverie, she “eat[s] enough to keep alive” (86). Her self-starvation is a means of quenching this “ignis fatuus”, of exorcising what she sees as an irrepressible “beast” living within her which makes her restless and dissatisfied with her lot:

Her senses were for a moment fully roused, ripples of excitement rising slowly in her and dying slowly away. She was familiar enough with this experience, which was always and only the product of her
uncontrolled imagination. It was the only form of purely sensual pleasure she knew. No doubt there was an unclean beast living in her mind. How it came there first she had no idea. But she believed that she was the only person in the world who habited with a beast, and she concealed the fact of its existence and its secret shameful ravages from everyone, and especially from Penn. (16)

If she can starve the “beast” out of herself she can live with a void. Her own imagination undermines her equally strong desire to return to the world of the living on different terms from those available to her. Food becomes “a metaphor for all objects of desire” (Ellmann 24): “Into Hervey’s [mind] was poured thoughts of her hunger, her unfinished book, the obscurity of her life, and a blind terror” (Yesterday 91). Her “passions”, variously called “intractable spirit”, “enemy”, “raging force”, “trapped animal”, “lust for possession”, “volcanic energy” throughout the novel, seem to be spontaneous anti-social, destructive forces, inherited from her mother:

Without knowing it, she [Sylvia Russell] felt that she must go on trying to cure Hervey of an intractable spirit. It was like an enemy, whom she had never been able to defeat in herself and who now defied her in the body and mind of her own child. The unmerciful thrashings she had given the child Hervey had all been aimed at this cunning enemy lying hidden in the tender flesh. (68)

Hervey must learn to channel her energies because they distort her perception of herself and of the world, they are “visions” (similar to those of religious ascetics) on which she feeds, though they are also paralysing, making her aware of the emptiness within and heightening the disproportion between her reality and the impracticable alternatives she constantly conjures up to escape it. Her ‘visions’ are never shared, but her despair is communicated in yet another way:

She thought confusedly and all at once of her unfinished manuscript, the turnip, her empty stomach, and the cracks in her finger-tips. They jostled each other in her mind like waves running to leap in a fountain of spumy water, and the pressure of them all together was too much for her. Her tears started freshly: she covered her face and felt them spurting between her fingers. Every effort she made to control them started a fresh new spring. She cried because she was hungry and because of her book and her hands and Penn’s want of sympathy and her shabby dress and her hunger. (151)

Weeping is, as Roland Barthes has explained, an outpouring addressed to someone, it is a “kind of blackmail” with which, like self-starvation,
I want to impress someone, to bring pressure to bear upon someone (“Look what you have done to me”). It can be –as is commonly the case- the other whom one thus constrains to assume his commiseration or his insensibility quite openly; but it can also be oneself: I make myself cry, in order to prove to myself that my grief is not an illusion.(Barthes 181-82)

Yet again, no one is present to witness Hervey’s suffering, so her weeping is self-serving, a self-induced despair with which she proves to herself that she has substance: Hervey is the only spectator of her melodramas.

Hervey’s socialisation is based on her development of ‘common sense’:

There were always, all her life, two forces at work in Hervey to destroy her. One was an impatient spirit which flogged her from step to step of her life: she could never wait on the event, she must always be managing and altering and plotting, unpicking the seams of events in a frenzied effort to make them fit better together; and what between this impatience and a kind of spiritual clumsiness that brought her to overlook the most obvious facts until they were crashing on her, she continually made mistakes and wasted herself in useless or calamitous efforts.

The other was the truceless struggle which would never end until she was old and tired. Perhaps not then. She pretended that she was stolid and sane. Actually she was violent, eccentric, cat-nervous, and sensitive to the verge of mania. (28)

Compromise, the result of “learning by experiment” as Marion Milner put it (128), is not an option open to Hervey in the state she is in throughout most of the novel. Impervious as she becomes to the world around her she cannot -indeed, stubbornly refuses to- negotiate the bewildering complexities of reality: hence her incapacity to be moderated, “at no time in her life is Hervey Russell eager to count her blessings, count them one by one. The half loaf that is better than no bread sticks ungratefully in her throat” (Yesterday 38). She can only be attentive to one thing at a time. Hervey’s illusory immunity to external influence is a result of her incapacity to separate thought from thing, which means that everything is coloured by her shrunken self. Ashamed of visibility, she fears and resents the judgement of her social equals, but she is also a snob, pretending to herself that she cares nothing for the opinion others have of her. Like all snobs, Hervey has pride in status rather than in profession or class, and in a shifting society like hers it becomes crucial to read people according to their lifestyle,
visible signs of their status status in dress, taste, speech, deportment, which Hervey lacks although she feels entitled to them. The dominant emotions of the snob, according to Lionel Trilling, are “uneasiness, self-consciousness, self-defensiveness, the sense that one is not quite real but can in some way acquire reality” by surrounding oneself with the “tokens of power” (Trilling, “Manners” 212). It is characteristic of the novel, he continues, to “record the illusion that snobbery generates and to try to penetrate to the truth which, as the novel assumes, lies hidden beneath all the false appearances” (“Manners” 213). What we see is the truth of Hervey’s impoverished circumstances. However, it is the other world, that of appearances which she values. The distance between these two dimensions is precisely what Hervey has to come to terms with because it is her stubborn self-importance that alienates other characters: “always diffident with new people, she thought she presented a picture of civil dignity -hostess in waiting. Actually she looked gloomy and indifferent” (Yesterday 251). Hervey simultaneously reveres and resents middle-class lifestyle, it is the world in which she wants to excel but she resents the enslaving hold it has on her imagination which does not allow her to “count her blessings one by one”. She expects and demands a great deal from her equals but suffers perpetually from the gross disproportion between her aspirations and their satisfaction by blaming the others for placing insuperable obstacles along her path to fame.

The actions of others are invariably perceived as a personal affront because of her heightened sensitivity to social difference, but even an event as ominous as the war “means less to me than the price of eggs or flour or what to give Penn for dinner” (89). Her states of heightened perception are “realised only at moments when something happened which jerked her to attention” (177). The episodes of domestic violence, in part deliberately provoked, excite her because they ‘jerk’ her out of her private, isolating reverie. Apart from being a disturbing description of the emotional violence of domestic life, they also illustrate that she is complicit in her humiliation:

A fog of rage and despair filled Hervey’s mind. She bent down and snatched his book from him and threw it across the room. Penn stood up quickly, with a furious face. His eyes had gone flat and cold.
“Pick it up.”
Hervey grinned at him. She felt excited and reckless, happy in a way. “Who do you think I am?” she said in a harsh jeering voice.
“Your mother? If she hadn’t behaved like a fool with your father he might be a reasonable human being. Pick up your own books.”
Penn drew up his arm sharply, bent at the elbow, like a puppet.
“Call her a fool again.”
“She behaves like a fool,” Hervey said.
Penn’s arm jerked, and came down on the side of her head.
Hervey fell clumsily. As she lay on the floor he lifted his foot quickly
and kicked her, then he turned his back on her and sat down again
with his book, stepping over her to pick it up.
Hervey lay dazed. She felt sick and frightened and after a time
she began to cry in a hopeless, determined way. Her mind was still
excited, but the fall had steadied her as well as shocked her. (91)

Hervey cannot engage in a genuine dialogue, trapped as she is in the familiar rhetoric of
the ‘scene’ with Penn, which provides the occasion for her to justify and air her
otherwise inarticulate anger against him and herself. Gone is the ideal of conjugal
felicity, marriage becomes the scene of a ‘sex war’: “There was a struggle between
them, certainly, but she would win, not Penn. She might be hurt, perhaps spoiled, but in
the end she would win, it might be only in the end” (230). As Roland Barthes acutely
observes, the purpose of a ‘scene’ is precisely that the couple engage in a rehearsed
confrontation which will not separate them but in fact is merely the continuation of an
endless exchange, the object of which is lost in the battle to gain the mastery of the ‘last
word’. Scenes are inconsequential, they go nowhere, “no scene has meaning, no scene
moves toward an enlightenment or a transformation” (Barthes 206). The scenes between
Hervey and Penn always reach a predictable impasse, physical aggression is just another
expression of their verbal violence. The dynamic cannot be resolved except by the
dissolution of the marriage bond: “She was aware, though not consciously, of the
impalpable thread joining her to Penn. It quivered between them, unbroken in spite of
anger, spiritual cleavage, and even dislike. It held below these. It could only be
destroyed by violence, by violent repudiation of it. She was so far from repudiating it
that the thought of leaving Penn only handed her over to despair”(153). Just like other
female characters in Jameson’s novels -Lotte, Evelyn, Georgina- Hervey seeks violence
as a means to wrench herself out of the ennui of domesticity to momentarily attain one
of those “rare moments of ecstasy when she knew she was alive” (194).

