

# **Seeking a New World: Modernism and Alternative Spirituality**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Humanities**

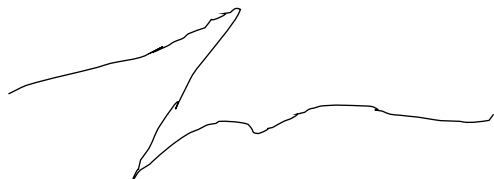
**Royal College of Art, April 2021**

### Abstract

This thesis traces the way in which established modes of belief lingered, and yet were transmogrified, in the work of some major modernist figures in the mid-twentieth century. The aim of the project is thus to analyse and reintegrate the cultural role of spirituality in Britain and I do so by combining archival research with literary and visual analysis of major and lesser-known works. My methodology is informed by recent critical work which has sought to show why spirituality was an integral component of British modernism; however, I develop a reading which stresses the complexity of this intellectual and emotional landscape. Rather than focus purely on occult and Christian traditions, whose importance within the cultural discourses of the period is now widely recognised, this thesis considers the significance of a more porous category of belief. The interwar years saw the vogue of the guru; typified by the notoriety attracted to figures such as G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky who taught independent systems of spiritual development, composed of ideas drawn from varied traditions. The increasing turn to Eastern religion also manifested something of this syncretic tendency, with enthusiasm often directed at specific facets of their traditions, notably the techniques of yoga and meditation, rather than the system as a whole. There was also excitement in activities that bordered on the mystical such as astrology, as well as forms of alternative therapies, that while directed as physical well-being, often had a heavily spiritual component.

I thus argue that the category of ‘alternative spirituality’ provides a useful way of characterising these heterogeneous pursuits and functions as crucial lens to illuminate artistic tendencies within the modern movement. In contrast to the fragmented form of the self stressed in multiple traditions of criticism, I argue that spiritual ideas fostered a counter-veiling strand of confidence in a sacredly endowed notion of being which acted to unite and animate the work of a range of authors. Each chapter of the thesis focuses on a key figure, but sets them in their matrix of intellectual, aesthetic and social connections. The figures are: Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, John Middleton Murry, Naomi Mitchison and Ithell Colquhoun. They range from the canonical to the more marginalised, but I chart how each shared an immanentist sensibility that nurtured an optimistic tenor within their works; particularly the belief that the spiritual could lead to the transformation of the world-at-large. The chapters consider how this apprehension unites Murry’s mystically infused criticism and politics of the 1930s with Huxley’s spiritual-pacificist vision articulated in his novel *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936); as well as Mitchison’s yoking of ideas of cosmic consciousness with a socialist futurity in both her historical fiction and social realism. This impulse, I will argue, was also manifested in a rarefied appreciation of the art object; an idea that is central to both Colquhoun’s magical automatism from the 1940s and the emphasis placed on the artist’s epiphanic insight that is found in the writings of Murry and Woolf. By placing the work of these diverse practitioners alongside each other I emphasise the way which mid-twentieth century culture, even in the absence of institutional faith, was still deeply imbibed by an affirmative spiritual vision of life.

“This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, connected strokes. The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Imogen Woodberry

11.04.2021

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<[www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk](http://www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk)> [accessed 24 March 2021].

### Acknowledgements

I am enormously grateful to my excellent and supportive supervisory team of Dr Leo Mellor and Professor Gemma Blackshaw. They have offered me invaluable assistance and advice, and it has been a privilege to work with them. I am extremely grateful for their unstinting generosity with their time and enthusiasm for the project.

I have appreciated my period as a student at the Royal College of Art and for the support provided by the Techne AHRC consortium. I am grateful for the funding provided by Techne that has enabled me to present my work at conferences and conduct research at different libraries and archives. I am particularly grateful for the help provided to me by staff at the Wellcome Institute, the National Library of Scotland, the Tate Archive and the British Library.

Sincere thanks to my excellent proof-readers: to Felix and Stephen Bungay, Ben Cooke, and most especially my parents for their unwavering support in this, as in all things. Thanks also to Ben and James Marriott for being such delightful flatmates and work companions, and enabling the completion of a PhD in during a pandemic to be a surprisingly pleasant activity.

Part of chapter 2 was published as an article 'Aldous Huxley: the Unstable Self, Consciousness and the 'Ground of Being' in *Textual Practice*, 39.4 (2020) 1455-1471.



## Introduction

Gurdjieff's face was manifestly Levantine. The skin was darkish; the twisted moustache was black, though greying; the eyes very black and vivid [...] He was bald and slightly stout; yet you could see that he had been good-looking in his earlier days, and it was obvious that women must have been susceptible to his Levantine virility. He was very obliging and smiled constantly, as though trying to show me his most attractive side. Nevertheless I began to feel rather queer. I am not what is called a 'good medium'; no doctor or hypnotist has ever succeeded in hypnotising me. On this particular occasion I was very much on my guard and prepared to counteract any possible psychic influence. And yet I was beginning to feel a distinct weakness in the lower part of my body, from the navel downwards, mainly in my legs. The feeling grew steadily, and after about twenty or thirty seconds it became so strong that I knew I should hardly be able to get up [...] I was observing this fascinating new experience with the keenest awareness.<sup>1</sup>

The episode recounts a meeting between the writer, Rom Landau, and the famed Russian guru, G.I. Gurdjieff, in the early 1930s. Landau includes his description of Gurdjieff within his account of the new mystic teachers who were gaining a hold in Western culture. Among the examples he gives of charismatic spiritual leaders operating in the 'English Scene' only two were Christians, the others – P.D. Ouspensky, Meher Baba and Krishnamurti – originated from Eastern centres, their teachings a syncretic blend of Indic and occult faith, elided with individualistic notions of spiritual development.

Unwillingly published in 1935 in the belief that the work would only be of interest to a 'handful', Landau's account became a surprising best-seller.<sup>2</sup> I want to contend that the tone of Landau's investigation and its popularity was indicative of a new believing culture that was emerging. Landau's voice has a rationalistic tenor, he comes to Gurdjieff on 'guard,' even when he is being hypnotised, he takes an observational stance which he follows up by an analytical digression on the possible causes of his odd sensation.<sup>3</sup> But he is not immune to the excitement, the strangeness, the possibility of more things in heaven and earth. His feeling of weakness in his

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<sup>1</sup> Rom Landau, *God is my Adventure: A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters and Teachers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935), p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Landau, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Landau, pp. 145-6.

lower body reinforces a tale given to him by an acquaintance of Gurdjieff's hypnotic powers over a female dining companion, who began to faint when she felt his gaze strike her in her 'sexual centre'.<sup>4</sup> Landau gives no thought to becoming a follower; the rest of the meeting is not a success, Gurdjieff is dismissive and curt, and the writing that he gives Landau to peruse is unimpressive. But the whole episode is marked by an openness towards Gurdjieff's claim to psychic power and the potential efficacy of his system.

This thesis is an account of the ways in which artists and writers pursued questions of the spiritual, predominantly in the years between the First and Second World Wars. It focuses on the way the period saw a lively engagement with diverse types of belief: with occult systems, Eastern religion and the teachings of independent gurus. It considers the mood of openness, exploration and excitement about the spiritual guidance and forms of knowledge these systems could offer – even if such enthusiasm tended to stop short of wholesale conversion. Rather than the emergence of a competing religious authority to the established church, the development I look to was of a plural, relativistic belief culture, which I refer to as 'alternative spirituality'; a term that has only recently begun to be theorised within an academic context.<sup>5</sup>

Proceeding via a case study analysis, I will examine the revelatory ways in which the category of alternative spirituality opens up unexpected resonances between writers and artists operating in the interwar period; and provides the basis for fresh textual and visual analysis of their works. I will argue that spirituality offers the means for connecting the canonical writers Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf and John Middleton Murry with the more marginalised figures of Naomi Mitchison and Ithell Colquhoun. By placing these practitioners alongside each other an artistic impulse, operating on the boundaries of the dominant tradition of anglophone modernism, forged by figures such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, can be appreciated. This was a mode of practice still driven by a desire for newness and to respond to the situation of the self within the conditions of modernity, but that tended to be less formally self-conscious and concerned with rejecting traditional genres and forms. Rather than united by an aesthetic sensibility or style, I will argue that the oeuvres of these figures was most fundamentally aligned

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<sup>4</sup> Landau, pp. 142-3.

<sup>5</sup> In this sense the sphere acts as a manifestation of what Charles Taylor has argued, in his influential history of secularisation, was the way modernity did not see a straightforward decline in religious belief, but its pluralisation. He writes of this as the 'nova effect' or 'the steadily widening gamut of new positions – some believing, some unbelieving some hard to classify – which have become available options for us'. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 423.

through their similarity of mood and feeling, a shared sense of optimism in a sacralised view of the self and its position with a beneficent cosmic order.

### The domiciliary guru

Know you seek a new world, a saviour to establish  
 Long-lost kinship and restore the blood's fulfilment.  
 (C. Day-Lewis)<sup>6</sup>

Gurdjieff became prominent within the literary community in London in the early 1920s, through his connection with *The New Age* journal, then edited by A.R. Orage. Orage, who had developed an interest in the ideas of Gurdjieff's associate, the Russian mystic and philosopher P.D. Ouspensky, was instrumental in establishing his reputation by inviting him to lecture at the studio of the noted art patron, Lady Rothermere in 1921.<sup>7</sup> Among the publication's associates who attended Ouspensky's lectures were T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read, Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley.<sup>8</sup> While Gurdjieff stayed only temporarily in Britain, his departure was followed, in 1922, by that of Orage and, notoriously, Katherine Mansfield, who both went on to practice his system at the Institute of the Harmonious Development of Man in France. Because of these associations there has been much interest in Gurdjieff in the field of modernist studies.<sup>9</sup> While I do develop his importance in my chapters on Woolf, Murry and Huxley, he is not the primary focus of my research. Rather than considering Gurdjieff as a central figure I want to bring out the significance of the guru-disciple relationship that he typified, with its notion of spiritual development via the teachings of a uniquely charismatic figure. I will argue that this model provides the means of unlocking, not just ways in which fresh approaches to religion were being

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<sup>6</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis, 'You that Love England', in *The Magnetic Mountain* (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Beekman Taylor, *Gurdjieff and Orage: Brothers in Elysium* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 2001), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Studies have typically tended to take a cultural historical approach to Gurdjieff's involvement with modernism, a focus typified by James Moore, *Mansfield and Gurdjieff* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980). However, Cecily Swanson has recently provided an insightful investigation of the way in which Gurdjieff's system influenced literary form: "The Language of Behaviour": Gurdjieff and the Emergence of Modernist Autobiography?, *Modernism/Modernity*, 24.4 (2017) 695-712. I will discuss some of the implications of the argument in my second chapter on Aldous Huxley.

pursued, but the role of the artist itself within this new climate of belief. What is at stake is not only spirituality but the very grounds of the aesthetic as such.

The guru, a Sanskrit term for a teacher, guide or master, began to be used in a British context in the nineteenth century, emerging as a term of common parlance in the interwar era. As Mathew Thomson has delineated, the increasing preponderance of its use coincided with the greater visibility of typically Eastern spiritual authorities within the public domain.<sup>10</sup> But instead of focusing on figures who made direct claims to possess psychic power or spiritual (even divine) authority, it is my contention that the notion of the guru is most helpful in understanding interwar literary culture as a way of framing modes of engagement with figures closer to home.<sup>11</sup> I will argue that D.H. Lawrence and Gerald Heard were key influences in the literary turn towards alternative religion. Rather than devote discrete sections to their thought, these figures run like threads through the chapters, providing one of the main points of connection between my case studies.

In *The Destructive Element*, Stephen Spender wrote: “There are two ways of regarding Lawrence. The first is [...] regarding especially the descriptive passages in his novel, and the Nature poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The other and more disappointing way is to consider him primarily as a preacher’.<sup>12</sup> The distinction that Spender draws here is symptomatic of a common response to Lawrence. If there is a redeemable version of this languishing modernist, it is the ‘accidental’ Lawrence, the Lawrence whose ability to capture real life was displayed in his detours and digressions, rather than in his earnest passages of quixotic mysticism. In the recent Penguin edition of his essays, Geoff Dyer sets out a case for the rediscovery of his ‘minor works’; that it was when ‘dashing off “little things”’ that his writing achieved an immediacy and vitality, which eluded it when making grand pronouncements on the eternal.<sup>13</sup> In something of this vein, David Trotter has made a case for reading Lawrence against the grain, in the sly strand of practical Lawrentianism he finds in his article ‘Lady Chatterley’s Sneakers’.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the novel’s hostility to modern life, its seemingly primitivist demand to return to the forest, is tempered by

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<sup>10</sup> Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, pp. 77-106.

<sup>11</sup> The Persian mystic Meher Baba, who established a band on followers in England and America in the 1930s, in 1932 proclaimed himself to be God in the pages of the Sunday Express. Landau, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Dyer, ‘Introduction’, *Life with a Capital L: D.H. Lawrence* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> David Trotter, ‘Lady Chatterley’s Sneakers’, *The London Review of Books*, 34.12 (2012).

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/>> [accessed 2 January 2019]. The article is closely based on his discussion of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in his chapter ‘Thermoplastic’ in *Literature of the First Media Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 120-168.

Connie Chatterley's 'cool' capacity to negotiate modern ease (her sneakers) with pastoral liberation. But I want to argue that Lawrence's mysticism also had a practical bent, if not in his abstruse pronouncements, but in its legacy within the writings and politics of figures such as Mitchison, Murry and Huxley. What is interesting is the way they did not respond to him so much in a literary sense, looking to Lawrence not primarily as an artist, but as a prophet, a teacher and guide to a new way of life, in short: a guru.

In this respect, Lawrence's position within the cultural landscape can be compared to that of Heard, who gained notoriety in the interwar years for his writings on the past and future of the human psyche. Like Lawrence, he claimed that consciousness was the source of powerful and mysterious depths and similarly idealised primitive humanity who, he argued, had lived in a state of psychic togetherness, or 'co-consciousness'.<sup>15</sup> He claimed that behind our present, more separated form of being, lay a latent impulse towards communality, a facet of the self that would be actualised in a new age of 'super-conscious' union. Whilst Lawrence expressed his belief in the sacred element to the world in grandiloquent poetic form Heard communicated a similar conviction in dryly philosophical and anthropological prose. But their message was a complementary one. Although largely unaffiliated to any one belief system, both adamantly affirmed the transcendent quality of being, something which the modern self could only ignore at its peril.<sup>16</sup> As with Lawrence, Heard was suspicious of the mechanical and industrial, also pursuing alternative schemes of living away from urban centres of modern life. Interestingly, both figures were the subjects of portraits in which they were painted as trees by the American artist, Georgia O'Keeffe.<sup>17</sup> A figure similarly noted for his charismatic presence; Christopher Isherwood was converted to the Vedanta through the ministrations of the 'disconcertingly Christlike' Heard, Mitchison described him as a 'prophet' and Auden, as one of the 'healers' of modern life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This account is a summary of Heard's ideas expressed in: *The Ascent of Humanity* (1929), *The Emergence of Man* (1931) and *Social Substance of Religion: An Essay of the Evolution of Religion* (1931).

<sup>16</sup> In 1937 Heard left England for America where he converted to the Vedanta. In the 1930s he was deeply interested in Eastern religion but was, as yet, unaffiliated to any one tradition.

<sup>17</sup> *The Lawrence Tree* (1929) and *Gerald's Tree I* (1937). See Brenda Mitchell, 'O'Keeffe's Arboreal Portraits of D.H. Lawrence and Gerald Heard', *Woman's Art Journal*, 19.2 (1998–1999), 3–7.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and his Disciple* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 9. Naomi Mitchison, *You Might Well Ask: A Memoir, 1920–40* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), p. 107, Lucy McDairmaid, 'W.H. Auden's "In the Year of my Youth"', *The Review of English Studies*, 29.115 (1978), 267–312 (p. 273).

## The alternative turn

The writings of Lawrence and Heard and the forms of engagement they inspired, were, I argue, symptomatic of the ‘alternative turn’ within interwar religiosity.<sup>19</sup> The figures this thesis examines participated to varying degrees, in an eclectic and hybrid belief culture. They looked to yoga, meditation and alternative therapy. They were interested in whether, in place of formalised religion, art might function as the new receptacle of the sacred. Some also turned to science as the repository of religious truths, with its potential to relocate notions of immortality and communication with the unseen onto an empirical footing. At one end, the form of spiritual engagement I am considering could see the acceptance of grand, totalising narratives and ritual practice; the following of arcane and complex magical systems. But at another, it could involve something as unremarkable as dietary change. As Virginia Woolf reflected: ‘Vegetarianism is part of the whole revolution – Don’t I know it without being told it. And the Adelphi would inform me, were I ignorant’.<sup>20</sup>

The study of ‘spirituality,’ as a category in and of itself, has emerged only in relatively recent years within academic disciplines. As Boaz Huss has discussed, since the second half of the twentieth century there has been a radical discursive shift in the way that the term is used.<sup>21</sup> Historically within a Christian context, it was used to denote a piety associated with the mystical or monastic, a form of intense engagement with the divine in which the worshipper sought to move away from the material world. But in more recent years, there has been an uncoupling of the term from the church. Notoriously, in popular parlance, spirituality is used in juxtaposition with religion rather than as complementary to it. Within an academic context the use of ‘spirituality’ to refer to the study of non-institutional religious practices, typically those which intersect with the New Age culture of the 1970s and 80s, is frequently qualified.<sup>22</sup> Robert Fuller has written of

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<sup>19</sup> This phrase is used by Steven Sutcliffe in *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth, 1977-84) II (1978), p. 245.

<sup>21</sup> Boaz Huss, ‘Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29.1 (2014), 47-60 (p.47).

<sup>22</sup> I have avoided using the category of ‘New Age’, although, as Sutcliffe notes, in contemporary parlance it is now ‘a tag or a codeword for a “spiritual” idiom’. However, in the interwar period it tended to refer specifically to the apocalypse – or least a radical break with the current order. Certainly, it did not designate spiritual trends associated with its contemporary use. Sutcliffe, *Children*, p. 29.

‘unchurched spirituality,’ Jon Bloch of ‘new spirituality’ and Hugh Urban and Steven Sutcliffe of ‘alternative spirituality’.<sup>23</sup>

I think the latter term is preferable because of its popular use to denote spiritual practices outside the church, but without suggesting the stark distinction from institutional Christianity that is implied by Fuller’s term – an opposition that did not really emerge from the subject of my own research. Because it is a rather heavy-handed formulation I will also use ‘spirituality’ to operate synonymously with ‘alternative spirituality’. This qualification is important to make in the light of a recent contribution to the field of modernist studies, *Modernist Women Writers and Spirituality*, which uses ‘spirituality’ to denote any form of religious expression, whether, ‘Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist or arcane credos’.<sup>24</sup>

It is not that I am rejecting the holistic potential of the term, it is just that for the purposes of my research I want to link it to a more specific cultural trend. My approach builds particularly on the work of Sutcliffe, who has discussed the way in which the interwar period can be approached on account of its genealogical relationship with the New Age movement, in its possession of a similarly amorphous and eclectic belief culture. One aspect of this trend involved the continuation of fin de siècle occultism; Sutcliffe notes that the years immediately the First World War saw a rise in the popularity of Theosophy and Spiritualism.<sup>25</sup> But rather than just point to trends within the esoteric domain, he argues that they operated as part of a broader spectrum of belief options through which the individual could pursue various ways of articulating a sense of a higher power to the world; some ‘vital principle’, without having an official religious identity.<sup>26</sup> These include the individualistic or ‘bricolage’ systems offered by the guru, as well as adopting aspects of migrant faiths.<sup>27</sup> At a more mainstream level, the interwar years also saw the emergence of astrology as a popular pastime, while another basis for predicting the future was explored in a widely read work by J.W. Dunne, which set forward the theory of pre-cognitive

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Fuller’s *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Jon Bloch, *New Spirituality, Self and Belonging: How New Agers and Neo-Pagans Talk About Themselves* (London: Praeger, 1988) and Hugh Urban, *New Age, Neopagan and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (California: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Introduction,’ in *Modernist Women Writers and Spirituality: A Piercing Darkness*, ed. by Andrew Radford, Heather Walton and Elizabeth Anderson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Sutcliffe, *Children*, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Sutcliffe in conversation with Boaz Huss, ‘Spirituality,’ *The Religious Studies Project*, interviewed by David G. Robertson (11 June 2018) <<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/>> [accessed 15 January 2021].

<sup>27</sup> On categorising Gurdjieff’s system as a bricolage see, Steven Sutcliffe, ‘Gurdjieff as a Bricoleur: Understanding the “Work” as a Bricolage’, *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, 6.2 (2015), 117-135.

dreaming.<sup>28</sup> Tales of hauntings were also the subject of widespread media coverage; a particular frenzy surrounded the claimed haunting of a family in Scotland by a mild-mannered, talking mongoose.<sup>29</sup>

The use of ‘alternative spirituality’ as a means of referring to these trends is one that is retrospectively applied, as Jake Poller has observed, the term only really gained currency in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> A more contemporary way of referencing this eclectic and porous culture of belief has been proposed by Alex Owen. Taking her cue from Woolf’s observation that ‘there is a great deal of mystic religion about,’ she uses the term ‘mysticism’ to refer to a sphere of activity hovering on the borders of the occult, but not quite falling into its domain.<sup>31</sup> This is a term I shall also sometimes apply. But this is not one, either, which any of my case studies would have used as a means of self-description. Murry would have claimed to a belief in ‘life’, Huxley (cautiously) to a ‘ground of being’. I am not sure Mitchison would have said anything at all. They did not see themselves as part of a movement; what they did know of each other’s pursuits they tended to either not take seriously or even to treat with disdain. But one of the purposes of this project is to consider these figures almost in-spite of themselves, to argue for close commonalities in their spiritual orientation, even if they were ones they did not acknowledge.

What were these resemblances? As Sutcliffe has pointed out, one of the typical features of alternative spirituality is a syncretic or even touristic mode of engagement.<sup>32</sup> The group I am considering were united by relativism, or a pluralised approach to matters of belief. None turned to one system as a sole authority. Traditions were taken up and put on, their spiritual techniques often plundered, and their teachings pursued alongside other pathways. There were, of course, different tenors to their modes of engagement. There was a radical distinction between Huxley’s scientised inquiry and Colquhoun’s magical searching; between Murry’s evangelical zeal and Mitchison’s playful delving. But each shared the idea that what might be most important was the self who seeks, rather than the object of inquiry; that ultimate authority lay with the practitioner, rather than the system they practiced. Underpinning this approach was the tendency to relocate

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<sup>28</sup> On the emergence of astrology as a popular pastime see Sutcliffe, *Children*, p. 36. J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (London: A&C Black, 1927). For a recent discussion of Dunne’s theory see Katy Price, ‘JW Dunne and the Promise of Popular Dreams’, *Mapping Ignorance* (2014) <<https://mappingignorance.org>> [accessed 8 April 2018].

<sup>29</sup> For an account of this case see Christopher Josiffe, *Gefl: The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose* (Devies: Strange Attractor, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Jake Poller, *Aldous Huxley and Alternative Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Alex Owen, ‘The “Religious Sense” in a Postwar Secular Age,’ *Past & Present*, 1.1 (2006), 159-177 (p. 159).

<sup>32</sup> Sutcliffe, *Children*, pp. 37-8.



religious authority away from an external deity and towards the self. They all participated in what Alex Owen has termed as a culture of ‘immanentist spirituality,’ where the self, without appeal to a transcendent being, was viewed as the hidden well-spring of goodness and power.<sup>33</sup> While the delving into organisations and systems was, in some instances, more limited, I will argue that this affirmative view of the self is the central point on which my case studies were united.

## Between Byzantium and Rome

Until recently, accounts of the influence of religion on literary and artistic practice have tended to focus on more easily definable categories of belief. The occult-modernist intersection is now well-served within the fields of literary studies and art history over the last thirty years and one can now discern generations of scholarship. An area historically marginalised, initial studies tended to focus on pressing a case for its legitimacy as a serious academic subject, primarily by pointing to evidence for the influence of occult systems on the work of high modernists.<sup>34</sup> Leon Surette’s introduction to his 1993 account of the use of the occult in the writings of Pound, Eliot and W.B. Yeats is defensively worded, repeatedly acknowledging academic ‘fear’ of the esoteric terrain.<sup>35</sup> This is a wariness that has been roundly dispelled. Far from being a cause of embarrassment, evidence of occult engagement often now provides the grounds for a writer’s recuperation. The occultism of marginalised modernists, notably HD and Mary Butts, has been recently the focus of academic engagement with their work.<sup>36</sup> There has also been a noticeable curatorial tendency to reclaim spiritualist painters within the context of fine art, often with the ambition of constructing an alternative genealogy for abstraction; one that began in the spiritualist back-parlour rather than in the studios of Paris and Moscow.<sup>37</sup> This is a trend manifest in the recuperation of Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton through major exhibitions of their work at the Guggenheim Museum and the Courtauld Gallery, focused on the

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<sup>33</sup> Owen, ‘Religious Sense’, 159-177 (p. 161).

<sup>34</sup> This is the focus of Leon Surette’s study, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1933).

<sup>35</sup> Surette also writes: ‘It seems to be widely believed that any contact with the occult is rather like contact with an infectious and incurable disease’, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Elizabeth Anderson, *HD and the Modernist Religious Imagination: Mysticism and Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Matte Robinson, *The Astral HD: Occult and Religious Sources and Contexts for HD’s Poetry and Prose* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) and Suzanne Hobson, ‘Radical Unorthodoxy: Religious and Literary Modernisms in HD and Mary Butts’, in *Modernist Women Writers*, pp. 21-37.

<sup>37</sup> *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings* (Courtauld Gallery, 2016), *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (Guggenheim Museum, 2018).

way in which the oeuvre of these 19<sup>th</sup> century mediums foreshadowed the origins of abstraction. A 2012 study by Leigh Wilson also argued for the origins of literary modernism in modes of magical thinking.<sup>38</sup>

Given the currency and, increasing expansiveness of occult scholarship, why am I largely avoiding situating my research directly within this terrain? Many of the forms of religiosity this study investigates could fit within the category of the esoteric. Huxley took a keen excitement in telepathy, Murry maintained a (tepid) interest in Theosophy and astrology. Although Colquhoun's occultism burgeoned after the period I investigate, it was still an arena in which she was deeply engaged, joining the Quest society and also attempting to become a member of an offshoot, the Golden Dawn. But it is not a category into which I could subsume all my case studies. While it might be possible to find an esoteric Murry, an esoteric Woolf involves much more of a stretch of the imagination. It would also take some sleight of hand to situate Mitchison's touristically anthropological preoccupation with the history of witchcraft and magic into the category.

As I will discuss in my chapter on Colquhoun, I think the current expansive drive of occult scholarship is not without difficulties. The field's quest for legitimacy, for claims to the mainstream, rather than a 'descent into dark realms,' can involve sterilising aspects of the terrain that was obscure, arcane and uncondusive to notions of modernity.<sup>39</sup> As I will discuss in this chapter, it was the lure of rebellion, separateness and counter-culturalism that was often the very facet of the arena that appealed to the practitioner. It is also important to remember the dubiousness of the cultural status of the occult within the interwar period. For many pursuing alternative spiritual pathways, the occult and esoteric could still seem weird and crankish. W.H. Auden's interest in Heard's ideas on cosmic consciousness did not stop him from mocking Yeats's 'silly' esotericism: 'he really went to seances, he seriously studied all those absurd books'.<sup>40</sup> Huxley's own engagement with unorthodox beliefs co-existed with his contempt for practising occultists. His ridicule of spiritualism, Theosophy and astrology unites his early satire *Chrome Yellow* (1921), written at a point at which he had minimal mystical interests, with his final novel *Island* (1962), a work that extols the virtues of Eastern spirituality and alternative medicine. While the interwar Huxley might have been slightly perplexed at being claimed for the 'spirituality' camp, the designation of 'occultist' would have met with certain outrage.

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<sup>38</sup> Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Surrette, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Yeats as an Example,' *The Kenyon Review*, 10.2 (1948), 187-195 (p. 191).

The distinction between the two domains is stressed by Alex Owen in her account of interwar spirituality. Unlike Sutcliffe, her interest in the period is less in the way it uncovers New Age roots, but rather points to esoteric afterlives: how fin de siècle occultism shaped a rather more porous spiritual domain. She turns particularly to Gurdjieff's system to argue for the way in which it was symptomatic of a move away from the 'arcane apparatus' of occultism in certain 'less orthodox' types of spirituality.<sup>41</sup> Gurdjieff taught a system recognisable to the fin de siècle occultist, with its quest to probe the hidden potentialities of the self, but it was one denuded of claims of Tibetan masters, astral travel or secret documents. As Owen points out, this form of religiosity, lacking both occult and ecclesiastical overlay, had the advantage of being more easily harmonised with the agnosticism that had become increasingly fashionable within intellectual circles.<sup>42</sup>

Another cause for my wish to distinguish between occultism and spirituality has to do with literary form. While there is not one model of the way the occult manifested in the literary sphere, certain tendencies can be usefully noted. As Timothy Materer has argued, the arena in which the occult tended to be most frequently engaged with was poetry, where stylistically it often led to a heightening of language and imagery.<sup>43</sup> In both the writings of Yeats and HD, mythic symbolism often elevates autobiographical or contemporary events into magical or archetypal import, an effect particularly striking in HD's work that generally lacks the ironic inflection which Yeats's often possesses. This self-aggrandising tendency has also been discussed by James Logenbach in his examination of the artistic collaboration that occurred between Ezra Pound and Yeats.<sup>44</sup> He looks at the way that their shared delving into the esoteric, with its notion of the existence of a hidden, persecuted elite, fostered their sense of being part of a poetic aristocracy.<sup>45</sup> This understanding, he argues, endorsed a turning towards a stylistically obscure mode of writing, manifested in the abstruse and enigmatic quality of their works written in the wake of their Stone Cottage studies.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Owen, 159-177 (p. 174).

<sup>42</sup> Owen, 159-177 (pp. 160-61).

<sup>43</sup> Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (London, 1995), pp. 1-25.

<sup>44</sup> James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>45</sup> His study focuses on their collaboration that occurred during their stay together for three winters at the Stone Cottage in Sussex between the years 1913-16. Logenbach cites Pound's use of occult metaphor in *Guide to Kulcher* (1938) to express his conviction that poetry articulated 'the mysteries self-defended, the mysteries that cannot be revealed. Fools can only profane them'. p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> The examples that Logenbach cites are Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921) and Pound's *Three Cantos* (1917), p. 79.

In this aspect, literary occultism can be compared to another well documented confessional identity: the Catholic church. While formally the works of its most British 20<sup>th</sup> century literary converts famous converts – Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh – were more accessible in their adherence to a realist mode, theologically they tended to foreground what was challenging, if not downright perverse about their newfound faith. Greene, in particular, relished the delineation of doctrines most incompatible with the modern age, particularly the concept of sin and the associated threat of damnation. The glamour attached to being in possession of such a demanding form of belief was mused on by Orwell in his review of Greene's work *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), in which he reflected: 'there is something rather distingué in being damned; Hell is as a sort of high-class night club'.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the hierarchy involved in the culture of guru, the form of religiosity I am delineating – alternative spirituality – had a democratic and inclusive ambition. This was not without tension. Huxley announced the inner divinity of all beings in prose that never entirely escaped misanthropic aloofness, while Murry's enunciation of the way humanity was permeated with the divine was counterpoised by a suspicion that this was a force to which only he and his favourite writers properly had access. Despite these nuances, all the figures this project considers were committed to the idea that the route to the sacred could be found within every individual. While formally this conviction manifested itself in diverse ways, one of the key tendencies that I will consider was the way that it endorsed a striving for clarity in prose and simplicity of style. Particularly in the case of Murry, Mitchison and Huxley, who viewed their work partly as a way of furthering their ideological convictions, there was a tendency prioritise accessibility of style – so that their messages could be communicated to as wide an audience as possible.

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<sup>47</sup> In a review of *Heart of the Matter* Waugh also criticised the perverse quality of Greene's expression of faith; yet his own novels tended to emphasise the challenge of belief. The plot of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), like the *End of the Affair* (1951), centres on a woman's renunciation of her lover to avoid divorcing her husband and so imperil her soul. In both novels this provides the catalyst for what only the religiously minded person could see as the hopeful note of the novel's climax in the conversions of the lonely and rejected men. Charles might be middle aged and alone and Maurice the frustrated and gloomy companion of Sarah's husband, but both can now look to the possibility of salvation after death.

## Modernism and the secular sacred

In my delineation of an amorphous religious category this research can be situated within a recent tendency within modernist studies to render a more complex understanding of the nuances of interwar religiosity. Suzanne Hobson's work has done much to illuminate the porosity between categories of belief, uncovering unexpected alliances and unforeseen afterlives. She has demonstrated the incongruous appearance of the figure of the angel within a variety of self-consciously modern contexts, in a study that contributes to attempts to rethink assumptions about the straightforwardly secular nature of the modern movement.<sup>48</sup> In addition to thinking through the ways in which religion can trouble the category of the secular, her work has also addressed how challenges of the secular itself, led to a reconfiguration of confessional identities. In a 2017 conference paper, she proposed the idea of the 'heresy of disinterestedness,' as a phenomenon that could provoke unexpected alliances.<sup>49</sup> Challenging the supposed opposition between Murry's prioritisation of the inner voice and Eliot's traditionalist adherence to Anglo-Catholic doctrine, she argues that the two were united by the spectre of a more unlovely opponent: those for whom religion was not even a matter of disbelief, but of total disengagement. Particularly in the work of Catholic authors there is often the idea that the opponent of their faith was not the one who rejected the tenets of their creed, but for whom religion raise a confused shrug or a disinterested sigh. It was Rex Mottram's response to the converting Father's questioning to him over the number of Christ's natures – 'how many would you like Father is fine with me' – or the ridiculousness of the figure cut by the rationalist Richard Smythe in *End of the Affair* (1951), who spends his days in Hyde Park railing against a God in whom no-one believes.

Eliot took up this subject in his discussion of blasphemy. Blasphemy, he argued, represented a 'curious survival'. In an age of disinterestedness 'no one can possibly blaspheme in any sense except that which a parrot may be said to curse'.<sup>50</sup> G.K. Chesterton made a similar observation on blasphemy's dependency on faith, observing 'if anyone doubts this, let him sit down seriously

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<sup>48</sup> Suzanne Hobson, *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910-1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Suzanne Hobson, 'Modernism, Internationalism and the "Heresy of Disinterestedness"', *Heresy and Borders*, Third Conference for the International Society for Heresy Studies with the Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature (15-16 June 2018).

<sup>50</sup> T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 51.

and think blasphemous thoughts about Thor'.<sup>51</sup> However Steven Pinkerton, in a recent study has turned these observations on their head, arguing that the proliferation of the aesthetics of the profane in modernist literature demonstrates the durability of faith. Even such aggressive notes as Joyce's sadomasochistic description of penance: 'Confession. Everyone wants to [...] Penance. Punish me, please' or Djuna Barnes' description of the bestial coupling of the protagonist with a dog on an altar at the conclusion of *Nightwood* (1936), he argues to be a counter-intuitive evidence of cultural hold of Christian belief.<sup>52</sup>

Although this argument may contribute to the sense of the continued cultural presence of Christian ideas, a religion that survives just long enough for Joyce's blasphemous jokes to still be funny, is one that is a rather limp force. The same can be said for the category of the 'secular sacred' that Pericles Lewis has coined within his own study of religion in the modernist novel.<sup>53</sup> Lewis similarly presents his account as means of nuancing narratives of secularisation, providing a sophisticated analysis of the way in which modernist writers negotiated their often agnostic or even atheistic identities with a continued engagement with the transcendent. But much of his account – as I will explore in my chapter on Woolf – is a tale of mourning. He provides a narrative of lost communion, of dislocated sensibility within the sacred space and attempts to commune with the departed that are frustrated and unfulfilled. This elegiac mood is distinct from the more joyful note which I argue that the spiritual could sound among the moderns. My focus is also not on the trickles of faith, of the way in which strands of Victorian piety managed cling on in modernity, but the lively and energetic ways in which the sacred was being reconceptualised and reconfigured.

### **Modernism and the menaced self**

Lewis's investigation of the way the in which 'the secular sacred', a spirituality incapable of providing unity and wholeness, permeated literary production in the 1910s and 1920s, positions religion as a force that chimes with modernism's much theorised declaration of the fragmented self. Commentators have repeatedly noted modernism's portrayal of the individual as indelibly

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<sup>51</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: John Lane, 1905), p. 20. Quoted in Steven Pinkerton, *Blasphemous Modernism: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Word Made Flesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Dover Publication, 2009), p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 25.

fractured: the notion of character as a ‘psychic battlefield’, that the conditions of modernity rendered a ‘fragmentation of experience’ and that nature is ‘elusive, indeterminate, multiple, often implausible, infinitely various and essentially irreducible’.<sup>54</sup> The intense striving to probe and explore the minutiae of the inner realm manifested itself within an autobiographical impulse – in the works variously of Marcel Proust, Robert Musil and Joyce, the shift away from an objective, narratorial voice and the development of new stylistic techniques as a way of capturing the inner workings of the mind.

In one sense the positioning of the self as the subject for intense study led to its elevation; Michael Levenson connects this tendency to the godlessness of the moderns – with subjectivity assuming a ‘new significance’ in its place.<sup>55</sup> But the self that is captured is repeatedly fragile and destabilised. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) explores self as inner void; in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912) the rational self battles with futility against the anarchic force of erotic desire; while in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27) and similarly Beckett’s later play, *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), the eruption of past selves undermine an integrated notion of being in the present moment. The origins of this vision have been typically connected to the dominating presence of deconstructive notions of the psyche within the European cultural landscape: the Freudian figuring of the menaced subconscious, Henri Bergson’s representation of the psyche as the locale of flux and instability and Friedrich Nietzsche’s interpretation of western metaphysics as a form of inner suppression.

I want to argue that the domain of alternative spirituality provided a competing, affirmative view of being, which writers and artists also found creatively productive. My approach builds on the work of Mathew Thomson, who has investigated the culture of the guru within the circles surrounding *The New Age* magazine. Challenging the oft held perception of Freudian hegemony in the interwar period, his study aptly charts the way in which there were a broad proliferation of models through which the psychological self was constructed. He notes the way in which, particularly at the level of popular psychology, there operated an optimistic modelling of the subconscious that conflicted with psychoanalytic figuring of the domain. The fashionable theory of Couéism, for example, taught that simply by chanting a repetitive formula, ‘Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better’, the individual could harness the mind’s latent capacity

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Introduction’, *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Irving Howard (New York: Horizon Press, 1967) p. 34, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 462 and *Modernism: 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 94.

for self-improvement and healing.<sup>56</sup> A similarly benevolent view of the psyche was proposed by figures such as Heard and Gurdjieff, who put forward simple methods by which the individual – without intervention of a therapist – could actualise higher levels contained within the self. The intersection between psychology and spirituality was typified by works such as Geraldine Costner's *Yoga and Western Psychology* (1935) which argued that yoga offered a practical system of personal growth, in which the practitioner had much greater autonomy than in the psychoanalytic encounter, in which the analysand is dependent on ministrations of the analyst.

The main impact of alternative spirituality on the literary and artistic sphere, I will argue, is the optimistic modelling of the self and the affirmative vision of the world that it proffered. In the case of Murry and Huxley, I will argue that while both were influenced by the fractured renderings of being within the works of their contemporaries, their spiritual beliefs led them to reject undertaking similar articulations. In this, there is a similarity to Colquhoun's development. She was drawn to surrealism, largely as the result of the International Surrealism Exhibition at the New Burlington Gallery in 1936, an event that displayed a surrealism of ironic posturing, insouciant provocation and mischievous humour. But the surrealism that she developed was one of sincere meditation on the sacred, devoted to the psychic capacity of the self and its encounter with the magically endowed or sacral landscape.

I will also argue that this affirmative impulse tended to foster a practically orientated mode in artistic representations of the self. One of the criticisms notoriously directed at the modern's scrutiny of psychic life, was its solipsistic tone. In 1923 D.H. Lawrence imagined himself as doctor called out to the sick-bed of the 'serious novel' which is 'dying in a very long-drawn out fourteen volume death-agony [...] "Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn't I?" asks every character of Mr Joyce or Miss Richardson or M. Proust. "Is the odour of my perspiration a blend of frankincense and orange pekoe and boot-blackening, or is it myrrh and bacon-fat and Shetland tweed?"'.<sup>57</sup> Valentine Cunningham argues that the social realist writers of the 1930s often rejected the techniques aimed at the literary rendition of the subtleties of the psyche, as a way of

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<sup>56</sup> The system was developed by the French doctor, Emil Coué. Unlike psychoanalysis, he eschewed self-examination into the cause of distress, promising self-improvement by repetition of the affirmation. Although lacking a metaphysical dimension, Dean Rapp has drawn attention to Couéism's spiritual overtones, in the ritualistic chanting of a set formula and the modelling of the subconscious as the source of goodness. He also notes instances where Coué's formula was adopted in modified form as a tool for Christian worship. "Better and Better" Couéism as a Psychological Craze of the Twenties in England', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 10.2 (1987), 17-36.

<sup>57</sup> D.H. Lawrence, 'The Future of the Novel', in *Study of Thomas Hardy and other Essays*, ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 149-155 (p. 151) (first publ. under the title 'Surgery for the Novel – Or a Bomb', *Literary Digest International Book Review*, 8 April 1923).



staking a claim for the political orientation of their project. Pitting the socialist ‘we’, against modernism’s interior ‘I’, they demanded, he argues, an escape from the inner domain, to ‘loose the self in the socialist plurality’.<sup>58</sup> The spiritual terrain complicates this distinction. The writing of Huxley, Murry and, to a degree, Mitchison, all foregrounded the importance of psychological probing and inner delving, but with the ambition of acting in the political realm. Their socialist, as well as pacifist and feminist thought, was underpinned by the belief that the self needed to be reconstructed for their political goals to be actualised. Moreover, theirs was an inward turn that led, conversely, away from the individual. The spiritual models of the mind that these figures adopted proffered an understanding of consciousness as, at its core, interconnected, in which the boundaries of the individual fade away.

### Case studies and modernisms

The figures my thesis considers are a heterogenous grouping. Their lack of religious affiliation was coupled with a conspicuous absence of artistic sympathy for one another. Woolf, Murry and Huxley gained some familiarity, largely via the networks surrounding Garsington. Woolf and Huxley corresponded, maintaining a relatively loose friendship; but their opinions of each other’s writing were lukewarm at best. Huxley worked under Murry when the latter was editor of *The Athanaeum*, developing a strong dislike of him, an opinion that was calcified by his repugnance for the cult of Katherine Mansfield, which Murry constructed after her death. Huxley offered a riposte to the pure, childlike Mansfield celebrated by Murry in the pages of *The Adelphi* in his depiction of her as a worldly young writer who affects a strategic innocence, in his contemporaneous novel, *Those Barren Leaves* (1925). A stronger connection can be found between Huxley and Mitchison. Huxley had lived with her family while a student at Oxford; their playful correspondence from the 1920s attesting to an initially warm friendship. But the crucial moment that I am investigating, the interest of both figures in the thought of Heard at the end of the 1920s, was a time at which their relationship had ruptured, following Huxley’s unsympathetic account of the death of her son in *Point Counterpoint* (1928). I can find no evidence from Colquhoun’s papers that she was acquainted with any one of this group.

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<sup>58</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 220. This claim chimes with Nick Hubble’s more recent argument that British proletariat literature of the 1930s saw the ‘expansion’ of modernist techniques rather than their rejection. *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 1.

But their comparative lack of closeness is important to my claim about the currency of spirituality within the interwar years. The fact that this was not a coterie, but acquaintances loosely allied by their participation in literary and artistic networks, attests to the way that alternative approaches to the spiritual were being widely disseminated within British cultural circles. I could have approached this topic through the examination of exchanges that occurred within a more specific historical moment and among a more connected groups of practitioners. The touting of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, along with the Serbian mystic, Dimitrije Mitrinović, within the circles of *The New Age*, or the Vedantic enthusiasms of Huxley, Heard and Christopher Isherwood, in California during the Second World War, could have been propitious points of focus. They are both moments that bear further research. But in my project, they function as part of the penumbra to an investigation of the way in which alternative spirituality operated within the cultural terrain in a more systemic sense. For this purpose, it has been important to consider the output of a more diverse set of practitioners over a broader timescale.

In my title I have used the term modernism to gesture towards the intellectual current in which I think their work can be best appreciated. This is not without trepidation. Although my chapter on Murry considers a time frame beginning with his avant-garde engagement before the First World War, my project mainly ignores the glittering experiments of the teens and the twenties with which the term is conventionally associated, focusing largely on realist productions of the 1930s. This is a period that recently has often been approached through the lens of ‘late modernism’. In a certain respect, the term is an apt one for my partial story of moderns whose negotiations with spiritualised ideas of the self, provoked the ‘detour’ identified by Tyrus Miller, ‘into the political region that high modernism had managed to view from the distance of a closed car’.<sup>59</sup> But I hesitate with the elegiac refrain that Miller has identified to have been endemic to this grouping, a mood that also underpins studies such as Jed Etsy’s investigation of modernist writers’ late-life musings on the contraction of empire.<sup>60</sup> While I detect a melancholic note in Woolf’s writing, she acts somewhat as an outlier to the more predominant mood I seek to explore, of excitement in the possibility of rupture and transformation – even if this urge to make things new was most overt in an ideological, rather than aesthetic sense.

This forward-looking sensibility is perhaps better captured by Kristin Bluemel’s notion of the ‘intermodernist’ – a politically radical breed, committed to left-wing politics and ‘non-canonical’

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<sup>59</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p.13.

<sup>60</sup> Miller, p. 13. Jed Etsy, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

or ‘middle-brow’ styles.<sup>61</sup> But again, I hesitate. While formally this might be a category more apt for writers such as Mitchison and Huxley, it imputes a political seriousness that I think is absent from their work. Certainly, Huxley’s patrician pacifism or Murry’s aesthete’s socialism – infused by florid musings on the sacral quality high art – lack the working-class commitment which Bluemel largely addresses. Colquhoun’s more separatist stance is also deeply at odds with this group.

I think the artistic strands this thesis considers can best be approached via Peter Nicholls’s idea of plural modernisms, a concept that has proved so productive to the field of new modernist studies, which has burgeoned since the 1990s.<sup>62</sup> My study coheres with the tendencies that Rebecca Beasley has discussed in her overview of the development of this terrain, of emphasising the cultural context of artistic production and modelling modernism as a multiform, rather than monolithic entity.<sup>63</sup> My thesis is partly the story of the way in which an earnest, Lawrentian infused modernism, unfashionably convinced in the ‘soul’ and the ‘dark night of otherness,’ resurfaced in more practical form in the 1930s.<sup>64</sup> It is a modernism that takes the sacred capacity of the self, less as a starting point for a poetic praxis, but more as a mode of engagement with the world – a desire for the mystical to be actualised for the social good. It is not that I exclude thinking of a modernism defined on formal grounds, it is just that the works of my case studies can be best understood in terms of their resistance to the stylistics classically associated with the modern movement; to fracture, fragmentation, to pessimism and the refusal to make whole. Many of the figures I address either self-consciously resisted such tendencies within their contemporaries, or incorporated them within a mode of practice that affirmed the harmony and completeness of the cosmos.

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Introduction,’ in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Nicholls’s *Modernism: A Literary Guide* was published in 1995. I have also avoided the characterisation ‘mid-century’, a term that is used by Allan Hepburn in his study of religion in literary culture, primarily of the 1940s and 1950s: *A Grain of Faith: Religion in Mid-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Although Hepburn’s study is mainly focused on Christianity, he too considers the way in which the term ‘faith’ acquired a more labile quality, ‘migrat[ing] away from religious signification towards personalised meanings’, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Beasley, ‘New “Modernisms”’, *Textual Practice*, 22.4 (2008), 775-819.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Introduction,’ in *The Letters of DH Lawrence*, ed. by Aldous Huxley (London: William Heinemann, 1956), pp. xxvi, xxvii.

## Methodology

As I have discussed, the critical foundation for this thesis is derived from an emerging sub-discipline within the field of religious studies. At one level my study offers a contribution to its development, adding to what is at present the rather scant body of research on how to think about alternative spirituality, not simply as a contemporary development, but as a term pertinent to the emergence of an increasingly post-Christian landscape within the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of its relative newness and the still sometimes hesitant quality of academic responses to this field, my research partly functions as a defence of its importance as a category, contributing to an awareness of how it relates to interwar religious trends.

My interest is not however with the historical alone. Rather this thesis seeks to investigate the new perspectives on literary and artistic practice that the spiritual illuminates. Rather than Sutcliffe's broad overview of spirituality within the anglophone domain, and Owen's more particularist account of alternative beliefs held by British interwar figures within the literary sphere – particularly those of Murry and Mansfield – my research is an interdisciplinary one, combining cultural history with literary and visual analysis.

One of the ambitions of this procedure is a recuperative one. By emphasising the importance of a category that has only been tentatively explored in relation to early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and artistic practice, it is my ambition to bring to the mainstream the beliefs of figures such as Murry and Huxley which have typically been viewed as quixotic and eccentric within a 1930s British context. Proceeding via case study analysis, I also use spirituality as the means to recuperate an individual's oeuvre – or even single works. My chapters on Murry, Colquhoun and Mitchison are particularly driven by the concern to rehabilitate figures marginal to current academic narratives of the period. Sometimes my focus is on form, sometimes on intellectual ideas. Huxley's turn in the thirties to Eastern philosophy is a moment relatively well-trodden within literary studies; but attempts to think seriously about how this affected his style are limited. With Murry the case is reversed. His method of literary analysis has been much discussed, but I think unfairly criticised due to a failure to properly engage with his belief system, through which, I argue, the coherency of his project can only be properly understood.

