'THIS MAY BE MY WAR AFTER ALL': THE NON-COMBATANT POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN, LOUIS MACNEICE, DYLAN THOMAS, AND STEVIE SMITH

Éadaoín Lynch

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2017

'This may be my war after all': The Non-Combatant Poetry of W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, and Stevie Smith

Éadaoín Lynch

University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

October 2017

Candidate's declaration

I, Éadaoín Lynch, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of PhD, which is approximately 77,707 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

I was admitted as a research student at the University of St Andrews in September 2014.

I received funding from an organisation or institution and have acknowledged the funder(s) in the full text of my thesis.

Date Signature of candidate

Supervisor's declaration

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of PhD in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Date Signature of supervisor

Permission for publication

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews we understand that we are giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. We also understand, unless exempt by an award of an embargo as requested below, that the title and the abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker, that this thesis will be electronically accessible for personal or research use and that the library has the right to migrate this thesis into new electronic forms as required to ensure continued access to the thesis.

I, Éadaoín Lynch, have obtained, or am in the process of obtaining, third-party copyright permissions that are required or have requested the appropriate embargo below.

The following is an agreed request by candidate and supervisor regarding the publication of this thesis:

Printed copy

No embargo on print copy.

Electronic copy

Embargo on all of electronic copy for a period of 5 years on the following ground(s):

- Publication would preclude future publication

Supporting statement for electronic embargo request

Publication would preclude further publication

Title and Abstract

- I agree to the title and abstract being published.

Date Signature of candidate

Date Signature of supervisor

Underpinning Research Data or Digital Outputs

Candidate's declaration

I, Éadaoín Lynch, hereby certify that no requirements to deposit original research data or digital outputs apply to this thesis and that, where appropriate, secondary data used have been referenced in the full text of my thesis.

Date Signature of candidate

Thesis abstract

This research aims to illuminate how and why war challenges the limits of poetic representation, through an analysis of non-combatant poetry of the Second World War. It is motivated by the question: how can one portray, represent, or talk about war? Literature on war poetry tends to concentrate on the combatant poets of the First World War, or their influence, while literature on the Second World War tends to focus on prose as the only expression of literary war experience. With a historicist approach, this thesis advances our understanding of both the Second World War, and our inherited notions of 'war poetry,' by parsing its historiography, and investigating the role critical appraisals have played in marginalising this area of poetic response.

This thesis examines four poets as case studies in this field of research—W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, and Stevie Smith—and evaluates them on their individual explorations of poetic tone, faith systems, linguistic innovations, subversive performativity, and their collective trajectory towards a commitment to represent the war in their poetry.

The findings from this research illustrate how too many critical appraisals have minimised or misrepresented Second World War poetry, and how the poets responded with a self-reflexivity that bespoke a deeper concern with how war is remembered and represented. The significance of these findings is breaking down the notion of objective fact in poetic representations of war, which are ineluctably subjective texts. These findings also offer insight into the 'failure' of poetry to represent war as a necessary part of war representation and prompt a rethinking of who has the 'right' experience—or simply the right—to talk about war.

Acknowledgements

My first acknowledgments and thanks are for my supervisor Dr Peter Mackay, whose exceptional guidance, unyielding encouragement, and remarkable kindness brought me through the PhD in one piece. Special thanks go to my friends, particularly Hannah Britton in St Andrews, Liz O'Connell-Thompson in Chicago, Jacob Klein in California, and Rosa Campbell and Patrick Errington in Edinburgh, for their tenderness, steady patience, and unwavering support. My deep gratitude also goes to Dr Karin Koehler for her guidance, feedback and reassurance throughout my studies, especially in the closing weeks.

My sincere thanks goes to the School of English at St Andrews, particularly Dr Christine Rauer for her mentorship, and Sandra, Jane, Laura and Andrea in the School Office for their constant help and support. I am grateful, too, to Profs Gill Plain, Susan Sellers and Andrew Murphy for their encouragement of my application to the PhD, as well as Drs Christina Alt, and Anindya Raychaudhuri for their support and kindness.

I am grateful for the Prof A F Falconer Scholarship for funding my PhD, because without that support, my research could not have been accomplished. This work was also supported by a Buchanan Scholarship.

I am indebted to the European Society for the Study of English for their bursary that allowed me to travel to the New York Public Library, Columbia University Library, and Harvard Houghton Library to undertake seminal archival research. Thanks also to Lyndsi Barnes in NYPL for her assiduous help while I was in the Berg Collection. Warm wishes to Prof Edward Mendelson for meeting a blithe postgraduate on her research trip to Columbia.

Thanks to the Fran Trust, Foundation Scotland for their grant to allow me to travel to the Stevie Smith conference in Jesus College, Oxford in March 2016, particularly Annabel Bath for her support and help. Thanks also to Dr Trudi Tate for inviting me to review for *Women: A Cultural Review*.

Elements of the third chapter, on Louis MacNeice, were incorporated into a Commentary for the *Times Literary Supplement* on 16 June 2017. Elements of the fourth chapter, on Stevie Smith, were incorporated into an article for the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, published online 26 July 2017.

Thanks to Shirin Murphy at the Carrickfergus Museum & Civic Centre for being so welcoming and encouraging while I was researching Louis MacNeice there.

Special thanks go to Prof Gerald Dawe for his mentorship and guidance. My interest in and love for war studies began in his undergraduate modules at Trinity College, Dublin. Thanks also to Dr Amanda Piesse for her stalwart encouragement and kindness.

This accomplishment would have been impossible without the care of my family, so the final word of acknowledgment and thanks goes to them, particularly my parents Mary & Pat Lynch, who have always encouraged me to follow my interests no matter what.

Table of Contents

Introduction:
What we talk about when we (do not) talk about war

'My conscience is troubling me about this fool war. I am beginning to think this may be my war after all.'[1] Writing to his friend and mentor E.R. Dodds in November 1939, Louis MacNeice concedes a reluctant sense of ownership in the escalating global conflict. Underlining the possessive adjective emphasises, literally and figuratively, his cautious participation in, and sense of belonging—even obligation—to, the 'fool war.' He also exposes his scruples in admitting, albeit grudgingly, that he has a responsibility to engage with it. This thesis takes his concession as the starting point of an inquiry into non-combatant poetry of the Second World War, focusing specifically on four poets: W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, and Stevie Smith. The strands which bring the four poets together converge on issues of belonging and obligation, and appropriate representation—whether in a mode of witness or silence, as an individual or as part of a collective. Each poet offers a distinct impression of their experience of war, but with varying emphasis on the *importance* of war experience. Analysis of their wartime poetry raises questions about the 'authority' of the author, identity and religious faith, the violence of representation, and ultimately the failures and slipperiness of language: they write poetry that asks if it is their 'war after all.'

Part of MacNeice's difficulty in committing to the war is the attendant issue of being a poet who has recognised that commitment. What does this mean for his poetry, which is now a poetry of war? Is it ineluctably 'war poetry'? And does the recognition of obligation to the 'fool war' mean that he must become a 'war poet'? As these questions suggest, MacNeice's admission is not merely a private discussion of the war with his close

[1] Louis MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Belfast, 19 November 1939, in *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Jonathan Allison (London: Faber, 2010), 366.

friend, but an insight into how—as Edna Longley expounds—'war transforms everything including the structures that represent it.'[2]

'War poetry' typically connotes—as Jon Stallworthy outlines—'battlefield poems.'[3] In the wake of the First World War, 'war poetry' implies what James Campbell terms the 'trench lyric:' that is, didactic, poignant poetry written by a combatant from the front lines, usually one with a message or a narrative to relay to the reader, intended to provoke an emotionally charged response.[4] Following the trench lyrics of Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen, however, criticism of war poetry began to indulge in what Campbell also terms 'combat gnosticism'—the culture of (combatant) war poetry that proposes, but simultaneously obscures, an arcane knowledge, which can only be accessed through first-hand experience. To put it bluntly, this has resulted in war poetry criticism espousing the ideology of its subject: where 'war poetry' as a category connotes combatant experience, war poetry criticism has also helped shape a canon that implicitly elevates combatant over non-combatant writing. Experience qualifies the ability or 'right' to talk about war.

Limiting 'war poetry' to 'battlefield poems' raises several problems. Can 'war poetry' only include the poetry that service poets write on, or concerning, the front lines? And within this assumption, is there not an unavoidable gender bias, which silences important voices outside that experience? If 'war poetry' includes non-combatant poets, must it still only include experiential writing? Is 'any war poem … a statement against war,' as Catherine W. Reilly suggests, or can they be more nuanced, more complex in their

---

[2] Edna Longley, preface to *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 18.
[3] Jon Stallworthy, 'The Fury and the Mire,' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 564.
[4] James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,' *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999): 204-5.

political intentions?[5] Must war poetry be patriotic (or anti-patriotic)? Or is it meant to shock a complacent audience? And what is to be gained from problematizing the inherited understanding of war poetry as that created by men in uniform?

The concepts of the 'trench lyric' and 'combat gnosticism' reflect the influence of the First World War on the category of 'war poetry.' As a de-historicised entity, however, 'war poetry' is much more difficult to define, not least because—in Stallworthy's words—poetry itself is 'notoriously difficult to define.'[6] 'War poetry' strives to transcend its historical moment—in effect, to become simply Poetry: as Michael Longley states, 'Good war poems escape the category "war poetry."'[7] In fact, in conversation with Longley (along with Andrew Motion and Santanu Das), Stallworthy revises his earlier claim that war poetry 'should embrace any poem about any aspect of war,' and laments the fact that 'the term "war poetry" may have outrun its use … It's become so elastic now that I think one has to use it in sort of quotation marks.'[8] Working around, and towards, a classification of 'war poetry,' Stallworthy and Longley demonstrate the fickle stickiness of definitions, and the necessarily open-ended and limitless process of determining what 'war poetry' can, or should, encompass.

One of the foremost issues in defining war poetry is that war has, for millennia, been understood to confound any attempt to express it. It is fundamentally overwhelming, and always has been. One of the most enduring literary tropes in war writing, as Kate McLoughlin outlines, can be seen as far back as Homer's *Iliad*: the classical rhetorical trope *impossibilia*, which is the admission that it is impossible to adequately

---

[5] Catherine W. Reilly, introduction to *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1984), xxvi.
[6] Stallworthy, 'The Fury and the Mire,' 564.
[7] Longley et al., 'War Poetry: A Conversation,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2014), 266.
[8] Stallworthy, 'The Fury and the Mire,' 564; 'War Poetry: A Conversation,' 260.

portray one's experience in words.[9] The bare fact of war poetry is that it attempts to express in words the inexpressibility of war, the totalising trauma, grief, and loss that accompanies conflict. War writing does not just challenge and expand our ability to experience or understand war, but, crucially, it *fails* to represent war. While Michael Longley—echoing Edna Longley's earlier claim from *Poetry in the Wars*—states that 'War turns everything upside down, and redefines poetry,' he elides the fact that this constant subversion and transformation of poetry still cannot replicate or sufficiently encompass war.[10] War cannot be 'adequately portray[ed],' and as such, the impossibility of describing war is not merely a rhetorical trope, but an inherent condition of war poetry: it ends in unavoidable failure.

If we accept, then, that 'war poetry' as a genre or category of writing is necessarily defined by its failure to fully represent its subject matter, the attendant question it raises is, how can poetry portray, represent, or talk about war? That is the central question running throughout this thesis, and as the following chapters will show, the poetry written by W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas, and Stevie Smith during the Second World War offers valuable insight into how poets can or attempt to talk about war. But why look at four non-combatants, especially if 'war poetry' usually connotes poetry from a combatant's experience? What do we gain from looking at poetry of war written by those who are not combatants? Any study of non-combatant poetry forces a recognition of the impact of war beyond combat zones, and how conflict affects 'normal life.' In the Second World War more specifically, however, non-combatant poetry blurs the boundaries of definition, as air raids on London made an otherwise 'non-combatant' landscape into a combat zone. Once air raids became part of civilian life, along with

[9] Kate McLoughlin, 'War and words,' in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.
[10] Longley, 'War Poetry: A Conversation,' 260.

rationing, black-outs, and propaganda, non-combatant poetry became poetry from the front lines. This war zone complicates the issues of involvement versus escape, and prompts further difficult questions: who qualifies as a war poet? What is their role? Is there an appropriate way to poeticise total war?

Is there 'nothing new'?: Originality and significance of research

This thesis will argue that expanding our definition of war poetry does not undermine or vitiate that category, but allows it to be more comprehensive, more nuanced, and more representational. War poetry as a term in and of itself 'accommodates binary oppositions,' as Tim Kendall outlines, because it is comprised of two words that form a paradox between creation and destruction: 'a war poem must be at war with itself, its affirming flame illuminating a dark subject-matter.'[11] War poetry has never truly been simplistic, straightforward or neat: neither should its definition, nor its limits, be.

What, then, do Auden, MacNeice, Thomas, and Smith tell us about Second World War poetry? Their individual merits will be discussed chapter by chapter, but collectively, they illustrate how the war was in effect a monumental silencer, a cataclysmic event, which no-one knew how to address properly. Through their failed attempts to represent the war, there is a nascent awareness that their failures were an intrinsic, necessary part of their response. Their work collectively demonstrates a trajectory in war poetry across the war years, from an insistent emphasis on experiential poetry, to a refusal to elevate first-hand accounts of war over any other kind of experience. There is, across the body of work of these four poets, an emergent narrative of interrogatory frustrations with the public expectations for war poets, the critical dissension about war poetry, and the threat

[11] Tim Kendall, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

of their work being used for propagandist ends—with the notable exception of Smith, whose complicated engagement with her own historical moment, as the final chapter will demonstrate, reveals a radically different approach to the questions raised above.

My discussion begins with an examination of the term 'war poetry' and its inherited connotations—based on battlefield poems, or at least soldier poems in the vein of First World War poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—and questions its usefulness, exclusivity, and bias towards military experience. It investigates the shifting scales of critical appraisal based on abstract measures, such as 'truth,' politics and propaganda, the poets' 'silence,' and the poet's 'role ' or 'duty,' concluding that these were only major issues while Britain was on what seemed the losing side of the war: dogmatic and hostile editorials and letters published in the print press vanish after 1943, when Britain began to get the upper hand militarily. This is reflected, too, in much of the poets' writings throughout the war. The early years prompted self-reflexive, anxious poems about the poet's role and the value of poetry: the later years often focus on the destruction of the Blitz, its purgative force, and the literal and linguistic fragmentation of a post-war society.

Questions concerning poetry and the role of the poet endure throughout the four main chapters of this thesis, but for each succeeding poet, become less and less urgent. Auden was particularly concerned with the role of poetry and the poet, and drew attention to both repeatedly, especially in his writings of the early war years: his later cuts from his corpus of war writing, however, illustrate a dissatisfaction with how he represented himself and his approach to war. For MacNeice, the role of the poet was to offer a voice of conscience to society, 'its still, small voice,' yet this was not always enough when the circumstances of war prompted him towards a more forceful, bitter tone (as

evident in poems such as 'Neutrality' and 'Bar-Room Matins').[12] Dylan Thomas, meanwhile, interpreted his own role as a poet during the war at first as one of resolute detachment, then reluctant engagement, and lastly as concerned citizen. Where MacNeice and Thomas initially felt distant from the conflict and gradually conceded their sense of obligation to the war, Auden began as the 'unofficial Poet Laureate' with poems such as 'Spain 1937' and 'September 1, 1939,' and carefully began to distance himself from the dogmatic poetry expected of a 'war poet.'[13] Unlike the three male poets of this thesis, however, Smith insisted 'the poet is not an important fellow,' every poet is replaceable: 'There will always be another poet.'[14]

This trajectory from Auden to Smith is not one of just chronology, gender disparity, or a tonal shift, but illustrates the impact the war had on their inquiries about the poet's role. There is a stark difference between Auden's initial insistence that the war was like 'any other experience' (and it was the poet's task to 'digest' it) and Smith's feeling that the war was, ambiguously, both 'ridiculous' and a calamity of 'crisis and exile;'[15] this difference indicates the developing awareness—in all four poets—that encompassing war in a poem was beyond the ability of the poet (and their use of language), and that to be a war poet meant accepting that fate.

Critical emphasis on experiential poetry, this thesis finds, tends to fall short when faced with the limitations of representation: first-hand experience of combat is only a small element of war as an area of study. As such, this thesis also challenges the critical

---

[12] Louis MacNeice, 'A Statement,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 98.
[13] Stephen Spender, 'The Year's Poetry, 1940,' in *Horizon*, February 1941, 141.
[14] Smith, 'My Muse,' in *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Faber, 1983), 151.
[15] Auden, 'W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War,' in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 152; Smith. 'Mosaic' in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds. Jack Barbera & William McBrien (London: Virago Press, 1981), 106; Smith, *The Holiday* (London, Virago, 1979). 9.

tendency to separate war experience into 'private' or 'personal,' and 'public' abstractions, thereby giving nuance to critical appraisals of Second World War poetry. The poets themselves, as this thesis illustrates, demonstrated their deep concerns with how war is represented and remembered. In turn, this prompts a re-thinking of both 'Second World War poetry' as a category, and an expansion of what 'war poetry' more generally can encompass. This addresses a recurring gap in existing critical material, one indicated by Marina MacKay in her 2017 monograph *Modernism, War and Violence*: 'What about noncombatant writers? In what ways, and to what effect, does their writing in the 1940s respond to the "secondness" of the Second World War?'[16]

This thesis takes up MacKay's questions in order to examine how poetry responds to the 'secondness' of the war. Though fiction is often considered the most popular or successful kind of literature arising from the Second World War—as Rod Mengham outlines, 'Both in form and content the short story was the medium of choice for conveying a shared experience of fragmentation, unpredictability, and … psychological stress'—this 'shared experience' can be found in the poetry also.[17] Mengham mentions in particular Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), which centres upon a persistent sense of decline and isolation, especially through implicit comparisons of remembered glories (Edwardian times) and present crisis.[18] Mengham asserts that the fiction of the Second World War often reflects the theme of being 'trapped in an impasse,' 'uncertain whether the present is intelligibly connected to, or disconnected from, the movement of history.'[19] He traces this through a survey of novels such as Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941), Graham Greene's

[16] Marina MacKay, *Modernism, War and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 105.
[17] Rod Mengham, 'British fiction of the war,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26.
[18] Mengham, 26.
[19] Mengham, 27.

The Ministry of Fear (1943) Henry Green's *Caught* (1943) and *Back* (1946), and Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948), commenting also on the 'abandonment, separation anxiety, and isolation,' particularly following widespread evacuation.[20] Green's *Caught*, in particular, underlines the inability to represent war experience adequately: as Richard explains to Dy, '"one's imagination is so literary … the point about a blitz is this, there's always something you can't describe."'[21]

It is telling that many of these thematic preoccupations—such as the sense of entrapment, uncertainty, disconnection and isolation—emerge in the poetry of the Second World War, too. What makes non-combatant poetry of the Second World War different from other writing of the same period is that—despite being from non-combatants—it was judged alongside the soldier poetry of the First World War. As Philip Tomlinson writes in the *Times Literary Supplement* in December 1939: 'This war has followed so close on the heels of the other that it conveys no sense of novelty to awaken the creative spirit … we are feeling the pulse of the same crisis.'[22] The short story did not have such lineage or expectation associated with it, nor did the novel, essay, or film. What much of the non-combatant poetry offers, that prose does not, is therefore a self-reflective awareness of the public desire for a certain kind of rhetoric, and the poets' refusal or failure to offer it. There are distinct reasons for looking at the poetry, beyond how it responded to the 'secondness' of the war: this thesis will show how the self-reflexivity of non-combatant poetry brought into question the 'use' or 'value' of poetry, and the discrepancy between poetic response and public expectations of poetry. It exposes the problems of the ethics of representation, and poetry's failure to be comprehensive, suitable, or bipartisan: 'war poetry' as a category must fail to

[20] Mengham, 31.
[21] Henry Green, *Caught* (London: Harvill, 1991), 175, 181.
[22] Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1939, 755. My italics.

encompass its subject, otherwise it fails to be 'war poetry.' Hence the existence of tropes such as *impossibilia* and *correctio*. Non-combatant poetry of the Second World War reflects upon the more universal questions of what representative art can hope to achieve.

Specifically, this thesis presents an original contribution to knowledge in terms of significant primary material: following an archival trip to the New York Public Library I found the original manuscript of Louis MacNeice's 1939 play *Blacklegs*, which I read alongside the existing plethora of critical writings on Auden and Thomas' war poetry, and the important, if side-lined, figure of Stevie Smith. The excitement that came with discovering a little-known and scarcely-noticed play of MacNeice was matched only by the discovery of its worth: in tying together an examination of the play's themes with his other wartime poetry, a more nuanced and colourful picture emerges of MacNeice's personal and poetic struggles in late 1939. Furthermore, as my research developed, Smith became an ever-increasing figure of importance, because her work formally and thematically encapsulates the characteristics of what this thesis considers 'war poetry,' where the writings of her male contemporaries, Auden, MacNeice and Thomas, were more concerned with questions of the poet's role, political engagement, and poetic integrity. Smith's personal relationships with soldiers of both wars deserve more critical attention (in tandem with readings of her war poetry), and the chapter dedicated to her war writings argues for how important a figure she is. I found that though much had been written about Auden and Thomas in terms of their war poetry, there was scant critical awareness or knowledge about Smith's poetic responses to war, nor MacNeice's play *Blacklegs*. This thesis gives vital critical space to and analysis of these important war writings and offers fresh insight into both the individual poets' work, and their overall contribution to the literature of the Second World War.

Historically 'good poetry': Thesis methodology and critical remit

One of the major contributions that the four poets of this thesis make to war poetry is their poetic acts of witnessing, specifically, of wars enacted upon non-combatant spheres, whether the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War, or the Blitzkrieg on London and Swansea. (As used throughout this thesis, the term 'act of witnessing' will refer to poetry that attests to the poet's experience, and with the aim of 'speaking truth to power'.) A notable variation on this emphasis on 'witnessing' is Smith, whose first-hand experiences are heavily exaggerated and fictionalised in her prose and poetry. To claim their acts of witnessing as 'poetry of witness,' however, is problematic. 'Poetry of witness' is a nebulous concept, popularised by Carolyn Forché in *Against Forgetting* (1993) and *The Poetry of Witness* (2014), co-edited with Duncan Wu. Her definitions radically change between these two publications. In 1993, Forché characterises 'poetry of witness' as poetry that 'frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation,' 'reclaims the social from the political,' 'marks a resistance to false attempts at unification,' 'will be impassioned or ironic,' 'will curse and it will bless.'[23] Ultimately, she writes, poetry of witness encompasses poems that 'bear the trace of extremity within them.'[24] This list of characteristics is plagued by abstractions. 'Extremity' is a relative concept, and experiences of 'extremity' from conflict to conflict can rarely be commensurate. The 'social' and the 'political' are equally abstracted concepts. As for paradox, equivocation, or irony—these are not singular to 'poetry of witness.'

In 2011, however, Forché revises her terms, and in a *Poetry* article, she concedes that as a term, 'poetry of witness' 'remains to be set forth':

---

[23] Carolyn Forché, 'Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness: A Column,' *The American Poetry Review* 22.2 (March/April 1993): 14, 16.
[24] Ibid, 9.

> it is a mode of reading rather than of writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood.[25]

'Poetry of witness' does not refer anymore to 'extremity,' but to a 'mode of reading,' and to the effect of poetry's subject matter on the reader. This takes 'poetry of witness,' as a de-historicised category, away from the fact of the poet's witness, and instead redefines it as a critical methodology. The problem with using witness as an interpretive method is that it allows too much for the implicit bias of its readers and critics. The fact of witness is based on an objective, verifiable actuality—as Forché implies, it is another form of 'evidence.' Yet poetry, at its core, cannot be held aloft as objective truth; it is an art form. And war poetry—if taken simply as poems that describe war—by definition cannot escape being representational.

Robyn Creswell, reviewing *The Poetry of Witness* (2014) for *The New Yorker*, asserts, 'There is something frustratingly vague about the notion of a poetry of witness … what exactly is an "event"? Is there a common scale of experience between a solitary death, a protracted civil war, and a genocide?'[26] Comparing witness across war zones and other kinds of social or political conflicts is, indeed, fundamentally problematic. While Creswell is criticising Forché and Wu's choices for inclusion in their anthology, his point stands for any comparison of poetry that encompasses war, conflict, or political violence. It also demonstrates that the debates around experience, and how traumatic or challenging that experience is, continue to complicate how we talk about war.

The poets do, nevertheless, 'witness' the war, but in ways that Forché's ideas don't encompass. Creswell maintains that 'Bearing witness—as Forché does, at least, seem to

---

[25] Carolyn Forché, 'Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art,' *Poetry* 198.2 (May 2011): 163.
[26] Robyn Creswell, 'Poetry in Extremis,' review of *The Poetry of Witness*, edited by Duncan Wu and Carolyn Forché, *The New Yorker*, 12 February 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/poetry-in-extremis

recognize—is a politically neutral action. There is nothing inherently progressive about being a witness.'[27] However, for the four poets of this thesis, bearing witness in poetry often *was* a political action, as a challenge to government-controlled dissemination of information, propagandist rhetoric aiming to obfuscate inconvenient realities of wartime, and the overpowering nationalist ideology of an objective communal experience of war. Thus, though 'witness' was certainly important to their responses to the war—not least with the pressure of having the 'right' experience—it does not define how they responded: it would be too reductive, and complicated, to claim that Auden, MacNeice, Thomas or Smith created a 'poetry of witness,' in any of the senses Forché applies. As such, for this thesis, any reference to 'witnessing' will be in terms of the act of witnessing, rather than the nascent critical framework Forché offers.

Leaving aside Forché's idea of the 'poetry of witness', then, is there a more appropriate means of examining non-combatant poetry of the Second World War? The sheer volume of non-combatant responses is too large for a comprehensive single-volume analysis. Equally, a single-author study would reinforce the exclusion of other important voices: the four non-combatant poets have been chosen to show a range of responses to war, and to allow useful oppositions and comparisons between them. To best examine issues of representation through the poets' own particular struggles with ideas of authority, faith, language and violence, this thesis aligns itself with a historicist-based methodology, though it does not wholly read the poetry through the lens of literary history—primarily because of the problem Auden outlines in 1947:

> The important and complicated relation between an artist and the age in which he lives has been the downfall of many an excellent critic. Some, denying its importance, have regarded works of art as if artists—and critics too—lived exclusively in the timeless and spaceless world of the spirit; others, denying its complexity, have assumed that a work of art is a

[27] Creswell, 'Poetry in Extremis.'

> purely natural product, like a pebble on a beach, totally explicable in terms of its physical causes.[28]

As part of the approach of this thesis, much of the close readings of poems and other texts will be based in historical context as well as alongside relevant biographical material: because so much war poetry criticism is centred upon the bias surrounding (in)experience, often the biographical material behind a text will be necessary to fully appreciate its response to war.

As such, this thesis examines how the category of 'war poet' was evolving and being constructed during the years of the Second World War. In part, this is an act of reclamative cultural historiography, exploring how the idea of the 'war poet' was discussed and formulated in poetry criticism of the war (and the years immediately preceding and following the war). More weight is placed on these discussions than on subsequent secondary criticism from the 1950s onwards—which tended to modulate, skew or misrepresent the tenor of those wartime debates—precisely because these are the conditions in which my four chosen poets found themselves writing. The pressures exerted by these debates about the 'war poet' are not just found in their poetry, but in their other writings, whether prose, letters, journals, or drama: all of these, then, will be considered as well.

There are no existing monographs dedicated primarily to the non-combatant poetry of the Second World War. This thesis aims to begin to fill that gap. Those studies that do examine non-combatant poetry tend to overlap, in agreeing that the 1940s saw poetry at its nadir, or to deviate, when identifying which poet is most 'representative', or most typical, of the war.[29] There is, then, a regrettable paucity of material, and what exists

---

[28] Auden, introduction to Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 13.

[29] See R.N. Currey, *Poets of the 1939-1945 War* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), 45: he maintains that the most representative poet is Sidney Keyes, Keith Douglas, and Alun Lewis all at once. See also

often prioritises the service poetry of the period. Vernon Scannell's *Not Without Glory* (1976), for example, places particular emphasis on the similarities to, or contrasts with, combat poetry of the First World War; Jonathan Bolton's *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt during the Second World War* (1997) focuses primarily on service or exiled poets; as does Rory Waterman's *Poets of the Second World War* (2016), which, to its credit, also at least acknowledges the importance of non-combatant responses, advising readers to investigate the writing from the Home Front.[30]

Those monographs that allow for both non-combatant and combatant poetry often struggle with the staggering breadth of material and heterogeneity of wartime responses in the Second World War. There are some continuities, however, from Mildred Davidson's pointedly titled *The Poetry is in the Pity* (1972) to Robert Hewison's cultural history *Under Siege* (1977), Linda M. Shires' *British Poetry of the Second World War* (1985), A.T. Tolley's *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* (1985), and John Lucas' *Second World War Poetry in English* (2013), all of which demonstrate a marked and recurring emphasis on the importance and elusiveness of the 'war poet' and their perceived role.[31] Davidson's analysis separates 'The 1930 Poets' (Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, Julian Bell and Charles Madge)—who she claims were 'more directly the outcome of the First World War than are the writers of the 1920s'—from 'The Older Generation' (such

---

Vernon Scannell, *Not Without Glory: The Poets of the Second World War* (London: Woburn Press, 1976), 55 (who argues it is Lewis); A.T. Tolley *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1985), 214 (advocates Roy Fuller); Linda Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 113 (she exalts Keyes); Brian Gardner, *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945* (London: Methuen, 2007), xx (also insists on Douglas).

[30] See Scannell, *Not Without Glory* (London: Woburn Press, 1976); Jonathan Bolton, *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt during the Second World War* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); and Rory Waterman, *Poets of the Second World War* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2016), 4.

[31] See Mildred Davidson, *The Poetry is in the Pity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972); Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985); A.T. Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1985); John Lucas, *Second World War Poetry in English* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2013).

as Herbert Read, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves), 'Middle Generation' (Spender, Auden, and MacNeice) and 'Younger Generation of Poets' (what she terms the 'fighter poets' such as Sidney Keyes and Charles Causley) in the Second World War.[32] While her study helpfully compares and contrasts among her chosen poets, the conclusion of her examination fundamentally misreads its subject: 'The dominant English note is that of eventual triumph.'[33] As this thesis will show, triumph—whether in tone or subject—is surpassed by failure as the 'dominant note' of Second World War poetry.

Hewison's study, by contrast, relies heavily on value judgments: referring to an article published in *Horizon* in March 1942, he claims, '"guilt, boredom and pathological anxiety about the future" … [are] the competing factors for the prime neurosis of the age, War Guilt.'[34] While his observations are well-grounded, this strand of criticism, which reinforces ideas of fatalism and resignation in the poets of this time, is only part of the story. Shires rightly picks up on this, and voices her concern that poetry of the Second World War is 'dismissed as a blackout period for art.'[35] However, she pays little attention to some of the primary poets of the period—Auden and MacNeice in particular—as they are 'not part of [her] subject,' and focuses more on offering a broad, if brief, examination of the period as a whole, arguing primarily against the negative critical conclusions offered by Orwell and Alvarez.[36] Tolley, meanwhile, offers another broad account, and falls into similar critical traps as others: 'what one can characterise as the poetry of the war—or as "war poetry"—does not dominate the poetry of the period,' and even then, 'only Alun Lewis stands out.'[37] Lucas's monograph argues 'for the variety and quality of

[32] Davidson, 25.
[33] Ibid, 135.
[34] Hewison, 67.
[35] Shires, xiii.
[36] Ibid, xv.
[37] Tolley, 205.

Anglophone poetry of World War II' but weighs his examination more towards the poetry of theatres of war—with separate chapters on 'War in the Air,' ground soldiers, 'War at Sea.'[38] Still, he acknowledges that civilians and soldiers shared 'the dread expectedness of war' and allows for a comparison on those terms.[39]

Since the 1980s, however, monographs on Second World War poetry have become much less common, replaced by either book chapters or articles.[40] Following debates concerning the role of the poet, Adam Piette, in three informative book chapters published between 2005 and 2009, offers succinct and detailed analysis of the intersections between literature and history throughout the war. In 'World War II: Contested Europe' (2005), he introduces the question reiterated throughout the early years of the war, 'Where are the war poets?', and offers a useful and insightful analysis of its underlying prejudice: 'The question was never 'Where are the War Poets?', but how effective their act of witness was to be to the prevailing conditions, in the light of the knowledge of the atrocities being unleashed in Europe.'[41] In looking for 'war poets' there was a public expectation for poetry that instructed its audience to feel, react and understand the conflict a certain way—an example set by the trench lyrics of the First World War. The fact that poetry of the Second World War did not often instruct its audience in this way is one likely reason why the search for the 'war poet' continued.

---

[38] Lucas, 18.
[39] Ibid, 13.
[40] This begins with Edna Longley's 1986 study *Poetry in the Wars*, which offers a chapter on two poets of the Second World War, Keith Douglas and Louis MacNeice, with valuable close readings of both their works; see *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), 78-93; 94-112.
[41] Adam Piette, 'World War II: Contested Europe,' in *The Cambridge History of 20th Century Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 430. See also 'War poetry in Britain,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13-25; and 'Keith Douglas and the poetry of the Second World War,' in *The Cambridge Companion to 20th Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 117-130.

There are also, occasionally, overly reductive conclusions, such as that of Michael North's 'World War II: the city in ruins' (2005), which asserts that the combatant poets of the war 'add so little to the world's stock of innovative literature, because it was the civilian experience of war that was so characteristically new in this case.'[42] While civilian experience of war had been changed by the technological advancements of warfare and threat of invasion (it is contentious to claim civilians had not experienced war before the Second World War), the implication that this is what should undermine the significance of combat poetry is unconvincing. If the issue is the 'innovative' literature, neither civilian nor combat poetry of the Second World War can claim a formal revolution. As North continues, 'what seems most conspicuously missing from the roster of World War II literature is not poetry or fiction per se but the kind of radical innovation in poetry and fiction that is so characteristic of the period during and immediately after World War I.'[43] Following the technical innovations of Modernism, trench lyrics, and Imagism (and so on) throughout the years of the First World War, there seems to have been an expectation that another war would bring with it another literary movement, another explosion of verse forms, another challenge to inherited tradition. Jon Stallworthy maintains that the poems of the Second World War 'have had less impact—not because they were less good, but because the reading public has become increasingly attuned to prose, and because the Word (prose as well as verse) has increasingly lost ground to the Image.'[44] The one thing North and Stallworthy point toward, however, is that poetry of the Second World War fell short of a critical expectation for formal invention, akin to that of Modernism or Imagism.

---

[42] Michael North, 'World War II: the city in ruins,' in *The Cambridge History of 20th Century Literature*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 444.
[43] North, 'World War II: the city in ruins,' 442.
[44] Stallworthy, 'The Fury and the Mire,' 576.

More recently, critical appraisals have been expanded and bolstered by *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, which contains nine chapters relating to poetry of the Second World War.[45] One of these in particular, Helen Goethals' analysis of poetry and patriotism, contains a useful review of the Second World War literary criticism, and concludes that,

> Sixty years after the cessation of hostilities, what is urgently needed is an enlargement of the canon, one which takes into account not merely the military and social history of the War, but also its diplomatic, economic, ideological, and cultural aspects.[46]

The enlargement of the canon had begun as early as 1969, with the publication of Angus Calder's *The People's War*, and has been developed more recently with Adam Piette's *Imagination at War* (1995), Tim Kendall's chapters on Auden, Blitz poetry, and Keith Douglas in *Modern English War Poetry* (2006), and Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins* (2011).[47] It is striking, then, that enlargement still needs to be argued for, and that the old habit of seeing the war poet as a 'combatant poet' refuses to go away: as Marina MacKay writes in 2007, the literature of the Second World War 'urges a reshaping of what counts as the literature of war in order to include authors who were not combatants and texts that are not "about" war in any straightforwardly mimetic way.'[48]

---

[45] See Dawn Bellamy, ' "Others have come before you": The Influence of Great War Poetry on Second World War Poets,' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), 299-314; Roderick Watson, '"Death's Proletariat": Scottish Poets of the Second World War,' 315-339; Helen Goethals, '"The Muse that Failed": Poetry and Patriotism during the Second World War,' 362-376; Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 377-397; Geoffrey Hill, 'Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective,' 398-418; Simon Featherstone, 'Women's Poetry of the First and Second World Wars,' 445-460; Cornelia D.J. Pearsall, 'The War Remains of Keith Douglas and Ted Hughes,' 524-541; Gareth Reeves, '"This is plenty. This is more than enough": Poetry and the Memory of the Second World War,' 579-591; and Claire M. Tylee, 'British Holocaust Poetry: Songs of Experience,' 592-612.

[46] Goethals, '"The Muse that Failed,"' 363.

[47] See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (London: Cape, 1969); Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London; Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995); Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[48] Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

As a means of addressing some of the critical pitfalls outlined above, this thesis will analyse the similarities and differences in the bodies of work of my four poets. W.H. Auden, born in York, is commonly viewed as the most popular and successful poet of this period.[49] His centrality in literary history and criticism offers a kind of control-test in this analysis for what it means to be a 'war' poet, but not a combatant. His return to religion in 1940 signals a change in his poetic approach to the conflict, characterised by his ongoing pursuit of an appropriate tone over the war years—and 'tone' was as or more important as poetic form or descriptive accuracy for Auden. Louis MacNeice, born in Belfast, was a prolific figure in the middle of London society through the war years; he nonetheless fundamentally perceived himself as an outsider looking in.[50] His work highlights issues of identity, both national and religious, and his engagement with anti-intellectualism provides an important contrast to the rhetoric of Ministry of Information propaganda. Dylan Thomas, born in Swansea, began a minor journalism career before gaining status in the early 1930s, and was catapulted into international fame with the publication of *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946. The melopoeia of his war elegies—the way they charge linguistic meaning with tonal or phonic meaning—evokes older roots of a vatic tradition in poetry (and makes his voice particularly distinctive within Second World War poetics). Stevie Smith, born in Hull, grew up in Palmers Green, a suburb in North London, where she lived the rest of her life, working as a secretary for Pearson & Newnes; she only garnered wide acclaim in the 1960s, receiving the Cholmondeley Award in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969.[51] Her use of superficially

[49] See Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 33; and Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981), xiii-xiv. Skelton announces Auden as 'the clear Master of the Period. He dominates it from first to last' (33).
[50] See Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1995), 43, 297-8; and Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False* (London: Faber, 2007), 38.
[51] See Francis Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1990), 277, 291.

simplistic forms—particularly rhyming couplets and children's rhymes—belies the content she places within them, often probing themes of suffering, death, nihilism, and irony, in a deeply ambiguous tone.

Focussing on these four poets does, however, necessarily only tell a partial story: there are, inevitably, gaps. This thesis does not examine any further Anglophone poetry, from America or elsewhere, nor does it include any study of T.S. Eliot, one of the foremost writers of the Second World War, if not the twentieth century as a whole. It is also, once more, balanced towards male rather than female poets. Moreover, it offers no in-depth examination of any Scottish non-combatant poets: in much Scottish poetry of the war there was a coming together of questions of poetic identity—expressed in multiple languages—the rejection of fascism, and an exploration (and often vehement espousal) of Scottish Nationalism, which falls outside the scope of the current thesis. One rationale for these absences is that no single study of non-combatant poetry can be both in-depth and comprehensive. There is no American poetry, as this study aims to focus specifically on the non-combatant experience in London, where the chosen poets were primarily centred during the war (with the awkward exception of Auden, who was nevertheless claimed in absentia as the 'unofficial Poet Laureate').[52]

Eliot is the main omission from this focus on London. His *Four Quartets*, published over the course of the war years—Burnt Norton (1936), East Coker (1940), The Dry Salvages (1941), and Little Gidding (1942)—was undoubtedly among the most popular and influential poetry of the war. Further, as editor of Faber, Eliot was also one of the primary literary figures of the period and was in regular contact with three of the four chosen poets (Smith again proves an exception). However, Eliot belonged to an older

[52] Stephen Spender, 'The Year's Poetry, 1940,' in *Horizon*, February 1941, 141.

generation, born in 1888, and in another country—and this thesis concentrates partly on revisiting a particular poetic 'generation.' Auden and MacNeice were both born in 1907, Smith in 1902; Eliot was already in university by the time Dylan Thomas was born in 1914. *The Waste Land*, moreover, published in 1922, made an indelible impact on the three male poets of this thesis. Edward Mendelson convincingly writes of the many instances where *The Waste Land*'s echoes can be heard in Auden's writing.[53] Thomas, John Goodby outlines, 'knew Eliot's work thoroughly, relishing the gothic-surreal sanctioned by *The Waste Land*.'[54] MacNeice, meanwhile, dates the exact point in his life when he first read it—in summer 1927 while at Oxford—and acknowledges that the poem was his 'obsession' because his generation 'had absorbed that sense of futility … which the ebbing of World War I had left behind.'[55] This is one reason why Eliot is excluded from this examination: he was an adult during the First World War, and wrote at length about its effect; his perspective on the Second World War was inevitably overshadowed by older memories.

The absence of any women's voices beyond Stevie Smith's is firstly due to the vicious circle of under-representation: even to include Smith in this analysis as a war poet was a venture into the dark, with only one other critic, Romana Huk, discussing her in this context. (When Smith appears in war studies criticism, it is usually as a novelist.) The relative dearth of critical material on female poets of the Second World War has been critically outlined by both Catherine W. Reilly and Simon Featherstone, and proves a challenge to any study wishing to resolve the gender imbalance.[56] As a means of redress,

---

[53] See Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981), 12, 64n1, 148, 175, 187, 227.
[54] John Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 95.
[55] MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 233.
[56] See Reilly, *Chaos of the Night* (London: Virago, 1984), xxi; and Featherstone, 'Women's Poetry of the Two World Wars,' in *Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 445-460.

this thesis will not attempt a broad analysis of multiple female voices, but will instead aim for a deeper examination of one, in the hope this will provide a template for further in-depth analysis of women's poetry of this period. The long-term vision, therefore, is to normalise the criticism of Smith as a poet, who was writing poetry of comparable importance to her male peers. Certainly, the London poetic scene—which I will now explore in more depth—was one in which women's voices played a significant role.

The poetry scene in London, and how it is understood

The London experience is, of course, only one among many narratives of non-combatant poets: this thesis acknowledges that it is only one element of a much larger picture. However, London was a poetic epicentre, and a particular combination of conditions—the totalizing nature of the war, the advancing air-raids on the capital, the blackouts and rationing enforced by a wartime government, and the publication industry—were all to be found in London in 1939-1945. In wartime London, as Adam Piette writes, 'the poetry scene was dominated by three literary magazines: Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*, John Lehmann's *New Writing* (later *Penguin New Writing*), and M.J. Tambimuttu's *Poetry London*.'[57] Their first challenge was the restrictions set by paper rationing, when their quotas were cut down to a third by 1943, 'stipulating page limits, words per page, and minimizing unnecessary design.'[58] Some magazines did not even get as far as these restrictions: in January 1939, Eliot terminated his editorship of *The Criterion*, and the same year saw the end of Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*.[59] Neither did *The London Mercury* or Julian Symons' *Twentieth Century Verse* make it past 1939.[60]

[57] Adam Piette, 'War poetry in Britain,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 16.
[58] Ibid, 13.
[59] Ibid, 13.
[60] Ibid, 15.

According to Linda Shires, there was a widespread feeling that these magazines folded upon 'witnessing the dissolution of an entire civilization,' and that writers 'gravely doubted the future of literature.'[61]

One of the most severe impacts on the London publishing scene was the Blitz attack of 29 December 1940, when five million volumes in locked and unguarded offices and warehouses, as well as the premises of seven publishing houses, were destroyed in the fire that followed the air raid.[62] The paper quality also declined rapidly, as rationing forced booksellers to make paper from home-produced straw, resulting in pages being 'rough, yellow and thin from being pulped and repulped so often.'[63] The difficulty of writing about the war, then, is not only of subject, but production. Despite this, as Hewison writes, poetry continued to be published to meet demand:

> While the number of fiction titles published steadily declined, poetry publication fell far less sharply in the first three years (from 310 in 1940 to 249 in 1942), and actually increased to 329 in 1943, followed by 328 in 1944.[64]

The appetite for literature, only increased: between 1939 and 1945, 'expenditure on books rose from £9 million to £23 million,' partly because of the increased costs of production, but primarily because of the increase in reading.[65]

In line with this continuation of publication, the arts and culture scene was active during the war years. One of the institutions that was greatly responsible for this was the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which was founded in December 1939, and began as an organisation to aid 'entertainment in the provinces.'[66] Its humble beginnings presaged a rapid increase in its impact:

---

[61] Shires, 4.
[62] Hewison, 32.
[63] Hewison, 79.
[64] Ibid, 97.
[65] Ibid, 76.
[66] Ibid, 157.

> In March [1940] the government matched this grant [£25,000 from the Pilgrim Trust] with an additional £25,000, and these twin sources of income continued until 1942 … government grants rose from £100,000 in 1942 to £235,000 in 1945, when CEMA became the Arts Council of Great Britain.[67]

CEMA was responsible for financing, promoting and maintaining 4,449 concerts in 1943 alone; by 1944, it was overseeing concerts and recitals 'at the rate of seventy a week in factories, and thirty a week in churches and village halls.'[68] Despite these figures of success, the perception of the arts and culture scene flourishing under duress may be slightly overstating the point: in her *London War Notes*, the novelist Mollie Panter-Downes wrote on 11 March 1945 that,

> During the war years, more and more Londoners have taken to reading poetry, listening to music, and going to art exhibitions, although there is less and less of all three to be had in this shabby, weary capital … The output of good poetry is small, but the public hunger for it is pathetically great. The demand for music is probably not much greater now than it was in peacetime, but it looks greater because the supply of concert halls and orchestras is sadly limited … People line up at the National Gallery every day for the lunchtime concerts organized by Myra Hess.[69]

So, though CEMA funded concerts, recitals and other literary and artistic events around the country, and there was an increased appetite for arts and culture, there was the underlying possibility that this apparent spike in interest was, as Panter-Downes observed, because the 'supply … is sadly limited.' Nevertheless, the demand was there, and CEMA was founded to support it. They were not alone in supplying it, however: the British Council and the BBC also played large roles in promoting arts and culture during wartime. The BBC notably published *The Listener*, commissioned writers and musicians (indeed it employed Louis MacNeice during the war, and until his retirement), and broadcast radio plays, talks, and poetry readings.

---

[67] Hewison, 23, 157.
[68] Ibid, 158.
[69] Mollie Panter-Downes, *London War Notes: 1939-1945*, ed. William Shawn (London: Persephone Books, 2014), 441.

Though the government, and government-supported institutions, were newly visible in their support for the arts, there was also the new problem of the government censor: for example, George Orwell had significant difficulty in publishing *Animal Farm*, because the Ministry of Information took a more active role in the editorial process. As Orwell writes in his (aptly-named) column 'As I Please' for the *Tribune*:

> The M.O.I. does not, of course, dictate a party line or issue an *index expurgatorius*. It merely 'advises'. Publishers take manuscripts to the M.O.I. and the M.O.I. 'suggests' that this or that is undesirable, or premature, or 'would serve no good purpose'. And though there is no definite prohibition, no clear statement that this or that must not be printed, official policy is never flouted.[70]

Censorship across literature was not government-controlled and regulated in an official capacity—the government still needed to strike an obvious contrast from Nazi book-burnings—but, as Angus Calder maintains, the Ministry of Information had a 'Scrutiny Division which aimed to read through everything published in Britain … the censorship itself, under this wary eye, remained voluntary.'[71] However, as Mengham argues, combat writers had a more rigorous form of censorship enacted on anything they wrote down.[72] Under these conditions, as Sebastian Knowles points out, 'To write anything at all was subversive; to write poetry in the sardonic, lacerative spirit of the first war was next to impossible.'[73]

The London poetry scene has generally been characterised, in secondary criticism, as a conglomeration of various cliques. Most prominent was what is referred to as the Auden generation, the Auden Group, the Thirties poets, or MacSpaunday (poets seen, rightly or wrongly to be under Auden's aegis, namely Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender,

---

[70] George Orwell, 'As I Please' (7 July 1944), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume III: As I Please 1943-1945*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 180-81.
[71] Angus Calder, *The People's War, Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 506.
[72] See Mengham, 39.
[73] Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xx.

and MacNeice). However, as Brian Gardner elaborates in his 'Introductory Note' to *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945*, they were not alone: 'Into the war beside the "Auden group" went the New Apocalyptics, the surrealists, the blatant obscurantists, the neo-Georgians, and individualists of Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*.'[74] For the purposes of this thesis, the most important of these are the New Apocalyptics (Henry Treece, J.F. Hendry, and somewhat reluctantly, Dylan Thomas); the Surrealists (led by David Gascoyne); and a 'group' not mentioned by Gardner, the O.C.T.U. generation (Alun Lewis, Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, Roy Fuller).[75] Notably, these groups do not account for many other poets active at the time, such as Stevie Smith, Edith Sitwell, T.S. Eliot, Laurence Binyon, Dorothy Wellesley, Kathleen Raine, or Herbert Read, as well as veterans of the First World War, such as Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon.

From each of these poetic 'groupings' there was an expected style, form, theme or approach. For Auden and those considered to be under his aegis, their 1930s poetry was widely read as a mix of documentary realism, colloquial informality, and political commentary (typified in such books as *Letters from Iceland* [1937] and *Journey to a War* [1939]). Auden's popularity was established by 1937 with a double issue of *New Verse* in his honour, featuring positive and celebratory reviews and essays on his work, in which he was lauded as 'the first English poet for many years who is a poet all round … traditional, revolutionary, energetic, inquisitive, critical, and intelligent.'[76] The combatant poets of the 'O.C.T.U.' were known for their blend of brutal realism—

[74] Gardner, 'Introductory Note,' *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945* (London: Methuen, 2007), xvii.
[75] For 'The Auden Generation' see Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1976); for 'Auden Group' see Ronald Carter, ed., *Thirties Poets—'The Auden Group': A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1984); for 'Thirties generation,' see Robin Skelton, introduction to *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 36; 'the O.C.T.U generation' appears in Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1985); for 'MacSpaunday,' see Roy Campbell (the originator of the phrase) in *Talking Bronco* (London: Faber, 1946), 81, 83; for 'Apocalyptics' and 'surrealists,' see Brian Gardner, 'Introductory Note,' *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945* (London: Methuen, 2007), xvii.
[76] See Geoffrey Grigson, ed., *New Verse* Auden Double Number, 26-27, November 1937, 1-48.

characterised by the kind of unflinching act of witnessing in Alun Lewis's 'Song (on seeing dead bodies floating off the Cape)'—and, as Linda Shires writes of Keith Douglas, their self-fashioning in 'the romantic tradition of great warriors,' including the concerns of inadequacy that such a tradition provoked:[77] Douglas in particular aired his concern that 'there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view about this war except its mobile character.'[78] The New Apocalyptics began as the antithesis to the political realism found in Auden's work (and that of the poets associated with him) and they envisioned themselves as 'seeking and finding the optimum living synthesis of man and exterior world … the fusion of man and government through the collapse of totalitarianism and "state" as a superhuman concept; fusion of man and art, by bringing art to actual life.'[79] What this usually resulted in was a renewed emphasis on vision and myth in poetry: Adam Piette criticises them for revelling 'in a self-indulgent poetic, safely overwriting under the twin banner of Surrealism and European Violence.'[80] Surrealism, meanwhile, was closely linked to the influence of Freud—his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was first published in English in 1922, and *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1930—and played on word association, juxtapositions, and hallucinatory imagery. Surrealism, Shires argues, made an attempt to 'support an increasing distrust in the failures of the rational, socio-political mind, now blamed for … the Depression and the Spanish Civil War.'[81]

Though criticism tends to comprehend the poetry scene as a series of groups in order to quickly digest its activity, to pigeon-hole writers into discrete categories is not

---

[77] Alun Lewis, 'Song (on seeing dead bodies floating off the Cape),' in *Collected Poems: Alun Lewis*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 1994), 121-22; Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 115.
[78] Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 1971, 478.
[79] J.F. Hendry, 'Writers and Apocalypse,' introduction to *The New Apocalypse: An Anthology of Criticism, Poems and Stories*, eds. J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece (London: Fortune Press, 1939), 15.
[80] Piette, *Imagination at War*, 198-99.
[81] Shires, 28-29.

only a means of parsing vast swathes of bibliographies, but also a means of dismissing them. In 1972, Ian Hamilton described exactly this tendency, in his introduction to *The Poetry of War*:

> 'It is impossible to indict a whole poetic decade,['] wrote Kenneth Allott in 1948, but he was surely optimistic. The decade in which he wrote this, the now notorious Forties, has been thoroughly written off in most current pigeon-holings of contemporary verse as a period dominated by the rhetoric of the New Apocalypse and by a war-time hysteria that could only have produced an 'impossibly overblown, exaggerated, strained' reaction from its poets.[82]

The poetry of this period, then, has long been subject to indictment, a judicial accusation of mediocrity and hyperbole, on the one hand, and the application of a reductive shorthand, on the other, which is dependent on the characteristics of the dominant journals.