For Hervey, “[f]ood is the prototype of all exchanges with the other, be they
verbal, financial, or erotic” (Ellmann 112.), it is the currency for an exchange between
her self and the world which begins when she accepts her relationship with the
American Captain Gage, a cultural other, who plays a mediatory role and facilitates her
reintegration into the world by suggesting a route to “lift her out of this dull, habitual
life” (Yesterday 311). Although this amorous episode is brief, it prompts the transformation of her life:

In some indefinite war her experience of Gage had destroyed the last props of her patience. He had made her feel more sharply than ever that nothing was worth while except to use all your energy and wits in some venture. This feeling was not new, he had not started it in her, but he had helped to make it an obsession. Her helplessness made her angry and bitter. (348)

Gage feeds her: he gives her a bowl of ice-cream, takes her to the American mess hall for lunch, invites her to a ball with a splendidly spread table, and generally courts her. At a very basic level, he even offers her the possibility of forming a romantic liaison, thus fulfilling her romantic fantasies in the image of an Ethel M. Dell romantic novel. More importantly, however, he inspires her to speak:

She had an exhilarating feeling that she could say anything to the American. This feeling excited her, because she was always so careful with people, careful not to offend them and if she liked them careful above everything else not to hurt. She kept so much back that scarcely anyone who knew her knew what she was like […] She spent so large a part of her time considering other people and their feelings and prejudices that very little of her real self came through, and it is not surprising how slight an impact she made on others. The effect she had on them was nearly always the effect, only the effect, they had prepared for themselves by their attitude. She gave back to them an echo of their own thoughts and emotions at the time, and kept herself shut away. (298-99)

The passion behind her obsession for him is, as she says, not a new one, but the notion of a “venture” is. Gage is at once radically different yet similar to Hervey, embodying that part of herself which must be controlled if she is to function properly in the world and which has haunted her from the beginning of the novel:

But he was alive, more, and more sharply alive than anyone she had ever known. And this was what she wanted. She had been half dead, her vitality, the deep, grasping energy she had through her mother and her grandmother, going slowly to waste in her. He made her more restless, more impatient with her un-getting life. He appealed to every impulse in her that sensible, disciplined people either do not have or have trained out of them. In some part of her nature she was crude, violent, and sentimental, wanting excitement and change more than she wanted other things. (311)
She resumes the quest she had abandoned upon marriage, and begins to plot a narrative for herself. Although Hervey is not integrated into the social order as harmoniously as the protagonist of a female Bildungsroman, she accepts it by channelling “passion”, the destructive, formless force within her (which is both her undoing and the origin of her resistance) towards the outside. But Gage, as she perceives him, is nothing but a mediator who enables her to give expression to her ‘true’ modern self: restless, vivid for change, forward-looking, ambitious. It is through him that she is allowed to move forward into the post-war era (it is no coincidence that he is American) by counting her losses and moving on: hence the title of the novel taken from Gage’s belief that “Only a damn fool worries about what happened yesterday” (331).

Rene Girard has explained in his classic Deceit, Desire, and the Novel that once an individual surrenders to another his fundamental prerogative, the capacity to choose his own objects of desire, he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire, they are chosen by an other, a mediator (Girard 1). Girard calls this economy between subject-object and mediator “triangular desire” and I believe it structures Hervey’s relationship to her world. To begin with, her yearning for “Fame, money, success” (Yesterday 235) is instigated by her mother, just as her romantic fantasies are inspired by sentimental fiction:

How was she to know that this couch, treasured by her mother above much, was itself the vague reminiscence of a couch belonging to Sylvia Russell’s own mother, with whom she had quarrelled, and that that couch in its turn was the embodiment of a memory, kept alive through years, in the mind of a young girl.

She wanted the couch in the window. All considerations of prudence went to the winds. I must have it, she thought, stepping back to see it better. Her mind moved in a fog of desire, blind to everything but the object. (11)

Unless her passion has an object to which it can be directed, it is, as we have seen, destructive of the self, and only through the intervention of a mediator can the object be brought to her attention and acquire value. Even Hervey rises in her estimation when another -even an imaginary mediator- sees her. Her writing is itself imitative: “Her novel was not really a novel, though this the poor silly young creature did not know. It was a number of scenes written, so far as she could imitate them, in diverse styles she admired, and though the hand was the hand of Hervey the words had commonly been
used by Philip and T.S. and others” (185). She often thinks of herself in the third
person, through the eyes of an/other for whom she is a heroine:

Entering the room with a light assured step, Miss Russell looked
smilingly from one man to the other. Her manner was modest, but
frank and pleasing. She kept her eyes on the editor’s face all the time
he was talking, thus distracting his attention from her shabby coat.
This young woman would hold her own in any company. ‘Yes, I see
your point,’ Miss Russell said kindly, ‘but for my part’… ‘What did
you think of her?’ ‘Very young, isn’t she? And shabby?’ ‘Yes, but
what an intellect,’ ‘Oh, I agree.’ Miss Hervey Russell, the youngest of
our dramatic critics, is the author of that brilliant and penetrating.
Young, but poised”. (11)

In these imaginary scenarios Hervey expresses desires which she does not experience
spontaneously but by imitation, although her hunger may seem to emerge and originate
from within her, sustaining the “illusion of spontaneous desire and of a subjectivity
almost divine in its autonomy” (Girard 28). Girard argues that if a character’s
expectations did in fact originate in the self they would be satisfied by the self, but
Hervey is young and open to suggestion because she needs to fill the void of her lack of
experience through the experience of others. She both reveres and despises the other
(society), she resents the hold it has on her yet is incapable of existing without it
because she cannot live like a “vagus”. She is condemned, however, to a life of
insatiable hunger because, as Girard has explained, possession of the object is
invariably disappointing (Girard 39): “She thought about the chicken but when it came
her stomach turned against food. The savoury smell rising from it only made her feel
sick” (Yesterday 84). Like Hervey, “every hero of a novel expects to be radically
changed by the act of possession” (Girard 53) because she feels an “insuperable
revulsion of [her] own substance” (Girard 54). Thus, when she can at last possess Gage
she rejects him because “the absurd thought that she was dying crossed her mind for a
moment” (Yesterday 329). What will die is her emerging self, because Gage not only
wants to marry her but is, in fact, herself, and surrendering to him would be tantamount
to surrendering to that aspect of herself that she wants to stifle.

“I, I, I, her mind stammered, like a bird calling in the first days of spring, a few
clear stuttering notes” (44). That Was Yesterday is an unusual novel of formation, in
that it does not follow the straightforward progress from youth to maturity, from
isolation to socialisation of the protagonist which one expects from such a form,
although this stammering ‘I’ emerges as a mature person by the end, despite the loosely structured narrative which moves from one banal, repetitive quotidian scene to another without any apparent strengthening of the protagonist’s sense of self. The sequence of scenes may effectively evoke Hervey’s stifling experience of domesticity and the *impasse* of marriage, “the ritual of existence, endlessly repeated” (12), but neither the narrator nor herself - in her endless ruminations- give us any indication of her destination. All we know is why she wants to move: the novel begins when she is in stasis. Read against the backdrop of the War, however, the novel is also an expression of the pain of loss of the pre-war youth that would become the lost generation: Hervey’s second novel is a “book of youth” in which she will record “before it was too late, the colour of life before the war, her life, when she and Philip and T.S. were very young, in London. They had seemed then to be on the marches of a new world. They expected so much of it. They held up little pennants of idealism and hope, which flew straight out, towards a cleaner freer world than the one behind them, the stuffy half-Victorian world on which scornfully they turned their backs” (274). In a sense That Was Yesterday is an elegy to that generation as experienced by a “stay-at-home” as much as it is an elegy to the death of Mrs. Thomas Penn Vane.

III

Rebecca West’s *The Thinking Reed: the Moral Life*

Would it not be better to recognise that; to confess that humanity is possessed by a devil as well as by an angel; to admit that in our tolerance of poverty we commit all day and every day something just as merciless as our sending forth of armies to the front; and to scrutinise every act of our will henceforward in case it is our expression of this will to misery and death? […] In peace and war we have a disposition to commit cruelty and suffer cruelty, which can only be checked by the most rigorous use of the intellect.

Rebecca West

Is it not clear as day that man’s condition is dual? The point is that if man had never been corrupted, he would, in his innocence, confidently enjoy both truth and felicity, and, if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea either of truth or bliss. But unhappy as we are (and we should be less so if there were no element of greatness in our condition) we have an idea of happiness but we cannot attain it. We perceive an image of the truth and possess nothing but falsehood, being equally incapable of absolute ignorance and certain knowledge; so obvious is it that we once enjoyed a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

Storm Jameson and Rebecca West were both concerned with the question of how to lead a moral life in the absence of a plausible religious conception of the world and the moral certainties that had bolstered the Victorians. For Jameson it was the responsibility
of the intellectual to provide moral guidance; literature and criticism were vital cultural practices to the formation of social cohesion. Thus the ideals which bind society are products of specific individuals. West gave that role to the accumulated cultural wealth of society, which included the arts, politics, science as well as the practices of everyday life. For West, moral beliefs and practices were not arbitrary but impersonal criteria which expressed and shaped the behaviour of the individual. The field of her inquiry was more restricted than Jameson’s because she explored the impact of social and cultural forces on the individual consciousness. To use Richard Rorty’s convenient distinction, Jameson believed that books “help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others”, while West explored “ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people” (Rorty 141). For both, the aim of the writer was to understand why human beings were cruel, so as to work out lasting solutions to the social and political problems of their time.

Feminist criticism has focused on West’s concern with gender and inequality, an important aspect of her work especially before WW1 and her novels of the 1920s. I would like to argue, however, that this was no longer her main or only concern by the end of the decade, despite her continued contributions to Time and Tide and membership of the Six Point Group. Like Jameson, West recognised that feminism was incapable of addressing the political and social problems facing Europe because they were not caused by patriarchy alone, but by moral disorientation and the isolating and corrosive effects of capitalism. For West, the oppression of women became simply another example of cruelty: “I realized that the subjection of women serves no purpose whatsoever except to gratify the desire for cruelty both in men and women” she wrote in 1940 (“This” 380). Later in life West and Jameson looked back to the pre-war period from their different vantage points and agreed that they had been politically naïve in their belief that, as West puts it, “We were quite sure that human nature was good and would soon be perfect” (“This” 100). Her thought, I believe, became more complex between the wars, and subsequently acquired a thematic consistency which one can trace from her short essay “My Religion” of 1926, the biography of Saint Augustine (1933), her essay “Goodness Doesn’t Just Happen” (1940), The Meaning of Treason (1949), “I Believe” (1953), to The Court and the Castle (1958) which all address the issue of what it means to lead a good life in a secular age deeply influenced by centuries of Christian theology. This is a troublesome aspect of her work, because the origin of
many of West’s ideas is often obscured in the process of appropriation and reinterpretation of the thought of various authors. It is important to pay attention to the many influences she had, not only to better understand her peculiar brand of feminism but to deepen our understanding of the connections between her fictional and non-fictional work.