Where relevant to thinking about these figures contextually, I have focused on their biography and where needed, have consulted archival material. It has been crucial to take an archival approach in my chapter on Colquhoun, who published and produced a limited body of work and

about whom there is scant secondary material. I also consulted Mitchison's papers to access her correspondence, to develop my argument about her importance as a node in a network of thirties authors. Although there was a lack of sympathy between the individuals I have studied to a degree I often found surprising, their participation within overlapping networks is important to my argument that in alternative spirituality we find, if not a self-defined group, a cluster of figures drawing on similar approaches to matters of belief. To develop this argument I have proceeded comparatively, focusing on resonances between their practices, beliefs and artistic style. I have also developed the sense of how they operated within a wider cultural sphere by often grounding my literary and artistic analysis in a comparative approach – considering the relationship between their work with examples drawn from their contemporaries.

Because of the breadth of this multidisciplinary project, I have avoided including a discrete literary review. Moving between questions arising from the fields of religious studies, art history, literary studies and single-author scholarship, in the interests of clarity I have addressed relevant scholarship as my thesis proceeds. Rather than address one specific research question, there is rather a bi-fold focus to my approach. As well as thinking about how the work of my case studies cumulatively contributes to a new understanding of cultural and spiritual trends, in each chapter I pursue an argumentative line about why spirituality provides a significant perspective on understanding the oeuvre of the specific author or artist in question.

Although a transnational history of alternative spirituality could, and indeed begs to be written, I have purely focused on the British cultural scene. This has been important to consider the role of figures such as a Heard and Lawrence who had an importance in forging new spiritualities in a specifically British context, to emphasise the significance that the tight-knit networks of its literary scene played in fostering a culture of alternative belief and, finally, to argue that despite its diversity, a distinct climate of mood and belief can be noted — something that might have been harder to trace within a looser geographical or temporal frame. I did however expect that my research might provide a greater contribution to post-colonial discourses. The emergence of new spiritual practices was, in many respects, a continuation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial encounter. Empire played a crucial role in the visibility of non-Christian faith systems, their accessibility particularly fostered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by major translations of Indic texts.<sup>65</sup> But rather than add to examinations of the way in which a 20<sup>th</sup> century dialogue continued to occur with Eastern cultures, my research indicates the degree to which they had become domesticated.

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<sup>65</sup> Edwin Arnold's poem 'The Light of Asia' (1879) provided a popular account of the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. Knowledge of Hinduism was made also accessible by the Max Muller's noted translations, between 1879 and 1884, of all twelve of the Upanishads.

Despite the frequent preferential pitting of Eastern faith over the church, my research has not uncovered any significant first-hand engagement with the literature and theology of these traditions. The figures I consider largely explored the ideas and practices from migrant belief systems via their dissemination in the work of Western authors.

In popular usage the term 'alternative spirituality' particularly as it pertains to acculturated Eastern practices, can have rather limp connotations. The widespread adoption over the last three decades, of techniques such as yoga, meditation, massage, acupuncture and chakra healing has been criticised for its focus on relaxation and wellbeing, at the expense of their sacral purpose within the religious systems from which they derive. Particularly their mainstream use can evoke a tepid approach to numinous, a vaguely pantheistic or animistic sentiment, but one that is not deeply interrogated or seriously applied to everyday life. The figures I am considering provides a different way of understanding what it means to practice alternative spirituality. Although all my case studies rejected, to varying degrees, institutional faith, what is interesting is the way that they were still ardently committed to a belief in the sacred. This project sets out to trace various ways in which spirituality was the subject of passionate engagement, how it was seen as the fulcrum of human existence, and also how it offered the promise of revolutionising the individual and the world at large.

## Dreaming of things to come: John Middleton Murry and Missionary Modernism

### Introduction

In Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928) the hero, Walter Bidlake, reminisces about the hiring process conducted by the editor of the journal for which he works:

He was never likely to forget his first interview with his future chief. 'I hear you're in want of an assistant editor,' he had shyly begun. Burlap nodded. 'Yes, I am'. And after an enormous horrible silence, he suddenly looked up with blank eyes and asked: 'Do you believe in Life?' Walter blushed to the roots of his hair and said, 'Yes'. It was the only possible answer. There was another desert of speechlessness and then Burlap looked up again. 'Are you a virgin?' he enquired.<sup>66</sup>

The episode draws on Huxley's experience of working on the literary journal, *The Athanaeum*, where the critic, John Middleton Murry (1889-1957), was then editor. The portrait it paints of Murry as the sanctimonious, preaching, treacherous Burlap was an echo of the repeated opprobrium that he attracted in the wider literary realm. J.S. Collis referred to his criticism as a 'frenzy of insincere sincerity,' on the publication of his journal *The Adelphi* the painter, Dora Carrington, wondered how 'anyone could stoop so low' and in 1936 Rayner Heppenstall concluded that Murry was the 'best-hated man of letters in England'.<sup>67</sup> This demonisation of Murry has continued to mark modernist scholarship, particularly in the arena devoted to his first wife, Katherine Mansfield. The dismissal of Murry by Mansfield's biographer, Claire Tomalin, is symptomatic of the approach towards him in this field. In a 1983 review of Murry's correspondence to her, Tomalin opened with the remark: 'There are plenty of buffoons among men of letters, but he is distinguished by being better documented than most', before concluding 'the publication of the letters do not change the existing view of Murry except perhaps to make it a shade worse'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 206-7.

<sup>67</sup> J.S. Collis, *Farewell to Argument* (London: Cassell, 1935), p. 203, Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan (May 1923), in *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, ed. by David Garnett (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 251 and Rayner Heppenstall, *Four Absentees* (London: Barrier and Rockliff, 1960), p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> Claire Tomalin, 'Mr Wrong', *New York Review of Books* (1983) <<https://www.nybooks.com/>> [accessed 8 April 2020]. In her introduction Sydney Kaplan considers the way in which her decision to reassess Murry's career, by considering his influence on Mansfield and Lawrence, was a reaction to the tendency in

There have been a few attempts, in more recent years, to recuperate Murry into the field of modernist studies. This procedure typically rests upon his coterie credentials, the way he was embedded within a network of more famous authors. In *Circulating Genius*, Sydney Janet Kaplan examines Murry's early criticism and fiction on the grounds of its intertextual relationship with the work of his better-known associates: D.H. Lawrence and Mansfield. A more expanded investigation into his evolving critical position has been undertaken by David Goldie, but his claim for the importance of considering Murry's writings still rests largely on the influence they had on the development of T.S. Eliot's critical methods.<sup>69</sup>

As a stylist there is something forbidding about approaching Murry on his own terms. Fervent, emotionally wrought and filled with religious pieties; responses to his writing often mirror the perception that he identified to have surrounded the reputation of his great hero, the poet John Keats: 'pathetic and poignant and sentimental – and false'. This is something, he argues, that the reality of Keats repels: 'there *is* stuff of legend in Keats's life and work'.<sup>70</sup> Moving between critical approaches, literary enthusiasms and social and political projects – in the 1930s he became a supporter of the Labour Party, a Marxist, a Pacifist, before advocating a return to medieval Christendom – Murry's protean career has often been pejoratively characterised as a manifestation his insubstantiality and changeability. In this chapter I want to reclaim the diversity of his pursuits, arguing for its significance in representing a modernism more of impulse than of style, that united multiform spheres of activity in its desire for comprehensive rupture and transformation. In his study of *The New Age* periodical Paul Jackson argues that the primary ethos lying at the heart of the publication was a 'radically regenerative' one, concerned with palingenesis or 'rebirth'.<sup>71</sup> Through this concept he connects the publication's widely noted interest in artistic experimentation with other forms of radicalism – particularly its left-wing politics and interest in new theories of the mind. The significance of Murry's modernism can be understood when situated in a similar framework. I will examine the way in which his literary, political and spiritual interests, while often varied in nature, were all critically united by a quest for new beginnings.

His religiosity has also attracted scorn for its vagueness; interested in Christianity as well as other, often more esoteric faith systems, he resisted one specific form of identification. But rather than

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Mansfield studies to 'use Murry as her negative counterpoint'. *Circulating Genius: John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and DH Lawrence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> David Goldie, *A Critical Difference: T.S. Eliot and John Middleton Murry in English Literary Criticism, 1919-1928* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> John Middleton Murry, *The Mystery of Keats* (London: Peter Nevill, 1949), p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Jackson, *Great War Modernisms and The New Age Magazine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 14-20.



view this multiplicity as a further manifestation of eccentricity, I want to claim that he was symptomatic of the new religious tendencies that were gaining increasing currency in the period. The core of his spirituality, his 'faith in life', rested on a conviction of the divine, or transcendent heights to which the self could reach. This was a notion that chimed with an increasingly popular immanentist ethos in both Christian and non-Christian spheres.

Although my interest is not so much in Murry as a stylist, the tonal seriousness created by the spiritual element in his prose is also indicative of an important literary pathway in British modernism. As I have discussed in the introduction, I think that one of the problems of the way in which the presence of religion within the modern movement has been approached is that, while its existence is being increasingly recognised in riposte to secularist assumptions, it is discussed in terms of the often cynical and self-aware modes of modernist stylistics. Murry's oeuvre offers a way of rethinking assumptions about modernism's knowing religiosity. Editor of the avant-garde journal *Rhythm* (1911-1913), champion of neo-impressionist aesthetics and an associate of the Bloomsbury Group, he could still turn without a blush to the notions of salvation, doom and the messianic coming. Rather than view him as an awkward outlier; a preacher stumbling amidst a group of sleek ironists, I am going to use Murry as a way of thinking about the different trajectories within the impulse to make it new.

Instead of demarcating a divide between his early interest in experimental modes of literary and artistic practice, and his later turn to religion and the writing of the Romantic poets, I am going to argue that both facets of his career were united by an inward leaning turn. I will address the impact of Henri Bergson on Murry's thought and the way his early attempt at fiction writing during the First World War chimed with the concern of his contemporaries to find new ways to render the workings of the mind in prose. In particular, I will probe a comparison between Murry and Mansfield's writing, to develop my argument that the crucial distinction was not in Murry's resistance to a psychologically orientated style, but in the type of selfhood his inward turn uncovered. Whereas Mansfield found a mode of being that was shifting and uncertain, Murry found one of religious fixity. I shall address this contrast by focusing on the differing ways in which they depict the subject of transcendence in their prose. For Mansfield these moments are typically ironic, labile and ambiguous, for Murry they are confident and clear points of insight and self-affirmation.

It was his epiphanic confidence that provided the basis for his revisionary form of faith, in that it allowed the individual to take a personal and subjective approach to existing religious systems, while still retaining a sense of absolute spiritual certainty. This duality manifested itself most

crucially in his role as a critic. His roving religiosity led him to the literary domain, becoming convinced that it was the most important repository of religious truth in the present age. This belief, allied to his confidence in his own spiritual sensitivity provided him with a missionary view of the role as critic; he felt a sense of religious urgency to spread his insights into the ‘word’ of the writer, endowed with greatness of soul, far and wide.

Murry is key to extend the point raised in my introduction, about the way in which the lens of alternative spirituality provides a way of rethinking the solipsistic quality of the psychological emphasis of modernism. Murry’s critical presence is perhaps most well-known in his ‘romantic’ championing of the divine capacity of the self in riposte to Eliot’s cool demarcation of the absolute distinction between God and man.<sup>72</sup> The flights of romanticism were also a critical *bête noir* of Wyndham Lewis. In his polemic *Time and the Western Man* (1927) he decried romanticism as symptomatic of what he argued to be the prevailing philosophy of Bergsonian ‘space-time’, that was manifested in literary terms in an indulgent turn to the inner realm. This, he argued, led to an art incapable of engendering external, revolutionary action. For Murry, however, it was his very belief in the divine capacity of the self, something that could only be uncovered by intense forms of self-examination, that directed his political engagement of the 1930s. I will show the importance of the influence on Murry of his friend D.H. Lawrence, as a writer whose work proposed a similarly spiritually infused ontology. However, Murry’s political schemes, in particular the community he founded in 1935, the Adelphi Centre, represented his attempt to respond to what he viewed as Lawrence’s turn away from the world. Focusing on this alternative community, as well as his writings on pacifism, I shall argue that his political projects of the 1930s demonstrate the connection that could occur between the exploration of the self and personal questions of faith, with the quest for far-reaching social change. Rather than a shift in his concerns, his political endeavours represented his desire to find a practical response to the exalted selfhood that his literary and spiritual probing of the earlier decades had uncovered. It was his belief in the transcendent quality of being that convinced him of the possibility of making the world the world anew. In this I shall argue that Murry is pivotal to thinking about the way in which the spiritual is an underacknowledged force in 1930s progressive politics – a point that I shall also develop in my later chapters.

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<sup>72</sup> Murry mainly championed the principles of romanticism largely in response to Eliot, but the notion of the ‘gap’ between the human and divine realm draws on the wording of T.E. Hulme, ‘Humanism and the Religious Attitude,’ in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1924), pp. 1-73 (p.3) (first publ. ‘A Notebook’, in an article series in *The New Age*, 1915-16).

### Murry and the mere facts of consciousness

Murry read the philosopher Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice* and attended his lectures while staying in Paris in 1910.<sup>73</sup> The impact of Bergson on his early thought can be seen in the enthusiastic articles he wrote endorsing his ideas in *The New Age* and the *Blue Review*. In 1911, he founded the journal *Rhythm* devoted to the application of Bergsonian principles to aesthetic practice.<sup>74</sup>

Bergson's decisive impact on literary approaches to the self, the turn towards the flux of the inner, subjective realm, was the direction in which Murry moved in his early forays as a writer of fiction – a short-lived aspect of his career.<sup>75</sup> His novel, *Still Life*, published in 1916, is an interesting example of the way in which Murry made an early attempt at writing in a self-consciously 'psychological' style. The actual plotline is relatively minimal; a woman, Anne Craddock, decides to leave her husband for a young man with whom she has had a strikingly brief acquaintance (they have met twice). They depart England for Paris, in the company of a male friend, where a *ménage à trois* ensues. The action is subsidiary to the minute observation of the interior domain; the novel's attention is directed towards charting the shifting and fractured quality of the psyche.

The novel's opening explores the young man, Maurice's, confused state of mind when trying to break off from his French mistress:

“Better make an end of it... better make an end of it... better make an end of it”. The steady beat of the night train from the German frontier to Paris became part of the argument. It was the argument. Maurice wondered whether he was anything save this monotonous reinforcement of his flagging purpose [...] Now he could find no point in his consciousness he might lean on and resist. All that remained in that chaotic interplay of argument and objection was the deep knowledge that to part was finally right, that all

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, 1993), p. 72.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Ann Gillies, *Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion for the impact of Bergson on modernist prose see (among others): Shiv Kumar, *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (London: Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1962) and Anne Fernihough, 'Consciousness as Stream', in ed. by Morag Shiach, *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 65-81.

else was wrong, and that he was too weak to do what was right. The train was taking him there.<sup>76</sup>

Maurice's dilemma charts not just the way that the individual can be riven by inner conflict, but how they contain different levels of self-perception. In addition to the tormented, deliberating part of his mind is an observer who can only look on helplessly while the train (and his train of thought) takes him inevitably to the uncomfortable scene with his mistress. When Maurice, overwhelmed by emotion, cancels a meeting with Anne, she also suffers a sense of inner divide: 'thought ticked and swung like a pendulum, deliberately, incessantly, until she was dizzy with the emptiness in which it moved' (90). The pervasive dislocation of the mind is also suggested by its manifestation in the more mundane, for example when Anne wakes, she has a sense of the way her, 'thoughts seemed rather to detach themselves like a vapour from her mind and float lazily upwards in her sight until they finally dissolved into the dust of the sunbeams. She could not hold them for a moment' (79).

Although this example of Murry's writing demonstrates his participation in the turn of his contemporaries towards the analysis of mental processes and the exploration of how they could be rendered linguistically, simply a few years later his reaction to the publication of novels demonstrating more advanced manifestations of these concerns was hostile. In a review of *Ulysses* (1922), he characterised Joyce as 'the egocentric rebel in excelsis,' a criticism that he re-articulated in his 1923 essay 'The Break-Up of the Novel', where he castigated the subjectivism of Joyce along with the works of Marcel Proust and Dorothy Richardson.<sup>77</sup>

His essay 'Poetry and Criticism' also saw Murry attacking the attempt of modern writers to render the intricacies of consciousness.<sup>78</sup> The result was boring; simply to 'register the mere facts of consciousness undigested by the being, without assessment or reinforcement of the mind is [...] no better than to copy down the numbers of one's bus-tickets'.<sup>79</sup> Caustically, he wondered at the 'queer spectacle of a whole race of very young poets who somehow expect to attain poetic intensity by the physical intensity with which they looked at any disagreeable object that happens

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<sup>76</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Still Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1916), pp. 1-4. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>77</sup> John Middleton Murry, review of *Ulysses*, by James Joyce, *Nation & Athenaeum*, 31 (1922), 124-5 (p.125). John Middleton Murry, 'The Break-Up of the Novel', in *Discoveries: Essays in Literary Criticism* (London: W. Collins Sons and Company, 1924), pp. 129-52 (first publ. Yale Review (12 January 1923), 288-304).

<sup>78</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Poetry and Criticism', in *Aspects of Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), pp. 176-83 (first publ. *The Athenaeum*, 4791 (26 March 1920), 408).

<sup>79</sup> Murry, 'Poetry and Criticism', pp. 176-83 (p. 182).

to come under their eye'.<sup>80</sup> The essay concludes by singling out work for praise that he felt to articulate some form of heightened sensibility, including, among others, Mansfield's short story 'Prelude' (1918), and Eliot's poem 'Portrait of a Lady' (1915), for their rendering of what he termed to be moments of 'intuitive comprehension'.<sup>81</sup>

### **Mansfield and the epiphany**

Both Murry and Mansfield influenced the interest of each other in accessing the transcendent and in their desire for art to record this domain. However, the way they rendered such moments tended to starkly differ. Although both repeatedly explored the epiphanic in their prose, in Murry we find a much more confident sense about the way these experiences are amenable to language and can be concretely know and understood, in contrast to Mansfield's more uncertain portrayal of heightened states.

Bryony Randall has noted the duality of modernist concern between the mundane and 'exceptional moments'.<sup>82</sup> Interest in states of consciousness was recurrently bifurcated between examination of the quotidian – thoughts of what to eat or wear, orders to give to the servants, day-dreams, states of absentmindedness – and moments in which the everyday is transcended in the epiphanic. Typically, the two are combined. Woolf notoriously used the feminine and domestic as portals to the transcendent: a dinner party, a torn dress, the scattering of petals all become means to a heightening of the self. The same was also true of Mansfield's writing which repeatedly foregrounds moments of revelation within the mundane or the homely. The story Murry cited, 'Prelude', is a meticulously observed account of the daily life of an upper middle-class family. But interspersed with details of their domestic routine are moments in which the characters enter a reflective state of being in which they access a new level of self-awareness. The mother, Linda, seems to have a form of mystical kinship with an aloe in the garden of her home. It is while contemplating this plant she becomes sharply aware of her hatred from her husband, a feeling that co-exists with her still genuine feelings of love and admiration for him.<sup>83</sup> The tale concludes with Beryl's, the pretty sister of Linda, dissatisfied awareness of her performative self.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>81</sup> Murry, 'Poetry and Criticism', pp. 176-83 (p. 179).

<sup>82</sup> Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'Prelude', in *Bliss and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 55-6. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

Assessing her appearance in the glass she breaks off in confusion: ‘What had that creature [...] to do with her and why was she staring?’, momentarily she becomes aware that she is ‘always acting a part’ and never her ‘real self for a moment’ (60).

In the pages of *The Athenaeum* Mansfield also asserted the importance of fiction to render moments of revelation. In a review entitled ‘A Model Story’, Mansfield argued that ‘being modern’ required the imparting of some form of vision or mystery to the reader – questioning ‘Do we feel that we have partaken of the author’s vision – that something has been revealed that we are the richer for having seen?’.<sup>84</sup> In a separate review she discussed this notion in terms of the ‘moment’, an idea that she gives a mystical hue, wondering how ‘to appreciate the importance of one “spiritual event” rather than another? What is to prevent each being unrelated – complete in itself – if the gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light is not to be followed by one blazing moment?’.<sup>85</sup>

The reflection is important for the way that it gestures to her labile rendering of the ‘spiritual event’, interwoven and emerging out of levels of consciousness that have different degrees of intensity – an aspect of her writing that Clare Hanson attributes particularly to the influence of Bergson’s philosophy.<sup>86</sup> One of the examples that Hanson cites, ‘Psychology’ (1920), a seemingly simple tale of two friends taking tea, likewise charts the break-down of the performative social self. The woman’s previously self-confident musings about the way their minds ‘lay open to each other’ is undermined when, triggered by the awkward petering out of their conversation, she becomes aware of a dislocating sense of separation, a feeling of moving towards a ‘deep glittering darkness’ (118, 120). Her disconcertion, and her friend’s abrupt departure prompts her to conclude that the pair will never meet again. But the interest of the story lies in its ambiguity about what, if anything, has been revealed.<sup>87</sup> Is it that the glimmering awareness of a deeper facet within the self has put a limit to what previously seemed like an unbounded intimacy? Or is the insight a more moral one, to be found at the end of the tale, when she finds herself appreciating the friendship of an ‘elderly virgin,’ whose attentions she had previously dismissed (124)? Or

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<sup>84</sup> Katherine Mansfield, ‘A Model Story’, review of *The Third Widow*, by Anne Douglas Sedgwick, *The Athenaeum*, 4704 (25 June 1920), p. 736.

<sup>85</sup> Katherine Mansfield, ‘A Novel Without a Crisis’, a review of *Heritage* by Vita Sackville West, *The Athenaeum*, 4648 (30 May 1919), p. 399.

<sup>86</sup> Clare Hanson, ‘Katherine Mansfield and Vitalist Psychology’, in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Gerri Kimber (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 23-37.

<sup>87</sup> My work on the ambiguity of Mansfield’s rendering of the epiphanic owes much to the recent iteration of Mansfield scholarship found in David Trotter’s, *The Literature of Connection: Signal, Medium, Interface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 134-160. Trotter considers the way in which the epiphanic in Mansfield is often a misleading source of information.

perhaps it is with the problem of the self's knowability altogether. Should we give any greater credence to the woman's certainty of the irredeemable rupture of her friendship, than to her earlier glib confidence in their unison?

One of Mansfield's most celebrated works, 'Bliss' (1918), is after all an elegant deflation of epiphanic certainty. The protagonist, Bertha's, giddy sense of newfound delight that seems to have been triggered by romantic desire for a female friend is abruptly curtailed by the revelation that this friend is, in fact, having an affair with her husband. Just as in 'Psychology', Bertha thinks she has a 'miraculous' awareness of their non-verbal communication – 'Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest and most intimate look had passed between them – as if they had said to each other: 'you too?' – that Pearl Fulton [...] was feeling just what she was feeling' – a certainty that is woefully mistaken (103-4). But while the epiphanic resists being captured as a discrete moment, it is still a permeating force, even if its origins are obscure to Bertha. The story begins with her rather grating sense of joy: 'What can you do if you are thirty, and turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss! [...] Oh, is there no way to express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? How idiotic civilisation is!' (95). Her excess of expression, as well as some of the more dubious sources that she cites for her happiness, particularly that she has 'modern, thrilling friends [...] keen on social questions', suggests that it is an emotion ripe for the puncture (100). But the narrative resists the easy dismissal of her ecstasy. While her sense of mystical union with Pearl, as the two stand together in the garden, is based on a misapprehension, the extended lyrical description of the scene's beauty suggests that she just might have stumbled across some form of spiritual apprehension, even if by mistake. This is also suggested by the end of the tale; although Bertha is made aware that her relationships might not be in the 'blissful' condition she fondly imagined, the narrative observes that 'the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still' (110). This seems to have been Murry's own line of interpretation, commenting on the character of Bertha in an early draft, that 'she is a soul with exquisite perfection & exquisite demands on life, which she doesn't know how to express'.<sup>88</sup>

Although Murry's earlier artistic forays seemed to have taken him in a similar direction to Mansfield, the labile quality of consciousness did not remain a lasting concern for him. I think that the influence of Bergson on him worked most decisively in its modelling of the self's capacity to access heightened states, rather than in the consideration of how these states might

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<sup>88</sup> John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield (10 March 1918), in *The Letters of John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Gerri Hankin (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), p. 135.

operate within the context of a moving and shifting centre of consciousness. This emphasis to Murry's concerns is suggested by his treatment of Bergson's notion of intuition in the pages of *Rhythm*. The first issue opened with a programmatic essay written by Murry, 'Art and Philosophy', in which he grounded his advocacy of aesthetic rupture, art as 'newness, ferocity, tearing at what lies before,' in Bergsonian intuition.<sup>89</sup> Although this was a heightening of sensibility that would bring a new appreciation of the world and understanding of being, the insights still had a fixed quality, expressing 'the eternal' and 'continuous with the absolute'.<sup>90</sup>

Murry strove for a humanist understanding of the term, nominally attempting to remove Bergson from what had come for the latter, to be the taint of mystical association. In his letter 'Bergson in Paris' he argued that Bergsonian intuition should be understood as allied with reason; that it is the 'culmination of logical reason,' the most fundamental way to misinterpret it would be to mistake it with 'that which the late Professor James analysed in the "Varieties of Religious Experience"'.<sup>91</sup> But we can see the slippage in 'Art and Philosophy' which both articulates the distinctiveness of intuition from mysticism yet speaks of the mystic as an artist, claiming; 'those "high revelations of eternal truth" which wrapped the soul of Saint Teresa [...] are now no longer the discredited phantasms of a fevered brain, but the clear and conscious vision of the artist, the true seer'.<sup>92</sup>

The infiltration of religious vocabulary points to Murry's increasing focus on the spiritual function of art. We can see this direction to his concerns in his study of *Dostoevsky*, published in 1916, three years after the ending of *Rhythm*. The text provides an examination of the spiritual contents of Dostoevsky's works, premised on the belief that his greatness as a writer lay in having recognised 'that which is ordinary is in some sense unreal' and 'gone boldly into dark and undiscovered countries'.<sup>93</sup> His study is also prefaced by the claim that his appreciation of Dostoevsky stems from his similar form of mystical awareness. He recalls various visionary experiences of his own, including a sense of the 'timeless', while standing in front of a cage of vultures at a zoo:

Suddenly I looked up and saw the birds motionless, looking out with blind and lidded eyes. They sit outside time. Though I hated and feared them I could hardly drag myself away. I remember that in a kind of delirium I kept on muttering to myself: "Obscene,

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<sup>89</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Art and Philosophy', *Rhythm*, 1.1 (1911), 9-13 (p. 10).

<sup>90</sup> Murry, 'Art and Philosophy', p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Bergson in Paris', *The New Age*, 9.5 (1911), 115-16 (p. 116).

<sup>92</sup> Murry, 'Art and Philosophy', p.12.

<sup>93</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), pp. 36, 24.



obscene,” and the word seemed to have taken on a new sense, a profounder meaning. This then, I thought, was the eternal and absolute obscenity. I have thought about it since, and I think still that there is a metaphysical obscenity beyond the bodily world, a metaphysical obscenity, which consists in the sudden manifestation of that which is timeless through that which is in time.<sup>94</sup>

What Murry lacked was Mansfield’s sense that even if someone had penetrated the ‘undiscovered’ they might not be able to understand what they had experienced – or might have even been mistaken about the nature of that experience in the first place. The revelation here is confidently delineated as metaphysical in quality, the penetration of the quotidian with something outside and beyond it. Despite the unnerving nature of the encounter, he appears to have been in no way uncertain as to its ‘eternal’ and ‘absolute’ nature, either in the moment itself, or in subsequent reflection (however abstruse the notion of ‘metaphysical obscenity’ might be). While Mansfield’s stories render the everyday as a space that offers whiffs of the epiphanic, Murry turned to the transcendent as a certain moment, which would provide clear forms of spiritual revelation. I think that it was this spiritual confidence which was the most important trigger for his increasing departure, in the 1920s, from the psychological orientation of his contemporaries. While he continued to passionately advocate inward exploration, he could not understand the point in its charting in the mundane. There was no need to seek epiphany ‘in the vulgarity of speech and gesture’, when – to the sensitive – discrete and absolute states of transcendence could be easily accessed and understood.<sup>95</sup> Although this led him in his interwar criticism increasingly to writers, notably the Romantic authors, who spoke in earnest terms about the divine, this later writing is still dominated by the concern that marked his literary forays in the teens with the personal and subjective.

### **To whom to pray?**

Despite the preponderance of spiritual considerations in Murry’s writing in the 1920s and 1930s, the nature of his belief is often hard to determine. His emphasis on the individual, and his shying

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<sup>94</sup> Murry, *Dostoevsky*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>95</sup> I refer here to James Joyce’s famous description: ‘by epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture, or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself’. *Stephen Hero. Part of the First Draft of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Theodore Spence (London: Cape, 1960), p. 216.

away from existing conceptual systems rendered an obscurity to his religious declarations. His spiritual leanings, in many ways, cohered with those of his close friend and literary associate, D.H. Lawrence, a figure whom Philip Reiff characterised as a 'literary methodist', proposing 'prayerful attitudes without mentioning anyone to whom to pray'.<sup>96</sup> The critique is pertinent to Murry. Assertions such as, 'the religious sense is not religious, though it may be', 'I am not Christian, I am not anything but I have been forced to the conclusion that I am religious' and his oft repeated watchword 'faith in life', attracted the bemusement of contemporaries, many of whom sided with Huxley's portrayal of his religiosity as an empty affectation.<sup>97</sup>

A more sympathetic response has been provided by Goldie: Murry's emphasis, he argues, on the individual's spiritual sensibility in place of concrete belief cohered with a contemporary tendency within Anglicanism to relocate the divine away from an external deity, towards the inner realm. According to his revisionist approach Murry was a man of his time, articulating a theology that was representative of current stresses within Christianity on the importance of the individual's relationship with God, at the expense of ecclesiastical or scriptural dogma. This approach achieved particular notoriety through a controversial conference held at Girton College, Cambridge, in 1921, on 'Christ and Creeds'. The Anglican priest, Hastings Rashdall, argued that the historical Jesus made no claims to have been divine, while James Bethune Baker, the Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, claimed that the miraculous birth of Jesus was 'aetiological and honorific' – simply a stylistic device to express his importance.<sup>98</sup> More controversially, in his 1927 elucidation of the principles of Anglican modernism, H.D.A Major, editor of *The Modern Churchman*, argued Christianity to have simply been one example among many of the genius of human spirituality.<sup>99</sup>

Murry likewise tried to establish a hierarchy of individual experience over church authority, arguing in his *Life of Jesus*, published in 1926, that 'the secret centre of Jesus' profoundest teaching' is 'no less than that man must be God'.<sup>100</sup> He advanced a similar argument three years later in *God: An Introduction to the Science of Metabiology* (1929), setting out the conviction that the core of Jesus's life resided in his experience of God, an experience that was fundamentally not

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<sup>96</sup> Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Haper & Row, 1967), p. 195.

<sup>97</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'The Sign-Seekers', in *The Evolution of an Intellectual* (London: R. Cobden-Sanderson, 1920), p. 5. John Middleton Murry, *To the Unknown God: Essays Towards a Religion* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), p. 60.

<sup>98</sup> D. Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 101-2.

<sup>99</sup> H.D.A Major, *English Modernism: its Origins, Methods and Aims* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1927), p. 119.

<sup>100</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Jesus: Man of Genius* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1926), p. 196.

unique. Its importance lay not in giving him a special position of authority, but rather in signifying the relationship of which all human beings could partake.<sup>101</sup>

Seen in the context of liberal Anglicanism Murry's religious writings could be understood as operating within a dialogic rather than oppositional relationship to Christianity; but situating his thought in this category is problematic. Although there was little in terms of its intellectual content that diverged from ideas operating within this sphere, it obscures the degree to which he actively sought to cultivate an oppositional stance: conflict was perhaps more stimulating for him than ecumenical dialogue. Particularly in the post-war moment he was influenced by a Lawrentian conviction that the church was part of an old order that needed to be overthrown. His revisionist approach to Jesus as an exemplar figure was not positioned by him as an accommodation to the church, but as antagonistic to it. In, for example, his 1925 article 'Christ or Christianity,' he starkly demanded that a choice must be made between the two.<sup>102</sup>

At points he dallied with identifying as a Christian, but generally turned his back on the possibility. Deeply depressed and uncomfortable with social contact in the wake of Mansfield's death in 1923 he fled London to Twyford, where he experienced what he would generally articulate as his definitive sense of mystical awakening. In the pages of the periodical he went on to edit, *The Adelphi*, he described it as a moment when 'the darkness of that ocean changed to light, the cold to warmth; when it swept in one great wave over the shores and frontiers of myself; when it bathed me'.<sup>103</sup> Although the imagery of warmth and light has overtones of the language of Christian mysticism, he recorded his wariness of interpreting it within such a framework: 'Was I condemned to be a Christian after all? There were months when I trembled on the verge of Orthodoxy'. He reflected that while 'I had become passionately convinced of a truth of a kind that must be called religious, yet I was, no less than before, completely without attachment, or desire to be attached, to Christianity, or any form of religion'.<sup>104</sup> Throughout his career he would continue to sound this wary note. In later life he considered taking holy orders, but he swiftly turned his back on the prospect, penning the fiery denunciation: *The betrayal of Christ by the Churches* (1940).<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> John Middleton Murry, *God: An Introduction to the Science of Metabiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 104.

<sup>102</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Christ or Christianity', *The Adelphi*, 3.4 (1925), 233-41.

<sup>103</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'A Month After', *The Adelphi*, 1.2 (1923), p. 95.

<sup>104</sup> Murry, *God*, pp. 63, 36.

<sup>105</sup> John Middleton Murry, *The Betrayal of Christ by the Churches* ([S.I.], Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1940).

## Murry and alternative spirituality

Murry's engagement with faith systems outside of the church came notably via the figure of the guru: Mansfield's turn to the teaching of Gurdjieff at the end of her life. Mansfield became the most famous inhabitant of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau, residing there until her death in January 1923, having moved there in the October of the previous year. Murry's attitude to Mansfield's esoteric turn was ambivalent. Close to her departure for Gurdjieff's community she became excited by the Theosophist, M.B. Oxon's, *Cosmic Anatomy* (1921), a book that he disliked. He tried also to persuade her from joining Gurdjieff, writing of his inability to bear discussing the 'doctrines of Ouspensky' with her.<sup>106</sup>

Despite these instances of hostility, there are indications that her move triggered his receptivity to alternative forms of the spiritual. Residing at Twyford in Sussex, Murry became increasingly close to his neighbour, the mystically inclined practitioner of raja yoga, Millar Dunning.<sup>107</sup> He wrote to Mansfield about his discussions with Dunning on astrology, assuring her in the letter of his interest in the esoteric: 'for heaven's sake, Wig, don't think you bore me by writing about these things, they're the only thing which really interest me'.<sup>108</sup> In the same letter he also articulated a more accommodating view of her stay at Gurdjieff's institute, expressing his belief that her life there suggested 'the very opposite of withdrawal and isolation'.<sup>109</sup> Dunning lent Murry a book to read on yoga and also assisted him with undergoing visualisation exercises. Murry made various attempts to rid his mind of thought, a process which in one instance led him to see a white light and a symbol, interpreted by him as the Egyptian Tau.<sup>110</sup> While he was uncertain about the efficacy of these techniques, his letters to Mansfield do suggest he felt himself to be taking part in some form of equivalent spiritual quest, writing of them marching on 'parallel paths – parallel paths which converge, and that the day is not so terribly far distant when we shall be ready for one another'.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> F. A. Lea, *The Life of John Middleton Murry* (London: 1959), p. 90.

<sup>107</sup> The two lived next door and were frequent companions. Murry, *God*, p. 27. Dunning's own contributions to *The New Age* reveal his similar interest in states of consciousness. In one article, in which he advanced the notion that nature influenced the human mind, he proposed the idea that consciousness operated on a spectrum, fluctuating between the 'vegetable' and higher, spiritual realms. Millar Dunning, 'The Subconscious Influence of Nature', *The New Age*, 24.19 (1919), 311-12.

<sup>108</sup> John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield (31 December 1931), *Letters*, p. 368.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 368.

<sup>110</sup> Murry, *God*, p. 28.

<sup>111</sup> Murry mentions reading Raja Yoga in another letter to Mansfield (29 May 1921), *Letters*, p. 341.

It is not that Murry eschewed Christianity to plunge into occult and Eastern practice, it is just that these spiritual forays are symptomatic of the way that what was foremost to him was the belief in the sacred quality of the self – the tradition or practice that articulated this principle was of secondary import. We can see this stance in his later interest in Theosophy. Murry never became a Theosophist himself, but the organisation's syncretic attitude to belief, presenting itself as a system in which the major world religions were united, greatly appealed to him. Becoming a frequent contributor to the Theosophical periodical *Aryan Path*, he wrote in the journal of his hope for the future of religion that lay in a Christianity which recognised itself as one option among many. Quoting the claim in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) that different religions 'represent one eternal Truth; separate they are but shades of human error and the signs of imperfection', he notes, 'That is Madame Blavatsky at her best. The truth she utters is vital'.<sup>112</sup>

### The missionary critic

In his lambasting of the elitist strain that he argued characterised literary modernism, John Carey notes the way in which religious ideas were often used by writers to endorse the model of the artist as a figure separate and superior to the rest of society.<sup>113</sup> As I will discuss in my final chapter on Ithell Colquhoun, a model of apartness was particularly endorsed within the esoteric domain. Luke Ferretter has examined this tendency in relation to Lawrence's writing, exploring the way in which Lawrence's appeal to occult language and imagery provided an abstruse quality to his prose, particularly in his more cryptic rendering of romantic desire. Ferretter has demonstrated the shift that occurred between Lawrence's emphasis on biblical imagery in *The Rainbow* (1915) and his appeal to the occult in the final draft of *Women in Love* (1920).<sup>114</sup> In the 1916 text of *Women in Love* the Pussum's feelings towards Gerald are described using standard romantic tropes of madness, blood and warmth: 'Her being suffused into his veins like a

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<sup>112</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'The First Book of Madame Blavatsky,' *Aryan Path*, 3 (1932), 58-63 (p. 60).

<sup>113</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligensia, 1880-1939* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 71-93.

<sup>114</sup> Luke Ferretter, *The Glyph and the Gramophone: DH Lawrence's Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 44. Ferretter argues that Lawrence's turn to occult language resulted from his reading of James Pryce's *Apocalypse Unsealed* (1910), which explored the book of Revelation as the receptacle of esoteric knowledge. The aspect of its teaching that particularly excited Lawrence was its account of the way in which human physiology is organised around four different 'life-centres', connected by a force named 'kundalin', based at the bottom of the spine.

delirium, a lovely intoxicating, maddening heat'.<sup>115</sup> But in the 1917 version the description takes on an obscurer quality, when Lawrence appeals to esoteric concepts: 'Her being suffused into his veins like a magnetic darkness, and concentrated at the base of his spine like a fearful source of power'.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, in 'Excuse' sexual desire between Ursula and Birkin is also rendered in Theosophical terms, when she traces the back of his thighs, 'following some mysterious life-flow there'.<sup>117</sup>

Murry's dislike of Lawrence's mystical descriptions of sex within the novel was the occasion for one of his wryer moments as a critic, when he poured scorn on Lawrence's description of Rupert Birkin's 'suave loins of darkness' through which Rupert and Ursula discover 'the deepest physical mind'. He notes the bathetic tone of the following episode in which the pair eat a meal and discover, "'among all things" a meat pastry', questioning, 'Does the "deepest physical mind" take pleasure in a tart when it is filled with apples and none when it is filled with meat?'.<sup>118</sup> Carey cites Murry as an exemplar of the elitist strain within literary modernism, in his conviction that art provided a route to a 'higher reality'.<sup>119</sup> But although Murry maintained an exalted view of the spiritual power of art, I want to argue that this characterisation obscures the degree to which he took a missionary view of his role as a critic; convinced that his task involved communicating his insights to as wide an audience as possible.

Certainly, his writing could take on a lofty, aesthetic strain. In his work from 1924, *To the Unknown God*, Murry enthused about the divine quality of art:

Shall I say then, Read Anthony and Cleopatra till the bugle-call of that unearthly challenge to human loyalty echoes in the remotest chamber of the soul? Or, listen to the last piano sonatas of Beethoven, till you feel that in the high B. of op. 109 all that human desire can imagine [...] Or shall I say, Read Tchechov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Read and listen, till you know what secret harmony and high design lies within all human discomfiture [...] These men, and other men like these, knew the secret of life.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *The First 'Women in Love,'* ed. by John Worthen and Lindeth Vasey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 62. Quoted by Ferrerter, *The Glyph*, p. 45.

<sup>116</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York, The Viking Press, 1960), p. 81. Quoted by Ferrerter, p. 45.

<sup>117</sup> Lawrence, *Women*, p. 226. Quoted by Ferrerter, p. 46.

<sup>118</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Reminiscences of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Cape, 1932), p. 223. He went on to criticise the novel for its depiction of 'the crudest kind of sexuality, wrapped up in what Mr S.K. Ratcliffe has aptly called the language of Higher Thought'. *Reminiscences*, p. 224.

<sup>119</sup> Carey, p. 82.

<sup>120</sup> Murry, *Unknown*, pp. 39-40.

But the founding of *The Adelphi* journal, a project contemporaneous to this work, was specifically aimed at resisting the notion of art's existence for an elite coterie. The prospectus that he drew up to set out its purpose indicates his reaction to the Bloomsbury-Garsington circles with which he had been closely aligned during his editorship of *The Athenaeum*. 'We are bored to death by modern dilettantism. We are sick of "Art"', it insisted, the current state of literature is castigated as a 'parlour game for effete intellectuals'. Instead: 'The Adelphi will not be a high brow magazine. It aims at being comprehensive and interesting to as many people as possible'.<sup>121</sup> As Michael Whitworth has demonstrated, this editorial line manifested itself in his tendency to eschew the Bloomsbury contributors who had made up the pages of *The Athenaeum* and to shy away from publishing formally experimental prose.<sup>122</sup>

As in Lawrence's 'Fantasia' (1922), Murry's pivoted on a personal style that emphasised his inner voice, some 'secret depths,' as the criterion of judgement.<sup>123</sup> But unlike Lawrence he never employed esoteric terminology, turning rather to more accessible biblical imagery and phraseology drawn from the language of Protestant evangelicalism. He used this mode in his study of Keats from 1925, that aimed to capture what he deemed as the essence of the writer – through a comparison with Shakespeare. His rationale for the work had a convert's zeal:

In Shakespeare I was lost; and I had wandered in his works as in a great and trackless forest for many years before I became possessed [...] He was the greatest adventurer of all; his was the greatest soul; his path the dizzy and most mysterious; he was himself verily "the prophetic soul of the wide world dreaming of things to come." (3)

The writing is florid, the terminology imprecise and its meaning obscure. But the work's proselytising, evangelical energy was driven by the sincere belief (to Eliot's shudder) that literature was so critical a source of religious truth that its message needed to be published as far afield as possible. This ambition, when channelled by *The Adelphi* that was initially a popular one;

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<sup>121</sup> An *Adelphi* announcement flyer, with a form to subscribe. Cited in F.A. Lea, *The Life of John Middleton Murry* (London: Methuen & Co), p. 107.

<sup>122</sup> Michael Whitworth, 'Enemies of Cant: *The Athenaeum* (1919-1921) and *The Adelphi* (1923-1948)', in ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009-13), I (2009), pp. 365-388 (p. 365). Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and Roger Fry were repeated contributors to *The Athenaeum*. Eliot, alone of this group, made sporadic contributions to *The Adelphi*.

<sup>123</sup> Murry uses this phrase to describe the criteria by which poetry is judged in *Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 7.

Murry's biographer, F.A. Lea, notes that the publication performed particularly well in nonconformist heartlands in the North.<sup>124</sup>

The democratic implications of Murry's project were somewhat marred, though, by his tendency to spiritual gatekeeping and high-faluting grandiosity. Although he did have a deeply immanentist sensibility, it was – as with Lawrence – counterpoised by a hierarchical tenor according to which he tended to claim a unique form of sensibility for himself and his chosen associates. The hagiographic portrait of Mansfield that Murry, after her death, painted in the pages of *The Adelphi*, as a spiritual being of pure, childlike goodness, was a continuation of the mythologising tendencies that had formed an integral part of their relationship. A friend of Murry once remarked that it was often hard to tell where Murry ended and God began, an observation borne out by some of the more florid flights within his letters to her.<sup>125</sup> Writing to Mansfield during the war, Murry headily proclaimed: 'Sometimes now I begin to think tremendous high thoughts, thoughts that make me dizzy. Suddenly, I seem to know the secret of the universe [...] I know this too, that you are I are *geniuses*'.<sup>126</sup> Murry repeatedly stressed the idea that the two were separate from the rest of humanity, a notion that was often blended with a spiritualised portrait of the pair as children: 'we belong to our own kingdom, which is truly where we stand hand in hand, even when we are cross together like two little boys'.<sup>127</sup>

Murry's writing fused the questioning with the didactic, the self-effacing with the assured. *The Adelphi*, initially intended as a vehicle for Lawrence's message, was in fact dominated by Murry's own voice. As Whitworth has demonstrated, he was the most frequent contributor in the years 1923-27, a tendency extended in 1933 when he decided to start a journal, *The Wanderer*, of which he was to be both editor and sole contributor.<sup>128</sup> Murry's prostration before the sensibility of his favourite writers – Keats, Shakespeare, Mansfield, Lawrence, Dostoevsky and Hardy – was counterpoised by the assertive tenor with which he claimed special knowledge of the key insight of their teaching and the way he would cast them off, if he came to doubt their spiritual import. It was Lawrence, as I shall discuss in greater depth, who suffered most from this method. After his death he published a critical appreciation of Lawrence's work, *Son of Woman* (1931), in which he argued his career to have been a failure.

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<sup>124</sup> Lea, p. 111.

<sup>125</sup> Tomalin, 'Mr Wrong'.

<sup>126</sup> John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield (10 March 1918), *Letters*, p. 136.

<sup>127</sup> John Middleton Murry to Katherine Mansfield (16 December 1915), *Letters*, p. 71.

<sup>128</sup> Whitworth, p. 385.



It is in the connection that he made between his unique spiritual sensitivity and his role as a critic that Sutcliffe's model of the guru and seeker becomes a useful means to understand Murry's project. As Sutcliffe sets out, the interwar guru operated in a market of 'seekers' attempting self-actualisation.<sup>129</sup> Although it involved, in one sense, a prostration before the special spiritual authority of guru, in another, it was an assertive form of spiritual engagement. The syncretic quality of the domain fostered the freedom of the practitioner to choose which, and how many, religious authorities to follow. They could also be discarded if failing to assist their personal project of sacred development.

### **Pacifism and the epiphany**

As I have discussed, a key criticism often levelled against Murry was the protean quality of his guises, his 'changeable discipleship' and 'dabbling' in different projects.<sup>130</sup> But I want to argue that despite the varied nature of his political pursuits, there was a clear continuity between his aesthetic concerns and his political activity. Focusing on his pacifist engagement, in this section I will argue that it represented a continuation of the epiphanic orientation of his critical method.

In her study *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson makes a plea for an understanding of the movement focused away from the exceptional, or 'the moment', as I have earlier used. She argues that too much attention has been given to the flashes of 'transcendent understanding' within modernist literature, with its ingrained attention to the ordinary, uneventful passing of daily life overlooked.<sup>131</sup> In terms that bear similarity to Murry's own complaints she argues that this artistic tendency often stemmed from a mood of pessimism; 'a response to what is represented as the hollowness of modern life, the loss of abstract ideals in which to believe, and the difficulty of really knowing another person'.<sup>132</sup> One of the reasons she cites for querying the significance of the exceptional is the way such moments do not provide a route to practical action. Citing Peter Buber, she argues 'aesthetic shock "is aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life," but the affective experience of being jolted out of the ordinary does not always

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<sup>129</sup> Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 200-208.

<sup>130</sup> Sharon Greer Cassavant, *John Middleton Murry: The Critic as Moralist* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), p. 135. Bridget Chalk, 'John Middleton Murry and Ethical (Anti-) Modernism,' *Modernism/Modernity*, 4.2 (2019) <<https://modernismmodernity.org>> [accessed 23 August 2020].

<sup>131</sup> Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>132</sup> Olson, p. 4.

offer a clear sense of *how* or *what* one is meant to change [...] Shock cannot have a permanent affect in and of itself.<sup>133</sup> This is something I will further address in my chapter on Woolf, where I will contrast her transitory notion of the epiphany with the more lasting model adopted by Murry and Huxley. As Murry articulated in his essay 'Romanticism and Tradition', his concern was 'not in a fleeting moment of heightened consciousness, but in a change of consciousness itself.'<sup>134</sup>

Murry's celebration of the 'rhythm of the soul', in contrast to Eliot's cool emphasis on a structured value system based on hierarchies of authority and institution, can, as the latter argued, appear fragmentary and flighty in tenor.<sup>135</sup> But what is interesting is the way Murry's collapse of the division between the divine and human realm provided a systematising element to his thought, a route from his work as a literary critic to political campaigner. The crucial distinction, as I have addressed, in Murry's notion of the epiphany is that the experience is able to be clearly understood, that it renders a fundamental change to the self and that its significance is amenable to language – via the written word its importance can be communicated to an audience beyond the individual experiencer. While for a writer such as Woolf the heightening of the self, or 'moments of being' contain an intimation that the world might be beautiful, that the self *might* be good, in Murry there is no ambiguity about the affirmative nature of reality. The self and the world at large are permeated by the divine, the task is only its actualisation.