The group names used all tend to correspond to a young generation of male writers—in their twenties and thirties for the most part—and also usually correspond to certain periodicals in which they appeared: *Horizon* and *New Writing* in particular sought writing from a younger generation (featuring work from many of the male poets mentioned above), where *Poetry London*, it seems, was less particular in its solicitations. In Shires' words, Tambimuttu's editorial policy was 'liberal in the extreme':[83] it could embrace writers as different as Lawrence Durrell, Dylan Thomas, and Keith Douglas. Connolly's editorship of *Horizon* took on a tone of literary lamentation, and an approach that was conservative, cautious, and overtly contradictory: each issue led with a 'Comment' from Connolly about his concerns for literature, some of which prove entirely inconsistent. Many critics have characterised *Horizon*, meanwhile, as a stalwart defence of the ivory tower.[84] Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*, by contrast, promoted

[82] Ian Hamilton, 'Introduction,' in *The Poetry of War: 1939-1945* (London: New English Library, 1972), 9.
[83] Shires, 17.
[84] Ibid, 16.

'encouragement of the unknown writer,' and was 'the most popular literary phenomenon of the war years,' not least because it was small enough to fit in a kitbag.[85]

Across the different poetic groupings, there is however at least one consistent thematic strand. As Leo Mellor outlines:

> Throughout the 1920s and 1930s British writing was filled with ruins and fragments. They appeared … as content: with visions of tottering towers and scraps of paper; and also in the *mise en page* shapes of broken poetics and recovered *objets trouvés* phrase shards. But from the outbreak of the Second World War what had been an aesthetic mode began to resemble a template.[86]

In other words, writers of the Second World War were actively utilising existing aspects of modernism, as prefabricated vehicles of expression, rather than looking for 'new,' contingent or *ad hoc* means of exploring experience. Fragmentation was no longer solely indicative of a post-war cultural weakness or instability, as typified by Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which, Marina MacKay outlines, became a series of tropes for writers of the 1930s and 40s.[87] Instead, fragmentation became a representative form of living through the Blitz; this perhaps accounts in part for the success of the short story, a kind of 'fragment' of prose. MacKay also comments on Mellor's argument above, and remarks that it describes 'how the spectacle of the Blitz generated elusive and oblique texts that foreground fiery obliteration as a challenge to textual representation.'[88] This was not a case of writers shoring the 'fragments' of their city (or their own poetry or prose) 'against [their] ruins' but of actively choosing the inchoateness of their art as the 'explanatory tool' of their experience. But this was itself seen as problematic by some writers; as Elizabeth

[85] Shires, 18.
[86] Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 5.
[87] MacKay, *Modernism, War and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 129.
[88] Ibid, 125.

Bowen argued, 'these years rebuff the imagination as much by being fragmentary as by being violent'—fragmentation might stymie the imagination as much as stimulate it.[89]

Writing in 1940, Virginia Woolf similarly asserted that 'there is a deep gulf to be bridged between the dying world, and the world that is struggling to be born … For some years now England has been making an effort—at last—to bridge the gulf between the two worlds.'[90] Moreover, she claimed, 'the poet is a dweller in [these] two worlds':

> They had nothing settled to look at; nothing peaceful to remember; nothing certain to come … There was no tranquillity in which they could recollect … The leaning-tower writer has had the courage … to tell the truth, the unpleasant truth, about himself.[91]

Truth-telling, as will be discussed later in this Introduction, is a common yardstick of poetic 'worth' in the war years, and a simultaneous weapon with which to beat and berate poets. The 'leaning-tower writer' that Woolf identifies refers to any one of Cecil Day Lewis, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, or Louis MacNeice (whose *Autumn Journal* she dismisses as 'feeble' poetry but 'interesting' autobiography).[92] What Woolf primarily discusses here is poetry 'arising out of the experience of war', which demonstrates what she terms an 'honest egotism.'[93] What writers write from the 'gulf' is characterised by a 'desire to be whole,' 'to write the common speech of their kind, and' 'no longer be isolated.'[94] Paradoxically, the only way to reach out to other people—to avoid the isolation that Alun Lewis, for example, suggests when he speaks of his position in the war as 'only a tiny one'—is this 'honest egotism,' and having 'the courage … to tell

---

[89] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Contemporary,' review of V.S. Pritchett's *In My Good Books*, in *The New Statesman*, 23 May 1942, 340.
[90] Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower,' in *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays, Volume One*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 176-77. See also Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 1996), 12-16; and MacKay, *Modernism, War and Violence*, 106-109. Both Janet Montefiore and Marina MacKay read 'The Leaning Tower' alongside George Orwell's 'Inside the Whale,' published the same year (1940).
[91] Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower,' 173-74.
[92] Ibid, 167, 169.
[93] Ibid, 175.
[94] Ibid, 173.

the truth, the unpleasant truth, about himself.'[95] Despite Bowen and Woolf's doubts, rather than 'rebuff[ing] the imagination,' the war years prompted plenty of poetry; the uneven and disjointed poetic responses are symptomatic of their cultural and historical context (however fragmentary and violent).

Critical appraisals: then and now

Having given a brief overview of the poetry scene during the war years, we turn now to a closer look at the periodicals of the Second World War, and their varied and challenging assortment of responses to the conflict. Robin Skelton, in his introduction to Penguin's *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964) indicates—albeit negatively—the prominence of the period's self-reflexivity: 'As one reads the periodicals of the time it sometimes seems as if the whole of the thirties generation was engaged in analysing its predicament and writing poetry and criticism about it.'[96] The analysis of this 'predicament' continued into the 1940s and revolved around various repeated themes: the insistent and, at times, overshadowing references and allusions to the First World War and its poets;[97] debates about the poet's perceived duty;[98] the burgeoning critical argument that the poetry of the

[95] Alun Lewis to Gweno Lewis, 21 May 1942, in *Letters to my Wife*, ed. Gweno Lewis (Cardiff: Seren Books, 1989), 219.
[96] Robin Skelton, introduction to *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 36.
[97] See Philip Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1939, 755; N.A., 'Noblest of Peace Poems,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 October 1940, 531; Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' in *Horizon,* January 1941, 5; Lord David Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World: War's Impact on our Literature,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 January 1941:, 18+; John Lehmann, 'Foreword,' in *Penguin New Writing* 3, February 1941, 8; Babette Deutsch, 'War Poetry Then and Now,' *The New Republic*, 21 April 1941, 567; Stephen Spender, 'Books and the War—V', *Penguin New Writing* 6, May 1941, 127-135; Spender, 'War Poetry in this War,' *The Listener*, 16 October 1941, 539-40; Hugh l'Anson Fausset, 'Songs of Emergency,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1942, 392; Hugh l'Anson Fausset, 'Challenge to the Poets,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 1943, 43; Alec M. Hardie, 'Poetry between the Wars,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 March 1946, 121.
[98] See Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' 755; Tomlinson, 'The Heroic Theme,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 September 1940, 447; Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World,' 18+; Spender, 'Books and the War—V,' 127-135; Spender, 'War Poetry in this War,' 539-40; Hugh l'Anson Fausset, 'On Going to the Wars,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 January 1942, 21; Tomlinson, 'Poets at School and War: The Younger Generation on Itself,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1942, 402; Fausset, 'War-Time Poets,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 September 1942, 440.

war would only appear after it concluded;[99] and debates about the 'silence' or 'absence' of war poets.[100] By looking at each of these issues in turn, then, we can trace a historiography of critical analysis, and of anxieties about poetry and its efficacy.

Setting the tone for war poetry debates for years to come, Philip Tomlinson, in the nearly-New Year's Eve issue of the *TLS* in December 1939, frames his expectations of Second World War poetry against the example set by the First World War, claiming that 'the last War presented the spectacle of hundreds of young poets … we need not despair of the birth of a new and finer order.'[101] (Such an assessment shows how, in Vernon Scannell's words, 'After 1918 it was impossible for the British reading public to think of a war without its War Poets.')[102] Writing just four months after the declaration of war, Tomlinson is already establishing an expectation for the poets of his time to respond in a vein similar to Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon: 'we are feeling the pulse of the *same* crisis … we are faced with an undeniable *repetition* of history.'[103] By stressing the earlier poets' harmony with 'the national will,' Tomlinson may be suggesting the poets' task is one that corresponds to the public message shaped and broadcast through the Ministry of Information and its propaganda campaigns.[104] Far from keeping poetry separate from politics, Tomlinson is lobbying for their convergence, and for a renaissance of war poetry that is, to some extent, a 'repetition' of the poetry of the First

[99] See 'Noblest of Peace Poems,' 531; Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World,' 18+; Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 1971, 478.
[100] See Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, January 1941, 5; Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World,' 18+; Lehmann, 'Foreword,' *Penguin New Writing* 3, February 1941, 8; Spender, 'Books and the War—V,' 127-135; Spender, 'War Poetry in this War,' 539-40; Robert Graves, 'War Poetry in this War,' *The Listener*, 23 October 1941, 566-7; Charles William Brodribb, 'Poets in War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1942, 391; Tomlinson, 'Poets at School and War,' 402; Spender, 'An Expectant Silence,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1943, 91.
[101] Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' 755.
[102] Scannell, *Not Without Glory*, 14.
[103] Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' 755. My italics.
[104] See Adam Piette, 'War poetry in Britain,' 13.

World War, and a defence of a nationally-defined shared 'heritage.' This is not just a convergence of poetry and 'politics' in the abstract, but of poetry and nationalist fervour.

As a counter example, T.S. Eliot indicates his own issue with the problems raised by varying expectations of war poetry—in 'Poetry in Wartime,' an article for *Common Sense* in 1942, he highlights the two distinct definitions inferred from the term 'war poetry:'

> We may mean patriotic poetry, that is to say poetry which expresses and stimulates pride in the military virtues of a people. Or we may be asking for poets to write poetry arising out of their experience of war.[105]

Eliot's distinction is between, on the one hand, a political and propagandist understanding of poetry at the service of a 'people,' and on the other an understanding of poetry reflective of personal experience (or witnessing). The non-combatant poets of this thesis adhere to the latter definition, favouring a subjective, inchoate poetry (reflective of their own act of witnessing) over a poetry that aimed to define and reflect 'the national will,' as Tomlinson urged.

The binary that Eliot discusses neatly avoids the problem of 'patriotic poetry' (and the poet who writes it) merely becoming another vehicle of propaganda. It is this precise problem of taking or avoiding responsibility that Stephen Spender outlines in May 1941:

> The first responsibility of the artist—so different from that of the political agitator—is to describe the truth as he sees it. He is primarily a witness … The task of the poet is to organize words in such a way that their meaning is clear and unmistakeable. This is betrayed if the poet takes over the propaganda of political parties and uses words in false contexts.[106]

Spender (echoing Woolf's emphasis on 'the courage … to tell the truth') stresses truthfulness, or 'witnessing,' as the primary characteristic of war poetry: in his analysis of the First World War, this could include speaking out about German imperialism, or,

---

[105] T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry in Wartime,' *Common Sense*, October 1942, 351.
[106] Spender, 'Books and the War—V,' 127-135.

military mismanagement. Truth-telling was held as the first and most important task of the war poet by many critics, particularly Hugh l'Anson Fausset—'The struggle to be true to their experience is the essential war in which they are engaged'—and Philip Tomlinson, who argued that war poetry 'will relate the immediate, agonizing facts in universal terms.'[107] Throughout these observations, there is a tension between the subjective—'as he sees it,' 'true to their experience'—and the universal. Lying behind this tension is a worry that bridging the two is impossible: no poet could ever achieve the 'clarity' that Spender calls for, the organisation of 'words in such a way that their meaning is clear and unmistakeable.'

Since the relationship between subjective experience and objective truth is complicated, this hampers any search for a representative 'war poetry' that can encapsulate or summarize the war. It is, perhaps, only with the passing of time, and the agglomeration of personal experiences into a shared narrative of 'The War' (with its air of objective truth), that a representative poetry, telling the truth about 'The War' might emerge. Until then, any poetry will be subjective, partial, incomplete and tentative. This, at least, is the argument Eliot makes, in the same 'Poetry in Wartime' article:

> You cannot understand war—with the kind of understanding needed for writing poetry—or any other great experience while you are in the midst of it; you can only record small immediate observations. And when, after the war, the experience has become a part of a man's whole past, it is likely to bear fruit in something very different from what, during time of war, people call "war poetry."[108]

In 1945, *War Poems from the Sunday Times*, a privately printed collection of patriotic verse, similarly claimed, 'We still await the masterpieces of war poetry and it may be a lifetime before some village Hardy finds his powers summoned forth by the events which

[107] Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' 755; Fausset, 'On Going to the Wars,' 21.
[108] T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry in Wartime,' *Common Sense*, October 1942, 351.

we know only too well.'[109] (For my purposes, it is important to note, here, the *Sunday Times*' invocation of Hardy, a non-combatant during both the Second Boer War and the First World War: in passing, these comments suggest the established acceptance of non-combatant voices during the war itself.) Ultimately, however, predictions of better poetry to come indicated an unwillingness to comment on—or even acknowledge—the poetry that was being written at the time.

When critical appraisal of war poetry was not actually postponed, then it often focused on the 'absence' or 'silence' of war poets: perhaps, as Eliot suggested, because of the difficulty of recognising—let alone appraising—'war poetry' while in the midst of war. In September 1940, Tomlinson asserted that at the beginning of the war, 'our poets … seemed to be stunned … their thoughts stultified.'[110] Lehmann, in February 1941, asks 'why did the poets who had made their names in the years immediately before the outbreak of the present struggle, keep silent so long about it, or seem to have so little to say?'[111] Spender, for *The Listener* in October the same year, reiterated this sentiment, asserting: 'They are silent perhaps because they feel … they cannot dupe people by spreading ideas that lack conviction or are untrue. They must stick to the certain but limited truth of their own experience.'[112] Critical worrying about poetic silence continued through the first three years of the war, and critics found various ways to define or taxonomize silence: as characterised by bewilderment, doubt, dread, or a cautious attempt at neutrality.[113] However, to see poets as 'silent' also required the critics to ignore the poetry that was actually being written.

---

[109] Keith Douglas, 'Poets in this War,' 478; 'Introductory Note,' *War Poems from the Sunday Times* (Printed for private circulation, 1945), 5.
[110] Tomlinson, 'The Heroic Theme,' 447.
[111] Lehmann, 'Foreword' in *Penguin New Writing* 3. February 1941, 8.
[112] Spender, 'War Poetry in this War,' 539.
[113] See Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, January 1941, 5; Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World,' 18+; Lehmann, 'Foreword,' *Penguin New Writing* 3, February 1941, 8; Spender, 'Books and the War—V,' 127-

From early 1943, there is a sudden and remarkable decrease in these self-reflexive editorials, letters, and articles concerning the poet's task and the role of war poetry and what can be done: at least fifteen referenced in this Introduction thus far from 1939 to 1942, and just two from 1943.[114] In the *TLS*, for instance, from 20 February 1943, when Stephen Spender wrote a Letter to the Editor, there is no other piece in which the words 'war' and 'poetry' reach the title (save for four book reviews), until 16 March 1946, when Alec M. Hardie writes a reflection on 'Poetry Between the Wars.'[115] The correspondence with military history is notable here; 1943 was the turning-point in the war for the Allied forces, after taking back Tripoli (23 January), the effective Tunisian Campaign (13 May), Mussolini's deposition (25 July), the Italian surrender (3 September), and increasing superiority of Allied air power.[116] The prospects of Allied success apparently reconciled the anxiety surrounding poetry about the war (or the lack of it).

Proving Eliot correct in his theory of necessary critical postponement, post-war evaluations of the poetry of the war picked up on the anxiety that characterised much of the war years, and used it as a means of discrediting the period as a whole. Cyril Connolly, in a particularly negative assessment, claimed in *Horizon's* hundredth issue, 'During the eight years I have edited *Horizon* we have witnessed a continuous decline in all the arts.'[117] Subsequent characterisation of Second World War poetry—in straining efforts to simplify the subject—often resorts to adjectives such as 'nonchalant, cool, laconic,' or

135; Spender, 'War Poetry in this War,' 539-40; Robert Graves, 'War Poetry in this War,' *The Listener*, 23 October 1941, 566-7; Charles William Brodribb, 'Poets in War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1942, 391; Tomlinson, 'Poets at School and War,' 402; Spender, 'An Expectant Silence,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1943, 91.

[114] Hugh l'Anson Fausset, 'Challenge to the Poets,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 1943, 43; Spender, 'An Expectant Silence,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1943, 91.

[115] See Spender, 'An Expectant Silence,' 91; Hardie, 'Poetry between the Wars,' 121.

[116] See Marina MacKay, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xvi; and Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 353-6.

[117] Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, April 1948, 233.

describing writers as 'numbed:' 'many, it appears, fell into resignation and despair,' or wrote with an 'unattached sensitivity.'[118]

The loudest denunciations of Second World War poetry came in Al Alvarez' 1962 essay 'The New Poetry,' in which he declared the 1940s as the decade 'when English poetry was at its nadir':[119] this criticism was bolstered two years later, by Philip Hobsbaum's assertion that the 1940s saw poetry 'in the worst doldrums English verse has ever known.'[120] While Alvarez and Hobsbaum evidently have personal disregard for the output of the 1930s and 40s, their critiques offer an opportunity to pause and reflect on the evolution of critical appraisal. In retrospect, even the more optimistic contemporary critics of 1940s culture—with their magniloquent and belletrist claims about the 'responsibility' of the artist (particularly from Spender)—could be seen to be expressing an anxiety about the quality of the poetic output of the decade. Echoing Kenneth Allott's statement that 'It is impossible to indict a whole poetic decade' from 1948, A.T. Tolley observed in 1985, 'Indictments continue to come, and the decade is still under suspicion. Yet these indictments and suspicions arise from widely held if not very authoritative valuations made during the decade itself.'[121] Whether or not this was a 'nadir' in literary history, Alvarez and Hobsbaum might at least reflect the earlier, contemporary, concerns about the quality of the poetry. However, in the attempt to evaluate critically the prolific output of poets during the war, the creation of categories of writing and the application of blunt labels such as 'nadir' or the 'doldrums' obscures the more complicated and diverse representations of war experience.

---

[118] Gardner, xix; Hewison, 183, 115-6; Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain*, 291.
[119] Al Alvarez. 'The New Poetry, Or Beyond the Gentility Principle,' in *The New Poetry: An Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 28.
[120] Philip Hobsbaum, 'Where are the War Poets?' *Outposts*, Summer 1964, 23.
[121] Allott quoted in Ian Hamilton, introduction to *The Poetry of War: 1939-1945* (London: New English Library, 1972), 9; Tolley, 294.

Degrees of (in)experience: Notes from the combatant poets

Before offering an overview of how to characterise Second World War poetry—and non-combatant poetry in particular—it is helpful to briefly consider the perspective of combatants concerning some of the issues raised above, especially how they questioned their roles as poets. Keith Douglas spoke to his concern, noted above, that 'Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological':[122]

> there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character … The poets behind the line are not war poets, in the sense of soldier poets, because they do not have the soldier's experience at first hand. English civilians have not endured any suffering comparable to that of other European civilians, and England has not been heavily bombed long enough for that alone to produce a body of 'war' poetry.[123]

Writing from an Egyptian hospital bed in early 1943—where he was convalescing after stepping on a mine in Libya—Douglas reflects on the circumstances of the Second World War, and its challenges for both combatant and non-combatant poetry.[124] His primary contention, that poets have a lack of what he considers 'comparable' suffering, nods to a recurring concern with the issue of appropriate, or adequate, experience. Douglas suggests no one has endured enough suffering to write war poetry that would not be 'tautological,' or that, conversely, could be 'new.' But how does one measure suffering? How much bombing would be enough? Having just survived a brush with death himself, Douglas's claims read as understated, almost ironic, and call into question what, in his view, would qualify as enough authority or suffering to merit poetry: if almost dying after stepping on a mine is insufficient, then is death the only standard for poetic authority?

---

[122] Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 1971, 478. This article was written in early 1943, and unpublished until 1971.
[123] 'Poets in This War,' 478.
[124] See Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 181-3, 190-3.

Douglas implies that the circumstances of the war stunted the poets' ability to respond to it. Surely, though, the same could be said for any war—hence the existence of tropes like *impossibilia* and *correctio.* What seems more likely is that Douglas was unwilling to elevate the poetry of the Second World War (which was ongoing, as he wrote 'Poets in this War') to the pitch of the First, which had by that time already reached, in Vernon Scannell's words, 'mythopoeic' status.[125] The vagueness about what Douglas means by 'tautology' and sufficient 'soldier's experience' further indicates an uncertainty about what war poetry can achieve. Acknowledging that the war was not yet over, and that the soldier's experience was not yet finished, was one way for Douglas to hint at the ever-expanding parameters of warfare, and by extension, war poetry.

Cyril Connolly, in his 'Comment' to *Horizon* (January 1941), pre-empts Douglas' concerns about the experience of soldiering or the endurance of suffering (or death), as the only standards for implicitly authentic war poets:

> About this time of year articles appear called 'Where are our war poets?' The answer (not usually given) is 'under your nose' … When the articles ask 'Where are the war poets?' they generally mention Rupert Brooke, because he wrote some stirring sonnets and was killed in action, though his poems were generally nostalgic or amorous. They want real war poets and a roll of honour.[126]

'Real' war poets, Connolly ironically implies, are those who fight, and ultimately die for their country—even, perhaps, for their writing—and are remembered with the words of their poetry, and the inscription of their name on a war memorial. As a means of discrediting this suggestion, Connolly then signals his indifference to any distinction between combatant and non-combatant war poets, noting that the same issue of *Horizon* contains 'Dylan Thomas's fine first war poem' ('Deaths and Entrances') side by side with

[125] Scannell, *Not Without Glory*, 14.
[126] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon,* January 1941, 5.

Alun Lewis's 'All Day It Has Rained…'[127] Thomas, a non-combatant, and Lewis, who was at the time a sapper with the Royal Engineers (before joining an infantry battalion in June 1941), are equally eligible for the title of 'war poet.'[128] Fortunately for Connolly's argument, both poets were alive and well in January 1941: they had managed to achieve the status of 'war poet' without having to die.

Although both Douglas and Connolly held that 'war poets' could be either combatants or non-combatants, not everyone agreed. Only a few months after Connolly's 'Comment,' *Horizon* published 'Why Not War Writers?: A Manifesto.' The manifesto petitioned for the government to offer more resources to creative writers, to declare creative writing 'a matter of supreme importance,' and to ensure that 'cultural unity [be] re-established and war effort emotionally co-ordinated' with the 'formation of an official group of war writers.'[129] It was signed by Connolly, George Orwell, Stephen Spender, and Alun Lewis, among others, and attracted a sardonic response from an anonymous 'Combatant' in the December issue of *Horizon*, who ruthlessly mocked it, and its organisers:

> The General Staff love initials; they would, I am sure, rejoice to put an armlet, D.A.E.C.W.E. on someone's arm and call him Deputy Assistant Emotional Co-Ordinator of the War Effort … I am afraid that I do not believe for a moment that these young men want to write; they want to be writers … They have been whimpering for years for a classless society, and now that their own class is threatened with loss of privilege they are aghast. That is the plain meaning of your manifesto.[130]

Sebastian Knowles identifies the 'Combatant' as Evelyn Waugh (supported by the appearance of this letter in the Waugh Collection at the University of Texas).[131] Waugh was at the time posted to 'Layforce,' the commando unit led by Brigadier Robert Laycock,

---

[127] Connolly, 'Comment,' January 1941, 5.
[128] See John Pikoulis, *Alun Lewis: A Life* (Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1984), 131.
[129] Arthur Calder-Marshall, et al., 'Why Not War Writers?: A Manifesto,' in *Horizon*, October 1941, 236, 238.
[130] 'Letter: Why Not War Writers?,' in *Horizon*, December 1941, 438.
[131] Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame*, xxiii.

and Waugh's own example shows that it was entirely possible to write during the war without the provision of special 'writerly' facilities, as he published two successful novels during the war years, notably *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945.[132] In this letter to *Horizon*, then, Waugh highlights three issues he sees within the *Horizon* call: bureaucracy, ego, and class. He argues that the undersigned only want a title—even one as laughable as that which he derides with an acronym. The status he attributes to being a 'writer' hints at his cynicism that their call for further political aid is genuine, not least because the writers' stated desire for a 'classless society' is dependent on it not applying to them. Redirecting the subject away from the political merits of creative writing, Waugh instead reads the manifesto as a self-serving liberal agenda: the name he uses to sign off on his rebuttal is the final reminder of the authority of war experience. He condemns the left-wing writers for being more concerned with political ideals—and emotional responses—than practical measures that would help writers. By extension, he castigates *Horizon* for its elitist leanings, and brings it all to a conclusion by asserting his irrefutable authority as a combatant: 'I may not sign my name to a letter dealing with military matters, but if anyone has any curiosity about my identity, please inform him.'[133]

This authority assigned to combat experience is, as outlined above, indicative of an implicit bias. In his essay on combat gnosticism, Campbell highlights this prejudice within the corpus of poetic and critical accounts of war in the early twentieth century: 'what it legitimates as war literature is produced exclusively by combat experience.'[134] Something curious happens after the First World War, however: soldiering, as Douglas implies above,

---

[132] See Peter Davison, ed., *George Orwell: All Propaganda is Lies, 1941-1942* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), 49n4; and Douglas Lane Patey, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 185-6.
[133] 'Letter: Why Not War Writers?,' 438.
[134] James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,' *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999): 204.

does not provide an experience that is distinctive enough from the First World War to inspire 'new' poetry. In *The War Poets An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century* (1945), Gavin Ewart, a captain with the Royal Artillery, suggests that this might be because 'modern war' has not changed since the First World War:

> Personally I feel very strongly that the best poems about war (modern war) have already been written—most of them by Wilfred Owen before he died in 1918. In a good many cases, all we can do today is to rewrite the poems of the earlier war … All we can do is to provide footnotes, the small, detailed cameos of our own experience.[135]

This deference is perhaps due to Ewart's awareness that among those collected in the anthology were the First World War poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. Considering the existing trend of responses, however, Ewart is likely also repeating the opinions expressed by critics and poets before him, that there was something lacking in the circumstances of the Second World War for both combatants and non-combatants, which barred them from writing comparable poetry. However, both he and Douglas maintain that 'there is nothing new' to write about war, yet that did not preclude them from writing memorable poetry. Perhaps their insistence that Second World War poetry was unremarkable, or inferior to poetry of the First World War, was not a critical observation, but a personal disclaimer: it also worked to lower expectations away from poems of great, grandstanding philosophical and historical heft, to individual, precise 'detailed cameos.'

Such disclaimers were common also among non-combatants: Auden, MacNeice, and Thomas, as we shall see, all voiced their concerns about representing war. Though Auden and Thomas each attempted to write poetry that did not prioritise war over any other kind of experience—in Auden's words, 'war experiences are like any others,' while

---

[135] Gavin Ewart, in *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: The John Day Company, 1945), 28-9.

Thomas too declared 'a squirrel stumbling to be of at least equal importance as Hitler's invasions'—their writings betray a deeper concern about how to represent war.[136] Smith, however, proves an exception, in seeming to accept that war is part of life, and so merits a subject in poetry: beyond that, however, she does not fret over the legitimacy or ethical adequacy of her poetic responses to war. These differing responses indicate a continuing enquiry over, and after, the war years about the essence of 'war poetry': must it be patriotic, or shock a complacent audience? Does it require the knowingness of history, and distance? Moreover, for poets, is death the only standard for 'poetic authority'? None of the poets can comfortably settle on definitive answers to these questions. These questions alone challenge the notion that war experience can be 'like any other': not every experience requires such careful and probing inquiry into how it can be represented.

What (Second World) war poetry has to offer

No matter one's evaluation of the quality of the poetry produced during the Second World War, the intensity of the discussion about the value of poetry was important. The critical questions that were being asked during the war are still relevant and pressing: what poet has the authority to speak of war? Who can readers turn to for an 'appropriate' response? If poetry is subject to propaganda, public demand, the overshadowing by previous literary generations, media coverage of the poet's perceived 'task,' as well as countless critical disagreements and contradictions about each of these issues, what can poetry offer to an understanding of war?

---

[136] W.H. Auden, 'W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War,' in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 152; Dylan Thomas to Henry Treece, Hampshire, 6/7 July 1938, in *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: J.M. Dent, 1985), 309-11.

War is, paradoxically, not something that can be put into words. As Kate McLoughlin writes, 'The purest word of war would … be an unquotable scream of pain, the verbal equivalent of Picasso's *Guernica*.'[137] Though *Guernica* is not merely a visual 'scream,' but an intricate, heavily codified composition of meaningful images, McLoughlin's point stands: the silent scream embodied in the mangled bodies, broken symbols and terror of *Guernica* visually represents the un-representable. Thus, as Gill Plain describes, 'an approximation of meaning can only be conveyed through metaphor, litotes and silence:' 'In the space of what writers cannot say, we find an intimation of what was and is beyond representation; we apprehend the unspeakable.'[138] McLoughlin similarly reviews the formal aspects of poetry that recreate paucity, hesitation, restatement—effects that she reads through the rhetorical trope of *correctio*—as technical tools that can express the inexpressible; indeed, she concludes that '*Not* finding words for war – or at least claiming not to find them – may therefore be the most potent technique for conveying its magnitude.'[139] As mentioned above, she dates this technique back to the *Iliad*, and Homer's use of the 'classical rhetorical trope adynaton,' or *impossibilia* in Latin, the literary truism of asserting that words fail description.[140] The reader is then prompted to fill in the absence with imaginative embellishment. In this way, silence is a presence, a cue for the reader to complete the gaps in the narrative.

Impossibilia, however, is just one classification in war poetry's taxonomy of silence. Silence can also operate as a symptom of shock or denial: as Lord David Cecil maintained, poets active in the 1930s 'described the cloud of suspense and terror which loomed larger and larger over the sky of Europe throughout the last ten years. Now that

---

[137] Kate McLoughlin, 'War and words,' 17.
[138] Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 177.
[139] McLoughlin, 'War and words,' 22. Emphasis in the original.
[140] Ibid, 15.

it has broken in storm over our heads their subject is taken away from them.'[141] The silence is imposed from shock, and in this context, comes as a result of the sudden presence of the war, a symptom of poetic numbness, even a failure to meet the poet's task. Silence can be fundamentally destabilising: because words can no longer offer consolation, poets look for consolation as silence.

The poets were only too aware of the incommensurability of language and experience, the fact that language was insufficient to reflect or represent reality. As Patricia Rae outlines, following the carnage and trauma enacted by the First World War, soldiers anticipated entering the next war 'not cynically, but without illusions,' and, 'Numerous proleptically elegiac poems share this prediction, foregrounding the silence that will replace consolatory language in the new round of suffering.'[142] Since 'consolatory language' is disallowed, silence is not a result of the trauma of war but a predicted, recommended response to it.

Silence can equally indicate looking at, or away from, war, and as such, it typifies the ambivalence involved in representing conflict. Yet, as McLoughlin writes, 'even as it resists representation, conflict demands it.'[143] And the act of representing is also, at heart, a testament to survival, to the creation of art out of suffering, and to the tenacity of the author. As Kendall writes, 'although a war poem may seek to justify itself as a warning, or a bearing witness … its primary motivation is to celebrate … its own achievement.'[144] However, ethical questions remain over the nature of this 'celebration,' as Hynes asks: 'Is the traditionally private content of lyric poetry, for example, appropriate to a time of

[141] Cecil, 'The Author in a Suffering World,' 18+.
[142] Patricia Rae, 'Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.2 (2003): 261. doi:10.2307/3176003.
[143] Kate McLoughlin, introduction to *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.
[144] Kendall, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, 2.

public distress? In a situation that seems to demand action, can any poem be a sufficient act?'[145] There are two models of war poetry coming into conflict here: Kendall's writer-centred suggestion that each poem primarily 'celebrates … its own achievement' and Hynes' argument that the poem has to be 'appropriate' or 'sufficient' to the historical moment and the requirements of its readership; in the latter, the poem is then measured by whether or not it is a 'sufficient act,' and will inevitably be found wanting.

Beneath the various discussions of silence, repetition, and sufficiency is the issue of truth-telling—once more—as one of the foremost identifying characteristics of war poetry. Kendall, introducing the *Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, asserts, 'Truth is a weapon to which soldier-poets during the twentieth century often lay claim. Nevertheless, according to its detractors, war poetry may be true neither to war nor to poetry.'[146] Truth-telling, we have already seen, is a contentious and slippery standard for war poetry, whether attempting a poetics of witness, a separation from political language (which Orwell described as innately untrue), or a documentary-style realism. For each of these sliding scales of definitions and abstractions, it appears that the standards of appropriate response, authority, and poetic responsibility are established only after poets succeed in meeting them, or more likely, fail to do so. With no objective understanding of what it does, or does not, encompass, the standards of war poetry become shrouded in myth, impenetrable pathos, and anxieties about authority, and can be used to laud or dismiss poets according to the agenda of the critic. On the other hand, allowing war poetry to be an expansive genre of writing means transfiguring a canon that has excluded significant voices. Rather than positing a singular definition of 'war poetry,'

---

[145] Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1976), 67.
[146] Kendall, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, 1.

this thesis explore different ways in which poetry was written about during the Second World War, in order to expand and trouble inherited notions of the 'war poet.'

Defining the role of the poet became even more difficult in the post-war years, specifically following Theodor Adorno's 1949 remark that complicates the relationship between poetry and the worst atrocities of the war: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.'[147] As Kate McLoughlin points out, Adorno altered his dictum in his 1965 'Commitment' essay, where he substituted the word 'Gedicht' (poetry), with 'Lyrik' (lyric poem): 'The substitution created a new sense: that it was barbaric to write anything other than *protest* literature after Auschwitz.'[148] This alteration charges the poet with the responsibility of attempting to find a way to represent war ethically, despite the fact that that duty was, by Adorno's own admission, 'impossible.' The 'fool war' is one that makes a fool out of you as well and surpasses your ability—as soon as you accept it as your responsibility—to talk about it.

The first chapter of this thesis begins with W.H. Auden and his journey to Iceland in 1936, and ends with his imaginative New York dreamscapes in *The Age of Anxiety* (1948). It will examine a cross-section of Auden's poetry in the interim period, analysing his work in terms of his quest for an appropriate tone to describe war. Chapter Two continues the discussions of nationality and being nationless that began with Auden, linking the same concerns to Louis MacNeice; it will outline MacNeice's wartime poetry in terms of his thematic preoccupations, focusing especially on his inquiries into faith. In particular it will offer fresh analysis of an unpublished play MacNeice wrote in the weeks following the outbreak of war, 'Blacklegs': this one-act play, which was never rewritten

[147] Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society,' in *Prisms*, eds. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
[148] McLoughlin, 'War and words,' 16. Emphasis in the original.

beyond a first draft, gives valuable insight into MacNeice's raw response to a Britain at war, and a neutral Ireland, and what these meant for him as writer. Chapter Three is devoted to an examination of Dylan Thomas' wartime work, incorporating readings of both his film scripts for the Ministry of Information and his celebrated collection *Deaths and Entrances*. Chapter Four focuses on one remarkable female poet of the Second World War, Stevie Smith, whose complex wartime responses incorporate farce as much as gravity. In particular, Smith's ruminations on (a usually personified) death, her use of humour and masquerade, and her insistent slippages in language, norms, and tone all mark out her idiosyncratic style. It is her sleight of hand in (mis)matching her form and content that allows for her most subversive, and revealing, poetic commentary on war; her linguistic playfulness, cleverness, and confusions also mark her out as the inevitable step beyond the problems of tone, belief, and linguistic violence that plague the work of Auden, MacNeice and Thomas.

Ultimately, the self-aware knowledge and exploration of the impossibility of representing war is one of the strengths of war poetry. The word itself, 'war,' from its etymological Germanic root **wers*, had an original meaning, 'to confuse [or] perplex.'[149] Considering this in the light of the critical debates above, analysis of non-combatant war poetry presents an opportunity to unpick the confusing or perplexing preconceptions of what constitutes war experience, poetic authority, and appropriate response. The 'confusion,' fug, and *impossibilia* of war, might be all the more pressing when accepted as being *yours*, in MacNeice's sense.

[149] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'war, (n.)1,' accessed 27 June 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225589?rskey=7eEBQv&result=1&isAdvanced=false

W.H. Auden by Howard Coster

W.H. Auden's Quest

> As poetic experience the incidents of war have nothing special about them; they are on an equality with all the other incidents that form the general flow of history out of which poetry is made, and the poetic use to which they can be put … depend always on the poet's individual character and gift[.] … As a rule war experiences are like any others; poets cannot use them until they have become thoroughly digested memories, and when they do finally enter their poetry, their war origin is often barely recognizable.[1]

W.H. Auden, writing of 'Poetry and Total War' for *The Chicago Sun* in 1942, effectively debunks the category of 'war poetry,' or at least the privileged position of 'war' as a generator of poetry: poetry is more a matter of 'digestion' than of sustenance. However, Auden's tone is defensive to the point of dogmatism, reducing the immediacy of war to 'the general flow of history:' Auden is, in effect, offering an alternative to Douglas's claim (from 1943) that poetry 'will be created after the war is over'—but where Douglas feels it is the circumstances of the war that preclude immediate poetic response, Auden argues that poetry must transcend its historical context. They each strive to define what war poetry is, or rather what it is not.

The argument that war poetry should be abstracted—or held separate—from the particulars of authorial personality or historical moment is not new. In this, Auden echoes W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, both of whom, in effect, rejected the influence of the First World War on their theories of poetry: in 1919, Eliot insisted that poetry should be 'impersonal,' because it is 'a concentration … of a very great number of experiences … which does not happen consciously or of deliberation,' and Yeats, in 1936, claimed that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.'[2] But Auden is not only placing himself in this tradition of

---

[1] W.H. Auden, 'W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War,' in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 152.

[2] W.B. Yeats, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), xxxiv; T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The*

glossing over the war, he is also engaged in an act of self-criticism or self-erasure, denying the immediate historical response that had inspired poems such as 'Spain 1937,' and 'September 1, 1939.' This erasure prompted Auden to reconfigure his ideas about the relationship between poetry and war, and how a poet was meant to represent it on the page.

Auden had ample reason to be as defensive as he is cautious in this extract, following at least five years' experience of assimilating 'incidents of war' into his poetry, and coming under critical fire for it. This criticism began with his experiences of the Spanish Civil War, written into his poem 'Spain,' later titled 'Spain 1937,' a poem that—*contra* Auden's assertions in 1942—is utterly dependent on its 'war origin' being 'recognisable.' George Orwell denounced 'Spain' as demonstrating a 'brand of amoralism … only possible, if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled.'[3] After the publication of *Another Time*, the 1940 collection in which 'Spain' appeared, Auden was also accused of 'frantic efforts to evade responsibility,' as *The Listener*'s 'Book Chronicle' argued: Auden was 'rejecting tradition and the past, and all their monitorship.'[4] Instead of facing his perceived 'responsibility' as a poet, Auden is imagined as absent or uninvolved.

Concerning Auden's 'frantic efforts to evade responsibility,' there is more than poetic subject matter at stake. Auden had emigrated from England with Christopher Isherwood in January 1939, an act that was—as Stan Smith has suggested—likened to 'desertion.'[5] As Cyril Connolly maintained in February 1940, 'two of our best writers …

Perfect Critic, 1919-1926, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press and Faber, 2014), 111.

[3] George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' [1940] in *A Collection of Essays* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 238.

[4] 'The Listener's Book Chronicle,' *The Listener*, 22 August 1940, 282.

[5] See Stan Smith, 'Introduction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

have abandoned what they consider to be the sinking ship of European democracy.'[6] For Auden, however, emigration to the U.S. presaged a shift in poetic tone and an evolution of his style. After this move, there is a definite shift in his poetic approach, away from questions of how to assimilate war, toward the issue of representing war in poetry—as evidenced by his essay 'Poetry and Total War.' He had been concerned with this issue since at least 1935, when he acknowledged his view that

> There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love.[7]

Knowingly or otherwise, in this assertion Auden alighted on the thematic book-ends of his wartime poetry. He set out the trajectory of his own forthcoming works, from the imagery of escape and exile in *Letters from Iceland* (1937), to *The Age of Anxiety* (1948), a parabolic, perhaps even allegorical, narrative that moves from a Third Avenue bar—not unlike the opening of the earlier 'September 1, 1939'—to a metaphysical landscape, and back again, ruminating on the 'displaced' people of wartime.[8] In between are the writings of witness and isolation ('Spain 1937,' *In Time of War*), frontiers and doubleness (*On the Frontier*), authority ('The Public v. The Late Mr William Butler Yeats,' 'September 1, 1939'), the use, or otherwise, of poetic language ('In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' 'New Year Letter'), and what lies beyond all of these—silence, or prayer, as expressed in *The Sea and the Mirror*, and *For the Time Being*. Throughout these years of prolific writing, it will become clear that Auden was on a literal, and literary, quest for an appropriate means of representing of war.

---

[6] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, February 1940, 69.
[7] Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day,' in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1977), 341-42.
[8] Auden, 'Journey to Iceland,' *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber, 1985), 23; *The Age of Anxiety*, ed. Alan Jacobs (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

In an unpublished prose piece from 1939, Auden acerbically remarked that, 'If the criterion of art were its power to incite to action, Goebbels would be one of the greatest artists of all time.'[9] By couching the ideas of 'action' in the context of Nazi propaganda, and by equating the Reich Minister of Propaganda with artistry, Auden taints any link between art, or poetry, and social change. Elsewhere, he also hints at the too-close relationship between poetry and propaganda in this period. As he writes in his Introduction to *Poems of Freedom* in 1938: 'Those who go to poetry expecting to find a complete guide to religion, or morals, or political action, will very soon be disillusioned and condemn poets, though what they are really condemning is their own attitude towards poetry.'[10] The issue is not that poets are evading responsibility, but that the public's expectations for poetry are misguided.

As Auden elaborates in 'Poetry and Total War,' poets 'digest' war experiences (like any other experience) into their work—but in terms of the 'poet' more specifically, he insists, 'If the poet, qua poet, has any other social function than to give pleasure, it is, in the words of the greatest poet produced by the last war, "to warn."'[11] He alludes here to Owen's unfinished Preface, which had been on his mind since at least 1933, when he had quoted from it in his poem 'Here on the cropped grass of the narrow ridge I stand…': '"The poetry is in the pity", Wilfred said.'[12] (Auden also admitted to E.R. Dodds in 1936 that he 'had been "seduced" by the example of Wilfred Owen,' when deciding to volunteer in the International Brigades in Spain.)[13] He names Owen in 'Poetry and Total War' alongside Rudyard Kipling, as two poets who 'have been able to use the immediate details of war

[9] 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' in *The English Auden*, 406.
[10] Auden, introduction to *Poems of Freedom*, in *The English Auden*, 370.
[11] 'Poetry and Total War,' 153.
[12] 'Here on the cropped grass of the narrow ridge I stand…' in *The English Auden:*, 144.
[13] Quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Vintage, 2003), 163.

directly as subject matter.'[14] While clearly an admirer of Owen, Auden is careful not to identify him as a direct influence, instead borrowing only the idea that a poet's function is one of impartial and clear-sighted warning: 'it is with the search for the true and the unconditional that the serious poets of today will with greatest profit be concerned.'[15] We infer that poetry that imbibes the incidents of war cannot be true and unconditional, but fictionalised and subjective. Auden's search for the 'true and the unconditional,' then, is quixotic: since poetry is subjectively 'digested,' the objectivity required in such a search is doomed to fail.

In 1936, Auden maintains that 'the kind of poetry I should like to write but can't is "the thoughts of a wise man in the speech of the common people".'[16] In short, Auden wanted to achieve poetry that could exist among a community without being its legislator or oracle. As Alan Jacobs writes, Auden sought 'to reclaim and revivify the tradition of civic poetry,' and serve both 'the human community in general and the community of faith.'[17] Although 'faith' was important to Auden, this was not central to his own model for the poetic process. He had a strong distaste for poetry of 'inspiration': as he writes in 1935,

> There have always been two views of the poetic process, as an inspiration and as a craft, of the poet as the Possessed and as the Maker … The public, fond of marvels and envious of success without trouble, has favoured the first … but the poets themselves, painfully aware of the labour involved, on the whole have inclined towards the second.[18]

Auden's own take on poetry is that of deliberate, attentive, writing—a 'labour.' But, in his own words, the public's take was quite different: in 1935, they expected 'marvels' from

---

[14] 'Poetry and Total War,' 152.
[15] Ibid, 153.
[16] Auden, 'Poetry, Poets, and Taste,' in *The English Auden*, 360.
[17] Alan Jacobs, 'Beyond Romanticism: Auden's Choice of Tradition,' *Religion & Literature* 21.2 (Summer 1989): 74, 69.
[18] Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day,' in *The English Auden*, 341-2.

their poets; in 1942 they expected them to be 'unacknowledged legislators.' In both cases—if for different reasons—they were misguided.

Auden's insistence that a poet be a 'Maker' as opposed to the 'Possessed' Shelleyan icon is borne out by his advice to Spender in the 1950s: 'Auden told me that I should drop the "Shelley stunt". "The poet is far more like Mr. Everyman than like Kelley and Sheats."'[19] (It is unclear what Auden means by 'Shelley stunt,' but he may have grown tired of Spender's frequent recourse to comparisons between his peers and 'unacknowledged legislators'). His playful spoonerism lampoons the authority ascribed to the Romantics and indicates his ongoing rebuttal of their poetic approach. Auden, however, had to do more than rebuff and reject the Romantic ideal—he needed to establish an alternative. In his Introduction to *Early Auden*, Mendelson describes how Auden perceived a schism in the history of poetry between the vatic poet, exemplified by Shelley, and the civil poet, embodied by figures such as T.S. Eliot, William Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer.[20] He also goes on to argue that Auden 'successfully challenged the vatic dynasty after more than a century of uncontested rule.'[21] Yet, as Richard Davenport-Hines explains, Auden 'was chafing at his celebrity as the cultural leader of young English partisans.'[22] The irony of such a reputation was—in Stan Smith's words—that Auden's power to speak for the times 'emerged from this very anomalousness.'[23] He aligned himself more with the civil tradition of poetry, but his poetry's thematic and formal qualities cannot be entirely extricated from their vatic roots; this is most tellingly revealed in Auden's frequent allusions to, and repudiations of, Shelley throughout the war

[19] Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London: Faber, 1977), 62.
[20] See *Early Auden*, xvi-xx.
[21] Ibid, xx.
[22] Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's life and character,' in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 19.
[23] Stan Smith, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 5.

years. The 'anomalousness' of Auden's wartime poetry primarily emerges from his self-fashioned line of influence, borrowing from work on either side of this schism.

Another Time, Auden's 1940 collection, engages in a slightly pained identification of literary predecessors, a tendency Spender accurately recognised as 'the isolation of the poet searching for spiritual equals and forefathers.'[24] This is most evident in poems that name other writers directly—'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' 'A.E. Housman,' 'In Memory of Ernst Toller,' 'Edward Lear,' and 'Voltaire at Ferney.' Auden is establishing an alternative tradition of war writing that does not include the First World War poets, such as Wilfred Owen, but instead opts for Yeats, who 'mad Ireland hurt … into poetry,' Housman, struggling with the 'uncritical relations of the dead,' Toller, a 'war-horse,' and an 'example to the young,' Lear, 'upset / By Germans and boats,' and Voltaire, vying to see if 'his verses / Perhaps could stop' wrongdoing.[25] Within this framework of writers negotiating their trying social or political circumstances, Auden is not just expressing his own 'isolation' from his peers; he imagines his predecessors as 'isolated' in their own ways and to varying degrees. Voltaire and Toller were each exiled from their home countries, as Auden acknowledges; Yeats is described as 'disappeared,' 'kept from his poems;' Housman is 'heart-injured,' 'dry-as-dust,' less alive than his pedantic, lonely work; and Lear is 'alone,' embarking on an abject allegorical quest, 'successfully reach[ing] his Regret.'[26] Auden creates his 'equals and forefathers' as recluses in stark contrast to the rhetoric of heroism surrounding the combatant poets of the First World War.

By identifying who he saw as his predecessors in the early years of the war, Auden was fixing the difference between the kind of poetry he wanted to write (which

[24] Spender, 'The Year's Poetry, 1940,' 141.
[25] 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1994), 248; 'A.E.Housman,' 182; 'In Memory of Ernst Toller,' 249; 'Edward Lear,' 183; 'Voltaire at Ferney,' 251. All citations are taken from this edition unless otherwise specified.
[26] 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' 247; 'A.E.Housman,' 182; 'Edward Lear,' 183.

Mendelson and Jacobs identify as 'civic poetry' or the role of the 'civil poet'), and that expected of him by an unquantifiable 'public' (the Shelleyan poet writing in the vatic tradition), as expressed through his various detractors.[27] Yeats is an interesting complication to Auden's distaste for vatic poetry, not least because of his (somewhat ironically titled) 1916 collection *Responsibilities*, in which he more or less rejects the requirement on him to respond to the First World War. Yeats's work was informed by theories of the occult in *A Vision* (1925), but he also fulfilled the civic role in his self-reflexive part as 'A sixty-year-old smiling public man.'[28] As Mendelson writes, 'Auden's goal was the vast territory between these extremes,' and Yeats's example offered a means of addressing 'specific political issues from a personal perspective.'[29]

By tracing Auden's development through the war years, the remainder of this chapter will unfold some of the questions raised previously regarding the role of the war poet—specifically their relationship with politics, and public expectation. The first section, 'Journeying to War,' will argue that, through his responses to the Spanish Civil War and the escalating conflicts in Europe (the Munich Agreement in particular), Auden grew less concerned with his perceived 'responsibility' to an unquantifiable 'public,' and began to develop his own response, which was shaped by a definitive ambivalence to his poetry's 'war origin.'

From there, the second section, 'The artist and the politician,' will interrogate in more detail this ambivalence and analyse in particular Auden's treatment of Yeats as an exemplar of political poetics. It will argue that the early years of the Second World War brought out Auden's uncertainty regarding how poetry ought to speak of the war, and his own repeated attempts to find the right tone. The third section, 'Silence & prayer,' offers

---

[27] See *Early Auden*, xvi; and Jacobs, 'Beyond Romanticism,' 69.
[28] 'Among School Children,' in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J.M. Dent, 1990), 261.
[29] *Early Auden*, 206, 179.

a critical framework for the register of prayer that began in Auden's war poetry and argues that it offered him a frame of response that did not have to aim for the 'right' tone, as it was a private plea made public.

From there, the chapter will posit that Auden's final ruminations on war (in *The Age of Anxiety* specifically) return to the issue of its 'origin,' and to his own sense of 'displacement.' This culminates in Auden's implicit acknowledgement that war, as Edna Longley would later write, 'transforms everything including the structures that represent it:' Auden had to experience the war from a (geographical or emotional) distance in order to have the privilege to perceive it as part of the 'general flow of history,' which nevertheless remained unchanged, whether or not he ever wrote a poem.[30] Despite his best intentions to extricate his work from his historical moment, however, Auden's war poetry reveals the inability of language to capture the expanse of total war, the reductiveness and limitation of poetry when attempting to express widespread political conflict, and the uncertainties of what poetry can achieve.

Journeying to war

If Auden believed in the value of 'escape-art' in 1935, by July of the following year 'escape' does not seem possible, or even desirable. 'We are all too deeply involved with Europe to be able, or even to wish to escape,' admits Auden in his verse letter, 'Journey to Iceland.'[31] Auden was working on this poem when news came of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War: the poem's concluding image—'again some writer / Runs howling to his art'—suggests not only the need for solace but also, and more pointedly, the poet's

[30] Edna Longley, preface to *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 18.
[31] 'Journey to Iceland,' in *Letters from Iceland*, 28.

grief.[32] Auden had in fact written this concluding line three years previously.[33] In the July 1933 issue of *New Verse*, Auden published 'Poem,' a sonnet lamenting the death of a boy, in which the line first appeared, albeit in different syntax: 'Send back the writer howling to his art.'[34] In this original lyric, 'howling' refers to the idea of the poet being moved to write, and perhaps moved in other ways, by the death of a young boy. Auden was in the midst of correcting proofs for his collection *Look, Stranger!* while travelling in Iceland, and seems to have removed the poem from the manuscript in order to use this line in a new, and newly politicised, context.[35] As such, it neatly exemplifies the shift in Auden's focus: art is still an emotional and affective response to death, loss, war, and the passing of youth, but it is now on a continental, rather than an individual, scale.

Auden was manifestly drawn to Iceland for its sagas and their stories of visceral heroism, reimagining the Story of Burnt Njál from the 10th century Icelandic sagas in his 'Letter to R.H.S. Crossman, Esq.,' before quoting at length Codex Regius, the Icelandic manuscript of Old Norse poems.[36] Davenport-Hines argues that Auden 'developed a set of warrior myths about his ancestors … and persuaded himself that the surname of Auden indicated that the family had Icelandic origins.'[37] However, these sagas, offering a narrative of heroism that is usually characterised by blood and battles, also served to place in relief the extent to which Auden himself did not embody their example of heroism in conflict. MacNeice makes this more explicit than Auden does. In his 'Eclogue from Iceland,' he reimagines himself and Auden—'Craven' and 'Ryan'—on the Arnarvatn Heath, visited by the ghost of Grettir Ásmundarson, belligerent outlaw of the 13th and 14th

[32] 'Journey to Iceland,' 24; see *Early Auden,* 314.
[33] I am both grateful and indebted to Edward Mendelson for alerting me to this link between 'Journey to Iceland' and the 'Poem' from *New Verse* July 1933.
[34] Poem no. 6, XVIII, Part IV, in *The English Auden*, 148.
[35] See *Letters from Iceland*, 109.
[36] See 'Letter to R.H.S. Crossman, Esq.' in *Letters from Iceland*, 90-94.
[37] Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 16.

century Icelandic sagas. Grettir confronts their self-imposed status as 'exiles' and maintains, 'Minute your gesture but it must be made / … it is your only duty. / And, it may be added, it is your only chance.'[38] Grettir's entreaties are echoed by the poem's disembodied 'Voice of Europe,' reminding them what is under threat;[39] the clear conclusion, then, is that the poets' 'duty' is to involve themselves, to return 'home,' and reject ideas of legendary heroism for even the most 'minute' contribution.