West was deeply worried by “society”, but she addressed social issues from the perspective of the cultural assumptions which shaped behaviour in specific historical moments. Her historical perspective was broad, cultural assumptions were read within the context of very long historical narratives, and she was mainly interested in one aspect of the Western tradition: “All writers and all readers are affected by forces emanating from the Bible and classical literature, if not consciously or perceptibly, then as the world of all things on it are affected by the cosmic rays: the experience does not enter into consciousness yet nevertheless will be a determining influence” she wrote in 1958 (Court 3). These “forces” indeed shaped individual consciousness, and she believed their influence persisted even after the material conditions in which they emerged no longer existed. That is, ideas arose in specific historical circumstances to solve specific problems yet on occasion outlived these circumstances, albeit in radically different form. West’s interpretation of historical change is peculiar, yet it is progressive. Human behaviour is social so is subjected to dominant moralities.

The only other assumption West makes about human nature is that it is discordant, her interest in Augustine, Manicheanism, Pascal and Freud confirms this since in different ways they too posit a dualistic human nature. Therefore, although she does believe that man is cruel by nature, she also believed, like Pascal, that human beings were capable of being good. Hence the importance of cultural tradition and her constant preoccupation with the question of determinism and free will. However, West also believed in a third element or order of existence, grace in theological terms, but for her an epiphanic Wordsworthian moment or “intimations” (“Grandfather” 171) as she called it, neither visionary nor mystical in the Augustinian/Pascalian sense but a moment of heightened consciousness in which mind and body, perception and feeling come together. She equated progress with man’s quest for happiness which required the harmonisation, however temporary or fleeting, of the disarray of the human psyche. The purpose of science, the arts and the practices of everyday life is the acquisition of knowledge about the workings of the human psyche and society and thus all contribute
to the eventual elimination of that destructive impulse manifesting itself in history which has caused so much misery in the world: “if one hopes that someday the mind shall govern life, then it is of value that one shall be shown a small instance of the sadism that makes the human being rejoice in killing, hurting, robbing its neighbour [...] ; and that therefore the mind must walk proudly and always armed, that it shall not be robbed of its power” (West, “Elegy” 393)

For Harold Orel, West’s 1933 monograph of St. Augustine is a turning point in her career because “it identifies, for the first time, clearly and without possibility of mistake, a religious centre to her consciousness” (Orel 71) absent from her earlier writing. I would add, however, that her interest in religious ideas began earlier. I would like to supplement Orel’s accurate appreciation of this theme in her writing by exploring the influence of Blaise Pascal in The Thinking Reed (1936), because it is an aspect of her work which has not received any consideration. Pascal, himself an Augustinian, saw man’s natural state as wretched (corrupt in Augustine’s terms, cruel in West’s), though for Pascal man’s wretchedness is paradoxically associated to man’s greatness, which allows him to overcome his fallen state. The Thinking Reed is, to a large extent, an exploration of love as Christian caritas, portrayed as a particular way of being in the world which expresses itself in human relationships. Unlike Orel, who believes that West was “religious”, though “her religion is not institutionalised” (Orel 92), I would suggest that despite strong evidence to the contrary, she merely employed theological language as a means to name the social and cultural realities of her time. This was both a recognition of the enduring influence of religious concepts on a variety of signifying practices, and a way of naming those spiritual aspects of human behaviour which could not be adequately described in any other language.

Original sin, man’s refusal to regard God as the centre of his world thus usurping His role and becoming concerned with himself, is interpreted by West in a non-Christian way, as man’s capacity to inflict and endure cruelty due to the absence of caritas in people’s lives. The origin of cruelty is, West acknowledged, unknown, “for our half-grown brains obviously cannot grasp the whole truth about the universe” (“My Religion” 24), though this does not imply that it will never be understood. The fundamental aspect of man’s quest for truth shared by Augustine and Pascal is the conflict expressed in all good art: “Every man is in a state of conflict, owing to his attempt to reconcile himself and his relationship with life to his conception of harmony.
This conflict makes his soul a battlefield, where forces that wish this reconciliation fight those that do not and reject the alternative solutions they offer. Works of art are attempts to fight out this conflict in the imaginative world” (West, “Long” 265), and are therefore to some extent contributions to tradition, they show the battle fought by man against himself to overcome his material and temporal limitations. If anything, West warns against complacency, “the gravity of the human situation” (“Elegy” 394) cannot and should not be underestimated. As Pascal put it,

Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched.
Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched. (Pensees 59)

These were not new concerns in 1930. West’s interest in morality is clear in an essay published in 1926 which helps to elucidate her perplexing attitude to religion. “My Religion” begins with the assumption that there is another universe “of greater beauty than this” which one can perceive intuitively and momentarily throughout life:

There are actions and emotions, of greater nobility and intensity, which print through this universe and make an impression on that other universe; and just so far as such actions and emotions predominate in one’s life one does not die in death. Anyone who really loves anyone else; anyone who creates good art or sound thought; anyone who achieves courage and generosity; anyone who does any work well; what such as these do happens not only in this life which passes but in another life which continues. (“My Religion” 20)

The intuitions that allow access to this other universe are not achieved by “any logical process” (“My Religion” 20) and, although the experience gained thereby can be communicated, the existence of that other, spiritual universe should not be taken for granted because, since the “human animal is above all things indolent, he would probably accept my proof as an assurance that life has a meaning and would refrain from seeking for his own revelation which alone can give him assurance in a form suited to the individual needs of his soul” (“My Religion” 21). So man’s purpose should be the pursuit of happiness by enacting a moral life, and, although West argues that membership of a Church is not indispensable to achieve this goal, organised religion seamlessly brings together morality with practice. Thus, the members of a Non-conformist congregation “certainly do not believe in hell. I doubt if more than a few
seriously believe in any system of rewards for the virtuous in the after-life. But they are passionately anxious to be good just for the sake of being good; they are anxious, for no other reason than altruism, to find out exactly what their duty to their fellow men is and how they can best perform it” (“My Religion” 21). Roman Catholicism offers a ritual which is of value because “it draws a picture of spiritual acts which human language still finds it difficult to express adequately or in a form equally comprehensible by all kinds of people”. For example, “‘O heart, be a slave of the King of the World and be King’” is a lesson in humility that encourages the members of the congregation to be less selfish and “bend one’s will to a purpose other than one’s own well-being” (“My Religion” 22), that is, to extend moral behaviour beyond the self.

In this essay West contends that bodies of thought are created in response to specific historical needs, which means that they are intrinsically obsolescent. Christ, for example, became a necessary icon at a time of widespread famine, illness and warfare who came to comfort the oppressed by celebrating man’s greatness and proclaiming the power of love to overcome adversity. Unlike his teachings, which preached the enduring value of tolerance, the Virgin Birth and the doctrine of atonement are meaningless in any other historical context, just as “it would have been impossible to convince [a man of that age] that a man was divine simply because his behaviour was supremely beautiful” (“My Religion” 23). Hence modern man must find an ideal more adequate to his needs, and West concludes this short essay by introducing yet another one of her life-long concerns, personal liberty: “When we let people do what they like and say what they like we are giving the Divine a chance to express itself when it comes” (24). For her, the Divine, or God, is simply another way of conceptualising the “creative spirit informing the world” (22) common to all people. A person’s well-being is dependent upon the creation of circumstances favourable to the free expression of creativity so long as it does not harm another in the process. God is, for West, a name for the altogether human capacity to overcome himself. It is clear that religion links transcendent values to the practices of daily life and functions much in the same way as cultural traditions should in the modern world, according to her, by orienting our actions and thought towards the pursuit of the good life which should, above all, consist in the avoidance of the perpetuation of cruelty and awareness of the social and practices which have allowed this.
West was probably familiar with Pascal before she wrote about Augustine through Aldous Huxley’s essay, “Pascal”, published in 1929 in the first issue of The Realist: A Journal of Scientific-Humanism, a journal to which West contributed the article “New Secular Forms of Old Religious Ideas”. The editorial of the first issue, which included the first part of Huxley’s essay, identified certain aspects of Pascal with the problems facing modern man:

no genius has illustrated so vividly the mystery of individuality, master of the most lucid of intelligences, yet chiefly remembered for championing the heart against the head. Here is put with clarity the supreme psychological conflict. What, we are driven to as ask, is individuality? [...] On one side there is Society, the group, the social heredity, and on the other the Individual lately emerged from the group into self-consciousness, and who has only to-day, at last and grudgingly, recognised that he is an animal. (“Editorial” 180)