Since the early 1930s, Murry had developed a close friendship with the critic Max Plowman who acted, temporarily, as editor of *The Adelphi*. Plowman had served in an infantry regiment during the First World War, but in 1917 had refused to join the Western Front due to the crystallisation of his early pacifist leanings. Following the war Plowman maintained an absolute commitment to pacifism and tried, at various points, to convert Murry to the cause. Although Plowman, more consistently than Murry, allied himself with the Christian faith, his theology was of a liberal kind. Rather than point to a specific creed, his pacifist conviction stemmed from his belief in the divinity of man.<sup>136</sup> He expounded on this principle in his 1927 study of William Blake, in which

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<sup>133</sup> Peter Buber, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 80. Cited by Olson, p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Romanticism and Tradition', *The Criterion*, 2.7 (1924), 272-295 (p. 290).

<sup>135</sup> Murry, 'Romanticism and Tradition,' p. 278. T.S. Eliot, 'The function of criticism' in *The Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), p. 70 (first publ. in *The Criterion*, 2.5 (1923) 31-42).

<sup>136</sup> Plowman's first, most developed, explanation of his pacifism came when he resigned from the army in January 1918 and wrote a letter to friends justifying that decision. It stemmed from a confidence in the

he argued that the key insight of his work was that: ‘Imagination could perceive “the infinite in everything”’, and in that moment of recognition discover that ‘man is inseparable from God, and God not to be separated from man’.<sup>137</sup>

Largely under the influence of Plowman’s enthusiasm, Murry wrote his own study of Blake. It was in this work that he first articulated a pacifist position, based, as with Plowman, on the sacral quality of the self. It was man’s capacity for ‘spiritual sensation’ that makes war so heinous; as ‘every man has the potentiality of being possessed by the Imagination of Eternity [...] he cannot be robbed of his birth right’. This idea functioned both as the basis for his belief in the immorality of war, but also how the vision of a pacifist society might be actualised. Again, turning to Blake in an article in *The Adelphi*, he outlined his belief that ‘the Divine Vision’ could, through its transformative impact, remove the human impulse towards the bellicose.<sup>138</sup>

The connection between Murry’s syncretic spirituality and pacifism was symptomatic of broader trends within anti-war activism in Britain. Of the progressive political movements clustered around the left, it was the pacifist cause that intersected most closely with religious thought. The movement had a long history of association with the non-conformist churches, notably Quakerism, and in its Peace Pledge Union (PPU) iteration at the hands of the Anglican cleric, Dick Sheppard, it developed close ties to the Church of England. The Christian strain of pacifism has been well documented in Martin Ceadal’s account *Defining of a Faith*, and is central to his conclusion, that by the end of the 1930s, pacifism developed into becoming primarily a creed rather than a political position.<sup>139</sup>

However, his category of Christian pacifism simplifies what was in fact a much murkier spectrum of religious and spiritual belief. In a set of notes on the PPU, Aldous Huxley spoke of a religious spirit within the pacifist movement that existed independently from Christianity: a ‘theology of pacifism’ rooted in the ‘underlying spiritual reality in humankind’ that incorporated both ‘Christian and non-Christian’.<sup>140</sup> Murry’s notion of heightening the self as a means of

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divinity of man: ‘So wholly do I believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation (that God indeed lives in every human body) that I believe that killing men is always killing God’. Max Plowman, ‘Reasons for Resigning,’ (1918), in *Bridge into the Future: Letters of Max Plowman*, ed. by D.L. Plowman (London: Andrew Dakers, 1944), p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> Max Plowman, *Introduction to the Study of Blake* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 101.

<sup>138</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘William Blake and Revolution,’ *The Adelphi*, 4.2 (1932) 536-43 (p. 538).

<sup>139</sup> Martin Ceadal, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8.

<sup>140</sup> Aldous Huxley, ‘Lettre sur la guerre et la psychologie de “individual”’, in *L’Ésprit, l’éthique et la guerre* (Paris : Institut international de coopération intellectuelle, 1934) 58-68. Quoted by Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 431.

bringing about peace had a close affinity with Huxley and his associate Gerald Heard's idea of cultivating the stance of non-attachment. But he fundamentally objected to the mechanism by which they thought it could occur.

Huxley and Heard worked closely with the advocate for non-violent resistance, Richard Gregg, whose own pamphlet, 'Training for Peace', proposed group activities such as dancing and communal singing as a means of heightening the individual's state of consciousness and fostering their spiritual connection to the community.<sup>141</sup> These proposals aroused the ire of many members of the PPU along with Plowman, who, after hearing Richard Gregg speak, commented with opprobrium about how 'When he'd finished [...] Kingsley Martin brisked things up by asking if we were a set of quietists or a political organisation,' and dismissed the techniques he recommended as 'Yogi-Bogie exercises'.<sup>142</sup> For Plowman and Murry their use to bring about a spiritual sensibility had a frivolous quality because of both the serious and elusive nature of mystic insight.

### **The sex crucified man: D.H. Lawrence and the world remade**

Although Murry was dismissive of Huxley's attempts, the mid-1930s saw him undertake a not dissimilar scheme aimed at cultivating the individual. In 1935 he founded the Adelphi Centre at Langham Farm in Essex, an organisation which sought the socialist transformation of society by regenerating the self through a programme of spiritualised rural living. He first ran it as a summer school, intending to form an egalitarian microcosm that would anticipate 'the future reality of the classless society', before turning it into a permanent dwelling in 1935.<sup>143</sup> I am going to consider the project in light of Murry's grappling with Lawrence's legacy. My interest in Murry's engagement with Lawrence is for the way it is demonstrative of his desire for real-world impact. Although much of his visionary confidence and his hope in the possibility of transforming the world via the creation of a new social nucleus stemmed from Lawrence, his desire to work alongside existing organisations represented a response to what he felt to be the impracticality of the latter's philosophy. Ultimately, I will argue that the project suffered from

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<sup>141</sup> Richard Gregg, *The Training for Peace: A Training for Peace Workers* (London: Peace Pledge Union, 1936) pp. 12-15.

<sup>142</sup> Plowman to Mary Marr (18 July 1936) and to Geoffrey West (21 October 1936), *Bridge*, pp. 572, 578.

<sup>143</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'The Summer School', *The Adelphi*, 9.1 (1934), 98-107 (p. 99).

failing to negotiate the tension between its spiritualised, separatist bent and his desire to work within society.

In *The Literature of Connection* David Trotter argues that Mansfield's deflated scene of communion in 'Bliss' queried Lawrence's dogmatic certainty about the ecstatic forms of communion that could be achieved in the context of male friendship.<sup>144</sup> He speculates that Bertha's failure to connect riffs on Lawrence's suppressed prologue to *Women in Love* which she would likely have read while staying alongside Lawrence in Cornwall in 1916. In the prologue the novel's male protagonists, Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich, become aware of an epiphanic form of intimacy between them. While spending a week together walking in the mountains they become 'enkindled in the upper silences into a rare, unspoken intimacy, an intimacy that took no expression from either but which was between them like a transfiguration'.<sup>145</sup>

The Birkin-Crich dynamic was loosely modelled on Lawrence and Murry's own relationship.<sup>146</sup> The two had had what was at times an extremely close friendship, but one riven by rivalries and fallings out. This rupture was signalled dramatically after Lawrence's death, when Murry published a four-hundred-page monograph on Lawrence in which he argued that his career had failed due to his sexual inadequacy; a fact he learnt from a brief affair he conducted with Freida.<sup>147</sup> Notoriously labelled by Huxley a work of 'destructive hagiography,' Murry approached Lawrence in religious rather than literary terms, judging his works not for their aesthetic success, but rather as 'a means by which he could make explicit his own "thought-adventures," the poem a means for uttering his immediate experiences'.<sup>148</sup> Although Murry maintained his belief in Lawrence's uniqueness – that he was a prophet, a 'major soul' and 'the great life adventurer of modern times' – he came to conclude that Lawrence had failed to actualise his spiritual potential.<sup>149</sup>

Murry argued that Lawrence's writing was invalidated by his existential failure; that his attempts at spiritual insight were undercut by the romantic attachment to his mother that caused his

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<sup>144</sup> Trotter, p. 141.

<sup>145</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, ed. by David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 489. Quoted by Trotter, p. 147.

<sup>146</sup> For a discussion of this connection see. Gerri Kimber, *Circulating*, pp. 57-72.

<sup>147</sup> Lea, pp. 165-8.

<sup>148</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'D.H. Lawrence', in *The Olive Tree and other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), p. 201. Murry, *D.H. Lawrence: Son of Woman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), p.173. The judgements this resulted in were quixotic at best. *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) and *Aaron's Rod* (1922) were celebrated as Lawrence's greatest works, while *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920) were dismissed as failures.

<sup>149</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 174.

sexual inadequacy. This led to his obsession with sex and its conflation with religious fulfilment, but his notion of the ideal sexual coupling between male and female was always undermined by its separation from his own lived experience. Instead of a mystical awakening what his novels address are the undermining of the spiritual aspirations of men by women in their relationships – a moment encapsulated for Murry in *The Rainbow* (1915) when Will Brangwen attempts to show his wife, Anna, his beloved Lincoln Cathedral. His loftier musings are deflated when Anna snidely points out that the face of one of the gargoyles was the stonemason's own wife. Tom's spiritual reverie is broken, finding more real 'the sly little face that knew better, than [...] the perfect surge of the Cathedral'.<sup>150</sup>

Like Mansfield, Murry was also suspicious of Lawrence's representation of the male bond. Male friendship represented, he argued, Lawrence's attempt to escape from his failed relationships with women. As a result, there was an unacknowledged homoerotic quality to them, but one that resulted in tension and frustration as they could never properly replace what he sought in women. As well as the friendship between Crich and Birkin he levelled this critique at the relationship between Rawdon Lilly and Aaron Sisson in *Aaron's Rod* (1922), a novel which he otherwise enthusiastically thought looked to the founding of a 'New Jerusalem'.<sup>151</sup> The problem, he argued, was that Lawrence's attempts to construct a new society was invalidated by this pathological incapacity to forge the bonds needed to form its nucleus.

Part of the awkwardness of Murry's relationship with Lawrence was his unhappiness with a discipleship role. While it was easier to adopt this position in relation to deceased authors, it was a more difficult guise when faced with a living, breathing and quarrelsome messiah. As his career in the 1930s suggests, Murry, convinced in his own unique spiritual sensitivity, also sought a competing status as a guru type figure. But his uncertainty with Lawrence's message, as I will address in my chapter on Naomi Mitchison, also looked to difficulties with his legacy which were being reflected on in the leftist cultural scene. Although Lawrence was extolled as a prophet of revolution, the lack of specificity or practicality to his message was lamented. Murry's criticism of Lawrence's refusal to accept the 'limitations of the actual' and to 'offer remedies which were possible, or at least conceivable,' was symptomatic of this concern.<sup>152</sup>

The Adelphi Centre aimed to work within society, not outside it – specifically to help the socialist and pacifist causes. Murry was at this time a Labour Party supporter and intended the

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<sup>150</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 81.

<sup>151</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 195.

<sup>152</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 165.

organisation to supplement parliamentary politics, rather than acting as an alternative to them. The centre also maintained close links with the PPU and, in 1937, it entered into what was perhaps its most useful operational phase when Murry handed the Adelphi Centre over to this organisation to use as a home for Basque refugee children.<sup>153</sup> The spirit of Lawrence thus lingered but as a domesticated sprite, for example Lawrence's demand for a radical transformation of the present monetary system in his poem 'Being Demand' – 'The world is waiting for a new great movement of generosity or for the great wave of death' – was used by Murry in an advertising campaign to raise money.<sup>154</sup>

Although Murry was attempting to respond to what he felt to have been the impracticality of Lawrence's message, he also had separatist tendencies that infiltrated his politics. Part of the problem lay in the temporally discordant dimension of Murry's spirituality. As I will emphasise in my treatment of Heard, in my chapter on Mitchison, there was often a future-orientated focus to spiritualised notions of consciousness. The heights to which the few could reach in the present day were significant as an intimation of the new form of being that could be forged in the future. Murry's epiphanic mode was in many ways a proleptic one, his own spiritual experiences were significant primarily in pointing to a form of integration that the 'new race of men' would be able to achieve.<sup>155</sup>

It is necessary to recognise the eschatological hue to Murry's thought to understand fully his critique of Lawrence. In the pages of *The Wanderer* he mused whether 'that remote and to us fantastic belief of the Jews of the time of Jesus [...] the belief that the world was on the brink of universal cataclysm [...] had suddenly become the conviction, or the fear, of every thinking and imaginative man to-day?'.<sup>156</sup> The absolute terms in which he outlined Lawrence's failure drew on biblical vocabulary:

Lawrence is now possessed by devils. There is *no* Lawrence. For who can say now which is Lawrence – the man who loves, or the man who blasphemes against love? The man who seeks life, or the man who imaginatively exults in violation and murder and death? [...] The doom had overtaken him.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Caroline Moorehead, *Troublesome People: Enemies of War, 1916-1989* (London: Hamilton, 1987), p. 177.

<sup>154</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'The Summer School,' *The Adelphi*, 12.1 (1936), p. 202.

<sup>155</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 340.

<sup>156</sup> John Middleton Murry, *The Wanderer*, 4 (1933), p. 87.

<sup>157</sup> Murry, *Son*, p. 341.

Lawrence's message was critical to an eschatological moment in which humanity needed to move into a new age of divine consciousness, hence his failure was endowed with a metaphysical seriousness.

Another facet of the temporally disjunctive aspect of Murry's notion of how the self would achieve fullness was his backward leaning glance; his nostalgic appreciation of the way that conditions of past ages offered the means to an integrated being. In his *Fantasia* (1922) Lawrence had posited a remote moment for psychic wholeness, in the Atlantic civilisation which pre-dated the Neolithic and Palaeolithic eras. He also identified the healthy psyche with past and non-European civilisations, idealising the vital forms of living of the Pueblo Indians and the Etruscans. Since the early 1900s Lawrence had speculated on the utopic possibilities of trying to recreate something of these conditions by moving small communities of men and women away from urban to rural locations. He considered, variously, the possibilities offered by the English country house, asking Ottoline Morrell whether he could start a community at Garsington, as well as looking more broadly to Cornwell, Florida and New Mexico as possible homes of 'Ranamin'.<sup>158</sup>

During the First World War, Murry's mental state had deteriorated – as with Lawrence. Although exempt from fighting on medical grounds, due to suspected tuberculosis, he became severely agitated, recording fantasies of killing himself in protest. He also walked the streets during air raids in the hope that he would be hit.<sup>159</sup> A sense of hysteria infused Lawrence and Murry's short-lived journal venture, *The Signature*, which ran for three issues in 1915. His first contribution opened with the assertion of the way in which war had become a 'more and more insidious nightmare. It lays wait for me and paralyses me'.<sup>160</sup> This was a moment in which Murry was particularly receptive to Lawrence's injunction to step outside of the urban industrialism responsible for development of mechanical consciousness, and escape to Cornwall as a landscape that offered an opening into the 'the world as it was in that flicker of pre-Celtic civilisation, when humanity was really young'.<sup>161</sup> In 1916 he moved there with Mansfield, where they lived in a cottage next to Lawrence and Freida.<sup>162</sup> Although their experiment at communal

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<sup>158</sup> *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. by Harry T. Moore, 2 vols (New York: Heinemann, 1962-65) II (1965), p. 441.

<sup>159</sup> Lea, p. 55. The threat of tuberculosis was a running theme through Murry's life. In addition to Mansfield and Lawrence's death, second wife, Violet Le Maistre died from the disease. Violet, a young writer who idolized Mansfield, was delighted by her diagnosis, exclaiming ' "O I'm so glad!" [...] "I wanted you to love me as much as you loved Katherine – and how could you, without this?"' Lea, p. 143.

<sup>160</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'There was a Little Man', *The Signature*, 1.2 (1915), p. 24.

<sup>161</sup> D.H. Lawrence to J.D. Beresford (January 1916), *Letters I* (1962), p. 492.

<sup>162</sup> Kaplan, *Circulating*, p. 153.



living ended in failure due to quarrels between the couples, Murry's interest in the salvific possibility of the commune lingered.

After his death Max Plowman wrote an essay *The Adelphi* celebrating Lawrence's significance in standing 'Right in the centre of the vortex of mechanism [...] protesting against this blasphemy against life and proclaiming the Holy Ghost in man as the only source of instinctive purity'.<sup>163</sup> In a speech to inaugurate the opening of the centre in 1934, Plowman, began in Lawrentian terms, observing on the way in which modern civilisation had rendered the individual a disintegrated being. War was the ultimate expression of this disintegration – its solution lay in the cultivation of a religious way of life.<sup>164</sup> At the heart of the organisation was to be a chapel unaffiliated to a specific religious tradition, which Murry hoped would be a chance where 'we could be more or less, as free spirits – as those who are not and never likely to be, involved in the equivocation of the secular institution of the Church – make our own [...] great Catholic tradition'.<sup>165</sup>

What did Murry envisage by his 'great Catholic tradition'? Although his writings on the Adelphi Centre are ambiguous, from contemporaneous texts it appears that the phrase gestured towards the model provided by the pre-Reformation church. *Heaven and Earth* (1938) saw Murry extol rural medieval communities as the model for an idealised form of togetherness. He argued that Chaucer's writing was embedded in a society in which; 'The common-field was the ground which this great harvest grew. Men depended on earth and on one another. They were knit to the earth and to one another; one common gesture united them all'.<sup>166</sup> It was through a 'voluntary community' that the individual could, in the present day, find a route back to medieval holism.<sup>167</sup> It is instructive that his reflection on how the centre might lead to broader structural change tended to be religious rather than political, hoping that it could provide the model for a series of similar institutions; the 'parent-house of a new monastic colonisation of England'.<sup>168</sup>

In his study of alternative communities in interwar England, Dennis Hardy designates the movement as one of 'partial' utopianism.<sup>169</sup> Although the period saw the lively proliferation of

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<sup>163</sup> Max Plowman 'The Significance of D.H. Lawrence,' *The New Adelphi*, 3.4 (1930), p. 250.

<sup>164</sup> Max Plowman, 'Pacifism' (An address to The Adelphi Summer School at Glossop September, 1934), *The Adelphi*, 9.4 (1935), p. 206.

<sup>165</sup> Lea, p. 246

<sup>166</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Heaven and Earth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), p. 43.

<sup>167</sup> Murry, *Heaven*, p. 43.

<sup>168</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'The Idea of the Centre', *The Adelphi*, 12 (1936), p. 267.

<sup>169</sup> Dennis Hardy, *Utopian England: Community Experiments, 1900-1945* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000), p. 273.

organisations that championed new ways of living in a typically rural setting, Hardy argues that, in their generally limited ambitions to bring about societal change, the movement can be best understood in terms of its half-heartedness. Murry, in particular, is singled out by Hardy as a figure symptomatic of the movement's insubstantiality; one that amounted 'to a light scattering across the landscape, almost negligible in its general impact,' and a withdrawal 'to indulge in the arts in Dartington, to flit from one idea to another in the company of John Middleton Murry, or to become totally self-absorbed in the exclusively Bloomsbury circles'.<sup>170</sup>

However, rather than understand the limitations of Murry's project and associated schemes according to Hardy's utopian lens, I want to analyse them according to Svetlana Boym's notion of nostalgia, as an underused but more perceptive optic than future-orientated utopianism.<sup>171</sup> The problem was not Murry's lack of drive, as Hardy implies, but what I have identified as his temporal confusion. The duality of the way in which he looked to the past to achieve the radical transformation of the present, is aptly characterised by her discussion of how nostalgia is not a simply retrospective mode of thought, but a 'prospective' one as well.<sup>172</sup> She discusses this dual lens according to the notion of the 'off-modern,' the study of nostalgia does not lead to what is simply a retreat from the modern, but to something more complex, 'the sideshows and back alleys rather than the straight road to progress'.<sup>173</sup>

Murry's centre was one of several organisations that looked to remove from urban society, yet sought, in that removal, the means to its reconstruction. This Janus-faced impulse towards perfectability was most dramatically played out in John Hargrave's organisation, the Kibbo Kift, which boldly fused the ancient and modern, the mystical and mundane. The language of the organisation blended Anglo-Saxon and Esperanto, its clothing and insignia mixed medieval and modern, geometric design, while its call to escape from urban living was ultimately channelled into a desire to remodel urban life, when the organisation morphed into a campaigning organisation for social credit.<sup>174</sup> A similar note also was struck in the centre at Gore Farm, founded in 1927 by the one-time follower of Hargrave, Rolf Gardiner, who also purchased Springhead Estate in 1933. On the advice of Lawrence – also looked to by Gardiner as a quasi-messianic figure ('the torch leader of my youth') – Gardiner abandoned John Hargrave's

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<sup>170</sup> Hardy, p. 203.

<sup>171</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>172</sup> Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia,' in *Atlas of Transformation* <html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-atlas-of-transformation.html> [accessed 15 October 2020].

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> For an investigation particularly of the visual records of the organisation see. Annebella Pollen, *Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon Books, 2015).

organisation, the Kibbo Kift, to start his own centre for rural revival.<sup>175</sup> Although Gardiner took issue with Hargrave's attempts to modernize past rituals, the lifestyle his organisation offered was a similar blend of contemporary concerns with historical and magical pursuits. Life at Gore Farm emphasised the sacramental quality of working within the land; its programme fused ancient ritual, folk singing and dancing, but with the aim of regenerating modern society rather than abandoning it.

Following the demise of the Adelphi Centre, Murry continued to speculate on ways that earlier forms of a religiously ordered society could offer visions of renewal. In his pamphlet written for the PPU *God or the Nation?*, he looked to a new society centred on an idealised image of the local parish church, extolling the role of the country-parson who, when 'mindful of his real relation to the village-community as a whole, he is not merely the priest of the church, but the father of his parishioners, their guide, philosopher, and friend'.<sup>176</sup> In *Heaven and Earth* Murry articulated a mystical understanding of the parson's role, as the 'man marked out to represent the community' and who was at the core of its 'mysterious organic wholeness'.<sup>177</sup> Murry, as I have noted, dallied briefly with the idea of becoming one himself. He decided against this route, spending his final years as a gentleman farmer and conservative voter.<sup>178</sup> Rather than see this a further *volte face*, the ultimate rejection of his progressive past, this pursuit can be understood as a continuation of his rural spirituality, of the Lawrentian idea of transformation via pastoral, mystical leadership. It is appropriate, as well, to the unstylish modernism that I have been delineating, in my examination of a man whose writing offered a blend of avant-garde concerns with evangelical tonalities. In this chapter I have shown how these divergent tendencies could be critically linked; how the impulse to newness could manifest itself in an earnest attempt to re-engage with the religious, as well as the literary sphere. I have argued that religion provides the crucial element connecting his literary career to his political questing, both driven by the notion of the capacity of the self to undergo some form of transformative rupture with the present moment, and for that experience to have far-reaching implications beyond the life of the individual. In this Murry functions as an exemplar for the affirmative quality of the alternative turn in religion that my chapters will go onto explore, and for the belief in the potential of art to heal, nurture and make whole.

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<sup>175</sup> R.J. Moore-Coyler, 'Rolf Gardiner, English Patriot and Council for the Church and Countryside,' *The Agricultural History Review*, 49.2 (2001), 187-209 (p. 193).

<sup>176</sup> John Middleton Murry, *God or the Nation?* (London: Peace Pledge Union, 1937), p. 19.

<sup>177</sup> Murry, *Heaven*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>178</sup> Kate Fullbrook, 'John Middleton Murry,' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) <<https://www.oxforddnb.com>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

## Aldous Huxley: The Unstable Self and the Ground of Being

### Introduction

Following the death of D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf wrote about her regret at not having engaged more closely with his work: ‘the fact about contemporaries [...] is that they’re doing the same thing on another railway line: one resents their distracting one, flashing past, the wrong way – something like that: from timidity, partly, one keeps one’s eyes on one’s own road’.<sup>179</sup> In the previous chapter I argued that spiritual belief took Murry on a route away from the notion of the labile self to one of religious fixity. Despite Aldous Huxley’s (1894-1963) mocking of Murry, I am going to argue that his writing in the 1930s saw him pursue a similar trajectory, and one that was likewise influenced by Lawrence. As with Murry, he was engaged with the psychological concerns that animated the modern movement and was influenced by the fractured selfhood that many of his contemporaries delineated. However also like Murry, fragmentation was not the final word, rather the railway line on which he travelled led him to a religiously rooted notion of being.

In 1930, in the first of a series of BBC talks on ‘The New Spirit in Modern Literature’, Harold Nicolson labelled Huxley a ‘modernist’ writer, placing him within a category which included both Woolf and Lawrence, as well as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.<sup>180</sup> This grouping is symptomatic of the way in which Huxley, in his day, tended to be classed among the high modernists. But since his death his position among them has become a more tentative affair. It is one that can be justified in coterie terms, he was involved in the Garsington set and was the close associate of many prominent experimental writers of his era. His works were also notorious for their ‘modern’ subject matter; espousing a Bloomsbury-esque anti-Victorianism, he was particularly infamous for his frank discussion of new sexual mores. But his avant-garde identity was not sustained in formal terms, his writing tended towards a realist mode and he was largely uninterested in artistic experimentation. Recent critical tendencies however, would seem to provide the basis for Huxley’s re-welcoming into the modernist home. With the expansive drive of new modernist studies, in which notions of high art tend to be dismantled and greater

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<sup>179</sup> *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1929-1931* eds. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-80) IV (1978), p. 315.

<sup>180</sup> Nicola Wilson, ‘Virginia Woolf, Hugh Walpole, the Hogarth Press and the Book Society’, *ELH*, 79 (2012), 237-60 (p. 237).

emphasis is placed on the dialogue that occurred between literature and social and political trends, the importance of considering ‘modernism’ from a formal perspective has become de-emphasised.<sup>181</sup>

But that criterion, I will argue, is a useful way of understanding Huxley’s project in the mid-1930s, even if only to think about why he resisted the more experimental bent of his contemporaries. In his article on the modernist novel, David Trotter argues that the quest for fresh modes of narration was driven by a frustration with its adequacy as a tool for representation, the feeling that it was ‘as traditionally conceived [...] no longer up to its job: that its imaginary worlds did not, in fact, correspond to the way one’s fellows spent their entire lives’.<sup>182</sup> If we turn to *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) as well as his contemporaneous essays, we can see how Huxley’s writing was indeed aligned with the concerns that often drove his contemporaries to seek ways of narrating the self. Huxley was also preoccupied with delving into the inner reaches of the mind, a process that led him to uncover a riven psyche; a self that is a battleground of conflicting impulses and emotional states. But rather than render these insights by turning to new fictional techniques, he tended to record his observations either through authoritative comments provided by the narratorial voice, or through assertions made by characters within the text, self-consciously musing on the limitations of their condition. What is missing is the sense of subjective states freely unfolding before the reader’s eyes. This crucial difference lay in his lack of the mimetic anxiety that Trotter cites. Instead of seeking new methods by which the novel could have greater representational veracity, Huxley’s interest in rethinking its potentialities were driven by therapeutic concerns. He was not striving, I will argue, for the novel to demonstrate more accurately the workings of the psyche, rather that it should assist with their cure.

*Eyeless in Gaza* does not see Huxley reject the cynicism that had typified his earlier writing, instead he tempers his pessimism with the spiritual solution that is provided at the climax of the novel. The work is the first in his oeuvre to foreground ideas drawn from Eastern religion and alternative therapy. In the paean it offers to the virtues of spiritual practice and clean living, its proffering of redemption via the ministrations of the guru, it functions as something of a prototype of the alternative spirituality novel. In my chapters on Woolf and Mitchison, while I will explore the way in which their own fiction was influenced by similar ideas and practices, I

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<sup>181</sup> Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, ‘The New Modernist Studies’, *PMLA*, 128 (2008), 737-48 (p. 738).

<sup>182</sup> David Trotter, ‘The modernist novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 69-98 (p.70).

will examine the way in which their efficacy is treated with ambivalence. But in Huxley's novel there is no sense of ambiguity about the way the sphere offers the solution to human ills.

In 1937, a year after the publication of *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley left England for America. The novel's themes were all ones that would burgeon in his later writing and would lead to his role as a prophet-like figure for American counter-culturalism. As this chapter will seek to demonstrate, the development of Huxley's ideas about group consciousness and lifestyle reform that went on to gain such a hold within the 1960s, can only be understood through their situation within a British interwar context. My focus on the way they responded to new ways of understanding and portraying the psyche that had emerged in the literary sphere from the late 1800s, emphasises the importance of Huxley as a node, connecting the self of modernism with notions of being that developed later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is important to emphasise the cultural significance of the novel's bridging role, because of its rather sidelined position within the Huxleyan corpus. The problem is the way in which approaches to Huxley tend to be concerned with his ideas, there is much greater interest in the opinions he expressed, rather than how he articulated them. This procedure favours his ever-popular *Brave New World* (1932), a spritely consideration of subjects that maintain a topical relevance – artificial insemination, totalitarianism and medication for mental wellbeing. But it leaves languishing what I think is his much more formally interesting work, *Eyeless in Gaza*, because of its permeation, not just with spiritual ideas, but his deeply unfashionable pacifist philosophy.

It was in the mid-1930s, largely as the result of this newfound interest in religion that had been fostered by his friendship with Gerald Heard, that Huxley became convinced of the mystical underpinning of the cosmos and with it the possibility of the self to achieve wholeness and integration. This belief came to underpin his mystical-pacifist philosophy of non-violent resistance. He advocated a programme of spiritual exercises aimed at the fostering of communality as a way of creating spiritually advanced individuals, capable of embodying pacifist principles. Clearly this approach had its limits as a way of opposing fascism. As Cecil Day-Lewis opined in response to Huxley's pacifist pamphlet, 'What are we going to do about it?' (1936) folk dancing and meditation had, unfortunately, limited efficacy against the ministrations of the four-engined bomber.<sup>183</sup> I am not trying to recuperate Huxley's political stance in the lead up to the

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<sup>183</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis, *We're NOT going to do NOTHING: A reply to Aldous Huxley's 'What are you going to do about it?', in Aldous Huxley*, in ed. by Donald Watt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 272-272 (p. 272) (first publ. London: Left Review, 1936).

Second World War. My interest is not in Huxley as a military strategist, but as a writer; how this philosophy changed what he was trying to do with the novel. The significance is not the content of the schemes that he outlined, but that he used the novel as a mechanism for their advocacy. I will argue that the dual focus of *Eyeless in Gaza*, towards diagnosing the flaws in the self and offering strategies for their healing, means that the work can be characterised as part-novel and part practical therapeutic guide.

In 1945 *Time* magazine published the article, ‘Universal Cult’ which featured Huxley alongside Gerald Heard and Christopher Isherwood.<sup>184</sup> It argued that these figures, as well as Somerset Maugham and the playwright, John van Druten, had created a new, spiritually focused ‘literary movement’.<sup>185</sup> Heard, Huxley and Isherwood tend to be particularly closely associated because all became followers of the Vedanta in California, where they arrived at the end of the 1930s, having left England to wide outcry.<sup>186</sup> Their spiritual interests, allied to their political retreat, both in geographic terms and in their anti-militaristic philosophy, has led to perceptions of the escapist quality of Huxley’s prose.<sup>187</sup> My reading of *Eyeless in Gaza* will argue that the critical reception of the novel has been ill-served by this grouping. Using a comparative reading of the novel’s conclusion with Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964), I will argue that while there is an escapist note to the mystical climax of Isherwood’s novel, in Huxley we find a much more practically orientated bent. Unlike Isherwood’s mysticism, I argue that Huxley’s religion is really a humanistic one, transcendent goals are espoused as a means of promoting human flourishing. Rather than see *Eyeless in Gaza* as an example of a minor literary footnote, the Vedantic novel, I want to consider it as a variant of the psychological turn within European literature – albeit one that is concerned with healing the selfhood that this turn uncovered. This formalist emphasis contrasts with the more cultural and historical approach I adopted in my chapter on Murry.

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<sup>184</sup> ‘Universal Cult,’ *Time*, 16.7 (1945) <<http://content.time.com/time/> html> [accessed 14 March 2019].

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Harold Nicolson wrote scornfully in the pages of the *Spectator*, ‘Mr Huxley strives, by practising “detachment”, by refusing to concern himself with what is terrible or wicked, to find “illumination”. I do not imagine for one moment so fine a soul as his can find detachment easy or illumination rapid. There must be moments for him, even in Hollywood, of doubt whether Higher Wisdom can best be defended at a distance of three thousand miles’. ‘People and Things,’ (8 March 1940) p. 327. Criticism was voiced from far and wide: the Dean of St. Paul’s was moved to pen the address ‘To Certain Intellectuals Safe in America’, *Spectator* (21 June 1940), p. 833. Questions also were raised in parliament about the departure of Isherwood, in the company of W.H. Auden. See. Ian Sansom, *September 1, 1939: W.H. Auden and the Afterlife of a Poem* (London: Haper Collins, 2019), p. 74.

<sup>187</sup> See W.E. McGregor, ‘The Great Escapist,’ *Our Time*, 1-2 (1941), p. 8. Valentine Cunningham describes the novel, along with *After Many a Summer* (1939) as ‘cosily wilful evasions’, *British Literature of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 70.

While I argued that the nuances of Murry's religiosity have been unappreciated, I shied away from attempting to recuperate him as a stylist. In this chapter I argue that interwar spirituality provides a way of appreciating the formal complexity of Huxley's novel. Although out of the scope of this chapter's purview, instead of delineating a route in which the novel's spiritual cure ends in 'mantras in Hollywood', it is also tempting position the work also as a progenitor of recent trends in publishing – the psychotherapeutic case study as well as the popularity of memoir and autofiction focused on mental health.<sup>188</sup> These types of writing have something of the dual function of Huxley's tale; they can be read for the intrinsic interest of their psychological explorations and, frequently, narrative zeal, but they can also function as a diagnostic tool that can indicate a therapeutic pathway for the reader. It is these twin tendencies of Huxley's novel, at once psychologically probing but also practical, that makes it such an intriguing one.

### **I can't make him feel it: realism and the riven self**

The feel of – that is to say the experience of reading – *Eyeless in Gaza* is, in many respects, that of a Victorian realist drama, with 20<sup>th</sup> century explicitness. It is a tale of the tangled romantic fortunes of the English upper classes, with added license to bring the varieties of abortion, homosexuality and casual sex openly into the plotlines. Although a small part of the narrative is told using the diary of the main protagonist, Anthony Beavis, the drama is largely conveyed via an authoritative narratorial voice that is all-seeing and all-knowing; coolly analysing the folly of the mortals under its sardonic purview.

The most seemingly experimental element is the novel's fractured time scheme. The opening description of Anthony's study of past photographs, the 'scattered snapshots' or 'old corpses' that marks his life, becomes programmatic of the tale that moves in fragmentary fashion between

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<sup>188</sup> Cunningham endorses the scorn of Huxley's contemporaries: 'Huxley's antagonists were right: his pacifism *is* cranky, an advocacy of the efficacies of prayer and private goodness for the well-heeled author who would shortly retire to vegetables and mantras in the Hollywood sunshine far from the threat of gas-chambers and bombs', p. 70. Examples of the psychotherapeutic case study include the popular works by the psychotherapist Irvin Yalom and the psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz: *Love's Executioner: and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (1991) and *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* (2013). Early examples of works that initiated the trend for life-writing focused on mental health include: Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993).



various episodes in his life.<sup>189</sup> The novel is structured primarily around three main phases in his existence: his boyhood following the death of his mother, as a young man in his early twenties, unhappily in love with a more worldly mistress, and finally as a middle-aged cynic, now a handsome and confident man of the world, but weary of life. Instead of moving through these episodes in chronological fashion, the novel jumps skittishly between them. The opening pages, for example, flit between the proximate past of Anthony's relationship with Helen Amberly, to the present of his political commitment, back again to the proximate past of his easy life in the South of France, from there to the past-past of his mother's funeral and then to the middle-past of Helen's teenage years. But taken in isolation the effect is less fragmentary than this account would suggest. There are no inner breaks within the internal order of the passages, the episodes they narrate proceed in clear and logical fashion. Re-organise the segments into chronological groupings and what would be left is a largely uncomplicated narrative tale.

A more interesting feature of novel, I would argue, is its approach to the depiction of the self. I want first to consider the description of Anthony's father's, an eminent philologist, breakdown at not being appointed president of the Philological Society:

The presidency of the Philological Society, which ought, without any question, to have come to him, had gone instead Jenkins. Jenkins, if you please! A mere ignorant popularizer, the very antithesis of a real scholar. A charlatan, a philological confidence trickster, positively (to use an American colloquialism) a 'crook'. Jenkin's election had taken Mr Beavis long strides towards death. From being a man much younger than his years, he had suddenly come to look his age. An old man; and tired into the bargain, eroded from within. 'I'm worried,' Pauline had confided to Anthony. 'He's making himself ill. And for something so childish, really. I can't make him see that it doesn't matter. Or rather I can't make him *feel* it. Because he sees it all right, but goes on worrying all the same' (377).

The humorous bathos in the collapse of a vain pedant over an insignificant rivalry would not be out of place as a (minor) plotline in the work Charles Dickens or Anthony Trollope. And Huxley makes about the same demand on the reader as we find in the works of either of these authors. Mr Beavis's voice is delineated by what is either his spoken words or internal dialogue, not in order to render the complexity of his subjectivity, but as a means of its parody. There is only

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<sup>189</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 4. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

sensitivity to the quirks of his voice to heighten its ridiculousness – his quibbling aside that ‘crook’ is an ‘American colloquialism’. There is no demand on the reader to make inferences, his self-destructive small-mindedness is blatantly apparent, its effects driven home by the narrator’s clarification that he has prematurely aged. I want to turn, though, to the final observation that is provided by his wife. She notes that his problem is not that he cannot see the irrelevance of his concerns, it is that the intellectual appreciation of his position does not have any impact on his emotional state.

Although Huxley does not destabilise subjectivity through the rendering of a labile consciousness that was pursued by his contemporaries, his writing does stake a claim for the self’s puckish, unmasterable quality. There appears an inalienable rent between forces of passion and reason; illustrated through a series of accounts of self-destructive behaviour, typically the pursuit of an unhealthy romantic attachment. It is noteworthy that the characters do not have a decisive revelation about their love object that causes its de-valuation, rather awareness of its lack of worth typically co-exists with its extreme desirability. Take Anthony’s love for his older mistress, Mary who continues an affair with him primarily out of boredom. The narrative underlines his awareness of her malice and insipidness, not after the passage of time, but rather in the very moment of his extreme passion for her:

Why did she have to be so horrible to him, he wondered, so absolutely beastly? He hated her, hated her all the more because of his desire for her, because of the memory and the anticipation of those pleasures, because of her liberating wit and knowledge, because of everything, in a word, that made it inevitable for him to do exactly what she wanted. Even though he knew it was stupid and wrong. (328)

Or take the plight of Mary and her daughter Helen at the hands of the former’s dastardly lover, Gerry. Before casually swindling Mary of her fortune, Gerry impregnates the teenage Helen for good measure. Helen does not need the wisdom of hindsight to appreciate the contradiction of her situation; she is bitterly aware of the ‘grotesque disparity between the facts’ and ‘her feelings’ (317). Gerry’s departure leaves Mary at the hands of a morphia addiction that is grimly compared to her passion for him: “I couldn’t help it,” Mrs Amberley replied. “It was like *this*.” She made a little movement with the hand that held the hypodermic syringe’ (361). Huxley, an effective observer of psychology, emphasizes the personality traits that have rendered each of these figures vulnerable: the way that Mary’s boredom leads her to become excited by Gerry’s lure of

danger, how the youth of Anthony lay behind the appeal of Mary's confident worldliness and the loneliness of Helen to the seductive overtures of Gerry in the guise of a caring brother. But the particularity of these tales remains secondary to their cumulative force; the way they function en masse to demonstrate the indelibly riven nature of the self.

#### **D.H. Lawrence and the polytheistic psyche**

The didactic purpose of *Eyeless in Gaza's* narrative rendering of the unstable self is indicated by the nesting of fragments of a book that Anthony is writing on the subject within the novel. He rejects the idea that the self should be considered a coherent entity, arguing that the sense we have of its coherency results from the limited powers of the mind: 'our world and we who live in it are the creations of stupidity and bad sight' (112). The psyche is rather analogous to matter, it might give the appearance of wholeness, but 'analyse it – and you find yourself in the presence of psychological atoms' (112).

Huxley's belief in the tangled multiplicity of the self was indebted to his reading of Lawrence, with whom he developed a close friendship. In an essay on his writing, Huxley enthused over Lawrence's sensitivity to the numinous quality of existence, particularly to what he termed to be his 'polytheistic' approach to the psyche; portraying human beings who are made up of forces above and beyond them and which work their way through them.<sup>190</sup> In phrasing almost identical to Anthony's analysis of personality, he writes that Lawrence's observation of behavior is 'carried so far [...] they cease to have characters and reveal themselves as collections of psychological atoms' (220).

Huxley flirted with the bold proclamation of an 'atomistic' understanding of being. In a lengthy essay from 1929, responding to what he argued to be Blaise Pascal's pessimistic understanding of the self, because of his emphasis on the afterlife, he articulated the many-selved-self as a way of adopting a celebratory response to life in the present moment. Defining the self as 'a series of distinct psychological states, a colony of diverse personalities', the essay proposes embracing the stance of the 'life-worshipper' who revels in their multiplicity of being and 'does not select one single being from his colony of souls, call it his "true self" and try to murder all the other

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<sup>190</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'D.H. Lawrence', *The Olive Tree and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), pp.199-238 (p. 213).

selves'.<sup>191</sup> We find the sorry fate of self-murderers in his contemporaneous novel *Point Counter Point*, published in 1928, which present the spectacle of two intellectuals whose attention to the life of the mind has come at the expense of being able to forge emotional or sexual relationships. Both enjoy academic success, but their wives are forced to look elsewhere for romantic fulfillment.

Huxley's essay on Pascal adopts a relativist stance, claiming that moral and philosophical positions are simply temporary projections of a changeable state of mind. It proposes a biological reductivism, arguing that that Pascal's ascetism was simply a projection of his own ill health; a 'neuralgia-metaphysic' (207). This is an idea that is also explored in *Eyeless in Gaza*. But there it appears more uncertainly, taking Anthony's rather weak-willed character as a way of questioning whether the self is really fragmented in the Lawrentian terms he describes. When Anthony goes back to read his observations, he concludes that 'He had written of the world in general', simply, 'as though the world in general were like himself – from the desire of course that it should be. For how simple it would be if it were!' (119). Here it is implied that the statement of self's multiplicity is simply the projection of character failings that are specific to that particular personality type.

### **Proust and the intermittences of the heart**

Huxley tended to be wary of the introspective leanings among his co-moderns. In an essay on Proust he characterised the 'modern' method as the presentation of psychological facts 'in the raw' to replicate real life modes of cognition, the way 'we have to form our estimate of other people's characters from a number of unarranged facts and casual observation'.<sup>192</sup> It was, he argues, a mode of writing in which artistry is necessarily limited, simply residing in the subtle arrangement of these facts in 'an order that the reader is compelled to make the desired induction about the nature of character as a whole'.<sup>193</sup> He generally gave exemplars of this technique short shrift. Like Murry, he was unenthused by Joyce, dismissing *Ulysses* (1922) as 'a

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<sup>191</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Pascal', in *Do What you Will* (London: Watts & Co, 1936) pp. 226-310 (pp. 238, 221). His argument attracted the opprobrium of Eliot, who pitted T.E. Hulme against him as a modern theorist of Pascal's approach to the discontinuity between the human and transcendent realm. 'Introduction,' *Pascal's Pensées* (New York: EP Dutton & Co, 1958), p. xix.

<sup>192</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Proust in English', in *Aldous Huxley Annual*, ed. by Jerome Meckier and Bernfried Nugel, 7 (2007), 54-57 (p. 55) (first publ. anonymously in the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* (4 November 1922)).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

kind of technical handbook, in which the young novelist can study all the possible and many of the quite impossible ways of telling a story' and one of the 'dullest books ever written'.<sup>194</sup> The charge of tedium also hovered in his (less venomous) characterisations of the work of Woolf and Mansfield. In a later interview Huxley would claim that while Woolf 'sees with incredible clarity', it is 'always as though through a plate of glass; she never touches anything'.<sup>195</sup> He likewise praised Mansfield's observational skills, writing that her stories were windows into 'a lighted room. The glimpse of the inhabitants [...] is enormously exciting'. But, like Woolf, the effect is limp – 'one knows nothing, when one has passed, of what they are really like'.<sup>196</sup>

A more serious charge against the introspective tenor of contemporary prose is found in Huxley's 1927 essay, 'Personality and the Discontinuity of the Mind'. The essay, which also charts the shifting nature of being – a condition that it again ascribes to bodily, as well as psychological causes – includes a section on Proust as a cartographer of the labile inner domain.<sup>197</sup> Although he endorses Proust's psychological acuity in rendering shifting states of the mind through which emotions come and go as though they had a life of their own, he views the nature of his project as fundamentally misguided.<sup>198</sup> There is, he argues, a complacency and 'moral poverty' in the way Proust was 'placidly content to live the life of an intermittent being'.<sup>199</sup> Instead of documenting the wandering mind, he should have been seeking its cure.

But rather than take up the mantle himself, his essay functions as a lament for the self's prospect of unification in the modern age. The essay lauds, variously, the Catholic system's binding of

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<sup>194</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'The Traveller's Eye-View', *Nation & Athanaeum*, 37 (16 May 1925), p. 204 and 'The Appeal of the Wicked to a Respectable but Somewhat Timid Society', *Vanity Fair*, 4.2 (1925), p. 92.

<sup>195</sup> 'Aldous Huxley', in *Writers at Work: The 'Paris Review' Interviews, Second Series*, ed. by George Plimpton, Second Series (New York: Viking, 1963) p. 208 (first publ. 'Aldous Huxley, the Art of Fiction', interview by George Wickes and Raymond Fraser, *Paris Review*, 23 (1960)).

<sup>196</sup> Huxley, 'Traveller's Eye-View', p. 204.

<sup>197</sup> In the essay 'Proust in English' Huxley actually distinguishes Proust's prose from 'the moderns' because of the more 'digested' quality of his observations, p. 54. But in his later critique of Proust's rendering of the psyche, he can be connected to the problems that Huxley here found within the modern project.

<sup>198</sup> Huxley had mixed feelings about Proust. He signed letter of tribute to the author on the occasion of his death which proclaimed: 'M. Proust seemed to have found, not only his past, but our own past as well', 'Proust pas perdu', *Time Literary Supplement* (4 January 1923) <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/>> [accessed 5 January 2020]. But in his essay on Pascal he rejected the universal quality of Proust's insights, claiming his writings to be merely an 'asthma-philosophy' p. 207. In *Eyeless in Gaza* he is described in even more unflattering terms as 'that asthmatic seeker of lost time squatting, horribly white and flabby [...] in the tepid bath of his remembered past' (6).

<sup>199</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Personality and the Discontinuity of the Mind', in *Proper Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927) pp. 230-260 (pp. 246-7).

reason with emotion as well as chivalry and Platonism, as systems that offered some means of disciplining the sexual impulse by channeling it in the direction of a superior cause. But the main coordinating system operative in the present, Huxley argues, is merely that of achieving socially recognized success. This leads to the prioritization of qualities that promote social efficiency – reason, the will and intuition – but fails to provide a means of coordinating these capabilities with the emotions, in particular the sexual impulse. As a result, such qualities live on autonomously, as an anarchic presence undermining attempts at rational and ordered functioning. Although Huxley is a little sketchy on the superior harmonizing capacity of earlier systems of thought, the essay is important for the implicitly degenerative account of the psyche it provides. By connecting psychological health with historically operative ideologies and locating the present as a moment of disintegration, the essay suggests that Huxley believed that the psyche could, in principle, be remade, even if at this point he did not have an effective solution for how it was to be done.<sup>200</sup>

### Therapeutic modernism

But was the modern self a necessarily introspective one? Joshua Gang, in his article ‘Mindless Modernism’, traces a competing psychological strand, highly resistant to interior delving.<sup>201</sup> He considers this tendency in the early works of Beckett, looking at the way in which the theory of behaviorism led to his scepticism over the possibility of capturing the internal sphere. Gang cites, among others, Beckett’s essay on *Proust* (1930) in which he argues that Marcel’s memories are simply physiological reflexes.

As Cecily Swanson has demonstrated, the behaviorist denial of mental states was central to the emergence of a particular mode of modernist life writing.<sup>202</sup> The connection she traces is an intriguing one, as it touches on the spiritual networks in which Huxley participated. Swanson examines the way in which A.R. Orage identified the resonances between Gurdjieff’s determinist philosophy with J.B. Watson’s theory of behaviorism, teaching the latter’s thought to the Gurdjieffian novitiates he instructed in New York in the 1920s. The behaviorist denial of mental

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<sup>200</sup> Although it is not an insight that is particularly developed, he speculates on religion as an effective form of discipline because of the structured use of ritual that provides a means of reigning in the wandering impulses of the mind. Huxley, ‘Personality’, pp. 230-260 (pp. 250-1).

<sup>201</sup> Joshua Gang, ‘Mindless Modernism’, *Novel: a forum of fiction*, 46.1 (2013), 116-132.