The war in Spain was never treated as a localised matter: Auden was sensitive to the civil war as an event that 'would make a European war more probable,' as he wrote in 'Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War,' a pamphlet printed by the Left Review.[40] In his Foreword to the 1965 edition of *Letters from Iceland*, he further admitted that, 'Though writing in a "holiday" spirit, its authors were all the time conscious of a threatening horizon to their picnic—world-wide unemployment, Hitler growing every day more powerful and a world-war more inevitable.'[41] This 'threatening horizon' is typified in one episode from the journey which Auden couched in language of the battlefield. Though far from the destruction in Spain and Morocco, Auden nevertheless witnessed bloody carnage in Tálknafjörður whaling station:

> The saw is for cutting up jaw-bones
> The whole place was slippery with filth—with guts and
> decaying flesh—
> like an artist's palette—[42]

Auden's photographs of the slipway were printed in the original edition, alongside his recounting of a nightmare he had after watching the whale being flensed by steam-winch.

---

[38] 'Eclogue from Iceland,' in *Letters from Iceland*, 132-3.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Quoted in *Early Auden,* 197.
[41] W.H. Auden, foreword to *Letters from Iceland*, 10.
[42] 'Letter to William Coldstream, Esq.,' in *Letters from Iceland*, 219-20.

His comparison of the station, covered in carcasses, with an artist's palette suggests he was already concerned with the violence enacted by artistic representation.

A 'threatening horizon' is the context for Auden's 'new phase of ethical questing,' as Davenport-Hines writes.[43] The Spanish Civil War impelled a philosophical quest through questions of truth, politics, and tradition in his writing: and Auden would gain equal measures of praise and censure for his relationship to the war, and representation of it. His decision to join the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, as he informed E.R. Dodds, was in the hope that here was 'something I can do as a citizen and not as a writer:'[44] this may account for his decision to volunteer as an ambulance driver.[45] Spain was the first war frontier to which Auden had the opportunity to bear witness, and the imagery of witnessing, sight, and vision, permeate his poem 'Spain 1937.' It actively draws attention to the act of seeing: from the fortress 'eyeing the valley,' the investigator who 'peers through his instruments,' the poor who entreat the papers to 'show us / History the operator,' and 'the life … [that] replies from the heart / and the eyes,' it is full of visions, concluding with the fated observation that 'The stars are dead. The animals will not look.'[46] This reluctance to witness—as the conclusion of a poem which operates almost exclusively as an eyewitness account—calls into question the ability, on which the poem is predicated, to 'represent' war, and to make that representation meaningful or purposeful. The polysyndeton—one clause piling on to the next in a long series of conjunctions—suggests a sense of a larger picture that cannot be fully expressed on the page: another kind of *impossibilia*.

---

[43] Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 226.
[44] Quoted in Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 163.
[45] See Valentine Cunningham, ed., *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 44; and Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 163.
[46] Auden, 'Spain 1937,' in *The English Auden*, 210-212.

Auden draws attention to the struggle to write in war, by including the figure of the poet:

> As the poet whispers, startled among the pines,
> … On the crag by the leaning tower:
> 'O my vision. O send me the luck of the sailor.'[47]

Auden is satirising the image of the vatic poet, scanning the skies for inspiration outside themselves, relying on superstition and providence: the 'vision' likely refers to a Muse figure, or the artistic faculty. This sets up a contrast to Auden's idea for writing as a 'citizen,' in the mode of civic poetry: 'O my vision' may operate—rather than as an invocation—as an expression of grief or suffering, a lament for the poet's 'vision.' The poet's later presence in the poem extends this hint of suffering in the tentative prediction, 'To-morrow for the young poets exploding like bombs.'[48] Like 'howling' in 'Journey to Iceland,' 'exploding' here seems to contain a double meaning—either of poets agitated and prolific in the wake of war, or poets being victims of it; the most famous Spanish poet of the war, Federico Garcia Lorca, was brutally murdered eight months before Auden composed his poem. Poets could not 'explode' in their responses to the war, without being aware of the fact that other poets had died in it.

This difficulty is foreshadowed in the way the poem struggles with representation, specifically in the speaker's vacillation between speaking as 'I' and as 'we': and this was a question of 'speech' itself as well as of the speaking subject. Speech was central to Auden's theory of poetry: in 1935 he claimed that poetry is primarily characterised as 'memorable speech,' 'in all its power of suggestion and incantation.'[49] Jonathan Culler, in *Theory of the Lyric*, offers a useful gloss on speech in poetry, particularly in outlining the difference between lyric as dramatic monologue, and lyric as epideictic discourse: for Culler,

[47] 'Spain 1937,' 211.
[48] Ibid, 212.
[49] Introduction to 'The Poet's Tongue,' in *The English Auden*, 327.

'speech' is 'public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world.'[50] In short, 'speech' distinguishes between language as act and language as representation.[51] For this distinction, Culler borrows heavily from J.L. Austin, who outlines various modes of speech in *How to Do Things with Words*, namely that speech is composed of three aspects: the locutionary act (uttering), the illocutionary act (performing what the utterance entails), and the perlocutionary act (that which produces an effect in the addressee).[52] Speech in poetry, then, operates as an utterance but also as a performance, and subsequently aims to elicit an effect. While Auden's focus in defining poetry as memorable speech stems from his belief that 'Poetry … should be recited, not read'—in other words, poetry is a form of ritualistic expression—the fact that he places such emphasis on speech inevitably includes these aspects of performance and 'effect.'[53]

The issue in 'Spain 1937,' then, is that the speech acts, and speakers, are in themselves ambiguous, hesitating between the first person and first-person plural, across time periods, before concluding with the voice of 'History' who, speaking 'to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.'[54] The illocutionary act of this speech is in Auden illustrating the allegorical figure of History washing its hands of Spain, and evading the outcome of the rise of Fascism. The perlocutionary act in 'Spain 1937' is, in Auden's own words, propagating a 'wicked doctrine,' likening 'goodness with success.'[55] Tim Kendall rightly argues that the primary strength of 'Spain 1937,' and Auden's experience in that war, was in teaching him that 'there is a kind of poetry he should not write':[56] being

[50] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 115.
[51] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 126.
[52] See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 103.
[53] Auden, 'Journal entries, 1929,' in *The English Auden*, 301.
[54] 'Spain 1937,' 212.
[55] Auden, foreword to *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1966), 15.
[56] Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 108.

a poet 'startled' by war, looking to an abstract 'vision' or 'History' for answers was not sufficient to represent and address conflict.

Looking back on his time in Spain from 1963, Auden claimed, 'It is always a moral problem when to speak. To speak at the wrong time may do great harm. Franco won. What was the use [of speaking out]?'[57] 'Speaking out,' then, is not inherently good or valuable, and can only be judged by the success or otherwise of its desired effects (in this case, bringing about a Republican victory). Speaking of conflict is a risk, because it reduces that conflict to a textual frame,. As Slavoj Žižek writes, 'What if, however, humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they *speak*? … Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature.'[58] Writing about war is a matter of exclusion and appropriation; troublingly, though, it might also be a matter of enjoyment. Auden indicates his sensitivity to the violence of appropriation, and the pitfalls of the perlocutionary act of speech in 'Spain 1937,' when he writes (in 1939):

> The artist qua artist is no reformer. Slums, war, disease are part of his material, and as such he loves them. The writers who, like Hemingway and Malraux, really profited as writers from the Spanish Civil War, and were perhaps really some practical use as well, had the time of their lives there.[59]

The moral problem Auden identifies in speech is exacerbated by the ethics of war writing and the risk of appropriation: Auden maintains that despite the struggle and suffering depicted in Hemingway and Malraux's war writings, artists (for him) love war, because it offers great material. Wars then become a source of pleasure: why would they call for 'reform,' to change the conditions that have offered such great material? The artist and the 'ethical person' are then inevitably at odds; even when they are the same person.

---

[57] Quoted in *Early Auden*, 196.
[58] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 52.
[59] 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' in *The English Auden*, 403.

Faber offered Auden another chance to examine these issues, by commissioning another travel book. *Journey to a War* is the book arising from the six months Auden and Isherwood spent in China at the beginning of 1938 witnessing the Second Sino-Japanese War. The first part is a travel diary, detailing their journey from London to Hong Kong to Macau, and the second part is a sonnet sequence, *In Time of War* (originally titled 'Sonnets from China'). Where Spain offered a conflict with 'too much … at stake,' as Kendall outlines, the Second Sino-Japanese war was 'for Auden, a generic war.'[60] For a writer who claims in the verse commentary following *In Time of War* that his world 'has no localized events,' Auden was quite candid about his detachment from the war surrounding him in China.[61] Despite their surroundings, Auden and Isherwood's primary focus remains on Europe, where, on 12 March, the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, or as they were more commonly known then, the Nazi Party, carried out the *Anschluss*. Isherwood recorded their reaction to the news: 'The bottom seemed to drop out of the world … the whole weight of the news from Austria descended upon us, crushing out everything else.'[62] Auden and Isherwood acknowledge their feeling of distance and powerlessness: 'By this evening a European war may have broken out. And here we are, eight thousand miles away.'[63]

When in Iceland and Spain, Auden was concerned with issues of involvement or escapism from European politics, but his time in China brings up questions instead of a deeper sense of personal isolation, beyond the political. In sonnet XVI, Auden admits,

> Our global story is not yet completed,
> Crime, caring, commerce, chatter will go on,
> But, as narrators find their memory gone,
> Homeless, disterred, these know themselves defeated.[64]

---

[60] Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry*, 113.
[61] Auden and Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber, 1986), 263.
[62] Ibid, 48-9.
[63] Ibid, 49.
[64] Ibid, 255.

'Disterred,' an obsolete transitive verb that means 'banished' or 'exiled,' indicates the isolation Auden and Isherwood felt, in addition to the admission of uncertainty as 'defeated' narrators—a notable echo of 'Spain 1937.'[65] The admission that their 'global story' is unfinished, combined with self-identification as narrators who have lost their memory, reveals their continuing preoccupation with the difficulties of expressing the current political predicament. This is further demonstrated in sonnet VII, in which a poet becomes his public's voice, and then loses it: 'Their feeling gathered in him like a wind / And sang … / Lines came to him no more.'[66] For Auden, the continuing preoccupation with exile, is bound up thematically with a concern about speech and expression—in China, the experience of being 'disterred' necessitates a 'defeated' narration: not, as in 'Journey to Iceland,' a 'howling' towards art.

Auden and Isherwood's shared expression of 'defeat' emerges in the melodrama they wrote and revised while on their journey across China, *On the Frontier.* This play sets out their fears for Europe on a sensational(ist) scale. Published in October 1938, this play dramatizes the outbreak of war between a fictional state, 'Ostnia,' and city-state, 'Westland.'[67] The melodrama occupies a space between reality and fiction, as it has clear political and cultural references—it mentions the contemporary status of countries such as England, the Soviet Union, Germany, the United States, as well as labour camps, workers' strikes, abdication, and Bolshevik revolution. Yet, the only geographical spaces depicted on stage are the frontier between the two states, and the 'Valerian Works' (a steel trust in Westland). Westland is a 'capital city,' controlled by the anonymous Leader,

---

[65] *Oxford English Dictionary*, '† di'sterr, (v.),' accessed 29 June 2015, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55640?redirectedFrom=disterred

[66] *Journey to a War*, 250.

[67] *On the Frontier*, in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 357-418.

whose title is reminiscent of Der Führer, even though the stage directions stipulate that actors should 'avoid resemblances to living personages.'[68] The Leader's 'pact of non-aggression' is particularly evocative of Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards the Nazi party from 1937 to 1939.[69] Auden evades any definite association of actual events with his fictional approximations, yet the 'frontier' suggests not only contemporary political conflicts, but a deeper, more fundamental sense of schism.

The staging conceit of the play is the Ostnia-Westland room, a stage setting in which half of the space is Westland and half is Ostnia, to 'convey the *idea* of the Frontier.'[70] The two families, the Thorvalds and the Vrodny-Husseks, occupy the same space but are totally unaware of each other. This complex method of staging lends itself to highlighting the similarities between each family and their political regimes. The presentation of a fascist dictatorship sharing a border with a monarchy was, in 1938, a bold illustration of the thin line between disintegrating political states in Europe. Such a threat of disintegration is underlined by Dr Thorvald's sharp assertion in I.2.: '"The chances of European peace"! What a ridiculous subject! … I tell you, Europe's a powder-magazine. It only needs a spark.'[71] *On the Frontier* only strikes one hopeful note about the war—it is sounded at the conclusion and comes in the conjoined disembodied voices of Anna and Eric, two lovers who never actually meet as they are each killed before the end of the play: 'BOTH: Dry their imperfect dust, / The wind blows it back and forth. / They die to make man just / And worthy of the earth.'[72] Their metaphysical dreamscapes focus not on what has been lost, but somewhat weakly attempt to find consolation for their own death in the honourable sacrifice of the soldiers. (Their metaphysical romance, however, did not

[68] *On the Frontier*, 359.
[69] Ibid, 396.
[70] Ibid, 375.
[71] Ibid, 377.
[72] Ibid, 418.

draw the approbation of his critics: MacNeice scathingly remarked their love scenes 'made one long for a sack to put one's head in.')[73]

Where the Ostnia-Westland room summed up, in Stan Smith's words, 'the way in which [frontiers] had become a symbol of the social and psychological condition of a generation,' *On the Frontier* itself attempts to find consolation and synthesis in transforming the frontier from a separating barrier to a topographically unifying one; however, that transformation only exists within an ethereal romance which ends in war and death.[74] Thus, the frontier remains a partition, denying any attempt at unity. The result is a play that strives for hope and unity and instead falls back on unconvincing, feeble, optimism: as Edward Mendelson writes, *On the Frontier* begins 'by striding forth among the simplicities of propaganda and ends by sitting down to weep.'[75]

Notably, the first draft of the play from 1937 had, John Lehmann reports, 'a revolutionary end [that] followed the outbreak of war between the two states, the people seizing power:' Auden included direct references to a 'Fascist Collapse' with the success of the 'People's Army.'[76] However, in the revisions, this pro-Communist ending was instead altered to the abstract last words of the dead lovers, who were largely Auden's creation.[77] The ambivalence of the two endings illustrates the difficulty of discussing contemporaneous political conflict in literature: if literature does discuss pertinent political issues, it is contentious; if it does not, it is trivial. Auden was attempting to imagine a state at war but fell back on melodrama. As MacNeice wrote in his critical

[73] Louis MacNeice, '*On the Frontier*. By W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 101.
[74] Smith, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 12.
[75] *Early Auden*, 268.
[76] John Lehmann, *New Writing in England* (Critics Group Press, 1939), 35; *On the Frontier*, 654, 663.
[77] *On the Frontier*, 654-5.

review of the play, 'Its theme … cries to be dramatized; the problem is merely how to do it.'[78]

When returning from China in June 1938, Auden and Isherwood stopped in New York—by August, Auden had 'already decided … to become an American citizen.'[79] When news of the Munich Agreement reached him, Auden's decision was final. As Nicholas Jenkins relates,

> One evening in autumn 1938, sitting at the window of a friend's Birmingham flat … Auden was steeped in gloom. 'What a window at which to sit and watch "the lights going out all over Europe"', he said. Europe was 'finished' and he admitted that he was thinking of going to America.[80]

By (mis)quoting Sir Edward Grey's remark about the imminent First World War—'The lamps are going out all over Europe'—Auden portends the approach of a Second.[81] This realisation set in motion Auden's decision to move to the U.S. and, on a much smaller scale, it frustrated his ongoing attempts to find the appropriate means of representing war (the 'mere' problem of how to dramatize it). *On the Frontier* had failed in this regard. It lasted 'a few performances,' before it 'passed away painlessly.'[82] Clearly dissatisfying, even embarrassing, for its authors, it seems the play was Auden and Isherwood's last attempt to reconcile the public's desire for war writing with their own literary interests—in short, their final gesture, however minute: after this, Auden rejected the idea of pandering to public expectation as his 'duty.'[83]

---

[78] MacNeice, '*On the Frontier.* By W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 101.
[79] Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 176.
[80] Nicholas Jenkins, 'Auden in America,' in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 48.
[81] See Viscount Edward Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916*, Vol. II (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), 20.
[82] Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind* (London: Vintage, 2012), 339.
[83] MacNeice, 'Eclogue from Iceland,' in *Letters from Iceland*, 132-3.

The artist and the politician

In early 1939, Auden was revising proofs of *Another Time,* and altered the 'necessary murder' in 'Spain 1937' to the 'fact of murder.'[84] These alterations soften the poem's political commentary, and despite Auden's staunch belief in the incompatibility of poetry and political history, 'Spain 1937' continues to be bound up with the political history of the Spanish Civil War, as well as his retraction of the poem from his later collections. Writing after Spain, however, Auden becomes dubious about the political impact of poetry; this would become a repeated theme of his criticism. In an unfinished book begun in 1939, 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' Auden updates his opinion on how politics and poetry should interact:

> Artists and politicians would get along better in a time of crisis like the present, if the latter would only realise that the political history of the world would have been the same if not a poem had been written.[85]

This negates the possibility that poetry can 'do' anything, as Auden also claims in the poem he was writing the same year, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats.'[86] It also hints at Auden's frustration with politicians' expectations for poetry that would affect political history. This, at first, seems odd, except for the fact that on 13th June 1940, politicians in the UK brought Auden up in a debate in the House of Commons. Major Sir Jocelyn Lucas, MP and veteran of the First World War, asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour, Ralph Assheton,

> whether British citizens of military age, such as Mr W.H. Auden and Mr. Christopher Isherwood, who have gone to the United States and expressed their determination not to return to this country until war is over, will be summoned back for registration and calling up, in view of the fact that they are seeking refuge abroad?[87]

---

[84] See *Early Auden*, 322.
[85] Auden, 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' in *The English Auden*, 406.
[86] See 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' in *Collected Poems*, 247.
[87] House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, *Commons Sitting of Thursday, 13th June, 1940.* Vol. 361, c.1361. Commons Hansard Archives Online, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/13/military-service-british-citizens-abroad

The fact that Auden's move to America was brought up in Parliament indicates both his profile, and the significance attributed to his relocation. It does also, however, prove that Auden's name was not ubiquitously known—Assheton responded that 'Mr. Austin' had promised he would return to England if called up.[88] Another MP was sufficiently outraged to ask the House to 'take steps to deprive these people of British nationality,' though no such action was undertaken.[89] Lucas's primary concern was 'the indignation caused by young men leaving the country and saying that they will not fight.'[90]

Lucas is using Auden and Isherwood as examples of well-known citizens gone abroad, rather than pinpointing them as writers—but for literary critics it was their example *as* writers that was most pertinent. Cyril Connolly, pre-empting the Commons debate, had noted that 'two of our best writers, who were also two of our most militant left-wing writers, have abandoned England and are taking out naturalisation papers in America.'[91] Francis Scarfe, writing his monograph *Auden and After* in 1942, claimed that for Auden to have moved to the U.S. was 'to have refused to share this suffering … he will return here as a stranger.'[92] Notably, the fact that Auden left a full eight months before Britain declared war on Germany was left out of any reproaches directed towards him for emigrating.

Both Scarfe and Connolly criticise Auden from the perspective of patriotism. However, nationalist fervour was something Auden rejected: early in the war, he asserted, 'America is the place because nationalities don't mean anything here, there are

---

[88] *Commons Sitting, 13th June, 1940*.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid
[91] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, February 1940, 69.
[92] Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1942), 12, 28-9.

only human beings, and that's how the future must be.'[93] He evinced little deference to nationalism, and felt it necessary to dispense with the 'dying roots' of English politics.[94] His assertion, then, that poetry had never had any effect on 'political history' may partly be obfuscating his own changing status, as he moved from an England soon-at-war to an (as yet) neutral country. He was no longer escaping, or in exile, or disterred, but an émigré. With this change in status came another, less tangible one: in Mendelson's words, this was the period in which 'the public figure diverged from the private man.'[95]

This divergence is figured in one of the first poems Auden penned after his emigration: 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats.' Yeats necessarily complicates Auden's idea of poetry being politically ineffective: in 1938, Yeats reflected on his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and its role in rousing nationalist sentiment in Ireland, asking, 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?'[96] Auden's tribute to Yeats—a poet, and Irish Senator, responsible for some of the most well-known poetry of the Irish War of Independence and Easter 1916 Rising—is not, however, a straightforward celebration. As Auden would write to Spender in 1964, 'he has become for me a symbol of my own devil of inauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities.'[97] Here, Auden may be accusing Yeats of an 'inauthenticity' that he feels he shares, or suggesting that Yeats's counter-example exposes his own inauthenticity. His admission can be read either way, and reveals Auden's complex response to Yeats, and ambivalent attitude to poetry as a political tool.

---

[93] 'From the Notebook of Robert Fitzgerald,' *Erato* 2.3 (Fall-Winter 1986): 1.
[94] Quoted in Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 180.
[95] *Early Auden*, 347.
[96] W.B. Yeats, 'The Man and the Echo,' in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, 392.
[97] Auden to Stephen Spender, 20 May 1964, The Berg Collection, The New York Public Library; quoted in Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 76.

The complexity of this response is crucial to 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' particularly in Auden's formal experimentation in the poem, which aims to blend traditional and innovative verse forms: each section becomes increasingly more formal, from the unrhymed free verse in part I, to the almost iambic verse in part II, to the catalectic trochaic tetrameter of part III, the last of which is reminiscent of Yeats's own poem 'Under Ben Bulben.' The steady movement from uninhibited to imperfect, or incomplete, forms indicates a desire for the rhetorical 'complete' elegy, and the refusal to bring this to perfection. The depth of loss refuses to be contained, perhaps, as Yeats himself cannot be contained—his influence continues, 'modified in the guts of the living,' as with the modulation of his verse form.[98] The frequent shifts also indicate changes in tone that cannot quite settle on one register.

The elegy is evidently as concerned with poetry, and Auden himself, as it is with mourning Yeats's passing. Poetry, Auden claims in this poem—perhaps as a counter to Shelley's 'Defence'—is an influence that 'makes nothing happen.'[99] The following lines read, 'poetry makes nothing happen / … it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth.'[100] Poetry, Auden maintains, is a means of expression, a representation, not an action. This line alone is one of the most successful—in terms of its perlocutionary act—that Auden wrote.[101] Regarding its illocutionary act, there is a curious inversion of meaning, as Tony Sharpe notes: 'poetry's making nothing happen doesn't consign it to irrelevance or complacent inactivity.'[102] In fact, the refusal to act, or prompt action, may be the next

[98] 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' in *Collected Poems*, 247.
[99] Ibid, 248.
[100] Ibid, 248.
[101] See Don Share, 'Poetry makes nothing happen … or does it?' *Poetry Foundation* Harriet: A Poetry Blog, 4 November 2009 https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/11/poetry-makes-nothing-happen-or-does-it/
[102] Tony Sharpe, introduction to *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

logical step after 'Spain 1937.' The overall effect of Auden's assertion, then, is to make a dogmatic, apolitical avowal that poetry has no obligation to act or prompt action.

Auden's ambivalence towards Yeats—and the issues of political effectiveness that Yeats exemplifies—reappears in his prose essay 'The Public vs. The Late Mr William Butler Yeats,' published in Spring 1939 in *Partisan Review*. This essay, composed of a long speech by a 'Public Prosecutor' and rebuttal from 'Counsel for the Defence,' reiterates many of the ideological debates present in Auden's poetic tribute to Yeats. 'The Public Prosecutor' demands that to deserve the epithet 'great,' a poet must 'give the right answers to the problems which perplex his generation,' a position the Defence immediately dismisses as 'nonsense.'[103] Note, the role of the poet, as outlined by the Prosecutor, is to give the 'right' answers to the generation's problems, not the 'true' ones. Auden's view of the poet's role, as the Counsel outlines, is that 'there is one field in which the poet is a man of action, the field of language.'[104] Auden sensed his responsibility was not to an unquantifiable 'Public,' but only to writing poetry. As the Counsel concludes, 'art is a product of history, not a cause.'[105] This reiterates Auden's feeling that poetry 'makes nothing happen,' and that it cannot affect political history.

To claim a poet as a 'man of action [in] the field of language' is also, however, to raise questions about poets' 'active' participation in other fields: including in combat. To some extent, then, it could be seen to be implicitly making the case for the value of 'non-combatant' war poetry. Indeed, in its careful (and tendentious) delineation of the poet's singular 'field of action' it comes close to arguing that all war poetry is 'non-combatant' poetry—'poets' are 'only' active in the field of language,.

---

[103] 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats,' in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Vol. II: 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.
[104] Ibid, 7.
[105] Ibid.

Judging the figure of the poet in some ways pre-empts the panel of 'Great masters' who 'challenge, warn and witness' in Auden's later poem 'New Year Letter,' which also, as John Fuller notes, echoes Shelley's 'jury' that 'sits in judgment upon a poet.'[106] Auden's recurring use of the symbolism of trial and judgment indicate the gravity of his inquiries into the function of poetry and poets. As potentially comical as it is to put a famous poet on a fictional trial, Auden's essay also has a serious point—'to judge, not a man, but his work'—and that judgement is as much directed towards Auden himself as it is to Yeats.[107]

The outbreak of the Second World War on the first day of September 1939 put a refreshed and increased pressure on the trial and judgment of poetry and poets. The artist is still 'howling to his art,' but is now also 'Uncertain and afraid.'[108] Unlike 'Spain 1937,' 'September 1, 1939' offers no final word from 'History'; there is no sense of detachment, as in *Journey to a War*; the only hope it can offer is a pained optimism in the final lines of prayer: 'May I … / Show an affirming flame.' The 'man-in-the-street,' hoodwinked by Fascism in 'Epitaph on a Tyrant,' and celebrated in a fictional marble monument in 'The Unknown Citizen,' is transformed in 'September 1, 1939,' duped by 'The romantic lie in the brain.'[109] This poem—with the American grammatical convention of placing the month before the day—marks a turning-point in his poetic reflections on the role of the poet. The poem attempts a register of despondent observation, reflected in the weighted verbs throughout: 'expire,' 'offends,' 'suffer,' 'cling,' 'conspire,' 'lost,'

[106] See John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber, 1998), 324; Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry,' in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments: Vol. I*, ed. Mary Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1840), 14; Auden, Part One, 'New Year Letter,' *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, 202.
[107] 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats,' 3.
[108] Auden, 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 245.
[109] Ibid, 246.

'grope,' 'lies.'[110] These verbs indicate pain in articulating the poem's narrative, as well as the pain of the narrative itself.

This, too, is reflected in the peculiar form Auden chooses—trimeters in eleven-line stanzas—which are both unusual and slightly jarring. The trimeter is, Michael Wood records, reminiscent of Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916': 'What is striking is that both poems offer remarkably unpolitical reflections on political events.'[111] The eleven-line stanzas structure the poem into ninety-nine lines, spread out over nine stanzas. By falling short of one hundred lines, Auden undermines any sense of completion this would offer, any sense of wholeness or harmony. The irregularity of the physical structure of the poem is further echoed in the unbalanced rhyme scheme: no stanza repeats the same rhyme scheme, and for each stanza the end-rhymes are sporadic, sometimes only offering half-rhymes: 'earth/death,' 'grave/grief,' 'street/State.' Yet, Auden uses full end-rhymes to underline certain truths across his poem: 'pain/again,' 'long/wrong,' 'lie/die,' 'the Just/dust,' 'everywhere/despair.' The erratic placement of exact rhymes throughout further highlights that the only 'order' imposed is one that leads to the concluding despair.

Through its formal devices, the poem also draws attention to the act of recitation, which is highlighted in Auden's assertion in the penultimate stanza,

> All I have is a voice
> To undo the folded lie,
> The romantic lie in the brain
> Of the sensual man-in-the-street
> And the lie of Authority
> Whose buildings grope the sky:
> There is no such thing as the State
> And no one exists alone;
> …
> We must love one another or die.[112]

[110] 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 245-47.
[111] Michael Wood, 'Atlantic Auden,' in *W.H. Auden in Context*, 135.
[112] 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 246.

This celebrates a sense of community, through the first-person plural, but warns of the dangers of community understood through nationalism or political ties. For someone who was considered the English 'court poet to the left,' this negation of nationality, political autonomy, or civil obligation at the outbreak of war is a desperate assertion of individual freedom.[113] Equally, however, this negation undermines individual freedom, by reducing that freedom to a single voice as the only means of redressing the omnipresence of 'Authority.' On the page, the 'lie of Authority' clearly points to political leaders. Read aloud—and bearing in mind that Auden intended poetry to be recited, not read—the capital cannot be signalled, and so it points to the lie of any authority, as well as any attempt to demarcate who is an authority and who is not.

The 'lie of Authority' extended to the author, too: nearly thirty years after writing 'September 1, 1939,' Auden would declare it to be 'the most dishonest poem I have ever written'—dishonest because of his claim that 'We must love one another or die.'[114] He would later revise the line to read 'We must love one another and die,' but he later removed the poem from his oeuvre altogether, arguing that this line was 'a lie, for we must die anyway whether or not we love.'[115] By excluding the poem from his collected works, Auden also de-emphasised the influence that the war had on his poetry, and his responses to it.[116] Even though 'September 1, 1939' made 'nothing happen'—in that, to use Auden's terms, the 'political history of the world' remained unchanged—the poem was still a 'way of happening / A mouth,' until Auden stopped it. Taking back his initial, raw, response was evidently preferable to being 'dishonest;' however, silencing himself hints not just at a concern with dishonesty, but ineffectiveness, a failure to ensure a 'way

---

[113] *The English Auden*, xix.
[114] Quoted in Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 319.
[115] Ibid.
[116] See *Collected Poems*, xviii.

of happening.' Even though he insisted upon poetry and politics remaining separate, his continual dissatisfaction and final rejection of this poem highlights his deeper ambivalence about war poetry and its effect.

It is telling that some of the first poems Auden penned in the U.S. were elegies of varying kinds: as well as 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' and 'The Unknown Citizen' (a satirical epitaph in the style of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), there was an 'Epitaph on a Tyrant.' This last, written in end-rhyming free verse, conflates a tyrant with the figure of the poet, both seeking 'Perfection,' both responsible for the violence that comes through representation: 'the poetry he invented was easy to understand / … when he cried the little children died in the streets.'[117] The artist and the politician become one in this short lyric; this union ends only in destruction. Further, the tyrant in this lyric embodies some of Auden's concerns in 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' particularly the Fascist pretence that 'the State is one Big Family: its insistence on Blood and Race is an attempt to hoodwink the man-in-the-street into thinking that political relations are personal.'[118] (Hence why the Unknown Citizen reacts to political states personally—he was at peace in peacetime, and 'when there was war, he went.')[119] The fact that Auden frames many of these concerns within the forms of elegy or obituary suggests that he was bidding farewell to his own past, and marking a sense of civilizational ruin.

Auden had, by this point, made a habit of distancing himself from public expectation. What is remarkable is how frequent and consistent his rebuttals are, and they re-emerge in one of his longest poems, 'New Year Letter,' written on 1 January 1940. 'New Year Letter,' along with the notes Auden wrote to accompany it, takes up the majority of his 1941 collection *The Double Man*. The poem operates as his response to a

[117] Auden, 'Epitaph on a Tyrant,' in *Collected Poems*, 183.
[118] Auden, 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' in *The English Auden*, 405.
[119] Auden, 'The Unknown Citizen,' in *Collected Poems*, 253.

new year of war. In Part One, Auden declares, 'Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society, / For art is a *fait accompli*.'[120] In the 'Notes' to this passage, Auden quoted Anton Chekhov in a letter to A.S. Souvorin: 'great writers engage in politics only in so far as it is necessary to defend people against politics.'[121] Yet, this defence is complicated by Auden's bold declaration that 'language may be useless, for / No words men write can stop the war.'[122] This restates the position he had held for much of the last decade: in war, poets are called on to be political, and despite Auden's belief, as he writes in 1936, that 'the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events,' 'New Year Letter' asserts that 'artists [are] less fitted for political thinking than most people.'[123]

Poets can be people of action in the field of language, yet language is not able to shape history or stop the war. Auden's rejection of the political efficacy of poetry, however, established a standard of scepticism for other non-combatants, and allowed for a continuing debate about how poetry 'should' respond, which in turn legitimised the war poetry that challenged its restrictive categorisation.

Silence & prayer

The conclusion of 'September 1, 1939' offers a secular prayer as a final attempt to respond to the news from Europe:

> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.[124]

[120] Auden, Part One, 'New Year Letter,' in *Collected Poems*, 201.
[121] W.H. Auden*, The Double Man* (New York: Random House, 1941), 78.
[122] Part One, 'New Year Letter,' 206.
[123] Quoted in *Early Auden*, 195; *The Double Man*, 78.
[124] 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 247.

By 'them,' the speaker refers to 'the Just.'[125] The speaker, wishing to be like the 'Just,' who 'Exchange their messages' like 'points of light,' indicates the 'justification'—even 'justice'—within overcoming 'Negation and despair.' In these final lines, the speaker uses only the first person pronoun, where before he wrote of 'Our world.' The switch in pronouns—which is reminiscent of 'Spain 1937'—raises the question, who Auden is representing in 'we' or 'I.' His frequent recourse to 'we' suggests that he is attempting a voice of authority and collectiveness, yet he has already undermined the idea of authority (it only offers a 'lie'). There is no sense of national loyalty or political imperatives, only individual, and religious, freedom.

Jahan Ramazani offers a useful critical framework for analysing Auden's integration of a prayer-like register:

> Poems incorporate the performativity of prayer but stand outside and inspect it; they give voice to prayer but fictionalize it … It is a ritual-like act that has been self-consciously aestheticized.[126]

Ramazani maintains, then, that by including a prayer in a poem, the prayer necessarily becomes an artistic presentation: it becomes a performance of praying, not an actual invocation of a deity. Both poetry and prayer evince 'metaphoricity, rhetoricity, and anthropomorphism,' he continues, and both have 'elements of suasive speech;' the formal differences between them, however, lie in the addressee.[127] Where poetry can be addressed to any reader, prayer is directed towards a specific deity. In 'September 1, 1939,' then, despite 'negation and despair,' Auden has found a solution in merely performing hope, in a ritual-like manner.[128] His prayer to 'Show an affirming flame,' then,

---

[125] 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 247.
[126] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 134.
[127] Ramazani, 172, 131.
[128] 'September 1, 1939,' 247.

can be read as the aspiration to be affirmative, rather than the promise of it: it makes the possibility of affirmation in a time of war that much more remote.

Hester Jones, in her study of Auden's language of poetic prayer, maintains that his poems are 'a working towards prayer, even the most apparently secular or hedonistic:'

> [prayer] arises out of the immediate and the given, and in prayer the individual seeks to return to that given immediate world with the eye of blessing. In doing this, Auden's language of prayer is strongly incarnational.[129]

In religious terms, 'incarnational' refers to the descent from heaven of a divine being.[130] For Auden, (who was brought up in the Anglican church, then briefly lapsed from it, before renewing his faith in 1940) 'incarnational' would primarily refer to the Christian doctrinal belief that Jesus Christ, the only son of God, was incarnated and sacrificed on earth. Jones's claim, then, is that when Auden invokes the language of prayer in his poetry, it is as a means of offering the world a blessing, in a mirror image of God sacrificing his only son.

Ramazani's theory of performative ritual, and Jones's ideas of poetic prayer as blessing incarnate, offer two contemporary frameworks of understanding Auden's poetic language. In 1970, however, Auden penned his own ideas about prayer and poetry:

> To pray is to pay attention, or shall we say, to "listen" to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—be it on a landscape, or a poem…—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying.[131]

Prayer is, in this sense, a means of divine inspiration, and a passive act, an attempt to access something greater than oneself through patient attendance. As Ramazani notes,

---

[129] Hester Jones, 'W.H. Auden and the Deep Language of Poetic Prayer,' in *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox, and John Took (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 207.
[130] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'incarnation (n.),' accessed 3 September 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/93332?redirectedFrom=incarnation
[131] Quoted in Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 160.

this 'recalls many descriptions not only of prayer but also of the poet's relation to the muse.'[132] Auden seems to work towards a religious understanding of the Christian God, and apprehend his poetry through this greater force.

There is, aside from performative ritual, blessing, and inspiration, a final relevant interpretation of the use of prayer in poetry. As Carolyn Forché wrote in 1993, 'The appeal for prayer is both a request for help and a stroke against solitude … It is to give help in the only way left to the powerless. Where there is nothing else, there is prayer.'[133] Furthermore, silence is a natural consequence of prayer, as Ramazani notes, and an appropriate state in addressing a deity (as there will be no response).[134] Prayer, Forché argues, is what is left after language fails to fully capture experience—it is the last attempt at expression before silence. Reading 'September 1, 1939,' in this way, it becomes clear that Auden moved from a private observation, almost akin to a diary entry, to a search for community through his (desperate) prayer of hope.

It is also striking that, over the war years, Auden's poetic corpus decreasingly addressed the war itself: his war writings moved into much less inflammatory topics, from his miscellaneous prose in 'The Prolific and the Devourer' (1939), to his 1941 libretto *Paul Bunyan* based on the life of the famous lumberjack, to his Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being* (1944), to his reimagining of *The Tempest* in *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), to his edition of Lord Tennyson's *Selected Poems* (also 1944). Following his renewal of faith, however, his poetry became increasingly inflected with Christian references and allusions, particularly *For the Time Being* (1944), which presents a sweeping narrative written for orchestra and voices. It is in many ways 'speech'—'in all

---

[132] Ramazani, 131.
[133] Carolyn Forché, 'Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness: A Column,' *The American Poetry Review* 22.2 (March/April 1993): 13.
[134] See Ramazani, 154, 134.

its power of suggestion and incantation'—and prayer conflated, retelling the Christmas story with choruses, narrations, dialogues and recitatives, in a style reminiscent to the quest narrative, starting with Advent and following through to the Flight into Egypt.[135] Auden was evidently fascinated by the materialisation of a deity on earth, what he termed the 'Paradox of the Incarnation' in 1941.[136] Despite this interest in theology and the specifics of the Christ narrative, he fills *For the Time Being* with contemporary images: Joseph runs through an urban crowd to a bar to meet his 'own true Love;' and the Narrator of 'Advent' describes a scene all too familiar for readers in the early 1940s:

> If, on account of the political situation,
> … If all sailings have been cancelled till further notice,
> If it's unwise now to say much in letters …
> That is not at all unusual for this time of year …
> Piracy on the high seas, physical pain and fiscal grief,
> These after all are our familiar tribulations …
> From sword to ploughshare, coffin to cradle, war to work[.][137]

Auden's use of polysyndeton resembles the opening canto of MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*—discussed in the next chapter—and his emphasis on the humdrum effects of war on daily life in particular echo MacNeice's style: 'The mines are laid, / The ribbon plumbs the fallen fathoms of Wall Street, / And you and I are afraid.'[138] In the midst of a Christmas oratorio, then, such a digression into a 1940s-inflected imagination of Advent is a subversion of the traditional idea of ritualised Anglican prayer, instead subliminally suggesting that like first century BC Judaea, the world of 1944 is in need of a saviour.

The emphasis on song in *For the Time Being* raises the issue of how poetry and song are used in a time of war. In one of the earliest theories on this in Western literature, Plato's *Republic*, he maintains that the only acceptable poetry is 'hymns to the gods and

---

[135] Auden, introduction to 'The Poet's Tongue,' in *The English Auden*, 327.
[136] Quoted in *Later Auden*, 183.
[137] 'Advent,' II, *For the Time Being*, in *Collected Poems*, 351.
[138] MacNeice, Canto V, in *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber, 2012), 15.

paeans in praise of good men.'[139] This relegates poetry to religious celebration, or to political use, a relegation with which Auden took umbrage, as we recall, in 'Poetry and Total War:' 'As poetic experience the incidents of war have nothing special about them.'[140] This polemic essay, written while he was also composing *For the Time Being*, distances poetry from historical specifics, and asserts Auden's criticisms of Plato's ideal:

> An invariable feature of any secular political religion, whether it be Greek Democracy, Roman Imperialism, or Fascism, is that, like Plato, it regards the arts as a useful means of persuading the masses to unity and order, and regards artists as dangerous, because they are liable to become political heretics.[141]

Auden disavows 'secular political religion' on the grounds that it inevitably produces propaganda and vilifies those artists who do not conform. Having witnessed the atrocities in Spain and China, and the slow collapse of Europe into the Second World War, Auden highlights here one of the major concerns for writers in a time of war. Describing non-conforming artists as 'heretics' evokes Inquisitions, and suggests a threatening subtext of violence against those who speak out. Moreover, he separates 'the arts' as a political tool from the 'artist' as heretic—the greater threat, we infer, is the value of the object that can be shaped by political narrative, rather than the creative artist. Like religious icons, the meaning of the arts can be controlled.

Auden's career had led him to distrust the entwining of political control with poetry, though he makes an exception for his writings about Spain and China:

> If artists during the last ten years turned themselves into journalists and committeemen for the Spanish or Chinese cause, it was because, however inefficient they might be, they saw that the fate of every individual was involved in these causes at a time when the politicians, the public, the efficient men of action, were still indifferent.[142]

---

[139] Plato, *Republic*, 607a, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 351.
[140] 'Poetry and Total War,' 152.
[141] Ibid, 153.
[142] Ibid, 152.

The exception for his rule of apolitical poetry, then, is when poets are the only ones paying attention. Auden's logic here sounds defensive at best, and speculative at worst. What is significant from this passage is his return to the concept of artists as 'inefficient,' echoing his earlier argument that 'poetry makes nothing happen.' In this, he reiterates that poetry is not a mouthpiece for the public, and poets in wartime do not have a duty to write about war, or to be advisors, or guides to the nation.

Auden's newfound faith offered him personal strength, but with a public still reeling from the experience of war, his religiously-inflected poetry gathered extensive criticism. The *TLS*, for example, felt that in *For the Time Being* 'his language is still much involved in … abstractions.'[143] Apparently his explorations of religious poetry did not translate to his home audience. This may account for his admission in 1947 that, 'In the war years, a poet had to be other-worldly. At any rate, I did.'[144] By 'other-worldly,' he may be sincerely referring to his search for consolation and meaning in religion, ironically suggesting his emigration to the U.S., or satirically mocking the vatic tradition of poetry—or, as is likely the case, all of the above.

Auden's Last War Poem?

'September 1, 1939' describes 'Faces along the bar,' that 'Cling to their average day:' Auden's parabolic quest narrative, *The Age of Anxiety*, opens with a similar bar scene, where four characters gather at a bar in the later years of the war.[145] This poem, which Auden began writing in 1944, was published only in 1948, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry the same year.[146] Its four main characters are Quant, the Irishman, Malin, a

[143] Charles William Brodribb and Hugh l'Anson Fausset, 'The Poet's Dilemma,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 March 1945, 140.
[144] Quoted in Maurice Cranston, 'Poet's Retreat,' *John O'London's Weekly*, 6 February 1948, 50.
[145] 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden*, 246.
[146] Alan Jacobs, introduction to *The Age of Anxiety*, xii.

Canadian Air Force officer, Rosetta, an emigrant Englishwoman and department store buyer in New York, and Emble, a young sailor in the Navy. Their names are all over-signified: 'Quant' is suggestive of either a quantitative value, or a quantum (the minimum amount of any physical entity) but is also one letter away from 'quaint;' 'Malin' is reminiscent of either 'malign' or 'maudlin;' 'Rosetta' suggests a translator between cultures; and 'Emble' is almost an 'emblem.' The subtitle of the poem, 'A Baroque Eclogue,' is knowingly antithetical, marrying extravagance with a form that traditionally exemplifies ascetic simplicity: the subtitle suggests an ornate pastoral poem, traditionally in a rural setting, discussing social, political, or urban issues. Yet, *The Age of Anxiety* is over a hundred pages long, set in downtown Manhattan, concerning characters who are decisively remote and detached from the global war. As Auden wrote in a draft blurb for the dust jacket of the book, its form 'adopts the pastoral convention in which a natural setting is contrasted with an artificial style of diction.'[147] *The Age of Anxiety* uses the eclogue's pastoral traditions but removes them to the centre of New York, thereby highlighting the characters' detachment and isolation even while in the middle of an enormous urban centre.

As Auden sat in a Fifty-Second Street dive in September 1939, so do his four characters sit in a Third Avenue bar in 1944, each one 'reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person.'[148] The first character Auden introduces, Quant, muses on his own reflection: 'My deuce, my double, my dear image.' The clarity of his 'double…image' is immediately turned over by Malin, who suggests 'Man has no mean; his mirrors distort.'[149] Their speech is also peculiar, adapting metres from *Beowulf* and

[147] Jacobs, introduction to *The Age of Anxiety*, xlv.
[148] Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, 3.
[149] Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, 6, 7.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the poem attempts to speak in a post-war poetic diction that draws from much earlier poetry.[150]

As Alan Jacobs outlines in his extensive introduction to the text, *The Age of Anxiety* encompasses Auden's preoccupations with Jungian psychological archetypes, the cultural differences between America and Britain, his newfound Christianity, and Jewish mysticism, especially in *The Zohar*.[151] The outcome of these miscellaneous influences and forms is to create an atmosphere that, even though it is rooted in an easily recognisable location, and poetic tradition, is ambiguous, even uncanny. The patchwork influences and formal experimentation in *The Age of Anxiety* express, in Jacobs's terms, Auden's 'manifold varieties of artifice; he multiplies forms and genres dizzyingly.'[152] Artifice seems to be the appropriate word, as when the characters speak aloud, they rarely speak to each other, but simply outward, and their meanings are picked up by the others present and repeated in different forms in reciprocal speeches. This motif hearkens back to the metaphysical love scenes of Anna and Eric in *On the Frontier*, published ten years previously. The effect of such detached speech is a sense of the figures attempting union but reaching only proximity.

The plot of the narrative concerns Quant, Malin, Rosetta, and Emble drinking in a bar (Part One: Prologue), speaking together in a small booth (Part Two: The Seven Ages) before each having dream quests-cum-nightmares. At the last call for drinks, they decide to go back to Rosetta's flat for a nightcap (Part Three: The Seven Stages), travelling there and finding their anxiety from the nightmares had not yet worn off (Part Four: The Dirge). Then, Emble and Rosetta begin to flirt while Quant and Malin drink more, and Emble falls

---

[150] Jacobs, introduction to *The Age of Anxiety*, xxxviii.
[151] Jacobs, introduction to *The Age of Anxiety*, xi-xlii. Auden was also inspired to write part III, titled "The Seven Stages," from Jaques' famous speech concerning the phases of man in *As You Like It*—see Jacobs, introduction to *The Age of Anxiety*, xxvii.
[152] Ibid, xxxix.

asleep (Part Five: The Masque), before Quant and Malin take their separate ways at dawn (Part Six: Epilogue).

Despite this simple plotline, the poem takes uninhibited imaginative journeys across the mindscapes of the four characters. The four begin their dream journey in darkness, before travelling through mountains, valleys, ports, the city, a big house, a graveyard, gardens, a forest, and a desert, variously teaming up or going alone. Each time they reach a place, they feel 'they may not linger long … We must leave at once.'[153] Their paths finally converge and at once,

> the world from which their journey has been one long flight rises up before them now as if the whole time it had been hiding in ambush, only waiting for the worst moment to reappear to its fugitives in all the majesty of its perpetual fury.[154]

The images of evasion, of frontiers that cannot be crossed, of borders that shift and dissolve between place, and finally the reality of the life from which each character attempts to escape, all signal a continuing concern with origin and dislocation, with nationality and being nationless, with detachment from, and inclusion, in a community.

Tim Kendall rightly maintains that Auden's 'treatment of [wars] eschews specifics.'[155] As with *In Time of War*, where the world 'has no localized events,' *The Age of Anxiety* exemplifies the generalised threat of wartime life, and postwar devastation. As Alan Ross writes in his *TLS* review 'Third Avenue Eclogue,' 'The poetry has become verse, and in making it so Mr. Auden has written his one dull book, his one failure.'[156] Indeed, though *The Age of Anxiety* covers such an imaginative range of wartime and postwar issues, it confirmed for his public, or Ross at least, that he was no longer the poet-prophet of the 1930s who could 'shame a generation into a political awareness:'

---

[153] Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, 57.
[154] Ibid, 78.
[155] Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry,* 107.
[156] Alan Ross, 'Third Avenue Eclogue,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1948, 596.

> in its implications Mr. Auden's poetry maintained a political relation to its time … The poet-protagonist has become the philosopher-commentator on the beach, who, having diagnosed the causes of the struggle … now watches the battle being fought out at sea; and he has a part in the action no longer.[157]

This was a continuation of the censure aimed at Auden for abandoning his country, but it also operates as a reading of *The Age of Anxiety* as an apolitical poem. The recurring criticism in Alan Ross's review is not of the poem itself, but Auden for failing to live up to his expected role, that of 'poet-protagonist.'

Auden, however, was more interested in limiting the role poetry could play: in the concluding lines of *The Age of Anxiety* he identifies poetry with unreal time, in the omniscient narrator's observation that Malin 'returned to duty reclaimed by the actual world where time is real and in which, therefore, poetry can take no interest.'[158] The exigencies of truth and falsehood in the highly localised and specific 'September 1, 1939' are surrendered in *The Age of Anxiety* to an evasive narrative of displaced characters travelling through a symbolic dreamscape. Auden's detached observance, his self-exile from action, is not an apolitical act, but a statement about (the lack of) poets' importance in political action.

Terminus

In 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' Auden self-identified as 'anti-political,' as 'one whose interests and values clash with those of the State.'[159] This precedes his assertion in 'Poetry and Total War' that 'the serious poetry of any given moment is always at odds with the conscious ideas of the majority.'[160] Beginning with a profound suspicion of

---

[157] Ross, 'Third Avenue Eclogue,' 596.
[158] Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, 108.
[159] 'The Prolific and the Devourer,' in *The English Auden*, 399.
[160] 'Poetry and Total War,' 153.

political ideas of the State, or the nation, Auden questioned the use of historical tenets such as the 'unacknowledged legislators' in Shelley's 'Defence'—because its author, he felt, was 'empty and unsympathetic'—or Plato's ban on poets in the *Republic*: Auden perceived both of these as 'totalitarian theories' that 'deeply mistrusted the arts.'[161] Neither afforded him a position of authority with concomitant personal liberty. His quest for the appropriate tone covered the range of the war years, and led him from Iceland, to Spain, China, and finally the U.S. His frequent examinations of how art, politics, and history correlate or diverge give insight into his continuing attempts to represent war on the page, both theoretically and in practice. His explorations of speech, prayer, and silence compel the issue of responsibility alongside private devotion, and ultimately lead to his final word on the war years, in the quest narrative of *The Age of Anxiety*.

Where his friend and peer Louis MacNeice asserted that 'this may be my war after all,' Auden wrote to his brother John in late September 1939, 'Apart from all this, the war is not our war (even if I hadn't become a pacifist before now).'[162] This declaration of disinvolvement apparently extended to his later feelings about his war writings, many of which he retracted in the years following their publication.[163] The pressure in asserting 'the war is not our war' and rejecting his role as the 'acknowledged legislator' forced Auden to tread the line between private and public discourses.[164] As Patrick Deer writes, 'Auden's poetry about war fared worse than his other poems in his own later revisions of his canon.'[165]

---

[161] 'Psychology and Criticism,' in *The English Auden*, 358; Introduction to John Mulgan, *Poems of Freedom*, *The English Auden*, 371-2.
[162] Quoted in Smith, 'Ideas about England,' in *W.H. Auden in Context*, 45.
[163] See *Collected Poems*, xviii.
[164] See Ross, 596.
[165] Patrick Deer, 'Auden and Wars,' in *W.H. Auden in Context*, 158.

Auden's revision of his wartime writing often ended in his cutting swathes of work from his corpus, from 'Spain 1937,' to 'September 1, 1939,' and the Commentary to 'New Year Letter.' These changes complicate readings of the retracted works and challenge interpretation, but ultimately their exemption from his collected works suggests that Auden found them lacking in some way. Nonetheless, his attempts to write poetry through the war, without being a 'war poet' in the same mould as Owen, or becoming another Yeatsian prophet-figure, produced a prolific corpus that traces his own search for a role, for poetic truth, ultimately leading to self-reflexivity, or varying iterations of silence. Just as Quant, Malin, Rosetta and Emble attempt to find their own way through the metaphysical and symbolic landscapes of their journey and emerge at sunrise to a new sense of belonging and community, Auden quested for a language that could be representative in a way that could be both truthful, and a warning.

Auden's quest for the right tone, expression, and form for his war poetry gives context for the responses to the war offered by the other poets of this thesis. In short, Auden supplies a conduit through which we can more fruitfully explore the intricacies and complexities of Second World War poetry. His search for 'the true and the unconditional' hits on the problem of truth-telling outlined in the introduction, and contextualises the importance of 'objectivity,' 'truth,' and universalising experience, with which MacNeice, Thomas and Smith all engage. His exploration of the role of the poet, particularly his rejection of poets as 'unacknowledged legislators,' anticipates MacNeice's continual claims for the poet as 'not the loudspeaker of society, but something much more like its still small voice.'[166] His insistence on objectivity in equivocating war experience with 'all other incidents' in the 'general flow of history' pre-empts Thomas's initial

[166] Louis MacNeice, 'A Statement,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 98.

resistance to the war, and later assertion that 'War can only in subject matter affect poetry.'[167]

Finally, Auden's adoption of a religious register coincides, too, with the overarching topic for the following chapter: MacNeice's search for faith during the war years. Where Auden drifted briefly away from Christianity in his early adult life, and re-joined the Anglican Church in 1940, MacNeice drifted quickly away from his father's religion in his undergraduate years and spent the remainder of the war questing for an external system into which he could put his faith, whether that be religion, nationalism, intellectualism, or politics. As the next chapter will show, that search—which in many ways mirrored Auden's continual, sometimes unsuccessful quest for the appropriate tone—yielded poetry that interrogates the fundamental praxis of faith, magnified by the pressures and uncertainty of wartime.