West certainly interpreted Pascal in this vein. The Thinking Reed, more than a novel concerned with the “meeting of redemptive female with self-destructive establishment male” (Scott, Refiguring 145) is an unique narrative of self-discovery. West did in fact gender the two elements of dual human nature, an aspect dealt with in detail by feminist critics, but this interpretation does not explain either the theatricality of the novel, nor can it account for the moral dimensions of the heroine’s “insatiable craving for goodness” (Thinking 407) which structures the novel. This search is conducted as a reaction to a specific social class. West used Pascal to explore the “effect of riches on people, and the effect of men on women, both forms of slavery, of forced adaptation, against which the individual with a sense of individuality is bound to struggle” (Rollyson, Saga 144). The “effect” of wealth is corrupting, its impact far more insidious than Victoria Glendinning suggests when she writes that West simply “wanted to find out what would happen to two modern people who had abandoned the religion-based ethical code yet wanted to make their marriage ‘as noble as an association as possible’” (Glenginning 150). Even these two people are inescapably trapped in a world rigidly structured by class. West explores the amoral world of the French and English haute bourgeoisie and aristocracy. As we shall see, The Thinking Reed is “a hymn of hate against the rich” (qtd. in Rollyson, Legacy 119), as West herself described it; Pascal addressed his Pensees to members of the specific social class about whom West writes, those who devote their lives to divertissement.
West’s dualistic conception of the human soul coincided with Pascal’s belief that man’s nature is made up of “instinct and reason”, although he added another element to the dualism, the heart, and thus posited the existence of three orders of being or faculties of knowing which determine whether man lives in one of two possible conditions:

First part: wretchedness of man without God.
Second part: Happiness of man with God. (Pascal 33)

Briefly, the ‘orders’ are those of the mind (reason) and the body (‘concupiscence’ is the word he uses, referring to the realm of the senses). These two orders, which are constitutive of human identity, can be harmonised through the intervention of a third faculty, in secular terms the order of the heart or charity (divine love) which is also a faculty of knowing but is intuitive, providing insights not accessible to reason (which does provide some principles of truth) but building upon them: “We know truth not only through our reason but also through our heart” (Pascal 58). As Alban Krailsheimer explains, the heart apprehends pre-rational and “supra-rational” principles, and perhaps more importantly for West, emotional and aesthetic experiences (Krailsheimer, “Introduction” 22): “What part of us feels pleasure? Is it our hand, our arm, our flesh, our blood? It must obviously be something immaterial” (Pascal 57). Reason alone cannot be a reliable instrument in discerning truth because its work is constantly undermined by the senses and the imagination:

Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace. Nothing shows him the truth, everything deceives him. The two principles of truth, reason and senses, are not only both not genuine, but are engaged in mutual deception. (Pascal 42)

The thrust of Pascal’s defence of grace is, predictably, that human beings should humbly acknowledge their inability to attain happiness unaided. It is arrogant of man to believe that he is capable of knowing truth through reason alone, given the extent of his wretchedness and the uncertainty which the conflict between reason and the senses produces. However, Pascal does not altogether dismiss the role of reason for, paradoxically, “only reason can persuade reason of its own inadequacy” (Krailsheimer, “Introduction” 23). Reason works with the evidence provided by the senses and instinct, just as the truths acquired by rational means are a prerequisite for grace: “The way of
God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace” (Pascal 83). The argument Pascal provides as uncontroversial rational proof of the existence of God is his famous idea of the wager.

It is in man’s faculty to reason well that his greatness lies, “only sentient beings can be wretched: a ruined house is not. Only man is wretched” (Pascal 166). Man is greater than the universe around him because he is aware of his wretchedness. This is the gist of the passage quoted by West as an epigraph to the novel:

Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water, suffices to kill him. But if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this. (Thinking ii)

If man were to acknowledge his limitations, pride can become dignified humility, wretchedness can be transformed into patience and humble self-awareness, prejudice and will can become habit, weakness and frailty in relation to the universe can be a sign of man’s greatness because he knows the universe and is aware of what is happening to him. That man is capable of both greatness and wretchedness is evident, Pascal argues, in his unremitting pursuit of happiness:

All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal. The reason why some go to war and some do not is the same desire in both, but interpreted in two different ways. The will never takes the least step except to that end. This is the motive of every act of every man, including those who go and hang themselves. (Pascal 74)

This search for happiness, however misguided, is proof, for Pascal, of the duality of man’s nature. In his prelapsarian state man had no occasion to exercise his will, but the Fall brought about the need for morality. The rebellion against his creator “may be seen as a sense of estrangement in human life” (Krailsheimer, Pascal 62) which induces fear:

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help
which he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself. (Pascal 75)

By accepting the order of charity man can find a “new harmony with himself, body and mind working together instead of at odds, in obedience to the heart, ruled by love and charity” (Krailsheimer, Pascal 66). Men are afraid to see into themselves because they would despair at the extent of their wretchedness, and risk falling prey to either inertia and indifference or the illusory happiness of distraction to avoid thought: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things” (Pascal 66). To overcome wretchedness humans should recognise their dualism and accept that the gap between the two possible conditions can only be overcome with grace. Pascal acknowledges the fear and despair which self-doubt occasions, but self-awareness is the initial step towards a harmonious, unalienated existence:

Man is obviously made for thinking. Therein lies all his dignity and his merit; and his whole duty is to think as he ought. Now the order of thought is to begin with ourselves, and with our author and our end. (Pascal 235)

Once this has been acknowledged, humans should embark upon a life devoted to the moderation of the passions and battle against the indifference and inertia which distract them from their moral cultivation. This disposition of thought and action will predispose men spiritually for grace, which cannot be earned, but it is within the power of man to eliminate some of the obstacles to it (Krailsheimer, “Introduction” 21). Happiness is not merely a state of mind but a way of life (Krailsheimer, Pascal 62). West did not fully quote the fragment in which Pascal refers to man’s dignity in the noble, right use of reason. The fragment concludes with a rule: “Let us strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality” (Pascal 95). Yet it is this last sentence which best explains the motive of our heroine’s quest, though hers is not the spiritual quest of the solitary mystic who overcomes selfishness by annihilating the self but the search for wholeness in marriage, understood by Isabelle as one of the many activities which enable men and women to lead noble, purposeful lives, with a “moral beginning and middle and end” (Thinking 386).
In the novel we can see the three Pascalian orders coming into play as character
traits defining Luba, Isabelle and Marc Sallafranque. Luba is an embodiment of the
principle of caritas, Isabelle’s identity is determined by her rationality and Marc’s by
instinct. The men that Isabelle encounters -Andre de Verviers, Roy, Laurence Vernon,
Alan Fielding- are all embodiments of ideas, not just evidence of men’s violent nature,
as Bonnie Kime Scott would have it (Scott, “Strange” 279-80). Luba and Isabelle are
exceptional women: “She and Luba stood for life, but they were in a minority”
(Thinking 304). Other female characters are portrayed as even more ruthless than the
men, though under the pressures of capitalism and the social prejudices of their
particular class which affect the whole of society, all have become cruel, violent and
vain, “votaries of incoherence” (Thinking 149). Luba’s “most essential function” (189)
is a “gift for tenderness” (251) which implies a way of life devoted to the unconditional
love of another, a surrendering of the self which is radically different from the self-love
of those other characters who participate in the exploitative “type of human transaction
to be observed in the Casino”, a microcosm of Isabelle’s social world. Luba is
consistently described in terms of her caritas:

Surely in each human being there is both a hungry, naked
outcast and a Sister of Charity, desolate without those whom she can
feed and clothe and shelter; and these cannot minister to each other.
That is the rule which has been put in to make it more difficult. They
must find a stranger outside the skin to whose Sister of Charity the
outcast can offer his sores, to whose outcast their Sister of Charity can
offer her pity. (166)

Luba realises her essence in marriage, which emerges as a complementary relationship
in which men and women must unconditionally give and humbly accept love. This is
the lesson that Isabelle learns. Throughout the novel she is described as predominantly
rational, unwittingly trapped in a world of moral chaos and disorder:

Her competent, steely mind never rested. She had not troubled
with abstract thoughts since she had left the Sorbonne, but she liked to
bring everything that happened to her under the clarifying power of
the intellect. For she laboured under a fear that was an obsession [...] Isabelle perpetually feared that she might be betrayed into an
impulsive act that was destructive to such order as reason had imposed
on life. Therefore she was for ever running her faculty of analysis over
in her mind with the preposterous zeal of an adolescent running a
razor over his beardless chin. (4)
She aspires to be “perpetually moderate” (“only moderation is good”, says Pascal, (Pascal 213), and is incapable of spontaneously participating in “any kind of violence” (Thinking 37) which would disturb the precarious balance of her spiritual and emotional life: “control was obstinately a part of all her nature, even her imagination” (37). Isabelle embarks upon an unconventional narrative of self-discovery in which self-knowledge brings about an awareness of how social class in a hierarchical society shapes her identity, and, specifically, how it shapes female identity in such a way that, even in 1929, a wealthy woman could not reconcile individual and social demands. The difference is, however, that after weighing up her options she submits to patriarchy willingly and knowingly: “every impulse was followed by one forbidding her to act until she had deliberated” (137). At first she is enslaved by established opinion. Her growing self-awareness parallels her encounters with men, who offer a life-style which she initially accepts only to later reject as destructive of the self. Unlike Luba, whose “distinguishing characteristic [was] to have thrown away all arms, to be defenceless because she had so absolutely renounced battle” (198), Isabelle is caught up in the “[c]ivil war in man between reason and passions” (Pascal 235), although the battle is between Isabelle’s reason and the passions of others. This is not a search for autonomy. Isabelle accepts the constraints imposed on her as a woman by the “structure which men have made” (Thinking 135), though she is susceptible to the influence of others because, as Pascal noted, “reason is available but can be bent in any direction” (Pascal 216):

She had never been able to live according to her own soul, to describe her own course through life as her intellect would have been able to plan it. She had progressed erratically, dizzily, often losing sight of her goal, by repercussion after repercussion with men travelling at violent rates of speed on paths chosen for no other motive than the opportunities they gave for violence. (Thinking 419)