<sup>202</sup> Cecily Swanson, “‘The Language of Behaviour’: Gurdjieff and the Emergence of Modernist Autobiography”, *Modernism/Modernity*, 24.4 (2017), 695-721.

states influenced a form of group practice in which participants would aim for self-awareness, not by analysing their thoughts and feelings, but by noting down detailed accounts of their actions and movements. She looks at the literary influence of this practice on three work published by members of this group, the memoirs by Muriel Draper (*Music at Midnight*, 1929) and Margaret Anderson (*My Thirty Years' War*, 1930), and Kathryn Hulme's autobiographical novel, *We Lived as Children* (1938). These works were experimental, not because of their introspective quality, but for their radical externality. Swanson discusses the way in which they are marked by meticulous attention to details of speech, mannerisms and gestures; a trait particularly noticeable when rendering, with irreverent precision, the quirks of their famous associates. Draper's memoir, for example, includes a lengthy dialogue devoted to the awkwardness of Henry James's stutter.<sup>203</sup>

As well attending Ouspensky's lectures in London in the early 1920s, Huxley turned again to Gurdjieff's system in the 1930s, which was then being taught to a secret circle in Britain by Ouspensky.<sup>204</sup> It is tempting to try to probe for a stylistic connection between Huxley and the Oragean memoir given his own focus on the external, not to mention the delight that is particularly evinced in his early satirical work in rendering the behavioral quirks of his literary contemporaries. Gurdjieffian culture, more broadly, also provides a helpful way of situating Huxley's curative concerns. The figures within Orage's circle who became most enamored with Gurdjieff's teaching tended to have backgrounds in psychology: the Freudian psychoanalyst David Eder, and the Jungian analysts Maurice Nicoll and James Young who joined Orage in following Gurdjieff to France.<sup>205</sup> In Young's later account of his experience there, he claimed that his chief motivation in following Gurdjieff's system was a therapeutic one; that he was concerned to find a practical means to psychic harmony, something that he felt was missing from psychoanalytic teaching.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Swanson, pp. 695-721 (p.706).

<sup>204</sup> James Webb, *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Work of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky and their Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 401.

<sup>205</sup> Webb, *Harmonious Circle*, p. 226.

<sup>206</sup> James Carruthers Young, 'An Experiment at Fontainebleau: A Personal Reminiscence', *The New Adelphi*, 1.1 (1927), 26-40 (p. 28). Maurizo Ascari has also identified the way in which Katherine Mansfield's interest in Theosophy and Gurdjieff stemmed from the desire to find some way of unifying the mind, turning to psychological support once medical treatment to cure her tuberculosis had failed. Maurizo Ascari, 'A Raft in the Sea of Loneliness: Katherine Mansfield's Discovery of Cosmic Anatomy', in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber and W. Todd Martin, Katherine Mansfield Studies, 8 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 38-55.

Huxley's own attitude to psychoanalysis was mixed. In addition to Freud's famous correspondence with Einstein, psychoanalytic explanations of conflict appeared in the public domain through the publication of Edward Glover's *War, Sadism and Pacifism* (1933), a text that Huxley read closely.<sup>207</sup> Like Glover, Huxley adhered to the notion that the impulses leading to conflict typically operate covertly. As with Glover's identification of a universal 'Saturnalian impulse', he also frequently presented the drive towards war as a ubiquitous one.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, in a BBC broadcast on the causes of war he concluded by referring to Glover's text and implied his endorsement of Glover's belief that the only real hope to end war would be through fifty years of psychoanalytic research.<sup>209</sup>

Despite advocating it in this instance, he was generally non-committal or even hostile towards psychoanalytic explanations of the self. In his novels from the 1920s, the Freudian modelling of the psyche provoked his satiric ire. *Chrome Yellow* (1921) sees Freud's ideas on sexuality punctured through the figure of Mary Bracegirdle, a caricature of a young, emancipated woman who constantly discusses her anxiety about being repressed and makes various farcical attempts to seek sexual encounters with the men in the household. Although she finally manages to overcome her 'repressions' when she meets with the libertine Ivor Lombard, their encounter results in her suffering miserably from the effects of unrequited love. The satire functions in a superficial sense as a parody of the fashion for Freudianism and of the way it could be adopted as a signifier of intellectual leanings. However it also points to Huxley's more fundamental objection to what he saw as its reductive quality. This concern was also evident in his novella 'The Farcical History of Richard Greenow' (1920) which similarly features the incorrect diagnosis of the hero's psychological ailments as due sexual causes – a passion for his Aunt.

Interestingly behaviorism seems to trump psychoanalysis in effectiveness as a tool for social harmony in *Brave New World* (1932). In New World society although the avoidance of the Oedipal drama is one of the key principals of its organisation and Freud is deified – 'or our Freud, as, for some inscrutable reason, he chose to call himself whenever he spoke about psychological matters' – the talking cure is notably absent and the therapies that are used are primarily directed at the body rather than the mind (30). Important among these is the use Pavlovian-esque electric shocks, vividly narrated in a scene that depicts its application as a means

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<sup>207</sup> Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 209.

<sup>208</sup> Edward Glover, *War, Sadism and Pacifism* (SI: Allen & Unwin, 1935), p. 13.

<sup>209</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Causes of War,' BBC (5 November 1934), British Library Sound Collection [accessed 2 July 2018].



of conditioning lower-class infants to dislike books and roses. The physiological focus of the psychological arsenal that is deployed in the New World is perhaps indicative of a fundamental critique of Freud that Huxley would later articulate: his ‘almost naked psychology’ and failure to consider the effects of the body on mental activity.<sup>210</sup>

But despite his flirtation with behaviorist ideas in this instance, I do not think it had any serious stylistic effect on his writing, or fundamental impact on his view of the psyche, particularly during the period of *Eyeless in Gaza*'s composition. If anything, this was the moment when the idea that the mind had complex inner levels into which it was fruitful to delve and explore, had become central to him. The problem was not his denial of the interior realm, but the question of whether its charting was, in and of itself, a worthwhile pursuit. However, the body of psychologically curious literature, geared toward self-improvement, that Swanson has highlighted, is useful in thinking about the diagnostic dimension the novel acquired for Huxley from the 1930s onwards. As I shall discuss in the next section, the climax of *Eyeless in Gaza* is heavily indebted to his own therapeutic experience of the various forms of alternative healing that he began to pursue in this decade.

### **Huxley's healers**

One of the chief innovations found in *Eyeless in Gaza* was Huxley's introduction of a guru type character who delivers lectures on self-improvement. This was a figure who would repeatedly appear in much of his following fiction. The form of teaching he imparts fuses an eclectic array of ideas drawn from spirituality and alternative forms of therapy. At the conclusion of the novel Anthony, having gone on a fool's errand to aid a revolution in South America in the hope that would give a sense of purpose to his life, meets with the figure of the wily and eccentric Dr Miller. Miller chides Beavis on the folly of his venture, suggesting simpler and more constructive amendments he could make to alter his state of mind.

The lifestyle reforms he proposes include the varied measures of adopting a vegetarian diet, standing up straight, meditation and colonic irrigation. The character represents the impact on

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<sup>210</sup> Aldous Huxley, in *Complete Essays: Volume VI 1956-1963*, ed. by Robert S. Baker and James Sexton (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 2000-2002), p. 140.

Huxley of a series of healers and psychological and spiritual guides that he turned to, particularly in the mid-1930s, when he was suffering from depression and insomnia. The advice about posture looks to the influence of F.M. Alexander, with whom Huxley had daily sessions.

Alexander's approach centred on an integrative connection between the mind and body: through the correct use of the self, in particular the erasure of poor postural traits, a calmer and clearer state of mind would emerge. Alexander also introduced Huxley to J.E.R. McDonagh, who believed that the intoxication of the intestine was at the root of most mental disorders.<sup>211</sup> Of Huxley's therapeutic experience with the Alexander technique his wife, Maria commented, 'He believes he has made a very important, in fact essential, discovery. He has certainly made a new and unrecognizable person of Aldous, not physically only but mentally and therefore morally'.<sup>212</sup> Reflecting later on this period of distress he also credited McDonagh with having saved him from 'breakdown'.<sup>213</sup>

It is noticeable that Miller's guidance is focused on bodily methods of healing, advice that seems suited to Anthony as a figure plagued by the obsessive turning over of past memory. It might be tempting to connect this emphasis to the focus on the body within Gurdjieff's philosophy. In Huxley's next novel, *After Many a Summer* (1939), we find the eschewal of rumination by an appeal to Gurdjieffian determinism. The novel includes the character of Professor Propter who, in similar vein to Miller, lectures other characters from a position of detached aloofness about spiritual truths and philosophical thought. When faced with a man bemoaning the meaninglessness nature of the death of a young friend, Propter chides the mourner, consoling him with reflections on the illusionary nature of freedom; the happy thought that his friend was fated to die. Most of humanity, he claims, is living 'on the mechanical level, where events happen in accordance with large numbers. The things we call accidental or irrelevant belong to the very essence of the world we elect to live'.<sup>214</sup> The assertion, along with the appeal to 'large numbers', seems to refer to Gurdjieff's philosophical system that maintain that events on earth happen according to a destiny governed by forty-eight laws.

This later novel was written at a more pessimistic moment in Huxley's career, after his attempt to spearhead a pacifist resistance to conflict had ended in failure. But this deterministic refrain is at

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<sup>211</sup> Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 184.

<sup>212</sup> Maria Huxley to Eugene F. Saxton (21 February 1936), *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. by Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969) p. 400.

<sup>213</sup> Aldous Huxley to Julian Huxley (27 May 1945), *Letters*, p. 525.

<sup>214</sup> Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Summer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p. 289.

odds with the mood of *Eyeless in Gaza*, which was written at a point in which he was optimistic about the capacity of the individual to bring about change. By the mid-1930s Huxley had developed a close friendship with Gerald Heard and was deeply influenced by the latter's turn to Eastern religion. Heard was at the time reading various accounts of Taoism, Yoga, Buddhism and the Vedanta and he was instrumental in turning Huxley's own preoccupations towards this sphere.<sup>215</sup> This is reflected in the spiritual concerns of the novel; the main change that Anthony is depicted as making to his lifestyle, aside from his pacifist campaigning, is his adoption of the practice of meditation.

Huxley's healers are probably the least popular element of his fiction. Criticism has often been directed at *Eyeless in Gaza*'s failure to integrate Miller's lectures into his narrative, while Propter's much longer digressions are also generally given extremely short shrift.<sup>216</sup> I am not making a claim for the aesthetic brilliancy of these sections of Huxley's texts, rather I want to argue that understanding of their significance has been ill-served by the tendency to characterise Huxley's works by the rather misleading phrase, 'novels of ideas'.<sup>217</sup>

Seen thus figures such as Miller and Propter are certainly unwieldy devices. They arrive, ex nihilo, in tales which have no need of them for their narrative development. Miller appears at random at South America, with no connection to the tight-knit friendship group the rest of the novel explores. Proper has slightly greater claims for inclusion – a sketchy backstory is provided about his school days with the millionaire in whose castle the story takes place. But his lectures, longer and more turgid than Miller's pithier injunctions, interrupt less forgivably an otherwise fast-paced (and funny) narrative tale.

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<sup>215</sup> Alison Falby identifies the works that Heard read as including Cyril Joad, *Counter-Attack from the East: the Philosophy of Rabakrishnan* (1933), Vivekanda's, *Rāja Yoga* (1922), Geraldine Coster, *Yoga and Western Psychology* (1934) Arthur Waley, *Taoism The Way and Its Power* (1934). See *Between the Pigeonholes: Gerald Heard, 1889-1971*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), p. 102.

<sup>216</sup> An early critic, W.Y. Tindall wrote perplexedly of the 'sermons of Mr Propter' and the 'solemn monologues of Anthony Beavis. Readers to whom I have spoken either skipped the sermons of Mr. Propter or read them with pain, lamenting the decline of the novelist'. 'The Trouble with Aldous Huxley,' *The American Scholar*, 11.4 (1942), 452-64 (p. 453).

<sup>217</sup> For discussion of the use of this phrase as a way of characterising Huxley's fiction see: Frederick J. Hoffman, 'Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas,' *College English*, 8.3 (1949), 129-137, Bhirathi Krishnan, *Aspects of Structure, Technique and Quest in Aldous Huxley's Major Novels* (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1977) p. 77 and Chris Baldick, *Literature of the 1920s: Writers Among the Ruins* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) pp. 68-9.

Was the figure of a healer simply a clumsy device by which Huxley could explore the latest philosophy that captured his attention? I think their importance is more serious, and one that can be understood if we re-think how this novel should be categorised. I want to argue that *Eyeless in Gaza* represents a form of innovation in which alternative philosophy is combined with a realist drama to probe the possibility of the novel as a form of therapeutic manual. The narratives of sexual disappointment become a type of psychological case study, the chiding words of Miller, a guide to healing. Certainly, the novel would have been improved had Huxley developed Miller's advice and tied it more closely to the psychological drama to which it attempts to respond. Vegetarianism just might target Anthony's slothful lifestyle, but would hardly seem to be the response to Mary's drug addiction or Helen's mistreatment; but his words, nonetheless, gestures to a route by which the character's unhappy lives have the potential to be transformed.

In her essay 'On Being Ill' from 1930 Woolf reflected on the marginalisation of sickness within the field of literature. Exploring the rich and varied vantage points that illness offers, the sufferer, she argues, has a form of 'mystic' penetration, which provides the opportunity to grasp beyond 'surface meaning'.<sup>218</sup> Woolf gestures toward the universal by reflecting on the absence of a common language for sickness in the same way that there are standard tropes to describe sensations such as romantic love. But the focus of the essay is on the way that exploring this side-lined facet of the human experience provides new ways of understanding and narrating the self. Huxley's narrative presents the reverse of this procedure. *Eyeless in Gaza* offers an intriguing variation on modernist life writing, in which the element of autofiction is utilised for a systemic purpose. His own heightening of vision that he felt was afforded him by his successful therapeutic experience of alternative medicine and Eastern spirituality is presented as significant in the novel, not for the insights that it offered about his individual subjectivity, but for humanity at large. Personal exploration provides the vantage point from which to formulate a social and political vision.

The use of the self as a tool to diagnose the condition of the world at large can be connected to the Lawrentian strand of Huxley's writing. At one point Miller chides Anthony in Lawrentian terms for the over-development of his mind at the expense of his body: 'you've got an unconscious body. An efficient thinking apparatus and a hopelessly stupid set of muscles and bones' (452). Huxley's turn to therapies such as the Alexander Technique and dietary reform can

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<sup>218</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *The New Criterion*, 4.1 (1926), 32-45 (p. 41).

be understood as an attempt, in a similar vein to Murry, to find a constructive response to Lawrence's philosophy; a way of trying to heal the bodily centres that have been ill-served by modern life.<sup>219</sup> While the reader of Lawrence might accept his lament at civilisational decline, unless they can flatter themselves into the belief that they are one of the natural aristocrats, then they are part of the problem – one of the world's sprawling masses. But the reader of Huxley is offered a hopeful prognosis. The indelibly fractured self of the modern age can be re-balanced and reintegrated by the redeeming effect of alternative therapy and a spiritual practice that aims to alter the self via bodily pathways.

### War and the unstable self

In the novel, personal psychological exploration, or, as it were, its self-help orientation, is also presented as a way of responding to the specific political climate of the mid-1930s. The state of the individual's psyche is seen as indelibly linked to the unstable political condition of the moment. Anthony's sense of malaise, his indifference and skepticism, are, Miller claims, characteristic features of modern life. While a lack of commitment might lead to frustration and misery for the individual, in a political sense the result is categorically toxic. The modern self, existing with 'holes in the mind, emptinesses waiting to be filled' is intensely vulnerable when met with the violent stimuli that is offered, for example, by the ideology of fascism. The 'hysterical appeals' of Nazism, 'the demand to persecute Jews, or murder socialists, or go to war' offer the intense forms of stimulation beloved by a mind craving deliverance from its state of ennui (425).

Alarmed by the rise of totalitarianism and the slide towards conflict, Huxley had begun to take a more active political role, joining the Peace Pledge Union in the autumn of 1935 and becoming one of the country's leading commentators on war.<sup>220</sup> His contemporaneous political writings

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<sup>219</sup> His Lawrentian understanding of the Alexander technique suggested in *Ends and Means*. Writing about the importance of the state of the body he argues that it is not simply a route to mental health but offers its own form of consciousness, something that the technique helps to foster. Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods* (London, London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), pp. 221-3.

<sup>220</sup> Grzegorz Moroz, 'Aldous Huxley, the Great War and Pacifism', in *Re-Imagining the First World War: New Perspectives in Anglophone Literature and Culture*, ed. by Anne Branach-Kallas and Nelly Strehlau (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), p. 65.

also honed his idea that the mind, in its quotidian state, was essentially unstable and thus prey to modes of action that could offer a sense of wholeness – however false and fleeting in quality. In *Ends and Means* (1937) he notes the way in which the mundane in the time of conflict is ennobled and enlivened. Everyday work becomes elevated to ‘war-work,’ while the drama of war provides a constant source of thrill.<sup>221</sup>

Likewise, the ideology of nationalism is associated with emotional extremes – all states from which the individual can ‘get a kick’.<sup>222</sup> A similar argument was employed by Huxley in his analysis of the slide towards fascism. As Martin Ceadel has noted, there was a recurrent tendency among pacifists to elide analysis of the appeal of war with that of fascism.<sup>223</sup> A frequent contributor to *Time and Tide’s* ‘Notes on a Way’, in a March issue from 1934 Huxley set out the palliative function of emotional attachment to a strong leader. In this article he argues that the sentiments involved in believing the Christian claims for Jesus’s miracles and for his divinity parallel those in the fascist devotion to the leader. The individual is compelled towards this devotion because it produces an emotional outlay that functions as a sedative for anxiety.<sup>224</sup> The quest to heal the self, for Huxley, was thus a political act – a way that proffered a means to avoid war.

### **Mysticism and wholeness**

Although Huxley warned against the religious devotion of the individual, he advanced an impersonal form of spirituality as the crucial mechanism for the avoidance of violence. As we have seen, Huxley’s confidence in the possibility of the psyche to be made whole, came in large part via the model of integration offered by Eastern spirituality.<sup>225</sup> Huxley did not ‘convert’ to a faith system as such; the crucial shift that we see in his thought, in the mid-1930s, is his rejection of a Godless universe in favour of the restrained conviction that there was something that could

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<sup>221</sup> Huxley, *Ends and Means*, p. 94.

<sup>222</sup> Huxley, *Ends and Means*, p. 97.

<sup>223</sup> Ceadel, *Pacifism*, p. 153. He suggests that Huxley’s association of the two may have been partly prompted by his attendance at Mosley’s rally at Olympia that exploded into violence, noting the appearance two other figures who were to become Peace Pledge Union sponsors: Vera Brittain and Storm Jameson.

<sup>224</sup> Aldous Huxley, ‘Notes on the Way’, *Time and Tide*, 3 (1934), p. 269.

<sup>225</sup> Although Huxley turned primarily to Eastern faith he also cited what he identified as the Western mystic’s tendency to progress from personal experience of the divine to a more detached sense of the nature of all being. Huxley, *Ends and Means*, p. 290.

be referred to as, 'transcendental consciousness,' 'the ground of being', or the 'impersonal principle of reality'. This region, 'simultaneously beyond the self and in some way within it' became the crux of his pacifist philosophy.<sup>226</sup> In his pamphlet 'What are you going to do about it?' Huxley programmatically asserted 'the unity of mankind' as the 'ultimate spiritual reality. The political, social and individual ideals of constructive peace follow logically from its doctrine'.<sup>227</sup> Alongside Heard he espoused a pacificism devoted to cultivating the higher, interconnected level of the self, making the much-scorned proposal of creating small units that together would pray or meditate or simply perform corporate exercises such folk dancing, singing and manual labour.<sup>228</sup>

In terms of his literary style, this quest also endorsed an introspective mode, but one directed away from the individual. His rare lapse into a mode of writing akin to stream of consciousness charted, not the vagaries of personal consciousness, but rather 'the I' melding into a sense of 'the we'. The conclusion of the novel renders the new state of consciousness that Anthony experiences while meditating, when he feels a sense of unity with all-being:

United at the depths with other lives, with the rest of being. United in peace [...] The same peace for all, continuous between mind and mind. At the surface, the separate waves, the whirlpools, the spray; but below them the continuous and undifferentiated expanse of sea, becoming calmer as it deepens, till at last there is an absolute stillness. Dark peace in the depths. A dark peace that is the same for all who can descend to it. Peace that by a strange paradox is the substance and source of the storm at the surface. Born of peace, the waves destroy peace; destroy it, but are necessary; for without the storm on the surface there would be no existence, no knowledge of goodness, no effort to allay the leaping frenzy of evil, no rediscovery of the underlying calm, no realization that the substance of the frenzy is the same as the substance of peace (502).

Although Huxley resolutely turned to faith systems outside of the church, given the sermon-like certainties of the refrain, it is tempting to also trace a 19<sup>th</sup> century lineage for Anthony's penitential change of heart. He is redeemed from life as an idle libertine and made spiritually new within Dr Miller's army of saved souls. This is 'Search your soul, Eustace' territory – only with

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<sup>226</sup> Huxley, *Ends and Means*, p. 303.

<sup>227</sup> Aldous Huxley, *What are you going to do about it? The Case for Constructive Peace* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1936), p. 29.

<sup>228</sup> Huxley, *What are*, p. 28.

Eustace tasked with the kindlier demand to take up yoga and vegetarianism on the shores of California instead of a missionary quest to central Africa.<sup>229</sup> It could also be read as a 20<sup>th</sup> century variant of the Victorian novel of doubt; the tale of a man's struggle to abandon the mainstream faith position of his associates – even if that faith is one of unbelief. After all, in *My Guru and his Disciple* (1980) Christopher Isherwood claimed that initially he found his greatest impediment to meditation the imagined scorn of his fellow intellectuals if they knew of his newfound religious commitment.<sup>230</sup> Huxley's Aunt, Mrs Humphrey Ward, the writer of the most successful example of that genre, *Robert Elsmere* (1888), appears in the narrative as the mother of Anthony's ill-fated friend, Brian. Brian is cursed by a high-minded idealism which prevents him from acting physically on his love for his fiancé, Joan. Distressed by his coldness she proves an easy prey for Anthony's attempt at her seduction as a dare. Such sexual prudery is simply out of place in the 1920s. There is nothing admirable about Brian's fastidiousness; it is a source of confusion to the girl he loves and mockery to his friends. Could Huxley have also been taking a dig at Ward's long outmoded tale of religious qualms? The tortured conscience of a young clergyman over his uncertainty about the veracity of Christian doctrine has no place in an irreligious age, when the only thing left to doubt is disbelief itself.

But I want to resist a reading of the narrative as primarily a tale of faith. The problem is the pragmatic tenor of the quality of Huxley's belief. Tonally there is little that distinguishes his essays from the period of his agnosticism to that of his 'post-conversion'. His travel writing, *Jesting Pilate* (1926), contains various contemptuous remarks about the forms of faith he witnessed in India. Encountering a holy man on the train, he writes sarcastically of this 'Hindu pope of considerable holiness,' concluding 'all that we could be certain of was that he looked unpleasant and was undoubtedly dirty'.<sup>231</sup> The definition of religion that he gives in the work is coolly impersonal, offering a vague endorsement its social function: 'Any force that tends to the strengthening of society is [...] of the highest biological importance. Religion is obviously such a force'.<sup>232</sup> But interestingly his essay collection, *Ends and Means*, written at the point of his newfound enthusiasm with Eastern faith systems, is of a piece with the humanist tenor of this

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<sup>229</sup> I refer here to Margaret M. Maison's study of the Victorian religious novel, *Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961). It is instructive to compare the conversionary ethos of Huxley's novel with Maison's overview of the popularity of 19<sup>th</sup> century tales of religious conscience: see. chapter 7, 'Gain and Loss: Conversions and Renouncements', pp. 138-169 and chapter 11, 'Two Distinguished Doubters: Mark Rutherford and Robert Elsmere', pp. 242-270.

<sup>230</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and his Disciple* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 20.

<sup>231</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), p. 54.

<sup>232</sup> Huxley, *Jesting*, pp. 41, 45.



earlier work. Again, he defines religion's significance in terms of human functionality, as 'a system of education by means of which human beings may train themselves, first, to make desirable changes in their own personalities, and, at one remove, in society'. It is only in a secondary sense that he suggests some sort of transcendental purpose, but then in qualified terms, as a means for the individual to 'heighten consciousness' and so establish not just more 'adequate relations between themselves' but also 'the universe of which they are parts'.<sup>233</sup>

Anthony never actually adopts a faith system, rather he takes up religious practices for interpersonal ends – to help cultivate the right relations that would assist the progress of his pacifism. His 'conversion' as the novel presents it, is a political and psychological one, albeit with a heavy dollop of mysticism thrown into the mix. It is clear from Huxley's contemporaneous writing that he was giving credence to ideas that bordered on the supernatural. But unlike, for example, in Graham Greene's *End of the Affair* (1951), when the conclusion of an otherwise realist narrative opens up to signs and wonders, Huxley keeps the text resolutely on the plane of the quotidian. The possibility of telepathy and clairvoyance are cited in restrained terms, in his pacifist essays, as of interest for the empirical evidence they might provide for hidden levels of consciousness.<sup>234</sup>

### **A single man**

I want to compare the conclusion of Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* with Isherwood's later work, that is similarly infused by his turn to Eastern spirituality, *A Single Man* (1964). From the end of the 1930s the pair developed a close friendship, both becoming drawn to the Vedanta. In 1939 Heard introduced Isherwood to the Hindu monk Swami Prabhavananda, who, along with Huxley, became his disciples. Despite their theological alliance, I wish to use the distinction between the conclusions of their respective tales as a way of emphasising the point I made in my introduction about the this-worldly orientation to Huxley's novel. The similarity between the endings of their novels is so striking that I think Isherwood intended his conclusion as an intertextual reference to Huxley's work. Earlier in the narrative Isherwood paid respectful homage to the man who had been instrumental to his conversion, when the novel's main

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<sup>233</sup> Huxley, *Ends and Means*, p. 225.

<sup>234</sup> Huxley, p. 259.

protagonist – the Professor, George – delivers a class on *After Many a Summer* to his students.<sup>235</sup> Just as Anthony, in the novel's spiritual climax, muses on the unreality of separation as analogous to the waves on the surface of the ocean, so Isherwood's novel adopts its own aquatic analogy for the unity of being:

Up the coast a few miles north, in a lava reef under the cliffs, there are lots of rock pools. You can visit them when the tide is out. Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names – such as George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness – so to speak – are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets [...]. But that long day ends at last; yields to the night-time of the flood. And just as the waters of the ocean come flooding, darkening over the pools, so over George and the others in sleep come the waters of that other ocean; that consciousness which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything (149-150).

George's sense of irredeemable isolation is as insubstantial as the appearance of separation among rock pools when the tide is out. Just as they cannot escape the unification that will be given them by the ocean waters when the tide turns, so George's sources of alienation – his partner's death, his homosexuality and his inclination to misanthropy – cannot remove him from the deeper level of consciousness where all is united.

In aesthetic terms, Isherwood's conclusion is far the superior of the two. The reader has closely inhabited George's mind (and body) for the duration of the text. Isherwood, like Huxley, concludes with the affirmation of unity after a tale that has stressed the relentless experience of separation and division. We have witnessed this sensibility, not just through George's sense of alienation, but also through the emphasis of the many selves with which George conducts his daily life. He feels himself to be a composite of multiple guises: the taciturn neighbour, the automaton chauffeur, the bereaved lover, the teacher, the seducer. Given that the reader's viewpoint is either within, or hovering next to, George's mind, it only takes a subtle shift to move outside his quotidian consciousness, to his deeper, nocturnal sensibility. However, in

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<sup>235</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Minerva, 1991), pp. 50-62. Future references to page numbers will occur within the text.

Huxley's novel the jump into Anthony's newly unified consciousness presents a more jarring shift in register. Huxley's similar lesson about the indelibly split self is illustrated, not through the portrayal of Anthony's riven subjectivity, but rather multiple narrative threads that come together in didactic force. We have learnt about Anthony's past, about his gloomy mentality in the present day. But we have not seen it from the inside. There is also a tonal problem to the pious certainties of Anthony's meditation in contrast to the briefer and more hesitant rendering of the state of being that George accesses in his sleep. It could be argued that Anthony's newfound spiritual awareness simply represents a continuation of the very thing he wishes to escape from. Although he thinks he feels a deeper sense of connection with other beings, the scene is still the unique heights of the unique mind. Is there much to distinguish his epiphanic appreciation of unity while meditating, from his sense of detached superiority while at work on the composition of his latest book?

But Huxley's novel is bolder in the claims on which it is willing to stake itself. If there is something frustrating in Isherwood's, admittedly more sophisticated text, it is the degree to which it sets itself up as the asker of the serious questions about the universe; but shirks responsibility for the implications of the answers it provides. Although the poeticism of its dreamlike uncertainty assists in its aesthetic success, the novel can be charged with the critique associated with the Eastern spirituality pursued by the English literati in America, considered in the introduction, that it was one of quietism and escape. There might be something redeemable about George's tragic sense of alienation in the notion that everything is connected. However, unlike the reader he cannot benefit from the observation as he is asleep. Even should some form of awareness penetrate his subconscious mind, that can hardly have a constructive force either, as Isherwood promptly disposes of him with a heart attack, although even this is presented as a 'what if'. Isherwood's languid ambiguity is in stark juxtaposition to the resolute injunctions of Huxley's tale. It is possible to scorn those injunctions, to argue that, although the text is diagnostically skilled, its solution is imperfectly worked through; but there is a daring in its willingness to stake itself on a solution, rather than simply wallow in the inadequacies of a lost being.

To return to Woolf's railways. Her famous dismissal of the Edwardian novelist in her essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', that to complete the novels of the Wells-Bennett-Galsworthy trio, the reader needs to 'join or society or, more desperately, write a cheque,' is a critique allied to what she thinks is their failure to probe into the depths of character.<sup>236</sup> These are 'sleek, smooth

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<sup>236</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Hogarth Essays*: 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 12.

novels' focused on the external, on matters of social import, rather than the complexity and subtlety of the self. Woolf, witnessing the sorry figure of Mrs Brown in a train carriage, muses on the way in which the Edwardians would seek her representation by situating her within the 'fabric of things,' by the material details of her life. This approach shies away from the complexity of the individual; the way in which the impression made by Mrs Brown on the observer is composed of a 'myriad' of 'incongruous ideas'. Huxley did not reject the literary rendition of the multiplicity and intricacy of the self. He too was concerned with charting the complicated nature of the inner realm, its conflicts as well as its hidden potentialities. But this was not from the intrinsic interest of approaching character 'in itself'. For Huxley, capturing the nuances of individual subjectivity was worthwhile to the degree it pointed to a course of external action.<sup>237</sup> Huxley only explores Mrs Brown's 'infinite variety' to seek its cure. Should she, or the reader become a pacifist, or plumb for the more desperate course of colonic irrigation, his object is well served.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Woolf, p. 23.

<sup>238</sup> Woolf, p. 24.

## The Discrete Charm of the Guru: Woolf, Art and the Immanent

### Introduction

The religious turn of modernist studies has seen, if not the resurrection of the Christian deity, at least the sense that he managed to hobble through the doubt of the Victorian age to linger on as a phantasmal presence within the new century. Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) notorious outcry on Eliot's conversion – that there was something 'obscene' in a 'living person sitting by the fire and believing in God' – oft cited as emblematic of modernism's indelible secularity, now appears more typically to be queried and revised.<sup>239</sup> For Stephanie Paulsell it is more indicative of the hyperbolic style that Woolf used in letter writing to her sister, for Lewis it expresses primarily her rejection of patriarchal authority than all of religion per se, and for Emily Griesinger it expresses the complication of her sentiments rather than a straightforwardly oppositional stance to belief.<sup>240</sup>

Another important point is the way in which, by 1928, Christianity just no longer seemed to be of the cultural moment. In a 1926 review for Leonard Woolf notoriously proclaimed 'liberal scepticism, atheism, or agnosticism' as most characteristic of modern readers.<sup>241</sup> A sense of faith's cultured dismissal pervades Woolf's writing – be it in the assurance that her tutor, Janet Case, was 'too well educated to be a Christian' or the repeated connection she made in her fiction between social inferiority and intense engagement with religion.<sup>242</sup> The mocking of the lower middle-class Charles Tansley as the 'little atheist' in *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927,

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<sup>239</sup> Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell (11 February 1928), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Change of Perspective 1923-28*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80), III (1977) p. 458.

<sup>240</sup> Stephanie Paulsell, *Religion Around Woolf* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 2, Pericles Lewis, 'Modernism and Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.178-196 (p. 178) and Emily Griesinger, 'Religious Belief in the Secular Age: Literary Modernism and Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway', *Christianity and Literature*, 64.4 (2015), 438-464 (pp. 438-9).

<sup>241</sup> Leonard Woolf, 'Rationalism and Religion', *Nation & Athenaeum*, 39 (12 June 1926), 279.

<sup>242</sup> Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell (29 August 1908), *Letters*, I (1975), p. 363. Something of this mood is suggested in the chapel scene in *Voyage Out* (1915) when the initially calm mood of the service is broken by the reading of a violent psalm. Its bloodthirsty refrain does not strike fear into the minds of the congregation but boredom and awkwardness. For Susan Warrington, as nothing 'in her experience corresponded with this', she cannot keep her concentration, while the men 'looked more secular and critical [...] as they listened to the ravings of the old black man with a cloth round his loins'. (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), pp. 276-7, 279.

suggests that taking a strong stance on issues of faith, even in terms of opposition, was perceived by Woolf as having an uncomfortable place within a cultured milieu.

Despite this condescension, matters of the spirit were dealt with by Woolf with fervour. Her fiction persistently charts states of mind in which there is a loss of self, feelings of ecstasy and a sense that language cannot quite capture the nature of what is being experienced. The urge to reclaim Woolf as a God haunted-modern has frequently led to her situation within the tradition of Christian mysticism; a line pursued by both Paulsell and Lazenby. However, the connections they have emphasised, between Woolf and, respectively, Marguerite d'Oingt, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Plotinus are based on affinity rather than influence, as these were writers she never actually read.<sup>243</sup> Although there are resonances between their portrayal of the transcendent, there is a fundamental tension in their respective orientation. While the Christian mystic seeks union with the Godhead, in Woolf the individual never finds union with a transcendent deity, but rather with other selves and organic states. The Woolfian sublime articulates the wonder and interconnectedness of the universe rather than the greatness of God. A more interesting approach has recently been provided by Jane de Gay in her detailed study of Woolf's engagement with contemporary Christian thought. In Woolf, De Gay finds, if not a closet Christian, someone who was deeply engaged with current strands of religious thought, and who had a more ambiguous appreciation of the arena than some of her more spiteful remarks would suggest.

Although De Gay's is a nuanced and insightful study, I want to question the degree to which understanding the spiritual dimension of Woolf's oeuvre can be fully captured by considering the ways in which it connects to Christianity. Because of Woolf's resolute rejection of institutional faith, De Gay emphasises the 'ambivalent responses', tentativeness and hesitancy within her spirituality.<sup>244</sup> In this chapter, I argue that appreciating the strength of the religious aspect of her writing can be more adequately addressed by placing it in within the movement among her co-moderns to construct a spiritual life independent of belief systems. Instead of a capricious religiosity, oscillating between scepticism and faith, this contextualisation points to a more consistent stance in her engagement with the sacred. As my thesis sets out, the alliance of intense concern with spiritual states and hostility towards religious organisations was widespread among her contemporaries. We have seen how Murry's fervid denunciations of the church sat alongside

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<sup>243</sup> Stephanie Paulsell, 'Writing and Mystical Experience in Marguerite d'Oingt and Virginia Woolf,' *Comparative Literature*, 44.3 (1992), 249-267 and Donna J. Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>244</sup> Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 219.

his allegiance to a 'faith in life', or how Huxley's scientised sneer at the church co-existed with his certainty that there was a spiritual core to the universe.

Turning again to the concept of the guru, I will discuss how the contemporary visibility of spiritual guides unaffiliated to traditional belief systems, provides a useful point of departure for the way Woolf often portrayed the special spiritual sensitivity of unique individuals. This facet of her oeuvre, I will argue, is particularly important for understanding her perception of the role of the artist. Just as Murry's grappling after new spiritual authorities led him to increasingly to turn to the artist as the conveyor of sacred truth, so Woolf, I will argue, heavily guided by post-impressionist theory, tended to position the artist as a figure endowed with a sacral role.

This aspect of her thought is important for the way that it impacted on Woolf's sense of her authorial role. In many respects, the strategy this chapter adopts mirrors the approach of Pericles Lewis. Lewis too, situates her in a 'spiritual but not religious' category, looking at her through the lens of what he terms the 'secular sacred' – the allied rejection of institutional belief, coupled with a conviction that the spiritual pervades the everyday.<sup>245</sup> But the religion he finds in her work is a largely tepid affair. Lewis uses a close reading of *To the Lighthouse* to argue that the spiritual can only provide an ironic form of communion. Religion, he also claims, provided Woolf with a humble model of authorship; she resisted 'imposing [...] the view of an author God', instead adopting a model of the writer as a passive receiver.<sup>246</sup> This chapter positions the spiritual as a much more affirmative force within her oeuvre. I will also examine *To the Lighthouse*, to argue that her emphasis on the complexities and ambiguities of the inner realm did not lead to the abnegation of authorial control. Through analysis of the God-like position of the narrator, particularly in 'Time Passes', I will argue that Woolf had an exalted view of the artist and the role of the artwork as a channel for spiritual comprehension and mediation.

Since the 1970s there has been an increasing effort to recuperate Woolf from the picture of her as a separatist aesthete, mired in a rarefied contemplation of the art object at the expense of the external world. There have been numerous attempts to argue that her concern with formal experimentation did not remove her from a concern with the social and material fabric of life.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>246</sup> Lewis, p. 158.

<sup>247</sup> The quest to find a socially and politically aware Woolf is typified by works such as Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008) and Alex Zwerdling's *Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). This drive is also reflected in the more recent publication *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). In Michael Whitworth's essay in this collection 'Historicising Woolf', he notes the way in which the question of whether to read her contextually is

In the spiritual we find a domain in which both elements are fused. The art object and its creator are elevated to a mystical level, but instead of an esoteric rejection of the everyday, particularly in the 1930s, we find her thinking about the spiritual role of art in terms of current social concerns about how community could be forged outside of the church. I will situate Woolf's 'moments of being,' not within the context of high modernist probing into the hidden layers of the self; but among attempts – as I have traced in Murry and Huxley – to use the epiphanic as a means of resisting fascism and war.

In the second half of the chapter, I will focus on the way in which *The Waves* (1931) and her final novel *Between the Acts* (1941) proffers an optimistic view of the individuals's capacity to forge connections with other beings. But I will argue that the moment at which Woolf was thinking most seriously about whether this facet of the self could be harnessed in a practical sense, was the point that her confidence most wavered. While Lewis's characterisation of the Woolfian sublime as 'temporary, ironic' is problematically applied to *To the Lighthouse*, I will argue that it is a characterisation that can be used of *Between the Acts*, in which the vision of a community spiritually united by the machinations of the artist is dubious and uncertain.<sup>248</sup> I will argue for a shift in her religiosity in the late 1930s; that Woolf's optimism in the pervasiveness of the sacred became imbued with a sense of frustration. While she never lost her sense of the all-encompassing quality of transcendence, the impending crisis of conflict led to her dissatisfaction that she could not see a way in which it could be concretely harnessed for the social good.

### **In search of a guru: The Years and To the Lighthouse**

I have discussed various turns to 'masters' or 'gurus' – be it Orage and Mansfield to G.I. Gurdjieff, Murry, to the native mystic, Dunning, or Huxley's tentative interest in the secret groups run by P.D. Ouspensky. Woolf, however, never became a follower and tended to dryly deflate figures she encountered who made claims made to spiritual authority. Annie Besant, whom she saw lecturing in 1917, was dismissed by her as 'a massive, & sulky featured old lady'.<sup>249</sup> She is also dryly referred to in *The Waves* as 'the pure flame who lit the life of one of our

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bound in the debate about whether her work is politically and socially engaged, an argument, he claims that 'appears to be won'. pp. 3-12 (p.3).

<sup>248</sup> Lewis, p. 160.

<sup>249</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1915-19, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979-84), I (1979) p. 293.



statesmen; now since his death she sees ghosts, tells fortunes, and has adopted a coffee-coloured youth whom she calls the Messiah' (124). Woolf's cousin, Dorothea Stephens, also embraced a syncretic philosophy. In 1918 she published a book – *Studies in Early Indian Thought* – which tried to find parallels between the Vedas and Christianity. In correspondence Woolf was brutally dismissive of this work: 'She lives in a village; can't talk a word of the language [...] learns Sanskrit with a pundit and intends to expound on the fallacies of Buddha. I pretended I had not heard of her book. Being excessively vain she was furious'.<sup>250</sup> Her dismissiveness of Dunning is also demonstrated in her correspondence in which she associated his teaching with rumours of Mansfield's apparition: 'Poor Katherine has taken to revisiting the earth; she has been seen at Brett's; by the charwoman. [...] But then Brett is not scientific; she at once takes the old fables seriously, & repeats some jargon learnt of Dunning [...] she feels the 'contact' she says; & has had revelations'.<sup>251</sup>

But I want to argue that her novel *The Years*, from 1937, shows Woolf's more ambiguous attitude to the guru as an agent for spiritual transformation than these pronouncements would suggest. One of the main strands in the final section of the novel is the attempt of the now-aging Eleanor to find mystic insight via the ministrations of the mysterious Nicholas Pomjalovsky. Various influences have been proposed for his characterisation. His Russian associations – Eleanor thinks that he is a Russian before finding out that he is a Pole – and disquisitions on the soul has led to examples from Russian literature being adduced, a sphere of writing then famed for its spiritual quality. Emily Dalargno links him to his namesake from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), Nicholas Rostov, while Hermione Lee has pointed to the Chekhovian overtones of Eleanor and Nicholas's fragmentary discussion of the struggle of the self for future fulfilment: "'The soul – the whole being' [...] 'It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form – new combinations'".<sup>252</sup> The figure of S.S. Kotelianskii, with whom Woolf collaborated in her translation of Russian texts, has also been proposed as another source for the character. Like Nicholas, he was a homosexual, and Woolf once complained of his tendency to digress on the nature of the soul.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Woolf to Vanessa Bell (8 November 1921), *Letters*, II (1976), p. 492.

<sup>251</sup> *Diary*, II (1980), p. 237.

<sup>252</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1937), p. 296. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text. Emily Dalargno, 'A British War and Peace? Virginia Woolf Reads Tolstoy,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50 (2004), 129-150 (p. 140). Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977), p. 196. Lee draws attention to the similarity of Nicholas's words with the dialogue in Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (1901).

<sup>253</sup> For a detailed account of Woolf's collaboration with Kotelianskii see Rebecca Beasley, 'On Not Knowing Russian: The Translations of Virginia Woolf and S.S. Kotelianskii,' *Modern Language Review*, 108.1 (2013), 1-29. For the suggestion of his influence in the characterisation of Nicholas see Roberta Rubenstein, *Virginia Woolf and the Russian Point of View* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 153.

While Woolf wrote of her admiration of the adeptness of Russian authors at capturing inner life, it is also possible that the deflationary element in her portrayal of Nicholas was intended to puncture some of the more exaggerated claims of their mystic quality. A more sceptical note can be found in one of Woolf's (many) diatribes against Murry's religiosity: 'in the Adelphi he is purging his sins; and the process is holy to watch, and salutary to us, the unconverted, too. He is one of those Dostoevsky relics. He sees himself pulled asunder by the angels of darkness and light'.<sup>254</sup> The criticism looks to Murry's spiritual approach to Dostoevsky's writing that I considered in the first chapter.

But Eleanor is not simply drawn to the content of Nicholas's philosophical musings. She believes there is something unique about his being – that he gives 'off an aroma; a whirr' – through which she can achieve spiritual insight (323). When they first enter discussion, he takes an authoritative tone, eliding close and serious questioning with cryptic and sternly expressed advice. The salvatory guise which this meeting leads her to attribute to him is suggested by her reflection on his 'medical' and 'priestly' quality (290). Later, she becomes again excited by the new forms of spiritual awareness that he facilitates: 'new powers, something unknown within her', the mere fact of his presence relieving 'her of the need of thinking' (297, 369).

The sense in which Nicholas seems to have some form of special power gives credence to suggestions for the impact of contemporary gurus on his characterisation.<sup>255</sup> In this respect, it is also significant that Eleanor is hinted at having moved towards Eastern forms of spirituality; there is a reference to her travelling in India and at one of the parties in which she is enraptured by Nicholas, she is dressed in Indian apparel. David Bradshaw and Ian Blythe have proposed a Gurdjieffian origin for him, a figure who would have been visible to Woolf particularly due to the death of Mansfield at his Institute. One of the core facets of Gurdjieff's teaching was that humanity is in a sleeping state in which they are not aware of themselves. This is aligned to Nicholas' repeated refrain that human beings have a lack of self-knowledge, 'We cannot make laws and religions that fit because we do not know ourselves' (282), an assertion that parallels Ouspensky's claim: 'We do not know ourselves – this is a law'.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Virginia Woolf to Gerald Brenan (1 December 1923), *Letters*, III (1977), p. 80. In her diary Woolf also referred to Murry scathingly as a 'revivalist preacher' and 'professor of the soul', *Diary*, II (1980), pp. 252, 314, while in another letter to Roger Fry (18 May 1923) she fulminated: 'That bloodless flea to talk about life! That shifty ruffian who can't keep his hands out of other people's pocket to prate of honesty!', *Letters*, III (1977), p. 38.

<sup>255</sup> David Bradshaw and Ian Blythe, 'Introduction,' *The Years*, by Virginia Woolf (Sussex: John Wiley, 2012), p. 15.

<sup>256</sup> P.D. Ouspensky, *A Record of Some of the Meetings Held by P.D. Ouspensky Between 1930 and 1947* (Cape Town: Stourton Press, 1951), p. 62.

Bradshaw also proposes that the character of Nicholas was influenced by Gerald Heard. Woolf's diaries and letters from the 1930s record references to her reading of Heard's works, including *The Emergence of Man* (1931) and, later, *Pain, Sex and Time* (1939).<sup>257</sup> In addition to its Chekovian overtones, Nicholas's emphasis on the need for human development could be connected to Heard's claim that humanity must move towards a higher state of consciousness, a theory that Woolf would have become familiar with through *The Emergence of Man*. Woolf had also met Heard socially, although she seems to have found him largely unimpressive.<sup>258</sup> She was aware of his spiritual guise, not just from the mystic tenor of his writings, but also via his pacifist engagement with Huxley, with whom she maintained a relatively close friendship. She was however snide in her estimation of their activities, remarking in her diary 'And Aldous & Gerald Heard, those apostles of the inner life & peace & goodness, are touring the States doing this in duet. Lord lord! what an example for the Soul'.<sup>259</sup> She later also observed drily: 'Talked of Aldous – his conversion. He thinks his soul & Gerard Heard's soul are one soul'.<sup>260</sup> In a further entry she also concluded fractiously: 'shant read Aldous. wh. Develops GH in fiction'.<sup>261</sup> This remark was likely a reference either to *After Many a Summer* (1939) or to *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), both novels, as we have seen, which include lengthy, didactic passages from a Heard-esque teacher.

While Huxley might invite his spiritual guides to digress for several pages, Woolf barely lets her own complete a sentence. Following the end of the Zeppelin raid Nicholas tries to talk to the company, only to be brusquely halted by Renny's abrasive words: 'We don't was speeches' (293). Later running into him at a ball, Eleanor is impelled to seek his aid in her tentative supposition that there is some form of pattern to the world: 'She wanted him to finish it; to take her thought and carry it into the open unbroken; to make it whole, beautiful, entire' (369). However, his response is halted by the vagaries of the social situation – first the interruption of Nicholas's partner, Sara, and next by the dancers.

But through these interruptions seems Eleanor to find some form of insight. The flirtatious teasing between Nicholas and Sara she concludes to be 'Another inch of the pattern', while the dancers appear to her to be taking part in some 'mystic rite' (370). The final account of Eleanor's attempt to draw spiritual guidance from Nicholas also appears as an illustration that if he is an agent of mystic awareness, it is only through the unexpected and unplanned. Trying to

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<sup>257</sup> Virginia Woolf to Ethyl Smyth (6 December 1931), *Letters*, IV (1978), p. 410.

<sup>258</sup> *Diary*, IV (1982), p. 67.

<sup>259</sup> *Diary*, V (1985), p. 97.

<sup>260</sup> *Diary*, V (1985), p. 185.

<sup>261</sup> *Diary*, V (1985), p. 243.

give an after-dinner speech he is halted by a series of increasingly bizarre interruptions. A girl falls over head-first, next Nicholas himself becomes lost in contemplation of flowers before someone else interrupts with the words ‘A pink frock; a pink frock’ (416). The final bizarre break comes through petals being scattered on another of the company to the accompaniment of the words, ‘Red Rose, thorny Rose, brave Rose, tawny Rose’ (419). When asked what his speech was to have been about, he claims, ‘It was to have been a miracle’, but when summarised, it falls away into platitudes. The implication is that meaning, if any, has been created indirectly through the koan-like phrases and nonsense events that his attempt at speaking provoked.

Woolf did not reject the idea that there were unique individuals who could have some form of higher spiritual capacity. In principle, the claims of figures such as Heard and Murry to mystic authority did not contradict her world view. Her objection was with the idea that their insights could be taught and disseminated in preacherly pronouncements. One of the arguments I want to develop in this chapter is the way in which Woolf’s cluster of alternative mystics offers a gendered riposte to Landau’s pantheon of ‘masters’. Aside from Nicholas’s ambiguous spiritual talents, the characters most who typically offer religious insight in her novels are women.

Her earlier novel *To the Lighthouse* had also explored the forms of spiritual heightening rendered by the uniquely charismatic presence of Mrs Ramsay. Although less demonstrably assertive than Nicholas, she is more successful in the hold she exerts over the other characters. James Ramsay experiences his mother’s words as ‘heavenly bliss’, being in her company fills Charles Tansley with ‘extraordinary pride’, while Lily contemplates declaring her love for her.<sup>262</sup> Although Mrs Ramsay has recently rejected her Christian faith, she still seems to have retained a religious sensitivity. Earlier in the narrative the beam of the lighthouse engenders a heightening of the self; seeming to stroke ‘with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness’ (73).