[167] Dylan Thomas to Oscar Williams, London, 30 July 1945, in *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: J.M. Dent, 1985), 625-26.

(Frederick) Louis MacNeice by Howard Coster

'A grain of faith': Louis MacNeice

In late 1939, when Louis MacNeice was on leave from his teaching post in London, seeing his family in Carrickfergus, and finishing his monograph on W.B. Yeats, he wrote a one-act play, commissioned by Dublin's national theatre, the Abbey Theatre, entitled 'Blacklegs.'[1] The story takes place on a church steeple where two characters, the Professor and Jim, are working through a general strike. They discuss the ubiquitous union protests continuing even while the nation is at war, and are soon joined by another blackleg, Jack—an anti-capitalist and a communist sympathiser—who argues with the others once they discover his brother is Rodd McGinn, the coercive communist bully engineering the strike. Rodd then makes an appearance, with a revolver, dismisses the Professor and Jim, and kills Jack for breaking the strike. As Jon Stallworthy outlines, it is 'a death almost immediately counter-pointed by … news of the birth of Jack's son.'[2] The pathos of this murder scene is further deepened by the conclusion of the play, in which Rodd is told by the two women from the nearest apartments that the war is over, an announcement to which he solemnly responds, 'Their war may be over … Mine will go on for ever.'[3]

MacNeice mentions the play in his surviving letters only twice—in both instances to E.R. Dodds, his Oxford mentor and later editor: the first letter, dated 19 November, informs Dodds that he has completed 'Blacklegs' and hopes the Abbey Theatre will stage the play; the next, dated 8 December, explains that they requested (unspecified)

---

[1] See Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1995), 253-67; and *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Jonathan Allison (London: Faber, 2010), 367. The play was composed between August and November 1939 (likely early November 1939).
[2] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 266.
[3] Louis MacNeice, 'Blacklegs' (unpublished manuscript, late 1939), Berg Collection MSS MacNeice, The New York Public Library, 24.

adjustments.[4] Aside from Stallworthy's concise summary of the drama in his 1995 biography of Louis MacNeice, these are the only critical mentions of what could be categorised as one of the most politically charged pieces of writing that MacNeice produced.[5] There is no clarification—either by MacNeice or in subsequent criticism—as to why the play was never performed. Ireland's neutral stance in the war may have had an influence on its national theatre choosing *not* to stage such an overtly political play, one which questions the role of the individual in a war.

The play only survives as a first draft, and there is no evidence to suggest that MacNeice ever revised it: this chapter will refer to the manuscript copy, kept in the New York Public Library, for its reading of the play.[6] As a first draft, 'Blacklegs' demonstrates both the formal and ideological rawness of a first attempt. Yet, even with its flaws, it highlights issues within nationality, blind religious and/or political belief, propaganda, and the writer's role in wartime. It also offers vehement criticism of the intelligentsia. Beneath all of these preoccupations, it deftly places public crisis within an individual's daily concerns, which comes as a natural consequence of *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice's long poem published a few months before the composition of the play. Though 'Blacklegs' lacks the technical or dialectic complexity of his later, polished, radio plays, such as *Christopher Columbus* (1942) or *The Dark Tower* (1946)—not least because it was one of his early attempts at dramatic writing—it nevertheless offers a fresh starting point from which to view his wartime work.

Before analysing his work, however, it is helpful to outline MacNeice's movements during the war: his locations and relocations inform his various responses. The late

[4] MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Belfast, 19 November 1939, in *Letters*, 367; MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Dublin, 8 December 1939, in *Letters*, 372.
[5] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 266-67.
[6] There is a photocopy of the original manuscript accessible in the Bodleian Library, and a subsequent transcription of the play in *Oxford Poetry* XI.I.

summer of 1939 had brought MacNeice home to Ireland on a leave of absence from his teaching post in London, where he had been—unhappily—teaching since 1936 at Bedford College for Women.[7] The reason for this leave was, it seems, to try to get a temporary academic job in America, which was primarily to accommodate seeing his sweetheart Eleanor Clark. She was an ex-wife of Leon Trotsky's Czech secretary Jan Frankl, and was also part of a circle of left-wing writers in New York, with fervent political commitments.[8] MacNeice and Clark had a tumultuous, and mostly long-distance, relationship from early 1939 to late 1940. He regularly corresponded with her and his letters often revert to defending his social and political beliefs (or, in Clark's eyes, lack thereof) in the face of her staunch left-wing activism.

Before he could engineer a way to visit her in America, however, MacNeice needed to spend the autumn of 1939 applying for jobs, and he elected to do it while staying with his family in Ireland, and writing his monograph on (the recently deceased) W.B. Yeats.[9] The war, however, weighed on his mind: 'Everyone told me that if I was going to America, I had better go quickly; war would break out within a month.'[10] While staying in Ireland throughout the autumn, he wrote *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 'Blacklegs,' and 'The Closing Album.' He had also applied to the Chair in Poetry at Trinity College Dublin, but in early December, heard that H.O. White had gotten the job instead. 'Blacklegs' vanishes from his letters around the same time, and there is no mention of it in the Abbey's digitized archive. Having no further reason to stay, MacNeice sailed for the U.S. in the second week of January 1940.[11]

---

[7] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 192.
[8] See Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 380; and Stallworthy, 244.
[9] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 253.
[10] MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 2007), 210.
[11] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 267, 285.

While in the U.S., MacNeice taught at Cornell University on a Special Lectureship, and he was invited on a reading tour around Vassar, Buffalo, Montreal, Northwestern, and Syracuse, following the success of *Autumn Journal*'s publication in January.[12] (He officially resigned from Bedford College on 27 April.)[13] Late 1940 was a prolific time for MacNeice (after he fell gravely ill with peritonitis and spent two months convalescing), and he composed many poems that would later be published in 1941, including 'Bar-Room Matins.' He also wrote most of his (unfinished) autobiography *The Strings are False* on the ship back to Britain in late November. He wrote to Nancy Coldstream (an old flame) on 16 August 1940 to tell her that he had been commanded back to England from the U.S. 'by order of the British government,' and further admitted, 'I am really rather pleased at having the onus of choice removed from me.'[14] The outbreak of war had placed him in a difficult position, faced with the decision of whether to follow in Auden's footsteps and stay in the U.S., or return to Britain and see it out. The 'onus of choice' was lightened further by the ending of his relationship with Eleanor; after that, he had no further ties to America.

Having returned to wartime Britain, however, MacNeice wrote in *Horizon* that the reason for his return was on account of the feeling 'that if I stayed another year out of England I should have to stay for good, having missed so much history, lost touch.'[15] He would have ample opportunity to engage with the history unfolding every day when he joined the BBC Features Department to write propaganda radio plays from January 1941.[16] He visited Ireland twice during the war—first in February 1941, and again in July

[12] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 272.
[13] Ibid.
[14] MacNeice to Nancy Coldstream, New Hampshire, 16 August 1940, in *Letters,* 399.
[15] 'Traveller's Return,' *Horizon*, February 1941, 110.
[16] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 290.

1942 after his marriage to Hedli Anderson.[17] Once the war was over, MacNeice returned to Carrickfergus in May 1945, in what started as a holiday from the BBC, but became a sabbatical, in which he had a burst of creativity, and composed his radio play 'The Dark Tower,' as well as a number of poems, including 'Carrick Revisited.'[18]

MacNeice was prolific over the war years, from his two poetry collections, to at least 66 scripts for the BBC (and Barbara Coulton's *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* acknowledges that that number is far from comprehensive).[19] Critical responses to his war writing, however, were not always favourable: when *Autumn Journal* appeared in May 1939, a review in the *TLS* asserted that 'he seems … to be making an almost priggish attempt to say the right thing and what is expected of a poet of his affiliation.'[20] Subsequent appraisals tend to be more forgiving: Edna Longley writes of his wartime work as 'vibrat[ing] with the tension between getting into things and getting out of them,' an allusion to a letter he wrote to Mrs Dodds in which he asserted that 'Freedom means Getting into things & not getting Out of them.'[21] His wartime work, then, could be read as interrogating the conflict between being free and being escapist; as Patrick Deane writes, 'the author of *Autumn Journal* will not allow himself to seek consolation in pondering an escape to Byzantium.'[22] However, as Peter McDonald suggests, 'To all appearances, [in 1940] he had joined Auden, Isherwood, and the rest in "escapism".'[23] Still, MacNeice was not attempting to escape from the war, but to find a means of staying in 'touch' with a shared history.

---

[17] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 292, 310.
[18] See ibid, 334-7.
[19] See Barbara Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (London; Boston: Faber, 1980), 204-5.
[20] Alan Francis Clutton-Brock, 'September Crisis,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1939, 294.
[21] MacNeice to Mrs Dodds, New York, 22 March 1940, in *Letters*, 381.
[22] Patrick Deane, *At Home in Time: Forms of Neo-Augustanism in Modern English Poetry* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 114.
[23] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 99.

This chapter begins with an analysis of 'Blacklegs' and its contexts in late 1939, before jumping back to MacNeice's earlier pre-war work, including *Autumn Journal* (written in late 1938), and continuing with analysis of a handful of his wartime poems, including 'The Closing Album' (1939), 'Bar-Room Matins' (1941), 'Troll's Courtship' (1944), 'Hiatus' (1945), 'Carrick Revisited' (1945), and 'The Springboard' (1944). It starts with an examination of 'Blacklegs' to foreground the nascent response MacNeice had to the war, and the approach he would take to it; in doing so, I highlight an overlooked, less accessible, and yet significant piece of Second World War writing. By reading the rest of his work in the light of this under-analysed play, we can begin to uncover a clear development of political responsiveness within his poetic philosophy, and a search for faith systems that MacNeice repeatedly engaged in over the war years.

This chapter will argue that throughout the war years, MacNeice navigated both his personal faith and public role amidst a variety of faith systems, and found the only faith he could have was in—as Terence Brown writes—'the simple existence of things and people themselves, limited as they are, attacked by death as they are.'[24] It was, Brown continues, 'the sceptic's faith.'[25] MacNeice elaborated on his beliefs in 1953:

> When faced with this question "What do I believe?" I assume it is a question not so much of fact as of value. The answer therefore should not be such an answer as "I believe *that* the cup is on the table," … [but] "I believe *in* cooking with garlic,' or 'I believe *in* splashing in my bath." This latter kind of answer cannot, as I see it, be assessed purely in terms of fact.[26]

Belief, for MacNeice, was worthwhile because of its appeal to individuality and subjectivity, and its escape from objective 'fact.' A search for belief allows for failure, negotiation, amendment, and personal bias. By focusing on various faith systems in

[24] Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 98.
[25] Ibid.
[26] 'Statement on Belief,' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 187. Emphasis in the original.

wartime, MacNeice was, perhaps, eliding the problem of objective 'fact,' and the inevitable problems in defining or reaching 'truth.' Truth-telling, as the Introduction discusses, is a bone of contention in discussions of war poetry, and a hotly contested measurement of 'success' and 'quality.' 'Belief,' however, is a specific personal choice: MacNeice's search in 'Blacklegs,' as the following section will show, focused on the value of different systems of belief, through the intelligentsia, political ideology, religion, and nationality, all of which were sensitive topics after the outbreak of the Second World War.

'This is our time to be arrogant'?: 'Blacklegs' and the outbreak of war

One day after Britain declared war on Germany, MacNeice wrote c/o the Abbey Theatre to Eleanor Clark, asking, 'how good a Marxist are you? … Living in Eire reminds one that people are by no means exclusively governed by economic factors.'[27] Prior to meeting Clark, however, MacNeice was hesitant to peer into his own political beliefs. In his 'potboiler' travel book *I Crossed the Minch* (1937) he suggested,

> My sympathies are Left. On paper and in the soul. But not in my heart or my guts … My soul is all for moving towards the classless society. But unlike Plato, what my soul says does not seem to go. There is a lot more to one than soul, you know.[28]

By referring to Plato's tripartite theory of soul—that the psyche is composed of three parts (the logical, spirited, and appetitive) which might be seen to correspond to the three classes of a society—MacNeice seems to reintroduce a new tripartite system of soul, heart, and guts, which maps slightly messily onto Plato's hierarchy.[29] 'Blacklegs' may be his attempt to dramatize the conflict between 'economic' and other factors on the one hand, and the 'heart,' 'guts' and 'soul' on the other: it is telling that MacNeice wrote the

[27] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, Dublin, 4 September 1939, in *Letters*, 353.
[28] MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 130.
[29] Plato, *Republic*, IV.439e, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 147-49.

play at this time, offering him a sounding board to examine issues of economic stability, political ideology and the state.

'Blacklegs' brings class hierarchy to the forefront of the drama: the characters work through a general strike and during a Communist coup, which aims to move 'towards the classless society.' When MacNeice wrote 'Blacklegs' in October/November 1939, there had been no general strike in the UK since 1926, when the Trades Union Congress attempted to prevent wage reduction and worsening work conditions. The subsequent Trades Dispute and Trade Unions Act of 1927 forbade sympathetic strikes and mass picketing.[30] The political backdrop for the play is a variegated amalgamation of MacNeice's own experiences of the British General Strike in 1926 and Irish historical context from the Dublin 1913 Lockout, when—in response to workers seeking better working conditions and the right to unionise—nearly 300 employers around Dublin locked out their workers and employed blacklegs from Britain and elsewhere in Ireland to cover.[31]

During the 1926 General Strike, MacNeice was still in Oxford. As he writes in *The Strings are False*,

> The most publicised blacklegs were the undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge who regarded the strike as an occasion for a spree; a comic phenomenon due to the Lower Classes; a comet that came from nowhere and dissolved in rubble and presaged nothing to come.[32]

'Blacklegs,' then, afforded MacNeice an opportunity to explore the recent history of industrial action in both Ireland and the UK on the same stage, and analyse how a society at war exerts pressure on an individual. It also gave him a stage to objectively assess Communism and its impact, on both a society and its individuals, through the framework

---

[30] See Rachelle Saltzman, *A Lark for the Sake of Their Country: The 1926 General Strike Volunteers in Folklore and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 41.
[31] See Pádraig Yeates, *Lockout: Dublin, 1913* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2000).
[32] MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 101.

of Anglo-Irish history. (Notably, his choice to conflate these histories in his play about political ideology is significant, considering his own complex national identity.) Imagining a state affected by strike and at war allowed MacNeice to cross-examine the practicality of political ideology, how it can be implemented (usually aggressively), and the dangers of allowing it to corrupt the individual—expressed most dramatically in Rodd's cold-blooded fratricide.

This link between political radicalism and intellectual debate emerges in 'Blacklegs' through two vitriolic attacks on The Professor, the first from Jack McGinn, his fellow blackleg, and the second, more rancorous, from Rodd, Jack's Communist brother:

> Jack: You've studied the whole history of the case! You've sat in a great big chair in your study + you've read your newspapers + you've sharpened your pencil maybe + made a few notes … All you college professors – you're the cat's paws of the capitalist bosses –[33]

> Professor: I believe in the truth.
> Rodd: Truth! I'll tell you about your truth. You spend your time looking in a microscope-
> Professor: I haven't got a microscope.
> Rodd: Oh yes you have … there you sit all day long goggling & giggling into your microscope. And there's one thing you always see … That one thing's yourself. A little self-deceiving bourgeois playing his tricks in the middle of a blob of scum.[34]

These passages on the original manuscript were apparently written in one sitting, without a pause, as the handwriting is rushed, without deleted words or superscript additions. The fluency of MacNeice's scorn, and painful self-accusation, is underlined by the humour employed in the second passage as the Professor pedantically interrupts Rodd to assert, 'I haven't got a microscope.' Putting this proxy image of himself on the

[33] 'Blacklegs,' 12.
[34] Ibid, 16.

stage suggests not only MacNeice's concern with the role of intellectuals, but also his awareness of the existing cultural attitude towards them.

To fully appreciate MacNeice's interrogation of this cultural attitude, a brief side note can explicate the anti-intellectualism of his historical moment: the recurring motif of the lounging professor, observing the world, and the war, from his study (or through a microscope), and acting as a puppet for the capitalist Establishment, hit a nerve in the cultural consciousness of the 1930s and 1940s. As Stefan Collini writes in *Absent Minds* (2006), there was a perception of 1930s intellectuals as 'literary Bourbons who had learned nothing and forgotten nothing.'[35] This description suggests that the intellectuals were just carriers of cultural baggage, without being able to learn from it. Further, the invocation of 'Bourbons,' the European royal house, further cements the cultural awareness of the 'intellectuals' as not just the elite, but the elitist, class. Moreover, 'Bourbon' suggests they are conservative and reactionary, in addition to being ignorant, incompetent and socially distant, like Marie Antoinette.

The term 'intellectual' is itself a minefield of nebulous definitions. As Peter Allen discusses in "The Meanings of 'An Intellectual,'" the term is 'directly related to the continuing struggle between the organized forces of high culture and popular culture,' once more defining elitism as a defining factor.[36] Collini discusses how the term refuses a 'single, relatively clear-cut, referent,' and offers three main senses of the noun:[37] 'the sociological sense,' referring to the profession of intellectuals; the 'subjective sense,' referring to 'an individual's attitude to … ideas … [and] emphasiz[ing] a particular commitment to truth-seeking'; and 'the cultural sense,' referring to 'those who are

[35] Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.
[36] Peter Allen, 'The Meanings of "An Intellectual": Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century English Usage,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 55.4 (Summer 1986): 342-43.
[37] Collini, 33.

regarded as possessing some kind of "cultural authority."'[38] For an analysis of MacNeice, the subjective sense is most pertinent, especially—as Rodd utters above—in his search for truth; this is perhaps how MacNeice can best be understood, as an individual, like the Professor, committed to seeking the truth.

MacNeice's prose demonstrates more explicitly how he perceived the intellectual's role. As he writes in late 1940, in *The Strings are False*,

> I remembered how under the Roman Empire intellectuals spent their time practising rhetoric although they would never use it for any practical purpose; they swam gracefully around in rhetoric like fish in an aquarium tank. And our intellectuals also seemed to be living in tanks.[39]

Though reminiscing on his life in 1933, this passage inadvertently underscores MacNeice's fundamental scepticism that the 'intelligentsia' could halt their self-involvement. MacNeice could not designate the intelligentsia—whose 'commitment to truth-seeking' was unreliable—as a steadfast foundation from which he could respond to the war, just as he could not rely on his 'soul' alone, as his comments in *I Crossed the Minch* suggest.[40]

The war, however, brought with it 'volcanic outbursts of anti-intellectualism,' as MacNeice terms in it his 'London Letter [4]' (May 1941).[41] Emphasising this atmosphere of 'anti-intellectualism,' in 1941 the *Times* published an editorial entitled 'Eclipse of the Highbrow,' proclaiming in a tone of warning that the output from the war could 'hardly give rise to arts unintelligible outside a Bloomsbury drawing-room.'[42] The editorial prompted a lengthy series of rebuttals on the role of 'highbrows' and 'intellectualism' in

[38] Collini, 46-67.
[39] *The Strings are False*, 145.
[40] Ibid, 46.
[41] 'London Letter [4]: Democracy versus Reaction & Luftwaffe,' in *Selected Prose*, 125-26.
[42] 'Eclipse of the Highbrow,' *The Times*, 25 March 1941, 5.

the war, replete with outraged letters from Kenneth Clark and Stephen Spender.[43] MacNeice commented on the editorial in his 'London Letter [4],' describing it as 'vague and inaccurate[,] but virulent,' further claiming that, 'The attitude of *The Times* (the late advocate of appeasement) to 'highbrows' seems to resemble the attitude of Goebbels to the Jews.'[44] This alarming comparison underscores the malicious anti-intellectualism to which MacNeice found himself subject.

MacNeice returned to this 'virulent' anti-intellectualism in his unfinished prose piece, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud,' composed in 1941-2, but unpublished in his lifetime:

> A member of a giggling & twitching intelligentsia? Yes, no doubt I was one, perhaps am still. But it is better to giggle & twitch than to be a stock or a stone, & an intelligentsia – however decadent or 'bourgeois' – is something much finer than the TUC [Trades Union Congress] or the Stock Exchange or London Society.
>
> The Marxist obsession encouraged us to crawl, to pretend ourselves cogs in a machine … Now, with a war on, we need not be so anxious for self-effacement, we can leave that job to the bombs. This is our time to be arrogant.[45]

His defence of the intellectual class, to whom he shows a slight loyalty—'no doubt I was one, perhaps am still'—develops over the passage into an appeal to them to speak out and be 'arrogant.' This is quite a shift from 'living in tanks' and swimming 'around in rhetoric,' as he had written less than two years previously in *The Strings Are False*. It seems attacks on the intellectuals were acceptable from their own, but not from outsiders.

---

[43] See Kenneth Clark, 'Eclipse of the Highbrow,' *Times*, 27 March 1941, 5; Stephen Spender, 'Sir – Your attack on the intellectuals,' *Times* 27 March 1941, 5; Kenneth Clark, 'Eclipse of the Highbrow,' *Times*, 7 April 1941, 5.

[44] Louis MacNeice, 'London Letter [4]: Democracy versus Reaction & Luftwaffe,' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 125-26.

[45] 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud,' in *Selected Prose*, 137.

The disdain MacNeice shows toward 'London Society' hints at a defensiveness about his own role in wartime, split between Ireland, which declared a state of Emergency, and Britain, a state at war. While the intelligentsia were being attacked for being too 'decadent' or 'bourgeois,' ideas MacNeice agreed and then disagreed with over the war years, his attitudes to religion and nationality remained quite consistent as a dialectic that fuelled his writing. MacNeice's conflict is best expressed in his own words: in September 1939 he wrote to Eleanor Clark to justify his refusal to write propaganda for the Ministry of Information: 'after all I amn't even English.'[46] His refusal to create propaganda is, he claims, because of his nationality, suggesting that he does not feel obliged to '[put] my brains at the disposal of the British Government.'[47] This may have come in response to a slight he received two months previously when F.R. Higgins 'denounc[ed] me for 24 hours for having de-Irishised myself.'[48] Higgins, MacNeice claimed, 'thinks I've sold my birthright,' presumably for moving to London and becoming involved in the English literary scene.[49] The apparent pressure on MacNeice to defend and justify his identity was noticeably greater while Britain was at war.

As he wrote to E.R. Dodds in 1945, 'I wish one could either *live* in Ireland or *feel oneself* in England. It must be one of them ould antinomies.'[50] The fact that he perceived his 'binationality' as an antinomy reflects his inability, if not unwillingness, to identify with one nation over the other. Yet the complexity of his identity—'Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,' but conscious of his Irish heritage—was even more pronounced during the war.[51] In 1939 he outlined in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* that, '*It is easy to be Irish;*

[46] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, Belfast, 24 September 1939, in *Letters*, 357. Emphasis MacNeice's own.
[47] Ibid.
[48] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, London, 16 July 1939, in *Letters*, 351.
[49] Ibid, 350.
[50] MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Co. Mayo, 31 July 1945, in *Letters*, 459.
[51] 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007), 262. All citations are from this edition unless otherwise specified.

it is difficult to be Irish.'[52] This section of his monograph delineates contemporary assumptions of what being Irish entailed—centring on ideas of sentimentality, partisanship, puritanism, tradition, and spirituality. Within this same section MacNeice somewhat tangentially admits, 'I, as a little boy among Orangemen, imagined myself a rebel against England.'[53] However if, as a boy, he is rebelling first against Orangemen—the Protestant fraternal organisation based primarily in Northern Ireland, sworn to maintain the Protestant Ascendancy—and second against England, this is a complex admission: these two ideas do not map easily onto each other. What it does reflect is how religion and nation were closely and negatively related in MacNeice's mind.

Moreover, his attitude to religion was complicated by the difficult status of his 'Nation:' he could not commit wholeheartedly to either. For MacNeice, both religion and nation proved too closely knit and too politically charged to function as bases for identity during the war years. At the centre of 'Blacklegs,' Rodd McGinn—the Communist and strike enforcer—arrives at the steeple to confront the strike-breakers, orders the Professor at gunpoint to walk out on a plank, and subjects him to interrogation:

McGinn: What do you believe in?
Professor: I believe in the Nation –
McGinn: The Nation is a thing of the past.
Professor: And I believe in God.
McGinn: God is a thing of the past.
Professor: And I believe in the voice of my own conscience.
McGinn: Maybe you believe in Santa Claus?[54]

The capitalisation of 'Nation' insists on it being as equally abstracted as 'God,' but each is dismissed by McGinn's trenchant political agenda. He and the Professor have a fundamental clash of beliefs: the Professor, earning nine hundred a year from his profession, is breaking the strike not out of financial necessity, but because 'the strike is

[52] *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber, 1941), 51. Emphasis MacNeice's own.
[53] Ibid, 50-51.
[54] 'Blacklegs,' 15.

crippling the Nation,' whereas McGinn is organising it to aid the 'World Revolution.'[55] McGinn aggressively acts on his political ideology, because, in his own words, 'A man can get things done if he believes in them.'[56] Though he opposes Communism, the Professor does not see himself as a capitalist, and believes the war is 'not a capitalist war. It is a war for civilisation.'[57] McGinn, meanwhile, dismisses each of the Professor's beliefs as 'a smokescreen of wonderful abstract ideas.'[58] Belief, in 'Blacklegs,' is played out in a literal life-and-death scenario on stage: the impasse only ends when the Professor claims 'I also am prepared to die for civilisation,' but McGinn deems him unworthy of sacrifice: 'I wouldn't waste the lead on you.'[59]

MacNeice's own multifaceted national identity complicates readings of his approach to religion and nationalism. In his 1993 Oxford lecture 'Frontiers of Writing,' Seamus Heaney offers a concise understanding of MacNeice's national identity and legacy:

> He can be regarded as an Irish Protestant writer with Anglocentric attitudes who managed to be faithful to his Ulster inheritance, his Irish affections and his English predilections. As such, he offers a way in and a way out not only for the northern Unionist imagination in relation to some sort of integral Ireland but also for the southern Irish imagination in relation to the partitioned north.[60]

Alan Gillis, Edna Longley and Peter McDonald have all written extensively on MacNeice's turbulent relationship with the politics of his time, and in each case discuss his own difficult position in terms of national identity.[61] Gillis criticises Heaney's approach above by highlighting that 'MacNeice could be "faithful" to both his "Ulster inheritance" and his

---

[55] 'Blacklegs,' 15.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Seamus Heaney, 'Frontiers of Writing,' in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), 200.
[61] See Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1988), 35-55.

"Irish affections" because he held them in equal contempt.'[62] McDonald, in '"Silly like us": Anglo-Irish Accommodations,' discusses MacNeice's complex national identity and how readers in both England and Ireland have historically sought to downplay it: as far as his periodisation in England, MacNeice was included in the 'Thirties poets' but too often overshadowed by Auden; in Ireland, meanwhile, his origins from 'the North' often prompted critical responses ranging 'from suspicion to open scorn.'[63] Moreover, MacNeice is not easily read as a successor to Yeats, as Yeats's conflict was between Ireland and England, where MacNeice's was, in McDonald's words, 'between Connemara and Carrickfergus, one way of being "Irish" and another.'[64] Equally, the fact that he is often categorised as a 'Thirties poet' under Auden's aegis sits uncomfortably alongside his Irish origins.

In other words, criticism has often interpreted MacNeice's national identity according to its own biases. The consequence of these inconsistent and thorny interpretations is a critical confusion about MacNeice's national identity, which has resulted in his inclusion in both British and Irish literary histories but belonging *solely* to neither. As the next section will discuss, such difficulties in categorising his work began in advance of the war, and were exacerbated by his ambivalence towards political ideology, his doubts about faith in religion or nationalism, and his refusal to adhere to any singular system of belief.

One thing that 'Blacklegs' clearly shows is that his conflict of identities comes, in part, from not being able to convincingly define what a 'nation' is. The concepts of nation and nationality do not necessarily correspond to a common principle; as Jack cries in

---

[62] Alan Gillis, 'Louis MacNeice: The Living Curve,' in *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.
[63] Peter McDonald, '"Silly like us": Anglo-Irish Accommodations,' in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 208.
[64] McDonald, *The Poet in his Contexts*, 204.

'Blacklegs,' 'The nation, Professor! Now there's a thing I never set eyes on.'[65] The Professor, as a result, intones a lengthy and patronising speech on Jack's failure to comprehend his 'unprincipled' attitude:

> You see, your principles were wrong ones. Now I took on this job because of my principles. But my principles are right. During a war the struggle between workers & employers becomes of entirely minor importance. The important thing is the nation. We must not impair the productive functions of the nation[.][66]

The Professor implies that his national identity requires him to be a loyal citizen, especially in a time of war, and that anyone who takes an alternative view is unprincipled and treacherous. Jim, in contrast, acts as a practical capitalist: 'There's only one reason I go to work, Professor, & that's the money.'[67] Jack, in the same scene, admits that he became a blackleg 'against my principles,' which he never makes explicit but, he continues, 'I have not abandoned them … I have merely betrayed them.'[68] Jim and Jack, each quietly tearing down the Professor's lofty ideals of loyalty and patriotism, by their simple admissions call into question the viability of clinging to ideals, as opposed to operating pragmatically. The Professor, whose monologue rapidly descends into a mechanical repetition of the importance of 'the nation,' offers less of a reason for remorse in his fellow blacklegs, than an example of the hollowness of rhetoric; by the end of his speech the concept of 'nation' reads as an empty symbol rather than a tangible, independent entity.

---

[65] 'Blacklegs,' 9.
[66] Ibid. Emphasis MacNeice's own.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid, 8, 9.

'what am I doing it for?': The prelude to war

Though MacNeice was continually sceptical of politics, he did on at least one occasion attempt to involve himself in parliamentary politics; he campaigned for the Oxford by-election of 1938, 'to support Lindsay, the Lib.-Lab., anti-Munich candidate against the Conservative, Hogg.'[69] He volunteered to drive Labour voters to the polls, an act that prompted him the following year to ask in *Autumn Journal*:

> And what am I doing it for?
> Mainly for fun, partly for a half-believed-in
> Principle, a core
> Of fact in a pulp of verbiage[.][70]

Like Spain on the brink of civil war in canto VI, MacNeice saw London in 1938 'ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin;'[71] the significance placed on political ideologies and aspirations appeared to him as a superfluity of words that conveyed only vagueness and redundancy. The difficulty of the question 'what am I doing it for?' indicates both his need to find an answer, and his suspicion that there was none.

Where many of his generation turned to 'a pulp of verbiage' for answers, MacNeice instead, as he writes in *The Strings are False*, 'continued dreaming about bombs and the fascists, was worried over women, [and] was mortifying [his] aesthetic sense by trying to write as Wystan did[.]'[72] Mortifying his aesthetic sense—by self-consciously emulating Auden—reads as a humorous disclaimer, but his tone fails to cover the dread indicated by his dreams of 'bombs and the fascists.' His worry about the impending war, especially in stark contrast to some of his contemporaries' whole-hearted subscription to Communism, demonstrates a real and self-centred concern for the future: were Britain to

---

[69] William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 29.
[70] MacNeice, Canto XIV, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber, 2012), 46.
[71] Canto VI, *Autumn Journal,* 18.
[72] Stallworthy, *The Strings are False*, 169.

become a Communist state, as MacNeice writes in *Autumn Journal*, 'I might be climbing / A ladder with a hod'—much like the blacklegs in his play.[73] The alternative, MacNeice seems to suggest above, was that 'bombs and the fascists' take over.

Indeed, for MacNeice, 'mortifying my aesthetic sense' may also carry an edge of ascetic Christian doctrine, which he repeats in criticising his contemporaries' propagandist work in 1939: 'they are all for mortifying themselves.'[74] Mortification can mean humiliation, or the penitential discipline of subduing desires, or the death of one part of the body while the rest is alive; MacNeice seems to hint at all when equating it with writing propaganda. MacNeice's uses of 'mortification' also, in both cases, relate to writing in someone else's voice—that of Auden, and that of the propagandistic state. This can, in part, explain his aversion to political language: it veers too far towards speaking as someone else. Unlike many of his contemporaries, MacNeice's political leanings were decidedly ambivalent; as he admitted in 1934, when completing a *New Verse* survey question, 'Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?,' 'No. In weaker moments I wish I could.'[75] That this question is being asked in author surveys is very telling of what is expected of his peers—including the military suggestions of 'take your stand.' In the tense inter-war years, such a (lack of) stance was controversial. Part of this ambivalence was due to the insurmountable conflict MacNeice perceived between politics and poetry, and their uncomfortable link to propaganda, which, as he later writes in 1941, he 'loathes.'[76]

In 'A Statement' for *New Verse* in 1938, however, he had been more expansive: 'The world no doubt needs propaganda, but propaganda … is not the poet's job. He is not

[73] Canto XII, *Autumn Journal,* 41.
[74] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, Belfast, 24 September 1939, in *Letters*, 357.
[75] Quoted in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 170.
[76] 'London Letter [1]: Blackouts, Bureaucracy & Courage,' in *Selected Prose*, 105.

the loudspeaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice.'[77] MacNeice seems to echo Spender's concern—as outlined in the Introduction—that the poet's task is 'betrayed if the poet takes over the propaganda of political parties and uses words in false contexts.'[78] The question 'what am I doing it for?,' then, leads to further questions of the merit of politics—what is politics for?—and the dangers of allowing poetry to become overtly propagandist, all of which lead back to the recurring question, what can the poet do?

What MacNeice turned to in response to these questions was a recurring preoccupation with 'conscience.' (Edna Longley comments on the recurrence of 'conscience' in MacNeice's writing over 1938-1941, through his letters to Dodds, as well as his poems 'Stylite,' and 'London Rain.')[79] Unlike the Professor of 'Blacklegs' who staunchly swears to Rodd, 'I believe in the voice of my own conscience,' MacNeice continues to interrogate the idea of conscience throughout the war years. His preoccupation with it emerges through the 'still, small voice' in 'A Statement' (1938), as well as three separate appearances in *Autumn Journal* alone. It was evidently a personal issue for MacNeice, because while in Carrickfergus on his leave of absence from Bedford College in late 1939, he wrote to Dodds, 'I have been hanging around in this country communing with my conscience—such as it is.'[80] His letter belies the fact that he had been 'communing' with conscience already for quite some time.

Autumn Journal, the long poem MacNeice wrote between August and the New Year of 1938/9, introduces 'conscience' with 'the national conscience, creeping / Seeping through the night' like 'rain' in the wake of 'treaties, dynamite under the bridges / The

---

[77] 'A Statement,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 98.
[78] Stephen Spender, 'Books and the War—V,' *Penguin New Writing*, May 1941, 127-135.
[79] See Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 80.
[80] MacNeice to Dodds, Belfast, 24 September 1939, in *Letters*, 355.

end of *laissez-faire*.'[81] After the Munich Agreement, MacNeice's speaker exclaims, 'The crisis is put off and things look better / And we feel negotiation is not in vain – / Save my skin and damn my conscience.' [82] In both cases, conscience comes as a result of political and social upheaval. Where it begins as 'rain,' however, conscience ends the poem allegorically lost and ruined in the desert:

> And Conscience still goes crying through the desert
> With sackcloth round his loins:
> A week to Christmas – hark the herald angels
> Beg for copper coins.[83]

The literal drying up of hope and faith throughout the last months of 1938 is underscored by the image of angels degraded to begging for alms. The message of this section, as Patrick Deane writes, is to regard 'conventional modes of belief … as another form of lotus-eating[.]'[84] His conscience, then, is not something MacNeice can rely on or put faith in—it is too easily corrupted in wartime, 'damn[ed]' in order to 'Save my skin.'

As the recurrence of 'conscience' demonstrates, this period of MacNeice's writings exhibit—in Peter McDonald's words—a 'concern with the integrity of the self.'[85] This comes especially to the fore in his letters to Eleanor Clark after the outbreak of war:

> Either European civilisation is doomed or it isn't doomed. If it is doomed there is no point in my prostituting my mind in its defence; if it isn't doomed, I may as well be there with an unprostituted mind to carry on with it.[86]

His emphasis on 'doom' suggests his half-humorous, half-scathing reproof of propaganda as a prostitution of his mind: his tone is weary with the tenor and terms of the debate about 'civilisation,' rather than being rooted in a felt and real metaphysical fear. In the

---

[81] Canto VII, *Autumn Journal*, 22.
[82] Canto VIII, *Autumn Journal,* 28.
[83] Canto XX, *Autumn Journal*, 68.
[84] Patrick Deane, *At Home in Time*, 115.
[85] McDonald, *The Poet in His Contexts*, 98.
[86] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, Belfast, 24 September 1939, in *Letters,* 357.

same letter to Clark, MacNeice mentions his disgust with propaganda, and predicts that, because of his refusal to write it, 'No doubt I shall soon be a pariah in this hemisphere—excepting in Eire—but, when they tell me the situation is clear-cut, I just can't agree with them.'[87] In fact, after F.R. Higgins's accusation that MacNeice has 'de-Irishised' himself, MacNeice retorts that the poet 'will be fulfilling his function as a poet if he records … things with integrity.'[88] This rebuttal indicates MacNeice's self-conscious role as an outsider; where others emphasised that there was only one perspective, MacNeice's 'incorrigibly plural' attitude (a phrase first used in his 1935 poem 'Snow,' but now, as Fran Brearton and Edna Longley outline, a phrase that 'characterises the world of MacNeice's poetry') ensures his position as a self-identified 'pariah.'[89] Ironically, for MacNeice 'integrity' comes in 'plurality,' not 'singularity.'

A primary reason for his refusal to write propaganda, as he asserts in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, is his belief that 'a work of art cannot be assessed merely by its political reference.'[90] He continues:

> The fallacy lies in thinking that it is the *function* of art to make things happen … It is an historical fact that art *can* make things happen … art can alter a man's outlook and so indirectly affect his actions.[91]

In this, MacNeice repeats Auden's claim in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' that poetry is 'A way of happening, a mouth.'[92] It is political in so far as it '*can* make things happen,' but no further. He revised his critical rebukes against propaganda creation in his 1940 essay—

---

[87] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, Belfast, 24 September 1939, in *Letters,* 357.
[88] 'Tendencies in Modern Poetry,' *The Listener*, 27 July 1939, 185-86; also quoted in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 257.
[89] Fran Brearton and Edna Longley, *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and His Legacy* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), ix.
[90] MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber, 1941), 192.
[91] Ibid. Emphasis MacNeice's own.
[92] W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1994), 248.

the title of which publicises his concern about the role of the poet in wartime—'The Poet in England To-day: A Reassessment:'

> A poet adopts a political creed merely as a means to an end … propaganda … demands either angels or devils. This means that in the long run a poet must choose between being politically ineffectual and poetically false.[93]

The greater issue than 'mortifying' himself was being political 'as a means to an end.' Ultimately, poetry with the intent to provoke a political response was not, in MacNeice's view, desirable, or even classifiable as poetry: its function is not to 'make things happen.' This presented MacNeice with an impasse, caught between truth-telling, or relegating poetry to political commentary.

MacNeice, then, was sensitive to the exigencies of political writing—how one can incorporate a political creed in poetry without making it propaganda, how one can take a 'clear-cut' approach to a complex global crisis, how art is perceived to 'make' things happen in a way similar to propaganda; this is evidenced by his repeated written explanations of his own ambivalence and hesitance to ascribe to any one doctrine or attitude. As MacNeice admitted to Clark in 1941, 'it's not that I don't believe anything, it's just that I don't think you can explain the Universe by saying 2 + 2 = 4 or by Dialectical Materialism or by the Cross of Christ.'[94] Here, MacNeice debunks the value of arithmetic fact, Marxist theory, and religion; as we know from his later prose piece, 'Statement on Belief,' 'When faced with this question "What do I believe?" I assume it is a question *not so much of fact* as of *value*.'[95] The question of 'value' comes to the fore in *Autumn Journal*, which vacillates between cantos that take on a public voice—observing everyday London and reflecting on the troubles in Spain from 1936—and the private worries, personal qualms, that edge in alongside.

---

[93] MacNeice, 'The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment,' in *Selected Literary Criticism*, 113.
[94] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, London, 15 March 1941, in *Letters*, 425. Emphasis in the original.
[95] 'Statement on Belief,' in *Selected Prose*, 187. Emphasis my own.

The 'Note' to *Autumn Journal* expands on the concerns MacNeice had in late 1938/early 1939:

> Nor am I attempting to offer what so many people now demand from poets – a final verdict or a balanced judgment. It is the nature of this poem to be neither final nor balanced. *I have certain beliefs* which, I hope, emerge in the course of it but which *I have refused to abstract from their context.* For this reason I shall probably be called a trimmer by some and a sentimental extremist by others. But poetry in my opinion must be honest before anything else and I refuse to be 'objective' or clear-cut at the cost of honesty.[96]

Here MacNeice unequivocally sets out the public/critical expectations that he anticipated—the expectations for poetry to be dogmatic, to offer a single way of approaching his subjects, to marginalise subjectivity in favour of social commentary. He also acknowledges the unpopularity of his approach, and the likely critical backlash he will face for refusing to be 'objective.' Not only does this 'Note' reinforce the prevalence and power of public reaction to poets' responses at the time, but it also demonstrates MacNeice's rebellion against it. His emphasis on 'honesty' also continues his choice not to be 'poetically false.'

MacNeice was on a lecture tour in the U.S. when *Autumn Journal* was published on 18 May 1939. This tour was organised in part by T.S. Eliot, who wrote to influential friends at Columbia, Harvard, and Wellesley College, among others, and it was the same trip in which MacNeice met Eleanor Clark.[97] Following this meeting, MacNeice began more than ever to reassess his relationship to politics, poetry and the war, and Britain and Ireland—all of which were thrown into harsh relief by the death of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice's dissatisfaction with his job at Bedford College, and (once he returned to Britain in April) his long-distance relationship with Clark. He visited the West of Ireland

[96] 'Note' to *Autumn Journal*, v. Emphasis my own.
[97] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 230.

in August because, as he writes in *The Strings are False*, 'the fatalist within me said, "War or no war, you have got to go back to the West. If only for a week. Because you may never again."'[98] He does not expand on this sense of fatalism, but his return to Ireland suggests a real concern that he would die before the end of the war.

His movements over this period are easily followed, as he was careful to record his precise locations when Germany and Britain entered the Second World War. When news of Hitler's invasion of Poland was announced on the wireless, he was in Galway, as he writes in the fourth section of 'The Closing Album:'

> Salmon in the Corrib
> Gently swaying
> And the water combed out
> Over the weir
> And a hundred swans
> Dreaming on the harbour:
> The war came down on us here.[99]

His imagery—particularly the weir and the swans—is an overt homage to Yeats, particularly the poems Yeats wrote in county Galway during the First World War, such as 'The Wild Swans at Coole' (1917): 'Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine-and-fifty swans.'[100] MacNeice's refrain, 'The war came down on us here,' contains a powerless, yet captivated, tone similar to the refrain of Yeats's war poem 'Easter, 1916,' 'All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born.'[101] His Yeatsian allusions in 'Galway' coincide with his work on *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, which he was completing in the autumn of 1939; Richard Danson Brown argues that an intertextual dialogue between

---

[98] MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 210.
[99] 'Galway,' part IV of 'The Closing Album,' in *Collected Poems*, 182.
[100] W.B. Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole,' in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), 180. Peter McDonald includes an extensive discussion of the Yeatsian influence in 'The Closing Album' in his monograph *The Poet in his Contexts*, 100-1. See also Nicholas Allen, 'Louis MacNeice and Autumn's Ghosts,' in *That Island Never Found: Essays and Poems for Terence Brown*, eds. Nicholas Allen and Eve Patten (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 78; and Richard Danson Brown, 'Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.3 (Spring 2005): 122.
[101] Yeats, 'Easter, 1916,' in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, 228.

MacNeice and Yeats 'informs the poetry MacNeice wrote during the war, in which his commitment to the Allied cause is at odds with Yeatsian Irish nationalism.'[102] MacNeice's 'commitment' to the Allied cause, however, is best described with quotation marks around it, as his ambivalence and scepticism about political or national commitment is patently ongoing and unyielding. Neither is the Allied cause necessarily at odds with a Yeatsian Irish nationalism; rather, in MacNeice's poetry, it creates a matrix of Anglo-Irish allusions that refuse a uniformity of personal and public loyalties.

MacNeice's identification with Ireland was strained by its role in the war, as he writes in his later poem 'Neutrality' (1944), which centres around a speaker addressing country and individual—'The neutral island facing the Atlantic, / The neutral island in the heart of man'—instructing them to 'Look into your heart' for Yeatsian images of Sligo ('A Knocknarea with for navel a cairn of stones'), decaying idylls ('fermenting rivers' that profoundly contrast the Corrib of 'The Closing Album'), and long-lost glories of Ireland: 'Intricacies of gloom and glint.'[103] These nostalgic reminders of a history ended long ago are contrasted with the final stanza that condemns the present:

> But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks
> A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,
> While to the west off your own shores the mackerel
> Are fat – on the flesh of your kin.[104]

Considering the interlocutor is both Ireland and 'the heart of man' these warning lines indicate both the European conflict in which Ireland has no truly 'neutral' stance, and the inner conflict in responding personally to the war.[105] As Peter McDonald maintains, 'If there is anger in the concluding lines, there is also distress, and a measure at least of self-

---

[102] Richard Danson Brown, 'Neutrality and Commitment,' 126.
[103] 'Neutrality,' in *Collected Poems*, 224.
[104] Ibid.
[105] See Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007).

accusation.'[106] McDonald, however, reads 'Neutrality' solely as an 'inward looking' poem, where its aim is more clearly focused on how the individual and their country are uncomfortably, and too closely, connected in a time of war:[107] the poem resists clarifying a singular interlocutor, instead addressing two that are apparently interchangeable.

MacNeice's concern about the claustrophobic connection between individual and country was not accepted by everyone, however: soon after the outbreak of war, MacNeice got into a fracas at the Palace Bar in Dublin, in which Patrick Kavanagh allegedly heard Austin Clarke sneer 'Let him go back and labour for Faber' (prompting Kavanagh's poem 'The Battle of the Palace Bar').[108] The exclusionary atmosphere in the Palace Bar seemed to play into MacNeice's sense of isolation following the announcement of war: in the opening pages of *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, he reveals that he was in Galway when Chamberlain made the announcement: 'As soon as I heard on the wireless of the outbreak of war, Galway became unreal. And Yeats and his poetry became unreal also.'[109]

He was careful to record his movements at this time: he also documents in *The Strings are False* that he spent the day after Germany invaded Poland,

> drinking in a bar with the Dublin literati; they hardly mentioned the war but debated the correct versions of Dublin street songs. Sunday morning the hotel man woke me … said, 'England has declared war.' … Next day I drove north[.][110]

Being reminded that he was an outsider may account for MacNeice's assertion in 'Dublin'—part I of 'The Closing Album'—that 'she will not / Have me alive or dead.'[111] This assertion may also have come as a result of MacNeice failing to attain the Chair of Poetry at Trinity College Dublin and being accused of 'having de-Irishised myself.' Dublin

---

[106] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 396.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 127, 306, 394-95.
[109] MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 17.
[110] MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 212.
[111] 'The Closing Album,' in *Collected Poems*, 179.

also would not have 'Blacklegs:' the Abbey archives show that, instead of MacNeice's commission, productions of Sean O'Casey's Dublin trilogy were staged over the winter/spring season of 1939/40.[112] It seemed every attempt MacNeice made to place himself in Dublin was rejected.

This steady stream of rejections may account for MacNeice's decision to involve himself in the war, as he wrote to Dodds from Dublin in October 1939:

> if the war were a rational war leading somewhere, I should want to stay out of it in order to see where it led to: but if it is a hopeless war leading nowhere, I feel half inclined to take the King's shilling & escape – more likely than not – the frustration to come.[113]

His willingness to volunteer for service, as a means of escapism, should the war prove 'hopeless,' demonstrates both his resistance to being cornered into propaganda work, and his preference for death above living under fascist rule. As Stallworthy outlines, there is 'some evidence that … he volunteered for service in the Royal Navy, but was rejected on grounds of bad eyesight.'[114] McDonald maintains MacNeice's rejection was 'on account of his recent operation for (life-threatening) peritonitis,' but, in either case, the reason was health-based, and so he had no opportunity to serve militarily.[115]

Though he felt some desire to involve himself in the war, he apparently felt more obliged to see Clark, and soon accepted the Special Lectureship at Cornell University from February to May 1940 and prepared for his voyage west by leaving his will with E.R. Dodds and naming him as his literary executor.[116] He later claimed that his decision to leave Britain in late 1939 was due to the fact that,

> I could visualise it [the war] myself so long as the 'Sitzkrieg' persisted, and during that period I had no wish to return to a Chamberlain's England,

---

[112] See Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, accessed 5 October 2017 https://abbeytheatre.nuigalway.ie:8443/component/Main/17ToA3p1yfaBss9G2InA3w..a
[113] MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Dublin, 13 October 1939, in *Letters,* 360.
[114] Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 287.
[115] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 378.
[116] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 267.

> where my fellow-writers were sitting around not writing. From June [1940] on I wished to return[.][117]

The American Immigration authorities granted him a twelve-month extension of his visa in July, but the British government ordered him back to the UK, to which he gladly returned in December.[118] He details the voyage home, and his initial feeling on arrival, in *The Strings are False*, and his *Horizon* article 'Traveller's Return,' in which he admits that upon returning to the UK he felt himself an 'ex-expatriate.'[119] This double dislocation recurs in his admission that 'While I was in America I felt a very long way from Europe, though not so far away as I felt during the autumn of 1939 in Ireland.'[120]

This, too, is evident from his letters of that time: when he finished 'Blacklegs' that autumn, MacNeice admitted to Dodds, 'if it is my war, I feel I ought to get involved in it in one of the more unpleasant ways.'[121] As discussed in the Introduction, his sense of obligation to the war brings with it questions of what 'war poetry' is, and if he must become a 'war poet.' 'Blacklegs' offered him the chance to examine his role more carefully, and explore why 'my conscience is troubling me about this fool war.'[122] *Autumn Journal* shows that 'conscience' had been troubling him for quite some time before the outbreak of war, but evidently became an even more sensitive issue once the war was declared: it is telling, then, that writing 'Blacklegs' in October/November 1939 led him to the conclusion that the 'fool war' may nevertheless be 'my war after all.'[123]

In May 1940, Eleanor Clark criticised MacNeice's reluctance and scepticism—typified by his underlined 'if'—and his lack of political partisanship. She accused

---

[117] MacNeice, 'Traveller's Return,' *Horizon*, February 1941, 110.
[118] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 263, 278, 286.
[119] MacNeice, 'Traveller's Return,' 110.
[120] Ibid, 110.
[121] MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, Belfast, 19 November 1939, in *Letters,* 366, 367. Emphasis MacNeice's own.
[122] Ibid, 366.
[123] Ibid.

MacNeice of 'an awful lack of curiosity about the world,' a reproof to which he took great exception:

> what in hell do you mean …? I was curious about the world & suffering from my curiosity about it before you were born … When for the last week I have been feeling steam-rollers go over me all the time, that isn't just nerves; it was imagining … what this war is going to do to England & Ireland.[124]

Writing from upstate New York, MacNeice struggled emotionally as well as poetically in responding to the war, but moreover, he highlights the permanence of his political ambivalence. The sensitivity with which MacNeice responds to Clark is revealing and may elucidate the vitriolic attacks on insularity in 'Blacklegs.' Prompted by Clark's own staunch politics, MacNeice asserted his personal difficulty with being loyal to a political agenda:

> I am trying to develop [a world-view] but I am damned if I am going to swallow Marx or Trotsky or anyone else lock stock & barrel unless it squares with my experience or, perhaps I should say, my feelings of internal reality.[125]

After the deliberations within 'Blacklegs,' MacNeice elected to ignore questions of political dogma, as they contradicted his understanding of 'internal reality,' a crucial understanding after the war made everything seem 'unreal.' He is relying upon personal ethics, rather than world-systems, but as the next section demonstrates, his 'internal reality' could not always square with his experience.

'I am I although the dead are dead': The self in, and at, war

MacNeice's insistence on 'internal reality' emerges in his 1940 poem 'Obituary' (also titled 'The Expert'), which narrates the last moments of a 'dilatory prophet,' an 'ex-

[124] MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, New York, 21 May 1940, in *Letters,* 393.
[125] Ibid, 396.

professor' who 'had already / Outlived his job of being in the know.'[126] The self-indulgent professor with a 'weight of … doctorates,' prophesies his own end, but, in a Christ-like cry from Gethsemane, nevertheless yearns for a way out from the burden of 'knowing:' 'And thought that, could he announce that he had died, / And so was no longer an expert, it would be nice.'[127] The war, bringing with it the daily risk of mortality, led MacNeice to write, however comically, an imaginary obituary. The poem details his wishes to be solipsistic and pessimistic:

> [']Man is a political animal admittedly
> But, politics being incalculable, I shall
> With your permission pour myself another; I see
> Nothing for it but to be animal.'[128]

MacNeice invokes his Classical training by dismantling Aristotle's theory that 'man is by nature a political animal.'[129] Yet, the dry humour of dismissing politics as 'incalculable' hints at his inclination to overturn Aristotle's claim, and instead see 'man' as an 'incalculable animal.' The navel-gazing solipsist painted here is a counterpoint to the Professor of 'Blacklegs,' and indicates MacNeice's preoccupation with exploding the stereotype. To a certain extent, this poem pre-empts MacNeice's journey- and death-orientated poetry from the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as 'Charon,' 'After the Crash,' and 'Coda.' His wartime collections *Plant and Phantom* (1940) and *Springboard* (1944) are, as Peter McDonald writes, similarly 'death-possessed.'[130] Paradoxically, in 'Obituary,' it is precisely because the prophet seeks escape through death that he realises his destiny:

---

[126] MacNeice, 'Obituary,' *Poetry* 56.2 (May 1940): 61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20582117. The poem was also titled 'The Expert' and included in his series 'Novelettes' in both *Poems 1925-1940* and *Plant and Phantom*; it was dropped from his later *Collected Poems 1925-1948*.
[127] 'Obituary,' 61.
[128] 'Obituary,' 61.
[129] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944). Perseus Digital Library Project, Tufts University. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1253a
[130] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 394.