Isabelle is forced into doing violence to herself by acting cruelly in order to gain freedom from oppressive relationships: she seeks to act in such a way that her “behaviour would hurt everyone least” (427). At the risk of being too schematic, I would suggest that Roy, Andre de Verviers, Laurence Vernon, Alan Fielding and, to some extent, Marc Sallafranque are all disordered (a word used by Isabelle to sum up moral chaos and a life without purpose), because their lives have no unity. These men
hypocritically accept that the “world in which human beings lived was not the same as the world of which they spoke and thought” (165). In each case, Isabelle’s relationship requires that she create disorder, culminating at last in her miscarriage. At first, she uses men instrumentally, as means to an end. But as her self-awareness increases, she realises that the purpose of a meaningful relationship is that the ties are unconditional, it is an end in itself. Thus Andre is perceived as hypocritical and self-centred, Laurence acts in his own self-interest, Marc is loved. Her attraction to Andre is physical: “It was an indisputable fact that both Andre and herself found a great joy in each other’s company, that as soon as the one came into the room the other felt an electric invigoration of the whole body, a saturation of every movement of the mind by pleasure” (23). However, she comes to realise that

so long as she was linked to Andre de Verviers, she was the ally and the slave of everything she hated: impulse, destruction, unreason, even screaming hysteria. The accusation that posited a state of affairs shameful to herself, that was barbed with horrible circumstantial details for which there was not the smallest foundation in fact, that was suddenly supposed to have been annulled—and this she found the most disagreeable of all—by a violent embrace which could have no logical bearing on it, was loathsome to her because she wanted the accusation discussed on its own terms and withdrawn as untrue—and this must be her daily bread, so long as she was with Andre de Verviers. (5)

Andre de Verviers creates emotionally charged scenes to entertain himself and relieve boredom, which, as we shall see, is a shield against the meaningless existence typical of his class. The purpose of the theatrical scenes he conjures up is to make “trouble, delicious, exciting trouble, which had scourged the nerves to a climax” (7):

‘Andre loves violence because his life is utterly peaceful,’ she explained. ‘He has a large income, he has an unassailable position, nothing can happen to him, so he likes a little fictitious excitement. But only so long as it doesn’t threaten his security. That’s why he liked me. He knew I was calm, he knew I could be trusted never to lose my self-control and cause a scandal, however much he stormed. So I set out to pretend that that wasn’t true, that I could be dangerous. I took those roses and threw them all over the courtyard so that his servant would tell him, and he would think that he had driven me beyond the limits of self-control, and let me go.’ She lived through the moment in the courtyard all over again and cried out, ‘Oh, I hated it all so, I hated acting like a madwoman!’ (58)
Not only does he create imaginary scenes which are incomprehensible to her logical mind, but under his influence she is forced to “split her personality into two”, just as he “was two people in his attitude to passion”. Isabelle can either be “la femme” (32), dominated and defined by her passions, or her rational self: “He would see to it […] that the generic woman in her who loved the generic man in him should have endless opportunities to betray the individual woman in her who loathed the individual man in him” (31). Above all, she despises his enjoyment of self-display, his actions are all done for effect, in the full gaze of public opinion, and she cannot participate in this highly ritualised, artificial relation without being false to herself: “She felt an uneasy suspicion that she had been given a part to act in a play which seemed innocent only because she had seen just her own lines and cues, but which offended all her sense of values once she heard the other actor’s words” (25). It is because he has given her a specific feminine social script that she must upset her “fundamental temperance, her inaptitude for any kind of violence” (37) by “invok[ing] the forces of disorder” with the “single uncontrolled gesture” of crushing the roses. Self-preservation is the source of her anger.

Andre’s accusations against Isabelle are products of his imagination:

\textit{Imagination:} This arrogant force, which checks and dominates its enemy, reason, for the pleasure of showing off the power it has in every sphere, has established a second nature in man. Imagination has its happy and unhappy men, its sick and well, its rich and poor; it makes us believe, doubt, deny reason. (Pascal 38)

According to Pascal, imagination is not intrinsically a negative faculty, “it creates beauty, justice and happiness, which is the world’s supreme good” (Pascal 41), but becomes harmful if used in the service of appearances.

In Laurence Vernon, a Stoic, Isabelle seeks “intellectual protection” from Andre’s “passion-governed world”. Even his home, significantly called Mount Iris, “seemed to exclude all the heated sort of wrong she feared more than anything else in life” (19):

always, every time they visited him, he strolled down the avenue to meet them, an open book in his hand, and always the letters on the cover spelled an ancient name, Plato, or Lucretius, or Plotinus […] Laurence, with his fine short pointed brown beard, which he never fingered, his clear brown eyes, which never sparkled, his trim body in his formal and unnoticeable clothes, seemed to rest as comfortably in the hour as if it were a library chair: so comfortably
that he could think with a coolness and detachment that she knew to be rare triumphs over the modern world. During that and other visits she learned that he had thought himself right out of the illusions common to the Old South. He preferred the classical to the picturesque any day; he knew that any tradition festered which did not in every generation take fresh vows of service to the timeless gods of justice and reason. [...] He was full of schemes for bringing money down to the South, for developing the resources of his country and making her nobody’s old downtrodden mammy; but he was fighting – if one could use that word of an activity in which there was no passion- every attempt to enslave the people by the same conscienceless industrialism as has made the Yankees the drab men-machines they were. (17)

Briefly, for the Stoics rationality was the sole means of acquiring knowledge of the world beyond the self; reason alone could reveal the constancy and order of the cosmic world disposed to “have the best results” (Russell, History 273) by a rational Lawgiver or God. “Down to the smallest detail”, explains Bertrand Russell,

the whole was designed to secure certain ends by natural means. These ends, except insofar as they concern gods and daemons, are to be found in the life of man. Everything has a purpose connected with human beings […]. God is not separate from the world; He is the soul of the world, and each of us contains a part of the Divine Fire. All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature. In one sense, every life is good when it is in harmony with Nature, since it is such as Nature’s laws have caused it to be; but in another sense a human life is only in harmony with Nature when the individual will is directed to ends which are among those of Nature. Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with Nature. The wicked, though perforce they obey God’s law, do so involuntarily. (History 262)

Earthly possessions and attachments are of no consequence to the Stoic because they do not promote the good, virtuous, way of life of which all rational human beings are capable; it is only a matter of directing the individual will to coincide with “ends which are those of Nature. Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with Nature” (262). The desirable virtues to be cultivated were wisdom, courage, justice, moderation and self-sufficiency which promoted a wholesome state of mind; the excesses of human nature which promoted disquietude and anxiety such as anger, fear and passion are symptoms of an unhealthy state of mind because ideally the virtuous man is indifferent to the vicissitudes of everyday material life which would awaken them. Even the duties of public life are directed to the promotion of the virtuous life (an end in itself), because
they give “opportunities for justice, fortitude, and so on […]. The Stoic is not virtuous in order to do good, but does good in order to be virtuous. It has not occurred to him to love his neighbour as himself; love, except in a superficial sense, is absent from his conception of virtue” (History 263). So it is a duty to promote a political and social order that mirrors cosmic order. It seems undeniable that Laurence Vernon is a modern Stoic. The description of the way of life that Isabelle associates with him is confirmation of all the above:

But in Laurence Vernon’s mind she would find unity. He would have but one image of her and that distinct as the figure on a Greek coin. He would have but one clean-cut image of their marriage, as simple as the year in the mind of a farmer. In the spring he would lay the foundation of his plans for public things and she would have her children, in the summer they would admire to see how their work fared in the heat of the day, in the autumn there would be harvest, and since the days grow shorter and they would have so much to talk over, no doubt winter also would not hang in their hands. Men grow weary of many things, but not of the seasons of the year. (Thinking 33)

Laurence Vernon, at first an “embodiment and a promise of the kind of life she longed to live” (5), becomes an exemplar of “violent coldness” (419) and “pithlessness” (415). He rejects Isabelle because he has witnessed what he has (mis)construed as an inability to control her self-destructive passions; unlike him she cannot “shut up the wild thing that threatened to come out of the unfettered darkness and break up the order he had imposed on his emotion” (18). She realises that his vanity, like Andre’s, is susceptible to public opinion. Although “his mind would be ashamed of deserting her” (59), he is too weak and proud to look beyond appearances and act according to his nature and sense of loyalty. He thus ungenerously forces her into the false position of having to lie, just as he lies to himself, because “he belonged to the vast order of human beings who cannot be loyal to their beloved if a stranger jeers” (58). Yet her mutinous “disorderly act” (39) is interpreted differently by Andre. Whereas for Laurence it is a moral flaw, for Andre it is a spectacle of her femininity, a deliberate transgression of social mores, fodder for the “mauvaises langues” (12). Andre is after all conservative, the last of a dying breed for whom morality is based on unfounded prejudice:

In realizing what he owed to the status quo he was cleverer than the more intellectually active Laurence or the more practically effective Marc Sallafranque, who both regarded their lives as purely individual
achievements, which they could have made the same in any world. Andre was well aware that anything that threatened the existing conditions of society threatened him with extinction. He spoke with equally personal dread of the growth of Communism, of the rearming of Germany, of the imprudence of anyone belonging to his own class who, by adoption of an extreme religious or political faith, or by a gratuitous divorce, or by clamant bad manners, became the subject of adverse public comment. The structure must not be shaken. (36)

Isabelle’s predicament is a result of the construction of femininity particular to her class. She is powerless (and indignant because powerless) and because she is perceived as a “maenad”, superfluous and irrational, her defiance is unreasonable. Her word and will are disregarded, her integrity is not respected, so she must make a spectacle of herself, flaunt her femininity by enacting her anger and playing an undignified role to achieve her ends, although this turns her into an accomplice of a world in which all relationships are based on deception, insincerity and dishonesty:

She was being swept away into the horrible world of violence that she feared, where one soul delighted in inflicting pain on another, where force and fraud were used to compel victories which were valueless unless they were ceded freely to an honest victor. It would be far better to resign herself to losing all she wanted. (55)

Both she and Laurence are embarrassed at her self-display, the spectacle of her gender is misunderstood by him, less a matter of airing dirty linen in public than a lack of self-control. If Andre sins in that he lives by passions and reason, Laurence does so because he is incapable of sympathy, keen as he is to maintain a distance from the vicissitudes of everyday life. These two characters err in that they exemplify two excesses, as Pascal explained, “to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason” (Pascal 85). However, this is the beginning of Isabelle’s growing awareness of the constraints placed upon her liberty by her class and, above all, by her sex.