Unlike Nicholas’s clumsy effort at delivering an after-dinner speech, Mrs Ramsay infuses a dinner party with the spiritual, not by means of discourse, but through the subtle effects of her charismatic presence and unvoiced sympathy. Reflecting that ‘the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her’ (95), after the initial stutters at social cohesion the disparate elements of the party are brought together. At the dinner Lily muses on the way in which Mrs Ramsay’s social influence has a supernatural quality; ‘She put a spell on them all, by wishing, so

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<sup>262</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp. 1, 16. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of text.

simply, so directly' (112). In its moment of climactic fusion, when the party conjures for Mrs Ramsay a sense of 'a coherence in things, a stability; something that is immune from change' Christian language is appealed to: 'Then sudden burst of laughter and then one voice (Minta's) speaking alone, reminded her of men and boys crying out the Latin words of service in some Roman Catholic cathedral' (116, 121). The scene stakes a claim for the ability of the spiritually sensitive to conjure a religious heightening of being, of equal intensity to what can be rendered by institutional faith.

### **Spirituality and significant form**

In Pericles Lewis's analysis, the dinner party scene is one of the more optimistic moments in Woolf's writing, offering the prospect of a re-enchantment that takes a richer form of communion than the private spiritual moments she more typically delineates.<sup>263</sup> In contrast, he argues that the painter, Lily Briscoe's, 'vision' at the end of the novel is comparatively 'less full-blooded' and 'ironised'.<sup>264</sup> I want to question this contrast. Textually it is problematic, as there is a clear deflation of the spiritual unity that Mrs Ramsay has worked to foster. Instead of ending the account with the realisation that her husband's friend, Augustus Carmichael, likes her more than he has ever done before, Woolf follows this moment of triumph with the scene's disintegration. Mrs Ramsay calmly surveys its departure, the chapter concluding with her realisation that 'it changed, it shaped itself differently [...] already the past' (123).

There is, however, no disruption to Lily's triumphant completion of her painting. In a sudden burst of creativity, she draws 'a line there, in the centre'. With this action she realises the work is complete, concluding climactically 'I have had my vision', at which point the novel ends (235). The seriousness which Woolf held Lily's project to possess is also suggested by the parallel between it and her own work; Lily's endeavour to capture Mrs Ramsay with paint can be compared to Woolf's own attempt to sketch the latter's persona through language. The sense that Woolf conceived the two to be analogous is indicated by her comment to Roger Fry that instead of containing symbolic import, the lighthouse functioned as a 'central line' to 'hold the design together'.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Lewis, p. 169.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid. 169.

<sup>265</sup> Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry (27 May 1927), *Letters*, III (1977), p. 385.

The point is an important one in probing the question of how for Woolf, spiritual insight could be fostered. In this section I will argue that the arena which she took most seriously for its religious potential was the artistic. Although, as I have delineated, Woolf remained scathing of Murry's mystic conversion, her belief in the spiritual capacity of the artist has much similarity to his thought. The difference was in tone; where Woolf whispered murmurs of the unknown, Murry thundered messianic certainties. But both cohered in their tendency to look to the artist as the mediator of religious insight. Each came to this position partially through the notion of artistic inspiration developed by their engagement with post-impressionist aesthetics.

Christopher Reed has drawn attention to the complexity of the stages in which Woolf became drawn to this arena, largely through her interaction with Clive Bell and Fry.<sup>266</sup> She was initially underwhelmed by neo-impressionist works. Writing at the time of the first exhibition to Violet Dickinson she opined 'I don't think them so good as books' and expressed bafflement at their perceived radicalism: 'Why are all the Duchesses insulted by the post-impressionists, a modest sample set of painters, innocent even in their indecency, I can't conceive'. Although she concluded that 'one mustn't say that they are like other pictures, only better, because that makes everyone so angry'.<sup>267</sup> This ludic mode of engagement also manifested itself in her further play at offense – dressing up with Vanessa as Gauguin girls at the Post-impressionist ball.<sup>268</sup>

But by at least the mid-1920s, as Reed points out, neo-impressionist aesthetics had become for Woolf a subject of serious intellectual concern. The retrospective importance that she attached to the first exhibition is suggested by her 1910 dating for the change of human character in her 1924 essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,' although not explicitly referred to in that text. But her 1925 essay 'Pictures' provides an overt statement of the importance of developments in painting on literary experimentation. Claiming to be 'under the dominion of painting' she argues that 'Were all modern painting to be destroyed a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cezanne, Derain and Picasso'.<sup>269</sup> This remark was made at the time she was composing *To the Lighthouse*, of which she would later express her wish to Roger Fry that she had dedicated it to him, for 'you have [...] kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone'.<sup>270</sup> After the publication of

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<sup>266</sup> Christopher Reed, 'Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 38.1 (1992), 20-43.

<sup>267</sup> Virginia Woolf to Violet Dickinson (27 November 1910) *Letters*, I (1975), p. 440.

<sup>268</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997) p. 291.

<sup>269</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Pictures,' in *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York, 1974), p. 71.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

*Orlando* (1928) she wrote to him in more florid terms, exclaiming ‘I venerate and admire you to the point of worship: Lord! you don’t know what a lot I owe you!’.<sup>271</sup>

Fry, who had come to reject the Quaker faith of his youth, would often hint at the spiritual quality of art and the way that it might offer a replacement to the function of religion in society. This idea is found in his essay ‘Art and Socialism’ in which he wrote of the way in which art could raise the individual above the quotidian aspects of existence to provide access to a sense of ‘permanence and reality that does not belong to the rest of our experience’. Without this heightening of sensibility, the individual ‘has not, properly speaking, a human life at all’.<sup>272</sup> Similarly, in the retrospective that he wrote for the collection in 1920, he ended by musing on the quality of the aesthetic emotion, concluding: ‘One can only say that those who experience it feel it to have a peculiar quality of “reality” which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I would make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop’.<sup>273</sup>

Where Fry hesitated, Bell boldly trod. His famous justification of neo-impressionist aesthetics, *Art*, from 1914, had devoted a chapter on the connections between the religious and artistic spheres. This was developed by him in two ways. First, as with Fry, religious categories are appealed to by Bell to render the intensity of response that a work of art could engender. He writes of it conjuring ‘exaltation’, ‘ecstasy’ and transporting the individual to a ‘superhuman’ sensibility.<sup>274</sup> Secondly, there is an implication that the people involved in the production and the proper reception of the art object to be something of a spiritually elect. The artist is a special individual, capable of accessing the ‘spiritual depths’ which exist within human nature while it is, ‘Only artists and educated people of extraordinary ability’ or the uncorrupted outsider – ‘some savages and children’ – who can properly ‘feel the significance of form’.<sup>275</sup>

The artist’s intensity of vision is foregrounded in the stories that Woolf wrote between the years 1917 and 1920, which were published under the title *Monday or Tuesday* (1921). It was a point of particularly warm relations with Roger Fry, who enthused about the quality of the work. One of the pieces, which Jonathan Quick identifies to have been ‘Kew Gardens’, prompted Fry to claim

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<sup>271</sup> Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry (4 December 1928), *Letters*, III (1977), p. 562.

<sup>272</sup> Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), p. 36.

<sup>273</sup> Fry, *Vision*, p. 199.

<sup>274</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), p. 82.

<sup>275</sup> Bell, *Art*, pp. 80-1.

in an exhibition review that the French Cubist artist Léopold Survage is ‘almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs Virginia Woolf is in prose’.<sup>276</sup>

The painterly quality of these stories stems from their eschewal of narrative in favour of compositional association of ideas through images. The story ‘Blue and Green’ presents an extreme example of this approach in its elision of a series of fragmented visual impressions, loosely associated by colour: ‘A wave rolls beneath the blue bells. But the cathedral’s different, cold, incense, laden, faint blue with the veils of madonnas’.<sup>277</sup> In these short stories Woolf also developed a visual approach to the epiphanic. In ‘Monday or Tuesday’ the initially sober description of the heron’s flight is broken by exclamations of wonder at the scope of its aerial vision: ‘A lake? Blot the shores out of it! A mountain? Oh, perfect – the sun gold on its slopes’ (36). The description of music in ‘String Quartet’ also becomes the pretext for ecstatic landscape imagery when Woolf attempts to find a visual equivalent for music in fragments of an exultant pastoral: ‘the first violin counts one, two, three – Flourish, spring, burgeon, burst! The pear tree on top of the mountain. Fountains jet; drops descend. But the waters of the Rhone flow swift and deep [...] free now, rushing downwards, or even somehow ascending in exquisite spirals into the air’ (61).

The visionary hue to Woolf’s notion of artistic image making underpins the mystical overtones of the description of Lily’s completion of her painting. It is through religious language that Woolf renders the success of the of the process, the brush moves with an ‘exciting ecstasy’, her conviction of the visionary import of the work is suggested by her final phrase ‘it is finished’, also the words of the crucified messiah from John’s gospel (235).<sup>278</sup> The process is rendered as an oscillation between a state of self-doubt and moments of inspiration. When Lily consciously tries to work on the image she is plagued by self-taunting thoughts; that she was ‘forty-four’, ‘wasting her time’, and ‘playing at painting’ (169). It is only when she loses her sense of self-consciousness – forgetting ‘her name and her personality and her appearance’ – that she can begin to work. Her actions are then described in passive terms: ‘she found herself painting that picture,’ ‘the brush descended’ (177, 178). Did Lily play an active role in its creation, or was she simply a trance-like receptacle for forces outside control? Reed has identified an important point

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<sup>276</sup> Jonathan Quick, ‘Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Post-Impressionism,’ *The Massachusetts Review*, 26.4 (1985), 547-570 (p. 557). Roger Fry, ‘Modern French Art at the Mansard Gallery,’ *The Athenaeum* (1919), 723-4.

<sup>277</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Blue and Green’ in *Monday or Tuesday* (London: Hogarth, 1921), p. 68. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>278</sup> John. 19:30.



of tension within Fry and Bell's formalism over the question of the role of the artist, whether their significance lay as an active creator or receiver of external impressions. In Fry's essay 'The Artist's Vision' his description of the creative process suggests that it involves a balance between the two:

As he contemplates the particular field of vision, the (aesthetically) chaotic and accidental conjunction of forms and colours begin to crystallise into a harmony; and as this harmony becomes clear to the artist, his actual vision becomes distorted by the emphasis of the rhythm which has been set up within him.<sup>279</sup>

The external realm provides the 'vision,' the artist, the 'rhythm'. Elsewhere he provided a more wavering assessment, claiming: 'In most artists we find these two impulses present in various degrees, and sometimes they vary in relative intensity at different periods'.<sup>280</sup>

Reed argues that the varieties of narrative voice in *Monday or Tuesday* show Woolf displaying anxiety over the question of artistic control. While in 'Blue and Green' the author appears more as the receptacle for different fragmented impressions, 'An Unwritten Novel' contemplates their role as a more active shaper of their material. It plays with the possibility of constructing a tale about a drab looking woman, assumed to be a spinster, in a railway carriage. But when her suppositions prove false, authorial certainty breaks down: 'Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There was never Moggridge. Who am I?' (57). This fracturing of selfhood was a forerunner to the exploration of the dissolution of identity that she would extend into an entire novel in *The Waves*.

### **The novel and the governing authority**

Reed argues that it was with a self-effacing model of authorship that Woolf ultimately sides. Reed, too, advances a more ambiguous reading of the description of Lily's image making process, claiming that emphasis should not be placed on the final triumphant assertion, but on its hesitations and difficulties. This, he argues, parallels Woolf's own authorial project in which she highlights her lack of 'omniscient knowledge' and control.<sup>281</sup> Lewis similarly contends that Woolf draws attention to her abrogation of authoritative knowledge, in the final image of Mr

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<sup>279</sup> Fry, *Vision*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>280</sup> Roger Fry, *Reflections on British Painting* (London: Faber, 1934), p. 127.

<sup>281</sup> Reed, 20-43 (p. 39).

Carmichael as a pagan deity who, instead of a trident, holds a 'French novel'. This, he views as puncturing the idea of the author as God – 'for novels do not have supernatural power'.<sup>282</sup> Lewis claims that the model of authorship she adopts is rather as a 'finely tuned receiver,' a device who picks up and records the 'the varied and impersonal truths of the world'.<sup>283</sup>

This way of responding to the novel is most famously associated with the critic Eric Auerbach. His final chapter of *Mimesis* features a close reading of *To the Lighthouse* in which he set out the innovation of Woolf's prose. Taking the opening segment of Mr Ramsay's gloomy prediction to his son James that the weather will prevent him going to the lighthouse on the next day, Auerbach examines Woolf's relegation of the external to the internal, of objective fact to subjective feeling. Instead of using a train of thought to set up why a particular action happens, external events are significant as sparks for mental processes. Objective reality is approached, 'by means of numerous subjective impressions', resulting in a labile, ambiguous narrative style in which the author has abdicated the position of 'final governing authority'.<sup>284</sup>

The problem with Auerbach's reading is that it minimises just how tonally assertive the narratorial voice can be. Arguably this interpretation have been better applied to Woolf's earlier novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which is more resolutely stresses the complexity of the inner realm. Although the narrative includes the almost too heavy-handed satire of the small mindedness of Septimus's doctor, Mrs Dalloway's reflection – 'she would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or that' – is programmatic of a text that systematically subverts the idea that people can be summed up or categorised.<sup>285</sup> Woolf juxtaposes the complex and uniquely specific inner life of Septimus and Lucrezia Warren-Smith with Peter Walsh's lazy assumption that they are 'lovers squabbling under a tree' and so a timeless symbol of the 'domestic family life of the parks' (115). This cosy framing of their distress is, of course, belied by our access to Septimus's psychotic states. Even the 'healthy' mind, due to its complexity, unsettles neat attempts at characterisation. Mrs Dalloway's unhappiness at being excluded from Lady Bruton's lunch party, rather than a demonstration of her superficiality, underlines the way in which the mind can elide the insignificant with the momentous. Her disappointment fuses with recognition of her

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<sup>282</sup> Lewis, p. 169.

<sup>283</sup> Lewis, p.156.

<sup>284</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by W.R. Task (Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 535-6.

<sup>285</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1953), p. 19. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

mortality, so that she reads ‘on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced’ (52).

Although *To the Lighthouse* retains a commitment to examining the labile and variegated quality of the inner realm, it takes a sharper approach to the construction of character. Looking back to the opening segment explored by Auerbach, we can see how, amid the impressionistic flow and play of the multiple interweaving voices, the narrator’s voice makes subtle but guiding interjections:

Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule on his wife, who was ten thousand time better in every way (James thought), but also with some conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult (6).

James’s fury is contextualized by the observation that his feeling is typical of the emotions that Mr Ramsay generally inspires in his children. The aspects of Mr Ramsay’s appearance that are seized on, are those which suggest his hard and unbending personality: he stands as ‘lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically’. These notes and clarifications are interspersed among what seem to be the thoughts and utterances of characters, either mental or verbal. But looked at closely, their separation from the narrator’s voice is more ambiguous. It is possible that the six-year-old James might just about think of his mother as ‘ten thousand times better in every way’ and we could explain his desire to have a weapon to ‘have gashed a hole in his father’s breast’, with its Freudian overtone, as the transcription of his subconscious. But it is harder to claim such a neat distinction in the case of Mr Ramsay. We are told that Mr Ramsay speaks with ‘the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule on his wife’ – an aim that he might dimly be aware of but unlikely to express even internally in such concrete terms, as, so too, that he had a ‘secret conceit with his own accuracy of judgment’. His final self-aggrandising thoughts have a parodic quality to them. In its repetition of ‘truth,’ and the mock-heroic tenor of ‘mortal being’ and his ‘loins’, the passage fuses Mr Ramsay’s internal monologue with the narrator’s satiric voice.

In her diary Woolf thrilled ‘to think [...] how all these people will read it [To the Lighthouse] & recognise poor Leslie Stephen & beautiful Mrs Stephen in it’.<sup>286</sup> Her need for definition is also manifest in her characterisation of Mrs Ramsay which is Austenesque in its combined access to her inner thoughts with their satire. Although the narrative gives greater attention to the free-flowing quality of her thoughts than to Mr Ramsay, again they seem to be heightened at points to subject her to (gentler) ridicule. Her imagination moves her to increasing distress for people who live on Lighthouses: ‘For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? she would ask; and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were’ (7). This chain of thought establishes both her imaginative sympathy but also her incapability to imagine the validity of lives lived in a different manner to her own – a failure drawn repeatedly in her response to Lily. While she is painted by her she muses on how ‘With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs Ramsay liked her for it’ (20). The patrician ‘one’ and patronising ‘little’ injects a note of humour into Mrs Ramsay’s bewilderment at Lily’s rejection of marriage.

### **The Lighthouse and the Word of God**

The more assertive tenor of *To the Lighthouse* is found, most strikingly, in its treatment of the natural realm. In his own correction to Auerbach’s emphasis on Woolf’s abdication of authorial omniscience, Michael Levenson notes her ambitiousness in the novel’s narratorial perspective, particularly in its treatment of the non-human.<sup>287</sup> In the novel, Woolf’s journeying into inner lives is dashing and wide ranging, roving not just between bodies and innermost thought, but also the organic and inorganic, past and present, time and space. The middle section of the novel, ‘Time Passes’, narrates the life of the empty house and surrounding locality over a ten-year period. Having been abandoned by the Ramsay family, there is no guiding human consciousness in the section, aside from the sketchily rendered Mrs McNab, the old charwoman who tends the house in the family’s absence.

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<sup>286</sup> *Diary*, III (1977), p. 61.

<sup>287</sup> Michael Levenson, ‘Narrative Perspective in *To the Lighthouse*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Allison Pease (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 19-29 (p. 21).

Woolf, at various times, had played with the construction of narratives from a non-human perspective. In 'Kew Gardens' (1919) the vantage point of a snail had provided the opportunity for the comedic re-imagining of the appearance of a flower bed: 'Brown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows, flat, blade-like trees that waved from root to tip, round boulders of grey stone, vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture' (71). While, overall, *To the Lighthouse* was celebrated by Fry, the central section of the novel drew his criticism. In correspondence with the wife of the French translator of her work, Fry commented on the way he felt the passage to be marred by the imposition of her authorial voice; 'she exaggerates, she underlines'.<sup>288</sup> Fry had voiced his concerns to Woolf, who later reflected in her diary: 'That was, by the way, the best criticism I've had for a long time: that I poetise my inanimate scenes, stress my personality, don't let the meaning emerge from the matière'.<sup>289</sup>

Instead of the elusive or impressionistic, the passage is a calmly authoritative portrayal of the non-human realm. Its assertive tone is bolstered by Biblical language, its approach to abstract consciousness siding with the perspective of the divine realm. The possibility of nature as the source of revelation is described as 'divine goodness' responding to 'human penitence and all its toil,' which parts 'the curtain'. The sermon-like association of terms 'penitence' and 'toil' is heightened by the biblical associations of curtain – suggesting the rending of the veil after Christ's death – a connection heightened later in the passage through the reference to Mrs McNab 'tearing the veil of silence' (145).

In the witnessing of a world unpeopled the perspective of the narrator fuses with the voice of God who creates the world, an association fostered by the repeated use of motifs taken from the first chapter of Genesis. The section opens with dimming of the lamps and the coming of an 'immense darkness' (140), while the degree of desolation is likened to a flood which, like that of Noah's, 'nothing could survive' (140). The darkness is also fused with imagery of light and chaos: 'the brightness of the day [was] as strange as the chaos and tumult of the night' (152). There is a sense that, in the absence of people, nature has regressed to its primordial origin, with 'the winds and waves' compared to the mythical sea monster that existed before the world was created: the 'amorphous bulks of leviathans' (152). In describing the happenings of this unpopulated realm the narrator's voice takes up the language of God describing his creation: 'Let the wind blow [...]

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<sup>288</sup> *Letters of Roger Fry*, ed. by Denys Sutton, 2 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), p. 598. Quoted by, James M. Hale, in: "'Le Temps Passe'" and the Original Typescript: An Early Version of the "Time Passes" Section of *To the Lighthouse*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 29.3 (1983), 267-311 (p. 268).

<sup>289</sup> *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), p. 300.

Let he swallow build in the drawing room [...] Let the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn' (157).

Although there is a clearly ironic component to wording the disintegration of a holiday home in terms of God's creative command, we should be wary of siding too much with Lewis's characterisation of her use of this phrasing simply as parody. Lewis is right that Woolf does not straightforwardly position the natural realm as the source of spiritual meaning, but neither does she use religious references simply for their ironic or deflationary overtones.<sup>290</sup> While 'divine goodness' might '[cover] his treasures in a drench of hail' (142) and the mystic cannot articulate the answer given to them '(what is was they could not say)' (147) we should avoid Lewis's assertion that the mystic is here simply the subject of satire.<sup>291</sup> Nature is creative and alive, continually presented in anthropomorphic terms as holding some sort of agency and cognitive presence. The darkness is active and assertive; 'creeping at the keyholes and crevices,' it 'stole round window blinds [...] swallowed up here a jug and a basin' (140), while 'the wind sent its spies' (149) and the 'moonlight [...] laid its caress'. In a strange, quasi-apocalyptic image the human and non-human realms are blended into each other: 'there came [...] imaginations of the strangest kind – of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts' (148). While the natural realm might not be the source of a decisive or clear form of enlightenment it is, nevertheless, an animistic sphere that still holds out the possibility of its offering.

The validity of the seeker's quest within the seascape is reinforced if we think, not just about the section's Biblical intertextuality, but its relationship with Arnold's retreating sea of faith. The passage, in its positioning of nature as throbbing, creative and spiritually alive provides a re-sacralisation of Arnold's 'darkling plain'. Mr Ramsay had lamented his lot in Arnoldian terms, musing that it was 'his fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away [...] and to so stand on this little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground on which we stand on' (49). In a riposte to his gloomy maritime reckoning, the seascape in 'Time Passes' is the source of revelation and knowledge that is affirmative and good: 'the [...] visionary, walked the beach, stirred the puddle, looked at a stone [...] suddenly an answer was vouchsafed them' (147). Instead of the 'withdrawing roar' heard by Arnold's listener, when Lily listens to the sea she

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<sup>290</sup> Lewis, pp. 165-6.

<sup>291</sup> Lewis, p. 166.

hears ‘the voice of the beauty of the world’ (161); a sea that also breathes ‘Messages of peace’ (161).

### **We are not single: history and wholeness**

The productive tension that this thesis traces between the hierarchical notion of the guru and the immanentist sensibility of the alternative turn also animates Woolf’s work, where it takes a particular form. The artist might have a special status within her worldview, but their power lies in actualising a divine essence in which all beings share. In this section I will argue that Woolf’s concern with forging new methods to capture the intricacies of consciousness was not simply directed at rendering the quotidian state of mind; but was also focused on capturing states outside the remits of everyday consciousness. I will explore this contention by examining her portrayal of the self in *The Waves*. I shall also argue that while the work seems to provide an optimistic statement about the nature of being, in its depiction of a deeper, interconnected state of mind, a more uncertain note results from Woolf’s interest in anthropological accounts of human development. There is a hint in the novel that present-day connectedness is merely a shadow of an earlier point of wholeness.

In Woolf’s early polemics against the ‘Edwardians’ she pitted the capturing of ‘reality’ as the standard against which those writers were falling short. The demands of plot devices – ‘comedy, tragedy, love interest’ – functions like some ‘unscrupulous tyrant’ keeping the writer away from engaging with life as it is actually lived, the ordinary facets of daily existence.<sup>292</sup> Similarly, the stress on the ‘fabric of things’ precludes a proper rendering of being; the Edwardian approach to characterisation (‘Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate’) is limited in capturing only the material facts of existence.<sup>293</sup> In these post-war essays Woolf staked out her purpose of delving into consciousness as a means of more aptly capturing the essence of real life. As Hermione Lee states: ‘Paradoxical though it may seem to call her a more realistic novelist than H.G. Wells, that it is the response she demands’.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 6-13 (p. 8) (first publ. in *The Times Literary Supplement* (10 April 1919) as ‘Modern Novels’ and then in revised form as ‘Modern Fiction’ in *The Common Reader* (1925), pp. 184-95).

<sup>293</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’ in Bradshaw, pp. 37-54 (p. 49). (first publ. *Criterion* 2/8 (July 1924), 409-30).

<sup>294</sup> Lee, p. 18.

But the capturing of reality, for Woolf, did not stop at simply rendering the consciousness of daily life, important though that was to her oeuvre. Like Murry, Woolf's pursuit of the inner realm meant attending to a level of mind more to be believed in than witnessed – a state of transcendence for which the everyday could act as a portal, but in which the individual's quotidian state was subsumed by the mystical. But unlike Murry she did not hold to the belief that this was a condition bestowed on unique the mind. Rather Woolf tended to probe the pervasiveness of transcendence and the way that could be found in the most unlikely subjects.

Her later essay 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' from 1927, saw Woolf framing reflection on her craft, not in opposition to her earlier *bête noire* – Galsworthy, Bennett and Wells – but her fellow moderns. However, the argument is waged in similar terms to her Edwardian critique, that these writers are failing to capture what is 'real', although her concern this time is not with the saturation of the material, but the absence of the spiritual. She cites the crooning of Eliot's nightingale – 'jug, jug to dirty ears' – as indicative of a 'mocking spirit' that is incapable of gesturing towards beauty without a sneer.<sup>295</sup> Woolf's criticism is not that this is a failure in the sense of causing aesthetic displeasure, but that it stops short at capturing what it means to be alive. The mind does have a spiritual side to it and can contemplate 'things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate' without seeking their puncture.<sup>296</sup> To properly render its fullness she speculates on the emergence of a form of prose-poetry: 'It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose'.<sup>297</sup>

The essay was written at the time she was thinking about the novel that would be later titled *The Waves*, a work that would take an even more expansive approach to the spiritual facet of consciousness. Although characters in the novels engage in day-to-day activities and pursuits – going to school, taking train journeys, falling in love – such phenomenon are responded to with an abnormal degree of intensity. In the opening pages, the characters experience the outside world in a state of ecstatic immersion: 'The back of my hand burns', 'a bee booms in my ear'.<sup>298</sup> Journeying by train is a particular source of agitation. As Louis leaves for school 'London crumbles' (20), while Susan, also departing the city by train sees it 'veiled, now vanished, now

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<sup>295</sup> Bradshaw, pp. 74-85 (p. 78) (first publ. 'Poetry Fiction and the Future', *New York Herald Tribune* (14 August 1927)).

<sup>296</sup> Bradshaw, pp. 74-85 (p. 80).

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>298</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp. 5, 6. Future References to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.



crumbled' (43). Bernard has similarly annihilative fantasies; entering the city he thinks of the train as a 'missile' which is about to 'explode in the flanks of the city like a shell' (78).

The novel might recount the events of normal life, but it is not the 'normal' mind which experiences them. Even as children the characters have an uncanny degree of self-awareness and ability to understand the minds and motivations of others. At school Bernard has an adult's ability to perceive the affectedness of his Headmaster, recognising that 'his words are too hearty to be true. Yet he is by this time convinced of their truth' (21). As a child, when Bernard sees Susan making her way across the field 'with a swing, nonchalantly' he recognises the falsity of the gesture, as a means of obscuring her actual unhappiness (8). This perceptiveness extends to more uncanny modes of awareness. When Neville sees Bernard with his hand in his pocket, he knows that he is fiddling with a piece of string, while in later life Bernard, in England, is able to witness Percival governing India (35, 96).

Hermione Lee has emphasised *The Waves's* divergence from stream of consciousness technique by situating a passage from the text alongside ones taken from Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (1913) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The exercise is a useful one in demonstrating stylistically how far Woolf had departed from the work of authors who, particularly in the case of Proust, had been so important to the psychological turn of her prose. Instead of Proust and Joyce's concern with tracing the idle, free-flowing quality of the inner realm, Woolf renders it in a heavily stylised manner. As Lee points out thoughts are made to cohere to a rhythm that is created by the repeated use of parallelism ('it will soften; it will warm' (68), 'she dreads us, she despises us' (84), 'Nothing can settle; nothing can subside' (86)) as well as the use of repetitive imagery.<sup>299</sup> It is not always clear whether Woolf is really setting about capturing the inner realm as trains of thought are complicated by the insertion of what seems to be symbolic imagery:

I drink. The veils drop between us. I am admitted to the warmth and privacy of another soul. We are together, high up, on some Alpine pass. He stands melancholy on the crest of the road. I stoop. I pick a blue flower and fix it, standing on tiptoe to reach him (111).

Here Jinny's thoughts and sensations while dancing are elided with religious and mountain imagery – straightforward motifs to convey her sense of romantic excitement. But the 'symbolic' quality of this, predominantly, natural imagery is sometimes more uncertain. The hint found in *To the Lighthouse* of the blending of the human and non-human realm in this novel explodes into an all-pervasive merging. Louis's desire to remain hidden at first expresses itself in the

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<sup>299</sup> Lee, p. 104.

comforting reflection ‘I am as green as a yew tree’ but quickly shifts into a more destabilising assertion of identity: ‘My hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle to the earth. My body is a stalk’ (7). Susan, more combatively, throws off her human guise, proclaiming: ‘I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons [...] January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn’ (69). This porousness of being also manifests itself in their relation to one another. The six figures frequently have a sense of their identities fusing. This can be the source of uncertainty – ‘As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody – with whom? – with Bernard?’ (58) – or the calm reflection of Bernard at the end of his life ‘I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them’ (208).

Although ‘stream of consciousness’ might not be the most useful phrase to describe Woolf’s effort in its association with tracing the trajectory of conscious thought, we should not see her as abandoning the inner realm. Rather than loosening her hold on the mind, replacing the meticulous tracing of its working with a symbolic approach, we should see her instead delving into the broader ranges of what the psyche contains. What she seems to be portraying in literary form is the idea current in the spiritual culture of the time that there were hidden levels of consciousness which were the source of untold power. She is continuing her psychological exploration; but into realms outside states that the conscious mind is aware of in which the boundaries of the ‘I’ collapses.

But I want to resist reading *The Waves* as a straightforwardly affirmative expression of being, particularly in terms of its expression of the unification of consciousness. One of the oddities of the text, that David Bradshaw has drawn attention to, is the infiltration of the present with the ancient past in the recurrent references to Egypt.<sup>300</sup> Strangely Louis, that most stolid of characters, who in later life reflects ‘I can dine where I like now, and without vanity may suppose that I shall soon acquire a house in Surrey, two cars [...] and some rare species of melon’ (143), continually thinks he is in ancient Egypt. One of his first visual impressions is of ‘a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans’ (6) and in later life he asserts that he is witnessing women by the Nile (67, 144). Bradshaw argues that these remarks indicate Woolf’s interest in the anthropological theory of diffusionism, a theory current in her circle at the time of the novel’s composition.

Diffusionism maintained that mankind had its origins in ancient Egypt in which it lived in a

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<sup>300</sup> David Bradshaw, ‘Beneath *The Waves*: Diffusionism and Cultural Pessimism’, *Essays in Criticism*, 63 (2013), 317–343.

golden age of social harmony before the appetite for wealth led to division and fracture. Although lightly gestured towards, on Bradshaw's reading these references contain the implication that intimations of unity within present day consciousness is a remembrance of an earlier, actualised form of togetherness.

### **Between the Acts and one-making**

In this section I am going to develop the way in which Woolf, towards the end of the 1930s, often tended to model present-day consciousness as a decline from an earlier, more integrated state. I will take up my point about her belief in the role of the artist as someone uniquely equipped to articulate and cultivate the transcendence of the self, focusing on her final novel *Between the Acts*. But I will argue that the novel, as well as her essays that she wrote during its composition, indicate a more pessimistic frame of mind. Although she can envisage the artist as the agent of togetherness in an earlier age, she is much less sanguine about whether they can forge lasting unity in the present day.

The theory of diffusionism had obvious resonances with Heard's belief about the way in which modern consciousness represents a fall from primitive unity. As I have noted, at the end of the 1930s Woolf read Heard's *Pain Sex and Time*. In her diary she wrote of her commendation of the first half of the book which sets out the theory that humanity had declined from an earlier state of psychic harmony. But the second, more hopeful half, in which he claimed that earlier connectivity would re-emerge in a future age and posited mechanisms to facilitate this development, she dismissed as a 'mere tangle' in which his 'fanatical starved or as he would say strangled individuality presides'.<sup>301</sup>

Something of this scepticism was articulated in 'Pointz Hall', her draft of the novel that would become *Between the Acts* (1941). In it the character Isa muses with glib confidence on a social utopia enabled by telepathy:

In a good state of society there would be complete feeling and thought transference; these hatreds, caused by impediments to understanding would yield. Transparency would

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<sup>301</sup> *Diary*, V (1985), p. 243.

result; universal love would follow, one sun would shine through over crystal clarity and all would be light.<sup>302</sup>

These reflections were edited out in the final version, which became a generic, but equally ambiguous, musing on spiritual futurity. But the notion of human development as a decline remained as a crucial structuring principle to the novel, although with a domesticated location of prelapsarian togetherness, within an early, rural England. Motifs of ‘old England’ are continually elided with a corroded present. The novel is set in a ‘remote village at the very heart of England’ and in the house of the Swithins, an old English family with roots before the conquest. But the house is now threatened by a ‘car factory’ and ‘bungalows’.<sup>303</sup> Even the sounds of Macbeth’s swallows, the ‘temple-haunted martins’ from Duncan’s speech have been corrupted by modernity, their noise ‘foretell[ing] what after all *The Times* was saying yesterday. Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall’ (164). The hardness of their corrupted song is then heightened by the starting of jazz music that produces ‘a jangle and a jingle! [...] What a cackle in a cacophony!’ (64).

In her contemporaneous writing Woolf played with the notion of the existence of a historic pastoral unity fostered and supported by the artist. In ‘Anon’, her unpublished essay tracing the history of English literature, the wandering bard or troubadour is identified as the lynchpin of a lost spiritual harmony:

At Midsummer they lit the bonfire on the hill. At Christmas the mummers acted Anon’s old plays; and the boys came singing his wassailing song. The road led to the old graves, to stones where in time past the English had done sacrifice. The peasants still went that way by instinct, in spring and summer and winter. The old Gods lay hidden beneath the new. It was to them led by Anon that they did worship, in their coats of green leaves.<sup>304</sup>

The novel’s pageant also nods to a lost communality caused by the dispersal of spiritual togetherness. The opening medieval segment also uses the plural voice with the characters speaking in unison, united in a shared pilgrimage (74). But the spirituality of the Victorians is individualistic, dominated by qualms of individual conscience; ‘Do not tell me, Miss Hardcastle – no, I cannot believe it – You have doubted?’ (149). The debased spirituality of the present is also

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<sup>302</sup> *Pointz Hall: the earlier and later typescripts of Between the Acts*, ed. by Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: University Press, 1983), p. 81.

<sup>303</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 68, 69. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>304</sup> Brenda Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356-441 (p. 384).

suggested by the failure of the Reverend to sum up the meaning of the pageant, his tentative attempt to express his thoughts on its message of wholeness is brusquely interrupted by a formation of warplanes (174). Attention caught by the ‘music’ of modern weaponry, the words of the church are unheard and the church is left unlit.<sup>305</sup>

But novel’s pageant, organised by the enigmatic and troubadourly Miss La Trobe, seems to offer a route to lost unity. La Trobe, with her speculated ‘Russian blood’ and her ‘power’ that ebbs and flows through the production, provides another female exemplar of the guru-esque (53, 125). As with Mrs Ramsay, she has some success in fostering a spiritual form of communality. Instead of *The Waves’s* rendering of the individual mind’s slippages into the ‘we’; *Between the Acts* brazenly presents its operation in group form. Long segments are written in a communal voice with the audience responding to the play as a collective.

It is a unity that also chimes with the lyric pastoralism expressed in ‘Anon’. The description of the location of the performance suggests its spiritual purpose, although outside it has the appearance of a sacred precinct, with the trees like ‘columns in a church; in a church without a roof; in an open-air cathedral’ (59). It is not in the play itself, but the pauses between the performance that a sense of spiritual community is forged, when nature is able to unite in a more certain way than the faltering drama is able. When the words of the villagers, enunciating the names of heroes and great houses that have risen and fallen, peter out there is a sound of the bellowing of cows which fills ‘the whole world [...] with dumb yearning’ (126). When Miss la Trobe’s desire to ‘douche’ her audience in present time by leaving them waiting for the next act to begins to falter, due to their boredom and confusion, there is a redemptive arrival of rain: ‘Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears, Tears. Tears [...] ‘That’s done it,’ sighed Miss La Trobe, wiping away the drops on her cheeks. Nature once more had taken her part’ (162).

But are these actual moments of fellowship, or do they simply represent communion through a blindsided lens? They are problematised by the repeated association of hope in unity with age and eccentricity; the foolish and rambling Mrs Swithin’s reflections on nature as a source of unity are coolly dismissed by the younger generation:

Mrs Swithin caressed her cross. She gazed vaguely at the view. She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination – one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves –

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<sup>305</sup> The purpose of the pageant was to raise money for electric lighting of the church, but the day ends with a deficit of one hundred and seventy-five pounds, pp.173-4.

all are one. If discordant, producing harmony – if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus – she was smiling benignly – the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so – she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance – we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. Well, if the thought gave her comfort, William and Isa smiled across her, let her think it (157).

In Jed Esty's reading of the novel this note of irony results from Woolf's discomfort with nationalist traditions, arguing that 'Several times in the novel, Woolf reverses course between collective and recuperative ideas of Englishness and her fundamental wariness [...] about any kind of national or collective participation'.<sup>306</sup> But why could not Woolf have sided with the pastoral idealism of figures such as Murry, whose notion of the revitalisation of the self within the English soil was articulated precisely to resist a nationalist call of duty to take up arms? Woolf may have chided Leonard for his willingness to fight (he signed up to the Home Guard) but neither did she espouse her earlier pacifism, adopting a more languid turning away from conflict.<sup>307</sup> In correspondence as well, Woolf could assert a belief in literary traditions and pastoral visions within a 'clean' nationalism, writing to Ethel Smyth that Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens were her 'only patriotism: save one vision, in Warwickshire one Spring when we were driving back from Ireland & I saw a stallion being led, under [...] the beeches [...] & I thought that this is England'.<sup>308</sup>

I think the core ambivalence of the novel lay, not in Woolf's patriotic wariness, but her scepticism about the degree to which consciousness could be accessed and manipulated by the artist to forge an empowered collective. Her autobiographical essay that she also wrote at the start of the conflict in 1939, 'A Sketch of the Past,' is instructive in this respect. The essay asserts, without the novel's note of ambiguity, the importance of the artist's role in expressing the transcendent heights of the self. She argues that the 'real novelist' is both able to express the everyday, or what she terms 'non being,' as well moments of the sublime, or 'being'.<sup>309</sup> Echoing her conviction in *Three Guineas* 'we should not believe in war, and we should believe in art', it is her capacity to experience transcendent states that leads her to express, in this essay, the value of

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<sup>306</sup> Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2003), p. 87.

<sup>307</sup> Zwerdling, p. 288.

<sup>308</sup> Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth (11 January 1941), *Letters*, VI (1978), p. 486.

<sup>309</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 61-139 (p. 70). Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

the writer's role on the point of war (148). It is this conviction, she claims, that 'affects me every day. I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if the war comes. I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else' (73).

The essay is famous for its lyrical exploration of 'moments of being'; the way her childhood was punctured by experiences of the mysterious sense of the depth and connectedness of the world. While these are partly rich and affirmative moments, they also contain a menacing note. As Woolf states, they were all marked by a loss of personal agency: 'they seemed dominant; myself passive' (72). Frequently she emphasises her confusion at their origins: 'Then, *for no reason that I know about*, there was a sudden violent shock' (71, my italics). Again, in her description of her sense of upset at hearing about a man's suicide, when she felt overcome by an intimation that it was somehow connected to a nearby tree, there is a break between her intensified sensation and its preceding state: '*The next thing I remember* is being in the garden at night' (71, my italics). This mode of description can be connected to her earlier, and oft quoted, observation on the 'accidental' quality of transcendence: 'One can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes; but look at the ceiling, at Grizzle, at the cheaper beasts in the zoo [...] the soul slips in'.<sup>310</sup> What is also revealing is that despite the evident intensity of these experiences and her vivid adult remembrance of them, she does not claim that they brought about any definitive change to her sense of self. Unlike Murry's identification of transformative spiritual episodes, these moments, for Woolf, seem to have made an impression that was more temporary.

In *Between the Acts* there is a sense, not that Woolf began to falter over the unplanned and unexpected quality of transcendence, but that she questioned its usefulness:

Now Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing, and streaming, on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together – the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? (88)

I do not think we should read Miss la Trobe as misguided in her belief that there has been a heightening of insight; the problem is the bathetic overtones of the temporal specificity. The description gestures towards a fluctuating self, rather than a form of reconstructed being. It is not that Woolf gave way in her belief in the essential harmony and beauty of the universe and the transcendence and connectivity of the self. It is just that she became uneasy within her conviction that these truths could only be stumbled upon, and when stumbled upon, would

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<sup>310</sup> *A Writer's Diary*, p. 84.

promptly fade. In face of the threat of war it was an intimation that could prove of limited comfort. While Huxley and Murry believed that the individual could consciously strive to reach heightened states and that these could provide the basis for lasting and meaningful change, the Woolfian self, immutable in its mutability, offered a promise of resistance that could only be tepid at best.



## The Varieties of Sexual Experience: Naomi Mitchison, Socialism and the New Age

### Introduction

Can the ‘spiritual but not religious’ self be saved? My last chapter ended on a melancholic note, with the redemptive possibility of the self’s transcendent heights failing to offer a response to the crisis of war. Even the optimistic attempts I considered in the first two chapters to avoid conflict through schemes premised on the self’s ‘original innocence’ were, in practical terms, skittish in implementation.<sup>311</sup>

As Leo Mellor and Glyn Salton-Cox have discussed, the thirties literary imagination was widely invested in notions of futurity – a futurity that is typically characterised as shrouded in apathy and gloom.<sup>312</sup> Scholarly treatments have emphasised the ominous shadow cast from the destruction rendered by the First World War, allied to the looming prospect of a Second. Leo Mellor argues that the fragmented aesthetic of modernism can be seen as proleptic of the actual destruction rendered by the bombs of the Second World War, while a more pathological tenor has been traced by Paul Saint-Amour. He claims that anxiety over the possible impact of a future conflict was so pervasive that the interwar mindset can be considered in terms of pre-traumatic stress syndrome.<sup>313</sup> These accounts accord with the menaced refrain traced by Richard Overly in his social history of the interwar era, *The Morbid Age*.<sup>314</sup>

In this chapter, I will use the lens of spirituality to complicate this prevalent and attractive teleology of doom, by focusing on the cultural impact of Heard’s narrative of the way consciousness was advancing to a new age of fulfilment. I will also examine the intersection of his ideas with other teleological schemes that predicted beneficent futures, focusing on the importance of these ideas within the writings of the novelist and political campaigner, Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999). A notably long-lived and prolific writer, Mitchison continued authoring fiction into the 1990s. But rather than address her whole oeuvre, this chapter takes the narrower

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<sup>311</sup> Philip Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>312</sup> Leo Mellor and Glyn Salton-Cox, ‘Introduction,’ in ‘The Long-1930s’, *Critical Quarterly*, 57.3 (2015), 1-9 (p. 4).

<sup>313</sup> Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War and Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>314</sup> Richard Overly, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

remit of her writings in the early thirties – at the point at which she became most influenced by the thought of Heard.

As I have argued in my introduction, I want to resist the notion that the strand of spirituality I am addressing was a narcissistic dalliance with consciousness; a quietist retreat while the world went to hell. Instead, I want to argue that what is distinctive about the manifestation of the ‘spiritual but not religious’ category in the interwar era was its social conscience; the degree to which it sought the improvement of the self to save humanity at large. Consideration of Mitchison’s work develops the sense in which the political engagements of Murry and Huxley were part of a broader trend towards a spiritually informed progressivism. Through exploration of her novels *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1930) and *We Have Been Warned* (1935), her contemporaneous essays and reviews and non-published archival material, I will explore the way in which Mitchison also turned to the spiritual as a device for seeking a more harmonious and connected social order.

Raised as an agnostic by a mother convinced that religion was a matter for the servants, in adult life Naomi Mitchison maintained a generally antipathetic attitude towards the church.<sup>315</sup> Eschewing church attendance – to the disapproval of her Scottish neighbours, while she could write sympathetically of early Christianity, she was generally critical of its institutional formation. When her son, Geoffrey, died in 1927, her Aunt Bay included this helpful reflection in a letter of condolence:

You have kept off that particular kind of thought, and not believing any of the catalogues of improbable events which are handed out as religious, are in a pretty awkward position. The only thing to do I suppose, is to cultivate your garden.<sup>316</sup>

It was her sexual progressivism, in particular her advocacy of birth control, that made Mitchison a figure so seemingly at odds with Christianity.<sup>317</sup> Her 1932 overview of social and cultural ideas, *Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents*, aimed at a young audience, blithely advocated the dismantling of the family unit. The publication incited clerical wrath; several prominent Anglicans signed a letter to the press denouncing its undermining of Christian values.<sup>318</sup> This was

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<sup>315</sup> Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (London: Pandora, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>316</sup> Elizabeth Haldane (Aunt Bay) to Naomi Mitchison (c.1927), Acc. 10140, National Library of Scotland (NLS), Edinburgh.

<sup>317</sup> The North Kensington Women’s Welfare Centre, founded in 1924.

<sup>318</sup> See Charles Skeeper’s entry ‘The Family or One Way of Keeping Together’, in *An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents*, ed. by Naomi Mitchison (London: Gollancz, 1932), pp. 455-492 (p. 492). On the

a fray in which Mitchison willingly participated; in 1931 she created controversy by publishing a series of letters criticising the Catholic Church's conservative model of the family.<sup>319</sup>

While Mitchison may have shied away from institutional faith, she was not simply dependent on vegetation as the source of spiritual support. Although it is easy to assume a straightforwardly oppositional relationship between Mitchison's sexual progressivism and religion, in this chapter I argue that consideration of her oeuvre in the 1930s complicates the seeming antithesis between the two spheres. In the years following her son's death she wrote excitedly endorsing Heard's ideas in the *Time & Tide* periodical and became involved in setting up a meditation group with him in London. Heard's modelling of consciousness became integral to Mitchison's understanding of the erotic as a sphere through which it was possible to effect social change; her ideas about non-monogamy were infused by the mystical notion that sex was a means to foster a higher sense of connectedness within the social whole.

Mitchison is a figure who is particularly interesting for the way she operated as a key node within the thirties' cultural scene. A noted London (and later Scottish) hostess, her house in Hammersmith operated as an alternative fulcrum for artistic exchange to the bastion of Bloomsbury.<sup>320</sup> This was an important part of her self-portrayal, in her memoir *You May Well Ask* (1979), about a third of the text is devoted to chapters on famous writers to whom she was close. Part of my way of approaching the significance of Mitchison is to emphasise her position within a cultural network, to address the role she played within intellectual circles through which many of the period's key scientific, mystic and political discourses were shaped. Mitchison's correspondence contained in her archive at the National Library of Scotland has been particularly important to develop this aspect of my research.

In terms of her relationship with Heard, Mitchison's correspondence attests to her role as the disseminator of his ideas in the twenties and thirties, not just in a public forum, but a personal one as well. She wrote enthusiastically about him to associates including E.M. Forster, Olaf Stapledon and W.H. Auden.<sup>321</sup> The Olaf-Mitchison correspondence points to another intriguing

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clerical denunciation of Mitchison, see. Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>319</sup> Jill Benton, *Historical Representation in the Novels of Naomi Mitchison (1931-1935)*, PhD thesis (University of California, 1986), p. 205.

<sup>320</sup> Benton notes the way in which Hammersmith was home to several artists and writers with whom Mitchison was friends, including A.P. Herbert, Julian Trevelyan, Joe Ackerley and Gertrude Hermes. *Mitchison*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>321</sup> See E.M. Foster's letters to Naomi Mitchison including: (15 June 1927), (8 January 1926), Acc. 6610 and Olaf Stapledon to Mitchison, (20 January 1931), (12 December 1935), Acc. 7644, NLS.

afterlife of Hearadian philosophy, not simply as a liberal post-Christian religion, a mystic undergirding of the Fosterian demand to connect, but within science fiction meditations on of the post-human. The evolution of consciousness was a central theme in Stapledon's works *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937), and one that would also surface in Mitchison's later writing, notably her novel, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962).

My focus on Mitchison is – as with Murry – on her polymathic identity, the way her writing crosses intellectual boundaries and genres, bringing together disparate spheres of knowledge. Her interest in the scientific was developed by her upbringing; she was the child of the famous physiologist, John Scott Haldane, as well as the sister of the renowned geneticist J.B.S. Haldane. This was a topic that she also pursued; in her youth she had notably conducted breeding experiments with guinea pigs, while in adult life she was a member of the eugenics society. I will explore her engagement with the field of popular science, focusing on the *Today and Tomorrow* series. I will address the way in which eugenically informed ideas of bodily and cognitive enhancement resonated with Heard's narrative of progress, in similarly offering an optimistic future in which humanity is perfected – albeit by the scientist's hand. I will consider the way in which Mitchison's 1930 pamphlet on birth control connected the two domains in its envisaging of the future of the reproductive body underpinned by Heard's belief in the emergence of a connected mode of consciousness.

I will argue that consideration of this matrix of ideas also points to an intriguing continuity between Mitchison's non-fiction and fantasy writing. Emphasising the teleological dimension of Mitchison's ideas about sexual liberalisation, I will advance a reading *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* as an exercise in exploring alternative forms of living. The use of the historical novel in the 1930s to comment on the contemporary political moment has been widely noted. Building on Perry Anderson's observation on the way in which it offered 'signposts to the future,' and Diana Wallace's stress on the politically subversive potential of the genre, I will consider the way in which the influence of Heard enables a proleptic reading of the novel's portrayal of spiritualised sexuality.<sup>322</sup> The dual lens of Hearadian temporality – the sense in which the harmonious past offers the vision of an idealised future – provides a means of reading Mitchison's celebratory depiction of free love within the tribal group as a model of connectedness for the future age. While set in the ancient Hellenic realm, I will argue that the novel's imaginings of an eroticised religious practice can also be considered comparatively with the spiritualised sexuality found in

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<sup>322</sup> Perry Anderson, 'From Progress to Catastrophe,' *London Review of Books*, 33.15 (2011) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/>> [accessed 6 May 2019]. Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

Aldous Huxley's futuristic tale *Brave New World* (1932), which similarly evinces the impact of Heard.