'the pavement, steady / As fate, rose up and caught him, rolled him below / A truck.'[131] His passivity is a self-mortification, in the sense of allowing death to encroach upon him, but is also, ironically, not a result of subduing his desire (to drink), but fulfilling it.

The need to escape through heavy drinking reappears in MacNeice's 1941 poem, 'Bar-Room Matins,' which—instead of a 'Messiah'—offers a corrupted prayer:

> We whose Kingdom has not come
> Have mouths like men but still are dumb
> …
> And God in words we soon forget
> Answers through the radio set
> …
> Mass destruction, mass disease
> We thank thee, Lord, upon our knees
> That we were born in times like these
> …
> Die the soldiers, die the Jews,
> …
> Give us this day our daily news.[132]

The title alone indicates how religion is corrupted in wartime: matins is an Anglican service held in the morning, and for it to be held in a bar-room indicates the secular shift in value, a shift that MacNeice uses as a grotesque pun in 'Mass destruction, mass disease.' The early pub drinking session takes on the air and significance of matins, in the absence of any other communal coming together and celebration of the 'word,' where the radio stands in for the priest. Daily bread is replaced by daily news, and the relaying of information through 'the radio set' emphasises the detachment of the audience from the humanitarian crises around them. The tone is scathing and accusatory and, amidst an atmosphere of Purgatorial waiting, hints at the frustration of being inert in the centre of such turmoil.

---

[131] 'Obituary,' 61.
[132] MacNeice, 'Bar-Room Matins,' in *Collected Poems*, 195-96.

'Obituary' and 'Bar-Room Matins' centre upon MacNeice's recurring preoccupation with death during the war years. Where 'Obituary' paints death as a tragicomic fate, death in 'Bar-Room Matins' prompts only hardened, detached insensitivity, which becomes almost sadistic: '["]Am I / My brother's keeper? Let him die",' 'Death is something that we fear / But it titillates the ear.'[133] Atrocities happening elsewhere are reduced to voyeuristic entertainment. The poem seems to be a working example of the utterances from *Autumn Journal*, '*We* are safe though others have crashed the railings,' 'Save my soul and damn my conscience.'[134] The endpoint of this survival instinct comes in 'Plain Speaking' (March 1940): 'And I am I although the dead are dead.'[135] Affirming his own survival is immediately counterpointed with acknowledging the death of others. However, the original title for 'Plain Speaking' in *Poems 1925-1940* was 'The Undeniable Fact,' suggesting that its final line speaks to both a celebration of survival, and survivors' guilt.[136]

This tension between celebrating survival and feeling ashamed of it takes on a new aspect after MacNeice was witness to one of the worst-air raids of the war: he was awake half the night of 16 April 1941, in which 685 fighters and 712 bombers flew over London, dropping nearly 2,000 tons of explosive. More than 1,000 people were killed.[137] He subsequently wrote a prose piece, 'The Morning after the Blitz,' for the *Picture Post*, in which his personal attitude to the war took a dramatic turn—he admitted he was 'half appalled and half enlivened by this fantasy of destruction:'[138]

> For it was—if I am to be candid—enlivening. People's deaths were another matter—I assumed they must have been many—but as for the damage to

---

[133] 'Bar-Room Matins,' 196.
[134] Canto IX, *Autumn Journal*, 29; and Canto VIII, *Autumn Journal*, 28.
[135] 'Plain Speaking,' in *Collected Poems*, 206.
[136] See *Collected Poems*, 804.
[137] Sarah Phillips, et al., 'The blitz 1940-1941: an interactive timeline,' The *Guardian* 7 September 2010. http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2010/sep/07/blitz-timeline-second-world-war
[138] 'The Morning after the Blitz,' in *Selected Prose*, 118.

> buildings, I could not help—at moments—regarding it as a spectacle … there was a voice inside me which … kept saying … 'Let her go up!' or 'Let her come down. Let them all go. Write them all off.[']139

Rather than the anxiety he expressed in May 1940 from America, in 'imagining … what this war is going to do to England & Ireland,' he began to understand, as Enda Longley notes, that the '"void" of the war years was a growth point for him too, and for his poetry.'140 He acknowledged this, too, in his prose piece 'Broken Windows' (1941/2):

> The War has thrown us back upon life – us & our writing too. But we were less alive than our art because more negative … The 'message' of a work of art may appear to be defeatist, negative, nihilist; the work of art itself is always *positive*. A poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life.141

The exhilaration he experienced from the destruction of the Blitz fits with his philosophy of poetry. For MacNeice, poetry is always a celebration of life, perhaps even of the same tenor as the war being 'enlivening.' The worry about 'bombs and fascists,' fears that 'civilisation is doomed,' the invocation of the 'Unknown God' or the 'Uebermensch,' all vanish in the sight of the actual destruction, and fall away to the realisation that 'we were less alive than our art.' The suffering and destruction enacted by the Blitz reminded MacNeice of the positivity of art and its affirmation of life.

It is also around this time that MacNeice signed on to write for the BBC. As he explained to Eleanor Clark on 30 May 1941,

> I have just—with a certain amount of misgiving—signed on to the B.B.C … in spite of all the vulgarisation involved, the predominance of *quantitative* values, & the unhealth which goes with a machine that is largely propaganda … it *has* its excitements & (what was less to be expected) its value.142

---

139 'The Morning after the Blitz,' in *Selected Prose*, 118.
140 MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, New York, 21 May 1940, in *Letters,* 393; Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 77.
141 MacNeice, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud,' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, 138. Emphasis in the original.
142 Quoted in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 297-98. Emphasis in the original.

His reluctant admission that writing propaganda might have 'value' both foreshadows the similar turn in Dylan Thomas's attitude to the war (and the film scripts he would eventually write for the Ministry of Information) and reinforces MacNeice's personal agenda to find the virtues of wartime writing. Even in the depths of his 'misgiving,' he strove for 'excitements.'

However, his desire to remain positive—find a 'value,' even 'in spite of all the vulgarisation involved,' and in spite of feeling 'defeatist, negative, nihilist'—was tested by the sudden deaths of his father in 1942, and his close friend Graham Shepard, in 1943 (Shepard, serving in the navy, was onboard a boat struck by an acoustic torpedo).[143] MacNeice commemorated and elegised these losses, attempting to find 'an act of homage to life': for his father, he wrote 'The Strand,' a lyric in *terza rima,* centred upon a beach in the West of Ireland, where MacNeice maps ideas of generational distance and familial legacy; for Shepard, however, he wrote 'The Casualty,' an elegy that imagines death as a surreal lapse in time, in which MacNeice treats death as missing 'the show'—as bad timing. In 'The Casualty,' he writes of an empty auditorium on the ocean bed, 'the seats vacated, / Eels among the footlights, water up to the roof,' when Shepard enters 'Jaunty as ever':

> you expect the show to begin
> But you are too late and cannot accept the proof
>
> That you are too late because you have died too early
> And this is under sea.[144]

The imagery of the stage set (even on the ocean bed) suggests drama, tragedy, or performance, perhaps also the famous lines from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and

[143] See Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 309, 319.
[144] 'The Casualty,' in *Collected Poems*, 237-38.

their entrances.'[145] If the sunken theatre in 'The Casualty,' then, is indicative of the 'world' of death, Shepard should be one of the 'players;' instead MacNeice twists the metaphor, and Shepard arrives as a late audience member. He has missed not only his cue but the entire performance. Shepard's 'exit' from life is an 'entrance' to death, both 'too late' and 'too early.'

MacNeice's poetry of this time was preoccupied with 'exits' and 'entrances,' just as the poet of the next chapter, Dylan Thomas, dedicated his wartime collection, *Deaths and Entrances*, to the same theme. *Plant and Phantom* ends with 'Cradle Song for Eleanor,' an ominous poem wishing that his lover's sleep will not be disturbed by the looming disaster of war: he sees Eleanor as a baby in a cot, and hopes to stave off the inevitable moment 'when the bough / Breaks.'[146] His next collection, *Springboard*, opens with a poem which is a mirror image of 'Cradle Song,' the portentous 'Prayer before Birth,' written in the voice of an unborn child: 'I am not yet born; forgive me / For the sins that in me the world shall commit.'[147] Though each focuses on imagery of vulnerable bodies and new life, they are both fixated on the world outside and the threats it poses. 'Prayer before Birth' ends with the plea, 'Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me. / Otherwise kill me.'[148] The dialectic of 'entrances' and 'exits'—life and death—is exemplified by the child's wish to die, even before being born. In 'Cradle Song,' death is presented through the threat of war; for the child in 'Prayer before Birth,' however, death is not a risk from war, but an avoidance of it, a desire for escape.

Through 'Obituary,' 'Bar-Room Matins,' 'The Casualty,' 'Cradle Song for Eleanor,' and 'Prayer before Birth,' then, we can trace a probing, recurring inquiry into the

---

[145] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Cynthia Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.vii.139-141; p.165.
[146] MacNeice, 'Cradle Song for Eleanor,' in *Collected Poems*, 209.
[147] MacNeice, 'Prayer before Birth,' in *Collected Poems*, 213.
[148] 'Prayer before Birth,' 214.

representation of death, perhaps even an exploration of belief in the afterlife. Whether as doomed fate, voyeuristic entertainment, lapse in time, imminent threat, or desired escape, death is never far from his poetry during the war years. As Peter McDonald writes, MacNeice's 'determination to be affirmative on the subject of death is seriously declared, and it shapes MacNeice's war poetry in a decisive way.'[149] The subject of death takes on a surreal aspect, however, when introduced in 'Troll's Courtship' (1944). In this poem, MacNeice allegorises the Blitz as a 'lonely Troll' who makes 'tributes' to an anonymous female figure:

> Nostalgia for the breasts that never gave nor could
> Give milk or even warmth has desolated me,
> Clutching at shadows of my nullity
> That slink and mutter through the leafless wood
> Which thanks to me is dead, is dead for good.[150]

To approach the Blitz as a pitiable, mythical creature defamiliarises an all-too-familiar subject to Londoners of 1944. The vulnerability of life in war is upended by the air attacks being personified into a pathetic figure that is, in turn, vulnerable. The overall effect, then, is a poem that pays tribute to the unattainable 'Her,' a maternal figure who evokes the troll's sense of orphanhood.

The inversion of attacker-and-attacked in this retelling of the air-raids as mythical trolls-and-mother figure is a conceptual stretch that indicates, in McDonald's words, a 'vivid, almost surrealist, disregard for "message" or conclusive argument.'[151] The effect, however, is to present poetry that delves into the ambivalence of conflict, through a voice 'half appalled and half enlivened by this fantasy of destruction.'[152] This dual feeling of horror and excitement reappears in 'Brother Fire,' which concludes: 'Did we not on those

[149] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 391.
[150] MacNeice, 'Troll's Courtship,' in *Collected Poems*, 220.
[151] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 388.
[152] MacNeice, 'The Morning after the Blitz,' in *Selected Prose*, 118.

mornings after the All Clear / … Echo your thoughts in ours? "Destroy! Destroy!"'[153] This, perhaps, accounts for the apparent enthusiasm of the troll, who has 'knocked down houses and stamped my feet on the people's heart.'[154] Death as something that 'titillates the ear' in 'Bar-Room Matins' has become in MacNeice's Blitz poems a fully-formed voyeurism.

Yet, the troll in 'Troll's Courtship' is still a pathetic figure, seeking 'Her with the voice of broken bells,' but catching only 'a gurgle as of the sea in shells.'[155] The sea sounds, and images of broken bells, hearken back to MacNeice's personal mythologies of childhood: 'Fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell / Half-heard through boarded time,' as he would later write in 'Carrick Revisited' (1945).[156] The methodical return to imagery of the sea through his early, wartime and post-war work suggests a fundamental preoccupation with its liminality, its signification of between-states, which operates as a refreshing alternative to the dialectic between flux and stasis. This is emphatic, too, in his elegies for his father and Graham Shepard, both of which rely upon imagery of the sea. His concern with between-states and dislocation is not peculiar to his wartime work alone—in fact, when the war was finally over, he returned again to Ireland, to a further sense of disorientation: 'Which war was which?' he asks in 'Carrick Revisited,' his hometown where he was 'dumbfounded to find myself … here, not there.'[157]

Where 'The Closing Album' marked the beginning of his wartime poetry, 'Carrick Revisited' reads as his final word, the other bookend to his war experience. MacNeice had asserted that the outbreak of war made his surroundings 'unreal,' and 'Carrick Revisited' also situates his return to 'peacetime' in terms of (un)reality: 'Time and place—our

[153] MacNeice, 'Brother Fire,' in *Collected Poems*, 226-7.
[154] 'Troll's Courtship,' in *Collected Poems*, 220.
[155] Ibid, 220.
[156] MacNeice, 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Collected Poems*, 262.
[157] Ibid, 261.

bridgeheads into reality / But also its concealment!'[158] Reflecting on the impact of the past—'Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf'—MacNeice revisiting Carrick acknowledges that while the passing of time means he has survived, that the war is over, Carrick is still 'plumb assured.'[159] Despite this, he also feels more detached than ever:

> Out of the sea
> We land on the Particular and lose
> All other possible bird's-eye views, the Truth
> That is of Itself for Itself—but not for me.[160]

With the conclusion of the war, MacNeice does not focus on another interpretation of death, but the consequences of the previous six years, which, he suggests, bring a fundamental loss of perspective. He is now in the 'afterlife' of the war, attempting to process his experience.

The speaker of 'Carrick Revisited' acknowledges that their memories 'peer at them' while they cannot know the 'meaning:' the speaker claims they can only land on 'the Particular,' while an objective 'Truth' remains out of their grasp. The anger and bitterness directed towards Ireland in 'Neutrality' is balanced out in 'Carrick Revisited' by a more muted consideration of 'what chance misspelt.' The fixation on death and destruction is replaced instead with entrenched feelings of isolation and misperception. It is not just survivor's guilt bleeding through this shift in focus, but a real concern that 'Truth' is unquantifiable, that in the wake of war, reality is 'not for me.'

In July 1945, two months after VE Day, MacNeice reinforced this concern with 'Truth' in his poem 'Hiatus,' which encapsulates the sense that the war a nightmare from which everyone had finally awoken:

> Yes, we wake stiff and older …
> And found some dark and tentative things made clear,

---

[158] 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Collected Poems*,, 262.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.

> Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count.[161]

After two collections that focused so keenly on issues of life and death, flux and stasis, individual and society, MacNeice's 'Hiatus' underlines a new sense of futility. 'Hiatus' seems to suggest that his wartime work was valuable in the moment—it made 'some dark and tentative things' clear—but that value is minimised when considering, as he does in 'Carrick Revisited,' that the past is inaccessible: 'Our past we know / But not its meaning – whether it meant well.'[162] Just as the speaker in 'Troll's Courtship' can only catch 'a gurgle as of the sea in shells,' MacNeice, having lived through a war, can only catch his past in 'Carrick Revisited,' 'as a child in bed / Glimpses a brangle of talk from the floor below / But cannot catch the words.'[163] MacNeice, looking back on the war years from 1945, indicates a concern that he either did not understand the conflict as he lived through it, or that his retrospective glance annuls his previous responses. The 'value' of his experience, and his beliefs about the 'value of living,' are no longer clear to him, now that his backward glance can only 'land on the Particular.'

Nothing will be impossible(?): MacNeice's final word on faith

> His friends would find in his death neither ransom nor reprieve
> But only a grain of faith – for what it was worth.[164]

'A grain of faith' was all MacNeice anticipated from the diver's self-sacrifice in his 1944 poem 'The Springboard,' yet his cynical afterword ('for what it was worth') undermines the Biblical allusion in this line: in Matthew 17:20, Jesus chastises his disciples for their doubt, asserting, 'for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and

---

[161] MacNeice, 'Hiatus,' in *Collected Poems*, 254.
[162] 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Collected Poems*, 262.
[163] 'Troll's Courtship,' in *Collected Poems*, 220; 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Collected Poems*, 262.
[164] 'The Springboard,' in *Collected Poems*, 236.

nothing shall be impossible unto you.'[165] The belief required to move mountains is more than the diver seems capable of himself; in McDonald's words, 'The figure seems paralysed by both his own "unbelief" and a more general scepticism.'[166] MacNeice, too, dismisses the power of a grain of faith, implying it is not worth much compared to 'ransom' or 'reprieve,' which may also be cynical interpretations of what consolations religion can offer.

'The Springboard' plays out the drama of a naked diver on a springboard above London who, through 'unbelief,' 'knew only too well / That circumstances called for sacrifice:'

> He will dive like a bomber past the broken steeple,
> One man wiping out his own original sin
> And, like ten million others, dying for the people.[167]

The explicit suggestion of a Christ-like sacrifice does not quite fit with the rest of the poem which, in McDonald's words, discusses how '[t]he situation combines the implied public scrutiny in a sense of duty with the private agony of suicidal despair.'[168] The diver, then, operates perhaps better as an analogy for poets in wartime London, rather than as a retelling of the Crucifixion, or surreal metaphor for free will. Taking into consideration, then, that the collection in which this poem first appeared took *Springboard* as its title, MacNeice points toward his own self-image as the diver, using poetry as a perch 'That kept him crucified among the budding stars.'[169] The metaphorical jump hinted at in the title poem, then, hints at the death of the poet. The value of the diver's life and death is never specified in the poem, not least because 'He never made the dive—not while I

---

[165] Matthew 17:20 (KJV).
[166] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 396.
[167] MacNeice, 'The Springboard,' in *Collected Poems*, 236.
[168] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War,' 397.
[169] Ibid.

watched,' and so its synecdoche for the collection as a whole acts as a comment on MacNeice's faith in the potential value of poetry.[170]

Both the poet and the diver as poet figure, then, are unbelievers, unable to trust in the idea that 'nothing will be impossible' once they have faith. Their scepticism is supported by the final line of the poem in which the diver is, 'like ten million others, dying for the people.'[171] MacNeice presents the reader with two contradictions in one – if ten million others have died for the people, how many are saved? And if the diver is sacrificing himself, surely his sacrifice is worth less when it has been matched by ten million others? 'The Springboard' relies on these unresolved tensions, evoking the crucifixion narrative to add *gravitas* to the diver's sacrifice, but contrasting it with his utter 'unbelief.'

This poem, which concludes *Springboard*, offers a final word on MacNeice's wartime preoccupation: 'He never made the dive.' Like the paralysed diver above London, MacNeice never committed to the promise of a single faith system. His explorations—and explosion—of religion and nationhood as viable foundations of belief are reflected in his admission that he 'long had ceased to believe / In any Utopia or in Peace-upon-Earth.'[172] Neither the diver nor MacNeice could subscribe to a single belief, but where MacNeice had the option of plurality, the diver knew 'what he must do.' 'The Springboard' plays out MacNeice's fear of what would happen were he to commit himself blindly to any one basis of faith—he would 'die.'

As MacNeice's 1953 'Statement on Belief' concludes,

> What I do believe is that as a human being, it is my duty to make patterns and to contribute to order—good patterns and a good order. And when I say duty I mean duty; I think it is the turn of enjoyment, I believe that life is worth while *and* I believe that I have to do something *for* life.[173]

---

[170] 'The Springboard,' in *Collected Poems*, 235.
[171] Ibid, 236.
[172] Ibid, 235.
[173] MacNeice, 'Statement on Belief,' in *Selected Prose*, 188. Emphasis in the original.

From a belief '*in* cooking with garlic' and splashing in the bath, MacNeice turns instead to a sense of responsibility to live, to 'order,' and celebrate life. Part of his search for faith systems in wartime, then, may be a more indirect struggle between reconciling his 'duty' to 'make patterns,' insisting upon the value of life, and the difficulty of applying 'order' to war, and celebrating a totalising destruction. What resulted from this struggle is a body of poetry that evinces careful scepticism and yet, like Auden, a desire to be affirmative. Like MacNeice, the poet of the next chapter—Dylan Thomas—wrote of the totalising destruction of war but refused to celebrate it. Thomas's work takes MacNeice's concerns with 'exits' and 'entrances' and applies to it the inability of language to capture total war: his poetry counters the value of 'good patterns and a good order,' and questions its own role in representing war.

Dylan Thomas by John Gay

'Poets can stop bullets, but bullets can't stop poets:'
Dylan Thomas and the violence of language

Writing in 1995, John Ackerman claims that Dylan Thomas was 'our first, and first great, civilian war poet;' in doing so, he is repeating, and building on, Cecil Day Lewis's assessment from the early 1950s that 'it was two non-combatants, Miss Edith Sitwell and Mr. Dylan Thomas, who wrote best about the 1939 war.'[1] In September 1939, though, that Thomas would come to be lauded in this way seemed a distant prospect. Then, he was expressing his desire to write about anything *but* the war:

> There's a need now for some life to go on, strenuously & patiently, outside the dictated hates & pettinesses of War, & that life I, for my own part, shall continue to support by my writing &and [sic] thinking & by living as coolly, hotly & as well as I know how.[2]

Thomas imagines 'some life … outside' the war, a space in which his writing might represent his own passions, interests and thoughts, rather than any dictated or pre-programmed position or approach. The pressure and expectations expressed in the literary periodicals of the time evidently had little effect on Thomas's perception of the poet's duty. As he writes to M.J. Tambimuttu in 1941, 'if the public likes all this matey to-you for-you we're-all-poets-together hugging and buggering party exhibition, then the public, as nearly always, is wrong.'[3] If Thomas was a 'war poet', he was one who had actively rejected what he perceived as public expectations for poets at the time of war (all those 'dictated hates & pettinesses').

Part of Thomas's desire to live 'as coolly, hotly & as well as I know how' was—as he admitted in letters a week after Britain declared war—a fear of what would happen to

---

[1] John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995), x. Cecil Day Lewis, 'Themes and Subjects in Modern Poetry,' *The Listener*, 5 February 1953, 228.
[2] Thomas to A.E. Trick, Laugharne, 29 September 1939, in *The Collected Letters: Dylan Thomas*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: J.M. Dent, 2000), 472.
[3] Thomas to M.J. Tambimuttu, Laugharne Castle, 9 June 1941, in *Collected Letters*, 550.

him. 'I want to get something out of the war, & put very little in (certainly not my one & only body),' he wrote to Glyn Jones; a fortnight later he was writing to A.E. Trick that 'My little body (though it's little no longer, I'm like a walrus,) I don't intend to waste for the mysterious ends of others.'[4] His preoccupation with his 'body,' and the size of it, appears repeatedly in his letters at this time: in November 1939, writing to Veronica Sibthorp, he notes that 'My only War joke is that I have been thinking of volunteering as a small tank. Really, I am going to do nothing at all.'[5] This was slightly disingenuous, however: he had already 'done' something in response to the war. The previous month he had written letters to his friends Henry Treece, Desmond Hawkins, Glyn Jones, and Rayner Heppenstall encouraging them to contribute to an article entitled 'Objection to War.' He envisaged this article as a 'collection of individual non-political (but political opinions can colour what they like) objections to war, this war, any war … merely the individual views of several people put together.'[6] The article was never written, however, as 'no satisfactory answers were forthcoming':[7] it is unclear, though, if this means his friends did not share his objection to the war or that their 'objections' were simply not convincing enough. In Thomas's short story 'The Peaches' (1938) the narrator had said that 'my body was my adventure and my name:' his letters of September to November 1939 suggest that at this point he was not willing to lend his 'body,' understood as either 'adventure' or 'name,' no matter how little or large, to the cause of the war.[8]

My interest in this chapter is, however, how he did ultimately come to put his body and voice into the war, what he 'got out of it,' and how this marks a development of (rather

---

[4] Thomas to Glyn Jones, Laugharne 11 September 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 462. Thomas to A.E. Trick, Laugharne, 29 September 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 471.
[5] Thomas to Veronica Sibthorp, Laugharne, 8 November 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 484.
[6] Thomas to Glyn Jones, Laugharne, 14 October 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 476. See similar letters to Treece, Hawkins, and Heppenstall, 474-81.
[7] Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) 181.
[8] Thomas, 'The Peaches,' in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (London: J.M. Dent, 1965), 18.

than a break with) his pre-war poetry. The chapter will examine Thomas's place in the wider London poetry scene during the war, before giving an overview of his writing process and philosophy of composition, in order to contextualise his understanding of poetic style and form. It will then close read two of his pre-war poems, 'The hand that signed the paper' and 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles,' alongside a discussion of his approach to the role of the poet and the issues with writing about one's historical moment, to help elucidate the poems he wrote in the early years of the war, and the scripts he wrote for Strand films (which forms the second section of this chapter). The final section examines in detail his 1946 collection *Deaths and Entrances*—his fullest response to the war—looking in particular at the ways in which it deals with the issues of representation and commemoration, its dialectic of destruction and creation, its chronological confusions, and Thomas's use of song.[9]

Where Thomas fits in, and how his poetry stands out

Thomas's attempt—and failure—to rally his friends to 'object' to war, suggests a broader problem when considering his place in the poetry scene of his time: a sense that he struggled to create or identify with any form of organised or collective endeavour (it is almost as if he did not really want to be a member of any group that would have him). He was not a member of the 'Auden Generation;' indeed, as early as 1935 Cecil Day Lewis was claiming in *The Listener* that 'George Barker and Dylan Thomas … are actually the

[9] For further biographical details of Thomas's life during the war see E.W. Tedlock, ed., *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet, A Collection of Biographical and Critical Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1963); John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Daniel Jones, *My Friend Dylan Thomas* (London; Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1977); John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); James Nashold and George Tremlett, *The Death of Dylan Thomas* (Edinburgh; London: Mainstream, 1997); Andrew Sinclair, *Dylan The Bard: A Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: Robinson, 2003); Lycett, *A New Life*; and Hannah Ellis, ed., *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

next generation after Auden and Spender.'[10] However, associating him with Barker—and the New Apocalyptic poets with whom he was identified—or with the Surrealist movement (as has been the subject of much critical attention) is not a straightforward matter.[11]

For the New Apocalyptic poets, Thomas was lauded as an inspiration. *The New Apocalypse* anthology, published in 1939, offered a diametrically opposed alternative to the '*New Country* poets' (principally W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Charles Madge, Stephen Spender, and Rex Warner), who had appeared in Michael Roberts's 1933 collection of that name. A changing poetic aesthetic is at work here (as well as a generational shift): the New Apocalyptic poets, as they wrote in their Manifesto, rejected the 'ethereal rationalist' 'abstraction' of the New Country poets, focussing instead on revelation, vision, and myth.[12] This carried an obvious appeal to a public preparing for war: as Henry Treece (one editor of the anthology) would later write in *How I See Apocalypse* (1946), 'war, after all, is an Apocalyptic affair—an organic movement with all the madness and the sanity of a bowel movement, all the systematic anarchy and the ordered chaos of a lover's dream.'[13] Thomas was an inspiration for the New Apocalyptics, as the other editor of the anthology, J.F. Hendry, noted in his Introduction: where the New Apocalypse is concerned with 'the

[10] Cecil Day Lewis and Paul Engle, 'Modern Poetry – English and American,' *The Listener*, 15 May 1935, 852.
[11] See John Goodby, '"The Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive": Dylan Thomas as Surrealist,' in *Dada and Beyond, vol. 2: Dada and its Legacies*, eds. Elza Adamowicz and Eric Robertson (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi Press, 2012), 199-223; William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962), 10-11; Peter Riley, 'Thomas and Apocalypse,' *Poetry Wales* 44.3 (Winter 2008-9): 12-16; James Keery, 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater,' *PN Review* 151, 29.5 (May/June 2003): 49-54; *PN Review* 152, 29.6 (July/August 2003): 57-62; *PN Review* 154, 3.2 (November/December 2003): 26-32; *PN Review* 156, 30.4 (March/April 2004): 40-42; *PN Review* 159, 31.1 (September/October 2004): 45-49; *PN Review* 164, 31.6 (July/August 2005): 57-61; *PN Review* 170, 32.6 (July/August 2006): 59-65; *PN Review* 171, 33.1 (September/October 2006): 56-62.
[12] Quoted in Giles Goodland, 'John Goodland and the Apocalyptic Movement: notes from the son of a literary footnote,' *PN Review* 154, 30.2 (November/December 2003): 23.
[13] Henry Treece, *How I See Apocalypse* (London: Drummond, 1946), 21. James Keery, in a series of articles for *PN Review*, sets out in further detail Thomas's relationship to the New Apocalyptics: see Keery, 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater,' *PN Review* 171, 33.1 (September/October 2006): 56-62.

technical problem of how to write organically,' 'Dylan Thomas, [is] the most organic of modern English poets.'[14]

Nevertheless, Thomas refused to sign their manifesto. He clarified his reasons in a letter to Treece: 'I won't sign [it], with or without argument … I agree with and like much of it, and some of it, I think, is manifestly absurd … organic reality is all my cock.'[15] When he writes 'organic reality,' Thomas is glibly quoting from the manifesto. In it, the New Apocalyptics disparage some examples of Marxism and Surrealism by arguing, 'These statements overlook the fact that man himself is part of the forces of nature, and that therefore, unless we are careful, the 'man-myth', the belief in human organic reality, will also disappear and man with it.'[16] Thomas's rude counter-argument implies the phallocentric natural fact of 'man himself' is unlikely to 'disappear.' It is clear that Thomas was not willing to be persuaded by Treece. This does not mean, however, as his letter suggests, that he disagreed entirely with the manifesto: indeed, some of his poems that appear most aligned to New Apocalyptic ideas, such as 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles' and 'When I Woke,' will be discussed later in the chapter.

Surrealism might seem a more fitting context in which to place Thomas's work. His dense syntax, imaginative leaps, and thematic shifts do lend themselves to being considered 'surreal,' in their apparent departures from objectivity or reality; like the Surrealists, he also had a thematic preoccupation with the unconscious, dreams, and childhood. Moreover, his early prose and poetry exist, as John Goodby writes, 'in a fruitful dialogue with Surrealism:' 'even at the level of grammatical mannerism … Thomas can be

---

[14] J.F. Hendry, 'Writers and Apocalypse,' introduction to *The New Apocalypse: An Anthology of Criticism, Poems and Stories*, eds. J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece (London: Fortune Press, 1939), 9, 15. See also Keery, 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater,' *PN Review* 154, 3.2 (November/December 2003): 22-25.
[15] Thomas to Henry Treece, Hampshire, 31 December 1938, in *Collected Letters*, 397.
[16] Quoted in Giles Goodland, 'John Goodland and the Apocalyptic Movement: notes from the son of a literary footnote,' *PN Review* 154, 30.2 (November/December 2003): 23.

seen to match Surrealist practice.'[17] However, Thomas distanced himself from surrealism, as he had from the New Apocalyptics. In a letter from 1935, Thomas declared, 'I am not, never have been, never will be, or could be for that matter, a surrealist:'

> I think I do know what some of the main faults of my writing are: immature violence, rhythmic monotony, frequent muddleheadedness, and a very much overweighted imagery that leads too often to incoherence. But every line *is* meant to be understood; the reader *is* meant to understand every poem by thinking and feeling about it[.][18]

Thomas's poetry challenges the scope of surrealism, because—in his own words—'the "plot"' of his poetry is 'told in images, & the images *are* what they say, not what they stand for.'[19] While his work might appear surrealist, it was for Thomas essentially realist in subject and tone—a realism that still differed from the 'human organic reality' of the New Apocalypse. In summation, surrealism and the New Apocalypse are important cultural and literary movements of the time, and they contextualise aspects of Thomas's imagery, his syntax, and his emphasis on revelation. John Goodby and James Keery have produced valuable critical work examining how Thomas exists within the contexts of these movements, but Thomas himself was careful to distance his work from them.

By distancing himself from the New Apocalyptics and the Surrealists (at least in his own mind) Thomas was—in part—creating a space for his poetry to develop its own path, without being bound by manifestos or creeds, and with his own individual relationship to 'realism.' This freedom to develop is important for his war poetry: from his earlier work of the 1930s, through to his 1946 collection *Deaths and Entrances*, we can trace various ways in which his poetry changes. Most pertinent for this thesis is the manner in which his poetry increasingly becomes interested in how we talk about, or

---

[17] Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 272, 273.
[18] Thomas to Richard Church, Swansea, 9 December 1935, in *Collected Letters*, 232. Emphasis in the original.
[19] Thomas to Hermann Peschmann, Hampshire, 1 February 1938, in *Collected Letters*, 313. Emphasis in the original.

'remember,' war and also his growing awareness of what John Goodby terms the 'ambi*violence*' of language: the way in which language can both create empathy with someone else's suffering while also exploiting it.[20] Both these concerns are intimately bound up, however, with Thomas's own unique approach to language as a whole (and not just the representation of conflict or suffering).

From his earliest encounters with language, Thomas was always captivated by the sound of words, by the rhythms of speech, and the power of recitation. As he wrote in his 'Poetic Manifesto' (1951), 'I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words:'

> The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolised, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the *sound* of them.[21]

Young Thomas stressed sound over substance, and loved the phonetics of language, the rhythm of the signifiers, perhaps even more than their subject matter. Older Thomas—Thomas the performer of his own work—also emphasized the sound of words: famously, in his readings he put on a highly stylised performance that dramatized the sound of his poetry, employing every register of his voice from quiet whispers to booming oratorios.[22]

By the mid-1930s, however, Thomas felt the need to reconsider the relationship with the 'sound' of words, with what they 'stood for, symbolised, or meant.' In a letter from early 1935, he explained his ideas about how poetry can 'mean,' and what the role of poetry is or should be:

> Poetry, heavy in tare though nimble, should be as orgiastic and organic as copulation, dividing and unifying, personal but not private, propagating the individual in the mass and the mass in the individual. I think it should work

[20] Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 157. Emphasis in the original.
[21] 'Poetic Manifesto,' in *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*, ed. Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1971), 154. Emphasis in the original.
[22] See Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas Reading His Poetry: Complete & Unabridged*, Harper Collins Audio Books, compact disc. Originally released in 2004.

> from words, from the substance of words and the rhythm of substantial words set together, not towards words. Poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper.[23]

Once more, Thomas emphasises the importance of the sound or texture of words (their 'substance' or 'rhythm'); however, his focus here is on how poetry can deliver meaning, rather than just sound. Rejecting symbolism (the idea of poetry as 'stigmata'), he emphasises poetry as a process or 'medium.' He insists that poetry is a form, devoid of specific content, but not of 'weight.' 'Tare' refers to the weight of an empty container; by suggesting it is 'heavy,' Thomas is acknowledging that part of poetry's meaning comes from its accumulated, shared and inherited connotations and effects. Meaning does not come from the poet, poem or individual alone: instead it 'propagates the individual in the mass and the mass in the individual.' His focus on 'propagation' hints at the word's etymological descendant, propaganda, and the (controlled or uncontrolled) propagation of meaning and significance by the words and images themselves, with no connection to an external truth. However, it is its biological suggestiveness that is most important here: the crux of his ideas is that language is a kind of biological process, that words are as substantive as people, and that poetry is the means through which his concept of language-as-biology is expressed.

Thomas often relates mental processes to the body and biological functions. Writing in November 1933 he argues,

> All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of thought or action – however abstruse it may be – can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imagined or translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells or senses. [24]

---

[23] Thomas to Charles Fisher, London, early 1935, in *Collected Letters*, 208.
[24] Thomas to Pamela Hansford Johnson, early November 1933, in *Collected Letters*, 57.

In 1938, meanwhile, he relates this form of 'embodiment' to his own poetic process, in a way that suggests a paradoxical understanding of language as embodiment, and embodiment as language, and so we are all at once word but also all 'flesh:'

> I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me … let it breed another, let that image contradict the first … and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method … is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.[25]

It is important that Thomas considered his poetic process as a conflict, a perpetual construction and destruction of words, images, and ideas. In the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, this would prove an apt process for exploring the impending war. Perhaps too apt: his poetry might appear to be solely about the approaching conflict (rather than reflective of an internal, biological conflict). In July 1938, Thomas wrote to Treece, attempting to distinguish his poetry from political commentary:

> You meant, I know, that my poetry isn't concerned with politics … You are right when you suggest I think a squirrel stumbling at least of equal importance as Hitler's invasions, murder in Spain … howitzers, tiny death-rattles … but I am aware of all these things as well.[26]

Here Thomas rejects any requirement to view contemporary political events (no matter how momentous or 'tiny') as being more important than a 'squirrel stumbling.' Instead, he insists on viewing the world as a single experience, a unified embodiment of being, that 'force that through the green fuse drives the flower,' or in this case, drives the squirrel.[27] This letter signals his intention not to let political conflicts or agendas influence his poetic subject matter. Claiming the equal importance of squirrels and the

---

[25] Thomas to Henry Treece, Hampshire, 23 March 1938, in *Collected Letters*, 328.
[26] Thomas to Henry Treece, Hampshire, 6/7 July 1938, in *Collected Letters*, 309-11.
[27] Thomas, 'The force that through the green fuse,' in *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*, ed. John Goodby (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 43. All further citations are taken from this edition.

Spanish civil war, Thomas espouses an anti-historicist approach to writing, one which prioritises biological and natural process over historical 'stigmata.' This was not a case of solipsism or narcissism, however: Thomas had always been 'aware' of historical events; and with the coming of the war his poetry would eventually become 'concerned with politics.'

'War can't produce poetry, only poets can'

In November 1939, the same month he began organising the 'Objection to War' article, Thomas shared his thoughts on the writer's role in wartime in a letter to Reyner Heppenstall:

> When you come to talk about one's duty as a writer, then *one* can only say that his duty is to write. If to undergo contemporary reality to its most extreme is to join in a war – the evil of which is the war itself & not the things it is supposed, wrongly, to be attempting to exterminate – against people you do not know, and probably to be killed or maimed, then one can only say flippantly that the best poems about death were always written when the poets were alive, that Lorca didn't have to be gored before writing a bullsong, that for a writer to undergo the utmost reality of poverty is for him to starve to death and therefore to be, as a writer, useless.[28]

In this account, Thomas debunks the notion that poetic authority lies in personal experience of whatever the poet is writing about, whether it be war, poverty—or most 'flippantly'—death. His reference to Lorca and his bullsongs also holds a thinly veiled allusion to Lorca's assassination by Nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War: this hints at Thomas's distrust of the acclaim applied to poets only after they have died in war. His 'flippant' assertion that 'the best poems about death were always written when the poets are alive' carries a bleak finality: death, however tragic, ensures only a poet's silence. There is, however, a sense of defensiveness in Thomas's words, a self-conscious

[28] Thomas to Rayner Heppenstall, Laugharne, 2 November 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 480. Emphasis in the original.

wariness towards political poetry and the ('nearly always … wrong') public's expectation.[29] Moreover, the entire extract is predicated on a prefatory 'If,' ensuring a conditional distance between Thomas and his subject: he is, implicitly, rejecting—or at least leaving open the possibility of rejecting—the equation of 'the war' and 'contemporary reality.'

He elaborates on this rejection after the war, in 1951: 'All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation, or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem.'[30] His emphasis on the 'enjoyment' of poetry—knowingly or unknowingly—echoes MacNeice's assertion that 'a poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life:' the idea, in Kendall's words, that a war poem's 'primary motivation is to celebrate … its own achievement.'[31] However, this is immediately qualified in Thomas's comment: 'enjoyment' is also related to that 'eternal movement' and 'vast undercurrent' of human emotions. For Thomas, the underlying ambition for poetry is to strive for something deeper and longer lasting than individual concerns, or historical crises. The rest of this chapter, however, will demonstrate that though Thomas insisted on the need for poetry to aim beyond or beneath the transitory historical moment, this can actually be understood as primarily a response to the historical circumstances he found himself in: ironically, it might not be a universal position.

Thomas's 'only explicitly political poem,' according to John Ackerman, is 'The hand that signed the paper,' composed in August 1933.[32] The date is significant, as it might

---

[29] Thomas to M.J. Tambimuttu, Laugharne Castle, 9 June 1941, in *Collected Letters*, 550.
[30] Thomas, 'Poetic Manifesto,' in *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*, ed. Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1971), 160.
[31] Kendall, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, 2.
[32] Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, 91.

signal Thomas's apprehension at the possibility of a new war in the wake of the Nazi Party taking power in January of that year. The poem hints at the fallout from the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (which is often blamed for leading indirectly to the Second World War):[33]

> The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
> Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
> Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
> These five kings did a king to death.
>
> …
>
> The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
> And famine grew, and locusts came;
> Great is the hand that holds dominion over
> Man by a scribbled name.[34]

In these stanzas (the first and third of the poem), word and action are conflated: the signing of the Treaty is both signifier (the words themselves on the page) and signified (the historical act and process it inaugurates). The point of the poem is the gulf between the simple act of 'signing' and 'scribbling' and its consequences—the felling of a city, halving of a country, holding dominion over man. There is also the possibility, stretching the syntax of the poem, of reading 'Man by a scribbled name' as the object of 'dominion' (rather than that dominion is being held 'by a scribbled name'): this suggests the equivalence of word and reality, that 'Man' does not exist *but* as a scribbled name. With this power identified with 'signing' and 'scribbling,' the potential for writing to cause violence and destruction infects the act of writing the poem itself: the poem Thomas writes about the Treaty is equated to it, and in the same way, his own 'hand' in writing it 'holds dominion over' its subject.

---

[33] The Second World War was, as Gill Plain writes, 'anticipated, by some, as far back as the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919.' See *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 7.

[34] Thomas, 'The hand that signed the paper,' in *Collected Poems*, 36, 37.

The poem can be read as a dramatic retelling of the interwar years, filled with puns and metonyms that deliberately confuse body, army, and state. Elevating the status of fingers to kings conflates body and government, underlining the concept of a ruler as 'head' of the 'body politic.' The destruction that follows—the Exodus-like plague of 'fever,' 'famine' and 'locusts'—is expressed as a comment on the consequence of war, but these consequences are presented as a matter—perhaps first and foremost—of wordplay ('doubl[ing]' the dead and as a result 'halv[ing]' the country).[35] Language, and especially punning and wordplay, is itself implicated in the process of destruction. As Goodby notes there are subtle accusations suggested by Thomas's choice of imagery: 'The "hand" … may also be a more literal play on "arms"; letters of this period … blame arms manufacturers, among others, for having dragged the First World War out so bloodily.'[36] As Ralph Maud outlines, in 1934 Thomas wrote an article for *The Swansea and West Wales Guardian*, in which he asserts, 'Let it be realized for once and for all that war is a capitalist machine utilized for the benefit of the few by the blood and bone of the many.'[37] Maud, reading this article alongside 'The hand that signed the paper,' remarks:

> When Thomas in this poem came to make his small contribution to memorializing those who died in the war, he gave a nod to the pity of it, but reserved his main attention for those warmongers who would do it over again for profit. These he would have no pity for. The Poetry is in the bitterness.[38]

Maud's analysis of 'the pity of it' hearkens back to Owen's Preface and his claim that 'The Poetry is in the Pity,' substituting 'bitterness' for 'pity'. Despite Maud's claims, however, in 'The hand that signed the paper' there is a cold, even sardonic, commentary on the pitilessness of those in power, which is difficult to identify definitively as 'bitterness'

---

[35] See Exodus 10:1-12:36 (KJV).
[36] *Collected Poems*, 248.
[37] Ralph Maud, *Where Have the Old Words Got Me? Explications of Dylan Thomas's 'Collected Poems'* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 238-40.
[38] Ibid.

(bitterness would come, though, with the outbreak of the Second World War, and Thomas's personal experiences in the Blitz).

If all that matters in poetry is, as Thomas's 'Poetic Manifesto' asserts, 'the enjoyment of it,' there is an issue of voyeurism in this poem, and a question of how ethical it might be to derive gratification from 'The crusted wound' of war, or 'enjoyment' from the description of death and destruction.[39] There is also the broader sense that despite his best intentions, Thomas's poetry belies his attempt to remain free of political commentary. Far from remaining 'outside the dictated hates & pettinesses of War,' 'The hand that signed the paper' directly addresses them, emphasising how words enact violence. This also runs through several of his other 1930s poems. Posthumously appraising Thomas's work throughout the run-up to the Second World War, R. George Thomas avowed the importance of his first three collections:

> There was a nightmare quality in the drift towards Hitler's War which was echoed more closely in Thomas's non-political verse than in any of the Home Guard poems of C. Day Lewis or the twisted agonies of Spender's more personal verse.'[40]

The 'nightmare quality' that R. George Thomas perceives is certainly present in Thomas's poetry, and in particular 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles.'

This poem, composed in January/February 1939 and meandering across 25 lines in a single stanza, opens with the image of animals being blinded, done in the belief that caged songbirds 'sing sweeter' as a result:[41]

> Because the pleasure-bird whistles after the hot wires,
> Shall the blind horse sing sweeter?
> …
> Shall I, struck on the hot and rocking street,
> Not spin to stare at an old year

[39] Thomas, 'The hand that signed the paper,' in *Collected Poems*, 37.
[40] R. George Thomas, 'Dylan Thomas and Some Early Readers,' *Poetry Wales: Dylan Thomas Special Issue* 9.2 (Autumn 1973): 4, 11-12.
[41] Thomas to Desmond Hawkins, Laugharne, 14 August 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 448. See also Goodby, 349; and Maud, 66.

> Toppling and burning in the muddle of towers and galleries
> Like the mauled pictures of boys?[42]

This is in part inspired by a dream Thomas once had, in which 'a horse stood in a cage made of wires which gradually became red-hot, on which a man standing by said, "He sings better now".'[43] The meta-poetic questions posed here (and left unanswered) are whether poets too sing better when exposed to pain and suffering, and whether the poet 'shall' take destruction as his theme and topic. The image of a toppling tower is then striking for its various connotations of the Tower of Babel, the Ivory Tower of the intelligentsia, Yeats's Tower, and Robert Browning's Dark Tower in 'Childe Roland;' moreover, the 'galleries' that Thomas pairs with 'towers' indicate that Thomas is preoccupied with visual art and representations of war. The destruction that Thomas is presenting here is as much a destruction of artistic representations as it is of the material world. It is the pictures of boys, rather than the boys themselves, that are 'mauled;' it is artistic and intellectual ambition (or hubris) that is brought low.

Thomas's own explanation of the poem is contained in a letter to Desmond Hawkins in August 1939: 'the poem has a figure in it standing suffering on the tip of the new year and refusing, blindly, to look back at, if you like, the *lessons* of the past year to help him; and the case, which is really a case for a prayer, begins to make itself clear.'[44] The last four lines of the poem reveal what 'the case' is:

> If the dead starve, their stomachs turn to tumble
> An upright man in the antipodes
> Or spray-based and rock-chested sea:
> Over the past table I repeat this present grace.[45]

---

[42] Thomas, 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles,' in *Collected Poems*, 108.
[43] *Collected Poems*, 350.
[44] Thomas to Desmond Hawkins, Laugharne, 14 August 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 448. Emphasis in the original.
[45] Thomas, 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles,' in *Collected Poems*, 108.

Goodby reads these lines as being the poet's sense of obligation to recognise the fallen: 'if the dead of 1938 and their "blasted place[s]" are not fed some "fable" of recognition, their hunger will overthrow the "upright" people.'[46] These closing lines suggest more than the inhabitancy of ghosts, however—the final 'grace' is the poet praying and remembering what has gone before. Rather than being blind to the troubles of his time, Thomas utters a grace, thankful for the bloody feast that history is serving up, or his deliverance from it, or his ability to turn it into 'fable:' offering a prayer of 'thanks' does once more suggest the (guilty) sense that poets might actually sing more sweetly the greater the violence and destruction.

The pathos of this poem is subtly different from 'The hand that signed the paper,' gesturing towards Thomas's own involvement, as he finishes not with an analytic description of the way in which power is exerted through the apparently simple act of signing a paper, but with a different form of linguistic act: grace being said for the 'past table.' Like Auden, Thomas incorporates the language of supplication and prayer; unlike Auden, Thomas is—however ambiguously—giving 'thanks'. If the act of 'prayer' raises the question of the relationship between public mediums and private messages, this is complicated by Thomas's sense that public suffering might, with however many caveats, be a boon for the individual poet.

The exploration of different attitudes to memory and the past in 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles,' concluding with opening ground for the dead to appear, all point towards Thomas's growing preoccupation with how to write about grief, loss, death, and suffering. Thomas's concerns about oncoming suffering and death were profound in the

[46] *Collected Poems*, 350.

months preceding the impending war. So much is apparent from 'When I Woke,' written between June and September 1939:

> I heard, this morning, waking,
> Crossly out of the town noises
> A voice in the erected air,
> No prophet-progeny of mine,
> Cry my sea town was breaking.
> No Time, spoke the clocks, no God, rang the bells,
> I drew the white sheet over the islands
> And the coins on my eyelids sang like shells.[47]

The first line of this stanza (the first of two) anticipates a line he would write in 1941, 'When the morning was waking over the war'—the opening of 'Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred.'[48] The doubleness within the noun 'mo[u]rning' was evidently a powerful one for Thomas, who was drawn to the disparity between dawn, with its connotations of new life and hope, and death. This disparity is encapsulated by the voice heralding the doom of Laugharne, the small village in Carmarthenshire where Thomas was living in his Boat House, and which forms the basis for the 'sea town' he sees as 'breaking:' the 'voice in the erected air' in the poem is the wireless bulletin, announcing the declaration of war.[49] Laugharne appears ready for him to draw 'the white sheet over' it, and then lay himself to rest as the ancient Romans did, with coins on their eyes to pay Charon (or indeed, Thomas is simply pulling the sheet over his head and going back to sleep).

This response hovers between the portentous and the mock-portentous. It does, however, bespeak a consistent attempt on Thomas's part to avoid participation in the war. Just a few months later, Thomas would write to Vernon Watkins about his Christmas wish:

---

[47] Thomas, 'When I Woke,' in *Collected Poems*, 113.
[48] Thomas, 'Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred,' in *Collected Poems*, 140.
[49] See *Collected Poems*, 355.

> What do I want for Christmas? Oh, that's nice. I want a war-escaper—a sort of ladder, I think, attached to a balloon,—or a portable ivory tower or a new plush womb to escape back into.[50]

Thomas certainly did try to 'escape' physical involvement in the conflict. He attempted every means of avoiding military service: in the early months of the war, he ventured to conscientiously object on a 'political excuse,' but received a negative response to this 'unheroic' approach.[51] Then, he allegedly appeared drunk at the medical examinations for conscription so as to ensure failure: as Goodby writes, 'Whether he avoided military service by guile or incapacity has never been established.'[52]

However, it was not just the threat of military service from which Thomas needed 'escape.' With the war came unemployment, and further impoverishment. He spent most of late 1938, 1939 and early 1940 in a state of extreme debt and dependence on generous friends; the failure of *The Map of Love* on publication in late 1939 only exacerbated Thomas's financial straits.[53] A compromise was necessary. By early 1940 Thomas was desperate for money, and wrote to Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the Film Division at the Ministry of Information, asking for an exemption for military service, and failing that, a job that would exempt him.[54] Neither was successful, but eventually, in 1941, Thomas was employed by Strand Films to write propagandist scripts for the war effort.

Thomas's job with Strand Films was his first stable income for eight years.[55] It was evidently not a job he relished, as a letter to John Sommerfield from 1942 suggests:

> I'm still helping to produce those things that Beachcomber calls the series of priggish, facetious shorts extolling the virtues of sad girls in unfitting

---

[50] Thomas to Vernon Watkins, Laugharne, 13 December 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 494.
[51] Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography—New Edition* (London: J.M. Dent, 1999), 171.
[52] *Collected Letters*, 512n2.
[53] See Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 302; and Thomas to Laurence Pollinger, Hampshire, 10 January 1940, in *Collected Letters* 496, and 496n1.
[54] See Thomas to Kenneth Clark, Laugharne, 25 March 1940, in *Collected Letters*, 507.
[55] Ferris, *The Biography*, 180.

> uniforms and the vices of happy thinking, moving, and x-ing – the word I must use.[56]

Despite Thomas's distaste for 'the film-writing racket,' his filmscripts are carefully crafted narratives.[57] These ranged from documentaries on Welsh productivity during the war, in *Wales—Green Mountain, Black Mountain*, to anti-Nazi condemnations in *These Are The Men*, a rallying call-to-arms in *The Unconquerable People*, a progressive defence of the arts in *CEMA* (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts), and the recruitment of the Women's Air Auxiliary Force in *Balloon Site 568* (the object of Thomas's glib dismissal in the letter to Sommerfield above).