Marc is qualitatively different from Andre and Laurence because he is naturally good, although he too is deceived by “social fictions” (71). Although this is a result of his “candour and humility” rather than conceit, it allows him to build a “fantasy which departed so monstrously from reality that it was dangerous” (72), and Isabelle’s reservations about his naivety are later justified when he plays into the hands of the resentful Monsieur Campofiore. Marc’s redeeming trait is that he embodies another aspect of the Pascalian orders, the instinctual, that allows him to be practical in the
material world: “Isabelle pressed close to Marc, who was a good animal with direct reactions, who ate when he was hungry, roared when he was enraged, who howled when he was hurt, who guffawed when he saw a joke” (348). As Krailsheimer has noted, Pascal had great “respect for the unthinking, automatic nature of man” because it subdued the “passions by habit by going through the external motions of faith (for example, taking holy water, having masses said), which will enable the unthinking reflex to replace self-will, in Pascal’s words _cela vous abetira_, ‘That will make you more docile, more like a trained animal’” (Pascal 58). Pascal refers to this aspect of human nature as the “machine”, and surely it is no coincidence that “[a] Sallafranque was no longer a man, but a cheap car” (Thinking 30). The machine refers to that aspect of human beings which functions automatically, without self-consciousness and deliberation:

In short, we must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit. With no violence, art or argument it makes us believe things, and so inclines all our faculties to this belief that our soul falls naturally into it. When we believe only by the strength of our conviction and the automaton is inclined to believe the opposite, that is not enough. We must therefore make both parts of us believe: the mind by reasons, which need be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit, and not allowing it any inclination to the contrary: _Incline my heart._ (Pascal 274)

Pascal described the human body as a machine formed by habit. It is therefore possible to harness behaviour to the search for the good because by adopting a behavioural pattern people’s internal feelings will begin to move according to their actions. Marc’s kindness is a moral habit, formed by custom, a state of mind and a way of life: “Though all his ties were with the strong and not the weak, he would not have had a sparrow fall, anywhere in the world” (Thinking 87). But Marc is blind because he is unaware of the consequences of his own actions, whereas the Lauriston women, for example, are vain because they are self-centred, and the “bias towards the self is the beginning of all disorder” (Pascal 154). Marc is exempt from being “morally null like the Lauristons, thanks to his sounder instincts” (Thinking 219). However, being exempt from “criticism nearly all his adult life” he is “undisciplined and uncontrolled” (219). Gambling, a weakness, is as Isabelle herself says a “habit that we will be able to throw off without an
effort” (123), but she misjudges how serious it is, though he gives us a hint: “’You
know, when I have thought of gambling, it has always seemed something dark and
powerful in my mind, a nightmare presence that could bide its time and then jump out
on you when you were least expecting it, as if it wasn’t something I did, but something
outside myself that could take control of me and make me do things I didn’t want to”
(123). However paternalistic someone like Marc is towards his disgruntled employees
and social inferiors, Isabelle perceives in him something that she lacks, “poetic vision”,
an intuitive faculty:

Hardly ever did he move in the sphere of logic and analysis which was
her natural home; […] he alone had the dark bloom of romantic and
passionate things. She marvelled at the dynamic power, far beyond the
reach of her own type, emanated by those who think without the use
of thought. (261)

Marc is forced by the artificial environment of Le Touquet into committing an
uncharacteristic act of cruelty against his wife. He reacts to his surroundings
instinctively, as Isabelle recognises later. His lack of self-awareness is a weakness
which leaves him open to men like Campofiore and the effects of his social
environment: “all his crimes were rooted in his innocence” (76). The rigorous discipline
of work and the rules of conduct to which he adheres have been instilled in him by his
typical bourgeois family, from whom he has also learned that neither wealth nor kinship
are insurance against misfortune, as they are for Isabelle: Andre and “an enormous
number of persons succeeded in remaining rich when without means; they continued by
reason of charm or associations of one or another sort” (251). The Sallafranques have
learned not to depend on a network of support and protection to survive economic
insecurity:

With a start Isabelle began to query the attitude in which she had been
brought up, which would have regarded it is unreasonable and even
ungallant for her to consider any proposed expenditure save from the
point of view that she was wealthy and that whatever money she laid
out would be replaced by next year’s income. This attitude was
perhaps not universal. It was perhaps not so sensible, nor even so
entertaining, as the attitude of the Sallafranques. Once she began to
root out her early prejudice, she could see plainly that it was really
both more reasonable and more gallant not to waste money but to use
it to build up a barricade between poverty and one’s children. (130)
Marc is strong because he relies only upon himself to survive. Unlike those around him his “sounider instincts”, received through heredity and upbringing, protect him from the amorality of the others, though his “sweetness could degenerate, through the influence of their money state, into dangerous smugness” (219). His fault is that in his “exemption from criticism, this ability to evade the consequences of any action, he was without discipline, he was without appropriate reverence for reality” (252). Uncle Honore, Isabelle’s significantly named mentor, deliberately instructed her to feel neither “arrogant or aggrieved” by dint of her wealth, “and later this instruction had been confirmed by literature” (71). Similarly, because of Honore’s influence on her education, “[p]ublic acclaim had never meant much to her, since she saw no useful end which it might serve” (143). Marc’s vanity differs from that of the English women Isabelle meets in Le Touquet, who live for material riches, unlike Isabelle: “I crave moral and not material riches” she explains, “Heiress as I am to ethical squalor, and exposed throughout my childhood to every disadvantageous influence, I am driven through life by an insatiable craving for goodness” (408). Lady Barron, in contrast, does not obey moral principles or values but is guided by purely subjective and therefore arbitrary standards:

It could be heard in her tone that she had no clear vision of the delight of wearing easy clothes and moving in loved surroundings, but was standing outside herself, rapt in admiration of her own simplicity, which could find satisfaction in a pleasure so much less pompous than the special recreations within the reach of the Lauristons. Such a disposition reduced every thought and action to a gesticulation made in a mirror; it made life an incoherent succession of self-congratulatory moments, in which no real moral habit could be formed. One lived solely according to the dictates of vanity, without the discipline of obedience to fixed external standards […] Knowing no difficulties one was without fortitude; knowing no criteria but one’s own achievements one was without taste. (218)

According to Krailsheimer, Pascal addressed his Pensees to the members of the social world from which he was removed by his conversion, a leisureed class devoted to a life of entertainment, cultured, intelligent freethinkers of refined manners whose “ideal was honnetete, a gentlemanly code governed by etiquette rather than ethics” (Pascal 43). Pascal argued that people’s pursuit of happiness was misguided, sought not in interior peace but in material riches (Pascal 67). As Ben Rogers has pointed out, Pascal indicted diversion because it was evidence that people occupied themselves with “means rather
than ends”, and means are necessarily transitory: “It is the distraction of the suspense, not the prize, that men are after” (Rogers 51). Paradoxically, this desperate need for distraction is, for Pascal, proof of man’s natural state: “If man were happy, the less he were diverted the happier he would be” (Pascal 66). So people are evidently unhappy, finding consolation for their unsuspected, relentless though stealthy wretchedness in gambling, dancing, hunting, etc., their attention focused away from themselves to avoid the realisation of how profound their wretchedness is. However, in their desperate flight from despair they avoid the first step towards self-knowledge:

They have a secret instinct driving them to seek external diversion and occupation, and this is the result of their constant sense of wretchedness. They have another secret instinct, left over from the greatness of our original nature, telling them that the only true happiness lies in rest and not in excitement. These two contrary instincts give rise to a confused plan buried out of sight in the depths of the soul, which leads them to seek rest by way of activity and always to imagine that the satisfaction they miss will come to them once they overcome certain obvious difficulties and can open the door to welcome the rest. (Pascal 69)

Isabelle’s description of the daily occupations of the “votaries of incoherence” who have taken “vows of wealth, chastity, and disobedience to all standards” (Thinking 89) follows Pascal almost to the letter. This group of people is constantly compared to a religious order. Their lives at in the cote d’azur are devoted to the consumption of non-essential goods, purchased for self-display and obviously desirable to enhance their status. Their relationships are of “free sexual exchange”, which is, according to Isabelle, amoral, but certainly easier to conduct than “disobedience to all standards” which prompts a division of the self between the “flesh and the spirit, for man is an inveterately theorizing animal, who cannot look out of his eyes without basing opinions on what he sees, and basing on those opinions preferences and parties and flaming loyalties and steely reputations, and, in fact, the formation of standards and obedience to them” (91). To avoid active engagement with the world which would require deliberation they practise a “resolute canalization towards personal ends of all their emotions, even of the sorts that one had thought inextricably associated with the intellect” (91). However, these votaries cannot obey their vows consistently because “No vows are easy to keep, since they demand a quality of persistence which the human race does not possess”, but the restlessness and lack of discipline in their lives arising
from a “kind of uncomfortable vacancy” is temporarily abated with constant activity. Their happiness is illusory because transient, they went from one diversion to another “feeling that at some point during this expedition they were going to have a good time” (95), though “they went to bed, most nights, feeling miserable” (93). The endless, repetitive everyday life, Isabelle recognises, is a strategy to avoid thought:

In this superbly invigorating air they were able to spend hour after hour in conditions precluding all danger that they might possibly lapse into thought. But when exhaustion drove them indoors, they were faced with their dread again [...] it is the inveterate habit of the human animal when it feels well to think, to speculate, to evolve standards. So, as on the Riviera, they called on alcohol as a prophylactic; they sat in the bar diluting the universe, and began to discuss whether Ferdy Monck had had a right to say what he had said to Gordon Lloyd at the ice-hockey match the other day, and whether Annette had really spoken to Laura as people said she had in the patisserie on Saturday morning. (147)

Pascal acknowledged the horrors of self-reflection, but only self-knowledge prepares the ground for happiness. Ennui, as Ben Rogers has explained, is a barrier against despair:

Ennui: Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort.