This orientation to the novel's depiction of sexuality is reinforced, I will argue, by considering the centrality of the presentation of renegotiated forms of personal intimacy to socialist futurity in her contemporaneous novel, *We Have Been Warned* (1935). The final section of this chapter will undertake a recuperative reading of this widely criticised text. In many ways the work is symptomatic of the limits to reclaiming Mitchison as a novelist. I am not going to attempt to advance its formal brilliance, instead I will champion its revisiting on grounds primarily on grounds of ideological import; the way it demonstrates the productive alliance between her political activism and literary art. While there might be a limit to the way in which Mitchison's oeuvre can be approached in aesthetic terms, the work is symptomatic of the way her fiction functioned as a terrain which nuanced and developed, or simply imaginatively extrapolated, on her social and political thought.

I will argue that Mitchison sets up a sophisticated internal dialogue on her ideas about the relationship between sexuality and politics. In my second chapter I looked at the element of autofiction in Huxley's novel *Eyeless in Gaza*, suggesting that the novel's ending could have been strengthened had this facet been developed. Although *We Have Been Warned* is a more mixed work, it employs a much more refined use of an autofiction approach than Huxley's vague gesture to the way in which his experience of meditation and dietary reform, that is embodied by Beavis, correctly conforms to Dr Miller's disquisitions on the subject. Mitchison, however, complicates her advocacy of individual sexual liberation as the harbinger of a new age, by placing it in tension with the disappointments of her lived experience of polyamory. The heroine Dione, closely modelled on Mitchison, embarks on a course of free love as a way, she believes, of enacting her socialist principles – a commitment seemingly endorsed by the signs of impending revolution. But her attempt to construct a new lifestyle within the old order is met with disappointment and confusion. I shall argue that in contrast to Huxley's didactic certainty, the work, by pitting a conflict between the novel's seeming revolutionary optimism and Dione's difficulty in constructing a lifestyle geared to the socialist tomorrow, acts more as a space for the creative play with ideas. It is not that Mitchison rejects her teleological perspective, it is just that she is open to doubt and self-questioning about the ease with which the individual can negotiate their personal life according to it.

## Spirituality and the post-human

In the volume edited by Mitchison, *Outline for Boys & Girls*, the science of eugenics is pitted against the meditations of the theologian; while the latter accepts the ‘material’ dimension of humanity as it stands, the former ‘is not so easily pleased’ and looks at what it has the potential to be.<sup>323</sup> In this section I will address the way in which Mitchison engaged with a discourse of scientific futurity focused on eugenic enhancement, a terrain which, despite its typically oppositional stance towards religion, I shall argue was frequently infiltrated by metaphysical notions.

The science of eugenics has been identified by Richard Overy as one of the primary manifestations of anxiety within the interwar decades.<sup>324</sup> But although it is a discourse driven by an ominous sense of the lurking threat of the degeneration of the human species, it also fostered excitement about the possible transformation that could be rendered should the scientist intervene, as Patrick Parrinder has traced in his discussion of the pervasive appearance of eugenic notion within fin de siècle utopianism.<sup>325</sup> These range from the heavy-handed visions of Francis Galton’s *Kantsaywhere* (c.1910), where couples must pass an exam to procreate, to its libertarian manifestation in William Morris *News from Nowhere* (1890), in which eugenics hovers in its advocacy of free love – in the belief that the union of a couple guided by physical affection for each other would naturally find the person they are most suited to procreate with.

In the interwar era this utopian refrain was sounded particularly in the arena of popular science. A series of works written by scientific intellectuals took the ‘eugenic imagination’ as their starting point, to speculate on a vision of a human future in which perfectability could be programmed and designed.<sup>326</sup> In recent years, the *To-Day and To-Morrow* series has attracted attention for the way it functioned as a key site for the reproductive debates that occurred within the decades.<sup>327</sup> Although Mitchison never contributed to the series, she approvingly reviewed Vera Brittain’s

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<sup>323</sup> N.W. Pirie, ‘Applied Biology, or Getting to Work of the Muddles,’ in *Outline for Boys & Girls*, pp. 207-89 (p. 214).

<sup>324</sup> See. Overy, Chapter 5, ‘A Sickness in the Racial Body’, in *Morbid Age*, pp. 176-236.

<sup>325</sup> Patrick Parrinder, ‘Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris’, *Utopian Studies*, 8.2 (1997), 1-12.

<sup>326</sup> The term is coined by Max Saunders in his study of the series: *Imagined Futures: Writing, Science and Modernity in the To-Day and To-Morrow Book Series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 15.

<sup>327</sup> In addition to Saunders, both Susan Squier and Aline Ferreira have written extended accounts about the way the series explored notions of reproduction, see: *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth Century Vision of Reproductive Technology* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) and ‘The Sexual Politics of Ectogenesis in the To-Day and To-Morrow Series’, *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 34.1 (2009), 32-55.

essay on the future of monogamy, a vision in which relations between the sexes are revolutionised through the combination of bioengineering and social and political reform.

Part of the liveliness of the series was its intertextual quality; writers would frequently reference, often to refute, ideas put forward in other contributions. Mitchison's brother, J.B.S. Haldane, penned what was perhaps the most famous contribution to the series to the series in his 'Daedalus' essay of 1924. The work speculated, notoriously, on a future in which ectogenesis (the gestation of the child outside of the womb) enabled the separation of sex from reproduction and the eugenic design of the foetus – this was a topic that Mitchison would go on to explore in her novel *Solution Three* (1975). Brittain's contribution offered a riposte to Haldane's vision, while not rejecting Haldane's notion of perfectability via scientific intervention per se, she broadened the criteria for thinking about how it could be achieved by considering emotional as well as bodily states.

Employing the device of 'future history' the work takes the form of an imagined essay written by a future female professor of moral philosopher. This philosopher looks back at the attempt to use ecotogenesis in the 1970s, which, while biologically successful in leading to the birth of children bred from the 'best stock', was socially disastrous as all died in their fifth year due to lack of parental affection.<sup>328</sup> Celebrated by Mitchison as a 'dream of a quite possible [...] future in which real monogamy is happily and beautifully practiced, no longer the sham thing to which we give lip service now', Brittain's work seeks the key to improving the couple relationship, partly in the biological equilisation of the sexes.<sup>329</sup> Her interest in scientific intervention is concentrated on measures that could further this goal, such as the use of sex-determination to lead to a numerical equality of the sexes and the Steinach rejuvenation method to bring the period of female sexual potency to the same length as that of men.<sup>330</sup>

The vision of a human future shaped by the hands of the scientist contained an obvious note of religious provocation. The title of the scientist's J.D. Bernal's prediction of humanity's cyborgian fate, *The World, The Flesh and the Devil: An Enquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul* (1929) tauntingly riffed on the Book of Common Prayer. Haldane entitled a further essay 'The Last Judgement' (1927), an essay that presented an eschatological vision of human salvation by scientific intervention: the earth uninhabitable, humanity can escape destruction by eugenic engineering that enables the creation of an improved species, able to live on Venus and Jupiter.

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<sup>328</sup> Vera Brittain, *Halcyon: Or the Future of Monogamy* (London: Kegan Paul & Co, 1929), p. 76.

<sup>329</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *Eugenics Review*, 21 (1929–1930), p. 300.

<sup>330</sup> Brittain, *Halcyon*, pp. 64, 70.

More acerbically, the sex reformer Dora Russell's contribution *Hypatia; Or, Woman and Knowledge* (1925), which discussed the emancipation of women by increased education, including increased access to sexual knowledge, was prefaced by the grandiose assumption of clerical hostility: 'Hypatia was a University lecturer denounced by church dignitaries and torn to pieces by Christians. Such will probably be the fate of this book'.<sup>331</sup>

But although there was a recurrently oppositional tone towards the church, the ideas of these thinkers were not straightforwardly secular. Part of my purpose in considering this body of writing is for the way they indicate the currency of Heard's notion of interconnected consciousness within a scientific domain. In Bernal's vision of futurity, the boundary of the self is transcended by the emergence of a collective form of identity, enabled by the mechanical fusion of the individual brain into a hive mind. Bernal was alive to the mystical overtones that this vision contained, claiming that the group sensibility it would enable would be 'a state of ecstasy in the literal sense' and a mode of connectivity that would '[transcend] the devotion of the most fanatical adherent of a religious sect'.<sup>332</sup> As life would no longer depend on the individual, the new cyborgian humanity would also be essentially immortal.<sup>333</sup> The spiritual refrain, devoid of Christian reference, also chimed with certain of Haldane's musings. In separate writings contained within his essay collection *Possible Worlds* (1930), he speculated on the possibility of telepathy and whether there might be some form of sacral principle to the universe.<sup>334</sup> Writing of the afterlife, he, like Bernal, rejected the notion of personal survival, but contemplated a more interconnected form of existence in which the individual merged with some form of infinite mind.<sup>335</sup>

The appearance of the language of mysticism in the scientific writings of self-proclaimed agnostics or atheists, manifests what Suzanne Hobson has usefully characterised as the contested ground of unbelief.<sup>336</sup> Hobson has also looked at the way in which Mitchison's writing on

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<sup>331</sup> Dora Russell, preface to *Hypatia; Or, Woman and Knowledge* (London: Kegan Paul & Co, 1925) [n.p].

<sup>332</sup> J.D. Bernal, *The Word, the Flesh and the Devil: Enquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul* (London: Kegan Paul & Co, 1929), pp. 53, 54.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

<sup>334</sup> J.B.S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), pp. 208, 210.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

<sup>336</sup> Suzanne Hobson, 'Religion, Modernism and Anglo-Agnostics: (Un)belief and Fiction in the 1930s', in *A History of 1930s Literature*, ed. by Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 271-284.



religion is indicative of such nuances.<sup>337</sup> Although Mitchison could be vocal in her criticism of the church, she, in a similar way to Huxley, took an instrumentalist approach to faith, affirming aspects of religious practice that could lead to the social good. Her 1939 work *The Kingdom of Heaven* shows her open-mindedness to the ‘thoroughly reasonable’ quality of ‘essential Christian doctrine’.<sup>338</sup> She is particularly laudatory of what she believes to have been the practice of first-century Christianity, speculating that its rituals successfully fostered agape love among small groups of believers; an idea that is likely drawn from the writing of Heard.<sup>339</sup> Heard’s ideas were easily tallied with her scientific leanings, with his mysticism expressed in language amenable to the rationalist. His grand narrative of human evolution fused the scientific with the spiritual; his promise of humanity’s eschatological deliverance from the ‘sin’ of separation, claiming anthropological and psychological evidence for its truth.<sup>340</sup>

### Gerald Heard and the revolution of consciousness

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed the way in which Heard’s affirmative, hopeful modelling of being adheres to Mathew Thomson’s claim that a competitive psychological culture operated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in place of the frequently held perception of Freudian hegemony. In the pages of the feminist periodical *Time & Tide*, Mitchison herself reflected on the question of the dominance of Freud. In her 1930 article labelled ‘Two Prophets’ (a title with a hovering, if absent, question mark) she observes that while Freud’s ideas had widely permeated, he is comparatively little read. In an objection that bears witness to her reading of Heard, Mitchison questions his modelling of the destructive nature of early communities, positing instead that early humanity lived in a ‘natural golden age’.<sup>341</sup> The article also situates what

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<sup>337</sup> Suzanne Hobson, ‘Mitchison and Organised Secularism,’ *Naomi Mitchison: 20 Years On*, symposium at the University of St Andrews (25 July 2019).

<sup>338</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *The Kingdom of Heaven* (London: William Heinemann, 1939), p. 149

<sup>339</sup> Mitchison, *The Kingdom*, p. 118-123. In *Social Substance of Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1931) Heard discussed the agape or the ‘love-feast’ of the early Christian community as a moment where real religion emerges for a short time.

<sup>340</sup> For a discussion about Heard’s anthropology, particularly his debt to W.H. River’s work *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920) see Paul Eros, “One of the Most Penetrating Minds in England:” *Gerald Heard and the British Intelligensia of the Interwar Period*, DPhil (The University of Oxford, 2011), pp. 30-52. Naomi Mitchison, ‘New Fiction,’ *Time and Tide*, (July 1930), p. 902.

<sup>341</sup> Naomi Mitchison, ‘Two Prophets,’ *Time and Tide* (27 June 1930), p. 963.

Mitchison believed to be D.H. Lawrence's celebration of sex as a riposte to Freud's negative understanding of human impulses.<sup>342</sup>

In a separate article a year later, 'Good News', Mitchison also pitted the affirmative, Heardian self, against Freud's menaced subconscious. The article endorses Heard's doctrine of the way the unconscious holds beneficent powers, arguing that accessing its latent impulse towards group love holds the power to transform society. The 'charity of the group', she claims, will take the 'bitterness out of sex, bringing with it, inevitably, a communism based not on fear and hate but on love'.<sup>343</sup> Reviewing his *Ascent of Humanity*, also for *Time and Tide*, Mitchison spoke of it in as 'the book of perhaps the last revolution, the revolution of consciousness', a millenarian note that she also sounded in her review of his later work, *The Social Substance of Religion* ('It must be read intently, and – I believe – joyfully, for peace is in sight').<sup>344</sup> In her memoir she went on to label him a prophet.<sup>345</sup>

As with Huxley, Mitchison became involved in Heard's practical schemes aimed at the fostering of new states of consciousness, helping to organise what was named the Engineer's Study Group. In Heard's description of the meeting, that Mitchison later recorded, the gatherings appear to have been a spartan affair. They were weekly meetings of around twelve people, seated together in a darkened room, whose attempts to cultivate feelings of togetherness were aided, at most, by music.<sup>346</sup>

How did these undemonstrative, small-scale meetings connect to wider revolutionary change? In 1929 Mitchison had introduced W.H. Auden to Heard, who also became enthralled by the ideas of this 'noble amateur'.<sup>347</sup> His poem, 'A Summer Night', from 1933, describes a moment of communion in a garden, a Heardian image of a sense of communality with 'colleagues'.<sup>348</sup> But the moment is troubled by the recognition of the political inequality that has enabled its

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid. 964.

<sup>343</sup> Naomi Mitchison, 'Good News,' *Time and Tide* (25 June 1931), p. 894.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid. 894.

<sup>345</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *You Might Well Ask: A Memoir, 1920-40* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1979), p. 107.

<sup>346</sup> Mitchison, *You May*, p.114.

<sup>347</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Five Early Poems', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3853 (16 January 1976), p. 53.

<sup>348</sup> *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 96. Auden later claimed that the poem was based on a moment when he experienced a sense of agape love for his colleagues while teaching at Downs School. See: Patrick Deane, 'Auden's England', in *A Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. by Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 25-28 (p. 31).

sensation; the ‘doubtful act’ that ‘allows | Our freedom in this English house,’ which is anyway ‘rent’ by the revolutionary flood.<sup>349</sup>

Samuel Hynes reads the poem as an account of the death of the bourgeoisie, how ‘private feeling’ is part of a ‘drowning world’.<sup>350</sup> But in the final verse agape re-emerges as the force that assists the world’s re-building after the revolution has spent its force. Auden’s belief in the political acumen of Heard’s thought is reinforced by consideration of his incomplete epic ‘In the Year of my Youth,’ written in the same year as ‘A Summer Night’. In the poem, intended to be a diagnosis of why communism would be hard to establish in Britain, Heard appears as a Virgilian ‘perfect teacher’ (404) guiding the poet through modern life.<sup>351</sup>

Although Heard focused on the transformative power of agape, there was an implication in his thought that erotic love could also have a healing power. This suggestion is found in *Social Substance of Religion* (1931) in which Heard argues that sex had been used in early forms of religious practice to re-affirm the sense of community that had been lost once co-consciousness had broken down. He claims that early religious ritual used orgies as ‘life-associative’ techniques to bridge the gap between individuals. Monthly the tribe would come together in an ‘explosion of unity’ from which the individual would leave ‘purified, balanced, at rest’.<sup>352</sup>

There is a similar imbrication of sex and anthropology in Mitchison’s pamphlet *Comments on Birth Control* (1930), based on a talk that she gave at the third international world congress on sexual reform which took place in London 1929.<sup>353</sup> Mitchison was an active figure in the birth control movement, founding one of Britain’s first clinics in North Kensington and using herself an experimental subject for new types of contraception.<sup>354</sup> The pamphlet is significant in fusing her reformist ambitions with the belief in the developmental nature of humanity. As in Brittain’s work it conceives of sexual relationships being improved not just by social reform, but also the belief that humanity itself could change and with it the nature of desire. However, rather than

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>350</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1976), p.135.

<sup>351</sup> Lucy McDiarmid, ‘W.H. Auden’s ‘In the Year of My Youth...’, *The Review of English Studies*, 29.115 (1978), 267-312 (p. 290).

<sup>352</sup> Heard, *Social Substance*, pp. 114-16.

<sup>353</sup> The paper that she gave was entitled ‘Some Comment on the Use of Contraceptives by Intelligent Persons’ in Norman Haire and World League for Sexual Reform, ed., *Sexual Reform Congress, London, 8-14 ix, 1929: Proceedings before the Third Congress* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co, 1930), pp. 182-188.

<sup>354</sup> Lesley Hall, ‘Send in the Clones? Naomi Mitchison (née Haldane)’s Musing on Reproduction, Breeding, Feminism, Socialism and Eugenics from the 1920s to the 1970s’, podcast for the *Centre of the Humanities*, Oxford Brookes University <<https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/>> [accessed 15 December 2020].

turn to the possibility of scientific enhancement, Mitchison takes Heard's developmental view of the self to speculate on a future in which sexual monogamy would have been transcended by new form of connectedness.

The pamphlet addresses the problems attached to heterosexual coupling in the present age. Although advocating a polyamorous lifestyle as the ambition of the '[i]ntelligent and truly feminist women' she recognises the difficulties with its contemporary establishment as a way of life.<sup>355</sup> She also considers the problem of the intensity of the emotions that are connected to monogamy, suggesting its alleviation by means such as the initiation of the young through homosexual relationships or even the maintenance of a celibate lifestyle. But the solution that the pamphlet primarily looks to is the emergence of a new form of collective identity. Comparing the un-coordinated, separated self of the present with the idealised interconnected self of a past, golden age; she takes Heard's soft primitivist lens, but applies it not to paleolithic humanity, but rather the Trobriand islanders, based on Malinowski's work.<sup>356</sup>

One of Malinowski's findings were the way in which the Trobriand islanders did not believe that sex led to pregnancy. This, Mitchison attributes to a form of spiritual and bodily connectivity so strong that the bodies of the women naturally register a taboo around procreation before adulthood and so do not become pregnant. Citing Heard, she claims that, by contrast modern western humanity is currently living in a state of separation, but hypothesises the emergence of a new psychic state in which an intense heterosexual bond between two people will have been superseded: 'the super-conscious community, might be simpler and lovelier still, for I cannot see that there would be any need in it for this intense couple and couple longing'.<sup>357</sup> The conclusion of the pamphlet indicates the way that Mitchison, at the start of the 1930s, had adopted a largely uncomplicated acceptance of Heard's ideas on sexuality. In the next section I will develop this claim by considering the enthusiastic fictionalisation of his ideas that Mitchison pursued, in her contemporaneous novel writing.

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<sup>355</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *Comments on Birth Control* (London: Faber, 1930), pp. 5, 22.

<sup>356</sup> *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-West Melanesia* (1929). Malinowski's discussion in this work about sexual expression among the young, was drawn on by Huxley in his depiction of 'erotic games' of the children in *Brave New World* (1932).

<sup>357</sup> Mitchison, *Comments*, p.31.

## Making peace in the house of Marob

The contemporary political resonance of *The Corn King and Spring Queen*, in its depiction of a socialist revolt in Sparta, has been widely noted by commentators.<sup>358</sup> I want to argue that in addition to the political angle, the novel can be read as a speculation on new modes of personal conduct. Advancing my contention about the productive relationship that occurred between Mitchison's social and political writing and her fiction, I will propose that the novel's celebratory presentation of tribal mores can be read as an imaginative extrapolation of her Heardian extolling of sexual liberation in her pamphlet on birth control.

At the end of the 1920s Mitchison and her husband decided to open their marriage; he formed a long-term relationship with the social reformer Margery Spring Rice, and she with the classicist H.T. Wade Gerry.<sup>359</sup> Both also had multiple other liaisons. In a letter to her disapproving Aunt Bay, Mitchison wrote earnestly of this way this lifestyle represented a serious attempt to forge a new form of social conduct: 'We have to try and make a world for ourselves, basing it as far as possible on love and awareness, mental and bodily, because it seems to us that all the repressions and formulae, all the cutting off of part of our experience [...] have not worked'. As part of her intellectual justification for this endeavour, she cited both D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley as formulators of its 'doctrine'.<sup>360</sup>

In this section I am going to probe the implications of Mitchison's citation of these figures in her defence of polyamory, through a comparative reading of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* and Huxley's novel *Brave New World* (1932). Both are novels that envisage a society whose religious practice uses a form of mystical eroticism. Although she used Huxley and Lawrence as a crutch in this letter, I will argue that it is, in fact, more instructive to think about the way her writing about sexuality differs from the work of these figures. While Lawrence and Huxley, in their different ways, were convinced about the transformative power of sexuality, Mitchison took a much less earnest view. I will develop this contention by also probing the tonal similarity between her writing and the playful erotics of Nancy Mitford's prose.

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<sup>358</sup> Elizabeth Malsen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', in *Women Writer's of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) pp. 138-155. Diana Wallace, p. 6.

<sup>359</sup> Benton, *Mitchison*, p. 49.

<sup>360</sup> Naomi Mitchison to Elizabeth Haldane (1928?) MSS 6028-40, Haldane Collection, NLS. Quoted in Benton, *Mitchison*, pp. 50-51.

Mitchison's novel centres on the relationship between the rulers of the fictional Marob society – the witch, Erif Der and the King, Tarrik – whose romantic love for one another is almost entirely untroubled by their non-monogamous lifestyle. This involves varied forms of sexual conduct: Erif has repeated casual encounters with her Marob subjects, with women and in one instance in Egypt, her own brother.<sup>361</sup> There is a distinctly untroubled approach to the active nature of Erif's desire – sex with a man she cannot see is presented as the healthy release of pent-up energy; 'she had not realised how much she had wanted a man all these weeks of summer' (337-8). Rather than a manifestation of vampish barbarian 'otherness', Erif is presented in unthreateningly childlike guise; she has a 'small face', 'grey eyes between the plaits', and hair of 'soft lightness' (119).

Heard's characterisation of orgies as the source of 'at-one-ment' and 'ecstasy' for the tribal group in the *Social Substance of Religion*, has been argued by Paul Eros to have been riffed on by Huxley in *Brave New World* – a connection that was originally drawn by Winifred Holtby in her review of the novel.<sup>362</sup> The influence is apparent in Huxley's vision of the solidarity rituals that the society undergoes to foster a mystically induced sense of connectivity. The vision is an unlovely one. The feelings of goodwill rendered by a cocktail of sex, soma and singing is undercut by the fusion of the narrator's account of the heightened emotional state of the group with the disconsolate and alienated subjectivity of Bernard. A figure continually isolated within New World society on account of his uniquely short stature, his glimmerings of group warmth are faint and stuttering and ultimately overcome by feelings of sexual repulsion. Trapped in the orgy's variant of a dull conversation at a party (cornered, he is forced to make love to a woman with eyebrows that met 'above the nose') the 'Coming, so far as he was concerned' remains 'horribly remote'.<sup>363</sup>

In Huxley sexual desire is something from which the self, most typically, needs to escape. In *Eyeless in Gaza* Beavis's epiphany fuses vegetarianism with celibacy; the sexually explicit conversations and casual relations between the characters in the first section of the novel are not a form of emancipatory assertion, but a boring, repetitive manifestation of the way they do not have the ability to make self-authored choices. Sexual activity is the act of the self bound by

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<sup>361</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010), p. 319. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>362</sup> Heard, *Social Substance*, p. 114. Winifred Holtby, 'The Right to Be Unhappy', review of *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *Time and Tide* (6 February 1932) p. 150. See Eros, *Most Penetrating*, pp. 207-10 for an analysis of the relationship between Heard's religious orgies and the solidarity service in *Brave New World*.

<sup>363</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 80, 82. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

demands of the body, it is only when the individual can say no to those urges that they are free.<sup>364</sup>

Mitchison presents the total inverse of this position. It was through the giving way to sexual desire that an emancipatory gesture of self-authorship could be made; a gesture that also functions as a harmonising and connecting agent for the group. Just as Lenina Crowe's multiple lovers signals her social respectability, for Mitchison the good girl is the promiscuous one. When Erif reflects on whether to have sex with one of the inhabitants of the tribal group over which she rules she muses, in joyful refrain, on the way the act would facilitate the community's prosperity:

Surely she was making it easier for the rain and the warmth to come, for the corn to spring, for beasts and women to breed! Surely she was making peace in the household of Marob! (238).

When Tarrik has a child with the woman, Linit, with whom he forms a relationship in Erif's absence, Erif celebrates the event as one that extends the loving unit of which she is part (520).

I think that in addition to Healdian spirituality, the description of the New World's orgiastic rites has an intertextual relationship with Mitchison's novel. Huxley, and his brother, Julian, had been close family friends of the Haldane's and known Mitchison since she was a child. Relations between them broke down dramatically following the death of her son Geoff from meningitis in 1927; although Huxley wrote a warm letter to her expressing his sympathy, he went on to include an unsympathetic portrayal of the event in his novel *Point Counter Point* (1928).<sup>365</sup> But we find evidence of a resumption of correspondence between them from the early 1930s, even if undertaken on more formal terms.<sup>366</sup>

Mitchison's novel foreshadows the duty to promiscuity that is the fulcrum of New World society. This principle is underlined most starkly in Mitchison's imaginings of the religious life of the tribe which centre upon the fertility rites of the 'Plowing Eve', a ritual performed by the Spring Queen and the Corn King to ensure the agricultural well-being of the community for the year ahead. Part of the way in which the inhabitants share in the psychic energy it releases is

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<sup>364</sup> Later, in his final novel *Island* (1962), Huxley would come round to a more affirmative model of spiritualised sexuality as, 'the yoga of love', but in the 1930s bodily desire was treated by him with resolute disdain.

<sup>365</sup> Aldous Huxley to Mitchison (23 August 1927), Acc. 7345, NLS.

<sup>366</sup> See. Aldous Huxley to Mitchison (13 August 1933), in *The Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. by Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 372.

through the sexual coupling of the members of Marob society with one another. Bearing a close similarity to the description found in Heard's *Social Substance of Religion*, the purpose of the event is as an act of community solidarity; the women 'stayed for the men to be able to work their own and only magic and help the Corn King to help the year' (216).

As in Huxley's ceremony, orgiastic coupling is heightened by dance, song and the use of intoxicants; but unlike his account, the narrator's survey of the sense of wellbeing is untroubled by the unhappy lone voice. There is little attempt on Mitchison's part to try and distinguish among the different subjectivities in the group, all, it is implied, share successfully in the psychic heightening of the event. Her description of the sexual coupling of the King and Queen nods towards her 'prophet' Lawrence, in the lyricism of the vocabulary that renders the lovemaking. The description of how 'his body curved and shot down towards her' and 'the seizing in ultimate necessity on woman's flesh', draws on his distinct turn of phrase (213, 214).

Although Huxley, as we have seen, dismissed Murry's oedipal critique of Lawrentian sexuality in *Son of Woman*, in *Brave New World* he satirised Lawrence in similar terms, through the character of John the Savage. The Savage has an intense devotion to his mother, Linda, which leads him to bring about her death in similar fashion to Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Rather than witness the continued suffering of their beloved parent, both administer pain relief to hasten her death. The earnestness of Lawrentian sexuality is also mocked through the figure of the Savage, who falls in love with a girl from the New World, also well-versed in the duty to promiscuity that is promulgated by her own society. But he is so convinced by the seriousness of his passion that he is unable to act on his desire, despite her own strenuous efforts at his seduction. There is a similarly Lawrentian hue in Huxley's emphasis on the bodily response to the Solidarity ritual:

A sensation of warmth radiated thrillingly out from the solar plexus to every extremity of the bodies of those who listened; tears came to their eyes; their hearts, their bowels seemed to move within them, as though with an independent life (84).

The bathetic descent to the independent life of their bowel movement is also rearticulated in description of the visceral reaction music that is heard, not with the mind, but the 'midriff' and 'yearning bowels of compassion' (84).<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> A similar image was used by Auden in the final stanza of his poem 'A Communist to Others' (1932) which speaks of 'Brothers for whom our bowels yearn' who are 'held in unseen connection' by 'Love outside our election'. Auden's biographer, Edward Mendelson, argues that this image was also drawn from Heard's *Social Substance of Religion*. *Early Auden, Later Auden: A Critical Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 138.



Although there is a stark contrast between Mitchison's earnest romanticism and Huxley's satiric disdain in this instance, I want to contend that thinking about the wider legacy of Lawrence helps us acquire a more nuanced understanding of their treatment of sexuality. Mitchison's novel, in its elision of sexual radicalism and lyric pastoralism, would seem to be aligned with Lawrentian visions of the rural as the locale for of self-actualisation via sexual awakening. It could also be connected to E.M. Foster's Carpenterian figuring of the 'greenwood' as the utopic site for the abandon of suburban restraint.<sup>368</sup>

Stephen Brookes has identified a florid strain in writings on sex reform which he connects to the influence of Lawrence. In an article on Dora Russell's advocacy of sexual freedom he identifies notes of embellishment in works of otherwise sociological or political argumentation, which he suggests shows the infiltration of Lawrentian stylistics. One of the examples he cites is from the pamphlet earlier addressed, *Hypatia*. Russell concludes the work flamboyantly describing men and women as 'things of fire intertwining in understandings, torrents leaping to join in a cascade of mutual ecstasy', a note similarly struck in *The Right to be Happy* where sex is described as 'the most vital [...] experience [...] which bears fruit in a union in which body and soul cry out: 'For this, for this I was born!''.<sup>369</sup> Russell's use of poetic language renders the absolute importance of sex to argue – an implication that can also be gleaned from Lawrence and Foster – that to force individuals either to forgo the experience altogether, or to refrain from engaging with the person uniquely capable of arousing such sensations would be cruelly repressive.

Huxley, for all his puritanical disdain, accepted this essential premise. To Mitchison, he wrote of his mixed feelings about Lawrence: 'A wonderful man, who would be great if he had not the streak of the fool as well as genius, uncritical Gabbler as well as intuitive seer'.<sup>370</sup> His attitude to sexuality, where Lawrence is a constant, hovering presence, bears out this duality. In *After Many a Summer* (1939) when the mistress to an ageing millionaire is seduced by the sadistic Dr Obispo, Huxley's rendering of her desire for him gestures towards Lawrence as both gabbler and seer:

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<sup>368</sup> In the epilogue to the original manuscript of E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* (published posthumously in 1971) the stockbroker, Alec, abandons his life of middle-class respectability to go and live as a woodcutter in the forest with the working-class manservant of a friend from Cambridge, with whom he has fallen in love. The ending was based on Foster's visit to Edward Carpenter's home in Millthorpe in 1913, where he lived openly with his young male lover, George Merrill. Foster was an admirer of Mitchison's work and personal friend. His letters to her expressed frequent praise of her work: see (12 Dec 1923), Acc. 6610, NLS.

<sup>369</sup> Dora Russell, *Hypatia*, p. 33 and *The Right to be Happy* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1927), p. 132. Works cited in Stephen Brooke, 'The Body and Socialism: Dora Russell in the 1920s,' *Past & Present*, 189.1 (2005), 147-177 (p. 166).

<sup>370</sup> Letter of Aldous Huxley to Mitchison (23 August 27), Acc. 7345, NLS.

Virginia had been [...] happy in limitation, not sufficiently conscious of her personal self to realize its ugliness and inadequacy or the fundamental wretchedness of the human state. And yet, when Dr Obispo had scientifically engineered her escape into an erotic epilepsy more excruciatingly intense than anything she had known before or even imagined possible, Virginia had realised that after all there was something in her existence that required alleviating and that *this headlong plunge through an intenser, utterly alien consciousness into the darkness of a total oblivion* was precisely the alleviation is required. But like other addictions [...] the addiction to pleasure tends to aggravate the condition it temporarily alleviates (my italics).<sup>371</sup>

This is Lawrence taken to a rationalist's conclusion, where the premise of the mystical transformation of the self via sexual awakening is explained in the language of addiction. Unlike for Lawrence, the fact that the sex is good, does not make it right. If anything, in the Huxleyan universe, the person who can invoke feelings of ecstasy is generally the person to avoid at all costs. His pessimism is typically explained in autobiographical terms: the result of the suicide of his brother following an unhappy affair with a servant girl and his own distress at his unrequited love for Nancy Cunard. Certainly, his novels repeatedly replay with clinical detail the bathetic tragedy of the emotions involved in those events. But I think, as well, that the political and social orientation of Huxley's imaginings are important. His wariness is the strategist's horror at the anarchic and uncontrolled; the solution is its denial unless in the context of monstrous marriage of Lawrence with Wells, in the New World's planned polygamy.

I do not think Mitchison ever came to more than a surface application of Lawrence's thought. She turned to Lawrentian vocabulary as a convenient resource for describing sex in celebratory terms, but her idea of what was at stake in an erotic encounter was fundamentally at odds with his vision. I want to now probe this difference by reading Mitchison against the grain, proposing a comparison, not with her advanced contemporaries, but the patrician insouciance of Mitford prose.

In his article 'Poor Hitler', Andrew O'Hagan discusses what he characterises as the 'posh aesthetic' of Mitford letter writing.<sup>372</sup> He identifies the way their style was typified by a rejection of the earnestness; an eschewal of 'effortfulness' in favour of the tonally girlish or childish enlivened by provocation – or what O'Hagan identifies as the 'ear for the unacceptable note'.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Summer* (London: Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 225.

<sup>372</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, 'Poor Hitler', *London Review of Books*, 29.22 (2007) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk>> [accessed 14 May 2019].

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

The unacceptable typically manifests itself in a kind of spiced up Wildean inversion; in the Mitford universe ‘a head cold is an utter tragedy and the invasion of Poland a bit of a bore’.<sup>374</sup> In Nancy Mitford’s novel *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) when the main protagonist Linda is about to embark on a long train journey alone, her cousin Fanny comforts her with the idea that perhaps she will have a companion after all as “ ‘Foreigners are greatly given, I believe, to rape’”. Linda responds to this play on the ‘unacceptable’ with sang-froid: ‘Yes, that would be nice, so long as they didn’t find my stays’ (a reference to money that she has smuggled in her underwear).<sup>375</sup> We also find this teasing inversion of values in her later *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) when Fanny’s Uncle is horrified that she has accepted an invite to a party at which he knows she will be unable to perform well socially. Comfort is at hand though, in the thought that ‘fun and games’ might be in Fanny’s reach as she is just about young enough to still attract the attentions of a paedophilic family friend (162).

Although without Mitford’s teasing sense of mischief, in Mitchison there is still a strongly playful note and the whiff of *épater le bourgeois*. When Erif Der travels to Egypt she meets:

A rather charming girl [...] suddenly fell in love with her and felt no awkwardness about demanding her satisfaction there and then. Erif protested and finally ran out of the palace, her ears tingling with everyone else’s laughter. She was annoyed with herself afterwards, thinking: why not? Why be unkind?’ (507).

This jollity pervades Mitchison’s personal reflections on her sexually experimental past. In her autobiography she recalls beating her homosexual director friend, Rudi Messel, ‘Once he asked me to tie and beat him, which I did, making fierce faces and quite enjoying it’, and her publisher’s ‘fatherly pawings’.<sup>376</sup>

Rather than identify these moments as awkward examples of dated turns of phrase, I want to argue that they are crucial to the implicit argument that lay behind Mitchison’s advocacy of sexual liberalisation. As I have discussed, in the writings of figures such as Foster, Lawrence and Russell the denial of sexual freedom is wrong because of the overwhelming quality of the passions involved. Huxley, too, belongs to this ilk to the degree to which he posits the erotic as an anarchic and uncontrollable force. But the implicit argument of much of Mitchison writings is

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love* in *The Nancy Mitford Omnibus* (London: H. Hamilton, 1963), p. 91. Future references to page numbers will occur within the text.

<sup>376</sup> Mitchison, *You May*, pp. 78-9.

that sexual prohibitions are misguided for the very opposite reason. Sex does not arouse intense feeling; it is something that it makes no sense to put any curtailment to, for the very fact of the insubstantiveness of the emotions at play. I think it was this sensibility that led her to speculate on modelling human sexuality, not so much as significant in-and-of itself, but as a force that is meaningful when harnessed to some goal beyond itself. In the next section I shall consider how Mitchison developed this idea in her exploration of the way in which the erotic life of the individual could be connected to a commitment in the socialist cause.

### **We Have Been Warned and the transgressive quest**

The connection between Mitchison's progressive ideals and her privilege was traced in early criticism of her work. One of the liveliest responses to her writing was a venomous critique of her novel, *We Have Been Warned*, by Queenie Leavis. A loosely autobiographical text, this work was based on Mitchison's involvement with socialism, of which she became a supporter in 1932.<sup>377</sup> Leavis's attack was directed at what she argued to be the superficial and performative nature of Mitchison's political commitment; that it was a socialism in which 'you may retain your leisure, servants and cocktail parties with an even enhanced complacency provided you only learn the Russian alphabet and take a trip to the USSR'.<sup>378</sup> Leavis's criticism focused particularly on the fashionable radicalism of the novel's sexual politics, which she argued, involved the lazy conflation of the progressive mores of her social set with the question of how to improve the lot of working classes (it is a utopia of 'attending a Bloomsbury studio party').<sup>379</sup> Leavis's review is cited in Valentine Cunningham's account of the way that the novel is representative of the association between sexual and political liberation within the thirties left, an imbrication that he treats in a similarly derisory vein.

But in more recent years there has been a sea change of approach – one recurrent strategy in attempts to recuperate Mitchison's importance involves emphasising her sexual radicalism. Mitchison's biographer, Jill Benton, commenting on the refusal for the novel's publication by

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<sup>377</sup> At the end of the 1920s Mitchison and her husband had moved into the orbit of the Labour writers G.D.H. Cole and Margaret Cole, under whose patronage Dick became the Labour candidate for King's Norton in 1931 and in 1935. Benton, *Mitchison*, pp. 79-80, 85.

<sup>378</sup> Queenie Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', in *Q.D. Leavis, Collected Essays: The Novel of Religious Controversy*, ed. G. Singh, 3 vols (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981-1989), III (1989), pp. 318-336 (p. 318) (first publ. *Scrutiny*, 4.3 (1935), 112-32).

<sup>379</sup> Leavis, 'Lady Novelists', pp. 318-336 (p. 322).

Victor Gollancz, argues that her ideas were simply too progressive for the male dominated world of the interwar left: 'In no quarter of Labourite socialism were men accepting of Naomi's socialist-feminist tenet that women had a right to possess their own bodies, and to share their bodies with whoever and as many as they might choose or, for that matter, not share with anyone'.<sup>380</sup> A similar note is struck by Nick Hubble who, in an article on Mitchison's novel *Travel Light* (1952), argues that she tried to write 'fiction that supported the expression of an unconstrained female agency'.<sup>381</sup> Hubble, as with Benton, also suggests that the hostile reception of *We Have Been Warned*, stemmed from the way it set about 'flagrantly transgressing the norms of the day'.<sup>382</sup>

These readings, I will argue, ignore the complexity of Mitchison's treatment of the erotic domain. A writer of female emancipation she may have been, of unconstrained agency she was not. The novel advances the notion of altruistic sexuality, in which the central female protagonist is liberated from the constraints of a monogamous marriage to meet with a new obligation to promiscuity, understood by her as a means of assisting the establishment of a socialist collective. The sex is bad, the values uncomfortable, but rather than sound a Cunningham-esque sneer, I will argue that there is an intentional awkwardness to the ethics she inflicts on her middle-class protagonist. Instead of a glib musing on the way in which fashionable bohemian mores are in some way a revolutionary act, I will argue that it provides a subtle reflection on the difficulty of constructing new ways of living within the old order.<sup>383</sup>

Again, I want to use Lawrence as a way of thinking about what was at stake in Mitchison's project. Lawrence retained an importance within the 1930s leftist imagination, for the way that his writings stressed the need for rupture and revolution. In 1935 Stephen Spender reflected in (Murry-esque terms) that 'his writing was a constant search for a new life and a new form of life in which civilisation might survive or be re-created'.<sup>384</sup> In Cecil Day-Lewis's 'Letter to a Young Revolutionary,' he cites Lawrence to claim the metaphysical rebellion he deemed necessary to

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<sup>380</sup> Benton, *Mitchison*, p. 95.

<sup>381</sup> Nick Hubble, "'The Kind of Woman Who Talked to Basilisks,'" *Travelling Light through Naomi Mitchison's Landscape of the Imaginary*, *The Luminary*, 7 (2016) 64-74, (p. 64).

<sup>382</sup> Nick Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 18.

<sup>383</sup> Widely derided on publication, the work has been the subject of far less scholarly attention than her much feted *Corn King and Spring Queen*. Hubble's recent close reading of the novel provides a useful and illuminating contribution to Mitchison studies. *The Proletarian Answer*, pp. 9-21. Whereas Hubble focuses on the form of the novel, the primary grounds for which I undertake a recuperative reading of the text is for its contribution to her ideas, in the unacknowledged nuance of its exploration of relationship between the personal and the political.

<sup>384</sup> Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 182.

commit to the communist cause – ‘Be still in your own soul, as Lawrence would say: do you feel new life springing there?’.<sup>385</sup> But the problem was the individualistic focus of this rebellion, with Lawrence’s eschewal of the political, something that Spender highlighted in his review of *Pheonix*. While not rejecting the appeal of the Lawrentian revolt, he argued that it was necessary to first strive for structural change.<sup>386</sup>

Mitchison’s novel was written at a transitional moment, when her own focus on the revolution within the self that was represented by her association with Heard started to wane, and she too was placing greater emphasis on change in structural terms.<sup>387</sup> But the novel still emphasises the importance of the personal to the political, although treating their relationship with ambiguity. In the *Destructive Element* Spender claimed that the Marxist attempts ‘to accomplish the sacrifice of individualist traits, to achieve the fulfilment of a more united and wider humanity, by a historic act of the will which makes him reach forward and forcibly impose on the present the visualised, completed social system of the future’.<sup>388</sup> It is in its exploration of negotiating the personal according to a teleological premise, that the novel is most interesting; ultimately problematising the idea that it is possible for the individual to forge a new way of living before the system itself has altered.

In his chapter ‘Notes from the Underground’ Valentine Cunningham explores the performative dimension of the bourgeois literati’s attempt to connect with the working classes, setting out the pervasiveness of motifs of disguise. The examples that he cites are literal in form: changes to accent, clothes, nomenclature, or to appearance – he cites Christopher Isherwood’s attempt to eat lots of sweets to disguise his ‘good bourgeois teeth’.<sup>389</sup> Mitchison had herself experimented with this form of belonging: with Rudi Messel she worked on a socialist propaganda film about

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<sup>385</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis, ‘Letter to a Young Revolutionary’, in *New Country*, ed. by Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), p. 42.

<sup>386</sup> His was a ‘revolution of the individual in himself [...] Here again, we can hardly accept his teaching, even though we recognize the truth of his vision. Until their material conditions are altered the vast majority of people are prevented by upbringing, environment, lack of opportunity and a hundred other things from living the experimental life which was possible for Lawrence’, Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics and People* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 27. In *Hope for Poetry* Cecil Day-Lewis also addressed the problem of the ‘individualism’ of Lawrence. While admitting his appeal, he writes of the perceived failure of Lawrence to achieve some practical social good, the ‘post-war poet [...] has watched him driven from continent to continent, driven ill and mad, a failure unable to recreate a satisfactory social group from the nucleus of his own individuality’. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1944), p. 47.

<sup>387</sup> See Mitchison, *You Have Been*, pp. 114–6, for the cooling of their friendship.

<sup>388</sup> Spender, p. 165.

<sup>389</sup> Cunningham, p. 254.

the means test, blacking out one of her teeth and dressing up in ragged clothing to play the poverty-stricken wife of an injured labourer.<sup>390</sup>

But I want to think about a subtler form of disguise that Mitchson developed in the novel: the dissembling to the self through the pretence of desire. In the early 1930s, in correspondence with John Pilley, Naomi evolved an ethic of sexual altruism that led her to become intimate with a sexually inexperienced young communist on her trip to Russia. She wrote to Pilley her mixed emotions about the experience:

John, I am really rather frightened; you have landed me with being a priestess, when my individual self wants to be your lover and nothing else. I am very inexperienced and I am so afraid of doing something which will leave a bad memory for him (and, for that matter, for me).<sup>391</sup>

A fictionalised version of this encounter forms the basis for the central episode of the novel when Dione departs for Russia in the company of a young communist whom she helps to escape Britain, after he has murdered a newspaper proprietor. On the boat she sets about confusedly seducing him.

One of the dismissive lines taken by Cunningham towards the socialism of figures like Auden and Stephen Spender is that it involved a sentimentalisation of their desire for working class men; their writing about the proletariat ‘vitiating by the bourgeois bugger’s specialist regard’.<sup>392</sup> Instead rejecting this statement, Glyn Salton-Cox sets about, as he terms, its ‘re-valorisation’, tracing the lively and mutually constitutive relationship between queer desire and communism.<sup>393</sup> His account presents communist engagement as a liberatory space for queer love in the early 1930s; an arcadia lost towards the end of the decade with the increasing association, among the left, of homosexuality with fascism.

Although building on his account of the imbrication between sexual radicalism and left-wing politics, I want to temper its heroicising suggestion about the way ‘erotic love could emerge from a shared relation to a radical collectivity’.<sup>394</sup> Re-turning to earlier critiques of the decade, we can find articulations of a different relationship between desire and activism – one in which a sexuality determined by politics is a more stuttering affair. Something of this strain, albeit

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<sup>390</sup> Benton, *Mitchison*, p. 88.

<sup>391</sup> Calder, p. 117.

<sup>392</sup> Cunningham, p. 150.

<sup>393</sup> Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 17.

<sup>394</sup> Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism*, p. 106.

idealised, was pointed to by Kermode, in his examination of the way in which the ‘transgressive quest’ of the bourgeois writer to find ‘some kind of genuine meeting with the worker [...] the unknown, the wholly other’ often landed upon romantic love as the agent of this leap. Kermode addresses the way in which the romantic attitude towards to the idea of the worker functioned as the facilitator for sexual desire: ‘despite any appearance to the contrary’ they were seen as ‘intrinsically and tragically beautiful’.<sup>395</sup>

Kermode notes this strain in Edward Upward’s *Spiral Ascent* (1962-77) which describes the love affair between an upper-class young man who has recently converted to communism and a working class and plain schoolteacher. He is so repulsed by her that he calls out ‘Oh Elsie, you are so ugly!’, however, recognising that this sentiment is no more than a ‘bourgeois hankering after romantic beauty’, he marries her out of commitment to the party.<sup>396</sup> But by virtue of her role as an agent of class solidarity she is ultimately rendered a desirable being in her own right.

Mitchison’s novel, however, dramatizes the failure of socialist commitment to redeem the desired object of desire. Campaigning with her husband Tom, who is standing as a socialist election candidate, Dione is pervaded by a sense of apartness from the constituents. The sentiment takes on a visceral hue in her Upwardesque reflection: ‘they were ugly; they didn’t know they were ugly; they moved badly [...] they would be horrible to be made love to by’.<sup>397</sup> By means of her affair with the young communist Donald, Dione seeks to correct the bourgeois niceties of her sexuality. At first, she takes the active role in his seduction, embarrassing him by and walking past him in a bathing dress and asking whether he is a virgin (226-30).

But when the two become intimate the sense of Dione’s control is more uncertain. This episode, as well as a later scene when Dione is raped by a communist, problematises celebrating Mitchison, without qualification, as a writer of female sexual freedom.<sup>398</sup> Although Dione chooses to become sexually involved with Donald, she also feels a sense of constraint. This

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<sup>395</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘On the Frontier’ in *History and Value: The Clarendon and the Northcliffe Lectures 1987* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 28.

<sup>396</sup> Edward Upward, *In the Thirties* in *The Spiral Ascent*, 3 vols (London: Quartet Books, 1978-9), I (1978), p. 214.

<sup>397</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (London: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), p. 54. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>398</sup> Later in the narrative Dione is raped in the boarding house of the Welsh communist Idris. Again, the encounter is rationalised in political terms – Dione excuses his actions on the basis that it is in some way a reparative act for the oppression of his social class: ‘No wonder Idris Pritchard was like he had shown himself to be. No wonder. Poor Idris. Poor people in this house. In other houses like it. Oh, poor dears, poor dears, how could one blame them for anything!’. She returns to Idris in his room explaining her conclusions: “‘Idris,” she said, “you – behaved very badly, but – living as you do, you’ve got to. I see that. It’s society’s fault. It’s the people who made you live with that bathroom.” He looked puzzled. “The people who oppress [...] it’s them I blame”” (415-16).



emotion does not stem from the actions of Donald, rather the way she feels pressured into the encounter by her own value system. The sense in which Dione is under the compulsion of her active choice can be linked to Judith Butler's discussion of the ambiguity of emotions that are often involved in consent. In a psychoanalytically informed discussion, she considers the way in which agreement to sexual contact, rather than necessarily an 'active and clear-headed' decision can be more of an exploration, a way of trying out new experiences and roles.<sup>399</sup> Consenting to sex can sometimes 'articulate a fantasy of being one *who can* agree to such things, of being more open or capacious than one is [...] sometimes in saying "yes" we seek to overcome a sense of limit in ourselves that we simply wish were not there'.<sup>400</sup>

The encounter between the pair is a subtle exploration of performative desire; of the attempt to enact a form of sexuality dictated by the wish to stake a claim for a political identity. When Dione and Donald begin to be sexually intimate with one another, Dione attempts to obfuscate the question of personal desire. Forcing herself to kiss Donald passionately, she attempts to frame the issue of her pleasure as unimportant: 'Did she like it or didn't she? Very probably she did. Anyway, who cares'. (252). This line is continued in conversation with Donald where she tries to rationalise her own enjoyment away: 'You know I like you, Donald, I respect you... I think you have power and you'll use it well. That's what matters, isn't it, not one's silly personal desires?' (251).