Living in London—before and while he was working from Strand Films—Thomas witnessed the first air raids on London. In a letter to Vernon Watkins he describes the Blitz attacks of September 1940:

> This is all too near … The Hyde Park guns were booming. Guns on the top of Selfridges. A 'plane brought down in Tottenham Court Road. White-faced taxis still trembling through the streets, though, & buses going, & even people being shaved. Are you frightened these nights?[58]

Five months later, in February 1941, Swansea suffered its worst Blitz raids over three nights, killing two hundred and thirty and levelling the High Street. Again Thomas witnessed the raid and lamented to his friend Bert Trick, 'Our Swansea has died.'[59] The worry this must have caused Thomas was translated into his 1942 filmscript *Wales—Green Mountain, Black Mountain*. The film was produced 'to evoke the unity and harmony of Wales at war: a necessary part of its wartime role and contribution.'[60] It is direct about its wartime concerns: in one of the earliest scenes an elderly woman is shown laying flowers at a First World War memorial while the voiceover announces—akin to the

---

[56] Thomas to John Sommerfield, London, 6 January 1942, in *Collected Letters*, 557.
[57] Thomas to A.E. Trick, Laugharne, 29 September 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 471.
[58] Thomas to Vernon Watkins, Wiltshire, early September 1940, in *Collected Letters*, 524.
[59] Ferris, *The Biography*, 190-91.
[60] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 26.

opening line of 'When I Woke'—'Morning is breaking over Wales at war … the terrible near war … against the men who would murder man.'[61]

The filmscript also draws from Thomas's earlier poems, such as his 1933 verse, 'We who were young are old':

> 'We who were young are old. It is the oldest cry.[']
> …
> The living dead left over from the war,
> The living after, the filled with fear.[62]

This poem, in Goodby's words, evinces an 'intensified mood of civilisational decline,' and pre-empts the social struggles later intensified by the Second World War.[63] In *Wales—Green Mountain, Black Mountain* Thomas again highlights 'the old-young men' and the economic depression they suffered:

> Remember the procession of the old-young men
> From dole queue to corner and back again
> …
> Dragging through the squalor with their hearts like lead
> Staring at the hunger and the shut pit-head
> …
> It shall never happen again.[64]

These lines provocatively indicate Thomas's consistent anxieties from the early 1930s through to the early 1940s concerning the quality of life, and the neglect of rural and industrial economies (despite his insistence that his only concern is himself). They also suggest his sensitivity to the consequence of war on his community. The filmscript continues, 'It must not happen again … The world shall never deny them again … War shall never happen again.'[65] Ferris is right to identify here 'an Auden-like ring,' a register Thomas employs for its polemic force.[66] In particular he seems to be borrowing from the

---

[61] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 26.
[62] Thomas, 'We who were young are old,' in *Collected Poems*, 17.
[63] Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 238.
[64] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 31.
[65] Ibid, 31.
[66] Ferris, *The Biography*, 183.

repeated imperatives of 'September 1, 1939': 'The lights must never go out,' 'We must suffer them all again,' 'We must love one another or die.'[67]

Film writing inevitably made Thomas more directly responsive to and outspoken about his social and political environment, particularly with scripts such as *These are the Men* (1943), a virulent anti-Nazi narrative denouncing the primary leaders of the Third Reich, and *The Unconquerable People* (1944), a script written before the end of the war which Thomas hoped would be screened 'after all the chief countries of resistance have been freed.'[68] The imagery of *The Unconquerable People* would have been particularly resonant for a British public in wartime, fearing imminent invasion:

> Like a disease on fire
> the Germans spread over the land
> …
> We who were free
> were prisoners then in our own country
> branded and bound in a cage of misery
> manacled in a sullen house of hate.[69]

While Thomas is making a comment on a British populace suffering air raids, this passage is the more striking for using the imagery of concentration camps. For Thomas's filmscript, it is unclear if his imagery of 'a cage of misery,' and prisoners 'manacled in a sullen house of hate,' necessarily implies that the British public were undergoing an attack comparable to the genocide enacted on the Jewish people. This is partly because—though British newspapers had been reporting on 'detention camps' since they were established in the 1930s, and accounts of mass executions were published at least as early as 1943—there was still considerable doubt that such a genocide was taking place.[70]

---

[67] W.H. Auden, 'Spain,' and 'September 1, 1939,' in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1977), 212, and 246.
[68] Thomas to Donald Taylor, Cardiganshire, 4 September 1944, in *Collected Letters*, 583.
[69] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 56.
[70] See Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London; Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), 196-97.

Newspapers recorded important deaths in detention camps—or misreported deaths, such as that of Fritz Thyssen—as well as inhuman tests performed on inmates.[71] But, as Adam Piette demonstrates, the public awareness of the Final Solution was mitigated by a 'deeply compromised need to "see through" propaganda.'[72] Though Thomas is comparing the British public under fire to the internment of Jewish people in concentration camps, it likely did not hold the same kind of implication then as it would for modern readers now.

Demonstrating his sympathy for civilian suffering, in early 1940 Thomas wrote to James Laughlin, 'I am disappointed that I cannot object, because the Germans are not my enemies, I do not want to die or kill, freedom's only a word and I'm a thinking body.'[73] There is a shift here from the body as 'adventure and my name' to a 'thinking body:' his conception of the body is not as concerned now with identity, but survival. By the time he came to write *These are the Men* three years later, his feelings about 'enemies' had evidently altered (and, perhaps, been magnified by the propagandist task at hand), to a much more aggressive attitude, at least towards the German high command: 'for those [Nazi leaders] … never, never, never shall there be pardon or pity: no hope of a new birth. They shall be put down: Forever.'[74]

The relationship between Thomas's film-writing, his witnessing of the air-raids, and his poetry, is complicated. Thomas's poetry appears to have been invigorated by the danger of the air-raids. In Goodby's words, 'it is no coincidence that the two wartime periods in which he wrote poems, 1939-41 and 1944-5, coincided almost exactly with the Blitz and the "Little Blitz" of the V-weapons—the two periods of greatest civilian

[71] 'Thyssen's Death In Prison Camp,' *Times*, 21 April 1941, 3. See also 'Tortured Poles,' *Times*, 11 June 1941, 3; and 'Prisoners Used In Gas Tests,' *Times*, 16 December 1943, 3.
[72] Piette, *Imagination at War*, 197.
[73] Thomas to James Laughlin, Laugharne, 15 April 1940, in *Collected Letters*, 510.
[74] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 44.

suffering.'[75] Such a causal link is something that Thomas himself would deny, however. Writing in 1945 Thomas argued that:

> War can't produce poetry, only poets can, and war can't produce poets either … A poet writing a poem is at peace with everything except words, which are eternal actions; only in the lulls between the warring work on words can he be at war with men. Poets can stop bullets, but bullets can't stop poets. What is a poet anyway? … When he is fighting he is not a poet … I think capital-lettered War can only in subject matter affect poetry. Violence and suffering are all the time, & it does not matter how you are brought up against them.[76]

For Thomas, 'war' is only a backdrop and not a threat to the poet: the poet's necessary business is the 'war with words,' and every other consideration is secondary. He also appears to be responding to Yeats's Preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. It is not that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry,' but that 'suffering' is not limited to the context of warfare, but is universal: 'violence and suffering are all the time.' Here, war does not produce or inspire poetry, but only offers itself as 'subject matter' (it is the 'war with words' that inspires poetry). This apparently presents an answer to the question posed 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles;' suffering is not the cause of 'sweeter singing,' but it might be the subject of it. The importance of such a distinction is removing primacy and authority from 'capital-lettered War,' and placing it on the poet (incidentally, it is important to note that Thomas's claim that 'When [a poet] is fighting he is not a poet' suggests—aside from the intrinsic sexism—that he rejects the idea that there can be such a thing as a 'soldier-poet').

Nevertheless as Robert Hewison writes, 'the war seems to have made Thomas feel the need to make a more public statement.'[77] This is perhaps related to the sense of involvement and 'duty' that came from his work on filmscripts: in Ralph Maud's words,

---

[75] Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 307-08.
[76] Thomas to Oscar Williams, London, 30 July 1945, in *Collected Letters*, 625-56.
[77] Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 109.

Thomas's writing of the destruction of war was 'a duty, as though he had been appointed the poet laureate of the Blitz.'[78] His most public poetic statement—the closest he comes to being the 'laureate of the Blitz'—is 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,' composed in late October/November 1944. This anti-elegy, composed of four free verse sestets, is written in the voice of someone who reflects on mourning as 'the shadow of a sound,' 'blasphem[ing],' and fixates on the child's death, naming her 'London's daughter:' the poem refers to her passing as 'The majesty and burning of the child's death,' and refuses to offer an 'Elegy of innocence and youth.'[79] Though it labours through a heavily syntactical opening sentence, isolating the subjects and objects of the first stanza allows a clearer narrative to emerge:

> Never until
> …
> all humbling darkness
> Tells with silence the last light breaking
>
> …
>
> Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
> …
> to mourn
>
> The majesty and burning of the child's death.[80]

Thomas suggests that it is only with 'the last light breaking' he will attempt to write an elegy. The ambiguity of this image lies within the gerund 'breaking:' it is not possible to determine if the light is breaking as dawn (possibly as the 'last light' on the last day), or if the light is breaking down (even the 'last' of the light). Since the darkness is also 'mankind making,' 'Bird beast and flower / Fathering' and 'all humbling,' there is a sense also that darkness is the destruction which creates. The 'silence' accompanying it is similarly

[78] Maud, 41.
[79] Thomas, 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,' in *Collected Poems*, 172-73.
[80] Ibid, 172.

ambiguous, as it may be the silence following total destruction of life, or the silence of shock, or relief that the destruction is over.

In the poem's second sentence, Thomas levels a serious accusation against poetry, that it might rely upon or enact an abuse of the dead:

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
> With any further
> Elegy of innocence and youth.[81]

The act of elegising is associated with 'murder' and 'blasphemy' here: it is seen as a process of appropriating another's death for a writer's gain. William Empson first highlighted how this poem plays on Thomas's guilt 'at having written propaganda films during the war years:' and there is certainly self-accusation in these lines, which emphasise their own culpability in failing to meet their only aim, as well as the underlying sense of the writer's complicity.[82]

The poem might enact the process of atoning for this guilt—the 'stations of the breath' hint at the Christian stations of the cross as well as the underground stations used as bomb shelters—but this depends on how one reads its end. Despite the poem's self-accusations, the final image of the child 'Robed in the long friends' seems to aestheticise death, particularly with the unfeeling, vitally life-like river, the 'unmourning water / Of the riding Thames,' carrying on regardless of the inexpressible death of 'London's daughter.'[83] The personified river confuses the separation of human from nature and life from death, a confusion which is exacerbated by the final line of the poem: 'After the first

[81] 'A Refusal to Mourn,' in *Collected Poems*, 172.
[82] Quoted in Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 393.
[83] 'A Refusal to Mourn,' in *Collected Poems*, 173.

death, there is no other.' Goodby acknowledges the equivocation of this final assertion, which 'sounds consolatory, but is highly ambiguous':[84]

> It seems to assert that a form of eternal life begins with death, but calculatedly denies the 'second death' the Bible promises at the Last Judgment and may even be understood to mean that utter extinction is all that awaits us.[85]

While there is certainly an important Christian element within the poem—as suggested by the 'stations of the breath'—the final line seems to hint more at the way grief functions, or *does not* function. In Louis MacNeice's words, 'Nostalgia … has desolated me.'[86] Death, extinction, and the (im)possibility of an afterlife were daily concerns under the fire of the Blitz, but asserting that there is only a 'first' death suggests that one can only truly 'mourn' one death, after which mourning becomes a reiteration, an echo of what has gone before. The final word in a poem that refuses to elegise 'London's daughter' asserts that it is not a true elegy. His objection to war is realised in a declared refusal to aestheticize it, even while ambiguously suggesting that the process of aestheticizing it is one that leads to guilt, and the realisation of one's own destruction. In keeping with his later comments on war only existing as 'subject-matter', rather than as the cause or impetus for the poet, Thomas here—in his most 'public', mannered and apparently official response to the war, subverts itself, calls the very notion of a 'war poem' or 'war elegy' into question.

'I sang in my chains like the sea': Commemorating war

As we have seen, Thomas argued against 'war' being the cause or producer of poetry: 'War can't produce poetry, only poets can'. However, as we have also seen, Thomas believed that his poetry relied upon the juxtaposition and dynamic

---

[84] *Collected Poems*, 393.
[85] *Collected Poems*, 393.
[86] MacNeice, 'Troll's Courtship,' in *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007), 220.

interrelationship of 'creation' and 'destruction:' 'my dialectical method … is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.'[87] It would be fair to accept Thomas at his own word: he, and his poetry, were not 'produced' by the war; he is not a 'war poet' in that sense. Rather, he was a poet whose method was belief in the 'constant building up and breaking down of the images' was particularly well suited to writing poetry in a world at war, of deriving acts of creation from a context of destruction. He was a poet of dialectical conflict, whose method, obsessions and preoccupations—with destruction and creation, death and birth—offered an apt framework to discuss the *Deaths and Entrances* (to borrow the title of Thomas's wartime collection) of war.

Thomas's 'dialectical method' is reflected in a handful of works from *Deaths and Entrances*. Flames and fire—emblems of creation and destruction—are peppered throughout the collection, in images such as 'the slum of fire,' and 'fire-dwarfed / Street' in 'Ceremony After A Fire Raid,' which re-emerges in the 'fires of … flying breath' in 'Deaths and Entrances,' and again in 'Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred,' where 'the craters of [his] eyes grew springshoots and fire.'[88] Where 'Ceremony After A Fire Raid,' describes the 'Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left,' bemoaning the death of possible life, 'Holy Spring' describes 'the husk of man's home,' hinting instead at the desolation facing those who are already alive.[89] These poems present fire as simultaneously death- and life-giving. In 'Holy Spring,' similarly, fire acts as a symbolic image of the sun's light: 'My arising prodigal / Sun the father his quiver full of the infants of pure fire.'[90] The 'pure fire' of sun and sunlight carries with it imagery of

[87] Thomas to Henry Treece, Hampshire, 23 March 1938, in *Collected Letters*, 328.
[88] *Collected Poems*, 144, 143, 122, 140.
[89] *Collected Poems*, 143, 165.
[90] Thomas, 'Holy Spring,' in *Collected Poems*, 165.

life and hope, but is immediately juxtaposed with the desolate pyre, and the funeral rites following wartime conflict.

Although this emphasis on fire is reflective of Thomas's method, it is also a common feature of other poetry (and prose) of the London Blitz. As the previous chapter demonstrated, some witnesses found the air raids, and the destruction they caused, 'enlivening:' 'there was a voice inside me which … kept saying … "Let her go up!" or "Let her come down. Let them all go. Write them all off."'[91] So it was also for the artist Clem, in James Hanley's *No Directions* (1943):

> Now what you felt, you couldn't even think, mind's doors closed up. It was what you saw. He stared entranced at the blazing sky. All that light, a sea, an ocean of light, from what vast reservoir had it flooded up, this drenching light, blazing red, and suddenly to his left a falling green, cataracts of light, red, and yellow and green, this riot of colour shouted at you.
>
> 'God!' he said, 'it's magnificent, it's——'[92] (135)

The final em dash of his speech, signalling the lack of a word to describe his vision—the trope of *impossibilia* used here in prose—is a telling and poignant *lack* of description. What is striking about MacNeice's and Hanley's accounts of the fires of London is the focus on the feeling of exhilaration and wonder in the midst of destruction, and a marked lack of interest in or discussion of the Luftwaffe conducting the raids. As Adam Piette writes, the Blitz is 'translated into solitary politics and aesthetics, as though the enemy did not exist:' 'The apocalypse falls from the empty sky into the waiting imagination, which claims it for its own.'[93]

Deaths and Entrances neatly exemplifies Piette's assertion. Thomas is less concerned with the actual 'enemy' causing the destruction, and much more concerned with the cycle of reincarnation explored in his earlier work—and which is, in his own

---

[91] MacNeice, 'The Morning after the Blitz,' in *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 118.
[92] James Hanley, *No Directions* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990), 135.
[93] Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995), 46.

words, 'all I ever write about or want to write about.'[94] The title is an allusion to John Donne's sermon 'Death's Duell,' in which Donne proclaims, 'our very birth and entrance into this life is *exitus à morte*, an issue from death,' and 'this *exitus à morte* is but *introitus in mortem*; this issue, this deliverance, from that death … is an entrance.'[95] Thomas shared Donne's idea of life and death as intrinsically linked in an eternal dialectic, and it dominates his poetic responses to the Second World War.

The title poem of *Deaths and Entrances*, composed in summer 1940, was finished as Thomas witnessed the first raids of the Blitz. The poem contains complex interweaving end-rhymes that do not follow a pattern, but each of the three stanzas are composed of 12 lines, each beginning, 'On almost the incendiary eve.'[96] This repeated line indicates the narrative focuses not on the air raids themselves but the previous night, the calm before the onslaught. The narration of the poem is incantatory, and warns of 'many married London's estranging grief,' and the 'One enemy' who 'Will pull the thunderbolts / To shut the sun.'[97] Despite using a prophetic tone, it does not claim prophetic vision—the narrative voice has the benefit of speaking with the knowledge of what has happened between 'almost the incendiary eve' and the unknown future from which it looks back. Yet, the 'almost' in the opening line that qualifies Thomas's description adds uncertainty and distance. This is not an elegy, as no death has yet occurred. In fact, 'Deaths and Entrances' seems to provide an alternative to the commemorative anti-elegy of 'A Refusal to Mourn.' It begins with 'several near deaths' and ends not with death but with the 'near and strange wounded:'

---

[94] Quoted in Gwen Watkins, *Portrait of a Friend* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2005), 74, 92.
[95] John Donne, 'Death's Duell; or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body' (London, 1633), 4, 6, *Early English Books Online*, <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:25485>
[96] Thomas, 'Deaths and Entrances,' in *Collected Poems*, 122-23.
[97] Ibid.

On almost the incendiary eve
  Of deaths and entrances,
When near and strange wounded on London's waves
  Have sought your single grave,
One enemy of many, who knows well
  Your heart is luminous
In the watched dark, quivering through locks and caves,
  Will pull the thunderbolts
To shut the sun, plunge, mount your darkened keys
  And sear just riders back,
  Until that one loved least
Looms the last Samson of your zodiac.[98]

Over the course of the poem, the destruction waged upon people moves from premonition to reality. Both Goodby and Maud read this stanza as the speaker addressing himself, but the pointedness of 'your single grave,' 'your darkened keys,' 'your zodiac,' means it is inevitably also addressed to the reader. This is not to say the speaker and the reader cannot both be affected by the destruction to come, but the poem leans towards presentiment, not self-reflexivity: the trajectory of the poem is towards the end or death of everything. The first two stanzas foretell the deaths of 'immortal friends' and the last stanza warns of an unknown 'One enemy;' it predicts the enemy's 'thunderbolts' will 'sear just riders back' after it has 'shut the sun'—an ominous image of mass destruction. Despite its title, the poem does not conclude with the continuation of life and death; it ultimately predicts only the end of life.

The premonitions and auguries of 'Deaths and Entrances' speak to an uncertainty about the future: understanding in the poem is, as the final line suggests, a 'zodiac,' reliant on the divination of celestial objects (rather, perhaps, than on the observation of actual enemy planes). With a pervasive sense of precariousness and the importance of chance, there is no solution but to turn to prognostication. This is emphasised by the confused chronology of the poem: the scene is set in the past, but the poet speaks in the present,

[98] 'Deaths and Entrances,' in *Collected Poems*, 123.

conditional, and future tenses; the boundary between what has happened, and what the speaker predicts will happen, is blurred.

As a useful comparison, many prose accounts of the Blitz also describe a feeling of fragmentation or employ a confused chronology. In William Sansom's 'Fireman Flower' (1944), for example, the eponymous character enters a burning building, and a seemingly magical reality in which he sees a mirror showing 'the ghost of himself,' wherein 'the reflection of his past masqueraded as the darkling ghost of the future.'[99] He then comes across an 'old friend' in a plush room, who seems oblivious to the fire: Flower then notices his own 'mother's fawn sewing bag,' while his friend recounts 'the story of a picnic they had enjoyed on a yellow summer's afternoon long ago.'[100] Flower sinks into an armchair and muses:

> A sense of security lay about these pictures of the past, for there was no doubt about what *had* happened, there was no chance. The past was more real than the present because the picture was clearly defined. It was secure, rounded off, a complete picture that was finished and which he knew nothing could now alter: nothing like the unstable present, which one could hardly understand at all.[101]

Sansom here echoes a poetic tendency towards nostalgia, a yearning for the past because it was 'more real.' (We remember Cyril Connolly decrying the public's desire in the wake of a new war for Rupert Brooke-style poems, which were 'generally nostalgic or amorous': 'They want real war poets and a roll of honour.')[102] In Thomas's poetry, however, the security that comes from the past is tempered by his reminder of what is to come: the title poem of *Deaths and Entrances* concludes its backwards glance by settling on 'the last Samson' looming ahead.

---

[99] William Sansom, 'Fireman Flower,' in *Fireman Flower and Other Stories* (London: Hogarth Press, 1944), 146.
[100] Sansom, 148-49.
[101] Sansom, 149. Emphasis in the original.
[102] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon,* January 1941, 5.

Deaths and Entrances as a whole can itself be seen to present a confused chronology, an 'unstable present, which one could hardly understand at all.' Across the collection, neither dates of composition nor historical events are followed in order. The effect of such deliberate confusion is a clever analogy for the experience of living through war, when—as MacNeice writes—'Our past we know / But not its meaning.'[103] For instance, 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' written in May 1944, was completed before 'A Refusal to Mourn,' but by being placed later in *Deaths and Entrances*, it is read in the light of the other poem. What this means is the reader of the collection encounters the aftermath of air-raids—replete with pathos—before re-experiencing the Blitz through the retrospective glance of 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid.' The result is a sense of déjà vu as the war is remembered in choppy, fragmented and repeated images.

Although both poems focus on the body of a dead child, where 'A Refusal to Mourn' comments on the futility of elegy, 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' instead presents a homily on the child's death. Over its three sections, the poem presents the movement from grief to hope in the aftermath of a Blitz attack. In part I, the survivors attempt to justify the child's death; part II contains a retelling of the Adam and Eve story, which operates as a metaphor for sacrifice and the Fall, in the context of the war; part III tries to merge the two previous narratives and focuses on the destruction of the air raids as a—paradoxically—cathartic opportunity for regrowth. Maud reads it as 'a new Mass for the Dead,' and Ackerman similarly maintains that Thomas had by this time 'become a preacher in verse.'[104] Thomas encouraged such an interpretation: 'It really is a Ceremony.'[105] The nature of that 'ceremony', however, is ambiguous.

---

[103] MacNeice, 'Carrick Revisited,' in *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems*, 262.
[104] Maud, 69; Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion*, 106.
[105] Thomas to Vernon Watkins, Carmarthen, 27 July 1944, in *Collected Letters*, 580.

Unlike 'A Refusal to Mourn,' which only describes the dead child in symbolic terms ('Robed in the long friends'), 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' fixates on the horror of a child's lifeless body—dehumanised into an 'it'—and the unforgiving harshness of both its body and the street being 'burned,' as well as the 'charred' mouth, while 'it' still remains on fire:

> Myselves
> The grievers
> Grieve
> Among the street burned to tireless death
> A child of a few hours
> With its kneading mouth
> Charred on the black breast of the grave
> The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.[106]

With the uncomfortable pun on 'dug,' following the 'black breast of the grave,' Thomas turns the mother's body into a grotesque, uncanny reality, transmuted into both the street and the grave. Considering Thomas's first two children were born in 1939 and 1943, and both survived Blitz raids on London, there is more than a hint of Thomas's paternal anxiety in the elegy on the child in 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid.' This makes his refusal to cushion and aestheticize the death even more remarkable. If this is a 'ceremony' or ritual, then it is one that develops its own ceremonial structures, its own poetic syntax, typified by this, the first stanza. Goodby notes a 'grammatical distortion' in the first four lines, which contain manifold possible interpretations: '*a* the poet is speaking for all the grievers … *b* "myself" and "street" stand for all "grievers" and streets affected … *c* the nature of the self is multiple, not singular, and its splits are exacerbated by grief and loss.'[107] The greater import from Thomas's opening lines is a purposeful suspension of clarity: it is not until the fifth line that the reader understands 'Myselves' is not the only object of the grieving. Once the 'child of a few hours' is introduced, the reader has to go

[106] Thomas, 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' in *Collected Poems*, 142.
[107] *Collected Poems*, 381.

back to the beginning and re-evaluate. By pluralising the speaking voice, Thomas allows for readings that are both the speaker's own personal response, and the speaker expressing a collective response: this is one (albeit arduous) method of avoiding the issue of mouth/mouthpiece over which both Auden and MacNeice laboured.

Pluralising the speaking voice also exaggerates the isolation and individuality of the dead child. Throughout the poem there is a consistent refusal to lionise or gloss over the blunt fact of death. Even the tentatively consoling final line of part I—'Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left'—is tainted with the mark of death in the 'black husk left.' Further, the manuscript version of the poem opens part II with the journalistic title, 'Among those Burned to Death Was a Child Aged A Few Hours.'[108] This register worked to off-set the emotionally-fuelled content, while still portraying the facts of the destruction. By considering it as the title for 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' a poem that does not flinch away from the intimately unsettling details of death and wreckage, Thomas is also offering a strongly sardonic retort to any attempt at neutralising war, to any attempt that turns war into a political or discursive phenomenon.

'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' ends with the speaking voice overseeing the wreckage left after the raid: 'the weathercocks' molten mouths,' 'the sun's hovel and the slum of fire,' 'the golden pavements laid in requiems.'[109] Where part II relays the 'legend' of the Garden of Eden—'Beginning crumbled back to darkness / Bare as the nurseries / Of the garden of wilderness'—part III reimagines the barren Garden of Eden as the waste land of London.[110] Thomas endeavours to end the poem on a hopeful note—in his own

[108] See *Collected Poems*, 381.
[109] Thomas, 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' in *Collected Poems*, 144.
[110] Ibid.

words, 'the third part of the poem is the music at the end [of the ceremony]'—and concludes with the graveyard-like sea heralding a new beginning:[111]

> The masses of the infant-bearing sea
> Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever
> Glory glory glory
> The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.[112]

This concluding sentiment points towards a hope that the widespread devastation will eventually lead to the 'genesis' of new generations, guided by the transcendental 'glory' of religious faith. Yet, the 'sundering' of the new 'kingdom of genesis' thunder' does not hint at a fresh beginning, but a continuation of destruction. Far from a 'genesis,' this reads as an apocalypse. Paul Ferris is similarly sceptical of a hopeful conclusion to the poem: 'Whether Thomas was … mak[ing] a "religious" statement, or whether the religious symbols and associations were there because of the convenient emotional charge they contain, is open to argument.'[113] The gerund in the final line hints at a continuing hurt and separation: Thomas's closing words equally emphasise grief and hope in the wake of destruction.

James Keery reads a different register into 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' which, he maintains, 'culminates in a crushing dismissal of its oratorical pseudo-question: "I know not whether / Adam or Eve … / Was the first to die."'[114] Steve Vine, however, measures the theories of mourning within *Deaths and Entrances*, and concludes that 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' 'has less to do with poetic signification than *performance*, less to do with poetic meaning than *event.*'[115] Vine asserts that it is the linguistic 'event' of the poem

---

[111] Thomas to Vernon Watkins, Carmarthen, 27 July 1944, in *Collected Letters*, 580.
[112] 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' in *Collected Poems*, 145.
[113] Ferris, *The Biography*, 193.
[114] James Keery, '*The Burning Baby* and the bathwater,' *PN Review* 33:1 (September/October 2006): 58.
[115] Vine, '"Shot from the locks": Poetry, Mourning, *Deaths and Entrances*,' in *Dylan Thomas: New Casebooks—Contemporary Critical Essays*, eds. John Goodby and Christ Wigginton (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 155. Emphasis in the original.

which overrides its poetic content, and the meaning of its various signifiers and signifieds, arguing that, 'Without meaning, without mourning and without elegy, then, "Ceremony" ends in a groundless affirmation of poetic performativity.'[116] In other words, in 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' it is the performance of the ceremony that carries the meaning, not necessarily the words themselves.

'Holy Spring,' meanwhile, imagines the world after the destruction evident in 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid,' and signals a return to Thomas's private nightmares, rather than a 'performed,' public mourning. Written in November 1944, it is a redraft of one of his earlier compositions from 1933: as Maud points out, the first stanza is taken verbatim from 'Out of a War of Wits.'[117] It is no coincidence that this stanza was originally composed following the Nazi Party assuming power, and repurposed as they began firing V2s—the first long-range guided unmanned ballistic missiles—on London. The same sense of helplessness prevails in both historical moments, and the composition history of this poem coincidentally reflects how 'the war,' for many people, really began in 1933.

'Holy Spring' tells of a speaker rising from bed after a night of passion—which 'soothe[d] / The cureless counted body'—and waking to a post-apocalyptic world, where the speaker is 'struck as lonely as a holy maker by the sun.'[118] His loneliness suggests that he is one of the few to survive the 'god stoning night' and the present-tense verbs all hint at an ongoing nightmare: it is not something that is in the past. The opening stanza reads as an attempt to assert survival, a written act of testament to endurance. The second (and last) stanza offers an insight into the aftermath of the war:

Out of the woebegone pyre
And the multitude's sultry tear turns cool on the weeping wall,
My arising prodigal
Sun the father his quiver full of the infants of pure fire,

[116] Vine, 155.
[117] Maud, 112.
[118] Thomas, 'Holy Spring,' in *Collected Poems*, 165.

But blessed be hail and upheaval
That uncalm still it is sure alone to stand and sing
Alone in the husk of man's home
And the mother and toppling house of the holy spring,
If only for a last time.[119]

The images of 'infants of pure fire,' 'the husk of man's home,' 'the woebegone pyre' all refer back to the dead in 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' and 'A Refusal to Mourn,' but 'Holy Spring' offers a revival of the words in new contexts, with new hope. Thomas's punning line break on 'prodigal / Sun' suggests the optimism of a wrong righted, as well as the light, and hope, of a new day. Nevertheless, he does not gloss over the 'uncalm still,' and the poet 'Alone' in a 'toppling house.' These balances of dark and light insist that despair and grief, enthusiasm and faith, are kept in check by opposition to each other.

It is in the midst of such juxtapositions that Thomas again figures himself within the poem, where he is 'sure alone to stand and sing.' Maud reads this line as a self-directed warning: 'The war might take him, so he may not have another chance to sing in this way.'[120] Goodby, in contrast, reads the speaker as being unable to admire the new day in the light of the air raid's destruction, but able to be consoled by the 'upheaval' it prompts, as the spring will ensure regrowth.[121] These two critics, then, read both death and life into Thomas's ambiguous descriptions, ambiguity that is typified in the poem's final line: 'If only for a last time.' Thomas's meaning is even more unreliable in the uncertain line break of the second stanza's opening lines: 'No / Praise that the spring time is all.'[122] Because the entire stanza is one sentence, the unreliability of the meaning of the opening lines casts doubt on the subsequent clauses: it is unclear if the 'No' qualifies the second line or reads as part of an overall coherent statement. As such, there is no definitive way

[119] 'Holy Spring,' in *Collected Poems*, 165.
[120] Maud, 111-2.
[121] *Collected Poems*, 389.
[122] 'Holy Spring,' in *Collected Poems*, 165.

to pin down Thomas's meaning. 'Holy Spring,' then, commemorates war with changeability and ambivalence; this allows Thomas to enact an unsettling lack of clarity about the war, even with the benefit of hindsight.

The enduring image at the centre of the poem is the speaker attempting to 'sing' of their experience, an image that Thomas repeats in his filmscript *Our Country*, written in May 1944. The film traces the shore leave of a sailor travelling around the British mainland and offers a strong voice of national unity amidst a stylised, modernistic production with regular lyrical deviations. The film moves from Glasgow, to London, Dover, the Midlands, the Rhondda Valley, and finally Aberdeen. It ends with ruminations on 'a quayside,' 'a fair grey day,' contrasted with the foreboding utterance, 'as though never in factory or harvestfield … it could have been forgotten,' hinting at the enduring grief in the wake of war.[123] The lyrical contemplations notwithstanding, *Our Country* demonstrates Thomas's endeavours to balance acceptance of change and remembrance of the past.

It is in the midst of this that the speaker emerges with the nostalgic, yet grim, observation, 'Oh, walking through the streets in the morning would make you nearly want to sing, though there were people dead under the stones, or people not dead.'[124] The initial joy at surviving an air raid is troubled by the sudden remembrance that other lives are at risk, or lost. More than commenting on survivor's guilt, this image also reflects on the poet's response to war. Thomas repeatedly returns to songs and singing as a means of discussing the poet's role, from his comments on Lorca's bullsongs, to the 'blind horse sing[ing] sweeter' in 'Because the pleasure-bird whistles,' to the isolated 'holy maker' who will 'stand and sing' in 'Holy Spring.' In each case, singing appears as a testament to

[123] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 73.
[124] Ibid, 72.

survival, to vitality, and hope. *Our Country*, however, demonstrates a thwarted voice: 'you nearly want to sing.' The speaker never achieves song because the reminder of corpses 'under the stones' halts the desire to rejoice.

Ackerman asserts that Thomas's propaganda work 'brought about, and his *Our Country* script signalled, the great civilian war poet of *Deaths and Entrances*.'[125] Working for Strand Films certainly expanded his poetic subject matter and altered his approach to discussing the war; however, his concern with representing war on the page had existed long before the war broke out, and continued beyond its end into 'Fern Hill,' the final lyric of *Deaths and Entrances*. He concludes the collection with a final word on song. Following five stanzas outlining the idealism of childhood, from 'the lilting house,' to 'the apple towns' and the 'happy yard'—when 'Time let me hail and climb,' 'let me play and be'—the poem's last lines cast a shadow across the speaker's memory, which is no longer 'happy as the heart was long':[126]

> Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
> Time held me green and dying
> Though I sang in my chains like the sea.[127]

The only thing that signals this shift is the speaker's assertion that 'time would take me / Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,' after which the speaker 'wake[s] to the farm forever fled from the childless land.'[128] The pastoral idyll is no more, and the nightmare the speaker endures is one that happens only after he wakes up—a motif borrowed from 'Holy Spring,' and seemingly sprung from his feeling, according to Vernon Watkins, that 'the war … was a nightmare from which [Dylan] never completely recovered.'[129]

---

[125] Ackerman, *The Filmscripts*, 66-67.
[126] Thomas, 'Fern Hill,' in *Collected Poems*, 177-79.
[127] Ibid, 179.
[128] Ibid, 178-79.
[129] *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. Vernon Watkins (London: Faber/Dent, 1957), 19.

Finishing with an image of the speaker singing in chains, 'Fern Hill' seems to suggest that remembering arcadia is as destructive as it is vital: commemorating the pre-war idyll cannot bring it back. The singer is at 'the mercy' of time, 'green and dying,' suspended in-between life and death. As such, this is an apt means of finishing a collection entitled *Deaths and Entrances*; however, it also raises a number of issues regarding 'Fern Hill' as Thomas's last word on war. The concluding image of the speaker tied down by 'chains,' but still singing, unsettles the idea that there is any freedom or peace for survivors. This ambiguity is reinforced by the verb 'held,' which could indicate that Time either cages and traps the speaker or embraces him. There is no sure freedom after the war, just as there is no sure way of knowing if the speaker's song is rejoicing, or a keening.

'this apparently hell-bent earth'

A review of *The Map of Love* (1939) in *The Listener* claimed that it was 'quite unlike the poetry of any other of the better-known contemporary poets. From Eliot to Auden … the emphasis of modern poetry has been on the intellect … But Mr. Thomas is a poet of an entirely different order … a writer of sustained power.'[130] Rather than being a poet of 'the intellect,' Thomas was from the first acknowledged as a poet of 'obscurity' and 'imaginative audacities.'[131] Towards the end of the war, however, (in January 1945 to be exact) *The Listener* published an article asserting, somewhat condescendingly, that though Thomas and Auden had established themselves before the war began, 'their war-time output has not been especially interesting: it is their influence that is significant.'[132] Evidently Thomas's wartime poetry did not resonate with everyone. One thing *The*

[130] 'The Listener's Book Chronicle,' *The Listener*, 19 October 1939, 780+.
[131] MacNeice, 'Dylan Thomas: Memories and Appreciations,' in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 183; 'Other New Books,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 March 1935, 161.
[132] Henry Reed, 'Poetry in War Time,' *The Listener*, 25 January 1945, 100.

Listener's criticism highlights, however, is that—regardless of how 'interesting' Thomas's work was—he was seen as an equal to Auden at the end of the war. His poetic tributes, (anti-)elegies, and commemorations were treated as of equivalent influence as the work of the 'Poet Laureate in absentia,' even by his detractors.

In June 1946, Thomas presented a radio programme 'On Poetry' (18 June 1946), addressing his developing ideas of what the poet can do.[133] In this, he presents his concerns about the post-war 'atomic age' and the poet's place within it:

> What's more, a poet is a poet for such a very tiny bit of his life; for the rest, he is a human being, one of whose responsibilities is to know and feel, as much as he can, all that is moving around and within him, so that his poetry, when he comes to write it, can be his attempt at an expression of the summit of man's experience on this very peculiar and, in 1946, this apparently hell-bent earth.[134]

Thomas has developed from the idea that a poet is only a poet while writing, now claiming that writing is 'a very tiny bit' of life. Moreover, he reiterates the emphasis on 'experience' that is also evident in Lewis, Douglas and Scannell's approaches to (war) poetry. This emphasis also signals a new mood in Thomas's approach to poetry, one far from his self-aware flippancy of 1939, when he declared that 'for a writer to undergo the utmost reality of poverty is for him to starve to death and therefore to be, as a writer, useless.'[135] Thomas's war-time experience had shaped his views on what his art should achieve, as well as on the importance of the poet. His first-hand accounts of the damage inflicted by the war prompted a new register in his poetry, and a change in his self-identified role. He moved from being the 'war-escaper' who felt the war was irrelevant to the dynamic and

---

[133] Thomas, 'On Poetry,' in *Quite Early One Morning: Stories, Poems and Essays* (London: J.M. Dent, 1968), 181.
[134] 'On Poetry,' 170.
[135] Thomas to Rayner Heppenstall, Laugharne, 2 November 1939, in *Collected Letters*, 480.

nature of his poetry, to the compassionate (anti-)elegist: to borrow Thomas's own words about Wilfred Owen, he became the 'arguer shell-shocked into diction.'[136]

What did not change, however, was his passion and reverence for words: as he writes in his 1951 'Poetic Manifesto,' 'What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-you … I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words.'[137] His witnessing, then, of the air warfare of the Blitz brought his theories of language and physicality into harsh perspective: this was further challenged after the war by the subsequent threat of Cold War nuclear winter. As Goodby argues, 'there is no choice about the actual narration of nuclear apocalypse:'

> [It is] "a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through" … for Thomas, literary responses to the threat are always deeply ambiguous, reluctant to represent annihilation, not so much out of unwillingness to confront it, but because of a desire to contain it.[138]

This is fundamental when discussing Thomas's war poetry: his poems are an attempt to contain an uncontainable death. His poetry enacted the violence of language at every opportunity in discussing the imminent threat, to attempt (as Goodby argues) to reverse its violence, with the hope that perhaps poetry in some way could—tentatively, at least, through attention to its own violent uses of language—oppose the destruction of war.

In the final chapter of this thesis, Thomas's perception of language as reality is countered by Stevie Smith's struggle with the 'cage of language.' Where Thomas perceived the body as an intrinsic part of his poetic process—an organic, dynamic site of vitality and concomitant decay—Smith ambiguously presented it as a site of gender and identity conflicts. They share an ambivalence regarding the strictures and failures of

---

[136] Thomas, 'Wilfred Owen,' in *Quite Early One Morning*, 102.
[137] Thomas, 'Poetic Manifesto,' in *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*, ed. Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1971), 155, 158.
[138] Goodby, *Under the Spelling Wall*, 409-10. Emphasis in the original.

language, but Thomas nevertheless sees words as inherently meaningful, even if that meaning is complicated through embodiment; for Smith, though, words are only as meaningful as the tone they're spoken in, and as the next chapter will show, her shifts in and manipulations of tone transform how we read her war poetry.

Stevie Smith by Godfrey Argent

Stevie Smith, war poet

'War poet,' as this thesis has discussed, is a difficult role for any writer to fill. At the time of the Second World War, it came with assumptions of authority, of political involvement, and of gender (assumptions that continue, with some modulations, to the present day). The poets of this thesis never tried to adopt it as a title for themselves, but their war poetry consistently draws attention to their own struggles with the ethics of writing in wartime, and the need for poetry to be political or reflective of its historical moment. They were not just war poets by virtue of being poets in wartime, but because of how they repeatedly questioned and battled with how to write war poetry. Until now, this thesis has given its main focus to male poets, in order to foreground Auden's primacy in the 1930s and his search for an appropriate poetic tone with which to respond to war, to analyse MacNeice's explorations of faith and national pride, and to examine Thomas's shift from decided disinvolvement in the war to being one of the foremost Blitz poets. To treat these three male voices as 'representative' of Second World War poetry as a whole would be wrong, though, and would repeat a pattern that continues to assume that 'war poetry' is necessarily a masculine category, or that poetry by women is not 'war poetry,' or a lesser type of 'war poetry.'

As Simon Featherstone writes, women's war poetry 'remains a problem for critics of war poetry,' since war poetry was 'predicated initially upon the heroism and sacrifice of the masculine body during the early years of the First World War, and latterly upon sceptical appraisals of such values.' Thus, despite Catherine W. Reilly's touchstone anthologies, *Scars Upon My Heart* (1981) and *Chaos of the Night* (1984), '[t]here persists a lack of attention to women's poetry of both wars,' and the category of 'war poetry' as a

whole allows 'for little more than a peripheral female space, and that defined by men.'[1] As a means of going some way towards addressing this neglect—and tracing out a 'female space' for war poetry that is not 'peripheral' or 'defined by men'—this chapter will look in-depth at one female poet of the Second World War, Florence Margaret (Stevie) Smith.

Stevie Smith wrote a different kind of war poetry from that of her male peers. This chapter will argue that the ethical questions that beset Auden, MacNeice, and Thomas do not appear as direct problems in Smith's poetry, nor does she attempt to prescribe an antidote or a balm to the historical crises of her time; rather, her poetry is playful, ironic, and satirical. The same standards might not apply: as Maroula Joannou writes, 'women poets [of the 1930s] have often been denied the critical recognition which their work deserves by the use of the "Audenesque" as a standard by which other poetry is judged and found to be deficient.'[2] Why, then, read Smith's war poetry alongside these other poets? To give Smith the critical recognition she deserves, she is being read here not just in terms of comparison with the 'Audenesque,' but also to explore how she developed her own poetic 'standards' and approaches, and how, in the process, she managed to avoid or go beyond the ethical quandaries that had plagued her male contemporaries, Auden included.

Smith is, of course, not the only female poet who could be discussed in this context. There was an older generation of well-known women poets writing during the Second World War that includes Frances Cornford, Ruth Pitter, Dorothy Wellesley, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Naomi Mitchison and Edith Sitwell. They are omitted here on the

---

[1] Simon Featherstone, 'Women's Poetry of the First and Second World Wars,' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 445-46.

[2] Maroula Joannou, in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2. Jane Dowson similarly criticises the periodisation of the 1940s 'in its insistence on "groups" and "movements" which has often been responsible for excluding women'; see Jane Dowson, *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

generational grounds outlined in the introduction: Sitwell, for example, was born in 1887, had personal memories of the First World War, and was already an established writer by the 1920s—she is closer to T.S. Eliot's generation than that of Auden, MacNeice, and Thomas. The wartime work of each of these women poets is, however, deserving of greater critical attention, especially—as Joannou argues—on terms other than comparison with the 'Audenesque.' One example of how this might occur comes in Jane Dowson's 'Women Poets and the Political Voice' (1999), which makes the case for the political poetry of Warner and Mitchison, and begins to explore how their work goes beyond the expectations created by Auden's:

> the poems of Warner and Mitchison, for example, are characterised by Audenesque features – realism; contemporary diction; mixed public and personal rhetoric – and they were more left-wing in terms of representing democratic ideals or the voices of the socially disadvantaged than W.H. Auden. Their poems particularly register the contemporary debates over whether direct polemic was the aesthetic or anaesthetic of art.[3]

Clearly, each of these poets needs to be discussed in terms of their unique and complicated responses to their circumstances. Any consideration of them as a singular or coherent 'women's war poetry' would in any case struggle to account for Sitwell's dismissal of 'women's poetry' as a whole: 'Women's poetry, with the exception of Sappho … 'Goblin Market' and a few deep and concentrated, but fearfully incompetent poems of Emily Dickinson, is *simply awful*.'[4] (Sitwell's stance is comparable to Smith's, however: in a review of an anthology of women poets in 1968, Smith asked, 'why have poems by women only?')[5]

---

[3] Jane Dowson, in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 47.
[4] Edith Sitwell, *Fire of the Mind: An Anthology*, eds. Elizabeth Salter and Allanah Harper (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1976), 188. Emphasis in the original.
[5] Smith, 'Poems in Petticoats,' in *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981), 180.

Among the women whose poetry could be seen as belonging to the generation being studied within this thesis (and who were considered for inclusion) are E.J. Scovell and Valentine Ackland, both of whom were a similar age to Auden, MacNeice and Thomas. Ackland, however, did not publish any collections during the war (her war poems were not published until *Twenty-Eight Poems* [1957]), and so her work does not trace out a developing public response to the war in the same way as the poets examined here. Scovell, meanwhile, did publish during the war and immediately afterwards—in *Shadows of Chrysanthemums* (1944) and *The Midsummer Meadow* (1946)—poems with an understated, autobiographical, lyricism. Her work has been the subject of valuable analysis in Simon Featherstone's chapter on 'Women's Poetry of the First and Second World Wars' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*; as such it is not as much in need of critical attention as Stevie Smith's wartime poetry, which as an object of interest in itself, has not yet received in-depth examination. Smith's distinctive exploration and dismissal of 'war poetry' and 'war poets' also provides a more telling and insightful counter-example to Auden, MacNeice and Thomas.

Smith was a peer of Auden and MacNeice (although slightly older), and one of the most celebrated women poets of her generation. Born in 1902, Smith spent her earliest years in Hull before her family relocated to Palmers Green, a small suburb in north London, where she remained living in the same house until her death in 1971. Her popularity reached a peak in the 1960s, when she received the Cholmondeley Award and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.[6] However, Smith's popularity has waned in comparison to that of some of her contemporaries. As Will May wrote in 2005, 'Smith's work fights shy of a popular following; although her work inspires cultish websites and

[6] See Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1990), 277, 291.

her poetry is still widely anthologised, her collected works have remained stubbornly out of print for nearly ten years:' May's own 2015 edition of the *Complete Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* has, thankfully, filled this absence. [7]

When Smith's work is approached critically, it tends to be by feminist literary critics. As Sanford Sternlicht writes in his preface to *In Search of Stevie Smith* (1990): 'The feminist movement and press have come to hail Stevie as a precursor for the expression of disaffection by modern women.'[8] Yet, Laura Severin, in her monograph *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (1997), raises questions about the extent or reach of that celebration: 'feminist scholars should turn at least some of their recovery efforts toward women critics … Stevie Smith is a critical voice that has been ignored too long.'[9] Though Severin is referring to Smith's prolific bibliography of book reviews across a range of periodicals—*John O'London's Weekly*, *The Observer*, and *The Listener* among them—her point can also be extended to cover Smith's war poetry: this, too, might operate as a form of 'criticism,' however opaque or tangential.

In particular, while much has been written on Smith and gender, and gender and war, the place in which these spheres of enquiry intersect has much to reveal. 'Ultimately,' as Karen Schneider writes, 'the war provides for Smith a means to interrogate the reciprocal relation between, on the one hand, war as social institution and mode of discourse and, on the other, the cultural construction of gender.'[10] Schneider sees Smith as an 'interrogator' of modes of discourse and cultural constructions. Romana Huk—in

---

[7] Will May, 'Stevie Smith in Combat,' *The Oxonian Review* 4.2 (March 2005), http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/stevie-smith-in-combat/
See also *Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber, 2015). All citations are taken from this edition unless otherwise specified.
[8] Sternlicht, ed., *In Search of Stevie Smith* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 1.
[9] Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 76.
[10] Schneider, *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 58.

her brief consideration of Smith's war work in her 2005 monograph *Between the Lines*—similarly identifies her as a poet who probes her 'culture's endgame:' 'It would not be wrong to think of Smith as being, broadly defined, a "war poet", given the continual and desperate attention she paid to her culture's endgame expressed in the extraordinary violence of her "times".'[11] As demonstrated by the abundance of inverted commas, Huk's already ambitious study cannot offer enough context for this broad definition; her analysis is, as a result, 'heavily qualified,' as May points out, or even 'diluted to the point of negation.'[12] However, like Schneider, Huk sees the value of Smith's poetry in terms of its 'desperate attention,' a critical, interrogating eye.

Of Smith's critics, May gives most consideration to Smith's war writing. In particular, he focuses on questions that her writing prompts, such as 'What might it mean to call somebody like Stevie Smith a war writer? How important is the political in our engagement with literature?'[13] He argues,

> In Huk's bid to make a serious Smith, we lose any sense of how she might have taken up and abandoned this mantle [of 'war writer'] for her own reasons. Why, for example, did Stevie Smith often dismiss her wartime novels in the final twenty years of her writing career? How did her alertness to the printed propaganda of the day relate to her own preoccupation with shaping an audience for her work?[14]

May here raises various issues with regarding Smith as a 'war writer.' Some of these are related to critical needs or requirements, such as his criticism of Huk's attempt to create a 'serious Smith.' This suggests (necessarily without resolving) a fault line of war writing: whether 'levity' is sufficient, or whether there needs at some point to be a serious turn in which the gravity of the situation is considered. As a way of approaching Smith's work this is not particularly helpful: one of her poetry's main characteristics is an ambiguity of

---

[11] Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 215-16.
[12] May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.
[13] May, 'Stevie Smith in Combat.'
[14] Ibid.

tone which wavers between the light-hearted and the solemn to the extent that a search for 'seriousness' quickly loses its way. But his comments do also identify Smith's own concerns with her war writing, which led to frequent renunciations, and not only in the last two decades of her career: in the early 1940s she wrote to her friend John Hayward to admit of *The Holiday* (which she had just completed), 'I'm afraid my novel wasn't any good after all, alas … I know that *Over the Frontier* was nothing to be proud of, and *Novel on Y.P.* just happened to come off.'[15] It is impossible to say whether this is a decided repudiation of her work, however, or authorial diffidence: in any case, the dismissal of her wartime novels does not obviously negate their worth. May's rhetorical question about the relationship between propaganda and Smith's attempt to shape an audience for her work is more central to the concerns of this thesis: this chapter will attempt to probe further than May in his analysis.

May is tentative about categorising her as a 'war writer.' Huk's caveats, meanwhile, suggest that the fraught mantle of 'war poet' (the reified subject of all those editorials discussed in the Introduction) is even more difficult to place on Smith's shoulders. For both, 'seriousness,' or her fluid movement between the serious and the non-serious, was one of the problems with fitting her into this category. This appears less a question of experiential authority or first-person involvement, than one of tone, of an appropriate way of responding to war, to add to all of the other expectations and limitations on 'war poets.' There is a possibility that 'seriousness' or levity might also be gendered: as such, one of the aims of this chapter is to clear a space to explore and interrogate how the artifice of Smith's language, her subversion of gender, and her gendering of war all inform a reading of Smith's 'war poetry.'

[15] Smith to John Hayward, London, 31 August (year unknown; the editors estimate it to be in the early 1940s), in *Me Again*, 284, 285.

Even critics sympathetic to Smith—such as Huk and May—have difficulties interpreting and situating her war writing. For other critics, there is often a tendency to express critical bafflement, frustration or evasion rather than to engage in incisive analysis significance of her work: this is true both of her contemporary reviewers and subsequent criticism. An anonymous review of *Over the Frontier* from 1938, for example, notes that 'it is extremely difficult to understand what is happening … readers may be puzzled, perplexed, and vaguely disturbed.'[16] Geoffrey Grigson, meanwhile, reviewing the 1975 edition of Smith's *Collected Poems*, asserted that,

> Poets like Stevie Smith are too awkward to treat academically, and are left alone, as a rule. Few bother about the virtuosity of their poems, even when they are inconvertible, incorruptible, incorrupt and incorrodible and more consequential than inconsequential, as hers were.'[17]

Grigson's wordplay reflects Smith's own flair for poetic badinage, while also suggesting it as the very reason for her relatively marginal place within twentieth-century literary history: 'Few bother' to work past the surface of her playfulness to the more solemn, troubling, meanings it conceals. For Grigson, the issue was Smith's unusual and complex style; for Catherine A. Civello it is the difficulty of pinning her to one label. Civello's *Patterns of Ambivalence* ('ambivalence' is a common critical crutch in discussions of Smith) (1997), rarely reaches conclusions beyond the obvious: 'Not an active feminist, political activist, or religious woman, she chose to express inner conflict in her own way, by means of an artistic response.'[18]

As a means of combating the perception of Smith's writing as 'awkward' or 'extremely difficult to understand,' the remainder of this chapter places Smith within the context of some of her peers, and builds on Schneider, Huk and May's analysis to explore

---

[16] 'New Novels: Personal and Political Problems,' *The Scotsman*, 20 January 1938, 13.
[17] Grigson, 'Sad, glad and serious,' *The Guardian*, 7 August 1975, 9.
[18] Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997), 23.

whether the ambiguities and wordplays of Smith's poetry can be read as incisive, tenacious, political, social and artistic commentary. The chapter continues with a brief discussion of Smith's style as a means of foregrounding her subversive use of language and how she relates to other women's writing of the period. From there, this chapter will offer close readings of poems from three of her poetry collections—*A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), *Tender Only to One* (1938) and *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942)—as well as discussion of her novels, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), *Over the Frontier* (1938) and *The Holiday* (1949). The chapter draws on Smith's slippery and unreliable wordplay, her blurring of binaries and boundaries, her own familiarity with war veterans from a young age, and her experience as a secretary in publishing during the war years. There are four main threads of analysis throughout the chapter: Smith's challenge to critical convention, her interrogation of gender, her understanding of war (primarily through second-hand accounts from those close to her), and her poetic representations of war; it concludes with a final comment on Smith's marginalisation in the canon, as well as her self-fashioning as a war poet.