Then he faces the nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness.
And at once there well up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair. (Pascal 235)

The people at Le Touquet also seek solace in ennui:

Presently they all sat down at a long table, the length of the terrace, and shadows filled their glasses with the muted sharpness of champagne and covered their plates with food that was either burning hot or icy cold. A flower of good cheer ought to have burst into bloom, were it not that there is a special foe of dedicated persons known as accidia. It descends upon them suddenly and is not to be repelled by argument. They are living their customary life, they are performing the exercises they have found most suitable for the promotion of their faith, but the wells of the spirit run dry. The purpose to which they have vowed their souls stares at them like a senseless monster, not worth nursing. The support of grace is withdrawn from them, melancholy flows in their veins. This disorder
has most often been noticed in monasteries and convents, but no votaries are exempt from it, whatever their vows. (Thinking 96)

The choice of life style is deliberate and, from Isabelle’s point of view, more objectionable. But as Isabelle herself realises, the aimless lives of the gamblers in the casino, in which all relationships are relationships of exchange, “appealed to something fundamental in human nature. The place had its power” (286). What exactly this power calls forth is ambiguous, yet it is safe to assume that it is the intrinsic capacity to be cruel. Exploitative relationships are acceptable and fundamental to the working of her social world, this is the basis of the complicity between those who have “taken vows of wealth, unchastity, and disobedience to all standards” (147) in order to preserve the status quo and ignore or destroy whatever obstructs an individual’s ambitions. Poots, Madame d’Alperoussa and Monsieur Campofiore in their different ways cleverly make use of existing prejudices and rules of conduct to climb the social ladder. Isabelle is again forced to express her revulsion against this social reality by taking on the role of the betrayed wife, a role which is meaningful to Mr. Pillans and Marc, though she again must dissipulate the reasons for her outburst so as to leave the world of appearances intact.

The unity of life sought by Isabelle in the midst of the ethical squalor of her class is best understood in terms of Aldous Huxley’s essay on Pascal, in which he outlines a model life. For Huxley, Pascal’s three orders of existence are “different states of the total reality as experienced by different individuals, and by the same individuals at different times” (“Pascal” 184). Each individual is made up “partly [of] heredity, partly of acquired habit”, and depending upon which of these influences predominates a man inhabits one of these universes —matter, mind, “charity, grace” (182). Contrary to Pascal’s ideal, it is impossible to live exclusively by only one of these ideas, because “one can only become consistent by becoming petrified” (187). Pascal finds the unity of truth through an ecstatic conversion, which for Huxley is nothing more than an example of what all experience is: “something is directly experienced; this experience is intellectually interpreted, generally in terms of some existing system of metaphysics or mythology; the myth, the philosophical system are regarded as true and become in their turn the source of new experiences and the channels through which the old emotions must pass” (201). Huxley does not believe in grace, but accepts that under certain conditions truth can be found, either through the delirium of the ascetic life, or by any
other ‘abnormality’ caused by illness. Both experiences allow man to acquire a degree of objectivity vis-a-vis the material world which the “healthy” man lacks because they “detach the mind from utilitarian reality and permit it to perceive, or create for itself, another reality, less superficial and tendentious than the normal utilitarian one of every day” (211). However, there are other experiences which can allow one to “get out of the ordinary world into another” (244): “Anger, the feeling inspired by sensuous beauty, the orgasm of amorous desire” (244). One is reminded that in the novel sex is the “greatest miracle possible to the human body” (West, Thinking 231).

Huxley celebrates life and I believe that this is the idea incorporated by West into the ideal of personality sought by Isabelle. Huxley argues that Pascal’s demand that all should aspire to be angels was contra natura because he denied man’s “manifold being” by imposing upon it an impossible unity. Huxley’s life-worshipper has a personality which persists despite changing external circumstances. Unlike Pascal’s idea of unity as consistency, however, Huxley’s ideal is neither a denial of nor a surrender to diversity, but a “deliberate organization” of all his “desires, passions, instincts, a body as well as a mind and a conscious will” (“Pascal” 221). Huxley’s ideal modern man assumes that “life on this planet is valuable in itself, without any reference to hypothetical higher worlds (220). This self is discontinuous because each human is a “colony of selves” (221), each of which has a right to exist:

He aspires to balance excess of self-consciousness and intelligence by an excess of intuition, of instinctive and visceral living; to remedy the ill effects of too much contemplation by those of too much action, too much solitude by too much sociability, too much enjoyment by too much ascetism. He will be by turns excessively passionate and excessively chaste. (224)

This could be a description of Isabelle’s aspiration to achieve a balance of excesses, but she finds this balance after she miscarries.

After the scene in the Casino when Isabelle again does violence to herself, she loses her moral bearings, and she turns with disgust from her fellow human beings: she deserts “humanity to desert the middle way” (Pascal 213) between the extremes of the angels and the beasts. She passes “into a phase of dejection” (Thinking 310) and becomes obsessed with thoughts of death after her miscarriage: “This despairing preoccupation with death must therefore, Isabelle supposed, be due to some such state of hypersensitiveness as she had passed through after the only attack of influenza she
had ever suffered” (315). Her illness, like her pregnancy, allows her to see past the world of appearances only to discover the abyss which lies behind it: “And she would realize that she had been standing in a trance by a felled oak beside the path in the woods, marvelling at the massiveness of things which should mean nothing, that the three-dimensional world should, in fact, not be solid at all, should be only the flimsiest membrane over a void” (314). Isabelle is overwhelmed by her insignificance in relation to the vastness of the void. Pascal encouraged man to compare himself to other beings and objects in the universe so as to “learn to take the earth, its realms, its cities, its houses and himself at their proper value” (Thinking 89). The universe is not composed solely of those objects perceptible to the senses.

For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes. (Pascal 89-90)

Isabelle emerges from despondency by finding this middle ground: to gloss Pascal, she is neither angel nor beast, but human. Immediately before her scene at the Casino she has a moment of inspiration, Marc’s poetic power allows her to perceive intuitively the “security of such love as she enjoyed with Marc, the defence it provided against instability and tragedy and disorder” (Thinking 301). It is her love for Marc and a deeper understanding of marriage to a Sallafranque which pulls her out of her despair. In the essay “My Religion”, West argued that procreation was crucial for the continuity of cultural traditions:

Provided that there is affection in a family, the father and mother confirm when they are old the miracle they performed when they were young. When they have loved and gave their children life; now they die, and make that gift absolute by taking away the fear of death from their children; for after one has watched a dying person with the clairvoyant eye of affection the idea of death as a triumph of decay passes for ever. One perceives that he is not ceasing to exist but passing into another universe. (“My Religion” 19)

Isabelle returns to normality when she realises that only with Marc can she protect herself from the society which had harmed her: “She had miscarried her child because she formed part of a society that was itself a miscarriage, that had not cohered into a culture or a civilization, that could not cohere into even the simplest sort of pattern” (327). It is significant that the people around her are either déclassé, or like Campofiore
deny their origins, émigrés or like the English aristocratic Lauristons, who no longer perpetuate a noble tradition:

If certain able stocks in the community were able to amass enough wealth […] so that they need never be influenced by mercenary considerations, and easy access to any form of public work they chose to undertake —why, then, the community had a race of perfect governors ready made. Only, as the Lauristons showed, the process worked out wholly different in practice. There came to these selected stocks a deadly, ungrateful complacency, which made them count these opportunities as their achievements, and belittle everybody else’s achievements unless these were similarly confused with opportunities; and which did worse than this, by abolishing all standards from their minds except what they themselves were and did. (217)

The Lauristons’ rootlessness is compared to the Sallafranque respect for tradition:

But [the Parisians] were all splendidly themselves, having been compelled by the extreme of their aggressiveness to throw aside everything that was not real and necessary to them and worth the trouble, which in their case was apt to be furiously inordinate, of defending. […] For it was from these people that the Sallafranques had risen unperturbed by their good fortune; it was to these people that the Sallafranques would return unperturbed by poverty if their fortune changed. (331)

Even the inherited furniture with which she fills her home tells the story of those who used it, and Isabelle is “moved by the idea that happiness and unhappiness had worked together to deliver her precisely what she wanted as the background of her life; and she felt gratified that she was about to restore these stable, solid things to just such a serene home as that in which they had begun” (129). For Isabelle civilisation and culture (words she uses indiscriminately) refer to a whole way of life manifest in a very broad range of social activities communicated through the family and reproduced in everyday life as habit, “second nature” in Pascal’s terms. Luba is strong because, according to Isabelle, she is a “superb achievement” of civilisation (197). Once Isabelle decides to “go home to the Sallafranques”, she is surprised by her need for the reassurance of habit: “She smiled to think of herself acquiring ideas through family alliances, through habit and the frequentation of the herd, instead of through the use of the mind” (330). Her sense of self will not be annulled by conformity to the mechanically reproduced beliefs and attitudes of the bourgeoisie. There is an important difference, however,
between Isabelle’s mode of being in the world and Luba’s. Luba does not occupy the middle ground between angel and beast but is otherworldly and dependent on others, which for Isabelle constitutes a weakness:

She was conscious, too, that even Luba’s qualities had their defects, that her extreme beauty and its timeless, hieratic quality, made her less like a woman who could be fitted into other human beings’ lives than an image whose place was among the candles on an altar, or on the shoulders of acolytes in procession during the feasts of the church. (205)

Cultural transmission is conducted through the family, and it is significant therefore that Isabelle did not have a child in her first marriage to the American Roy:

Her marriage with Roy had been sterile […]. It would have been almost supernatural for her to have had a child during that time when she was almost perpetually being propelled by combustion engines through cold airs of transcontinental, transmontane routes, or through still colder airs across the skies […]. But now her life, though as busy or even busier, was calmer and more deeply rooted; the times were more propitious. (142)

It is not only the comfort of familiar surroundings that she needs, but also a stable, meaningful network of relationships which are affective and authentic. Her return to Paris is her reintegration into society, a realisation that no matter how insidiously corrupt her world is only domestic life provides the married couple with “an armour against the world, so that they could go about calmly, laying out their lives to the best advantage” (23). However, she is reconciled to Marc only when she accepts that she had turned against him for the very same reason that Laurence Vernon and Andre had betrayed her:

‘I have been making this hideous fuss because I was hurt by the loss of my baby, and I felt a mean impulse to take it out of life by hurting someone else, and of course I got the maximum sensation out of hurting Marc, because he is nearest to me. I gave way to that impulse without restraint, because I am a rich woman and have never been disciplined. So I committed this horrible offence of treating my husband as if what strangers saw counted, which destroys the whole purpose of marriage, which betrays the trust which is the real point of marriage. It is a cad’s trick, but of course I am a cad because I am a privileged person, and the two things are bound and the same.’ (407-08)
Love and forgiveness must take the place of retaliation and self-indulgence: she realises she has reacted blindly ("it was his child as well as mine" (407)), and lost sight of the true purpose of marriage, which is a harmonisation through love—an intuitive, poetic power- of instinct and reason, of Marc and Isabelle. Love, like beauty and thought generate “coherent processes, ultimately [leading] to civilization, to the preservation of life” (285). Isabelle’s ideal is a necessary communion of the sexes. As individuals they are in need of succour, “naked outcasts” and also “Sisters of Charity”, capable of giving love.

However, this is not a conventional happy ending but a compromise, “resignation more than celebration marks Isabelle’s attitude” (Rollyson, Saga 145): “Had you not better learn to put up with men, since there is no third sex on earth?” (Thinking 420) she asks herself. Despite her anger at the injustice of prevailing sexual discrimination, Isabelle acknowledges that she must “preserve a sort of fairness in life”, a decision significantly based on feeling rather than deliberation: “But it would be as well at this moment if you did not think, but felt” (420). Given the specific conditioning of Marc and Isabelle, the resolution can be no other than imperfect resignation, although the compromise may be a temporary one: “It struck her that the difference between men and women is the rock on which civilization will split before it can reach any goal that would justify its expenditure of effort. She knew also that her life would not be tolerable if he were not always there to crush her smooth hands with his strong shot fingers” (431). The difference between the sexes is inescapable and necessary, because men “cannot detach themselves from their surroundings and criticize them” (421), so it is up to women to negotiate the complicated distance between appearances and reality. It would seem that the former are incapable of reflexive self-awareness because of the division of labour which condemns the latter to “a privacy of fate” (134):

‘It is comprehensible enough that you should not want to change society, because you have your work; that gives you discipline, that keeps you in touch with reality, when you do wrong you fail, when you do right you succeed. But a rich woman, she is nothing, she lives in a vacuum, insulated from life by flattery. One has complete freedom of choice, and no experience of reality to tell one what to choose. That is why I so terribly want a child, it is partly because I love you, but it is partly because, when I am having it, it will be the only time when my life is determined by necessity.’ (421)
Isabelle acknowledges her own superfluity, common to all the women of her class, and yet she differs from them because she strives to lead a moral life. She may not be “in touch with reality”, which in the novel is associated with politics and work, “an immense territory of which [Marc] knew every detail and of which she was entirely ignorant” (241). But this ignorance gives her an objectivity lacking in Marc and Laurence, whose “power over the immediate world” (429) seems to require a certain degree of uncritical acceptance of the status quo: “’There is no compromise that men cannot make’” (429). She learns that “[o]ne must have deeper motives and judge everything accordingly, but go on talking like an ordinary person” (Pascal 53). Isabelle behaves like “an ordinary person”, midway between the angel and the beast, but this does not imply that she uncritically accepts the values of her social world. What is important is that she has chosen how to live her life aware of the limitations of her circumstances, she can be held responsible for her choices and decisions, and is no longer the passive victim of circumstance.
Concluding Remarks

After the Second World War the three surviving writers, Storm Jameson, Rebecca West, and Naomi Mitchison went their separate ways politically and aesthetically, a significant development which shows how crucial the cultural and socio-political contexts of the inter-war period were in shaping their cultural and political endeavours. It was felt that there was a unique coincidence of interests and goals during this period, perhaps more obvious in political discourse than in fictional writing, so it is not altogether inexplicable that so much effort was put into the revitalisation of the public sphere. This was a self-defeating task in a modern industrial society, although as an ideal it is still alive today, especially for communitarian political theorists. Perhaps the merit of a close examination of the fiction and non-fiction of West, Mitchison, Holtby, and Jameson is the knowledge that for them, as for many of their contemporaries, morality-value systems were understood as an intrinsin dimension of individual and social life, a means of interpreting experience and directing action by providing a sense of purpose to human endeavour. Though not surpassingly innovative in their writing, or strikingly original in their thought, these four writers were nonetheless particularly adept at capturing and naming a mood, the disillusionment of the post-war period, and the related search for viable antidotes. Hence their concern for the “function of belief” (Johnstone 20) in personal and social life, and their search for a system of values with the same pervasive influence that religion had had for previous generations. They had all grown up at a time when religious practice was still very much alive, so it is no surprise that religious ideas return time and again as a source of meaning and of value, indeed as a common language.

Denise Riley has argued that the history of feminism can be read as a “concentration on and a refusal of the identity of ‘women’” (Riley 1). Given that the category ‘women’ is essentially unstable because it acquires meaning within particular discursive, historical and social contexts, feminists have opted to emphasise either difference as a way to reconceptualise identity or to downplay sexual difference and aspire to be identified as fully human (which in turn is usually associated with ‘man’). With a few exceptions, such as the maternal pacifism of writers like Brittain or the politics of Labour women, the 1930s can be thought of as an age in which politicised women sought to identify with the human in all its rational, moral and social capacities.
Speaking in defense of “Old Feminism” Holtby stated, in her well-known response to Eleanor Rathbone, that Old Feminists

have their vision of society, a society in which sex-differentiation concerns those things alone which by the physical laws of nature it must govern, a society in which men and women work together for the good of all mankind; a society in which there is no respect of persons, either male or female, but a supreme regard of the importance of the human being. And when that dream is a reality, they will say farewell to feminism, as to a disbanded but victorious army. (“Feminism Divided” 49)

This disagreement makes sense only in the context of politics in general, particularly welfare, and so not exclusively in relation to feminism. It is clear that for Holtby there are certain areas in which women should receive preferential treatment, but in most aspects of social life “both sexes may work together for the good of the community” (“Feminism” 49). After a careful examintaion of both the fiction and non-fiction of West, Holtby, Mitchison, and Jameson it becomes apparent that they can only be brought together as socialists, not on the basis of their feminism alone. Although for West and Mitchison, for example, women were often a redemptive other, in practical political terms they were egalitarian feminists. Their difficulty in conceptualising a feminist theory in response to the changing position of women was a result of their inability to address both the prevailing ideology of famlialism (Holtby’s objection to family allowances rests on the argument that women should be citizens as individuals, not mothers), and an adequate integration of socialism and feminism that could understand the complex relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and other types of oppression.

Another obstacle to the creation of a feminist ideology was the post-war instability of gender roles and the lack of an adequate conceptual tool that would enable feminists to break free of the biological determinism implicit in terms such as “sex differentiation”: “We do not know how much of what we usually describe as ‘feminine characteristics’ are really ‘masculine’, and how much ‘masculine’ is common to both sexes. Our hazards are often wildly off the mark” (Holtby, Women 192). Obviously they were well aware that gender shaped the collective imagination: fascism was described as both patriarchal and feminine; the privatisation of national life was perceived as a feminisation of the nation; the masses were feminised as passive
consumers of the mass media; they were emotional and dependent as fascist supporters. Similarly, Fascism as a political organisation and state was masculine because it was militaristic, although leaders, like Hillier, for example, were self-regarding, narcissistic and therefore to some extent feminine. Shell-shocked war veterans, as Elaine Showalter has pointed out, were unmanly hysterics. Unemployment placed men in a disempowered passive position, often in fiction taking on a housewifely role while their spouses worked in paid employment, although these married working women did not in turn acquire masculine characteristics or power. However, compared to upper class males living on their rents, unemployed men were unmistakably masculine, especially those involved in strikes. In this context of fluctuating identities and uncertain identifications, it is no surprise that these four writers chose to “under-feminise” women, who as historical subjects came to be recognised as human beings first and foremost. This was a strategic move, not the result of naivete or a denial of sexual difference.
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