When they begin to be physically intimate Dione reflects: 'now they were pushed off, in the current, there was no need for her to do more than be very kind and very certain. If she could be', then correcting this note of hesitancy with the assertion 'A Socialist woman *must* be' (238, italics my own). When Donald tells her he loves her, she corrects his declaration, counselling him, 'You mustn't say I love you, you mustn't get tangled with me [...] We are both of us Socialists, we love all mankind, and so we love one another' (239).

After having read a draft of the novel the critic David Garnett wrote a letter to Mitchison criticising her focus on Dione's intellectualisation of her affairs rather than exploring her sense of passion.<sup>401</sup> Garnett's response represents an inattention to Mitchison's intent to present passionless passion, of desire that runs counter to the physical act. This is sex in which eroticism is absent, that only occurs by virtue of its intellectualisation. What is interesting and unnerving is that Mitchison does not simply resort to vagueness, a general implication that it is probably all

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<sup>399</sup> Judith Butler, 'Sexual Consent: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law', *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 21.2 (2011), 405-429 (p. 45).

<sup>400</sup> Judith Butler, 'Sexual Consent', 405-429 (p. 48).

<sup>401</sup> Benton, *Mitchison*, p.94.

justified in the socialist cause; but includes a distinctly troubled note. While Dione may attempt to obfuscate the question of her enjoyment, the narrative frequently implies her actual distress. When they first embrace the only physical sensation that she is aware of is the pain of being squashed against the metal of the boat. Similarly, when he begins to kiss her, although this is an encounter that she has initiated, it is Donald who is described in predatory guise, he is ‘hungry,’ ‘starved’ while ‘bones of his face hurt her, pressing against her’ (240).

Dione’s husband Tom seems to fare better at his own attempt at non-monogamy, starting an affair with one of the beautiful young Russian women with whom the couple find the country teeming. But his emotional response to the end of the affair shows that he, like Dione, has also not developed a properly socialist form of sexuality. The Russian woman, Oksana, can treat Tom with total lack of possessiveness – being kind to Dione and untroubled that the affair will end when he returns to England. But Tom is overcome by acquisitive distress, desolate at the thought that he will not be able to see her again.

In a contemporaneous work tracing the history of the home, Mitchison argued that the idea of intimate relationships in the USSR had changed because of the way in which the society fostered a primary sense of devotion to the group – ‘the factory, the learned Institute, the Collective’ – rather than to the claims of the home.<sup>402</sup> The novel also reflects on the way in which material conditions shape emotional responses. When Dione reports on the death of a working-class acquaintance and Tom asks whether her husband is upset Dione responds: ‘I don’t know. They’re all so matter of fact. They make me feel as if I was another race, full of elaborate hot-house, high-brow feelings. Are we as bad as that?’ Tom responds with a determined lecture on the way in which strong emotional attachments are no more than an indulgence enabled by material wealth:

The Two Worlds. People like you have bothered about that for the last hundred years. Yes, a lot of our fine feelings are just a very unimportant by-product of too much money. That’s why I can’t stand all these novels and poems about them (117).

The novel adheres to Tom’s strictures in the barren simplicity of its rendering of the emotional exchanges on display in the USSR. Tired of Dione’s hesitancy Donald finally loses his virginity to a young soviet woman, Marfa. Marfa displays none of Dione’s irresolution; when Donald explains to her that he is still a virgin her response is to laugh before declaring ‘I teach you. Then – you teach Nina’. Her friend Nina approaches the situation with an equal degree of pragmatism:

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<sup>402</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *The Home and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane, 1934), p. 117.

‘She translated to the other who laughed too. “Nina, she say, she comosol, she like sleep first time with Scottish Party comrade. But – I show you first”’ (274).

Soviet sexuality represents one of the more problematic arenas of the novel, it was Mitchison’s writing in these passages that attracted the particularly snide asides of Leavis and Cunningham. There is an inescapable ridiculousness to the scenario, but the difficulty stems from the fact that it is Mitchison’s attempt to write about a sexuality that stems from an emotional culture that does not exist; it is an attempt to imagine the form of eroticism that might belong to a radically different political dispensation.

The novel is dominated by a proleptic tenor in which the quotidian is continually unsettled by the hints that revolution is at hand, the everyday is repeatedly ruptured by the motifs of violence. The homely safety of Dione’s Oxford dwelling – calmly populated by naughty children, tea with strawberries and cream and ‘roses at their best’ (196) – is punctured by the arrival of Donald with the announcement that he is wanted for murder. Donald is aware of the incongruity of his presence, exclaiming, after having been offered some of the family’s food: ‘I’ve killed a man and you give me strawberries and cream’ (209). Dione also reflects on the destabilising effect of violence within a quotidian space; the sight of a man being physically harmed by the police prompts her to exclaim on the oddity of ‘being alone in the middle of London – yes, there was the Marble Arch! – with a wounded man’ (454). These proleptic hints culminate in the final three chapters that presents alternative visions of the future, the desired socialist election victory that is dispelled by the image of a successful fascist uprising.

Even more striking than Leavis’s objection to the novel was the introduction to its 2012 reissue, which opens with an introduction from Isobel Murray in which she labels the work a ‘disaster’ for her literary reputation.<sup>403</sup> Murray’s criticism centres primarily on the uncomfortable alliance of the work’s social realism with its elements of magic. These recur throughout the text: Dione’s ancestor is a witch, Green Jean, who haunts her in the present day. Policemen in Oxford transform into an elephant, Pheobe is chased through her home in the South of England by two Highland ghosts, who also appear to Dione at a party ‘cleverly disguised as moderns’ (205, 133).

While Mitchison’s scientised mysticism has been the focus on this chapter, there was another important aspect of her spirituality that was represented by her life-long interest in folklore and

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<sup>403</sup> Isobel Murry, ‘Introduction’, in *We Have Been Warned* by Naomi Mitchison (London: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), v.

enchantment. Its importance to her as a world-view was strikingly reflected on by Stapledon in a letter to her:

The 'modern spirit' 'has to be supplemented by something else, perennial, not a new discovery. The sense of lack in it drove you to magic, Gerald to yoga, others to fascism, others to emotional communism, – and you too, because all this longing not to be 'separate' is a weakness.<sup>404</sup>

While magical tropes pervade her output, it is questionable whether the domain was seen by her in such earnest terms as Stapledon, here, suggests. Her more sceptical account of visiting a séance is, I think, a better representative of the tenor of her engagement. Although impressed by the strangeness of events on display she concluded with the cautious refrain: 'I simply don't know what it was if it wasn't fraud; I've never quite disbelieved in magic, but I can't swallow spirits somehow'.<sup>405</sup> Her magical engagement is more suggestive of the 'not-quite-disbeliever', veering between playful self-posturing – her home in Carradale featured a painting of her in the guise of Circe, while in personal correspondence she often compared herself to a witch – and anthropological enquiry.<sup>406</sup> Her source material for the magical practices within her novels were generally taken from anthropological histories – works such as *The Golden Bough* (1906-15), *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) and *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) – all texts that were in wide circulation within literary circles.

This sense of distance manifests itself, I think, in the way that in the novel, rather than structuring a comprehensive framework in which the everyday is governed by magical laws, the supernatural instead fringes the quotidian. The characters might meet ghosts and see the odd magical portent, but they have minimal impact on the events. It is this lack of integration that Murray finds so problematic.<sup>407</sup> Although they are not closely integrated within narrative, I think they have a more important effect than Murray identifies. They can be seen as are a playful variant of the of the metaphysical symbolism of thirties writing; a capricious futurity mediated by witches, sprites and ghouls in contrast to the divine certainty of Auden's purging flood. The flood as the symbol for revolution was also used by Day-Lewis in his political parable from 1936, *Noah and the Waters*. Hynes comments on its lack of subtlety, the way it symbolises a pre-

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<sup>404</sup> Olaf Stapledon to Naomi Mitchison (12 December 1935) Acc.7644, NLS.

<sup>405</sup> Naomi Mitchison to Stella Benson (15 November, no year) Acc. 7644, NLS.

<sup>406</sup> Marina Warner, 'Introduction', in *The Fourth Pig* by Naomi Mitchison, in the Oddly Modern Fairy Tales Series (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 11.

<sup>407</sup> Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', xv.

determined commitment: ‘In the end, Noah accepts the Flood. But then, we knew all along that he would – how could he not?’<sup>408</sup>

The magical flourishes of Mitchison’s novel sets up less certain refrain. At the beginning of the narrative, when Dione speculates with glib enthusiasm on the swift and easy coming of revolution, Tom chides her for her magical thinking:

“You’re difficulty,” he said, “is that you talk about the revolution as if it were some nice, magic hey-presto. Press the button and a new England comes out of the hat, complete with nationalised industries, the classless society, bankers and bricklayers playing ring-a-ring-of-roses round the may-pole on May Day” (144).

The actual reality, he claims, would be a tedious and drawn-out affair. Yet the novel is itself guilty of replicating Dione’s magical notion of change, with the two images of political transformation it offers infused by motifs of enchantment. When Dione returns home from the USSR she muses on its sense of unreality: while a ‘good country’ it is a ‘fairylad’ that entices its travellers with ‘fairy fruit’ (312). At the end of the novel, it is Green Jean who offers Dione the image of Britain transformed by revolution: by looking through a magical white stone with a hole at its centre a future socialist Britain is conjured. However, the image quickly fades, and Dione returns to the capitalist present of the comfort of her Highland estate.

Mitchison had greater qualms about socialism than the often giddily optimistic tenor of the novel would suggest. She had mixed emotions over the way of life she saw on display in Russia and her decision to convert to the cause was made after some delay. Benton records her wavering commitment, quoting a further letter that Mitchison wrote to Pilley: ‘I do believe that in time capitalism will give way to socialism of some kind, yet it may not be a kind that we would care for or recognise’.<sup>409</sup> The tense of the novel, rather than future, is optative; presenting the ‘what-might-be’, rather than the ‘what-will’. The deflation of the heroine’s attempt to construct a lifestyle supportive of the socialist cause can be connected to the uncertainty of the teleological framework in which she operates. Whereas Mitchison had more happily yoked sexual liberation to the Heardiian eschaton, the marriage of sexuality to a socialist future is more awkward. Her vision also reflects a subtle troubling of her own idealism regarding sexual progressivism; it is attentive to the way, even if the individual’s lifestyle experiment might work to towards the emancipation of the group, the immediate result is as likely to be the loss of autonomy rather than liberatory gain. As in the writing of Murry, and particularly Huxley, Mitchison took an

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<sup>408</sup> Hynes, p. 201.

<sup>409</sup> Benton, *Mitchison*, p. 85.

instrumentalist approach to the mystical. Rather than a Woolfian aesthetic appreciation of the transcendent, her vision is rather of a spirituality in the service of the Comintern. But she shares the note of hesitancy that I found in my last chapter, the sense that even if the individual has some form of mystic depths through which the world has the potential to be remade, the attempt at its actualisation is far from a straightforward pathway.

## Ithell Colquhoun: Surrealism and the Hermetic Pastoral

### Introduction

In their ambition to delve outside the region of daily, quotidian being and find the ‘forbidden world of sudden parallels, of petrifying coincidence [...] of lightning flashes that make one see, but really see’ the surrealists found the occult a productive domain.<sup>410</sup> From the late 1930s there was an increasingly close engagement with the esoteric, an orientation that found post-war expression in the exhibition ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947’ at the Galerie Maeght, an event which foregrounded alchemical and tarot symbolism.<sup>411</sup> In the work of Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) we find an artist whose interest in surrealism was intricately wedded to her hermetic pursuits. In the 1940s she created a series of potent and haunting paintings that used automatic technique as a way of responding to magical, occultic and folkloric themes and motifs. The year 1947 also saw an esoterically infused surrealism on display in a British setting, through an exhibition of Colquhoun’s work at the Mayor Gallery in London.

In many ways, Colquhoun represents an outlier among my case studies. As a practising occultist she is theologically distinct. While the other figures this project considers are symptomatic of a ‘spiritual, but not religious’ ilk, Colquhoun had a more clearly defined belief system. Although her approach was syncretic, she turned to occult systems rather than developing a more personalised forms of spirituality that the rest of this project has traced.<sup>412</sup> The work that I consider most closely was produced by Colquhoun at a later date than has been the focus of my earlier chapters. While I will examine the way her engagement with the surrealist movement began in the 1930s, my interest is primarily on the way it fostered her more refined oeuvre of the 1940s. Of my group, she is the only painter. I have explored literary renderings of spiritually

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<sup>410</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove, 1960), p. 19.

<sup>411</sup> The stairs in the middle of the exhibition were all assigned a card of the Tarot’s Major Arcana. One of the rooms was a ‘Rain Room’ symbolising purification and rebirth while another was devoted to the idea of esoteric initiation. See Tessel Baduin, ‘The Occultation of Surrealism in 1947’, Conference paper, ESSWE 3: *Lux in Tenebris* (6-9 July 2011).

<sup>412</sup> In twentieth and twenty-first century academic scholarship occultism typically refers to esoteric currents that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; notably Theosophy, spiritualism and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. I will use the terms occult and esoteric interchangeably. In its strictest sense hermeticism refers to the system based on the teaching of the legendary Hellenic figure of Hermes Trismegistus, however it can be used more loosely to designate the subjects associated with Hermes within esoteric practice such as alchemy, astrology and magic. It is in the latter sense that I shall use the term in this chapter.

heightened states and, in the case of Woolf, considered a mode of representation that had an intensely visual component. But in this chapter, I turn to the canvas as a way of developing my claim about the systemic role of the spiritual within cultural practice.

Colquhoun is crucial to my argument about the way that spirituality provides a lens through which to uncover an affirmative quality within the practice of figures more commonly approached in terms of the stylistics of fragmentation and disruption. I will explore the way in which Colquhoun initially toyed with a mode of surrealism that dealt with the aesthetics of erotic subversion, but I will argue that the integration of her esoteric interests into her artwork caused her to develop a more earnest style that sought – counter-intuitively – not to puncture or transgress, but to invoke a sense of harmony and completeness. In my chapters on Murry and Woolf I examined the way in which they turned to art in place of traditional forms of the sacred. In Colquhoun I note a not dissimilar tendency, but consider what happens to the meaning and purpose of the art when it is integrated, not within a spiritual appreciation of life, but magical belief. In Colquhoun's work in the 1940s I find an even more exalted view of the art object as something not simply endowed with a spiritual hue, but with its own magical agency.

My turn to Colquhoun is also driven by the recuperative drive of this project, the way I want to use spirituality as a lens through which to draw attention to work that that I think has been marginalised or misunderstood. Despite the distinctiveness and originality of her output, historically she has attracted little critical attention. For this reason, my chapter has made extensive use of her archive, held at the Tate Gallery. Despite the sophistication of her writings on her occult and surrealist practice, she published few of these theoretical texts. Records of some of her key images, particularly those attached to her esoteric pursuits, only exist in her archive.

Part of the reason for the side-lining of Colquhoun was the fractious and short-lived nature of her official affiliation to the surrealist movement. Drawn to surrealism following her attendance at the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936, she had a joint exhibition with one of Britain's leading surrealist practitioners, Roland Penrose, in 1937, and contributed texts to the movement's main periodical, the *London Bulletin*. However, she suffered from the Belgian artist, E.L.T. Mesens's, attempt in 1939, to formalise a British surrealist group. Largely due to her occult affiliation, she was unable to accept the terms of membership that he proposed as he demanded that affiliates belonged to no separate organisations.<sup>413</sup> Her relationship with the

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<sup>413</sup> Paul Ray, *The Surrealist Movement in England* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1971), p. 228. Although Ray mentions Colquhoun's exhibitions and associates, he gives scant attention to her work. His



British movement further worsened in the 1940s when her then husband, Toni del Renzio, attempted to form a surrealist group in competition with Mesens's coterie.<sup>414</sup>

The recuperation of Colquhoun has largely come at the hands of feminist art historians, as part of a drive foreground the practice of women associated with movement. She was included in the landmark survey of women surrealist artists published by Witney Chadwick in 1985 and was the subject of an article on female surrealists by Dawn Ades, also in that decade.<sup>415</sup> In more recent years, Victoria Ferentinou has repeatedly published on her work, and 2020 also saw the publication of a biography of her by Amy Hale.<sup>416</sup>

Within this body of scholarship Colquhoun is typically positioned alongside other female surrealist practitioners interested in the esoteric, notably Leonor Fini, Remedios Varo and, particularly, Leonora Carrington.<sup>417</sup> In their work, I argue, we find a performance-orientated esotericism, with the occult and hermetic co-opted to construct and display identities that are deviant and other. In the first section I will look at the way in which Colquhoun dallied with the performative in her exhibition strategy with Penrose, in which she asserts an alliance between her creative process and sense of otherness. But the free-spirited, pastorally attuned, femmenfantesque guise she displays already suggests a shying away from the ironic, subversionary

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article on the surrealist novel suggests that he did not view it that seriously. His comment on her work *The Goose of Hermogenes* (1961) is magisterially dismissive, labelling it as a novel 'only by courtesy'. 'Some Notes on Surrealism in the Novel, *Romance Notes*, 7.1 (1965), 1-4 (p. 2). In Michael Remy's history of the surrealist movement in Britain Colquhoun work receives critical attention, although his treatment of her is comparatively brief: *Surrealism in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

<sup>414</sup> Ray, *The Surrealist Movement*, pp. 233-248.

<sup>415</sup> Witney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) and Dawn Ades, 'Notes on Two Surrealist Painters: Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun', *Oxford Art Journal*, 3.1 (1980) 36-42.

<sup>416</sup> Victoria Ferentinou has developed the understanding of the occult context of her work: 'Theosophy, Women Artists and Modernism: the Case of Ithell Colquhoun' in *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, ed. by Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015) and 'The Iconography of Coniunctio Oppositorum: Visual and Verbal Dialogues in Ithell Colquhoun's Oeuvre', in *Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, ed. by Peter Forshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2017) pp. 363-369. She links her occultism particularly with gender concerns in: 'Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism', *Aries*, 13.1 (2013), 103-130 and 'The Quest for the Goddess: Matriarchy, Surrealism and Gender Politics in the Work of Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington', in *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous*, ed. by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani (London/New York: Routledge, 2018). See also Amy Hale's recently published biography: *Ithell Colquhoun: Genius of Fern Loved Gully* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2020).

<sup>417</sup> In Chadwick's chapter on hermeticism these three figures form the principal players. Ferentinou, in particular, has built on her approach, having written extensively on the comparison between Colquhoun's and Carrington's work.

tactics that we find, for example, in Fini and Carrington's oeuvre. Although the performative is an aspect of Colquhoun's surrealism that is important to address, as her later work was very much indebted to her sense of self as different and unique, this was also not a subject that she pursued in painterly terms. She never turned to the self-portraiture that is so pervasive in the work of these figures.

In fact, what I think is most productive about this comparison, is its use in thinking about the distinctiveness of Colquhoun's painterly occultism. In the work of Fini, Varo and Carrington we tend to find an engagement with the esoteric that has a strongly ludic element. I will focus particularly on the way in which Colquhoun's outlook compares with that of Carrington, arguing that whereas Carrington's mode of hermetic engagement hovers between genuine fascination and ironic deflation, in Colquhoun we find something much more earnest in tenor. Unlike Carrington, rather than co-opting the occult into the poetics of transgression, it has a serious and weighty resonance within Colquhoun's work, manifesting the sincerity of deeply held belief. For her, the hermetic was not to be deployed in a metaphoric manner; a poetic way of modelling an essentially material transformation of being, but a device by which spiritual alteration to the self could actually be brought about.

In the recent essay collection from 2017, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*, the editors argue that the appeal of occultism for the movement lay in the way that it fostered belief in the hidden reality of the world and desire to expand consciousness. This outlook is linked by them to an affirmative mood that manifested itself in the belief in the possibility to change not just the self, but society at large.<sup>418</sup> The first two points cohere very much with the orientation of Colquhoun's outlook, with her occultism fostering her optimistic ontology. Her magical practice convinced her of the power and depths contained within hidden levels of the mind, something, that I will argue underpinned much of her art practice. More problematic, though, is the claim for occultism as a 'potent site of revolution, subversion, radicalism and utopian politics' – so 'challeng[ing] the view that recourse to occultism was a nihilistic return to primitivism and religion'.<sup>419</sup> Passing over the pejorative overtones the editors seem to impute to religion, I want to argue that one of the problems facing scholarship on the occult-modernist intersection is a lack of criticality and nuance in appreciating the theological tendencies of the terrain. Instead of the egalitarian and inclusive occultism this body of criticism typically finds, I will argue that it is important, as well, to address the hierarchical ontology that pervaded the field.

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<sup>418</sup> *Surrealism, Occultism*, p. 10.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

I will argue that the occult systems that Colquhoun turned to, fostered a hierarchical-immanentism; a concept that I have addressed in my chapters on Murry and Woolf, but here found to a much more intense degree. While these systems developed a belief in the sacred capacity of the self, this sat alongside the conviction that this was a quality only seriously manifested in the few. I am going to develop this contention by arguing that Colquhoun's work from the 1940s functions in a twofold sense, offering both a visual exploration of hermetic themes and tropes, while also functioning as magical objects, or at least objects that can foster magical capability. This latter role, I will suggest, is something that can only be fully appreciated by the psychically attuned.

My emphasis on the way her work developed a sense of the hidden power, particularly contained in the landscape, contributes to the broader argument of this thesis about the development a spiritually informed, affirmative artistic vision in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it also functions in a more specific sense in providing a revisionary approach to British surrealism. As Leo Mellor has argued, the spiritual and pastoral tendencies of movement – its 'organicist turn' – has typically been identified as symptomatic of its lack of the transgressive bite of its continental counterpart.<sup>420</sup> Consideration of Colquhoun, and her interest in nature, helps to reconceptualise the role that the spiritual played and resist an approach to national surrealisms that demand they replicate the French version or else fail.<sup>421</sup> As I will discuss, criticism of this strain of the movement has been particularly directed at work of the artist Paul Nash, widely touted in his day as one of Britain's leading surrealist practitioners. Nash's version of a spiritually infused pastoralism provides a useful point of contrast with the organicism of Colquhoun. The comparative radicalism of her project, in her bolder chromatic approach and esoteric strangeness, challenges perceptions of the dulcet lyricism of the surrealist pastoral. Colquhoun, I will argue, continued to critically engage with continental trends, but placed them in dialogue

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<sup>420</sup> Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 92.

<sup>421</sup> The criticism of the British movement for its comparative lack of revolutionary fervour manifested early in the history of its reception. Humphrey Jennings wrote a notoriously scornful review of Herbert Read and Hugh Sykes-Davies volume *Surrealism* (1936), opening with the lament: 'How can one open this book, so expensive, so *well* produced, so conformistly printed [...] and compare it even for a moment with the passion, terror and excitement [...] which emanated from *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*,' 'Surrealism', review in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, 8 (1936), 167-168 (p. 167). This assessment of the movement was also developed by Paul Ray and has been articulated more recently by Peter Nicholls in his article entry on 'Surrealism in England' for *The Cambridge History of English Literature*. Writing of the energy that resulted from the International Surrealist Exhibition he argues that: 'the spectacle was a short-lived one, and the air of "gentle-frivolity" which prevailed in London in the months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War both paved the way for the Exhibition's success and contributed to the English movements ultimate demise'. Ed. by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 396-416 (p. 403).

with her individualistic, even quixotic, belief system. The result was not sylvan whimsy or a tepid imitation of avant-garde practice, but an eerie, curious and deeply idiosyncratic body of bewitching work.

### Esoteric self-fashioning

In Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) André Breton appears among her exemplars of male artists who adopt a mythologising attitude to woman. She argues that he developed an appreciation of woman as 'Other', in the sense that he exalts female alterity as a mechanism by which the object of surrealist research could be obtained: 'she is a disturbing factor: mouth, key, door, bridge, she is Beatrice leading Dante into the beyond'.<sup>422</sup> Considering the way that Nadja in Breton's novel is idealised as 'Clairvoyant, Pythic, inspired [...] she opens the doors of the supernatural world,' she argues that this idealising process contained an implicit dismissal.<sup>423</sup> For if woman is 'other', however exalted, she is effectively reduced to source material that provides the means for male artistic practice: 'Breton does not speak of woman as *subject*' (my italics).<sup>424</sup>

In the following decades feminist approaches to surrealism have often taken the mythologising of women within the movement as their starting point; but nuanced the degree to which this was a discourse that rendered woman necessarily as 'subject'. In Gloria Orenstein's essay 'The Women of Surrealism', she considers the way in which the guises for which women were celebrated were often actively seized upon by female practitioners as a means of self-identification.

In the body of literature addressing the resonance between Colquhoun's occult interests and that of Varo, Fini and Carrington, the focus of these studies is typically orientated towards hermeticism as the subject of their artwork, rather than as a way of being or mode of self-portrayal. In the first section of this chapter, I want to reverse this procedure and think rather of the surrealism gestured towards by de Beauvoir and Orenstein; considered in terms of display

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<sup>422</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 231.

<sup>423</sup> De Beauvoir, 'The Second', p. 233. Nadja, an 'enigmatic waif', seems to have psychic power in her premonitory capability, telepathic perception and strangely hypnotic quality over men. But his interest lies in her power to bring him 'near to the things that are near her'; in personal terms Nadja's bizarre behaviour proves increasingly irksome and his developing sense of antipathy towards her climaxes in the brusque revelation that she had been committed to an asylum. 'Nadja', p. 90.

<sup>424</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second*, p. 237.

rather than subject. I will focus on strategies of self-presentation within surrealism, exploring the highly performative bent that was often involved in these artist's appropriation of hermetic subject matter. Although Colquhoun's early works were largely devoid of occult themes, I will argue that a connection can be drawn between her later painterly exploration of the esoteric and her display of alterity in the initial years of her involvement with the movement.

The sorceress was a role for which women were repeatedly celebrated within surrealism. Breton extolled Carrington's witch-like guise in his 1943 *Anthology of Black Humour*. 'Upon hearing the word witch we tend to imagine the hideous hags from Macbeth. But their cruel trials tell us otherwise. Many died precisely because they were young and beautiful. Today, who better than Leonora Carrington could answer to the entirety of this description?'.<sup>425</sup> Eileen Agar was also lauded by Herbert Read and Roland Penrose, when they visited her studio to assess her work for the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936, for her 'feminine clairvoyance'.<sup>426</sup> Sheila Legge was famed for appearance at that event wandering through the crowd as the Surrealist phantom, her face covered in roses.

But this guise was also actively looked to by female surrealists as a creatively productive form of identification. Varo, Fini and Carrington all turned to the hermetic within their self-portraiture.<sup>427</sup> Fini often depicted herself in the guise of magical creatures, typically as a sphinx or as a feathered, bird-like beings.<sup>428</sup> Varo often portrayed herself in witch-like or alchemical form; seated wanly feeding a moon in *Papilla Estelar* (1958) and peering sinisterly from the folds of a robe that covers most of her face, her hair in two horns in *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst* (1960). Although Carrington shared Varo's enthusiasm with esoteric study, there are comparatively fewer examples of her self-portrayal along magical lines. But it was an element in her oeuvre, and one that manifested itself early in her career, notably in her famous work *Self Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Hourse)* (1937) in which she sits in a strangely empty room, in mysterious communion with a hyena.

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<sup>425</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), p. 335. Quoted by Katherine Conley in *Automatic Women: The Representation of Women in Surrealism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 49.

<sup>426</sup> Ades, 'Notes', 36-42 (p. 80).

<sup>427</sup> Gloria Orenstein, 'Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism', *The Journal of General Education*, 27.1 (1975), 31-54 (pp. 33, 35).

<sup>428</sup> As her biographer, Peter Webb, has discussed, the iconography of the sphinx was particularly pervasive in Fini's work. Webb takes it as the focus of his study: *Sphinx: The Life and Art of Leonor Fini* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). In the 1940s Fini made an extravagantly feathered mask in which she was repeatedly photographed.

One of Colquhoun's first moments of engagement with the surrealist movement was also a striking form of magical self-presentation, when she was photographed in costume by Man Ray in 1932, during a stay in Paris. In the image hermetic tropes carries mysterious elan; she is adorned in a head dress and holding a bushel of wheat:



(Fig 1: Ithell Colquhoun, photographed by Man Ray (1932))

Colquhoun's later writing dated her initial interest in the occult to her school days, when her attention was caught by an article on Alistair Crowley's Abbey of Thelema.<sup>429</sup> During the 1920s she developed this interest while she was an art student in London, when she began to study

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<sup>429</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom: Macgregor Mather and 'The Golden Dawn'* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p. 15.

alchemy and attempted to become a member of different esoteric groups.<sup>430</sup> Interestingly, in her early hermetic engagement, there is a suggestion of a frustrated desire for an occultism orientated towards spectacle and display. In later life she became a member of Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis, an organisation that placed a heavy emphasis on magical dress and ritual. Photographs attest to her later participation in bardic rites, after having become a Druid.<sup>431</sup> However, her attempt to join the heavily ritualistic Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was unsuccessful and she became only a member of the Quest society – one of the more drily scholarly of the interwar occult groups.<sup>432</sup> Her desire for magical display seems to have been channelled into forums outside of an esoteric setting, notably in the play she wrote while a student at the Cheltenham School of Arts and Crafts about the philosopher's stone, 'The Bird of Hermes'. She wrote the script, designed the costumes and also performed the lead part.<sup>433</sup>

Part of the initial appeal of the surrealist movement for Colquhoun was the way that it acted as a forum in which capital was attached to the performance of alterity. It was the International Surrealist Exhibition that led to her more serious involvement. The surrealism that the event displayed was notoriously orientated towards performance, or 'amateur theatricality'; that implied the production of surrealist work to be tied to the strangeness of self.<sup>434</sup> Among a series of bizarre displays, Dali infamously delivered a lecture from the depths of a deep-sea diving suit.<sup>435</sup> An event usually characterised in comedic terms – an incident in which surreal play was met with the harsh reality of bodily limit (the helmet screwed too tight, he almost suffocated) for Colquhoun it was a serious moment of wonder and mystique. In her later reflections she would describe the mesmeric, hynoptic quality it held for her:<sup>436</sup>

It seemed he did actually evoke phantasmic presences which generated a tense atmosphere; the white cloth stretched to form a lowered ceilings vibrated as in a strong

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<sup>430</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword*, p. 16.

<sup>431</sup> Eric Ratcliffe, *Ithell Colquhoun* (Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford, 2007) p. 50. Until recent years, consideration of Colquhoun's life and work has tended to come at the hands of fellow travellers in her occult and folkloric interests.

<sup>432</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword*, pp. 15, 21.

<sup>433</sup> Hale, pp. 30-32.

<sup>434</sup> This jibe was made by Jennings in his 'Surrealism' review, 167-68 (p. 167).

<sup>435</sup> Additional bizarre sartorial displays and weird antics included the sight of Breton in a suit of green, smoking a green pipe with the hair of his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, also dyed green, and Dylan Thomas serving cups of boiled string.

<sup>436</sup> His deep-sea diving suit was decorated plasticine hands and he also had a jewelled dagger at his belt and a pair of Irish Wolfhounds.

wind, though the weather was still and sultry. Dali was minute, feverish, with bones brittle as a bird's, a mop of dark hair and greenish eyes.<sup>437</sup>

### Penrose and the pastoral

In an essay on 1970s women's art Lisa Tickner explores examples of women artists' self-depiction in sexual poses as a means of parodying male objectification of the female form.<sup>438</sup> This is a strategy that is often identified as having been utilised by female surrealists; that the guises they adopted at once participated in discourses surrounding woman's othering, but also offered a critique of that process. This ironic note is found in images such as Fini seductively posing with a cat positioned between her splayed legs and Claude Cahun's photographic self-portrayals in which she blurs indicators of gender, she is coquettish, yet with the signifiers of her femininity removed. Cahun, in particular, is often lauded, as Rebecca Ferreboeuf argues, as an artist who challenged the stereotypes not just of women in society, but also in an avant-garde context.<sup>439</sup>

There have been attempts to analyse Colquhoun's treatment of the erotic along similar lines. Focusing on three of her early images displaying sexual subjects – *Scylla* (1938), *Gouffres Amers* (1939) and *The Pine Family* (1940) – Tifaine Bachet argues that Colquhoun's work had a 'fierce parodic' quality and that her surrealism was imbued with a 'firmly ironic stance'.<sup>440</sup> The works, in particular *Scylla*, are some of the most well-known of Colquhoun's oeuvre. They are the ones that most overtly employ the stylistics of surrealism. All were painted by Colquhoun in the years immediately following her attendance of the International Surrealist Exhibition and were heavily influenced by Dali's paranoic-critical method.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, "Surrealism", *Paintings, Drawings, Collages 1936-76* (Newlyn: Newlyn Orion Galleries, 1979) [n.p.].

<sup>438</sup> Lisa Tickner, 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality & Women Artists Since 1970', *Art History*, 1.2 (1970), 236-252 (p.246).

<sup>439</sup> Rebecca Ferreboeuf, 'Claude Cahun and Surrealism: A Politics of Detachment', in *The European Avant-Garde: Text and Image*, ed. by Selena Daly and Monica Insigna (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 18-33 (p. 19).

<sup>440</sup> Tifaine Bachet, 'Parody and Femininity in British Surrealism (Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington)', *Polysemes – Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires*, 23 (2020), 1-32 (p.11) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/polysemes>> [accessed 3 September 2020].

<sup>441</sup> Ades, 'Notes', 36-42 (p. 36).





(Fig 2: Ithell Colquhoun, *Scylla* (1938) Oil on board. 36 x 24in. (91.4 x 61 cm.))

In *Scylla* (1938) there is a violent distortion of scale, so that the image of her legs and vagina seen in the bathtub doubles as two over-hanging cliffs in the sea. The gentler elements of the work – the muted, pastel tones of the seascape – are counterpoised by its quality of sexual aggression; as well as appearing as rock formations her thighs also appear to be grotesquely enlarged penises. The seaweed also doubles with pubic hair and the pointed boat that glides towards it has clearly phallic implications.

The rather over-emphatic eroticism of the work also led Dawn Ades to argue in the *Oxford Art Journal* that it was intended to be parodic – a satire of the surrealist cult of love.<sup>442</sup> But this interpretation, advanced by Ades during Colquhoun's lifetime, met with her opposition. She wrote to the journal, categorically denying this analysis: 'I never wished to parody anything and indeed I find all caricature repugnant'.<sup>443</sup> The image was painted merely two years after the point of her initial enthusiasm with the movement, before her rift with Mesens. It is an appealing way of resolving the heavy-handed quality of the image, but I think this stems from Colquhoun using a style that was new to her, and one that she quickly moved away from in her work in the 1940s.

The painting was displayed at her 1939 show with Roland Penrose at the Mayor Gallery. The exhibition also featured another work cited by Bachet, *Gouffres Amers*, which is interpreted by her as a parody of the surrealist celebration of the female body as the route to erotic liberation, an 'inversion' of that subject in the image of a corpse-like male form.<sup>444</sup> The man is skeletal, with greying skin and there is a suggestion of castration; instead of a penis he has tube out of which emerges a flower. The *Pine Family* presents another image of erotic violence, depicting the doubling of blocks of woods with the lower form of three castrated men. Although these works provide a way of approaching Colquhoun as a sexually transgressive image-maker, I want to question how important they are to her oeuvre. Although she certainly played with surrealism's foregrounding of the erotic as a way of thinking about the unconscious, this was not a route that would prove a particularly productive one for her. Where sexuality later features in her work, it tended to be within an esoteric framework, and without the suggestion of violence that is contained in her work from the 1930s.

It is instructive to consider *Scylla* and *Gouffres Amers* in conjunction with the rest of the images on display at her exhibition with Penrose to appreciate their aberrant quality. Most of the other works are much more muted, taking simple household objects. One of these, *Cucumber* (1939), has phallic connotations, but others – *Fruit Peelings* (1938), *Pears* (1937) and *Interior* (1939) – lack any obvious erotic suggestion. These works suggest Colquhoun to be at a point, in painterly terms, uncertain in her trajectory. They adopt different styles: while *Corner* (1937) is a cubist-type abstract, *Water-Flower* (1938) is a hyperreal rendering of natural forms and *L'Helice* (1939), a naturalistic image of a boat propeller.

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<sup>442</sup> Ades, 'Notes,' 36-42 (p. 40).

<sup>443</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'Women in Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, 4.1 (1981), p. 65.

<sup>444</sup> Bachet, 'Parody', 1-32 (p. 13).

Instead of their sexual quality, I think that what is most revealing about *Scylla* and *Gouffres Amers* is their pastoral overtones, foreshadowing the organicist turn of her painting in the 1940s. This emphasis is reinforced when considered alongside her writing that was published in the edition of the *London Bulletin* devoted to the work of Colquhoun and Penrose, to coincide with their exhibition. Instead of adopting the ruptured stylistics typically associated with surrealist writing, Colquhoun's prose has a harmonious quality. In the *London Bulletin* she presented two 'prose sketches'; extended descriptions of oneiric visions of the natural realm.<sup>445</sup> The first is an account of a secret and magical volcano whose lava turns into gold:

Right in the middle of the island is a huge volcano, yes, a real volcano, quite as active as Vesuvius or Stromboli – but the islanders are at some pains to keep its activities hidden. They won't even admit to its existence to anyone from the mainland. When you see a glow in the night sky and ask them what it is, they will tell you it's a fire in the maquis. So it may be, and very likely the olive trees are burning too; but what has started the conflagration?<sup>446</sup>

The writing has folk or fairy-tale quality – the subtle effects of the uncanny that it conjures rests simply on the obscurity of the description. The account of the volcano is resolutely cryptic, with no hint about its meaning or significance. In the second piece of writing, 'The Echoing Bruise' there is a note of disjunctive imagery in the paranoid-critical description of a boat as 'two little brown dolls [...] then I see that they are shoes from the feet of his sister's children'.<sup>447</sup> But the passage is primarily an unbroken account of a seascape; a continuous description of a boat race viewed from the tops of the cliffs. Both pieces have an ekphrastic quality, their intensely visual focus seems to allude to a work of art either real or imagined.

The pastoral lyricism of her surrealist prose was developed in her writings published in the early 1940s. Her contributions published in *New Road* in 1943 are still anti-narrative, but they offer more orientation to the reader by situating the openings into the uncanny within the rhythms of the everyday. Two of her pieces centre on a fissure in an urban setting that transports the protagonist to an enchanted pastoralism. 'Experiment II' describes finding a marsh between Oxford Street and Piccadilly, 'a rough, tussocky piece of land, quite extensive, where flowers of

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<sup>445</sup> Herbert Read used this phrase to characterise Colquhoun's writing in a letter to her (21 September 1940), TGA 929/1/1845.

<sup>446</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'Volcano' *London Bulletin*, 17 (1939), p. 15.

<sup>447</sup> Colquhoun, 'The Echoing Bruise', p.17.

a unique and curious species were growing'.<sup>448</sup> To get closer to them the protagonist is forced to wade through water, coming across jewel-like sea creatures, before finding herself anti-climactically expelled from the moor and near Bond Street Station. In 'Experiment III' she looks for a house to let from among a dingy row of houses in Maida Vale. Entering one she looks out of a window at the back and is transported to a seascape vision: a 'strip of ground overgrown with brambles, then a pebbly shore, and beyond, the crash and smother of Atlantic waves'.<sup>449</sup>

It is in her writing that we can gain a sense of why the Dalinian double image would not provide a productive route for her. The problem is the direction in which the effects of the marvellous are created. It conjures a sense of the bizarre and uncanny by the imposition of 'paranoid' psychic state onto the external sphere, capturing the discordant meeting between inner psychic drama and quotidian reality. Colquhoun's interest, however, was increasingly working in another direction, towards the wondrous and magical quality of the external realm.<sup>450</sup> Although, as I shall argue, Colquhoun believed that this facet of the outer sphere could only be appreciated by the psychically attuned self, for these select few, that meeting would not be one of contradiction or rupture. Instead, this unique self would be in harmony with the hidden, enchanted rhythms that nature contained.

This orientation is important when considering Colquhoun's initial attitude to the surrealist movement. In line with Ades parodic interpretation of her work, Richard Shillitoe has argued that, in the exhibition space at the Mayor Gallery, *Scylla* would have appeared as a form of combative eroticism, a 'picture of female sexual assertiveness' to contrast Penrose's 'passive, fragmented and fetishized women's bodies'.<sup>451</sup> I want to resist this antagonistic understanding of her exhibition strategy with Penrose and focus instead on the aspects of his work that were conducive to Colquhoun's creative leanings. A dialogic relationship emerges, particularly when considering, not just their work, but her strategies of self-presentation in the issue of the *London Bulletin* that accompanied the exhibition.

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<sup>448</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'Experiment II', in *New Road*, ed. by A. Comfort and J Bayliss (Billericay: Grey Walls Press, 1943), p. 197.

<sup>449</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'Experiment III', ed. Comfort, p. 198.

<sup>450</sup> Her later novel, *The Goose of Hermogenes*, published in 1961, but compiled of passages often written much earlier, also features a distinctly Dalinian image when a Goddess is described as disintegrating: 'A passing giant smudged away her clavicles; her right breast detached itself, slithered down her torso, its tubular nipple pointing towards the lake, flopped in and melted' (London: Peter Owen, 1961), p. 50. But these instances are the exception rather than the rule and, particularly the latter, in its overt, almost comedic flourish of strangeness, sits uncomfortably in a text that conjures subtler forms of the uncanny.

<sup>451</sup> Richard Shillitoe, *Ithell Colquhoun: Magician Born of Nature* (North Carolina: Lulu, 2010), p. 227.

Although some of Penrose's images featured violence to the female form his work also contained a more idealising strain. His poem from 1936 'Half Born' conjures a sense of the wondrous by juxtaposing discordant images of the female subject with those taken from nature.

Clothed in flowers I took her from the summer bank/ a flight of pigeons lifted from her eyes/ her lips became whispering shells.<sup>452</sup>

Later, the work shifts from the rendition of surrealist shock to enchanted pastoralism:

My love was hidden behind the branches/ the badger took her by the hand leading her barefoot through the woods/ and meadows kissed her feet/ with sugared lips.<sup>453</sup>

This image seems to have been inspired by his first wife, the poet Valentine Boué, of whom he would later reminisce in similar terms. He remembered how 'When living in our remote stronghold, the Chateau de Pouy, she would return naturally to her underlying temperament of the benign witch. I would wake up to find my bed deserted until early dawn, when a lithe little naked dew-soaked girl would come to me and whisper the adventure she had had with a family of badgers among the rocks and the black oaks'. He described how during their life together she appeared to him a 'goddess of the irrational, of inutility, of feminine mystery, and charm such as I had ever dreamed of'.<sup>454</sup> Valentine was also interested in mysticism, making several lone trips to India where she studied meditation and Eastern religion. When the pair wed in 1925 she dressed in a sari – a sartorial choice often favoured by Colquhoun, who also claimed a spiritual affinity to India, where she had spent the early years of her childhood.

Colquhoun's mode of self-presentation in the *London Bulletin* issue coheres with Penrose's idealised vision of pastoral, free-spirited femininity. It features a series of photographs of her in which she is pictured outside sunbathing topless, lying on a beach in a bikini and posed in shorts in a garden in Tenerife. These images cultivate a sense of erotic insouciance, portraying a

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<sup>452</sup> Roland Penrose, 'Half Born', in *On the Thirteenth Stroke of Midnight: Surrealist Poetry in Britain*, ed. by Michel Remy (London: Carcanet, 2013), p. 165.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Roland Penrose, *Scrapbook 1900-1981* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), pp. 31 and 42.

whimsical and carefree mode of being. There is also a childlike suggestion in the seeming unconcern in her pose that connects to the simple, almost infantile terms in which she discusses her process of her image formation: ‘sometimes this surface is so lovely that it seems a pity to paint on it at all’, ‘I am not going to say what is in the medium, but it smells very nice’.<sup>455</sup>



(Fig. 3: image of Ithell Colquhoun in *The London Bulletin*, 17 (1939))

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<sup>455</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, ‘What Do I Need to Paint a Picture’, *The London Bulletin*, 17 (1939), p. 13.



(Fig. 4: Roland Penrose, 'The Last Voyage of Captain Cook' (1936) pictured in *The London Bulletin*, 17 (1939))

There is a resonance between these photographs and Penrose's images of the naked female torso that appeared in the exhibition, in which the form of a beautiful woman situated in an oneiric space, typically appears as an agent for transposition and metamorphosis.<sup>456</sup> In *Good Shooting* (1939) a woman stands against a brick wall, her arms raised. These arms provide the gateway out of the violence of the main body of the image into a lyrical landscape scene: in place of her neck and head, there is a picture of a lake beneath a delicately clouded sky. In *Night and Day* (1937) the body of a woman is similarly fused with the natural landscape: her torso is composed of a blue sky, her pelvic region is formed of grass, her legs of terracotta clay and each hand replaced by a bird. Penrose also included a work that had been featured at the International Surrealist

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<sup>456</sup> Having moved to Paris in 1922 Penrose developed close friendships with leading European surrealists including the German artist, Max Ernst. Penrose played a key role in founding the British movement: it was partly at his prompting that David Gascoyne published his seminal introduction to surrealism in 1935 and he was also one of the key organisers of the International Surrealist Exhibition. In 1938 Penrose took over the London Gallery on Cork Street with E.L.T. Mesens, as a centre to promote the movement's work. The pair also founded the *London Bulletin*.



Exhibitions, *The Last Voyage of Captain Cook* (1936) which stakes a claim for female sexuality as the force around which the world revolves, in the placing of a naked plaster torso in the centre of a wire globe.<sup>457</sup>



(Fig 5: Roland Penrose, *Night and Day* (1937) Oil on canvas. 29.5 x 24 in (75 x 62 cm))

<sup>457</sup> Images of cages do not simply appear within the sexually aggressive strain of surrealism, but also in more pastorally orientated works. Penrose's *The Conquest of the Air* (1938) depicts a head merged with a cage that encloses a hawk, while Paul Nash's work often deployed a grid like structure. This was a way, not to conjuring fetishistic associations, but of using formal devices associated with abstraction to convey a sense of the uncanny within the pastoral realm. See, among others, *Mansions of the Dead* (1932) and *Voyage to the Moon* (1934-7).



Amy Hale critiques Colquhoun's presentation in the *London Bulletin*, arguing that she appears as 'object rather than subject' and attributing her appearance in nude and semi-clad photos to the journal's editor, E.L.T Mesens's, sexual attraction to her.<sup>458</sup> In contrast to the sexualised portrayal of Colquhoun, Penrose's treatment is aloof and reverential; the only images the issue presents are of his work and the description of his practice is not self-authored, but a reverential account written by René Magritte and Paul Nougé.<sup>459</sup> But I want to suggest that Colquhoun had a more agential process than Hale suggests, that she actively chose to be presented in this way as a means of performing her sense of alterity. Although, as I will discuss, this form of theatrical self-display did not become central to Colquhoun's oeuvre, this early moment of connecting her surrealist work to her sense of otherness was important in laying the groundwork for her later fusion of her art practice with her esotericism.

### Occultism and Carrington

Recent attempts to situate Colquhoun's work alongside that of Carrington, Varo and Fini's provide an effective strategy for her recuperation; a riposte to her marginalisation in the parochial English movement by looking at the thematic connection between her work with the esoteric turn of international surrealism. While I have stressed the resonance of her early element of tentative performativity with their practice, Colquhoun did not develop a visual repertoire of self-portrayal in esoteric guise that is found in the painting of these figures. I think that it is actually by considering her *difference* to them that a better understanding of the way she came, in the 1940s, to engage with occult themes can be sought.

The first point I want to stress is the seriousness of her occultism, for which it is productive to revisit the similarity that has been recently drawn between Colquhoun and Carrington. There is a biographical logic for approaching the two artists comparatively: both the rebellious children of upper-middle class British households, they came to the surrealist movement as a result of the International Surrealist Exhibition. Both pursued esoteric practice; a concern that came to pervade their art and was perhaps the source of their critical marginalisation.

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<sup>458</sup> Hale, pp. 53, 60.

<sup>459</sup> The article opens with an assertion of his reputation and stature: 'It is unnecessary to present Roland Penrose to the English public, which, as might be expected, already knows and appreciates him', René Magritte and Paul Nougé, 'Colours – Colours, or, An Experiment by Roland Penrose', 'The London Bulletin', 17 (1939), p. 9.

For Victoria Ferentinou, who has written at length on these figures, the two espoused a kind of progressive-esotericism, their use of hermetic motifs acting as a means of exploring ideas of female empowerment.<sup>460</sup> Their use of hermetic iconography is interpreted by her on these lines, so that Colquhoun's use of the alchemical concept of 'connunctio oppositorum' functions 'as a critique of non-egalitarian, sexist, hegemonic ideologies' while images of the goddess in her own and Carrington's work becomes a way of re-conceptualising gender roles within society.<sup>461</sup>

Although in later life Carrington engaged with feminist politics, conflating this concern with her esotericism implies an earnestness that is generally absent from her work. In her afterword to Carrington's short stories, Marina Warner aptly stresses the 'fundamentally comic' aspect to her oeuvre, in which 'irony streaks through her use of Celtic enchantment'.<sup>462</sup> Her stories forge an animist vision, but one in which magic is continually undercut by humour, whimsy and downright silliness.