'several assaults at the literary establishment:' Smith's challenges to convention

Smith's style of writing requires a different kind of reading to Auden's, MacNeice's, or Thomas's work: as Laura Severin and Randall Stevenson argue, it demands a postmodernist reading.[19] Severin, in particular, reads Smith through Linda Hutcheon's idea of postmodern poetics as a critical context in which, 'the text qua formal text has no fixed and final value in and for itself … but [is] an open process.'[20] As Severin comments, 'Smith had faith in the ability of her readers/viewers to challenge conventions, and her

[19] See Severin, 20-21; and Randall Stevenson, *Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 12: 1960-2000: The Last of England?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 227.
[20] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 220.

difficult though playful art often requires them to do so.'[21] The fact that Smith's work is playful, performative, and difficult to interpret, then, is part of its purpose: Smith is not concerned with 'realism, contemporary diction, mixed public and personal rhetoric' (the characteristics of the 'Audenesque,' in Dowson's terms), nor is she concerned with sharing a sympathetic act of witnessing.[22] Where Auden's, MacNeice's, and Thomas's work is often preoccupied with discerning a verifiable 'truth' among personal experience, Smith instead requires that her readers—as the subtitle of *Novel on Yellow Paper* demands—'work it out for yourself.'[23]

Not only was Smith's style challenging and subversive, but so too were the subjects of some of her poems. As Dowson writes, her poems often exhibit a 'hostility to the hierarchical structures of the Church and State,' and questioned their status 'by satirising their authority figures in vitriolic portraits.'[24] This also extended to the literary establishment. 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop,' first published in *Tender Only to One* (1938), is a parodic comment on Smith's exclusion from the literary mainstream: this, Dowson notes, is 'one of several assaults at the literary establishment which made it difficult for her to get her poems published and properly reviewed.'[25] Indeed, despite her prolific output in the 1930s, Smith did not successfully get any poems published until David Garnett agreed to print some of her work in the *New Statesman* in 1936.[26] In 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop,' then, Smith inhabits the voice of a 'self-appointed guardian of English literature' who represents the exclusionary tactics to which she was also subjected:

> English literature, as I see it, requires to be defended
> By a person of integrity and essential good humour

---

[21] Severin, 20.
[22] Dowson, in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 47.
[23] Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper, or Work it Out for Yourself* (London: Virago, 1993).
[24] Ibid, 56.
[25] Dowson, in *Women Writers of the 1930s*, 56.
[26] Ibid, 55.

Against the forces of fanaticism, idiosyncrasy and anarchy.[27]

Smith's choice of nouns offers a pointed critique of the conservatism of the literary critics of her time, and also a possible defence of the 'idiosyncrasy' of her own poetry, and the 'anarchy' it threatens, by questioning all kinds of structure and semblance of norms. 'Fanaticism,' meanwhile, is both visually and semantically close to 'fascism,' but more broadly suggests a distrust of any politically committed poetry, anything that would upset the 'good-humoured' status quo. These forces are not necessarily aligned but represent a range of threats. One of the greatest threats to the canon is being expanded: the canon can only operate if it remains exclusive. The poem ultimately—in May's words—'pours scorn on the very process of categorizing and canonizing poets.'[28]

This is a process that is clearly gendered. He is a 'Monsieur' rather than a 'Madame' Poop, and it is surely no coincidence that the writers Monsieur Poop is ready to 'go to the stake / For' are all male: 'I am, after all, devoted to Shakespeare, Milton, / And, coming to our own times, / Of course / Housman.'[29] These three English male writers are, for Monsieur Poop, 'the established classics.'[30] One thing that Smith's poem is doing is drawing attention to the relative marginalisation of women in literary history. Smith, by writing 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop,' inscribes an irony into every word 'spoken' by the critic: this is a women poet using a male voice to elide the existence of women's poetry.

There are limits to how effective such ironic undermining of patriarchal authority could be. As Gill Plain claims, 'Socially and politically women were allowed to play at rewriting the gender rules, but their games were kept firmly within the schoolroom of

[27] Smith, 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop,' in *Collected Poems*, 150, 151. Emphasis in the original.
[28] May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.
[29] 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop,' in *Collected Poems*, 150.
[30] Ibid.

patriarchal authority.'[31] If the war seemed to offer a space for these rules to be permanently rewritten, this was an illusion: although women were conscripted, and obtained full-time employment in factories in traditionally 'male' roles, and gained valuable working experience and a glimpse of autonomy, once the war ended, so too did their 'right' to such positions. In Jenny Hartley's words, 'women's place in the public ranks of war was always seen as temporary – "for the duration".'[32] Even in this temporary period, though, there was not full equality: as Margaret R. Higonnet notes, women 'tended to remain in subordinate relationships to men, who continued to dominate the labor market and monopolize political power.'[33]

This broader societal trend—of greater opportunities for women that were still, however, circumscribed—has some parallels with the position of women writers. As Hartley argues, '[t]he political responsibility of the writer in wartime was, of course, very much a live issue … War was not the time for the articulation of disillusion or inner doubt.'[34] Clear, unambiguous political commitment was key, in other words, and there were certainly women writers who were active in this way, among them the novelists Storm Jameson, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Naomi Mitchison. Each of these, as Janet Montefiore has shown, were 'well-known liberal women writers' in the 1930s who had 'close intellectual, political and sometimes personal ties.'[35] Montefiore carefully details their political affiliations: all were 'left-wing liberals,' 'all embraced internationalist pacifism,' all wrote for 'the liberal feminist weekly *Time and Tide*,' and

[31] Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 29.
[32] Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997), 11.
[33] Margaret R. Higonnet, introduction to *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, eds. Margaret R. Higonnet et al. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987), 3.
[34] Higonnet, 10.
[35] Janet Montefiore, in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 27-28.

'[a]ll wrote polemical novels using fairly old-fashioned realist narrative modes.'[36] Moreover, Brittain and Holtby were also 'active campaigners and speakers for the League of Nations,' and Jameson was 'one of the first sponsors of the Peace Pledge Union in 1936' (soon followed by Brittain).[37] Women poets also demonstrated a committed political activism: as Jane Dowson writes, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland were members of the Left Book Club and the Communist Party, and in 1935 attended the Paris Congress of Writers (where Holtby, Jameson and Mitchison also appeared).[38]

In comparison to these, Smith held no official political affiliations, did not attend Congresses, and was not a card-carrying member of any party. (Phyllis Lassner, nevertheless, groups Smith with Jameson, Elizabeth Bowen, and Phyllis Bottome, as 'avowedly political' writers.)[39] Indeed, Smith consistently expressed a sceptical doubt about 'dotty idealismus'—as she describes politics in *Over the Frontier*—and the concept of subscribing to one doctrine or framework of belief: 'Death to all ideologies,' as Pompey (her alter-ego) announces in that novel.[40] As Dowson observes, for Smith '[t]he major enemy … was totalitarianism of either left or right: totalitarianism meant state control and organised religion, which were to be feared for producing cultural mediocrity.'[41] Montefiore concisely summarises Smith's politics in the assertion that they are 'to be found in her disregard for all the discourses of power; by disrupting familiar syntactical or formal structures, she challenges their associated assumptions and cultural authority.'[42] In short, Smith's political commentary is expressed through the tonal and

[36] Montefiore, in *Women Writers in the 1930s*, 27-28.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Dowson, in *Women Writers in the 1930s*, 48-49.
[39] Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 1-2.
[40] Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Virago, 1980), 255.
[41] Dowson, in *Women Writers in the 1930s*, 55.
[42] Montefiore, in *Women Writers in the 1930s*, 57.

formal subversiveness of her poetry. Rather than setting a picket in front of the 'real' Monsieur Poop's editorial office, she mocks him through the poetry he ignores. However, Smith's avowedly non-political stance in her personal life did not stop her from making comments in her writing about on the possible political role of the poet. As Pompey asks in *Over the Frontier*:

> How is our Colonizing Animal, our so darling pet Lion of these British Isles? … the insufferable darling animal will turn over on his sleek fat belly and have a good sleep—with the poets, I hope, to trouble his dreams with the prods and pains he at times so richly deserves.[43]

Smith here emphasises the significance of the poet, and her own self-fashioned role, in defying and provoking the status quo. Not only is the poet expected to interrupt and incite, but they are meant to 'trouble' and 'prod' the 'Colonizing Animal' of their own nation as they do so.[44]

Gender: 'a miserable face'

The gender of the 'poets' in *Over the Frontier* appears irrelevant; more generally, reading Smith's poems—even poems such as 'Souvenir de Monsieur Poop'—primarily in gender terms is complicated. This is not only because of Smith's own flippant attitude to such an approach (suggested by her asking 'why have poems by women only?'), but also because of her repeated emphasis on the importance of individual—rather than representative—experience.[45] Writing in the 1960s, about her own place in the literary and cultural context of her time, Smith makes an argument for individual autonomy, rather than for gender equality:

---

[43] *Over the Frontier*, 105-06.
[44] Ibid, 98.
[45] *Me Again,* 180.

> But I'm alive today, therefore I'm as much part of our time as everybody else. The times will just have to enlarge themselves to make room for me, won't they, and for everybody else.[46]

Smith also often tended to use gender-ambiguous terms for poets: in her 1960 essay 'My Muse,' for example, she claimed that 'The poet is not an important fellow. There will always be another poet.'[47] As she elsewhere argued, the quality of the poems mattered much more than the gender, or oddity, of the poet who wrote them: 'Differences between men and women poets are best seen when the poets are bad… But neither odd lives nor sex really signify, it is a person's poems that stand to be judged.'[48] There is a broader problem as well, however: as Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate have observed, focusing exclusively on gender can 'produce a curiously depoliticised reading of our culture, its history, and its writing.'[49] Nevertheless, Smith's niche status as female poet within a majority masculinist literary history requires further critical examination, especially since elsewhere her poetry does address gender issues, and how these are affected by the context of the war.

Smith's collection *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942), for example, demonstrates a range of varying attitudes to the relationships between mothers and their children. The opening poem of the collection, 'Human Affection,' speaks to a heartfelt relationship between mother and child, where 'the love between them kept them warm.'[50] Yet the lyric 'The Sad Mother' presents a more unsettling family unit: its illustration portrays a sinister figure hovering over a sleeping child, seeming to emphasise the poem's warning that the

---

[46] Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge, 1966), 229.
[47] Smith, 'My Muse,' in *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Faber, 1983), 151.
[48] Smith, 'Poems in Petticoats,' review of *Without Adam: The Femina Anthology of Poetry*, for *The Observer*, in *Me Again*, 181.
[49] Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tait, eds., *Women's Fiction of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.
[50] Smith, 'Human Affection,' in *Collected Poems*, 181.

child 'must learn to creep.'[51] 'The Sad Heart,' meanwhile, written in the voice of a child, asserts ''Tis pity that ever my mother bore me.'[52] Most menacing of all is 'She Said…,' where a mother drops a baby into water, declaring, 'go sink or swim, / … Do you expect me always to be responsible for you?'[53] Motherhood, in other words, might encompass affection and cruelty, warmth and a denial of parental responsibility. This might not necessarily be actual motherhood, but motherhood used as a metaphor: through the voice of Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), Smith asserts, 'I think of my poems as my kiddo, and no doubt but Tennyson felt that way too.'[54] If read through this metaphor, then, many of the mother-child relationships within Smith's poetry take on the broader symbolism of creation and creativity, and can be seen to explore also the highs and lows of writing; they can still, though, be seen as taking part in, or making use of, a broader probing and reshaping of gender roles that was taking place during the war.

The war itself meant that gender roles and identities were fluid and contested, in ways that can be seen as politicised rather than depoliticised. War, as Margaret R. Higonnet writes, 'must be understood as a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants.'[55] Women, even while taking traditionally 'male' employment, were still required to represent the 'affinity for peace,' and 'fend off the barbarism implicit in war;' their implied symbolic value was expressed through 'images of femininity, nurturance, and the family.'[56] In short, though women were allowed to take on a proxy independence while the men were away, they were still required to strictly adhere to cultural expectations of morality and motherhood.

---

[51] Smith, 'The Sad Mother,' in *Collected Poems*, 196.
[52] Smith, 'The Sad Heart,' in *Collected Poems*, 205.
[53] Smith, 'She Said…,' in *Collected Poems*, 203.
[54] Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper, or Work it Out for Yourself* (London: Virago, 1993). 28.
[55] Higonnet, 4. Emphasis in the original.
[56] Higonnet, 1.

Storm Jameson, for example, in an article for *Woman's Journal* in autumn 1939, outlined some wartime roles for women:

> [A woman's] most honourable war work consisted precisely in keeping her home what she had made it for her children and her husband, a small cell of warmth and peace in the noisy thoroughfare of this world, a place from … which all their lives they will draw strength.[57]

Jameson was a close friend of Smith's, and in January 1939 she pressed Smith to join PEN (which was then 'making a stand against Fascism and giving help to refugees').[58] Jameson pleaded with her friend: 'Writers of your quality are desperately needed.'[59] Yet, there is no evidence Smith ever joined the literary organisation, nor did she subscribe to Jameson's proposed ideas of a woman's 'most honourable war work.' Jameson's words also imply that a 'woman' has a husband and children. This was another ideal Smith did not live up to, and not one, perhaps, she was disposed to fall into: 'the institution of marriage certainly didn't suit Smith personally,' Diane Mehta writes, 'but she didn't think its conventions suited women, period.'[60] Smith, as Mehta argues, might have opposed the conventions of marriage; her attitude to motherhood, however, is— as *Mother, What Is Man?* suggests—more complex and difficult to pin down.

The reshaping of gender roles was most obvious in wartime propaganda: as Higonnet argues, 'the most explicit and deliberate efforts to redefine masculinity and femininity have appeared in propaganda.'[61] In this propaganda there was a tendency to stress that these new gender roles were temporary performances, and did not create new societal norms:

---

[57] Quoted in Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald & Co. Ltd., 1987), 14.
[58] Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1990), 147.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Diane Mehta, 'A Chain on the Great Feelings,' *The Paris Review,* 11 February 2014, http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/02/11/a-chain-on-the-great-feelings/
[61] Higonnet, 5.

> Propaganda reminded female defense workers that they were not themselves—that is, not "natural"—but behaving temporarily *like men*. Industrial employment would not permanently endanger their femininity … and neither could such employment be expected to last.[62]

There were propaganda posters that encouraged women to be factory workers, or to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the Women's Royal Navy Service, or the ARP, such as 'Women of Britain: Come into the Factories,' which depicted the overflowing joy of a regular factory worker, arms raised to the British planes overhead. However, these had to compete with other, conflicting, narratives of feminine involvement and duty. A tendency to defend traditional models or understandings of femininity is apparent in propaganda campaigns such as 'Worth Fighting For—Worth Saving For' (1944, reproduced in Appendix 2), which illustrates a wife and children as the image of sanctity and value. This was, as the tagline reveals aimed specifically at men in uniform: 'For ways of saving, ask the officer who pays you.' The wholesome, happy mother of two in this campaign had to contend, however, with the sly, untrustworthy Siren figure of the 'Keep mum, she's not so dumb' posters (reproduced in Appendix 1). These examples suggest how propaganda campaigns that stressed women's femininity (rather than their wartime usefulness) often operated on an implicit Madonna/whore dialectic: women were either a symbol of the nation's value and integrity, or they were unreliable threats to national sovereignty.

The appearance of the female body in these images also corresponds to the message of women's wartime magazines, which urged:

> [it is] of national importance—that women today should … make the most of their looks … You owe it to yourselves, you owe it to your country, to be beautiful, brave and of a grand cheerfulness at this time, as becomes British women.[63]

---

[62] Higonnet, 7. Emphasis in the original.
[63] *Woman's Magazine*, November 1939, quoted in Waller and Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime*, 13.

How a woman presented herself and her body was a matter of patriotic duty and (personal and national) debt: a woman's beauty, bravery and cheerfulness determined whether she was a source of strength to the nation, or an 'unbecoming' risk. Implicitly, women were a source of strength in this way because of the effect that they would have on British men: women were treated as aesthetically pleasing, passively suffering, vanity objects. As such, wartime propaganda often amplified contemporary cultural attitudes, placing women in the unenviable role of both nation-symbol (the mother of 'Worth Fighting For') and national liability (the spy of 'Keep mum').

Smith had first-hand access to a good deal of the wartime propaganda which painted women as fundamentally belonging in the home. For more than thirty years, she worked for the publishing company Pearson Newnes.[64] They published a variety of women's magazines, notably *Modern Woman*, which, as Severin states, 'continued Victorian domestic ideology by concentrating on home and family.'[65] As Severin notes, '[t]hat one of domesticity's sharpest critics should work for a producer of domestic ideology is hardly a coincidence.'[66] Certainly, Smith's own domestic life did not map easily onto the ideology *Modern Woman* espoused, and did aim or aspire to concentrate on home and family. Looking back in 1969, Smith reflected: 'I am haunted by the fear of what might have happened if I had not been able to draw back in time from the husband-wives-children and pet animals situation in which I surely should have failed.'[67] Although she rejected that model of domesticity throughout her life, she did, however, eventually—and happily—fulfil a domestic role, when her Aunt needed a carer at home in 1962: this,

[64] Severin, 8.
[65] Ibid, 77.
[66] Ibid, 4.
[67] Smith, 'What Poems are Made Of,' in *Me Again*, 128.

though, was domesticity very much on her own terms, in which male and female roles were combined. As Spalding notes,

> In a radio interview Stevie insisted that domestic labour satisfied one's creative and destructive urges very satisfactorily. 'I like cooking,' she told an *Evening Standard* reporter, 'I love going out and getting the stuff, and chopping it up, stripping bits off, hacking it up. It's a wonderful way of getting rid of aggression.'[68]

Where Jameson in *Woman's Journal* had painted the domestic sphere as a (conservative) site of peace, Smith happily charts her own impulses toward violence and belligerence onto the same space: she also combines traditional concepts of being 'masculine'—bringing home the meat, and using the language of hunter-gatherers to prepare it, 'stripping bits off, hacking it up'—and the 'feminine' role of cooking the meal. Smith avoided getting into the 'bright little tight little hell-box' of the 'matrimonial swamp,' as Pompey describes it in *Novel on Yellow Paper*; instead, she enjoyed the comforts of self-sufficiency at home, and being able to play both 'male' and 'female' domestic roles, rather than simply creating 'a small cell of warmth and peace' as Jameson had suggested.[69]

Reading Smith's war writing, then—in Severin's words—'involves recovering another voice in, and another woman's opinions on, this period's dialogue concerning domesticity.'[70] This voice was often parodic, and these opinions ambivalent towards prevalent ideas of women's roles and the domestic sphere. So much is clear in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, in which Pompey—Smith's alter-ego—conducts vitriolic attacks on the 'silly…female half-wits' who are dependent on marriage to fulfil all their dreams: to this end, she parrots the headlines of the 'twopenny weeklies' that promote these girls' 'pop-eyed dreams:'[71]

---

[68] Spalding, 244.
[69] *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 153, 223.
[70] Severin, 23.
[71] *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 150-51.

> These are the girls who believe everything our contributors tell them … they are Good Listeners, they are Good Pals, they are Feminine, they Let him Know they Sew their own Frocks, they sometimes even go so far as to Pay Attention To Personal Hygiene.[72]

Severin suggests that *Modern Woman* was 'one of those women's magazines that Smith had deplored in *Novel on Yellow Paper*:' by regurgitating the headlines of such ladies' magazines within her own prose, Smith both incorporates and lampoons the language of female domesticity.[73] The lampoon also satirises the end-point of this domesticity, and the requirement for women to keep 'their funny thoughts on matrimony.'[74]

Similarly, how women were expected to present themselves—and what they were expected to want—is also the subject of Smith's poem 'Girls!' in *Mother, What Is Man?*:

> Girls! although I am a woman
> I always try to appear human
>
> Unlike Miss So-and-So whose greatest pride
> Is to remain always in the VI Form and not let down the side
>
> Do not sell the pass dear, don't let down the side
> This is what this woman said and a lot of balsy stuff beside
> (Oh the awful balsy nonsense that this woman cried.)
>
> Girls! I will let down the side if I get the chance
> And I will sell the pass for a couple of pence.[75]

The repetition and the aside place great emphasis on the word 'balsy:' this word could be seen to encapsulate the poem's ambiguities. 'Balsy' is one of Smith's linguistic creations, and this poem is the *OED*'s only reference for it. Meaning 'absurd' or 'ridiculous,' it stems from the slang for testicles, which also act metonymically to connote meanings ranging from 'determined and courageous,' and 'plucky, spirited,' to 'masculine; virile,

---

[72] *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 151.
[73] Severin, 77.
[74] *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 151.
[75] Smith, 'Girls!' in *Collected Poems*, 187.

aggressive.'[76] By conflating the meanings of 'absurd' with 'determined,' in a word with a specifically masculine connotation, Smith confounds any use of gendered language, and reliance on essentialist gender norms. This is important, as the poem explores the role expected of women during wartime (not 'letting down the side'). The concluding couplet presents a stark renunciation of such expectations: to 'sell the pass' is to 'betray one's countrymen by giving information to the authorities.'[77] The poem (somewhat jokily) suggests that the speaker would betray her nation in war: crucially, this is a 'womanly' rather than 'human' act. With its knowing, feminine act of betrayal, the poem could almost be read in the voice of the 'Siren' in the 'Keep mum, she's not so dumb' poster.

The illustration accompanying 'Girls!' in Will May's *Collected Poems and Drawings* (2015), depicts an older woman with a walking stick, and a flat expression, standing upright on what seems to be a hilltop. In the *Selected Poems* (1962), however, Smith instead paired this poem with a number of illustrations, of a woman with flowers, a girl's facial profile, and a cat. It is curious that in May's edition, the older woman would seem to represent Miss So-and-So, whereas in the *Selected Poems*, Smith's inclusion of two figures instead highlights the conflicting perspectives within the text. The illustrations dictate whether we read the first-person speaker's account as authoritative, or whether the reader should interpret the text as a conflict of equally valid perspectives; that there are different editions also means that neither can ultimately be viewed as definitive.

In a much more light-hearted mimicry of the importance of women's roles, Smith's 1937 poem 'Dear Female Heart' satirises the societal pressure on women to look—as *Women's Magazine* had required—'cheerful:' 'in common with the rest of the human race,

---

[76] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'ballsy (adj.),' accessed 29 July 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15011?redirectedFrom=balsy.
[77] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'sell, (v.),' accessed 18 August 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/175504?redirectedFrom=%27sell+the+pass%27.

/ You may also look most absurd with a miserable face.'[78] The illustration accompanying this short poem depicts a woman caught unawares, mid-gesture, in her bedroom, with a hairbrush in one hand and the other holding up the midriff of her dress; she stares at the viewer, startled to inertia. The 'female heart,' the poem maintains, 'must suffer, that is all that you can do.'[79] The illustrated woman, interrupted by the gaze of the reader, seems to stand as metaphor for the 'female heart,' which, as the text and accompanying drawing would have us believe, spends most of its time pursuing beauty and vanity, and the rest of its time being interrupted and (passively) suffering.

Such undermining of gender roles is common to Smith's exploration of a Britain preparing for war. *Over the Frontier* (1938), Smith's second novel, contains—in Severin's words—a shift from 'the "feminine" genre of the romance plot to the "masculine" genre of the adventure story.'[80] In this novel, Pompey becomes a spy in Germany, encouraged by her love interest Tom Satterthwaite. In one of the central images of the novel, Pompey dresses in a military uniform, hiding her gender, thereby both literally and figuratively assuming the mantle of a (male) soldier.[81] Pompey later admits to Tom that the military coat is 'detestable:'

> 'And the thoughts that go with it, they are so utterly detestable.'
> 'Any more of that Pompey, and I'll wring your neck, Pompey die Grosse or no Pompey die Grosse.'
> Pompey die Grosse. Pompey *der* Grosse.[82]

By referring to herself as 'Pompey der Grosse'—Pompey the Great—she is fashioning herself as a twentieth-century hero of an older heroic model: Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, from the late Roman Republic, who had in turn adopted the moniker from Alexander the

[78] Smith, 'Dear Female Heart,' in *Collected Poems*, 141.
[79] 'Dear Female Heart,' in *Collected Poems*, 141.
[80] Severin, 37.
[81] *Over the Frontier*, 217.
[82] Ibid, 228. Emphasis in the original.

Great; Smith, by consciously placing her alter-ego in this line of succession, highlights the amplified, legendary, military masculinity which 'Pompey Casmilus' is attempting to join.[83] Moreover, the use of gendered German articles shows how Pompey's identity shifts from the feminine 'die' to the masculine 'der.' The passage, with its macaronic movement between languages, also punningly marks this shift as a 'death' of the feminine, or a shift from (feminine) death (the 'die' follows immediately on Tom playfully threatening to wring her neck).

Certainly, Smith uses Pompey to explore the tensions between feminine and masculine selves: these tensions ultimately lead to Pompey's breakdown. She concludes the novel with thoughts of suicide, and the assertion that 'Power and cruelty are the strength of our life, and in its weakness only is there the sweetness of love.'[84] As such, Pompey offers a direct alternative to Susan Gubar's point that 'women in war literature by men are portrayed in a manner similar to that of the war posters,' that is, as sexualised Siren-figures apt to betray their country from either cunning or stupidity.[85] On the contrary, Smith was, as Severin notes, 'strongly anti-essentialist' and Pompey operates as a locus for Smith's postmodernist approach to identity, which would trouble any binary opposition between men and women (or indeed the literature of men and of women—the 'feminine romance' and the 'masculine adventure').[86]

However, for Pompey, the transgression from female alter-ego to masculine-coded spy is also inexorably a transition from good English subject to spy: a transition

[83] See Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2015), 270.
[84] *Over the Frontier*, 272.
[85] Susan Gubar, '"This Is My Rifle, This Is My Gun": World War II and the Blitz on Women,' in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, eds. Margaret R. Higonnet et al., (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987), 231, 240. See Appendix 1 for an example of this, the 'Keep mum, she's not so dumb!' campaign from 1942.
[86] Severin, 6.

which ultimately limits or forecloses the sense of fluid and flexible identity. As Gill Plain writes,

> Fascism is empowered through language; words are its most powerful weapon and because it manipulates them so successfully it is able to disguise its true intentions. Smith graphically illustrates this in *Over the Frontier* by turning Pompey's open-ended, free ranging, non-phallogocentric narrative into a closed and brutal narrative of Fascism.[87]

Pompey ends up, not a liberated and fluid subject, but self-hating and trapped in a 'galère,' in undesirable company: 'I think: How hateful you are, Pompey … I guess there is no hope in you, wedded to a vulgarity of absurd ambition … it is my fault I am in this galère, I have brought myself to this absurd pass.'[88] The novel probes fanaticism and the difficulties of opposing fascism without ending up a fascist oneself: as Kristin Bluemel writes, Pompey ends up 'in a fight that pits the "dotty idealismus" of the enemy against the pragmatism of English mercenaries and their ragtag troops.'[89] There is a double bind—opposing a political belief risks replicating it; ascribing to a political belief is the surest way of betraying it.

A similarly bleak perspective on loyalty and belief can be found in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, which—like Smith's *The Holiday*—was written during the war years, but published first in 1949. Bowen's protagonist, Stella Rodney, is told by the mysterious Harrison that her lover Robert Kelway is passing on important information to the enemy. She eventually confronts Robert with this accusation, which he denies, after which she returns to Harrison and accepts his offer to keep Robert safe. Harrison then

---

[87] Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 72-73.
[88] *Over the Frontier*, 267.
[89] Kristin Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 48.

rejects her, after which she returns to Robert, who reveals the accusations were correct: Robert then meets an ambiguous end, either leaping or falling to his death.[90]

The Heat of the Day, like *Over the Frontier*, is a spy novel, but where Smith employs absurdity and dreamlike abstraction, Bowen presents a more realist narrative. Both, however, question the belief in political affiliations, and demonstrate the dangers of subscribing to any. As Plain writes of *The Heat of the Day*: 'Individuality, the novel threatens to suggest, becomes meaningless in the moral climate of war.'[91] Equally, however, the two novels find a common ground in their shared concern that 'the forces of chaos and evil [are] internal rather than external.'[92] As soon as Stella and Pompey begin to entertain the power that comes with spying—with watching, observing, and thereby enacting control over their surroundings—they have succumbed to the forces they are ostensibly fighting through espionage.

The nature of their spying is, however, subtly different. Pompey is warned at the end of *Over the Frontier* to 'disinvolve, dissociate, hold a watching brief;' Stella, meanwhile, is 'listening for the listener, watching for the watcher.'[93] This is where Smith's writing diverges from Bowen's—her prose demands a similar examination of its 'open process' as that of her poetry. In *Over the Frontier*, this is a reminder that the narrative itself is about observing, documenting, and performing witness: without necessarily having the sense, as suggested in *The Heat of the Day*, that there are other clandestine forces, other spies, to be listened or watched for. In *The Heat of the Day*, the deceptive and clandestine workings of wartime espionage are implicated in relationships, and serve to undermine trust in loving relationships: after Robert deflects Stella from confronting him

[90] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998).
[91] Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, 168.
[92] Ibid, 71.
[93] *Over the Frontier*, 270; *The Heat of the Day*, 127.

about his undercover activities, he proposes to her, saying, 'I cannot bear you out of my sight.'[94] Once one knows what is to come, such a statement is doubled, and can be interpreted as coming from both Robert her lover, and Robert the spy. For Pompey, her complicity and espionage leads inevitably back to an isolation and destruction of individual identity: it is a matter of 'disinvolvement' and 'disassociation,' rather than romantic involvement or mutual observation and suspicion.

Although disinvolvement, isolation and dislocation were, as Plain argues, 'connected to a more general wartime concern with powerlessness,' for Smith and Bowen 'questions of power are equally questions of gender.'[95] Though Smith, as a woman, was bound by the cultural limitations of her time—to twist Huk's phrase, the 'cage of gender'— this did not stop her sceptically exploring her the gender norms and roles expected of her, and the power dynamics that underlay those. This marks her out from the other poets in this thesis. Bluemel argues that Smith 'deserves to be recognized as radical in her departure from the cultural norms for women and in her departure from the literary norms that were defined by the work of the men in the Auden Generation.'[96] These 'departures' are closely linked and, as the next section discusses, her departure from such literary norms was not just a matter of gender, but also of subject position, and how she reimagined the warzones of both world wars.

Understanding war: 'the poets are silent'

Smith's war poetry was inevitably conditioned by her knowledge of and attitude towards the First World War. As a young teenager, Smith held an ardent belief in 'the

[94] *The Heat of the Day*, 197.
[95] Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, 122.
[96] Bluemel, 66.

necessity of the 1914-18 war;' she had, according to Frances Spalding, 'shared in the widespread patriotic fervour.'[97] Barbara Berman further claims that Smith 'had read war poetry by all the greats and some of the unknowns of World War I,' and this poetry provided ample material for her fertile imagination.[98] Smith's knowledge of the war was not only literary, however. Spalding details Smith's acquaintance with the Somme veteran Sydney (Basil) Scheckell, for whom Smith penned the tribute 'A Soldier Dear to Us' in 1968. Scheckell was convalescing nearby in Palmers Green when Smith was attending the North London Collegiate (1917-1920). He occasionally visited the Smith family, and, Spalding speculates, 'may have known the Smiths when they lived in Hull.'[99] In Smith's later tribute, she articulates how Scheckell activated her imagination:

> Basil never spoke of the trenches, but I
> Saw them always, saw the mud, heard the guns, saw the duckboards,
> Saw the men and the horses slipping in the great mud, saw
> The rain falling and never stop, saw the gaunt
> Trees and the rusty frame
> Of the abandoned gun carriages.[100]

Another convalescent in Palmers Green, Tommy Meldrum, sent Smith a copy of Rupert Brooke's poems at the end of February 1919, yet it is not Brooke, but Robert Browning, that she uses to shape Basil's narrative.[101] In her unpublished essay 'A Very Pleasant Evening' (1946), she had written, anachronistically, about how Browning's poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' is 'such an exact spiritual description of the detail of the Flanders battlefield.'[102] Notably she does not aim for realism in describing battlefields in 'A Soldier Dear to Us' (despite the 'duckboards' and the 'gun carriages') but 'spiritual

---

[97] Spalding, 31.
[98] Barbera Berman, '*All the Poems* by Stevie Smith,' *TheRumpus*.net, 24 February 2016, http://therumpus.net/2016/02/all-the-poems-by-stevie-smith/
[99] Spalding, 29.
[100] Smith, 'A Soldier Dear to Us,' in *Collected Poems*, 606.
[101] See Spalding, 34.
[102] Smith, 'A Very Pleasant Evening,' in *Me Again*, 33-34.

description.' This poem is not a 'witnessing' (based on experience), but an imagining of war, dependent on literary precursors as much as raw details.

Such literary or intertextual framing of 'war' is not, of course, limited to Smith alone; it might be a necessary condition of war writing. As Kate McLoughlin writes, '[s]imultaneously impossible and necessary to convey, war gives rise to representations that are palimpsestic, self-reflexive, hypertextual.'[103] The fact, then, that Smith acknowledges the vision of war she had 'was the same / As the poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" / I was reading at school,' indicates her self-conscious intertextuality.[104] Choosing this Victorian quest poem—inspired by the final lines of *King Lear*—to contextualise a First World War experience is telling, and suggests not only an equivalence or emotional correspondence across historical periods, but also how the experience of war itself (and not just its poetic depictions) might be shaped by such literary forerunners. Browning was influential on the First World War poets, too: many of them, as Paul Fussell has established, were familiar with 'Childe Roland.'[105]

Scheckell's influence also taught Smith—according to Spalding—that 'painful things could be brushed off lightly without diminishing them.'[106] This idea underpins Smith's entire *oeuvre*, and the fact that she learned it from a convalescing First World War veteran, who survived the Somme, indicates how trauma (even second-hand trauma) can often lie beneath Smith's poetic use of whimsy, humour and lightness. In 'Mosaic,' one of a series of 'diary-like sketches' published in 1939 in *Eve's Journal*, Smith records the humdrum chats and streams of thought circling Palmers Green in the months before the

[103] McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7-8.
[104] Smith, 'A Soldier Dear to Us,' in *Collected Poems*, 606.
[105] See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 136.
[106] Spalding, 31.

war, with such comments as, 'perhaps we are already again at war, perhaps not.'[107] By simply accounting for her own, her Aunt's, and other female friends' perspectives, she uses a whimsical tone to cover darker concerns. Also, the March '39 'Mosaic' expresses her conflicting feelings about the oncoming war:

> Oh, sad echoing of fiendish laughter! Oh, the hollow laughter that goes echoing round the halls of hell upon these words. 'We have signed the Peace Pledge.' And already upon my eyes there is darkness and a great wind blowing over dead battlefields, and the stench of death without honour, and the ridiculous sad cry: We never knew.[108]

The imagery Smith uses in this extract is abstracted and general—her lack of detail is unsettling. Written in 1939, however, these abstract images juxtapose the First World War and the devastation of the trenches, with Chamberlain's declaration of 'Peace in our Time.' The fact that the cry is 'ridiculous' hints at Smith's impatience with the optimistic assumption that peace is possible: optimism requires a rejection of what was in living memory (that 'great wind blowing over dead battlefields'). The First World War did not just provide an imagistic template for the next war but undermined any easy assumption that peace was subsequently possible.

Smith also had first-hand contact, albeit briefly, with at least one soldier of the Second World War. In *Me Again*, the editors Jack Barbera and William McBrien include a letter Smith wrote to a member of the Royal Berkshire Regiment, John Gabriel, who had contacted her to say he had 'known and loved your poems for some time.'[109] Gabriel was an Intelligence Officer in the No. 3 Military and Air Mission (later re-formed as the No. 1 GHQ Liaison Regiment), and died en route to Cairo in April 1941 when a U-Boat attacked his ship.[110] Unfortunately, Smith's response was only written the day before Gabriel was

---

[107] Spalding, 141; Smith, 'Mosaic,' in *Me Again*, 105.
[108] 'Mosaic,' 106.
[109] Smith to John Gabriel, London, 7 April 1941, in *Me Again*, 276.
[110] Asher Pirt, *GHQ Liaison Regiment: A Nominal Roll with Short Biographies (Phantom)* (Walmer, 2011), 42. See also http://uboat.net/allies/merchants/crews/person/49600.html

reported 'missing, believed drowned.'[111] There is no further mention of Gabriel in either primary or secondary material currently available on Smith.

Scheckell and Gabriel example offered Smith examples of war as a masculine, soldierly experience; perhaps as a result, Smith was ambivalent about putting her own 'war experiences'—which did not fit this model—onto the page. Such ambivalence merges with cutting self-awareness in her most direct war lyric, the 1942 poem 'The Poets are Silent.' Composed at a time when newspapers and periodical editorials were repeatedly asking the question 'Where are the War Poets?,' this poem amounts to an avowal that war poetry had no responsibility to respond to public expectation, and neither did poets:

> There's no new spirit abroad,
> As I looked, I saw;
> And I say that it is to the poets' merit
> To be silent about the war.[112]

The opening line operates as an implicit justification for the poets' perceived silence: Smith's poem argues that the 'silence' of the poets is warranted. That there is no 'new spirit' abroad suggests that Smith is responding to the debates of her time, particularly Philip Tomlinson's 1939 *TLS* editorial (discussed in the Introduction), which claimed, '[t]his war has followed so close on the heels of the other that it conveys no sense of novelty to awaken the creative spirit.'[113] Smith's poem questions precisely the relationship between war and the creative 'spirit' that it awakens. 'Spirit,' originating from Latin *spiritus* meaning 'breath' or 'life,' is etymologically and semantically synonymous with inspiration, meaning both to inhale, and to be visited by the Muse—

---

[111] Smith to John Gabriel, London, 7 April 1941, in *Me Again*, 276.
[112] Smith, 'The Poets are Silent,' in *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, ed. James MacGibbon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 208. (Unfortunately, the 2015 edition of Smith's *Collected* contains a typo in this poem.)
[113] Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1939,

Smith's opening line then suggests that there was no new inspiration to be had during this War (even if there is 'old' inspiration).[114]

But what is the nature of that 'spirit' or inspiration (even when it is absent)? There is, in 'The Poets are Silent,' a stress placed on differences in perception: 'As I looked, I saw.'[115] By emphasising that 'looking' and 'seeing' are different, through the shift from active observer to passive receiver, Smith acknowledges that perception is an issue. The distinction, however, is not made clear (not made fully visible) and bespeaks uncertainty rather than authority: she also refuses to clarify if her sight is reliable, or simply beyond the reader's comprehension (we cannot be sure if what she 'saw' was the 'no new spirit abroad' or something else). This is complicated by the echo, in the second line, of *Revelation* 6:8: 'And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.' [116] This act of 'looking' then suggests both the apocalyptic horizon of war, and perhaps (somewhat sarcastically) the revelation of the poet's oracular vision: if it is Death that she 'saw,' then she does not share it with the reader.

The poem exemplifies, in Jonathan Hart's words, 'the topos of inexpressibility itself, expressing the inexpressible.'[117] In a poem that is not being silent about being silent about the war, the tension between speaking and silence is itself a comment on the role of the poet in wartime. Silence has a cultural weight when read alongside the ongoing governmental propaganda poster campaigns during the war, such as 'Keep mum, she's not so dumb' (with its puns on 'mum' and 'dumb').[118] If Smith is nodding to the 'Keep

---

[114] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'spirit, (n.),' accessed 16 July 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186867?rskey=iL8WgI&result=1&isAdvanced=false
[115] 'The Poets are Silent,' in *Collected Poems*, ed. MacGibbon, 208.
[116] Revelation 6:8 (KJV).
[117] Jonathan Hart, 'Representing the Second World War,' in *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189.
[118] See Appendix 1 for a reproduction of this image.

mum' campaign, her advocacy of silence is an act of duty in regards to national security; this, however, would be another layer of irony. There is a tension established in the closing lines of 'The Poets are Silent' between voicing opinion and discussing the war, a tension heightened by its editorial context. As Will May reveals in his notes to the *Collected Poems*, 'Smith was encouraged to revise or omit this poem … by her editor at Cape, who worried its "defeatist" tone would be seen as "hindering the war effort"': this poetic 'silence,' that is, might be a threat to or a fulfilment of national security.[119]

The visual dimension of the poem once more further complicates it. The drawing accompanying 'The Poets are Silent' depicts an androgynous figure wearing what seems to be a uniform, suggestive of either school or service—perhaps a schoolchild, a pageboy, or a young naval officer. (The fact that the gender of this figure of a 'war poet' is unclear is significant for the purposes of this thesis.) In the illustration to 'The Poets are Silent,' the androgynous figure has their right hand over their heart and their left one raised, as if swearing an oath, singing a patriotic anthem, or making a pledge. The overall effect of the illustration is to place a person in the position of truth-telling; this suggests that Smith is swearing to the reader she is being honest in the poem, that she pledges her word to be as it seems. In representing a speech act of truth within a poem that advocates silence, Smith also presents us with another irony: her word cannot be read as it seems because its meanings conflict the more it is read. The result is a poem that justifies its truth-telling capability, as well as its refusal to clarify that truth, rather than offering a concrete reason for championing silence: 'The Poets are Silent'—as May writes—'insists on its own inadequacy, on its failure to meet the task.'[120]

---

[119] *Collected Poems*, ed. May, 755.
[120] May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

But the poem's contradictions—or confusion about its self-justification—are key and become more apparent the deeper one 'looks' into the poem itself, and the limitations of language it has at its disposal. It is a poem that begins and ends in 'confusion.' 'Abroad' has another meaning of being 'perplexed', or 'confused';[121] 'war', meanwhile, originates from the Germanic root **wers*, which (as mentioned in the Introduction) also means 'to confuse, [or] perplex.'[122] 'The Poets are Silent,' then, begins and ends with internal linguistic reflections on confusion and discombobulation regarding the role of the poet in war. Language—even the most apparently transparent language—is beyond understanding or control; better than oaths or pledges, in this case, is the uttering of the need to be silent.

The complicated relationship between looking and speaking is central to the poem, and to *Mother, What is Man?* as a whole. Romana Huk argues that Smith elects 'to be "silent" by being self-observant' in this collection 'by documenting what she saw around her in her most intimate relations with the "too articulate world".'[123] Huk's assertion adds another possibility to the types of silence discussed in the Introduction: that of watchful documentation, the disinvolved, disassociated 'watching brief' of *Over the Frontier*.[124] In the novel, Pompey repeats this order to herself—'Hold a watching brief'—and thereby stresses the centrality of observing; earlier, she had thought to herself, 'remember and remember to be wary and watchful.'[125] This is as much an instruction to the reader as Pompey herself, and reflects Smith's own position: holding a 'watching brief' from the other side of some unspoken, invisible frontier. While Huk's point stands, then,

---

[121] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'abroad, (adv.), (prep.), and (n.),' accessed 16 July 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/594?rskey=vbItZO&result=2&isAdvanced=false
[122] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'war, (n.1),' accessed 16 July 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225589?rskey=Rfg4P6&result=1
[123] Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 277.
[124] *Over the Frontier*, 270.
[125] Ibid, 32.

it also strays too close to attaching a singular meaning to Smith's poetry, or poetic intentions. It can be said that Smith's poetry often uses imagery and motifs of spectating, but to claim that it attempted to 'document' oversimplifies her purposefully variable, ambivalent, sometimes contradictory language: being 'watchful,' 'holding a watching brief,' or 'seeing' do not necessarily have any outcome other than themselves (there is no resulting 'document').

This may in part explain the fraught relationship between poet and text in the 1942 poem 'Poet!:'

> Poet, thou art dead and damned,
> That speaks upon no moral text.
> I bury one that babbled but;
> Thou art the next. Thou art the next.[126]

Speaking 'upon' a 'moral text' suggests a discussion of, or oath on, the Bible—and the use of the pronoun 'Thou' is conspicuously allusive to the language of the King James Bible in particular. The repetition within the last line suggests the transience of the poet, as well as a sense of divinely ordained vocation. Huk maintains that the 'archaic diction offsets the uncertain seriousness of [the poem's] call for moralising,' while the concluding couplet 'leaves wide open the critique of all writing at her wartime moment, including her own:' the implication, then, is that the wartime writing Smith and her contemporaries were producing was lacking in (a religious) morality.[127]

Equally, however, the opening couplet could be read to mean that poets were 'dead and damned' if they failed to speak upon a moral text; that is, that they had a responsibility to be explicitly and avowedly moral in their writing—and Smith is calling for moral engagement over escapism. Smith was writing at a time that fixated on the

[126] Smith, 'Poet!' in *Collected Poems*, 190.
[127] Huk, *Between the Lines*, 277.

purpose of poetry, how it aided the war effort, and how it transcended its historical moment to offer universal truths: 'Poet!' then, in its apparent sincerity and probable irony, subtly calls into question what the role of the poet should be. If it is both sincere and ironic, what the poet 'speaks upon,' and the consequences of such speech, is a moot point: the poem subverts the idea—as the following section elaborates—that a poet's subject can, or should, be so easily set out.

Representing War: 'let the red blood flow'

When Smith as poet 'speaks upon' war, the issue of representing war on the page is brought to the fore. Her 1938 poem 'The Lads of the Village' presents this issue in sharp focus, making use of the literary traditions of the First World War while challenging its legacy. In so doing, it explores a cultural double vision at work in the 1930s, which looked back to the conflicts of the past, and forward, in psychological preparation, to the coming war.[128] The illustration accompanying 'The Lads of the Village' portrays such a double vision: an androgynous figure holds a pen aloft in their right hand, apparently interrupted by another androgynous figure, its heart punctured by a large cross, and its right hand on the other's shoulder. This might indicate that the presence of immediate suffering 'interrupts' the writing that has gone on before, so that all writing must recognise that suffering. However, it might also be a figurative representation of dissuasion—of the Muse, whose heart is perforated and bleeding, warning the poet that they should not write of wounds they have not experienced.

The opening lines of the poem focus attention on the writing subject—the poet herself—and the war poem she is composing:

---

[128] See Patricia Rae, 'Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.2 (2003): 246-75. doi:10.2307/3176003

> The lads of the village, we read in the lay,
> By medalled commanders are muddled away,
> And the picture that the poet makes is not very gay.
>
> Poet, let the red blood flow, it makes the pattern better[.][129]

The title suggests an elegy on young men leaving for war, as it contains both low- and high-brow allusions to older tales of war, in particular A.E. Housman's 'The lads in their hundreds,' and the popular First World War music hall song, 'Where are the Lads of the Village Tonight?'[130] The text itself arises out of the speaker reading 'in the lay,' rather than hearing the song; the distortion of reading something intended to be heard is augmented by the ambiguity of the word 'read,' which cannot be definitively identified as either the present or past tense. This confusion of media, and tenses, hints at a greater sense of discomfort at the 'picture that the poet makes,' which is 'not very gay.' Smith's understatement demonstrates an ambivalence that both reinforces the sense of a reality too terrible to discuss and sanitises that reality of the 'red blood flow[ing].' For instance, 'read in the lay' unambiguously aestheticises the 'pattern' of 'red blood': if read in the past tense, it can be glossed over as being an earlier, historic concern, and if read in the present, it sanitises the realities of war.

Moreover, rhyming 'medalled' and 'muddled' emphasises an atmosphere in which interpretation is not possible, in which the order, authority and validation associated with 'medalled commanders' becomes undermined. Smith's euphemistic phrasal verb 'to muddle away,' suggests, for Huk, 'the lack of an accurate one in language's repertoire for war.'[131] Smith is pushing at the limits of language here (one of the chief aims, as James Campbell argues, of war poetry), and this is part of a broader trend: the indirect

---

[129] Smith, 'The Lads of the Village,' in *Collected Poems*, 156.
[130] See A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1990); and Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (Ottawa, Canada: The Golden Dog Press, 1998), 196.
[131] Huk, *Between the Lines*, 266.

descriptors and euphemisms throughout the poem subversively highlight the artificial (and 'muddling') nature of all literary responses to war.[132] To return to the image of the 'red blood flow[ing]' as an example, there is a clear and grotesque link between the blood of the fallen men and the ink of the poet's pen. The blood, Smith asserts, 'makes the pattern better.' 'Pattern' indicates both a strong visual aspect—perhaps nodding to the idea of the body as a text, as something on which experience leaves patterns—a model, copy, or example, and also a recurring design or strategy: as a 'pattern,' it is not a one-off event, but part of a series of repeated offences, repeated aestheticizations of war.

Thus the word 'pattern' is itself repeated, appearing again in the concluding stanza:

> Oh sigh no more: Away with folly of commanders.
> This will not make a better song upon the field of Flanders,
> Or upon any field of experience where pain makes patterns the
> poet slanders.[133]

The 'folly' of the commanders is mirrored by that of the poet attempting to 'make a better song upon the field of Flanders / Or upon any field of experience.' This comparison betrays a condemnation of poetic reimaginings of front line combat. The instruction to poets to 'sigh no more,' to cease making poetry out of pain and war, is a direct quotation from *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever … To one thing constant never.'[134] The allusion offers a scathing critique of men's inconstancy, and disparages poetry that attempts to describe war: pain will always describe it more accurately. It acknowledges that the 'sigh' is pointless, because the vehicle for that

---

[132] James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,' *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999): 209.
[133] Smith, 'The Lads of the Village,' in *Collected Poems*, 156.
[134] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. A.R. Humphreys (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), 2.iii.61-4.

expression is overshadowed by its content: any attempt to represent war in words is a lyrical deception, or worse, a 'slander.'

'The Lads of the Village' raises serious questions about the good faith of war poets, and whether war poetry can ever amount to more than a slander. With the onset of the Blitz, however, Smith tried a different approach to 'spirit.' Her poem 'The Failed Spirit' addresses those who are 'isolate:'

> To those who are isolate
> War comes, promising respite,
> Making what seems to be up to the moment the most successful
> [endeavour
> Against the fort of the failed spirit that is alone for ever.
> Spurious failed spirit, adamantine wasture,
> Crop, spirit, crop thy stony pasture![135]

War, this poem ironically suggests, is a reprieve from solitude. War offers an opportunity for communal identity and victory, an antidote to failure. The convoluted syntax of the first four lines makes it difficult to grasp the poem's meaning: that war is a tonic against seclusion, and it forces even the most isolated people to be included in some kind of communal activity. Huk reads this poem as a proposal that 'human isolation or alienation rejoices in war.'[136] It is telling, then, that Smith chooses the word 'pasture,' the Latin root of which suggests 'spiritual nourishment,' as the last line condemns 'the failed spirit' to reaping no reward, since their pasture is 'stony,' they will ultimately get no 'respite.'[137]

Will May's note to this poem in the *Collected* maintains that Smith alludes to Thomas Gray's 'Ode to Adversity:' 'Bound in thy adamantine chain / The proud are taught

---

[135] Smith, 'The Failed Spirit,' in *Collected Poems*, 251.
[136] Huk, *Between the Lines*, 275.
[137] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'pasture, (n.),' accessed 4 September 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138655?rskey=ZokXMB&result=1

to taste of pain.'[138] Smith's use of the word 'adamantine,' however, bears a much more striking resemblance to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (which Gray also alludes to):

> Strength: Hephaestus, do your duty … Here is Prometheus, the rebel:
> Nail him to the rock; secure him on this towering summit
> Fast in the unyielding grip of adamantine chains.[139]

Strength (or, Kratos, in the original Greek), on behalf of Zeus, orders Hephaestus to bind the 'rebel' to the rock, to punish Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humankind. Smith, then, binds the 'failed spirit' in adamantine chains, and thereby indicates that 'those who are isolate' can find a metaphor for themselves in Prometheus, bound forever to an 'unyielding' prison. Prometheus is secured on a 'towering summit' of rock, just as the failed spirit is condemned to 'crop thy stony pasture.' In each case, respite and the 'failed spirit' are mutually exclusive. Smith has attempted to find a virtue in war, but ended on a barren, unforgiving rock. The poem suggests that the whole idea that war might rescue those who are isolate is 'spurious;' not even war can rescue those characterised by an 'adamantine wasture.'

In stark contrast to the earthbound cropping of the 'stony pasture' which concludes 'The Failed Spirit,' 'No More People'—which also appears in *Mother What Is Man?*—offers a bird's-eye view of the war, written in the voice of a bomber pilot. The pilot describes flying through the skies surrounded by 'moping' angels, 'wing sore,' who 'wish they were earth-born.'[140] The climax of the piece comes in a reflective moment when the pilot asks,

> Do they look sideways because they know
> That they will live to see the day when there are no more people?
> All right. All right.

---

[138] Thomas Gray, 'Ode to Adversity,' in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, eds. H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 10.
[139] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 20.
[140] Smith, 'No More People,' in *Collected Poems*, 243.