This deflationary note also tends accompany her visual imagery. Her 'Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)' (1937-8) is often analysed autobiographically, in terms of her rebellion against paternal authority in her decision to become an artist; a rebellion that the work seems to ally to a belief in her supernatural otherness; expressed by her magical connection with the animalistic realm.<sup>463</sup> But her grandeur of pose and gravity conveyed by her dress, seriousness of expression and the strange barrenness of the room is undercut by the whimsicality of the little hands on the throne-like chair she sits on and the tiny high heels at the bottom of its legs. It is also difficult to view her 'Portrait of Max Ernst' as really presenting a 'mystical figure of transformation'; the portrayal of him as sinisterly magi-like, wandering through a darkened landscape and holding a green lantern is comedically counterpoised by his bright yellow stripey socks and furry tale.<sup>464</sup> In Colquhoun we find an animist vision that is utterly sincere and devoid of humour. Notes of the absurd are unintentional, her later reflection that crawling through a stone monument had failed to cure her rheumatism because she had omitted to perform the rite nude is said in all

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<sup>460</sup> These progressive ambitions Ferentinou argues were typical of the hermetic-surrealism of female artists more generally, claiming that Valentine Penrose, Carrington, Colquhoun and Fini all 'recognized in the occulture of their age an emancipating potential for women'. *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*, p. 110.

<sup>461</sup> Ferentinou, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*, pp. 390, 391.

<sup>462</sup> Marina Warner, afterword to *The Debutante and Other Stories* by Leonora Carrington (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 150. Future references to page numbers will occur within the body of the text.

<sup>463</sup> Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010), p. 33-4.

<sup>464</sup> Fiona Bradley, *Movements in Modern Art: Surrealism*, exh.cat (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 53.

earnestness.<sup>465</sup> The subtler forms of the uncanny for which Colquhoun strives, in their detailed, dream-like quality tend to lack Carrington's economy and bite.

Their difference of approach can be seen in their literary treatment of the animal realm. In Carrington's stories we find the frisson of the bizarre through her juxtaposition of the discordant. Animals appear in ecclesiastical robes (5), a hyena coyly admires the neatness with which it has nibbled round the face of the maid it has just eaten (3) and a group of bats take strange objection to being woven into a garment:

In front of us [...] lay the mistress of the house – Fear. She looked slightly like a horse but was much uglier. Her dressing gown was made of live bats sewn together by their wings: the way they fluttered, one would have thought they didn't much like it (7).

One of Colquhoun's early contributions to the *London Bulletin* consists of a detailed description of two months:

The general colour was a pale green, emerald in hue but milky, with borderings and eye-markings of a slightly intenser yellow and an artificial-looking pink. These in their turn were emphasised by a very deep maroon colour [...] The wing scales were fine and soft, and long silky hair grew near the body [...] the Crow-moth [...] was thick and heavy, and its flight, you felt, must be low and darting, though extremely powerful.<sup>466</sup>

This is a serious approach to the natural realm, undertaken from the conviction that if looked at closely enough its preternatural will emerge. But the passage, I think, is marred by the problem that Colquhoun's friend and fellow surrealist Conroy Maddox identified in her prose – its tendency to opacity. The problem is particularly prevalent in passages such as these, in which the obscurity is not counterpoised by subject matter of intrinsic excitement.<sup>467</sup>

The tonal distinction in their writing manifests itself in their autobiographical reflections on their occult sensibility. Carrington's descriptions of her magical self-belief during her period of

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<sup>465</sup> This observation was made in her guide to the folklore and landscape of Cornwall that she wrote after the war: *The Living Stones: Cornwall* (London: Peter Owen, 1957), p. 62.

<sup>466</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'The Moths,' *London Bulletin*, 10 (1939), p. 11.

<sup>467</sup> He expressed this reservation in a letter (undated) to Colquhoun, in which he recommended submitting only the most 'lucid' to the American literary and art magazine, *Vien*. TGA 929/1/1088.

madness in wartime Spain revels in the megalomaniac grandiosity that her disturbed state of mind provoked:

Later, with full lucidity, I would go Down Below, as the third person of the Trinity. I felt that, through the agency of the Sun I was an androgyne, the Moon, the Holy Ghost, a gypsy, an acrobat, Leonora Carrington and a woman. I was also destined to be, later, Elizabeth of England. I was she who revealed religion and bore on her shoulders the freedom and he sins of the earth [...] The lump on my left thigh no longer seemed to form part of my body and became a sun on the left side of the moon.<sup>468</sup>

This passage is indicative of an ambivalence that we find more broadly in Carrington's work between a genuine interest in magic and the esoteric and the supernatural as a shorthand for asserting difference and rebellion.

Colquhoun's public reflections on her occult engagement are, by contrast, polite, tepid and restrained. In the autobiographical chapters in her history of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, *Sword of Wisdom* (1975), a work intended for a general audience, she recurrently deflects the grandiose element of her subject with doubt and understatement. She tempers her claim to magical power, recalling her early sense of uncertainty when challenged in the initiation process: 'At one point she asked me: "Are you psychic?" I hesitated over some non-committal reply – I really did not know whether I was or not'.<sup>469</sup> There is similar abstemiousness in her description of when she does come to experience a sense of psychic power. Staying at the guru and healer Meredith Starr's country retreat she describes feeling a strange sense of what she terms as 'The mysterious power of Y': 'I stood aside mentally, watching, but nothing more happened. The force was gradually withdrawn. I returned to normal consciousness and fell asleep'.<sup>470</sup> She writes not to induce shock at her otherness, but that her intimate experiences might garner understanding, sympathy and, most importantly, belief.

### **Hermetic hierarchy and the hidden**

Although Colquhoun had a less grandiose way of asserting claims to magical power, we should not see it as lessening the degree to which she was convinced by the reality of her psychic

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<sup>468</sup> Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (New York: EP Dutton, 1988), p. 195.

<sup>469</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword*, p. 20.

<sup>470</sup> Colquhoun, p. 26.

sensitivity, a sensitivity developed and fostered by her intensive study of esoteric systems and initiation into occult groups. This self-perception is crucial to understanding what I want to argue are the two levels in which we can see her artwork operating. In a recent conference paper on the fashion for the occult in contemporary art, Marco Pasi provided a rough system for categorising the nuances with which it is engaged with by practitioners.<sup>471</sup> There is one level in which Colquhoun's images can be understood and appreciated according the first group Pasi sets out, that its 'occultness' manifests in its use of, and play with, occult and hermetic symbolism – a category in which I think Carrington's works should also be placed. But I want to argue that there is another level that is speaking to the fellow practitioner, or at least educated laymen, that coheres with his third category; as a 'means to induce extraordinary experiences' and so having a 'spiritual/ mystical/ initiatory/ shamanic/ magical qualities'.<sup>472</sup> This is a key point on which I want to stress the distinction between Colquhoun's work and that of Varo, Fini and Carrington. The hermetic symbolism that she used was not simply a form of creative play, largely decorative in their pictorial setting. For Colquhoun these motifs were alive with meaning and power, something the only a fellow occultist would be able to fully interpret and respond to.

In arguing for the existence of a covert level of meaning in Colquhoun's work it is important to understand the hierarchical and secretive culture of the occult sphere in which she operated. By emphasising this facet I am going against the interpretative grain of much recent scholarship addressing the intersection of occultism and modern art. The study of the occult, in recent years, has been marked by a revisionist thrust that aims at rejecting the perception of its retrogressive and irrational quality and emphasising, instead, the way in which it participated in the central intellectual currents of modernity. The approach is an effective one, particularly when looking at the relationship between magic, esotericism and science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where we do find a porousness in between the domains. This boundary crossing was typified by the Society for Psychical Research which applied empirical modes of investigation to psychic and occult phenomenon. Excellent histories have been written of the way in which discoveries in both the biological and physical sciences were seized on by both the occultist and scientist alike as indicative of world views that were still in the process of trying to exert hegemony.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Marco Pasi, 'A Gallery of Changing Gods: Contemporary Art and the Cultural Fashion of the Occult', *Changing Gods: Between Religion and Everyday Life*, CESNUR (9-11 September 2010) <<https://www.cesnur.org>> [accessed July 2020].

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> There have been a number of studies published on close interaction that occurred between science and the occult, particularly within the fin de siècle. Roger Luckhurst, in his history of Telepathy, has examined the way in which the theories of the mind developed within the Society for Psychical Research,

The problem has arisen from the uncritical importation of this revisionist tendency into the field of art history and literary scholarship, in which there has been a recent tendency to refer to the occult, somewhat counter-intuitively, as an intrinsically modern phenomenon. In the introduction to Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson's recent study we find the assertion that 'Modernists who turn to the occult do so as part of their engagement with modernity'.<sup>474</sup> The claim is justified on the basis that 'Occultism asks the same questions as modernism: What does it mean to be modern, and how should a modern life be led? What has been gained in the modern age, what has been lost?'<sup>475</sup> The problem is what, if any, content the word 'modern' here imparts. Some glimmer of a logic is hinted at the use of the word 'lost', with its implication that occultism can be understood through the lens of Max Weber's characterisation of modernity as disenchanted, and so the occult is 'modern' in the sense that it is responding to the reconfiguration of contemporary modes of belief. But the suggestion is tortuous at best.

Despite the legitimising and vindicatory associations the term 'modern' holds within the academe, its use also has the danger of obscuring what it was about occult practice that was actually fun. Colquhoun's reminiscences on her interwar occult pursuits, aside from its touches of dryness, evokes a domain that was clearly deeply enticing for the very fact of its weird and fantastical quality. The culture she describes is one permeated by the lure of the ancient and hidden; a world of secret volumes and groups, where genteel tea parties transform into magical initiations and friendships cease on the whisper of psychic unsuitability.

The arena was, of course, a multi-faceted one. Many involved in occult organisations were highly sophisticated thinkers who were close engaged with mainstream political, social and scientific concerns and were interested in combining their esoteric interests with these domains. But this should not obscure the way in which there was an inflection antithetical to the modern, which

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particularly Frederic W.H. Myers's theory of the subliminal mind, was influential on the emerging sciences of psychology and psychoanalysis: *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Alex Owen has also stressed the relationship between depths models of the self that were being advanced in psychology and the exploratory approaches to consciousness with the occult domain: *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). In her study, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Pamela Thurschwell focuses on the impact of telecommunication technologies on subjectivity, exploring the new models of selfhood that were manifested in the literary and occult spheres. Egil Asprem has taken a 20<sup>th</sup> century timeframe for his examination of esoteric and scientific border crossing, arguing the two domains continued to intersect until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourses 1900-1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>474</sup> 'Introduction', in *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Cinema*, ed. by T. Bauduin and H. Johnsson (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 8.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

touted a return to the lost wisdom of the ancients. If we look at the organisations that Colquhoun was engaged with in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can see the differences in the way this past was approached. There was a radically different tenor to the sober, scholarly historicism of Mead's Quest Society to the ritualistic and performative Golden Dawn. But both were united by the belief that authority was held in the past and that it was by a return to it that the magical or mystical self could be developed, and ultimately, saved.<sup>476</sup>

Colquhoun's writings contain odd notes of self-reflection on the lure of the past – her distress at the encroachment of modern technology into the Cornish landscape and her fondness for the archaicism contained in Golden Dawn documentation.<sup>477</sup> To say that her occult pursuits had a backward leaning slant does not mean her work is retrogressive, rather it is to argue that its very richness stems from the frisson derived from the interplay between the ancient and avant-garde; hermetic wisdom and contemporary art practice.

Another point that is also important for the duality of her work that I want to develop, is the qualitative distinction to the esoteric self. In many ways the culture of esotericism was an elite and hierarchical one, in which knowledge was a jealously guarded commodity, its privileged possession enacted ritually in ceremonies conveying the recipient's power and prestige.<sup>478</sup> As Hugh Urban has argued, this leads the esotericist to have a typically separatist attitude to

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<sup>476</sup> Charles Mead was initially primarily interested in Hinduism but his focus became increasingly orientated towards Western antiquity. He turned to Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and Hermeticism, publishing major works on Graeco-Egyptian spirituality including: *Orpheus* (1896), *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900) and *Thrice-Greatest Hermes* (1906). His spirituality was closely informed by Gnostic systems of thought, centring on an emanationist model of the soul, according to which it sought a return to its divine origins. The notion of salvatory 'gnosis' encouraged his investigation of ancient systems of belief, a concern that dominated the Quest society and associated its periodical. The foundational documents of the Golden Dawn, the Cipher Manuscripts prescribed a curriculum of teachings that included the Qabalah and Hermetic magic, including occult tarot, geomancy and alchemy. The founders of the society claimed a mysterious and ancient origins for the documents, asserting that they were antique manuscripts of unspecified provenance, acquired by the elderly Masonist, A.F.A Woodford, who received them from a 'dealer in curios'. Questions about their authenticity helped lead to a schism in the society in 1900, with assertions that the authors were in fact the society's founders, William Wynn Westcott and Samuel MacGregor Mathers, throwing the legitimacy of the order into doubt.

<sup>477</sup> She criticises an occult text *The Cosmic Doctrine* (1930), which tried to claim Golden Dawn authority, for the modernity of its style: 'The content [...] is in any case almost worthless from an esoteric standpoint: its attempt to up-date "theosophic" ideas by the misuse of scientific jargon is not only disagreeable, but at once sets it apart from GD usage (I find the aura of archaism characteristic of the GD attractive – no doubt a reaction from socialist realism in prose, breeding box-architecture and functionalism in design generally.)' Colquhoun, *Sword*, p. 184. See also, *The Living Stones*, p. 48.

<sup>478</sup> Antoine Faivre stressed secrecy as one of the defining features of western esotericism in his foundational survey of the field: *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 10-15.

mainstream society; a 'Janus-faced identity', in which 'occult self' stands hidden and separate from 'the illusion of the outer social self'.<sup>479</sup> This was an outlook that the Golden Dawn particularly fostered, with its mysterious, selective process of initiation and a rigidly hierarchical system centred around secret grades signifying the adept's magical growth and attainment.

In an essay from the late 1920s on mysticism and blasphemy that Colquhoun read to the Quest society, she focuses, not on the opposition between occultism and Christianity but between the agnostic and the adept. In Eliotic vein she draws a category distinction between the believing and non-believing subject, musing that 'The invocation of the devil and the work of God are both equally tiresome and meaningless to a mind without belief in either'.<sup>480</sup> Rather than trying to flout the mainstream, the tradition of hermeticism shrouds itself in secrecy, reflecting that 'It is surprising, not that the secret tradition should be guarded with silence, but that it has not been more closely guarded'.<sup>481</sup>

### **Automatism and the mystic vision**

Although Colquhoun had a profound sense of discomfort with the terms Mesens used to define the British movement, throughout her life she continued to identify as a practitioner of surrealism.<sup>482</sup> Part of her enduring receptivity stemmed from her awareness of the occult turn within global surrealism. Colquhoun recurrently appealed to the occult leanings of Breton as a way of staking a claim for the authenticity of her surreal practice, a direction that she felt was being silenced within Britain. Following her dispute with Mesens, esotericism resurfaced as a bone of contention when Colquhoun's then husband, del Renzio, attempted to revivify the British surrealist movement during the Second World War by publishing the pamphlet 'Incendiary Innocence' (1944). In the editorial he referred to Breton's manifesto, to claim that 'Only a deliberate conspiracy had prevented Breton's call for "the deep and genuine occultation

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<sup>479</sup> Hugh Urban, 'Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry', *Numen*, 44.1 (1997), 1-38 (p.23).

<sup>480</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, 'The Connection between Mysticism and Blasphemy', p. 2, c. 1928/1929, unpublished mss., TGA 929/2/3/2.

<sup>481</sup> Colquhoun, 'The Connection', p. 15.

<sup>482</sup> In later life Colquhoun continued to engage in surrealist practice. In from 1956 onwards she compiled a *Little Anthology of Inadvertent Surrealism*, unpublished mss., TGA 929/6/4/1.



of Surrealism”<sup>483</sup>. In this section I will probe the way in which Colquhoun attempted her own ‘occultation’ of her style, through an automatism aimed at probing beyond the boundaries of the unconscious, towards the magical depths that she believed the cosmos contained. But rather than consider this alteration in her oeuvre purely in terms of developments within international surrealism, I will argue that her attempt to rethink the potentialities of the automatic process also chimed with a sense of frustration with the procedure within a British context.

Tessel Bauduin has provided a nuanced treatment of Breton’s esotericism, arguing that even after his increased engagement in this sphere in the early 1940s, his investment remained at the level of inquiry rather than belief. His use of the occult was primarily poetic and metaphorical, as devices to think about the weird and bizarre quality of the mind, rather than because he seriously considered the possibility of supernatural forces.<sup>484</sup> Bauduin has also emphasised the materialist mode of the early surrealist deployment of automatism, which, although influenced by its practice within spiritualist circles, did not share in its metaphysics. Instead of a technique to contact beings external to the self, it was a mode of accessing the hidden regions of the mind.

Although it is an important distinction to make in terms of Bretonian surrealism, it does not seem to have been a qualification that Colquhoun herself was aware of.<sup>485</sup> Colquhoun’s sense that the surrealism being practiced on the continent offered her a model for the incorporation of her esotericism into her art was fostered by her connection with artists who had, like her, more recently joined the movement with a pre-existing interest in hermeticism. In 1939 she stayed at the Château Chemilieu with Gordon Onslow-Ford and Roberto Matta, forging a creative collaboration which would have a decisive impact on the work she went onto produce in the 1940s.

The pair had developed what Matta termed ‘psychological morphology,’ an automatic procedure aimed at accessing a psychic reality outside the confines of the unconscious. Matta had become frustrated by the Freudian emphasis of surrealism, believing instead that the technique of automatism could be applied to the accessing of forces beyond the unconscious mind. Both had been influenced by Ouspensky’s discussion in *Tertium Organum* (1912), of the way that art could be used as a route to the fourth dimension, by capturing the hidden dimensions contained within

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<sup>483</sup> Toni Del Renzio, *Manifesto. Incendiary, Innocence* (London, 1944), TGA 929/6/24.

<sup>484</sup> Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), p. 156.

<sup>485</sup> In her writings on surrealism Colquhoun would repeatedly stress its connection with occultism: see ‘Surrealism and Hermetic Poetry’, p. 7 which looks at the way in which Breton’s group was excited by esotericism, unpublished mss., (1968), TGA 929/2/1/60.

everyday forms. In the pages of the *London Bulletin* in 1940, Onslow-Ford described psychological morphology as a method of giving not just ‘form to unbridled thoughts’, but also to a reality beyond the self, in the portrayal of objects bound ‘into one unity by auras and lines of force’.<sup>486</sup>



(Fig 6: Ithell Colquhoun, *Alcove* (1946), Oil on Board. 9 x 13 ½ in (22.9 x 34.3 cm))

We can see the influence of Matta and Onslow-Ford’s technique in the similar visual repertoire of Colquhoun’s work using automatic procedure. In these pieces she likewise eschews figuration, portraying amorphous, blurred forms in a molten colouration. But in contrast to the neo-platonic thrust of their work, focused on abstract philosophical ideas, in the output of Colquhoun there is also a local specificity at play. During the war she spent increasingly more time in Cornwall, eventually taking a studio there in 1947.<sup>487</sup> In her travel writing about the district, *The Living Stones* (1957), she expressed her belief in her psychic connectivity to the

<sup>486</sup> Gordon Onslow-Ford, ‘The Painter Looks within himself,’ *London Bulletin*, 18-20 (1940), 30-33 (p. 31).

<sup>487</sup> Hale, p. 97.

landscape, that she felt identified with ‘every leaf and pebble,’ while also warning of the ‘dark emanations’ that she experienced in certain places.<sup>488</sup> The region recurrently played an important part in her artworks, central to which was the notion of the unique metaphysical chemistry that could emerge from an encounter with a spiritually charged place.

This theme was reflected on by the critic E.H. Ramsden in his introduction to the catalogue of her 1947 show at the Mayor Gallery, in which he speaks of the way she is ‘Endowed with a natural feeling for the “lore” of the countryside’. But his understanding of her automatic procedure stopped at the level of unconscious; his identification of the role played by invisible forces in the image’s production went no further than speculation on the role of ‘some hinterland of the mind’.<sup>489</sup>

Colquhoun was less coy, connecting the automatic practice that dominated much of the work in the exhibition with esoteric forms of knowledge in her essay ‘The Mantic Stain’ (1949) and, in expanded form, ‘Children of the Mantic Stain’ (1952). While noting perfunctorily that the process is concerned with plumbing the depths of the unconscious, the main body of the essay compares the procedure with esoteric practice. She considers the similarity between the marks made in the automatic process to the ‘ink-splashes, sand, pins thrown by chance, and the irregular patterns left by tea-leaves’, made by clairvoyants; marks equally cryptic and indeterminate but made meaningful by the ‘telepathic faculty’.<sup>490</sup> She also compares the plethora of forms that automatism produces to work of the alembic, quoting from the alchemical treatise from 1667: ‘The reign of the moon lasts just three weeks; but before it closes, the substance exhibits a great variety of forms [...] sometimes it will present the appearance of fishes’ eyes, and then again of tiny silver trees, with twigs and leaves’.<sup>491</sup> This reference suggests that in addition to her divinatory framework, she also conceived of the automatic process in alchemical terms, the canvas functioning, as with the alembic, as device that causes transmutation.

Rather than focus on the way Colquhoun’s practice chimed with the increasing emphasis on the mythic and esoteric within Bretonian surrealism, I want to consider the relation between her practice and debates that were occurring in a British context. Her imbrication of automatism within magical systems was symptomatic of a wider tendency to resist using the practice as a

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<sup>488</sup> She found these dark emanations were so strong at the hilltop site Carn Brea that Colquhoun wrote of being able to sense them even when passing by it on the Train. *The Living Stones*, p. 71.

<sup>489</sup> E.H. Ramsden, *Ithell Colquhoun, Paintings*, The Mayor Gallery, exh.cat (1947) [n.p.] TGA 929/10/1/1.

<sup>490</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, ‘The Mantic Stain’, *Enquiry*, 2.4 (1949), 15-21 (p.18).

<sup>491</sup> Eirenaeus Philalethes, *An Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King* (1667), quoted by Colquhoun, ‘The Mantic’, 15-21 (p. 19).

purely chance-based procedure. Mark Morrisson has argued that the late 1930s saw a ‘crisis of automatism’, connecting Colquhoun’s attempt to re-think the technique with debates surrounding surrealism within the short-lived New Apocalyptic group.<sup>492</sup> Figures such as J.F. Hendry, Henry Treece and G.S. Fraser expressed an anxiety with origination; a concern with carving out a space for the artist to play a conscious part in the creative process, rather than simply functioning as a tool through which the unconscious works its will. Fraser defined the ambition of the group as a building on the limitations of the surrealist automatic process, claiming: ‘It embodies what is positive in Surrealism. It denies what is negative – Surrealism’s own denial of the right of man to express conscious control [...] it recognises that is, that the intellect [...] is part of the living completeness of art’.<sup>493</sup>

The desire for the intellect to be harnessed to the unconscious connects with another aspect of wariness with automatism, that Steven Connor has addressed, which stemmed from the concern for surrealism to have a definable productive use. The problem was the way automatism, as a procedure whose outcome should not be possible to predetermine, made surrealism a capriciously when faced with an ideological goal. This difficulty manifested itself particularly in political terms, in the attempt to yoke the movement to Marxism. As Connor states, the movement’s Marxist adherents faced the problem of connecting the ‘formlessness’ of surrealist aesthetics with a ‘firm political programme’.<sup>494</sup> Connor looks particularly to the poetry of Roger Roughton as an example of unwillingness to fully surrender to the unpredictability of the automatic process, using instead a ‘contained dislocation’ to evoke excitement at imminent revolution.<sup>495</sup>

But there was another strand to this productive impulse that needs to be identified; the desire to co-opt surrealism to a spiritual world view. Although we do not find the occult impulse within British surrealism to anything like the degree of its continental manifestation, there was a heavily mystical strain. In his entry to the catalogue for the International Surrealist Exhibition, Breton attempted to defend surrealism against ‘accusations of mysticism’.<sup>496</sup> But the qualification was undermined by the expansive selection criteria the organisers had used which led to the accommodation of mystical works alongside those that used a more obviously surrealist lexicon.

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<sup>492</sup> Mark Morrisson, ‘Ithell Colquhoun and Occult Surrealism in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain and Ireland,’ *Modernism/ Modernity*, 21.3 (2014), 587-616 (p. 8).

<sup>493</sup> G.S. Fraser, ‘Introduction’ to *The White Horsemen: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse*, ed. by J.F. Hendry, Henry Treece and G.S. Fraser (London: Routledge, 1941), p. 14.

<sup>494</sup> Steven Connor, ‘British Surrealist Poetry in the 1930s’, in *British Poetry 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition*, ed. by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp.169-192 (p. 185).

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>496</sup> André Breton, preface to *International Surrealist Exhibition*, trans. by David Gascoyne, New Burlington Galleries, exh. cat (London, 1936), pp. 6-8 (p. 8).

Notable was the inclusion of the work by the artist Cecil Collins: *Virgin Images in the Magical Processes of Time* (1935) and *Angels and Images and Negative Spectres in Conflict* (1933) which both included overt religious symbols and motifs.<sup>497</sup>

Collins's approach to surrealism is interesting for the way he positions the movement, not as an end in itself, but the necessary starting point for a liberation that would occur via a mystical awakening. Characterised by Stephen Spender as someone who had 'passed over the threshold of surrealism' to end in his 'own world of curious poetic imagery', in 1941 Collins celebrated the movement for having exposed the contents of the mind, and by so doing, rebelled from the 'brutal, mechanised age'.<sup>498</sup> But the next stage would involve something more productive and affirmative, with art taking over the role of religion in society. The task of the artist was to construct a new form of mythology, a project that he hoped would lead to a new age of 'world consciousness', or the 'world as one living body,' an ambition he worked to achieve in the formation of an idiosyncratic lexicon of religious symbolism.<sup>499</sup>

### **Magical organicism**

Despite the eschatological zeal contained within Collins's narrative of surrealism, the manifestation of the mystical element has been taken, more commonly, to be indicative of the placid and temperate quality of the surrealist movement in Britain. For the early historian of the British surrealist movement, Paul Ray, Herbert Read's appeal to language of mysticism in his criticism, particularly in his championing of the pastoral aesthetic of Paul Nash, showed his fundamental misunderstanding of the movement.<sup>500</sup> I want to use Colquhoun's work as a way querying the dismissal of the surrealist pastoral. Instead of viewing the organicist turn as a moment in which the subversive energy of surrealism dissipated, I will argue that it marked its development towards a more productive and affirmative form.

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<sup>497</sup> Remy, 'Surrealism', p. 85.

<sup>498</sup> Stephen Spender, 'The Work and Opinions of Cecil Collins,' *Horizon*, 9.50 (1944), 115-19 (p.116). Cecil Collins, 'The Artist in Society,' in *Cecil Collins: The Vision of the Fool and other Writings*, ed. by Brian Keeble (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 2002), pp. 67-87 (p. 73) (Unpublished mss., 1 October 1941).

<sup>499</sup> Collins, 'The Artist', pp. 67-87 (p. 82).

<sup>500</sup> From their correspondence Read appears to have been a qualified supporter of Colquhoun, offering her advice about her painting and prose as well as exhibition guidance. See. TGA 929/1/1843-8.

The works of Colquhoun in the 1940s are interesting because of their greater visual and ideological complexity compared to her images that I have discussed from the 1930s, incorporating erotic tropes and automatic stylistics with systems of hermetic philosophy. Rather than the examples of magical play that I have considered earlier in the chapter, I want to argue that Colquhoun seriously considered this combination to have its own psychic capability. The works, articulating the artist's esoteric vision, offered the viewer the possibility of participation in their psychically charged energy. It is on this point that it is productive to compare her work with that of Nash. While Nash's work contained hints of the visionary and the power of the animist landscape, Colquhoun's work is saturated in hermetic richness.

Ray scathingly cites Read's introduction to Nash's work in which he described the surrealist object as evidence that 'Nature, too, could dream [...] Such objects are probably unconscious symbols, but it is simpler to say that they possess magic'.<sup>501</sup> An even less equivocal statement of the sacral quality of the surrealist object was provided by Read in his catalogue for the 1937 exhibition 'Surrealist Objects and Poems'. There he wrote of the 'chances which bring unexpected things into unexpected places [...] The general effect of such chances is to invest the object with a spirit, a life of its own, and from that point of view surrealism may be regarded as a return to the animism of our savage ancestors'.<sup>502</sup> For Ray this strain of practice and criticism marked the British movement's fatal abandonment of the bite of the continental counterpart; lost in talk of 'placid savages in sylvan retreats'.<sup>503</sup>

In terms, particularly of subject matter, there are close parallels between Nash and Colquhoun. Both had a fascination with the ancient and, more specifically, megalithic. While this was a subject that had a broad currency among the interwar avant-garde, rather than the formal interest that Neolithic forms provoked in artists such as Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, Nash and Colquhoun's response was orientated towards the atmospheric: on the structure's mood and aura. Formally too, there is a resonance between Colquhoun's automatic works and the demonstrative, fluid brushstrokes of Nash's later, mystically charged landscapes. In the 1940s he returned to the mystical subjects that had dominated the work of his youth, his images of

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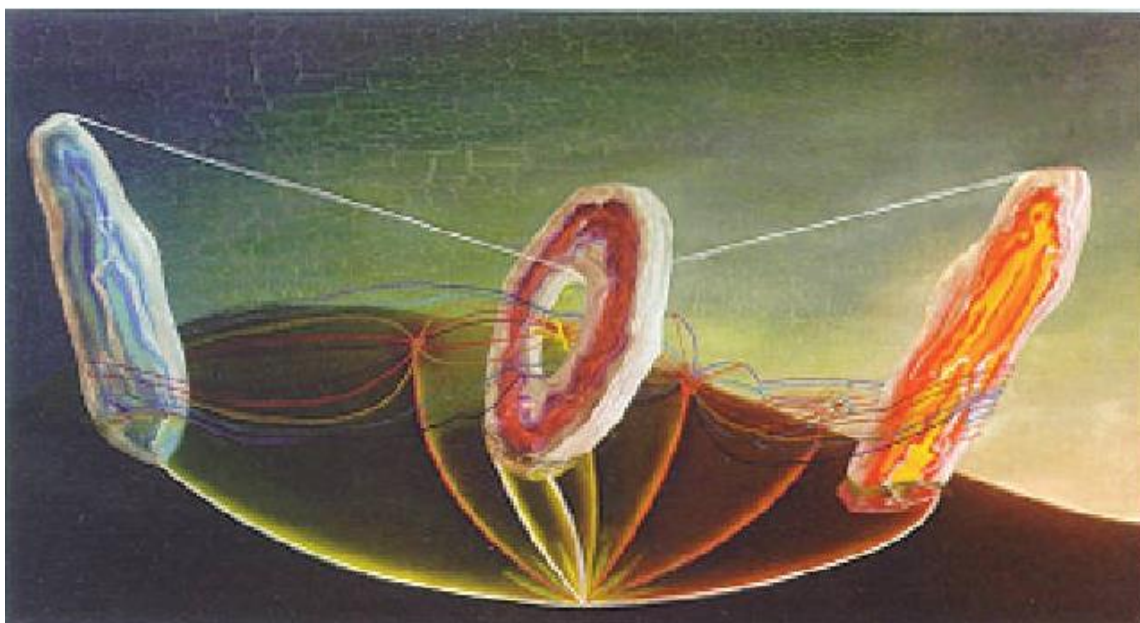
<sup>501</sup> Hebert Read, 'Introduction', in *Paul Nash, Contemporary British Painters*, 1 (London: Soho Gallery, 1937) [n.p.].

<sup>502</sup> Herbert Read, 'Foreward', in *Surrealist Objects and Poems*, ed. by Roland Penrose and E.L.T Messens, exh. cat (London Gallery 1937) [n.p.].

<sup>503</sup> Paul Ray, 'Sir Herbert Read and English Surrealism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 24.3 (1966) 401-13 (p. 410).

sunflowers conveying a whirling ecstatic intensity, while *Cumulus Head* (1944) revisits his earlier imagery of a magical, female presence in the sky, contained in *Vision at Evening* (1911).

But there was a distinct difference to their quality of belief which is manifested in their work. In an article addressing Nash's spirituality, David Mellor situates him amongst a group of what he labels as 'esoteric modernists' working in Rye.<sup>504</sup> Although Nash was interested in alternative belief systems, particularly through the influence of his wife, Margaret, a Christian scientist interested in clairvoyance, Nash's religious convictions amounted to a rather vague pantheism. Even that could take on for him an essentially metaphorical hue, a way of expressing wonder at the uncanny beauty of natural forms, rather than a serious belief in a metaphysical presence within nature. Writing of how his home in Iver Heath was the first location to produce his appreciation of the genius loci, he stated that this 'did not suggest that the place was inhabited by a geni in the psychic sense, its magic lay within itself, implicated in its own design and its relationship with its surroundings'.<sup>505</sup> This means that his pastoral surrealism dealt essentially with no more than the psychic transformation that could be rendered by the visual impact of a particularly striking landscape vision.



(Fig. 7: Ithell Colquhoun, *Sunset Birth* (1942), Oil on canvas. 15 ½ x 28 in. (39.3 x 71.2 cm))

<sup>504</sup> David Mellor, 'A Spectral Modernity', in *Paul Nash*, ed. by Emma Chambers, exh. cat (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), pp. 23-35 (p. 31).

<sup>505</sup> Paul Nash, *Outline, an Autobiography: And Other Writings* ([S.I.]: Faber, 1949), pp. 106-7.

We can see the difference in their metaphysical approach in the striking dissimilarity of their chromatic treatment of Neolithic structures. In his famous *Equivalents for the Megaliths* (1935) Nash uses a muted palate, its disjunctive effects relying on the fusion of the abstract with the representational; the appearance of stylised geometrics within a naturalistic landscape setting. Colquhoun's depiction of the Cornish megalithic monument, Men-al-Tol, in *Sunset Birth* (1942) and the Merry Maidens stone circle in Cornwall, in *Dance of the Nine Opals* (1942), likewise fuse the depiction of the seen and the unseen. But the images do not abandon the mimetic; the swirling, rich chromatic lines that pass through and around the monuments depict the psychic energy that Colquhoun believed pervaded the structures, even if only visible to the few. In *The Living Stones* she relates her conviction that they were the repositories of 'ancient powers' and 'psychic forces', that the sensitive were still able to witness.<sup>506</sup>

Colquhoun's archive contains multiple examples of diagrams that she made of Golden Dawn colour systems, that appear to have been used by her in her magical practice. The chromatic scheme of some of her artworks also correspond to its design. *The Thirteen Streams of Magnificent Oil* (1940) is a quasi-diagrammatical image of a figure whose body is divided according to the colours of the sephiroth of the tree of life. As Richard Shillitoe has noted, Colquhoun's use of colour varies, while sometimes the chromatic schemes of her paintings accord with hermetic schemes, others do not seem to correspond to a known system of colouration.<sup>507</sup> But I think it is likely that in the 1940s she drew on the idea of colour as a tool to foster higher states of consciousness. In the Golden Dawn colour was used in ceremonial magic, based on the belief that different shades produced a certain physiological effect in the viewer which offered a form of psychic energy. The chromatic intensity of her automatic works in the decade suggests that she conceived of them having some form of heightening effect. The ecstatic points of brightness that the amorphous whirls of colour often contain are also suggestive of the epiphanic. In *Alcove* (1946), for example, the gradation of colour, with the framing of bright core of a hermetic blend of red, yellow and blue amidst darkness, has revelatory overtones.

The idea that the works offers some form of magical raising of the self is also reinforced by their frequent suggestion of spiritual or divine visitation. Works such as *Attributes of the Moon* (1947), *Cloud figure* (1947), *Gorgon* (1946) and *A Visitation 1* (1945) depict quasi-anthropomorphic matter, that intimate the appearance of sacred beings. The spiritual reference of their subject matter is

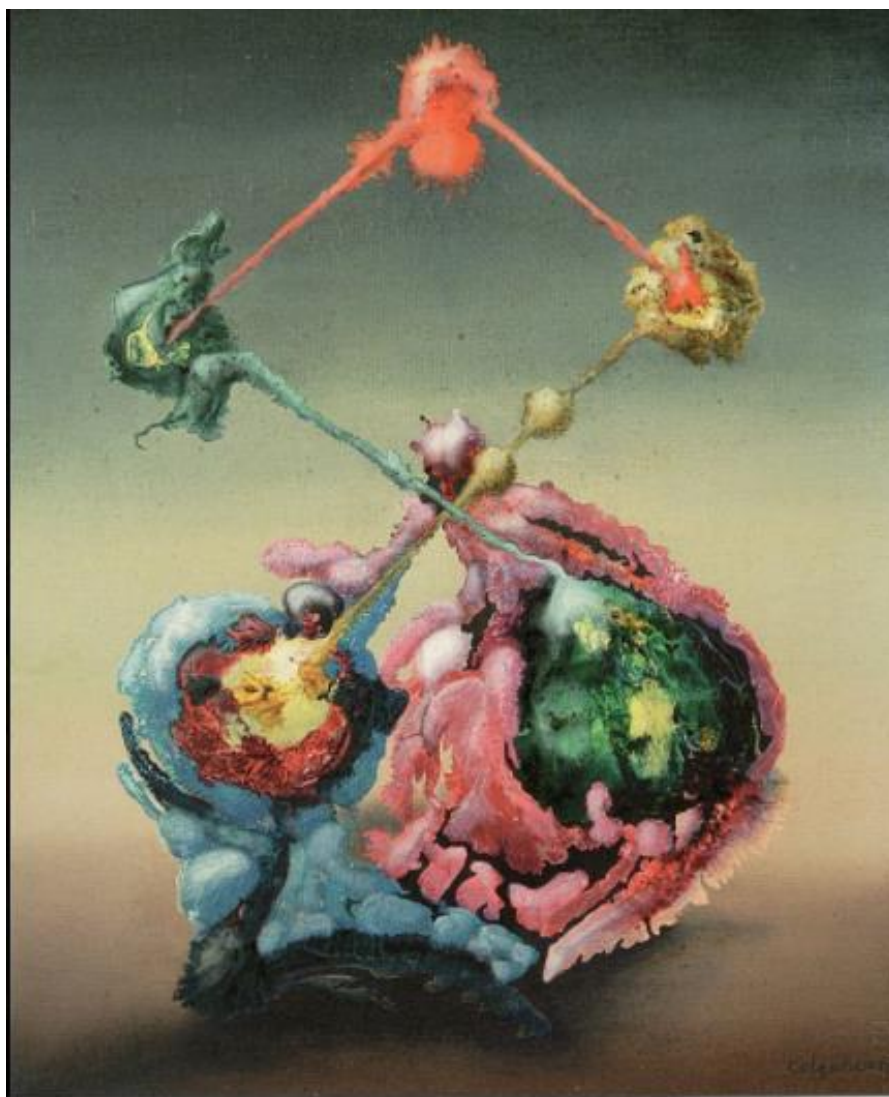
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<sup>506</sup> Colquhoun, *The Living*, p. 58.

<sup>507</sup> Shillitoe, 120.



particularly explicit in the first image, in the depiction of a being with a crown of ten silver spheres, suggesting the ten sephirah from the tree of life. Colquhoun was convinced in her capacity to contact beings who existed on different astral planes, a belief that she claimed to have inspired her work *Grotto of the Sun and Moon* (1952). She wrote of how the image originated from a secret alchemical order that contacted her in a dream through the astral plane.<sup>508</sup>



(Fig. 8: Ithell Colquhoun, *A Visitation 1* (1945), Oil on canvas. 24 x 20in. (61.5 x 51 cm))

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<sup>508</sup> 'Introduction', in *I Saw the Water: An Occult Novel and Other Selected Writing*, ed. by Richard Shillitoe and Mark Morrisson (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), p. 18.



(Fig. 9: Ithell Colquhoun, *Gorgon* (1946) Oil on board. 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (57.8 x 57.8 cm.))

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, there has been a recent tendency to re-situate the works of spiritualist artists within a fine art context. Given the belief Colquhoun seems to have possessed about the forms of psychic revelation that her work conveys, it is tempting to place her in this category, particularly in view of the centrality of automatism to her oeuvre. In certain ways, we find a greater eschewal of authorship in her automatic work than in those of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint. Rather than simply operating as a receptacle in which the spirits could communicate their message, in the later works of af Klint automatism is eschewed in favour of the recreation of images of visions that she had experienced.<sup>509</sup> Colquhoun's favourite technique of decalcomania also enabled her hand to play less of a guiding role in the image's construction than in Houghton's frenetic line drawings.

<sup>509</sup> Tracey Bashkoff, 'Paintings for Temples', in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, exh. cat (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2018), p. 24.

But such categorisation should be avoided. Unlike Houghton and af Klint, Colquhoun identified as a fine art practitioner and wanted her work to be displayed in a gallery setting. Colquhoun was never drawn to spiritualism per se and in a separate essay on automatism was firm about distinguishing the surrealist and spiritualist use of the technique, as the difference between ‘exploration and regurgitation. His [Breton’s] writing could not be confused with the cosy platitudes delivered by the average spiritualistic circle’.<sup>510</sup> Although she believed her work contained revelatory content, and, likely, that they possessed a form of psychic energy, they were not simply tools for magical or occult practice. In contrast to the dictionary Hilma af Klint used to define how words and colours are used in her paintings, Colquhoun did not seem to believe that her work contained a form of hermetic meaning that could be clearly delineated. Rather, her images possess the frisson of magical resonances, hints and allusions. We can see this more exploratory sense of speculation and possibility in the essay she wrote on symbolism contained in *The Dance of the Nine Opals* (1942). She considers multiple and varied possible referents – druidic stone circles, the nine planets of traditional astrology, a Celtic solar-festival, Apollo, a supernatural flower – but none of these she definitively states as its sole meaning.<sup>511</sup>

In later life Colquhoun recorded being given a portrait of the founder of the Golden Dawn, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, painted by his wife, Moina. Cleaning the picture, she was able to witness its hidden regalia – a magic ring and steel crown – of which there had been later attempts to obscure.<sup>512</sup> She describes strange alterations in the appearance of Mathers; how his costume and expression seemed to change and the way the painting seemed to exude heat. Colquhoun attempted to channel its psychic energy, performing a Winter Solstice ritual while ‘meditating on the significance of the painting’s revelation of itself’.<sup>513</sup> The painting functions as ‘art’, but there is another level on which the image, by virtue of the psychically attuned energy of the painter, the subject and its new owner, functions as a supernatural object. It is on these two planes that we should see the work of Colquhoun operating. There is one level in which they function as aesthetically satisfying objects, enlivened and exoticised by the element of magic. But there is another, in which the quality they have is revelatory, ritualistic and invocatory. It is because of these two planes of her more developed oeuvre that the case studies of this thesis provide a crucial context in which to understand the significance of Colquhoun’s work. It is important not to consider her images of the 1940s simply as an outgrowth of her early

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<sup>510</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, ‘Notes on Automatism,’ (1980) [n.p.] TGA 929/2/1/40/1.

<sup>511</sup> Ithell Colquhoun, ‘Dance of the Nine Opals’, p. 1, TGA 929/2/1/17.

<sup>512</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword*, p. 41.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid. 41.

surrealism, but for the way that they linked to a wider tendency within the cultural sphere to view art as having a spiritually productive role. Although Colquhoun did not possess the political concerns that I have repeatedly traced, she shared an instrumentalist view of the art object, in her sense that it could function both as sacred object and object that fostered sacred practice.

### Coda

Even in one of the most materialistic of our great novelists – in Trollope – we are aware of another world against which the actions of the characters are thrown into relief. The ungainly clergyman picking his black-booted way through the mud, handling so awkwardly his umbrella, speaking of his miserable income and stumbling through a proposal of marriage, exists in a way that Mrs Woolf's Mr Ramsay never does, because we are aware that he exists not only to the woman that he is addressing but in a God's eye. His unimportance in the world of the senses is only matched by his enormous importance in another world.<sup>514</sup>

In Graham Greene's review article, reflecting on a loss of a 'religious sense' in the modern novel, he argues that the subjective turn evident in recent literature was an attempt to find 'another dimension' by which reality, bereft of the divine, could recapture its lost significance. The endeavour, as Greene understood it, was a failed one. But within the religious terrain that this thesis has set out to map, the spiritual significance of the self was maintained without appeal to an external deity. At the core of every individual was a latent, divine capability. Although Trollope's ungainly clergyman can simply bask in the support of the transcendent for his cosmic significance, should Mr Ramsay be persuaded take up meditation or become (to his creator's disapproval) a vegetarian, he too can proceed to access his own divine potential.

As a soteriology alternative spirituality looked, not to 'another world,' but offered redemption in the present moment. If the seeker could find the correct tools, the spiritual practice through which they could achieve self-actualisation, then they had the capacity not only to revolutionise the self, but the world at large. This spiritually confident, Lawrentian-infused, modernism was a side-lined force within an Anglophone tradition committed to a more uncertain notion of selfhood. But it resurfaced in the counter-cultural moment of the 1960s and has acquired a more mainstream status as a confessional identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in the Western sphere. Religious approaches to the self have also resurfaced in recent forms of popular psychology that have infiltrated everyday modes of speech. Notions of 'self-love', 'self-care' and 'self-compassion', are premised on what is an essentially metaphysical conviction that

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<sup>514</sup> 'François Mauriac' in *Graham Greene, Collected Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 92. (first publ. 'François Mauriac vu par un Anglais', *La France Libre*, 16 April 1945).

all beings have an intrinsically boundless degree of worth; a belief that also typically operates independently of a specific religious system.

This development is important to note in light of the blow struck at this world view by the Second World War. I think one of the reasons spirituality has not been approached as a systemic force in respect, particularly of the 1930s, was its infelicity as a moment in world affairs in which to attempt to advance the self's 'infinite reservoir of possibilities'.<sup>515</sup> Faced with the pure evil of the Nazi regime, Murry and Huxley's belief in the individual's inner goodness and the possibility of avoiding conflict on this basis, appeared dangerously complacent. Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of the pacifist movement, drawing on Karl Barth's theology of the absolute distinction between the human and divine realms – their 'infinite qualitative distinction' – in view of the horrors of conflict, appeared to be pragmatic and true.<sup>516</sup> In the post-war era it was easier to dismiss Murry and Huxley's writings as the quixotic musings of eccentric intellectuals, rather than as symptomatic of a wider impulse to harness the potentialities of the self as a means of enacting political change.

Yet I want to stress the significance of the relationship they saw between the cultivation of the self and acting in the world at large, even if it does not allow for a recuperation of the content of their politics. This idea might have borne an awkward relationship with their own moment, but it is an intriguing connection in view of criticisms that have been levelled at present-day spirituality as a manifestation of narcissism and as a by-product of Western individualism. While in contemporary discourses the spiritual is often engaged with as a matter of personal well-being and happiness, in the moment that I am addressing the individual was secondary to the good of the social whole.

The belief that selfhood had a divine potential represented a crucial strand of the understanding of being within interwar cultural practice. It was a mode of thinking that tended to lead to a serious, often didactic – even preacherly turn of phrase. This was a tonality that united diverse modes of practice. Huxley's therapeutic approach to the novel, Murry's evangelical criticism and

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<sup>515</sup> This phrase was used by T.E. Hulme in 'Romanticism and Classicism' in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1924), pp. 111-141 (p.116) (written c. 1911/12).

<sup>516</sup> This termed, first coined by Søren Kierkegaard, was used by Karl Barth to express the division between God and humanity in the preface to *Epistle to the Romans* (trans. by Edward C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 10). Barth's theology was applied to a critique to the pacifist movement in the late 1930s by the Protestant pastor, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had been a prominent member of the American peace organisation, the F.o.R, but under the influence of Barth became convinced of the fundamental sinfulness of humanity and its inability to live harmoniously within society. See Ceadal, pp. 207-9.

Colquhoun's appreciation of the magical power of the painterly object were each linked by a shared sense of the importance of being earnest; the serious role that art had to play in cultivating and expressing the inner beneficence of the self.

I started this project by focusing specifically on the guru as a way of unlocking this artistic trend. The two distinct tendencies that I noted – the guru's propensity to espouse the divine potential of all individuals, while maintaining their unique spiritual authority – is a duality played in out in the works I have examined. I have considered the way in which the spiritual fostered both the instrumentalization and the rarefication of the art object. For a figure such as Huxley and, to a degree, Mitchison, literature was a spiritual tool, a device for aiding the transformation of consciousness. Particularly in the case of Huxley, the novel, in a sense, became part of a category which could include everything from psychology manuals to prayer meetings, vegetarian diet and folk dancing. Murry partially shared this emphasis, in his passionate advocacy of literature as a device that could revolutionise selfhood. But he also possessed the sense that is found most notably in the works of Woolf and Colquhoun, of the elevated position of the artist and their creation. The creator and their text or canvas is endowed with mystical and epiphanic power, presenting the end of spiritual striving as well functioning as its tool.

Although unified by these two tendencies – the elevation of art and the attempt to harness it for practical use – stylistically the work of these diverse individuals that I have taken for my case studies varied widely. Part of the reason for this was the way that spiritual concerns tended to lead to less self-consciousness about form. The modernism I have been considering still diagnosed the alienated condition of the self in the modern world, but was less concerned with art's aesthetic response to that alienation and more with the idea that it could offer a practical solution. This was a tendency fostered by the this-worldly orientation of the mystical. Instead of the parallel lines that Greene envisages for the Trollopean cleric – bumbling quotidian, elevated by a resolutely off-stage divine – in the works I have considered the spiritual and the everyday are integrally fused. Such a fusion held out the possibility of redemptive transformation in the present moment. This thesis has set out to explore the various ways in which this hope was engaged with by artists and writers, arguing that despite their stylistic variance, this impulse led to an aesthetic of harmony, beneficence and completion that threads its way throughout the cultural landscape of the interwar years.

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