(I drop my bomb upon a church steeple.)[141]

The parenthetical addendum underscores how casual the pilot's release of the bomb seems to him. It has the air of a stage direction: the speaker is aware of the cruelly comedic timing of the bomb-dropping, the effect of which the reader cannot ascertain, as the poem finishes in parentheses. The relationship between the 'heavens' and the earth, and between inhabitants of the heavens, is also 'muddled' and unclear. The angels sadly 'plod' through heaven wishing they could be on earth, only to then see the bomber pilot attack a church, their own centre of belief on the ground. (The illustration accompanying the poem, an androgynous figure with wings and a halo, has a stern, angry expression, suggesting the angels' reaction to the bombed church.) The pilot may unconsciously be drawing a connection between himself, 'Passing at my pleasure's pace … / Above the sun on the lily-bright air,' and the angels who 'plod' and look on helplessly.[142] Certainly, the way in which they 'look' is once more important. In the poem, the angels look—ambiguously—'sideways.' This might indicate distrust, fear, or anger, perhaps exacerbated by the pilot's apparent indifference; but it might also suggest that the angels' way of looking is not the same as the pilot's, that he will not be able to envisage their point of view.

The parallels—or lack of them—between the pilot and the angels are also suggested by the form of the poem. It is composed of rhyming couplets until the pilot's doubting admission, 'But sometimes I have a feeling that my busy clatter / Has a mocking echo,' after which the poem drifts into free verse.[143] Significantly, the pilot's voice changes its rhythm once he observes the angels' reaction to his presence and actions (and the sense of there being a *mocking* echo). The pilot's colloquial appeasement, 'All right. All

[141] 'No More People,' in *Collected Poems*, 243.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.

right,' can equally be read as a statement of preparation to release the bombs, a statement that everything which came before his utterance is 'right,' or an eventual acquiescence to someone else's command: it is unclear, at the end, whose action it ultimately is to drop the bombs, who is the instigator of the destruction.

'No More People' serves as a useful medium for Smith's ongoing contemplation of isolation in opposition to community. Where the 'isolate' were representatives of 'failed spirit' who sought 'respite' in war, the pilot in 'No More People' is alone and absent-mindedly 'let[s] the engine carry' him.[144] These poems explore the tension between action and inaction, loneliness and sociability, living and death, but each can also be read as offering a commentary on the differences between 'writing' about war as a combatant or a bystander. Smith's poems consider whether or not writing a 'war poem' is equivalent to 'let[ting] the red blood flow', singing 'songs,' cropping a 'stony pasture,' or dropping a 'bomb upon a church steeple:' ultimately, they suggest (problematically) that it is comparable to all of these. Unlike Auden, MacNeice or Thomas, however, Smith does not appear particularly concerned with the ethical questions that might arise from this comparison.

This bypassing of ethical questions is an important part, in May's words, of Smith's 'self-positioning as a war commentator in the 1930s and 40s.'[145] The tonal ambiguities that it produces are present also, in possibly the most political of Smith's poems (and one that is explicit in its commentary about war), 'Voices against England in the Night.' In this poem she brings together references to propaganda, Nazism, and imperialism, all while discussing England's role in the war. As the title suggests, there are several conflicting voices in the poem: Hermione Lee maintains that in the first three stanzas it is 'clear that

[144] Smith, 'The Failed Spirit' and 'No More People,' in *Collected Poems*, 251, 243.
[145] May, 'Stevie Smith in Combat.'

this is the voice of [Joseph] Goebbels,' and that Smith 'opposes the pacifists and those who say that the empire is outworn.'[146] The poem opens with Goebbels addressing 'England,' personified through the trope of sexualized femininity:

> And as you sing the sliver slips from your lips,
> And the governing garment sits ridiculously on your hips.
> It is a pity that you are still too cunning to make slips.[147]

'Goebbels' sexualises and demeans his personification of England, emphasising the passivity, and objectification, of its 'lips' and 'hips.' The 'slips' in the poem suggest 'blunders' but it might also refer obliquely to the covering 'garment' that 'sits ridiculously,' hinting at the vulnerability of the female body, and by implication, the government; or, as the last stanza of the poem suggests, it might invoke the 'mantle' of Empire. This is another poem which can be read as a response to gendered wartime propaganda: the feminine image used as a synecdoche for national sovereignty is a direct predecessor of the propaganda poster campaigns war.

The voice that responds to Goebbels speculates, 'Perhaps England our darling will recover her lost thought / We must think sensibly bout our victory and not be distraught.'[148] But the risks facing the woman, as a synecdoche for the nation, are such that the responding voice concludes:

> Could not England, once the world's best,
> Put off her governing garment and be better dressed
> In a shroud, a shroud? O history turn thy pages fast![149]

The symbols of governance and control are falling away from 'England,' until 'she' is no more than a body ready for burial. That Smith presents her discussion of English military and political power within imagery of the (weak or dying) female body both invokes the

---

[146] Lee, *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, 199, 200.
[147] 'Voices against England in the Night,' in *Collected Poems*, 248.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

warnings from women's magazine propaganda, and underscores how such imagery 'sits ridiculously' in a larger discussion of nations at war, such as those suggested by the invocation of Goebbels.

As May mentions in his note to the poem, the reference to Goebbels may be a nod to his 1939 article, 'Children with their Hands Chopped Off,' in which he maintains that the vitriolic English propaganda of the First World War was what defeated Germany, and that English words were not to be trusted.[150] In this article, Goebbels argues:

> The [First World] war caught Germany entirely by surprise, proof that we had not wanted it … English propaganda turned the whole world against us. One had not thought them capable of it. The experts found its planning and execution brilliant. English propaganda was limited to a few powerful slogans.[151]

English propaganda was certainly powerful, using xenophobic images of Germans as 'the Hun' to extreme ends (illustrated by the slogan 'The Hun and the Home' from one propaganda campaign).[152] However, Goebbels is disingenuous, at best, to claim that Germany was caught by surprise by that war.

His article states, on behalf of the Nazi government, that 'Our advice to the propaganda experts in the Foreign Office is to get rid of their old lies and find better ones that will be worth our while to deal with.'[153] In Smith's poem, however, lies and propaganda are re-presented through Goebbels' imagined voice as 'songs:' 'England, you have been here too long, / And the songs you sing are the songs you sung / On a braver day. Now they are wrong.'[154] This is a curious metaphor (if not outright euphemism) which inevitably forces the reader to perceive the poem as a self-reflexive piece of

---

[150] See *Collected Poems*, 756.
[151] Joseph Goebbels, 'Children with Their Hands Chopped Off,' *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin College (Grand Rapids, MI). http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb27.htm
[152] See Appendix 3 for a reproduction of this image.
[153] Goebbels, 'Children with Their Hands Chopped Off.'
[154] 'Voices against England in the Night,' in *Collected Poems*, 249.

writing. 'Goebbels,' here, is curiously aligned with those critics who sought a 'new' war poetry that was different from, but could compete with, the poems of previous wars.

The context in which the poem was published is important. It appears in *The Holiday*, Smith's final novel, written in 1943, but published only in 1949 (the delay followed editorial differences and publishing difficulties during the war). The poem is offered as the response of the protagonist, Celia, to the possibility of Britain ceding control of the Indian subcontinent, and as such captures both Imperialist and colonial attitudes. Celia is exasperated by voices crying, 'England should go because she no longer governs:' 'Is not this an envious and superficial argument?' she asks.[155] Nevertheless, she concedes the wrongs of imperialism, and after citing the poem, asserts to her cousin, Caz,

> We are leaving India … it is the first time a great colonizing Power, not driven by weakness but in strength choosing to go, has walked out for conscience sake and for the feeling that the time has come. That is the answer to the voices in the night.[156]

It is apt, then, that Goebbels is present in her poem as the representative of the Third Reich: he operates as a symbol for invasion, oppression and destruction, against which British Imperialism, 'in strength choosing to go,' is thrown into sharp relief.

Celia, by reciting this poem in response to a questioning of Britain's Imperial occupation of the Indian subcontinent, is both replying to the 'voices,' and prodding the 'colonizing Power' into life with her answer: there is a self-allusion here through the phrase 'great colonizing Power' to the 'Colonizing Animal' in *Over the Frontier*—the 'darling pet Lion,' representing these 'these British Isles'—and to Pompey's 'hope' that 'the poets … [will] trouble his [the Lion's] dreams with the prods and pains he at times so richly deserves.'[157] Celia's choice to use poetry as her political response is then also a

---

[155] Smith, *The Holiday* (London, Virago, 1979), 128.
[156] *The Holiday*, 129.
[157] *Over the Frontier*, 105-06.

telling action in and of itself: it suggests that poetry is more adept at offering political commentary (and provocation) than she is. Such 'prodding' poems are not the songs that Goebbels had recommended England find; they may, though, be the kind of trouble-making poems Smith herself excelled in.

Post-war?

In *The Holiday*, Caz mournfully asserts, in the opening pages, 'I do not know … that we can bear not to be at war.'[158] Celia soon responds: 'Mark my words, Caz, crisis and exile are our lot.'[159] As two split aspects of Smith's alter-ego Pompey, Caz and Celia personify the ongoing destabilisation that pervades Smith's work. However, their despondent attitudes to the prospect of peace are shared: Celia asks Caz, 'where can one get this idea of a new world and how can one believe in it?'[160] The publishing history of *The Holiday* underlines the difficulty of representing this 'peace.' As Gill Plain notes,

> The novel was originally written during the war, but could not find a publisher—a situation perhaps attributable to its characters' enervating states of despair and suicidal melancholy—and it was not until Smith went through the manuscript inserting 'post' before each war reference, that the book was accepted.[161]

The addition of the word 'post-' demonstrates an astute understanding of the psychology of the peace, and the way in which the despair of war has translated into the despair of peace. Caz's assertion, moreover, suggests that the war was more emotionally bearable than the uncertainty of the 'post-war.' The post-war era did not offer much in terms of consolation, as Britain's social and economic infrastructure struggled to re-establish

---

[158] *The Holiday*, 8.
[159] Ibid, 9.
[160] Ibid, 92.
[161] Plain, *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 185.

itself, while Europe as a whole was devastated, both materially and psychologically. As Plain writes, 'The new "peace" that followed the conflict would prove similarly difficult to negotiate, as writers struggled to make sense both of past atrocity and a present that seemed, if anything, still more difficult to assimilate.'[162]

May, however, is uncertain about Smith's editorial decision:

> Does it point us once again to Smith the artless trickster, an author of contingency, or to a deeply complex writer whose casual adaptation of her own novel's setting from war to post-war points up the limitations of language in tracking such an ideological shift from conflict to peace?[163]

The crux of the issue for May here is whether or not, once more, to consider Smith a 'serious writer.'[164] If a study of her other wartime work, such as that above, underscores her sustained and complex interrogation of war and its impact on poetry, Smith's novel stratagem of changing 'war' to 'post-war' highlights the limitations of language in describing an individual's experience in moving from a wartime to a post-war, nigh post-apocalyptic, setting.

Ultimately, Smith's work offers (seriously) playful, performative, and subversive accounts of war. Smith's examination of the difficulties of representing or 'authoring' war—whether or not it stems from first-hand knowledge of its 'field of experience'—perplexes our inherited understanding of it. When the genre of war poetry implicitly includes only male combat poetry, it renders women, as Susan Schweik writes, 'silent and invisible and static': it 'suppress[es] our own dynamic and complex relations to systems of warmaking.'[165] It is to our 'merit', perhaps, not to let female war poets fall silent, even

---

[162] Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, 239.
[163] May, 'Stevie Smith in Combat.'
[164] Ibid.
[165] Susan Schweik, 'Writing War Poetry Like a Woman,' *Critical Inquiry* 13.3 Politics and Poetic Value (Spring 1987): 554. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343512

if that means—as in the discussion of Stevie Smith—a reconfiguration of what a 'war poet' is.

As I have discussed, Smith's challenge to critical convention is characterised by her own departure from many other female poets and novelists of her time who (as outlined above) took a much more active role in the war, or debates surrounding the war. Where Auden, MacNeice and Thomas struggled with issues of poetic authority and public expectation, the violence of representation and the threat of aestheticizing war by poeticising it, Smith wrote poetry that questioned, challenged, and ultimately subverted these issues. (MacNeice's concern with national ties and belief systems, however, offers a notable parallel to Smith.) Her writing demonstrates the difficulty of representing war verifiably, objectively, factually, and then plays exactly upon that difficulty by employing a tone and form that is deliberately ironic or eccentric. Smith thereby moved the spotlight away from the poet (or 'war poet'), towards the reader, who is put in a position of having to discern meaning, and to acknowledge that such meaning is not inherent, intended, or even—ultimately—'true.' This was largely enacted through a poetic method reliant on self-conscious artifice of language (which is, as Huk argues, a wider hallmark of war poetry).[166]

By showing the ways in which no one representation of war—or of anything—would be sufficient or definitive (there are always multiple 'voices', or illustrations to complicate the readings of poems), Smith's work offers an alternative to the tropes of *impossibilia* and *correctio*. Rather than writing of war as an 'unacknowledged legislator,' or as a poet blowing a 'trumpet call,' or someone seeking to ascertain objective fact, Smith

[166] Huk, *Between the Lines*, 284.

forces the reader to find what they consider the 'truth' among her poems.[167] If the meaning of a poem is only accessible through subjective interpretations, then the possibility of there being an objective truth which can offer a salve to problems posed by the war becomes increasingly dubious, perhaps impossible. Rather than an answer, or point, her poems leave the reader with silence, accusations of slander, or a casually dropped bomb.

[167] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments: Vol. I*, ed. Mary Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1840), 56-57; Tomlinson, 'To the Poets of 1940,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1939, 755.

Conclusion: 'the whole truth'?

> The public expected to find startling new genius between the covers of the slimmest of volumes by the slimmest of talents; who knew where he might lurk, that prophet, that Messiah, the War Poet? There were hundreds of young men, in and out of uniform, writing poems about the war, but the critics rejected most of them; they had in their minds a prototype of a War Poet to which these did not correspond. He was young, he was handsome, he was precocious, he was doomed; he was propaganda.[1]

In this extract from his 1969 study *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, Angus Calder succinctly highlights the core of public expectation. The war poet is, of course, gendered male in the critical consensus, and in many ways a 'Messiah.' Calder's conclusion—that the idea of the war poet was itself a type of propaganda—is a stark illustration of a 'crisis of writing' during the war: a crisis suggesting a 'turning point,' a judgement, and an act of discrimination as well as a period of great, decisive anxiety. How to choose what to write, and how to write about it, was a cause of great insecurity, not least because to adopt the prescribed model—as outlined retrospectively by Calder—would be to seal one's own doom.

As we have seen, in the years 1939-45, non-combatant poets faced a dilemma in attempting to navigate the circumstances of wartime living in London, the public expectation for poetic consolation, and the dangers of political writing. The shifting measures of authority led to an inevitable anxiety about power and responsibility. How poets were going to navigate the rise in biased accounts of the war through government-controlled media, the expectation to espouse First World War-style poetics, and their own true experiences of the conflict, were all to the forefront of critical debate as early as 1942: Charles William Brodribb, in the *TLS*, asks, 'Can anything like the whole truth about

[1] Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (London: Cape, 1969), 517.

so vast a subject, so ubiquitous a presence, as universal war, be revealed to any eye?'[2] The four main poets of this thesis demonstrated that Brodribb's question was, to a certain extent, rhetorical: 'the whole truth' of war is a 'vast' subject, which no poem can feasibly encompass. Yet, even as non-combatants, the war poets of this examination were expected to nevertheless showcase 'startling new genius' about it.

A brief summary of the main findings

This research was prompted by the question: how can one portray, represent, or talk about war? The main findings from my research pose a challenge to inherited understandings of both 'war poets' and 'war poetry.' Firstly, this thesis demonstrates that viewing 'war poetry' merely as 'combatant poetry' is limiting, reductive, and narrows our understanding of war experience—so, too, with defining 'war poets' as 'combatant poets.' Secondly, examining non-combatant poets allows us to parse more than military matters: it exposes the more universal problems of representation ethics, the 'use' or 'value' of poetry, and the discrepancy between poetic response and public expectations of poetry. This research brings the non-combatant poetry of the Second World War into debate with larger questions of the representation of war in the modern era: how can one discuss war in poetry without aestheticizing, appropriating, or politicising it? I argue that any attempt to represent war in poetry will likely also aestheticize, appropriate, or politicise it, but that is not to say that war poetry is always unethical, inappropriate, or propagandist. Poetry's failure to be comprehensive, suitable, or bipartisan is part of its remit: 'war poetry' as a category must fail to encompass its subject, otherwise it fails to be 'war poetry.' Hence the existence of tropes such as *impossibilia* and *correctio*.

[2] Charles William Brodribb, 'Poets in War,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1942, 391.

Thirdly, analysis of individual poets illustrated their sense of ownership—even when reluctant or delayed—and their attempts to navigate their own roles as 'war poets.' The notable exception here is Smith, who uses the war more as a backdrop than a fraught poetic subject, and insists that it is only poetry, not the poet, that holds significance. Nevertheless, each poet also demonstrates the fact that war poetry's emphasis on war experience must not necessarily be relegated to military experience. This is not just because the war came to London—in effect, on top of these poets' heads (except Auden, who nevertheless felt it deeply enough to write 'September 1, 1939' even from New York)—but because the total war of the Second World War underscored the fact that hand-to-hand combat, genocide, civil war, civilian oppression, air raids, and solitary death are all on a scale of war experience, none of which can be objectively taken as more 'experiential' than another. Collectively, these poets' war writings illustrate the main conclusion of this thesis: that the failure to poetically represent war *is* a representation of war experience, as war cannot be contained within any poem.

Limitations of research and recommendations for future research

One main limitation of this research is its narrow focus on poets of the London literary scene, who—for the most part—were all white, educated, English-language writers. This has excluded the important voices of other experiences of the Second World War, such as American, Italian, Polish, Russian, and German poetry, as well as the vast amount of French Resistance writings.[3] For the purpose of looking at a generation of

[3] For example: American poetry, see Randall Jarrell, and others in Oscar Williams, ed., *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century* (New York: The John Day Company, 1945); Italian poetry, see Primo Levi, Giuseppe Ungaretti or Eugenio Montale; German poetry, see Bertolt Brecht; French Resistance writings, see Simone DeBeauvoir, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, René Char; Polish poetry, see Anna Swir, and Osip Mandelstahm; Russian poetry, see Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak.

comparable poets, it also excluded some major literary events of the time, such as the publication of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the works of Ezra Pound, or Scottish poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid. For reasons of space, it does not include other non-combatant poets in London, such as Edith Sitwell, Cecil Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender; nor does it cover veteran war poets of the First World War still writing throughout the Second World War, such as Siegfried Sassoon or Robert Graves.

Poetry is, of course, not the only literary form of the period: both prose (in particular, the short story) and film are important artistic modes of the Second World War, in terms of their cultural sway, and subsequent critical attention. Within the remit of non-combatant poetry, both prose and film were necessarily excluded; however, any discussion of non-combatant experience of the Second World War would benefit from comparison with the work of major prose writers such as Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Elizabeth Bowen. So, too, for reasons of space, this thesis has not included more relevant cultural materials such as propaganda films and posters, the visual and musical arts, and philosophical developments of the period. In Gill Plain's words, 'the fragments of prose and poetry produced in this period acquire complex cumulative meanings as incremental parts of a much larger, communal narrative of war.'[4] The remit of this study would also benefit hugely from incorporating comparable German writings of the war, including that by refugees and the propaganda writings of the Third Reich.[5] For future research, then, examinations of non-combatant poetry of the Second World War would be greatly expanded and improved by including writings of other countries involved in the conflict. Interpretation of war poetry in Britain is still coloured by a form of First and

[4] Plain, *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar, and "Peace"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 8.
[5] For example of refugee writings, see the work of Paul Célan, Günter Kunert or Nelly Sachs.

Second World War-obsession that might not be the case in other countries. Expanding beyond Anglophone writing, then, could offer a means of challenging this thesis's tenets of the importance of 'failure' to represent war, the shifting perceptions of the role of the poet, and the influence of critical reviews in shaping modern understandings of the poetry of the period.

Coda: 'counter the racket'

No aspect of daily—or nightly—life went untouched for poets based in, or from, the London literary scene. Ever since the Zeppelin raids on London in 1915, the prospect of war brought with it panic about aerial warfare, and—in Mark Rawlinson's words—'fantasies and prophecies of airborne destruction; gas and germ warfare, and high explosive.'[6] London had been preparing for this possibility before the war broke out, as MacNeice details in canto vii of *Autumn Journal*, with the felling of trees on Primrose Hill: 'They want the crest of this hill for anti-aircraft, / The guns will take the view / And searchlights probe the heavens for bacilli / With narrow wands of blue.'[7] The natural world is being destroyed for military defences even when, MacNeice notes, 'nobody can tell / What will happen next.'[8]

In a remarkable anecdote of tenacity during bombardment, John Lehmann describes a reading Edith Sitwell gave in autumn 1944, during one of the first V-1 flying rocket attacks on London:

---

[6] Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 69; see also Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124.
[7] Louis MacNeice, Canto VII, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber, 2012), 22-3. Auden also writes of his concern regarding chemical warfare in his 1937 poem 'James Honeyman,' in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1994), 162-66.
[8] Canto V, *Autumn Journal*, 15.

> She had, I believe, never experienced a doodle-bug raid before; but she seemed quite unperturbed…
> the rattle grew to ominous proportions … Edith merely lifted her eyes to the ceiling for a moment, and, giving her voice a little more volume to counter the racket in the sky, read on.[9]

London was, certainly, the Home Front, and the off-hand belittling nickname given to the German rockets exemplifies an understated self-control, a *sang-froid*, reminiscent of trench humour in the First World War, or what Paul Fussell terms 'British Phlegm:' 'The trick here is to affect to be entirely unflappable; one speaks as if the war were entirely normal and matter-of-fact.'[10] There is, here, a strange similarity between the First World War trench poets, and the air raid survivors of the Second World War: both shared the sense of encroaching occupation, the terror of random attacks, and the threat of widespread destruction.

Sitwell's decision to 'counter the racket' by raising her voice is an apt metaphor for the responses offered by the non-combatants of the Second World War. Though threatened by imminent ruin, they continued writing poetry, even if it could not be properly 'heard' by their public, or the critics. What this thesis aimed to accomplish was allowing a space in which their voices could be listened to and engaged with on their own terms. It discovered that World War Two poetry is characterised as much by the 'ominous' 'rattle' of bombs, the sound of gunfire, and the whine of air raid sirens, as it is by the calm of the 'All Clear,' the ambivalent peace of the 'post-war,' and the quiet of graveyards. That being said, this research also illustrates that the relationship between the rattle of the bombs and the 'All Clear' is complicated, in terms of the ethics of representation, and the poets' guilt, involvement, and response to war, whether in denial, as rejection, or as propagandistic sloganizing. While the non-combatant poets were

[9] John Lehmann, *I Am My Brother: Autobiography II* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1960), 280-81.
[10] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 181.

accused of being 'silent,' they were nevertheless speaking, even 'howling' to, and for, their art. The poets 'read on,' so, too, must their readers.

War refracts and concentrates issues that deal with poetry's use and worth—namely, what the function of (war) poetry can be, and how the poet can respond to the crises of their time. For Auden, poetry 'makes nothing happen,' yet it can still 'Show an affirming flame:' it is not a political tool, but a personal prayer and source of courage. Auden's work, however, is most illustrative in its journey to these assertions, and his continued quest to find the appropriate response to the war. For MacNeice, poetry 'must be honest before anything else:' it is society's 'conscience,' a removed perspective which can offer guidance and solace. MacNeice thereby demonstrates a vital non-partisan approach to the war, which is often missing from accounts of the conflict. For Thomas, poetry was 'a medium, not a stigmata on paper:' it treats language as if it were physical, incarnational, and so representing actual violence through language becomes a kind of metalinguistic violence. Thomas's work exemplifies a self-reflexive exploration of the ethics of representation. For Smith, we do not know what poetry meant, only her varied and ironic comments on the poet, who is, alternately, a figure that 'slanders' 'patterns' from the 'field of experience,' killed by 'neglect,' or 'dead and damned' for speaking (or not speaking) upon 'a moral text.' Her tricky, subversive, evasive writing refuses clarification, and as such, offers the final word on representing war. Her determination to represent it—by making it unrepresentable, unclassifiable, and unresolved—is what led the decisive finding of this thesis: that war poetry must, by its nature, fail to represent its subject, and that it is its constant failure to do so that gives it depth and clarity.

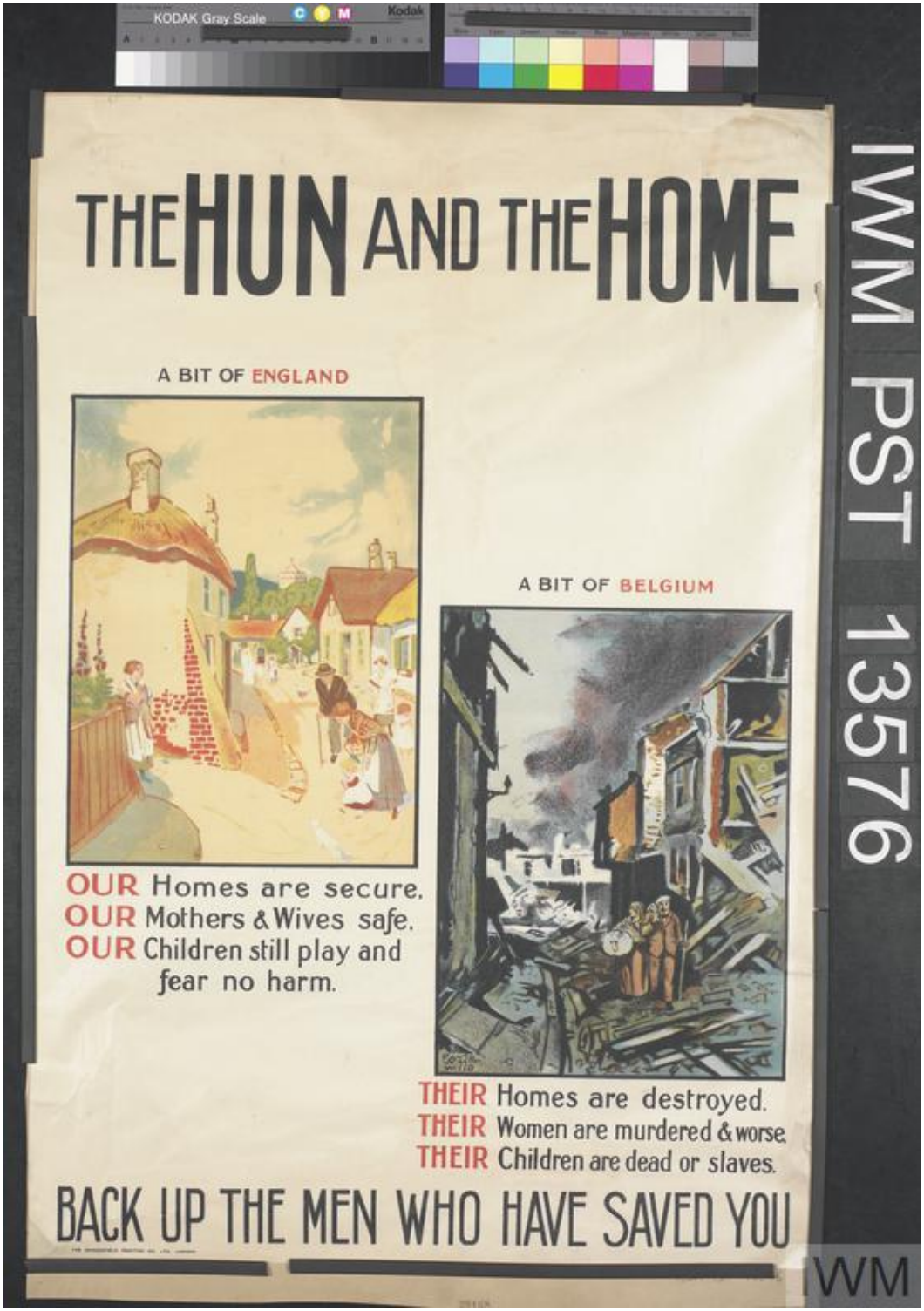
Appendix 1

'Keep mum, she's not so dumb!' (1942)
© IWM (Art.IWM PST 4095)
http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/9736

Appendix 2

'Worth Fighting For—Worth Saving For' (1944)
© IWM (Art.IWM PST 16425)
http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/33378

Appendix 3



'The Hun and the Home' (1918)
© IWM Art.IWM PST 13576
http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/2143

Bibliography

Abbey Theatre Digital Archive. Webpage at National University of Ireland, Galway, accessed 5 October 2017. https://abbeytheatre.nuigalway.ie:8443/component/Main/17ToA3p1yfaBss9G2InA3w..a

Ackerman, John. *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.

———, ed. *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts*. London: J.M. Dent, 1995.

———. *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Adorno, Theodor. 'Cultural Criticism and Society.' In *Prisms*, edited by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber, 17-34. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.

Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*. Translated by Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books, 1961.

Aldington, Richard. *Death of a Hero*. Ottawa, CA: The Golden Dog Press, 1929.

Allen, Nicholas. 'Louis MacNeice and Autumn's Ghosts.' In *That Island Never Found: Essays and Poems for Terence Brown*, edited by Nicholas Allen and Eve Patten, 73-90. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007.

Allen, Peter. 'The Meanings of "An Intellectual": Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century English Usage.' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 55.4 (Summer 1986): 342-358.

Alvarez, Al. 'The New Poetry, Or Beyond the Gentility Principle.' Introduction to *The New Poetry: An Anthology*, 21-32. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944. Perseus Digital Library Project, Tufts University.

http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1253a

Auden, W. H. *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue.* Edited by Alan Jacobs. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

———. *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Edited by Edward Mendelson. London: Faber, 1994.

———. *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*. Edited by Edward Mendelson. London: Faber, 1966.

———. *The Double Man*. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. *For the Time Being*. New York: Random House, 1944.

———. Introduction to *Poems of Freedom*. In *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson, 371-2. New York: Random House, 1977.

———. Introduction to *Intimate Journals* by Charles Baudelaire, translated by Christopher Isherwood, 13-28. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006.

———. 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats.' In *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Vol. II: 1939-1948*, edited by Edward Mendelson, 3-7. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

———. 'W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War.' In *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II 1939-1948*, edited by Edward Mendelson, 152-3. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Auden, W. H. and Christopher Isherwood. *Journey to a War*. London: Faber, 1986.

———. *On the Frontier*. In *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928-1938*, edited by Edward Mendelson, 357-418. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Auden, W.H. and Louis MacNeice. *Letters from Iceland*. London: Faber, 1985.

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Beard, Mary. *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*. London: Profile Books, 2015.

Bellamy, Dawn. '"Others have come before you": The Influence of Great War Poetry on Second World War Poets.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 299-314. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Berman, Barbera. '*All the Poems* by Stevie Smith.' *TheRumpus.net* 24 February 2016. http://therumpus.net/2016/02/all-the-poems-by-stevie-smith/

Bluemel, Kristin. *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Bolton, Jonathan. *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt during the Second World War*. London; Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997.

Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Heat of the Day*. London: Vintage, 1998.

———. 'Contemporary.' *The New Statesman*, 23 May 1942, 340.

Brearton, Fran and Edna Longley, eds. *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and His Legacy*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012.

Brodribb, Charles William. 'Poets in War.' *Times Literary Supplement* Issue 2114 (8 August 1942): 391.

Brodribb, Charles William and Hugh l'Anson Fausset. 'The Poet's Dilemma.' *Times Literary Supplement* ,24 March 1945, 140.

Brown, Richard Danson. 'Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War.' *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.3 (Spring 2005): 109-129.

Brown, Terence. *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975.

Calder, Angus. *The People's War: Britain, 1939-45*. London: Cape, 1969.

Calder-Marshall, Arthur, Cyril Connolly, Bonamy Dobrée, Tom Harrisson, Arthur Koestler, Alun Lewis, George Orwell, and Stephen Spender. 'Why Not War Writers? A Manifesto.' *Horizon*, October 1941, 236-239.

Campbell, James. 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism.' *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999): 203-215.

Campbell, Roy. *Talking Bronco*. London: Faber, 1946.

Carter, Ronald, ed. *The Thirties Poets—'The Auden Group': A Casebook.* London: Macmillan, 1984.

Cecil, Lord David. 'The Author in A Suffering World: War's Impact on our Literature.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 January 1941, 18+.

Civello, Catherine A. *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997.

Clark, Kenneth. 'Eclipse of the Highbrow.' *Times*, 27 March 1941, 5.

———. 'Eclipse of the Highbrow.' *Times*, 7 April 1941, 5.

Clutton-Brock, Alan Francis. 'September Crisis.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1939, 294.

Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

'Combatant.' 'Letter: Why Not War Writers?' *Horizon*, December 1941, 438.

Connolly, Cyril. 'Comment.' *Horizon*, February 1940, 68-71.

———. 'Comment.' *Horizon*, January 1941, 5-7.

———. 'Comment.' *Horizon*, April 1948, 232-35.

Coulton, Barbara. *Louis MacNeice in the BBC*. London; Boston: Faber, 1980.

Cranston, Maurice. 'Poet's Retreat.' *John O'London's Weekly*, 6 February 1948, 50.

Creswell, Robyn. 'Poetry in Extremis.' *The New Yorker* 12 February 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/poetry-in-extremis

Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Cunningham, Valentine. ed. *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980.

Currey, R. N. *Poets of the 1939-45 War*. London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1960.

Davenport-Hines, Richard. *Auden*. London: Vintage, Random House, 2003.

———. 'Auden's life and character.' In *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, edited by Stan Smith, 15-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Davidson, Mildred. *The Poetry is in the Pity*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972.

Davison, Peter, ed. *George Orwell: All Propaganda is Lies, 1941-1942*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1998.

Day Lewis, Cecil. 'Themes and Subjects in Modern Poetry.' *The Listener*, 5 February 1953, 228.

Day Lewis, Cecil and Paul Engle. 'Modern Poetry—English and American.' *The Listener,* 15 May 1935, 852.

Deane, Patrick. *At Home in Time: Forms of Neo-Augustanism in Modern English Poetry*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

Deer, Patrick. 'Auden and Wars.' In *W.H. Auden in Context*, edited by Tony Sharpe, 150-159. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Deutsch, Babette. 'War Poetry then and Now.' *The New Republic*, 21 April 1941, 565-67.

Donne, John. 'Death's Duell; or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body.' London: B. Alsop, and T. Fawcet, 1633. *Early English Books Online*. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:25485

Douglas, Keith. 'Poets in this War.' *TLS*, 23 April 1971, 478.

Dowson, Jane. 'Women Poets and the Political Voice.' In *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, edited by Maroula Joannou, 46-62. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

'Eclipse of the Highbrow.' *Times*, 25 March 1941, 5.

Eliot, T. S. 'Poetry in Wartime.' *Common Sense*, October 1942, 351.

———. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' In *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition—The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, edited by Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, 105-114. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, and Faber, 2014.

———. *The Waste Land*. In *The Complete Poems & Plays*, 59-80. London: Faber, 2004.

Ellis, Hannah, ed. *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Fausset, Hugh l'Anson. 'Challenge to the Poets.' *TLS*, 23 January 1943, 43.

———. 'On Going to the Wars.' *TLS*, 10 January 1942, 21.

———. 'Songs of Emergency.' *TLS*, 8 August 1942, 392.

———. 'War-Time Poets.' *TLS*, 5 September 1942, 440.

Featherstone, Simon. 'Women's Poetry of the First and Second World Wars.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 445-460. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Ferris, Paul. *Dylan Thomas: The Biography–New Edition*. London: J.M. Dent, 1999.

Fitzgerald, Robert. 'From the Notebook of Robert Fitzgerald.' *Erato* 2.3 (Fall-Winter 1986): 1.

Forché, Carolyn, ed. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994.

———. ‘Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art.’ *Poetry* 198.2 (May 2011): 159-74.

———. ‘Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness: A Column.’ *The American Poetry Review* 22.2 (March/April 1993): 9-16.

Forché, Carolyn and Duncan Wu, eds. *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014.

Fuller, John. *W.H. Auden: A Commentary*. London: Faber, 1998.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Gardner, Brian, ed. *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-45*. London: Methuen, 2007.

Gillis, Alan. ‘Louis MacNeice: The Living Curve.’ In *Irish Poetry of the 1930s*, 28-61. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Goebbels, Joseph. ‘Children with Their Hands Chopped Off.’ *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin College (Grand Rapids, MI). http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb27.htm

Goethals, Helen. ‘“The Muse that Failed”: Poetry and Patriotism during the Second World War.’ In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 362-376. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Goodby, John. ‘Dylan Thomas and the poetry of the 1940s.’ In *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, edited by Michael O’Neill, 858-878. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

———. *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

———. '"The Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive": Dylan Thomas as Surrealist.' In *Dada and Beyond, vol. 2: Dada and its Legacies*, edited by Elza Adamowicz and Eric Robertson, 199-223. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi Press, 2012.

Goodland, Giles. 'John Goodland and the Apocalyptic Movement: notes from the son of a literary footnote.' *PN Review* 154, 30.2 (November/December 2003): 22-25.

Graham, Desmond. *Keith Douglas: A Biography*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

———, ed. *Poetry of the Second World War: An International Anthology*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1995.

Graves, Robert. 'War Poetry in this War.' *The Listener* 23 October 1941, 566+.

Gray, Thomas. 'Ode to Adversity.' In *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, edited by H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson, 10. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

Green, Henry. *Caught*. London: Harvill, 1991.

Grey, Viscount Edward. *Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916*. Vol. II. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925.

Grigson, Geoffrey. 'Sad, glad and serious.' *The Guardian*, 7 August 1975, 9.

———, ed. *New Verse* Auden Double Number 26-27, November 1937, 1-48.Gubar, Susan. '"This Is My Rifle, This Is My Gun": World War II and the Blitz on Women.' In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Margaret R. Higonnet et al., 227-259. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987.

Hamilton, Ian. Introduction to *The Poetry of War: 1939-1945*, edited by Ian Hamilton, 9-12. London: New English Library, 1972.

Hanley, James. *No Directions*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1990.

Hardie, Alec M. 'Poetry between the Wars.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 March 1946, 121-123.

Hart, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Hartley, Jenny. *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*. London: Virago, 1997.

Heaney, Seamus. 'Frontiers of Writing.' In *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, 186-203. London: Faber, 1995.

Hendry, J.F. 'Writers and Apocalypse.' Introduction to *The New Apocalypse: An Anthology of Criticism, Poems and Stories*, edited by J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece, 9-15. London: Fortune Press, 1939.

Hewison, Robert. *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

Higonnet, Margaret R., Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz, eds. *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987.

———. Introduction to *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Margaret R. Higonnet et al., 1-18. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987.

Hill, Geoffrey. 'Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective.' *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 398-418. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hobsbaum, Philip. 'Where are the War Poets?' *Outposts*, Summer 1964, 21-23.

'The Horrors of Lublin.' *Times*, 12 August 1944, 3.

House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. *Commons Sitting of Thursday, 13th June, 1940.* Vol. 361, c.1361. Commons Hansard Archives Online.

http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/13/military-service-british-citizens-abroad

Housman, A.E. 'A Shropshire Lad.' New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1990.

Huk, Romana. *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Hynes, Samuel. *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*. London: Pimlico, 1976.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Christopher and his Kind*. London: Vintage, 2012.

Jacobs, Alan. 'Beyond Romanticism: Auden's Choice of Tradition.' *Religion & Literature* 21.2 (1989): 61-77.

Jenkins, Nicholas. 'Auden in America.' In *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, edited by Stan Smith, 39-54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Joannou, Maroula, ed. *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

———. 'The Woman Writer in the 1930s—On Not Being Mrs Giles of Durham City.' In *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, edited by Maroula Joannou, 1-15. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Jones, Daniel. *My Friend Dylan Thomas*. London; Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1977.

Jones, Hester. 'W.H. Auden and the Deep Language of Poetic Prayer.' In *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II*, edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and John Took, 205-220. London; New York: Routledge, 2016.

Keery, James. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 171, 33.1 (September/October 2006): 56-62.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 151, 29.5 (May/June 2003): 49-54.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 152, 29.6 (July/August 2003): 57-62.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 154, 30.2 (November/December 2003): 26-32.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 156, 30.4 (March/April 2004): 40-42.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 159, 31.1 (September/October 2004): 45-49.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 164, 31.6 (July/August 2005): 57-61.

———. 'The Burning Baby and the Bathwater.' *PN Review* 170, 32.6 (July/August 2006): 59-65.Kendall, Tim. *Modern English War Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

———, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Kershaw, Ian. *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949.* London: Penguin Books, 2016.

Kirsch, Arthur. *Auden and Christianity*. New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2005.

Knowles, Sebastian. *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

Lassner, Phyllis. *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own.* London: Macmillan, 1997.

Lee, Hermione, ed. *Stevie Smith: A Selection*. London: Faber, 1983.

Lehmann, John. 'Foreword.' *Penguin New Writing* 3, February 1941, 7-8.

———. *I Am My Brother: Autobiography II*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1960.

———. *New Writing in England*. Critics Group Press, 1939.

Lewis, Alun. *Letters to My Wife*. Edited by Gweno Lewis. Cardiff: Seren Books, 1989.

———. *Collected Poems: Alun Lewis*. Edited by Cary Archard. Bridgend: Seren, 1994.

'The Listener's Book Chronicle.' *The Listener* , 22 August 1940, 282.

'The Listener's Book Chronicle.' *The Listener* , 19 October 1939, 780+.

Longley, Edna, ed. *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 2000.

———. *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*. London: Faber, 1988.

———. *Poetry in the Wars*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986.

Longley, Michael, Andrew Motion, Jon Stallworthy, and Santanu Das. 'War Poetry: A Conversation.' In *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, edited by Santanu Das, 257-268. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Lucas, John. *Second World War Poetry in English*. London: Greenwich Exchange, 2013.

Lycett, Andrew. *Dylan Thomas: A New Life.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.

MacGibbon, James, ed. *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985.

MacKay, Marina, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

———. *Modernism, War and Violence*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

———. *Modernism and World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

MacNeice, Louis. 'A Brilliant Puritan.' *The Listener*, 8 December 1938, VIII.

———. *Autumn Journal*. London: Faber, 2012.

———. 'Blacklegs.' Unpublished manuscript, late 1939. Berg Collection MSS MacNeice. The New York Public Library, New York.

———. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Peter McDonald. London: Faber, 2007.

———. *I Crossed the Minch*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007.

———. *Letters of Louis MacNeice*. Edited by Jonathan Allison. London: Faber, 2010.

———. 'Obituary.' *Poetry Foundation* 56.2 (May 1940): 61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20582117.

———. '*On the Frontier*. By W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood.' In *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser, 101-03. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

———. *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. London: Faber, 1941.

———. *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*. Edited by Alan Heuser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

———. *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*. Edited by Alan Heuser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

———. *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography.* Edited by E. R Dodds. Preface by Derek Mahon. London: Faber, 2007.

———. 'Tendencies in Modern Poetry.' *The Listener*, 27 July 1939, 185-6.

———. 'Traveller's Return.' *Horizon*, February 1941, 110-117.

Maud, Ralph. *Where Have the Old Words Got Me? Explications of Dylan Thomas's 'Collected Poems.'* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003.

May, William. *Stevie Smith and Authorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

———. 'Stevie Smith in Combat.' *The Oxonian Review* 4.2 (March 2005). http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/stevie-smith-in-combat/

McDonald, Peter. *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

———. 'Louis MacNeice's War.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 377-397. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

———. '"Silly Like Us": Anglo-Irish Accommodations.' In *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*, 189-216. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

McKinnon, William T. *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.

McLoughlin, Kate. *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

———. 'War and words.' In *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, edited by Kate McLoughlin, 15-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Mehta, Diane. 'A Chain on the Great Feelings.' *The Paris Review* 11 February 2014. http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/02/11/a-chain-on-the-great-feelings/

Mellor, Leo. *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Mendelson, Edward. *Early Auden*. London: Faber, 1981.

———, ed. *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*. New York: Random House, 1977.

———. *Later Auden*. London: Faber, 1999.

Mengham, Rod. 'British fiction of the war.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of World War II*, edited by Marina MacKay, 26-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Montefiore, Janet. *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Nashold, James and George Tremlett. *The Death of Dylan Thomas*. Edinburgh; London: Mainstream, 1997.

'New Novels: Personal and Political Problems.' *The Scotsman*, 20 January 1938, 13.

Nicholson, Linda J. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York; London: Routledge, 1990.

'Noblest of Peace Poems.' *Times Literary Supplement,*19 October 1940, 531.

North, Michael. 'World War II: the city in ruins.' In *The Cambridge History of 20th Century Literature*, edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, 436-452. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Orr, David. 'Freely Rhymed: "All the Poems of Stevie Smith."' *The New York Times*, 22 April 2016.

Orr, Peter, ed. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*. London: Routledge, 1966.

Orwell, George. 'Inside the Whale.' In *A Collection of Essays*, 210-251. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1970.

———. 'As I Please.' In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 3: As I Please 1943-1945*, edited by Sonia Orwell an Ian Angus, 178-81. London: Secker and Warburg, 1968.

'Other New Books.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 March 1935, 161.

Panter-Downes, Mollie. *London War Notes: 1939-1945*. Edited by William Shawn. London: Persephone Books, 2014.

Patey, Douglas Lane. *The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

Pearsall, Cornelia D.J. 'The War Remains of Keith Douglas and Ted Hughes.' *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 524-541. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Phillips, Sarah, Paddy Allen, Matt Fidler, and Jason Rodrigues. 'The blitz 1940-1941: an interactive timeline.' *The Guardian*, 7 September 2010.

http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2010/sep/07/blitz-timeline-second-world-war

Piette, Adam. 'Keith Douglas and the poetry of the Second World War.' In *The Cambridge Companion to 20th Century English Poetry*, edited by Neil Corcoran, 117-130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-45*. London; Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995.

———. 'War poetry in Britain.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of World War II*, edited by Marina MacKay, 13-25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

———. 'World War II: Contested Europe.' In *The Cambridge History of 20th Century Literature*, edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, 417-435. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Pikoulis, John. *Alun Lewis: A Life*. Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1984.

Pirt, Asher. *GHQ Liaison Regiment: A Nominal Roll with Short Biographies (Phantom)* (Walmer, 2011), 42. http://uboat.net/allies/merchants/crews/person/49600.html

Plain, Gill. *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace.'* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

———. *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by Desmond Lee. 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

'Posthumous Award for Dylan Thomas.' *Times*, 21 December 1953, 5.

'Prisoners Used In Gas Tests.' *Times*, 16 December 1943, 3.

Quinn, Antoinette. *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001.

Rae, Patricia. 'Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain.' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.2 (2003): 246-275. doi:10.2307/3176003.

Raitt, Suzanne and Trudi Tate, eds. *Women's Fiction of the Great War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Rawlinson, Mark. *British Writing of the Second World War*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

Reed, Henry. 'Poetry in War Time.' *The Listener*, 25 January 1945, 100.

Reeves, Gareth. ''This is plenty. This is more than enough': Poetry and the Memory of the Second World War.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 579-591. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Reilly, Catherine W., ed. *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse from the Second World War*. London: Virago, 1984.

———, ed. *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*. London: Virago, 1981.

''Reprisal' Camp in Belgium.' *Times*, 10 January 1942, 3.

Richter, David, ed. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 3rd ed. Boston; New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.

Riley, Peter. 'Thomas and Apocalypse.' *Poetry Wales* 44.3 (Winter 2008-09): 12-16.

Ross, Alan. 'Third Avenue Eclogue.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1948, 596.

Saltzman, Rachelle. *A Lark for the Sake of Their Country: The 1926 General Strike Volunteers in Folklore and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

Sansom, William. 'Fireman Flower,' In *Fireman Flower and Other Stories*, 126-63. London: Hogarth Press, 1944.

Scannell, Vernon. *Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War*. London: Woburn Press, 1976.

Scarfe, Francis. *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941*. London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1942.

Schneider, Karen. *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Schweik, Susan. 'Writing War Poetry Like a Woman.' *Critical Inquiry* 13.3 Politics and Poetic Value (Spring 1987): 532-556. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343512

Severin, Laura. *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Edited by Cynthia Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

———. *Much Ado About Nothing*. In *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, edited by A.R. Humphreys, 913-940. London: Methuen Drama, 2011.

Share, Don. 'Poetry makes nothing happen … or does it?' *Poetry Foundation* Harriet: A Poetry Blog, 4 November 2009. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/11/poetry-makes-nothing-happen-or-does-it/

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 'A Defence of Poetry.' In *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments—Vol. 1*, edited by Mary Shelley, 1-57. London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1840.

Shires, Linda. *British Poetry of the Second World War*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985.

Sinclair, Andrew. *Dylan The Bard: A Life of Dylan Thomas*. London: Robinson, 2003.

Sitwell, Edith. *Fire of the Mind: An Anthology*. Edited by Elizabeth Salter and Allanah Harper. London: Michael Joseph, 1976.

Skelton, Robin, ed. *Poetry of the Thirties*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971.

Smith, Stan, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

———. 'Ideas about England.' In *W.H. Auden in Context*, edited by Tony Sharpe, 35-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Smith, Stevie. *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. Edited by James MacGibbon. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975.

———. *Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*. Edited by Will May. London, Faber, 2015.

———. *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*. Edited by Jack Barbera and William McBrien. London: Virago, 1981.

———. *Novel on Yellow Paper, or Work It Out for Yourself*. Introduction by Janet Watts. London: Virago, 1993.

———. *Over the Frontier*. London: Virago, 1980.

———. *The Holiday*. London, Virago, 1979.

Spalding, Frances. *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography*. London: Faber, 1990.

Spender, Stephen. 'Books and the War—V.' *Penguin New Writing*, May 1941, 127-135.

———. 'An Expectant Silence.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1943, 91.

———. 'Sir—Your attack on the intellectuals.' *Times*, 27 March 1941, 5.

———. 'The Year's Poetry, 1940.' *Horizon*, February 1941, 138-147.

———. 'War Poetry in this War.' *The Listener*, 16 October 1941, 539-540.

———. *World Within World*. London: Faber, 1977.

Stallworthy, Jon. *Louis MacNeice*. London: Faber, 1995.

———. 'The Fury and the Mire.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 564-576. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Sternlicht, Sanford, ed. *In Search of Stevie Smith*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990.

Stevenson, Randall. *Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 12: 1960-2000—The Last of England?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Tedlock, E.W., ed. *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet, A Collection of Biographical and Critical Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1963.

Thomas, Brook. *The New Historicism, and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Thomas, Dylan. *The Collected Letters*. Edited by Paul Ferris. London: J.M. Dent, 1985.

———. *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*. Edited by John Goodby. New Centenary Edition. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014.

———. *Dylan Thomas Reading His Poetry: Complete & Unabridged*. Harper Collins Audio Books, compact disc, 2004.

———. *Letters to Vernon Watkins*. Edited by Vernon Watkins. London: Faber/Dent, 1957.

———. 'On Poetry.' In *Quite Early One Morning*, 168-170. London: J.M. Dent, 1954.

———. 'Poetic Manifesto.' In *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*, edited by Walford Davies, 154-160. London: J.M. Dent, 1971.

———. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. London: J.M. Dent, 1965.

———. *Quite Early One Morning: Stories, Poems and Essays*. London: J.M. Dent, 1968.

———. 'Welsh Poets.' In *Quite Early One Morning*, 139-152. London: J.M. Dent , 1954.

———. 'Wilfred Owen.' In *Quite Early One Morning*, 91-105. London: J.M. Dent, 1954.

Thomas, Edward. 'Rain.' In *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, edited by Jon Silkin, 95. London: Penguin Books, 1981.

Thomas, R. George. 'Dylan Thomas and Some Early Readers.' *Poetry Wales: Dylan Thomas Special Issue* 9.2 (Autumn 1973): 3-19.

'Thyssen's Death In Prison Camp.' *Times*, 21 April 1941, 3.

Tindall, William York. *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962.

Tolley, A. T. *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1985.

Tomlinson, Philip. 'The Heroic Theme.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 September 1940, 447.

———. 'Poets at School and War: The Younger Generation on Itself.' *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1942, 402.

———. 'To the Poets of 1940.' *Times Literary Supplement* 30 December 1939, 755.

'Tortured Poles.' *Times* , 11 June 1941, 3.

Treece, Henry. *How I See Apocalypse*. London: Drummond, 1946.

Tylee, Claire M. 'British Holocaust Poetry: Songs of Experience.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 592-612. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Vine, Steve. '"Shot from the locks": Poetry, Mourning, *Deaths and Entrances*.' In *Dylan Thomas: New Casebooks—Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by John Goodby and Chris Wigginton, 140-157. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Waller, Jane and Michael Vaughan-Rees. *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945*. London: Macdonald & Co. Ltd, 1987.

War Poems from the Sunday Times. Printed for private circulation, 1945.

Waterman, Rory. *Poets of the Second World War*. Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2016.

Watkins, Gwen. *Portrait of a Friend*. Taylbont: Y Lolfa, 2005.

Watson, Roderick. '"Death's Proletariat": Scottish Poets of the Second World War.' In *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall, 315-339. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

White, Hayden. 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact.' In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, edited by David Richter, 1384-1397. Boston; New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.

Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself': A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*. Edited by Ezra Greenspan. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Williams, Oscar, ed. *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century*. New York: The John Day Company, 1945.

Wills, Clair. *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War*. London: Faber, 2007.

Wood, Michael. 'Atlantic Auden.' In *W.H. Auden in Context*, edited by Tony Sharpe, 128-137. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Woolf, Virginia. 'The Leaning Tower.' In *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays, Volume One*, edited by Rachel Bowlby, 159-78. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Yeates, Pádraig. *Lockout: Dublin, 1913*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2000.

Yeats, W. B., ed. *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

———. *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*. Edited by Daniel Albright. London: J.M. Dent, 1990.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile Books, 2009.